

concerns us is not the threat of toxins to the body but the threat of contaminants to our cultural sense of order: "the threat is less to our stomachs than to our thought: to our clear classification of how the world should be." The way we talk about meat and its dangers (or strengths) is revelatory of our ideas about health in general, personal and global. Health becomes the medium of our discussion, but a discussion which goes well beyond the boundaries of bodily functioning.

Fiddes amply demonstrates that meat offers a useful entry to discussion of pollution and contamination. Yet he also demonstrates an emerging contrast between contemporary attitudes and those of the very recent past. Meat has long been regarded (and perhaps still is by a majority) as the premier food, one of so high a status that it seems a near-necessity. Indeed he cites one instance in which fresh fruit and vegetables were actually banned during an epidemic as unsafe, while meat was taken to be pure. But quite aside from its alleged physical properties, meat has also been emblematic of the status of its consumer. That is, the ability to eat meat has been taken to indicate a superior being, an aristocrat among people or among species, one who wields the power of life and death and who is entitled to consume the flesh of others. This evidence of power is part of the symbolic significance of meat-eating, and meat thus constitutes the kind of nourishment needed to sustain the arrogance of a world-dominating being. Meat-eating is, then, the environmental crisis in microcosm: it is daily evidence of the attitude of domination and control which Western societies have practiced upon nature and upon their own minorities. Parenthetically, Fiddes' distinction between the contrasting reactions to environmental malaise - the advocacy of ever-greater

control under the guise of "wise stewardship" versus the call for greater humility in the face of environmental limits -- is a useful encapsulation of much of the literature, and his contrasting labels "light green" and "deep green" are a welcome change from the shallow/deep dichotomy more common in North American debates.

The really striking feature of recent times, then, must be the evidence of a decline in meat consumption, accompanied by a rapidly growing antipathy to the very idea of flesh-eating. It is not the mere fact that some people shun meat that is significant, for there have always been dissenters. What is interesting in the current debate is the range of participants and the rapidity with which the resistance to meat seems to be growing. The larger context which Fiddes provides -- the underlying significance of meat eating -- helps considerably in understanding the current trend. Simply put, resistance to meat is a social indicator of resistance to the traditional attitudes to nature in general.

However, while this may constitute the major significance of the book, Fiddes' illustration of the symbolic content of material objects will also be of interest to those who have had only minimal exposure to the writings of social anthropologists. His discussion of cannibalism, for instance, reveals a traditional means by which one society can indicate its superiority over others, in this instance by implying that "they" eat people and are therefore subhuman. And if the ban on eating people is a consequence of the sense of kinship, we find ourselves in a categorical anomaly, which is always troubling. These creatures are clearly "they" and therefore devoid of any protection from our appetites, and yet at the same time they are "us" when taken into our homes. Hence our discomfort at the thought of

people eating dogs or cats, and at attempting to explain why it is proper to eat infant cattle as "veal" but improper to eat kittens. In short, Fiddes gives us a primer on the social constitution of meaning in the course of a discussion of meat.

Fiddes has provided an intriguing study of the history of meat-eating, and has done a considerable service in raising the level of the discussion from the physical benefits/hazards of that foodstuff to its symbolic importance to the societal psyche: meat is not just nutrition, but a metaphoric connection to the "otherness" of nature. A similar understanding of "environment" might well provoke a more useful discussion than does our usual litany of pollutions and depletions. The sparks that disperse from his discussion of meat will ignite enough intellectual bonfires to keep any reader entertained -- and this despite the fact that the book had its origins as a doctoral dissertation, which so often leads to stodgy literature. But Fiddes writes very clearly, and deftly directs the reader to his thoughtful conclusion. Most readers will find this a thoughtful and enjoyable exploration of a surprisingly rich topic.

