

Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____.

Still under construction. Dig we must. Sorry about the formatting and colors.

Written by [Jacob Hale](#), with thanks to Talia Bettcher, Dexter D. Fogt, Judith Halberstam, and Naomi Scheman. Note that the list refers to transsexuality rather than to transgender *per se*. However, many items also apply to non-transgendered researchers writing about transgender, as well as to trans-folk writing across trans-trans differences.

- 1. Approach your topic with a sense of humility: you are not the experts about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans _____. Transsexuals are.
- 2. Interrogate your own subject position: the ways in which you have power that we don't (including powers of access, juridical power, institutional power, material power, power of intelligible subjectivity), the ways in which this affects what you see and what you say, what your interests and stakes are in forming your initial interest, and what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work. (Here's what Bernie Hausman, p.vii, says about how her initial interest was formed: She had been reading about transvestism and ran across library material on transsexualism. "Now *that** was fascinating." Why? "The possibilities for understanding the construction of 'gender' through an analysis of transsexualism seemed enormous and there wasn't a lot of critical material out there." Remember that using those with less power within institutionalized, material and discursive structures as your meal ticket (retention, tenure, promotion) is objectionable to those so used.)
- 3. Beware of replicating the following discursive movement (which [Sandy Stone](#) articulates in "[The Empire Strikes Back](#)," and reminds us is familiar from other colonial discourses): Initial fascination with the exotic; denial of subjectivity, lack of access to dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation.
- 4. Don't erase our voices by ignoring what we say and write, through gross misrepresentation (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone and to Kate Bornstein), by denying us our academic credentials if we have them (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone), or by insisting that we must have academic credentials if we are to be taken seriously.
- 5. Be aware that our words are very often part of conversations we're having within our communities, and that we may be participating in overlapping conversations within multiple communities, e.g., our trans communities, our scholarly communities (both interdisciplinary ones and those that are disciplinarily bounded), feminist communities, queer communities, communities of color. Be aware of these conversations, our places within them, and our places within community and power structures. Otherwise, you won't understand our words.
- 6. Don't totalize us, don't represent us or our

discourses as monolithic or univocal; look carefully at each use of 'the', and at plurals.

- 7. Don't uncritically quote non-transsexual "experts," e.g., Harry Benjamin, Robert Stoller, Leslie Lothstein, Janice Raymond, Virginia Prince, Marjorie Garber. Apply the same critical acumen to their writings as you would to anyone else.
- 8. Start with the following as, minimally, a working hypothesis that you would be loathe to abandon: "Transsexual lives are lived, hence livable" (as Naomi Scheman put it in "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer").
- 9. When you're talking about male-to-female transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., make that explicit and keep making it explicit throughout; stating it once or twice is not sufficient to undermine paradigmaticity. Don't toss in occasional references to female-to-male transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., without asking what purposes those references serve you and whether or not those purposes are legitimate.
- 10. Be aware that if you judge us with reference to your political agenda (or agendas) taken as the measure or standard, especially without even asking if your agenda(s) might conflict with ours and might not automatically take precedence over ours, that it's equally legitimate (or illegitimate, as the case may be) for us to use our political agenda(s) as measures by which to judge you and your work.
- 11. Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or transsexual ____ tell you about *yourself*, *not* what does it tell you about trans.
- 12. Ask yourself if you can travel in our trans worlds. If not, you probably don't get what we're talking about. Remember that we live most of our lives in non-transsexual worlds, so we probably do get what you're talking about.
- 13. Don't imagine that you can write about the trope of transsexuality, the figure of the transsexual, transsexual discourse/s, or transsexual subject positions without writing about transsexual subjectivities, lives, experiences, embodiments. Ask yourself: what relations hold between these categorial constructions, thus what implications hold between what you write about one and what you don't write about another.
- 14. Don't imagine that there is only one trope of transsexuality, only one figure of "the" transsexual, or only one transsexual discourse at any one temporal and cultural location.
- 15. If we attend to your work closely enough to engage in angry, detailed criticism, don't take this as a rejection, crankiness, disordered ranting and raving, or the effects of testosterone poisoning. It's a *gift*. (And it's praise: there must be something we value about you to bother to engage you, especially since such

engagement is often painful, as well as time-consuming, for us.)

References:

Naomi Scheman, "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer"; in Diana T. Meyers, ed., *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Boulder: Westview Press, forthcoming.

Sandy Stone, [The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto](#), in *Camera Obscura 26*; also in Straub and Epstein (eds): *Body Guards*; Routledge 1991.

Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

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