

GenderQueer

Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary

Edited by Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins

 **alvyson books**

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theory or a national movement for gender or transgender rights. I believe real change comes only from the bottom up, one heart and mind at a time. That's why my activism is simply going to work each day as a public librarian, greeting patrons at the reference desk as an obviously transgendered person, and meeting their questions and (sometimes) ridicule with openness, however they choose to approach me.

I say "obviously transgendered" because I make little effort to present either a feminine or masculine appearance. I lived half a lifetime creating the caricature of a man and have no interest in spending the other half doing "woman." So my example as the face of genderqueerness to hundreds of new faces every day in Brooklyn is my activism. Sometimes it's a struggle because I accrue no stability or continuity of identity in the public eye. Most of the people I see every day I've never seen before, so I'm continually called upon to declare my gender. When asked, I say "woman," but I do not correct anyone's assumption otherwise.

Bearing witness—day after day, week after week—through the mundane actions of everyday life is my contribution to the trans civil rights campaign. Riki has her political work, Joan her writing and editing. We bring different passions to the struggle for tolerance and understanding, but we're all headed in the same direction and we're all in it for the duration. This book has been a labor of love for all of us.

A Certain Kind of Freedom:
Power and the Truth of Bodies—
Four Essays on Gender

Riki Wilchins

It's Your Gender, Stupid!

Take Me to Your Gender

Gender. Everyone talks about it, but no one knows what it is or agrees on a definition. Gender *identity*? Gender *expression*? Gender *characteristics*? The gender *system*? A softer synonym for "sex"? *Gender* never stands alone, but always seems to need a noun to refer to.

So, it seems strange in a book devoted to gender that no writer takes the space to define what *gender* means. We assume that it's a common term of meaning, although it appears to be anything but. As with pornography, we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it.

The fact that *gender* is used in so many different but related contexts hints that we've touched on something very basic and pervasive in the human condition. So does the fact that we "know it when we see it." But I believe all the confusion surrounding gender means that perhaps just the opposite is the case: that gender is a set of meanings, and so like children learning to tell Daddy from Mommy and little boys from little girls, we see it once we know it.

Early Morning Do

The most popular conception of gender is as a sort of inner substance, an essence we all carry within us, that is always conveniently binary and, except in the case of transexuals, matched to our physical

sex. It is the “expression” of this gendered core that leads us to various gender behaviors: from wearing dresses or ties to displaying dominance or vulnerability during sex.

But according to theorist Judith Butler, gender refers not to something we *are* but to something we *do*, which, through extended repetition and because of the vigorous suppression of all exceptions, achieves the appearance of a sort of coherent psychic substance.

In this view, there is no doer behind the deed, no gendered identity behind the acts that we say result from it. The acts are all there is, and it is the strict regulation of these acts within the binary—females must produce feminine behaviors and males masculine—that produces the appearance of two coherent and universal genders.

Thus, I don’t pull on certain clothes in the morning or style my hair a particular way because of something within me. I do these acts in a manner consistent with either masculine or feminine norms because to do otherwise would render me socially unintelligible. People wouldn’t know what I was or how to treat me, and I would be the target of a great deal of hostility.

My achieving a consistent appearance and behavior is then offered as proof of a binary gender inside me.

If my gender is a doing that has to be redone each day just like I pull on those clothes each morning, that would help explain why sometimes my gender “fails”: Even though I’ve felt like a man (and then later like a woman), people didn’t always recognize me as such. Even I couldn’t always recognize myself as such.

Better Dead Than Read

If I can “fail” accidentally, maybe there are ways I can fail on purpose that will create room for me to grow, to find new ways of expression that resonate more deeply. If gender is a doing and a reading of that doing, a call-and-response that must be continually done and redone, then it’s also unstable, and there are ways I can disrupt it. Maybe universal and binary genders are not so inevitable after all.

This is an attractive line of thinking, especially for anyone who has found themselves transcending narrow, outdated, 20th-century gender norms. Which is to say, all the writers in this book and most of its readers.

But how do we square this with some of the facts? For instance, transsexuality. It is undoubtedly true that some people (the author

included) have, or do, feel a profound sense of discomfort at being confined to one sex and gender instead of another. If gender is a *doing*, does that imply that the transsexual in distress is somehow reenacting his or her own pain each morning in a repeated series of gendered acts?

And transsexuality aside, most people do report experiencing a stable, long-term sense of identification with either male or female, man or woman. That would seem to constitute pretty good evidence of gendered identities.

But then again, there are only two types of identities one can report experiencing. For instance, I said, “I feel like a woman trapped in a man’s body,” and my doctors understood and shipped me off to surgery. But if I’d worn my Intersex Society of North America HERMAPHRODITES WITH ATTITUDE T-shirt and told them, “I feel like a herm trapped in a man’s body,” they wouldn’t have understood and would have shipped me off to a rubber room.

Moreover, paradoxical as it sounds, there is room to question whether any identification, however stable and long-term, actually constitutes *having* an identity. Identification is always an act, a repetition, a name we give to a collection of discrete traits, behaviors, urges, and empathies.

A System of Meanings

Let me repeat something from the introduction: Gender is a system of meanings and symbols—and the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality: masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness.

To gender something simply means investing it with one of two meanings. So anything and everything can be gendered, for example: ships, clothing, sexual positions, pens, bowls, hand positions, head tilts, vocal inflections, body hair, and different sports. Indeed, in many romance languages, every object is given a gender (*vive la difference*, *Le Monde*, *la dolce vita*, *el toro*, *el Riki*).

Because being gay itself is a transgression of the rules of gender, because those rules heavily disfavor femininity, gay and feminist (and lately transgendered) critics have tended to focus on gender’s many repressive aspects.

The punishments we exact for using the “wrong” words cross from

the mundane to the fatal, including hostile stares in the women's room, being humiliated after gym class for being a "sissy" or a "dyke," unfair termination for being a "ball-buster," assault for being a "faggot," arrest for "impersonating a woman," rape for being "too sexy," forced psychiatric treatment for gender identity disorder, genital mutilation for intersexed infants, and, of course, murder.

But like any language, gender's primary effect is not repressive but productive: It produces meanings. These are created through a vast and visible top-down structure: binary birth certificates, restrooms, adoption policies, immigration laws, passports, and marriage laws. But they are also produced and maintained from the bottom up, through thousands of small, everyday acts—interactions that create and destroy gendered meanings in every moment. These microexchanges of meaning—in an elevator, over a meal, while buying a newspaper, when answering the phone—stamp us with our gender, bind us to it, and require us to answer to it in order to interact with other people.

Thus not only does gender restrain us as individuals, but it is through the language of gender that we become who we are, that we come to recognize ourselves—and be recognized by others—as men and women, and only as men and women.

As an academic concept, gender has been remarkably productive. Every year witnesses a new crop of articles, books, and theory about gender. Yet as a civil rights cause, gender is just beginning.

One can see in it the outlines of something that links misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and the restricted way we raise our youth. Indeed, a widespread understanding of gender would have enormous potential to transform society and remove inequity and violence.

A Sex by Any Other Name Would Still Smell as Sweet

If gender is a system of meanings, then what are we to make of the recent and remarkable degree to which "gender" is replacing "sex" to refer not only to men and women but also male and female? Perhaps this is only a way to avoid saying the overloaded word "sex," which also means intercourse, in public speech.

Yet it also seems to contradict the widely accepted notion that sex is a natural, physical property of bodies, while gender is something culturally derived from sex. In Butler's formulation, sex (male/female) is to "raw" as gender (man/women) is to "cooked." Sex is there "on the far

side of language," while gender is something added on afterward.

The increasing use of gender to replace sex may be an acknowledgment, if only unconsciously, that once you start looking there is nothing, or at least very little, on the far side of language. As an experiment, I recently asked a large group of very hip queer youths to list on a blackboard all the attributes that made up a "real man" and "real woman." Interestingly, on the list beneath "real man" was "has a penis"; the list beneath "real woman" included doesn't have a penis." Not one person in the entire group thought to list "doesn't have a vagina" or even "has a vagina" as an identifying trait of bodies. I take from this that although the body's moving parts may all be "over there" on the far side of language, nearly everything we make of them to render them meaningful to us is right here, in our laps.

I'd Like to Buy a Women's Dictionary

Gender as a language is at once terribly simple, because it has only two meanings, and terribly complex, because it touches us across the entire plane of contact between our bodies and society. In most languages, words can be used by anyone who can master them. But gender is a language that creates and sustains binary difference. To achieve this, gendered signs must be highly regulated so they don't fall into the wrong hands, as if certain dictionary words were colored blue for boys and pink for girls. Wearing a skirt, smoking a pipe, crying in public, moaning during sex, scratching your crotch, describing anything (but God) as divine: These are some of the signs that may be given by only one half of the population or the other.

