

CONSUMING THE LIVING, DIS(RE)MEMBERING THE DEAD IN THE BUTCH/FTM BORDERLANDS

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The one saith, This is my son that liveth, and thy son is the dead; and the other saith, Nay; but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living. And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king.

And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other.

—1 Kings 3:23–25

Indiscriminate Erasures: The “Brandon Teena” Slice-’n’-Dice

In Nebraska, a man was sentenced for killing a female cross-dresser, who had accused him of rape, and two of her friends. Excuse me if this sounds harsh but, in my mind, they all deserved to die.

—Norm MacDonald, “Weekend Update,” *Saturday Night Live*, February 24, 1996

On 31 December 1993, John Lotter and Marvin Thomas Nissen murdered three young people in a farmhouse in Humboldt, Nebraska. It is unlikely that this triple homicide would have received much attention in mainstream media, academic studies, or in lesbian, gay, and transgender publications had not one of those murdered been a gender-ambiguous young person who had lived for several years in a butch/ftm border zone.¹ A week before being murdered, in the early hours of

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Christmas Day, this twenty-one-year-old person sometimes described as a “female cross-dresser” was kidnapped and raped by Lotter and Nissen, after they forcibly removed the youth’s pants to expose a vagina. The consequences of finding a vagina underneath the clothing of a person who appeared to be a young man were less severe at the hospital where the youth went for treatment after being raped: the hospital chart was amended to read “Teena Brandon/F” rather than “Charles Brandon/M”; physical evidence of vaginal and anal penetration was collected, and medical treatment was provided.² Upon discovering subsequent to this medical examination that the “transvestite Teena Brandon” had a substantial criminal record for petty crimes and some outstanding warrants, Richardson County sheriff Charles Laux and Deputy Sheriff Tom Olberding questioned the young person, and that interrogation provided an occasion for a revictimization that took forms specific to the young person’s gender ambiguity.³ Laux asked questions about socks stuffed into pants, virginity, willingness to have intercourse with the accused rapists, “kissing on girls,” and gender presentation, and said, referring to the rape victim, “You can call it an *it* as far as I’m concerned.”⁴

In the period before the murders, the young person whom Laux dehumanized and objectified with the pronoun *it* usually just went by the name “Brandon.” This person’s birth and burial name was Tecna Renae Brandon, though in court during the murder trials the name “Teena Ray Brandon” was used.⁵ This young person first passed as male using the name “Billy Brinson” but had a savings account as a teenager under the name “Teen R. Brandon.”⁶ At various times, the youth used many other masculine or gender-neutral names: “Charles Brandon,” “Brandon Brinson,” “Ten-a Brandon,” “Billy Brandon,” “Brandon Brayman,” “Tenor Ray Brandon,” and “Charles Brayman,” a cousin’s name. There was a local rumor, attributed to a bartender, that this young person had once signed the name “Brandon Teena.”⁷ Donna Minkowitz also reports that “the woman christened Teena Brandon . . . reversed her first and last names,” but she does not disclose her source.⁸

While being questioned by the sheriff’s department, according to Aphrodite Jones, “Teena told them she was experiencing a sexual identity crisis, but when asked about it, she couldn’t explain what that meant.”⁹ A state of crisis over identity, sexual and otherwise, characterizes not only “Brandon’s” brief life but also the media attention devoted to this murdered youth. Much of this crisis finds its focal point in the necessity of being named (a crisis reflected in my own attempts to avoid pronominal references to the young person whose self-identity is at issue). The question about “Brandon’s” last name is particularly significant. Having a full name—first, last, and middle—in a culture with this naming norm

is part of what constitutes a subject's solidity within the social order. For some transsexuals, settling on a full name that will be used for the rest of our lives is an important part of the process of repositioning ourselves within a gendered social order, and choosing a full name, if we have not used one consistently, is an act of reinsertion into that gendered social order in which we previously have not been fully or firmly located. This might have been especially relevant to someone who used a family name as a gendered first name, often without using any last name.

The function of naming as solidifying insertion into the social fabric is what drives transgender activists—justifiably sensitive to the many ways in which the lives of transgendered subjects are socially, corporeally, or linguistically erased—to insist that “Brandon Teena” and masculine pronouns as markers of transsexual or transgender configurations of this young person's identity are the only correct modes of representation. In the words of one contributor to *TNT: The Transsexual News Telegraph* who made the pilgrimage to Nebraska for the murder trial, nomenclature is crucial: it is “Brandon Teena (never, not ever Teena Brandon)” and “the criminal ashamed-to-call-them-humans who murdered Brandon because He (not Her, not ever Her because We decide who We are) had the courage and the strength to live a life of his choice.”¹⁰

The erasure of transgender subjectivity and the foreclosure of potentially transsexual life paths or identifications in both mainstream and gay/lesbian media coverage of “Brandon” have in fact been significant factors in the development of transgender political activism and community organizing in North America. One of the first actions undertaken by Transsexual Menace, a direct-action group whose T-shirts with dripping blood-red lettering on a black background have become recognizable throughout North America, which was founded in New York by Riki Anne Wilchins, was a protest of Donna Minkowitz's 1994 *Village Voice* article “Love Hurts: Brandon Teena Was a Woman Who Lived and Loved as a Man: She Was Killed for Carrying It Off.”¹¹ Despite the multiple ambivalences of this young person's life, the figure of transgendered or transsexual “Brandon Teena” has quickly become part of the seabed onto which a burgeoning transgender/transsexual political movement has anchored itself. “Brandon Teena” has become the primary emblem of transphobic violence, an emblem deployed to exemplify the vulnerability of transgendered people, the extent of hatred against transgendered people, and the need for changes in law, policy, media representation, and public opinion. To a certain degree, the success of this movement in advancing its goals can be gauged by the willingness of other progressive movements or groups to embrace “Brandon/he” as hegemonic markers of their commitment to transgender social justice. One recent example is that in early 1997 GLAAD and the Gay and Les-

bian Anti-Violence Project joined FTM International and GenderPAC in writing letters to protest the *New Yorker's* publication of John Gregory Dunne's article "The Humboldt Murders," decrying Dunne's multiple uses of feminine pronouns and "Teena" to refer to the person whom Wilchins positions as a "transsexual man."¹²

While she is insensitive to transgender concerns in some respects, true-crime writer Aphrodite Jones accurately assesses the situation when she notes that stabilizing and popularizing the name "'Brandon Teena' . . . was putting transgenders on the map. Of course, it was of no concern to them that there was no such name as Brandon Teena. That was a minor detail."¹³ Insistence on "Brandon Teena" produces a representation of someone more solidly grounded in gendered social ontology than the subject (recon)figured by that name actually might have been. The creation and maintenance of that name as the anchoring emblem for a transgender political agenda requires the erasure of all the many aspects of "his" life that do not resolutely conform to "properly" transsexual or transgendered self-identifications. In a crisis center after an alleged suicide attempt, "Teena Brandon" received papers ruling out "lesbian transsexuality" (i.e., ego-dystonic homosexuality leading to a desire for sex change) and confirming that this person was indeed a "man trapped in a woman's body."¹⁴ A transsexual trajectory, however, was never pursued by "Teena Brandon"; physical intersexuality often provided a self-explanatory discourse.¹⁵ According to Minkowitz, a high school best friend helped invent "the hermaphrodite story" because "Teena . . . was afraid maybe that's [sex reassignment] not what she wanted."¹⁶

This suspect stabilization of the name "Brandon Teena" on behalf of nonetheless laudable transgender political and social goals also worked to harden the borders drawn between butches and ftms. When *Transexual Menace* picketed the *Village Voice* for what it considered Donna Minkowitz's transphobic (and "stone-bashing") portrayal of "Brandon" as a stone butch, mutual accusations of colonizing each others' identities flew back and forth across the divide. As Minkowitz herself notes, "Brandon's survivors choose their own images of her according to their memories, gender norms, and sexual shame" (26), yet she seems totally unaware that she, too, as one of "Brandon's survivors," also chooses an image of "her" according to her own norms, categories, and investments in gender, sex, and sexuality:

However they classify Brandon, everybody wants her. From photos of the wonder-boychik playing pool, kissing babes, and lifting a straight male neighbor high up in the air to impress party goers at her and Gina's engagement party, Brandon looks to be the cutest butch item in history—

not just good-looking, but arrogant, audacious, cocky—everything they, and I, look for in lovers. Her bereaved girlfriends are leery of describing sexual details, but it's glaringly clear Brandon was the precise opposite of a "do me" feminist. "He wouldn't let anyone touch him *here, here, or here,*" Lana says, pointing to her breasts, crotch, and thighs. Other lovers report, with varying degrees of explicitness, that Brandon never got touched by them. She was the only one who touched, stroked, stimulated, or shtupped. You could call Brandon a top, but I'm not sure that word fully captures her enormous desire to give other people pleasure. (27)

Transgender critics, especially ftms, have been quick to point out how Minkowitz's characterization of "Brandon" folds gender ambiguity in a female-bodied person into the category "lesbian" as part of the pathology of stone-butched sexuality, attributing gender confusion, a possible transsexual identification, and stone sexuality all to childhood sexual abuse.¹⁷ Minkowitz's representation joins with many gay and lesbian viewpoints that evidently cannot place transgender phenomena in any framework other than that of sexual orientation, and thus she constructs the violent crimes enacted on this nonnormatively gendered body as instances of lesbian-specific hate crimes.¹⁸ Such a construction erases the specific dangers of gender-ambiguous embodiment.

Minkowitz is not the only lesbian author to use the figure "Brandon" to ground an analysis of stone-butched sexuality. *Girlfriends* editor Heather Findlay interpolates quotations about the rape and murder of "Brandon Teena" from her pseudonymous stone-butched informant J-Boy in a manner that elides tensions between the categories "woman," "lesbian," "butch," and "stone." J-Boy speaks about the need for new category words to talk about convergences of nonnormative gender, sex, and sexuality in general, whereas Findlay recasts this as a point about needing new language to talk specifically about stone-butched desires and practices:

"Our mission is to find new names that work," says British-born J-Boy. . . . J-Boy cites the case of Brandon Teena, the Nebraskan youth who was raped and murdered in 1993 after townsfolk discovered that their handsome neighbor, whose straight girlfriends thanked him for "the best sex [they] ever had," was actually a woman. "We need names that we can use to draw people into subcultural sexual communities and out of that hostile world where their genders have no chance of being recognized."

To be fluent in the language of stone does not amount, simply, to

researching and supporting a minority “desire” among lesbians. To understand stone butch identity is to see that lesbianism isn’t as simple as women loving women, that lesbian desire—even the most garden variety—obeys individual patterns or structures. To understand stone butch is to meet a group of women who may be riding the wave of a widespread cultural redefinition of what it means to be a woman or man.¹⁹

In a series of inadvertent yet indiscriminate erasures, Findlay, like Minkowitz, folds gender ambiguity in a female-bodied person into the category “lesbian” and collapses stone butches into the category “woman,” (apparently without grasping that the words *female-bodied* and *woman* might not be coextensive with regard to some people’s self-identifications), especially those of some stone butches. To her credit, Findlay does not reproduce Minkowitz’s representation of stone sexuality as pathological. Although she evidently approves of an anticipated widespread “redefinition of what it means to be a man or a woman,” Findlay nevertheless reproduces a very traditional and (in a queer feminist context) politically problematic definition of womanhood in her remark that “townsfolk discovered that their handsome neighbor . . . was actually a woman.” What the townsfolk discovered was a vagina. Findlay inadvertently turns a vagina into the actuality of gender categorization—as if biology was destiny after all, as if self-identifications and social presentations matter for nothing, as if we all “really are” what our culture tells us our genitals mean, and as if genitals always, inevitably outweigh agency. Findlay’s unremarked conflation of a vagina with womanhood might well overlook many choices made by that gender-ambiguous young person murdered in a Humboldt farmhouse, and certainly this conflation elides the realities of many stone butches who do not self-identify as women. Her construction of the relationship between genitals and gender erases the self-constructions of others who orchestrate other relationships between gender presentation, genitals, and other aspects of embodiment, self-identification, and subjectivity.

Elaine K. Ginsberg uses “Brandon Teena” in a strikingly different way. She positions “Brandon Teena” as the primary figure around which to develop an analysis of gender passing, the dissolution of gender essentialism, the permeability of gender boundaries, and the downfall of male gender privilege. Ginsberg writes, “In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to create new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress.”²⁰ However, Ginsberg’s foreclosure of a possible transsexual

self-identification or trajectory for "Brandon" leads her into self-contradiction. By conjoining a reduction of the sexed characteristics of "Brandon's" body to a vagina with a similar reduction of transsexuality to surgical alteration, "Brandon's" "female body" (that vagina which Lotter and Nissen exposed a few hours before the rape) signifies for Ginsberg "Brandon's" solidly nontranssexual female identity (2, 16 n. 2). The textual technique used to accomplish these reductions mimics other means by which transsexuality is rendered invisible. Transsexuality is mentioned only as the limit case for the range of phenomena under consideration and then only in an endnote which sweeps it to the periphery of the author's (and reader's) critical gaze: "This discussion also does not consider the case of transsexuals, those who wish to alter their physical body surgically so that it more closely conforms to their felt identity" (16 n. 2). Duly noted and tucked safely out of sight, the boundary between a dismissed and disparaged transsexuality and a celebrated gender passing is affixed firmly to a stable genital reference point. By glossing gender passing as cross-dressing, Ginsberg keeps familiar associations between *female* and vagina, *male* and penis, securely in place, thus making gender boundaries increasingly rigid (13).²¹ Further, construction of the trope "Brandon Teena" excludes instances of exactly those "multiple subject positions" forged through self-determination and agency whose proliferation she seeks to encourage.

Three young people's self-determination and agency were ended by the murders John Lotter and Marvin Thomas Nissen committed. One of these young people's self-determination and agency continues to be erased indiscriminately even in death. Riki Anne Wilchins accuses John Gregory Dunne of having "appropriated . . . Brandon Teena's tragic murder" for his "larger cultural agenda";²² yet charges of appropriation in the service of cultural and political agendas are leveled just as accurately against any of those who insist on fixed categorical locations of that young person who could not (or would not) explain to officers Laux and Olberding what it meant to be having a sexual identity crisis. The best evidence available to us shows that multiple future trajectories were still open for this young person, including some for which there is no existing language. Normatively gendered feminine heterosexual womanhood is the only trajectory inconsistent with all of the fragments of apparently contradictory evidence we have about this life as it was lived. If people insist on appropriating this corpse by locating it definitively within any particular identity category, they must explain away multiple inconsistencies, ambiguities, and ambivalences in self-identification, self-explanation, behavior, and presentation by using concepts of denial, repression, fear, and internalized prejudice and shame that all tend to diminish the agency of the subject

once animated in that dead flesh. To justify belief in different, solidly located outcomes, all that need shift is the content of these schematic rhetorical devices and those aspects of the life to which they are applied. For example, if internalized transphobia explains why “Brandon Teena” did not pursue a transsexual future despite receiving the requisite diagnosis and being urged to do so by “his” mother and girlfriends, internalized lesbophobia explains equally well why “Teena Brandon” claimed that “she” was not a lesbian, that lesbians were disgusting, and that lesbian sex was gross.²³

We do not know which trajectory—or which multiple trajectories that appear inconsistent with each other by our lights—this young murder victim would have followed. All were foreclosed by murderers’ blades and bullets. In a necrophagic feeding frenzy, the living have sliced this corpse into at least five different pieces: cross-dresser, transvestite, transgender, transsexual, and butch lesbian.²⁴ (The living likewise bury any aspects of the embodied self this youth constructed that do not fit their own constructions) In so doing, the living refuse to acknowledge that this person was a border-zone dweller: someone whose embodied self existed in a netherworld constituted by the margins of multiple overlapping identity categories. Perhaps Brandon or Teena—or the same person by another chosen name—would have stayed in the borderlands; perhaps she or he would have sought and found a more solid categorical location and language with which to construct and speak that self. We simply do not know. To do more than speculate about this is to collude with the foreclosure of future self-constructions that was so abruptly enacted by murder.

