

## Learning on Their Feet by Ariel Goldberg

published February 2022 by *BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, UK, BALTIC Digital:*  
"Dark Room: Handling Queer Photographs," for the occasion of Phyllis Christopher's exhibition  
Contacts

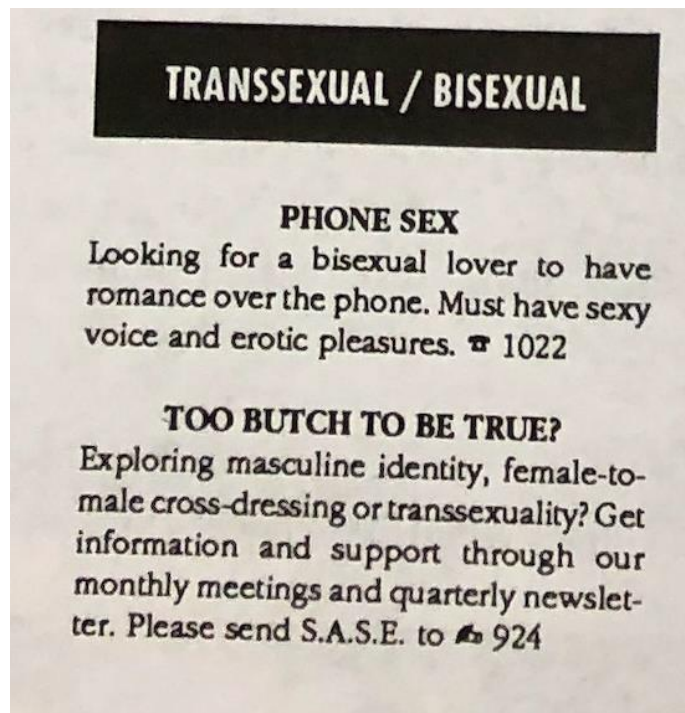


Figure 1

I flip through stacks of *On Our Backs*, the 1984-2006 San Francisco-based magazine of *Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian*, stumbling on the question of how trans representation emerged in this context, against the backdrop of a messy and irresistible sex-positive multiverse. I find signs of trans life popping up in classified ads for an FTM support group and newsletter, in listings for Connie Norman's radio show, and in the form of a book review of Kate Bornstein's now iconic *Gender Outlaw* – the list goes on, although compiling it requires attention to changes in language and names.<sup>1</sup>

To guide a process of time travel, I ask to talk to people who participated in shaping this

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Ace's poem DANCE, Jack Halberstam's film criticism, Patrick Califia waxing poetically on leather, Del LaGrace Volcano's Queer 'Porn for Queer People' manifesto, Cathie Opie's Dyke Daddy spread, Leon Mostovoy's photo essays...

rapidly evolving image culture. When I ask Phyllis Christopher about trans presence in *On Our Backs*, she takes a few weeks to revisit her archive of issues she shipped to Newcastle, England after she moved. We meet on Zoom and she holds up her stack of magazines with neon post-it notes marking every time she spotted trans content in the magazine. That's a lot!

