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KATE BORNSTEIN

**G E N D E R
O U T L A W**

On Men,
Women,
and the Rest of Us



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This book is dedicated to my friend and teacher, John Emigh, who taught me about laughter and acting, who showed me it was OK to break some rules and to follow some others, who responded to my gender change with both respect and a good sense of humor, and who encouraged me to continue working in theater when I was sure I'd have to give it up. Bless you and thank you, John—you've always asked me challenging questions.

NAMING ALL THE PARTS

For the first thirty-or-so years of my life, I didn't listen, I didn't ask questions, I didn't talk, I didn't deal with gender—I avoided the dilemma as best I could. I lived frantically on the edge of my white male privilege, and it wasn't 'til I got into therapy around the issue of my transsexualism that I began to take apart gender and really examine it from several sides. As I looked at each facet of gender, I needed to fix it with a definition, just long enough for me to realize that each definition I came up with was entirely inadequate and needed to be abandoned in search of deeper meaning.

Definitions have their uses in much the same way that road signs make it easy to travel: they point out the directions. But you don't get where you're going when you just stand underneath some sign, waiting for it to tell you what to do.

I took the first steps of my journey by trying to define the phenomenon I was daily becoming.

There's a real simple way to look at gender: Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, "On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman." It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple.

Gender means class. By calling gender a system of classification, we can dismantle the system and examine its components. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in their landmark 1978 book, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, open the door to viewing gender as a social construct. They pinpoint various phenomena of gender, as follows:

Gender Assignment

Gender assignment happens when the culture says, “This is what you are.” In most cultures, we’re assigned a gender at birth. In our culture, once you’ve been assigned a gender, that’s what you are; and for the most part, it’s doctors who dole out the gender assignments, which shows you how emphatically gender has been medicalized. These doctors look down at a newly-born infant and say “It has a penis, it’s a boy.” Or they say, “It doesn’t have a penis, it’s a girl.” It has little or nothing to do with vaginas. It’s all penises or no penises: gender assignment is both phallogocentric and genital. Other cultures are not or have not been so rigid.

In the early nineteenth century, Kodiak Islanders would occasionally assign a female gender to a child with a penis: this resulted in a woman who would bring great good luck to her husband, and a larger dowry to her parents. The European umbrella term for this and any other type of Native American transgendered person is *berdache*. Walter Williams in *The Spirit and the Flesh* chronicles nearly as many types of *berdache* as there were nations.

Even as early as 1702, a French explorer who lived for four years among the Illinois Indians noted that berdaches were known “from their childhood, when they are seen frequently picking up the spade, the spindle, the ax [women’s tools], but making no use of the bow and arrow as all the other small boys do.”

—Pierre Liette, *Memoir of Pierre Liette on the Illinois Country*

When the gender of a child was in question in some Navajo tribes, they reached a decision by putting a child inside a *tipi* with loom and a bow and arrow—female and male implements respectively. They set fire to the *tipi*, and whatever the child grabbed as he/she ran out determined the child’s gender. It was perfectly natural to these Navajo that the child had some say in determining its own gender. Compare this method with the following modern example:

[The Montana Educational Telecommunications Network, a computer bulletin board,] enabled students in tiny rural schools to communicate with students around the world. Cynthia Denton, until last year a teacher at the only public school in Hobson, Montana (population 200), describes the benefit of such links. “When we got our first messages from Japan, a wonderful little fifth-grade girl named Michelle was asked if she was a boy or a girl. She was extraordinarily indignant at that, and said, ‘I’m Michelle—I’m a girl of course.’ Then I pointed out the name of the person who had asked the question and said, ‘Do you know if this is a boy or a girl?’ She said, ‘No, how am I supposed to know that?’ I said, ‘Oh, the rest of the world is supposed to know that Michelle is a girl, but you have no social responsibility to know if this is a boy or a girl?’ She stopped and said, ‘Oh.’ And then she rephrased her reply considerably.”

—Jacques Leslie, *The Cursor Cowboy*, 1993

Is the determination of one another’s gender a “social responsibility?”

Do we have the legal or moral right to decide and assign our own genders?

Or does that right belong to the state, the church, and

the medical profession?

If gender is classification, can we afford to throw away
the very basic right to classify ourselves?

Gender Identity

Gender identity answers the question, “who am I?” Am I a man or a woman or a what? It’s a decision made by nearly every individual, and it’s subject to any influence: peer pressure, advertising, drugs, cultural definitions of gender, whatever.

Gender identity is assumed by many to be “natural”; that is someone can feel “like a man,” or “like a woman.” When I first started giving talks about gender, this was the one question that would keep coming up: “Do you feel like a woman now?” “Did you ever feel like a man?” “How did you know what a woman would feel like?”

I’ve no idea what “a woman” feels like. I never did feel like a girl or a woman; rather, it was my unshakable conviction that I was not a boy or a man. It was the absence of a feeling, rather than its presence, that convinced me to change my gender.

