

FOREWORD

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At a moment in history when so many things seem to be getting worse the whole world over, it's nice to see some things moving in a direction that feels better. Ardel Haefele-Thomas's *Introduction to Transgender Studies* is one of those better-feeling things.

Ardel and I both hail from Oklahoma, both felt the genders we were assigned at birth didn't quite fit, both turned the curiosity our gender-questioning inspired in us toward careers in education, and both wound up making long-time homes in the San Francisco Bay Area. Reading this book felt like hanging out with a friend and having a conversation about things we share and care about. I trust it's a conversation you'll feel welcome and at home in, too.

I wish I'd had something like this book when I was growing up in Oklahoma in the 1960s and 1970s. I'd felt trans my whole life but kept my mouth shut and my head down about it. I learned the word *transsexual* from reading a "Dear Abby" column in my hometown newspaper when I still was a preteen, but I had a hard time finding information that rang true with me—the only books I could find in the card catalogue of the Carnegie Public Library of Lawton, Oklahoma, about the kind of people I thought I was were textbooks of abnormal psychology.

I was mesmerized when the early 1970s trans film *I Want What I Want* played at the Diana, a sort of sleazy second-rate movie theater downtown, because it was the first time I'd encountered visual media depicting a trans person. By the time I was in high school, Renée Richards, the trans woman who was a professional tennis player, was all over the news, and the ridicule and resistance she encountered let me know I'd been wise to stay silent about my own trans feelings. Still, I learned from all that sensationalistic coverage that Richards was the most notable transsexual since Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, which was my first clue that folks like me had a history.

By the time I got to college at the University of Oklahoma in 1979, there were still only two books on trans topics in the university library: the psychiatrist Robert Stoller's *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* and Janice Raymond's notorious *Transsexual Empire*, the mother lode of transphobic feminist rhetoric, tropes, and discourse. One spring break, I found a copy of the lesbian feminist anthropologist Esther Newton's remarkable study of drag performers, *Mother Camp*, in a secondhand bookstore in Austin, Texas, which was the first time I'd seen anything trans-related treated in a smart, morally neutral, non-stigmatizing manner.

Even after I'd started graduate school in U.S. history at UC Berkeley in 1983, I had a hard time finding trans resources in one of the best research libraries in the world, though I did encounter there Carol Riddell's *Divided Sisterhood*, a transfeminist rebuttal of Raymond's hateful bilge. My people had a politics, it seemed, as well as a history.

Mostly, though, I learned about being trans simply by being trans. It was a seat-of-the-pants, hem-of-the-skirt sort of education. There was little in the way of affirming literature to read, or positive media representation to watch, in the 1980s. I had the good fortune of living in an urban area where, when it became really clear to me that I needed to transition if I wanted to live a life that felt worth living, I could snoop around the dark corners of the city and find interesting people to talk to, learn from, and be myself with—most of whom were constrained in their life circumstance because of their gender, some of whom were broken by their circumstances, but all of whom were fierce. Still, it was a furtive and underground sort of existence.

It still didn't seem possible, into the early 1990s, for me to both be trans and do the kind of work I was being trained to do. And when I finally flamed into public visibility just as I was finishing my degree, it in fact did turn out to be not possible to work in my profession and be openly, unapologetically trans. The financial hardships of the following years, the kind of marginalization and stigma that I lived through, are what stoked in me an unquenchable desire to use my academic training to change not just *what* people knew of trans, but *how* they knew it.

A cliché about universities is that they are “knowledge factories.” There's a truth in that cliché, because what universities in fact do is produce what could be called “legitimated knowledge”: not just what Uncle Donnie tweeted yesterday while scratching his keester and drinking a beer, but knowledge drawn from research and cogent thinking, grounded in other research and cogent thinking, ad infinitum. My goal as a trans academic working outside the academy was to make a different kind of knowledge about trans people, drawn as much from what we all knew from living in our bodies in the world as it was from what my grandmother called “school-book learnin’,” and to get that knowledge into circulation, both on the streets and in the so-called ivory tower. The practice of making that different body of knowledge about trans people is what I think of as “transgender studies.”

I feel very fortunate that I was eventually able to use my work in transgender studies to gain a university professorship, and that transgender studies has indeed helped produce a more affirming kind of knowledge about trans lives, both within and beyond the formal classroom, that can help people think dif-

ferently about themselves, their world, and of the varieties of transness to be encountered therein. I see this book as a welcome addition to that expansive project. It offers a useful place to start thinking about basic concepts like sex and gender, sexual orientation, and identity. It offers, too, an opportunity to reflect on how best to acknowledge that human cultures throughout time and around the world have concocted a great many gender systems, without therefore assuming that all that diversity can be squeezed into the three little syllables of “transgender,” or that everybody who has ever lived a life at odds with currently dominant forms of Eurocentric gender categorization can properly be referenced by that perpetually fraught pronoun, *we*.

I love that this book has such a strong historical focus, not just because I’m a history nerd, but because I think we can learn a lot about what’s possible—what *can* be—by learning more about what already *actually has existed*. The past offers a kind of testimony that how things are is not how they’ve always been, which bears the sly implication that the future can be different from the present, too. Change is the only reality. And I love, too, that what counts as knowledge in these pages is not just what cisgender experts have to say about trans lives, but what trans people—those with formal expertise and scholarly training as well as those who went to the school of embodied experiences—have to say for themselves, about themselves. As the “Writings from the Community” sections of the book make clear, we are the best experts on our own lives.

Back in Oklahoma, I now have a young trans nephew who came out while he was still in high school, served as president of his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, and socially and hormonally transitioned before his twenty-first birthday. I have friends and colleagues who have gender-nonconforming, nonbinary, and trans-identified kids, who support their children’s creative gender exploration at earlier and earlier ages. Something profound is shifting in our culture’s understanding of what gender means and does, and what we call “transgender” now is but a window into that deeper transformation.

Though gender’s change is a welcome one, that change also distances the experiences of “kids today” from the experiences of their trans elders, among whom I now number myself. Books like this *Introduction to Transgender Studies* thus play a vital role in transmitting intergenerational knowledge. As you undoubtedly will see as you read the pages that follow, Ardel Haefele-Thomas has done a commendable job presenting what *transgender* has meant up to our present moment, thereby giving the rising generation a generous gift to use as they see fit for the ongoing project of creating a less straitjacketed, more expansive sense of what a human life can be.