

Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity

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We think of manhood as eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man. We think of manhood as a thing, a quality that one either has or doesn't have. We think of manhood as innate, residing in the particular biological composition of the human male, the result of androgens or the possession of a penis. We think of manhood as a transcendent tangible property that each man must manifest in the world; the reward presented with great ceremony to a young novice by his elder for having successfully completed an arduous initiation ritual. In the words of poet Robert Bly (1990), "the structure at the bottom of the male psyche is still as firm as it was twenty thousand years ago" (230). . . .

This idea that manhood is socially constructed and historically shifting should not be understood as a loss, that something is being taken away from men. In fact, it gives us something extraordinarily valuable—agency, the capacity to act. It gives us a sense of historical possibilities to replace the despondent resignation that invariably attends timeless, ahistorical essentialisms. Our behaviors are not simply "just human nature," because "boys will be boys." From the materials we find around us in our culture—other people, ideas, objects—we actively create our worlds, our identities. Men, both individually and collectively, can change. . . .

Masculinity as a Homosocial Enactment

Other men: We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance. Literary critic David Leverenz (1991) argues that "ideologies of manhood have functioned primarily in relation to the gaze of male peers and male authority" (769). Think of how men boast to one another of their accomplishments—from their latest sexual conquest to the size of the fish they caught—and how we constantly parade the markers of manhood—wealth, power, status, sexy women—in front of other men, desperate for their approval.

That men prove their manhood in the eyes of other men is both a consequence of sexism and one of its chief props. "Women have, in men's minds, such a low place on the social ladder of this country that it's useless to define yourself in terms of a woman," noted playwright David Mamet.

"What men need is men's approval." Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale. (Even those moments of heroic conquest of women carry, I believe, a current of homosocial evaluation.) Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood.

Masculinity as a homosocial enactment is fraught with danger, with the risk of failure, and with intense relentless competition. "Every man you meet has a rating or an estimate of himself which he never loses or forgets," wrote Kenneth Wayne (1912) in his popular turn-of-the-century advice book. "A man has his own rating, and instantly he lays it alongside of the other man" (18). Almost a century later, another man remarked to psychologist Sam Osherson (1992) that "[b]y the time you're an adult, it's easy to think you're always in competition with men, for the attention of women, in sports, at work" (291). . . .

Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay. "The word 'faggot' has nothing to do with homosexual experience or even with fears of homosexuals," writes David Leverenz. "It comes out of the depths of manhood: a label of ultimate contempt for anyone who seems sissy, untough, uncool" (1986, 455). Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend, that we are, like the young man in a poem by Yeats, "one that ruffles in a manly pose for all his timid heart." Our fear is the fear of humiliation. We are ashamed to be afraid.

Shame leads to silence—the silence that keeps other people believing that we actually approve of the things that are done to women, to minorities, to gays and lesbians in our culture. The frightened silence as we scurry past a woman being hassled by men on the street. That furtive silence when men make sexist or racist jokes in a bar. That clammy-handed silence when guys in the office make gay-bashing jokes. Our fears are the sources of our silences, and men's silence is what keeps the system running. This might help to explain why women often complain that their male friends or partners are often so understanding when they are alone and yet laugh at sexist jokes or even make those jokes themselves when they are out with a group.

The fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood. It starts so early. "Boys among boys are ashamed to be unmanly," wrote one educator in 1871 (cited in Rotundo 1993, 264). I have a standing bet with a friend that I can walk

onto any playground in America where 6-year-old boys are happily playing and by asking one question, I can provoke a fight. That question is simple: "Who's a sissy around here?" Once posed, the challenge is made. One of two things is likely to happen. One boy will accuse another of being a sissy, to which that boy will respond that he is not a sissy, that the first boy is. They may have to fight it out to see who's lying. Or a whole group of boys will surround one boy and all shout, "He is! He is!" That boy will either burst into tears and run home crying, disgraced, or he will have to take on several boys at once, to prove that he's not a sissy. (And what will his father or older brothers tell him if he chooses to run home crying?) It will be some time before he regains any sense of self-respect.

Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight. The origin of our expression that one "has a chip on one's shoulder" lies in the practice of an adolescent boy in the country or small town at the turn of the century, who would literally walk around with a chip of wood balanced on his shoulder—a signal of his readiness to fight with anyone who would take the initiative of knocking the chip off (see Gorer 1964, 38; Mead 1965).

As adolescents, we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies. One of the favorite tricks when I was an adolescent was to ask a boy to look at his fingernails. If he held his palm toward his face and curled his fingers back to see them, he passed the test. He'd looked at his nails "like a man." But if he held the back of his hand away from his face, and looked at his fingernails with arm outstretched, he was immediately ridiculed as a sissy.

As young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through. The possibilities of being unmasked are everywhere. Even the most seemingly insignificant thing can pose a threat or activate that haunting terror. On the day the students in my course "Sociology of Men and Masculinities" were scheduled to discuss homophobia and male-male friendships, one student provided a touching illustration. Noting that it was a beautiful day, the first day of spring after a brutal northeast winter, he decided to wear shorts to class. "I had this really nice pair of new Madras shorts," he commented. "But then I thought to myself, these shorts have lavender and pink in them. Today's class topic is homophobia. Maybe today is not the best day to wear these shorts."

Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat. Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language. Think, for example, of how you would answer the question: How do you "know" if a man is homosexual? When I ask this question in classes or workshops, respondents invariably provide a pretty standard list of stereotypically effeminate behaviors. He walks a certain way, talks a certain way, acts a certain way. He's very emotional; he shows his feelings. One woman commented that she "knows" a man is gay if he really cares about her; another said she knows he's gay if he shows no interest in her, if he leaves her alone.

Now alter the question and imagine what heterosexual men do to make sure no one could possibly get the "wrong idea" about them. Responses typically refer to the original stereotypes, this time as a set of negative rules about behavior. Never dress that way. Never talk or walk that way. Never show your feelings or get emotional. Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet, so it is impossible for any woman to get the wrong idea about you. In this sense, homophobia, the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women. Homophobia and sexism go hand in hand.

The stakes of perceived sissidom are enormous—sometimes matters of life and death. We take enormous risks to prove our manhood, exposing ourselves disproportionately to health risks, workplace hazards, and stress-related illnesses. Men commit suicide three times as often as women. . . . In one survey, women and men were asked what they were most afraid of. Women responded that they were most afraid of being raped and murdered. Men responded that they were most afraid of being laughed at (Noble 1992, 105–6).

Homophobia as a Cause of Sexism, Heterosexism, and Racism

Homophobia is intimately interwoven with both sexism and racism. The fear—sometimes conscious, sometimes not—that others might perceive us as homosexual propels men to enact all manner of exaggerated masculine behaviors and attitudes to make sure that no one could possibly get the wrong idea about us. One of the centerpieces of that exaggerated masculinity is putting women down, both by excluding them from the public sphere and by the quotidian put-downs in speech and behaviors that organize the daily life of the American man. Women and gay men become the “other” against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood. Women threaten emasculation by representing the home, workplace, and familial responsibility, the negation of fun. Gay men have historically played the role of the consummate sissy in the American popular mind because homosexuality is seen as an inversion of normal gender development. There have been other “others.” Through American history, various groups have represented the sissy, the non-men against whom American men played out their definitions of manhood, often with vicious results. In fact, these changing groups provide an interesting lesson in American historical development.

At the turn of the 19th century, it was Europeans and children who provided the contrast for American men. The “true American was vigorous, manly, and direct, not effete and corrupt like the supposed Europeans,” writes Rupert Wilkinson (1986). “He was plain rather than ornamented, rugged rather than luxury seeking, a liberty loving common man or natural gentleman rather than an aristocratic oppressor or servile minion” (96). The “real man” of the early nineteenth century was neither noble nor serf. By the middle of the century, black slaves had replaced the effete nobleman. Slaves were seen as dependent, helpless men, incapable of defending their women and children, and therefore less than manly. Native Americans were cast as foolish and naive children, so they could be infantilized as the “Red Children of the Great White Father” and therefore excluded from full manhood.

By the end of the century, new European immigrants were also added to the list of the unreal men, especially the Irish and Italians, who were seen as too passionate and emotionally volatile to remain controlled sturdy oaks, and Jews, who were seen as too bookishly effete and too physically puny to truly measure up. In the mid-twentieth century, it was also Asians—first the Japanese during the Second World War, and more recently, the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War—who have served as unmanly templates against which American men have hurled their gendered rage. Asian men were seen as small, soft, and effeminate—hardly men at all.

Such a list of “hyphenated” Americans—Italian-, Jewish-, Irish-, African-, Native-, Asian-, gay—composes the majority of American men. So manhood is only possible for a distinct minority, and the definition has been constructed to prevent the others

from achieving it. Interestingly, this emasculation of one's enemies has a flip side—and one that is equally gendered. These very groups that have historically been cast as less than manly were also, often simultaneously, cast as hypermasculine, as sexually aggressive, violent rapacious beasts, against whom "civilized" men must take a decisive stand and thereby rescue civilization. Thus black men were depicted as rampaging sexual beasts, women as carnivorously carnal, gay men as sexually insatiable, southern European men as sexually predatory and voracious, and Asian men as vicious and cruel torturers who were immorally disinterested in life itself, willing to sacrifice their entire people for their whims. But whether one saw these groups as effeminate sissies or as brutal uncivilized savages, the terms with which they were perceived were gendered. These groups become the "others," the screens against which traditional conceptions of manhood were developed.

Being seen as unmanly is a fear that propels American men to deny manhood to others, as a way of proving the unprovable—that one is fully manly. Masculinity becomes a defense against the perceived threat of humiliation in the eyes of other men, enacted through a "sequence of postures"—things we might say, or do, or even think, that, if we thought carefully about them, would make us ashamed of ourselves (Savran 1992, 16). After all, how many of us have made homophobic or sexist remarks, or told racist jokes, or made lewd comments to women on the street? How many of us have translated those ideas and those words into actions, by physically attacking gay men, or forcing or cajoling a woman to have sex even though she didn't really want to because it was important to score?

Power and Powerlessness in the Lives of Men

I have argued that homophobia, men's fear of other men, is the animating condition of the dominant definition of masculinity in America, that the reigning definition of masculinity is a defensive effort to prevent being emasculated. In our efforts to suppress or overcome those fears, the dominant culture exacts a tremendous price from those deemed less than fully manly: women, gay men, nonnative-born men, men of color. This perspective may help clarify a paradox in men's lives, a paradox in which men have virtually all the power and yet do not feel powerful (see Kaufman 1993).

