

ARE YOU A MAN OR A WOMAN?

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Abstract

I have awoken multiple times from a nightmare hearing this phrase screamed at me over and over again. Whether awake or asleep, it echoes over and over and over again through my brain. It is like machine-gun fire, ricocheting through my body with unbelievable velocity. It is a question that will probably follow me throughout [...]

Article

I have awoken multiple times from a nightmare hearing this phrase screamed at me over and over again. Whether awake or asleep, it echoes over and over and over again through my brain. It is like machine-gun fire, ricocheting through my body with unbelievable velocity. It is a question that will probably follow me throughout my entire life. Yesterday, I was walking out of the mall to go and catch the bus. A group of people apparently had quite a fun time checking me out, because as I walked away from them, a middle-aged woman yelled at me: “Are you a man or a woman?” If I had a hundred dollars for every time I have been asked a variation of this question, usually by a complete stranger, I would be one rich tranny. Sadly, the rude asking of this question comes with no economic compensation. It does however come with psychic violence. It comes with the price of chipping away at my safety, my self-esteem, and my sanity. Because the gender demander was with a large group of other folks, I did not answer her. I remained silent in the interest of my own survival, my own self-preservation. So, in this Blog Post, I would like to answer her question: ARE YOU A MAN OR A WOMAN? with a variety of responses.

Yes, I am a man or a woman. Yes, I am a man and a woman. Yes, I am a man. Yes, I am a woman. Yes, indeed. I have been a man and I have been a woman. I have been many other genders yet unnamed. I am all of those and more. Is that affirmative enough for you? Yes! YES! YES!!!

No, I am not a man or a woman. No, I am not a man and a woman. No, I am not a man. No, I am not a woman. Definitely not. I have been a not-man and I have been a not-woman. I revel in negation. I refuse to define myself by your narrow parameters. I am beyond man and beyond woman. Through radical dis-identification, I create new ways of being in the world. Is that negative enough for you? No! NO! NO!!!

Maybe. Maybe I am a man. Maybe I am a woman. Maybe I am both. Maybe I am neither. I am ambiguous about the question. I refuse the basic premise of the question. I categorically reject the notion that I must answer only “man” or only “woman.” I revel in my ambivalence. My maybe may transform into a “yes” or a “no.” Maybe it won’t. I’ll let you know.

I don't know. It is a really hard question. It's not that I haven't thought about it. People ask me the question all the time. But I reserve the right to not know. I think answering with I don't know is perfectly legitimate. Perhaps too many people KNOW in such an absolute way that not knowing will open up more space for creativity and possibility. I don't know is a wise response. Do you know? How do you know?

Confused? I understand; I am confused, too. But I am not confused about any of the above responses. I think all of the above responses, and many more possible responses, are all perfectly acceptable, sane and healthy. But you know what does confuse me? The question: Are you a man or a woman? That confuses the hell out of me, because I think it is not a question that is on the level. I think it is much more revealing and telling than wanting to know a simple "fact" about a person's gender. I also think that it does not lend itself to simple answers, at least for some of us. I do think it leads to a whole lot of other questions. Since above I answered the gender demander's question, though perhaps not to her satisfaction, I would now like to follow that up with some of my own questions:

WHAT THE FUCK GIVES YOU THE IDEA THAT YOU HAVE THE GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO KNOW THAT ABOUT ME? Here we are, fellow shoppers in the capitalist marketplace of America. Or fellow bus-riders. Or fellow dog-walkers in the park. Or people who live in the same apartment complex. So, we share space. We are fellow human beings on our own unique life trajectories. What exactly gives you the idea that because of sharing common air space, that it necessarily follows that you have the right to know whether I am a man or a woman. It doesn't. You, Stranger, do not have the right to know how I identify, who I love, who I do or do not have sex with, nor do you have the right to know what's in my pants/panties/boxers. Got it? It's off limits to you, Stranger. In a world that is constantly trying to define me in THEIR own way, without my consent, I demand the rights to my own sex/gender/sexuality identities. They are mine, and I will not give them away to you for anything in the world.

