



READ
MY
LIPS

*Sexual Subversion
and the End of Gender*

RIKI ANNE WILCHINS



Firebrand
Books

6. Pursuant to the sensitivity training, the hiring of at least two transexual/transgendered persons to work at Gay Games until their completion.

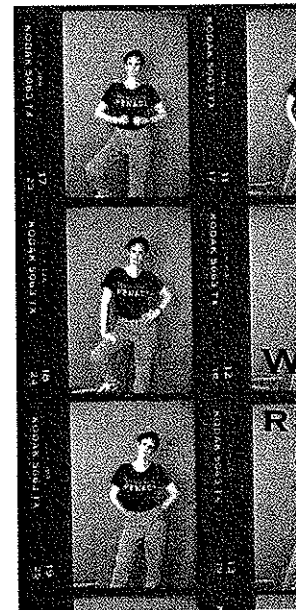
7. A meeting between the Gay Games board and the transexual/transgender community to: (a) air our grievances; (b) open lines of communication (so you need never again go in search of the mythical nontransexual "expert in transexuality": you can feel entirely comfortable talking to us about us); (c) prevent future occurrences and/or friction; and (d) underline the historical and continuing contributions by transexual and transgendered people to the queer community and struggle.

Until our goals have been met in full, we will continue our public protests, education, and actions against the Games' policies up to, and including, the Games themselves. We do this more in a spirit of regret than antagonism. In spite of the Games' demonstrated indifference to our contributions to the queer community, we are aware of the enormous effort, talent, and desire which have gone into the Games.

Nonetheless, we are not prepared to be doormats for anyone, nor to be marginalized in any way, nor to have our concerns or participation sacrificed for anyone else's comfort. In other words: *We're here. We're queerer. Get used to it.* See you at the Games. Inside or, if need be, outside.

Yours in queerness,

Riki Anne Wilchins
Transexual Menace



WHY IDENTITY POLITICS REALLY, REALLY SUCKS

An attendee at NOW's Young Feminists Conference, when asked about the horrific incidence of men's prison rape, is heard to say, "NOW is about women, not men." A second attendee responds, "But if you're against sexual violence, what possible difference could it make what's between the victim's legs?"

The Human Rights Campaign introduces an Employment Non-discrimination Bill (ENDA) which deliberately excludes protection for gender expression because, as one staffer privately alleges, "It would cost us twenty votes." Transpeople picket in two dozen cities. When HRC's Executive Director brings the principal organizers to their D.C. headquarters, her opening question is, "Why come after us? Why not pick on someone else?" One of the organizers yells back, "No! The moral question isn't, 'Why come after us?' It's, 'Why did we have to?'"

A member of GenderPAC, the national organization founded by transpeople, "devoted to gender, affectional, and racial equality," says, "Of course race and class are important, but we can't devote

too much time to them. They aren't our issues." A second member points out, "But isn't the we that defines our issues white, middle class, and employed?"

In Washington, D.C., an EMS technician stops treating a critically injured black woman following a hit-and-run when he cuts open her pants to discover a penis. Backing away, he then begins making jokes to the horrified crowd. Dawn Wilson, a former NAACP board member, writes an impassioned letter to her organization, imploring them to speak out. She receives a pro forma letter stating that of course the incident is terrible, but the "NAACP is about racism, not gender expression."

A staffer at the White House Liaison Office for Gay and Lesbian Affairs turns down a request by transpeople for a meeting to discuss trans-inclusion in pending hate crimes legislation, stating, "But you aren't gays and lesbians."

ONE MORE TIME, FROM THE TOP

Okay, please raise your hand if you still think identity politics works.

Whenever I'm invited to address a queer audience, inevitably someone asks, "But why transgender? I thought Gay Lib was about sexual orientation, not gender." I always reply, "Excuse me? Are you telling me that inserting a man's penis into your body is not a fully gendered act, regulated and reserved for only female bodies?"

