



READ  
MY  
LIPS

*Sexual Subversion  
and the End of Gender*

RIKI ANNE WILCHINS

1997

  
Firebrand  
Books



## WHY THIS BOOK

THE FIRST TIME I'D SEEN WHITE CUFFS LIKE THESE was in my women's incest group. It happened that two of us were trans-identified. We'd kept fairly quiet out of fear, although, in truth, I was pretty much "out."

Our fears were not misplaced: after a year of unremarkable participation, the casual mention that one of us was "pre-op" blossomed quickly into weeks of acrimonious exchange. We looked on in silence, gripped by a kind of dazed fascination, as people we thought we knew discussed us animatedly in the third person, as if we weren't there. In a sense, we weren't.

While part of me listened to the argument over whether we were "women enough" to stay, another part quietly wondered how it was that only my identity and body were suddenly "in play." Who had made these rules so others got to vote on me in a way that I was not symmetrically empowered to vote on them? Why were their bodies a priori legitimate while mine was somehow the product of group resolution? And how was it that I knew, even if the vote went in our favor, we would have already been disempowered?

I did not know. I lacked the conceptual tools to understand anything about my situation except that it hurt. I wouldn't have any answers until years later.

It was during this time, in the lull of an inexplicably calm Thanksgiving meeting, that a woman blew like a winter breeze through the crack in our door, folded herself onto the edge of the gunmetal gray chair nearest the exit, and, perching there, began quietly examining the linoleum floor as if it contained the key to the scriptures. By unspoken agreement, we shared in a "go-around" that night so she wouldn't have to raise her hand to speak.

We needn't have bothered. She bolted the room without a backward glance when her turn came, leaving a wraithlike hole where she'd sat. Then it was the rest of us carefully examining the floor, until someone quietly mentioned the white tape on her wrists.

There had been two others after that. One was my friend Hannah, a sculptor. She'd nearly severed her hand in a radial arm saw when she was eighteen. She swears she was lucid and calm at the time; yet she was also so desperate, lonely, and disconnected, she hoped it would kill her, or bring someone running—anyone—who'd finally listen to the pain inside her.

The other was Christine, a guitarist, writer, and sometime working-girl. Trying to escape from her life for one night, she stoned out on a mix of booze and PCP. Then, using the sharp blade of a sword, she severed the fingers of her guitar-picking hand right above the top knuckle, one-two-three-four, and didn't feel a thing until the next morning. The cops had seen this particular tranny in the tank so many times they didn't even try to have her fingers sewn back on.

And then, of course, there's Susan here. Her hands on the steering wheel look strong and capable in the bright Georgia sunlight. I have just come from addressing an indifferent Atlanta Pride parade audience on this hot June afternoon. She is winding her car along the endless freeways, expertly negotiating each turn and on-ramp, hauling me back to the air-conditioned Delta lounge and my plane to New York.

The baking heat must have made me more brain-dead than

usual, because only now do I notice her wrists. Around each, barely above the coffee tan of her hands, are two bands of surgical cotton gauze so immaculate and neatly taped they look for all the world like a matching pair of white shirt cuffs.

There is something peculiarly incestuous about trans-experience. It robs us of our bodies, our intimate moments, our sexuality, our childhood. It robs us of honesty, of open friendship, of the luxury of looking into a mirror without pain staring back at us.

It means hiding from friends and family, from spouses and children, as surely as it means hiding from the police car during an evening stroll, or from that knot of laughing boys down at the corner when we go out for a Coke. In the end, it is as tiring as a constant pain and as barren as the bottom of an empty well at high noon.

So why, with the surge of trans and gender theory flooding from the presses, does so little address or assuage our pain? Why is it mostly irrelevant to translives? Why have all the observations and theories been so utterly useless for transpeople themselves?

The earliest works were usually about people in rehab somewhere. The psychiatrists who wrote them inspected our fetishes, fixations, and gender confusions, producing carefully distanced narratives which were couched in the obscure, analytic language of dysfunction and derangement. We were patients.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the feminist theorists who—while erasing our own voices, and without soiling their pages with the messy complexities of our lived experience—appropriated us as illustrations for their latest telling theories or perceptive insights. We had become examples.

Upon us now is the "transgender studies" anthology, a ticket to an academic grant and a book. These come from earnest anthropologists and sociologists who study us as if we were some isolated and inexplicable distant tribe.<sup>2</sup> Their gaze is firmly fixed on such pressing issues as our native dress, social organization, kinship structures, and relationship with the local gender witch doctors. They employ the objective and nuanced language of ethnography. We

have become “natives.”

Is there not something deeply immoral in the way these writers fail to help those whose lives they blithely mine for new insights and incantations? Do they never feel a twinge of guilt as their “studies” merely escalate the politicalization of our bodies, choices, and desires, so that, with each new book, while their audience enjoys the illusion of knowing more about us, we find ourselves more disempowered, dislocated, and exploited than before?

Aren’t you still a male? Do transpeople reinforce gender stereotypes? Are you a “third sex”? Why do transpeople divide themselves up into men and women—shouldn’t you be “gender-free”? Is sex-change surgery voluntary mutilation? Is transgenderism a pathology or mental disorder, and is it learned or genetic?

Academics, shrinks, and feminist theorists have traveled through our lives and problems like tourists on a junket. Picnicking on our identities like flies at a free lunch, they have selected the tastiest tidbits with which to illustrate a theory or push a book. The fact that we are a community under fire, a people at risk, is irrelevant to them. They pursue Science and Theory, and what they produce by mining our lives is neither addressed to us nor recycled within our community. It is not intended to help, but rather to explicate us as Today’s Special: trans under glass, or perhaps only gender à la mode.

Our performance of gender is invariably a site of contest, a problem which—if we could but bring enough hi-octane academic brainpower to bear—might be “solved.” The academician’s own gender performance is never at issue, nor that of the “real” men and women who form the standard to which ours is compared. Through the neat device of “othering” us, *their* identities are quietly, invisibly naturalized. How nice to be normal, to know that the gender-trash is safely locked in the Binary Zoo when they turn off the word processor at night.

