

GENDER OUTLAW

A FOUNDATIONAL VOICE...
KATE BORNSTEIN IS A
HISTORIC FIGURE IN THE
QUEER AND TRANS
COMMUNITY."

- THE
HUFFINGTON
POST

ON MEN, WOMEN,
AND THE REST OF US
REVISED & UPDATED

KATE
BORNSTEIN



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

In Loving Memory of:

Doris Fish
"Tippi"
Lou Sullivan
Tedde Matthews
John Payne
Leland Moss
Ethyl Bichelberger
Charles Ludlam
Kelly
Christine Jorgensen
and
Billy Tipton

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GENDER IS A WOOLY WORM

Welcome to the almost-silver-anniversary
edition of *Gender Outlaw*

When you translate the playful title *Gender Outlaw* into Mandarin, it comes out as the not-so-playful *Sex Criminal*. So my Chinese publisher, New Star Press, asked me for some other titles. I rummaged through my mind for familiar gender metaphors and hopped onto Skype with my translator, Liao Aiwan, who uses the pronouns *they, them, and theirs*.

"How about *Gender Is a Butterfly*?" I suggested.

"No, no," they said. "This book of yours is a radical call to gender activism. To a Chinese reader, *butterfly* makes it seem like a fluffy children's book. But the butterfly metaphor is certainly in the right ballpark."

I suggested *Gender Is a Cocoon*, and they explained to me that to a Chinese mind, the image of a cocoon conjures the panic that comes with claustrophobia. We both stared at each other blankly. Then their face lit up.

"**Gender Is a Caterpillar!** It's perfect!"

"Ah," was all I could think to say.

Liao Alwan explained that, to a Chinese reader, the caterpillar stage conjures the notion of great possibilities. "That's what you're trying to say about gender, isn't it? Possibilities?"

I nodded; yep, that's what I was going for with the book. They continued, excitedly, saying that we should use the child's term **wooly worm** because that gets us back to playful. And so, if you want to buy this book in China, look for the title **Gender Is a Wooly Worm**.

"Just like you wanted **gender outlaw** to be playful. Right, Kate?"

Just so. And between the two of us, we found a common language of gender.

So . . . what's **your** language of gender? With whom do you talk about gender? Are there people who speak a language of gender that doesn't quite make sense to you?

The language of gender that I learned growing up in the fifties was all in service to the difference, between men and women. White men and white women, to be specific. And the earliest differences were biology. In the early 1980s, I knew for a fact that I could never be a woman so long as I had a penis. So I transitioned from male to female by means of gender confirmation surgery—it was the only way I could possibly live as the woman I believed myself to be. In Denmark some fifty years earlier, Lili Elbe knew for a fact that she could never be a woman so long as she had no uterus. Miss Elbe died from complications result-

ing from *her* gender confirmation surgery, an attempted uterus transplant. At that time, the trans story began with hormones and ended with surgery. But stories shift over time and culture, as does the language used to tell them.

There's not just one trans story. There's not just one trans experience. And I think what they need to understand is that not everybody who is born feels that their gender identity is in alignment with what they're assigned at birth, based on their genitalia. If someone needs to express their gender in a way that is different, that is okay, and they should not be denied healthcare. They should not be bullied. They don't deserve to be victims of violence. . . . That's what people need to understand, that it's okay and that if you are uncomfortable with it, then you need to look at yourself.

—Lavonne Cox (*Time* magazine, May 29, 2014)

Recently I had the great pleasure of introducing Ms. Cox and her twin brother, M. Lamar, at a speaking gig they were doing in New York City. Backstage, they thanked me—told me that they'd read **Gender Outlaw** in college and that it had been a great help. I thanked them in return, saying that the two of them had taken the exploration and expression of gender much further than I'd ever dreamed while I was first writing this book.

The study of gender parallels the study of particle physics, in that both fields have made, um, quantum leaps over the past fifty or sixty years. I grew up understanding subatomics as protons, neutrons, and electrons—that was the sum total of public discourse on the subject. As more and more sophisticated methods of investigation were developed, more and more basic particles were discovered—and the language of physics expanded in response to more and more in-depth study of quantum particles. I was sixteen years old when the quark model was first proposed. In the same way that our understanding of particle physics has grown more nuanced, we today speak casually about many finely honed nuances of gender that never occurred to me when I first sat down to write this book.

The point now, in these early days [of particle physics], is to investigate physical systems of a sort that just haven't existed before.

—Jeff Kimble

My experience of gender—the whole big deal about why I got to write this book—was that I experienced myself as not-man, not-woman. And not too many of us were talking about that in the first person. Not-man, not-woman—I defined myself by what I was not. Today, tens of thousands of people who understand themselves to be not-men, not-women use words that describe *precisely* who they are: femme-identified, nonbinary trans, or gender nonconforming, or agender, or transmasculine genderqueer, and so forth. The permutations of identity and expression are seemingly endless. I've done my best to take all that into account when I wrote this updated edition.

Happily, the basic concepts I was writing about then still hold true—but I needed to tweak the words I used to describe those basic concepts. For example, in the original we used the

word *transgendered*. Yep—it never occurred to us that the suffix *ed* implied that transgender was something that had been done to us. Live and learn. Furthermore, the word *transgender* was an inclusive term for anyone who was messing with gender. To this day, a great many people still use *transgender* like that: an umbrella term for anyone for whom the management of gender consumes a great deal of their day-to-day attention. But in the broader discourse, out in mass media, *transgender* has shifted meanings. Today, *trans* is the term that's inclusive of people's myriad experiences of gender. *Transgender* today simply means a man or a woman who has transitioned from another gender. That's what we used to call *transsexual*—and to be fair, there are many people who still today understand their transition to be a physical journey that brings their bodies into alignment with their gender identities. But by and large, today's transgender men and women understand that it's not *sex-as-biology* that's essential to life, but rather *gender-as-identity*. So, I've gone through the book with as fine-toothed a comb as I could to make changes to bring that up to date.

And of course, language will continue to change. In five, ten, fifty years, the language used to describe gender will become even more nuanced. More identities and expressions of gender will emerge, necessitating ever more changing definitions.

Additionally, our narrow view of gender back then was radically different from today's intersectional perspective. Today, we know that gender is impacted by at least a dozen inescapable modifiers: class, race, age, disability, mental health, religion, family and children, politics, looks, language, and habitat and ecology. Back when I was writing this book, we isolated gender from its many entanglements. Well, physicists study particles by isolating atoms and

photons in huge particle colliders, just to see what actually happens when one lone particle is hit by another. While we've learned the importance of context, the study of gender in the absence of all its cultural modifiers can still give us a clear picture of the mechanics of gender phenomena. My second book, *My Gender Workbook*, and its recent new edition, *My New Gender Workbook*, do embrace a more intersectional analysis, and thereby a more nuanced view of gender as it plays itself out in day-to-day living.

