READ MY LIPS

Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender

RIKI ANNE WILCHINS

Firebrand Books

avoid this?... Okay. Okay, yes. I'm sure you're looking out for my interests. Good-bye.

CLICK.

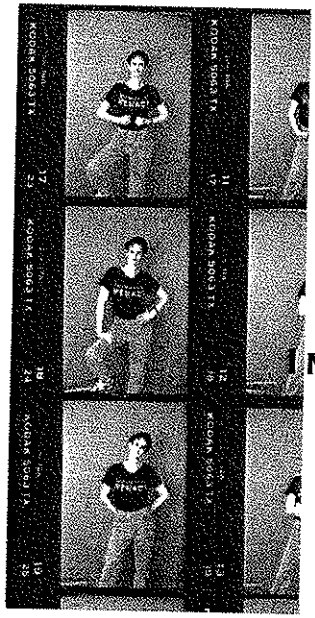
Hello? Hello? Dr. Farvis? Dr. Francis Farvis? Yes. This is Riki Anne Wilchins. Yes. That's right...from Dr. Sprocket. Yes, Thursday is fine...afternoon is fine. How much? You said how much?? Is that absolutely necessary?... Okay, okay. Yes, I want to get my paperwork done... Yes, I'll be there at four o'clock sharp.... No, believe me, Doctor, it won't be any trouble getting off work.... No, I haven't been in therapy before.... Yes, I'll try to come properly dressed. Speaking of which, did you know that Dr. Sprocket— No, never mind, just thinking out loud.... Yes, I know thinking out loud could be a sign of— Well, of course I sound a little agitated and defensive, Doctor. Now let me ask you a question: Do you have any idea at all how frustrating it can be going through all this stuff and getting a sex-change operation and— Oh really? I had no idea. Yes...yes...okay, I'll see you Thursday. Good-bye, Doctor.

CLICK.

Hello? City Court? Yes, I'm a transexual woman and I need to get my name changed and—

CLICK.

Hello? Hello?



IMAGINARY BODIES, IMAGINING MINDS

You make me feel like a natural woman.

Aretha Franklin (Carole King) song

Damn it, when I put on a skirt and heels it makes me feel like a woman and, I hate to admit it, but sometimes I like that.

Androgynous lesbian-feminist in women's rap group

All I ever wanted was to feel like a man.

Transexual man

I lusted, I pined, to look like, act like, and be accepted as a nontransexual woman. I believed in my heart that there was a marble altar in a hidden temple somewhere, surrounded by flickering candles and hooded acolytes, with the word FEMALE indelibly inscribed upon it. Only nontransexual women could attend it, only nontransexual women knew where it was, and only nontransexual women selected who was or wasn't allowed in. And I was not. At best, I might be allowed to approach, the precise distance depending upon from what quarter the winds of political correctness blew at that moment.

Author's unpublished manuscript

Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.

Michel Foucault[1]

Contemplating that mythical altar, how is it possible for me to want to feel "like a woman" in the same way as my lesbian-feminist friend who occasionally dons heels and a skirt? Since we both want to feel that way, how is it possible for us *not* to? How do we construct and recognize a particular state as feeling "like a woman," a state that, on the one hand, we are both able to experience, yet on the other, subsequently reflect upon and realize it is not what we customarily feel?

We can well ask, in fact, given that bodies can mean so many things, and that multiple internal experiences exist, how is it possible for us to feel "like" anything at all? How are certain feelings centered, focused, and solidified into a recognizable form? Finally, how is it possible that we can identify features of our bodies as internal experiential states, like feeling ugly, or fat, or tall, or like a woman? While one can *be* any of these things, what can it mean to *feel* them as well?

In short, how is the knowledge of one's body being a social identity (woman/man), or being read as having a particular physical property (tall/feminine/fat), converted and congealed into a specific, internal feeling, an identifiable subjective experience?

