

Politicizing Gender

Moving toward revolutionary gender politics

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1994

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The ongoing challenge in feminist discourse over social constructionist versus biological determinist views of gender often remove us from the people feminists would hope to liberate. In writing a critical analysis of the issues involved, it's important for me to locate myself in relation to a politic born of my own contradictions and necessities. As a 26 year old transgender woman I did not come upon these issues solely as a feminist and anarchist. My gender politics developed from my personal struggles starting at an early age. As I grew to recognize the painful disparity between my self-identification as a young girl, then a woman and my socialized identity as a boy, I began challenging gender. Articulating my identity has not been easy. Coming to understand my gender identity has led me to undertake the process of a sex-change. This ongoing process has been augmented by other factors including my economic status. I recognize my white, middle-class and "male" privileges, even while I have lived with a great dissonance of being invisible as a woman-passing as a boy. Gender is imposed. Claiming a biological foundation, gender categories serve to limit freedom. In this sense none of us have any choice.

It is important for me to confront the differences and similarities between myself and other women. It's essential that we don't ignore our uniqueness nor rank our oppression. Acknowledging the specific nature of the oppression transgender people face, we can begin to deal with oppression not just from a theoretical base, but by "grappling with" what Cherrie Moraga describes as "the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place."

Transsexualism: limiting identities and sources of power

People who do not fit into the gender binaries of female and male have always been with us. "Transsexualism" or "Gender Dysphoria" are historically recent definitions used by the medical and psychiatric establishments. A transsexual is basically defined as a person who has a long-standing, internal image of possessing inappropriate sexual characteristics. From this reductionist conception, those transgender people who (mis)happen to seek help from the medical and psychological establishments, (and can afford it) are rated on a gender scale, modeled after Alfred Kinsey's scale to measure sexual orientation. They are then encouraged/told what they are to do to actualize their gender. Make no mistake, the options the medical "experts" are willing to provide are quite conservative. They range from cases of imposed heterosexuality to rigid dress codes and standards of behavior. When we consider homosexuality was defined as a mental disorder until 1973, and transsexualism is still defined as such by the psychiatric establishment, we must regard even their most well intentioned help with serious skepticism.

Gender is not solely a psychological state of being, it is a political status. I've chosen to identify Transgender as a word of liberation in my hopes of forging a common language of liberation with all gender outlaws. Transgender identity indicates a refusal to separate transsexuals from bulldaggers, transvestites, drag kings, drag queens, femmes, intersexes, androgynies, genderfucks and those who refuse all stated categories. However, this position is not necessarily widely held in these communities.

Women's Liberation: What kind of revolution?

The second wave of feminism emerged out of the civil rights and anti-war movements in the late 1960s. Women began to recognize their oppressed status and talk, originally in consciousness-raising groups, about how they were oppressed. Growing out of other radical movements, these early radical feminists tended to be anti-capitalist and to look toward revolutionary strategies for the liberation of all women. Gender was understood as oppressive because it created artificially constructed roles of feminine and masculine to legitimate male supremacy. The destruction of capitalism was not enough, since capitalism only buttressed male supremacy. Different groups of women sought different strategies. Aspects of gender essentialist politics had been with the movement since its inception, but it was only around 1973 that cultural feminism became the dominant form of feminism. Alice Echols has argued that as the "possibilities for radical structural change seemed remote," feminism began to be reinterpreted as the "female principle."

It may be difficult for us today to resurrect the intoxicating sense of empowerment these women must have felt as they forged the way for women's liberation. "Sisterhood is powerful" was more than a rallying cry or book title, it was a part of the sudden mass recognition that women were systematically oppressed. For many feminists, the movement held the common assumption that women's experience was similar and that differences were only imposed from without. This is not without some logic. Most of the early feminists were college-educated, politically left, middle to upper class white women. As the women's movement grew, many of the women who joined came from diverse backgrounds, some of whom were interested only in finding self-help, not in the radical politics of societal transformation.