What does a man feel like?

What does a woman feel like?

Do **you** feel “like a man?”

Do you feel “like a woman?”

I’d really like to know that from people.

Gender identity answers another question: “to which gender (class) do I want to belong?” Being and belonging are closely related concepts when it comes to gender. I felt I was a woman (being), and more importantly I felt I belonged with the other women (belonging). In this culture, the only two sanctioned gender clubs are “men” and “women.” If you don’t belong to one or the other, you’re told in no uncertain terms to sign up fast.

Sweet Loretta Martin

Thought she was a woman

But she was another man.

All the girls around her

Thought she had it coming

But she gets it while she can.

Get back, get back,

Get back to where you once belonged.

Get back, Loretta.

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney,

Get Back, 1969

I remember a dream I had when I was no more than seven or eight years old—I might have been younger. In this dream, two lines of battle were drawn up facing one another on a devastated plain: I remember the earth was dry and cracked. An army of men on one side faced an army of women on the other. The soldiers on both sides were exhausted. They were all wearing skins—I remember smelling the un-tanned leather in my dream. I was a young boy, on the side of the men, and I was being tied down to a roughly-hewn cart. I wasn’t struggling. When I was completely secured, the men attached a long rope to the cart, and tossed the other end of the rope over to the women. The soldiers of the women’s army slowly pulled me across the empty ground between the two armies, as the sun began to rise. I could see only the sun and the sky. When I’d been pulled over to the side of the women, they untied me, turned their backs to the men, and we all walked away. I looked back, and saw the men walking away from us. We were all silent.

I wonder about reincarnation. I wonder how a child could have had a dream like that in such detail. I told this dream to the psychiatrist at the army induction center in Boston in 1969—they’d asked if I’d ever had any strange dreams, so I told them this one. They gave me a I-Y, deferred duty due to psychiatric instability.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are collections of factors which answer the question, “How do I need to function so that society perceives me as belonging or not belonging to a specific gender?” Some people would include appearance, sexual orientation, and methods of communication under the term, but I think it makes more sense to think in terms of things like jobs, economic roles, chores, hobbies; in other words, positions and actions specific to a given gender as defined by a culture. Gender roles, when followed, send signals of membership in a given gender.

Gender Attribution

Then there’s gender attribution, whereby we look at somebody and say, “that’s a man,” or “that’s a woman.” And this is important because the way we perceive another’s gender affects the way we relate to that person. Gender attribution is the sneaky one. It’s the one we do all the time without thinking about it; kinda like driving a sixteen-wheeler down a crowded highway... without thinking about it.

In this culture, gender attribution, like gender assignment, is phallogocentric. That is, one is male until perceived otherwise. According to a study done by Kessler and McKenna, one can extrapolate that it would take the presence of roughly four female cues to outweigh the presence of one male cue: one is assumed male until proven otherwise. That’s one reason why many women today get “sirred” whereas very few men get called “ma’am.”

Gender attribution depends on cues given by the attributee, and perceived by the attributer. The categories of cues as I have looked at them apply to a man/woman bi-polar gender system, although they could be relevant to a more fluidly-gendered system. I found these cues to be useful in training actors in cross-gender role-playing.

Physical cues include body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement.

I’m nearly six feet tall, and I’m large-boned. Like most people born “male,” my hands, feet, and forearms are proportionally larger to my body as a whole than those of

people born “female.” My hair pattern included coarse facial hair. My voice is naturally deep—I sang bass in a high school choir and quartet. I’ve had to study ways and means of either changing these physical cues, or drawing attention away from them if I want to achieve a female attribution from people.

Susan Brownmiller’s book, *Femininity*, is an excellent analysis of the social impact of physical factors as gender cues.

Behavioral cues include manners, decorum, protocol, and deportment. Like physical cues, behavioral cues change with time and culture. *Dear Abby* and other advice columnists often freely dispense gender-specific manners. Most of the behavioral cues I can think of boil down to how we occupy space, both alone and with others.

Some points of manners are not taught in books of etiquette. They are, instead, signals we learn from one another, mostly signals acknowledging membership to an upper (male) or lower (female) class. But to commit some of *these* manners in writing in terms of gender-specific behavior would be an acknowledgment that gender exists as a class system.

Here’s one: As part of learning to pass as a woman, I was taught to avoid eye contact when walking down the street; that looking someone in the eye was a male cue. Nowadays, sometimes I’ll look away, and sometimes I’ll look someone in the eye—it’s a behavior pattern that’s more fun to play with than to follow rigidly. A femme cue (not “woman,” but “femme”) is to meet someone’s eyes (usually a butch), glance quickly away, then slowly look back into the butch’s eyes and hold that gaze: great, hot fun, that one!