20/20 Hind-Cite

If gender is a system of meanings, then, in a book of the same name, what is meant by "genderqueer"? For one thing, it brings back together those two things that have been wrongly separated: gender and gayness.

For Butler, "successful" genders are those that cite other earlier examples. Thus we learn to become men and women and to be recognized as such by copying other examples. In popular thought, men and women are considered examples of "real" genders, and drag, transsexuals, and butch/femme couples are considered copies. Thus drag is to copy as woman is to real. Drag imitates real life.

But if Butler is right, if gender is always an artifice that copies

something else, then all gender is a reuse of familiar stereotypes according to the rules for their use. All gender is drag. And those that fail, that are read as "queer," are simply those that break the rules. Thus neither a Streisand drag queen doing "Barbra" nor Barbra herself doing "woman" is any more or less real. There is no real gender to which they might be compared. Both use common symbols to achieve a visual meaning. The drag queen appears "false" because we don't grant her access to those symbols.

Considering gender as a language, I would approach queerness somewhat differently. What did I mean when I told my doctors that I felt "like a woman?" How was it possible for me to feel like anything other than myself? Perhaps I only meant that I was feminine. But although one can be seen as feminine, feel feminine feelings, or to express femininity through our clothing, hairstyle, and posture, can anyone really *be* feminine?

Achieving femininity sounds like a lot of work: how I feel, how I express myself to others, and how they perceive me. It's one thing to feel consistently male or feminine or like a boy, but keeping all that feeling/expressing/being-perceived continuously intact must take a lot of concentration. Having any gender at all is really a sort of accomplishment, a sustained effort.

Genderqueers are people for whom some link in the feeling/expressing/being-perceived fails. For example, a stone butch may feel masculine and embody—in his own mind and behavior—masculinity. Yet because of his sex (the pronoun strains here), she might still be read as womanly, like a girl trying on her boyfriend's clothes, especially if she is large-breasted and large-hipped.

If genderqueer bodies are those that fail because they don't follow the rules, the grammar of gender-as-language, then what are the boundaries of such a term and what are its exclusions? Is a lesbian femme harassed for her miniskirt and fuck-me pumps genderqueer? Is a 3-year-old who tries on his sister's dress or a 40-year-old who loses a promotion because her boss believes women should be seen but not promoted? What about a football captain who's humiliated by his coach because he wept after a tough loss?

If genderqueerness is not something we do but an identity we are, then none of these people would seem to be candidates. So one of the problems is that a narrow definition will exclude the millions of people

who rub up against gender norms but don't step all the way out.

Some feminist theorists have questioned the queerness and radicalness of any sort of gender that doesn't do just that: leave norms behind. They consider transexuals, butch/femmes, and drag queens as not only not genderqueer but actually gender-conforming, because they partake of binary stereotypes. For them, the only "radical" choice is adopting more androgynous genders that fall totally off the binary map.

But how are we to tell someone who faces discrimination or violence that they aren't really queer? Surely their attackers think they are.

Using queerness itself as a category of analysis seems to invite a new round of debate devoted to who is "really queer." A voice that originated from one set of margins begins to create its own marginalized voices. These twin problems of identities—boundaries and hierarchies—emerge whenever we try to base politics on identity.

It's Not Me, I'm Just on Loan

If gender is always a bending of self toward prevailing norms, then gender is always a kind of displacement, from which not even genderqueers are immune.

For instance, Clare Howell recently said to me, "I know I sound like a man." This kind of displacement repositions her voice as coming from somewhere else. This is like the cross-dresser who declares, "I like wearing *women's* clothes." It's safe to say that no cross-dresser ever wore "women's clothes." If the bill came to him, they're his clothes, he bought them: They're obviously *men's clothes*. The displacement in naming them "women's clothes" prevents us from getting outside the terms of the language, from getting to something new that might redefine skirts or dresses or femininity as being about men.

Many cross-dressers would reply that the point of dressing for them is that these *are* women's clothes. It is the otherness of the clothing, the fact that they are "women's," that is precisely what allows them to feel feminine. But once again, we can't get to someplace new, where femininity might be something about men that is not anchored in Woman (or vice versa).

(I remember telling my therapist one day in what felt like a breakthrough: If I'm a woman and I haven't had surgery, then this must be a woman's penis. Wet dreams must be part of women's experience. However, I would be slow to make this argument at the next feminist conference.)

I don't mean to fall into the familiar trap of criticizing those who want to eat their cake but not have it. Some genderqueers, including cross-dressers, are not interested in that "something new." They will always enjoy appropriation *as* appropriation for its own sake. These strategic displacements renounce ownership and participation. They announce that "this part of my gender isn't me, it belongs to someone else, and I only appropriate/approximate it." They announce an acceptance of a particular gender's rules of access, who "owns" which words and who is allowed to use them. For instance, it's not possible for Clare to declare, "I sound like other men with breasts" or "I sound like other women trapped in male impersonators' bodies" or "I sound like a Clare," because those are not legitimate categories of description. By definition Clare must sound like something else, because her own body is not among the available choices.

Jenell, one of my favorite cross-dressers, always reminds me that her enjoyment is transgression itself. If microminiskirts ever become fashionable for men, she'll have to decamp and find something else that is queer. In this sense, we are working somewhat at cross purposes. We both want to end the intolerable discrimination suffered by those who transcend gender stereotypes. But while I want to empty out those margins and bring queerness into the mainstream, she'd rather keep transgression in place, where s/he can enjoy it, but end its stigmatization. In retrospect, I think we both are right.

You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman Impersonator

Why do most genderqueers perceive themselves as falling within a long succession of binaries: female/male, butch/femme, top/bottom, boy/girl? Just as when we were children, we all learned to distinguish binary mommy from binary daddy, brother from sister, and little girls from little boys, it seems that like everyone else, genderqueers see in twos.

It is popular to explain genderqueerness as resulting from a "spectrum of gender" along which all individuals—queer and nonqueer—fall. This is presented as a more enlightened and inclusive approach to bodies. Yet when you look closer, every spectrum turns out to be anchored by the same familiar two poles—male/female, man/woman, gay/straight. The rest of us are just strung out between them, like damp clothes drying on the line. The spectrum of gender turns out to be a spectrum of heterosexual norms, only slightly less oppressive but not

less binary than its predecessors. Maybe the problem is that gender is a way of seeing: black-and-white glasses through which we view a Technicolor world. Wherever we look, no matter what is "out there," we see only black and white.

There is an apocryphal story of an American anthropologist who visited a remote island where natives had 17 genders. Upon his return, he reported to the anthropological society that, "like all others we've studied, this culture also has only men and women."

We Are Men With Breasts. We Come in Peace.

I recently spent a week at a large queer activist conference in the Midwest. I was dressed in my best Banana Republic menswear and looking, if I may say, pretty phat for a woman trapped in a six-foot male impersonator's body. I went across the street to a sports bar to get some change, and when I entered the whole room just seemed to stop: woman *and* men turned from the immense TV screen showing the Sunday NFL game to watch me. It was intimidating. I got suddenly very nervous and self-conscious. I knew, for these people, I might just as well have landed from Mars. Before I knew it I was raising my voice, feminizing my stance, and trying to blend in a little.

I try to remind myself that if we can hold our course, it is at precisely such moments that we create a certain kind of freedom. It's a hard thing to keep in mind when you're afraid, that at these times we are doing the best and the most anonymous kind of activism.

What, I always wonder, did those people see? I asked my lover on one such occasion what she thought people were seeing and she replied, "Well, you do look like a man with breasts." Which, fortunately, was exactly the gender I was trying to do that day. As if that were possible. I only wish that option were available. Mostly I think people just try to figure out *what* in the world I am.

Don't Fuck With Mother Nature

But there are lots of things about bodies and genders that don't fit the binary model into which we try to force them, even that most unassailable of binaries: biological sex. Biological sex is considered to be the most basic and natural product of bodies. All creatures reproduce, and to reproduce—unless you're an amoeba—requires two sexes. But consider the lowly seahorse, a creature that is said to

"switch sexes." (No, not with the help of a little aquatic seahorse surgeon.) We say it changes "from male to female" because what else could it change from or to?

And the "female" hyena, which not only dominates its species like a male but also has what any decent biologist would admit is a penis. Yet it must be a female, because it bears young. Or the male garter snake, which often morphs into a female after birth to attract male snakes to keep it warm. Something I might try during the next snowstorm.

