

2. Jeffrey Wells, "Mirror, Mirror," *Entertainment Weekly*, 12 April 1996, 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. It is relevant that developments in television technology have produced a "skin contouring" camera that makes wrinkles disappear. Using puns about "vanity video" and "video collagen," J. Max Robins, in "A New Wrinkle in Video Technology," *TV Guide* (Los Angeles Metropolitan Edition), 28 September-4 October 1996, tells of this "indispensable tool for 'TV personalities of a certain age' first used 'as a news division innovation' (among its beneficiaries: Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Barbara Walters). According to one news director, "it can remove almost all of someone's wrinkles, without affecting their hair or eyes." "The magic," however, "only lasts as long as the stars remain in front of the camera" (57).
5. Vivian Sobchack, "Revenge of The Leech Woman: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film," in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1994), 79-91.
6. Elissa Melamed, *Mirror, Mirror: The Terror of Not Being Young* (New York: Linden Press, 1983), 30.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The Predisposition to Obsessional Neurosis," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959), 2:130.
8. Wells, "Mirror, Mirror," 8.
9. *Ibid.*, 9.
10. Kathleen Woodward, "Youthfulness as a Masquerade," *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-1989): 133-134.

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Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb

SUSAN STRYKER
Transsexuality and the

Emergence of Postmodernity

*A story which culture tells itself, the transsexual body is a
 tactile politics of reproduction constituted through textual
 violence.*

—SANDY STONE, "The Empire Strikes Back"

Another Manhattan Project

One afternoon in the closing months of 1949, the person who was becoming Christine Jorgensen stepped up to the counter of a drugstore in New York City.¹ At that moment she still answered to the name "George" and, by most standards, was a painfully insecure young man with a rather unsettled sense of individual identity. Jorgensen was twenty-three years old at the time, an aspiring filmmaker born to Danish American parents and raised in unremarkable middle-class circumstances in the Bronx. She was a draftee recently discharged from the U.S. Army who had served her entire fourteen-month enlistment at Fort Dix, New Jersey, processing demobilization paperwork for the combat troops streaming home after the bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and World War II had finally come to an end. Jorgensen was not yet the woman who would make "transsexual" a household word, though she was now taking the first practical step in the long process of becoming precisely that person.

During a directionless phase of life in 1948, after attending various photography schools, holding an unglamorous job in the cutting room of the RKO motion picture studio in New York duplicating and cataloging stock film images, and failing miserably to make a break for herself in Hollywood, Jorgensen happened upon a copy of popular medical writer Paul de Kruif's recent book,

The Male Hormone. It changed her life. Jorgensen read with fascination about the structural similarities of testosterone and estrogen, the biochemicals whose effects on moods and bodily morphology we have learned to interpret as signs of the masculine and the feminine. A difference of only "four atoms of hydrogen and one atom of carbon" in each hormone, she learned, was all that distinguished one substance from the other (71).

It seemed to Jorgensen that if indeed hormones determined one's status as a man or woman, then an exceedingly fine border, a boundary measured on a submolecular scale, was potentially all that separated the sexes. She reasoned that "there must be times when one could be so close to that physical dividing line that it would be difficult to determine on which side of the male-female line" one belonged (76). Perhaps, she thought, this newly discovered scientific fact explained her effeminate mannerisms, her delicate facial features, her emotional attraction to men and her feeling that, whatever her genitals might seem to suggest, she was not really a man at all. Wasn't there woven throughout de Kruij's narrative a tiny thread of recognition pulled from her own private theories—that she might in fact be a woman in some real yet ill-defined and largely unattained sense?