In many transsexual and transvestite meetings I attended, when the subject of the discussion was “passing,” a lot of emphasis was given to manners: who stands up to shake hands? who exits an elevator first? who opens

doors? who lights cigarettes? These are all cues I had to learn in order to pass as a woman in this culture. It wasn't 'til I began to read feminist literature that I began to question these cues or to see them as oppressive.

Textual cues include histories, documents, names, associates, relationships—true or false—which support a desired gender attribution. Someone trying to be taken for male in this culture might take the name Bernard, which would probably get a better male attribution than the name Brenda.

Changing my name from Al to Kate was no big deal in Pennsylvania. It was a simple matter of filing a form with the court and publishing the name change in some unobtrusive “notices” column of a court-approved newspaper. Bingo—done. The problems came with changing all my documents. The driver's license was particularly interesting. Prior to my full gender change, I'd been pulled over once already dressed as a woman, yet holding my male driver's license—it wasn't something I cared to repeat.

Any changes in licenses had to be done in person at the Department of Motor Vehicles. I was working in corporate America: Ford Aerospace. On my lunch break, I went down to the DMV and waited in line with the other folks who had changes to make to their licenses. The male officer at the desk was flirting with me, and I didn't know what to do with that, so I kept looking away. When I finally got to the desk, he asked “Well young lady, what can we do for you?”

“I've got to make a name change on my license,” I mumbled.

“Just get married?” he asked jovially.

“Uh, no,” I replied.

“Oh! Divorced!” he proclaimed with just a bit of hope in his voice, “Let's see your license.” I handed him my old driver's license with my male name on it. He glanced

down at the card, apparently not registering what he saw. “You just go on over there, honey, and take your test. We'll have you fixed up soon. Oh,” he added with a wink, “if you need anything special, you just come back here and ask old Fred.”

I left old Fred and joined the line for my test. I handed the next officer both my license and my court order authorizing my name change. This time, the officer didn't give my license a cursory glance. He kept looking at me, then down at the paper, then me, then the paper. His face grim, he pointed over to the direction of the testing booths. On my way over to the booths, old Fred called out, “Honey, they treating you all right?” Before I could reply, the second officer snarled at old Fred to “get his butt over” to look at all my paperwork.

I reached the testing booths and looked back just in time to see a quite crestfallen old Fred looking at me, then the paper, then me, then the paper.

Mythic cues include cultural and sub-cultural myths which support membership in a given gender. This culture's myths include archetypes like: weaker sex, dumb blonde, strong silent type, and better half. Various waves of the women's movement have had to deal with a multitude of myths of male superiority.

Power dynamics as cue include modes of communication, communication techniques, and degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence, and ambition.

Sexual orientation as cue highlights, in the dominant culture, the heterosexual imperative (or in the lesbian and gay culture, the homosexual imperative). For this reason, many male heterosexual transvestites who wish to pass as female will go out on a “date” with another man (who is dressed as a man)—the two seem to be a heterosexual couple. In glancing at the “woman” of the two, an inner dialogue might go, “It's wearing a dress, and it's hanging on the arm of a man, so it must be a woman.”

For the same man to pass as a female in a lesbian bar, he'd need to be with a woman, dressed as a woman, as a "date."

I remember one Fourth of July evening in Philadelphia, about a year after my surgery. I was walking home arm in arm with Lisa, my lover at the time, after the fireworks display. We were leaning in to one another, walking like lovers walk. Coming towards us was a family of five: mom, dad, and three teenage boys. "Look, it's a coupla faggots," said one of the boys. "Nah, it's two girls," said another. "That's enough outa you," bellowed the father, "one of 'em's got to be a man. This is America!"

So sex (the act) and gender (the classification) are different, and depending on the qualifier one is using for gender differentiation, they may or may not be dependent on one another. There are probably as many types of gender (gender systems) as could be imagined. Gender by clothing, gender by divine right, gender by lottery—these all make as much sense as any other criteria, but in our Western civilization, we bow down to the great god Science. No other type of gender holds as much sway as:

Biological gender, which classifies a person through any combination of body type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporal or chemical essence. Belief in biological gender is in fact a belief in the supremacy of the body in the determination of identity. It's biological gender that most folks refer to when they say *sex*. By calling something "sex," we grant it seniority over all the other types of gender—by some right of biology.

So, there are all these *types* of gender which in and of themselves are *not* gender, but criteria for systemic classification. And there's sex, which somehow winds up on top of the heap. Add to this room full of seeds the words *male*, *female*, *masculine*, *feminine*, *man*, *woman*, *boy*, *girl*. These words are not descriptive of any sexual act, so all these words fall under the category of gender and are highly subjective, depending on which

system of gender one is following.

But none of this explains why there is such a widespread insistence upon the conflation of *sex* and *gender*. I think a larger question is why Eurocentric culture needs to see *so much* in terms of sex.

It's not like gender is the **only** thing we confuse with sex. As a culture, we're encouraged to equate sex (the act) with money, success, and security; and with the products we're told will help us attain money, success and security. We live in a culture that succeeds in selling products (the apex of accomplishment in capitalism) by aligning those products with the attainment of one's sexual fantasies.