But what if reproduction doesn't have to include two sexes? Or what if there are other sexes, and they can reproduce as well? But that's not possible, is it? Because any creatures that can reproduce must be either male and female—*by definition*. Hence surgeons' frantic search to locate the "real" sex of intersexed infants before their genitals are cut up to resemble "normal" male or female. The infant's "real sex," *by definition*, cannot be intersex, cannot be whatever it is. Any sex but binary male or female is pathology, unnatural, and unreal, to be discarded and corrected with the knife. We say two sexes is "nature's way." But Man produces this feminine version of Mother Nature—passive, pure, and reserved—when we need her, and then pushes Her aside when the facts don't fit His needs.

The debate over the naturalness of binary sex is circular: Whatever reproduces must be one of two sexes because there are only two sexes to be. Thus it is gender as a system of meaning that produces the "natural" Mother Nature, male and female sexes, and the gender binary that establishes what is genderqueer.

Queerer Bodies

When I Was in Gender and You Were the Main Drag

Somewhere inside yourself, you just know.

—nontransgendered lesbian explaining how she knows she's a woman

Inside, I just know.

—transgendered lesbian explaining how she knows she's a woman

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

—Michel Foucault, presumably explaining how he doesn't know if he's a man or a woman, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 1977

When it comes to gender, each of us, in our own private way, is an implicit philosopher. For instance, you probably believe that your body is male or female, that you are gay or straight (or bi), that feminism is distinct from gay rights, that physical sex is genetic but gender learned, and that sexual orientation is distinct from other kinds of gendered behavior. These beliefs probably feel to you like "just common sense." But that is only because philosophical beliefs, aged in the keg, and widely enough accepted, are promoted to common sense. None of these concepts is just "out there." We think them because we think

about bodies and the world in very particular ways. If you spoke about these thoughts a lot, people would call you a theorist, and if you spoke about really big thoughts, people would call you a bigamist.

In this section, I want to encourage you to think those big thoughts. This is an anthology of personal narratives written by some very exceptional people, often living very painful lives, and I hope it's accessible to readers on an emotional level. But that's not all. While the exceptionalism and the pain are important, for me, they are not the point of this book. The real importance lies in how these writers' lives show that the ways we think about bodies is broken, is frequently oppressive, and needs to be changed.

And I don't just mean changed in the sense of being more tolerant and inclusive, although that is important. Nor do I mean better ways of thinking about gender, although that's important too. I mean changed in the largest sense: revising how we think about things like language and meaning, truth and difference, knowledge and power. Especially the political effects of these things on people, when they suppress individual experience, discourage difference, and prevent new forms of knowledge from emerging.

These are big themes. But of all the things we know in the world, the most fundamental is our bodies. If the ways we have of knowing don't work there, I can see only two conclusions: Either these are bodies that have "failed" or the ways we have of knowing about them have failed—and, by extension, the ways we have of knowing about all bodies and many other things have failed as well.

These stories point the way to a new kind of freedom. Not an ultimate freedom, because I doubt that exists, but a different kind of freedom nonetheless. Whatever we are, whatever that fuzzy thing called "self" may be, I think these stories point to the way toward being more of that self in a deeper and fuller sort of way.

Every model of reality has margins where it begins to run out of explanatory steam, where we can see its problems and limitations. This anthology is about the people at those margins and thus about those who have found their bodies the target of discrimination because they transcended narrow stereotypes, because they were perceived as too old, young, black, short, fat, disabled, deaf, hairy, ill, butch, flamboyant, or any of a thousand other things. In short, this is about all of us.

We're not the ones who are broken. It's the model that's broken. The

model of Western thought about bodies itself, and much more besides. So, welcome to my breakdown.

A Fluid Analogy

What is knowledge? Consider something simple and familiar: bodily fluids. We'll check someplace objective and scientific, perhaps several medical textbooks.

We begin with menstrual blood. "Menstruation entails the discharge from the body of a couple of teaspoons of lukewarm fluid. This discharge occurs about once a month for a number of years, and women's bodies lose perhaps 500 gametes slowly over about 40 years."

As a bodily fluid, menstrual blood is a loser. It symbolizes—there's no kind way to say this—waste, weakness, loss, passivity—all the general ills associated with a feminine disposition. Young girls are often properly appalled to learn this, spending hours staring in shamed silence at their bodies, imagining all the little potential human beings leaking out, perhaps even at that very moment.

We move on to ejaculation. "Ejaculation entails the discharge from the body of a couple of teaspoons of lukewarm fluid. This discharge occurs—oh, up to five times a day it seems—for a number of years. Men's bodies lose perhaps two gazillion (the number is imprecise here) gametes each time: potential little human beings sprayed onto the carpet, handkerchiefs, rolled pieces of liver, and hollowed-out pumpkins."

As a bodily fluid, semen is the Man. It symbolizes—there's no unkind way to say this—dominance, strength, activity, vitality, potency—all the general benefits associated with a masculine disposition. Young boys are often properly proud to learn this, spending hours in rapt contemplation of their own pubescent, potent crotches.

"With a Capital P / And That Rhymes with T / And That Stands For..."

Bodies bear an enormous weight of cultural meaning. While acknowledging that bodies are "really there," one can reasonably question the meanings we give them. Anything but the barest facts—weight, mass, height—seems to go well beyond knowledge into the politics of meaning. I don't mean politics here with a capital P, as in civil rights and political parties. I mean "small p" politics: the power to say and track and even control different things about bodies.

For instance, when I shaved my legs and put on my first dress, everyone wondered what it meant. When I yearned for surgery, everyone thought it meant I was crazy. I thought it meant I really wanted to wear a dress and have a more feminine body. There wasn't anything else to know, any more than there was something to know about my inexhaustible craving for chocolate.

While my wearing dresses has resulted in my being diagnosed with a mental illness (gender identity disorder), it never occurred to anyone to ask whether my choco-cravings constituted a mental disorder, because we don't regulate or politicize attraction to chocolate. If we did, no doubt the nation's therapy couches would be filled with "cross-chocolaters," disgorging their deepest, darkest, semisweet secrets. ("And you were how old when *your mother* gave you your first piece of chocolate? Well! First, let's try something we call 'behavioral therapy.' Just put your foot in this warm clamp here, hold on to this electrode while I plug in your chair, and we'll watch some *nice* pictures of chocolate together.")

Cashing in on Knowledge in a Different Register

Maybe that seems silly. But not as silly when you consider that while our taste for specific foods passes without comment, our taste in specific bodies and pleasures seldom does. People immediately start asking what it means.

Why do men want to wear women's clothes? Why would a femme, who could have a "real man," instead want a wife-beater tank-top, strap-on butch? Why do some men want to become women? The only reason to track such things about bodies as their sex, genders, and desires is because we want to *do* something with them. Knowledge about bodies does not stand passively by, awaiting discovery by an objective and dispassionate Science.

Beyond measurable facts, knowledge about bodies is something we create. We go looking for it, and we fashion it in ways that respond to cultural needs and aims. We create the idea of binary genders because it marks something we want to track and control about bodies' appearance and behavior. We create gender identity disorders (GIDs) because we want to control sex and discourage the desire to change the body's sexual characteristics. We create the knowledge of sexual orientation and study it exhaustively because we want to know and control the individual's capacity to contribute to reproduction. There is no bright-line

separation here between knowledge and politics. Knowledge marches to the beat of power. Specific kinds of knowledge *about* bodies enable us to exercise specific kinds of power *over* them. Such knowledge is not "disinterested." It is *very* interested, it is purposeful, it has aims.

For instance, when I went in for a nose job, the doctors were agreeable, quick, and friendly. But when I went in for that groin job, my whole life went to hell. Everything came under fire: my upbringing (probably failed), my mother (probably overbearing), my father (probably distant), and the demands of modern manhood (obviously threatening). I'm really a man (I'm still Arnold), finally a woman (but I look like Brooke), basically homo (news to my girlfriend), and actually a transvestite (news to my tailor).

Luckily for me, here come the professionals. Doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists on one hand and theorists, academics, and writers on the other. Not to mention gender's Holy Trinity: Sally, Jerry, and Oprah.

The fact that many of us prefer different bodies, genders, or pleasures is clearly knowledge in the same register as the meaning of those bodies, genders and pleasures. In fact, I would go a step further. The propagation of norms for things like pleasure and gender, and the pursuit and categorization of divergence from such norms, are also knowledge in a different register. And the realm in which that knowledge lives is not Science but Politics.