But this voice that asks, "Aren't we about sexual orientation?" fails to amaze; eventually, it fails even to surprise. It is the same voice that says, "We're about sexual orientation, not racism." Which is true, unless you're African American and queer, or Asian and queer, or Latina and queer, or Native American and queer. It says, "We're about sexual orientation, not class." Which is true, unless you're a queen trying to survive on welfare. And it says, "We're about sexual orientation, not gender." Which is true, unless you're a trans or bisexual or lesbian woman concerned about the right to choose, about spousal abuse, about the freedom to walk our streets with-

out the crippling specter of rape. And, as churches go up in flames around the country, I hope that at least you and I are clever enough to know that surely *this* is not a gay issue. Which it isn't, until the torches come for the Metropolitan Community Church, Beth Simcat Torah, or Unity Fellowship Church.

There is a common cultural machinery at work, and its tools are fearfully similar from one group to the next. It defines and stigmatizes them. It pushes them out to the margins. And then it flushes them out the bottom economically. You can't change that system by just getting your own rights, tinkering with the engine and leaving. You have to take on the whole machine.

ALL OF THE REAL WOMEN, TAKE A SEAT—THE REST OF YOU CAN LEAVE

The head of New York City NOW, the oldest and largest chapter, informs me that I am welcome, but only to work on "women's" issues. I cannot work on my own, which, by definition, are "men's" issues. "Do you mean I can work on your access to postmenopausal hormones, but not on my access to pretransition hormones?" I ask. "Your breast implants after mastectomy but not my breast implants before sex-change? Your danger of ovarian cancer but not my danger of prostate cancer?" She nods, glaring steadily. On the way out she asks me for a hug.

Feminist politics begins with the rather commonsense notion that there exists a group of people understood as *women* whose needs can be politically represented and whose objectives sought through unified action. A movement for women—what could be simpler? But implicit in this is the basic idea that we know who comprises this group since it is their political goals we will articulate. What if this ostensibly simple assumption isn't true?

For starters, we'll have to decide who qualifies as a woman for inclusion in our movement. Otherwise, we'll find ourselves representing anybody who calls themselves a woman. Now, we know that we don't want transexual women: just taking hormones and having a vagina made doesn't make you a woman. We don't want

transsexual men either: they're busy taking hormones, getting hairy chests, and becoming, well...men. We can't have too many stone butches, diesel dykes, or passing women, because they all live as men. What could they know of women's issues or women's experience? And we certainly don't want crossdressers or drag queens: we're not interested in representing the political concerns of men in dresses. And intersexuals who live as women? Oh, please.

An interesting contradiction rears its ugly head at this point. Although we began with the best of intentions—forming a movement to liberate women—it seems that our founding gesture is to decide who can call herself one, and then barricade the gates to prevent the barbarians from invading. Is a liberatory struggle about keeping out the “wrong people,” especially those who feel they ought to be in?

If so, then regardless of who is judged a woman, an even more troubling question arises: who gets to decide? Some of us must have already been legitimized as women in order to make this determination to begin with, authorizing us to judge the rest. In so doing, we're not just keeping the riffraff out; we're creating a hierarchy where “real women” are separated from the rest of the group.

One solution, of course, is to get out of the judgment business entirely and return to plumbing: if you've got the right kind of body, you're a woman. Even momentarily putting aside the issue of intersexual women, doesn't reliance on “equipment” bring us back to a definition of *woman* in which biology becomes destiny? Doesn't it, in fact, return us to the classic oppressive construction of *woman* which defines her strictly by reproductive organs and function? Will we replace consciousness raising with crotch checks, complete with the edifying spectacle of us squatting and pointedly inspecting each other's genitals like a band of lower primates?

Worst of all, we started out wanting to liberate women. We wanted to represent their political interests and, in so doing, open up whole new horizons for them. Yet our first act has been to fence off all the things they cannot do and still be considered women. Our message is no longer, *You are free to become whatever your talent and heart allow*, but rather, *You are free to become whatever your*

talent and heart allow as long as it's not too masculine and you continue to look and act like a woman. And it appears that the woman you will look and act like is based on the traditional, limiting, heterosexual-based model we had hoped to chuck for good.