These questions are generally overlooked in feminist literature because the answers usually lead to a Jamesian kind of introspection where you examine your own subjective states and try to figure out what is going on. It is a process that is messy, easy to critique, and much more challenging than talking in general theoretical terms. Transpeople, however, as well as others trapped in unpleasant and painful bodily meanings, do not have the luxury of ignoring this inquiry. For the identification of being trans, if it is about anything, is about the private experience of profoundly important and complex subjective states. This is a mountain we cannot go around or over. Only through.

PILE-UPS ON THE PSYCHIC FREEWAY

The question of how gendered states of consciousness are possible has usually been countered with one of two assertions. Neither of them is very useful.

The first is the existence of a gendered identity. In my situation, this would mean that I felt like a man but sought to experience myself as a woman: my gender identity was female but my physical sex was male. Furnishing me with a gender identity does not, however, provide an explanation for internal subjective states. It simply presumes precisely what I'm trying to illuminate, namely, how it's possible for subjective bodily experiences to happen at all. How can my experience become stabilized and gendered in the first place?

This argument encounters further difficulties. For instance, since I also felt tall, young, athletic, Caucasian, and slender, I would also need a length identity, a durational identity, an athletic identity, and so on, with all of them dashing about inside me, and piling up on the Psychic Freeway during emotional rush hours.

The second assertion advanced is that my body objectively has certain features, i.e., I actually *am* slender or young or male, and so I *feel* slender or young or male. This kind of straightforward, unexamined essentialism assumes that my subjective experience flows directly from my physical features. It fails to answer the same kind of questions. For instance, I might *be* tall, but how is it possible for me to *feel* tall?

In addition, it implies that all slender or female or young people share a distinct subjective experience, one which transcends their individual lives, their cultural, historical, and ethnic identities. Isn't this unrealistic? The essentialist position also fails to address the inevitability of error: suppose I feel young and good-looking but I'm not?

The success of any of these objections means one must argue that essentialism is true, yet somehow fails to work. Even worse, an essentialist position completely fails to explain my lesbian friend and her high heels. Since she is a woman, then feeling like a woman

should not only be unproblematic and independent of her attire, it should be unavoidable.

So we return to the same questions. How is it possible for physical features and social identities to be transformed into subjective internal experiences? How is it possible to *feel* ourselves to *be* anything at all?

IMAGINED BODIES: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE REAL

How can we find my *real* body? Does it exist? And what if there are differing accounts of it? Perhaps, just perhaps, I have no real body, because any understanding of my body comes via the construction of an imaginary body, one that is created from the reservoir of cultural signs. In this way Foucault called the body a "volume in perpetual disintegration."[2] It is a totality that every culture or epoch dismembers into various parts, giving each a meaning and a name, then stitching them back together into a pseudo and supposedly natural "whole." The debate over the literal construction of trans-bodies has effectively hidden and therefore legitimized this constructed nature of *all* bodies.

Since we've introduced the word *signs* here, a brief review of semiotics is in order. "A sign," said Charles Pierce, "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect."[3] Thus, words are signs, but so are paintings, and even gestures, like saluting the flag.

Every sign can be thought of as composed of two parts: the symbol or picture, and its meaning. More formally, these parts are called the *signifier* and *signified.* But that kind of terminology gets real confusing, real quick. The picture of a horse, or the word *horse,* is the symbol, and that molasses-slow, four-legged equine that cost me fifteen bucks in the fifth at Aqueduct is the meaning. My pointing gesture is the symbol, and "you are about to get stung by this humongous and really pissed-off-looking insect" is the meaning. This all sounds perfectly charming as long as it's kept simple. But what if there are greater complexities? If, for example, *cunt* is the sign, what can we fix as its symbol? What as its meaning?

We'd all like to believe that there is a primary experience of

our bodies which precedes language and our body's subsequent break-up into signs. But it's a difficult argument to make. By the time we grasp the body *as* a body, it's already been draped in an entire blanket of cultural meanings. The same goes for sensation. Even in that most primal sensation, pain, cultural meanings play a critical role. The pain experienced in S/M play shows this, as does the pain of running a marathon or giving birth.

When we think, when we perceive, we use and manipulate signs. Each era and each culture creates its own signs and meanings, thus effectively shaping its own version of reality. To think of our bodies at all requires we use such signs. Once we do, we're no longer dealing with any direct experience of our bodies, but with experience as mediated, as understood through cultural signs.

