

TRANSGENDERISM: CHALLENGING THE BINARY

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The Transgender (TG) community has come of age, stepping forward and taking its place in the world as the agent of change that upsets the binary gender system.

At the root of this, as in all change, is the emergence of new ideas. The rapid spread of these new ideas has been reshaping the way that a lot of people, transgender and otherwise, regard themselves and others. Perhaps the most influential new ideas were those of Judith Butler, a leading feminist scholar and gender theorist.

The message from Butler that knocked TGs to our feet was that gender is a performance. Butler tells us that masculinity and femininity are not essential elements in all of us but rather labels and interpretations that we assign to parts of ourselves and our world. Division along lines of sex and gender is a political act, enforced by rules of conduct that are neither negotiated nor defensible.

While embracing these ideals, the TG community has continued to educate itself in the gender ways of other cultures, especially native American cultures that honored transgenderism with respected social roles. As transgenders (those whose gender display at least sometimes is counter to what the culture dictates) and their increasingly receptive friends and families nurtured a pan-cultural perspective, we learned that transgender shame is imposed by a culture striving for something unnatural and repressive. The strict binary of sex and gender is a myth that is enforced by popular notions, creating pervasive but usually repressed discontent with gender roles. The pervasiveness of the discontent shows in the popularity of gender transgression in the media, where Howard Stern's book parading his crossdressing is a best-seller, and where movies like *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* were box-office hits. TV networks parade forth their most gender transgressive content during ratings week, when their advertising income has the most to gain. In Boston, for example, a normally staid "Chronicle" ran a segment on transgenderism with flashy promotion for ratings week in February, and then again during November's ratings week.

The dawning recognition that "gender dysphoria", the medical term applied to some transgender persons, might be the healthy response of a sensitive individual to a repressive society has had a profound effect on the TG community. Individuals, instead of blaming themselves for perversion, can instead regard the failure of a society that stigmatizes their naturalness. This shift has been crucial in bolstering the self-esteem of the transgender community. This healthy perspective is increasingly supported from without the TG community, most recently by the book *Gender Shock* by Phyllis Burke.

When we encountered transphobia and dis-inclusion within the gay and lesbian communities, some TG folk recognized that a struggle only for transgender rights would surely leave out some other minority group(s). We've responded by committing to a policy of respect for diversity and inclusion. We've opened our movement to include all who wish to be a part, redefining ourselves as gender transgressors, an overarching category that potentially includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, feminists, and literally anyone. Rather than acting as "wannabe's" to some pre-existing group, we've defined an arena for social change in which we play a pivotal part as key disrupter of established norms, but in which all persons have a role and are welcome.

Evidence of the growing popularity of these and related ideas shows in the events of 1995 and 1996. In February of '95, an International Congress on Gender, Cross-Dressing, and Sex Issues was held in Los Angeles. It was the first time the medical and academic communities extended an open invitation to the TG community to join a professional dialogue on TG issues. Not long before, the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) taught an American Psychiatric Association convention that the dominant pathology in gender dysphoria lies not in the individual, but in the culture. The international conference was an attempt by professionals to stop pathologizing transgenders and start listening to us instead.

In May of 1995, key members of the TG community made a commitment to draw the line on violence against transgenders. Since then, they have conducted demonstrations at sites across the country where transgenders have been victims of violence or persecution. They first did so by conducting a vigil at the trial of one of the murderers of Brandon Teena, a young person born apparently female but living as a man, loving women. Brandon's nasty murder shocked the small town

of Falls City, Nebraska and sent ripples reverberating across country. The appearance of 40 transgender activists on the front steps of the county courthouse received much less publicity than the murder, but has had greater impact. The intrepid transgender activists who traveled to Falls City had no idea what to expect. The best possible result was that they would emerge unscathed from this town that had already claimed the lives of three people for daring to transgress gender norms. As it turned out, declaring to the world their support for the murdered transsexual was an act of courage that left them feeling empowered as never before. Taking on a potentially dangerous mission, they earned some serious self-respect.

