

Lesbian Generations— Transsexual . . . Lesbian . . . Feminist . . .

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I INTERPRETED QUITE LITERALLY, perhaps *too* literally, Leila Rupp's kind invitation to "speak informally for about ten minutes" in the roundtable on lesbian generations by putting the emphasis on "informally" and extemporizing some rather haphazardly organized thoughts on what generation of lesbian I considered myself to be. The venue being the Big Berks and the personal, of course, still being political, I assumed in framing my remarks that an ample amount of autobiographical reflection would be, if not original in its methodological implications, then intelligible or at least excusable under the circumstances. When my turn came to speak, I offered an impromptu performance in which I sought to cite generational, ethnic, national, and class-based competencies of lesbian identity, while simultaneously ironically distancing myself from those very norms through a calculated and strategic cultivation of affect. By which I mean to say: I tried to make people laugh, and I was pleased to have succeeded through a variety of techniques (gesture, expression, phrasing, timing, embodied context) that don't render well on the printed page. You had to be there—but what follows is a loose rendition of that performance into text.

I tried to be funny (1) to demonstrate that lesbian feminists can, in fact, have a sense of humor, and (2) because ironic distancing—a self-protective critique from within of something I actually care about

being part of—has been a mode of survival for me as the particular sexual and gendered subject that I am. As decades of feminist injunctions to be mindful of intersectionality have taught us, all identities are complicated; none can be articulated in monolithic purity and isolation, nor can the messily lived complexity of identity's intermingled attributes be disarticulated and hierarchically arranged other than by conceptual and narrative operations that are always political and often violent. While I don't deny that my whiteness, upward economic mobility, level of educational and professional attainment, or coastal cultural mores inform my lesbian identity, these intersections have not been particularly difficult to occupy; they are, after all, forms of privilege. Being transsexual—well, that's presented more of a challenge. Being transsexual *and* lesbian, with one identity being no more or less ontologized than the other and no more or less constructed, has been a fraught identitarian intersection indeed. Hence, as Donald O'Conner put it so eloquently in *Singin' in the Rain*, "make 'em laugh." Contemplating other approaches to this conversation just makes my stomach churn.

Taking things too literally, by the way, such as the way I took Leila Rupp's invitation to participate on the lesbian generations roundtable, is something transsexuals are often accused of doing—literalizing that which is properly metaphorical. For example, I might, when called upon to do so, defend my practices of embodiment or stake my claim to gender authenticity by protesting that Simone de Beauvoir herself said, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," to which a critic would reply, "But she didn't mean it like *that*. Why do you always have to be so *literal*?"

I was born in 1961, which means I'm turning fifty the summer that I'm writing this. I graduated from high school and started college in 1979. The words feminist, lesbian, and transsexual were the labels available to me in my native English at the time that I was doing my formative identity work, and they all stuck. Eventually. Transsexual was the one I consciously wrestled with from the earliest age. I came across the term in a Dear Abby advice column published in my hometown newspaper in southwestern Oklahoma in the early 1970s when I was about eleven. I had always felt transgendered, but had never before that moment seen reflected back to me from the world one scrap of evidence that such feelings might map onto an objective reality shared

by others, rather than being just a subjective perception of my own. I immediately rushed down to my public library to find out more about this potentially life-changing bit of information but was disappointed to learn, from the textbooks on abnormal psychology that were the only source of information available to me, that transsexuals were profoundly psychopathological people with a deep aversion to homosexuality who mutilated their bodies in order to appear straight.