While the women's movement may have seemed like a united front in 1968, by 1970 it had exploded into many warring factions. It is in this state of intense factionalism and the right-wing backlash of the election of Nixon that the insular counter-culture and liberal politics of cultural feminism must have seemed inviting.

Cultural feminists like Kathleen Barry and Robin Morgan offered the vision of a conflict-free state of global sisterhood. Liberation was defined as a state of femaleness, whereby racial, class, sexual and cultural differences were de-emphasized. In a feminist counter-culture, or women's community, which subordinated political struggle for lifestylism and imposed homogeneity, speaking of revolution was to risk being considered "male-identified."

Conversely, radical feminists, like Ann Snitow and Pat Parker, beginning in 1967 had recognized the material basis of women's oppression in capitalism and male supremacy. Sexism was viewed as a psychological condition and men were the enemy only so long as they were complicit in the past and present oppression of women. Radical feminists thus adopted parts of the methodology of Marxists and the left, while critiquing them for not addressing women's issues comprehensively. For cultural feminists, the left, along with all things male, was a contaminating influence. This led women to policing one another to reject "male" political categories and solutions.

The cultural feminists argued that there are innate and immutable differences between women and men. Regardless of whether they stem from the totality of women's history, socialization or biological factors, they argued, these differences should be valued, preserved and protected. All men or those deemed "male-identified" are considered equally oppressive (non-sexist behavior notwithstanding). This has included: Butch and femme lesbians, S/M dykes, pro-pornography

feminists, sex workers, transvestites, transsexuals, revolutionary and anti-imperialist women. Such was the case of Jane Alpert.

Gender Essentialism: reactionary feminism

Alpert was an anti-war activist and member of an independent collective committed to armed struggle in 1969. After being caught, along with three others, including her lover Sam Melville, Alpert jumped bail and went underground. Soon afterward Alpert joined the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), a group of mostly white revolutionary anti-imperialists. Soon Alpert left the WUO. It was then that she wrote the widely read and influential essay “Mother Right: A New Feminist Theory,” considered a ground-breaking work of cultural feminist theory.

In it, Alpert attacks all leftist revolutionary politics for their inherent maleness, details the sexism in the WUO, and describes intimacies relating to her lover, Sam Melville, who had been murdered in 1971 during the Attica prison uprising. She ends with the crass declaration: “And so, my sisters in the Weatherman, you fast and organize and demonstrate for Attica. Don’t send me news clippings about it, don’t tell me how much the deaths moved you. I will mourn the loss of 42 male supremacists no longer.”

Alpert soon surrendered to the FBI, who proudly said she was cooperating fully and providing details of her years underground. What information she did give is up for debate. Alpert maintains she fed the FBI lies. However, in March 1975 Pat Swinton was arrested with information Alpert provided. Fortunately for Swinton, Alpert refused to testify, pleading “self-preservation.” This because the prison newsletter Midnight Special had “alerted women in the prison that there was a traitor in their midst.”

A Feminist Circle of Support for Jane Alpert, founded by Robin Morgan, celebrated her refuting the “male violence” of the WUO and provided aid during her 2-year prison sentence. Yet when out lesbian and revolutionary anti-imperialist Susan Saxe was captured later that same year, much of the lesbian-feminist community blamed her for FBI snooping in their community and claimed “anyone accused of bank robbery is not a lesbian.” Finally, in Ellen Frankfort’s Kathy Boudin and the Dance of Death, a sensationalist account of the former WUO leader, Frankfort links these women’s role in armed struggle with an inability to remove power from their sexual relationships and rejection of the nurturing of motherhood and the pacifism of Kathy Boudin’s mother.

In examining armed struggle it is wise to be aware of the potential for self-indulgent adventurism, nihilism and reactionary violence. Macho-posturing is legendary in the WUO history. However, cultural feminists seem only interested in dividing people and behaviors into maleness and femaleness, not questioning whether revolutionary armed struggle might be necessary.