In the first edition of this book, the word *binary* wasn't being used at all. Instead, I variously used *two-gender* and *bi-polar* gender. But *binary* and *nonbinary* are a good deal more helpful to understanding and parsing gender today—so I think it's important I define *binary* as I understand it.

Imagine, please, a circle. Anything and everything about gender is inside that circle. Now, divide that circle with a vertical line so that you've got two equal parts. Anything and everything about gender is still inside the circle, only now it's got to fit on one side or another—and everything on one side has an opposite counterpart on the other side. Got it? For any aspect of gender to grow beyond its designated place on one side, it's got to encroach upon the space of the other side. In this way, every bit of growth on one side is seen as an attack on the other side. This is a binary system of culture—in form, a binary system is a battlefield.

Now, if you introduce an element into that binary system that clearly does not belong on one side or the other, you shatter the binary into innumerable components. You've still got a circle, and that circle still includes anything and everything about gender. Only now, there are lots of binaries: man and woman, girl and boy, butch and femme, lady and gentleman, and so on. And there are spectrums of gender in that circle. Any way you can imagine looking at gender can exist peacefully alongside every other way of looking at gender. The circle is no longer a binary—it's a dialectic. In form, a dialectic system is a playground.

A quarter century ago, the idea of transitioning from one gender to another was against the binary cultural law of gender that very clearly said, *Thou Shalt Not Transition*. And so, transsexuals—those of us who saw ourselves as men and women in need of a physical transition—were gender outlaws. Today, trans men and trans women routinely tell me that they are not gender outlaws. And I agree. The idea of gender transitions from M to F and F to M has reached a tipping point, and so today's transgender men and women live well in accordance with the binary view of gender: they are not gender outlaws. If anything, they are gender *in-laws*, along with people who identify as cisgender (people whose gender identity corresponds to the biological sex they were assigned at birth).

It's wonderful to see such a proliferation of nonbinary gender identities and expressions these days. When this book first came out, the idea of an identity other than one of two genders was literally unthinkable—we couldn't wrap our minds around it. Not so much now. Now, nonbinary genders are deliciously problematic in the LGBTQ paradigm of sexuality and gender that we're currently working with. In LGBTQ, nonbinary gender identities can occupy either the T or the Q. On the other hand, nonbinary genders can also be seen as the third that shatters the binary of cisgender and transgender. Deliciously problematic.

I understand today that for many people, cis and trans alike, it's a good deal more comforting to work with gender as a binary—but the either/or of it was never a comfort to me. All I knew to express, all those years ago, was in today's language:

BINARY GENDER = BAD

NONBINARY GENDER = GOOD

Of course that's not true. It's a binary notion that's been targeted by critics of my

Can you draw gender?

ideas of gender. In this edition, I've done my best to break that binary with a more nuanced analysis.

Now, this brings me to one more point of this book that needs some clarification. Many people have taken exception to my idea that gender needs to be done away with entirely. Well, it's been almost twenty-five years, and I've come to see that a little more clearly: we need to do away with any system of gender that presures us into believing that we are imperfectly gendered. The gender I'm perfectly happy with keeping around is the gender I live with that shifts on its own accord, as I move forward in time and space. After all, our genders are one of many ways that we interface with others, and with our surroundings. I believe that if we simply trust ourselves to shift, sure enough, our genders will shift as we need them to. Chameleons don't decide to change colors. I'm totally fine with that kind of gender. The rest of it? The gender that mandates a right way or wrong way? Yeah, that needs to be done away with.

I'm grateful to Vintage Books for giving me a do-over. I'm especially thankful to my editors, Catherine Tung and Emily Giglierano. Publishing, like theater, is much more of a cooperative effort—my editors are excellent dramaturges and a lot of fun to work with.

They also agreed with me that it would be best to keep some sections of the book exactly as they first appeared:

1. Those artistic expressions of neither/nor gender, as in the play *Hidden: A Gender*, or the performance pieces "Transsexual Lesbian Playwright Tells All!" and "The Seven Year Itch."
2. Those snapshots of a time when gender-as-biology was just beginning to come to a screeching halt (as in the sections covering transsexual surgery and queer theater).

Crafting this new edition came down to translating my language from a culture that existed in time and space a quarter of a century ago. And so I'd like to close *this* introduction by quoting a section of my introduction to the Chinese translation of this book, *Gender Is a Woolly Worm*:

When I first wrote this book, language was a big problem. People knew about transsexuals. But not many people were talking about the phenomenon of people who are neither men nor women, no matter how they choose to express their gender. To embrace those people (myself included), I borrowed the word **transgender**. But in many circles today, that word has become simply another word for transsexual—so in my country, the newer and more inclusive word is simply **trans**. You will read words in this book that don't ring true to you. Please, take a pen or pencil and cross them out. Write in a word you like better. And when that word doesn't work for you anymore, use another word. The way of gender is a living, changing path, like a river—it does no one any good to try to keep either gender or a river still.

The language you discover may be useful to others, so please share it with them. Write blogs, poetry, drama, and films that use **your** language for gender. Meet with other people who are finding **their** words, and discuss the value of language in the search for freedom and fluidity in gender. Your language may make others angry.

Their language may make you laugh. That's all part of the fun.

Now, if anything you read in this book makes you feel bad or wrong or small and weak, then please know that I said something wrong. This book was written many years ago, and the culture I wrote it in is not the culture in which you're reading it. So, if you find anything to be personally insulting, please accept my apology and keep reading with the knowledge that your gender identity and how you express your gender are correct only when you feel they are correct.

In closing, I'd like you to know that I'm writing this to you at the age of sixty-eight. I'm very old. I may very well be alive as you're reading these words. But if I'm dead, I would be honored if you call upon me as your ancestor in our mutual journey of gender exploration. I promise you that alive or dead, I will do all that's in my power to help you find and live your destiny.

Much Love and Respect,
Kate Bornstein

**GENDER
OUTLAW**



LIFE WITH FATHER AND MOTHER BEGAN FOR

ALBERT
EINSTEIN



MARCH
15



first things first

I keep trying to integrate my life. I keep trying to make all the pieces into one piece. As a result, my identity becomes my body, which becomes my fashion, which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I've written in an effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion.



