

Book Review: **Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism**. By Pat Califia. Cleis Press, San Francisco, California, 1997, 307 pp., \$16.95. *Arch Sex Behav* 33, 418–420 (2004).  
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“What if gender was no longer a marker for privilege? Who would you be if you had never been punished for gender-inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to live in a society where you could take a vacation from gender?” (p. 277). Califia concludes this book with these and other provocative questions. In antecedent chapters, Califia traces the historical evolution of transsexuality/transgenderism from medical curiosity to politicized minority culture. A powerful blend of political activism and personal disclosure infuses the extensive review and critique of the gender literature, and the accompanying sociocultural analysis of transsexual/transgender cultural formation.

In writing this review, we encountered two linguistic dilemmas. For readability, we collapsed the concepts of gender dysphoria, transgenderism, transsexuality, transvestism, and other nonstandard forms of gender expression with one abbreviation: TG. We recognize and apologize for the oversimplification of the subtleties those discrete terms convey. The second problem relates to Califia’s decision, after completing this book, to initiate female-to-male gender transition. Califia now lives and works full-time as Patrick. In the book, Califia professes an uneasy acceptance of her conflicted gender feelings and, at the time, rejected gender transition. In congruence with his gender while writing *Sex Changes*, we use female pronouns to reference him as the book’s author and male pronouns to reference him posttransition. The English language, like most languages, is woefully inadequate to deal with gender ambiguity; neuter pronouns would certainly facilitate gender-related discourse.

Califia, exemplifying the gnome “personal is political,” begins by disclosing her “profound discomfort with sex-role conditioning” (p. 2), and identifying as a “gender outlaw” (p. 7). She recounts her personal struggle with gender dysphoria, her investigation of sex reassignment, and her resignation to “a sort of psychic hermaphroditism” (p. 5). Her own gender dysphoria obviously provided a fundamental impetus for writing the book.

Califia conceptualizes TG cultural formation primarily as movement from object to subject—from TG individuals appropriated as objects for study by an array of “experts,” to a TG activist community speaking subjectively and defining its own political agenda. She challenges the objectivity of the “objective outsider who, because of a sheaf of credentials, purports to have a point of view that is more important or powerful than that of transgendered people themselves” (p. 1).

Califia deconstructs TG cultural evolution into two discrete “waves” of TG activism: the first extending from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s, and the second from the mid-1990s to the present. The “first wave” comprises several early transsexual autobiographers, which Califia credits with the founding of early TG activism. She criticizes their desires to pass as members of their chosen gender, to distinguish themselves from homosexuals, and their obedience to medical professionals. She castigates the early “gender scientists” (p. 52), the feminist “transphobes” (p. 86), and gay male social scientists, suggesting that they assumed self-aggrandizing, privileged vantage points from which to appropriate and define TG issues.

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Califia excoriates the “gender scientists,” in particular Harry Benjamin, Richard Green, and John Money, for standing as gatekeepers to sex reassignment and for defining transsexuality as psychopathology: “These people inappropriately apply a medical model of health and disease to gender identity and pleasure seeking” (p. 80) and “would have absolutely no ethical problem with genetically engineering transsexuals out of existence” (p. 81). She acknowledges that Benjamin and Green demonstrated certain sympathies with their transsexual patients, but harshly criticizes John Money, despite his numerous contributions to the field.

Califia specifically condemns two feminist writers, Janet Raymond and Catherine Millot, as irrational “transphobes” in academic costume and their antitranssexual treatises as diatribes cloaked in feminist theory. Both Raymond and Millot decry sex-reassignment surgery; Raymond equates it with foot binding and infibulation, and Millot regards it “in simplistic Freudian terms, as castration” (p. 109). Califia, herself, a renowned feminist thinker, skewers their brand of fundamentalist and exclusionary feminism; her antipathy resonates throughout this part of the book.

Califia also challenges gay male social scientists, singling out Jonathan Katz, Walter Williams, and Will Roscoe, as another faction of “experts” appropriating transsexuality for political mileage. Califia accuses them of (mis)appropriating historical bisexuals and transsexuals in a “drive to normalize homosexuality by simply documenting its widespread existence” (p. 121) and of misrepresenting Native American berdaches as “gay role models who have absolutely nothing to do with transgenderism” (p. 127).

Califia contrasts the earlier “transsexual pioneers” (p. 163) whose goal was to gain “social acceptance” (p. 245) with the “modern transgendered activists” (p. 163). The modern activists actively challenged the status quo of gender dimorphism, the premise that TG was a form of psychopathology, and the continuing attempts by outside experts to appropriate and define the TG agenda.

The second wave of TG activism emerged in the mid-1990s, concurrent with several social developments: (1) an expanding TG community and the increasing dissatisfaction with traditional gender clinics and sex-reassignment processes; (2) the increasing visibility of other sexual minority communities; (3) Brandon Teena’s murder (for being a female-to-male transsexual); (4) the Michigan Womyn’s Festival’s exclusion of a TG woman; and (5) the 1996 European Court of Justice ruling preventing employment discrimination against transsexuals. Califia finds this second wave of transsexual literature more representative of TG experiences and concerns. Those include challenging (before the European Commission for Human Rights) the British government’s refusal to allow changes to birth certificates, identifying and confronting issues concerning partners of TG individuals, and exploding binary gender constructs. She specifically cites Mark Rees, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Leslie Feinberg, and Kate Bornstein as important second wave authors and activists.

In the final chapter of the book, Califia speculates on the future of TG activism and culture. She predicts ongoing advocacy for removal of Gender Identity Disorder from the DSM, increased access to sex-reassignment procedures, and improvement in posttransition outcome (particularly for sexual satisfaction). Drawing on her experiences with lesbian feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, Califia cites identity politics as the most divisive issue facing the TG community: “There will probably continue to be conflict between transsexuals who see the sex reassignment process confirming their true gender, and transgendered people who believe that their only hope for liberation lies in dismantling biological sex itself” (p. 275).

Califia envisions an admittedly utopian social order resulting from a broad alliance of transactivists, which would encompass anyone whose individuality and potential has been compromised by coercive sex role expectations. With her concluding provocative questions about gender and sex role conformity, Califia illuminates the insidious “gender tyranny” (p. 276) into which we are all unwittingly socialized.

As with many literature reviews, this book occasionally verges on the tediously meticulous. Califia dissects the available literature at length and casual readers may grow impatient with the level of minutiae she examines; however, she often rescues these sections with her trademark barbed and pithy sociopolitical commentary. Califia’s personal experiences and observations ground her theoretical analysis and explain the emotion underpinning it. Yet, Califia’s emotions sometimes cloud her judgment. The early gender researchers and TG individuals faced historical and societal constraints that she fails to acknowledge; she ignores the courage and innovation these gender pioneers exhibited. With the wisdom of hindsight and interceding years of research, we now realize their original concepts bore certain flaws; however, their ideas were revolutionary at the time. This lack of perspective does mar an otherwise outstanding review of the literature.

We heartily recommend this book to any sexologist, and especially to anyone embarking on a gender research project; it is well suited for college and postgraduate courses, and lay audiences will find it readable. Despite recent research, which renders the book slightly outdated, professionals will find it informative. In short, we believe this is an important, incisive, and definitive study of poorly understood phenomena.

Although historical and cross-cultural evidence indicates that the individuals we would label today as transsexual and transgendered have existed for millennia, modern constructs of transsexuality and transgenderism are nascent. *Sex Changes* lays a comprehensive historical and scientific foundation for the TG culture currently under construction. We hope Califia continues contributing to the TG literature. His voice is well worth hearing.