

NOBODY PASSES

Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity

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For JoAnne, 1974-1995

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REACHING TOO FAR:

An Introduction

MATTILDA, A.K.A.
MATT BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE

It's possible to say that this book began the first time someone called me sissy on the playground (age four). Or maybe it began when my grandmother asked why all my friends were "colored" (age seven). Or when my parents first abandoned me on a soccer field among unknown monsters of my assigned gender (feels like yesterday). Or maybe this book started when my female friends first developed crushes on the misogynist, queer-bashing boys we'd previously hated together (age thirteen). Of course, I could talk endlessly about the ways in which I've tried to pass, or failed to pass, or refused to pass. But since I'm leading you into a book called *Nobody Passes*, it seems more illuminating for me to start by revealing some of the ways in which I've passed in order to bring this book to fruition.

In the summer of 2005, I was featured in a *Bitch* magazine interview titled "Free Radical," which centered around my challenges to the tyranny of assimilation, as presented in my last anthology, *That's Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*. In the interview, I exposed the ways in which members of a privileged gay elite have hijacked the queer struggle, and positioned their desires as everyone's needs, reimagining the dominant markers of straight conformity as the ultimate goals of gay success. I reinvoked the radical potential of queer identity to enable everyone to choose their gender, sexual, and social identities, to embrace a radical outsider perspective, and to challenge everything that's sickening about the dominant cultures around us. More readers wrote to me about the *Bitch* interview than have corresponded about any of my books. People sent entire essays, sharing their own fears and dreams and their ideas for how to fight the cultural erasure that surrounds us.

One of the people who contacted me was Brooke Warner, now my editor at Seal Press, who prefaced her invitation to publish with Seal by saying: "We're a women's press, but I'm interested in exploring topics of gender-bending." At the time, I was planning to edit an anthology exploring the intersections of assimilation, Jewish identity, and resistance (arising from my own experience, of course). But I quickly shifted gears, and decided to dissect and expose assimilation from a different angle: that of passing. Specifically, I wanted to examine passing as a means through which the violence of assimilation takes place.

I proposed an anthology exploring and critiquing the various systems of power seen (or not seen) in the act of passing. I was speaking of passing in the broadest possible sense—passing as the "right" gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, body type, health status, ethnicity—or

as a member of the coolest religion, political party, social/educational institution, exercise trend, fashion cult, or sexual practice. In a pass/fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled. I wanted to challenge all standards of authenticity, to confront societal mores *and* countercultural norms. Instead of policing the borders with pass/fail politics, I was intent on confronting the perilous intersections of identity, categorization, and community in order to challenge the very notion of belonging.

In part, you already know the end result of my correspondence with Brooke (which ruins the suspense factor!), but I think it's important to reveal the process—in other words, I'm attempting not to pass as "not-passing." Brooke responded immediately. She was excited about the project, and found it perfectly fitting that I was resisting her desire to create an anthology that wasn't exactly what I wanted.

Then came the first big question: How is this book relevant to women? It now sounds quite quaint, but at the time I was thinking: *Are you kidding?* You see, in the *Bitch* interview (as in my life), my politics are firmly situated within feminism (the feminism of challenging power, not accessing power, thank you). I developed a feminist consciousness early, in the process of surviving that good old-fashioned laboratory of patriarchal family violence known colloquially as "home." By seventh grade, when my aforementioned female friends became obsessed with the grotesque specimens of brutal manliness they'd formerly despised, I, like many young feminists, decided that all penetrative sex was rape. That didn't stop me from anguishingly hooking up with men in public bathrooms, but I grew into a sexually liberated feminism around radical dykes, fags, activists, and whores dedicated to politicizing every aspect

of identity and processing the ramifications of every choice—from how we ate to who we hated (and dated) to how we fucked (and fucked up).

For the past fifteen years, I've been involved in creating radical queer challenges to the violence of police brutality, imperialism, gentrification, binary gender tyranny, patriotism, and other forms of social control. This is a radical queer politic with feminism as a foundation for challenging power, demanding accountability, and living defiantly outside the status quo. I always assume that my work is seen in a feminist context, but since I was assigned the label "male" at birth, I've been disqualified from feminist authenticity of the surface variety. Thus, I don't immediately fit into Seal Press's tagline: "By women. For women."

Which explains another of Brooke's questions: "Do you have a gender identity, by the way?" I will give Brooke credit for daring to contact me in the first place, and for immediately acknowledging the possibility that I might not claim a specific gender identity. She also admitted the absurdity of asking "these questions when you're specifically working to break down categorizations." Brooke was preparing to pitch my proposal to the editorial board, so I bit my labia and answered: "I identify as a genderqueer faggot and a queen, meaning that I'm somewhere on the trans continuum, in the genderblur, gender-bending section. I use female pronouns and identify as femme, but I'm not necessarily invested in people seeing me as either 'male' or 'female.' Rather, I'd like to create something more delectable and devious."

Guess what? I passed. But not quite to the finish line. I was interested in creating a book that challenged passing in all of its manifestations, but Seal was worried that such an expansive vision would make the book difficult to market, and suggested that I foreground my own history of

gender defiance to center my analysis around gender and sexuality. This concern, and the request for a breakdown of contributors using the disastrous categories of "men" and "women" (thankfully, this would be impossible), gave me flashbacks of conversations with an earlier publisher about my first two anthologies, *Tricks and Treats: Sex Workers Write About Their Clients* and *Dangerous Families: Queer Writing on Surviving*. That publisher had insisted that both anthologies would only be marketable if they centered around "male" sex workers, or "male" survivors; I only convinced the publisher otherwise after intense debate. This time, the demands were reversed, but nevertheless the rules of niche-marketed publishing threatened to foil my intentions. What about challenging standards of authenticity, destroying notions of acceptability, and creating new possibilities for defiance? To Brooke, I replied:

While I certainly intend to use gender and sexuality as central lenses through which to view and dismantle the mechanisms of passing, I would not like to limit the project to this framework. Rather, I feel strongly that the book as a whole will be more interesting, politically relevant, and accessible—and inspire a deeper level of understanding and innovation—if it takes on all types of passing. It's the refusal to restrict categories of inclusion that opens up the possibility for the most rigorous work—work that skewers all hierarchies and builds something new in the ruins.

Thus began a difficult series of conversations. Brooke insisted that the book needed to center around gender and sexuality, but that it could

encompass other issues as they arose within the individual essays. I argued that the book would certainly contain a strong gender focus (how could it not? I would be editing it!), but that I did not want to limit the scope. As an anticapitalist, I found this conversation, in many ways, to be my worst nightmare. Here we were arguing about the content of an anthology that didn't yet exist. I hadn't even circulated the call for submissions and already we were talking about a finished product. Why did this conversation get so heated? Because, I realized, we were arguing about a product that actually did exist: That product was me.