No one bothers to investigate the actual conditions of our lives or the lives of those we hold dear. No one asks about the crushing loneliness of so many translives, or about sexual dysfunction. Nor does anyone question why so many of us have to work two

minimum-wage jobs and suck dick on the side so we can enjoy the benefits of a surgical procedure theorists and academics are casually debating for free.

No one does an exposé about people like my friend Sarah, who was busted for soliciting. Aware that they had no case and that the judge would let her walk the next morning, the cops tossed her—high heels, make-up, short skirt, boobs and all—into the men’s tank, and closed the stationhouse door behind them as they left. She was forced to have sex with forty-two men just to survive the night and, by the time the sun came up, she did walk without having to see a judge. But then, she had already served her sentence.

No one writes about the scores of us who lose our children in custody battles, or the trans-teens who contract HIV by sharing dirty needles because insurance doesn’t cover hormones and their parents have thrown them out on the streets. No one researches the special struggles of transpeople of color, or documents the life of my friend Francis, who transitioned in a wheelchair and had bricks thrown through her windows at night.

Nobody inquires why so many transpeople are survivors of incest, child abuse, and outright rape, or what might be done to remedy these crimes.

No one writes about the names we cannot forget, names we still hear in the night—like Christian Paige, a young woman who moved to Chicago to earn money for surgery and ended up brutally beaten, strangled, and then stabbed in the chest and breasts so many times that her family at first thought her body had been intentionally mutilated. We don’t hear about Marsha P. Johnson (drowned), Richard Goldman (shot by his father for crossdressing), Harold Draper (multiple stab wounds), Cameron Tanner (beaten to death with baseball bats), Mary S. (fished out of the trunk of her car—beaten, stabbed, and drowned), Chanelle Pickett (strangled), Brandon Teena (raped, beaten, stabbed, and shot), Deborah Forte (strangled and stabbed), Jessy Santiago (beaten, repeatedly stabbed with box cutter, screwdriver, and knife), or her younger sister, Peggy, also transgendered, who was killed just three years earlier.

I carry with me a small slip of paper from Camp Trans, “the

educational event across the road from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," as a reminder of what is really at stake in the struggle over translives. Out of thirty of us at Camp Trans, twelve were trans-identified. We were mostly white, mostly middle and working class, from big cities and small towns, many with at least a year or two of college. In other words, except for being trans-identified, there was nothing exceptional about us.

Whenever I see such courage and determination I assume there's a lot of survivorship at work and so, on a hunch, I did a makeshift poll, walking casually from person to person as they munched down cold cereal and hot eggs in the morning mist. After a while, folks started coming up, peering over my shoulder to check the growing tally. Their jaws would tighten, but none looked particularly surprised.

I make no pretense at formal validity, but based on a population of twelve, here are the results:

Incested	5 ( 40%)
Sexually abused as a child	9 ( 75%)
Physically abused or beaten (as a child or adult)	12 (100%)
Raped	6 ( 50%)
Shot	2 ( 16%)
Stabbed	3 ( 25%)
Arrested	6 ( 50%)

In addition, one of us had been burned and one of us had been horsewhipped.

You won't find any of this in the next trans or gender studies book because the real challenges of our lives aren't perceived as relevant to anyone's theory.<sup>3</sup> It is far easier to invest *us* as a topic of study than the depredations of the gender regime which marginalizes and preys upon us. As if one could analyze any ghetto in com-

plete isolation from the conditions and forces that create and maintain it.

Trans-identity is not a natural fact. Rather, it is the political category we are forced to occupy when we do certain things with our bodies. That so many of us try to take our own lives, mutilate ourselves, or just succeed in dying quietly of shame, depression, or loneliness is not an accident. We are supposed to feel isolated and desperate. Outcast. That is the whole point of the system. Our feelings are not causes but effects.

The regime of gender is an intentional, systemic oppression. As such, it cannot be fought through personal action, but only through an organized, systemic response. It is high time we stopped writing our hard-luck stories, spreading open our legs and our yearbooks for those awful before-and-after pictures, and began thinking clearly about how to fight back. It is time we began producing our own theory, our own narrative. No one volume can hope to achieve all this. At best, this is a rough set of beginnings.

I intend to wage a struggle for my life. I intend to fight for my political survival. And until other authors wade down into the deep end of the pool and confront the challenges we face every day, until their gender is seen as just as queer as mine, then they are simply another part of the system I seek to overturn.

So this book is dedicated to those who have shared some of this experience: this having one's body and life captured and held hostage, made to bear witness against one's own deepest meanings, this abduction in broad daylight. It is to trans-identified bodies, incested bodies, aging bodies, fat-identified bodies, intersexed bodies, differently abled bodies—to any and every kind of body which has been stigmatized, marginalized, and made to bear unbearable meanings—that I write.

And it is to the people with the neat white cuffs that I speak. Some wear them on the outside, some on the inside. In the end, only they will judge my success or failure.



## WHAT DOES IT COST TO TELL THE TRUTH?

I WAS TWENTY-SIX WHEN I LEARNED I was very tall. For most of my life I had been considered normal height. But at twenty-six, suddenly, strangers in elevators began leaning toward me conspiratorially and asking, "How tall are you, anyway?" as if we'd been having a conversation on the subject. There were delivery men who inquired, "You play roundball?" and even one man on a motorcycle who slowed alongside me to exclaim, "You must be a volleyball player!"

Although I had never before worried about my height, I began studying myself in mirrors. I began *seeing* myself as tall. In short order, I became self-conscious about the length of my body. I stooped fashionably while walking down the street, tried not to stand up too straight in bars or at parties, and leaned against walls and pillars when speaking so I wouldn't appear to be towering over shorter people.

### WELCOME TO GENDERHELL

I learned a lot of other things about my body as well. My voice was unnervingly deep. My hands were too large, my shoulders too broad,

my hips too narrow, and my feet much too big. The same size basketball sneakers I'd been wearing for over ten years suddenly looked ridiculous, even to me. People made public jokes about my "boats." I stopped wearing them, even stopped shooting hoops. Although I'd been slender for decades, since I was now "too big," I stopped working out at the gym as well.

