

Editorial

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The version of record of this manuscript has been published by Intellect Ltd. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, Volume 21, Issue 1, *Transforming Genitals in Culture and Media*, Jun 2023, p. 3 – 13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/nl_00034_2

Abstract

Although they are ordinary and almost everyone has them, genitals are riddled with controversies, taboos and anxieties. Despite their social and cultural importance, genitalia have been left out of systematic analysis and research in the context of social sciences and humanities. They are most often positioned in terms of dualisms that create, support and strengthen social distinctions, hierarchies and asymmetries. Transcending the essentialist gender ideas and binaries attributed to human bodies opens up space for new understandings of genitalia in movement, transformation and transition. The key question is: how do culture and media intersect/work through genital transformations? The papers featured here provide inspiring, innovative and research-stimulating responses to the complex presence and representation of genitalia through various media (online forums, novels, video art, performance art, television drama, reality television, mainstream news, feature film and vlogs). Each paper, as well as the entire thematic issue, represents a contribution to the further development of genital studies and strengthens the multidisciplinary questioning of genitalia, power, gender, differences, transgression and resistance.

Keywords: Jones/Geiger Zeman, genitals, culture, media, genital transformations, genital studies, vulva/vagina studies, penis studies.

Introduction

trans-

prefix

1

: on or to the other side of: across: beyond

2

: so or such as to change in form or position or transfer

(Merriam-Webster 2023)

As the above definition explains, trans-, as a prefix, largely denotes movement. This volume, while not about movement in any predictable sense, stays true to this meaning by interrogating the ways in which notions of mobility and change manifest, specifically when they intertwine in the representational and/or symbolic nexus of media and genitals.

Genitals are ordinary and almost everyone has them, but, very often, they are controversial, taboo and fraught with anxiety. They have prominent mythological, religious, ethical and cultural meanings. Genitals are attached to ideologies, connotations, inscriptions, norms, practices, technologies, imaginaries, feelings, experiences and representations (Blackman 2008). Historically, they are often positioned in terms of dualisms: femininities/masculinities, youth/old age, beauty/ugliness, pleasure/pain, hatred/love, disability/capacity, intimacy/violation, private/public, etc. These binaries create, support and reflect social distinctions, hierarchies and asymmetries. There are few sufficient theoretical or ethnographical texts around genitals, despite their social and cultural importance.

This yearbook examines how culture and media intersect with, consider or work through genital transformations. We started with a wide-ranging call for expressions of interest asking: how are genital transformations represented visually and textually – in film, television, social media, print, etc., for what cultural reasons, and with what effects/affects? We sought papers that addressed transformations of genitals that could be metaphoric, mythical, representational, artistic, surgical, phenomenological, etc. Thus, the chapters chosen to include here deal with confluences of the corporeal, the discursive and the transformational. Genitals in this volume ‘appear’ in print, in audio, on small and large screens, and in both everyday and extraordinary modes.

Figure 1:

Vagina Graffiti, Gothenburg. Photographer: Metro Centric. 2012. Wikimedia Commons.



Media

Media transmit, translate, transport and transform information. Marshall McLuhan's maxim 'The medium is the message' (the title of the first chapter in his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*) holds true six decades after he wrote it and, in an age of increasingly digital modes of being, it is possibly more apt than ever. There is never any 'pure' message because every communication depends on a medium (voice, facial expression, painting, text, etc.) and each medium will alter or even become the message in some way. Media then, are never merely carriers of set meanings: they themselves impart intelligence and significance. For example, the same narrative may evoke feelings of calm, terror or boredom when told via different media, and further, because the body itself with its complex sensorium is a receiving medium, then 'messages received' by different people, even when exposed to the same mode of storytelling, will be different. This is a well-worn observation and hardly warrants an argument, but it is one worth repeating as we introduce this volume that joins together media, genitals and transformations.