She abruptly enrolled in the Manhattan Medical and Dental Assistants School, determined to learn more about endocrinology. She had already read in the newspaper that virilization experiments using testosterone were being carried out on chickens in New Haven, Connecticut. She knew from reading de Kruij that there was "an uncanny ability in one of the pure female hormones to alter the lives and fate of man" (71). Now she began spending hours in the library of the New York Academy of Medicine reading the technical literature of fields she barely understood, and she came across references to surgical "conversion experiments" being carried out in Europe—procedures entirely unavailable in the United States. She sensed possibilities for herself in this newly acquired and rapidly expanding body of knowledge. For nearly a year Jorgensen had been cautiously approaching medical specialists, screwing up her courage to ask if they might help her explore the possibility of hormonal feminization, but all she yet had to show for her efforts was a psychiatric referral. Still, she insisted to herself, to the question of her personal identity, "There was an answer—somewhere" (76).

Though her reading, Jorgensen began to form a vague yet compelling idea: "I would experiment on myself. But in order to do that, somehow I'd have to get hold of that miraculous substance known as 'estradiol,'" a recently synthesized version of estrogen (76). If Jorgensen found the "answer" she sought in a chemical, she found her "somewhere" in a drugstore chosen more or less at random where she could anonymously purchase the drug. She had no idea clear what estradiol would do to her if she ingested it, but she was

compelled to find out. On that portentous afternoon in New York in 1949, Jorgensen drove around in her car until she found a pharmacy in an unfamiliar neighborhood of the city. According to her own account of the incident, she approached the unsuspecting pharmacy clerk and "adopted a tone of voice designed to convey my familiarity with things medical." She first ordered several unremarkable items—tongue depressors, perhaps, or an antiseptic solution and some cotton gauze—before asking nonchalantly for "high-potency estradiol."

"That's a pretty strong chemical," the clerk replied. "We're not supposed to sell it without a prescription."

"Well, I guess I could have gotten a prescription, but just didn't think of it. You see, I'm at a medical technicians' school, and we're working on an idea of growth stimulation in animals through the use of hormones."

The clerk hesitated. "Oh, well, in that case I guess it's okay." (77)

Moments later Jorgensen was sitting in her car again, somewhat stunned by the ease with which she had accomplished a feat with such vast implications for her future. She unwrapped the package eagerly. "There at last, the small bottle lay in my hand. How strange it seemed to me that the whole answer might lie in the particular combination of atoms contained in those tiny, aspirin-like tablets. As recently as a few years before, science had split some of those atoms and unleashed a giant force. There in my hand lay another series of atoms, which in their way might set off another explosion" (77).

Jorgensen raced home. That night, and every night thereafter for the next several months, she took one of her little pills. Within a week she began to notice "a strange though not unpleasant feeling," a "sensitivity in my breast area and a noticeable development" (78). These changes quickly inspired her to form an even bolder plan—to go to Europe to find doctors who could administer the hormones more effectively to produce even more noticeable effects and who could perform the genital conversion surgeries that would allow her to "find [her] proper place in the world" (79). Jorgensen wrote in her autobiography years later, "No doubt these were radical thoughts, based only on my own desire and emotions, half-formulated ideas from scraps of medical information, but from then on, I was even more determined to follow the dream" (79). Using her last shred of savings, she purchased a one-way ticket and set sail in May 1950 for her ancestral Denmark, where she found the medical help for which she long had searched.

Jorgensen had little idea how big the "other explosion" she imagined outside the drugstore in 1949 would be until three years later, when, as she lay convalescing in a Copenhagen hospital, she learned that news of her recent

"sex-change" surgery had been trumpeted to the four corners of the earth. Somewhat surprisingly given that the medical procedures involved were by then more than two decades old, Jorgensen was deluged with an unprecedented outpouring of media attention. She was promised tens of thousands of dollars for exclusive newspaper and magazine interviews, offered lucrative nightclub engagements, received thousands of letters and telegrams, and made banner headlines around the world. "It seems to me now a shocking commentary on the press of our time," Jorgensen recalled in her memoirs, "that I pushed the hydrogen-bomb tests on Eniwetok right off the front pages. A tragic war was still raging in Korea, George VI had died and Britain had a new queen, sophisticated guided missiles were going off in New Mexico, Jonas Salk was working on a vaccine for infantile paralysis—Christine Jorgensen was on page one" (130).