I was obsessed with how I looked and was perceived. I became a ferocious shopper, lusting after any clothing that would hide my height and shoulders. I bought winter gloves and dress shoes a size too small. My pinched hands and feet went along with the higher voice I practiced when speaking on the phone.

Over a terrifyingly short period of only one year, my entire perception of my body changed to match the social truths everyone else read there. The mirror, formerly a friend, turned into a deadly enemy. I felt humiliated, ashamed, each time I looked in it, weeping quietly in dressing rooms and loudly at home. I appeared ridiculous to myself because I was seeing what I was told was there: this absurdly tall person with large hands, ungainly feet, wide shoulders, a deep voice, and a masculine manner. Need I go on? What is most remarkable is that I had been about the same size and shape since I was fifteen.

#### READ ANY GOOD WOMEN LATELY?

What had happened was that I'd started being read by others "as a woman."

That my body became the site of all kinds of social inspection and pronouncements didn't surprise me. But the virulence did. I was accosted from every direction: from the men who hissed at me on street corners; to the man on the train who leaned over and said, "Nice tits," as I boarded; to the construction workers who whistled or yelled, "Faggot!"; to the driver who rolled down his window at a crowded intersection, the very first time I went out in a dress, to shout, "God, you sure are uuug-ly!"

In many ways I imagine that what happened to me is not much different from what happens to many teenagers once their bodies

hit puberty and are seized by the cultural machine. In my case, though, I already had a stable body image, and I was an adult, fully aware of what was going on. It shocks me to this day how quickly I learned to make my body over, to embrace the various social truths about it, and to see on it what I was told. I knew what people were thinking when they looked me up and down, stared at my body parts, and inspected my face.

#### TELL ME HOW I LOOK

"People being introduced to me no longer make eye contact—they make crotch contact," a friend, just starting to be read as a woman, told me.

My body, like hers, heretofore just a place to put food, carry out certain operations of pleasure, and get me from point A to point B, had overnight become an armed camp which I surveyed at my peril. It hurt to be me, and it hurt to see me.

I am reminded of a recent meeting with a transsexual female friend of mine. She had begun living full-time as a woman, and eagerly showed me pictures of herself in make-up and various outfits. Again, this is much like any teenager would do. What particularly struck me was that, as she anxiously scanned my face for a reaction, she said, "I have to depend on other people to tell me how I look because I don't know how to see myself yet."

How strange that she was soliciting this information from someone who customarily walks around with a short, butchy haircut, wearing no make-up, dressed in blue jeans, sneakers, and a large black Transsexual Menace T-shirt. Which is to say that I do not, at first blush, inspire confidence as the best possible judge of such matters. I could not care less how either of us is read by nontranssexuals.

#### NO ADMISSION TO LIFE WITHOUT A VALID GENDER ID

*How does it happen that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through what forms of rationality, through what historical necessities, and at what price? My question is this: How much does it cost the subject to be able to tell the truth about itself?*

Michel Foucault, "How Much Does It Cost to Tell the Truth?"<sup>1</sup>

Foucault asked about the necessity of making one's self an object of possible knowledge, to be learned and memorized. For genderqueers, that necessity is survival. The purpose of a gender regime is to regulate these meanings and to punish those who transgress them. In order to survive, to avoid the bashings, the job discrimination, and the street-corner humiliations, my friend will be forced to place herself as a site of *truth* to be mastered. That knowledge will come from others. She must know how others see her so she can know how to see herself; otherwise, she enters society at her peril.

She will gradually learn how she looks and what her body means. She will carry this knowledge around, producing it on demand like pocket ID when she enters a subway car, applies for a job, approaches the police for directions, uses a women's room, or walks alone at night past a knot of men. Summoning up the image in her mind's eye, she will recall the truth of her looks, checking it quickly to determine if anything is "wrong," feeling shame at her shortcomings and pride in her attractive features.

Like me, she may find herself growing further and further from direct sensation, so that in small, gradual steps it becomes successively less important what her body *feels like* than how she *feels about* it. As the source of what her body means becomes more firmly lodged in the perceptions of others, she may experience a curious and distressing sense of dislocation and vulnerability. This ID that she carries—her body—will be continually subjected to being displayed, stamped, and judged.

Since her status and legitimacy as a woman will always be at risk, always be determined by and dependent upon others, she may find that her lack of contact with sensation grows along with a nagging sense of bodily disorientation. She will wake one day to find herself lost within the unfamiliar landscape of her own body, like a nomad in some strange and foreign desert, surrounded by unknown landmarks and inhabited by those whose alien features, and distant ways, she can no longer recognize.

What does it cost to tell the truth?

#### A DACHSHUND PONDERES WIENER-PEOPLE

Someone out there is undoubtedly saying, "Well, all this is very moving, but there *is* a reality to bodies and you can't get around it. For starters, compared to other women, you are tall." Such a comment highlights my point.

We like to think, in Judith Butler's memorable phrase, that physical features exist somewhere out there "on the far side of language."<sup>2</sup> But if even a feature as fundamental and measurable as my "tallness" can only be derived through your reviewing a population of bodies, perceiving some normative measure, and then carrying out (albeit unconsciously) an operation of comparison, then that tallness looks suspiciously to me like something you read on me instead of some innate feature in me. My measurable height may not be arguable; what it *means* is.

Characteristics of mine that are truly innate, that originate "on the far side of language," ought to be totally apparent to you whether you'd ever seen another human being or not, even if you'd only seen me mounted like the gendertrash insect I am, even if you were a Martian seeing your first humanoid, or a wiener-dog viewing its first vertically challenged primate. Any other readings of my body are culturally relative, contingent upon the context in which you locate me. Hence, if we lived among the Munchkins, you'd argue I was naturally a giantess, while if we lived among the New York Knicks, you'd insist I was somewhat short.

The response to deconstructing the body in this way is frequently to offer up counterexamples, of which skin color is the most common. That line of reasoning goes like this: "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps *some* things about bodies are culturally constructed. But some features are simply there. For instance, what about race? Surely color is just color and not some cultural by-product."