You'd assume from this discussion that there are lots of meanings for our bodies to have, a wide marketplace of meanings from which to choose. You'd also expect that we'd be able to shift meanings at any time. In fact, it should practically be impossible not to change meanings much of the time, for if bodies have no fixed and predetermined meaning, stabilizing one should be pretty difficult.

TURN LEFT AT THE NEXT SIGN

In reality, this isn't the way things work. We've discussed the gender system using the body as "a site of constraint and authorization." This means it uses the constructed "natural" body to constrain certain feelings ("big boys don't cry"), while authorizing others ("don't you look sweet in your new dress?"). Thus, the gender system marks out what bodies can mean, regulates those meanings, and punishes transgression. This starts to address my first question about how it is possible to "feel like" anything at all, why our subjective experiences of our bodies don't just rush off in all directions at once, refusing to center or congeal into any particular experience.

One insight we can gain from semiotics is that the gender system doesn't have to punish to enforce its will. Recall Foucault's observation that power not only restrains, it creates. We live and think in a system of signs which by itself significantly shapes the meanings we can give our bodies. For instance, when a friend said

to me, "I'd like to get surgery to eliminate this manly bulge that shows in a tight dress," my response was to ask how she knew the bulge was "manly." But the meaning that goes with the symbol of that bulge and makes the sign *penis* includes "manly, potent, and virile." It's hard to think of a *penis* as *penis* without connecting in some fundamental way with the concept of "masculinity."

The sign itself acts as a significant constraint on the ways in which we can conceive of that particular portion of flesh. It is this forcible shaping of our perception of our bodies within an inevitably heterosexist and binarist sign system that de Beauvoir calls "a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another. It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics."[4] It requires, as Judith Butler notes, "that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression."[5]

For me, this means that "thinking" my body at all implicates me in my own self-oppression. The very signs I use to think about my body—my penis, breasts, semen—also render them completely unintelligible and strange. What should be a source of constant exploration of my innermost feelings is, instead, placed beyond my grasp. My body should be the one safe place to which I can turn in answering the questions life poses for us all: What is it I bring here? What will I leave behind? Answering these questions becomes for me a kind of physical as well as logical impossibility.

You can watch this participation in self-oppression at work within the transcommunity itself. Language has given us a kind of original, structural difference between nontransexuals and transexuals. Now transpeople themselves, while seeking furiously to narrow the social gap between themselves and nontransexuals, continually re-architect the original difference. This is done through the use of a series of terms, both invented and imported for the occasion, including *genetic girl, real woman, biological woman,* and *born woman.*

Yet the problem I have is not so much that the meanings are anathema to me. I recognize that the basic vocabulary of binarist meanings, of masculine and feminine, is reductionist, and enforced in an oppressive manner. But I personally don't seek meanings outside of that binarist system; I only seek to blend and merge its parts. What causes me pain is having my body read against me. The way I am asked to feel, think, and interact places precisely those meanings I want to bring into the world, and leave behind, out of my reach.

To go into this in any depth, we need to first grasp how I could understand what feeling "masculine" meant. Let's step back a moment to the time when—without knowing the word—I learned about "feminine." Let's start, where all good philosophy does, with my mother's bra.

ABREAST OF THE TIMES

I was about six when I discovered breasts. I had seen chests before but I did not yet recognize bosoms. My mother and my Aunt Peg were in the bedroom getting ready for a big family dinner. Not thinking to send me out, they began changing clothes. I'd seen chests before, though never a bra. The bra enabled me to recognize "breasts."

I watched them in the mirror, excited and struggling to understand as subtly as a six-year-old can stare without appearing to stare. In other words, I probably appeared transfixed, but they were kind enough to pretend not to notice. Mom and Peg were wearing these strange, lacy white harnesses. While they clearly functioned to hold their chests stationary, to me it seemed they were intended to do much more.