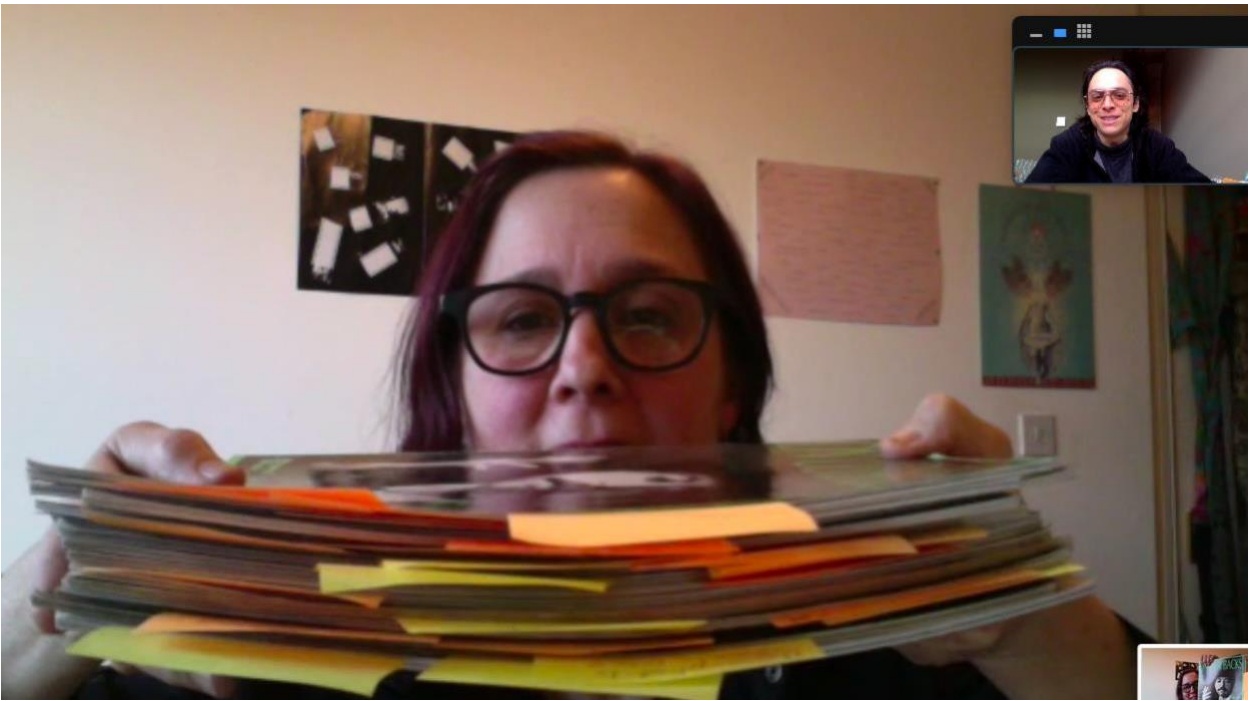


Figure 2

Phyllis Christopher was a staff photographer at *On Our Backs*, and Photo Editor from 1991- 1993, embodying much of the unseen coordination that went into illustrating the magazine, which had a circulation of 10,000. *On Our Backs*' staff was mostly white-and working class: everyone needed other jobs to support themselves. They ensured contributors *always* got paid, even if just a symbolic honorarium that averaged \$30. Christopher reflects on the sheer energy bound up in managing shoestring budgets, limited equipment, and tight deadlines. All the while, being in such an open-minded environment (there was a Hitachi vibrator in the *OOB* office bathroom) was formative. Looking back, Phyllis does not approach the photography produced for the magazine with unequivocal preciousness. She shows me a

cover with an Elvis impersonator who escaped the sharpness of the camera's focus in the club's mood lighting, mid-lip raised sneer. This shot was chosen to meet the magazine's philosophy that the cover of every issue would feature eye contact.



Figure 3

Christopher's book *Dark Room* offers her preferred photos of the same Drag King: Elvis Herselvis gets ready for a performance in front of a bathroom mirror, with Priscilla standing close behind him, her hands on his back as he combs gel into his hair while she gazes off perhaps in a California light infused daydream. A few pages later we meet Herselvis on stage at Klubstitute in 1991, eyes closed and mouth open lip synching, his jacket in a glimmering blur, disjointed from Christopher's bright flash which freezes his pose. Christopher was making a living from photography, which was possible before Silicon Valley and its enablers robbed the Bay Area of cheap rent. The photo Christopher took for Patrick Califia's *Public Sex: The*

*Culture of Radical Sex* (1994), is typical of her photography outside of *OOB*: her camera tilts at an unobtrusive angle while ‘Shar and Jackie’ make out by a fire hydrant in a brutalist hallway of arches. A flood of light blares against a tiled wall.