Not so, I say, for while skin color itself may be on the far side of language, nearly everything else we can know about it and all that is culturally resonant is not. Such resonances are often specific to particular subcultures. *Black*, for example, is a peculiarly



American phenomenon. White Americans often see only “African-American” or “black” when they look at someone who appears darker-hued than they are. This perception unconsciously follows the notorious “one drop rule,”<sup>3</sup> a bizarre invention of white America which historically held that “one drop” of African blood made a person black. Yet most black Americans are able to see the complex range and variety of shades in which skin color can come. Since being white has been supremely privileged, and therefore required no further qualification, specific shades of brown or black have held tremendous significance and implications for surviving within a racist system.

#### EVERYONE’S ANSWER IS THE ONLY ANSWER

Each era in history considers its own embrace of the body’s features as “natural” and eternal. But bodies, like all cultural products, go through periods, phases, and even fashions. Consider the breast in the recent American landscape. Only a few decades ago the duckbilled breast, as shaped by the tortured duckbill-shaped bra, was the standard of beauty. Shortly thereafter, large full breasts were seen as beautiful and the height of femininity. In just the next generation, with bras burning across the land, small breasts were “naturally” feminine and those “cursed” with big, full breasts found themselves “too big.”

For another hoot, consider how definitions of masculinity and muscularity have changed. Look at George Reeves of the old black-and-white *Superman* TV show. His stomach stuck out beyond his chest; his arms had no noticeably defined muscles. Compare him to Christopher Reeve of the modern *Superman* movies, who was sculpted like a body-builder. Both generations find their models “naturally” manly. Both would find the other’s model incomprehensible.

For that matter, you would think at least that cherished staple, the Big Dick, would have a stable cultural identity. I mean, more is always better, right? Not necessarily. Thomas Laqueur<sup>4</sup> relates that the ancient Greeks, from whom we inherit much of our aesthetics,

found small penises masculine and attractive. Large dicks were considered animal-like, and often the butt (sorry) of public jokes. Men with big dicks learned shame and began to “tuck,” just like any sensible drag queen. A transmale friend who recently returned from a trip to Greece told me how comfortable he’d felt. Everywhere he went, all the statues and pictures had small, manly dicks—just like his.

#### OH YEAH? WELL, MY MOM SAYS YOUR BODY IS JUST A DISCURSIVELY PRODUCED EVENT BASED ON HIGHLY VARIABLE CULTURAL NORMS

As I sat down next to my seatmate on the bus leaving the National Women’s Music Festival in Bloomington, Indiana, she said quickly, “Please pardon my fat hips.” I was nonplused, not having noticed her hips. Foucault’s questions came to mind: What kind of system bids us each make of our bodies a problem to be solved, a claim we must defend, or a secret we must publicly confess, again and again?

Since she and I were stuck together for the next two hours, we proceeded to discuss some of these questions, in particular, why she had felt obliged to apologize to me, a complete stranger.

“Oh, I know, I shouldn’t think of them that way,” she said. “My feminist friends tell me I should think of them as *nurturing* and *maternal*.”

“Oh, no,” I exclaimed, “that’s the same thing. It just means this time the jury came back with a different verdict. You’re still in the dock awaiting judgment—either way they decide, you’ll still have been radically disempowered. The question really should be, what is the original cultural concern with your pelvis and bodyfat that *requires* us to recognize and agree on a meaning in the first place? In other words, whose agenda is it that demands your hips must be gendered with a particular meaning, or to even have any meaning at all?”

“The body,” said Simone de Beauvoir, “is a situation.”<sup>5</sup> In or-

der to grasp our bodies, to think of them as well as to understand the cultural gaze that fixes upon them, we must construct what our bodies can be said to mean and to look like.

We rely upon other members of our speech community to do this, since it is in the meanings reflected back at us through culture that we find *truth*. Almost everything about bodies is discovered through comparison from the collection of meanings stored in a common language: pretty, fat, plain, masculine, short, light-skinned, wrinkled, feminine, broad, sleek, ugly, athletic, deformed, slim, round, buxom, old, delicate. The litany traps and enfolds each body.

For some of us, the meanings culture drapes upon our bodies are extremely painful and depressing. Worse still, a gender system tends to enforce monolithic meanings. Big breasts must mean one thing, hairy backs another, wrinkles yet another still, providing us little or no room to construct our selves and create alternatives.

Simply having our bodies exposed to social judgment can be painful and disturbing to some people. I remember my sixty-five-year-old friend who said, "You know, when I first look at myself in the mirror, I look fine. I think, *Well, all right!* But I look once again, harder, imagining how people must see me, and then I see only the fat and wrinkles and I feel just awful."

*What does it cost to tell the truth?*

I guess if your sense of self matches closely with the cultural grid of what you should mean, and you find those meanings pleasing, then the "truth" doesn't come too expensive. For the rest of us, though, it can cost a great deal.

1. Michel Foucault in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* by Judith Butler (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 93.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 114.

3. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p. 14.

4. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 31.

5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. 301.



## VIDEO TAPE

### REWIND

"It's beautiful," I exclaim. It is, in fact, a particularly fine watch my father has just bought for my seventh birthday, the jewelled face throwing back at me the summer's sunlight. "It's...it's..." I hesitate, searching for just the right word, "it's *divine*." I breathe happily. My father's face comes up sharply, his pupils narrowing. "Boys don't say divine." And he watches me, his head cocked slightly to one side. I open my mouth to question this unfathomable statement, as if certain dictionary words were colored blue for boys and pink for girls, but there is something hard in his voice and eyes. Suddenly, my pleasure evaporates and is replaced entirely by fear. I know if I question him I'll probably get the palm of his hand. You know, when a six-foot-three-inch, two-hundred-pound man hits you in the face with his open hand, it's like being hit in the head with a ham. And so, mumbling something to my feet like, "Well, it is very nice," I make a small mental note to avoid this particular word in the future.