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## Reading Transvestism

BY Patricia Elliot

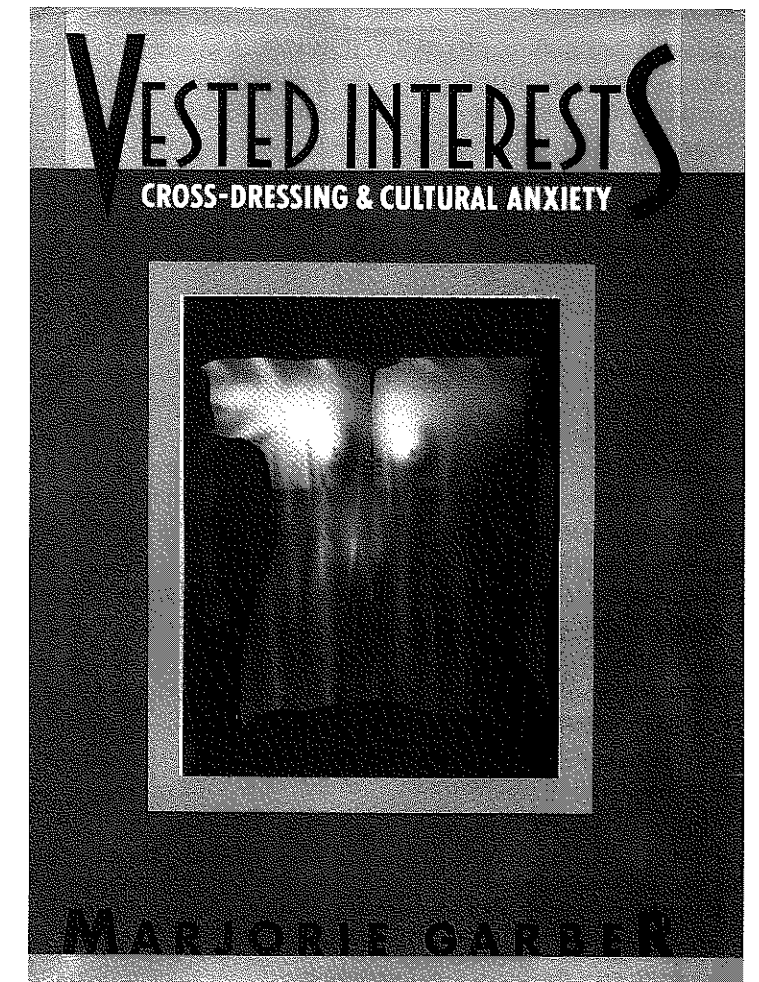
Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York: Routledge, 1992

On February 8, 1992, headlines "Burglars in Drag" and "Dressed to Steal" drew the attention of Globe and Mail readers to Eric Morgenthaler's story from West Palm Beach, Florida where "a shadowy gang of 100 transvestites has been terrorizing Florida's up scale boutiques". What makes a "big-time burglary ring manned by female impersonators" shadowy is their success in eluding police who "don't seem keen to go undercover themselves." The transvestite gang appears to have captured not only sequined gowns, but also the attention of "law-enforcement professionals" who attend transvestite beauty pageants in voyeuristic fashion, to videotape, photograph, and take notes. Transvestite beauty contestants appear to the police as suspects, as transgressing the border between law-abiding and law-breaking citizens. But the elusive nature of their criminal activities is repeatedly brought back to the elusive nature of their gender, hence to another transgressed border. According to detectives, the transvestite criminal eludes the police because society has sanctioned the transgression of gender borders, so that the transvestite no longer "stands out like a sore thumb." In this case, the failure to nail the transvestites as men is displaced onto, and given as a reason for the failure to nail the suspects as criminals. Although the detectives warn against the temptation to regard all transvestites as potential criminals ("These are criminals who just happen to be transvestites"), it is clear that they

also regard cross-dressing as a clever way to elude the law.

Neither the confusion nor the appeal of cross-dresser as criminal would be news to Marjorie Garber, author of *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. Professor of English and Director of the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies at Harvard, Garber draws on an impressive knowledge of cultural history to explore the nature and significance of cross-dressing and to account for our fascination with it. Garber contends it is important to look closely at the transvestite, rather than looking through or past him/her, because the transvestite is a complex and overdetermined cultural signifier.