If You're Not Part of the Problem, You're Not Part of the Solution

Prefer what is positive and multiple: difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.

—Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 1977

There is a huge and ongoing current critique of Western knowledge—sometimes called "postmodernism"—that is questioning what we know, how we know it, and what effect it has on those we know it about. And of all the things we know, indeed feel we *must* know, none is more fundamental than our own bodies. If that knowledge is showing cracks, then what else might be faulty as well? It is this nexus—the models of how we think and the problems posed by bodies that don't fit the model—that has led to the explosion of interest in genderqueerness and "gender studies."

Whenever I wanted to feel feminine, I couldn't because I was a boy, too tall, too wide-shouldered, not "real." Later, when I sometimes wanted to feel masculine, I couldn't because I had breasts, I was too curvy, I was no longer a "real" man. And when I wanted to feel something that was neither—well, that was impossible. It doesn't matter that some of these were things other people said about me and others things I said silently to myself. What matters is that the way in which we think—and especially the way we "think the body"—has too often become an off-the-rack, one-size-fits-all approach. One that favors that which is universal, known, stable, and similar. But my experience of my body and my place in the world was exactly the opposite: mobile, private, small, often unique, and usually unknown. These are places familiar to many people on knowledge's margins where many of us wish to go. And these stories, standing just beyond the sexual binary, point a way.

Truth Corrupts, Absolute Truth Corrupts Absolutely

"Let's assume you're right..."

"No, let's not assume I'm right. Let's assume there are lots of different 'rights' out there and this is just one of them."

—exchange in a gender seminar

The philosophical tradition, at least from Plato on, has always favored the concept of the same; i.e., the aim of philosophical thought has been to reveal the essential characteristics that two things hold in common.

—Newton Garver, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 1994

Why are we so frightened of difference and multiplicity? Perhaps it is the Western belief in the One True God? Strength, goodness, and truth are properties of our God's oneness. And all those tribes with multiple gods, tribes that were slaughtered by the ancient Hebrews, must have been weak, false, evil, and duplicitous.

Probably we fear that the alternative to the universal is not plurality but an endless abyss, a chaos where no person's knowing is any more (or less) right than any other's. And if all this reminds you of the revolt against queer bodies as well as the "threat" of multiculturalism, then go to the front of the class.

Some cultures accommodate, even exalt, difference. Yet in the West

we pursue unity, we believe in singularity, we worship not only our God but final Truths. If it's not true somewhere, then it's not really true. There is no room for what is private or unique. To seek the Truth—always capital T—is to seek what is universal and perfect.

Unfortunately, such an approach is a kind of intellectual fascism that squeezes out individual truths. As the exchange quoted above illustrates, valuing of difference can cause real confusion in my presentations.

Good modernists that they are, my students assume that there is a (single) right answer about things like gender and the meaning of bodies. Our job is arguing over the right one. It's a winner-take-all approach to knowledge. But where gender and meaning is concerned, there are lots of little truths. The way you understand your hips, your chest, your hair. How you feel when your lover holds you, gets on top, makes you come. The rush when you dress up, dress down, put on silk or leather. These are immensely small and private experiences. They are among our most intimate experiences of ourselves in the world. And they are precisely what is lost when we propound and pursue singular and monolithic Truths about bodies, gender, and desire.

We have "centered" all such knowledge over a binary of masculine/feminine. Body hair must mean masculine. Breasts must be feminine and passive. Hips are maternal, muscles masculine. An erect clitoris is vulnerable, an erect penis is commanding and strong. We need to de-center knowledge about the body. We need to allow other kinds of meanings to emerge, and other experiences of the body. We need room to find truths—always small t—that resonate with ourselves. To do this, many of us will need to transcend and transgress the kinds of knowledge that are out there. But that is how things change. That's why if you're not part of the problem, you're not part of the solution.

One Truth With No Trimmings, Please

Counseling, NOT Cutting! Get Your Scalpels Off Our Bodies!

—Hermaphrodites With Attitude poster

Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.

—Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 1977

There is nothing abstract about the power that sciences and theories have to act materially and actually upon our bodies and our minds...

—Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 1992

If multiplicity is a pinging under the hood, a “noise” in the system waiting to be found and fixed, then there’s no louder *ping* than one that disrupts two perfect and complimentary opposite sexes. Male and female are Nature’s way, our highest physical Truth. But what if Nature doesn’t oblige? What if She exasperates us by producing bodies that aren’t “natural?” What if that pinging under the hood is the sound of genderqueer bodies that just...don’t...fit?

I am speaking, of course, of intersexed infants. Such children, who are not clearly male or female, occur in about one in every 2,000 births. Because anything that is not male or female is not a true sex, we pronounce them “abnormal,” fit them legally into male or female, and fit them physically into boy or girl by cutting them up at the rate of about five every day. Thus are “natural” males and females maintained. In the aphorism of the Intersex Society’s Cheryl Chase, intersex is the sex that can’t exist. Because by definition, every child must be male or female. Inside every intersex infant is a real boy or girl just waiting to come out.

For instance, in one segment of *Primetime*, a pediatrician showed color slides of intersex genitals while Diane Sawyer tried to guess their “real sex”: That surreal change went something like this:

DS: That’s a male, right?

Doctor: Nope. A female. And this one?

DS: A female.

Doctor: No. A male.

DS: Now, this is surely a male. That looks like a penis.

Doctor: Sorry, another female. This one?

DS: Female?

Doctor: Male.

DS: Shee-it!

The surgeon’s job is figuring out which sex the child really is “underneath” whatever sex they “appear” and to surgically restore them to what Nature intended. If Nature produces some kids that aren’t “natural,” well, even Nature stops now and then to down a brewski. Such doctors

are not malicious or destructive. In fact, they are anything but. They are usually dedicated physicians and surgeons who are doing what they see as compassionate surgery for little, if any, fee.

But it is part of the peculiar tyranny of our taste for perfect and singular Truths that difference cannot be ignored but must be stamped out and made to fit the model. If the model and the body disagree, it is the body that must give way. And this is the case whether it’s intersexed infants, cross-dressing teens, or genderqueer adults.

It’s Always the Same Movie if You Don’t Change the Reals

Part of the problem of applying notions of truth to the body is that lurking in the background is always the idea of what is real and authentic. Now, since I keep getting called “sir” these days, maybe I should create a whole new category called M-to-F-to-M, where I finally get to be Real:

You know you’re a real M-to-F-to-M when...

* You mother still calls you “Richard.”

* You tell your boss you’re transsexual and he asks, “Which way did you go?”

* You look at your girlfriend’s naked butt and wish you had a good strap-on.

* Your lesbian girlfriend looks at your naked crotch and wishes you had a good strap-on.

We’re back to different orders of knowledge here. What can it mean to say that my sister’s femininity is real but that of a drag queen, a cross-dresser, an effeminate little boy, or an M-to-F is not? Why do we say that the masculinity of a Sly Stallone is real but that of an F-to-M, a stone butch, or a woman bodybuilder is not?

This kind of knowledge is still politics going in drag. It’s about power. By creating notions of realness and dividing bodies along a binary of real/false, bodies like mine are kept disempowered. And indeed, in places as diverse as my last job, the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, my local women’s events house in Miami, and the next women’s room I have to use, I run smack up against the Real. Realness is not only about naturalness and the distinction between the groin you were born with and the one you bought yourself for Christmas. If gender is about

language and meaning, then Realness is also about ownership, about who is allowed to use what meanings legitimately.

For instance, a drag queen is seen as appropriating women's symbols. No matter how convincing the illusion of femininity is, it's still an illusion, because by definition, the femininity is copied, not owned. The same is true for a transexual. No matter how "real" an M-to-F looks, she will never be Real.

Queer bodies are always defined by gender norms that are constructed in their absence. In fact, such norms are constructed only by their absence, because if they were there at the inception, the norm couldn't exist. It would be queered from the start.

It's particularly intriguing to hear charges of Realness coming from lesbians and feminists. Barely 100 years ago suffragettes were not considered to be "real women" because they shunned passivity to invade men's social prerogatives. Only 40 years ago, lesbians were accused of not being "real women" because they didn't want to marry men and become mothers. Twenty years ago femmes were ridiculed for not being "real lesbians" because they looked like straight women—yet another kind of displacement that ceded femininity to heterosexuality.

And, of course, through it all, any man who slept with or desired the same sex gave up forever the hope of ever being a "real man." In fact, the United States may be the only country in the world where we are so insecure about gender that the words *man* and *woman* have no meaning unless they are preceded by *real*.

Realness circulates in so many different contexts because it is very politically effective. As a form of knowledge, it empowers some bodies, discourages others, and teaches all to stay within the lines.