Read at a transexual speak-out held at New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center in 1993 in honor of the fortieth anniversary of Christine Jorgensen's sex-change surgery.

**FAST FORWARD**

The woman sitting across from me is so butch she is often mistaken for a man. We have been discussing the pros and cons of her beginning testosterone treatments. But at the moment, she is lecturing me on being more feminine. "You sometimes—I don't want to hurt your feelings—but you sit crosslegged in meetings and sometimes it takes up some of the space of the woman next to you. As a woman, I just wouldn't do that. It's your male training, like the men on the subway who have to spread their legs and take up two seats. You don't understand how intimidating to women male behavior can be."

**QUICK REWIND**

I have been invited as a guest panelist at the Lesbians Undoing Sexual Taboos conference for women. I sit when I'm done speaking, sensing the pressure that has built up in the room. The women start applauding, and it just goes on and on and on. I sit. I can't even look at this stunning validation, this unbelievable, unsought welcome back into some kind of women's community after I left all that behind twelve years ago in Cleveland. Later, in response to an audience question, I remark how strange it is to be an honored guest at an event that probably would have tossed my ass out ten years ago. It's like riding the crest of a wave. What a strange thing—to be on the edge of a coming change, a change you have waited for, hungered and worked for, that suddenly begins to happen all around you.

**FORWARD, NORMAL SPEED**

One of the exciting things to come out of the LUST conference is that a woman is planning a dinner and sex party for one hundred women. Oh boy, does this sound hot or what? I've been waiting about a decade for something like this to happen. I find one of the fliers at the Center. As I quickly scan the brochure, I see on the bottom of the last page: *No Men, No Transvestites, and No Transsexuals*. Riding the crest of a wave indeed. The board has just flipped

and I have a mouthful of saltwater. For once, I've got to confront someone who is discriminating against me, if only to talk. I call, just asking for a dialogue, a chance to at least explore our differences. After a few minutes she tells me I'm simply a transvestite who has mutilated himself and hangs up.

**REWIND**

Eighth-grade math class. I cannot hear what the teacher is saying. In fact, I don't care what she's saying. I am totally mesmerized by the sight of Dara Rosen's new young breast disappearing into the cup of her new young bra, something I can just barely see as she sits across from me in her sleeveless dress. Worse, I am torn between wanting desperately to touch that soft breast and wanting desperately to have that soft breast.

**FAST FORWARD**

I am on the trading floor at Republic National Bank. It is the third day of my nine-month consulting contract. One of the block traders far down the floor is taking down everyone's name and phone extension, and when he gets to me he calls for me to spell out my name. I do, and he yells back, "Riki Anne, that's cute. Where'd that come from?" "Well," I respond, "it used to be Richard." The heads of two distant block traders, intently tracking the DOW movement on their monitors, swivel sharply around as if on soundless ball bearings. They stare briefly at me before returning to the DOW. My boss, sitting next to me, who has come to Wall Street from a very gay twelve-year career in musical theater, chuckles softly without even looking up from his screen. He is having more fun with this than a pig in shit.

**FORWARD, NORMAL SPEED**

My new boss, a twenty-five-year-old NYU finance graduate, is staring intently at my chest. Actually, not my chest, but the area on my coat over my chest—just over my heart, on the left side. I've been a little intimidated here at J.P. Morgan. I've spent a year and a ha'

trying to get a consulting contract and I'm finally in. I look down, knowing helplessly that I'm probably wearing some of my breakfast. Just what I need. But I am not. What I am wearing is my *Take a Transsexual to Lunch* button, which I wear everywhere *but* into work and which this morning, of all mornings, I have neglected to remove.

#### REWIND

My friend Deborah has offered to stay over with me. It's my first night back home from surgery, and I gratefully accept. We lie quietly in bed together. She's holding me gently. "Can I feel?" she asks after a minute. "Yes, but I have a dilator in, so you can't really go inside." She puts her hand between my legs anyway. "Can I move it?" she asks. "Sure, why not." I have no thought on this subject, just a kind of curiosity and a small, flaming desire to lose whatever kind of virginity this is, after losing so many others. She pushes gently, firmly, on the dilator, as her body leans toward mine. For the first time in my twenty-eight-year-old life, I feel a woman moving inside me, in my vagina.

#### FAST FORWARD

I am at a private, very underground, lesbian women's S/M night at Paddles here in New York, having been invited by Pat Califia, who, by many accounts, began this movement. This is, at best, a super-marginalized minority within a minority, which New York's Finest can raid with complete impunity at any time they choose during the evening. A woman approaches me, dressed entirely in shining black leather from neck to toe, holding a rather substantial riding crop. She flexes it as we talk. After a few minutes, she confides that she finds me very attractive, and wonders if I enjoy being whipped because she would very much like to whip me. As we continue talking and I mention I am transsexual, she freezes, stares intently, and looking a bit green around the gills excuses herself hurriedly to stalk across the room, where she and several of her nontranssexual leather-clad lesbian-feminist sado-masochistic (I'm

running out of hyphens here) friends can stand and giggle and point at someone as strange and unique as me.

#### REWIND

Dad is climbing through the fence, which is made of barbed-wire strands, strung from fence posts all over this farm where we are hunting pheasant. It is freezing cold with a half foot of snow on the ground, but we are both bulkily dressed and shod against the weather and the wind that gathers speed blowing down across the open fields. To get through the fence, to separate and hold the rusted barbed wire, he has to hand me his big 12-gauge shotgun, which I hold along with my smaller, lighter 20-gauge. As he climbs through, I can see the only thing around us, the clubhouse, far over his shoulder in the lonely distance, a single black silhouette against the gathering sky. I tell myself I can do it. I can say I dropped it and it went off, and inside my head a little pounding begins and small quivers are starting to knot my stomach and shoulders. You wouldn't really, I say to myself, but already I can see the look of surprise, that final, complete grasp of fact as the shotgun goes off, blowing a hole in that bastard that only a 12-gauge shotgun at very close range can make, a hole I could put my entire thirteen-year-old fist through, the sound echoing off the clubhouse and back at us, locked in that moment, gratefully and mercifully our last moment together. Me knowing I am free, finally, at last. They'll believe me if I cry, if I withdraw into myself. I know how to do months of silent, strained shock to hide from people. He has at least taught me that. And then I imagine the devastation to my mother and our lives, and the years of questions and forms and police and authorities and, while I am thinking of all this, he is through the fence and reaches for me to hand him his gun, no thought in his head but that I obey instantly, as usual, and like a puff of quick air, the single moment of safety and freedom hits me and is gone.