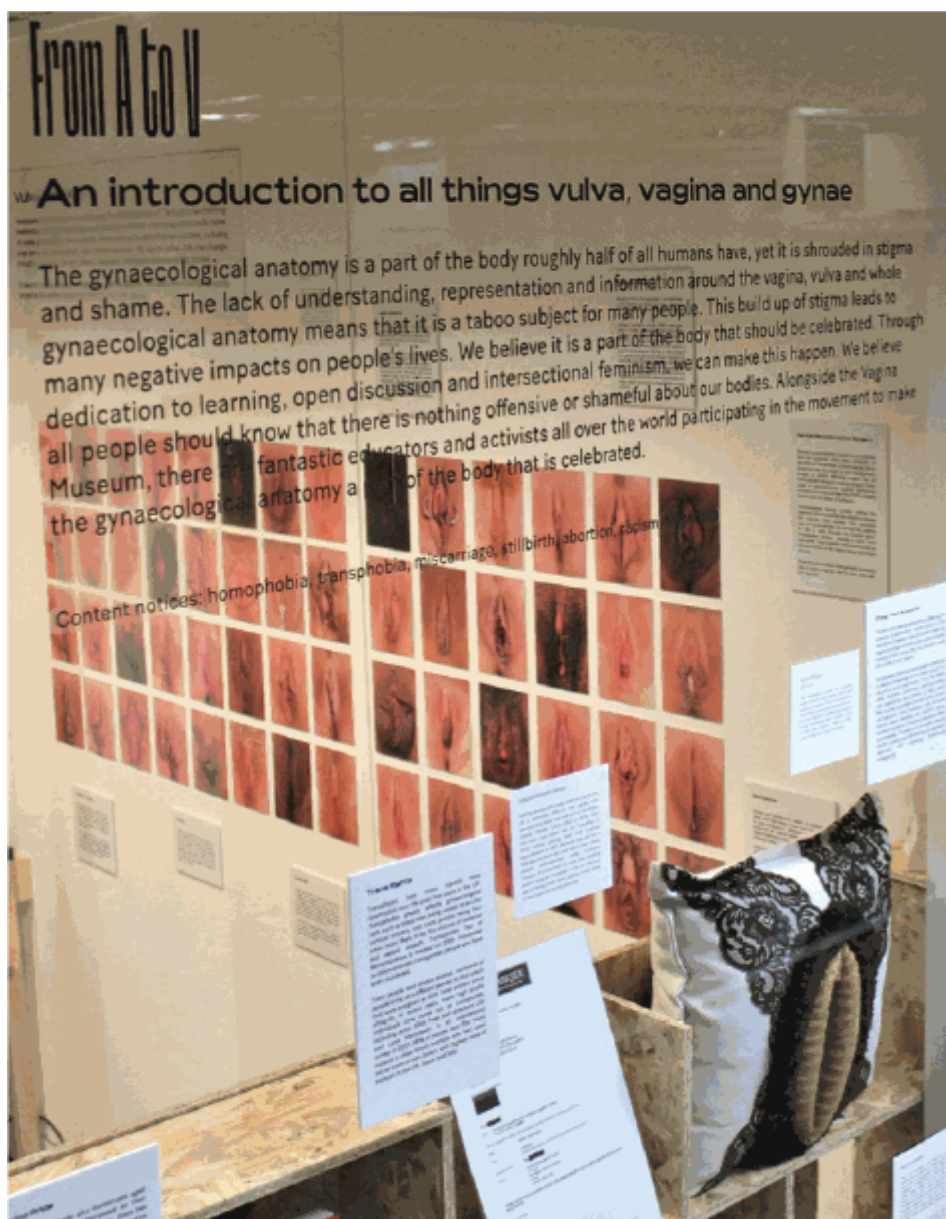
McLuhan and James Carey (1989) upended the previous transmission model of communication, complicating it with notions of ritual and sharing, and demonstrating that media themselves are powerful. Similarly, queer and trans scholars are now upending notions of male/female sexed bodies and a binary gender system in favour of exciting, open and conducive thinking that has the potential to

enhance individual and collective freedoms to be and to express. The concept of trans has ‘radical productive potential’ (Pearce et al. 2019a: 2). Joe Latham (2019) suggests that reality itself – at least our notions of what that is – is called into question as we interrogate (or even quietly suggest) that the male/female binary and its accompanying connections to specific genitals may not have always been true, may not be true now, and indeed may well be done away with in the future.

