

Confessions of a Middle-aged Transinista

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Abstract

Somewhere along the line, I became a Transinista. I don't know how it happened -- there was no recruitment drive -- I just found myself looking at a photo of myself dressed in combat boots, mirrored sunglasses, floppy angel wings trimmed with sequins and feathers, and sporting a lit stogie dangling out of my mouth. [...]

Article

Somewhere along the line, I became a Transinista. I don't know how it happened -- there was no recruitment drive -- I just found myself looking at a photo of myself dressed in combat boots, mirrored sunglasses, floppy angel wings trimmed with sequins and feathers, and sporting a lit stogie dangling out of my mouth. "Holy Jeebiz," I muttered. "That's got to be Photoshopped. And I don't appreciate the moustache."

Now, I think my credentials are pretty good. I'm not a litigation activist, my focus has been on community-building. Part of this has meant learning a lot of perspectives (our community is incredibly diverse), and then trying to teach T-folk what the other groups of T-folk are all about. And learning what I could about Intersex, crossdressers, gender renegades, drag performers, Two-Spirits, non-op transsexuals as well as those who clearly need the operation has introduced me to a wide experience of unique people who I respect. I never assume that my experience of being trans is the only valid one. It's the approach which drove me to write "Transbigotry?"

Maybe this is sort of the equivalent of the cartoon squirrel who scurries up with an olive branch, squeaking, "why can't we all just get along?" before someone pulls out an M16 and perforates her, a note of satisfaction for the far right-wing and far left-wing types who resent "bleeding heart peacemakers." But I've actually found diplomacy to be an approach that most people -- both at the grassroots level and in the online world -- to be usually quite open to. There are, however, always people of strong opinion who won't be swayed:

This colours my point of view just as those who identify as some brand of trans come from an entirely different point of view. I see the world through the eyes of a feminist woman who has studied history and is also a pagan theologian. I live within the greater world where the dominate viewpoint of gender is a strictly bi-gendered one where most people's understanding of gender is limited to there are men and women and if slightly more enlightened, some people are born intersexed and some are born transsexual but both these groups get put in either the male or female bin. -- Cat Kisser, from "Not Ready For Prime Time, Or: How the TG Rights Movement Went Insane By Talking Only To Itself."

One of the major schisms of the transgender community is the struggle between “Old Guard” transsexuals and the newer deconstructionist movement. This isn’t a comment on ageism -- a trans teen can subscribe to Old Guard philosophy, while a senior might encourage and participate with the deconstructionists. But Old Guard philosophy tends to be prevalent among transfolk who have gone through their RLT and surgery prior to the 1990s (or outside the community, usually choosing from early on to shun it), and have had to fit the older Harry Benjamin Standards of Care quite rigidly in order to do so. And the fact is, I have no intention of taking sides: Old Guard is not “wrong,” it is a perfectly valid choice for those who feel the need to transition completely through the accepted process and live stealth. I can certainly understand the need to become “Mercedes the woman” to the outside world, and not “Mercedes the woman who used to be a man,” and am reserving my own right to one day slip into anonymity. I don’t vilify Old Guard thinking -- I do, however, take exception to the idea that the Old Guard experience of transgender is the only valid one, just as I would take exception if that attitude were to come from deconstructionists. The argument, which first appeared at Trans-Feminist, continues:

While I have no problem with someone deconstructing their own gender, I have a major problem with someone deconstructing my own but this is exactly what the trans community demands. Think I’m full of it? Think again. Recently on the Bilerico Project a woman of transsexual history was told by a prominent transgender blogger and loud voice in TG activism that:

“You want to get technical [name]? In the strictest definition, you’re not female. The distinction between the “sexes” is that a female has the ability to produce ova, and the male has the ability to produce sperm. Your “sex” isn’t based on an organ but on your reproductive ability. For that matter, your neo-vagina isn’t even an “organ.” An organ is tissue or a group of tissues that constitute a morphologically and functionally distinct part of an organism. Your “vagina” isn’t a social construct, it’s a surgical construct. And an incomplete construct at that! Go find your bartholin glands....”

I can’t speak for the beliefs and motives of the person who made the argument in question, but I would hope that it hinges around the phrase “in the strictest definition” used, possibly as a way to theorize based on general public perception, as if to say, “this is always something that people will be able to throw at us.” Either way, despite this, my experience of deconstructionism has been that it questions everything -- rather than deciding it has all the answers, which are declared absolute and applied to all transsexual or transgender folk. On the other hand, there are some elements of the Old Guard entrenched in the desire to sever any and all association with non-transsexual, non-surgical transpeople. Although Cat doesn’t go to that extreme, she does say regarding the general term “transgender:”

I find being lumped under that umbrella extremely offensive as I do the equation of those with a sexual fetishistic driven disorder to equate themselves with those with a neurological birth condition.

One thing to be cautious of is painting large groups of people with a broad brush, such as when some of the commentators assert that non-op transsexuals can only be fetishists. Assuming this is just plain wrong. I’ll give one example, a Two-Spirit transwoman, a DES birth with evidence of being born intersex (a malformed ovary), who displays the primary characteristics of transsexual psychology, including an

aversion to touching the existing body parts except when necessary, and who doesn't mind that her Hormone Replacement Therapy has decimated her sex drive. Instead, she chooses to keep the parts and make what peace she can with them, because on a spiritual level, she wants to discover all that she can about being Two-Spirited (thinking that surgery brings her that much closer to single-spirited) and about being transgender. She also feels that there is a higher purpose for having been born as she is, and feels that she should explore it. She is reserving the right to decide to have GRS at a later date, and suspects that someday she will.

