

Book Reviews



Transgender History. SUSAN STRYKER. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008. 190 p. ISBN 10: 1-5800-5-224-X/ ISBN 13: 978-5-8005-224-5.

It is an understatement to say that gender is complicated, but when the idea of transgenderism is introduced, notions of gender become utterly bewildering to many people. In her book *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker succinctly explains why transgender people are often treated with open disdain and disrespect in society: “Because most people have great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person’s gender, the gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness” (p. 6). Indeed, there are strong male and female signifiers that humans are conditioned to recognize from a very early age, and we become confused when those signifiers are distorted. Facial hair? Male. High heels and breasts? Female. But what of the person with facial hair in heels?

Assumptions about gender start at birth: “Congratulations! Boy or girl?” There is a strong social desire to immediately classify something new, and it begins with needing to know whether blue or pink blankets should be used, and if family and friends should start purchasing toy dolls or toy trucks. Gender assumptions and generalizations are difficult to get away from, and this is precisely what Stryker addresses: What *is* gender? What is sexual identity? The quick and dirty answer: it is complicated. As Stryker explains: “Because transgender issues touch on fundamental questions of human existence, they take us into areas that we rarely consider carefully” (p. 7).

Transgender History is a compact, thorough introduction to modern transgender history, concentrating mainly on the United States (though European transgender history is also explored; the reader is duly informed that the first recorded “sex change” operations took place in Europe). The actual text is a relatively short 153 pages, divided into five chapters, and accompanied by a reader’s guide, a wealth of suggested readings, detailed sources, and an index. The author’s qualifications are impressive: Stryker has held positions at both

Stanford and Simon Fraser Universities, and is currently teaching gender studies at Harvard University. Although a transgendered woman herself, she manages to leave the personal out of this largely academic, yet accessible, book (save for a brief mention of her personal situation in the prologue). There is a clear articulation in this work; Stryker is clearly an educator, and her use of archival materials throughout the text (photographs; mid-nineteenth-century cross-dressing laws; oral histories; etc.) demonstrates how important it is for marginalized groups and movements to be documented and studied. This becomes particularly important given the confusion surrounding transgender discussions, not only in mainstream and academic communities, but within the all-too-compartmentalized queer communities as well.

The first chapter, “An Introduction to Transgender Terms and Concepts,” serves as a detailed glossary. It is here that Stryker carefully explains terms such as gender, transgender, intersex, Gender Identity Disorder (as well as an explanation of the political ramifications of labelling one’s identity as a disorder), transsexual, and the recently introduced cisgender and cissexual:

The prefix *cis-* means “on the same side as” (that is, the opposite of *trans*). The idea behind the terms is to resist the way that “woman” or “man” can mean “nontransgendered woman” or “nontransgendered man” by default, unless the person’s transgendered status is explicitly named; it’s the same logic that would lead somebody to prefer saying “white woman” and “black woman” rather than simply using “woman” to describe a white woman (thus presenting white as the norm) and “black woman” to indicate a deviation from the norm” (p. 22).

Perhaps one of the simplest, and most important definitions of gender is supplied early on:

Gender is not the same as sex, though the two terms are often used interchangeably, even in technical or scholarly literature, creating a great deal of confusion. Gender is generally considered to be cultural, and sex, biological (though contemporary theories posit sex as a cultural category as well). The words “man” and “woman” refer to gender. No one is born a woman or a man – rather, as the saying goes, “one becomes one” through a complex process of socialization (p. 11).

Chapters 4 and 5, “The Difficult Decades” and “The Current Wave,” are intense chapters, describing how various factions within the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) communities are clearly as transphobic as a large portion of society – hate, unfortunately, is universal. Bluntly put, it is incredibly depressing to learn of the hatred and prejudice that various feminist and homosexual rights activists hold for trans people, the marginalized hating the marginalized. Many members of the LGB community do embrace those among them that identify as transgender – the inclusive acronym of LGBT has become increasingly mainstream – but there are just as many who view transgender

individuals as freaks. Acceptance is growing, but slowly. The latter two chapters require a degree of concentration: new acronym strings are hurled at the reader with alarming regularity, and one can easily get bogged down in trying to keep track of who is hating whom, and for how long and how many times a group changed its name.

Despite the numerous, sometimes onerous, acronyms (e.g., LABIA [Lesbians And Bisexuals In Action] or the highly inclusive LGBTIQQA [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, and Allies]), this well-researched, highly detailed, yet inherently complicated recounting of the history of the transgender movement in the United States makes for an excellent read. It is informative without being dry, provided that the reader has an interest in feminism, gender, sexuality, social issues – or all of these subjects combined.

Stryker's exploration of the transgender movement brings attention to the wide variety of sources used to research such marginalized groups. She relies heavily on primary archival sources, such as her own personal collection, as well as the holdings (transcribed interviews, photographs, journals, private letters, etc.) of the GLBT Historical Society (both the San Francisco and Northern California chapters). Also included are reproductions from photographic collections held at major universities and the archived psychiatric/medical records of patients who have had sex change operations. Unfortunately, the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, the first major archives of international sexual issues, particularly transgender issues, was destroyed by fascists in the 1930s, and its founder, Magnus Hirschfeld, was denounced by Hitler as "the most dangerous Jew in Germany" (p. 40).

The shame and stigma often associated not only with transgender issues, but with sexuality in general, make organizations such as the GLBT Historical Society absolutely vital in their mandates to acquire, preserve, and make available records on queer issues. These organizations also compel "mainstream" professionals, including archivists, to question their attitudes and practices in capturing and representing the queer experience in their own collections. For example, what of the experiences of individuals who are not closely connected with, or active in, the GLBT community? How have they been treated in archives? How many historically important items – or entire collections – have been destroyed or dismissed by archivists who are uncomfortable with a subject they view as morally wrong or pornographic? Stryker reminds the reader that it is still completely legal in the United States to discriminate against a transgender person. Her book, however, proves that great strides to acceptance have been made in a relatively short period of time. Most importantly, she is able to convey that there is hope for acceptance – one day.

Carrie Schmidt
Independent contract archivist