

Debunking TERF Essentialism: Part III of the ‘Sexing the Body is Gender’ Series

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Abstract

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Article



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In Part II, what gender is and is not was discussed and the ways in which we contextualize our bodies were reviewed. In this section, essentialism arguments regularly asserted as being self-evidently true are reviewed and deconstructed.

When appealing to a substance - say, genetics, chromosomes, etc. - as being a sexed essence which defines how we collectively regard the body as a whole and how that individual must also regard their own body, we are in fact appealing to an essence to elicit normative identification behavior on an individual

and societal level.

The ideology of sexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. Every system of domination establishes divisions at the material and economic level. Furthermore, the divisions are abstracted and turned into concepts by the masters, and later on by the slaves when they rebel and start to struggle. The masters explain and justify the established divisions as a result of natural differences. The slaves, when they rebel and start to struggle, read social oppositions into the so-called natural differences. For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society. The primacy of difference so constitutes our thought that it prevents turning inward on itself to question itself, no matter how necessary that may be to apprehend the basis of that which precisely constitutes it. - Monique Wittig

The radical feminist Monique Wittig notes that sexing behavior ("masculine/feminine") and sexing a body ("male/female") is a behavior we engage in because it serves our patriarchal culture. She goes further in asserting that the obsession with sexing bodies and behavior is a corrupting way of viewing our world and that this view is rooted in concepts of creationism; that is, that these divisions are a creation of nature and not culture. The problem with being taught that it is natural to sex behavior and the body is that people tend to buy into the belief that such natural divisions are "real" because god/nature said so.

Wittig was probably the first feminist writer to propose the revolutionary idea that building a movement rooted in notions of a naturally sexed body is, to use Lorde's vernacular, a tool of the master:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. - Audre Lorde

Whereas Wittig envisioned a response detached from the naturalistic essentialism patriarchy created, TERFs are seemingly obsessed with rooting out who is and who is not naturally woman. Wittig, viewed by many as the progenitor of radical feminism, asserted that lesbians should reject the label "women" because the naturalistic binary system of defining what one is by what one is not is a poison chalice from which the response to the patriarchy must not drink.

Trans activists have been pointing to this truth for decades. Consider the way in which Sandy Stone, the trans woman so hatefully targeted by the TERF Janice Raymond, seems to echo Wittig's insight:

What I am saying is that one of the ways that people justify oppressing people of any alternative gender or sexuality is by saying that the social norm is natural. That is, it originates in the authority of Nature itself. In other words, it comes from god, an authority to which to appeal. All of this is, in fact, a complete fabrication, a construction. There is no 'natural' sex, because 'sex' itself as a

medical or cultural category is nothing more the momentary outcome of battles over who owns the meanings of the category. There is a great deal wider variation in genetics than most people except geneticists realize, but we make that invisible through language. The way we make it invisible through language is by having no words for anything except male and female. One of the ways our culture erases people is by not having words for them. That does it absolutely. When there's nothing to describe you, you are effectively invisible.

- Sandy Stone, 1995

There is a robust and nuanced discussion to be had about the implications of Wittig's ideas. Some have noted that these radical ideas - formed in the early days of radical feminism - are now a bit too conservative in that the framework is unable to adequately deal with queered and/or digital identities. TERFs, on the other hand, seek to institutionalize the naturalistic essence-based sexed binary as a means of taking ownership of sexed labels, which they mistake for authentic empowerment.

Postmodern and queer theorists share with transgender theorists the idea that 'gender' is a moveable feast that can be moved into and out of, swapped and so forth. Gender, used in this sense, disappears the fixedness of sex, the biological basis that underlies the relegation of females to their sex caste... The inferior sex caste status of women is assigned with reference to their biology, and it is through their biology that their subordination is enforced and maintained through rape, impregnation and forced childbearing... Another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect is due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour. - Sheila Jeffreys, Ph.D., *Gender Hurts*, pp 5-6

While much of the rest of the feminist world is confronting both the causes and effects of oppression, while TERFs spend a significant amount of time and energy in preserving, supporting and appealing to a binary-sexed body system constitutionally incapable of working with concepts like cis, trans, gender queer, agender, or intersex as it relates to reality of human bodies because such views of humanity are supplanted by the asserted preeminence of an ad naturam binary sexed essence.