#### FAST FORWARD

Jaye Davidson is going to pull the trigger. She is absolutely going to

pop that nontranssexual IRA bitch. I am watching *The Crying Game*, which every nontranssexual friend and acquaintance has told me I *must* see, and I'm remembering being in that final presurgical meeting at the Cleveland Clinic. I am in tears, surrounded by about eight doctors and a dozen perky young nurses, trying desperately to convince these sodden bastards that yes, I am a transsexual and yes, I want them to make sure I have a functioning clit when they're done carving up my groin because yes, I do still get hot for women and I look forward to them going down on me. One doctor has asked me with barely suppressed disgust how I would feel if I couldn't have an orgasm (how would you feel if your sorry-assed wienie-roasted limp dick couldn't have an orgasm?) and another has pointed to his impossibly feminine, delicate WASP nurse, explaining patiently that I understand, of course, I won't come out looking like *her*, and I am thinking of all the women telling me that I can never be a real woman, presumably like them, and now phrases like *women-born women only*, *biological women only*, *genetic women only*—or whatever exclusionary formula is in vogue with our very best lesbian thinkers this year—start tumbling over and over each other in my head like a bunch of manic puppies. I am thinking about all those feminine, self-satisfied, dismissive young Jewish girls I grew up with, went to synagogue with, hated and lusted for and lost sleep over, and I swear I am practically coming in my pants here on the theater seat as Jaye finally pulls the trigger on that nontranssexual bitch. Not just once, the first shot echoing out and the surprise registering on those small, delicate, well-spaced features just like I knew it would on my father's larger, heavier European ones. No, Jaye, my hero of the moment, my trans-savior, pulls again and again and again and five, six, seven—how many shots are in an automatic?—until that beautiful nontranssexual woman, the kind that if we look like them they tell us how well we pass, she's down for the count, and I'm telling myself frantically after four years of Twelve-Step programs that I'm not about violence and I've given up fighting anyone or anything. But the anger and tears rise in my throat with the bitterness of bile and stick there like some kind of demonic fishbone, and I know helplessly and a little guiltily that I'll rent this

video, not for the directing, which is nearly perfect, nor the storyline, which is brilliant, but just to see Jaye pull that trigger in this scene again and again and again.

The problem with transsexual women is not that we are trapped in the wrong bodies. The truth is that that is a fairly trivial affair corrected by doctors and sharp scalpels. The problem is that we are trapped in a society which alternates between hating and ignoring, or tolerating and exploiting us and our experience.

More importantly, we are trapped in the wrong minds. We have, too many of us for too long, been trapped in too much self-hate: the hate reflected back at us by others who, unwilling to look at the complexity of our lives, dismiss our femaleness, our femininity, and our sense of gender and erotic choices as merely imitative or simply derivative. Wanting desperately to be accepted, and unable to take on the whole world alone, we have too often listened to these voices that were not our own. We have forgotten what Alice Walker says when she declares:

*No person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world.<sup>1</sup>*

And our lesson is neither new nor unique. From Lyndall MacCowan:

*It means knowing I'm a freak. It means knowing that I am not a woman. I means falling in love with girls and, at the same time, despising their femininity, their obsession with makeup and boys, their lack of strength and brains. It means knowing that both the kind of woman I want and the kind of woman I am don't exist, do not have names... If it does not someday make me kill myself, it's something that can get me killed.<sup>2</sup>*

Transsexuality? No, she's speaking about being a self-identified lesbian femme in the '70s and '80s. There are no new changes, just new faces.

In closing, let me tell you about one transsexual. After ten years of hiding and passing and sucking up to nontranssexual women, strung out and totally desperate, she started a transsexual group.

She started talking with them and hanging out with them and being seen with them, although at first she hated it. She started wearing buttons and coming out at every appropriate and inappropriate moment, just as if her life were as normal and natural as anyone else's. And she learned that although she might hate herself, she could not hate the fifty or one hundred other transsexuals she met, whose stories she heard, whose tears of frustration and rage she saw, whose everyday, one-day-at-a-time, courage to survive she witnessed. And she understood, at last, the redemptive power of community, and how it can only be stifled by self-hate and silence.

Community, my friends and transsexual kin is what we build here today, by coming together to claim our own, our history, and our Christine. Christine, standing alone in God's own light, in a way none of us have had to since, made all of this and all of us possible.

1. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1983), p. 636.

2. Lyndall MacCowan, "Re-collecting History, Renaming Ourselves: Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties" in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, edited by Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson, 1992), p. 311.



## SEX! IS A VERB

The Transsexual Menace demonstrates at a reading Janice Raymond does in 1994 at Judith's Room, the last of New York City's women's bookstores (and now defunct). She is the author of a remarkably hostile, transphobic tract. Dr. Raymond draws about two dozen people who are obviously bewildered to be in the midst of an equal number of genderqueers in black Menace T-shirts. By prior agreement with the owners, Dr. Raymond and I engage in a debate following her reading. I am taken aback as she immediately exclaims, "But why would you want to do that to your body?"

"Do what?" I ask.

"Well, have it cut into, change your sex."

"How do you know I've had surgery?"

"Well, I mean I assume..." she trails off, gesturing vaguely at my Menace T-shirt and looking baffled.

"But why would you care? At the risk of sounding heartless, Dr. Raymond, I don't give a damn what you do with your body."

Yes. Hello, I'm a transexual woman and I—

CLICK.

Hello? Hello?

Yes. Hello, I'm interested in changing my sex on my driver's—

CLICK.

Hello? Hello?