My mother was so proud to have given birth to a son. Our love and friendship grew into much more than either mother-son or mother-daughter.

TRANSGENDER STYLE

Some Fashion Tips

People are starting to ask me about fashion. I love that! Maybe they think the doctor sewed in some fashion sense during my genital conversion surgery.

I see fashion as a proclamation or manifestation of identity—so as long as identities are important, fashion will continue to be important. The link between fashion and identity begins to get real interesting, however, in the case of people who don't fall clearly into a culturally recognized identity—people like me. My identity as a transsexual lesbian whose female lesbian lover transitioned to gay male is manifest in my fashion statement—both my identity and fashion are based on collage. You know—a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing.

And that's the style of this book. It's a trans style, I suppose. I can see it in the work of Susan Stryker, Sandy Stone, David Harrison . . . the list is getting longer and longer.

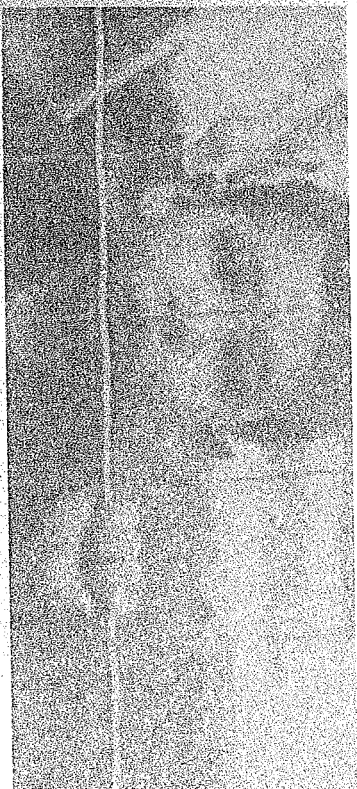
But the need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity—these are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality. Hence the clear division between fashion statements of male and female, between the fashions of queer and straight.

In my case, however, it's not so clear. I identify as neither male nor female, and now that my lover went through his gender change, it turns out I'm neither hetero nor homo. What I've found as a result of this borderline life is that the more fluid my identity has become—and the less demanding my own need to belong to the camps of male, female, gay, or straight—the more playful and less regimented my fashion has become—as well as my overall style of self-expression.

Will the identification with a trans writing style produce an identification with a trans experience?

Anyone who knows fashion will tell you that the operative word is *accessorize*! That's how I dress in the morning. That's how I shift from one phase of my life to the next—first I try on the accessories. And that's also part of the style of this book: I've added some accessories here and there to spice it up a bit.

Welcome to my runway!



sorting seeds

The very first task that Psyche had to accomplish in her search to be reunited with her lover, Eros, was to sort, by type, a roomful of seeds. According to the myth, these seeds covered the floor and rose to nearly the height of the ceiling. I spent the first thirty years of my life sorting out the cultural seeds of gender and sexuality.

THE HARD PART

The novel being dead, there is no point to writing made-up stories. Look at the French who will not and the Americans who cannot. Look at me who ought not, if only because I exist entirely outside the usual human experience . . . outside and yet wholly relevant, for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities (shall I ever be free of the dull lingering pain that is my peculiar glory, the price so joyously paid for being Myra Breckinridge, whom no man may possess except on her . . . my terms!).

—Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge*, 1968

The hard part was sorting it all out. The hard part was taking a good look at everyone else and the way they looked at the world, which was a lot different from the way I was looking at the world!

There are some trans people who agree with the way I look at the world, and there are others who are really angry with me for writing this stuff. Every trans person I know



In the backyard of our house on the Jersey Shore. I'm about two years old.

went through a gender transformation for different reasons, and there are as many truthful experiences of gender as there are people who think they have a gender.

I know I'm not a man—about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing. The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other—a world that doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other is.

When I was a kid, everyone else seemed to know they were boys or girls or men or women. That's something I've never known; not then, not today. I never got to say to the grown-ups, "Hold on there—just what is it about me that makes you think I'm a little boy?" As a kid, I just figured I was the crazy one; I was the one who had some serious defect.

For most of my life, my nontraditional gender identity has been my biggest secret, my deepest shame. It's not that I didn't want to talk about this with someone; it's just that I never saw anything in the culture that encouraged me to talk about my feeling that I was a different gender than most people believed me to be. When I was growing up, people who lived cross-gender lives were pressured into hiding deep within the darkest closets they could find. Those who came out of their closets were either studied under a microscope, ridiculed in the tabloids, or made exotic in pornography, so it paid to hide. It paid to lie. That was probably the most painful part of it: the lying to friends and family and lovers, the pretending to be someone I wasn't. Going through a

gender change is not the easiest thing in the world to do, but I went through it because I was so tired of all the lies and secrets.

It was a strange kind of lie. It was a lie by action—I was always acting out something that everyone assumed I was. I wonder what it would have been like if someone had come along and in a quite friendly manner had asked, "Well, young one, what do you think you are: a boy or a girl—or something else entirely?" What would it have been like not to have been afraid of getting hit because of some wrong answer? See, what we used to call "sex changes" never were an appropriate topic of conversation—not at the dining table, not in the locker room, not over a casual lunch in a crowded restaurant.

Nowadays, I try to make it easier for people to ask questions. I tell people that I've never been hurt by an honest question, and that's true—it's a cruel opinion that hurts, never a question. But people still don't ask questions easily; maybe that has something to do with manners or etiquette. Despite the increased visibility of trans people, folks seem to naturally back off from inquiring as to the nature of someone's—my—gender. It seems to need some special setting. Like in my living room, or on television, or from behind a podium at some university. It's "good manners" to say and ask nothing, and that's sad. But the children still ask.

Two days after my lover and I appeared on TV as guests on *The Phil Donahue Show*, the five-year-old child of our next-door neighbor came up to me and asked, "So, are

you a boy or a girl?" We'd been living next door to these folks for over two years.

"I'm a girl who used to be a boy," I replied. She was delighted with that answer and told me I'd looked very pretty on television. I thanked her and we smiled at each other and went about our days. I love it that kids will just ask.

Adults don't ask. Adults are afraid to ask, "What are you?" so we ask, "What do you do?" or "What's your pronoun of choice?" . . . in hopes of getting a clue to someone's identity. Gender identity seems to be an unspeakable thing in our culture, just as names are considered unspeakable in some other cultures. By the same token, we hardly ever ask outright, "What kind of sex do you like?" When it comes to work, we can ask. When it comes to sex and gender, we're supposed to observe discreetly and draw our own conclusions.