Manhood is equated with power—over women, over other men. Everywhere we look, we see the institutional expression of that power—in state and national legislatures, on the boards of directors of every major U.S. corporation or law firm, and in every school and hospital administration. Women have long understood this, and feminist women have spent the past three decades challenging both the public and the private expressions of men's power and acknowledging their fear of men. Feminism as a set of theories both explains women's fear of men and empowers women to confront it both publicly and privately. Feminist women have theorized that masculinity is about the drive for domination, the drive for power, for conquest.

This feminist definition of masculinity as the drive for power is theorized from women's point of view. It is how women experience masculinity. But it assumes a symmetry between the public and the private that does not conform to men's experiences. Feminists observe that women, as a group, do not hold power in our society. They also observe that individually, they, as women, do not feel powerful. They feel afraid, vulnerable. Their observation of the social reality and their individual experiences are therefore symmetrical. Feminism also observes that men, as a group, are in power. Thus, with the same symmetry, feminism has tended to assume that individually men must feel powerful.

This is why the feminist critique of masculinity often falls on deaf ears with men. When confronted with the analysis that men have all the power, many men react

incredulously. "What do you mean, men have all the power?" they ask. "What are you talking about? My wife bosses me around. My kids boss me around. My boss bosses me around. I have no power at all! I'm completely powerless!"

Men's feelings are not the feelings of the powerful, but of those who see themselves as powerless. These are the feelings that come inevitably from the discontinuity between the social and the psychological, between the aggregate analysis that reveals how men are in power as a group and the psychological fact that they do not feel powerful as individuals. They are the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it. No wonder many men are frustrated and angry. This may explain the recent popularity of those workshops and retreats designed to help men to claim their "inner" power, their "deep manhood," or their "warrior within." . . .

The dimension of power is now reinserted into men's experience not only as the product of individual experience but also as the product of relations with other men. In this sense, men's experience of powerlessness is *real*—the men actually feel it and certainly act on it—but it is not *true*, that is, it does not accurately describe their condition. In contrast to women's lives, men's lives are structured around relationships of power and men's differential access to power, as well as the differential access to that power of men as a group. Our imperfect analysis of our own situation leads us to believe that we men need more power, rather than leading us to support feminists' efforts to rearrange power relationships along more equitable lines.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt (1970) fully understood this contradictory experience of social and individual power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with . . . disappears, "his power" also vanishes. (44)

Why, then, do American men feel so powerless? Part of the answer is because we've constructed the rules of manhood so that only the tiniest fraction of men come to believe that they are the biggest of wheels, the sturdiest of oaks, the most virulent repudiators of femininity, the most daring and aggressive. We've managed to disempower the overwhelming majority of American men by other means—such as discriminating on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, age, or sexual preference.

Masculinist retreats to retrieve deep, wounded, masculinity are but one of the ways in which American men currently struggle with their fears and their shame. Unfortunately, at the very moment that they work to break down the isolation that governs men's lives, as they enable men to express those fears and that shame, they ignore the social power that men continue to exert over women and the privileges from which they (as the middle-aged, middle-class white men who largely make up these retreats) continue to benefit—regardless of their experiences as wounded victims of oppressive male socialization.

Others still rehearse the politics of exclusion, as if by clearing away the playing field of secure gender identity of any that we deem less than manly—women, gay men, nonnative-born men, men of color—middle-class, straight, white men can regroup their sense of themselves without those haunting fears and that deep shame that they are unmanly and will be exposed by other men. This is the manhood of racism, of sexism, of homophobia. It is the manhood that is so chronically insecure that it trembles at the idea of lifting the ban on gays in the military, that is so threatened by women in the workplace that women become the targets of sexual harassment, that is so deeply frightened of

equality that it must ensure that the playing field of male competition remains stacked against all newcomers to the game.

Exclusion and escape have been the dominant methods American men have used to keep their fears of humiliation at bay. The fear of emasculation by other men, of being humiliated, of being seen as a sissy, is the leitmotif in my reading of the history of American manhood. Masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part. The restlessness that men feel today is nothing new in American history; we have been anxious and restless for almost two centuries. Neither exclusion nor escape has ever brought us the relief we've sought, and there is no reason to think that either will solve our problems now. Peace of mind, relief from gender struggle, will come only from a politics of inclusion, not exclusion, from standing up for equality and justice, and not by running away.

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Which Outlaws? Or, "Who Was That Masked Man?"

Kate Bornstein

On the day of my birth, my grandparents gave me a television set. In 1948, this was a new and wonderful thing. It had a nine-inch screen embedded in a cherrywood case the size of my mother's large oven.

My parents gave over an entire room to the television set. It was "the television room."

I've tried to figure out which questions get to the core of transgender issues—the answer to the riddle of my oddly-gendered life would probably be found in the area we question the least, and there are many areas of gender we do not question. We talk casually, for example, about *trans*-gender without ever clearly stating, and rarely if ever asking, what one gender or the other really is. We're so sure of our ability to categorize people as either men or women that we neglect to ask ourselves some very basic questions: What is a man? What is a woman? And why do we need to be one or the other?

If we ask by what criteria a person might classify someone as being either male or female, the answers appear to be so self-evident as to make the question trivial. But consider a list of items that differentiate females from males. There are none that always and without exception are true of only one gender.

—Kessler and McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, 1976

Touching All the Basis

Most folks would define a man by the presence of a penis or some form of a penis. Some would define a woman by the presence of a vagina or some form of a vagina. It's not that simple, though. I know several women in San Francisco who have penises. Many wonderful men in my life have vaginas. And there are quite a few people whose genitals fall somewhere between penises and vaginas. What are *they*?