It's possible that our conversation might not have gone so far if both Brooke and I had not become invested in the process. I was excited by the possibility of doing a book with Seal Press, and part of that excitement revolved around Seal's history as a feminist press—would I finally be seen not just as some wingnut faggot, but as some wingnut faggot with a feminist agenda? More important, I was certain that publishing with Seal would magnify the intent of the book: If the editor's name on the cover already isn't passing, what frightening commotion could possibly exist inside?

Both Brooke and I were right. The submissions I received for the anthology overwhelmingly centered around gender, *and* never failed to confront multiple layers of passing obsessions, realness charades, and debacles of belonging. Trouble, in short. In this anthology, you will find a delectable variety of material that tears binary gender norms to shreds, and proceeds to embrace, challenge, and transform not only the categories of "man" and "woman," but the categories of femme, transgender, butch, genderqueer, and "none of the above, thank you." In these same essays, you will find numerous takes on mixed-race identity, the legacy

of slavery, white liberalism, immigration, and sexual liberation. You will find essays that address the domestic violence prevention movement, sweat tea, ecstasy, academic tokenism, queer racism, rural poverty, *The Decameron*, able-bodied protectionism, accidental passing, SM, a reading group, radical drag, homohop, shopping for shoes, the prison industrial complex, do-it-yourself hypocrisy, the psychiatric industry, international travel, high school, incest, barhopping, anti-Arab hysteria, cruising, marriage, art school, the U.S. flag, crystal meth, the nonprofit industrial complex, the right kind of victim, fetishism, welfare, consumerism, ghost stories, personal responsibility, 1950s gender norms, mental health scams, Code Pink, rural poverty, wheelchair access, gay male fear of female bodies, transgression within seemingly conventional hetero relationships, nationalism, motherhood, 1970s gay liberation, Okie migration, homeless shelters, the sex work origin myth, Chicano history, industrialization, Jewish ritual baths, trans misogyny, migrant farmworkers, misinterpretation, surgery, counterculture norms, bleeding, SSI, pilot training, private school, public school, AIDS, the suburbs, and Rupert Everett.

But wait. As this book nears completion, Brooke and I have yet another series of frustrating conversations in which Brooke informs me that she's worried that I'm compromising the integrity of the book by "reaching too far beyond the parameters we've tried to establish." I respond that the point of the book is to make people reach too far, to roll into critical, complicated, dissonant essays that grumble with uncomfortable revelation.

I'm hoping to reveal the ways in which we're all caught in a passing net, even in our attempts to challenge, subvert, and dismantle this tyranny.

As I write this introduction with voice activation software, I wonder if I'm passing as able-bodied. How can I use this evenly spaced, uniform text to convey the way that my wrists burn even after turning just a few pages, holding the pen too tightly, grasping for the right words? *Fibromyalgia* is a word for this relentless cycle of pain and exhaustion that is the physical manifestation of my struggles to survive what happened in the house where I grew up, and that still resides in my body, in my brain, in these poor hands that never could have protected me.

Maybe that's where this book started, nestled quietly on a tree-lined suburban street. Inside the process of upward mobility, in rooms filled with sweatshop-produced Scandinavian furniture, in the cars that started out modest and grew grander—that's where I learned what passing meant. First disappear, then smile. No one will notice.

I'm reminded of a moment when I was circulating the call for submissions for this anthology. I'd arrived at a particularly bourgeois lesbian party, held at a typical yuppie loft space with exposed beams and cement floors. Someone asked: "What do you do?" I handed her the call for submissions for *Nobody Passes*. She read it, and inquired politely: "Do you have a PhD?" I think she meant this as a compliment; she assumed I was carrying the credentials. "No," I said simply.

In that moment of near-silence, what violence did I enact against the alternative ways of living and learning that I hold so dear? The truth is that I don't have any degrees at all. Well, except a high school diploma—it was a great high school, I swear. I learned a lot about passing. At every assembly, the principal would declare: "Blah blah blah was the first integrated school in Washington, D.C." It was championed as the most liberal of D.C.'s private schools, so liberal that gay

teachers were required to remain closeted and U.S. History ended just before the civil rights movement. Maybe that high school was where this book started.

Anyway, a few days after my encounter with a lesbian who wanted to know about my PhD, I was chatting with a group of writers, many of whom had numerous degrees, and the subject arose of how I made a living. I've supported myself as a whore for the last twelve years, since it's not like writing pays the bills (no, not even an anthology about passing!). Almost in unison, everyone voiced the same question: "What about teaching?"

In this terrible world, there are not many ways for critical thinkers to make a living. With five books to my credit, and fifteen years of direct action organizing, I suppose it's not surprising that people ask me about teaching. The truth is that, while I certainly believe in the exchange of knowledge, I'm also interested in dismantling the whole way of thinking that creates disempowering roles of "teacher" and "student." Nevertheless, I have given my share of college lectures, expounding on the violence of assimilation while encouraging students to challenge everything around them. While I'm not exactly a believer of "change from within," I do think it is possible for me to appreciate the academy for the level of critical engagement it can sometimes allow, while still seeking to bring the whole machine down.

I grew up in an upper-middle-class, assimilated Jewish "family," where it was assumed that if I did well in school, I would be graced with the privilege of going to a prestigious college, and then continuing immediately through grad school. I certainly internalized the idea that the only way to escape my parents was to beat them on their own terms,

and so I did in fact spend a year at one of those posh East Coast liberal arts breeding grounds for the intelligentsia. There I decided that making my parents proud (and leaving them behind) through upward mobility of the mind was not a solution I could stomach. I needed to get so much farther away if I was ever going to learn anything beyond the rules of passing for the erudite elite.

I fled to San Francisco, where I found other radical queers desperately trying to create new ways of living, lusty for and caring for one another in a world that wanted us dead. We were incest survivors, whores, outcast kids, vegans, runaways, and sexual renegades trying not to disappear. We shoplifted and made zines; we organized potlucks and office takeovers; we talked about surviving rape and childhood; we fought for syringe distribution and universal healthcare; we fought against police brutality, gentrification, and the prison industrial complex; we fought one another.

Occasionally, we won. We went crazy and cried a lot, or went crazy and stopped crying, or just went crazy. Unlike an earlier generation of queer radicals, we did not have memories of the 1970s to romanticize or mourn.