It might be thought that worries about how a dead person lived and would have lived are no more than pedantic quibbles over niceties of historical, sociological, or definitional accuracy or obsessions with trivial details, since such disputes are, presumably, of no concern to those now dead. The wisdom of Solomon might have saved the life of an infant and restored him to his mother’s bosom, but John Lotter and Marvin Thomas Nissen have already taken this life. But I would like to suggest several ways in which categorical placement of the dead matters politically. Specific representational elements used to pull a dead body into a category can have quite specific consequences for choices the living make about their own lives. For example, transsexual activists’ construction of the rape and murder of film “Brandon Teena” as emblematic of transphobic violence has led some films to seek vaginectomies for fear of being treated as women by being raped and revictimized if they report the crime. The hegemonic transsexual construction of “Brandon Teena” has seemed to provide compelling reasons for some films not only to stay closeted themselves but to decry others’ openness for fear that increased film

visibility will increase the chances that their own transsexual status will be discovered and that they will meet the same fate as “Brandon Teena.” It has prompted others, such as Stephan Thorne, to become or remain politically active and in the public eye as a counterpoint to violent erasure.²⁵

Disputes about contested category placement are one of the arenas in which contemporary categories and their boundaries are articulated. Such articulations, of course, have consequences for the living: they matter for decisions about who is included in and who is excluded from contemporary categories, whether in accordance with or contrary to individuals’ desires. More specifically, when a border zone denizen’s corpse is claimed by those with firmer categorical location, border zones become less habitable for those who are trying to live in the nearly unspeakable spaces created by the overlapping margins of distinct categories. Border zone inhabitants infer reasonably that their lack of fixed location within categories is prohibited by the more firmly located, that such absence will be used as grounds for subjecting them to multiple indiscriminate erasures, and that their sullen resistant silences and their dissenting cries alike will be folded into the discourses of those with more solid categorical and thus social locations. Such border zone denizens might be people who are attempting to forge permanent border zone existences, or they might be people who are desperately seeking a more solid location but whose attempts to construct a way to live within their own skins are hampered when they are continually grasped at from all sides. In both situations, tropes become disconnected from lives, and subjectivity is erased by others’ inappropriate use. Insistence by others on consistently gendered pronouns that do not reflect one’s own subjectivity and agency can be as much a technique of objectification as Sheriff Laux’s “You can call it an *it* as far as I’m concerned.” Indiscriminate erasure of a living border dweller’s multiple complexities, ambiguities, inconsistencies, ambivalences, and border zone status hinders that subject’s ability to build a self through which to live.

Dis(re)membering the Dead/Eating the Living: Epistemological and Definitional Problems with Border Defense

The most visible butch/ftm border war skirmishes have been necrophagic fights over dead bodies such as that of “Brandon Teena”/“Teena Brandon.” From the ftm side of the border wars, it sometimes looks as if lesbian and gay organizations and media collude with the mainstream press to consume the flesh of (transsexual or otherwise) transgendered men’s corpses. Louis Sullivan’s reclamation of female-bodied historical figures who lived as men was an important facet of initial ftm com-

munity formation in the United States. Until his death from AIDS complications on 2 March 1991, Sullivan ran FTM, a San Francisco–based support, social, and informational organization exclusively for ftm transsexuals and cross-dressers, which later became the first international ftm organization.²⁶ Sullivan edited the first fourteen issues of *FTM* (September 1987–December 1990; later, this became the *FTM Newsletter*) in which he occasionally featured short articles about such historical figures. Additionally, Sullivan’s *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual*, widely distributed among ftms as a multiply photocopied booklet before publication of the third edition in perfect-bound form in 1990, contains many such reports.²⁷

It is worth noting that Sullivan, the individual most responsible for ftm community formation in the United States and for the ftm reclamation of earlier historical figures, is someone who belies the notion of a butch/ftm continuum. Sullivan, a gay man who saw himself as a heterosexual transvestite before transition, had no history of intimate relationships with women or participation in lesbian communities. Butch/ftm border wars threaten to erase the subjectivities and experiences of those ftms who might already be most marginal within ftm communities.

The three butch/ftm border war figures, in addition to “Brandon Teena,” whose names are most recognizable in contemporary ftm circles are medical doctor and novelist Alan Hart (1892–1962), whose location relative to the categories “butch” and “ftm” was at issue in a recent transgender community controversy;²⁸ jazz musician Billy Tipton (1915?–1989), who died after refusing to seek medical treatment for a bleeding ulcer;²⁹ and newspaper columnist, Spanish-American War army-transport cabin boy, male nurse, and adventurer Jack Bee Garland (1869–1936), the child of Mexico’s first consul to San Francisco who lived the last forty years of his life as a man after the sex/gender of “the mysterious girl-boy, man-woman, or what-is-it” became a matter of dispute and gossip in Stockton, California, area newspapers in 1897–1898.³⁰

To place contemporary corpses, such as that of “Brandon Teena”/“Teena Brandon,” categorically, we would need to have adequate criteria for membership in the contemporary categories “butch” and “ftm.” Additionally, we would need to have reliable, relevant information about those people over whose dead bodies we fight: about how they actually lived their lives and about how they actually thought about themselves. It is often difficult to gain accurate information about the lives of those now dead, since often the survivors—upon whose reports we frequently must rely—construct their reports based on their own investments in the genderings of the dead. Just as Minkowitz writes that “Brandon’s survivors choose their own images of her according to their memories, gender norms, and sexual

shame,” reports from the survivors might construe the dead as what the survivors most wanted them to be, as what the survivors most feared they were, or by means of a conceptual toolbox that does not include the categories with which the dead identified.³¹

When the border wars are virophagic, eating the flesh of the living, we might better be able to access relevant information about the lives of those whom we would place on the butch or the ftm side of the divide.³² Even if we have such information and can be confident that it is reliable, there are still serious problems with definitions here. The most likely clusters of characteristics to invoke definitionally are those of masculine subjectivity and the accessing of medically regulated technologies for male reembodiment. I will examine, in turn, the difficulties with using these two clusters to mark a butch/ftm distinction.

Undeniably, an important characteristic of ftm subjectivity is masculine subjectivity in persons assigned female at birth and raised girl-to-woman with fairly unambiguous female embodiments for at least parts of our lives. Once we try to be more precise about the relevant notions of masculine subjectivity, however, matters become extremely complicated. Masculine subjectivity cannot be simply reduced to self-identification as a man, for not all ftms self-identify as men in any simple, nonproblematic way. Several alternatives are available here. Some ftms, such as David Harrison, self-identify as transsexual men and view that as “a different gender from what people commonly think of as ‘man.’”³³ Michael M. Hernandez writes, “My sexual orientation is queer. I consider myself to be a hybrid of woman and man, thus lesbian as well as gay.”³⁴ Just as some mtfs, such as Kate Bornstein, self-identify as neither man nor woman,³⁵ some ftms discursively position themselves as neither or as members of a third gender or look “forward eagerly to the day when there [will] be more genders from which to choose.”³⁶ Some ftms, such as myself, are profoundly uncomfortable with all of the already given gender categories; however, we are forced to locate ourselves within them in some situations (e.g., my California driver’s license must bear one of two sex/gender designations: “F” or “M”), we might choose tactically to locate ourselves within them in some situations for some purposes (e.g., when I here claim authority to speak as a—one, most assuredly nonrepresentative—ftm transsexual), and we may be located within them against our wills in some situations (e.g., when another ftm on a talk show panel insisted that I was a woman because I said that I had not yet had “top surgery” and did not intend to have “bottom surgery”).³⁷

Moreover, masculine subjectivity in persons assigned female at birth is not the exclusive province of ftms. Many butches share this characteristic with us. As Gayle Rubin has pointed out, *butch* is a lesbian vernacular term that marks a his-

torically and contemporaneously important category within lesbian communities and, thus, has "accumulated many layers of significance."³⁸ It "encompasses individuals with a broad range of investments in 'masculinity'" (467). As such, it encompasses both individuals who have no interest in "male gender identities" and some who have "partially male gender identities" (468). "Partially male gender identities" is also an apt phrase to describe the self-identifications of ftms who say that as transsexual men they belong to a different gender from nontranssexual men, or those who describe themselves as partially man and partially woman or neither man nor woman. Indeed, some butches might have richer, more solid male or masculine self-identifications than do some ftms. Consequently, drawing a distinction between butches and ftms in terms of masculine subjectivity threatens to elide both some ftms' self-identifications and some butches' self-identifications relative to the categories "man," "male," and "masculine."