Switching my gender knocked me for a time curiously out of the loop of ads designed for men or women, gays or straights. I got to look at sex without the hype, and ads without the allure. None of them, after all, spoke to me, although all of them beckoned.

Kinds of Sex

"Can you orgasm with that vagina?"

—Audience member question for Kate
on the *Geraldo Rivera* show.

It's important to keep *gender* and *sex* separated as, respectively, *system* and *function*. Since function is easier to pin down than system, sex is a simpler starting place than gender.

"Yah, the plumbing works and so does the electricity."

—Kate's answer

There are so many sex manuals on the market—the how-to kind—and depending on where you look, there's bound to be one that talks about what you like to do. That's great, and I own several of them, but it's

beyond the scope of this book. The purpose of talking about sex here is to disentangle it from gender.

Sex does have a primary factor to it which is germane to a discussion of gender: *sexual orientation*, which is what people call it, if they believe you're born with it, or *sexual preference* which is what people call it if they believe you have more of a choice and more of a say in the matter.

[W]e do not need a sophisticated methodology or technology to confirm that the gender component of identity is the most important one articulated during sex. Nearly everyone (except for bisexuals, perhaps) regards it as the prime criterion for choosing a sex partner.

—Murray S. Davis, *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology*, 1983

The Basic Mix-Up

A gay man who lived in Khartoum

Took a lesbian up to his room.

They argued all night

Over who had the right

To do what, and with what, to whom.

—anonymous limerick

Here's the tangle that I found: sexual orientation/preference is based in this culture solely on the gender of one's partner of choice. Not only do we confuse the two words, we make them dependent on one another. The only choices we're given to determine the focus of our sexual desire are these:

- » *Heterosexual model*: in which a culturally-defined male is in a relationship with a culturally-defined female.
- » *Gay male model*: two culturally-defined men involved with each other.

- » *Lesbian model*: two culturally-defined women involved with each other.
- » *Bisexual model*: culturally-defined men and women who could be involved with either culturally-defined men or women.

Variants to these gender-based relationship dynamics would include heterosexual female with gay male, gay male with lesbian woman, lesbian woman with heterosexual woman, gay male with bisexual male, and so forth. People involved in these variants know that each dynamic is different from the other. A lesbian involved with another lesbian, for example, is a very different relationship than that of a lesbian involved with a bisexual woman, and *that's* distinct from being a lesbian woman involved with a heterosexual woman. What these variants have in common is that each of these combinations forms its own clearly-recognizable dynamic, and none of these are acknowledged by the dominant cultural binary of sexual orientation; heterosexuality/homosexuality.

Despite the non-recognition of these dynamics by the broader culture, *all these models depend on the gender of the partner*. This results in minimizing, if not completely dismissing, other dynamic models of a relationship which could be more important than gender and are often more telling about the real nature of someone's desire. There are so many factors on which we *could* base sexual orientation. Examples of alternate dynamic models include:

- » *Butch/Femme model*, however that may be defined by its participants.

Butch style, whether worn by men or women, is a symbol of detachment. Dressing butch gives the wearer the protection of being the observer, not the object. A femme-y look, by contrast, suggests self-display, whether in a quietly demure or sexually flashy fashion. Butch is a style of understatement: "I don't need to show flesh because I am in a position to choose. Butch

is no coy "come hither" look, but a challenge—"I see you and maybe I like what I see."

There is something about femme-y style that in itself produces insecurity, a sense of vulnerability and exposure. The femme invites the gaze and it takes a great deal of feminine self-confidence to risk that kind of scrutiny.

—Wendy Chapkis,

Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance, 1986

>> *Top/Bottom model* which can be further sub-classified as dominant/submissive or sadist/masochist.

The bottom is responsible for being obedient, for carrying out her top's orders with dispatch and grace, for being as aroused and sexually available and desirable as possible, and for letting her top know when she is physically uncomfortable or needs a break....The top is responsible for constructing a scene that falls within the bottom's limits, although it is permissible to stretch her limit if she suddenly discovers the capacity to go further than she ever has before.

—Pat Califia, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*, 1983

There are also:

Butch/Butch models

Femme/Femme models

Triad (or more) models

Human/Animal models

Adult/Child models

Same-aged models

Parent/Child models

Multiple partners models

Able-bodied models

Differently-abled bodies models

Reproductive models

Owner/Slave models

Monogamous models

Non-monogamous models

I'm sure I'm leaving models out of this, and someone is going to be really upset that I didn't think of them, but the point is there's more to sex (the act) than gender (one classification of identity).

Try making a list of ways in which sexual preference or orientation could be measured, and then add to that list (or subtract from it) every day for a month, or a year (or for the rest of your life). Could be fun!

Sex Without Gender

There are plenty of instances in which sexual attraction can have absolutely nothing to do with the gender of one's partner.