Through Jorgensen, the spectacle of transsexuality mushroomed into public consciousness during the early days of the Cold War with all the force of a blistering hot wind roaring across the Trinity Test Site. Transsexuality was nothing short of an atomic blast to the gender system, and a former boy from the Bronx found herself at ground zero. It's difficult now at the turn of the century, as transsexuality and other transgender phenomena become increasingly ubiquitous in media and culture, to appreciate the impact Jorgensen's story made in the early 1950s. Her return to the United States in 1953 garnered the kind of coverage usually reserved for movie stars and heads of state. Members of the medical profession debated the question of Jorgensen's "true sex" in highly public forums; the paparazzi dogged her heels, and the tabloid press hung upon her every utterance. The initial media frenzy that greeted her story subsided after a few months, but after achieving celebrity status Jorgensen was never able to resume an entirely private life. She eventually gave in to the inevitable and pursued a successful career in show business. She remained a cultural reference point for decades—constantly sought out for commentary on matters related to gender and sexuality from the 1950s through the 1980s.

What interests me most about Jorgensen, though, is not her remarkable career, which in any event is being researched by others with a great deal more scholarly attention to detail than I will attempt here.² Rather, I am more intrigued with the striking imagery of atomic bombs she repeatedly offers in metaphorical connection with transsexual medical technologies. She was not alone in making such an association. The weekly magazine *People Today* reported on May 5, 1954, after other transsexual stories had broken in the media, "Next to the recurrent hydrogen bomb headlines, reports of sex changes are becoming the most consistently startling world news."³ The movie version of Gore Vidal's transsexual farce *Myra Breckinridge* later referenced this

theme as well; Myra's opening monologue is spoken in voice-over narration as an image of a hydrogen bomb explosion in the Pacific fills the screen (Same 1970).

Because the bomb functioned as a master symbol for post-World War II American anxieties about the exigencies of existence in relation to scientific technology, it is hardly surprising that Jorgensen turned to it in her attempt to bring into language her own transformative experience with a new technology.⁴ Nor is it surprising that a transsexual body, by corporealizing the trans-formation of human existence through scientific technology, should evoke on a mass scale some of the same ambivalent hopes and fears inspired by the bomb. I want to point out these associations by rhetorically conflating transsexual and atomic technologies just as Jorgensen did in her autobiography to construct a fanciful yet serious literary device: Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb, a figure intended to suggest that in the spectacular advent of Jorgensen's public womanhood we can discern a moment of rupture in the fabric of Western culture, a new event in our material circumstances, a point of ecstatic passage into the hyperreality of postmodern conditions.

Pomo/Euro/Techno Angst: The Transsexual as Cultural Fantasy Figure

"What could be more postmodern than transsexuality?" Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub posed this question in the introduction to their influential 1991 anthology, *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (11). The two editors elaborated their question no further, for the answer was apparently obvious to them: nothing is more postmodern than transsexuality. Epstein and Straub defined neither of their terms but clearly assumed them to be related in the form of a syllogism. My construction and deployment of Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb is motivated by the very questions the editors of *Body Guards* implied but left unvoiced. How can we begin to articulate the relationship between transsexuality and postmodernity and to complicate the syllogism they assumed? How are new technologies and cultural innovations implicated in the production of historically novel subject formations and subject positions? To what extent can transsexuality be considered a technological fantasy that helps map the contours of contemporary society? How might it be considered a type of "assisted reproduction" that spawns and sustains new forms of embodied subjectivity?

