

# You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Transgendered Person: Contemporary Photography and the Construction of Queer(ed) Identities

Stefanie Snider

Some queer identities have appeared recently in lesbian zines and elsewhere: guys with pussies, dykes with dicks, queer butches, aggressive femmes, F2Ms, lesbians who like men, daddy boys, gender queens, drag kings, pomo afro homos, bulldaggers, women who fuck boys, women who fuck like boys, dyke mummies, transsexual lesbians, male lesbians. As the list suggests, gay/lesbian/straight simply cannot account for the range of sexual experience available.<sup>1</sup>

Sex, gender, and sexual identities have exploded in the last ten to twenty years on both theoretical and practical levels. The roles described by Judith Halberstam certainly put pressure on the seemingly uniform categories of straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Some might call the proliferation of such descriptors evidence of particularly queer expressions of gender and sexuality, such that queer might be a better term or concept to encompass that which does not fit into hetero- and homosexuality, or even lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sexes, genders, and sexualities. It is the intention of this paper to consider how a photographer who identifies as transgendered/transsexual uses his work to interrogate queerness and identity.

This paper explores these issues within the context of photography by and about female-to-male (FTM) transsexual photographer, Loren Cameron. In his photographs, Loren Cameron deals with issues of sex and gender; in his work, the body becomes the canvas or map in and on which various identities are performed, sustained and documented. This discussion analyzes his images with regard to questions suggested by queerness and its possibility as an identity category. Do the photographs construct or embody issues around queer theory and/or identity politics? How are identities reified, constructed, deconstructed, and/or made over in specifically *photographic* images? How is photography used within the context of identity issues and what makes photography good for these purposes?

In her book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Judith Butler discusses how identity formation

might be seen as a process of repetition that both reifies and makes unstable the identities in question.<sup>2</sup> I would suggest that not only might methods of queering be seen in this way, but also the process of photography itself. Butler writes that the construction of sex is a repeated process that takes place in time and space and both produces and destabilizes itself through its very acts of repetition. The categories of sex and gender appear natural because they come about through a reiterative or ritual practice [...] yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm.<sup>3</sup>

Butler argues that these gaps open up powerful possibilities for deconstructing seemingly stable norms in order to "put the consolidation of the norms of 'sex' into a potentially productive crisis."<sup>4</sup>

Butler explains that the performativity of identity as a method of operation is one that necessarily and simultaneously produces itself as continuous and fractured. In other words, built into the very system of making identity coherent is the process that has the potential to bring about its downfall. It is by recognizing this disjunction and acting on and with it that we may see, or even exploit, the creation of identities as both a queered or unstable process and a fruitfully consistent one as well. This discussion extends these ideas to include queerness as an identity category in itself, with mutability, conglomeration, and recitation as some of its main and constant attributes. In numerous ways, photography as a particular kind of medium also plays a major role in the formation of coherent but splintered senses of identity, and the four self-portraits by Loren Cameron discussed here play on the body and the photographic medium in these ways.

Photographs, much like identities, are both consistent and fractured. Art historian Deborah Bright describes photography in a way that can be characterized as queer because it plays along the line of the real and constructed, while never truly belonging to either genre: "Photographs [...] masquer-

<sup>1</sup> Judith Halberstam, "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity," *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 212.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Butler 10.

<sup>4</sup> Butler 10.

ade as compelling evidence of the real, while obscuring their status as (always already) mediated representations. As a result, they are assigned a credibility and persuasiveness that inspires belief.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this credibility is contingent upon multiple factors based in social definitions of what is “real” and what is “imagined,” with the former seeming to hold sway over the latter. Consequently, photography gives an *illusion* of “reality.” Also inherent to the medium of photography is its basis in repetition—multiple shots, frames, and reproductions. Strictly speaking, photographs don’t have an original, due to the circumstances of the negative/positive process of photography. In photographs of the body, the subject is at once constituted as both the same and different, singular and numerous, with each photograph. The repeated process of becoming, of creating, of always already layering forms and meanings, works effectively with the identity category of queerness, confounding more traditional identity categories while demonstrating the dependence of queerness on identity characteristics.

An analysis of Cameron’s work may begin by looking closely at an early image of his transition from female to male. This image provides a referent to which may be compared Cameron’s more masculine body in the later images, while also compelling us to ask why and how the nude body becomes a privileged zone of identity construction. Both the body and the photograph are multiple and irregular, but also just coherent enough to be marked as a whole.