Genotype as a natural binary sexed essence

Genotype refers to the genes of a person and many TERFs appeal to this as an essential sexed substance to advance a system of regulating behavioral norms associated with identity ownership. When we hear an anti-trans troll assert that because our genes/chromosomes (terms usually mistakenly used interchangeably) make a body male or female, that trans people, therefore, remain the sex they were assigned at birth, they are appealing to a constructed concept of the body.

Leaving aside the fallacy that bodies with only XY and XX chromosomes are immutable,[1] the appeal to genes/chromosomes as being a fixed male or female essence[2] that if present, define a human body in our culture, is an appeal to essentialism. In this way of viewing the world, AIS women are males, not females with male chromosomes. Their female body is a male body in the same way that trans women are "male-essenced." For TERFs, the presence of this "male-essence" means that the human body in question is itself male, and, subsequently, that the (now male) body and society alike must regard it in a certain way or face certain social consequences. I will review some of the punitive consequences TERFs

privilege themselves in exacting upon those who question the validity of their preferred gender system later in this series.

Phenotype as a natural binary sexed essence

Phenotype is the physical manifestation of a person. When we hear an anti-trans troll assert that because what is taken to be an acceptably long phallus was discovered at birth, a male sex was established and therefore cannot be changed, they are appealing to a fallaciously constructed concept of phenotype permanence. If a baby is born with a phallus - the phallus being the “essence” of a man - the person is said to have been born a man. Like appeals to genotype, this essence is regarded as an ever-enduring locus from which a human body drives linguistic currency within our social system. If an AIS or trans woman has vaginoplasty, a TERF will assert that their sex phenotype has not changed because to accept this change is to admit that a body’s sexed attributes can change.

In biology, phenotype is expected to change via genetic and non-genetic forces during one’s lifetime. In the Segen’s Medical Dictionary, sex reassignment is defined as, “The constellation of surgical and medical therapies intended to physically change a person from one sexual phenotype to another.”

This view of phenotype is frowned upon by TERFs. A TERF will not talk about the trans body experience in terms of actual phenotype and will, instead, speak of it in moralistic language, appealing to the primacy of an eternal naturally-constructed binary imbuing sexed essence.

Men appropriating our identity hate us, and want to take our skin to become us. Can never happen, but they sure want to destroy us in the process. No, of all the oppressive forces against Lesbians and women in patriarchy, I believe the trans cult is at the top. Far more dangerous than the rest of the right wing like the nazis and clan and christian, muslim, etc. religious fanatics, THEY WANT TO DESTROY US FROM THE INSIDE OUT. - Bev Von Dohre, TERF pioneer

Keep the theme of TERF morality in mind; I will later review how it is (perversely) used against trans people in the name of feminism.

Critiquing the trans essence argument

My main conclusion is that transsexualism is basically a social problem whose cause cannot be explained except in relation to the sex role and identities that a patriarchal society generates. Through hormonal and surgical means, transsexuals reject their “native” bodies, especially their sexual organs, in favor of the body and the sexual organs of the opposite sex. They do this mainly because the body and the genitalia, especially, come to incarnate the essence of their rejected masculinity and desired femininity. Thus transsexualism is the result of socially prescribed definitions of masculinity and femininity, one of which the transsexual rejects in order to gravitate towards the other.

- Janice Raymond, PhD, The Transsexual Empire, p 16

While appealing to a natural male/female essence to substantiate TERF rhetoric, they simultaneously construct an easily critiqued trans population caricature that appeals to a behavioral male/female essence:

In transgender ideology, persons who transgender are seen as being in possession of an ‘essence’ -

consisting of clothing or habits - of the 'gender' more usually associated with the opposite sex. This essence is understood to be the result either of an accident of biology, or as the product of some other mysterious and not usually identifiable process, and therefore 'natural'. - Sheila
 "I-don't-care-that-'trans'-is-an-adjective" Jeffreys, PhD, Gender Hurts, p 15

In this caricature, a naturally male-essenced body wants to take on the clothing or habits of a naturally female-essenced body, and, therefore attempts to artificially imbue the naturally male-essenced body with unnaturally-acquired female essence so one can then take on the clothing or habits of a naturally female-essenced body. It is within this fallacious appeal to the morality of naturalism that TERFs weirdly characterize the trans experience as rape and parasitism.

All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. - Janice Raymond, PhD, The Transsexual Empire, p 104

To punctuate the embedded naturalistic morality TERFs push, they will frame the trans experience as monstrous, Frankensteinian and/or even vampire-like. TERFs like Janice Raymond make a point of ensuring that the morality of the natural[3] is withheld when speaking about trans women through phrases like, "male-to-constructed-female." TERFs, so focused on watch-dogging which essence is natural (ie, "real" and therefore valid) - predicated on the notion that their appeal to their own perceived woman-essence is natural - they fail to perceive their own hypocrisy.