Double Vision

"Can I ask you something—are you a man or a woman?"

—attendee at women's conference

"Not always, but sometimes I think I am."

—smart-ass author

What is it about binaries that so captivates our thinking: men/women, gay/straight, M-to-F/F-to-M, white/black, real/artificial,

male/female, lesbian/feminist. Whoops...sorry. Scratch that. If there are more than two genders, it's a cinch that, with our bifocal glasses, we'll never see them. Actually, that's backward. Two-ness is not something "out there" but a product of the way we see. We look for that two-ness. Our categories assure that we see it. That's why no matter what gender I do, the only question is "Are you a man or a woman?" because that exhausts all the available possibilities.

When we pick up complex things—like desire or gender—with primitive mental tools like binaries, we lose nuance and multiplicity. Binaries don't give us much information. But then, they're not supposed to.

Quick: What is the meaning of masculinity? Mannish, not feminine, right? What about being straight? That means not being gay.

To say that I'm still really a man is only meaningful in terms of my not being a woman. I am feminine only to the exact degree that I am...not masculine. I am gay only as much as I'm not straight or to the exact number of songs I've memorized from *The Sound of Music*.

There's really not very much meaning or information circulating here, because with only two possibilities, meaning is confined to what something is not. As a form of thinking, binaries prevent other kinds of information from emerging. That is why no other genders ever appear. Binaries are the black holes of knowledge. Nothing is allowed to escape, so we get the same answers every time.

Two's a Crowd

So in binaries all knowledge is broken down into two equal halves, right? Actually, no. Despite the name, binary thinking is not like two, like two halves of an aspirin you break down the middle.

At this point in my life, I have spoken to hundreds of people about my body. Some of them even standing up. In 20 years, not one has asked me anything about "gaining a vagina." If they mentioned my surgery at all, every one said something, often in the form of a crude joke that was related to my losing the big Magic Wand. Now, I'm as impressed with my genitals as the next person. Maybe more so. This is the same sort of question posed to F-to-Ms. It seems no matter what sex it is, it's about male.

At this point, it should surprise no one that binaries are about power, a form of doing politics through language. Binaries create the smallest possible hierarchy of one thing over another. They are not really about two things, but only one.

Consider Man. We understand Man as a given, universal, and inclusive. That's why we say "all of Mankind" or "the study of Man." Woman is defined as what is left over: sex, procreation, and mystery. In this sense Woman is always "Other." Confined to what is not-man—sex, procreation, and mystery—Woman is always genderqueer. In terms of color, this would be equivalent to Asian being racially queered. Asians are seen through the lens of Orientalism. What is Western and white is universal, while the Orient as Other is confined to the mysterious, exotic, and primitive.

The second term of a binary exists only to support the first term. Thus Woman functions not as an equal half but as a support and prop, derivative from and dependent on Man. So both terms of the binary are really in the first. This gives the first term of any binary a lot of power. It defines the terms in which we talk. By doing so, it is itself insulated from discussion. We debate what Woman is, what women want, etc., etc. ad nauseam. But Man is immune from such debate. We endlessly debate the "meaning" of blackness, but whiteness—until very recently—is a given.

Only by overturning binaries and binary thinking will we really be able to open up more room for the second terms to come into their own, for things now obscured at the margins to emerge. But toppling binaries is not easy. They are very compelling forms of thinking. For instance, I can promote genderqueerness all I want. But questioning "real" sexes and genders, whether male and female, man and woman really exist, just leaves me looking like a fool.

And as long as I can't question the existence of normative sexes and genders, it will be *my* body and my gender that are on the firing line, that I will be forced to define, defend, and write books about, over and over again.

Genderqueerness may be a failed project from the outset. Our challenge is not promoting genderqueerness—as if it weren't already another way of promoting normative genders—but rather challenging the whole narrow, outdated notion of applying binary norms to bodies and genders.

Seeing Through Transparency

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word was made flesh....

—The Gospel According to John

In the beginning was Sex, and Binary Sex was with God, and Binary Sex was from God...and Binary Sex was made flesh, and it became The One, True Thing about everyone's body.

—The Gospel According to Us

As a panel member at a gay journalists' conference, I wanted to talk about issues, politics, gender-based hate crimes and job discrimination. But first audience members wanted to know what I "was." As reporters, they needed a label to identify me to their readers, not to mention their editors. The predictable questions flew. Did I consider myself transgendered? Was I presenting myself as male or female? Did I use male or female pronouns? Was I pre-op or post-op? Did I want to sleep with men or women (short menu in this restaurant)?

As I insisted on ignoring my personal life to focus on issues, their questioning grew more insistent. The more I deflected them, the more demanding they became. Finally several audience members became openly hostile, standing to verbally attack me with epithets and slurs, and finally physically assaulting me onstage with fists, chairs, and broken bottles.

No, wait a minute. I'm sorry. That was an S/M panel I was on. But at the gay journalism conference, my audience *did* repeatedly question what I was and express their frustration with my refusal to answer.

The question is whether language is transparent. Does it faithfully reveal the world, as though beneath a clear sheet of glass, or does it first create the world we say it reveals?

What kind of information did these journalists want?

Was I gay or straight?

Is it true I was transgendered?

Had I had surgery?

I wonder what in the world these things had to do with creating gender equality for all Americans. Is there anything I could say about my body or identity to those journalists that wouldn't obscure everything I really wanted to tell them? Are there any names for myself I could have given them with which I did not completely disagree, which wouldn't have made me complicit in my own silencing?

Our belief in language is based on our naive faith that the world is right here: finite, knowable, immediately and totally available to us. Thus what isn't named doesn't exist. What is named must therefore exist

I'll See It When I Believe It When You've Named It

But is the world really "right here?" Do words really describe the world accurately, exhausting what's "there"? Or are they limited only to what is repeatable and shared, and thus communicable? What about all those messy spaces between words and around their borders? Many of them are populated by our life's more profound experiences. Can language capture why you prefer wearing a nice dress to a new suit, why you want to penetrate instead of being penetrated, why you enjoy having a chest but don't want breasts, how you feel when you're stoned (not that the author has any experience here), or why you like Big Macs but hate sashimi (Japanese for "tastes like shit")?

Indeed, what about all those messy spaces between words like *feminine* and *masculine* and around the borders of words like *male* and *female* that are populated by bodies that don't fit the language? Or any of us whose gender experience confounds words when we transcend the narrow, outdated language of norms?

Words work well for things we can repeat, that we hold in common. What is unique or private is lost to language. But gender is a system of meanings that shapes our experience of bodies. Genderqueerness is by definition unique, private, and profoundly different. That's what makes it "queer." When we force all people to answer to a single language that excludes their experience of themselves in the world, we not only increase their pain and marginalization, we make them accomplices in their own erasure.

It is bad enough to render them silent, even worse to make them speak a lie, worse yet if speaking the lie erases them.

A recurrent theme of this anthology is writers struggling with language used about them and against them, even as it struggles back, twists in their hands, erases their sounds. All of us have those small, private experiences that we can never truly put into words. Our belief in language tells us that they aren't as real, as important, as the things we can say and share.

But I think it's just the opposite. For nowhere are we more ourselves than in those small, private moments when we transcend the common reality, when we experience ourselves in ways that cannot be said or understood or repeated. It is to those moments that we are called, and it is to those moments that we must listen.

Changing the Subject

My Mother Made Me a Lesbian (She Can Make One for You Too)

Sexuality "did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century." What had been some three hundred years earlier just so many disparate urges, inclinations, and activities, were delineated as a problematic set of traits and drives that supposedly define a central aspect of human nature.

—John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, 1991

What do we mean by *identity*? No one is perfectly gay, completely straight, totally womanly, or wholly transgendered. So what do we mean when we identify as such? Are identities real properties of people, or are they more like approximations, normative ideals against which we measure ourselves but never perfectly fit?

What about those of us who are Democrats or over 50: Why has sexual activity solidified into a social identity but party affiliation has not? Why do we consider the Human Rights Campaign an identity-based group, but not the American Association of Retired Persons? It is perhaps because we politicize bodies' age differently than we do their sexuality?

Is gayness an essential property of gay bodies, so that when we look in the mirror each morning we see a gay person staring back? Or is it rather a way we learn to recognize and see ourselves in the mirrors of others' eyes?

Perhaps all identification is a kind of displacement, a loss of self that is replaced by a reference to something else that one is not. But if that's so, identity is not a natural fact of bodies: it has a history. It emerged through specific kinds of language and knowledge that were a response to certain cultural needs.

