

To be on Song

Laurie J. Shrage, ed. 2009. *'You've Changed': Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press. 220 pp.
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'You've Changed': Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity is a collected volume, edited by the feminist philosopher Laurie J. Shrage, whose previous work concerns reproductive and sexual rights. The book's eleven chapters centre on themes as diverse as bodily agency and authenticity; the legal, ethical and social aspects of intelligibility; plastic surgery and race change; and the sex/gender distinction. These topics are discussed in terms of their relevance for transembodied and non-transembodied subjects, underlining the book's stated objective to facilitate bridge-building between trans and nontrans feminists. As Shrage puts it in the Introduction, the essays in this collection on transsexuality raise issues 'about the sex or gender identities of those who see themselves as normally sexed and gendered' (9).

The argument throughout *'You've*

Changed' is that transsexuality cannot be located in an identity or a singular difference. The terminology of the book also reflects the impossibility of final location. While the authors sometimes use 'transsexuality' to refer to people who seek sex reassignment, and 'transgender' to denote those without medical treatment, these terms are also used interchangeably. This is the usage I will be following here, giving semantic privilege to the prefix 'trans' that, in the transtheorist Bobby Noble's words, has the capacity 'to signify subjectivities where bodies are at odds with gender presentation, regardless of whether that mis-alignment is self-evident in conventional ways or not' (Noble cited in Overall 2009, 11). The pronoun 'we' will also be used frequently in the review. It is intended to refer to those located at the intersections between transtheory and feminism and is not meant

to erase differences between individuals.

What links the different chapters in the volume together is the understanding that the scope of personal change – including, but not limited to, gender transition - exceeds the self. Chapters 1-4 question the possibility of imagining gender as well as transgender as bounded categories that produce equally bounded selves. The first chapter, written by Christine Overall on ‘Sex/Gender Transitions and Life-Changing Aspirations’ questions the ‘gender within’ argument that assumes that ‘the [post-transition] real person is a reified self that constitutes the core of the individual and that does not change during the transition’ (18). Overall argues that gender is not innate, given or uncomplicated, and it does not cease to be problematic once the transition is over. In ‘Transsexuality and Contextual Identities’ (Ch. 2), Georgia Warnke goes further by proposing a ‘dis-establishing’ of gender. As Warnke writes, ‘when we think we are describing gender, we may well be describing something else instead, not only race or class but nationality, age and a host of different attributes’ (32). Instead of using gender as the basis of categorizing people, Warnke suggests that we see identities as interpretations whose gender is relevant in some contexts, but not in others. For instance, trans/gender should not be seen as an essential marker of identity that has any bear-

ing on the meaning of marriage. The imperative to disestablish identity categories, such as the ontologically stable category of ‘the transsexual’, is also put forward in Jacob C. Hale’s chapter, entitled ‘Tracing a Ghostly Memory in My Throat: Reflections on Ftm Feminist Voice and Agency’ (Ch. 3). For Hale, the worldliness or embodied complexity of translives is not reflected in extant identity categories that require ‘denying, erasing, or otherwise abjecting personally significant aspects of ourselves’ (55). Therefore, Hale proposes that we seek to inhabit categorial borderlands rather than categories themselves. Category slippages carry the promise of freedom also for Naomi Zack. In her obituary-essay entitled ‘Transsexuality and Daseia Y. Cavers-Huff’ (Ch. 4), Zack claims that gender is a choice for trans and nontrans people alike. Transpeople do not transgress gender so much as they transgress prevalent ideas about freedom; about what can be. That is why transsexuality appears to be a problem for normatively gendered interpretive others: because it stands for too much freedom. This transgression is also seen as automatically relating to other multiple positionings. As Zack writes provocatively: ‘I speculate that editors assume I am qualified to write about transsexuality by virtue of being multiracial’ (74).