In *The Transparency of Evil*, Jean Baudrillard asserts that postmodernity is characterized by "a general tendency toward transsexuality which extends well beyond sex" into all other areas of cultural production (Baudrillard 1993, 7). Baudrillard railed against this "transition towards a transsexual state of

affairs' (12) but considered it the problematic culmination of sexual liberation discourses from previous decades that called for "the bursting forth of the body's full erotic force." Baudrillard claimed that the historic exhaustion of the sexual liberation "orgy" in the AIDS epidemic "left everyone looking for their generic and sexual identity" but that in the postmodern aftermath of failed humanist emancipation metanarratives few viable answers could be found. Instead, people increasingly took their bodily pleasures not within the context of sexual difference but rather from "playing with the commutability of the signs of sex" (20). Transsexuality, which Baudrillard understands as a refusal of sexual difference and a flight from the somatic body into technologically mediated body images fantasized as circulating within a dematerialized "traffic in signs" (24), is thus symptomatic and characteristic of the current era. Symbolically, Baudrillard claims, to the extent that we all necessarily participate in this semiotic (s)exchange, "we are all transsexuals, just as we are all biological mutants in *potentia*" (21).

Throughout *The Transparency of Evil* Baudrillard's tone is vitriolic. He not only ignores or erases the specificities of (dare I say it?) real transsexual lives; he excoriates "symbolic" transsexuality as the embodiment of all he finds wrong with postmodern conditions. He does so by means of highly offensive representations of AIDS, race, and (homo)sexuality. Michael Jackson, for example, whom he considers to represent the tendency toward transsexuality that he condemns, is described as a "genetically baroque" being, a "turncoat of sex," a "solitary mutant" with "Frankensteinian appeal," an ideal symbol for a "miscegenated" society (21). What I find worth remarking in Baudrillard's thoughts on transsexuality is not that he condemns it but rather that he uses the figure of the transsexual to narrate a history of the second half of the twentieth century. I reject the trajectory of his plot—a further degeneration from the postlapsarian knowledge of sexual difference into the gray entropy of undifferentiation—but his underlying project is one with which I have considerable critical sympathy. The transsexual can, and often does, productively figure in attempts to make sense of recent as well as prospective historical experience.

As Rita Felski points out in "Fin de Siècle, Fin de Sex"—her own essay on transsexuality, postmodernity, and the millennial shift—Baudrillard's work can be situated within a more general cultural appropriation of "the figure of transsexuality as a semiotically dense emblem in the rhetoric of fin de millenium. . . . If ends of centuries serve as privileged cultural moments for articulating highly charged myths of death and rebirth, senescence and renewal, in our own era such hopes and anxieties are writ large across proliferating representations of the transgendered body" (341–342). These same highly charged myths are also articulated in current debates about the meaning (or

very existence) of "postmodern conditions," debates that can be understood to a certain extent as meditations on the meaning of contemporary history incited by the singular calendrical event of the year 2000.

There is a slight but significant distinction between "modernity and postmodernity" and "modernism and postmodernism" that seems useful to mark at this point. The first set of terms tend to refer to problems of historical periodization and to the dynamics of social, political, and economic change. They tend to be used when asking whether or not a new historical era has emerged that is as different in its worldview from the European Enlightenment as the Enlightenment was from the preceding period. The second set of terms tends to revolve around aesthetic considerations and styles of cultural production. They have something to do with pastiche, parody, appropriation, simulation, anachronism, and eclecticism. Charting various trajectories from modern conditions (in the historical sense) to postmodern cultural idioms (in the aesthetic sense), determining whether these changes are qualitative or quantitative and whether they represent a continuation of modernity or a profound discontinuity, assessing the moral and ethical significance of these developments, and formulating an appropriate stance *vis-à-vis* them constitute the bulk of the "postmodern" debate. It will not be possible in this essay to delve too deeply into these matters, but my basic premises are that the advent of transsexuality as a cultural phenomenon capable of generating widespread attention during the immediate post-World War II period bears an important relationship to the emergence of postmodernity's preconditions, and that this "transsexual phenomenon" needs to be interpreted within the context of the postmodern debate.

