

Sappho by Surgery

The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist

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JANICE RAYMOND'S *THE TRANSSEXUAL EMPIRE* did not invent anti-transsexual prejudice, but it did more to justify and perpetuate it than perhaps any other book ever written. Paradoxically, because it provoked such an outraged, anguished, and deeply motivated counter-response from transgender people, it also did more than any other work to elicit the new lines of critique that coalesced into transgender studies. It is a profoundly polemical book that is difficult to approach in a neutral manner, in much the same way that it is difficult to approach the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or other notorious works of propaganda. To substantively engage with it is to give credence to the easily falsifiable fantasies that structure it; to ignore it is to deny the power it still has to demonize transgender people in ways that have material consequences.

Raymond's book is still uncritically accepted by some on the cultural left, particularly lesbian-feminists, as a paragon of feminist criticism of "patriarchal" medical-scientific practices, and a politically progressive ethical condemnation of transsexualism. Within the new field of transgender studies, however, it is routinely vilified as an ideologically driven pastiche of shoddy research. She falsely asserts, for example, that transsexual surgical techniques were perfected by the Nazis in medical experiments performed on inmates of the death camps, and seriously advances the claim that male medical doctors are involved in a vast conspiracy to create a race of artificial women (the dreaded "transsexual empire" of her title) designed to replace biological females, as in *The Stepford Wives*. Raymond pays scant attention to female-to-male individuals, because she cannot easily fit them into her scheme.

In "Sappho by Surgery," the chapter that has caused the most offense among transgender people, Raymond expands upon the premise built up in earlier chapters, that biology defines gender. She claims that males who undergo sex-reassignment procedures remain deviant men and never become women. They use the appropriated appearance of the female body to invade women's spaces, particularly lesbian feminist spaces, in order to exercise male dominance and aggression over women and to subvert the feminist movement. Raymond claims that this is tantamount to rape—an undesired penetration—and that all MTF transsexuals are by definition rapists.

As will be seen throughout some of the articles in this anthology, Raymond provided the impetus for many transsexuals to begin theorizing their own lives, and asking whether they could ever claim the name of "feminist." Her work still creates misunderstanding, exclusion and prejudice, and "womyn-born-womyn" policies based on her ideas still dominate many women's events and services, from music festivals to discussion groups to rape crisis centers. Raymond articulated the fear of men that many women justifiably have, but she could be said to have unfortunately and misguidedly targeted a group of people who face even more inequalities than nontransgender women. With the republication of *Transsexual Empire* in 1994 with a new introduction, Raymond made it clear that her views had not changed in light of many years of critique.

Transsexualism is multifaceted. From all that has been said thus far, it is clear that it raises many of the most complex questions feminism is asking about the origins and manifestations of sexism and sex-role stereotyping.* While regarded by many as an obscure issue that affects a relatively minute proportion of the population, transsexualism poses very important feminist questions. Transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists show yet another face of patriarchy. As the male-to-constructed-female transsexual exhibits the attempt to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women, the male-to-constructed-female who claims to be a lesbian-feminist attempts to possess women at a deeper level, this time under the guise of challenging rather than conforming to the role and behavior of stereotyped femininity. As patriarchy is neither monolithic nor one-dimensional, neither is transsexualism.

All men and male-defined realities are not blatantly macho or masculinist. Many indeed are gentle, nurturing, feeling, and sensitive, which, of course, have been the more positive qualities that are associated with stereotypical femininity. In the same way that the so-called androgynous man assumes for himself the role of *femininity*, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist assumes for himself the role and behavior of *feminist*. The androgynous man and the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist deceive women in much the same way, for they lure women into believing that they are truly one of us—this time not only one in behavior but one in spirit and conviction.

CONTRADICTIONS OR CONFIRMATIONS?

