



WHAT DOES IT COST TO TELL THE TRUTH?

I WAS TWENTY-SIX WHEN I LEARNED I was very tall. For most of my life I had been considered normal height. But at twenty-six, suddenly, strangers in elevators began leaning toward me conspiratorially and asking, "How tall are you, anyway?" as if we'd been having a conversation on the subject. There were delivery men who inquired, "You play roundball?" and even one man on a motorcycle who slowed alongside me to exclaim, "You must be a volleyball player!"

Although I had never before worried about my height, I began studying myself in mirrors. I began *seeing* myself as tall. In short order, I became self-conscious about the length of my body. I stooped fashionably while walking down the street, tried not to stand up too straight in bars or at parties, and leaned against walls and pillars when speaking so I wouldn't appear to be towering over shorter people.

WELCOME TO GENDERHELL

I learned a lot of other things about my body as well. My voice was unnervingly deep. My hands were too large, my shoulders too broad,

my hips too narrow, and my feet much too big. The same size basketball sneakers I'd been wearing for over ten years suddenly looked ridiculous, even to me. People made public jokes about my "boats." I stopped wearing them, even stopped shooting hoops. Although I'd been slender for decades, since I was now "too big," I stopped working out at the gym as well.

I was obsessed with how I looked and was perceived. I became a ferocious shopper, lusting after any clothing that would hide my height and shoulders. I bought winter gloves and dress shoes a size too small. My pinched hands and feet went along with the higher voice I practiced when speaking on the phone.

Over a terrifyingly short period of only one year, my entire perception of my body changed to match the social truths everyone else read there. The mirror, formerly a friend, turned into a deadly enemy. I felt humiliated, ashamed, each time I looked in it, weeping quietly in dressing rooms and loudly at home. I appeared ridiculous to myself because I was seeing what I was told was there: this absurdly tall person with large hands, ungainly feet, wide shoulders, a deep voice, and a masculine manner. Need I go on? What is most remarkable is that I had been about the same size and shape since I was fifteen.

READ ANY GOOD WOMEN LATELY?

What had happened was that I'd started being read by others "as a woman."

That my body became the site of all kinds of social inspection and pronouncements didn't surprise me. But the virulence did. I was accosted from every direction: from the men who hissed at me on street corners; to the man on the train who leaned over and said, "Nice tits," as I boarded; to the construction workers who whistled or yelled, "Faggot!"; to the driver who rolled down his window at a crowded intersection, the very first time I went out in a dress, to shout, "God, you sure are uuug-ly!"

In many ways I imagine that what happened to me is not much different from what happens to many teenagers once their bodies

hit puberty and are seized by the cultural machine. In my case, though, I already had a stable body image, and I was an adult, fully aware of what was going on. It shocks me to this day how quickly I learned to make my body over, to embrace the various social truths about it, and to see on it what I was told. I knew what people were thinking when they looked me up and down, stared at my body parts, and inspected my face.

TELL ME HOW I LOOK

"People being introduced to me no longer make eye contact—they make crotch contact," a friend, just starting to be read as a woman, told me.

My body, like hers, heretofore just a place to put food, carry out certain operations of pleasure, and get me from point A to point B, had overnight become an armed camp which I surveyed at my peril. It hurt to be me, and it hurt to see me.

I am reminded of a recent meeting with a transsexual female friend of mine. She had begun living full-time as a woman, and eagerly showed me pictures of herself in make-up and various outfits. Again, this is much like any teenager would do. What particularly struck me was that, as she anxiously scanned my face for a reaction, she said, "I have to depend on other people to tell me how I look because I don't know how to see myself yet."

How strange that she was soliciting this information from someone who customarily walks around with a short, butchy haircut, wearing no make-up, dressed in blue jeans, sneakers, and a large black Transsexual Menace T-shirt. Which is to say that I do not, at first blush, inspire confidence as the best possible judge of such matters. I could not care less how either of us is read by nontranssexuals.

NO ADMISSION TO LIFE WITHOUT A VALID GENDER ID

How does it happen that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through what forms of rationality, through what historical necessities, and at what price? My question is this: How much does it cost the subject to be able to tell the truth about itself?

Michel Foucault, "How Much Does It Cost to Tell the Truth?"¹

Foucault asked about the necessity of making one's self an object of possible knowledge, to be learned and memorized. For genderqueers, that necessity is survival. The purpose of a gender regime is to regulate these meanings and to punish those who transgress them. In order to survive, to avoid the bashings, the job discrimination, and the street-corner humiliations, my friend will be forced to place herself as a site of *truth* to be mastered. That knowledge will come from others. She must know how others see her so she can know how to see herself; otherwise, she enters society at her peril.