I have memories of the early '90s, when, all around me, people were dying of AIDS and drug addiction and suicide. We were finding one another in the ruins, but that was rarely enough. Three years after my arrival in San Francisco, I did go back to that fancy college, just to make sure it wasn't what I wanted. I saw that the more radical in content a course became, the more intellectually elitist. I found that the friends that I had made three years earlier had dramatically changed: Regardless of their class background, all spoke in the language of the

elite, shuffling around abstractions while competing for the ownership of ideas. Or maybe I was the one who had changed. Either way, I fled after another semester.

But I've returned, on the other side of the lectern. In 2003, I was invited to a conference at the University of Michigan titled "Gay Shame," purportedly inspired by those of us who created the radical queer activist group and events of the same name. With only one panel directly addressing activism (ours), it was obvious to us that we were seen as a fetish object, called on for a few realness points, and we arrived at the conference ready to challenge this blatant appropriation. I proposed that the Gay Shame conference was *trickle-down academia*, by which academics appropriate anything that they can get their hands on—mostly people's lived struggles, activism, and identities—and then claim to have invented them. I expected that everyone would nod their heads and take notes for a few clever papers, but instead, famous academics stood up and literally started screaming at me. One of these scholars even likened me to Dick Cheney, implying that by critiquing the academy I was furthering the goals of the Christian right.

My experiences with academia are not always so traumatizing. At the National Women's Studies Association conference in 2006, attendees loved my anecdote about trickle-down academia. I was on a panel called "Transfeminisms," so I took the opportunity to ask fun questions, like: "What does it take to pass as a feminist here, in the embrace of the Marriott corporation, global tourism pioneers, and prison industry profiteers?" And: "What does it take to pass as a transfeminist at a women's studies conference?" No one screamed at me; instead, people laughed and smiled and applauded and asked

interesting questions. They were so engaged that I thought: *I should do this every day.*

Around the same time, I participated in a radical queer critique of gay marriage for a progressive radio show. The program was refreshing because all six of us on the show (including the host) were dedicated to challenging the notion that gay marriage should be central to queer struggle. The other four guests were academics, and their comments were articulate and on-topic—certainly actualizing the potential of academic discourse to be absolutely rigorous about a specific, measured area. Their language was accessible, their logic relentless. I spoke last, and I felt like I sounded completely crazy. Whereas my fellow panelists spoke deliberately and evenly, my voice went all over the place; I laughed about serious things! I felt absolutely stupid.

Now, I'm not generally intimidated by academics. I'm usually the one telling my friends not to be silenced by the myths of indisputable theory and authoritative knowledge. I'm usually the one saying: "You're smarter than they are." What made me feel so disempowered in this particular instance? I think it's because I was on a panel of "experts," and when it came my turn to speak, it was as if I, the "activist," was supposed to deliver the antidote to every atrocity that the other speakers had addressed.

I want to say quite clearly: I am not an expert at anything. I do not have answers. Looking at this world of violence that surrounds us, I feel just as desperate as anyone else. I feel terribly hopeless about the possibility of systemic change. I feel more hopeful about individual and collective acts of resistance. With this book, I'm

seeking to shift conversations about passing away from the dead end of authenticity, in order to ask: If we eliminate the pressure to pass, what delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation might we create?

It's time to reach beyond the parameters we have tried to establish.

ALL MIXED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO:

*Inhabiting Mixed Consciousness
on the Margins*

NICO DACUMOS

: *When I Was a Man* :

Five years old and the summer sun beats down on my black bowl cut, heating my scalp and sending streams of sweat to the tips of my hair and into my collar. It's so-hot I could take off my shirt, but my mom and I have already had that battle:

"Ay! M'ija! What are you doing, you changa? Loquita! Put your shirt back on *now!*"

"Why? They all get to take off their shirts! It's not fair!"

"You are a *girl*. You're too old to be going around like that anymore."

"But Mami!"

"Do you want a spanking? Put that shirt on right now, girl, before I tell your daddy!"

Five years old and my favorite outfit is a navy blue velvet sailor suit. Blue like boys. Navy like my daddy. I smooth my chubby hands over my belly, fuzzy like Grover's and round like E.T.'s.

A shadow falls over me as I play with my Voltron action figures in the yard.

"Hey, you wanna play?"

He is blond like Jesus. Blue-eyed, too, his hair curling soft around his pink angel cheeks. He is so nice to me, not like the other boys I play with, who make sure to treat me extra rough 'cuz they don't want to get beaten by a girl. He never sees the wrath that lets me knock boys who are faster and older to the ground. I let him boss me around and choose which toys we will play with. I even let him be Lion-O and I settle for being his sidekick, Panthro.

I don't know his name and he doesn't know mine, but at the end of each day I dream about bringing him into the house, tucking him into bed with me so we can giggle and wrestle till we fall asleep, our mouths pushing breath against each other's faces all warm and dewy.

Now, as a cynical grown-up faggot, I know that he was just hustling me for the toys he would never get to call his own. He didn't have the kind of mother who would comb the thrift stores and swap meets for all the latest Toys "R" Us castoffs. But still, it was one of the first times I felt those jolts of boylove slide through my body.

I am now twenty-two years old and home from college. My mother is ashamed to show the rest of our family my graduation pictures,

the anime-boy hair beneath the graduation cap, the brown slacks and button-down shirt beneath the gown.

Twenty-two years old and my mother, as always, is telling me stories:

"Remember that white boy that lived on the block, M'ija?"

"Which one, Mom?"

"The puti, the one that used to play with you sometimes . . ."

"Oh yeah! What ever happened to him? He never came around anymore after a while."

"Yeah, well, I never told you, but there was this one time you weren't home and he came to the door and he says, 'Can I play with your little boy?'

"I don't have a little boy,' I says. 'Oh . . . you mean my little girl. Her name is *Mah-nee-kuh*.'

"He just looked at me so confused! 'Oh,' he says, and . . . he just left, baby. He never did come back after that, did he, M'ija?"

"No, he didn't, Mom."

Twenty-two years old and I can hardly explain the sadness that I feel. I think that I may never know boylove like that again.

I may never pass like that again either. Or be so completely and heartbreakingly betrayed.

: *Don't Get It Twisted; or, Facing the Consequences of Mixed Consciousness* :

Okay, let's get this shit over and done with: Nico is a flaming queer radical polysexual two-spirit female-bodied middle-class multiracial bottom who always ends up topping anyway Filipino-Chicano antisogynist transgender butch fag in a polyamorous committed relationship with

kids, extremely bad credit, and chronic illnesses and incurable diseases that seem invisible. Oh Audre Lorde, where are you when I need you? Sigh. The problem with being everything is that it mostly gets me a whole lot of nothing. In theory I should be able to claim all the identities and related spaces above, but we all know that's not true. Instead I find myself isolated. And a liar.