Instead of asking directly, adults look in roundabout ways for answers to their questions about me and my people. Like reading transsexual and transvestite pornography, which, judging by much of its content, must be written by people who have never met one of us but who must have great longing to be or love who we are.

There's this entire wonderful underground genre of trans erotica. You may have seen some of the titles—they're terrific—like **He's Her Sister! Or Transvestite Marriage or Transvestite Trap**. My personal favorites were **Captive in Lace** and **They Made Him Love It!**

Reading those stories came in handy when I was doing phone sex for a living, because a lot of the men calling in wanted to be cross-

dressed as women, or they wanted to know what it would be like to be a woman and have sex with another woman—guys want to know that sort of thing. They want to know, "What do lesbians do with each other?" It's a sad question, really; it shows how little thought they give to exactly what pleases a woman.

There's another whole group of people who really like gender ambiguity; it turns them on. I remember a group of sailors in the audience on **The Geraldo Rivera Show**. After it was announced who and what I was, they kept on looking at me, they kept on wanting something. I could feel their eyes traveling up and down my surgically constructed, hormonally enhanced woman's body. What's the pull? What is it about a sexually blended, gender-bended body that lights those flames? I know it gets me going!

For the most part, people cautiously observe and don't ask questions, and there are plenty of opportunities in today's world to look at people like me. The talk show ratings go way up, during sweeps month when they trot out the transgender folks, the cross-dressers, and those who claim nonbinary or genderqueer identities. There are the drag shows and the female-impersonator spectacles—even though we began them for our own entertainment and enjoyment, their widespread popularity seems to grow and grow, you've probably got one of those shows in your city, or in a nearby town. Or please, watch *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Right now. What's more, trans identities are a comedy staple—we're always good for a cheap laugh. I'll have more to say about that later.

Both popular music and cinema reflect my not-man, not-woman face back to me. Glance discreetly, if you will, at some of the brightest deities in our cultural heavens. At this writing, Miley

Cyrus has been out as nonbinary for several years, drawing cheers and jeers from around the world. Both *Orange Is the New Black* and *Transparent* have opened up story lines that include trans people who identify as neither men nor women. Nouveau cabaret artists are emerging onstage, with genders far too fabulous to be pinned down to man-or-woman.

Distance?

It's interesting that we can ask questions about trans issues when there's some distance between us and the person we're asking about—whether that distance is online, onstage, or onscreen; we just don't ask directly.

I read, watch, and listen to all the ads and commercials. You can learn a lot about gender from commercials. I've also been watching the talk shows, listening to the call-in programs, and browsing the myriad blogs and videos. When I was very young, growing up in the '50s, I read the medical texts, devoured the tabloids, and hoarded the pornography—because I was intensely interested in me and my people.

I was scared, though, shaking scared, to see what I might actually find out. But I couldn't stop reading. See, I was a lonely, frightened little fat kid who felt there was something deeply wrong with me because I didn't feel like I was the gender I'd been assigned. I felt there was something wrong with me, something sick and twisted inside me, something very, very bad about me. And everything I read backed that up.

The possibility missed by most of the texts prior to the past few years, and by virtually all the various popular media, is this: the

culture may not simply be creating roles for naturally gendered people, the culture may in fact be creating the gendered people. In other words, the culture may be creating gender. No one had ever hinted at that, and so, standing outside a "natural" gender, I thought I was some monster, and that it was all my fault.

In living along the borders of the gender frontier, I've come to see the gender system created by this culture as a particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of the culture to question gender, its own creation. The studies conducted by the duly appointed representatives of the culture are still conducted less on the basis of conversation and more on observation. I want this book to begin to reverse that trend. I want this book to be the conversation I always wanted as I was growing up, and never had the chance to have.

The time for discreet and distant observation of trans lives seems to be coming to an end. There's more and more evidence that trans folks are making a place for themselves in the culture. I wrote this book, for example, and it got published because there's been a shift—that this is a new edition of this book says the shift is still going on some two decades later. Up until the turn of the century, all we'd be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pinning away in the bodies of women. Stories by and about brave nonbinary-identified people who'd lived their lives hiding deep within a false gender—and who, after much soul-searching, decided to change their gender, and spent the rest of their days hiding deep within *another* false gender. That's what we could get published about our nonbinary selves—the romantic stuff that set in stone our image as long-suffering, not the challenging stuff. And it always seemed that the people who would write *about* us either had some ax to grind or point to prove, or they'd been hurt and needed someone to blame it on. People like Janice Raymond, Catherine Millor, and Robert Stoller have ultimately perpetuated the myth that trans people are malevolent, mentally ill, or mon-

sters. We got left holding the cultural bag. We ended up wearing the cultural hand-me-downs.

But there's another kind of trans(gressive)gender experience going on in this culture, and nowadays we're writing our own chronicles of these times. Our stories all tie together, our stories overlap; and you can hear lots about me in the stories of other trans people. My story weaves through Caitlyn Jenner's story. My story lies within the story of the late historian Louis Sullivan. Christine Jorgensen and Renée Richards wrote chapters of my story in their autobiographies. For years, Sandy Stone taught her story, my story, our story in any number of her classes. Rachel Pollack has painted trans into her tarot cards. Laura Jane Grace belts it out in punk rock and whispers it in her poetry. Gwen Smith makes archives available online. For decades, Leslie Feinberg traveled back and forth across the country to make our story heard in the political arena. Del LaGrace Volcano captures us in exquisite photographs. Lana and Lilly Wachowski bring us into their films. Mr. Justin Vivian Bond, Taylor Mac, Silvia Calderoni, David Harrison, and dozens more trans folk perform our story live onstage. Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, RuPaul, and dozens more trans people of color are bringing the intersections of gender, race, class, and age into mainstream media. Trans people are talking to one another at conferences around the world, in online meeting rooms, and through an increasing number of blogs, newsletters, and journals. It's an exciting time, here in the still-early days of a movement. It's a time when we've begun to put down the cultural baggage. We've begun sewing sequins onto our cultural hand-me-downs.

My voice on this subject is not representative of all trans people. But when a minority group has been silent for as long as we have, as disappointed as we have been, the tendency is for those in the majority to listen

to the loud ones when they first speak up; and to believe that we speak for the entire group. More important than my point of view, than any single point of view, however, is that people begin to question gender.

For the past quarter of a century, the voices of trans people have been rising in concert with the voices of more and more people who are writing their work based on what we have to say. Suzanne Kessler, Wendy McKenna, Marjorie Garber, Jennie Livingston, Judith Butler, Wendy Chapkis, Anne Bolin, Walter Williams, and Shannon Bell are some of the earliest cisgender writers who have been asking great questions and making room for us to respond.

