Sons of the Movement

FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Each of the chapters are organized in relation to the terms “trans-gender” and/or “trans-sexual,” but what these terms mean is another story. Even a cursory look at the social histories of the words themselves, as well as the burgeoning field of trans studies, can tell much about the value and importance of the performances, artists, and counter-discursive spaces theorized in this book. But each chapter here also marks a relation to my previous book, *Masculinities without Men?* (UBC Press 2004). That book, and its prior life as my doctoral thesis, raised, and then by necessity, both delayed and deferred the meddlesome questions that have become *Sons of the Movement*. *Masculinities* raised questions about my own relationships to masculinity, gender transitions, bodies, sexuality, and so forth, questions I refused to traffic through that physical incarnation (Ph.D. candidate) and space (institutional exercises). On the other hand, *Sons* shapes its theoretical trajectories deliberately around, on, and through the occupation of both a different time (what I’m going to call post-queer), but also a differently modulated space. These are traces of a transed FtM body, a body simultaneously inside and outside of both genders, working institutionally in a similarly housed Women’s Studies department, but also trans-geographically (situated in a new city but theorizing a past in Toronto). *Sons* insists on being hailed precisely by those unanswered intertextual questions. *Masculinities*, then, echoes and resonates throughout *Sons*, quite wilfully, as its moment of origin, but also, like any moment of productive origin (something we might also mark as trauma), it tenaciously haunts as an accidental and unknowable moment of return. As I argued in *Masculinities*, the relationship between female masculinity and trans masculinity does its best work, when those resemblances function as dependent traces of each other, rather than as anxious performative deflections. So it is only fitting that, in many ways, the argument here continues to elaborate that relation. Let me write it this way: *Masculinities* is to *Sons* what a pre-transition body is to its post-transition iteration: a ghostly presence where everything is the same except for its difference.

What I am calling trans studies has reached a level of sophistication and self-definition that firmly establishes it as a field with its own theoretical and political location. Of course, connections to feminist and queer theory,
and increasingly to transnationalism and anti-racism persist, but while these connections might share a critique of misogyny, heteronormativity, homophobia, and racism, the methodologies and goals of each field differ, often dramatically when intersectional frameworks are not deployed. Significantly, though, I am increasingly convinced that it is no longer viable for feminist readers to dismiss the projects of trans theorists and activists as acrimonious to or outside of feminist discourses. Nor is it tenable, I will argue, to view trans studies as an optional “extra” in discussions of anti-racism or studies of sex, gender, and queer theory. This book, and the work it documents and theorizes, represents an intersectional challenge to each of these fields while also simultaneously situating trans studies as and within a field of its own. But it certainly warrants repetition: I am seeking discursive and political relations, not distance.

“Trans-sexual” and “trans-gender” are essentially contested terms within and outside trans communities, and part of what is at stake in this work is the relation between established sex, gender, and sexuality labels on the one hand, and these emergent categories of new configurations of genders on the other. More than the term “queer,” the prefix trans- itself captures what we imagine are various kinds of sex and gender crossing, and various levels of permanence to these transitions, seeming to signify everything from the medical technologies that transform sexed bodies, to cross-dressing, to passing, to a certain kind of “life plot,” to being legible as one’s birth sex, but with a “contradictory” gender inflection, “trans” is rapidly becoming a free-floating category, signifying its own discursive history as much as any, all, or, at times, none of the above. For example, the prefix trans- just as often marks a space of movement across national affiliations or identifications. Recent calls for papers, as one example, explore relations between trans-gender and transsexual and transnationalisms in an increasingly globalized and diasporic world order dominated by the growing terrorism of American foreign policy. I do not see queer functioning with the same connotative value in these instances. But even within the U.S., if the most recent election is any “real” indicator, the term “American” just as often marks a space of disidentification with its public image. The appearance, after the re-election of George W. Bush, of apologetic Web sites, is a curious phenomenon. The first one was set up by student James Zetland immediately following the 2004 U.S. presidential election. His Web site www.sorryeverybody.com carried the message “We’re sorry. We Tried. Half of America by thousands of Americans sending out apologia to the world,” which indicates, if anything, that the U.S. continues to be marked by an internal civil war, something perhaps easily described by
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the term “transnational.” The notion of transnationalism is one lived on and through the bodies of the racialized and nationalized diasporic citizenship. Transnationalist writers such as Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera, Rinaldo Walcott, and others clearly take up and problematize notions of belonging and citizenship in any context, not the least of which is a queer, i.e., White, queer citizenship. By emphasizing the importance of this trope, I am certainly not detracting from the importance of such work. But as I will explore more fully in Chapter 4, in this post-colonial and postmodernity era of deconstructing—sometimes literally imploding—nation-states, including queer nations, I want to ask a series of questions about the trope of trans- for rethinking the disembodiment of whiteness and nation as a universal signifiers.