Instead of freeing women, we have moved to foreclose options and choices. This has the paradoxical effect of creating a liberation movement whose inaugural success is fixing and stabilizing the identity of *woman* even more firmly than before. Surely this isn't what we intended.

BRING ON THE SIEVE

Perhaps you are thinking, “Isn't this all a philosophical sidebar? Hasn't feminism done a good job of devoting itself to women's issues?”

To answer this, let me return to my earlier discussion about the problems of a gay rights movement based solely on sexual orientation. While the idea of such a movement sounds straightforward enough, in application it functions like a sieve, filtering out any issue not purely focused on sexual orientation. Left untouched is any problem which is about “sexual orientation AND.” So we're not going to deal with queers of color, because that's sexual orientation AND race. We're not going to deal with the issues of working-class queers or queers on welfare, because that's about gay AND class. And we're not going to deal with the concerns of lesbians, because that's about gay AND gender.

Pretty soon, the only people we represent are those fortunate enough to possess the luxury of a simple and uncomplicated oppression. That is, their race, class, and gender are “normal,” and so go unmarked and unoppressed. This is why the gay rights and feminist movements have done an exemplary job of representing the needs and concerns of white, eurocentric, middle-class Americans, but not much of anyone else.

It is turning out to be a pretty pale and bland liberation struggle we're waging. To those at “the bottom,” on the lower rungs of the oppression ladder, the new boss looks an awful lot like the

old one. People with the greatest needs remain unrepresented and unaddressed. This is why Third World feminists at the Beijing International Women's Conference bitterly complained about the Americans' obsession with birth control, abortion rights, and sex education, while they needed to discuss male property ownership, polygamy, and female genital mutilation—issues more immediately addressing their oppression.

Some theorists have tried to preserve the foundation of a politics based on identity by moving the criteria for identification from *what you are* to *what you've experienced*. A feminist movement would then represent all people who've had "women's experience." The question not asked is, is there really some universal core to women's experience transcending culture, race, history, and ethnicity? Or is this newer configuration just the umpteenth appearance of that now-familiar Western conceit that anticipates a monolithic identity and then erects its own eurocentric, heterosexual, white experience as the litmus test?

Is women's experience about raising two-point-three children in the burbs with a working husband and two cars in the garage? Is it about an urban, single, highly educated young woman on the career fast track? Or is it about polygamy, having to wear the veil, and being unable to legally drive a car or appear in public without male chaperones? If you're an HIV-positive dyke in Cuba, does that make AIDS central to the women's movement?

FOUCAULT & FRIEDAN? I THINK IT'S A LAW FIRM DOWN THE HALL

How do all these problems come about? We need to return to Foucault's observation that cultural power does not just restrain and oppress various identities, it also produces them. For instance, culture not only oppresses women, it also creates the identity of *woman*. The same goes for the identity of *homosexual*, *transgender*, and so on. As long as we do not pay attention to this dual nature of power, we'll continue to overlook the oppressive side effects of our own production of identity.

By basing the movement on the category *women*, we prevent ourselves from historically examining how the category came about. We assumed its existence rather than asking whose interests it serves to confine us within a binary of bodies that makes patriarchy possible to begin with.

JUST LET ME PRODUCE YOU

These are important questions because, in posing them, we gain insight into how the production of any identity inevitably creates winners and losers, those who are prelegitimized and those who are second class and "allowed" in after the fact. Until we ask these questions, we'll continue to trip over the effects of our own production of identities.

Even worse, if we *don't* ask them, we unwittingly allow the patriarchy to set the terms of our struggle. Binary sexes will remain intact and unchallenged. All that's then left for our movement to do is wrangle over the available political turf. Judith Butler talks about power's uncanny ability to generate only those rebellions that are bound to fail. When she was asked to write a piece for a gay and lesbian studies book, she replied that she could not write "as a lesbian" when the category announced a set of terms she proposed to contest.¹

What is left to organize around if we don't use identities? While postmodernism has been largely unable and unwilling to apply itself to the nitty-gritty of social change, you and I don't have that luxury. We have a movement against gender oppression to mount.