Transgender activists such as Serano have developed a new vocabulary to advance their political agenda. One of these new terms is 'cis', which they apply to all those who are not unhappy with their 'gender'. In effect the term 'cis' creates two kinds of women, those with female bodies who are labeled 'cisgender', and those with male bodies who are 'transwomen'. Women, those born female and raised as women, thus suffer a loss of status as they are relegated to being just one kind of woman and their voices will have to compete on a level playing field with the other variety, men who transgender. - Sheila Jeffreys, PhD, Gender Hurts, p 50

Returning to what Wittig said, "The primacy of difference so constitutes our thought that it prevents turning inward on itself to question itself, no matter how necessary that may be to apprehend the basis of that which precisely constitutes it." Jeffreys, acting to protect her steak in a natural binary sexed essence asserts that cisgender should not be used because it somehow impugns the nature of her own claim within a natural sexed binary. There can be only one natural - and thus, valid - woman and, as Jeffreys herself puts it:

Another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect is due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour.

Jeffreys seems totally oblivious to the reality that when she explicitly appeals to the embedded ad naturam morality within her natural sex binary, she is publicly pronouncing her attachment to and support of behavioral norms and taboos predicated upon a coercive binary cultural system. Jeffreys' hubris and morality blind her to her own hypocrisy while functioning to validate her cruel behavior. Not buying into the naturalistic binary of Jeffreys' female-essence is, to her mind, a morally dishonorable behavior. Jeffreys' drive to lay claim to labels rooted in a morally natural male/female essence means that she is privileged to dismissively or mockingly disregard another's identity precisely because,

within her gender system, such behavior is honorable and even preordained.

“There is a witness to the transsexual’s script, a witness who is never consulted. She is the person who built the transsexual’s body of her own flesh and brought it up as her son or daughter, the transsexual’s worst enemy, his/her mother. Whatever else it is gender reassignment is an exorcism of the mother. When a man decides to spend his life impersonating his mother (like Norman Bates in Psycho) it is as if he murders her and gets away with it, proving at a stroke that there was nothing to her...” - Germaine Greer, PhD, *The Whole Woman*

In transsexualism, males put on “female” bodies (which are in fact pseudofemale). In a real sense they are separated from their original mothers by the rituals of the counseling process, which usually result in “discovering” that the mother of the transsexual-to-be is at fault for his “gender identity crisis.” These “patients” are reborn from males. As Linda Barufaldi suggested, this fact was symbolized in the renaming of the renowned transsexual of tennis, Renee (literally, “re-born”) Richards, whose original first name was Richard.” The re-birthing male supermothers include psychiatrists, surgeons, hormone therapists, and other cooperating professionals. The surgeons and hormone therapists of the transsexual kingdom, in their effort to give birth, can be said to produce feminine persons. They cannot produce women. - Mary Daly, PhD, *Gyn/Ecology*, pp 67 - 68

Trans: the non-essenced experience

When Jeffreys asserts that trans people believe there to be a mental male or female essence, she is in effect representing the trans experience as a Dualism argument. When TERFs talk about “gender identity,” they equivocate about the meaning of gender identity for trans people in order to accommodate their trans-experience-as-Dualism argument. There is no gendered essence haunting the brains of trans women, forcing us to like pink, and gender identity doesn’t just mean social identity.

When trans people talk about “gender identity” we can be talking about:

A: One’s subjective experience of one’s own sexed attributes;

B: One’s culturally influenced sex identification within the context of a social grouping; or,

C: Both A and B

TERFs like to pretend that “gender identity” only ever means the penultimate Category B because the former and latter deviate from the trans-experience-as-Dualism argument - an anathema for TERFs. For TERFs, there is a naturally created essence-based binary sex rubicon, defining us all which cannot be honorably crossed.

Women do not decide at some time in adulthood that they would like other people to understand them to be women, because being a woman is not an ‘identity’. Women’s experience does not resemble that of men who adopt the ‘gender identity’ of being female or being women in any respect. - Sheila

“I’ve-never-asked-a-cis-teen-about-this” Jeffreys, PhD, *Gender Hurts*, p 6

When I was 5 and prayed that god either kill me in my sleep or fix my body, I was concerned with my subjective experience of my body. Period. It’s not that I wanted a dolly and thought that I needed a different body shape to get one; rather, I experienced my body in the way that many trans people do.