It is not accidental that most male-to-constructed-female transsexuals who claim to be feminists also claim to be lesbian-feminists. In fact, I don't know of any transsexually constructed feminists who do not also claim to be lesbians. It is this combination that is extremely important. Lesbian-feminists have spent a great deal of energy in attempting to communicate that the self-definition of lesbian, informed by feminism, is much more than just a sexual choice. It is a total perspective on life in a patriarchal society representing a primal commitment to women on all levels of existence and challenging the bulwark of a sexist society—that is, heterosexism. Thus it is not a mere sexual alternative to men, which is characterized simply by sexually relating to women instead of men, but a way of being in the world that challenges the male possession of women at perhaps its most intimate and sensitive level. In assuming the identity of lesbian-feminist, then, doesn't the transsexual renounce patriarchal definitions of selfhood and choose to fight sexism on a most fundamental level?

First of all, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist may have renounced femininity but not masculinity and masculinist behavior (despite deceptive appearances). If, as I have noted earlier,

* For a long time, I have been very hesitant about devoting a chapter of this book to what I call the "transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist." In the order this book was written, it was actually the last chapter I wrote. The recent debate and divisiveness that the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist has produced within feminist circles has convinced me that, while transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists may be a small percentage of transsexuals, the issue needs an in-depth discussion among feminists.

I write this chapter with the full realization that feminists look at the issue of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist from the vantage point of a small community in which transsexuals have been able to be very visible—not because there are that many of them, but because they immediately have center stage. Thus focusing attention on this particular aspect of the transsexual issue may only serve to inflate the issue and their presence all the more. It may also distract attention from the more central questions that transsexualism raises and the power of the medical empire that creates transsexualism to begin with.

Because the oral and written debate concerning the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist seems to be increasing out of proportion to their actual numbers, I think that feminists ought to consider seriously the amount of energy and space we wish to give to this discussion. However, if any space should be devoted to this issue, it is in a book that purports to be a feminist analysis of transsexualism. Furthermore, most of the commentary thus far has been limited to letters to the editor and editorial comments in feminist papers, as well as a few scattered articles in various journals. Because of limited space, these analyses are necessarily restricted. I would like, therefore, to provide an extensive and intensive analysis of the issue and to address the deeply mythic dimensions that the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist represents.

femininity and masculinity are different sides of the same coin, thus making it quite understandable how one could flip from one to the other, then it is important to understand that the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist, while not exhibiting a feminine identity and role, still exhibits its obverse side—stereotypical masculinity. Thus the assumption that he has renounced patriarchal definitions of selfhood is dubious.

Masculine behavior is notably obtrusive. It is significant that transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists have inserted themselves into the positions of importance and/or performance in the feminist community. The controversy in the summer of 1977 surrounding Sandy Stone, the transsexual sound engineer for Olivia Records, an "all-women" recording company, illustrates this well. Stone is not only crucial to the Olivia enterprise but plays a very dominant role there.¹ The national reputation and visibility he achieved in the aftermath of the Olivia controversy is comparable, in feminist circles, to that attained by Renee Richards in the wake of the Tennis Week Open. This only serves to enhance his previously dominant role and to divide women, as men frequently do, when they make their presence necessary and vital to women. Having produced such divisiveness, one would think that if Stone's commitment to and identification with women were genuinely woman-centered, he would have removed himself from Olivia and assumed some responsibility for the divisiveness. In Boston, a transsexual named Christy Barsky has worked himself into a similar dominant position, this time coaching a women's softball team, coordinating a conference on women and violence, staffing a women's center, and performing musically at various all-women places. Thus, like Stone, he exhibits a high degree of visibility and also divides women, in the name of lesbian-feminism.

Pat Hynes has suggested that there is only an apparent similarity between a strong lesbian, woman-identified self and a transsexual who fashions himself in a lesbian-feminist image.² With the latter, his masculinity comes through, although it may not be recognized as such. Hynes especially points to the body language of transsexuals where she notes *subtle but perceptible* differences between, for example, the way lesbians interact with other women and the way transsexuals interact with women. One specific example of this is the way a transsexual walked into a women's restaurant with his arms around two women, one on each side, with the possessive encompassing that is characteristically masculine.