Are you a man because you have an XY chromosome? A woman because you have XX? Unless you're an athlete who's been challenged in the area of gender representa-

tion, you probably haven't had a chromosome test to determine your gender. If you haven't had that test, then how do you know what gender you are, and how do you know what gender your romantic or sexual partner is? There are, in addition to the XX and XY pairs, some other commonly occurring sets of gender chromosomes, including XXY, XXX, YYY, XYY, and XO. Does this mean there are more than two genders?

Let's keep looking. What makes a man—testosterone? What makes a woman—estrogen? If so, you could buy your gender over the counter at any pharmacy. But we're taught that there are these things called "male" and "female" hormones; and that testosterone dominates the gender hormone balance in the males of any species. Not really—female hyenas, for example, have naturally more testosterone than the males; the female clitoris resembles a very long penis—the females mount the males from the rear, and proceed to hump. While some female humans I know behave in much the same manner as the female hyena, the example demonstrates that the universal key to gender is not hormones.

Are you a woman because you can bear children? Because you bleed every month? Many women are born without this potential, and every woman ceases to possess that capability after menopause—do these women cease being women? Does a necessary hysterectomy equal a gender change?

Are you a man because you can father children? What if your sperm count is too low? What if you were exposed to nuclear radiation and were rendered sterile? Are you then a woman?

Are you a woman because your birth certificate says female? A man because your birth certificate says male? If so, how did *that* happen? A doctor looked down at your crotch at birth. A doctor decided, based on what was showing of your external genitals, that you would be one gender or another. You never had a say in that most irreversible of all pronouncements—and according to this culture as it stands today, you never *will* have a say. What if you had been born a hermaphrodite, with some combination of both genitals? A surgeon would have "fixed" you—without your consent, and possibly without the consent or even knowledge of your parents, depending on your race and economic status. You would have been fixed—fixed into a gender. It's a fairly common experience being born with different or anomalous genitals, but we don't allow hermaphrodites in modern Western medicine. We "fix" them.

But let's get back to that birth certificate. Are you female or male because of what the law says? Is law immutable? Aren't we legislating every day in order to change the laws of our state, our nation, our culture? Isn't that the name of the game when it comes to political progress? What about other laws—religious laws, for example? Religions may dictate right and proper behavior for men and women, but no religion actually lays out what is a man and what is a woman. They assume we know, that's how deep this cultural assumption runs.

I've been searching all my life for a rock-bottom definition of woman, an unquestionable sense of what is a man. I've found nothing except the fickle definitions of gender held up by groups and individuals for their own purposes.

Every day I watched it, that television told me what was a man and what was a woman.

And every day I watched it, that television told me what to buy in order to be a woman.

And everything I bought, I said to myself I am a real woman, and I never once admitted that I was transsexual. You could say I'm one inevitability of a post-modern anti-spiritualist acquisitive culture.

A Question of Priorities

I haven't found any answers. I ask every day of my life what is a man and what is a woman, and those questions beg the next: why? Why do we have to be one or the other? Why do we have to be gendered creatures at all? What keeps the bi-polar gender system in place?

I started out thinking that a theory of gender would bridge the longstanding gap between the two major genders, male and female. I'm no longer trying to do that. Some people think I want a world without gender, something bland and colorless: that's so far from how I live! I love playing with genders, and I love watching other people play with all the shades and flavors that gender can come in. I just want to question what we've been holding on to for such an awfully long time. I want to question the existence of gender, and I want to enter that question firmly into the fabric of this culture.

I used to watch **The Lone Ranger** on television. I loved that show. This masked guy rides into town on a white horse, does all these great and heroic deeds, everyone falls in love with him and then he leaves. He never takes off his mask, no one ever sees his face. He leaves behind a silver bullet and the memory of someone who can do no wrong. No bad rumors, no feet of clay, no cellulite. What a life! There's a self-help book in there somewhere: **Who Was That Masked Man? Learning to Overcome the Lone Ranger Syndrome.**

As I moved through the '50s and '60s, I bought into the fear and hatred that marks this culture's attitude toward the genderless and the nontraditionally gendered. People are genuinely afraid of being without a gender. I've been chewing on that fear nearly all my life like it was some old bone, and now I want to take that fear apart to see what makes it tick. Nothing in the culture has encouraged me to stay and confront that fear. Instead, the culture has kept pointing me toward one door or the other:

Girls or Boys
Men or Women
Ladies or Gentlemen
Cats or Chicks
Faggots or Dykes

I knew from age four on, that something was wrong with me being a guy, and I spent most of my life avoiding the issue of my transsexuality. I hid out in textbooks, pulp fiction, and drugs and alcohol. I numbed my mind with everything from peyote to Scientology. I buried my head in the sands of television, college, a lot of lovers, and three marriages. Because I was being raised as a male, I never got to experience what it meant to be raised female in this culture. All I had were my observations, and all I could observe and assimilate as a child were differences in clothing and manners. I remember building a catalogue of gestures, phrases, body language, and outfits in my head. I would practice all of these at night when my parents had gone to sleep. I'd wear a blanket as a dress, and I'd stand in front of my mirror being my latest crush at school—I was so ashamed of myself for that.

I was obsessed, and like most obsessed people, I was the last one to know it. The culture itself is obsessed with gender—and true to form, the culture as a whole will be the last to find out how obsessed it really has been.