When Batman and Catwoman try to get it on sexually, it only works when they are both in their caped crusader outfits. Naked heterosexuality is a miserable failure between them....When they encounter each other in costume however something much sexier happens and the only thing missing is a really good scene where we get to hear the delicious sound of Catwoman's latex rubbing on Batman's black rubber/leather skin. To me their

flirtation in capes looked queer precisely because it was not heterosexual, they were not man and woman, they were bat and cat, or latex and rubber, or feminist and vigilante: gender became irrelevant and sexuality was dependent on many other factors....

You could also read their sexual encounters as the kind of sex play between gay men and lesbians that we are hearing so much about recently: in other words, the sexual encounter is queer because both partners are queer and the genders of the participants are less relevant. Just because Batman is male and Catwoman is female does not make their interactions heterosexual—think about it, there is nothing straight about two people getting it on in rubber and latex costumes, wearing eyemasks and carrying whips and other accoutrements.

—Judith Halberstam, "Queer Creatures," *On Our Backs*,
Nov/Dec, 1992

Sexual preference *could* be based on genital preference. (This is not the same as saying preference for a specific gender, unless you're basing your definition of gender on the presence or absence of some combination of genitals.) Preference could also be based on the kind of sex *acts* one prefers, and, in fact, elaborate systems exist to distinguish just that, and to announce it to the world at large. For example, here's a handkerchief code from the Samois Collective's *Coming To Power*. The code is used for displaying preference in sexual behavior. Colors mean active if worn on the left side, or passive if worn on the right.

| Left Side | Color | Right Side |
|----------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| Fist Fucker | Red | Fist Fuckee |
| Anal Sex, Top | Dark Blue | Anal Sex, Bottom |
| Oral Sex, Top | Light Blue | Oral Sex, Bottom |
| Light S/M, Top | Robin's Egg Blue | Light S/M, Bottom |
| Foot Fetish, Top | Mustard | Foot Fetish, Bottom |
| Anything Goes, Top | Orange | Anything Goes, Bottom |
| Gives Golden Showers | Yellow | Wants Golden Showers |
| Hustler, Selling | Green | Hustler, Buying |
| Uniforms/Military, Top | Olive Drab | Uniforms/Military, Bottom |
| Likes Novices, Chickenhawk | White | Novice (or Virgin) |
| Victorian Scenes | White Lace | Victorian Scenes, Bottom |
| Does Bondage | Grey | Wants to be put in Bondage |
| Shit Scenes, Top | Brown | Shit Scenes, Bottom |
| Heavy S/M & Whipping, Top | Black | Heavy S/M & Whipping, Bottom |
| Piercer | Purple | Piercee |
| Likes Menstruating Women | Maroon | Is Menstruating |
| Group Sex, Top | Lavender | Group Sex, Bottom |
| Breast Fondler | Pink | Breast Fondlee |

I love this code! It gave me quite a few ideas when I first read it. But despite the many variations possible, sexual orientation/preference remains culturally linked to our gender system (and by extension to gender identity) through the fact that it's most usually based on the gender of one's partner. This link probably accounts for much of the tangle between sex and gender.

The confusion between sex and gender affects more than individuals and relationships. The conflation of sex and gender contributes to the linking together of the very different subcultures of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, leather sexers, sex-workers, and the transgendered.

A common misconception is that male cross-dressers are both gay and prostitutes, whereas the truth of the matter is that most cross-dressers that I've met hold down more mainstream jobs, careers, or professions, are married, and are practicing heterosexuals.

A dominant culture tends to combine its subcultures into manageable units. As a result, those who practice non-traditional sex are seen by members of the dominant culture (as well as by members of sex and gender subcultures) as a whole with those who don non-traditional gender roles and identities. Any work to deconstruct the gender system needs to take into account the artificial amalgam of subcultures, which might itself collapse if the confusion of terms holding it together were to be settled.

In any case, if we buy into categories of sexual orientation based solely on gender—heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual—we’re cheating ourselves of a searching examination of our real sexual preferences. In the same fashion, by subscribing to the categories of gender based solely on the male/female binary, we cheat ourselves of a searching examination of our real gender identity. And now we can park sex off to the side for a while, and bring this essay back around to gender.

Desire

I was not an unattractive man. People’s reactions to my gender change often included the remonstrative, “But you’re such a good-looking guy!” Nowadays, as I navigate the waters between male and female, there are still people attracted to me. At first, my reaction was fear: “What kind of pervert,” I thought, “would be attracted to a freak like me?” As I got over that internalized phobia of my transgender status, I began to get curious about the nature of desire, sex, and identity. When, for example, I talk about the need to do away with gender, I always get looks of horror from the audience: “What about desire and attraction!” they want to know, “How can you have desire with no gender?” They’ve got a good point: the concepts of sex and gender seem to overlap around the phenomenon of desire. So I began to explore my transgendered relationship to desire.

