



PERSPECTIVES *for a* DIVERSE AMERICA

Gender Trouble

[This article discusses the some of the issues that can arise when institutions attempt to address the complexities of the gender spectrum.]

Over the past few years, attacks on transgendered people in public places have been on the rise. In 2009 a transwoman in Queens was pelted with rocks, beer bottles and misogynistic slurs. Just weeks before in the same borough, two men used a belt buckle to beat a transwoman named Leslie Mora. In late April a widely disseminated video captured two teenage girls punching and dragging Chrissy Lee Polis from a women's room to the front door of a Baltimore-area McDonald's. That video, made by an employee, shows bystanders just watching, with little move to aid her.

Crimes like these often stem from simple homophobia; but they reveal a more specific discomfort with the ambiguity that transgendered people embody. The intensity of that discomfort extends to many situations that fall short of violence. Insults and isolation in housing, the workplace, gyms, schools and always, always in public bathrooms — premised on resolute gender binarism— leave transgendered people forever making the “wrong” choice. There are, for example, queasy debates at Smith and other women's colleges about how to negotiate the presence of students who are admitted as women but graduate as men.

Transgender identities challenge us to think about the morphisms of “sex” and “gender,” “woman” and “man,” “real” and “not real.” This is a hot topic in academic circles: for example, attempting to disambiguate the notion of “identity” as a matter of legal subjectivity, when, say, a man with a heap of warrants is finally arrested—but by the time the police catch up, he has become a she, and in the name of that transformation asserts as a defense that “he” was a different person. It's easy to dismiss this sort of discussion as funny or unimportant, but I think it's necessary, not merely because it directly affects the lives of the transgendered but because it tests and expands the thinking of those of us who are not transgendered yet whose collective responses shape the social environment.

Take Smith. Its administration has said it welcomes trans students as part of a diverse community, but apparently not all students and alumnae agree. For some, a commitment to remaining a women's college rests on assumptions about what a woman is as a biological matter, what gender is as a social construction and why a woman's experience is, or is deemed to be, different from that of a man. Trans students evoke squeamishness particularly among older alums, as well as among those who come to a “single sex” school for its white-glove, ladylike connotations, or perhaps out of commitment to women's education as a form of empowerment (Gloria Steinem went to Smith, after all). This contentious conversation scrutinizes not just the gender of individual students but overall institutional identity. The debate at Smith brought to the fore, for example, those who were unhappy to see their school's feminine image newly shared with transmen.

The debate is difficult precisely because it feels so new—and in some ways it is. Sex reassignment technologies are so novel that the accompanying medical discourse still conflates those who have ambiguous genitalia; those whose endocrine systems are ambiguously skewed; and those whose psychology is felt to be at odds with their biology. And what about the culture of elective cosmetic surgery, or the cult of physical perfection that drives even normatively gendered people to feel “not normative enough” and so seek to become “more feminine” or “more masculine” through the wizardry of nose jobs, labial stitching, liposuction, pectoral implants and breast enhancement?

So what do we mean when we ask a pregnant person if “it” is a boy or a girl? The inquiry seems permissible only in utero. We get edgy when we don’t already know the answer when encountering a full-grown adult. Do we expand our meaning so that “woman” includes those who may have been born with uncertain genitalia but who grew up being dressed, viewed, identified as female from birth? Do we include that category of people who regarded themselves as men from the very beginning of childhood consciousness yet who, in asserting that sense of self, are not privileged with the perquisites of (white, straight) masculinity but are instead branded as freaks or frauds?

Most difficult of all, what might it mean to explode the entire category of “woman” as anything like a stable designation? What does that mean for the status of women’s colleges, women’s sports, to say nothing of the proverbial ladies’ room? After all, it’s not as though men have never been on the campuses of women’s colleges. I went to a women’s college, and “gentlemen callers” were everywhere—at meals, in seminars, in bedrooms and bathrooms, all but climbing in the windows on weekends. But those were “men” defined in a clear, binary and thoroughly heterosexual context.

To engage in gender-bending means that we are thrown into confusion with regard to everything from Title IX to the college rankings of *U.S. News & World Report*. , Rightly or wrongly, women’s and men’s identities are still largely linked to the preservation of images of good wives in pearls and husbands in spats or, as one of the teenagers in the McDonald’s assault put it, to literally beating back competition for the affections of “my man” (or “woman,” as the case may be)

There are lessons to be mastered in all this, about principles of antidiscrimination and freedom of expression; about the complexities of perceived reputation (“I don’t want to be sneered at for still having a woman’s body,” said a Bryn Mawr student in the process of changing genders); and about institutional investments, dependent as they are on assessments of risk (Smith’s endowment managers are no doubt sweating bullets, given the power of alums as donors). Resolving these conflicts with dignity and thoughtfulness is no less important than educating and prosecuting those who use sticks and stones to beat away their terror of humanity’s infinite variability.

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