These were not what you would call practical or casual garments. This told me that what they contained must have very special social significance. These harnesses were intricately worked, with lace and little flowers in the design and many tiny curlicues. They were clearly meant to be looked at, to attract attention to these body parts. The effect was of something intended to be found enticing and alluring. In addition, the bright white cotton suggested innocence and purity to me, while the lace suggested softness or vulnerability.

This information was confusing to me. It didn't square with what

I knew about either my mother or my aunt. Both were strong-willed, mature, and substantial women. I didn't conceive of them, nor any portion of them, as soft, vulnerable, or enticing, yet the lacy, detailed construction of these garments made clear that they thought of their chests in this way. And anyone looking, as I was now, was meant to think of them that way as well.

These weren't particularly clandestine garments; after all, they were showing them to me, and to each other. On the other hand, since they wore them under their street clothes, being allowed to view them was apparently an act of some intimacy. The fact that they both wore them made me suspect that other women did so as well. So seeing women's chests as soft and vulnerable, enticing and alluring, was, therefore, probably a matter of general social agreement.

All of this constituted a kind of nonverbal dialogue between the three of us about their bodies. The fact that the door was closed, that they wore these things regularly under their clothes but seldom showed them, told me that this was a very intimate dialogue. This was my first conscious experience with the hiding and displaying of bodies and their various parts as a means of creating intimacy, and I found it exciting. Without ever having experienced desire, I was beginning to comprehend it: in discovering breasts, I had also begun to discover femininity and, with it, the concept of eroticism.

My second lesson, occurring at about the same time, came from my father, who taught me to look up girls' skirts. He had been complaining about short skirts over dinner, and I asked why he cared. He stared incredulously at me, suspicious that he was being put on. Reassured from my expression that I was perfectly serious, he snorted that, of course, everyone likes to look up women's skirts, because of what you could "see up there."

Now it was my turn to be incredulous. "Why in the world," I asked, "would anyone want to look at cotton panties? What is so exciting about them?" If I was so interested, I could see my fill in my sister's dresser drawer or in the women's section of any department store.

"It's what's behind them that makes it exciting," he said, explaining what he believed to be self-evident.

"But," I responded, "you're not looking at what's behind it." In truth, I hadn't a clue what was behind it, except that it was something I wasn't supposed to see. "In any case, you can see more with the girls on the beach in those bikinis. What's the big deal?"

The conversation broke down with him thinking I was either stupid or deliberately obtuse, probably both. The upshot was that I learned to look up women's skirts. After all, something very important was up there. If you were supposed to look at the white cotton over it, well, that must be some kind of intimate, exciting thing to do.

I spent the better part of second grade sitting directly across from Karen Masur, who was careful to stretch her skirt so tautly and primly across her legs that I could see right up it. To this day, if someone's skirt blows up like Marilyn's in *The Seven-Year Itch,* I know I'm going to look. I still don't know exactly why, but I know I will.

Now that we've made some progress in explaining how I learned what femininity was, we can move on to my education about what my body meant.

BUT EARLIER THAT SAME DAY, OVER ON THE SWINGSET...

I'd been playing in the sandbox during recess and looked up to see "Sweeta" Silverman on the swingset. Her real name was Cecile, but everyone called her Sweeta. I do not make this up. In fact, I finally ran into Sweeta again at our twentieth high school reunion and recounted this whole story.

Anyway, Sweeta was dressed in a nice white jumper, lace leggings, and little patent leather shoes. She wouldn't have lasted a minute in that sandbox. All us guys were dressed in heavy dungarees, sneakers, and other guy-type wear. We weren't color coordinated, we weren't clean, and we weren't supposed to be. The teacher certainly didn't lift us out of the sandbox like we were fragile pieces of china the way she carried Sweeta off that swingset when the bell

rang. I envied her immediately.

I read the signs as clearly as if they'd been written on paper: the auguries were not good. I understood what her body meant and, in the same instant, I knew my father would make mincemeat of me if I wanted to dress like Sweeta, act like Sweeta, or be treated like Sweeta. He was certainly not going to treat me like valuable china—more like disposable plastic—and he'd have to stand in line behind all the boys in my class to do it. The bottom line was that my body was not going to have those meanings I associated with Sweeta, and I was going to have no say in the matter whatsoever.