At it most evocative, trans- is descriptive, marking lives lived across, against, or despite already engendered, sexed, national, and even racialized bodies. Often collapsed into “trans-gender,” that umbrella term that references almost all of the above practices from one degree to another, the term “trans-sexual,” for instance, is thought to mark the use of medical technologies to correct the disjunction between the body and a self that seems at odds with that body. But at its most provocative, trans- and the space it references refuses the medical and psychological categorical imperatives through which it has always been forced to confess. As Foucault has taught us, confession is always already an overdetermined discursive practice, choreographed by regimes of power (1982). In the case of trans-folks, confession and the legitimacies it accords have often demanded congruency between so-called changed desire and object choice; between chosen gender and sexual conservatism; and, most pernicious, between sex and gender themselves.

But what is also at stake is a politics of self-representation within and often opposed to these violently policed dualistic options. Central to this polemic, then, has to be something of a paradox for trans-folks seeking images of themselves/ourselves: how does one represent oneself when one’s self has unrepresentable (within current and often conservative categories) forms, practices, and discourses? Hence, the importance of trans-art and, I hope, Sons of the Movement; both have created a space in which to represent the unthinkable overdetermined by binaristic gender schemas but also beyond the celebration of contradiction itself. What I call for here is a political deployment of contradiction and incoherence against the intersectional hegemones of the White supremacist, sex/gender system.

An almost century-long series of lessons of feminist gender theory have been significant. Trans-work builds upon well-established deconstructions and complications of the relationship between sex and gender. If the term
“gender” refers to the process whereby concrete individual subjects are constituted as subjects of a pre-existing social category, then, as Gayle Rubin suggests, the sex/gender system, or those sets of arrangements that perform this task, function best by cloaking their operations and implying that their effects are those of nature instead. Recent scholarship in the fields of queer studies, gender studies, and trans studies all expose and trouble the technologies and cultural infrastructures that construct gender as an unchanging biological essence.

That crisis is significant because when you really investigate centres and margins, we learn that the terrain is never quite as simple as it seems. Early feminist theory all but collapsed the causal link between sex and gender, but curiously, queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick cautioned against such ruptures. It is true that Sedgwick, in particular, built upon Rubin's call for analytical distance between these terms, but Sedgwick also held in reserve the necessity of fully exploring the epistemological links between them. That is, when Sedgwick writes in Axiom 2 that “the study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender,” she certainly solidifies the significant paradigm shift launched by Rubin. But Sedgwick concludes that axiom with the following: “But we can't know in advance how they will be different” (1990: 27). We can analytically assume then, that in what I have called elsewhere this No Man's Land of queer and trans-genders, that while they—sexuality, sex, and gender—are different, we also need to assume that “different” does not necessarily mean unrelated as hegemonic and historical categories. Butler too draws this out not only in Bodies That Matter, but also in her new work, Undoing Gender, suggesting that “to understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that “anatomy” and “sex” are not without cultural framing” (Butler 2004: 10). Even as we pull these terms apart, an equally tenacious and conservative set of rhetorics and practices at the heart of the sex/gender system continues to fold one back into the other. Sometimes that folding occurs quite incidentally inside our movements just as often as outside.