About five months into living full-time as a woman, I woke up one morning and felt really good about the day. I got dressed for work, and checking the mirror before I left, I liked what I saw—at last! I opened the door to

leave the building, only to find two workmen standing on the porch, the hand of one poised to knock on the door. This workman’s face lit up when he saw me. “Well!” he said, “Don’t you look beautiful today.” At that moment, I realized I didn’t know how to respond to that. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. I really wasn’t prepared for people to be attracted to me. To this day, I don’t know how to respond to a man who’s attracted to me—I never learned the rituals.

To me, desire is a wish to experience someone or something that I’ve never experienced, or that I’m not currently experiencing. Usually, I need an identity appropriate (or appropriately inappropriate) to the context in which I want to experience that person or thing. This context could be anything: a romantic involvement, a tennis match, or a boat trip up a canal. On a boat trip up the canal, I could appropriately be a passenger or a crew member. In a tennis match, I could be a player, an audience member, a concessionaire, a referee, a member of the grounds staff. In the context of a romantic involvement, it gets less obvious about what I need to be in order to have an appropriate identity, but I would need to have *some* identity. Given that most romantic or sexual involvements in this culture are defined by the genders of the partners, the *most* appropriate identity to have in a romantic relationship would be a gender identity, or something that passes for gender identity, like a gender role. A gender role might be butch, femme, top, and bottom—these are all methods of acting. So, even without a gender identity *per se*, some workable identity can be called up and put into motion within a relationship, and when we play with our identities, we play with desire. Some identities stimulate desire, others diminish desire. To make ourselves attractive to someone, we modify our identity, or at least the appearance of an identity—and this includes gender identity.

I love the idea of being without an identity, it gives me a lot of room to play around; but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on: it doesn’t really matter what identity I take on, as long as it’s recognizable. I can be a writer, a lover, a confidante, a femme, a top, or a woman. I retreat

into definition as a way of demarcating my space, a way of saying “Step back, I’m getting crowded here.” By saying “I am the (fill in the blank),” I also say, “You are *not*, and so you are not in my space.” Thus, I achieve privacy. Gender identity is a form of self-definition: something into which we can withdraw, from which we can glean a degree of privacy from time to time, and with which we can, to a limited degree, manipulate desire.

Our culture is obsessed with desire: it drives our economy. We come right out and say we’re going to stimulate desire for goods and services, and so we’re bombarded daily with ads and commercial announcements geared to make us desire things. No wonder the emphasis on desire spills over into the rest of our lives. No wonder I get panicked reactions from audiences when I suggest we eliminate gender as a system; gender defines our desire, and we don’t know what to do if we don’t have desire. Perhaps the more importance a culture places on desire, the more conflated become the concepts of sex and gender.

As an exercise, can you recall the last time you saw someone whose gender was ambiguous? Was this person attractive to you? And if you knew they called themselves neither a man nor a woman, what would it make you if you’re attracted to that person? And if you were to kiss? Make love? What would you be?

I remember one time at a gay and lesbian writers’ conference in San Francisco, I was on a panel and asking these same questions. Because it was a specifically gay and lesbian audience, an audience that defined itself by its sexual orientation, I wanted to tweak them on that identity. I asked, “And what if I strapped on a dildo and made love to you: what would that make me?” Without missing a beat, panelist Carol Queen piped up, “Nostalgic.”

« 5 »

INTERLUDE

The Lesbian Thing

Issues: *The thing that really fascinates me is that as a man, you were heterosexual, in the eyes of the construct, anyway. Did you feel like you were a man who was a lesbian?*

Kate: I didn’t feel like I was a man. Ever. I was *being* a man, but I never felt like I was. I was, in every aspect, fulfilling the gender role of “man.” The societal role of man. And so socially, I was a man. No question. But I never *felt* like I was.

Justin: *What is the difference between the way that heterosexual women related to you, and the way that lesbians relate to you now?*

Kate: Real good question! When I was being a man relating with a woman, there was much more of an assumed “man role” and an assumed “woman role,” and it was dichotomized. For the most part, there were certain constructs that were assumed, patterns of relating that are uniquely heterosexual that would be silly to try now. Now there’s much more negotiating, much more talking, and much more fluidity in terms of roles in relating with women. Also, there’s a distance in a heterosexual relationship. There can be a certain kind of getting together, but then there’s always,

"What the fuck *are* you anyway?" It stops, it just stops. And in a lesbian relationship—and I'm assuming it's the same in a homosexual male relationship, I don't know—there's much more familiarity. There's just much more closeness.