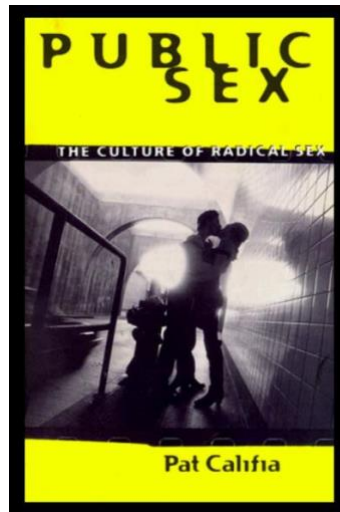


Figure 4

Reading *On Our Backs* today feels like hanging back at a club and watching a distant public play with sexual fantasies. Here’s L.A. Hyder’s ad for ‘hand-printed, signed originals’ of the ‘collector’s item’ photo adorning the cover of *On Our Backs*’ first issue. A person with short hair faces a wall, one arm up over her head with the other arm pulling backwards, elbow at a right angle, escaping a leather jacket. The motion of this gender-neutral striptease taunts those with an appetite for musky softness. Next to Hyder’s, is another ad for a small business selling piercings and custom-made jewelry. Honey Lee Cottrell, the magazine’s first Photo Editor, on the lookout for extra work, advertised her erotic photography services in *On Our Backs* in the mid 1980s. Did many people commission her to document their fantasies and sexual experiences? Phyllis thought it was unlikely they got much business from their ads.

In the magazine’s first eight years, locally produced *Femme Fatale* (lesbian made) porn or the weekly ‘BurLEZk’ show alternately took up the back-page advertisement. Then, starting

in 1991, Absolut Vodka bought a regular full page back cover ad, which I consider a parable of gay liberation ethos being swallowed into an identifiable consumer base. But Christopher has fonder memories and perhaps more of a practical attitude, recalling how this regular corporate sponsor made full color covers affordable.



Figure 5

The magazine was under the impossible expectation to represent dissonant and multivalent lesbian life and culture. Christopher reflects, ‘We always made someone angry... and especially the photography, because photography is so emotional.’ She reminds me this was a time when lesbians were reeling from the trauma of losing their biological families, jobs, and friends were dying of AIDS.

I struggle with the political tenor of *On Our Backs*, especially with its unquestioning portrayal of U.S. Imperialism as some gays were narrowing their activism on being able to serve openly in the military. In the year of the first Gulf War, the story and image of ‘Former Army Reservist Donna Jackson’, an out lesbian eager to go into combat, dons the cover of the March/April 1991 issue, which also features the first extended article on trans men, Marcy

Scheiner's 'Some Girls Will be Boys'. Under subheadings 'The Process', 'Causes', 'Community Identity', 'Male Privilege', and 'The Future', Scheiner weaves together the experiences of five trans men, including stories of going on testosterone and battling lesbians who equate transitioning with giving up on the fight against sexism. There is no unanimous experience; she frames their lives by their range of job (businessman to massage therapist). Race is not broached in the article in a typical surround sound of whiteness.

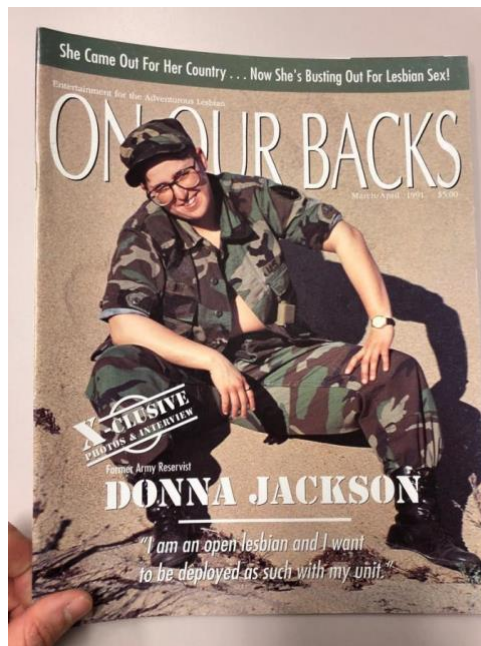


Figure 6

'Some Girls Will Be Boys' introduces readers to one interviewee with his 'before and after photograph, a trope common to images of trans people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article opens with a diptych of Mickey Larson's headshots: a high school yearbook portrait next to an adult passport photo. Relying heavily on the already unstable idea that photos present 'the truth', then on dramatizing the presentation of change in linear time, their use here sets out to prove to non- trans publics that changing sex is not only real but possible. With an aura of the mugshot about it, the 'before and after' photo meets the gender essentialist's suspicion on their terms. Upon second glance, however, Mickey's photos subvert this trope because he does not appear as

crossing over from one gender to another, just as a slightly younger and older version of himself, living as we all do, through different fashion trends of the collared shirt.