A brief example drawn from the work of Fredric Jameson helps suggest the centrality to the analysis of postmodern conditions of the tendency Baudrillard metonymically reduces to "transsexuality." In an essay on postmodern architecture, Jameson writes:

We are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not as yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it; in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture . . . stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions. (Jameson 1990, 38–39)

Like Baudrillard, Jameson advances a claim that recent cultural innovations compel the refiguration of both flesh and consciousness. Within Jameson's critical framework, however, this "neomorphic imperative" is not attributed to near-past historical antecedents. Rather, it is seen as deriving from a fundamental condition of human existence—that all Being (including forms of embodied subjectivity) is modulated through particular technological, political, and socioeconomic relations and is therefore always historically and culturally contingent. These changing modes of cultural organization are in fact the proper object of critical historical inquiry. Approached in this manner as a figure of the embodied subject embedded in and articulated through newly emergent biomedical and juridicollegal practices and discourses that have implications far broader than the construction of transsexuality, the transsexual body functions as something of an avatar of postmodernity. It becomes spectacle in the sense of which Guy Debord wrote: "a social relation among people, mediated by images," a "socially organized appearance" that is "nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation[.] . . . the historical moment in which we are caught" (Debord 1967, 4, 10, 11). Like media images, like architecture, transsexual bodies materialize, concretize, and render visible many of the structuring principles of the culture that produces them.

Ernest Mandel's characterization of the mid-twentieth century as a moment of quantum change between one organizational moment of capital and another helps explain the timing of transsexuality's appearance as spectacle through the vehicle of Christine Jorgensen's celebrity. In Mandel's view, this historical moment was partially determined by newly emergent power technologies and a concomitant shift from electricity and combustion engines to computers and nuclear devices. As other writers have suggested, it also involved a deepening crisis within the socially dominant empiricist epistemology of the modern West, specifically with regard to the problem of linguistic reference. In the atomic age, it has become increasingly difficult to think of representation as the mimetic reproduction for subjectivity of a stable, material objectivity that lies outside the subject (Jameson 1984, viii; Solomon 1988).

This complex cultural shift toward a non- or postreferential epistemology modeled by performative linguistic acts, generated in part by the advent of nuclear technology and by all the epistemological issues this technology raises, is primarily what I am referring to when I write of the emergence of "postmodern" conditions. Although postmodernism became a dominant aesthetic mode only in the early 1970s, it was in the late 1940s in the United States that postmodernity's necessary material preconditions initially established themselves—including nuclear war capabilities, a vastly expanded mass

media and communications network, electronic computers, and a United States-dominated framework for international relations cobbled together from the wreckage of European imperialism. The semiotic environment produced by the postwar technoscientific transnational capitalist system is precisely what I intend to evoke by invoking the figure of Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb.

Atomic bombs and transsexual bodies are similarly ambivalent devices. On the one hand, they have perversely colluded with the fantasies driving contemporary culture, supplying evidence to modern Western subjects that their scientific worldview has triumphed over all. Anything from cold hard matter to the ineffable essence of a human identity can be engineered into or out of existence. Like the processes through which uranium is manipulated to set off a chain reaction of explosive changes at the atomic level, transsexual and hormonal transformations represent the accomplishment of a desire for technical mastery over the material world. Metaphysical fantasies of transcendent power, like the old alchemical dream of turning lead into gold, apparently have been realized in nuclear technologies that could turn matter into energy, as well as in transsexual technologies that seemingly turned men into women (and women into men). On the other hand, this fantasy of total power precipitates its own inevitable anxiety-ridden crises. By attesting to a previously unimaginable potential for disrupting and refashioning the most fundamental attributes of existence, transsexual bodies and atomic bombs both confront modern Western subjects with the specter of their own dissolution by bearing witness to conditions in which the explanatory structures of modernity no longer suffice. They are both signs of an apocalypse of sorts that sets the stage for new forms of culture organized according to fundamentally different rules.

The parallel roles in recent history of transsexual bodies and nuclear bombs are rooted in the fact that both accomplish a literalization of modernity's representational crisis by abolishing the stability of material referentiality in a historically novel fashion. In doing so, they actualized the destruction of the modernist episteme. One end of modern history can indeed be found in a mushroom cloud, where meaning evaporates. Time and space lose all referentiality where Ground Zero and the Year Zero collide to mark the spot where reality evacuates itself into another dimension. Transsexuality, too, is posed as an impossible reality beyond the absolute limit of an incommensurable sexual difference, a liquidation of the body as a stable ground of meaning. It is the end of history in another sense, a space in which semiotic activity must mutate into new forms if it is to survive.