Sometimes I lie my ass off for even the tiniest taste of community. I let my family and some radical straight people of color call me by my given name in the interest of feeding our tenuous connection. I remain "she" amongst butches of color to hang on to the one community that ever felt kinda good to belong to. I let transmen assume that I am also FTM, that I unequivocally long for top surgery and testosterone. I don't try to explain the strange feeling that resides inside me, the feeling that someday I will find elders who will help me to understand that there may be a reason why I fell into this female body this lifetime—even as I go back and forth every day between wanting to craft my body into the form my mind tells me it should be and trying to find a reason for the way it is.

Much of my young adult life I have spent in search of community. In high school I hungered for queer intellectual community. I discovered queer theory just before college, when some East Coast professors got ahold of me and blew my mind wide open with sexy Foucault, baffling Butler, and some proto-tranny theorizing in the form of clumsy critical readings of movies like *Tootsie*. I heard the words *transgender* and *genderfuck* for the first time. They sounded so seductive: terms to include all gender nonconformists, terms that implied motion, fluidity, never comin' home like a roooooollin' stone . . . I held high hopes for the

queer feminist ignorance-free utopia I was sure awaited me at Smith College, the women's college where one of those professors taught.

However, when I arrived at my overpriced alma mater, I found myself sorely disappointed. I was thrown into one of the most violently racist and classist environments I have ever experienced: I had white women ask me to show my student ID before letting me enter my own dorm; I saw a stud from another school harassed after white students called campus police and reported a suspicious black male roaming the halls; later, during the protests sparked by the incident, I watched the college's president console the student who had made that phone call to campus police as she shed her disarming white-woman tears; I saw a good friend fight off a nervous breakdown after receiving racist death threats on the dry-erase board on her door; I lost friends who could not afford to attend anymore, whether economically or emotionally.

Given this environment, I knew I would never survive alone. I went in search of community. Alas, in the straight people of color communities my female masculinity provoked fear and disgust. In the queer people of color community established through the PRISM student organization, my person of color-ness came under question. So I started listening to hiphop again and relearned the slang and nonstandard English that my child-of-immigrants upbringing had worked so hard to erase. Re-forming myself and conforming to everyone else's ideas of what "queer woman of color" meant was the only way I knew to survive that place. It worked, too, for a while. That was, as long as I never pushed for dialogue around the animosity felt toward those with white lovers, or challenged the transphobia that kept FTM people of color from feeling welcome at PRISM meetings and events.

Looking back, I feel sorry for all of us. All of us, white students and students of color, economically privileged and poor, queer and straight, transgender and nontransgender, found ourselves in an overwhelming situation with no one to help us navigate the difficult negotiations and acts of violence that occur when people from all these different communities suddenly find themselves in close quarters. U.S. society, after all, continues to be starkly segregated along class and race lines, never allowing people to have the sort of interactions necessary to undo prejudices, stereotypes, and oppressions. However, my empathy only lasts so long—I remember my own experiences and those of other people I know who attended private liberal arts colleges. There is nothing like luring low-income and first-generation-college-attendeé students of color to an institution like Smith College and then subjecting them to white, sheltered, economically privileged people to inspire thoughts of suicide and/or homicide. Ultimately, the white and economically privileged students benefit from this experience. They learn how to be good liberals and comport themselves in ways that conceal their complicity with white supremacy; they find their lives "enriched by diversity." Meanwhile, students of color and poor students suffer lifelong emotional scars and face the hard truths of why they were recruited so heavily to attend these institutions in the first place. At best, students of color and poor students learn how to pass themselves off in "polite (white) society" so that they can get a job at a large corporation or a nonprofit organization, perhaps learn how to invest money in the capitalist system, and other American Dream—type skills that are meant only to benefit the individual and leave the rich-poor gap, institutionalized racism, and U.S. status quo intact.

Somehow, though, pockets of radical, antioppressive thought survive within the academy. I wouldn't be writing if they didn't. Somewhere in the middle of college I discovered radical women of color writings and theories. Gloria Anzaldúa showed me the borderlands, the crossroads where I belonged, lonely and brutal as they may be. Audre Lorde taught me to claim all the parts of myself at once, no matter how unlikely it was that anyone would have the courtesy to respect me in all my multiplicities. The Combahee River Collective showed me that those of us in the most marginal margins have always already figured shit out and will need to wait about twenty years for the mainstream and the theory heads to catch up. bell hooks taught me that I could love my urge to kill whitey and still love whitey at the same time. Above all, these women of color writers taught me to love and honor the women in my life—lovers, friends, my sister, my mother, my grandmothers—not only because they have often been the only people willing to offer me sanctuary, nourishment, and much-needed critique in a world that often leaves me alone, exhausted, and afraid, but also because I have learned from these individuals that liberation for all people depends upon close attention to the needs, desires, and issues of women of color.

Somewhere else in the middle of it all I discovered mixed-race activism, a revelation that nevertheless left me resentful of the dominant narrative of mixedness, which only looks at the struggle that mixed people face in having a white parent. That narrative was nothing like my experiences as a multiracial Filipin@/Chican@. Since childhood, my family told the story of my race through my phenotypic traits; I saw my mother's round eyes melded with an exotic chinkyness, her light Latin skin, and my father's flat Filipino nose ail come together to make the

face I saw in the mirror each day. There was no separating them out, no expectation that I pass as just one or the other. Hell, my siblings and I even coined a whole new race called Flipican. However, no one else ever read this story on my body. I was always something other than the races that were "really" me, in that classic mixed-kid way. But no matter; thinking about things from a mixed-race perspective started me thinking that mixedness was somewhere at the heart of my discomfort with identity, my inability to "just pick one" no matter what identity matrix I was being sucked into. So I stopped trying. I also stopped trying to like just girls or just boys. I even stopped trying to like just *one* girl or *one* boy. I stopped trying to be just a girl or just a boy. Or a transboy or a butch girl.

This is mixed consciousness, friends. Coming soon to a cultural studies class near you.

: ***¡Lucha Libre! Transgender vs. Butch*** :

Meanwhile, transgender failed me in so many ways throughout college and continues to do so in its mainstream incarnations. Despite the fact that transgender identities seemed to explain so well how I felt genderwise, I steered clear of the students who identified with transgender masculinities like FTM or genderqueer, who cut their hair, changed their names, grew stubble, and took a college van to the True Spirit conference every year, all without worrying about where they were going to get the money to fund all these actions that were seen as central to their identities. I just couldn't relate to them and sometimes even feared them. I questioned the wisdom of some of the same white kids I knew to be racist fucks taking on masculine privilege and using

their transgendered otherness to shield themselves from being called out on actions that were racist, classist, or misogynistic. I didn't feel like I could say any of that out loud, though. The only other people lodging those sorts of complaints were also known as transphobic second-wave feminists.