Why We Haven't Asked Questions

I know there must have been other kids—boys and girls—going through the same remorse-filled hell that held me prisoner in front of my bedroom mirror, but we had no way of knowing that: there was no language for what we were doing. Instead, cardboard cut-out versions of us were creeping into the arts and media: in poetry, drama, dance, music, sculpture, paintings, television, cinema—in just about any art form you can think of there have been portrayals of people who are ambiguously or differently-gendered, all drawn by people who were not us, all spoken in voices that were not ours.

Dominant cultures tend to colonize and control minorities through stereotyping—it's no different with the transgender minority. Make us a joke and there's no risk of our anger, no fear we'll raise some unified voice in protest, because we're not organized. But that's changing.

We never did fit into the cultural binary of male/female, man/woman, boy/girl. No, we are the clowns, the sex objects, or the mysteriously unattainable in any number of novels. We are the psychotics, the murderers, or the criminal geniuses who populate the movies. Audiences have rarely seen the real faces of the transgendered. They don't hear our voices, rarely read our words. For too many years, we transgendered people have been playing a hiding game, appearing in town one day, wearing a mask, and leaving when discovery was imminent. We would never tell anyone who we were, and so we were never really able to find one another. That's just now beginning to change.

See, when we walk into a restaurant and we see another transsexual person, we look the other way, we pretend we don't exist. There's no sly smile, no secret wink, signal, or handshake. Not yet. We still quake in solitude at the prospect of recognition, even if that solitude is in the company of our own kind.

Silence=Death

—ACT UP slogan

Silence of the Meek-as-Lambs

Simply saying "Come out, come out, wherever you are," is not going to bring the multitudes of transgendered people out into the open. Before saying that coming out is an

option (and I believe it's an inevitable step, one we're all going to have to take at some time), it's necessary to get transgendered people talking with one another. The first step in coming out in the world is to come out to our own kind.

Before I dealt with my gender change, I had gold card membership in the dominant culture. To all appearances, I was a straight, white, able-bodied, middle-class male. I fought so hard against being transsexual because I heard all the teasing and jokes in the locker rooms. I saw people shudder or giggle when they'd talk about Renee Richards or Christine Jorgensen. I was all too aware of the disgust people were going through when *Playboy* published its interview with Wendy Carlos. I watched Caroline Cossey (Tula) get dragged through the mud of the press on two continents. The lesson was there time after time. Of course we were silent.

In the summer of 1969, I drove across Canada and the United States, living out of my Volkswagen station wagon that I'd named Mad John after my acting teacher. I was a hippie boy, hair down past my shoulders and dressed very colorfully: beads, headband, bellbottoms. I pulled into a state park in South Dakota to camp for the night. Some good ol' boys came up to my campsite and began the usual "Hey, girl" comments. I ignored them, and they eventually went away. Later that night, I woke up in my sleeping bag with a hand on my chest and a knife in front of my face. "Maybe we wanna fuck you, girl," is what this guy said. He brought the knife down to my face—I could feel how cold and sharp it was. "Maybe you oughta get outa here before we fuck you and beat the shit outa you." Then I was alone in the dark with only the sound of the wind in the trees. I packed up camp and left.

The following summer, I traveled across country again, this time in a VW mini-bus, but I stuck to more populated areas: I'd learned. Too many transgendered people don't get off that easy.

What a Tangled Web We Weave ...

A less visible reason for the silence of the transgendered hinges on the fact that transsexuality in this culture is considered an illness, and an illness that can only be cured by silence.

Here's how this one works: we're taught that we are literally sick, that we have an illness that can be diagnosed and maybe cured. As a result of the medicalization of our condition, transsexuals must see therapists in order to receive the medical seal of approval required to proceed with any gender reassignment surgery. Now, once we get to the doctor, we're told we'll be cured if we become members of one gender or another. We're told not to divulge our transsexual status, except in select cases requiring intimacy. Isn't that amazing? Transsexuals presenting themselves for therapy in this culture are channeled through a system which labels them as having a disease (transsexuality) for which the therapy is to lie, hide, or otherwise remain silent.

I was told by several counselors and a number of transgendered peers that I would need to invent a past for myself as a little girl, that I'd have to make up incidents of my girl childhood; that I'd have to say things like "When I was a little girl . . ." I never was a little girl; I'd lied all my life trying to be the boy, the man that I'd known myself **not** to be. Here I was, taking a giant step toward personal integrity by entering therapy with the truth and self-acknowledgment that I was a transsexual, and I was told, "Don't **tell** anyone you're transsexual."

Transsexuality is the only condition for which the therapy is to lie. This therapeutic lie is one reason we haven't been saying too much about ourselves and our lives and our experience of gender; we're not allowed, in therapy, the right to think of ourselves as transsexual.

This was where a different kind of therapy might have helped me. Perhaps if I hadn't spent so much time thinking and talking about being a woman, and perhaps if the psychiatrist who examined me had spent less time focusing on those aspects of my life which could never be changed by surgery, I would have had more opportunity to think about myself as a transsexual. It was exposure to the press that forced me to talk about my transsexuality, and it was a painful way to have to learn to do so.

—Caroline Cossey, *My Story*, 1992

Another reason for the silence of transsexuals is the mythology of the transgender subculture. Two or more transsexuals together, goes the myth, can be read more easily as transsexual—so they don't pass. I don't think that's it.