To facilitate focusing our gaze on the transvestite, Garber has included forty pages of photographs and illustrations of transvestism (both familiar and obscure). These images are helpful reminders of the prevalence of transvestism in culture, and reinforce Garber's claims that transvestism both creates culture and is created by culture. *Vested Interests* is organized into two sections, "Transvestite Logics" and "Transvestite Effects," where arguments for these two claims are made and supported by an almost overwhelming number of examples. It is clear that the transvestite (defined by Garber, perhaps too broadly, as any cross-dresser, from Tootsie to transsexuals) appears in



all forms of culture (theater, literature, music, sports, film, art) and has a very long history. Cultural historians will undoubtedly find Garber's research compelling reading as it includes hundreds of examples from classical Greek theater to Madonna, from Elizabethan dress codes to contemporary clubs for cross-dressers. The sixteen page index also serves as a useful guide to anyone in search of examples of transvestism. But it is not the sheer volume of examples that leads to Garber's more radical claim that "there can be no culture without the transvestite." Rather, this claim is part of an extended argument concerning the meaning and function of transvestism in (predominantly Western) culture.

Unfortunately, Garber's theory is never very clearly stated, nor is it located in one place in the book. Often presented as a kind of Lacanian riddle ("there can be no culture without the transvestite because the transvestite marks the entrance into the Symbolic"[34]) which is likely to baffle even those readers familiar with Lacan, Garber's theory does not compare favorably with her excellent anecdotes and textual readings of particular instances of transvestism. Despite this lack of clarity, it is the theory I find most engaging, and other readers will probably share my desire to have more of it. In what follows, I discuss the central tenets of Garber's theory, with particular emphasis on those aspects that most interest me: transvestism as signifier of "category crisis," and transvestism as cultural fetish.

Garber employs Lacanian theory to make sense of the phenomenon of transvestism, primarily by drawing an analogy between the function of the phallus in what Lacan calls the Symbolic order, and the function of the transvestite in the realm of culture. Just as the phallus in Lacan's schema plays its role "only when veiled" (the repression

of the desire to be the phallus allows the subject to emerge as a separate and desiring being), so too, the transvestite, who blurs the distinction between male and female, must be repressed or veiled if the cultural signifiers of gender difference are to appear. Moreover, as long as there is no culture without gender categories (regardless of how the content of those categories is defined), there will be no culture without the (repressed) figure of the transvestite.

When the transvestite appears, or rather, returns, as the repressed is bound to do, it serves as a troubling reminder that binary sex and gender distinctions are social constructions, cultural fictions, not natural facts. In other words, the (main?) function of the transvestite is to indicate what Garber calls a "category crisis," which is "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another." At one level, then, the transvestite makes his/her cultural appearance at those historical moments when some aspect of gender has been seriously questioned. Garber describes transvestism as the "third term" that "challenges the possibility of harmonious and stable binary symmetry." Like the appearance of the phallus (according to Garber's reading of Lacanian theory), the appearance of the transvestite marks a "space of possibility" or "space of desire."

Although I have some questions about the analogy between the transvestite and the phallus (does it matter that the transvestite is a person?) and about Garber's reading of Lacan (doesn't the presence of the phallus obstruct the circulation of desire and eliminate the possibility of consciously choosing to embrace ambiguity?), I find Garber's description of

transvestism as a signifier of gender crisis convincing. But this is not its only role.

The transvestite signals a crisis not only in the category of gender, but also in other categories such as those of class, race and sexuality. Through detailed analysis of many historical texts and contexts in which transvestism appears, Garber observes that the transvestite is an "index of destabilization" marking not only illicit boundary crossings of male and female, but also of black and white, gay and straight - of other categories that have become displaced onto gender. Thus, the presence of the transvestite in a context that does not seem to be primarily concerned with gender indicates a "category crisis elsewhere." For example, official concern with "excessive" men's dress in Elizabethan England was provoked not so much by a fear of crumbling gender codes, or of female impersonators, but by a fear of loss of status and social position. According to Garber, the figure of the transvestite appears at moments of social or political crisis, whenever distinctions of class, race or gender seem to be threatened. To take another example Garber discusses at length, transvestism in Barbara Streisand's *Yentl* signals more than a crisis of sexist distinctions that excluded women from participating in intellectual life. It also signals a crisis of race - the oppression of Eastern European Jews; a crisis of sexuality - *Yentl* is married to and loved by another woman; and, at another level entirely, a crisis of power relations in the film industry - Streisand's personal struggle to be both star and producer of the film.