One of the communities I did connect with at college was the butch of color contingent, where I found a queer history that I wanted so much more desperately than I desired to become the secret boy name I only revealed to lovers. The way I still see it, my forefathers and mothers are butches, marimachas, studs, and bulldaggers. Those who passed every day, those who didn't try to pass and wore pantyhose at work. Those who bound their breasts or had them removed, those who didn't. Those who were stone, those who took it up the ass and any other hole available. It was a gente thing; it was my sister's best friend since middle school's youngest sister, who I went to elementary school with, showing up to a family party all b-boyed out and fresh out of juvie, her chola girlfriend standing by her side in all her black lip liner, tattoos-in-tribute-to-all-her-dead-homies glory. It was older butchas seeing me on the street and nodding approvingly.

It wasn't until after college that I met transmen of color with radical, antiauthoritarian politics, transmen who mixed freely with butches, genderqueers, and nontransmen because it served a greater radical politic to do so. Transmen who loved femmes and couldn't imagine a revolution that wasn't planned and executed side by side with their sisters, mothers, girlfriends, and camaradas. Transmen who understood intimately that there weren't enough of us to be exclusive about where we found love and friendship. I realized that I could be Nico full-time

and still articulate (most of the time) the things that made me not quite FTM and still emotionally, historically, and politically attached to butch-ness. Am I a transgender butch? I don't know. I do know that this or any other honest articulation of my gender identity will never convince Dr. Harry Benjamin's followers, who mete out access to medical treatments like gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy based on a narrow and pathologizing understanding of "transsexuality," to allow me self-determination over how I choose to modify my own body. I also know that I will continue to search for alliances with those who foreground the concerns of femmes and feminine-identified people while also creating new options for enacting masculinities.

Only now, in retrospect, have I taken the time to seriously consider the fact that I didn't encounter transwomen at Smith College. I have done some Internet searches recently relating to transwomen attending women's colleges and none have yielded results beyond hypothetical questions of what particular institutions would do if a transgender woman applied for admission. I realize that I must acknowledge my own complicity in the erasure of transwomen by failing to see feminine-identified transgender people as part of my queer, antiracist, antimisogynist, anticlassist, gender-challenging reality. At the same time, this topic (unexplored by me) offers the opportunity to ask many questions. What sorts of alliances might be forged between nontrans femmes, women of color, antimisogynist masculine-identified people, and transwomen? How can we make room for the stories of all the feminine-identified transgender people out there, like Sylvia Rivera, who always have led and continue to lead our struggles and could potentially offer some of the most insightful interventions into antioppressive theories and

strategies? Who will acknowledge that transwomen find themselves in some of the most vulnerable positions in this society, oftentimes unable to access even the paltry privileges allowed to nontrans women? It seems to me that the pervading attitude about feminine-identified transgender people casts them as utterly reactionary, at best apolitical, and most likely a detriment to the cause of women's liberation. After all, isn't anyone who would *actively* seek to inhabit femininity frivolous, foolish, and therefore responsible for her own oppression? This stereotype in itself is pretty damn misogynistic; it also points out the misogyny inherent in many who would call themselves feminists, who, rather than reimagining femininity, buy into the dominant discourses that devalue it and do all they can to divorce themselves from that which they fear will make them weak and powerless.

But I still cannot pretend that transgender in general does not continue to fail me when it does not fulfill its promise of butch inclusion. It fails all butches, AGs/aggressives, and studs who find themselves facing the same issues of state and interpersonal violence that FTMs or genderqueers face, minus the academic and political hype. My experience of this "butch exclusion" strikes me as particularly tied to race and class. Butchness, as understood by academics and mainstream gay and lesbian communities, only draws interest when anthropologized or relegated to the past, and cast as a precursor to transgenderism. Even then, the stories told focus on the experiences of white butches. Butches, AGs, and studs of color, their histories and communities, remain invisible. Transgender masculine politic was founded and finds its home in the academy, which validates the history and experiences of economically privileged white people while erasing those of poor people and people

of color. Transgender or genderqueer become identities mainly concerned with medical technologies, psychology, and psychiatry, or else a masturbatory celebration of the radicality of "transversing" or "performing" gender without looking at why. For people who might struggle to survive at basic levels, it may be more fulfilling to claim an identity like butch, which does not necessarily require engagement with institutions like medicine or academia, which have historically sought to kill, pathologize, or ignore people of color and poor people (and queers). Most transgender scholarship leaves little room for groups of people or ways of being that do not fit a narrow definition of what is scholarly enough or trans-gressive enough. Transgender *masculine* politic also shuts out transgender women from these queer and feminist academic circles: Misogyny among privileged gay and/or straight male academics actively excludes transgender women; transphobia among feminist academics casts transgender women as wolves in sheep's clothing.

The explanation of the relationship between butch and transgender cries out for new scholarship and artistic works along the lines of Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman*, which pointedly addresses the ways that young queer women of color hunger for elders, mentors, a sense of history that informs our present, and theory that offers a relevant matrix through which to understand our existence. The absence of butches of color from both mainstream media and the relatively marginal world of queer and feminist academics leaves me unsurprised by the behavior of my seventeen-year-old queer cousin, who hates on the one transgender boy at her school and won't call him "him" while at the same time she rolls all thug-boy style and talks about the fun she would have if she had a dick. How am I gonna help her find

the space to figure this shit out? Can I offer her a path that does not end in trips to a psychiatrist and thousands of dollars in medical procedures that she may never be able to afford?

But wait. There *are* young butches of color emerging, and they are demanding to be heard both inside and outside of white-dominated academic spaces. I was honored when the performance troupe called Butchlalis de Panochtitlan asked me to take part in one of their shows. I knew that the Butchlalis, and most notably their producer/curator/unofficial troupe leader (hereafter called La Jefe), were forming new venues outside of traditional women of color and queer performance spaces. I met these "Butch Stars of Pussyland" through one of my lovers (hereafter called Femme Dramaturg). From the moment I met them, things started to go sour, but I was preoccupied by the prospect of finding masculine-identified gente with whom I could collaborate and create new artistic modes.

The night before the show, Femme Dramaturg picked me up from the airport. She was visibly upset, after a long day of conflict with the Butchlalis during rehearsal for the show (she was helping to direct). La Jefe had accused Femme Dramaturg of "anthropologizing" the Butchlalis because she'd seemed to be journaling about them while they were unwinding after rehearsal, just like another femme artist who had allegedly stolen the Butchlalis' idea for a video about butches. Later I learned from Femme Dramaturg that she most likely *had* been studying the Butchlalis very closely, but rather than to anthropologize, she'd done so because she was trying to come out as butch herself after years of being made to believe that femme was her only option.