The subjects inhabiting the No Man's Land—a stretch of contestatory and discursively productive ground that no man nor woman can venture into and remain a coherently ontological and natural subject—are marked by relations between sexuality and gender, although one of the assumptions I hope this book will correct is that we no longer need to think in terms of that relation. On the contrary, we still know far too little about its various internal, albeit non-essentialist, operations. Clearly, as both Judith Halberstam and I suggest, one
of the other subjects, but nowhere near the only subject, repeatedly misread but persistently entrenched within No Man’s Land is female masculinity. Female masculinity references a range of subject positions—drag king, butch, female-to-male (FtM) trans men, both operative and non-operative, trans-gendered men, stone butches—simultaneously constituted by irreducible contradictions between (de)constructions of “bodies” misread in a certain way as “female” and yet masculine.

But that subject is not alone in No Man’s Land. While it is also true that no one of these practices is reducible to the other as exemplary of female masculinity, it is also true, within the logics of this deconstruction, that the category of female masculinity, as I argue in Masculinities without Men? (2004), works best when it marks spaces defined away from the conventionally defined female body as well as the male. That is, one of the arguments I make in that earlier work, an argument that I want to develop in Sons of the Movement, is that our conceptual work in rethinking the feminist sex wars, and our work on the butch-femme renaissance of the late 1980s, which anticipates the emergence of FtM masculinity, all suggest that many of our tools continue to assume, and by implication, renormalize a kind of coherence of the essentialized body.

For instance, much of that work began to reclaim the figures of butch-femme sexual cultures of the 1950s and, despite opposition, shed light on what were at that time long-forgotten practices of hetero-gendered butch-femme erotic systems. Sally Munt, Lynda Hart, Judith Halberstam, and others acknowledge that the phrase “butch-femme” references homosexual (differences in sexual orientation), but in terms that are hetero-gendered (differences in gender identifications) and that centre erotic practices that emerged in post-World War Two urban working-class lesbian communities in the United States. These practices were driven underground after a harsh condemnation by lesbian-feminism in the 1970s, but reappeared in the early 1980s after the acrimonious sex wars; this condemnation, of course, was and remains akin to the same vitriolic hysteria meted out toward trans-sexual women. Butch-femme communities share with trans identities a need to battle narrowly defined gender polemics, or so it seemed.

But more recently, debates around butch-femme have overlapped with those around trans-gender and trans-sexual (not at all the same thing) discourses necessitating a similar shift in language from “butch,” referencing particular forms of lesbian masculinity, to “female masculinity,” or particular types of gender expression that bring together both ends of that phrase while, at other times, refusing the distinction altogether (Halberstam 1998a). At stake in many of these debates are the ways in which female masculinity
has erroneously become coterminous with ontological “lesbianism” (not all female masculinities are lesbian; not all lesbians are masculine; not all lesbians are female). When pressure is placed on the fault line between masculinities, the limitations of heteronormative (read: binaristic) configurations of gender, embodiment, and identities are exposed in the fissure. All too frequently, lesbian configurations of identity that strive toward stability and certainty also have assumed a kind of concordance between body shape and gender category, a concordance that has reproduced the limitations and sometimes the violence of a naturalized biological essentialism. They have also assumed (at times dictated) a coherence between the categories “butch” and “woman.” But if this narrative holds, then what lies at the heart of the contradiction mapped by the phrase “female masculinity” remains a subject where bodies and subjectivities must remain, by definition, in contradistinction. What then of one subject, the female-to-male trans-sexual man, for example, who moves toward eliminating that distinction? Such subjectivities remind us that not every subject of female masculinity necessarily wants to mark himself as such. Is it possible then that this newly configured category (“female masculinity”) remains singularly lesbian and not transed? It seems that the sex wars are not over at all.