Media analysed in the research presented here include online forums, novels, video art, performance art, television drama, reality television, mainstream news, feature film and vlogs.

Figure 2:

Vagina Museum display, detail. London. 2022. *Courtesy of The Vagina Museum.*



Genital studies

While analyses of media products and their effects in the arts, humanities and social sciences are ubiquitous, there has been far less written about genitals. Even the feminist ‘corporeal turn’ of the 1990s, which insisted that we begin to examine ‘bodies in their concrete specificities’ (Grosz 1994: vii; see also Probyn 1993; Butler 1990) with its luminary insights into gender and sexuality (many of which paved the way for the trans scholars of today) did not tell us much about genitals. Thus, we situate this yearbook in a new interdisciplinary area that we call genital studies and its sub-disciplines penis/phallic studies (Allan 2015; Jones and Callahan 2022a) and vagina/vulva studies (notably Blackledge 2020; Rees 2013; Gross 2022; Schechter 2023).

We do not refer in this introduction to ‘male’ or ‘female’ body parts – instead we offer at least the possibility of decoupling genitals from essentialist notions of masculinity/femininity and binaries of men’s/women’s bodies. This cleaving is fruitful in terms of language, context and modes of understanding: it opens space to think more freely and fruitfully about genitals in multifarious spatial, temporal and discursive contexts.

Vulva/vagina studies is an important emerging interdisciplinary field. Artists have led the way in opening the vulva to visual knowledge, perhaps most famously Georgia O’Keeffe (although it is important to note that she always insisted that her paintings were of flowers, not vulvas, see Ellis-Petersen 2016) Rokudenashiko and Judy Chicago. Relatively recent books (noted above) by Catherine Blackledge, Emma Rees, Florence Schechter and Rachel E. Gross are leading the way in new scholarship about the vulva/vagina, while London’s Vagina Museum is the first of its kind and educates around topics such as masturbation, FGM and periods/period poverty (see also popular sites such as <https://www.hildeatalanta.com/thevulvagallery>, accessed 30 June 2023). Nevertheless, vaginas and vulvas continue to be cloaked in secrecy, shame and disgust. Mainstream media are quick to deride or sensationalize ubiquitous pornography, FGM and genital cosmetic surgeries (‘designer vaginas’ [see Jones 2018: 29]), but actual vaginas and vulvas in terms of people’s everyday experiences such as in relation to health or pleasure remain relatively invisible. Public conversations about the complexities of vulvas and vaginas including sexuality, ageing, gender, childbirth, menstruation, desire and illness remain rare, leading to ignorance and sometimes devastating consequences for people who live with these body parts. We laud Rihanna for her Super Bowl Halftime concert this year, derisively labelled her ‘halftime masturbation show’ by the notoriously misogynistic British tabloid press (Stephen 2023: n.pag.). This performance was unapologetically centred around the vulva and its pleasures, with dance moves including genital self-caresses. It was also about the centrality of the ovum in human reproduction: Rihanna appeared pregnant, clothed in richly red puffy garments, a patent red breastplate and a dangling zipper-tag in front of her clitoris. After being serenaded and worshipped by 280 faceless, somewhat frantic, dancers dressed as sperm in pointed white hoods, a nonchalant Rihanna rose, Goddess-like, to float alone above the stadium.