Although she argues that the butch/fm boundary is permeable and cautions against border wars, Rubin maintains that there are two areas of difference between butches and ftms: "Some butches are psychologically indistinguishable from female-to-male transsexuals, except for the identities they choose and the extent to which they are willing or able to alter their bodies" (473). As Rubin notes, not every fm avails himself of all the existing technologies for reembodiment (476). For reasons as diverse as differing desires regarding our physical configurations, states of health, financial resources, and evaluations of current surgical results, many ftms occupy physical states between typical nontranssexual male embodiment and typical nontranssexual female embodiment or qualitatively different from either. Yet some butches also avail themselves of some of the same reembodiment technologies, including exogenous testosterone, breast removal and chest reconstruction, hysterectomy, oophorectomy, bodybuilding, and genital alteration through piercing. Leslie Feinberg is one person who has crossed the butch/fm border more than once, whose journeys have included accessing some of these technologies, and who self-identifies as butch.³⁹ I know a small handful of Los Angeles and San Francisco butches who have used some or all of the technologies listed above to achieve embodiments more in keeping with their senses of self without ever self-identifying as ftms. Indeed, some butches access more of these technologies than do some ftms. As Zachary I. Nataf notes, in some cases, self-identification might be the only distinguishing characteristic.⁴⁰ Indeed, in some cases there may be no distinction at all, since some people self-identify as both butch and fm.

It is no doubt misguided to try to locate one or two necessary or sufficient conditions by which to demarcate butch/fm differences. Most people who partici-

pate in trans community circles take it as already given that there is no one characteristic that provides a sharp distinction between nontranssexual women and nontranssexual men, though it would be fallacious to draw from this the conclusion that there is no distinction here at all. Elsewhere I have argued that the dominant cultural definition of *woman* in the contemporary United States has thirteen defining characteristics, clustered into several groups and weighted differently. None of these thirteen characteristics is necessary or sufficient for membership in the category “woman.”⁴¹ Rather, these characteristics are best understood as Wittgensteinian family resemblances: resemblances that some women, to greater and lesser degrees, share with some other women, just as I share some resemblances with some members of my biological family to greater or lesser degrees and fail to share some other resemblances that some of my biological family members share with others in my biological family. On this view of the logical type of definition adequate to contemporary gender categories, developed more generally by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, things within one category bear numerous resemblances to other things within that category, as well as to things in other categories.⁴² It need not be the case that all things within one category bear any one resemblance to each other; some resemblances may be taken as more important to category membership than others; some members of one category may be more paradigmatically located within that category than other members of the same category by virtue of possessing more of the more heavily weighted characteristics of resemblance; consequently, category boundaries are fuzzy. Borders between gender categories, then, are zones of overlap, not lines.

Analytically pursuing definitions of *ftm* and *butch* in terms of Wittgensteinian resemblance characteristics would render a descriptively adequate distinction more likely than would attempting to draw a sharp distinction based on one or two clusters of characteristics such as masculine subjectivity and male reembodiment. Concerns about how such a definition of *ftm* would likely function, however, stay my hand, for it could easily provide a paradigm closely paralleling the coercive medicalized construct of the “real,” “true,” or “primary” (female-to-male) transsexual. This is because of the crucial role paradigm cases tend to play in constructing Wittgensteinian family resemblance definitions: those *ftms* who are most uncontroversially within the category would continue to occupy paradigmatic status within the category as defined by this method. In this way, the paradigmaticity of those who instantiate “real,” “true,” or “primary” (female-to-male) transsexuality would simply be reinscribed, whereas those whose membership in this category is more controversial would remain in their marginal or borderline positions. This “real,” “true,” or “primary” transsexual construct, tellingly cri-

tiqued by Dallas Denny, forces transsexual narratives into a single, normative chorus by prescribing severe sanctions—no hormones, no surgeries—for those who will not follow the psychiatric hymnal.⁴³ This construct also enables the perpetuation of medicalized conceptions of transsexuality, which both stigmatize transsexuals and enable fundamentally conservative, coercive medicopsychotherapeutic regulations of gender.

Sorting cases from earlier historical periods (or other contemporary cultural settings) into our contemporary categories introduces new political, epistemological, and ontological problems of classification. To sort in a principled way, we would need to have adequate grounds for thinking that our contemporary categories could be applied, either directly or as Wittgensteinian family resemblance relations such as ancestry, across temporal and cultural distances, without neglecting historical and cultural specificities of the embodiments and subjectivities of those persons we sort.

Looking for historical sameness or similarity between contemporary transsexuals and earlier figures is more troublesome than is the case with many of our other contemporary categories of sex, gender, sexuality, and their interconnections because concepts of transsexuality are so intimately, perhaps even inextricably, intertwined with recently developed medical technologies such as (for ftms) production of synthetic androgens and surgical techniques used to manipulate breast/chest size/contours and genital/gonadal configurations. In the course of blurring the butch/ftm boundaries, Rubin points out that many of the historical figures “venerated as lesbian ancestors are also claimed in the historical lineages of female-to-male transsexuals”; she speculates that “some of these women were likely also transsexuals” and that “if testosterone had been available, some would undoubtedly have seized the opportunity to take it.”⁴⁴ Perhaps we can reliably make counterfactual claims that earlier historical figures would have helped themselves to these technologies had these technologies been available to them, though I am skeptical that we can access adequate, reliable evidence for such claims. For reasons similar to those I have raised in my discussion of “Brandon Teena,” I am concerned that such claims about dead people are merely speculative.

Two distinct issues arise here. One issue is about the historical specificity of the category “transsexual.” Is this a category that came into existence concomitantly with the advent of (some or all of) those medically regulated technologies contemporary transsexuals use to transition? Or is the category to be found transhistorically and, thus, independently of medically regulated technologies? Even if we assume that transsexuality is a transhistorical phenomenon that is not neces-

sarily intertwined with contemporary culturally and historically situated categories of sex, gender, sexuality, and their interconnections or with medically regulated technologies, a second issue arises. How can we tell which figures who lived in earlier historical periods fall into the category “transsexual”? This is the problem I have traced with regard to “Brandon Teena,” and I shall now turn to this difficulty as it manifests itself with regard to the categorical placement of dead people from earlier historical periods.

Ken Morris and Candace Hellen Brown propose to define *transsexual* in terms of desire, writing, “It is not surgery which defines a transsexual, but the internal visualization and experience of the body as being of the opposite sex, which creates the desire to bring the body into conformity with the internal image.”⁴⁵ This proposal is unsatisfactory on four counts. First, it either classifies as transsexual those butches who desire at least partial male reembodiment or, if it is tightened to require desire for “complete” reembodiment, it implies that ftms who do not have this desire are not transsexual. Second, it is transsexual-centric at best to classify as transsexual someone who desires reembodiment but elects not to act on that desire and does not self-identify as transsexual, as Morris and Brown’s definition implies, since they propose that desire based on internal visualization and somatic experience is sufficient for membership in the category “transsexual.” A third problem is that not all ftms report having any positive visualization or experience of their pretransitional bodies as bodies that are culturally encoded as male; some ftms, instead, talk about being disassociated from their bodies or unhappy with their bodies and do not form a positive visualization or somatic experience until their bodies are hormonally or surgically altered. The fourth problem is more directly relevant to classification of historical individuals into contemporary categories: just as some contemporary people are able to form desires for reembodiment only under the condition that they are aware that reembodiment is a possibility for themselves, Morris and Brown’s definition ignores relationships between having a desire and having concepts through which to form or make sense of a desire.

Contemporaneously, self-identification as butch or ftm is the only characteristic that distinguishes some butches from some ftms. Thus, in order to avoid misclassification based on factors other than self-identification, counterfactual claims using contemporaneous criteria for categorization to show that a figure from an earlier historical period was transsexual would have to take the following form: if contemporary categories had been available to X, X would have self-identified as an ftm transsexual. But, since self-identification as an ftm can vary indepen-

dently from any of the other resemblance characteristics that together form the contours of the category “ftm transsexual,” there can be no possible warrant for such a counterfactual claim.