Absurd? Not at all. I am talking about myself. I am of an age and background where the Old Guard approach would probably suit me best, but I choose to know more about "the dark side," the deconstructionism, before I decide where I belong. And despite the author's contention that the deconstructionists have subverted the transgender community, I too have faced exclusion for my decision. However, one thing I have learned from being in that middle is that the two sides are not incompatible.

Much of these arguments boil down to the need to define oneself, and to differentiate oneself from the impressions given by other segments of the transgender community. However, it is one thing to define oneself, and it is entirely another to do so at another part of the community's expense, wholesale.

She goes on to insist that:

What has happened is that actual civil rights that in a practical sense would cover transgenders as well as people of transsexual history and those in transsexual transition have taken a back seat to the agenda of deconstruction of gender for all.

Again, I don't see this. ENDA, a piece of legislation meant to protect GLBT folk from employment discrimination, from which transgender folks were later dropped, was the number one battle for the U.S. transgender community in 2007. Either way, I don't see that deconstructive philosophy has taken over, nor do I see where advocates suddenly became guerillas staging a bloody palace coup.

Hm. That calls for another cigar.

Further discussion following the article reveals a number of other attitudes from the Old Guard and anti-trans Intersex sort, such as:

If you have a penis use the boys room and don't intrude upon the spaces that offer privacy to those with vagina's. -- comment by Diane.

Of course, doing so would get many MTFs dismembered and impaled on stakes as a warning to others. For some of the Old Guard, this appears to be inconsequential to them. (To be fair, the original author did not say this, although she does condemn anyone "talking about the 'rights' of people with penises to enter women's space") I wonder: if I lined up three photos of transsexuals, one post-op, would you be able to tell me which one would be "entitled" to use the ladies' room? Too bad for those TS folk who are nearing eligibility for surgery, can't afford it or are precluded from it for health reasons. I guess in the meantime, the other option is to hold their pee until they get home -- not an easy task for someone in the middle of an eight-hour shift of work.

And one of the participants in the discussion is Nick K.D. Chaleunphone, known for his predominantly pro-intersex and anti-transgender blog, The Kallmann's Syndrome Life, where he has quizzically linked to both "Not Ready For Prime Time..." (with the divisive tone of it), and then also my "Transbigotry?" (which opposes divisiveness), saying of each that they "finally hit the nail [on the head.]" The latter link may, of course, disappear following the debut of this post.

That's the same issue we have within the intersex community. Those who stay intersex and don't transition are fine and okay. They are content with where they are. It's the ones that do transition and who want call themselves intersex trans after they transition is what bothers me and irks me.

Nick also asserts that the intersex community is falling victim to a transgender take-over attempt, and that the two should not be associated. But I think that this results from some confusion in perspective. I've continually said that I believe that transgender will one day be a smaller aspect of the larger concept of intersex. With the provocative research found regarding Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs, including DES), genetic studies like the recent one from UCLA, and demonstrations of how the minds of transgender people are most often in line far more with the minds of the gender to which they identify, I do believe that someday transgender will be found to have largely biological origins, rather than psychological ones -- even in the seeming "fringe" folk, where their transgender need is so far less intense that it becomes explored in lesser, part-time and even sexual ways. Someday, intersex will annex that, much to Nick's chagrin. It will also encompass a significant number of intersex people who were lucky enough to be assigned at birth to the gender with which they identify, and therefore not understand the transgender experience, not having experienced it. To them, I suppose, we'll always be the embarrassing sister or brother that they would rather not have anyone know is part of their family.

Returning to the article, though, it is important to note that Cat Kissar says:

The issue has always been the same one, a total lack of respect for women of transsexual history by the TG community that drives them out viciously then claims to speak for them.

and:

Literally the most horrible abuses and transphobic attacks I have suffered since I first transitioned all almost exclusively from the TG community.

One thing to remember is that feelings of this intensity don't spontaneously ignite in a vacuum, although once ignited, they can be fueled by as many misinterpretations as face-value experiences. When she says she's experienced discrimination from the deconstructionists, I don't doubt it. And it was horrible when the lesbian community of the politically-correct '80s jettisoned everyone who fit the "butch" or "femme" stereotype because they were said to propagate bad clichés about lesbians - especially because many of those "butch / femme" people numbered in the majority of lesbians who were first to come out and worked hard for the community, at a time when there was not a lot of support. It will be no less reprehensible if deconstructionists do this to Old Guard transfolk. But the challenge to both the Old Guard and the deconstructionists is to meet halfway, willing to choose to show mutual respect, even if they don't understand or agree with each other. I'd hope that Old Guard and

deconstructionists could somehow arrive at this, rather than what we're seeing here.

Something that "Transbigotry?" and this post do is point out divisive problems faced by the vast transgender community. They do not yet, however, provide solutions. I suspect that any solution will need to follow this course:

- Awareness.
- A resolve to mutually respect each other, despite all differences, and despite the hurts that have gone on before.
- A vow to work earnestly to achieve the needs of all trans elements, and while doing so, attempt to acquire as deep an understanding of them as possible.
- It is, of course, one's prerogative to disagree at times. It is not, though, in the best interest of the community to attempt to detonate another's foundations or sling around slander, hate or disrespect in the process.

If my convictions are correct, these points need to filter through the community at every level, from the national organizations down to the local support groups, in order to -- at the very least -- prevent any further bitterness like we see here... or at the very most, develop some real unity and change. They need to be discussed earnestly, rather than just given lip service, and probably reiterated from time to time. If the greater GLBT community can get behind transfolk in the form of UnitedENDA via a choice to respect and try to understand a community notably different (homosexuality is about sexual orientation and transgender is about gender identity... one does not dictate the other), then why can't the transgender community pull itself together?

Perhaps that is the community's challenge for 2008.

There goes Mercedes, again, running around with squeaky voice, saying, "why can't we all just get along?"

I am waiting for the bullets.

Suggested citation

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