Damn. I wasn't a transsexual after all, I thought to my little eleven-year-old self, because I was pretty sure I wasn't crazy, and I actually thought homosexuality sounded kind of cool. I have no more insight into the origins of my sexual orientation than into the origins of my gender identification, just an awareness of the lifelong presence and persistence of both. Go figure—you could get a PhD in trying to sort out how such things can be possible and still not have a good answer. But as far back as I can recall, I always thought of myself, to myself, as a girl who liked girls, and who wanted to be liked as a girl by girls who liked girls. That has been the inalterable transhomosexual structure of my desire and bodily sense. "The Girl from Ipanema" was a big hit on the radio when I was about five, and I remember projecting myself into it as a proto-femme-lesbian fantasy: *I* was the tall and tan and young and lovely one, who walked just like a samba that swung so cool and swayed so gentle. As Astrud Gilberto rhymed it in slightly mangled syntax, "Each day as she walks to the sea, she looks straight ahead not at he." That was the me I wanted to be: femininely desirable, oblivious to the male gaze, heading toward something powerful and dynamic and as big as an ocean that could engulf and sweep over me like a lover.

The feminist part came later, but it seemed like a no-brainer. After my father died unexpectedly when I was thirteen, my brother and I were raised by our widowed single mother, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that "equal pay for equal work" was simply fair or that the government assistance programs we lived on after my mother decided to go to college to become a social worker helped keep our family together. I earned a reputation as a wild-eyed liberal among my high school friends because I supported the ERA—although raised a boy, I'd been putting myself in the other guy's shoes, so to speak, my whole life and knew that I wouldn't want anybody discriminating against *me* just because of my gender. I knew "nice" girls who

needed abortions and “bad” girls who hated their horrible pimps; I heard unfiltered misogynistic and sexist locker-room talk from guys who took me for one of their own; I knew from firsthand experience the kinds of psychic woundedness from histories of sexual violence that can echo down through the generations of a family. Feminism, once I was exposed to the concept of it during my undergraduate honors seminar in US history (we read and discussed *The Feminine Mystique*), simply made a lot of sense to me as a political framework and fit with my perceptions of what a just world should look like. I came to consciousness as a “second waver.”

So there I was, at age nineteen, a transsexual-lesbian-feminist wannabe, trying to figure out how to put my life together, with all relevant authorities telling me that the pieces couldn't possibly fit. Gender identity disorder officially entered the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, and for people like me, who were assigned “male” at birth, being attracted to people assigned “female” at birth was a contraindication for diagnosis—and pathologization offered the only access route to the medically controlled techniques of body modification that promised any sense of sustainable embodiment. Janice Raymond's paranoiac *The Transsexual Empire* was published a year earlier (it and the psychiatrist Robert Stoller's *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* were the only two books on transsexuality I could find in my college library), and Raymond specifically attacked as “rapists” people who wanted to become “Sappho by surgery,” alleging that they—that is to say, me—were symbolically inserting a male presence into a feminine space where it was unwelcome and, hence, were anathema to feminism and lesbianism.

Raymond's book taught me the valuable lesson that there was more than one kind of feminism. At the very least there was the feminism that held that social structures, gendering practices, government policies, economic disparities, and media representations needed to be changed through political action in order to end gender-based oppression; then there was the feminism that one might want to have vulnerable conversations with (and within) about sexuality and gender, provided there was some mutual respect and reciprocity involved; and then there was the aggressive crazy-talk kind that spewed venom every bit as toxic as that served up by the fundamentalist Right, the kind that would lash out to hurt you if you

threatened it. That's the part that still makes my stomach churn, waiting for it to pop up when least expected, the part that makes irony and humor feel safe.

One question roundtable participants were asked to consider was: *What makes someone part of "lesbian history"?* I feel very much a part of that history in the 1970s and 1980s, although not in a way most people would readily recognize—I was neither a subject nor an object of that history, but rather an *abject* of it, relegated to the negative space that circumscribed and defined its positivity. I was no less generationally marked by that historically contingent experience of lesbian feminism for being excluded from its field of intelligibility. This makes me curious, in turn, about the subjectivities of those women able to appear positively as lesbian feminists who were likewise shaped by a tacit transphobia that, however palpable to me, remained largely invisible to them. Negative affect, it would seem, is a technology that operates on all bodies, centering some and displacing others.