We must tread softly when using family resemblances to claim dead flesh as our own, lest we position ourselves as the heads of the family, inserting ourselves into the position of discursive centrality by positioning ourselves as the image others mirror.⁴⁶ When we read other people’s similarities to ourselves as conclusive evidence that they occupy the same categories we do, assuming that there are no relevant differences between ourselves and them, we construct ourselves as gods creating others in our own image without regard to their conceptual frameworks and choices within those frameworks.

Guarding the Ftm Borders from Butch Invasion: Political Problems with Border Defense

In this section, I will return to the contemporary scene. Drawing on some of my personal experiences in Southern California’s ftm-only support group Under Construction, I will explore the political functions of current butch/ftm border wars as they are enacted through defense of ftm spaces and identities from butch invasion or infiltration. I will resume my discussion of definitions in the following section.

Until recently, Under Construction fliers stated explicitly that Under Construction is an “ftm-only” group and that this excludes female cross-dressers and lesbians: “This is NOT a group for lesbians exploring gender issues.” No positive definitions of *ftm* have been given on mailings and no categories other than “female cross-dresser” and “lesbian” have been specifically excluded. During a transgender panel two other Under Construction members and I presented to Los Angeles’s Butch/Femme Network on 18 May 1995, both of my ftm copanelists said that butch masculinity is something butches can just put on (presumably, then, masculinity is something butches can take off just as easily and inauthentically as they put it on—rather like a jacket or a strap-on dildo) but for ftms masculinity is something deeper: it’s who we really are, who we’ve known we really were since we were young children. At Under Construction meetings I have been treated to innumerable facile distortions of butch specificities, always given in explicit or implicit contrast to ftms. For example, after talking about having his girlfriend suck his dick (testosterone-enlarged erectile tissue, not surgically altered), his desire for a fully functioning penis, and his dissatisfaction with current phalloplasty results, one ftm remarked that “a butch dyke can always just strap it on.” The implicit contrast, obviously, is that an ftm needs a permanently affixed, flesh-and-blood penis.⁴⁷

A number of distinct though closely related discursive strategies are at work in these examples. At the Butch/Femme Network panel, the notion expressed was that the masculinities of non-ftms with (varying degrees of) female embodiments are no more integral to their senses of self than an article of clothing and, hence, inauthentic—as if masculinities expressed differently from ours are less authentic aspects of the selves who express them merely because they are expressed differently, as if our ftm masculinities would be suspect if any other birth-assigned females were to don masculinities of their own, as if masculinity is a scarce commodity in a male-dominated economy, as if eating the flesh of non-ftm, masculine, birth-assigned females would imbue us with virility. As Michael M. Hernandez pointed out to me, this reduction of authentic masculinity to only one type of masculine self-expression and self-understanding lends itself easily to mandating a hierarchical system of masculine identification in which the guy with the biggest dick wins: ftms who have been “completed” by phalloplasty sit immediately below the hierarchy’s pinnacle; “factory-equipped” nontranssexual men retain pride of place; and penis-less butches whose masculinities are deemed “inauthentic” are at or near the bottom.⁴⁸ In cultural discourses that give greater weight to a speaker according to assessments of that speaker’s masculinity, this kind of hierarchy gives greater weight to the opinions of ftms who conform most closely to dominant phallogocentric models of both masculinity and transsexuality and very little if any weight to butch voices. Moreover, it reinscribes the dominance of nontranssexual men’s masculinities.

The remark that “a butch dyke can always just strap it on” elides both butch desires for penises and extremely various and highly idiosyncratic bodily sites of ftm distress and also reinscribes phallogocentric conceptions of masculinity and transsexuality. First, the remark is simply untrue. Butches have widely ranging attitudes toward and desires for dildos and penes. Findlay’s pseudonymous informant J-Boy is one stone butch who cannot always just strap it on: “When I’m having sex with someone, I’m thinking I have a penis most of the time. And the dildo kind of ruins that for me. Because it’s not one. And it is clumsy to wear a dildo. It’s easier for me to have sex with someone and imagine I have a dick, than it is to wear a strap-on that lets me know I don’t have one.”⁴⁹ The recurrence of ftm anxieties about penes and dildos, displayed in analogizing strap-on dildos to inauthentic masculinities, might have some of the same manifestations in both butches and ftms.

Second, the remark obscures the wide range of differences in where and how ftm distress about female embodiments locates itself on our bodies. Partly because most children only have nontranssexual cultural norms and models avail-

able to them,⁵⁰ ftms and other gender queers often forge idiosyncratic relationships between self-understandings, including bodily images and desires, and the dominant sex/gender/sexuality scheme.⁵¹ An example of this kind of idiosyncrasy was afforded by a conversation that caused consternation at a recent Under Construction meeting. Two friends and I compared notes about the specific bodily zones that cause us the greatest distress. For one it was the absence of a penis, for another it was absence of testicles, and for the third it was the presence of breasts. Differences among ftms' attitudes toward genital surgeries, as well as vaginal penetration, are evident in Deva's interview with Mike, Eric, Billy, Sky, and Shadow; slightly more than half of Holly Devor's informants who had not had genital reconstruction surgery said that they were not particularly interested in having any.⁵²

Further, constructing desire for a penis as the desire that divides ftms from butches reproduces phallogentric conceptions of both masculinity and transsexuality and, as I will argue below, does so in ways that perpetuate mtf discursive dominance in the trans community. The phallogentricity of the normative sex/gender/sexuality scheme is reflected in much trans discourse and is especially detrimental to queer ftms and other gender queers who were assigned female at birth. Desire to acquire or rid oneself of a penis of one's own has been taken as the most salient diagnostic characteristic of transsexualism. We might be diagnostically required to affirm that a man's body ("the right body" or "the wrong body," depending on the speaker) is a body with a penis, a man's subjectivity is desire to have a penis, a woman's body is a body without a penis, and a woman's subjectivity is a desire not to have a penis.⁵³ When a sex/gender distinction is invoked in transcommunity discourse, sexed embodiment is often reduced to the presence or absence of a penis. A now "complete," "formerly transsexual" man, as some would have it, is portrayed as a man with a penis: phalloplasty—penis acquisition—is figured as the final step in curing a transsexual man's mental disorder, birth defect, or other medical condition that is, allegedly, treatable only under the signs of medical diagnosis. Once the phallic cure is complete, the phallic man is complete: his phallus has the power to refigure nonphallic men as less manly than himself. This is not to suggest that desiring or acquiring a penis is phallogentric in and of itself. Meanings of an act do not reside in the act itself but rather in the conditions, form, and content of its production and representations, so my objection to one discursive construction of one genital act is not an objection to that act in and of itself nor to different constructions of that act.

Transsexuals are expected to place ourselves under the signs *postoperative*, *preoperative*, or *nonoperative*, in relation to *the* operation or *the* surgery. When we locate ourselves under these signs, we define ourselves by encounters with sur-

geons' knives, reducing our identities to the marks of phallic inscription figured in this construction of the scalpel's power and thereby diminishing our own agency, as Dallas Denny points out.⁵⁴ Moreover, if we locate ourselves under these signs, we define ourselves according to our desires to acquire or rid ourselves of a penis made of our own flesh, thus locating ourselves relative to phallogentric cuts that divide the social world into cock/no-cock encampments.

When ftms locate ourselves under these signs, ftms further mtf discursive dominance. When the expression "*the operation*" is applied to mtfs, we can be fairly clear that the operation to which this expression refers is genital or gonadal, though we might not be sure which of several genital or gonadal operations is the referent. Applied to ftms, "*the operation*" is a distorting imposition, since there is not one and only one operation available to us as a mechanism of reembodiment and since it is unclear that genital or gonadal operations are of greatest importance to us. Asking an ftm if he has had the operation might elicit confusion or anger since, caring more about whether or not he has a penis than he does but attributing that concern to him, the interlocutor has figured his gender identification as being primarily about absence of and desire for a cock. "*Which operation?*" is a polite ftm rejection of such a question. For similar reasons, the term *non-op* is ambiguous in ftm usage: sometimes it is used synonymously with *no op*, and sometimes it means "no genital op" without rejection of surgical change of sexed characteristics in or on nongenital bodily zones.