Cultural feminists are a far cry from nurturant in their attacks against male-to-female transsexuals. Transsexualism is troubling to cultural feminists because it illustrates the mutability of gender. In Janice Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire*, she criticizes transsexuals’ “usurpation of female biology,” although “he” can never really pass among real women. Transsexuals, according to Raymond, “rape all women,” especially lesbian transsexuals, who are appealing to lesbians’ “residual heterosexuality.” In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly reasons that transsexuals want to destroy the burgeoning women’s community, stating, “their whole presence becomes a member invading women’s presence and dividing us once more from each other.” These theories, with

their conspiratorial undertones, wouldn't be nearly so offensive if it weren't for their widespread acceptance. From former editor of Ms. Robin Morgan's attacks on all things "male-identified" to the Michigan Womyn's Festival's standing policy of "women born/women only" to the feminist press coverage of the murder of Brandon Teena, gender-phobia is alive and well.

Brandon Teena: a case of denial

Brandon Teena was a transgender man. Born Teena Brandon, he escaped from his home at an early age to get lost in the bigger city of Falls City, Nebraska. There he lived full time as a man and chose to engage in heterosexual relationships, going steady with Lana Tisdel. Brandon resorted to petty theft and writing false checks. After being arrested for forgery, Brandon's birth identity was intentionally released in the local papers. Soon after, on Christmas Eve, 1993, Brandon was brutally raped by Lana's ex-boyfriend and his friend. Brandon reported these crimes to the same police who had arrested him but they did nothing. One week later, on New Year's eve, Brandon was repeatedly stabbed and shot to death by the same two men. In the mainstream and radical press, Brandon was repeatedly referred to as a woman—a deceptive woman and a self-hating lesbian.

This was the case with Donna Minkowitz's article "Love Hurts" in *The Village Voice*. Brandon, Minkowitz argued, was a self-hating lesbian, who only donned male drag out of necessity. That Brandon defined himself as a male who wanted a sex change is just "false consciousness" to Minkowitz. Here there is no proof, only Minkowitz's insight based on her desire to essentialize all "women's" experiences. That she doesn't know any transsexuals and hasn't taken the time to study our history might have something to do with it.

After the article appeared, a transsexual woman wrote in to *The Voice* stating that she had not addressed Brandon with male pronouns and had robbed him of his identity, concluding that Brandon was a true transsexual. Minkowitz responded that she didn't believe there are any essential gender categories, and while transsexual's choice should be respected, there is no such thing as a true transsexual. Interestingly, in other columns Donna Minkowitz has stated there are no essential sexual categories, therefore she has chosen to be a lesbian. Yet, if we use the same logic in Brandon's case, can't she accept and respect his choices? In this sense I do claim Brandon a transgender man, not out of my desire to fulfill an agenda, but based on how he lived his life and how he defined himself. *The Village Voice* is only repeating a familiar pattern. As the weekly is statedly pro-queer, this has meant lesbian and gay, not transgender or bisexual. Over the past three years, *The Voice* has only recently published one article by a transgender person.

In "The Menace In Michigan" by Riki Anne Wilchins, she chronicles her experiences at this year's Michigan Womyn's Festival held in August. Up until this year, Michigan has had a standing policy of "womyn born/womyn only," officially barring the transgender community. This policy has not been revised. As Wilchins reports, transgendered women were only allowed in for a single event—being met with cheers, jeers and quite a few threats of violence. It is unclear what the Festival will do in the future. However, I wonder if this small success may divert transgender activism from the necessity of liberating gender in the larger society we live in to carving a niche in the lesbian and gay ghetto.