Penis studies, similarly, is an emerging and highly interdisciplinary field. Penises and phalluses have been ‘abiding (although sometimes obfuscated) subject[s] in fine art, literature, archaeology, psychology, anthropology, gender studies, cultural studies, feminism, theology, sociology, history, and fashion theory, but never recognised [as worthy of a discipline]’ (Jones and Callahan 2022a: 2). Jonathan Allan writes that, ‘the penis occupies a great part of our cultural imaginary’ (2015: 339) and yet – although discussion of penises is far more socially acceptable than vulvas/vaginas – these body parts remain mysterious and fear-inducing. Conor Reilly says in his short documentary (that culminates in him revealing his naked body on screen and to a life-drawing class) ‘I’m terrified right now’ (2023: n.pag.).

Despite increasing understandings of gender and sexuality there is still relatively little social, cultural or scholarly discussion around sexual acts (which we here call sex) or – more to our purposes – the roles of genitals in them. Of course, sex does not have to include genitals – sensuality and eroticism can be facilitated via any body part/s and indeed without them (in the case, say, of VR, texting/sexting or any mode of arousal that happens separate from or adjacent to the physical). However, this volume is not solely, and indeed is hardly at all, concerned with genitals vis-à-vis sex. Just as the heart is understood as both a vital organ and an enduring, ubiquitous symbol and metaphor, genitals are more than corporeal. They have important representative powers; the humanities and social sciences interrogations of them can give insight into deep cultural change, including fear and desire, and into issues such as sexuality, gender, violence, power, art, hatred and love. Genitals have multifarious meanings that manifest discursively – visually, textually, philosophically, socially – and it is these meanings’ ongoing transformations that we are most interested in.

Transformations

Transformation is perhaps the most complex concept in our knotty triad and this theme has many axes. In this volume transformation may refer to considerations of how and why genitals are surgically transformed (e.g. through circumcision, aesthetic/cosmetic surgery or bottom surgery) but, more interestingly, to considerations of how genitals are mediated. How are they altered in public and private imaginaries, in different spatial and temporal moments, through narrative and discourse? Each essay presented here answers this call in some way.

We are living in a highly mediated era in which the meanings of genitals, including the actual physical shapes of them, and the ways that they are represented and discussed, are transforming. Transgender modes of being, including activism, are leading one of our most contentious (and confusing for some) yet liberatory cultural changes. Just as different waves of feminism sought and continue to seek to do nothing less than change the world ontologically and epistemologically, transgender is a movement that calls into question notions of reality itself. For cultures that have come to rely on the binaries penis =

male and vagina = female, and that have taken for granted that these two modes of being are the only ones that are acceptable, trans notions can comprise blows to understandings of what existence and authenticity are. J. R. Latham has argued – via analyses of medical guide books – that medicine must understand transness in ways far more sophisticated than the blunt ‘being born in the wrong body’ (2019: 13) narrative, which attempts (often via surgery) to align gender and genitals that have been deemed incongruent.

Some rather obvious but imperative questions arise: what if we are able to separate genitals and gender? What would reality be like if those with penises were not ‘men’ but simply people with penises? What if someone with a vulva/vagina could identify, without question, as any or no gender? These basic questions – at the heart of discussions around non-binary and trans – too often invite laughter or derision. We must keep these questions at the fore because they often, horrifyingly, lead to brutal violence (see Trans Murder Monitoring Project 2009–present).

Chapter summaries

We open the volume with an extraordinary essay by video artist and curator EO Gill. Uncompromising and provocative artistic practice has the potential to observe things outside established frameworks. This is perfectly demonstrated by Gill who creates new, engaged spaces for ambivalence and resistance. The central figure of Fulgora, the curatorial project described here, (commissioned video works by five Australian-based artists, and films programmed in collaboration with LA-based collective Dirty Looks Inc.) is the tiny fulgora (the lantern fly). Gill explains how, because of pleasure-seeking, elusiveness, evasion and deception, the fulgora is a ‘figure of bodily decadence’ (14 in this issue). This creature completely transcends normative static binary constructions of gender and sexuality, and is deployed by Gill to open up creative practices of gender and sexuality production through film and video. These creative and artistic media enable the establishment of new types of communication between gender and sexuality that affirm innovative and adventurous queer representation.