What Butler suggests is that we allow identity to float free, that we stop barricading the gates of gender and encourage everyone to define themselves as they wish, even change their identity or invent new ones. Instead of merely tolerating this gender fluidity as a necessary evil, we accept the inherent instability of all identities and make it work for us. As new identities enter from the "outside," e.g., stone butches, trans folks, drag people, and passing women, the category expands. The boundaries blur, shift, and open. Some women become indistinguishable from men. Some women become

more distinguishable from women. Some fall off that specious male-female spectrum entirely, becoming totally new genders we haven't yet named. Possibilities which our original feminism could not have foreseen or anticipated are created. Fluidity is transformed into a key feminist goal and an important liberatory tactic.

Our movement shifts its foundations from identity to one of functions of oppression. Coalitions form around particular issues, and then dissolve. Identity becomes the result of contesting those oppressions, rather than a precondition for involvement. In other words, identity becomes an effect of political activism instead of a cause. It is temporary and fluid, rather than fixed.

In practice, this means that if you identify as gender oppressed, or are interested in these issues, you're welcome in the Transexual Menace. You don't have to be a transperson, much less be judged one, in order to work within the Menace. Or, returning to the example which opened this chapter, if you're opposed to rape, you fight all rape and sexual violence, regardless of what genitals or bodies are involved. The same goes for employment discrimination. You fight it regardless of whether it's due to race, class, sexual orientation, abledness, or gender expression.

Groups as varied as the Christian Coalition and the Democratic Party have organized around issue clusters, such as abortion, welfare, and school prayer, but that's as far as it's gone.

I like to believe that if women, transpeople, or queers have learned anything from millennia of oppression, it's the experience of outsiderdom, and how the suppression of difference can kill hearts, minds, and lives. So far, unfortunately, each of these groups has waged an increasingly narrow struggle for the few at the expense of the many. Oppression, painful as it is, is also a question posed by life to each of us: will your heart grow larger, so it holds the universal hurt, or will it grow smaller, so that, in the end, it can contain only your own?

YOU KNOW ME AS RIKI FROM "AS THE GENDER TURNS." I'M

NOT A TRANSEXUAL, BUT I PLAY ONE IN REAL LIFE.

I have no interest in being part of a transgender or transexual movement whose sole purpose is to belly up to the Big Table and help ourselves to yet another serving of Identity Pie, leaving in our wake some other, more marginalized group to carry on its own struggle alone.

What I am interested in is the original cultural gesture to regulate and contain what your body and mine can mean, or say, or do. The point of a gender liberation movement for me is not just to rescue and acclaim those people sometimes referred to as "transgressively gendered," those specimens inevitably corralled in the Binary Zoo: the stone butches and diesel dykes, drag kings and drag queens, leatherdykes and dyke daddies, the radical fairies and fag hags, nelly queens and fruit flies, the transexuals, transgendered, crossdressers, and intersexed.

It is also about the seventeen-year-old Midwestern cheerleader whose health is destroyed by anorexia because "real women" are supposed to be preternaturally thin. It's about the forty-six-year-old Joe Six-Pack who wraps his car around a crowded school bus on the way home from the bar because "real men" are supposed to be heavy drinkers. It's about the unathletic and fat little boy who's physically attacked by his classmates every day after school. It's about the two lesbian lovers stalked and killed on the Appalachian trail in Virginia. It's about the aging body succumbing to an unnecessary hysterectomy because certain kinds of gendered bodies simply don't matter as much. And it's about the sensitive, straight young man who is repeatedly raped his first year in prison because, within that environment, he's perceived as genderqueer, genderdifferent, or simply gendervulnerable.

In short, a gender liberation movement is not just about people like Brandon Teena, Marsha Johnson, Christian Paige, Deborah Forte, Tyra Hunter, and Chanelle Pickett, all of whom died simply because of the way they expressed sexuality and gender. It's also about those who felt impelled and even empowered to kill to pre-

serve the regimes of gender. In fact, it's about working until each and every one of us is delivered from this most pernicious, divisive, and destructive of insanities called gender-based oppression.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A MOVEMENT

Mariette Pathy Allen



1. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, edited by Charles Lement (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).