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 focus on the role of perception in shaping trans/bodies and trans/lives. Gayle

Salamon reads the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's 'fantastically ambiguous' (85) account of sexuality in 'The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception*' (Ch. 5). Merleau-Ponty argues that the body exists in how the 'I' experiences it, but one's perception alone is not sufficient to make one's body. Instead, the body is forged through one's relationships with, and desire for, others. For Salamon this means that no ontological truth can be inferred from the contours of one's body: the 'truth' of the body's sex exists in the 'relation between the material and the ideal, the perceiver and the perceived, between the materiality of any one body and the network of forces and contexts that shape the material and the meaning of that body' (93). However, as Talia Mae Bettcher points out in 'Trans-Identities and First-Person Authority' (Ch. 6), we can only understand sex this way if the other and the self exist in an ethical relationship. Ethics here means recognizing others' authority over their self-perceptions, something which transpeople have historically been denied. In 'Queer Breasted Experience' (Ch. 7), Kim Q. Hall writes that instead of understanding sex and disability as bodily facts, we should see them as attributions. Calling for a disalignment of sex and body parts, Hall suggests that the experiences of, for instance, women with mastectomy scars and female-bodied men are intelligible

only in terms of 'a phenomenology of sex in which biology offers no unifying ground' (129).

Cressida J. Heyes and Diana Tietjens Meyers' texts are concerned with the feminist critique that sees sex reassignment as unnecessary body modification and relates it to plastic surgery, a pertinent and undertheorized example of elective body manipulation. Heyes's focus is the assumed analogy between transsexuality and transracialism, or the modification of one's racial features by surgery. As she writes in 'Changing Race, Changing Sex: The Ethics of Self-Transformation' (Ch. 8), the analogical model of thinking is misleading because it treats 'gender, race, sexuality, and other identity categories as identical building blocks by assuming their equivalence' (138). Heyes argues that different differences are mutually constitutive: one cannot be understood through the analytic rubric of the other. In 'Artifice and Authenticity: Gender Technology and Agency in Two Jenny Saville Portraits' (Ch. 9), Meyers contests the Cartesian underpinnings of the feminist discourse on plastic surgery and sex change. Similarly to Heyes, Meyers also relies on a model of mutual constitution, only she emphasizes the radical correlation between body and mind. Meyers claims agency for bodies that are produced by surgery by arguing for a 'psychocorporeality of selfhood' (156) whereby the self is seen as residing in the body, not

only or specifically in the mind.

As Shrage and Graham Mayeda show, dominant scientific and legal discourses would have us disbelieve this notion that agency resides in the body. Shrage's chapter, 'Sex and Miscibility' (Ch. 10) discusses female and male hormones that are taken to be determining for the development of sexed embodiment. Shrage states that these so-called 'sex hormones' can be found in both females and males. This implies that sex only masquerades as a given; in fact, bodies and body parts 'become female and male by virtue of their respective female and male chemicals and chemicals take on female and male properties by virtue of their presence in bodies we read as female and male' (181-82). Mayeda in 'Who Do You Think You Are? When Should the Law Let You Be Who You Wanna Be?' (Ch. 11) writes about how the law relies on the stability offered by the scientific categorization of bodies on the basis of their sex. As he says, 'Challenging the binary of male/female surprises, and the law, like society, does not like surprises' (197). In Mayeda's view, there needs to be an ethical relationship between the law and its subjects. This is possible only if the law takes into account one's self-identification: 'if we recognize another's self-identified gender identity, we have the possibility of freeing them from restrictive social norms, and thereby we take responsibility for both the subjectiv-

ity of the other and the way in which these norms exclude her' (203).

'*You've Changed*' got its title from a popular jazz number. The song 'You've Changed' is about heartbreak and losing the other. As Billie Holiday sings it, 'You've changed/ You're not the angel I once knew/ No need to tell me that we're through/ It's all over now/ You've changed'. "*You've Changed*", the book reverses this narrative order. It recognizes that the words 'you've changed' also create a scene of address. Calling somebody 'you' – as opposed to, say, 'the transsexual', or 'the nontrans feminist' - does not so much ask the possibility of a shared reality as it marks the recognition of the presence and urgency of such a world. The volume is the first co-authored book in philosophy that is, to borrow Bettcher and Garry's phrase, both 'feminist and trans-centered' (Bettcher and Garry 2009, 1). It provides a well-guided tour to various theories. What it does *not* do is play the same old song.

References

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