Like the bomb, the transsexual body is both a literal artifact and a powerful technocultural fantasy that offers us an opportunity to ruminate on and elaborate our concerns about our existential condition at a particular moment

in history. They are simultaneously mirrors that reflect reality and hammers that shape it. It is relatively easy to see nuclear bomb technology as a force that shapes the world and less obvious that "nuclearism" has also been a lens through which to view the world. The reverse holds true for transsexuality. As I have been suggesting above, the transsexual has become a privileged figure in postmodern history, but as I will argue below, it is also an important vector through which postmodern conditions are themselves produced.

Points of Passage: Or, Christine in the Cutting Room

In a 1959 interview with television journalist Mike Wallace, Christine Jorgensen spoke about her lifelong fascination with photography in a way that opens out into broader discussions of the role of technology in (re)producing historically contingent forms of embodied subjectivity, and of the ways in which attention to transgender phenomena can help map postmodernity. If the atomic bomb has been the figure of technology that best represents the awesome impact of the new technological conditions that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, the cinematic apparatus is perhaps better suited for modeling the means through which these conditions continue to operate. In attending to Jorgensen as both photographer and visual image, we can perhaps begin to appreciate the mechanisms through which contemporary subjectivity has increasingly come to be understood as an effect of the visual performativity of bodily surface and how transsexuality exemplifies this process.

In the 1959 interview, Wallace asked Jorgensen a question about her nightclub performances, to which she began to reply, "I like performing very much. I—" Wallace, who throughout the interview seemed determined to put the worst possible construction on Jorgensen's every word, quickly interrupted: "Was there a great need in yourself for recognition? Is there possibly any of this involved in your going through with the surgery?" Jorgensen responded to the insinuation of crass publicity-mongering with characteristic graciousness:

No, not with the surgery, not at all. But to say that I was not at all . . . interested in the theatrical world would be untrue, too. . . . I worked for RKO before [changing sex], in the motion picture industry. I was in the cutting room. I was a photographer. I believe that this is the reason why I went into the nightclubs—well, the reason I became a photographer was because I could work behind the cameras, because I was afraid to work in front of them.

When Wallace asked if the publicity surrounding Jorgensen's sex change gave her the show business break she'd always been looking for, Jorgensen in-

sisted that she had taken up her career as an entertainer "for a very pure economic reason." Her unsought notoriety foreclosed other possibilities for living an unobtrusive private life, and by capitalizing on her celebrity status she could provide better for herself and her aging parents. Wallace persisted in looking for a vulgar motive in Jorgensen's choices, suggesting that supporting herself through nightclub appearances came "at a considerable price, in terms of exhibition of yourself." To which Jorgensen replied: "Exhibition is a very interesting word. I think every human being is an exhibition of themselves. We have a physical being which we are constantly showing to friends and people, because this is us. We have to carry it with us. Inside I believe there is another person. There is the thing that makes "you" you, and "me" me, and each person themselves" (Wallace 1959). Jorgensen's sense that there is an immaterial essential self that visually presents itself to others through the materiality of the body lies close to the heart of much recent theoretical work on transsexual subjectivity. As Jay Prosser argues in his recent book, *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, it is the perceived discrepancy between the morphology of the transsexual's subjective image of the "bodily ego" and the reflected image of the transsexual's physical organism that launches the drive for somatic sex transformation (Prosser 1998, 61–96). Though Jorgensen did not rely on the technical psychoanalytic vocabulary that Prosser employs, she expressed in lay terms a compatible understanding of the process through which she shifted her subject position from man to woman. It seems that for Jorgensen, becoming a woman in the eyes of others was largely a matter of materializing and rendering objectively visible "the thing that made 'her' her." While she might well have described that "thing" as her soul, it could also be characterized as the projected image of her phantasmatic body, an image with which she made primary subjective identifications and through which she sought to situate herself as a speaker in language, an image whose acquisition and incorporation constituted the process through which "she" became instantiated as a subject in the first place.