Another visual trope of trans representation common in the 1990s was the medical closeup of areas of the body where sex characteristics land, such as genitals and chests.<sup>2</sup> These images are intended to offer functional information about what surgery can look like for those who seek it out. One caption in ‘Some Girls will be Boys’ reads: ‘An example of genital transformation. The enlarged clitoris becomes a penis.’ Photographs always take us on a thrilling ride of empowerment that could swerve into decontextualization, serving the opposite purpose of exhibiting trans people’s bodies as freakish. Cropping out faces offers a form of protection. The first page of the article notifies viewers of how risky it was to openly identify as transsexual with the disclaimer: ‘Some of the names have been changed.’

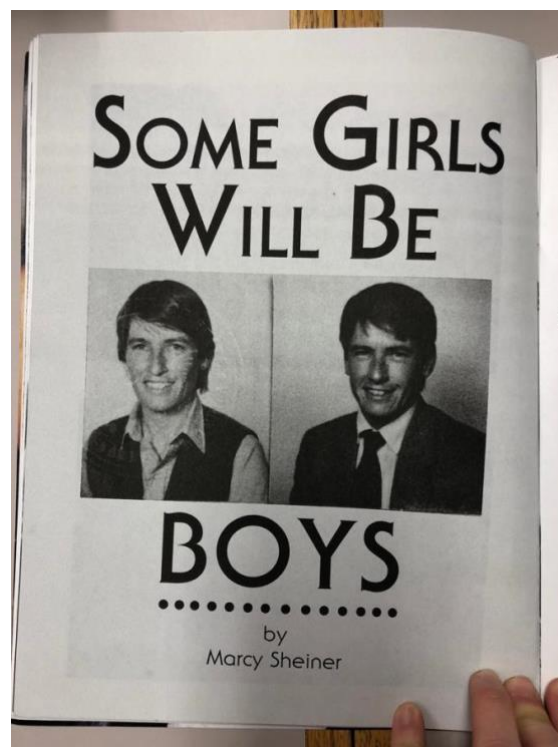


Figure 7

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<sup>2</sup> Chase Joynt and Emmett Harsin Drager, ‘Condition Verified: On Photography, Trans Visibility, and Legacies of the Clinic,’ MDPI, 2019.

One of Scheiner's interviewees, who goes by 'Manx', has large cat stripe tattoos adorning his forearms, chest, and thighs. Manx is described by Scheiner as 'a body builder whose bigendered appearance makes him seem like a character out of a science fiction movie.' Honey Lee Cottrell and Kathleen Aird photographed a nude Manx against a stark black backdrop in what looks like a calisthenics abdominal exercise crossed with a reclining odalisque on the bare studio floor. Cold and uncomfortable. Were the photographers trying to show off his top surgery? His scars are not nearly as visible as the bleach blond highlights in his short-cropped haircut.