I've taken as much care as I can to encourage questions in this book, especially questions about my conclusions. I hope that soon after this book is published I'll have some more questions. Questions are the hard part.

INTERLUDE

Nuts and Bolts

To this day, most people in the world believe that gender is determined by one's genitals. It's no surprise that many transgender people have adopted that belief, pursuing genital conversion surgery in their quest for a full and complete transition. The following text is an interview I did on the subject with *Issues Magazine*, back in the early 1990s—when most trans people opted to prioritize surgical genital modification as a prerequisite to transition. Way back then, it was all about the ladies. Transgender men were only just beginning to emerge into cultural awareness.

On the Surgical Process

Issues: *All right. We'd like to start with the biological/technical questions, the "nuts and bolts," as it were . . .*

Kate: [laughing] . . . I bolted from mine, that's for sure . . .
Issues: . . . *could you talk a little bit about the entire process of the surgery and how it's done?*

Kate: It's a long process. It requires a year to two years of therapy, and then another therapist has to validate your therapist's opinion, for you to be qualified to go to a surgeon and say, "See, they think I'm a girl." During that time you can start hormones.

Before surgery you need to do what's called a "Life Test," which is living as another gender for at least a year, sometimes two years.

Issues: *What does that mean?*

Kate: Day and night. Before any kind of genital reassignment surgery. In other words, if you were going to do this, you'd have to live as a man for a year to two years to see if you could function socially, if you could make a living. For example, in *Hidden: A Gender*, the character Justin Bond plays [Herculine Barbin] couldn't function socially or economically as a man. And so that would have been discovered and they would have said, "Hey, look. Give it up. Go back." And some people cannot get it together to function one way or the other. So you live that test, and then you go through with genital surgery. I know mostly about male-to-female surgery. There are two female-to-male techniques. Both are fine, except that sometimes they're not cosmetically up to snuff, so to speak.

Issues: *I was going to ask whether women can become men, because a lot more of the sex changes you hear about are men becoming women.*

Kate: Ah, the qualifier is that you hear about it; it's about 50-50.

Issues: *Where does the penis come from?*

Kate: Well, in one technique they take a skin graft, either from the inner thigh or the belly, literally roll it up, and attach it at the top of the thigh and the bottom of the belly. Then the patient has to lie in bed for four weeks or so while this heals up, to make sure the blood is going fine. So you've basically got what looks like a suitcase handle

They then remove one end from the thigh, so the suitcase handle is hanging down from the bottom of the belly. They don't have a way to extend the urethra through this penis, so the man must pee through the same urethral opening he had when he was a woman. Some men keep their vaginas, some have their vaginas partially sewn up.

Issues: *Okay. So what about men to women?*

Kate: The most common technique is the one I had: it's called "penile inversion." They lay the penis out and make an incision down the length of it, pull the skin open, scrape out the spongy stuff, being very careful not to disturb the blood vessels and nerves. The scrotal sac is laid open, the testicles are removed and become compost, I guess [general laughter]. So then they take the tip of the penis and start pushing it in. Kind of like turning a sock inside out. Everyone has this natural cavity, right, so they just push it in. . . .

Issues: *They invert it.*

Kate: Yeh, exactly. So that the outside of the penis becomes the walls of the new vagina. The tip of the penis functions in the position of a cervix. They create a kind of clitoris, using the spongy material from the perineum. And then they hope for the best. The real tricky part of the surgery is the urethra. You're catheterized, because if you can't pee, you die. So that's real important. And they place this big pack in there while everything heals for about five days, and then they remove the pack and you have to keep dilating your new vagina by putting this little balloon thing in, and pumping it up, and letting it dilate for about twenty minutes, five or six times a day.

One of the comic things that you're told about before surgery, which is so frightening, but funny in retrospect, is that when the pack has been in there, it's pushed up against this new urethral opening, and the catheter's

been pushing it, so the urethral opening is pushed over to the side, so you don't know in which direction you're going to pee when you finally pee. So when I sat down to pee, it shot straight up in the air, and I was like, "Oh nooooooooo!" But eventually it gets itself into the right position and you pee in the right direction.

There's a doctor at Stanford who performs this penile inversion technique who takes a section, about half an inch, of intestine, which is a mucous membrane, and also grafts that in there, so that it will lubricate, because it is, in fact, membranous tissue. I don't lubricate, so if I'm going to have any kind of penetration I need lubrication. The disadvantage to that technique is that it never stops lubricating, so you're kind of always wet and sloppy [smiles]. Which doesn't have to be a disadvantage.

Issues: *How much did all this cost?*

Kate: Remember, this was 1985-86: it was four thousand dollars for the nine days in the hospital, and four thousand dollars to the doctor. Then there was the round-trip airfare, it was in Colorado . . . there's lots of fees involved in this. Blue Cross ended up paying for it. It took a while to process because of a computer fuckup. They had put in "genital surgery" as a category, and they had my gender listed as female. Well, the only category that the computer could find vaguely near genital surgery was circumcision, and when it saw *circumcision* and *female*, it created a loop that it couldn't get out of. So it just spun around in the computer for a while.

On Hormones

Issues: *So this actual surgery happens after taking the hormones for a while? It's the last step?*

Kate: It's what they consider the final step, yah. And what

happened with me was I got my surgery about seven months after I'd started taking hormones, because the hormones have different effects on people. Yes, they can cause breast growth, but this [referring to her chest] mostly grew after surgery. What happened with me is that my penis started shrinking incredibly while I was taking hormones. And the doctor said, "If I don't do the surgery now, we're going to have to add a skin graft from your butt or your thigh, so that you can have some kind of depth." I'd already told him that I didn't need much depth, [smiles] that wasn't what I was concerned with.

Issues: *What other effects did the hormones have?*

Kate: They changed the texture of my skin—my skin's a lot softer. They caused breast growth. I'm on a hormonal regimen now of what they would give most women after a hysterectomy, who still have a uterus. I take Premarin every day, which is estrogen, and then seven days a month I take progesterone.

Issues: *You're going to be taking that forever?*

Kate: Forever. Unless I want to go through menopause again. . . . I went through all the "classic symptoms" of menopause when I was getting onto hormones initially. While I was still producing my own testosterone, I had to take these massive doses of estrogen to overcome that. I'd sit at my desk at work and cry a lot. And now, I've got seven days a month of raging PMS. The only thing I don't ever do is have cramps or bleed. But I get the water retention, the mood swings, and all that.