Christine Jorgensen's reminiscence of herself as George at work in the cutting room of the RKO studios suggests ways in which cinematic modes of processing experience informed the construction of her transsexual identity just as much as did the medical techniques through which she made her self visible. Jorgensen's job in the cutting room required her to take film stock shot for RKO feature films and snip it into discrete images or short sequences (e.g., planes landing, lions hunting prey on the savanna) that could be recycled and incorporated into other film projects. She then filed the segments away according to a subject index of the images they contained, and reproduced the film stock as needed. As editor, archivist, and photographic copyist, Jorgensen

occupied a position in which she necessarily learned both to fragment the visual representation of the world and to assemble those fragments according to any number of narrative structures. It seems likely that her extensive reading in medical literature allowed her to grasp how, through surgical and hormonal techniques, her own body could be "edited" in much the same way as film, its visual surface deliberately manipulated to capture the image of herself she saw in her mind's eye, and to produce and sustain the narratives that structured her identifications and desires. In applying cinematic insight to her own embodiment, Jorgensen moved herself from one type of cutting room to another. As she herself notes, it was this very transition that enabled her to become an object in front of the camera rather than merely a dis- (or mis-) embodied subject behind the lens.

The more one explores the emergence of transsexuality as a wide-scale phenomenon, the more readily it appears as part of a broader debate about the emergence of new epistemological conditions and a new aesthetic sensibility. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard outlines several fundamental aspects of late-twentieth-century life, in addition to the aforementioned loss of the stable material referent, that are significant in assessing the relationship between postmodernity and transsexuality. These include the increasing extension of performative principles and criteria into new areas of social life, what he refers to as the "instrumentalization of knowledge," through which information is reduced to operational codes, and the proliferation of simulacra, where the difference between the original and the reproduction becomes increasingly irrelevant. Taken together, these various epistemological conditions focus attention on surfaces rather than depths, images rather than substances, "doing" rather than "being." Modernist notions of causality and narrative flatten out and break down in the face of a performatively defined present (Lyotard 1984, 3-67).

Transsexuality is "postmodern" according to each of these criteria. The sex of the body has, to a significant degree, become an object of the will—that is to say, the sexed appearance of the body has become more manipulable, so that the category of sex, rather than being an anchoring material referent of personal identity and social gender, has become an operationalized surface effect achieved through performative means. In this regard, transsexuality literalizes and renders visible the processes that postmodern performative theories of gender hold are the bases of all gender. In so doing, the naturalness of ontologizing bodily difference into social and psychological gender through the category of sex is called into question, and its destabilization is publicly displayed in spectacular fashion. The greater the skill in reproducing the semiotic codes that produce recognizable gender as their surface ef-

fect, the more indistinguishable the transsexual "simulacrum" becomes from "authentic" men and women. To the extent that transsexuality as spectacle has become one of the principal sites for encountering these new ways that bodies and gender can mean, transsexuality functions as a point of passage between modernity and postmodern conditions.

In suggesting that Christine Jorgensen was the prototypical postmodern transsexual I am not suggesting that either she or her doctors understood the project that drew them together as a harbinger of new cultural forms, new means of embodiment, new modes of establishing subjective identifications in the objective realm, or new ways for bodies to mean. But as Lyotard himself points out, the postmodern functions not only as a historical period but as modernism's avant-garde (79). Jorgensen was a modernist who accepted the metanarratives of Western science and believed science would discover the truth of her Being in its meticulous investigations of her material substance. When science pronounced her female, she had only to surrender to its verdict. This does not undermine the point I have been trying to make about her postmodernity. When I say that in Jorgensen's transition from man to woman we can see an emergence of postmodern conditions, I mean only that we can see at the microlevel of an individual life changes of more global significance, changes that have to do with new modes of semiotic production.