I think transsexuals keep away from each other because we threaten the hell out of one another.

Each of us, transsexual and non-transsexual, develop a view of the world as we grow up—a view that validates our existence, gives us a reason for being, a justification for the nuttinesses that each of us might have. Most non-transsexuals have cultural norms on which to pin their world view, broadcast by magazines, television, cinema, electronic bulletin boards, and the continually growing list of communications environments.

Since transsexuals in this culture are neither fairly nor accurately represented in the media, nor championed by a community, we develop our world views in solitude. Alone, we figure out why we're in the world the way we are. The literature to date on the transgender experience does not help us to establish a truly transgender world view in concert with other transgender people, because virtually all the books and theories about gender and transsexuality to date have been written by non-transsexuals who, no matter how well-intentioned, are each trying to figure out how to make us fit into *their* world view. Transgendered people learn to explain gender to themselves from a very early age.

When I was ten or eleven years old, I used to play alone in the basement, way back in the corner where no one would come along to disturb me. There was an old chair there to which I attached all manner of wires and boxes and dials: it was my gender-change machine. I would sit in that chair and twist the dials, and—presto—I was off on an adventure in my mind as a little girl, usually some budding dykelet like Nancy Drew or Pippi Longstocking.

Most transsexuals opt for the theory that there are men and women and no in-between ground: the agreed-upon gender system. That's what I did—I just knew I had to be one or the other—so, in my world view, I saw myself as a mistake: *something* that needed to be fixed and then placed neatly into one of the categories.

There are some wonderfully subtle differences in the world views developed by individual transsexuals. Talk to a few transgendered people and see how beautifully textured the normally drab concept of gender can become.

We bring our very personal explanations for our existence into contact with other transsexuals who have been spending *their* lives constructing their *own* reasons for existence. If, when we meet, our world views differ radically enough, we wind up threatening each other's basic understanding of the world—we threaten each other. So we'd rather not meet, we'd rather not talk. At this writing, that's starting to change. Transsexuals and other transgendered people are finally sitting down, taking stock, comparing notes—and it's the dominant culture that's coming up short. Some of us are beginning to actually like ourselves and each other for the blend we are. Many of us are beginning to express our discontent with a culture that wants us silent.

This Western culture of ours tends to sacrifice the full range of experience to a lower common denominator that's acceptable to more people; we end up with McDonald's instead of real food, Holiday Inns instead of homes, and **USA Today** instead of news and cultural analysis. And we do that with the rest of our lives.

Our spirits are full of possibilities, yet we tie ourselves down to socially-prescribed names and categories so we're acceptable to more people. We take on identities that no one has to think about, and that's probably how we become and why we remain men and women.

The first step in liberating ourselves from this meek-as-lambs culturally-imposed silence is for transgendered people to begin talking with each other, asking each other sincere questions, and listening intently.

Myths And Myth-Conceptions

A transgender subculture is at this writing developing, and it's subsequently giving rise to new folk tales and traditions of gender fluidity and ambiguity. . . .

>> *We are normal men and women.*

Is there such a thing as a normal man or woman? I have this idea that there are only people who are fluidly-gendered, and that the norm is that most of these people continually struggle to maintain the illusion that they are one gender or another. So if someone goes through a gender change and then struggles to maintain a (new) rigid gender, I guess that does make them normal. That's the only way I can see the grounding to this myth.

>> *We are better men or women than men born men or women born women, because we had to work at it.*

I don't know about this one—I think everyone has to work at being a man or a woman. Transgendered people are probably more aware of doing the work, that's all. The concept of some nebulously "better" class of people is not an idea of love and inclusion, but an idea of oppression.

>> *We have an incurable disease.*

No, we don't.

>> *We are trapped in the wrong body.*

I understand that many people may explain their pre-operative transgendered lives in this way, but I'll bet that it's more likely an unfortunate metaphor that conveniently conforms to cultural expectations, rather than an honest reflection of our transgendered feelings. As a people, we're short on metaphors, any metaphors, and when we find one that people understand, we stop looking. It's time for transgendered people to look for new metaphors—new ways of communicating our lives to people who are traditionally gendered. . . .

>> *There is a transgender community.*

*Someone asked me if the transgendered community is like the lesbian/gay communities. I said no, because the lesbian/gay communities are based on who one relates to, whereas the transgendered experience is different: it's about identity—relating to oneself. It's more an inward thing. When you have people together with **those** issues, the group dynamic is inherently very different.*

—David Harrison, in conversation
with the author, 1993

We're at the beginning stages of a transgender community, but, at this writing, there are still only small groups of people who live out different aspects of gender. I'm extremely interested in seeing what develops, taking into account Harrison's analogy of personal and group dynamics. Just now, pockets of resistance to social oppression are forming, most often in conjunction with various gay and lesbian communities. . . . I really *would* like to be a member of a community, but until there's one that's based on the principle of constant change, the membership would involve more rules, and the rules that exist around the subject of gender are not rules I want to obey.



The Conundrum of Difference

Sandra Lipsitz Bem

Stated in its most dichotomous form, the question that has plagued the debate on female inequality for 150 years is whether women and men are fundamentally the same or fundamentally different. This recurring question of sexual difference has prevented even feminists from achieving consensus of social policy because besides being inherently irresolvable itself, it has generated yet another set of apparently irresolvable dichotomies. These second-order dichotomies are revealed in answers to the following three questions: (1) What is the cause of female inequality? (2) What is the best strategy for ending female inequality? and (3) What is the meaning, or definition, of female equality?