Mary Daly in explaining *why* this difference is perceptible points out that the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is able to deceptively act out the part of lesbian-feminist *because* he is a man with a man's history; that is, he is free of many of the residues of self-centered, self-depreciation, and self-contradiction that attend the history of women who are born with female bodies all of which is communicated both subtly and not so supply in gestures, body language, and the like.³ Thus it is precisely *because* the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is a man, and *not* a woman encumbered by the scars of patriarchy that are unique to a woman's personal and social history that he can play our parts so convincingly and apparently better than we can play them ourselves. However, in the final analysis, he can only *play the part*, although the part may at times seem as, or more, plausible than the real woman (as is also the case with the male-to-constructed-female transsexual who appears more feminine than most feminine women).

What is also typically masculine in the case of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is the appropriation of women's minds, convictions of feminism, and sexuality. One of the definitions of *male*, as related in Webster's, is "designed for fitting into a corresponding hollow part." This, of course, means much more than the literal signification of heterosexual intercourse. It can be taken to mean that men have been very adept at penetrating all of women's "hollow" spaces, at filling up the gaps, and of sliding into the interstices. Obviously, women who are in the process of moving out of patriarchal institutions, consciousness, and modes of living are very vulnerable and have gaps. I would imagine that it would be difficult, for example, for Olivia Records to find a female sound engineer and that such a person would be absolutely necessary to the survival of Olivia. But it would have been far more

honest if Olivia had acknowledged the maleness of Sandy Stone and perhaps the necessity, at the time to employ a man in this role. As one woman wrote of Sandy Stone and the Olivia controversy: "I feel raped when Olivia passes off Sandy, a transsexual, as a real woman. After all his male privilege, is he going to cash in . . . lesbian feminist culture too?"⁴

Rape, of course, is a masculinist violation of bodily integrity. All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women's sexuality and spirit, as well. Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception. It is significant that in the case of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist, often he is able to gain entrance and a dominant position in women's spaces because the women involved do not know he is a transsexual and he just does not happen to mention it.

The question of deception must also be raised in the context of how transsexuals who claim to be lesbian-feminists obtained surgery in the first place. Since all transsexuals have to "pass" as feminine in order to qualify for surgery, so-called lesbian-feminist transsexuals either had to lie to the therapists and doctors, or they had a conversion experience after surgery.⁵ I am highly dubious of such conversions, and the other alternative, deception, raises serious problems, of course.

Deception reaches a tragic point for all concerned if transsexuals become lesbian-feminists because they regret what they have done and cannot back off from the effects of irreversible surgery (for example, castration). Thus they revert to masculinity (but not male body appearance) by becoming the man within the woman, and more, within the women's community, getting back their maleness in a most insidious way by seducing the spirits and the sexuality of women who do not relate to men.

Because transsexuals have lost their physical "members" does not mean that they have lost their ability to penetrate women—women's mind, women's space, women's sexuality. Transsexuals merely cut off the most obvious means of invading women so that they *seem* noninvasive. However, as Mary Daly has remarked, in the case of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists their whole presence becomes a "member" invading women's presence and dividing us once more from each other.⁶

Furthermore, the deceptiveness of men without "members," that is, castrated men or eunuchs has historical precedent. There is a long tradition of eunuchs who were used by rulers, heads of state, and magistrates as *keepers of women*. Eunuchs were supervisors of the harem in Islam and wardens of women's apartments in many royal households. In fact, the word *eunuch*, from the Greek *eunouchos*, literally means "keeper of the bed." Eunuchs were men that other more powerful men used to keep their women in place. By fulfilling this . . . eunuchs also succeeded in winning the confidence of the ruler and securing important and influential positions.