Other concepts common in medical, psychotherapeutic, legal, and popular discourses about transsexuality, as well as in trans-community discourse, could also be shown to be significantly more distorting when applied to ftms than when applied to mtfs, such as the distinction between living part-time and living full-time in one's "gender of choice." I will not provide thorough arguments for the relatively greater discursive power of mtfs in this essay, since the negotiation of ftm/mtf borders is not my main topic here. My claim, however, is not merely that mtfs tend to have more power in community organizations and greater access to public media; rather, my claim is that current discourses of transsexuality distort ftm specificities to a greater extent than they distort mtf specificities.

This is not to deny that discourses of transsexuality also regulate mtfs in oppressive ways and distort mtf specificities. Indeed, for some mtfs nongenital, nongonadal surgical alterations, such as breast augmentation, vocal modification, or facial reconstruction, are significantly more important than genital or gonadal alteration. Yet we know which bodily zone is the target of inquiry or interrogation when an mtf is asked if she has had "*the operation*." This difference reflects differences between the types of bodies that are diagnosed "male" at birth and those

that are diagnosed “female” at birth: in only one case is the “primary” sexed characteristic external and, normatively within medical treatment of transsexuals, surgically altered in the same operative moment during which genital alteration occurs. This difference also reflects differences between how bodies of the types diagnosed “male” at birth and those diagnosed “female” at birth are culturally weighted in gender attribution, which might lead to different tendencies in how ftms and mtfs conceive of their own bodies and their power to communicate senses of self. The most heavily weighted physical characteristic in making the gender attribution “female” to adults is the presence of breasts, whereas the most heavily weighted physical characteristic in making the attribution “male” is the presence of a penis.⁵⁵ These factors, conjoined with the facts that breasts are more likely than penes to be evident when a body is clothed and that breast removal/chest reconstruction is simpler technically than penile construction, account in large measure for the greater distortion of ftm embodiments and specificities encoded in the term *the operation*.

Why is it so important for some ftms to distinguish themselves from butches? Identity is always doubly relational (at a minimum). We form and maintain our identities by making continually reiterated identifications *as* members of some category U(s). This is accomplished both positively and negatively by repeated identifications *with* some (not necessarily all) members of U, and by reiterated identifications *as* not-members of some other category T(hem). Identifying *as* and identifying *with*, while closely related, are not identical. Identifying *as* U always involves identifying with some members of U, but the converse does not hold; for example, I identify *with* leather dykes—as a result of historical ties, continuing friendship circles, and some affinities of sensibility and value—but I no longer identify *as* a leather dyke. Some members of U serve as positive identificatory referents, whereas some members of T serve as negative identificatory referents. For many ftms, lesbians—and especially butches because of their masculinity—serve as primary negative identificatory referents.⁵⁶

One motivation for some ftms’ specification of butches as the primary negative identificatory referent class is suggested by Pat Califia: “As long as reassignment surgery cannot provide transsexual men with functional sexual equipment, the mainstream will see them as lesbians *manqué*.”⁵⁷ Since some ftms are portrayed as lesbians, it might be crucial to some ftms’ self-identities to distinguish themselves from lesbians by taking butches as their primary negative identificatory referent class. Califia overstates her case, however: since ftms have many different sexual objects, it is hard to see how the phallogocentric “mainstream” will construct transfags, say, without penes that work right, look right, and feel

right as “lesbians manqué.” Transfags are more likely to be misrepresented as perversely phallic heterosexual women, especially if we derive sexual pleasure from penetration of that orifice into which a physician would insert a speculum to perform a pap smear. Similarly, other ftms who have sex with persons figured as essentially male by “the mainstream,” such as mtfs who have penes, are more likely to be constructed as heterosexual women than as lesbians by the dominant culture. So the motivation Califia suggests for some ftms’ constructions of butches as the primary negative identificatory referent class is more likely to be compelling to heterosexual ftms than to transfags or some other queer ftms.

Another motivation for this construction of butches is that many a formerly lesbian ftm who no longer identifies (even partially) as a lesbian has trouble ridding himself of a lesbian present—it sticks like recalcitrant camouflage face paint. There’s a B side to that scratchy old vinyl disk whose A side—“You’ve Betrayed Your Sisters by Going over to the Patriarchal Enemy”—still gets some lesbian airplay: some lesbians seem still to play that song, “Once a Lesbian Always a Lesbian” and refuse to let us leave their dance. For example, some leather dykes who know about my transition have repeatedly invited me to attend women-only play parties, encouraging me to attend (in part) on the grounds that “you still count as a woman by our [genital] definition.” This is not surprising, considering that the skirmishes over who counts as a woman for purposes of admittance to leather-dyke play parties—openly sexual spaces for women, thus fragile and needing active defense in an oppressively repro/heteronormative culture—have provided some of the most active fields for border war belligerence and negotiation.⁵⁸

The butch/ftm border wars are contestations built on ftm and lesbian “frontier fears”⁵⁹ about consolidating identity, creating safe spaces and communities, policing (containing and regulating, claiming and disowning) oppressive or excessive masculinities—all downwind from the rotting carcasses of purity discourses.⁶⁰ In such moments when I am held hostage, I too feel the battle cry roiling within my veins, my heart drums a blood lust beat. Recognizing that motivation does not necessarily provide justification, I try to resist these combative impulses: I need neither disavow my lesbian past nor disallow butch masculinities in order to resist being taken as a prisoner of war.

Establishing a Demilitarized Zone: Tactics of Resistance

In this section I will examine definitions as political tactics and suggest that, for some queer ftms, other tactics might better serve radically democratic political

aims at this particular historical juncture. To date, definitions have not served transsexuals especially well. In the United States, the primary driving force behind definitions of *transsexual* has been the achievement of a differential diagnosis (in 1980)—a dubious achievement at best—and its modification in later editions and revisions of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*.⁶¹ Other (overlapping) motivations have included establishing justifications and procedures for accessing medically regulated "treatments," making reliable prognostic predictions, developing criteria for evaluating treatment outcomes, locating etiology, creating taxonomic classifications of deviance or aberration, fixing a class of research subjects, and, recently, carving out intellectual space for the nascent interdisciplinary field of transgender studies.

Although most of these definitional urges have served oppressive ends and much postmodern theorizing revels in boundary blurring, creative boundary marking can also be a positive step for marginalized, oppressed peoples, particularly as we begin to form communities.⁶² Our trans embodiments and subjectivities are often fragile, often under attack. These attacks take a wide variety of forms, including murder, rape, assault, imprisonment, unemployment, underemployment, extralegal and legal restrictions on mobility, harassment, ridicule, indiscriminate erasure, denial of the possibility of our existence, normalization through (mis)representations that wipe out our categorical excess, psychiatric regulation, pathologization, and threats to deny access to medically regulated technologies to those of us who will not police our own excessiveness or at least lie about it. Sometimes we need the refuge of safe spaces, for some of the same reasons that nontranssexual women realized they did at the beginnings of the second wave of feminism, and we cannot have safe spaces without some policing of our boundaries.

At least three definitional tactics are available to those of us who are profoundly discomfited by traditional representations of transsexuality. These tactics are not necessarily mutually exclusive: one person can use all three in different moments according to the political exigencies of differing situations and shifts in individual needs.⁶³ Thus, I view them as *tactics* of resistance to traditional representations of transsexuality, not as distinct strategies.

One, advocated by Susan Stryker, is to give historically and culturally specific definitions of transsexuality that resist pathologization and shift according to the context and purpose of a given definitional moment, in circulation of ideas with others, in attempts to make the change in language a real change.⁶⁴ This tactic refuses fixed, solid definitions in favor of cyborgian identities that are partial, hybrid, fluid, politically engaged, and responsive to others. Thus, it might avoid constructing a new transsexual hegemony. There is, of course, no guarantee that it

will not result in a new transsexual hegemony: definitions an author means to be cyborgian might become frozen, or, while specific definitions might be different from one another, taken as a whole they might have a tendency to perpetuate unjust power structures and power differences. Definitional boundary marking always creates some exclusions and often captures some who do not identify under the defined category term. This concern can be partly alleviated by offering Wittgensteinian definitions rather than definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; then, as I have argued earlier, the concern shifts from avoiding erasure to avoiding the political problems of reinscribing traditional notions of primary transsexuality as paradigmatic within the category “transsexual.” This is especially troublesome for fims in light of mtf discursive and community dominance. Advancing either of these distinct logical types of definition carries political responsibilities. Such responsibilities include paying close attention to whose specificities are lost in definitional boundary marking as well as to the political consequences of these losses, always asking, Whose power and privilege are increased, whose diminished, and how does this fit into hegemonic power structures, reproducing them or loosening them?

