

Parts and Pieces: Reconstructing Gender

We live in a world dominated by gender roles with their associated rules. For the most part, these rules are so omnipresent that they are invisible. They run our lives and we don't even notice. Being a tomboy turned radical feminist, I used to think that I was immune to these rules. But in my mid-twenties, I came face to face with the power of gender rules. I had acquired a kitten named Donovan. The people who gave Donovan to me said that he was male. I wasn't particularly interested in doing in-depth research and Donovan wasn't inclined to stand still while I looked, so I assumed that they were right. Five months later, I took Donovan to the veterinarian's office for a check-up and found out that my little guy was a girl. The vet wasn't very nice about pointing this out, either. I was shocked at how difficult I found it to come to terms with this news. My boy kitten was a girl! More horrifying, I had to face the fact that I had been invested in my cat's gender. The real lesson came when we got home. Donovan was just as active and destructive as she had been when I thought she was a he. The change in labels didn't affect her behavior one bit.

The parts and pieces that mark our biological sex are just props that tell us how to play our roles and what costumes we are supposed to wear. They also send a signal to others that tells them how to interact with us and what roles they should expect us to play. We learn from an early age that people with breasts are supposed to be nurturing, delicate and passive while people with penises are supposed to be strong, dominating, and in charge. Little girls are supposed to like pink and lavender/purple and play with Barbie, while little boys are supposed to play with trucks, tear things up and like sports.

On the upside, the gender system makes the social world orderly and predictable. On the downside, the gender system can be oppressive to people whose dreams and abilities don't fit neatly within its confines. By our very nature, GLBT people challenge this system. This is possibly the main issue that straight America has with us – beyond (or perhaps underlying) any religious doctrine - we are subverting the gender system. We challenge the unwritten rules that society holds sacred by loving whom we chose to love, in the way that we choose to express that love, and by the way that we choose to dress and act in the world. By challenging the rules, we make their oppressive force visible. People get really uncomfortable when these gender roles are broken and sometimes go to extremes to enforce the rules. At some level, gaybashers are punishing us for stepping outside of the gender roles that society has prescribed for us as well as pledging their own allegiance to the system.

The rules are so powerful that even as we challenge them, we sometimes inadvertently impose a modified set of the rules on others. Years ago, for example, I remember having deep, heated discussions in my feminist reading group about the inappropriateness of drag performances. We decided that drag performers were celebrating the misogyny that we were trying so hard to destroy, and we held those who didn't abandon gendered constructs in contempt. We failed to see the irony in the fact that we were essentially dressing in the garb – flannel shirts and/or t-shirts and jeans – of working class men even as we condemned men for dressing in drag. Fortunately, some of my gay male friends helped me to see drag in a different light. They explained that growing up male and being pushed into sports and pressed to “act manly” was the form of oppression that they had experienced. To them, to be able to dress up and wear heels was liberating.

Transgender issues are the final frontier when it comes to rights and acceptance in our society, perhaps because transgendered people challenge conventional thinking about gender so much. By saying, “I feel like I was born with the wrong parts,” and then taking steps to live life according to the gender that one feels oneself to be, transgendered people turn the gender system on its head. They show the extent to which gender rules are simply social constructs. In doing so, they threaten the system of privilege

and oppression, rights and obligations, and benefits and costs associated with the parts and pieces that one was born with.

Living life according to our own internalized identity comes with a price. We risk social condemnation, discrimination and violence. But the cost of living a lie is also high and may be more deadly in the long run. Documentaries like *Transgeneration*, movies like *TransAmerica*, and books like *Three Girlhoods*, *My Mother's, My Father's, and Mine* and *Luna* show the costs of trying to live a truth that's not acceptable in the mainstream culture. But they also show the freedom one experiences as one stops trying to live the more socially acceptable lie.

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