In the current cultural debate, female inequality is typically attributed to one or the other of two causal factors, which need not be treated as mutually exclusive but usually are. Either women are being denied access to economic and political resources by policies and practices that intentionally discriminate against even those women "whose situation is most similar to men's," in which case the consensus is that the government must step in to remedy the situation; or, alternatively, women's biological, psychological, and historical differences from men—especially their psychological conflict between career and family—lead them to make choices that are inconsistent with building the kind of career that would enable them to attain those economic and political resources, in which case there is no one to blame for female inequality and hence no consensus about any need for remediation.¹

Surprising as it may seem at first glance, recent economic studies have demonstrated that women as a group are as economically disadvantaged in U.S. society today as they were in 1960, with only the subgroup of young, white, unmarried, and well-educated women showing any substantial economic progress and with everyone else so segregated into the lowest-paid occupations and part-time work that overall, women as a group still earn a mere 65 percent or so of what men earn.² Although this persistent female inequality after thirty years of antidiscrimination law is frequently taken as evidence that discrimination against women is not nearly so important a cause of female

inequality as female choice, I think this persistent female inequality is instead a testimony to the inadequacy of the understanding of how discrimination against women actually works.

Ever since the Supreme Court ruled in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) that protective legislation could be used to compensate women for their “disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence,” two opposing strategies for ending female inequality have been at the center of the debate on gender policy. Gender neutrality, also known as gender blindness, mandates that no distinctions of any sort ever be made on the basis of sex; and special protection for women, also known as sensitivity to sexual difference, mandates that special provision be made in the workplace to compensate women for their biological and historical role as the caregivers for children.

The gender-neutral approach to sexual equality was popular during the 1960s and early 1970s, as indicated not only by the Supreme Court’s willingness in *Reed v. Reed* to finally declare explicit discrimination against women to be unconstitutional but also by the willingness of almost all feminists of the day to enthusiastically support the passage of that most gender-blind of all feminist proposals, the equal rights amendment. The gender-neutral approach was so popular because it was consistent with three important facts that feminists were just then managing to bring to the attention of the general public: (1) discrimination on the basis of sex had long denied women the equal protection under the law that should have been guaranteed to all citizens by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; (2) protective legislation designed over the years to benefit women in the workplace had done more to hurt them economically than to help them; and (3) women are as inherently intelligent, responsible, and capable of supporting themselves, if given the opportunity to do so, as men—not inherently inferior, as legislators and judges traditionally represented them to be.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, champions of equal rights increasingly realized that gender neutrality so deemphasized the differences in the life situations of women and men that as a strategy, it was helping only those few women who were similarly situated to men while doing little, if anything, to help those many women who were locked into low-paying jobs by their gendered life situations as wives and mothers. Not only that, but when applied mindlessly and formulaically in divorce settlements, gender neutrality was actually harming differently situated women by falsely presupposing them to have as much earning potential—and hence as little need for alimony—as their husbands (Weitzman 1985). Concentrating on this very large group of differently situated women highlighted the shortcomings of gender neutrality and thereby brought special protection back to center stage.

This time around, the advocates of special protection supported, not the kind of special limits for women that were at issue in *Muller v. Oregon*, but instead, special benefits for women. Specifically, they proposed work-related policies designed to make it possible for women to be both highly paid workers and responsible primary parents, policies such as mandatory insurance coverage for pregnancy leave and a guaranteed return to one’s job at the end of such a leave, paid days off for mothers of sick children, and even subsidized childcare. Although demands for these kinds of sex-specific arrangements in the workplace would have been beyond imagining in the difference-blind heyday of the equal rights amendment, they were not all that exceptional in an era when virtually all minority groups were vigorously asserting the values of pluralism and sensitivity to difference—including even physically disabled people, who were at last beginning to get the special access to the mainstream of American life that they need.

In the 1990s, a great deal of support for these kinds of special benefits remains, as does a great deal of resistance to them. The support comes primarily from those feminists who see gender neutrality as having failed and, worse, as having required women

to virtually become men to make it in the world of paid employment. The resistance comes from other feminists and from nonfeminists.

The feminist resisters think special protection homogenizes women too much and reinforces the old sexist stereotype that women as a group are inherently incapable of competing successfully with men until and unless special provisions compensate them for their special needs. The nonfeminist resisters, on the other hand, see no justification for making special arrangements to help a group whose economic and political disadvantages derive not from discrimination but from their own decision to invest time and energy in their children, rather than in their careers. As these nonfeminist resisters see it, to prevent employers from doing harm to women through outright discrimination makes sense, but to mandate that employers make special arrangements to help women in a marketplace that is not discriminatory does not.

But as controversial as special protection for a woman's biological and historical role as mother has been since the Supreme Court first upheld it in 1908, yet another form of special protection has become equally controversial since the 1960s. I refer here to the special protection against subtle and indirect discrimination that is embodied in the twin policies of comparable worth and preferential hiring. Comparable worth would move beyond the mandate that women and men doing the same work be paid equal wages to mandate equal wages for women and men doing different work that is of comparable value. Preferential hiring would move beyond simply prohibiting discrimination against women to mandate that an individual woman be hired over an individual man with similar qualifications and that goals and timetables be set for the hiring of a certain percentage of women by a certain time. Setting goals could, in turn, foster the use of quotas to reserve positions exclusively for women.