When boundaries need to be drawn for some specific purpose, they can sometimes be drawn without defining identity categories. For example, a support group might form to hold discussions of a particular range of topics, or a political organization might devote itself to working on a specific cluster of issues or to using a particular range of approaches. In such situations, two other counterhegemonic discursive tactics are available.

One of these tactics is to refuse definition but to accept, perhaps even insist upon, discursive placement under the sign *transsexual*. Both this tactic and the previous one accept location within the category “transsexual,” but they differ with regard to willingness to accept others’ definitions and to engage in definitional labor oneself. Both these definitional tactics might be useful when combined with a primary focus on transsexual communities and contexts. It is the second tactic for which Sarah Lucia Hoagland opts, with regard to the word *lesbian*, in her book *Lesbian Ethics*. While arguing for the necessity of community formations, she maintains that

to define “lesbian” is, in my opinion, to succumb to a context of heterosexuality. No one ever feels compelled to explain or define what they perceive as the norm. If we define “lesbianism,” we invoke a context in which it is not the norm.

Further, when we try to focus on ourselves, we feel compelled to

define what it means to be a lesbian. And immediately the question arises of who gets to count. We feel that we must define what a lesbian is so we can defend our borders from invasion. We feel threatened from the outside, and we want to determine who we can trust.

Yet we've found that we cannot trust someone simply because she's female or because she's lesbian. Even if we had a firm and theoretically coherent definition which articulated the borders of lesbian community, it would not serve us in the way we have imagined. So I let go of the urge to define.⁶⁵

A third tactic is to resist both definitions of transsexuality and discursive placement within the category "transsexual," even if we satisfy definitions others propose and thus fall within the category as they define it. For example, although I marginally met the diagnostic criteria for *DSM* 302.85 at the time of diagnosis, I may dispute the adequacy of this definition and, further, foreground my difference from certain aspects of it—such as not having had an intense childhood desire to participate in the stereotypical games and pastimes of the other sex or otherwise having been drawn to embody dominant cultural norms of masculinity—in order to resist being pulled within the confines of the sign *transsexual*. One might also deploy this tactic by using one's difference from a particular aspect of transsexual discourse, taken as definitional though less carefully formulated than the *DSM* diagnostic criteria, as grounds for refusing placement within the category "transsexual." For example, one friend of mine insists that he is not transsexual because he does not believe that his life would have been better on balance had he been born male, and another friend scoffingly disavows any desire for genital alteration when others locate him within the category "transsexual." Both of these friends, however, have acted on deeply felt personal needs to access medically regulated technologies for reembodiment and have gained such access through the same mechanisms that many self-identified transsexuals use regularly.

This third tactic is especially useful as part of a challenge to the regulation of access to such medical technologies through mechanisms of diagnosis and gate-keeping that position male and female embodiment as all-or-nothing and as intimately linked with embodiments of dominant cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. If one of our political aims is to change structures of access so that principles of bodily autonomy and informed consent will govern all medical alteration of sex characteristics (so that, for example, a butch dyke can obtain not merely breast reduction but breast removal and chest reconstruction and a non-transgendered butch leather man may receive an oriechtomy, this third tactic chips

away at the borders of diagnostic criteria and moves us toward this goal. When those of us who are marginally within the category “transsexual” as others define it emphasize both that we differ from the paradigms and that these differences do not diminish the depth of our desires to change our bodies as safely as possible, this emphasis shifts the location of justification for access to medically regulated technologies from category placement to personal desire. Resisting placement within the category “transsexual” as others define it can call into question the justification for transsexual diagnosis, definition, or self-identification as necessary conditions for accessing those technologies that transsexuals access for reembodiment; this unsettling moves us toward changes of the mechanisms of access and their underlying principles in ways both radical (in that they further confuse and subvert hegemonic systems of gender) and conservative (in that they insist that normative principles of medical ethics should be applied across the board).

I have argued elsewhere that feminist political aims are best served when a strategy of feminist redefinition and revaluation of the concept “woman” operates at the same time as a gender proliferation strategy that creates multiple refusals of discursive placement within the category “woman.”⁶⁶ Similarly, I argue that in trans contexts radically democratic goals are best served if all three tactics of definitional resistance are at work at the same time. We should be highly suspicious of our ability to make predictions about the (one and only) best means of resistance in a highly complex, continually shifting set of overlapping and competing political, economic, legal, medical, psychotherapeutic, and technological discursive/material fields. Further, having these three tactics functioning at the same time, particularly when they are employed by people who hold each other in sufficient esteem to attend respectfully and responsively to one another’s work, produces a creative tension that could prove fruitful for moving discourses in radically democratic directions.

The greater a person’s felt unintelligibility within already given discourses, the less attractive and viable the first tactic will appear to that person. If the limits of already given language press closely, if the limits of this language squeeze tightly, definitions—even creative, partial, fluid, cyborgian definitions—are likely to seem exclusive and restrictive. As such, definitions and other identity-based border effects will appear unpromising routes to new discursive openings for those subjects who feel themselves to be almost unutterable.

To my mind, various queer ftms—including me—are in living a historical/discursive moment in which our language has run out. For reasons as personal, varied, and idiosyncratic as the personal, varied, and idiosyncratic connections we draw between our embodiments, identifications, social statuses, and subjectivities,

we find little in already given discourses—transsexual and otherwise—other than indefinite sequences of indiscriminate erasure. Already given discourses might elide the specificities of those with firm locations within already given categories but not to the same degree that they elide the specificities of those of us who are dislocated from such categories. Those of us who live in border zones constituted by the overlapping margins of categories do so not in order to engage in high-spirited celebration or revelry. We do so because our embodiments and our subjectivities are abjected from social ontology: we cannot fit ourselves into extant categories without denying, eliding, erasing, or otherwise abjecting personally significant aspects of ourselves. The price of committing such violence against ourselves is too great, though our only other option is also very costly. When we choose to live with and in our dislocatedness, fractured from social ontology, we choose to forgo intelligibility: lost in language and in social life, we become virtually unintelligible, even to ourselves.

Our dislocatedness provides us with subject positions. This might sound paradoxical but it is not, for dislocatedness is not the absolute absence of location. Because borders between gender categories are zones of overlap, not lines, our dislocatedness is constituted by our locations in the overlapping margins of multiple gender categories: we bear Wittgensteinian family resemblances to people who occupy multiple gender categories. Different border zone denizens are, of course, differently located: not only do we exist in the areas of overlap of different gender categories but also we differ in our placements in those areas of overlap. Only by speaking quite specifically about those located elements of our dislocatedness can we who dwell in border zones speak at all. Such lengthy, detailed specifications do not provide the discursive material for full occupancy of social existence, which at present requires more central, less multiple instantiations of social categories.

Some queer ftm border zone occupants need to unlearn the oppressive genres that come together on our bodies. These genres do not focus primarily on our genitals; they focus primarily on our tongues. Since resisting definitions offers the most freedom for inventing a polyglot of new and excessive languages with which to express and re-create ourselves, the second and third tactics with regard to definitions lend themselves most readily to the needs of queer ftm border zone residents. Some of us need to resist definitions that indiscriminately erase our specificities in order that we may carve out social space in which to invent new discursive tools; with these implements we can build fully embodied selves and reinsert ourselves more fully into a restructured social ontology. We must be

accorded, and accord ourselves, our privilege of resistance. As a corollary to the political principle that meaningful consent is possible only in conditions in which meaningful dissent is possible, we can assert that a condition of possibility for the right to self-define is the right to refuse definition. Border zones need not be battle zones, but they must be demilitarized.