What is interesting and sad is that even though no one actually told me what my body meant, it didn't make much difference. Signs don't mean anything in isolation. They only take on a meaning in relation to one another. In a gender system, the relations are always binary. By learning that my body could not mean what Sweeta's did was more than sufficient to tell me a great deal about what my body *must* mean.

In case you're wondering, yes, they treated me well at the reunion, and Sweeta was marvelous about the whole thing. Then again, she hasn't seen this book.

THROW DOWN YOUR MEANINGS AND GIVE YOURSELF UP

As I've grown older, I've spent many an evening trying to figure out why I couldn't just fight the language, no matter what my body meant. Why I couldn't create my own understanding of it, like a private language, the kind schizophrenics sometimes create. I've slowly realized there are several reasons why this was not possible.

The first is that I am not unhappy with the gendered alternatives, only with the way they are administered. Culture determines what my body means, and the meaning has to be completely one thing or another. Movement, mix and match, are strictly prohibited. This is like living in a straightjacket. So when people ask me if transexuality is learned or genetic, I conjure up the strangest image. I see them moving around in their straightjackets, hopping about with great concern. Then, noticing me with my arms free,

they ask, "Are loose arms learned or genetic? Wouldn't you rather be normal?" Thank you, no.

The second reason why fighting the language is not the solution is that Foucault was right: the body may not be a stable basis for recognition. The meanings must be created and reinforced over and over, throughout one's life. Although recognizing one's body is impossible, it is, nonetheless, imperative. For me to navigate culture, for me to survive within it, I am compelled to recognize what others see in my body. I must acknowledge the hand of society pressed heavily upon my shoulder.

Most people master this recognition in childhood. They know what their bodies look like and accept the signs they learn to represent it without question. For transpeople, who completely shift registers of social recognition, the process has to be relearned, rehearsed, and recast.

When people started reading me as a woman, I had to very consciously learn how they saw me in order to use the restroom. I had to learn to recognize my voice, my posture, the way I appeared in clothing. I had to master an entire set of bathroom-specific communicative behaviors just to avoid having the cops called. In essence, I had to build an elaborate mental representation of how I looked and was read. And in spite of all this effort, sometimes it didn't work. The cops would humiliate me, checking my ID as publicly as possible, making sure everyone got a good, long look at the gendertrash being put back in its place—which was out of sight.

But my problem is not only avoiding social punishment, although failure to do so can result in humiliation, physical assault, even death. Building an "accurate" imaginary body, which maps closely to the social reading of my body, is critical to navigating social space. It's integral to knowing which clothes to wear, who I can ask for a date, how to get my hair cut, when to go on a diet, whether the ballet turn I just executed was sloppy or graceful, if I'm displaying a pleasant smile when you're talking to me, how to show the stranger on the street I don't want to be panhandled or the stranger at the bar I'm not interested in his buying me a drink.

With all this said, I'd like to think it's possible to negotiate the

cultural labyrinth while still maintaining a private understanding. I used to wonder why I didn't just give the devil his due, form my own comprehension of myself, and go my own way—all the while learning to act appropriately in public. I have known a few exceptional souls who've been able to do this. They are very brave, very resourceful. For me, it was impossible.

One additional factor I have had to take into account is that I have always borne the curse of so many abuse survivors—a terrible emotional transparency. The language of signs which enfolds each of our bodies communicates what's inside us too clearly for our own good.

JUST KEEP IT TO YOURSELF

If the body is always a sign being read, then not communicating is impossible. One's body continues to display a multitude of information through nonlinguistic signs, the languages of gesture, posture, stance, and clothing. How could it be possible to feel feminine or masculine and not communicate it in every moment for the world to read? Whenever I felt the things I saw on Sweeta, the visible language of my posture, gesture, and vocal inflection said it as clearly as if I wore it in big letters across my chest.

While it certainly is possible for some people to hide their feelings, not many of us can do it for very long, certainly not for a lifetime. And in childhood, every day is an entire lifetime, a month an eternity. The ability to hide feelings, using bodily clues to misdirect or obscure, is usually something learned in adulthood.