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK IT IS AN EITHER-OR QUESTION? Okay, okay, I do get that the dominant society constantly rams the binary gender system down our collective throats. It is understandable that you would think there are two and only two options. But doesn't my very existence, and the existence of so many other people whose gender is not readily apparent, suggest to you that the issue is much more complex? So, in case you don't know, there are many more genders out in the world beyond the number 2. So you may not get the answer that you want. The breadth of human diversity is incredibly wide. Endless really. And the sooner you accept that, the less time you will spend concerned with what other people are. You may even grow to love yourself a little bit more.

DO YOU REALLY THINK I AM FOOLED BY YOUR QUESTION? Because whatever I say (see above) is not going to satisfy you. You see, that the question has to be asked at all, that's what this is really about. That the question has to be asked at all, that is the primary problem here. It is about clearly marking out those of us who fail to deliver on the sacrosanct, cardinal rule of society, to faithfully portray one of two cardboard options: masculine male or feminine female. If we fail to do this convincingly, we automatically give up our right to humanity, to personhood. To not be a man or not be a woman is to basically not exist at all in the current system, to be a thing, or an object, at best an anomaly. While most people "pass", some of us by definition fail. By failing to be a man or a woman, we fail to be a human being in your eyes. Thus, your question is not a simple request for information, but an attempt to dehumanize me and others. How dare you disrespect the courageous people who dare to be

different, who dare to expand the possibilities of what human beings can be and become in this world.

DOES CALLING OUT MY GENDER “FAILURE” MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE A “REAL MAN” OR A “REAL WOMAN” ? The current sex/gender system is predicated on my repudiation. It is predicated on the repudiation of my fellow gender outlaws. By “othering” me and my gender-nonconforming peeps, you strengthen not only your own normative identity, but the very system that creates and re-creates that sense of universal normalcy. But power should not come from the degradation and dehumanization of others. By “othering” me, you will never discover the truth of who you really are, because it is based on an illusion of absolute separateness and superiority. Plus, it is really, really cruel to fortify your own identity through the objectification and debasement of another person. I have to believe that there is room for all kinds of people on the planet. My uniqueness and my right to be myself does not detract from your identity, it does not subtract from your sense of gender because I, and others, are called to do it differently.

To conclude, I would just like to simply say to the gender demanders of the world: Stop. Please, please stop. I belong to a group of human beings who are struggling to survive in every sense of the word: physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually and materially. Many of us wake up in the morning and think: what is going to happen to me today due to my gender expression? And it is not only the obvious and severe horrors of systemic and institutionalized discrimination and oppression that await us. It is the thousand little pecks, the teeny tiny slices that take away our dignity, our hope, our self-respect on a daily basis. Every day I have to say, like a mantra: I have the right to be here. I have the right to be who I am. I have the right to live a full life and to be proud of the work that I do. I will not allow you to take that away from me, whether or not you stop. And I will stand with the people of the gender twilight, the people who are courageously changing the face of this world, just by standing at a bus stop and not breaking when they are being viciously baited. Just by walking their dog and not running back inside when a “drive by” yeller disrespects their precious humanity. Just by daring to enjoy the sunlight and not backing down when a stranger demands to know if they are a man or a woman. Just by not flinching, their back against the wall, their life on the line, because being exactly who they are is worth that fucking much. So, I hope that you stop. But if you do not, we will not go away. We will not stop expressing the exquisite diversity that is US. We will not be swayed by your words, your questions, your hate or your epithets.

ARE YOU A MAN OR A WOMAN? WHAT ARE YOU? WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU? ARE YOU A MAN OR A WOMAN?

Let me try to answer you one last time.

I am a ferocious, fabulous child of the scintillating Rainbow God/dess. I am a Warrior Wo/man who has come to work my magnificent magic on you. I am here to glitter-bomb you, to throw Divine sequins over your somber gray state of conformity, to sprinkle brilliant stars over your well-worn path. I am here to use my Uppity Queer Diva-tude to make you understand that the separation you imagine between us does not exist, can't exist. Because, We are of the same precarious flesh, the same crimson blood, the same distant dreams cobbled together out of nothing but hope and sheer audacity. I am a Defiant Outlaw and yet I stubbornly cling to the idea that we can live together in some semblance of peace and harmony on this vast, crazy planet. I revel in my resistance and my survival, because We, the people of the Gender Twilight, a Tribe of Indomitable Outcasts, will live to see many more dazzling dawns. Will you be there

with us? Will you?

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