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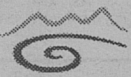
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PORTRAITS OF TRANSFORMATION

BY ELI CLARE

In *Phallus Palace*, photographer and writer Dean Kotula gathers together photos, essays, and interviews that explore the experiences of being a female-to-male transsexual (FTM). This is a book of many fragmented parts. There are Kotula's photo portraits of FTMs accompanied by their personal statements, a handful of autobiographical pieces by Kotula about transsexuality and his life as a transman, several articles by non-trans professionals who work with FTMs, a series of interviews with doctors who do FTM surgeries and photo essays of their surgical procedures, a couple essays about trans history and the process of transition, and two pieces by family members of FTMs.

In short this book is a collage of information. Not quite an anthology but more than a single-authored volume, it is hard to characterize and feels a bit like a whirlwind.

At the center are Kotula's portraits of FTMs. These black-and-white full-page photos show a whole range of transmen from the 22-year-old guy who has just started taking testosterone and looks all of 14 to the man who transitioned 24 years ago; from the impish looking clarinet player hunkered down on a railroad track to the kayaker paddling away from a dock. Paired with these portraits are smaller pictures of these men before transition – when they were often perceived as women – and short statements by each of them. The words and pictures combine to create powerful stories about what transition means to FTMs. Michael writes: "I was always masculine in my innermost essence – though I didn't come by my physical manhood until much later, and not easily ... And this journey, this bliss, is my manhood. I have approached, and breached, what I was made to believe was the impossible: to become a man" (p. 120).

It is necessary for non-trans gay, lesbian, and bi people to absorb these stories about FTMs who are men. All too frequently in non-trans queer space I hear mutterings about how transsexuals are just selling out, how it's essentially conservative to transition, how the lesbian community is losing all its butches. These transphobic attitudes are frustrating at best, and as a genderqueer on the FTM-spectrum, I get really weary of responding to them. The men in Kotula's portraits are repeatedly saying, "Through transition I became whole, I became happy, I became able to live in my body." These aren't stories of selling out or becoming conservative or losing anyone, but rather stories of liberation.

The book as a whole focuses on FTM transsexuals who identify as men, which is a small slice of the whole range of FTM-

spectrum gender possibilities. Kotula goes to great lengths to differentiate transmen from other trans identities. His story and belief, bolstered by the other voices in the book, is that he and other transsexuals are simply men whose female bodies needed to be corrected.

This viewpoint is vital, and around its edges lies a lot of complexity. First, I want to acknowledge the sexist messages that declare all women's bodies wrong and the ways those messages get internalized. Given this truth about sexism, some feminists are quick to dismiss Kotula's FTM transsexual reality of being a man living in the wrong body – a female body – as internalized sexism. I believe that these truths – one feminist and the other trans – actually aren't contradictory. Women can struggle mightily with internalized sexism, and transmen can struggle with a deeply internal feeling, unconnected to sexism, that their female bodies are in need of correction. By holding these two realities together, we can all arrive at a more complex understanding of sex, gender, and sexism.

And second, I want to note that there are many different kinds of gender identities among trans people. Kotula's focus is narrow, and *The Phallus Palace* would be best read in conjunction with trans books that are broader in scope. *Genderqueer*, edited by Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchens, (reviewed in October's *OITM*) and Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* come to mind.

Around the central series of portraits is a constellation of information designed to educate readers about FTMs. We hear from a number of non-trans professionals: surgeons, therapists, and a researcher. Kotula took his camera into several operating rooms, and the resulting pictures are quite graphic. If you are squeamish, skip the surgical photo essays. While they are somewhat informative for folks wanting to know more about FTM chest and genital reconstruction, I wonder whether they play into the widespread prurient interest in trans people's bodies, particularly genitals. (The book's rather flip title, *The Phallus Palace*, comes from a device by the same name used in one of the surgeries that creates a penis.)

The therapists in the book are a mixed bag. Katherine Rachlin adeptly debunks many myths and stereotypes about FTMs, clearly taking the position of an ally to the trans community. With Gender Identity Disorder and Gender Dysphoria still listed as psychiatric diagnoses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, too many non-trans therapists and health care providers medicalize, even pathologize, trans experience. Disappointingly that is exactly the tone of Diane Ellaborn's "Seeking Manhood: An Introductory Guide to

review

Dean Kotula

The Phallus Palace: Female to Male Transsexuals

Alyson Press, 2002
paperback, 253 pp, \$19.95

Assessment of the Female-to-Male Adolescent" later in the book. This makes me appreciate Rachlin's article even more.

In a nod to research about transsexuality, Kotula interviews Milton Diamond about his theories regarding gender identity formation. Diamond favors a biological explanation, centering on the notion that pre-natal hormones shape the sex of the brain. Although it is interesting (and mirrors the debate about a biological origin for sexual orientation), neither Kotula nor Diamond clearly states that this is only theory, not proven fact. Kotula bases much of his thinking about transsexuality on this theory and writes about it as a given, rather than one of a number of possibilities.

We also hear about some FTM-specific history. Margaret Deidre O'Hartigan writes about Alan Hart who unambiguously lived as a man in the early 1900s and was one of the first people to utilize medical technology in his transition from female to male. And Ken Morris writes about two female-bodied Civil War soldiers who lived as men their entire adulthoods, unlike many of the passing women who fought in the Civil War and returned to their lives as women after the War. Both pieces of history are important to a growing body of trans cultural work. Too often FTM history has been subsumed into lesbian history and transmen are misunderstood as butch dykes. Morris's distinction between FTMs and passing women is important in understanding the difference between trans history and lesbian history.

And finally Kotula writes about his own history in a series of autobiographical pieces. Oddly enough it is Kotula's writing that I find the most disappointing in *The Phallus Palace*. He tends to make sweeping generalizations about transsexuals. For example, he writes on page 227, "[M]ost [transsexuals] will say, 'I had no choice; it was either transition or die,'" as if this were an absolute truth. Yes, there are many FTM transsexuals for whom transition is a life-or-death matter, but for many others, it is not. Kotula never acknowledges that he's writing about one particular kind of trans experience. Instead he repeatedly generalizes from his life to all or most FTMs.

In addition Kotula can be overly romantic about manhood and unrepentantly sexist. For example, he writes, "Now I want to recover my childhood, to be viewed as a boy and young man ... without hesitation or jeers. I want what was rightfully