Between the Scylla of a preemptive categorical exclusion and the Charybdis of compulsory psychopathologization, I kept my head down for a decade and deferred gender transitioning. I got through the 1980s with the help of graduate school, Michel Foucault, poststructuralism, and Gayle Rubin, sublimating my various dysphorias into a dissertation on the cultural politics of emergent forms of personal and collective identity, and by knocking around in radical sexuality subcultures in the San Francisco Bay Area. The queer movement that erupted around 1990 felt like what I had been waiting for all along, and I threw myself into it without hesitation. New groups such as the Lesbian Avengers, the post-identity politics of Queer Nation, and the eruption onto the scene of this new term, *transgender*, opened up a vital space of possibility. I felt at last that I had someplace to transition *into*: a place for coming out as a transsexual lesbian feminist.

Some of the lines of research I've pursued as a scholar for the past twenty years, as well as my efforts to help establish transgender studies as a recognized academic field, have been motivated to a significant degree by the lesbian feminist identity politics I lived through, albeit in a queer sort of isolation, during the late 1970s and 1980s—a coda, or perhaps a second act, to the "sex wars" that aim to reframe what can be properly considered feminist positions on embodiment, identity, desire, and gender. Looking forward now to

future developments in the fields of gender and women's history and its intersection with transgender studies, there are a few emerging matters coming into focus that merit brief mention before winding these remarks to a close.

Another question roundtable participants were asked to consider was: *How do we address the contentious borders between lesbian and transgender identities, between passing women and transmen, between gender identity and sexual identity?* It seems both obvious yet necessary to point out that the transgender border question cannot be reduced to one between "passing women" and "transmen." This border has indeed been a hot-button issue for some time now and has received high-profile scholarly treatment in works like J. Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*. But there is another border. Transwomen are like Canadians in contemporary US discourse on border surveillance and immigration; we're not on the border that gets most of the attention these days, and yet there is a history there, too, of boundaries marked through wars, of cultural conflict, of tropes of nation and citizenship being deployed, of access barriers thrown up to the restricted country of feminist womanhood—all of which is overripe for rigorous historical appraisal.

I know of only one scholar thus far, A. Finn Enke at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who is doing academic work on transgender women and transgender issues in US feminism in the 1970s. There are rich veins of historical material yet to be mined there. Check out the *Alternative Press Index* headings for "transsexual" and "transvestite" and you will find tantalizing leads about transpeople doing political support work for prisoners convicted of sex crimes, participating in gay liberation, joining feminist collectives and establishing women's buildings, organizing rallies against the war in Vietnam, and speaking out about disability in lesbian feminist communities. There is a new history yet to be written of this recent past, one that upends our received narratives about the 1970s. In Philadelphia, for example, a group called Radical Queens partnered with the separatist Dyke Tactics to push jointly for economic and political transformation. A group of formerly closeted heterosexual male cross-dressers in Washington, DC, came out to support the ERA, arguing that in good conscience they couldn't claim to be "woman identified" if they didn't participate in feminist causes. A dating service in California, the Salmacis Society (named for the typically unheralded female

nymph in Greek mythology who fused her body with the demigod Hermaphroditus to become part of a doubly sexed being), promoted "femme-femme" relationships between all sexes and genders. And there is still much work to do in documenting how transsexual and transgender issues became flashpoints and turning points in the histories of better-known social movements—the ejection of revolutionary street-queen Sylvia Rivera from the Christopher Street Liberation Day commemoration, for example, or Robin Morgan's verbal attack on transsexual lesbian feminist Beth Elliot at the West Coast Lesbian Conference, or Janice Raymond's campaign to have Sandy Stone fired by the Olivia Records women's music collective. Investigating these and similar acts of transgender exclusion from broader movements shines a light on the otherwise invisible operations of the unacknowledged normativities through which social change often moves forward.