The Panochtitlan performance itself reinscribed certain forms of

homophobia and misogyny even as it purported to promote a "radical masculinity" with antimisogyny as one of its core tenets. From the beginning, I was struck by the structure of the show, which included two other special guests who had masculine names and seemed to lean more toward the FTM spectrum than the Butchlalis. Our performances were folded in amongst the Butchlalis' sketch pieces. When, in the first few minutes of the opening monologues, La Jefe articulated her sexuality and gender identity by saying, "I don't do the trannyfag," I began to feel suspicious of what my relationship to these Butchlalis was supposed to be. I began to feel like the "Them" in relation to their "Us." Throughout the weekend of the performance I found myself parroting misogynistic discourses in an attempt to relate to the Butchlalis, the same old shit that happens any time I try to gain entry into masculine spaces. Boyspace with the Butchlalis ended up being a mind(fucking)scape that proved to me once again what a masculine failure I am.

I find that I fail miserably at being a guy, whether it's with butches or transmen or any other masculine-identified people. I feel more comfortable with femmes of any gender, but I don't quite present or feel feminine enough to call myself a femme. I'm like one of those '70s feminist men trying to make it okay for other boys to cry. I simply find myself incapable of accepting the messages that masculinity seems to be telling me about love: Love is my fist slammed into your face; love is my cold shoulder pressed into your hot back as I fuck you deep. Is it my fate to end up beaten and thwarted, too stupid or brave or desperate to hide the soft, sweet parts, to just wear the mask that masculinity has carved out for us and ignore the rest?

My femme friend and I were accused of disrupting the "sacred boyspace" of Panochtitlan, as if Butchlalidat were some sort of nationalist identity and Pussyland was its patria. This left the Butchlalís with the power to ask me for ID if my actions did not adhere to their definitions of butchlalidat. In the end, my "work visa" expired, and I doubt that I will be offered re-entry. The artistic and personal relationship that Femme Dramaturg has with certain members of the Butchlalís continues to be strained as she steadily emerges as a butch fag. Her tumultuous relationship to the Butchlalís is as much a story of the ways that gendered people spend so much time shoring up the boundaries of their identities by making sure that others stay within theirs, as it is the story of a butch disrespecting a femme.

As I struggle to navigate the violence of masculinities enacted by butch *and* trans people, there is the curious fact of the butch vs. trans border war. Never mind that the line between the two seems as tenuous as the barbed wire fence that juts out into the Pacific Ocean at the U.S.-México border: Its vain attempt to demarcate the two countries will inevitably fall to the steady flow of waves slamming back and forth across its rotting posts. Seems to me that sometimes the only difference between a butch and an FTM involves personal intention, especially when the people who bash us aren't going to stop because we say: *Look, dude! I'm a butch lesbian! It's the transmen you want to be punching in the face!*

Somehow I got caught in the middle of this border war, caught at the crossroads. Some of the old- and new-school femmes who brought me up are invested in my butchness. A good friend even dubbed me "the last unicorn," as she has watched so many butches she knows become

transmen. Butch friends want to firmly establish the borders between themselves and transmen. A butch of color for whom I have much love and respect nevertheless doesn't think that the butch community that she is trying to build should include people who do not accept their bodies or feel comfortable with their breasts and menstruation. What kind of bullshit is that? Who in this society really loves and accepts her body all the time, every day? And why do I feel more comfortable fucking nontransmen than transmen, convinced that transfags won't find me man enough?

: ***Attack of the Killer Identitarians*** :

So really, what we're talking about is the tyranny of identity and our various efforts to get out from under its rule. But it's all so difficult, isn't it? The postmodern, poststructuralist projects would have us abandon the fictions of home, of identity, of black or white. At the same time, the oppressors who continue in the same manner that they have for hundreds of years clamor for the erasure of identity to further their goals of exclusion and genocide, the paper trail conveniently lost. I have a sneaking suspicion that there is a reason that angry white men (and women) dubbing themselves poststructuralists and queer theorists came onto the scene and declared the death of identity just as people of color and white feminists were firmly establishing themselves as viable candidates for tenure-track university positions and tidy little publishing deals. Identity isn't dead, it's just competing for airtime with other philosophies that really don't want to deal with the critical questions that identity raises or find viable ways to sidestep and/or negotiate identity's very real limitations.

The other potential problem with rejecting traditional identity politics is that its worst possible alternative is a type of super-consumer custom-made identity that leaves you with very little upon which to build a movement. Or it's some Hallmark card bullshit about how love sees no color or gender or stack of money or lack thereof. Damn. It's truly with the most vital issues that you find yourself attacked from both sides, isn't it?

Only now am I truly realizing that I will never find the community I seek based on shared identity. I once heard Anna Deavere Smith call community spaces based on identity "safe houses." She encouraged people to step out of their safe houses to make connections with others, to forge alliances on even the most tentative bonds in order to get shit done. What she failed to mention was that although one might find a haven and love within the walls of these so-called safe houses, therein also lies the potential for violence, hate, and betrayal. And what about those of us who are denied entrance to the safe houses where we think we might belong? Is there a password? A secret knock?

Sometimes I feel like pure hunger and desire, a soul in search of living flesh. I realize that I will always find respite amongst the migrants, the refugees, the expatriates, the homeless, the pirates. I will always be the fence-sitter. I will pass as I see fit and fail to pass when I was really hoping I would and refuse to pass when it serves my purposes. Even as I write this I wonder whether I will pass at rejecting passing enough to make it into this anthology.

I'm trying to find happiness in the spaces I inhabit. I'm trying to learn how to live my life free from fear and suspicion, to come at everyone with as much trust, patience, and love as I do my own family,

the people I stick with despite all the ways they hurt me. I came to this realization recently while talking to my little cousin, a beautiful nineteen-year-old man of color who is trying to be a man in ways that the men in our family never taught him were possible. I know that he initially came to respect me because he saw my polyamorous lifestyle as playa-pimp, but now he comes to me because he values my advice and because I don't judge him. We talk about relationships and violence. He struggles: He's trying to learn to talk instead of throwing fists; he's trying to learn to cool down and walk away instead of slamming doors or being verbally abusive; he's trying to earn the love and respect of the woman whom he loves by giving respect. I am amazed and honored that he trusts me enough to struggle with me. I find my masculinity validated, in ways I know will never happen if I walk into a club or party or "community space" and hope for people who don't really know me to respect and value all the parts of me. In this way I also find myself doing activism and making radical change in the world in the ways I have always wanted. I find myself becoming the elder that I always hoped to find.