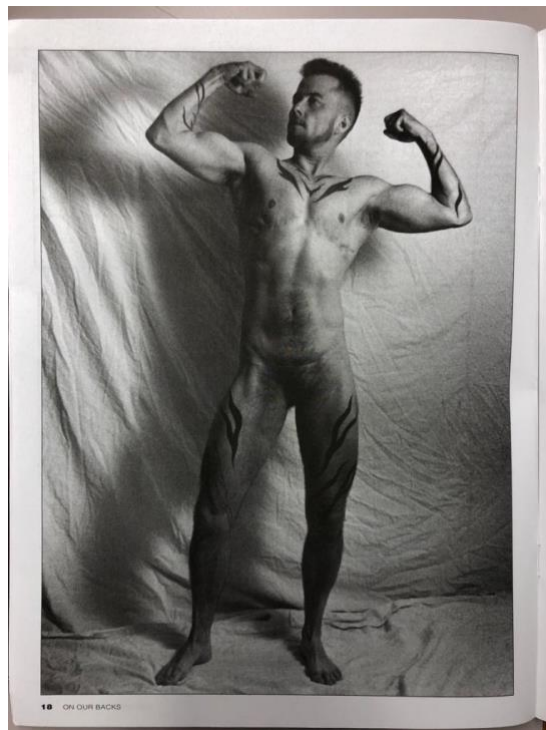


Figure 8

Four years later, in the January/February 1995 issue of *On Our Backs*, we meet Manx again, but now he is Loren Rex Cameron, shedding his pseudonym and the cisgender photographers' gaze. 'How Shall I Address you? Pronouns, Pussies, and Pricks – Talking to Female to Male Transsexuals', by Cherry Smyth opens with a full-page self-portrait of Cameron.



Squarely facing the camera, Cameron raises his flexed biceps in a classic strong man pose as he turns his head in profile, denying the viewer a direct gaze. The wrinkles in the bed sheet provide a charming backdrop and are accentuated by his figure's shadow.

As the yellow banner 'Transsexual Nudes' of the 1995 cover promised (every issue of *On Our Backs* delivered nudity), a selection of Cameron's nude portraits illustrate 'How Shall I Address You?' This selection was culled from a body of work Cameron showed a year earlier in his first photography exhibit at 848 Community Space in San Francisco. *Our Vision, Our Voices: Transsexual Portraits and Nudes* featured 22 friends and those in a loose network of trans people in the Bay Area. The overall body of work included many clothed trans people going about their lives, as well as tentatively posed portraits in front of that same wrinkled sheet. *Our Vision, Our Voices* was a catalyzing exhibit. The gallery had to schedule a second opening because there was a line out the door. When I ask Christopher if she attended either of Cameron's exhibits at 848 in the mid-1990s she says maybe, but doesn't remember. There was a lot going on!

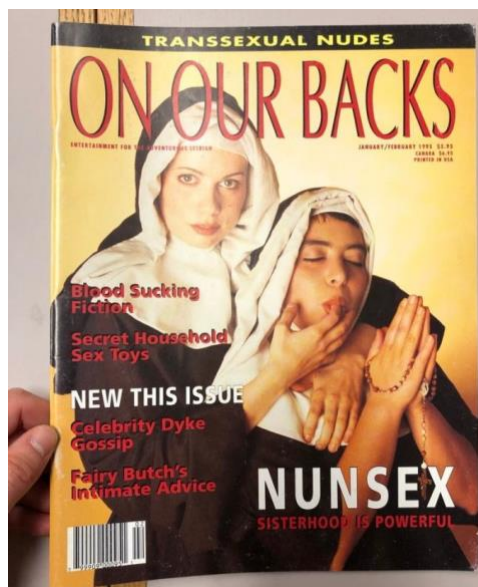


Figure 9

A handful of photographs in this body of work echo the medicalizing trope of an

anonymous post-operative close-up, but the tenor in Cameron's work is one of consent and providing educational information.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the 1991 article's purpose to offer 101-style information on trans life, *OOB* publishes a closely cropped picture of a man's groin area to show his metoidioplasty, or bottom surgery. Next to Cameron's picture is not a medical description but a reflection from the person depicted on the feeling on being in his body now: 'At left, Anonymous: In a way, I see the change I've gone through as a kind of miracle.'

'Many people don't even know we exist', Cameron wrote in his artist statement for *Our Vision, Our Voices*. And yet it was hard to defy dominant modes of representation and invent new language for understanding trans life, not to mention for countering the often unseen societal forces of erasure that trans people faced: pathologizing medical care was near impossible to get, and daily life was (and still is for many) criminalized. As one indicator of the 1990s discourse within this one lesbian periodical, Smyth's article's subtitle claims to focus on trans men, 'Talking to Female to Male Transsexuals' but it also includes Cameron's photographs and interviews with MTF transsexuals.