#### MEET ME IN THE DARK, UNDER THE SMALL PART OF THAT CURVE, YOU KNOW—WHERE ALL THE HOT, NEW ANOMALIES HANG OUT

Is there one sex or two? Or, including the intersexed (hermaphrodites), how about three or four? The argument that intersexed bodies are pathology doesn't help us much, because—assuming the bodies are perfectly functional—that's a value judgment masquerading as medical fact.

Saying that the intersexed comprise just a negligible fraction doesn't help us, either. It just takes us out of the land of Fact and Nature, plopping us squarely in the squishy realm of Probabilities and Chance. Deciphering this begins to look suspiciously more like cultural judgment than the cold eye of Impartial Science.

#### ATTACK OF THE INTERSEXED PEOPLE!

Who gets to say which bodies "count," and why? How small a percentage counts as negligible? Whose body counts as the standard for normal, and how different can I be before I become pathology?

According to the Intersex Society of North America, about one in two thousand births is intersexed. They estimate that five intersexed infants are operated on each day. All these operations, of course, are performed without the patients' consent. Many are mutilated for life by a medical science that seeks to impose aesthetic norms on bodies that function perfectly well but are different. For

that matter, forget all these arguments and try the "negligible" line out on Cheryl Chase, a founding member of the protest group Hermaphrodites With Attitude.

#### HONEST OFFICER, THEY WERE SEXED HERE WHEN I ARRIVED

We're taught that while gender may come from Culture, sex comes from Nature. All bodies already have a sex "in" them. This sex is recognized and expressed by culture as gender through social practices like clothing, hairstyles, and whether one finds pastels simply *faaaaabulous*. In this narrative, sex is a natural property of bodies, while gender is just what culture makes of them. In Judith Butler's terms,<sup>1</sup> Sex is to Nature (raw) as Gender is to Culture (cooked). The naturalness of sex grounds and legitimizes the cultural practices of gender. But what if this narrative is actually inverted?

The more we look, the less natural sex looks. Everywhere we turn, every aspect of sex seems to be saturated with cultural needs and priorities. Mother Nature has Mankind's fingerprints all over Her.

Maybe the formula is reversed. Gender is not what culture creates out of my body's sex; rather, sex is what culture makes when it genders my body. The cultural system of gender looks at my body, creates a narrative of binary difference, and says, "Honest, it was here when I arrived. It's all Mother Nature's doing." The story of a natural sex that justifies gender evaporates, and we see sex standing revealed as an effect of gender, not its cause. Sex, the bodily feature most completely in-the-raw, turns out to be thoroughly cooked, and our comforting distinction between sex and gender collapses. We are left staring once again at the Perpetual Motion Machine of gender as it spins endlessly on and on, creating difference at every turn.

#### ANOTHER DAY IN THE LIFE OF A GENDERTRASH REJECT

What social systems make the recognition and lifelong attachment of a sex on my body possible? What cultural agencies push it along? Which institutions store and retrieve knowledge about my body,

and at what points of contact with society is this information brought into play?

Let's take a walk around town. I've a busy day, so try to keep up. It's 1980 and I'm preparing for "sex-change" surgery, which is wonderful, but the timing is kind of a bummer since I have to register for graduate school at Cleveland State University. But I can handle it. I'm a genderqueer. I can handle anything.

My first stop is the Cleveland Clinic. My social worker makes notes as usual in my chart as I talk about how my life "as a woman" is going, whatever that means. I think it means how people are reacting to me and how I feel about it. But why should that count toward my surgery? I mean, it's going to be my body lying on the table, not theirs, and certainly not the hospital's.

What is it like living as a woman? Well, between the stares in the bathroom with threats to call the cops, and the guys on the street who make sucking noises and comment on the teenage breasts growing on my twenty-six-year-old body, it's no picnic. Everyone seems to be looking at my body and trying to do something about it. She scribbles away.

She asks me to sign these long, legal-looking documents. One says that I understand all the various procedures they're going to do; the other that I'm not married. Seems that after the operation, I'll be considered legally female, so it would be illegal for me to be married. This takes them off the hook. Huh...so if I had a wife, our relationship would suddenly become a same-sex marriage. A loving union made in heaven becomes a crime with a flick of a blade. Oh, goody! She is not amused. I shut up and sign. She gives me a date for surgery.

From the medical bureaucracy to the civil bureaucracy. I go down to the County Recorder's office and don't even get to see a judge. Alas, I will miss the irony of a man who lives half his life running around publicly in a floor-length black dress passing judgment on my gender. Instead I get some bored clerk who looks like a third-year law student. He eyes me sourly from behind a battered gray desk, one of those broad, rough things that invites graffiti. I try to read the desktop art upside down while he examines my proof

that I've publicized my legal change of name in the *Cleveland Legal Register* for the required thirty days.

He asks me how the sovereign state of Ohio can know I'm not doing this to defraud someone, because that kind of name change is strictly illegal. *I mean, look at me, asshole. I'm a guy in a dress who gets hassled in the restroom for trying to take a pee and you're worried that I'm going to turn out to be John Freaking Dillinger on the lam in drag? Get a life.* I say nothing, of course, just look at him respectfully and bat my eyelashes until he thinks I'm probably making a pass at him, or the estrogen has fried my brain. He finally signs the papers, staring up at me as if I'm something he's discovered in the back of the fridge from last year's hunting trip.

But I'm not done. I ask him about changing my Ohio birth certificate, which still lists me as male. He loftily informs me that the state of Ohio doesn't do that sort of thing. It turns out they want a record "contemporaneous with my birth." He intones contemporaneous solemnly, all one-hundred-and-twenty-pounds of him. I'd like to contemporaneous his geeky twit head, but right now he's my knight in shining armor because I have my name-change papers tucked under my arm. So, batting my lashes one last time, this time just to cheese him off, I exit stage left. Anyway, it's September, and if I don't get to school in time for registration, all my preferred courses will be closed out.

A guy holds the door for me at the elevator. As he gets in behind me he casually asks, "So, how tall are you anyway, Miss?" Then he looks again, a lot closer. Clearly confused now, he's not sure if he has just been polite or if he's made an ass of himself by holding the door and flirting with a guy in drag.