The first image, simply entitled *Loren Cameron: Before Sex Reassignment*, and not dated (Figure 1), is quite different from most of his other self-portraits. Here Cameron photographs himself lying on his back, atop a patterned rug or blanket, before the double mastectomy that would remove his breasts. His exposed upper body is highlighted in a wash of light while his face is partially shadowed, as is the lower right corner. The smooth skin on his face, arms, and upper torso, and thin arms and body mark this image as one taken before extensive hormonal use and physical bodybuilding. The tattoos on his upper chest and forearms are obvious in the raking light and further highlight the soft skin of his face and body. The tattoos are evidence of an already marked body; Cameron, even before his FTM transition, is apparently interested in fleshly modification. The tattoos do not mark a single place on the body, but create a unified set of markings that encircle the torso and emphasize his chest and arm muscles (or in this photograph, lack thereof) in each of his nude self-portraits. The tattoos draw attention to the contours of the body and designate it as self-defined and personalized to a larger extent than non-modified bodies.

Cameron wears pants, but the majority of his lower body is cropped out. He looks obliquely to the left of the photo, managing not to make eye contact with the viewer and obscuring any recognition of his own body as well. His hands lie

just below his breasts on his stomach. They seem if not awkward exactly, perhaps slightly protective of the body he is offering the viewer. The positioning and lighting might imply a certain sense of friction between what the viewer sees and what Cameron might want us to see; the averted gaze is neither coy nor shy nor ashamed, but rather appears to feign disinterest in the viewer and in his own body. Cameron as a subject is here and not here in this image. He is both subject and object, and as he looks beyond the frame, we have no real idea of what he might be seeing, making his complicity in the image difficult to read. Because we don’t know if we are intended as the initial viewer of this image, or if perhaps the original viewer was only to be the photographer himself, there is a pervasive sense of voyeurism. Cameron presents himself as vulnerable to our gaze and distanced from it. By taking the position offered to us by the image, we become a consumer of this splayed body. In comparison to his later standing self-portraits, as we shall next see, this image is both ambiguous and particularly intimate. Perhaps adding to this sense of vulnerability is the fact that this photograph portrays Cameron before his mastectomies; we are aware that it is his wish to have his breasts removed, yet we are now intimately privy to this tenuous, incipiently transitive body.

The next three images form a triptych entitled *God’s Will* from 1995 (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Each of these is a three-quarter length nude image of Cameron’s body; it is in large part Cameron’s nudity in these images that make them a compelling examination of non-normative identities. Others of Cameron’s self-portraits, showing him in various forms of dress, do not work in quite this same way. In one hand he holds the shutter release bulb that is ubiquitous in his self-portraits, and in the other he holds a prop, signifying, as this discussion asserts, an aspect of his physical embodiment of a particular mode of masculinity. In one photograph he holds a scalpel, doubtless a reference to his now evident double mastectomy and his lack of a surgically constructed penis (Figure 2). In the next image he holds a free weight, and both arms are flexed, one up, holding the weight, one down holding the bulb, as he faces and stares at the viewer (Figure 3). In the third image his body is in an ultra-twisted contrapposto curve as he injects his right thigh with testosterone from a hypodermic needle (Figure 4). In each of these images, Cameron asserts himself as a truly “self-made” transsexual man. In these images Cameron is exposing his own body and its personal reconstruction under his own line of body conditioning, and revealing how it is that one can (re)construct the signs of man and masculinity, despite the traditional notion that both are “natural” characteristics of the male-bodied individual and the group “Man.” Cameron enacts masculinities as they relate to his female-born but male-identified body.

Cameron’s use of photography emphasizes this in several ways. First, Cameron invariably photographs himself by using a remote shutter release bulb that allows him to be both the author and subject of his image simultaneously. As such, the construction of the photograph is never a hidden process;

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Bright, “Introduction: Pictures, Perverts, and Politics,” *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 5.

nowhere do we find Cameron trying to secure a smooth, discrete and impermeable image that might “fool” the viewer into thinking this is anything other than a posed shot. In his book *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*, from which these images are selected, Cameron writes,

People have asked me [...] why I don't try to conceal the [shutter release] bulb in the photographs. At times, given the composition of a photograph, concealing the bulb may not be possible. I also feel a certain pride in making a decent image without seeing through the lens, so I don't really mind that the bulb is visible. Its presence serves as a metaphor: I am creating my own image alone, an act that reflects the transsexual experience as well.<sup>6</sup>

As art historian Richard Meyer makes the case for Robert Mapplethorpe's 1978 *Self-Portrait* with a bullwhip, Cameron here serves as “both the productive agent and the receptive object of photography.”<sup>7</sup> One might even go so far as to say, while not implying sadomasochism in any way similar to Mapplethorpe, that Cameron does indeed refer to the penetration of his own body through testosterone injection and scalpel incision. It is in part through these penetrative acts that Cameron becomes a transman; in both the photographs and in actuality, he must act on his own body to produce an appearance of masculinity. In framing the images of himself with the “tools of the trade,” of how to become masculine in a transsexual realm, Cameron exposes traditional concepts of masculinity as unfixed and shifting, while also presenting an unstable representation of how to be masculine as an FTM transsexual. Cameron displays for the camera the constructedness of both male- and female-born masculinities.