Since hiding my feelings wasn't possible, I did the next best thing: I learned not to feel at all. I displayed either active disinterest, aggression, or anger. All displays were meant to keep people at a distance, to protect me from discovery. They worked. They formed the basis of my emotional vocabulary and sustained me until I was nineteen. By then I had left home, hearth, and friends for a succession of far-off places where complete anonymity assured me that my body would be of little interest to anyone.

My first and best lesson in emotional camouflage came in the

boys' locker-rooms. It was normal to engage in pecking-order displays, like the put-down fights in which we insulted each other's mothers and sisters with the lewdest possible lines. Cries of, "Hey, Johnson, I butt-fucked your sister!" had to be rejoined with, "Yeah, and after your mom got done sucking my dick I let her off her knees and handed back her quarter."

Failing to participate in these verbal assaults meant risking being branded a queer. It meant winding up a sexual suspect. I had to be on my guard every day, all day, for as long as I was at that school. And no parent, no teacher, no friend was going to protect me from it. I was in danger and I knew it. Seeya would have to wait.

Within the closed world of those locker-rooms, three times a week, every week of the school year, year in and year out, I practiced being male and masculine. It was a matter of building a mental representation of myself that expressed itself in my posture, voice, and stance. In other words, by putting the right signs in my head.

If I went numb and cold, if I concentrated on envisioning myself as muscular, angry, and aggressive, I could get by. Guys would leave me alone. The harassment stopped. It was replaced by respect, or at least distance, which was all I wanted from them. Actually, it was what I preferred. I had learned to be a "boy."

With hindsight, the funny thing is that I thought I could be such a tough character. The honest truth was, I didn't have a violent bone in my body. What aggression I had came out of my mouth. I became a complete smart-ass. That got me beat up a couple times, too. I found out many of the guys avoided me simply because they considered me a jerk. But it worked.

I kept those images in my head for years, that particular sense of myself. I still use it today when I'm out alone late at night and have to walk in a dangerous neighborhood, or I see someone sizing me up from across a darkened street. That self-image reemerges forcefully in my stride, in the way I hold myself, clench my fists, and scowl.

Survival came at a cost, however. It would take me eight years to begin recovering some of those feelings I had lost in that sandbox. I would spend entire evenings on my knees, crying and "chew-

ing the carpet" as my childhood and adolescence came rushing back to me. Underneath what was numb there was pain. Sometimes I needed the numbness back, just to be able to pull on my clothes and get to work.

YOU CAN ALWAYS FALL OFF A HORSE, BUT IT MAY NOT BE A HORSE WHEN YOU GET BACK ON

My original question about how it's possible to feel oneself as *anything* arrives here. The subjective experience of gender, as well as being read or experienced by another as gendered, is not a *being*, but a *doing*. It is performed anew each time. It is the thrill of friction, of the possibility of the performance going awry, being destabilized, misappropriated, that accounts for the fascination with—and fear of—transpeople.

Culture's greatest magic trick is convincing us that reading a body as gendered requires something inside which that body is or has, and which expresses itself through gendered acts. The reading of gender onto bodies is, in itself, a gendered act. One might say it is the gendering act. The imaginary bodies created by such readings are not the origins of gender but their result.

This process accounts for our confusion when discussing gendered bodies in general and transbodies in particular. We mistake what we read on such bodies for a reality *in* these bodies—one which precedes, and is therefore independent of, our reading. Thus, transbodies serve as an extended Rorschach test. The way people read our bodies is eerily reminiscent of the joke where the subject who sees sex in every single inkblot is finally confronted by the shrink and then protests, "But *you're* the one with all the dirty pictures."

If gender is something composed of acts, both the act of performing gender and the action of reading that performance, then in each moment there is also the small possibility of change, of movement, of reading the map "incorrectly." There is the possibility of transgression and difference. For although gender is an effective system, it's not perfect; otherwise, I wouldn't be here.