When I arrive at Cleveland State, I have to fill out the admission forms, including indicating my sex. Well, I guess I can start checking the *F* box. The student behind the counter is trying to be friendly. I've stopped by home to change into a pair of jeans, and he doesn't look real close, thinks he's talking to the average guy, and asks, "You play any hoops?" As I consider the answer he eyes the forms I've been completing, spots *Sex: F*, and looks up quickly. But by then he's mine. "Oh yeah. Love to. In the men's league last year



they considered me just a small forward. But in the women's league this year I got to play a Patrick Ewing sort of power center."

"Great," he replies, without an ounce of enthusiasm. I want to ask him if we can go out and shoot baskets sometime, but he's already turning an interesting shade of green so I leave for the registration lines. On the way I stop to sign up for student insurance, which they offer at a really good discount. Again I have to declare and sign my sex. Only this time, I have to answer a whole barrage of questions: Have I ever been pregnant? Hmmmm...let me think. Have I ever had an abortion? Not knowingly. Do I need information on birth control pills? Not unless my surgeon is a lot better than I think he is. But who knows, a good girl scout is always prepared. I check that one *Yes*. Maybe now I'll find out where you insert those little pink pills.

It's on the way to the financial aid office that I become aware I have to pee. This is always the most complex part of the day. Getting a sex-change is easier than negotiating the public toilet system. Which is worse—a woman in the men's room in heels using the urinal, or a man in the women's room using a stall? It's a toss-up. I make a beeline for the women's room.

Naturally, there's a line. I have to stand there, pretending ignorance of all the stares. Although half the women waiting are more butch and gender-variant than I am, I'm a head taller than anyone else. What can I say—a swan among the platypuses draws attention.

Someone asks me the time, which is usually a voice check. I see that she is wearing a watch herself. She's closely examining my face, along with about three of her friends. The rest of the line is casually watching while trying to look like they're not watching. I'm tempted to shift into low gear here and use my truckdrivin' growl, but I need a stall, not a scene. I answer in my highest and most petite voice. They ain't convinced, but at least they conclude I'm not the Mad Cleveland Bathroom Rapist stalking their restroom.

Once in the cubicle, I sit. But then I notice I'm making more noise than anyone else. They're all swooshing, and I'm splashing like a fire hose against a kettle drum at close range. I pass on fluff-

ing before the mirror when I'm done and beat a hasty retreat. Discretion is the better part of gender valor. On my way out, a dyke smiles indulgently. *Mon ami!*

At the student aid office there are still more forms for loans, for the minimum-wage on-campus job they're throwing in to sweeten the package, and for more insurance in case I croak in school so the loan is retired. Each time I have to record and declare my sex. Why do they need my sex on a loan, for chrissakes? Do penises pay differently? Am I going to sit on the money or something so that what's between my legs makes a difference? When I have a vagina will they change my interest rate?

The registration lines still reach halfway across the gym. But, in short order, I'm done. It's almost five o'clock and time to go. I stop off at the library for some books I'll need for the first day of classes. Too much Coke while waiting in lines and again I need a bathroom.

Uh-oh. This time there are two CSU campus cops in their brown uniforms right outside the door. This is a city campus, and they're fully armed these days. The whole thing flashes in my mind like an old George Raft movie:

*Cop One: "All right, Miss, step away from that door!"*

*Cop Two: "Look out, Charlie! She's got a dick!"*

*Cop One: "Don't move, Miss! Okay, put both balls on top of your head. Now lay your dick on the floor, and kick it over here...slowly!"*

I can't handle another situation right now. I need to get busted for Public Impersonating like I need a hemorrhoid. I'll bear the pain until I get home. A young kid on the subway, noticing I'm carrying a load of books, offers me his seat. Chivalry isn't dead. Then his friend elbows him and whispers and they both look at me again and start to crack up. Chivalry hits the floor, colder'n a mackerel.

That's the easy part. The hard stuff is getting past the guys hanging around the corner near my house. It's usually not too bad, only they don't seem to know my name. One of them thinks I'm someone called "Mary Cohen." No, wait, it's *maricon*. Another calls me *putah*. They do this every time I walk by. So far nothing physical has come of it, but I'm waiting and I'm also well-prepared. I'm well-prepared to hysterically cry my head off the first time one of them so much as touches me; then I'll hit them with a full load of Jewish guilt. After that, they won't want to live.

I have a date tonight with Kris, my sweetheart. Contemplating this makes the day behind much more bearable. She comes by at eight, and we go to our favorite gay bar. The music is awesome. While I get up to snag some brewskies, another woman comes up to her and says, "You know, that's really a guy you're with."

Kris just smiles sweetly. As if mulling over this new information, she begins thoughtfully scratching her chin with her middle finger. Later that night she wonders aloud if my surgery will "finally make an honest lesbian of me." Who knows? What are labels, anyway, but whole-body condoms to protect us from making intimate contact with each other?

#### WHAT IF THEY GAVE A SEX AND NOBODY CAME?

Sex! is a cultural command that all bodies understand and recognize themselves in a specific way, an identification of our bodies that we are forced to carry around and produce on demand. To participate in society, we must be sexed.

We see this with perfect clarity in the case of the intersexed, the original lost brigade in any discussion of binary sex. Intersexuals are not permitted to live without a sex. Even if they resist, society inevitably forces one on them. The machinery of sex gets very upset when you try to live outside of it.

I have a friend who is raising his first child. He is determined to raise it without a sex until it is old enough to select its own. In the meantime, he tells me he cannot believe the incredible intensity of the daily cultural pressure he gets to sex his child. From the

person at the checkout counter who asks, "Is that a boy or a girl?" to the insistent hospital records office which absolutely requires a sex, to salespeople in the kiddy clothing stores, to the forthcoming battles with nursery school officials.

There is an entire social apparatus whose sole purpose is to determine, track, and maintain my sex. Perhaps sex is not a noun at all. Perhaps it is really a verb, a cultural imperative—as in, "Sex yourself!"—in the face of which none of us has a choice.