One of the places where they have resurfaced and where sex, sexuality, and gender fold back into each other has to be the British Columbia case Kimberly Nixon vs. Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter. Kimberly Nixon is a male-to-female (MtF) transsexual woman who has been living as a woman for 19 years. In 1995 Nixon signed on for the Rape Relief training program at the Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter, but was eventually ejected from the process when, after a series of questions, she was told that Rape Relief did not allow “gay men” in the training sessions. When Nixon made it clear that she was, in fact, not a gay man but a post-operative male-to-female transsexual, Nixon was told she was not welcome to continue the training. The case went before a British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal where Nixon won her charge of discrimination, but VRRWS is appealing the decision on the grounds that a person who grew up as a male lacks the personal history and life experience to sensitively counsel women who have been raped or abused by men. What’s particularly interesting about the case is the work that is being done across feminist organizations attempting to define and stabilize the definition of a “woman.” In their appeal, VRRWS claims, by implication, that the experience of victimization and sexual abuse is the cornerstone of the definition of woman. Even if the courts themselves cannot adequately answer the question “What is a woman?”, some women’s organizations
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have attempted to weld together victimization and femininity, tyranny and manhood. Such essentializing assertions, whether trans-phobic in intention or “only” in consequence, attempt to fix not only the limits of gender but also the intelligibility of what counts as the experiences of the appropriately gendered body. That supposedly “female” body is knowable through a teleological narrative overdetermined as a history of victimization. Gender, then, is reduced to experiences that, according to VRRWS, have nothing to do with the body and yet everything to do with the maturation experiences of that body all at the same time. (Do all women really have the same experiences and experience the same trajectory from birth to death?) And both the body and gender are reducible to what is visible and discernible.

Admittedly, we can dismiss the trans-phobic resistance to Kimberly Nixon’s presence in VRRWS as (conservative) feminist politics gone wrong. But what about the case of the person Sons of the Movement will claim as a FtM trans hero, David Reimer? To date, very few trans-cultural workers and academics have taken up Reimer’s case, despite his suicide in 2003. Important caveats by Halberstam and Hale about claims made on the dead notwithstanding (1998), David’s case is worth pausing over. Like many other trans-folks I’ve had conversations with since hearing of David’s suicide, I was struck by the degree to which his movement through genders, despite his birth into a male body, uncannily resembles many of the stories of FtMs. David’s story seems to come into the public realm in and around 1967, when he and his twin brother were circumcised at the age of seven months. As the story goes, David’s is botched and as a remedy, David’s family agrees to a somewhat unusual, controversial, and seemingly far-fetched treatment. That remedy—sexual reassignment surgery and treatment—launches the career of Dr. John Money, who uses David’s case to build an argument against essentialist causation in favour of social construction. The treatment fails and at age 18, David begins a process of reassignment into a masculine identity, one that he claims in John Colapinto’s As Nature Made Him (2000) as well as in other interviews was his natural identity all along. So, the trajectory of David’s identity has been from M to F, then to F to M again, where we understand that these multiple “M’s” and “F’s” are not themselves necessarily even equal to each other. As evidence of this, “David” was not even his actual birth name; it was the name he chose after transitioning back into what he characterized as his birth identity. David’s birth name was Bruce; David’s first reassigned name was Brenda; his twin brother, who committed suicide several years before David, was named Brian.
The degree to which Dr. Money medicalized trans- and intersexed identities is evident in David’s story as it was told to Colapinto. These seem to be always already mediated narratives, perhaps even and especially for David, but the narrative he and David produce are telling for the stakes of the medicalized management of appropriately sexed and gender bodies. The lives of David, Bruce, and Brian were significant and while I certainly am not claiming a definitive interpretation, I remain convinced that each is worth including within the frameworks of post-queer incoherence. It is significant that David has left behind a legacy of interviews as well as his book with John Colapinto and even though we may not have agreed on the “cause” of gender identities, David’s story continues to haunt any narrative of the medicalized (mis-)management of gender identities. What becomes very clear in David’s story is the degree to which his gender identity, regardless of where and how it came to be, was somewhat established by the time his MtF reassignment took place. After his FtM reassignment, David recounts memories of himself as a boy as well as a strong male self-image. But what is also clear is the degree to which David and his brother were both forced to endure abuse at the hands of Dr. Money in the name of treatment and corrective therapy. For instance, Colapinto reports memories from both Brian and David about the use of pornography in teaching children about the supposed difference between male and female genitals (Colapinto 2000: 86), but even more disturbing were memories of visual self-inspection (inspecting each other’s genitals) and simulated sex, which was:

First introduced when the twins were six years old. Money, [Brian] says, would make Brenda assume a position on all fours on his office sofa and make Brian come up behind her on his knees and place his crotch against her buttocks. Variations on the therapy included Brenda lying on her back with her legs spread and Brian lying on top of her. On at least one occasion, Brian, says, Dr. Money took a Polaroid photography of them while they were engaged in this part of the therapy. (Colapinto 2000: 87)

Again, regardless of how one accounts for the production of gender identity (the nature vs. nurture debate), these accounts of sexual abuse passing as “therapy”—that is, sexual abuse in the name of compulsory heterosexuality and forced and coercive engendering—should be enough to fold these issues directly into both a feminist agenda and issues of social justice. To date, there is nothing but silence about these types of abuses of children (of any gender) in the name of heteronormative corrective management. If we presume, as
we can, that Brian and David were not isolated cases, then how is it possible that these are anything other than feminist issues? Moreover, David’s chosen identity and his experiences as they are detailed in *As Nature Made Him* are those of an FtM, at least for part of his life. So, at the same time, then, how could David (and even his brother Brian) not be a trans hero(es)? And why are we, as trans activists and academics, not championing his trans story?

And given the poverty of our sexual and gender categories, where might we place David: Queer? Heterosexual? Homosexual? None seems to fit particularly well, which tells us that our categories are already out of date. Hence the need for the term “post-queer” in my subtitle. Part of the work I want *Sons of the Movement* to accomplish—beyond carrying stories like David’s to their necessary audiences—is to challenge the existing and available categories we have for classifying both our lives and our social movements. I will return to a discussion of the impoverishment of our categories later in Chapter 1, where I argue that for me as an FtM who has had a long life as a lesbian that I do not renounce, the oversimplistic and invested categories of “man,” “lesbian,” “butch,” and even “FtM” are not flexible enough to name my experiences. If I call myself, as I do, a “guy who is half lesbian,” where does that fit? I want to begin documenting in this book the realities and lived experiences of those of us who might be verging on incoherent, post-queer landscapes. As I will posit here, it seems that “queer” is beginning to become an unusable term; it has the potential to be centripetal or stabilizing the space it marks, or centrifugal, that is, destabilizing the spaces it flags (as in to pervert, torsion, make strange). While I am convinced, for instance, by Ann Cvetkovich’s argument that each of these markers—“queer” as much as “lesbian”—are insufficient as monolithic spaces, relations, categories, etc., it seems to me it’s time to call for another—dare I say a post-queer—refinement of our languageings (Cvetkovich 2003).

Nowhere is this refinement more evident than in the smallest but most resonant traces that mark the “I” we live through: gendered pronouns. When “gender” no longer references “sex,” then the pronouns “he” and “she” can no longer reference a discernibly gendered body. In this book, I will use pronouns strategically, including my own, to reference what I identify as post-queer rearticulations of counter-discursive subjectivities and practices. If subjects are in dialogue with discourse and speak it as often as they are spoken by it, then the processes of “self-articulation” are themselves meta-discursive. That is, they are about those discourses as much as they are of and in opposition to those discourses, hence the importance of trans-cultural work in mapping these discourses both on the same map with, but certainly on a different grid,
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from those mapped by feminism, queer theory, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual studies. Butler names the stakes: “That feminism has always countered violence against women, sexual and nonsexual, ought to serve as a basis for alliance with these other movements, since phobic violence against bodies is what joins anti-homophobic, antiracist, feminist, trans, and intersex activism” (2004: 9). That said, within intersectional methodologies and frameworks not all violences against bodies are equal, nor are they extraneous to these movements. To be White, as I will argue in Chapter 4, means to be situated relative to systemic violences whether intentionally enacted or not. Again, to quote Butler: “Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group, and another way for another group” (2004: 8). I recognize that for me, “becoming male” is a lifelong process. I also recognize at the same time that White masculinity has been, not to overstate the case, an agent of near-genocide, death, violence, terror, and destruction. Sons of the Movement is, I hope, situated in both of these truisms and calls for a radical politic of deconstructing White masculinity as much as many of us need to step into these admittedly post-queer categories all at the same time.