As for *The Village Voice*, this article cannot negate its history of silence and subtle attacks towards the transgender community. In their special edition debating the homophobia in the film

Silence of the Lambs, two avowed feminists did not find the killing of a transgender character troubling, considering the strong feminist overtones in Jodie Foster's portrayal of an FBI agent. In the review of the film "Female Behavior," a German documentary by lesbian feminist Monica Treut, another woman in *The Voice* attacked the transgender male character for disavowing "her" femaleness. These small examples I believe illustrate a larger pattern of transgenderphobia in the lesbian and gay community.

As queers gathered in NYC for Stonewall 25, transgender people were again relegated to the familiar status of cheerleaders. Good to have around for a laugh, but not good enough to be a part of the stated demands of the June 26 march on the United Nations. It was all too apparent that no longer are queers struggling for sexual and gender liberation, but for the civil rights of an increasingly small group of people, abandoning everybody else.

We Struggle Alone

Due to our often ambiguous appearance, transgender people present easy targets both for homophobes and sexists. Passing, meaning being able to assimilate in a society governed by gender rigidity, is often necessary and at times desired. Ultimately, it is an acceptance of invisibility. By our acceptance of just passing we are often denying our history, reinforcing a system based on neat and polarized gender roles. But let's face it, gender outlaws have a harder time getting work than most people and if getting a job means wearing clothes and performing tasks that are traditionally gendered then that's survival. Any theories purporting to liberate gender must be located in the day-to-day struggles of transgender people. Also, because of the lack of support in radical circles, transgender people are left to struggle alone—even in the larger queer community support is minimal.

Gender Revolution: how anti-authoritarians and gender outlaws can empower one another

The cruelest aspect of how oppression operates is how it teaches us to hate ourselves. Dealing with our own internalized oppression is often the hardest thing to do. Especially when I'm in progressive circles, it hurts so much when I realize that I want to distance myself from other transgender persons. I'll critique drag queens' campy humor as apolitical or I will remark about some transsexuals' "overdone" make-up, as if I wasn't secretly jealous of her "more feminine" appearance. Or I'll just ignore other transgender people because sometimes I want to pretend that they're not me.

At the same time, progressives shouldn't assume that because they've dealt with sexism, racism or homophobia on a theoretical level, they're beyond prejudice or insensitivity. I am sick and tired of people telling me I'm in a "queer safe space," while they tell humiliating jokes about a person's gender difference or discuss whether transgenderism isn't in fact oppressive!

The transgender movement is only in its initial stages. Because of this, anti-authoritarians can find possible allies in gender outlaws—we both want to overthrow authoritarian constructs. The transgender movement needs to broaden its analysis of oppression, while striking at the institutions that oppress us. A transgender "free space" is important. However, that space won't mean much if we don't become committed to challenging the larger society.

For many anti-authoritarians there may be the temptation to “smash gender” or “destroy gender roles.” This may seem logical to some. However, I believe this too leads to an alternate form of authoritarianism. The transgender community is neither inherently radical or reactionary, just like any other social grouping, we span racial, sexual, class and political backgrounds—a gender revolution will only be meaningful if it substantively empowers everyone. A part of any revolutionary process involves listening to oppressed communities without assumptions. Questions and criticisms are a part of this, though they hopefully will be aware of their potential to limit the expansion of needed dialogue.

In reality our vision is largely determined by where our identity and its power is located within a society of gender hierarchies and rigidity. In the 1970s, feminists (defined as middle-class college-educated white women) banished Butch and femme lesbians from their movement for some 10 years for their “male-identified” gender roles. Let’s not make the same mistakes again. Gender must be liberated, but we all must have a voice in what that means, not from an abstract pre-determined theory, but a synthesis of real people’s experiences. From this I believe we will see that many people find gendered roles liberating, while others experience serious oppression through these roles. Any strategy toward liberation must maintain the integrity of all our experiences and be willing to question how different communities can accept divergent and antagonistic needs without creating an atmosphere of punishing silences and real violence. We have a long way to go; our power is in drawing on our collective weaknesses and strengths.

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