My issue was my body which is to say, my issue was Category A.

In transgender TERF ideology, persons who transgender cisgender are seen as being in possession of an 'essence' - consisting of clothing or habits - of the 'gender' more usually associated with the opposite their sex.

TERFs speak of this social essence as the sexed "ghost in the machine." Trans women are men because they possess an immutable socialized man-essence. For instance, in a paper titled, Transgender Activism: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective, Jeffreys appeals to an an immutable socialized woman-essence for the purpose of authentication:

"Woman" is the result of the experience of living as a woman under male supremacy. This includes the experience of living in and as a female body and the way in which the actual or potential activities of this body, menstruation, childbearing are constructed in male supremacist society. It means having a lifetime's experience of the way in which the politics of body language and space diminish and restrict women's freedom.

For Jeffreys, there exists an authentic natural "woman" because she is defined by the habitual trappings of socialization. Should Jeffreys appeal to a social role as a woman-essence for the purpose of authentication, such reductivism isn't viewed a sex essentialism. However, should Jeffreys perceive (rightly or wrongly) a trans woman appeal to a social role as a woman-essence for the purpose of authentication, it's viewed as sex essentialism and worthy of her trademark sneering "criticism."

Maybe at some point in the future it will become an undisputed scientific fact that trans people experience our bodies in the way that we do as a result of some neurological structure that is triggered due to some genetic/epigenetic causality, but, regardless, the point is that for many trans folk throughout the world, transition is about addressing the way we experience our bodies.

Perhaps being mindful of Wittig's warning, when I interviewed Judith Butler, she said:

I know that some subjective experiences of sex are very firm and fundamental, even unchangeable. They can be so firm and unchanging that we call them "innate". But given that we report on such a sense of self within a social world, a world in which we are trying to use language to express what we feel, it is unclear what language does that most effectively. I understand that "innate" is a word that conveys the sense of something hired-wired and constitutive. I suppose I would be inclined to wonder whether other vocabularies might do the job equally well. I never did like the assertion of the "innate" inferiority of women or Blacks, and I understood that when people tried to talk that way, they were trying to "fix" a social reality into a natural necessity. And yet, sometimes we do need a language that refers to a basic, fundamental, enduring, and necessary dimension of who we are, and the sense of sexed embodiment can be precisely that.

My sense is that we may not need the language of innateness or genetics to understand that we are all ethically bound to recognize another person's declared or enacted sense of sex and/or gender. We do not have to agree upon the "origins" of that sense of self to agree that it is ethically obligatory to support and recognize sexed and gendered modes of being that are crucial to a person's well-being.

Are some trans people chiefly concerned about Category B? Of course, just as there are some who are

chiefly concerned with Category A and some with Category C. There are all kinds of trans people, but you wouldn't know that from TERF rhetoric. Being trans is, at its root, about nothing more than being true to one's sense of embodied selfhood. TERFs turn this lived truth on its head, purposefully repackaging the trans existence as inherently oppressing naturally woman-essenced people.

For many TERFs, all trans women want to take up that which is socially habitual and prescriptive for girls and therefore go through a medical and social hell just so they can do it. Trans men transition just because they're trying to escape the patriarchy and other TERFs claim that trans women are really just gay men who couldn't deal with patriarchal demands that they 'act like a man.' Therefore, the existence of trans people supports the oppression naturally women-essenced people face.

They expect we'll be shocked to see statistics about them being killed, and don't realize, some of us wish they would ALL be dead. - BevJo, TERF opinion leader, author, speaker [4]

Here, I find it appropriate to conclude with the now decades-old reflections of trans advocate and academic pioneer, Suzan Striker:

[T]he Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. [5]

Guide to the Sexing the Body is Gender Series

1. Introduction: 8/11/14
2. Contextualizing the Body: 8/12/14
3. Debunking TERF Essentialism: 8/13/14
4. TERFs Selling Women into Rape Culture: 8/14/14
5. Critical of "Gender Critical": 8/15/14
6. TERFism as an Obsessive Sadistic Fetish: 8/16/14

NOTES:

- Bone marrow-derived cells from male donors can compose endometrial glands in female transplant recipients by Ikoma et al in Am J Obstet Gynecol. 2009 Dec;201(6):608.e1-8
- Transplanted human bone marrow cells generate new brain cells by Crain BJ, Tran SD, Mezey E. in J Neurol Sci. 2005 Jun 15;233(1-2):121-3

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