Trying to speak intelligibly from a trans-lesbian-feminist sensibility has required developing critiques of dominant forms of womanhood and lesbianism, as well as of queerness, that in retrospect look a lot like the emerging critiques of neoliberal homonationalism. To wit: the kind of female homosexual or homonormative male that is increasingly recognized as a legitimate version of the subject-citizen within Eurocentric modernity secures her or his relationship to state and market precisely by not troubling the regulative framework known as *gender*—a biopolitical technique of bodily administration that transgender embodiment can profoundly problematize. In hindsight, a lot of the trash talk about transfolks since the rise of gay liberation and Second Wave feminism sounds like a subspecies of modernization discourse. Some (homo)normative, nontransgendered gays, lesbians, and feminists frequently posit themselves (as in recent debates about trans inclusion in the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act) as more progressive, more modern, more liberated, more politically advanced, more befitting of rights than those backward transpeople who are either sick, bad, or wrong, who need to be saved from themselves, who need to be educated and have their consciousnesses raised by their more enlightened leaders so that they will become fit bearers of rights at some unspecified point in the future—after real women and men, both queer and straight, get theirs.

But a queer, feminist, transgender analysis of contemporary society, one that can expose and articulate from the inside the relations of power that cast aside all things transgender as inconsequential marginal phenomena, can actually function as a potent site from which to launch a radical, antireactionary, future-oriented, countermodern critique of modernity itself. Hopefully, this sense of the critical potential of a queer feminist transgender studies resonates with other, more familiar, discursive maneuvers within feminism. Writers such as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty have helped teach people to see that Western feminism risks repeating the colonizing gesture of “white men saving brown women from brown men” to the extent that it simply puts white womanhood in the geopolitical place of the white man. A new wave of feminist transgender scholarship, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi’s meticulous work on the state funding of transsexual surgeries in the Islamic Republic of Iran, highlights the extent to which transsexuals can now be held up as evidence to support contemporary kinds of neocolonial intervention through a structurally identical conceptual operation—namely, Western activists waving the bloody shirt of human rights to save disempowered, queer subjects in distant lands from the backward Islamists who want to transsexualize their bodies to fit them into an oppressive, fundamentalist heteropatriarchy rather than allowing them to become the liberated modern gays they rightfully should be in a free world.

So what is one to make of the fact that in 1979 (during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran, one might note), Janice Raymond publishes her fantasy of a “transsexual empire” in which “she-male” infiltrators of women’s space subvert feminism from within and become, like the eunuchs of old, (this is her language, not my gloss) guardians of the harem in service to their patriarch masters? Laughter would be an entirely sufficient response, were it not for the pernicious persistence of the “paranoid style” in US politics and cultural life—certain strands of feminism not excepted—and for the seeming effortless with which transsexual women can be slotted into a phantasmatic structure that imagines a stealthy enemy at once foreign, internal, and (as is increasingly the case) Orientalized and Islamized.

When transsexual women are not rendered objects of fear (think here of how the guy-in-a-dress-rapist-in-the-women’s-room caricature

is deployed to defeat antidiscrimination legislation), they're made into objects of fun (think here of every cross-dressing shtick you've ever seen in a so-called comedy). This is really no laughing matter. (See me perform my righteous feminist anger?) It's not just that transphobic violence can kill and that transwomen need to take back a night of their own. It's also that, if we take seriously the discursive maneuvers that foist upon transwomen the most outrageous of constructs, and if we collectively hold space for conversation in a manner that allows transwomen to speak of their subjection to those constructs and of their evasions of those constructs, then transwomen will at last be in a position to report on the state-sanctioned violence of coercive gender-normativization in a voice every bit as powerful as the ones Audre Lorde used to talk about black and Gloria Anzaldúa used to talk about borders.

So: how many transsexual lesbian feminists does it take to change a light bulb? That's *really* not funny—because we're not trying to change light bulbs; we're trying to change the world.

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