We follow with Cavyn Mitchell’s essay about genitals, disability and representation in the reality television programme *Naked Attraction*. Mitchell’s focus is not on visual representations per se, but on another form of representational transformation: the audio descriptions (AD) that are provided to (supposedly) enhance consumption of this programme by visually impaired (VI) people and others. Unnecessary comic euphemisms abound in the AD, and Mitchell explains that they do very little to give a VI person any idea of what is happening on-screen. This observation is then analysed in terms of stigmas around discussions of sexuality and sex in relation to disability, including internalized shame, alongside discussion of the abiding and wrong notion that disabled people should not/cannot be fully sexually active or empowered.

Brigita Miloš's essay explains that aesthetic (cosmetic) genital surgery is a challenging field for feminist theory and for debates about the un/importance of physical appearance, self-acceptance and the internalized male gaze, as well as for other scientific fields. In addition to the fact that the width of the labia minora change during life, medical studies have shown that there are not only variations in labial length and width, but also common asymmetries between the left and right labia (Hayes and Temple-Smith 2020, according to Miloš). When are labial variations acceptable and when are they subject to operative medical procedures? Miloš examines online debates about labiaplasty on a Croatian forum (forum.hr). The focus of the analysis is 'motivation for labiaplasty' and the finding is that most self-explanations and arguments for labiaplasty are based on 'functionality'. From the perspective of online commentators, this functionality is reduced to 'medical reasons', namely, the desired removal of problematic 'surplus' or 'excess' (42 in this issue) labial flesh/skin that causes discomfort and problems in bodily sensations and everyday activities. Miloš points out that in the online discussion, on the one hand complex and unequal gender relations in society and inequality are not questioned, but on the other hand the online space creates and opens a safe space for normalization and anonymous discussion about a topic that is usually hidden in everyday social interactions.

Penile circumcision is a complex medical and cultural practice related to issues of rights, gender sensitivity, culture, religiosity, health, etc. Often perceived as unimportant (yet strange), according to Aggleton circumcision is a 'practice that carries with it a whole range of social meanings' (2007: 15). Jonathan A. Allan deals with these issues via an analysis of Lisa Braver Moss's novel *The Measure of His Grief* in an original and interesting way, intertwining discussions around the foreskin (or its lack), circumcision and masculinity, while taking into account a range of cultural meanings attributed to them in different cultural contexts. Circumcision is a practice that is exposed to different positions, from uncompromising support to questioning and advocacy of genital integrity and autonomy. In the context of the circumcision debate, Allan emphasizes the cultural ties and constructions that firmly link masculinity/masculinities and the penis. Allan points to the importance of 'caring masculinity' (51 in this issue) (as opposed to hegemonic or toxic masculinity) as a progressive and inclusive gender construct and a set of supportive relationships among men which (among other things) enables them to talk about their own/others' penises and possible foreskin restorations.

In an innovative and original way, Melissa Beattie reads and analyses the globally known transnational drama *Succession* (2017–23), focusing on detecting phallic and other gendered discourses situated in the context of the fictional pseudo-royal Roy family. The hyper-competitive corporate environment central to the programme, in which toxic and hegemonic masculinity, homophobia and power dramatically merge, is analysed with a focus on queerness, genitalia and castration. The originality of Beattie's approach is in the emphasis on classical references present in *Succession* (especially in the dialogue between the characters Tom and Greg, and their homoerotic but unconsummated relationship).

Beattie explains that ancient culture, on the one hand, functions as a factor in strengthening the quality and cultural capital of the series, and on the other hand, works to satirize that same cultural capital.