On Orgasms

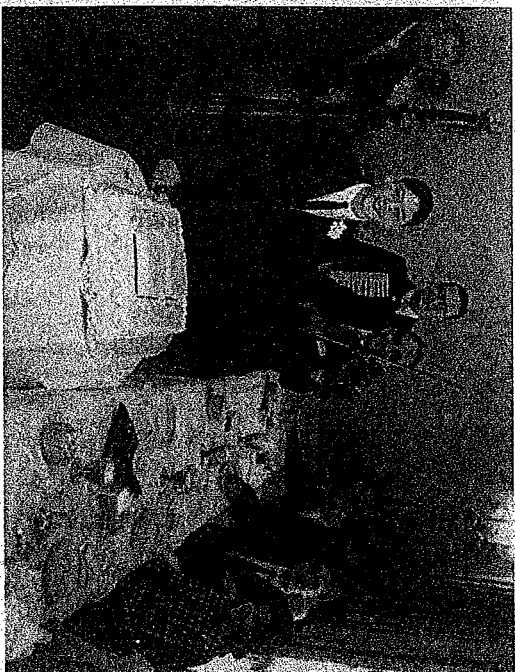
Issues: *What is actually stimulated during orgasm? And where is it?*

Kate: There are different kinds of orgasm. My vaginal walls are more sensitive than your vaginal walls, your clitoris

*What's the system
of the system
Cecilia*

is more sensitive than my clitoris. I can be stimulated to clitoral orgasm. That's a lot of fun. Actually much more so than with a vaginal orgasm. It's been changing. But I can have a vaginal orgasm just by the stimulation of the vaginal walls. That's kind of nifty, too. I do have a lack of sensation in my labia. I can feel pressure, but the surface of the skin does not have any sensation. So there was a certain amount of nerve damage there.

These days, not all transgender people opt for genital modification—and many decide against taking hormones. Nonetheless, surgical and hormonal body modifications are essential to many trans people. The desire to change our appearance or presentation has always been present in trans people—it's just a matter of method and degree. All such changes—or lack of changes—are worthy of our respect.



My Bar Mitzvah: March 4, 1961, "Today I am a man."

4

NAMING ALL THE PARTS

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

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

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

There's a real simple way to look at gender: once upon a time, someone drew a line

in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, "On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman." It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple.

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

Gender Assignment

Gender assignment happens when the culture says, "This is what you are." In most cultures, we're assigned a gender at birth—and once you've been assigned a gender, that's what you are and always will be. For the most part, it's doctors who dole out the gender assignments, which shows you how emphatically gender has been medicalized. These doctors look down at a newly born infant and say, "It has a penis, it's a boy." Or they say, "It doesn't have a penis, it's a girl." It has little or nothing to do with vulvas or vaginas, let alone DNA, hormones, or dozens of other nuances of biological sex. It's all penises or no penises; gender assignment is both phallocentric and genital. Other cultures are not or have not been so rigid.

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

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

—Pierre Lette, "Memoir of Pierre Lette on the Illinois Country"

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

[The Montana Educational Telecommunications Network, an early online bulletin board] enabled students in tiny rural schools to communicate with students around the world. Cynthia Denton, until last year a teacher at the only public school in Hobson, Montana, (population 200), describes the benefit of such links. "When we got our first messages from Japan, a wonderful little fifth-grade girl named Michelle was asked if she was a boy or a girl. She was extraordinarily indignant at that, and said, 'I'm Michelle—I'm a girl of course.' Then I pointed out the name of the person who

had asked the question and said, 'Do you know if this is a boy or a girl?' She said, 'No, how am I supposed to know that?' I said, 'Oh, the rest of the world is supposed to know that Michelle is a girl, but you have no social responsibility to know if this is a boy or a girl?' She stopped and said, 'Oh? And then she re-phrased her reply considerably.'

—Jacques Leslie, "The Cursor Cowboy" 1993

Is the determination of one another's gender a "social responsibility"?
Do we have the legal, moral, or ethical right to decide and assign our own genders?
Or does that right belong to the state, the church, and the medical profession?
If gender is classification, can we afford to throw away the very basic right to classify ourselves?

Gender Identity

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

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

I've no idea what "a woman" feels like. I never did feel like a

girl or a woman; rather, it was my unshakable conviction that I was not a boy or a man. It was the absence of a feeling, rather than its presence, that convinced me to change my gender.

What **does** a man feel like?
What does a woman feel like?
Do **you** feel "like a man"?
Do you feel "like a woman"?
I'd really like to know that from people.

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

Sweet Loretta Martin
Thought she was a woman
But she was another man.
All the girls around her
Thought she had it coming
But she gets it while she can.
Get back, get back,
Get back to where you once
belonged.
Get back, Loretta.

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney,

"Get Back" 1969

I remember a dream I had when I was no more than seven or eight years old—I might have been younger. In this dream, two

lines of battle were drawn up facing each other on a devastated plain: I remember the earth was dry and cracked. An army of men on one side faced an army of women on the other. The soldiers on both sides were exhausted. They were all wearing skins—I remember smelling the untanned leather in my dream. I was a young boy, on the side of the men, and I was being tied down to a roughly hewn cart. I wasn't struggling. When I was completely secured, the men attached a long rope to the cart and tossed the other end of the rope over to the women. The soldiers of the women's army slowly pulled me across the empty ground between the two armies, as the sun began to rise. I could see only the sun and the sky. When I'd been pulled over to the side of the women, they untied me, turned their backs to the men, and we all walked away. I looked back and saw the men walking away from us. We were all silent.

I wonder about reincarnation. I wonder how a child could have had a dream like that in such detail. I told this dream to the psychiatrist at the army induction center in Boston in 1969—they'd asked if I'd ever had any strange dreams, so I told them this one. They gave me a 1-Y, deferred duty due to psychiatric instability.

belonging or not belonging to a specific gender?" Some people would include appearance, sexual orientation, and methods of communication under the term, but I think it makes more sense to also think in terms of things like jobs, economic roles, chores, hobbies; in other words, positions and actions specific to a given gender as defined by a culture. Gender roles, when followed, send signals of membership in a given gender.

Gender Expression

Gender expression is how we put our gender identity into play out in the world—and like gender identity, the manner in which we express our gender(s) is for us alone to decide. Components of gender expression include but are not limited to: clothing, body modification, speech, posture, movement, language, attitude—whatever it takes for us to experience integrity, fulfillment, and joy. Gender expression is how we garner a desired gender attribution from others.