Issues: *Were you ever attracted to men?*

Kate: I had fantasies about men. But was I ever attracted to a man? One [looks at Justin—they smile]. That was a crush, and I just couldn't understand it. "What is this?!" I was just hopelessly crushed out on Justin. And it was so intriguing. I've gotten over that to the point where I just love him so dearly, I just feel really close to him. But beyond that, no. I was never attracted to a man. I've had sex with men, prior to my surgery, and certainly not afterwards, and did not enjoy it. I still have fantasies, though, and they're fun, and sometimes during sex, my girlfriend and I would take turns strapping on dildos—which isn't the same as being a man or playing at being a man—and I'd look down at this thing and say "Oh, I remember *that!*" [lots of laughter all around]. My lover says I'm more practiced than any of her other women lovers. It's lots of fun [laughter].

Acceptance in the Lesbian Community

Taste Of Latex: *What's the reaction in the lesbian community to your being a transsexual lesbian? Were you seeking acceptance, and did you find it?*

Kate: I sought acceptance in one lesbian community that had a bad experience with a transsexual lesbian five or six years prior to my being there. According to women who were there, she had attempted a power play to take over this huge lesbian organization in the city, and the reaction was very strong, very vocal. The reaction was very much, "Well that's a man for you!"

Then I came along, and they were like "LOOK-OUT, another one!" People wouldn't know I was a transsexual and then they'd find out and they'd be like "Oh, I knew all along: it was male energy, I felt that!" It was not very good acceptance. I [did find] acceptance with people much younger than me. People in their twenties and thirties were much more accepting than my generation who are major fuddy-duds.

Now, it doesn't matter that much. I don't hang where I'm not accepted. I still get some people who have problems, who say "Well, you're not really a woman," and I say, "Right..." And they say, "Well, how can you be a lesbian?" and to me that's the heart of it—I try to engage those folks by asking, "What's a woman? What's a man?" I wish someone would answer me that—it would make my life a lot easier. I could get on playing some other kind of game. But no one has been able to answer that. There's no hard and fast rule.

But there are rules. And there is a rulebook.

ABANDON YOUR
TEDIOUS SEARCH

The Rulebook Has Been Found!

In the '80s, there were a lot of theories about addiction and co-dependence. Most of these agreed on the point that we get addicted to some thing in order to avoid or deny some other thing. Workaholics work, alcoholics drink, and sexaholics fuck. I look at gender in the same light: it's something we do to avoid or deny our full self-expression. People, I believe, compulsively act out gender—there actually are rules on how to do this.

I'd better not go too far on this, or someone will start a twelve-step program around this idea! Nonetheless, there are rules of gender.

The rules of gender are termed the “natural attitude” of our culture (the real, objective facts) per Harold Garfinkel's 1967 *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. I like to read these rules every now and then to see how each rule has continued to play a part in my life—it's frighteningly accurate. I keep in touch with these rules—it helps me figure out new ways of breaking them. Here are Mr. Garfinkle's rules, and a few ideas about each*:

1. There are two, and only two, genders (female and male).

The first question we usually ask new parents is: Is it a boy or a girl? There's a great answer to that one going around: "We don't know; it hasn't told us yet." Personally, I think no question containing *either/or* deserves a serious answer, and that includes the question of gender.

I'm a member of a commercial electronic bulletin board service called **America Online**. My screen name is **OutlawGal**. I inevitably get two queries: "What makes you an outlaw?" to which I always reply that I break the laws of nature. The second question is almost always, "M or F?" to which I answer, "Yes." Anyone who has a sense of humor about that is someone I want to keep talking with.

2. One's gender is invariant. (If you are female/male, you always were female/male and you always will be female/male.)

The latest transsexual notable has been Renee Richards who has succeeded in hitting the benefits of sex discrimination back into the male half of the court. The public recognition and success that it took Billie Jean King and women's tennis years to get, Renee Richards has achieved in one set. The new bumper stickers might well read: "It takes castrated balls to play women's tennis."

—Janice G. Raymond,
The Transsexual Empire, 1979

Despite her vicious attack on transsexuals, Raymond's book is a worthwhile read, chiefly for its intelligent highlighting of the male-dominated medical profession, and that profession's control of transsexual surgery. Raymond and her followers believe in some essential thing called "woman," and some other essential thing called "man," and she sees

transgendered people as encroaching in her space. Raymond obeys the rules: in her world view, there can be no mutable gender.

There have been both cultural feminists and hard-line fundamentalists who have agreed that I was not only born male, but that no matter what happened to me, and no matter my choices, I will remain male 'til the day I die. I no longer dispute people like that: that's how they're going to experience me no matter what I say or do. As long as they neither threaten me nor keep me from entering any public space, I feel more sorry for them than anything else.

3. Genitals are the essential sign of gender. (A female is a person with a vagina; a male is a person with a penis.)

I never hated my penis; I hated that it made me a man—in my own eyes, and in the eyes of others. For my comfort, I needed a vagina—I was convinced that the only way I could live out what I thought to be my true gender was to have genital surgery to construct a vagina from my penis. Fortunately, I don't regret having done this.