Sons of the Movement also theorizes the post-queer spaces in one specific location—Toronto—as significant to the culturally specific situatedness of trans-ness as it emerges within the city as a construct itself. The completion of this book occurred as I left Toronto to begin my work at the University of Victoria. While I have been happy to leave behind many aspects of a large urban centre—pollution, noise, traffic, endless line-ups, etc.—I find, on the other hand, that it is precisely the diversity offered by such a city that enables livable, sustainable political, social, and aesthetic practices. I have not lost my ambivalence for Toronto since leaving it, but even as I write, I know that Sons of the Movement is part memoir, part emotional archive and testament, but like all good memoirs, it is also a social and critical history of present politicized communities and artistic practices in No Man’s Land. Mine is one snapshot of a life well lived in one geographical location, but it remains singular and, I am certain, an invested reading as it is always already autobiographical.

That said, the questions raised by these post-queer skirmishes in No Man’s Land are the questions shared by both trans studies and contemporary scholarship in gender and sexuality studies: What is masculinity? Femininity? What is gender? And how is gender related to bodies? This book suggests that answers to these questions are to be found in cultural artifacts: texts, performances, and/or images that explore engendered and trans subjects. Those artifacts are the stuff of, quite literally, life-changing cultural work and the important questions raised and documented by Sons of the Movement.
Chapter 1 develops many of the conversations of the introduction, although it begins to elaborate on the differences in these identities/identifications in a more autobiographical way. I tell the most recent part of my own story here through the two primary men in my childhood: my father, who was a closeted gay man, and my grandfather, who came to Canada as one of the Barnardo children. Barnardo ran a series of orphanages throughout England at the turn of the 20th century as a strategy to deal with the increasing number of street children. The Barnardo homes and affiliates struck a deal with the Canadian government to ship these “little immigrants,” children between the ages of 12–18, to Canada to work in the kitchens and fields of Canadian farms. The violent, exploitative, and abusive experiences of these children are well documented; my grandfather was one of the “Barnardo boys” and I trace a genealogy of my own class and gender through these two very different working-class men in an attempt to elaborate on trans-rearticulations of manhood in No Man’s Land.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore theoretical questions around female, male, and trans-sexual masculinity within the larger context of masculinity in popular culture and White masculinity in several Hollywood films: *Gangs of New York*, *Fight Club*, and *8 Mile*. Here I consider the resurgence of the boy as a gender identity in car television commercials, boy bands, recent Hollywood films, and postmodern theory. Chapter 3 in particular reads for that boi/boy in queer popular culture what Kathleen Martindale called un/popular culture. The objects I choose to look at here are not all produced in Toronto: for instance, *Girl King* is a brilliant film made by a West Coast femme film-maker, Ileana Pietrobruno (2003). But if anything links these performances of boy culture together, it must be my own personal culture of consumption, which was Toronto, a far different culture of reading practices than those in Victoria. This chapter will read the relationship between masculinity, race (including whiteness), class, and sexuality by analyzing the performances of several local drag kings who are resident members of Toronto’s No Man’s Land—Susan Justin (“Stu”) and Deb Pearce (“Man Murray” and “Dirk Diggler”)—as well as other Toronto drag king troupes: KingSize Kings, New Cocks on the Block, and the first ever group of kings in Toronto, The Greater Toronto Drag King Society. Drag king performances resignify masculinity through various postmodernist strategies, including parody and ironic reiterations of song lyrics. Man Murray, on the other hand, takes aim at the whiteness and the gender contradictions of Canadian singer Anne Murray. Layering recognizable performances of female masculinity onto a “failed” performance of heteronormative femininity, Man queers that which has signified queerly