Gender Attribution

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

In this culture, gender attribution, like gender assignment, is phallocentric. That is, one is assumed to be male until perceived otherwise. According to a study done by Kessler and McKenna, one can extrapolate that it would take the presence of roughly four female cues to outweigh the presence of one male cue. That's one reason why more trans women today get "sirred" whereas fewer trans men get called "ma'am."

Gender Roles

Gender roles are collections of factors that answer the question, "How do I need to function so that society perceives me as



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

I'm nearly six feet tall, and I'm large-boned. Like most people assigned male at birth, my hands, feet, and forearms are proportionally larger to my body as a whole than those of people assigned female at birth. My hair pattern included coarse facial hair. My voice is naturally deep—I sang bass in a high school choir and quartet. I've had to study ways and means of either changing these physical cues or drawing attention away from them if I want to achieve a female attribution from people. See, I know I'm not a woman, but as long as most people believe there are only two options for gender, my great joy is walking through the world as a woman.

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

Behavioral cues include manners, decorum, protocol, and deportment. Like physical cues, behavioral cues are relative to the contexts of time and culture. Most advice websites freely dispense gender-specific manners. The majority of the behavioral cues I can think of boils down to how we occupy space, both alone and with others.

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

Here's one: As part of learning to pass as a woman, I was taught to avoid eye contact when walking down the street; that looking someone in the eye was a male cue. Nowadays, sometimes I'll look away, and sometimes I'll look someone in the eyes—it's a behavior pattern that's more fun to play with than to follow rigidly. A femme cue (not "woman," but "femme") is to meet someone's eyes (usually a butch), glance quickly away, then slowly look back into the butch's eyes and hold that gaze; great, hot fun, that one! None of this is written down or even particularly enforceable, but in my part of the world, all of this was required for membership in the gender woman. (Of interest is that these are also universal cues of submission.)

In many of the transsexual and transvestite support meetings I've attended, when the subject of the discussion was "passing," a lot of emphasis was given to manners: Who stands up to shake hands? Who exits an elevator first? Who opens doors? Who lights cigarettes? These are all cues I had to learn in order to pass as a woman in this culture. It wasn't 'til I began to read

feminist literature that I began to question these cues or to see them as oppressive.

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

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

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

"Just get married?" he asked jovially.

"Uh, no," I replied.

"Oh! Divorced!" he proclaimed with just a bit of hope in his voice. "Let's see your license." I handed him my old driver's license with my male name on it. He glanced down at the card, apparently not registering what he saw. "You just go on over there, honey, and take your test. We'll have you fixed up soon. Oh," he added with a wink, "if you need anything special, you just come back here and ask old Fred."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sexuality and gender are discrete phenomena. Depending on the qualifier one is using for gender differentiation, sexuality and gender may or may not be seen as dependent on each other.

There are probably as many types of gender (gender systems) as could be imagined. Gender by clothing, gender by divine right, gender by lottery—these all make as much sense as any other

criteria. But in Western civilization, we bow down to the great gods of medical science. And so, no other type of gender holds as much sway as:

Biological gender, as determined by science and documented by the state, which is the most universally respected gender cue—it most nearly always guarantees a desired attribution. Bio gender (or sex) classifies a person through any combination of body type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporal or chemical essence. Belief in biological gender is in fact a belief in the supremacy of the body in the determination of identity. It's biological gender that most folks refer to when they say *sex*. By calling something "sex," we grant it seniority over all the other types of gender—by some right of biology.

So, all these *parts* of gender determine types of gender that in and of themselves are *not* gender, but criteria for systemic classification. And there's sex, which somehow winds up on top of the heap. Add to this roomful of seeds the words *male*, *female*, *masculine*, *feminine*, *man*, *woman*, *boy*, *girl*. These words fall under the category of gender and are highly subjective, depending on which system of gender one is following.

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

It's not like gender is the **only** thing we confuse with sex. As a culture, we're encouraged to equate sex (both the act and the biology) with money, success, and security; and with the products we're told will help us attain money, success, and security. We

live in a culture that succeeds in selling products (the apex of accomplishment in capitalism) by aligning those products with the attainment of one's sexual fantasies and gender identity.

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

Kinds of Sex

"Can you orgasm with that vagina?"

—Audience member question for Kate on The

Geraldo Rivera Show

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

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

—Kate's answer

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

The upshot is that sex (the biological act) is defined (culturally

dependent upon) as sex (the biological identity). Please keep in mind that what we are calling sex (biological gender) is as ephemeral as any other gender, because determining sex/gender by the presence or absence of a penis is at best a haphazard guess as it negates all the other factors of biological identity. And that brings us giddily back to what is sex?

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

—Murray S. Davis, *Smut: Erotic Reality!*

Obscene Ideology, 1983

The Basic Mix-Up

A gay man who lived in Khartoum

Took a lesbian up to his room.

They argued all night.

Over who had the right

To do what, and with what, to whom.

—Anonymous limerick

Here's the tangle that I found: sexual orientation/preference is based in this culture solely on the gender of one's partner of choice—thus we make sex, sexuality, and gender all tangled up by their-dependence-upon-one-another. And so, the only choices we're given to determine the focus of our sexual desire are these:

- » *Heterosexual model:* in which a culturally defined male is in a relationship with a culturally defined female.

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

Variants to these gender-based relationship dynamics would include heterosexual female with gay male, gay male with lesbian woman, lesbian woman with heterosexual woman, gay male with bisexual male, and so forth. People involved in these variants know that each dynamic is different from the other. A lesbian involved with another lesbian, for example, is in a very different relationship than that of a lesbian involved with a bisexual woman, and that's distinct from being a lesbian woman involved with a heterosexual woman. What these variants have in common is that each of these combinations forms its own clearly recognizable dynamic, acknowledged or not by the dominant cultural binary of sexual orientation: heterosexuality/homosexuality.

And if we are going to use gender as a condition or basis of sexuality, we are sooner or later obliged to include trans as a factor of desire. Just now there is no agreed-upon word for the desire and desirability of trans bodies. The TV show *Transparent* came up with **transamorous**. Now doesn't that just blow apart the binary of homo-or-hetero?