Moreover, the word *eunuch* is also related to the word *scheme*. (Eunuchs schemed to obtain political power.) In Mesopotamia, many eunuchs became royal officers and managers of palaces, and "others emerge on the pages of history as important and often virile figures."⁷ Some were famous warriors and statesmen, as well as scholars. One finds eunuchs associated with temples dedicated to the goddesses from at least 2000 B.C. until well into the Roman period.⁸ In fact the earliest mention of eunuchs is in connection with the Minoan civilization of Crete, which was a transitional period from an earlier gynocentric society. It thus appears that eunuchs, to some extent, always attached themselves to women's spaces and, most frequently, were used to supervise women's freedom of movement and to harness women's self-centeredness and self-government. "It is stated that entree in every political circle was possible for eunuchs even if occurred to other men."⁹

Will the acceptance of transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists who have lost only their outward appendages of physical masculinity lead to the containment and control of lesbian-feminists? Will every lesbian-feminist space become a harem? Like eunuchs, transsexuals have gained prominent

and dominant access to feminist political circles "barred to other men."¹⁰ Just because transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists are not only castrated men, but have also acquired artifacts of a woman's body and spirit, does not mean that they are un-men, and that they cannot be used as "keepers" of woman-identified women when the "real men," the "rulers of patriarchy," decide that the women's movement (used here as both noun and verb) should be controlled and contained. In this way, they too can rise in the Kingdoms of the Fathers. The political implications of historical eunuchism and its potential for female control should not be lost upon woman-identified women.

MYTHIC DIMENSIONS OF TRANSEXUALISM

Transsexuals are living and acting out a very ancient myth, that of single parenthood by the father. This myth was prevalent in many religious traditions, including the Jewish, Greek, and Christian. Eve was born of Adam; Dionysus and Athena were born of Zeus; and Jesus was generated by God the Father in his godly birth. (Mary was a mere receptacle used to conform Jesus to earthly birth standards.) When this myth is put into the context of transsexualism, the deeper dimensions of how transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists reinforce patriarchy can be perceived.

Simone de Beauvoir has remarked that "if [woman] did not exist, men would have invented her. They did invent her. But she exists also apart from their inventiveness."¹¹ Men, of course, invented the feminine, and in this sense it could be said that all women who conform to this invention are transsexuals, fashioned according to man's image. Lesbian-feminists exist apart from man's inventiveness, and the political and personal ideals of lesbian-feminism have constituted a complete rebellion against the man-made invention of woman, and a context in which women begin to create ourselves in our own image. Thus the transsexual who claims to be a lesbian-feminist *seems* to be the man who creates himself in *woman's* image. This, however, is deceptive, for note that he is still created in *man's* image since he is essentially a child of the Father (in this case, the medical fathers), renouncing his mothered birth.

Mary Daly has written at length in her most recent work, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Medical Feminism*, about the myth of Dionysus.¹² She also recites various versions of the myth along with some scholarly commentaries on it. These can shed much light on the mythic implications of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist. First of all, Philip Slater points out the very interesting fact that, "Instead of seeking distance from mastery over the mother, the Dionysian position incorporates her."¹³ In the most popular version of the myth, Semele the mother of Dionysus while pregnant with him, is struck by Zeus with a thunderbolt and is thus consumed. Hermes saves the six-month fetal Dionysus, sews him upon Zeus's thigh, and after three more months, Zeus "birthed him. Thus Zeus exterminates the woman and bears his own son, and we have single-parent fatherhood (read motherhood). Moreover, Jane Harrison has pointed out that "the word Dionysus means not 'son of Zeus' but rather Zeus Young Man, i.e., Zeus in his young form."¹⁴ Thus Dionysus is his own father (read mother) and births himself into existence.