She will gradually learn how she looks and what her body means. She will carry this knowledge around, producing it on demand like pocket ID when she enters a subway car, applies for a job, approaches the police for directions, uses a women's room, or walks alone at night past a knot of men. Summoning up the image in her mind's eye, she will recall the truth of her looks, checking it quickly to determine if anything is "wrong," feeling shame at her shortcomings and pride in her attractive features.

Like me, she may find herself growing further and further from direct sensation, so that in small, gradual steps it becomes successively less important what her body *feels like* than how she *feels about* it. As the source of what her body means becomes more firmly lodged in the perceptions of others, she may experience a curious and distressing sense of dislocation and vulnerability. This ID that she carries—her body—will be continually subjected to being displayed, stamped, and judged.

Since her status and legitimacy as a woman will always be at risk, always be determined by and dependent upon others, she may find that her lack of contact with sensation grows along with a nagging sense of bodily disorientation. She will wake one day to find herself lost within the unfamiliar landscape of her own body, like a nomad in some strange and foreign desert, surrounded by unknown landmarks and inhabited by those whose alien features, and distant ways, she can no longer recognize.

What does it cost to tell the truth?

A DACHSHUND PONDERES WIENER-PEOPLE

Someone out there is undoubtedly saying, "Well, all this is very moving, but there *is* a reality to bodies and you can't get around it. For starters, compared to other women, *yqu* are tall." Such a comment highlights my point.

We like to think, in Judith Butler's memorable phrase, that physical features exist somewhere out there "on the far side of language."² But if even a feature as fundamental and measurable as my "tallness" can only be derived through your reviewing a population of bodies, perceiving some normative measure, and then carrying out (albeit unconsciously) an operation of comparison, then that tallness looks suspiciously to me like something you read on me instead of some innate feature in me. My measurable height may not be arguable; what it *means* is.

Characteristics of mine that are truly innate, that originate "on the far side of language," ought to be totally apparent to you whether you'd ever seen another human being or not, even if you'd only seen me mounted like the gendertrash insect I am, even if you were a Martian seeing your first humanoid, or a wiener-dog viewing its first vertically challenged primate. Any other readings of my body are culturally relative, contingent upon the context in which you locate me. Hence, if we lived among the Munchkins, you'd argue I was naturally a giantess, while if we lived among the New York Knicks, you'd insist I was somewhat short.

The response to deconstructing the body in this way is frequently to offer up counterexamples, of which skin color is the most common. That line of reasoning goes like this: "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps *some* things about bodies are culturally constructed. But some features are simply there. For instance, what about race? Surely color is just color and not some cultural by-product."

Not so, I say, for while skin color itself may be on the far side of language, nearly everything else we can know about it and all that is culturally resonant is not. Such resonances are often specific to particular subcultures. *Black*, for example, is a peculiarly

American phenomenon. White Americans often see only "African-American" or "black" when they look at someone who appears darker-hued than they are. This perception unconsciously follows the notorious "one drop rule,"³ a bizarre invention of white America which historically held that "one drop" of African blood made a person black. Yet most black Americans are able to see the complex range and variety of shades in which skin color can come. Since being white has been supremely privileged, and therefore required no further qualification, specific shades of brown or black have held tremendous significance and implications for surviving within a racist system.

EVERYONE'S ANSWER IS THE ONLY ANSWER

Each era in history considers its own embrace of the body's features as "natural" and eternal. But bodies, like all cultural products, go through periods, phases, and even fashions. Consider the breast in the recent American landscape. Only a few decades ago the duckbilled breast, as shaped by the tortured duckbill-shaped bra, was the standard of beauty. Shortly thereafter, large full breasts were seen as beautiful and the height of femininity. In just the next generation, with bras burning across the land, small breasts were "naturally" feminine and those "cursed" with big, full breasts found themselves "too big."

For another hoot, consider how definitions of masculinity and muscularity have changed. Look at George Reeves of the old black-and-white *Superman* TV show. His stomach stuck out beyond his chest; his arms had no noticeably defined muscles. Compare him to Christopher Reeve of the modern *Superman* movies, who was sculpted like a body-builder. Both generations find their models "naturally" manly. Both would find the other's model incomprehensible.