So, all current mainstream-approved models of sexuality depend on the gender of the partner. This results in minimizing, if not completely dismissing, other dynamic models of desire and relationship that could be more important than gender and are often more telling

about the real nature of someone's sexual desire. In the same way that there are many ways beyond simple biology to parse gender identity and gender expression, there are many factors on which we could base sexual orientation. Examples of alternate dynamic models include:

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

Butch style, whether worn by men or women, is a symbol of detachment. Dressing butch gives the wearer the protection of being the observer, not the object. A femme-y look, by contrast, suggests self-display, whether in a quietly demure or sexually flashy fashion. Butch is a style of understatement: "I don't need to show flesh because I am in a position to choose." Butch is no coy "come hither" look, but a challenge—"I see you and maybe I like what I see."

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

—Wendy Chupkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance*, 1986

- » *Top/Bottom model*, which can be further subclassified as dominant/submissive or sadist/masochist.

The bottom is responsible for being obedient, for carrying out her top's or-

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

—Patrick Califia, *Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*, 1983

There are also:

Butch/Butch models
 Femme/Femme models
 Triad (or more) models
 Human/Animal models
 Adult/Child models
 Same-aged models
 Parent/Child models
 Multiple partners models
 Able-bodied models
 Differently-abled bodies models
 Reproductive models
 Owner/Slave models
 Monogamous models
 Polyamorous models

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

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

Sex Without Gender

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

When Batman and Catwoman try to get it on sexually, it only works when they are both in their caped crusader outfits. Naked heterosexuality is a miserable failure between them . . . When they encounter each other in costume however, something much sexier happens and the only thing missing is a really good scene where we get to hear the delicious sound of Catwoman's latex rubbing on Batman's black rubber/leather skin. To me their flirtation in capes looked queer precisely because it was not heterosexual, they were not man and woman, they were bat and cat, or latex and rubber, or feminist and vigilante: gender became irrelevant and sexuality was dependent on many other factors.

You could also read their sexual encounters as the kind of sex play between gay men and lesbians that we

are hearing so much about recently: in other words, the sexual encounter is queer because both partners are queer and the genders of the participants are less relevant. Just because *Batman* is male and *Catwoman* is female does not make their interactions heterosexual—I think about it, there is nothing straight about two people getting it on in rubber and latex costumes, wearing eyemasks and carrying whips and other accoutrements.

—Judith Halberstam, "Queer Creatures," On

Our Backs, Nov/Dec 1992

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

Left Side	Color	Right Side
Fist fucker	Red	Fist fuckee
Anal Sex, Top	Dark Blue	Anal Sex, Bottom
Oral Sex, Top	Light Blue	Oral Sex, Bottom
Light S/M, Top	Robin's-Egg Blue	Light S/M, Bottom
Foot Fetish, Top	Mustard	Foot Fetish, Bottom
Anything Goes, Top	Orange	Anything Goes, Bottom
Gives Golden Showers	Yellow	Wants Golden Showers

Left Side

Color

Right Side

Hustler, Selling	Green	Hustler, Buying
Uniforms/Military, Top	Olive Drab	Uniforms/Military, Bottom
Likes Novices, Chickenhawk	White	Novice (or Virgin)
Victorian Scenes, Top	White Lace	Victorian Scenes, Bottom
Dogs Bondage	Gray	Wants to Be Put in Bondage
Shit Scenes, Top	Brown	Shit Scenes, Bottom
Heavy S/M & Whipping, Top	Black	Heavy S/M & Whipping, Bottom
Pierce	Purple	Pierce
Likes Menstruating Women	Maroon	Is Menstruating
Group Sex, Top	Lavender	Group Sex, Bottom
Breast Fondler	Pink	Breast Fondler

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

The conflation of sex, sexuality, and gender affects more than individuals and relationships—it contributes to the linking together of the very distinct subcultures of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, leather sexers, sex workers, and trans people.

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

A dominant culture tends to combine its subcultures into manageable units. As a result, those who practice nontraditional sex

are seen by members of the dominant culture (as well as by members of sex and gender subcultures) as a whole with those who embody nontraditional gender roles and identities. Any work to deconstruct the gender system needs to take into account the artificial amalgam of subcultures, which might itself collapse if the confusion of terms holding it together were to be settled.

In any case, if we buy into categories of sexual orientation based solely on gender—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and even transamorous—we're cheating ourselves of a searching examination of our real sexual preferences. In the same fashion, by subscribing to the categories of gender based solely on some presumed male/female binary, we cheat ourselves of a searching examination of our real gender identity.

Trans and Desirability

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

About five months into living full-time as a woman, I woke up one morning and felt

really good about the day. I got dressed for work, and checking the mirror before I left, I liked what I saw—at last! I opened the door to leave the building, only to find two workmen standing on the porch, the hand of one poised to knock on the door. This workman's face lit up when he saw me. "Well!" he said. "Don't you look beautiful today?" At that moment, I realized I didn't know how to respond to that. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. I really wasn't prepared for people to be attracted to me. It took me a long time to comfortably respond to a man who's attracted to me—I never mastered the rituals of male/female attraction.

To me, desire is a wish to experience someone or something that I've never experienced, or that I'm not currently experiencing. Usually, I need an identity appropriate (or appropriately inappropriate) to the context in which I want to experience that person or thing. This context could be anything: a romantic involvement, a tennis match, or a boat trip up a canal. On a boat trip up the canal, I could appropriately be a passenger or a crew member. In a tennis match, I could be a player, an audience member, a concessionaire, a referee, a member of the grounds staff. In the context of a romantic involvement, it gets less obvious about what I need to be in order to have an appropriate identity, but I would need to have *some* identity. Given that most romantic or sexual involvements in this culture are defined by the genders of the partners, the most appropriate identity to have in a romantic relationship would be a gender identity, or something that passes for gender identity, like a gender role. A gender role could be, for example, any role that signifies butch, femme, top, or bottom—these are all

methods of acting. So, even without one of two approved gender identities *per se*, some workable identity can be called up and put into motion within a relationship.

When we play with our identities, we play with desire. Some identities stimulate desire, others diminish desire. To make ourselves attractive to someone, we modify our identity, or at least the appearance of an identity—and this includes gender identity.

I love being without an identity—it gives me a lot of room to play around—but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on: it doesn't really matter what identity I take on, as long as it's recognizable. I can be a writer, a lover, a confidante, a femme, a top, or a woman. I retreat into definition as a way of demarcating my space, a way of saying, "Step back, I'm getting crowded here." By saying, "I am the [fill in the blank]," I also say, "You are not, and so you are not in my space." Thus, I achieve privacy. Gender identity is a form of self-definition: something into which we can withdraw, from which we can glean a degree of privacy from time to time, and with which we can, to a limited degree, manipulate desire.

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

desire, the more conflated become the concepts of sex, sexuality, and gender.

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

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