Revolting Subjects

[I]t is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.

—Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," from *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1980

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage.... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Part 1*, 1978

According to Foucault, it was in the 19th century that the homosexual was created. He doesn't mean by this that same-sex attraction was invented on the spot. On the contrary, for thousands of years people had known about disco, plaid shirts, show tunes, and whale watching, but sex was considered something one *did*, not something one *was*. But sex was an appetite, just like our appetite for food or money. If you liked one thing and not another, that was a matter of personal taste. People were still considered to have sexual problems, but not the way we think of them. If you used sex for humiliation or conquest, if you pursued it to excess or pined away in lust, then, yes, you had a problem with sex. But the problem was how sex was used, not its direction.

But in the 1800s scientists produced a new catalog of disease based on sex. It included: gerontophiles (old people turn you on), pedophiles (young people turn you on), onanophiles (you turn you on), zoophiles (Mr. Ed turns you on), masochists (a little pain won't hurt), sadists (especially if it's someone else's), necrophiles (don't ask), and of course the homosexual (don't tell). Such people were thought to be joined by shared emotional traits, physical dispositions, latent characteristics, childhood experiences, family histories, and so on.

A new kind of knowledge had been created, and along with it a new category of self-experience. It now became possible to experience one's self *as a homosexual* and to be identified by others the same way. And now we have a powerful civil rights movement based on this self-perception invented just 150 years ago.

As sex went, so did gender. Diseases like "transvestic fetishism" and "gender dysphoria" were added to the catalog. Individuals who transcend gender norms have been around since the first culture created norms and then tried to impose them. But we are now witnessing the emergence of a whole new class of people, once simply "queer," who now understand themselves *as transgendered individuals*, although the word did not exist 10 years ago.

FertilityQueers: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary

Two concerns: Is this really a big change in people's thinking? If so, how are such powerful effects achieved?

To the first concern, it's easy to respond that the idea of the "invention" of the homosexual is just "playing semantics." It may or may not be semantics, but it is not any sort of "play": The effects of such forms of knowledge are both profound and personal.

Quick: What is the name for the identity we use to refer to infertile women? How about women who have XXY chromosomes? Women who are masculinized because they produce too much testosterone? Mothers who like wearing suits and ties to work?

There are no such identities, because these are not bodies we want to track and control. But women who've had sex changes? We *all* know the name created to track *that* identity. But suppose, as with these other bodies, we didn't care about a woman's surgical history? Then such individuals would simply be "women," and the whole discourse around transexuality and the politicization of such bodies would not have happened, as it did not with these other kinds of women. Yet there is no doubt, had we given them an identity, categorized them socially and legally as not being "real women," and subjected them to widespread discrimination and violence, we would now be witnessing the emergence of a community of such individuals and a political movement to represent them, along with their demands for inclusion within feminist (and lesbian) organizations and anthologies like this one to promote their visibility.

How to Be Hip

Nor are the effects of such forms of knowledge confined to the political sphere. For instance, when I first decided to change my body, I was told I was transsexual. I just wanted to change my body, but I was told the reason for this was that I was a "woman trapped in a man's body." I had a gender identity disorder. But I learned to think of myself as having a "birth defect," characterized by my new mental disorder.

When I entered the lesbian-feminist community of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, I was told I was still "really a man" or a "surgically altered she-male": in short, some kind of gender freak. I was kicked out of my apartment, shunned in bars, and barred from local events. Painful as this was, even worse was my buying into what was being said about me. I learned to think of myself as some sort of man-woman, neither male nor female: not even appropriate for my (lesbian) lover.

With the advent of transgenderism, I finally had a way of thinking of myself that gave me a sense of pride. I began to understand myself as transgendered. And, of course, at some point, that didn't work either, because like everything that preceded it, it didn't really fit.

It's not that I'm especially impressionable. To understand our bodies at all, we must make a stand somewhere. There is no neutral place, no position outside of language. We seek ways of understanding our bodies that solve what we perceive to be their problems.

In my case, the problem that was created about my body was its genderqueerness. And I sought ways of understanding it that would resolve that problem: some painful, some empowering. The problem could have been many other things. For instance, there's the gentlewoman who sat next to me on the bus, saying, "Please excuse my fat hips." When I asked her about this, she said, "I know, my feminist friends said I should think of them as nurturing and maternal." We had a long talk about her hips and my body and how miserable they'd made each of us.

Was she especially susceptible? I doubt it. But someone had explained to her that her hips were "width-queer," that they transcended some norm somewhere. She had internalized this as a problem of her body and sought ways of understanding it, just as I had, that would explain its "meaning."

Indeed, two things stand out most about our stories. First is how feminism's counterdiscourse on women's bodies has in its own way

become as narrow and inflexible as the one from which it was supposed to free us. Second is how much the understanding of our bodies has colored how we feel about them. I doubt my wanting to change my body or that woman's hips had much implicit meaning. But the attachment of meaning is a powerful tool for making us experience ourselves in the world in very specific ways.

You Cut Me Up

Which brings me to my second concern: How are such effects achieved? As good progressives, when we think of Power, we imagine something above us, overwhelming, and harsh that we need laws to rein in. This works well with big, institutional power, like the police powers of arrest, the power of courts, and the government's power to spy on us or restrict our speech. But that kind of power doesn't go very far in explaining that women's hips or my body. After all, there was no central registry tracking us, no government agency compelling our experiences.

For that kind of power, we need another model: discourse. I seldom use the word, because when I do, Clare thrusts two fingers down her throat and makes rude gagging sounds. Academics may overuse it, but I think it's useful here. Discourse simply refers to power "from the bottom up." This is the kind of small power exercised in hundreds of little everyday transactions.

Think of the body's surface as a sheet of cookie dough. Because the dough has no inherent meaning, you can cut it all into circles, stars, or squares, or a mixture of different shapes all at once. When you're done, no doubt the cookies are "real." But there is no "truth" behind them, nothing to be learned from why one is a star and not a triangle, and no shape was any more *there* beforehand than any other. What truths there are lie with the cutter, not its product. Discourse is the cookie cutter.

But wait. All this is too abstract. Why don't you take a break for a minute, go down to the corner newsstand, and buy a *Times*?

News to Me

Fine. Does the man ahead of you hold the door for you as you leave your building? Do people step aside when you walk down the crowded street, or do they unconsciously expect you to step aside?

When you get to the newsstand, does the newspaper vendor address you as "Sir," "Ma'am," or "Miss"? Perhaps he finds you sexually confusing

and stumbles awkwardly over pronouns. When he hands you your change, does he look down in respect, meet your eyes, or perhaps refuse to acknowledge you at all? Does he smile in friendliness or frown in disgust? If he's the guy you always see, before you leave, does he swap a dirty joke or ask about "the wife and kids?" Or maybe he flirts just a little, asking if you've lost weight and telling you that you need a young man in your life.

Even in this tiny exchange, a small fraction of your day, are piled up one interaction after another that stamp us with our sex, gender, or class. This is not power from the "top down," but from the "bottom up." It is not the big, familiar power of concrete buildings and visible institutions, power that is both massed and massive. Rather, it's the power of what is said and thought about us: the small, diffuse, invisible power created and instantly destroyed in thousands of little, insignificant exchanges.

It is through just such interactions that fat hips and queer bodies are made, interactions that tell us what we are, what we mean, and to what names we must answer.

Help! Youths Are Escaping the Stable!

But if this power of discourse is created and destroyed over and over again, then it must be inherently unstable too. What happens if it "fails"?

What about the homosexual? Could some people who are gay simply fail to acknowledge it? Not going into the closet, but simply refusing to answer to the name?

That is exactly what is happening among queer youth. As we've seen, identities are created in response to the politicization of bodies and desires. Eventually a countermovement emerges—as it did with homosexuals and now is doing with gender—to fight that politicization. But as this countermovement becomes successful, a paradox ensues. The more successful it is, the more unstable the discourse becomes. Gays show up on TV, in movies, as politicians running for office: Gayness is no longer so "queer."

Sexual orientation becomes less of a problem. (Recall that we asked at the opening if identities were a real feature of experience or an approximation of an ideal.) Young gays and lesbians don't walk down the street holding hands like we did, terrified, self-conscious, and staring rigidly straight ahead. They just walk around holding hands openly like

their straight classmates. As the oppression that defined gay identity shifts, so does the meaning of the identification. Young queers face new possibilities, they can be other kinds of individuals, they can explore other selves.

Luckily for us, one of the selves many have used their new freedom to explore is gendered. Increasingly, numbers of youth are asking, "If I don't have to be gay anymore, what other selves are there for me to explore? Who might I be in another gender?" Gender, the old battleground, is quickly emerging as the new battleground and the new playground, for today's youth.