In a gender-binary, heteronormative and patriarchal culture, gender-stereotyping coding permeates all aspects of society, and this is nowhere more apparent than in media representations/reports/mentions of celebrities' genitals. Analysing articles (text and images) published in the most famous Croatian daily news portals (Večernji list and Jutarnji list) that focus on or mention the genitalia of celebrities, Mirela Holy and Nikolina Borčić argue that traditional, stereotypical gender dogmas remain strong and firmly in place. They show how the penis is represented as an active subject and the vagina as a passive and dull object and how this is increasingly perpetuated in a mainstream media space.

Through an interesting analysis of the films *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2015) and *Girl* (Dhont 2018), Michaela Fikejzová and Martin Charvát show how media representations of trans people and their life experiences are simplified, medicalized, pathologized and mostly focused on the so-called 'wrong' genitalia towards which the protagonists feel hatred and contempt. The concept of gender dysphoria and the narrative of 'being trapped in the wrong body' (90 in this issue) play key roles in such distorted representations. In both cases, these constructions are deeply rooted in phallogentrism. Fikejzová and Charvát emphasize that the films they analysed did not challenge the binary structure of the phallogentric order. Instead, by fetishizing the bodies of trans persons and presenting simplified portrayals of trans women, they contributed to additional marginalization of trans persons and the affirmation of the gaze of cisgendered viewers/audiences.

In contemporary performance art, the exposure of the naked body has become somewhat ubiquitous. However, performative exposure of the genitals, especially when central to a project, remain controversial. Alex Lyons points out that the staging of spectacles in and through contemporary performances shocks and challenges audiences to become aware of socially imposed limitations, and can invite consideration of alternative narratives that transcend patriarchal power structures. Although many second-wave feminist artists have established vaginal iconography in their artistic expressions, systematic analyses of the representation of the vulva in contemporary performance art are still too-often invisible and neglected. Examining 'performing vulvic spectacles' in works by The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, Del LaGrace Volcano and others, Lyons invites us 'to look twice and think anew' (99 in this issue). This essay describes performances that, by exposing the vulva as the most shameful and taboo part of the body, critically question and challenge phallogentric notions, knowledges and practices about bodies, genders and sexualities.

The volume concludes with an essay that both determines the importance of genitals in culture and simultaneously calls that importance into serious question. In online trans culture, vlogs (video blogs) play a prominent role – this is a genre that creates and maintains a safe space for learning and sharing information, as well as archiving/documenting the corporal changes experienced by trans persons. Luca

Karhu Tainio points out that vlogs are important sites for defining and visualizing the transmasculine body. Although the main focus of the vlogs is on the upper part of the body, Tainio's focus shifts to the lower part of the body, specifically the penis, pointing out that the penis has a normative aspect in both cis and trans cultures. Challenging the idea of the 'lack' of a penis and questioning the established and simplistic cis division into those who have a penis and those who do not, Tainio goes beyond the limited understanding of what is considered a penis through analysis of three YouTube vlogs. He does not define trans penises in terms of categories of lack/deficit, but considers them as discursively created and maintained.

This volume expands the frame through which we examine the intricate and multifaceted body parts called genitals. Each of the authors featured here significantly contributes to the development of genital studies and their work is helping the mapping of new topics and innovative research challenges. We focus on media and transformations in order to augment, question and challenge historic, contemporary and future discursive frames of oppression, pain, pleasure and desire. With this volume we wanted to open a space for multidisciplinary questioning of genitalia, power, gender, differences and resistance that are constituted by and through the media. Certainly, this is an opportunity to establish a more systematic dialogue about genitalia as 'an absent presence' (Shilling 2012: 12, original emphasis), both in culture and in the social sciences and humanities.

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Article Type: Editorial

Keyword(s): culture; genital studies; genital transformations; genitals; Jones/Geiger Zeman; media; penis studies; vulva/vagina studies