It's real interesting all the papers you have to sign before actually getting male-to-female gender reassignment surgery. I had to acknowledge the possibility of every surgical mishap: from never having any sensation in my genitals, to never having another orgasm in my life, to the threat of my newly-constructed labia falling off. As it turned out, I have some slight loss of feeling on the surface of the skin around my vagina, but I can achieve orgasms, and the last time I looked my labia were still in place. Like I said, I'm lucky; some folks aren't.

4. Any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously. (They must be jokes, pathology, etc.)

I remember one time walking into a Woolworth's in Philadelphia. I'd been living as a woman for about a month. I came through the revolving doors, and stood face to face with a security guard—a young man, maybe nineteen or twenty years old. He did a double take when he saw me and he began to laugh—very loud. He just laughed and laughed. I continued round through the revolving doors and left the store. I agreed with him that I was a joke; that I was the sick one.

I went back in there almost a year later. He came on to me.

5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones (masquerades).

The Mummers' Parade is held annually on New Year's Day in Philadelphia. Hundreds of men—mostly blue-collar family men—dress up in sequins, feathers, and gowns, and parade up and down the main streets of the City of Brotherly Love.

In most shamanic cultures, there exists a ceremonial rite whereby spiritual leaders, like the Siberian "soft man," need to live part of their lives as another gender before attaining the rank of spiritual leader.

The transformation [from man to "soft man"] takes place gradually when the boy is between ages eight and fifteen, the critical years when shamanistic inspiration usually manifests itself. The Chukshi feel that this transformation is due to powerful spirits.

—Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 1986

6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another. (There are no cases where gender is not attributed.)

Do you know anyone to whom you've not assigned the gender male or the gender female? Isn't that a hoot? That alone makes it important for each of us to question gender's grip on our society.

7. The male/female dichotomy is a "natural" one. (Males and females exist independently of scientists' [or anyone else's] criteria for being male or female.)

There is black on one side of a spectrum, and

white
on the other

with a middle ground of grey, or
some would say there's a rainbow between the two.

There is
left, and

right

and a middle ground of center.

There is birth on one side,

and death on the other side

and a middle ground of life.

Yet we insist that there are two,
only two genders: male and female.

And we insist that this
is the way of nature.

Blue

yellow

green.

Nature?

Nature?

Nature.

8. Membership in one gender or another is “natural.” (Being female or male is not dependent on anyone’s deciding what you are.)

In the mid-80s, when I first got involved with women’s politics, and gay and lesbian politics, I saw these buttons that read:



or



I thought they were particularly relevant to my situation as a transsexual. But I found out otherwise. If I attempt to decide my own gender, I am apparently transgressing against nature—never mind what the buttons said.

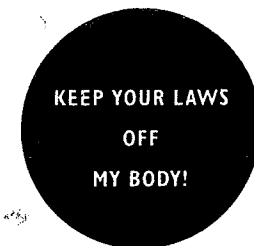
When I entered the women’s community in the mid-80s, I was told that I still had male energy. (I never knew what “male energy” was, but I later figured out that it was the last of my male privilege showing.) They said that I’d been socialized as a male, and could never truly be a female; that what I was, in fact, was a castrated male. And that hurt me for a long time—over a year, in fact.

I kept hearing people define me in terms *they* were comfortable with. It’s easy to play victim, and to say that these people were being malicious, but assuming the worst about others is simply not truth, and it’s not a loving or empowering way to look at other people. So, I began to look at their investment in defining me. What I found was that each person who

was anxious to define me had a stake in maintaining his or her own membership in a given gender. I began to respect the needs of those who had a stake in their genders.

So I began to say things like, “Yep, I’m a castrated man all right, if that’s what you see.” And my joy at the look on their faces was the beginning of my sense of humor about all of this—I was no longer humiliated by their definitions of me.

I still have my



button—it’s more nostalgic than anything else.

Somewhere, Beyond the Rules

So there are rules to gender, but rules can be broken. On to the next secret of gender—gender can have ambiguity. There are many ways to transgress a prescribed gender code, depending upon the world view of the person who’s doing the transgressing: they range from preferring to be somewhat less than rigidly-gendered, to preferring an entirely non-definable image. Achievement of these goals ranges from doing nothing, to maintaining several wardrobes, to full surgical transformation.

It doesn’t really matter what a person decides to do, or how radically a person plays with gender. What matters, I think, is how aware a person is of the options. How sad for a person to be missing out on some expression of identity, just for not knowing there are options.

And then I found out that gender can have fluidity, which is quite different from ambiguity. If ambiguity is a refusal to fall within a pre-

scribed gender code, then fluidity is the refusal to remain one gender or another. Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender.

A fluid identity, incidentally, is one way to solve problems with boundaries. As a person's identity keeps shifting, so do individual borders and boundaries. It's hard to cross a boundary that keeps moving!

It was the discovery of my own ambiguity and fluidity of gender that led me to my gender change. It was figuring out these two concepts that allowed me to observe these factors—inhibited or in full bloom—in the culture, and in individuals.