Subsequent demonstrations included a rally in Colorado Springs at the sentencing of Sean O'Neill, a young female-to-male transsexual, helping him to receive fair treatment. A demonstration at mayor Marion Barry's office in Washington, DC, helped to reopen the investigation into the death of Tyra Hunter, a young transgender who died after a rescue worker refused to treat her injuries on discovering that she possessed a penis. In Boston, over 250 people participated in a vigil and march to the State House (in 20 degree cold) in support of Chanelle Pickett. A transsexual, she was strangled to death by a man who first claimed to have done it because he "didn't know she was a he", then changed his story when he was exposed as a regular "admirer" of transsexuals.

In undertaking serious political effort, most transsexual activists lost interest in the Michigan Women's Music Festival. Previously, the festival's exclusion of transsexuals had drawn the focus of TS activism. Following the Brandon Teena vigil, though, the focus shifted to more serious hurts, marking a maturing of the TG activist community. It takes greater courage to openly challenge those who would do bodily harm, instead of those who deny admission to a party.

An incident of exclusion, rather than violence, moved TG activists in 1995 on a national scale as never before. During the International Conference on Transgender Law & Employment Policy in Texas, attended by many leading activists, the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) announced that the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would bar discrimination based on sexual orientation, would be submitted to Congress without including transgender discrimination. Several of the activists at the Texas convention had lobbied successfully with sponsoring Senator Jeffords for TG inclusion. When they heard that their amendment had been refused, not by some right-wing politico, but by HRCF, the leading gay and lesbian lobbying group, the activists became enraged. Over the next few months, they organized a sustained nationwide campaign of leafleting at all HRCF fundraising events. Eventually HRCF invited the TG activists to talk, and all agreed to work together for eventual TG inclusion in ENDA. For the TG community, it was the first exercise of a newfound political muscle.

Testing that muscle, TG folk for the first time turned out en masse to declare their participation in the process of government. On October 2 and 3, 1995, about 100 TG activists gathered in Washington, DC, where they lobbied the offices of virtually every senator and representative. For most of those visited, it was their first time knowingly meeting a transgender person in that environment. For the TG folk who participated, it was an unshakably empowering experience that sent ripples of excitement through the community.

1995 saw the first publishing of "*IN YOUR FACE, the journal of political activism against gender oppression*", and also the widespread acceptance of *THE TRANSEXUAL MENACE*, a direct action organization. Their commitment to confronting with love, recognition that unruly behavior makes more enemies than friends, and understanding that education is best conducted with a smile, have proven effective in publicizing and alleviating injustices. The Menace, playing a lead role in virtually every demonstration of significance, gives TG activists a rallying point not of aggression, but of courage and pride.

Transgender inclusion in other gender-transgressive groups grew markedly, mostly without the acrimony and conflict of HRCF/TG relations. Leaders in the gay/lesbian/bisexual communities began declaring support for inclusion of transgenders in their constituency. At the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force national conference in Detroit, a rousing plenary on inclusion and diversity was delivered by Dr. Elias Farajaje-Jones, an imposing and proud dreadlocked figure. An outspoken bisexual, he delivered his speech in a Transsexual Menace T-shirt.

Another key trend in the TG community has been the emergence of the men, the "Female-To-Male" (FTM) community. The FTM presence brings a fresh, balancing perspective to the TG community, and encourages recognition and inclusion of more global gender issues. Their presence also brings greater credibility, as the movement is no longer just a "guy thing". The participation of

both MTFs and FTMs makes it clear that gender transgression is a game for everyone.

The most amazing thing about the maturing of the TG community is how different things were just a year or two ago. Originally, the Menace were a few radicals that most TG folk wished would go away. There was little overt political activism. When a transsexual was murdered, everyone sunk their heads and slunk away, hoping someone else would do something and glad they weren't the victim. TG groups were more concerned with petty inter-group rivalry than with joining society as equal members. Passing was more important than challenging the gender binary. Inclusion meant welcoming transsexuals at a transvestite event. Feminism was merely a way for crossdressers to feel more feminine.

We've come a long way in a short time. It's an exciting start. As more and more people step forward and embrace transgenderism, the momentum grows to change forever the way in which we regard gender.

Thank goodness. It's long overdue.