From the point of view of proponents, comparable worth and preferential hiring are necessary because discrimination against women often targets not women per se but anyone and everyone with the kinds of jobs or job histories that women as a group are much more likely to have than men as a group. From the point of view of opponents of these policies, preferential hiring unfairly deprives innocent males of equal opportunity by violating the almost sacred principle of gender neutrality, and comparable worth violates yet another sacred American principle—the right of employers to set wages in accordance with the free market.³

Just as those who emphasize discrimination as the cause of women's inequality, and gender neutrality as the cure, presuppose male-female similarity, then, so those who emphasize female choice as the cause of women's inequality, and special benefits as the cure, presuppose male-female difference. This dichotomy between similarity and difference shows up again in the two opposing definitions of female equality; with one group envisioning that women and men will come to play exactly the same roles both at home and at work and the other group envisioning that women will come to have exactly the same level of economic well-being, or equity, as men, despite continuing to play their traditionally different roles as homemakers and mothers.

Not surprisingly, the sameness conception of female equality was popular during the era when discrimination, gender neutrality, and the equal rights amendment dominated the feminist discourse and the concept of psychological androgyny was being celebrated as well. As feminists then saw it, the only effective way to end the sexist stereotyping of women and the discrimination against women that stereotyping inevitably produces was to abolish gender distinctions once and for all—that is, to move at last toward an androgynous future, where women and men would have not only the same level of economic and political power but the same rights, the same responsibilities, and even the same roles.

Although initially only antifeminists like Phyllis Schlafly opposed this definition of equality as sameness (on the grounds that it demeaned and destroyed the woman's role within the home), in time a great many feminists came to have that view as well. Defining

female equality as sameness to men, they argued, was tantamount to saying that a woman's historical role and the values that it represents are of no intrinsic value.

So yes, the argument continued, women are inherently as competent as men are—there is no disagreement about that—but women are also inherently different from men in a special way having to do with their biological capacity for childbearing; and because of that difference, any worthwhile definition of equality must preserve the woman's biological and historical role as mother and give that role as much cultural value as has traditionally been given to male roles. In other words, the feminist goal should not be to facilitate women's acting exactly like men in order to earn what men earn; rather, women should be able to earn what men earn while still preserving their distinctive concern with the welfare of their own, and other, children.

After more than a century of dichotomies that relate to the single question of whether women are basically the same as men or basically different from men, feminists have recently begun to concentrate on yet another dichotomy. It is best captured by the following question: Are women of different races, classes, religions, sexual preferences, ethnicities, and perhaps even nationalities sufficiently similar to one another in their needs, goals, and experiences to constitute the kind of a political interest group that could possibly be served by any single program of social change, or are women of different groups so inherently different from one another that there can be little or no common cause among them and hence no possibility of a common feminist solution to their female inequality?⁴

These female-female differences notwithstanding, the historian Estelle Freedman eloquently defends the continuing validity of the feminist struggle.

In a historical moment when the category 'woman' continues to predict limited access to material resources, greater vulnerability to physical and psychological abuse, and underrepresentation in politics. . . . we must avoid the tendency to assume both a false unity across genders and a greater disunity within our gender than in fact exists." (1990, 261)

Put somewhat differently, if feminists are to keep from getting mired in yet another set of impasse-producing dichotomies, they must not allow their newfound appreciation for the differences among women to undermine the longstanding feminist project of creating a social world in which the category of woman is no longer synonymous with the category of inequality.⁵

With that said, however, the question remains: How can feminists construct the kind of discussion about gender policy that would enable a male-dominated society like the United States to finally create such a social world? How, in other words, can Americans transcend all the irresolvable dichotomies that have plagued even feminist discussions of female inequality for 150 years? My answer is that those dichotomies can be transcended—and a consensus on gender policy can be forged—if a certain level of male-female difference is accepted as axiomatic, and the starting point for the discussion is thereby shifted from difference per se to the society's situating of women in a social structure so androcentric that it not only transforms male-female difference into female disadvantage; it also disguises a male standard as gender neutrality.⁶

Notes

1. For a relatively benign example of this "Feminist Choice" reasoning, see Kirp et al. (1986).
2. The most concise and convincing presentation of these data is in Fuchs (1988).
3. For other discussions of the overall conflict between gender neutrality and special protection, see Baer (1978), Kaminer (1990), and Kirp et al. (1986). For an excellent introduction to the comparable-worth debate, see Gold (1983). For a radical proposal related to the preferential hiring of women, see Hawkesworth (1990).

4. This recent feminist concern with female-female difference grew out of the legitimate accusation made by women of color in the 1970s that feminists, and feminism, were guilty of falsely universalizing what were really just the interests of white, middle-class women; feminists were also accused of denying their own complicity in the racist and classist oppression of people of color, both male and female. For more on the perspectives of feminists from different races and classes, see Davis (1981), hooks (1984), Hull, Scott and Smith (1982), and Joseph and Lewis (1981).
5. Freedman's remarks about the continuing validity of the feminist project were made in 1987 at a Stanford University conference on feminist approaches to sexual difference. Although the conference was much more oriented to theory than to social policy, the collection that grew out of it (Rhode 1990) nevertheless provides an excellent example of the debate over difference that I have characterized here.
6. This argument that androcentrism turns difference into disadvantage has many features in common with arguments put forth elsewhere by MacKinnon (1987), Okin (1989), and Rhode (1989).

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