Put Down That Clipboard or I'll Shoot

The ways in which we formulate notions of selfhood out of the models of subjectivity available to us, shape our behavior in the world...

—Patricia Waugh, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory," from *Postmodernism: A Reader*, 1992

Do not demand of politics that it restore the "rights" of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power.

—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Part 1*, 1978

We are used to taking the side of individual rights against institutional and governmental power. And we have centuries of political thought and experience to guide us in such struggles. But as Nancy Fraser notes, "Talk of rights and the inviolability of the person is of no use when the enemy is not the despot but the psychiatric social worker" with a clipboard. (Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, 1989, p. 44)

With discourse, we're talking about a completely different kind of power—one that creates individuals. Our old political and theoretical tools don't apply. If the homosexual and the transgendered are themselves the product of certain kinds of power, we need new kinds of political action that will call into question individuality itself. Our problem is not fighting for the rights of specific individuals, but rather fighting for the right to *be* different kinds of individuals.

In other words, the question for genderqueers is, Do we want to fight *as genderqueers*? Or do we want to question the whole project of

queerness? Do we want to make genderqueerness OK, just as gay rights is making gayness OK? Or do we want to attack the notion of normative genders itself?

The question is not as trivial as it sounds. For instance, a transgender movement devoted mostly to the problems faced by transexuals has the capacity to help a lot of embattled people. Yet it will leave out many people who are often gender-queered but not trans.

Do we want a transgender struggle that focuses on the rights of transexuals to change their driver's licenses, get surgery, and transition on the job? Or do we want a movement against the gender stereotypes that affect all Americans? This is not a rhetorical question. As gay rights continues to mature, the fight for gender equality looms as the next major civil rights struggle on the horizon. Our answers to such questions will have enormous power to shape what comes of it.

Deconstructing Trans

We're Just Like You, We're Just...Different

When a lesbian—perplexed at the furor over trans inclusion in her organization—asked me, “Where were transpeople 20 years ago?” I told her, “They were there, but they were gay.”

I wasn't being snippy, but accurate. In the '70s they *were* there, and they *were* gay. But in just 20 years, they were neither.

Gender should have been the quintessential issue for both gay rights and feminism. And both owed a substantial debt to genderqueers: from outspoken suffragettes to radical dykes; from the genderqueers who rioted at the Stonewall Inn, to nelly boys picked out for assault.

But in the late 1970s and the '80s, both the gay and feminist movements turned away from gender as a primary issue, both for social and political reasons. The political reason was that following the success of black civil rights, minority rights turned definitively away from freedom of expression in favor of “immutable characteristics”: things you can't change even if you want to.

If there's something socially undesirable about you that you *won't* suppress, then it's a matter of choice and not the law's concern. But if it's something undesirable that you *can't* suppress (race, disability, ethnicity), then the law should offer you protection. This has short-changed the right to self-expression. It has made social legitimacy an effect of helplessness before your own sexual and gender orientation

and whatever biological foundation you can put forth to explain them.

In the gay community the focus on immutability has led to promoting sexual orientation in a way that is completely removed from gender expression. Gay men never act effeminate, don't wear pastels, don't brandish limp wrists, and wouldn't be caught dead lip-synching to Barbra Streisand's Broadway album. Lesbians aren't butch, don't ride motorcycles, never sport crew cuts, and only wear combat boots if they've just come from Army boot camp.

In the trans community, just the opposite is the case. Gender is promoted at the expense of sexual practice. It's OK for me to say I'm changing my body because of my "gender identity." But it would be considered superficial, even perverse, to say I was doing so because having a more feminine body would turn me on. Among cross-dressers, it's acceptable to say that I wear women's clothing to "explore my feminine side," but not because it gives me an erection.

That's the political, but there's also the social reason these movements turned away from gender. Looking gender normative is vital to social acceptance. That's why few things are more uncomfortable than seeing someone whose gender you can't discern or more socially unacceptable than being a man who looks and acts like a woman or a woman who looks and acts like a man.

When gay activists began asserting, "We're just like straights, we just sleep with the same sex," that "just like" was shorthand for "gender." It said, "We look and act just like your parents, your friends, or your boss: Don't be uncomfortable with us."

And when feminists began explaining, "We're not trying to be men," the phrase "trying to be men" was also shorthand for "gender." It said, "We're just like your wives, mothers, daughters: Don't be uncomfortable with us either."

While the intervening years have proven this to be very successful rhetoric, they've also proven that it isolated genderqueerness as a civil rights issue. That was the price of social acceptance for two new and often-threatening movements.

It's fair to say that "transgender" was created by the gay and feminist movements. Its emergence became practically inevitable from the day those movements began moving away from gender.

A Hard Man Is Good to Find (But That Has *Nothing* to Do With My Gender)

Most remarkable in gender's evolution as an issue has been the widely accepted separation of gender and sexual orientation, even among transgender activists. But is desire really distinct from gender? Only if we confine *gender* to *gender identity*, as many gay organizations have done.

But watch any butch with big biceps, tight jeans, and a lit Camel walk into the local gay bar. Or a butch queen at the gym spending hour upon hour pumping and primping so he's buff enough to catch the eye of that cute new number with the tight butt, long eyelashes, and rippled abs. Or watch them in bed, one raising his butt, spreading his legs, and moaning to arouse the other. It is only through such gendered behaviors that sexual orientation is consummated, that it makes any conceptual sense. These behaviors are how we make ourselves attractive to others, are attracted to them, and make love.

Moreover, sexual orientation will always be tied to genderqueerness, because desire *itself* is gendered. A man having sex with a man or a woman having sex with a woman is itself the most profound transgression of gender norms conceivable. It is at the heart of homophobia.

It need not harm gay political aspirations to admit the obvious: That if it is gender-feminine to pull a dress over the male body, it is gender-feminine to pull a man down on it as well.

The Queerer Sex

Where is feminism in this today? Why has transgenderism remained the source of long-running tensions within feminist ranks? Genderqueerness would seem to be a natural avenue for feminism to contest Woman's equation with nurturance, femininity, and reproduction: in short, to trouble the project of Man. Yet feminists have been loath to take that avenue, in no small part because queering Woman threatens the very category on which feminism depends.

Man is the universal. Woman is defined by her opposition to Man, by what she does not have, the Penis, and the one thing she has that Man does not, reproduction and sexuality. Thus, to be androgynous is not gender-neutral but male. Man is the default sex; womanhood must continually prove itself by artifice, adornment, and display. In a culture centered on Man, Woman will always be the genderqueer. This has

made Woman an inherently fragile project. Feminist and lesbian communities have remained deeply unreceptive to the new barbarians at the gate—F-to-Ms, M-to-Fs, passing women, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, and tranz youth—who seem to threaten the very foundation of Woman, while male communities feel no such concern. A bearded, muscle-bound F-to-M evokes nothing like the same resentment, anxiety, and concern for authenticity in a men's group that either he or an attractive, curvaceous M-to-F does in a women's group.

It may take a new generation of young women to take queerness to its natural feminist conclusions—women for whom such queerness is not a threat but a new kind of feminist freedom.

Only Half the Man I Used to Be

"Transgender" origins lie in the search for a name for people who didn't want to change sexes (as transsexuals do) or occasionally change to clothing of another sex (as cross-dressers do) but who wanted to change their genders: live full-time in another sex without medical intervention. Over time transgender came to be used for anyone who "transgressed gender," including—according to who you ask—cross-dressers, transsexuals, and the original transgendered but also butch women, effeminate men, intersexuals, drag people, and genderqueer youths.

The term has not been without its conceptual awkwardness. Defining a class of people by "transgressing" norms would seem in some way to reinforce those norms. In addition, it defines people by what they are not—normal men and women. However, *transgender* has undoubtedly enabled many despised and marginalized people to come together around a common voice and a way to identify that is empowering and constructive.

Most cities now boast a local transgender group, and today, transgender conferences are being held somewhere in the United States almost every month. There is even a kind of tenuous artistic legitimacy, as transsexuals find their way into movies like *Boys Don't Cry* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. With this legitimacy has come political activism: Transsexual activists now pass local ordinances, educate policy makers, and win lawsuits. And while transgender's increasing acceptance has not stopped the flow of blood from trans murders and hate crimes, there is reason to hope.

Let Me Hold That Umbrella for You

Transgender was intended as an umbrella term, then a name of inclusion. But umbrellas don't work well when one group holds them up. Today, trans activism is often focused on the problems (bathroom access, name change, workplace transition, and hate crimes) faced by those who have been most active in its success: postoperative male-to-female transsexuals (any similarity to the author is purely coincidental).