Consider again the question of hormones and the scenario at the drugstore that opened this essay. Jorgensen self-administered estrogen and subsequently received it from her doctors because she and they believed it contained the biological essence of the womanhood that she claimed to possess within her in some mysterious fashion. It's worth noting that science named the glands that produce hormones the "endocrine system," in that the Greek root, *kreinin*, is a cognate of the Latin root for both "secret" and "secrete," and that *endos* means "interior" or "within." Both Jorgensen and her doctors were fully caught up in a scientific discourse that conflated "internal secretions" with "inner secrets," and which thus conceptualized estrogen and testosterone as deep truths of the body waiting to be discovered and confessed, elaborated on, augmented, and publicized in a manner familiar to all readers of Michel Foucault. According to the views held by Jorgensen and her doctors, supplying the proper hormones to make a latent "true sex" more perceptible would represent a heroic scientific triumph, as would surgically altering the genitals of such persons. Through transsexual technologies, transgendered subjects could finally appear as embodied subjects within the heteronormative matrix. While the improper application of these techniques risked mismatching Nature's handwork rather than magnifying its designs, their development and use could be fully justified within modernist narratives and discourses.

Within this modernist framework, however, postmodern conditions began to emerge. As noted previously, many of the important effects of estrogen on a biologically male body are visual. They are changes in skin texture and fat distribution, surface changes in the appearance of the body. Genital surgeries, too, have important visual effects in that they also change the shape of the body and alter its appearance. To a significant degree, transsexuality can be considered a technology that relies on hormonal and surgical manipulations of bodily surface to actualize in the visual (and therefore social) register psychological (and therefore private) identifications with specifically sexed images of the body-ego. In acting out older notions of essences and depths, in probing materiality to discover there the very projections they imagined as their project's ground, Jorgensen and her medical team inadvertently instrumentalized the very mechanisms through which the sexed appearance of the body is performatively produced and through which it disappears again into the fiction of a natural state of being. Precisely because the material body is so readily taken as an ultimate form of truth, this instrumental knowledge encoded within transsexual technologies has had the power to produce the reality of the transsexual's gendered embodiment as one of its peculiar effects. Somewhat ironically for Jorgensen and many other transsexuals who have followed her, modernity's quest to ground the meaning of gender in the flesh of the human body began pointing beyond itself toward new, historically postmodern ways for bodies and genders to mean. Pushed to its limit, the body of scientific modernity collapsed into elsewhere, to arrive in a place where the phantasmatic body of a transgender imaginary could warm itself beneath the same sun that heated the surface of the skin.

Notes

- Portions of an earlier version of this essay have been published previously as "Transsexuality: The Postmodern Body and/as Technology," *Exposure: The Journal of the Society for Photographic Education* 30, nos. 1-2 (fall 1995): 38-50, and are forthcoming, in revised form, in Susan Stryker, *Ecstatic Passages: A Postmodern Transsexual Memoir*, from Oxford University Press.
1. All information on Jorgensen in this essay is drawn from her published autobiography (1968), but see also Meyerowitz (1998) and Sirlin (1995) for more information on the historical context. The following anecdote about Jorgensen's transition is drawn from Jorgensen, 77-78, 130.
 2. Sirlin (1995) offers a hostile account that stereotypically misreads Jorgensen as a closeted homosexual who went through surgery in order to appear heterosexual. Meyerowitz (1998), who is working on a book-length history of transsexuality, supplies a more nuanced perspective on her career and places her in a broader history of transsexual discourses and practices in the United States. Hausman (1995) devotes several pages to Jorgensen in her treatment of transsexual autobiography, as does Prosser (1998).
 3. I would like to thank Joanne Meyerowitz for calling my attention to this source.

4. Transsexuality's relationship to "nuclearism" and cultural discourses of containment are explored in more depth in the extended version of this article forthcoming in my book. See Boyer (1985); Chaloupka (1992); Henrikson (1998); May (1988), chap. 4; "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb," 92-113; Nadel (1995); Nye (1994), chap. 9; "Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI: New Forms of the Dynamic Sublime," 225-256.