Whether we are talking about being born of the father, or the self (son), which in the myth are one and the same person (as in the Christian trinity), we are still talking about male mothering. At this level of analysis, it might seem that what men really envy is women's biological ability to procreate. Transsexuals illustrate the way in which men do this, by acquiring the artifacts of female biology. Even though they cannot give birth they acquire the organs that are representative of this female power. However, it is the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist who illustrates that much more is desired than female biology—that much more is at stake than literal womb envy. He shows that female biology, whether exercised in giving birth or simply by virtue of its existence, is representative of female creativity on a profound mythic level. Thus the creative power that is associated with female biology

is not envied primarily because it is able to give birth physically but because it is multidimensional, bearing culture, harmony, and true inventiveness.¹⁵

The transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist feeds off woman's true energy source, i.e., her woman-identified self. It is he who recognizes that if female spirit, mind, creativity, and sexuality exist anywhere in a powerful way, it is here, among lesbian-feminists. I am not saying that the lesbian-feminist is the only self- and woman-identified woman. What I mean to express is that lesbianism-feminism signals a *total* giving of women's energy to women, and that it is this total woman-identified energy that the transsexual who claims to be a lesbian-feminist wants for himself. It is understandable that if men want to become women to obtain female creativity, then they will also want to assimilate those women who have withdrawn their energies from men at the most intimate and emotional levels.

This, of course, is not the usual way in which lesbian living has been harnessed. Most often, lesbian existence is simply not acknowledged, as evidenced in the laws against homosexuality, which legislate against male homosexuals, but not lesbians. It has been simply assumed that all women relate to men, and that women need men to survive. Furthermore, the mere labeling of a woman as "lesbian" has been enough to keep lesbian living harnessed or, at best, in the closet. "Lesbian is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows that she... has crossed the terrible *boundary* of her sex role."¹⁶ (*Italics mine.*)

Whereas the lesbian-feminist *crosses* the boundary of her patriarchally imposed sex role, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is a *boundary violator*. This violation is also profoundly mythic, for as Norman O. Brown writes of Dionysus, he as the "mad god who breaks down boundaries."¹⁷ Thus exhibiting qualities that are usually associated with femininity, he appeared to be the opposite of the masculine Apollo.

While the super-masculine Apollo overtly oppresses/destroys with his contrived boundaries/hierarchies/rules/roles, the feminine Dionysus blurs the senses, seduces, confuses his victims—drugging them into complicity, offering them his "heart" as a love potion that poisons.¹⁸

It is, however, the *feminist* Dionysus who appears in the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist. But he "blurs the senses, seduces, and confuses" in much the same way as the *feminine* Dionysus. He not only violates the boundaries of women's bodies but of our mind and spirits. What is more tragic, however, is that he unable to make women break down our boundaries of self-definition. Elizabeth Rose in a letter in response to my article in *Chrysalis*, "Transsexualism: The Ultimate Homage to Sex-Role Power," illustrates well this tendency of feminists to be seduced by Dionysian boundary violation.

Raymond's article encourages us to set our "bottom line" (about whom we will allow the privilege of self-definition.

I am upset that a magazine "of women's culture" ... is basically encouraging the elitist/separatist attitude that self-definition [is] ... subject to the scrutiny and judgments of those who, in the name of political purity, claim the power to define who is allowed entry into the feminist community ... and, now, who is or is not female.¹⁹

Rose would encourage us to set no boundaries by employing the analogy of how boundaries have been used oppressively against lesbians in the past/present. "There are so many painful parallels between how the world has treated strong women and lesbians and how Raymond and others categorize and discount transsexuals."²⁰ But the analogy is false. The boundaries that have been and are used against lesbians are the boundaries of the Fathers:

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The contrived Apollonian boundaries—such as the false divisions of “fields” of knowledge and the splits between “mind” and “heart.” But in this process we do not become swallowed upon male-centered (Dionysian) confusion. Hags find and define our own boundaries, our own definitions. Radical feminist living “on the boundary” means this moving, Self-centering boundary definition. As we move we mark out our own territory.²¹

Rose and other women who have been confused/seduced by Dionysian transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist boundary violation would have us believe that all boundaries are oppressive. Yet if feminists cannot agree on the boundaries of what constitutes femaleness, then what can we hope to agree on? The Dionysian “Final Solution,” as Daly points out, produces confusion in women—“inability to distinguish the female Self and her process from the male-made masquerade.”²² It encourages the leveling of genuine boundaries of self-preservation and self-centering.