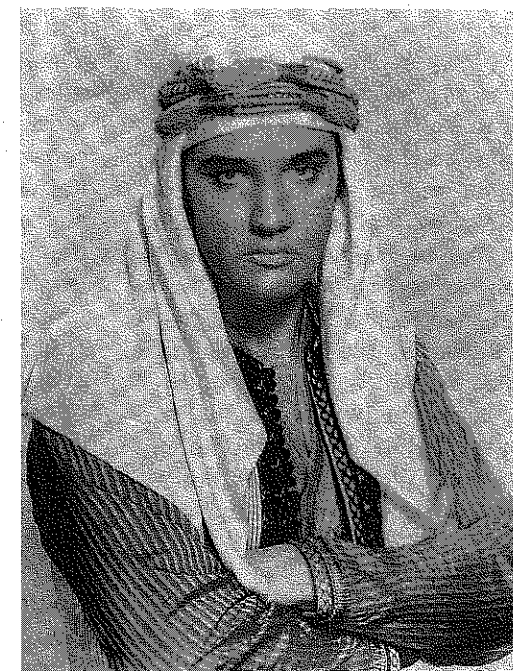
That transvestism can and does mark any number of category crises leads Garber to claim that it signifies "the crisis of category itself." In her view, this makes the transvestite a powerful figure, but also one that fascinates insofar as it

embodies an unconscious desire for what is not contained or containable within socially constructed categories, a desire for the unbounded, the excessive. This brings us to another role or function of the transvestite, that of cultural fetish.

In the chapter "Fetish Envy" Garber argues that "fetishism is a kind of theater of display...and that theater represents an enactment of the fetishistic scenario." We should not be surprised, then, at the prevalence of transvestism in theatrical representations, or at the connection between transvestism and fetishism. Garber does not suggest all transvestites are fetishists, but discusses fetishism as a kind of representation that characterizes at least the "theatrical" cross-dresser.

According to psychoanalytic theory, fetishism involves an unconscious desire to preserve the maternal phallus, to deny "castration," separation or loss. The fetish object, like the theatrical transvestite, stands in for the phallus and is the source of erotic pleasure as long as it remains disguised: "The fetish is a metonymic structure, but it is also a metaphor, a figure for the undecidability of castration, which is to say, a figure of nostalgia for ordinary 'wholeness' - in the mother, in the child. Thus the fetish, like the transvestite - or the transvestite, like the fetish - is a sign at once of lack and its covering over." Thus, for Garber, the transvestite on stage is involved in enacting the fetishistic drama of castration and its denial, of phallic presence and absence, what she describes in the last chapter as the enactment of a "primal scene."

Needless to say, this fetishistic drama does not belong to the transvestite alone, for the spectator also fetishizes the transvestite. Garber argues that figures like Elvis or Madonna are "transvestic symptoms" of popular culture which serve "to gratify a social or cultural scenario of desire. The on stage transvestite is the fetishized part-object for the social or cultural script of the fan." Scattered throughout the book are endless examples of transvestite writers, rock



stars, musicians, artists, actors and actresses who are fetishized by fans and who are more adored the more category boundaries they cross. Garber's reading of Elvis as a "living category crisis" is perhaps the best example of this fetishization.