For that matter, you would think at least that cherished staple, the Big Dick, would have a stable cultural identity. I mean, more is always better, right? Not necessarily. Thomas Laqueur⁴ relates that the ancient Greeks, from whom we inherit much of our aesthetics,

found small penises masculine and attractive. Large dicks were considered animal-like, and often the butt (sorry) of public jokes. Men with big dicks learned shame and began to "tuck," just like any sensible drag queen. A transmale friend who recently returned from a trip to Greece told me how comfortable he'd felt. Everywhere he went, all the statues and pictures had small, manly dicks—just like his.

OH YEAH? WELL, MY MOM SAYS YOUR BODY IS JUST A DISCURSIVELY PRODUCED EVENT BASED ON HIGHLY VARIABLE CULTURAL NORMS

As I sat down next to my seatmate on the bus leaving the National Women's Music Festival in Bloomington, Indiana, she said quickly, "Please pardon my fat hips." I was nonplused, not having noticed her hips. Foucault's questions came to mind: What kind of system bids us each make of our bodies a problem to be solved, a claim we must defend, or a secret we must publicly confess, again and again?

Since she and I were stuck together for the next two hours, we proceeded to discuss some of these questions, in particular, why she had felt obliged to apologize to me, a complete stranger.

"Oh, I know, I shouldn't think of them that way," she said. "My feminist friends tell me I should think of them as *nurturing* and *maternal*."

"Oh, no," I exclaimed, "that's the same thing. It just means this time the jury came back with a different verdict. You're still in the dock awaiting judgment—either way they decide, you'll still have been radically disempowered. The question really should be, what is the original cultural concern with your pelvis and bodyfat that *requires* us to recognize and agree on a meaning in the first place? In other words, whose agenda is it that demands your hips must be gendered with a particular meaning, or to even have any meaning at all?"

"The body," said Simone de Beauvoir, "is a situation."⁵ In or-

der to grasp our bodies, to think of them as well as to understand the cultural gaze that fixes upon them, we must construct what our bodies can be said to mean and to look like.

We rely upon other members of our speech community to do this, since it is in the meanings reflected back at us through culture that we find *truth*. Almost everything about bodies is discovered through comparison from the collection of meanings stored in a common language: pretty, fat, plain, masculine, short, light-skinned, wrinkled, feminine, broad, sleek, ugly, athletic, deformed, slim, rotund, buxom, old, delicate. The litany traps and enfolds each body.

For some of us, the meanings culture drapes upon our bodies are extremely painful and depressing. Worse still, a gender system tends to enforce monolithic meanings. Big breasts must mean one thing, hairy backs another, wrinkles yet another still, providing us little or no room to construct our selves and create alternatives.

Simply having our bodies exposed to social judgment can be painful and disturbing to some people. I remember my sixty-five-year-old friend who said, "You know, when I first look at myself in the mirror, I look fine. I think, *Well, all right!* But I look once again, harder, imagining how people must see me, and then I see only the fat and wrinkles and I feel just awful."

What does it cost to tell the truth?

I guess if your sense of self matches closely with the cultural grid of what you should mean, and you find those meanings pleasing, then the "truth" doesn't come too expensive. For the rest of us, though, it can cost a great deal.

1. Michel Foucault in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* by Judith Butler (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 93.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 114.

3. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p. 14.

4. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 31.

5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. 301.



VIDEO TAPE

REWIND

"It's beautiful," I exclaim. It is, in fact, a particularly fine watch my father has just bought for my seventh birthday, the jewelled face throwing back at me the summer's sunlight. "It's...it's..." I hesitate, searching for just the right word, "it's *divine*." I breathe happily. My father's face comes up sharply, his pupils narrowing. "Boys don't say divine." And he watches me, his head cocked slightly to one side. I open my mouth to question this unfathomable statement, as if certain dictionary words were colored blue for boys and pink for girls, but there is something hard in his voice and eyes. Suddenly, my pleasure evaporates and is replaced entirely by fear. I know if I question him I'll probably get the palm of his hand. You know, when a six-foot-three-inch, two-hundred-pound man hits you in the face with his open hand, it's like being hit in the head with a ham. And so, mumbling something to my feet like, "Well, it is very nice," I make a small mental note to avoid this particular word in the future.

Read at a transexual speak-out held at New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center in 1993 in honor of the fortieth anniversary of Christine Jorgensen's sex-change surgery.