READING IN THE DARK

Changing what I "meant" required my learning to use a particular set of internal signs to create myself, to re-read my own body. I believe this performance of internal visualization, of manipulating signs, is what makes it possible for me to be anything. It is what makes it possible for me to feel "like a woman," or sometimes "like a man," sometimes like in-between, and sometimes like nothing at all. It is what makes it possible for my lesbian-feminist friend to feel "like a natural woman," and for Aretha to sing about it.

The images we form of ourselves and see in our heads constitute a kind of internal dialogue. They are conversations we hold with ourselves about what our bodies mean, an imaginary construction we undertake over and over again. In time, these images stabilize and become what we identify as "our selves."

These signs usually do not have clear pictures, but the meaning is always clear. For instance, imagine a body/sign you know well, perhaps Marilyn Monroe. Although you may have seen her image scores of times, chances are, the symbol or picture is pretty fuzzy. What it means, however, remains vivid. The sign "works" as a whole. It is not that her body necessarily means anything at all, but each time you perform that meaning, you re-create her as well. It is the stability of this performance that creates an identifiable "Marilyn" for you. Many people, myself among them, do that with our selves.

In the locker-room, I learned to keep a sign in my head for my body. Its meaning was hard, masculine, and angry. It was not easy for a good Jewish boy to do, but it was sufficient for me to survive and pass as male.

But feelings do not go away; they just go underground. Those feelings that were native to me didn't disappear. They reappeared—on other bodies. To experience "feminine" I went in search of bodies where I could safely have feminine feelings. I spent years sleeping with as many women as possible when I reached adulthood. I did this not because I was turned on or wanted sex, but because, within that environment, it was safe for me to have that particular subjective experience, even if I had to locate it as happening on someone else's body.

It seems that while we are capable of experiencing different gendered states, most of us identify with only one of those as "us." This means that only certain identifications harmonize with how we want to be in the world—what we want to bring, what we want to leave behind.

This process of identification was disastrous for me. The meanings with which I was allowed to identify, as well as the way my body was read by others, was inverted and painful. So I acted out sexually, trying to both escape that pain and re-own something lost inside me long, long ago. The process of unlocking my misery, of getting my body "back," has been neither brief nor easy. What I see in the mirror still occasionally distresses me: at times I see the "me" in the locker-room, and it hurts.

Ultimately, it is to that person in the mirror that we must take the fight against a gender regime. Of course we need to struggle in the streets, in homes and churches, schools and jobs, state and federal capitols. Finally, though, we must struggle in our own hearts, for it is here that a gender system first regulates who and what we can "be." To reinvent and re-gender yourself is a tall order. In the words of Fritz Perls, "To die and be reborn is not an easy thing."[6]

DE-GENDERING SOCIETY

A friend once said to me that all this was about Buddhism, about transcending the self. The problem of my male self would be resolved when I transcended the very ideas of "self" and "gender" and merged with the greater Oneness. This echoes the notion that transpeople should somehow aim to be "genderfree," as if that were a possible, or desirable, goal.

No doubt for some it is. For me, it is not. Eroticizing bodies almost inevitably leads to gendering them in some fashion, and then to a system that regulates them. A gender regime enforces five basic laws: (1) there are only two cages; (2) everyone must be in a cage; (3) there is no mid-ground; (4) no one can change; and (5) no one chooses their cage.

I want just three things: (1) the right to choose my own meanings—including none at all; (2) a freer marketplace from which to choose; and (3) freedom from the constant threat of punishment for my choices. That's all.

Many of us, both trans and nontrans, are not interested in transcending or relinquishing our selves, but in being very particular and specific selves, ones which give meaning and resonance to our lives. It is this search that leads each of us down the varied spiritual paths we travel, hoping to find ourselves at the end, sitting quietly in that primeval playground—happy and alive and waiting.

---

1. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 153.

2. Ibid., p. 148.

3. Charles Pierce in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology,* edited by Robert Innes (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 1.

4. Simone de Beauvoir in Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender," *Feminist Issues* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 5.

5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 116.

6. Fritz Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (Lafayette, CA: Real People Press, 1969), author's epigraph.