What accounts for our attraction to transvestites, and why would we be bound to create them if they didn't already exist? Vested Interests may be read as an elaborate response to this question, although the focus is more on the functions and effects of transvestism than on the reasons why we find it so

compelling. Garber's analysis suggests, however, that the transvestite's function both as signifier of category crisis and as fetishized fetishist may serve as a clue to our fascination. Like the phallic mother, the transvestite is both despised - a scapegoat for our fear when identities are threatened, and loved - the star whose imagined ability to transcend the categories of gender, class, race or sexuality makes him/her an object of desire. Garber suggests the combination of pleasure and danger evoked by the figure of the transvestite is due to the fetishistic provocation and dissipation of our anxiety around phallic loss: "The theatrical transvestite literalizes the anxiety of phallic loss. The overdetermination of phallic jokes, verbal and visual, that often accompany transvestism on stage, is a manifestation of exactly this strategy of reassurance for anxiety through artifactual overcompensation."

One need not subscribe to the theory of universal nostalgia for "originary wholeness," as Garber sometimes appears to do, to grant a certain unconscious power to the enactment of the drama of loss and recovery played out by the transvestite. Insofar as the construction of any identity involves loss, separation and the forming of boundaries, the transvestite dramatization of loss and recovery may well have some kind of universal appeal.

On the other hand, what seems to appeal most to Garber about the transvestite has less to do with any symbolic function or fetishistic appeal it may have. Rather, her interest lies in the transvestite as enigmatic figure who occupies a space of seeming or appearance where every gesture needs to be read as a "complex cultural sign that defies any simple translation into meaning." Developing an idea from Severo



Sarduy's essay "Writing/Transvestism" where the politics of reading transvestism are explored (Review 9, Fall 1973). Garber claims, "this emphasis on reading and being read, and on the deconstructive nature of the transvestite performance, always undoing itself as part of its process of self-enactment, is what makes transvestism theoretically as well as politically and erotically interesting - at least to me." Garber's fascination with the transvestite is a fascination with the imaginary space where the "transvestic fantasy," characterized by the "complex interplay, slippage, and parodic recontextualization of gender markers and gender categories" demands to be read.

While the "theatrical" transvestite, as opposed to the actual transvestite, does indeed provide ample ground for the textual play in which Garber indulges, we should also remember that to be on the wrong side of the distinctions the transvestite transcends is to be marginalized, oppressed, even endangered. Garber does not ignore the negative implications of calling into question those categories that structure society, but in her idealization of the transvestite's destabilization of binary terms she does seem to gloss over some important distinctions.

First, is there a difference between the way we might read the theatrical or on stage transvestite and the way transvestites read themselves? Would discussions with transvestites corroborate Garber's reading of their function in society or suggest something else? I am not suggesting Garber write a different kind of book, nor would I introduce the disputed distinction of original and imitation, but I do suggest the conflation of real transvestites with fictional or theatrical ones might well be problematic.

Second, the inclusion of transsexuals in the broad category of

transvestite raises another set of questions. While Garber makes some interesting observations about transsexuals, particularly with respect to issues of gender and subjectivity (see chapter 4), her location of transsexuals on a "transvestite continuum" where the difference is reduced to one of degree, is highly questionable. If the transvestite fantasy is to put gender categories into play, and to keep the fantasy in play, as Garber claims, then how can transsexuals who, as Garber acknowledges, "wish to literalize that fantasy through an alteration in the body" be seen as sharing the same fantasy? To take another example from Garber's theory, she claims that "if transvestism offers a critique of binary sex and gender distinctions, it is not because it simply makes such distinctions reversible but because it denaturalizes, destabilizes, and defamiliarizes sex and gender signs." While Garber's multiple examples of transvestism appear to corroborate this claim to function as critique, her descriptions (and my understanding) of transsexuals blatantly contradict it. For transsexuals, sex distinctions are reversible, genitalia are essentialized (as Garber also notes), gender identities are considered stable and fixed, and corresponding sex and gender signs are rigidly upheld. Other instances of what I would call undercutting differences could be mentioned, but my point is that Garber's inclusion of transsexuals in the category transvestite undermines rather than supports her theory.