The reality of trans *women* also participating in lesbian and queer spaces was perhaps suppressed by the erroneous subtitle that escaped the copyeditor's grasp. Echoing this oversight, in the issue following the 1991 Scheiner story, Mani Porter's letter to the editor expresses gratitude for the article and suggests that next time they should also write on 'people like my roommate, who is MTF and a lesbian'. *On Our Backs'* coverage of trans life in the early 1990s both seamlessly fits into the language and realities of today *and* it ruptures and convulses against norms in our language and visual cultures. Christopher reminds me: 'We tried our best.'

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<sup>3</sup> In 2001, Cameron would go on to publish *Man Tool: The Nuts and Bolts of Female-To-Male Surgery* (Zero eBooks) with detailed descriptions of procedures and doctors.

As I fumble through transition at middle-age, I admit I am rattled by Cameron's work as it draws me into the chaotic energy of the early 1990s, full of the militancy of an emerging culture that had to rely on binary language to get its message *of existence* across. Cameron was in the process of teaching himself photography as he produced *Our Vision, Our Voices*, which undoubtedly heightened the powerful and vulnerable space for connection between trans people the occasion of the photograph provided.

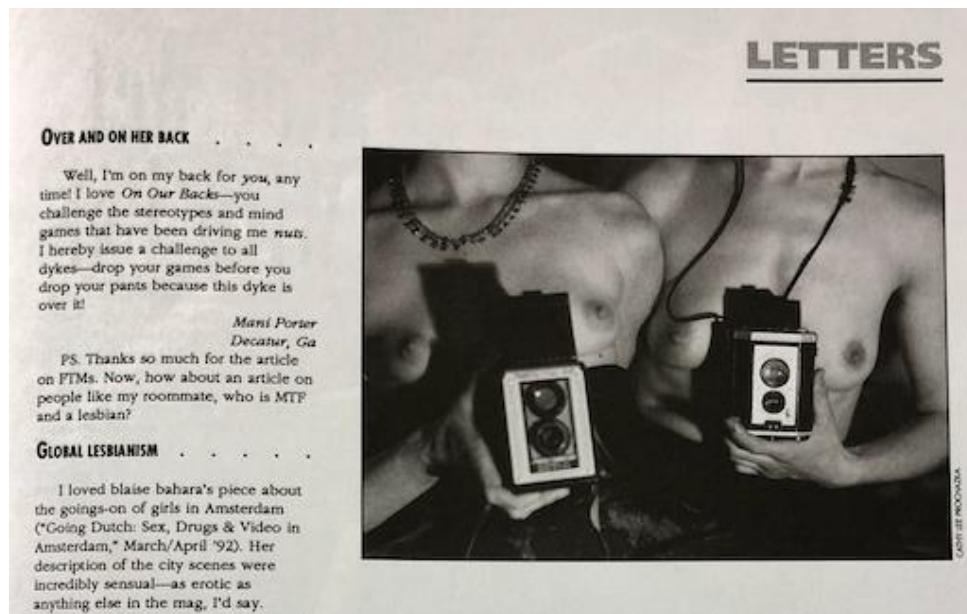


Figure 10

The checklist for *Our Vision, Our Voices* includes quotes of varying length from the people who posed for him, with each model sharing a sentence or two on the impossibly broad themes of shedding shame, gaining self-affirmation, and reflecting on the risks they'd taken. I don't know what questions Cameron asked those he photographed or how he collected these texts, as audio transcribed or a request to write out a testimony on their trans-ness. Letting the subject tell their story is a gesture toward self-representation, intervening in the often-negative stereotypes and misconceptions of trans life. In 'How Shall I Address You,' founder of Transgender Nation Anne Ogborne, appears in photographs Cameron took of her and her pull

quote quips: ‘This is a really nice body – it’s like a brand-new sports car. About a \$17,000 sports car.’ Medicare for all is one way to imagine trans liberation.