This is not to argue that Cameron is constantly performing variations of masculine identities in and on his disruptive body *solely* for the purposes of exposing sex, gender, and sexuality identities as many-layered and constructed fictional categories. Cameron's images are assertions of his lived subjectivity beyond the gender binary. Gender theorist Jacob Hale writes about how thoroughly individuals in our cultural systems are dependent upon gender to establish subjectivity:

To attempt to image ourselves as [genderless] would be to attempt to imagine ourselves out of social existence. The remaining possibilities, then, would be imagining oneself as having some gender other than *man* and *woman* or imagining oneself

on a borderline between the category in which one began life and some other category of the realm of the genderless.<sup>8</sup>

Cameron's photographs put pressure on the system of identification by imaging himself as “hyper-gendered,” by constructing masculinities not adherent to the male body, as well as constructing the body as quite literally transsexual—in-between male and female—in order to expose both as fantasies.

Gender theorist Sandy Stone articulates a nuanced concept of “posttranssexuality” in her essay, “*The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*.”<sup>9</sup> Here posttranssexuality implies that *all* bodies, not just those designated by owner or others as transgendered or transsexual, should be read in a way that revels in the body and its associated identities as constructed phenomena, and that acknowledges that the body is a primary site for gender manipulation. Stone urges transsexuals to give voice to their identities, rather than having their identities mapped for them by the medical and legal systems that depend on the dual and seemingly mutually exclusive gender system to “correctly diagnose” and provide “treatment” for transsexuals.

Stone writes that in reclaiming hidden histories and lives, transsexuals might disrupt the normative binary that restricts and excludes transsexuality. Instead of swapping one's “born gender” for the “opposite gender,” and thus perpetuating the dichotomy, Stone suggests that transpersons own their lived histories *as transsexuals*. In this way transsexuals might provide a “counter discourse”<sup>10</sup> that interrupts traditional notions of gender. Cameron's photographic triptych operates in just this way. In exposing his body as neither male nor female, in highlighting his physical transitivity, these images disrupt traditional binary gender norms. Stone's argument that transsexuality “occupies a position which is nowhere”<sup>11</sup> in the dual sex/gender regime, repositions transsexuals as productively marginal, and as able, in interrogating and rejecting binary gendered discourse, to profitably create and represent alternative realities.

Critic David Pagel, writing about transgender imagery, states:

each detail [of the subject's body and posture] proves to be an unreliable hint....The real strength of [this] art lies....in its rigorous scrutiny of perception, and the social values embedded in the physical and psychological facts of vision. [These] powerful photos are not interesting because they ‘give voice’ to some unrecognized subgroup, but

<sup>6</sup> Loren Cameron, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1996) 11.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002) 196-197.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Hale, “Are Lesbians Women?,” *Hypatia* 11:2 (Spring 1996): 106; emphasis original.

<sup>9</sup> Sandy Stone, “*The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*,” *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Stone 295.

<sup>11</sup> Stone 295.

because they effectively interrogate what takes place when we all look at each other.<sup>12</sup>

Loren Cameron's photographs destabilize the ways in which we categorize ourselves and others. We are asked to reevaluate how as queer and/or LGBT or straight subjects and viewers, Cameron's and our own identities are constructed, en-

acted, and embodied through the photographic image. By staging his nude body as a space "in between," Cameron queers sex and gender and is symptomatic of posttranssexuality.

University of Southern California

<sup>12</sup> David Pagel, "Catherine Opie at Regen Projects," *Art Issues* (September-October 1994): 45.



Figure 2. [left] Loren Cameron, *God's Will*, 1995, gelatin silver print. Reproduction permission and copyright Loren Cameron.

[middle] Figure 3. Loren Cameron, *God's Will*, 1995, gelatin silver print. Reproduction permission and copyright Loren Cameron.

[right] Figure 4. Loren Cameron, *God's Will*, 1995, gelatin silver print. Reproduction permission and copyright Loren Cameron.





Figure 1. Loren Cameron, *Loren Cameron: Before Sex Reassignment*, n.d., gelatin silver print. Reproduction permission and copyright Loren Cameron.