Right here, right now, it's making just a little bit of sense to me.

FRICION BURN:

A Nonfiction Admission

STACEY MAY FOWLES

I.

There is a friction burn on my left wrist that I have hidden with a collection of brightly colored plastic bracelets that I bought for forty-nine cents apiece from the local Goodwill. My mother is transfixed by the gaudy accessories as they noisily slide up and down my arm each time I lift my glass of white wine to my mouth, and I realize quickly that my camouflage is faulty.

Pay attention to what I'm hiding, the bracelets scream.

"Are you all right?" she asks me as I pull my sleeve beneath the bracelets and over the crimson marking.

"Work. Work's been busy," I lie.

In truth I haven't been sleeping well, but work or insomnia or a packed agenda cannot be blamed. The friction marks and the bruises are to blame for the lack of sleep, and as I casually lie to my mother I suddenly realize that I am more awake than I have ever been.

My mother has invited me to lunch, after my constant questioning, to explain the ramifications of a batch of tests she had done at the hospital last week. We are sharing a brief moment on a Sunday together so she can explain what her bouts of dizzy spells, nausea, and bed rest mean in concrete medical terms, but so far—over two generous slices of quiche and a mixed green salad—we have talked about nothing but the weather and my father's pending retirement. This was to be expected, since my mother is a woman who speaks endlessly but shares nothing, and as she motions to the waiter for the bill I quickly realize that it is likely this luncheon will not include a conversation about colonoscopies.

And my mother (always tactless, and almost always drunk) has always said, "Write it down, honey."

A pack-a-day smoker, a functional alcoholic, a broken woman, her insides riddled with disease, always telling me to write it down, as if my script had some grand importance and validity, capable of overshadowing reality. Here we are sharing brunch, talking about nothing, and I will indeed write it down. I will steal this moment from her like I have stolen so many others, and I will turn it into a self-aggrandizing piece on sadomasochism that will inevitably embarrass her and cause her to cry into an empty wineglass.

These visits we have together are too few and far between, even now that I have returned to Toronto, the city of my birth, after my

lover has left me and I have been shamed, collecting my belongings from my poorly planned Vancouver hiatus to return with my tail between my legs.

I fight off my mother's offer to pick up the cost of our lunch. Post-payment, she orders another chardonnay that I myself decline.

"So you're seeing someone now?" she suddenly asks.

She always asks this, and generally I have to shame myself by telling her that no, I am not seeing someone now, but this time I have another answer.

The minute the sentence leaves my lips I immediately regret it, her eyes lighting up and off my bracelet-clad wrist, and the additional questions formulating in her mouth too quickly for her to get them out.

"Oh, that's wonderful. Tell me all about him," she exclaims.

And my attention is back on my left wrist, because indeed that is all anyone would need to know about him. Frankly, that is all they would need to know about me as well, but a Sunday lunch of chardonnay and quiche seems the wrong time and place to confess to my mother that I have finally discovered the only thing that keeps me awake in a life I had previously been sleeping through.

II.

While in the bathtub I survey the maze of bruises on my body, various badges beneath the water, each worn with divine pride.

Freshly flourishing scarlet palm prints and bite marks, knees littered with little blue-black kisses from his hardwood floor. Sometimes, after I get out of the bath and before I dress, I sit on the bed and outline the markings with a black ballpoint pen, noticing how they collectively

look like tiny countries floating in the sea of my skin. I am a world map of submission, a universe of pleasurable pain.

In these moments I don't pull my sleeves to my wrists with shame.

In these moments I am proud of what I have endured.

In these moments I am normal.

III.

I have no misapprehensions about what the mainstream world thinks of people like myself.

We are people confined to dungeons, clad in leather, avoiding our daddy/mommy/rape/incest/abuse issues via a vast array of implements purchased on the Internet, torture devices that arrive in unmarked packages that are shared with equally tormented and emotionally stunted perverts.

When I discovered I had an intense affection for submission I immediately cultivated a sense of shame due to my lack of normalcy. Beyond that, I felt the immediate need to defy it, because I don't necessarily fit the transcribed type that the rest of the world attributes to BDSM. For one, I am a product of a women's studies degree, an academic domain that certainly does not embrace the notion of submission in any form. Secondly, I am otherwise quite "traditional" in my life choices, a path which has set up a major roadblock—until recently, every lover who I asked to dominate me thought I was a grotesque deviant and not the good little girl they wanted me to be. I would receive *that look* in my most vulnerable moment, the look that people give you when they have suddenly discovered that they have no idea who you are, the look that people give you when they discover they love something broken.

Some of them would even make promises of helping me get "better," or "healthy." In the quest to be normal, the need to be bruised and labeled a whore must be blotted out.

Despite so much sociopolitical sexual progress, a woman who yearns to be dominated is still regarded as a woman who needs to be educated. I have been endlessly educated and I still yearn for a firm grip on my throat, yearn to be bound and told what to do and when to do it, yearn to be demeaned and demoralized with words. Although a majority of sexual educators and experts would deem this desire valid and normal, the world at large accepts the deviancy with sometimes sympathetic but often scathing judgment.

We are intriguing characters in *CSI* episodes, or players in an Internet porn fetish section that your average user avoids.

There is nothing about me that would immediately give me away as a lover of pain, but the real question lies in what exactly the world is looking for as a signifier of the submissive or dominant. My partner does not have me on a leash at social events, I prefer angora and tweed to leather and chain mail, and it's not as if I recruit romance by requesting that a stranger at the bar slap me in the face and call me a dirty slut before last call. I am attracted to dominant males, but someone's ability to take charge at work or in social situations does not necessarily translate into a passion for bondage. Navigating my submissive self has been an act of concealment as far as partners were concerned, although my fantasies were always crystal clear.

IV.

On yet another beautiful West Coast morning, my partner looks at me mournfully as we slowly wake for work. We have been together for more than two years, and in this moment he has confessed to me that he cannot tolerate my desire to be demeaned. In this silver grey early-morning light I am a freak of nature, an anomaly. I am a deceptive traitor who worked my way into his bed with promises of pies baked under the guise of charming table manners.

He cannot call me a whore because then he would be making love to, loving, a whore, he tells me. He had a good upbringing, has a good job, is well dressed and successful, loves his mother, loves me.

He cannot love a whore.