Yet there is little being done today to address the needs of drag people, butches, cross-dressers, transsexuals who do not seek surgery, or (besides the Intersex Society of North America) intersexuals. Cross-dressers especially have suffered from lack of representation, although they number in the millions and experience severe problems associated with child custody, job discrimination, hate crimes, and punitive divorce precedents.

Thus has transgender, a voice that originated from the margins, begun to produce its own marginalized voices. And in part because—as an identity organized around "transgression"—there is a growing debate over who is "most transgressive."

In Surgery We Trust

How does one decide such questions? For instance, as one transsexual put it, "I'm not this part-time. I can't hang my body in the closet and pass on Monday."

There is no doubt, from one perspective, that cross-dressers enjoy some advantages. They are large in numbers, most only dress occasionally, and they can do so in the privacy of their own homes. Does that mean they would live that way if they had a choice? Does it really make them "less transgressive"?

In fact, nobody wants men in dresses. There are no "out" cross-dressers, and almost no political organization wants them or wants to speak in their name. "A man in a dress" is the original "absurd result" that judges, juries, even legislators try to avoid at all costs when rendering verdicts or crafting laws. "Men in dresses" isn't the next hit movie: It's a punch line in the next joke.

Among genderqueer youth, it is no longer rare to hear complaints of being frozen out of transgender groups because they don't want to change their bodies. In an identity that favors transsexuals, changing

one's body has become a litmus test for transgression. And even that litmus test is not always applied.

For example, one would assume that preoperative transexuals (or the increasing number of nonoperative transexuals) would be considered more transgressive, as would transgendered people of any stripe who don't "pass" as binary males and females. A 6-foot, 3-inch presurgical transexual woman with a deep voice and 5 o'clock shadow is doing the hardest, loneliest, and most dangerous gender activism there is. The same could be said for a 5-foot, 2-inch butch with a pear shape, small hands, and high voice who insists on having her masculinity recognized, acknowledged, and respected. Yet these are not the individuals who are highly prized as "most transgressive." In fact, as with most communities founded on oppression, the opposite occurs: those who can pass are most highly valued, as are those whose surgery makes them legally male or female. Since trans activists have loudly and justifiably complained about being "most transgressive" and about being consigned to the bottom rung of gay and feminist concerns, so it is doubly unfortunate to see them developing hierarchies of their own, in which transpeople must compete for legitimacy and in which their own margins sometimes go unrecognized. Indeed, like assertions over who has more "privilege," debates over who is most "transgressive" are a form of reverse discrimination that seeks to confer status based on who has it worst.

Which is to say, debates over identity are always divisive and never conclusive. They are divisive because at heart they are about conferring status; always a zero-sum game. For one person to win, another must lose. They are inconclusive because there are no objective criteria by which to decide. Winning such debates is always a function of who sets the rules and who gets to judge. And since postsurgical transexuals are most often in a position to judge, at the moment, the rules tend to favor their life experiences.

You're Indescribable

Transgender is now commonly used in two ways: as both an identity and a descriptive adjective. As an identity, it faces the same question as gender itself. Is it transgression about something we *are* or something we *do*? So far the answer has been definitely "something we are." This has created an interesting collision between theorists who understand gender as a doing and many transexual activists who claim it as a being.

The arguments being used to promote the theoretical importance of transexuals are undercutting those being used to advance their political legitimacy.

Organizations seeking to add transgender issues to their work add "gender identity" to their mission statements: a psychiatric term related to transexuals. But when we equate transgenderism with those individuals who can claim *their* gender is a sign of an internal, binary essence, we privilege transexuals over other genderqueers who cannot make similar claims. Moreover, we diminish those who conceptualize their transcending of narrow gender stereotypes as a matter of the right to self-expression.

If a boy is repeatedly beaten up after school for being a "sissy," can he plausibly claim that his "sissyness" results from some inner identity? What about a big-breasted femme who is sexually assaulted for being perceived as "sexually provocative"? Does the fact that they cannot claim their transgression to result from a "gendered identity" make it any less meaningful? Some gay and trans activists would reply yes.

While transgender identity is promoted as including butches, femmes, and drag people, it is hard to find many who so identify. Perhaps one lesson is that when an identity cannot be applied equally, those who are less equal refuse identification.

And while there are undoubtedly millions of Americans who frequently transcend gender roles—from ballet-loving quarterbacks to suit coat-wearing soccer moms—the identity remains inhospitable to them as well.

Too Queer for Words

Some trans activists have tried to correct these limitations by "embracing the contradiction." They emphasize the big-tent approach of transgender-as-adjective and assert, "We are *all* transgendered." This rings true, but does it also ring useful?

If people refuse a term as identity, is it more likely they will accept it as a description? And if not, of what use is describing people with an adjective they reject? The emphasis on transgender as a description also harks back to the idea of *all* gender as drag, as a kind of displacement of self into binary norms. Yet many transexuals reject such arguments. They understand—and want others to understand—that their gender results from a core identity, a true self that is not the result of some external norms.

Moreover, many transgendered people are attracted to the term because it is not openly inclusive, because it *does* name a specific group of people. They accept *transgender's* wider use when it leads to greater social acceptance. But they would deeply resist the guy in the next cubicle who wept over last night's Super Bowl loss to the Packers, saying, "Yeah, I cried...I guess I am transgendered."

In fact, GenderPAC's reaffirmation in 2000 of its mission to be a human rights group for all Americans drew angry rejoinders from many trans activists who wanted a gender rights group that was exclusive to them. Among the loudest voices were those who had been calling for gay organizations to be transgender-inclusive and were now attacking a human rights approach for not being exclusive enough. In retrospect, it is difficult to see how excluding gay, feminist, or straight Americans is ethically superior to excluding transgendered people...or anyone else.

The only group today using transgression in its widest and most uncritical descriptive sense is queer youth, who consistently prefix anything genderqueer with "trans" or "tranz." Many such radical youths are taking civil rights to the next level: finally making the long-delayed connection among gay, feminist, and trans politics.

It is still an open question if *genderqueer*, a word promoted to resolve some of these issues, will yet create its own hierarchies and exclusions. Looking over the many debates about which authors and voices belong in this anthology, my bet is it will.

The New Gay

What began as the "gay community," then the "lesbian and gay community" (make sure not to erase women, put them first to make up for historic injustices), then the "lesbian, gay, and bisexual community" (append bisexuals whenever we remember to, don't forget they get oppressed too for sleeping with the same sex, wish they'd finally choose one sex or the other and stop passing themselves off as straight when it's convenient), has finally become—for all practical purposes (except when one was being quoted in *The New York Times* or on CNN, you know, something important)—the "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community."

The term *LGBT* is still uncomfortable for some people. Some gays and lesbians can still be heard asking quietly, in their more politically incorrect moments, "Why—I mean, I know, I shouldn't even think this,

let alone say it—but why does changing your gender/sex belong in a movement about sexual orientation?" A good question if you think that sexual orientation and gender are separate. An even better question if you are fortunate enough to look, well...straight.

But there is no denying that after a persistent 10-year struggle, the *T* in *LGBT* is here to stay. Will the new gay embrace of transgender be successful? Will gay organizations actually devote any real resources to transgender, and if so, will they give us anything more than transexual rights?

On this, the jury is still out. Although a few organizations have led the way, most organizations have not brought to bear anything like real muscle, and what muscle there is continues to be channeled into "gender identity" and transexual concerns.

In the meantime, butches, queens, fairies, high femmes, tomboys, sissy boys, and cross-dressers have completely vanished from civil discourse. They are never mentioned in public statements by any major progressive organization. For political purposes, they have ceased to exist.

Gender itself remains invisible as a progressive issue. If it is mentioned at all, it is carefully confined to transgender. In effect, *gender* has become the new *gay*. It is the thing we no longer speak about in polite company. I think here of school bullying, which is all about gender. People are paying attention to it now because, unfortunately, some victims shot their classmates. These are terrible crimes. But is the gender-bashing of school-age youths new? Hasn't it been a regular feature of schools since there were classrooms and young boys in them? Or did we just overlook it because sissy boys are not a gay, feminist—or now gender identity—issue?

With gender stretched across the whole surface of individuals' relations with society, maybe it's time to quit attacking the problem piecemeal, waiting for the next issue to appear on the front page of *The New York Times*. Maybe it's time to acknowledge gender stereotypes as a problem we all share, a central concern, a way to come together: a human rights issue for us all.