The experience of being photographed is only occasionally broached in these first-person captions that accompany Cameron’s *Our Vision, Our Voices* exhibition and his *On Our Backs* creative debut.<sup>4</sup> For every photograph that manages to re-circulate, there are absences of conversations, afterthoughts, and relationships that may have emerged from the recorded images. I long for all that small talk I imagine taking place as Cameron set up and broke down his equipment. What do we do with such charged visual records – produced by trans and cisgender people alike – that are not exactly tasked with collecting the experiences and feelings of the ongoing photographic event, but nonetheless stand in for such rich contextual information?

In the mid-1990s, before she helped build the academic discipline of Trans Studies, Susan Stryker wrote two illuminating pieces about being photographed by Cameron. In ‘Loren Cameron: This Guy is Hot’, published in *Anything That Moves: The Magazine for the Uncompromising Bisexual*, Stryker gives a rave review of *Our Vision, Our Voices*, then reveals the catalyst for Cameron’s work was feeling misrepresented in the 1991 ‘Some Girls Will Be Boys’ article for *On Our Backs*:

Dissatisfied with the way the shots turned out, Cameron couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he could do better photographic work himself – but first he’d have to learn how to use a camera. ‘When I started, I didn’t even know what an F-stop was,’ Cameron confides.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cameron continued to use this form of including the words of those he photographs alongside the portraits in his book *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Cleis, 1996), which focused (to my disappointment) exclusively on trans men.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stryker, ‘Loren Cameron: This Guy is Hot’, *Anything That Moves*, No. 9, (San Francisco, Bay Area Bisexual Network, 1995): 32-33.

Another essay of Stryker's, 'Looking at You / Looking at Me', was published inside Smyth's *OOB* article as an insert alongside Cameron's sensitive full length nude portrait of Stryker. She reflects candidly on how she 'always resisted standing in front of a camera' before she began her transition and how photographs of her then seemed like 'pointless insults'. As she grew more comfortable in her body, she became drawn to the camera as part of being out for political reasons: photography served to 'document the fluidity of the body as well as the versatility and durability of the category "woman".' Stryker then knights Loren Rex Cameron as the only photographer she believes is 'familiar enough with the nuances of transgender desire and transsexual embodiment' that she can entrust. At the end of the brief essay, she asks the readers of *OOB* directly what they might face about their own gender and body that looking at her provokes.

### Image Captions:

Figure 1: Early 1990s *On Our Backs* Transsexual / Bisexual classified

Figure 2: Phyllis Christopher from a January 2022 call with the author

Figure 3: Phyllis Christopher, 'Priscilla & Elvis Herselvis, San Francisco, CA, 1991'

Figure 4: Phyllis Christopher's photo 'Jackie & Shar,' on Patrick Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (Cleis, 1994).

Figure 5: Mid 1980s *On Our Backs* advertisement for L.A. Hyder's 'collector's item'

Figure 6: Cover of March/April 1991 *On Our Backs*: Donna Jackson photographed by her lover Christie Carr

Figure 7: Title page of Marcy Scheiner's 1991 article 'Some Girls Will Be Boys' with 'Mickey Larson, Before and After'

Figure 8: Opening photo for 'How Shall I Address You?' in Jan/Feb 1995 *On Our Backs* with caption on facing page: 'At left, Loren Cameron: "I used to read a lot of graphic art novels and loved looking at all those masculine archetypes. I always wanted a body like those comic book heroes with their bulging biceps and firm hard pecs. But it wasn't just about muscles, it was about gender identity"'

Figure 9: Cover of Jan/Feb 1995 *On Our Backs*: Sister Mother-Theresa (right) and Sister Saphistry have NUNSEX in an unconventional pictorial by Chloe Atkins.

Figure 10: Clipping from Letters to the Editor May/June 1992. *On Our Backs*.

*Research Images from Cornell University Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Collection of On Our Backs (San Francisco, CA). This essay was written with the support of the Human Sexuality Collection's Phil Zwickler Memorial Research Fund Research Fellowship and The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.*