Living as a nearly unintelligible creature is no easy task. However, those of us who choose this life have several methods we can adopt. First, we can ask questions about the political functions of definitions and justifications, questions suggested by Hoagland's remark about how the act of defining "lesbian" functions "to succumb to a context of heterosexualism."⁶⁷ As Shane Phelan observes with regard to theories about lesbians, rather than ask whether such theories are true, we need to ask, "So what? Why do we need to justify ourselves?" and thereby shift our focus to oppressive social institutions.⁶⁸ We may hold onto this space of discursive resistance by insisting firmly that, as Naomi Scheman points out, the questions to ask about intelligibility always are: "Who has to make themselves intelligible to whom, in what terms, for what reasons, against what forms of resistance, with what resources?"⁶⁹ Gender intelligibility and gender unintelligibility are effects of relative gender power and powerlessness. The normative sex/gender/sexuality regime privileges itself with an (appearance of) obviousness: (apparently) transparent intelligibility that need not speak its name or display its marks. A border zone denizen's version of border defense consists of carving out and protecting a demilitarized zone.⁷⁰

A complementary, more reconstructive approach is to develop communicative, performative, and critical modalities alternative to narrative and other prose. We can, for example, sing and dance and paint and draw and make films and shoot videos and take photographs and compose poems. Less directly embedded in the linguistic structures through which gendered, especially nonnormatively gendered, embodiment and subjectivity are constrained, such modalities offer both a further distance from those oppressive genres that focus on our tongues and particularly productive, qualitatively different constraints within which to retool explicitly technologized or performative sex/gender embodiments and subjectivities.⁷¹ This is not to claim that such modalities are not constrained by their own conventions; nor is it to ignore the material aspects of language that Judith Butler, for example, explores in *Bodies That Matter*. It is to suggest, however, that in some of these nonnarrative modalities, the inescapably obvious material constraints of our media function analogously to the material constraints of already signified embodiments in the construction and communication of gendered subjectivity;

hence, such modalities offer especially rich resources for exploratory reconstruction of subtly nuanced specificities of explicitly technologized or performative embodiments and subjectivities.⁷²

Location within an already given social ontology might not be as violent for some queer ftms as for others. Different subjects may legitimately make different choices when confronted with alternatives that are all painful, and subjects who are not queer ftms might find themselves in similar situations. Moreover, acknowledging my own subject position to be constituted by dislocatedness does not necessarily position me as opposed to the recuperative projects of those with firmer locations within social categories. Rather, I take it as obvious that such differences between different subjects' locations will lead to different political tactics. Still, some broad characterizations of a few such differences can be drawn tentatively.

Some of the kinds of abjection from social ontology faced by ftms and mtf tend to be qualitatively different, leading to different tactics of resistance. Insofar as transsexual discourse has been constructed by people assigned male at birth to regulate people assigned male at birth, this discourse tends to have greater leverage over mtf embodiments and subjectivities. Sometimes ftms can slip through the cracks of this regulatory discourse. For example, statutes and regulations designed with mtf in mind are often crafted in ways that clearly require surgical alteration of genitals for mtf to change sex/gender markers on legal documents. When applied to ftms, however, some of these statutes and regulations are vague enough that we might be able to change sex/gender designations without surgical alteration of our genitals if we obtain medical documentation whose vagueness matches the relevant juridical vagueness. This difference in leverage is two-edged: it might allow for practical advantages, but these are premised upon having slipped through the cracks of language. Because ftm and mtf bodies tend to have different relationships to regulatory discourses, ftms and mtf tend to have different stakes in relation to those discourses: it tends to be easier for ftms to escape discourses that were not designed with bodies like ours in mind, and it tends to be more difficult for ftms to stay put within such discourses.

Differences within the category "ftm" also lead to the adoption of different tactics. Sexuality is one arena in which some such differences are manifest. The contemporary organization of sexuality dominant in the United States specifies a person's sexuality categorization in terms of a relation between that person's sex/gender status and the sex/gender status or statuses of those others whom that person desires: within this organization of the sexual world, a person is heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Insofar as sex/gender is hegemonically constructed as nontechnologized and nonperformative, all of us whose sex/gender is explicitly

technologized or performative are abjected from the organizing principles of this system at a singular minimum: we are not the kinds of desiring subjects whom this system countenances. Those of us who, additionally, desire others whose sex/gender embodiments or subjectivities are hegemonically constructed as explicitly technologized or performative are doubly abjected from this system. Double abjection is complete abjection from a system founded on a two-termed relation. Thus, for example, an ftm whose primary objects of desire are nontransgendered females or males (or both) will be more likely to insist on having a place within the dominant sexuality system than a gender-queer ftm whose primary objects of desire are other gender queers. Neither approach need vitiate the other, but indiscriminate erasure constituting evisceration of sexual desire and subjectivity occurs when one insists on placing the other within his own system against the other's will. This occurs, for example, when my desire for mtfs is folded into heterosexuality and, equally, when my desire for ftms is seized within the confines of gay male sexuality.

Some ftms envision discursive projects very different from mine. In his essay, "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," Jay Prosser argues for an analysis of transgendered subjectivity centered around a metaphoric of home with the goal of "separating it [transgender] out from generic queerness."⁷³ Prosser constructs *transgender* through his reading of Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*⁷⁴ and transsexual autobiographies and against his reading of queer theory, which he takes to be paradigmatically exemplified by Judith Halberstam's "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity."⁷⁵ Metaphoric of home ground Prosser's analysis of the difference between queer theory/subjectivity and transgender theory/subjectivity: he argues that by embracing antiessentialist gender notions queer theory/identity eschews "the symbolic intersection [of home] with very powerful notions of belonging" that provides the structuring principle of transgender narratives, subjectivities, identities, politics, and theory.⁷⁶ Queer theory, as Prosser reads Halberstam, "thus fails to read the transsexual man's story—his particular narrative of becoming—in its specificity, to recognize its origins in painful wrong embodiment, its end in the reconstruction of the material body" (488). For Prosser, this reconstruction of the material body "figures a final going home" (488) not only to a body that the subject figures as home but also to "the home of a community founded on the body" (486).

I will not fully explore Prosser's view here, but I would like to explore several points of difference between the kinds of projects in which the two of us are engaged. At one level, our projects can coexist peacefully: since different ftm subject positions lead to different relationships to social ontology, there is no princi-

pled reason why one ftm cannot carve out a borderland domain while another ftm establishes a habitus located more firmly within social categories (e.g., “man,” “transsexual man”). However, insofar as Prosser’s definitional project is one that produces transgender narratives as *the* line of transgender and queer differentiation, those of us who are shut out of narrative structure will be erased from his analysis. Prosser’s binary, totalizing methodology is signaled by his repetitive use of the definite article (e.g., “the transsexual man’s story,” as if all transsexual men shared one story), his conception of borderlands as “the uninhabitable space” between painful wrong embodiment and home (487–88), and his use of an unproductive opposition of *transgender* and *queer*. This binary methodology leads to a binary consequence for border zone dwellers: either we are seized by a figuration of transgender that elides our border zone specificities, or we are thrown out of the realm of transgender and subsumed under the opposing sign. Border zones become battle zones whose occupants are removed from their domain by capture or who are traded into opposing camps. At this second level of analysis, our projects are directly antithetical.

Border zones need not be battle zones: border zones must be recognized and demilitarized. Just as queer, transsexual, transgender, gender-queer, butch, and ftm embodiments and subjectivities are complex and complicatedly different within any one category, so any discussion of them must be complex enough to reflect the complex living, breathing specificities of the lives lived—centrally or marginally—under these signs. Any politics based on totalizing, simplifying, binary analysis that mistakes a central position within a category for the totality of the category will, of necessity, be impoverished.

Let us remember the wisdom of King Solomon when we sit in judgment, lest we rend living bodies in two. If we must engage in border war combat to survive, let us do so only to establish and defend demilitarized zones. Only by so doing can those of us who need to loosen the bonds upon our tongues create new spaces in which, for which, and from which posttranssexual—and, in some cases, postlesbian—gender-queer discourses can emerge.⁷⁷ We can best establish demilitarized zones by forging alliances and loyalties—personal, intellectual, and political—with people whose values we share, who respect our specificities and we theirs, across the gendered and other identity-based categories of social ontology.