Another distinction that becomes blurred in the transvestic space of Garber's book is the distinction between what is conscious and what is unconscious. It seems to me transvestism's potential for critique, "for rupture and for the reconfiguration of the cultural Imaginary" will be rather weak as long as that critique

functions at an unconscious level for both transvestite and spectator. Garber has a tendency to idealize the figure of the transvestite (both the theatrical and the actual) whose actions are not necessarily freely chosen or consciously embraced, but the result of compulsion. Likewise, our fascination with transvestism, our desire to cross gender boundaries as well as other boundaries, may only exist at the level of the unconscious. Garber is fond of psychoanalyst Robert Stoller's phrase "a fetish is a story masquerading as an object" because, like the transvestite, the fetish only works when it is in disguise, when the story remains unconscious. However, Stoller also warns that "if the text becomes conscious, the fetish no longer in itself causes excitement, is no longer a fetish." To continue the analogy, then, the transgressive power of the transvestite can only function at an unconscious level, it cannot be realized in the world. What is disconcerting is that neither the transvestite nor those who are fascinated by her/him consciously embrace the deconstructive potential she/he represents. Until we find some way of making the unconscious desire a conscious one, we will continue to be haunted by that phantom, the transvestite. On the other hand, perhaps that means Florida's transvestite thieves will continue to elude the voyeuristic police who, not having read *Vested Interests*, have not learned to see in the transvestite the embodiment of their own desire.

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## Blank Generation

BY Todd Dufresne and Clara Sacchetti

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales For An Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991

*Generation X* chronicles the search for meaning and identity in our post-mortem, post-structural and, in particular, post-baby boom world. In effect, and not unlike Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, Coupland captures the fragmentation of modern life experienced by the "twenty-something" crowd - the so-called "X generation." In the process he introduces the reader to 96 seductive, often amusing, anecdotal characterizations of postmodern culture. And these he places, parodying intro textbooks everywhere, in the book's wide margins.

Structurally and thematically, the novel opens under the ominous shadow of a solar eclipse over the Manitoba prairie in the late 1970s. Alas, this significant image marks an opening which is already a closing, a blotting out of the sun, of reason itself. But it also marks, of course, the promise of rebirth, of a new day in the sun. This, then, is the crux of "a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination" that envelops the characters (and perhaps the readers) of *Generation X*. The eclipse can thus be read, and even demands to be read, as the beginning of the end of our posted values (or lack thereof). Or again, the eclipse marks a first step in Coupland's Christian revaluation of our postmodernist devaluations. This, at least, is the sub-text upon which the novel operates.

In *Generation X*, the search for meaning functions almost entirely in the most negative and reactive terms. Coupland's enemy is predominantly the economic and social culture of the hippie turned yuppie, a culture (or shadow) to which he directs sometimes funny, but always resentful, arrows of hostility. For instance, one of Coupland's anecdotes reads: "Bleeding Ponytail: An elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days." But such resentment is not limited to the baby boom generation. Railing against his parents, one character states: "Sometimes I'd just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of futurelessness. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear." Siblings are also attacked ("Global Teens"), and so too are the "sub-groups" which comprise the X generation. Coupland characterizes (or, if your prefer, caricatures) this subgroup thus: "Yuppie Wannabes" (those who desire and affirm the yuppie lifestyle), "Squires" (those couples who yearn for "Eisenhower-era" plenitude), and "Black Holes"

(those who romantically reject these options).

In addition, Coupland adds a fourth, undefined group; a group which is either the true X generation, or is that which goes beyond its (coopted) devaluations. This is a group, in other words, which mediates Coupland's more disguised attack on postmodern values. Not unlike the "Black Holes," they have chose "by free will to inhabit that lunar side of the fence." Escaping their unfulfilled lives, each character enacts the logic of the desert father and relocates to the desert town of Palm Springs. Claire, for instance, leaves her old job in Los Angeles as a garment buyer, loses her "unwanted momentums" and escapes the "endless, compulsive and indulgent" family discussions of Nostradamus, JFK, Warhol, Tylenol and milking horses. Dag, having suffered his (seemingly inevitable) "Mid-Twenties Breakdown" - "My crisis wasn't just the failure of youth but also a failure of class and of sex and the future and I still don't know what" - leaves his job as a "Yuppie Wannabe" and escapes the "Veal-Fattening Pens" and "Sick Building Syndrome" of

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL RIVOCHÉ