THE SEDUCTION OF LESBIAN-FEMINISTS

It is not hard to understand why transsexuals want to become lesbian-feminists. They indeed have discovered where strong female energy exists and want to capture it. It is more difficult to understand why so many feminists are so ready to accept men—in this case, castrated men—into their most intimate circles. Certainly Dionysian confusion about the erasure of all boundaries is one reason that appeals to the liberal mind and masquerades as “sympathy for all oppressed groups.” Women who believe this, however, fail to see that such liberalism is repressive, and that it can only favor and fortify the possession of women by men. These women also fail to recognize that accepting transsexuals into the feminist community is only another rather unique variation on the age-old theme of women nurturing men, providing them with a safe haven, and finally giving them our best energies.

The question arises: are women who accept transsexuals as lesbian-feminists expressing gratitude on some level to those men who are finally willing to join women and pay for their male privilege with their balls? Gratitude is a quality exhibited by all oppressed groups when they think that some in the class of oppressors have finally relinquished their benefits to join them. But, of course, it is doubtful that transsexuals actually give up their male privilege. As one woman put it: “A man who decides to call himself a woman is not giving up his privilege. He is simply using it in a more insidious way.”²³ Furthermore, a man who decides to call himself a lesbian-feminist is getting a lot. The transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is the man who indeed gets to be “the man” in an exclusive women’s club to which he would have otherwise no access.

Women who think that these men are giving up male privilege seem to be naive about the sophisticated ways in which it is possible for men to co-opt women’s energy, time, space, and sexuality. Transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists may be the first men to realize that “if you can’t fight them, join them.” In a short story entitled “The Women’s Restaurant,” by T. C. Boyle, which appeared recently in *Penthouse*, this point is well made.

The story begins by setting the scene in and around Grace & Rubie’s Restaurant and is written from the point of view of the voyeuristic narrator. “It is women’s restaurant. Men are not permitted. . . . What goes on there, precisely, no man knows. I am a man. I am burning to find out.”²⁴ The narrator then proceeds to caricature Grace and Rubie as butch and femme, as well as to relate his several attempts to gain entrance. After two unsuccessful endeavors, he goes to a department store, buys a pink polyester pantsuit, a bra, pantyhose, and cosmetics with which he makes himself up to pass as a woman. He gains entrance and is able to experience what he has been missing.

Here I was, embosomed in the very nave, the very omphalos of furtive femininity—a prize patron of the women's restaurant, a member, privy to its innermost secrets.... There they were—women—chewing, drinking, digesting, chatting, giggling, crossing, and uncrossing their legs. Shoes off, feet up. Smoking cigarettes, flashing silverware, tapping time to the music. Women among women. I bathed in their soft chatter, birdsong, the laughter like falling coils of hair. I lit a cigarette and grinned. No more fairybook-hero thoughts of rescuing Rubie—oh no, this was paradise.²⁵

Having drunk six tequila sunrises and a carafe of dinner wine, the male intruder/narrator finds it necessary to relieve himself, but forgets to sit down when he urinates in the rest room, at which point he is discovered by Grace. The story ends with his savoring of the triumph of temporary infiltration and a plan for permanent invasion.

I have penetrated the women's restaurant, yes, but in actuality it was little more than a rape.... I am not satisfied. The obsession grows in me, pregnant, swelling, insatiable with the first taste of fulfillment. Before I am through, I will drink it to satiety. I have plans.... The next time I walk through those curtained doors at Grace & Rubie's there will be no dissimulation.... There are surgeons who can assure it.²⁶

