
Julie Peters’s ambitious book *A Feminist Post-transsexual Autoethnography: Challenging Normative Gender Coercion* offers an autoethnographic account of her life, as well as a sociological analysis of the impacts of coercive regimes of gender upon gender-non-normative individuals. The book explores what happens when a person realizes that the sex she has been assigned at birth is incongruent with her own sense of her gendered self. The story encompasses the confusions and secret agency of a gender-non-normative childhood, the trials of puberty, and eventual realizations that others who exceed normative gender templates also exist in the world. Peters offers readers an insight into the slow, deliberate and nonlinear work that the author undertook to become herself and make a life (and a living) as a gender-non-normative person in Australia from the early 1950s until the mid-2010s. This is a valuable account that touches on a host of themes, ranging from the psychological and physical work of transition, gendered study choices and workplace relations, the impact of trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourse, and what it is like to lead a public life and stand for political office as an openly gender-non-normative person.

The book arrived on my doorstep close to Christmas Day in 2018 as I was gearing up for a rather unusual holiday season. I had moved to Melbourne only six months prior, in what had been the most turbulent few months of my life. My mother had died suddenly in Aotearoa while I was in Thailand packing my life into boxes so that I could take up a new position in Australia. This book has accompanied me as I have begun to find my feet in my new home, Melbourne, which is also the primary setting of Peters’s story. I have found myself visiting some of the places described in this book as I have been reading about them. But mostly I read this book in my bath in the Northern suburbs, in the cozy chairs at my university library, in shady spots in parks avoiding the summer heat, and in busy cafes near the beach. I am glad to have had Julie’s words as company as I have felt my way through this recent period of upheaval in my own life.
The book contains nine chapters. The first two offer some critical framing about autoethnography, ethics, and sociological framings of gendered subject formation. Chapters 3 through 5 are autoethnographic “data” chapters that chart the autoethnographic subject’s transition from Peter, to “Ghost,” to Julie, encompassing a period of around sixty years. The final four chapters (chapters 6 through 9) offer further elaboration on the narrative, with a focus on how gender-non-normative individuals might understand, negotiate and resist gender-dichotomous social norms.

There are many things to praise about this book. Top of mind for me is the rich archive of material, collected over decades and assembled shrewdly in the book. The sheer amount of texts called upon is fascinating. As Peters notes, her work encompasses workbooks from primary school and squemish woe-is-me diaries from my early 20s, hundreds of articles and books and the notes I made on them trying to make sense of my life. I have lab books documenting my early attempts at being a woman, with details such as how to hide the beard line I detested. I have about 5,000 photos of myself experimenting with gender portrayal, as well as the papers I have presented, my own writing and articles written about me.1

Clearly part of an ongoing project of leading a reflected-upon life, Peters is also able to call upon a personal manifesto of over seven thousand words written in 1990 in which she reflects upon feminism, imagines new terminologies for living a gender-diverse life, and investigates her own struggles.

The data are mostly presented in chronological order, with a focus on the gendered subjectivity and embodiment of Peters during different “acts” of her life. What emerges on these pages is a decades-long struggle to understand how coercive practices of gender normativity might be endured, negotiated, and challenged.

Due to the care she has taken to record details throughout her life, Peters is able to present the temporality and psychological life of transition very richly. For example, as readers we learn that Peters was able go out dressed in alignment with her gender about twenty times in 1974. Details that might have been lost, such as the three days it took the author to pluck her beard, or the dreams she had as a child, have been recorded. Some of the thousands of photographs the author has taken over decades also help bring the narrative to life. There are many moving lines that prompted me to reflect on the violence of gender normativity, for example: “At that time, I’d rather be shot in Vietnam than tell anyone I wanted to be a girl.”2 There is also levity in this book. Peters is brilliant when describing the “sausage sizzle” party she organized prior to gender-affirming surgery, or her engagements with the media that resulted in headlines like, “Julie Peters was a man for 40 years, but now she says, VOTE FOR ME, I’m a transsexual lesbian.”3 Some parts of this book were so captivating that I failed to notice the bathwater I was sitting in had long gone cold.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is that by sharing her own “gender project,” Peters reminds us that we are all involved in lifelong “gender projects” (even if for some of us they are more about congruence than rebellion). By sharing hers, Peters offers inspiration for all of us who wish to find ways of becoming “unsquashed” by rigid gender norms.
While the book has considerable strengths, I did notice unevenness across chapters. I found the most engaging part of the book to be the middle, where the data were presented. The beginning of the book (particularly chapter 2, “Critical Framing: Literature Review”) aimed to cover a wide array of significant debates ranging from the social construction of gender, identity and stigma, to biological/medical versus psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourses on sex and gender, to the competing complexes of power (e.g., family and religion, the law, the economy, medicine, popular culture) that shape gendered subjectivity. The chapter is clearly the product of a wide and engaged project of reading, but I think the literature review would have benefited from a narrower scope to prevent it straying too far from the central arguments of the book. Equally, I felt the end of the book did not quite meet the sparkle of the middle. Autoethnography often calls writers to strike a careful balance between telling a story and analyzing it. In terms of the analysis in the book, I found the immediate exegesis (embedded in the autoethnography) more persuasive than the exegesis chapters that make up the end of the book. These final exegesis chapters seemed to rehearse data from earlier chapters without the payoff of new ways of working with the data or thinking it through. I also would have appreciated further layers to the analysis, which might have explored how this particular life connects to or departs from a wide interdisciplinary scholarship on transgender, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people. While, broadly speaking, Peters presents her life in the form of a progress narrative, I wondered about the life narratives of gender-nonconforming people whose gender projects are less tidy and resolved, and the stories of gender-nonconforming people who find that aging presents not only opportunities and agency but also costs and constraints.

I will be recommending this book to researchers interested in thinking about the social construction of gender, the impact of socially ascribed gender norms, and the ways in which gender nonconformity may be negotiated and lived.

I would like to conclude by leaving the last words to Julie, for us all to ponder:

I have been a slow learner, particularly on how the social world works, but maybe I had more to learn than most. I’m still intrigued that most people try to fit themselves into the world as one of the named genders and sexualities when they don’t need to. If anything, I would like others to learn from my mistakes and help create a world where no individual, conformist or nonconformist, is limited by the cultural, social and economic constraints of gender.4

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NOTES
2. Peters, 82.
3. Peters, 144.
4. Peters, 185.