

Taking The Tyranny Out Of The Y

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Abstract

With the ongoing battles between radical feminists and transgender bloggers, I've spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to be transgender. Radical feminists, in the vein of Andrea Dworkin's dream of an "androgynous society," hope to demolish gender roles. Recently i read an article written by Susan Cole of Now magazine. She [...]

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Recently i read an article written by Susan Cole of Now magazine. She discussed her gender fluidity and how she's beginning to enjoy it.

"Does this mean I've lost my feminist edge? I know I still believe that women have the right to female-only spaces and I'm still super-proud of my dykedom and my lesbian motherhood. But at the same time, I'm warming to the idea of my gender fluidity."

She continues to analyze her gender identity by saying:

"The truth is, the more experience I have, the more I see myself as ever-morphing. I change depending on who I'm with. In the company of an über-butch I become a little more femmy, but give me a high femme and I can do butch with the best of them."

The constraints of the male heterosexual gender identity are tightly guarded. The fluidity that Susan Cole enjoys is tolerated by a society to a higher extent than a "sissy" or "prissy" male bodied person that is going the opposite way.

Female bodied people in this culture are allowed to be more fluid with their gender presentation from birth. From clothing choices, to hair styles, the dichotomy is clear. Many times when a male bodied person first flirts with gender fluidity, it's the first time in their life they've been allowed to do so. You'll notice that many who are early in their experimentation (through gender change or cross dressing) go way over the top dress and demeanor. Their ultra feminine dress may border on campy and at times is down right clownish. But in a heterosexual world, femininity is looked at as a weakness. When that wall of masculinity is toppled, a waterfall of extreme femininity often is the result.

“While I’m feeling liberated by my softening edges, some trans people feel they’re liberated by their transition to a specific gender.”

I can’t really comment on other transgender people, but for me this has been about finding what works for me. Think about the clothes you wear every day. The clothes that you choose are like drawing a picture of how you want to present yourself to the world. There are fashion cliques even in butch lesbian circles. From the way you wear your hair, to the shoes you wear, everything about your presentation tells the world something about how you see yourself. Your gender identity really is a mirror to who you see yourself to be.

“It’s left me wondering what it feels like for a person contemplating a sex change to know with such confidence who they really are. Given the ridiculous male-female dichotomy we’re forced to live with, do any of us know what our real gender potential is?”

She continues by saying

“many trans people embrace the idea of fluidity, still identify as queer, and some choose a sex change precisely because their pre-transition gender ambiguity makes them more vulnerable in a world that tolerates nothing but extremes.”

The reality that Susan lives is one that even at its most oppressive moments won’t end up in her being jailed and convicted of a crime. If she is mistaken for a man in a restroom, she can prove otherwise. Having a penis in a women only space (restroom or locker room), no matter it’s size or ability to function sexually, is enough to get you thrown in jail. But presenting in a feminine manner in any form and using male only space can and has ended in murder.

The fact that her masculine appearance actually might aid her in other facets of her life. Honestly, I think “male privilege” is a misnomer. Masculine privilege is a more appropriate name.

A common question, even among people in the GLB community is why have surgery. She asks:

“I have to wonder (though I know I’ll catch flak here) whether trans people who are taking hormones and making surgical changes to their bodies are causing pain to themselves? When I raise this with folks who have transitioned, they say absolutely not. It feels, they say, like something’s finally being made right. Which is why anyone passionate about sexual liberation has to respect these decisions and support full funding for medical treatments.”

There’s a difference between gender identity and body image. It took me a long time to pry the two apart. Growing up I always felt a disdain for my body. As a young child when I got out of the shower, I’d always position myself so that I didn’t have to see my body. It felt wrong. I had this underlying confusion about why I felt so “wrong.” I can’t say I felt like a girl. I didn’t feel like I was “born in the wrong body.” I just felt like a stranger in a strange land, that was my own skin. My body dysphoria may rub up against my gender dysphoria, but it’s not the same thing. Taking hormones did kill two birds with one stone. It cured my body dysphoria and centered me emotionally in a way that I’d never felt before.

She ends her article by saying

“in the spirit of Pride I celebrate their courage, honour sexual pluralism and invite everyone on the planet to challenge the tyranny of assumptions that prevent us from being who we really are.”

My hope is that those in the radical feminist camp come to the same conclusion. I don't think Andrea Dworkin's vision of an androgynous society is the answer. A “one size fit's all” gender identity would be stale and boring. Gender identity needs to be unlinked from biological sex. Gender is only oppressive when it is something that is hoisted upon you without your consent. If everyone were able to pick and choose their gender presentation, be it masculine or feminine, the oppressiveness of gender would be forever destroyed.

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