That this story appeared in *Penthouse* is no surprise. It is obvious that its editors thought it would be of interest to their readers, whether budding or closet transsexuals. In spite of the ludicrous details and caricatures, one can see that the narrator was primarily attracted to the woman-centeredness of the restaurant. "Women among women... this was paradise." Such an attitude is representative of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist who indeed gets his "paradise," because there *were* surgeons who could "assure it." Ironically, the would-be transsexual narrator of the story says that the next time he walks through the doors, "there will be no dissimulation." Transsexualism, however, is dissimulation. As I have shown previously, to not acknowledge the fact that one is a transsexual in a women's space is indeed deception. Finally, "penetrating" the women's restaurant was "little more than a rape." Little more than a rape, indeed! What "little more" is there to such an act, unless it is the total rape of our feminist identities, minds, and convictions? The transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist, having castrated himself, turns his whole body and behavior into a phallus that can rape in many ways, all the time. In this sense, he performs *total* rape, while also functioning *totally* against women's will to lesbian-feminism.

We have seen three reasons why lesbian-feminists are seduced into accepting transsexuals: liberalism, gratitude, and naiveté. There is yet another reason—one that can be perhaps best described as the *last remnants of male identification*. This is a complex phenomenon, which has various ingredients.

On the one hand, there is fear of the label "man-hater." Are women who are so accepting of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist trying to prove to themselves that a lesbian-feminist (she who has been called the ultimate man-hater) is really not a man-hater after all? As Adrienne Rich has pointed out, one way of avoiding that feared label, and of allowing one's self to accept men, is to accept those men who have given up the supposed ultimate possession of manhood in a patriarchal society by self-castration.²⁷

On the other hand, there is a second component to this "last remnant of male identification"—i.e., *attraction to masculine presence*. As Pat Hynes has suggested, there is an *apparent* similarity between a strong woman-identified self and a transsexual who fashions himself in a lesbian image. Because there is an *apparent* similarity, some lesbian-feminists may allow themselves to express the residues of their (buried) attraction to men or to masculine presence, while pretending to themselves that transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists are really women. This allows women to do two things: to express that attraction, yet also to decide themselves.

SELF DEFINITION

One of the most constraining questions that transsexuals, and, in particular, transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists, pose is the question of self-definition—who is a woman, who is a lesbian-feminist? But, of course, *they* pose the question on their terms, and we are faced with answering it. Men have always made such questions of major concern, and this question, in true phallic fashion, is thrust upon us. How many women students writing on such a feeble feminist topic as “Should Women Be Truck Drivers, Engineers, Steam Shovel Operators?” and the like, have had their male professor scribble in the margins: “But what are the real differences between men and women?” Men, of course, have defined the supposed differences that have kept women out of such jobs and professions, and feminists have spent much energy demonstrating how these differences, if indeed they do exist, are primarily the result of socialization. Yet there are differences, and some feminists have come to realize that those differences are important whether they spring from socialization, from biology, or from the total history of existing as a woman in a patriarchal society. The point is, however, that the origin of these differences is probably not the important question, and we shall perhaps never know the total answer to it. Yet we are forced back into trying to answer it again and again.*

Transsexuals, and transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists, drag us back to answering such old questions by asking them in a new way. And thus feminists debate and divide because we keep focusing on patriarchal questions of who is a woman and who is a lesbian-feminist. It is important for us to realize that these may well be non-questions and that the only answer we can give to them is that we know who we are. We know that we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy, and that whether or not we were socialized to be so-called normal women, patriarchy has treated and will treat us like women. Transsexuals have not had this same history. No man can have the history of being born and located in this culture as a woman. He can have the history of *wishing* to be a woman and of *acting* like a woman, but this gender experience is that of a transsexual, not of a woman. Surgery may confer the artifacts of outward and inward female organs but it cannot confer the history of being born a woman in this society.

What of persons born with ambiguous sex organs or chromosomal anomalies that place them in a biologically intersexual situation? It must be noted that practically all of them are altered shortly after birth to become anatomically male or female and are reared in accordance with the societal gender identity and role that accompanies their bodies. Persons whose sexual ambiguity is discovered later are altered in the direction of what their gender rearing has been (masculine or feminine) up to that point. Thus those who are altered shortly after birth have the history of being practically born as male or female and those who are altered later in life have their body surgically conformed to their history. When and if they do undergo surgical change, they do not become the opposite sex after a long history of functioning and being treated differently.

Although popular literature on transsexualism implies that Nature has made mistakes with transsexuals, it is really society that has made the mistake by producing conditions that create the transsexual body/mind split. While intersexed people are born with chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, which can be linked up with certain biological malfunctions, transsexualism is not of this order. The language of “Nature makes mistakes” only serves to confuse and distort the issue, taking the focus off the social system, which is actively oppressive. It succeeds in blaming an amorphous “Nature” that is made to seem oppressive and is conveniently amenable to direct control/manipulation by the instruments of hormones and surgery.

* A parallel is the abortion issue, which can also be noted in this context. The key question, asked by men for centuries, is “when does life begin?” This question is posed in men’s terms and on their turf, and is essentially unanswerable. Women torture themselves trying to answer it and thus do not assert or even develop our own questions about abortion.

In speaking of the importance of history for self-definition, two questions must be asked. Should a person want to change his/her personal and social history and if so, *how* should one change that history in the most honest and integral way? In answer to the first question, anyone who has lived in a patriarchal society has to change personal and social history in order to be a self. History cannot be allowed to determine the boundaries, life, and location of the self. We should be change agents of our own history. Women who are feminists obviously wish to change parts of their history as women in this society; some men who are honestly dealing with feminist questions wish to change their history as men; and transsexuals wish to change their history of *wanting* to be women. In stressing the importance of female history for female self-definition, I am not advocating a static view of such history.

What is more important, however, is *how* one changes personal history in the most honest and integral way, if one wants to break down sex-role oppression. Should nontranssexual men who wish to fight sexism take on the identity of women and/or lesbian-feminists while keeping their male anatomy intact? Why should castrated men take on these identities and self-definitions and be applauded for doing so? To what extent would concerned blacks accept whites who had undergone medicalized changes in skin color and, in the process, claimed that they had not only a black body but a black soul?

Can a transsexual assume the self-definition of lesbian-feminist just because he wants to, or does this particular self-definition proceed from certain conditions endemic to female biology and history? Women take on the self-definition of feminist and/or lesbian because that definition truly proceeds from not only the chromosomal fact of being born XX, but also from the whole history of what being born with those chromosomes means in this society. Transsexuals would be more honest if they dealt with their specific form of gender agony that inclines them to want a transsexual operation. This gender agony proceeds from the chromosomal fact of being born XY and *wishing* that one were born XX, and from the particular life history that produced such distress. The place to deal with that problem, however, is not the women's community. The place to confront and solve it is among transsexuals themselves.

One should be able to make choices about who one wants to be. But should one be able to make *any* choice? Should a white person attempt to become black, for example? The question is a moral one, which asks basically about the rightness of the choice, not the possibility of it. Should persons be able to make choices that disguise certain facets of our existence from others who have a right to know—choices that feed off others' energies, and reinforce oppression?

Jill Johnston has commented that, "many women are dedicated to working for the 'reconstructed man.'"²⁸ This usually means women gently or strongly prodding their significant men into androgynous behavior and action. Women who accept transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists say that these men are truly "reconstructed" in the most basic sense that women could hope for—i.e., they have paid with their balls to fight against sexism. Ultimately, however, the "reconstructed man" becomes the "reconstructed woman" who obviously considers himself equal to and a peer of genetic women in terms of his "womanhood." One transsexual openly expressed that he felt male-to-constructed-female transsexuals *surpassed* genetic women.

Genetic women cannot possess the very special courage, brilliance, sensitivity and compassion—and overview—that derives from the transsexual experience. Free from the chains of menstruation and child-bearing, transsexual women are obviously far superior to Gennys in many ways.

Genetic women are becoming quite obsolete, which is obvious, and the future belongs to transsexual women. We know this, and perhaps some of you suspect it. All you have left is your "ability" to bear children, and in a world which will groan to feed 6 billion by the year 2000, that's a negative asset.²⁹