Up until this moment I have been able to pass. We have made plans, talked about marriage, children. He has avoided my sexual history, preferring to believe that despite the fact that I am twenty-three years old, he was my first and will be my last. My clothes and my hair, my education, and my job all suggest I have a yearning for romance, a passion for the saccharine sweetness of gifts bought and romantic get-aways to resort hotels. And despite the fact that I hate my life, despise what it has become while linked to him, I am a carefully cultivated companion at dinner parties, the good girl you bring home to your parents. My admission of a need to be his whore has suddenly destroyed this well-crafted illusion. Within weeks, things will fall apart and I will never again be allowed to attend dinner parties by his side. And despite all his love, he will grow to despise me.

"It's abnormal," he says. "You should go into therapy."

I will leave Vancouver, the city I followed him to, within two months.

As I watch him dress for work, I know that I have lost my all-access pass to a normal life, one where we talk about marriage and children and our life together.

On this beautiful West Coast morning I have been disposed of, cast off as something filthy and inherently wrong.

V.

In the wake of this rejection, resources fail to assist me. Books I buy off the Internet that condone and embrace my submissive self are filled with anecdotes I fail to relate to. Tales of beautiful dominant women run rampant while submissive women are few, their psychological rationale rarely fleshed out in a way that satisfies or normalizes me. I am lost in technical diagrams and responsible warnings, itemized grocery lists of toys and props.

Insert tab a into slot b.

My lover has left me.

There is no way I can explain to my friends, no way to explain to my mother over quiche and chardonnay, why he has done so.

I find solace by renting a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto's gay village and spending my weekends at queer events in the West End. This is a culture that, in its most flattering light, accepts a variety of sexual avenues with tolerance and open arms. I find a comfort and an honesty there I've never felt before. To my new companions, my desires, although not necessarily the norm, are nothing more than a minor detail of a larger picture of who I am. For a while I enjoy the acceptance.

But despite the sudden solace, the reality is that I still remain the straight vanilla character in the play, the blushing hetero girl who likes

boys, prefers pink, and highlights her hair. And the fatigue of being a gay boy's dance floor accessory proves to be at times as isolating as being the deviant with the dirty secret.

I am a piece that fails to fit, at times too straight and at others too bent, and as much as I desire the normalcy of a picket fence and Volvo station wagon future, I can't deny my affection for a pair of handcuffs and a string of filthy phrases.

VI.

When I was seventeen years old, someone tried to fuck me while I was sleeping. When I was twenty-one, someone succeeded.

I am told this is not an entirely uncommon phenomenon.

When I was seventeen, he refused to drive me home until I told him I wasn't angry and I wasn't going to tell anyone. Locked in the suburbs without a bus to take me home, I wasn't angry, I was petrified. And I didn't tell anyone.

I will steal this moment like I have stolen so many others, and I will turn it into a self-aggrandizing piece on sadomasochism that will inevitably embarrass.

When I was twenty-one he told me he assumed it was a permissible thing to do, despite my deep slumber in borrowed pajamas, because I "always seemed like a girl who was up for it."

I will steal this moment like I have stolen so many others, and I will turn it into a self-aggrandizing piece on sadomasochism that will inevitably embarrass.

I wanted a choice.

I wanted to decide.

I want him to beat me because I want to receive things asked for rather than to be surprised by a sudden fist.

And what is this obsession with abuse? What is it that wills me to be so wounded by the hand that heals me? Is it a sad offshoot of a youth so fucked with? Or is it more complicated than all that? Is it a desire to relinquish power? And why is it all so closeted? If this is who I am, then why has it been hidden? Why is it that I so desire the loop of his belt around my neck? That I desire only to surrender my flesh, to be so consumed, so bruised, so beautifully destroyed?

People often use the word *power* when they talk about sexuality. Power struggles, power games—but ultimately the power we all want is the power to decide *what we want*. Despite my women's studies degree, my drive to be independent and respected, all my successes, I want to decide to be demeaned by the person I love.

Despite my angora and tweed, I yearn for a length of rope and a pair of handcuffs.

And despite my minor or major "deviancy," I yearn to be accepted.

VII.

And, of course, I did find a place where I fit. After years of concealing my submissive self, I found, quite surprisingly, a person who found the same interest in demeaning me as I found in being demeaned. Now I am free to consent and free to ask for phrases and markings, knowing that he will gladly give them to me as tokens of tenderness. Like violent violet flowers that will flame and fade from the hidden places on my skin. That he will give me bruises like he will make me peppermint tea when my stomach is upset.

He abuses me with such tenderness.

That I will no longer despise who I am for what it is I desire.

My rope burns will be kisses that scar. And he can do and say what he pleases, and order me to order another to do and say as I please. And he doesn't go. It is amazing that he doesn't go.

Because at this point in the script, in the first light of beautiful West Coast mornings, they all go.

My concealment shifted from hiding my desires to hiding bruises and bite marks from my mother over Sunday luncheons. There is a quiet calm in finding someone to dominate you, where your secrets become treasures rather than embarrassing confessions fueled by too many shots of liquor.

In the weight of this discovery, I readily realize that I have this luxury to *decide* to be a submissive, a choice that my mother who I lunch with on lazy Sundays never had. My broken and battered mother instead is a woman who walked out of one abusive teenage marriage, only to end up pregnant and abandoned by her family and her lover in an unwed mothers' home in northern England. Her stories of abuse are those lacking choice, a detail I am blessed with despite all my perhaps selfish personal battles with identity.

I will forgive the woman who orders another glass of wine after the bill has been paid. She has spent her life running from a prescribed submission to the status quo.

I will steal this moment like I have stolen so many others.

And she says, "Oh, that's wonderful. Tell me all about him."

And the reality is that I cannot admit why this particular man is better than the ones who came before him.

To admit to her over quiche and chardonnay that I relish the sting of a friction burn, the perhaps fictional and obviously fantastical abuse of a dominant male hand, would be more painful than the nausea and dizzy spells we are avoiding talking about.

WHO'S THAT WAVIN' THAT FLAG?

*On the Signs, Stories, and Strategies
of the Current Immigrant
Rights Movement*

JESSICA HOFFMAN

Spring 2006. In cities and small towns across the United States, millions of immigrants and their allies appeared on the streets to demonstrate their opposition to HR 4437, a repressive anti-immigrant bill proposed by Wisconsin representative Jim Sensenbrenner. Mainstream English-language media, racist "nativists," and non-Spanish-speaking lefties alike were broadsided by the energy and apparent strength of communities that had long been—to them—mostly invisible. In the months that followed, as the movement kept moving, it also began to split into coalitions in conflict over issues of strategy, messaging, goals. What does it mean in a practical sense to organize as a broad-based, multiethnic, politically heterogeneous movement? Who is

emerging as the face/s of this movement, and who is being left out? How is the movement addressing norms relating to citizenship, gender, family, and criminality? And what do we make of a sea of U.S. flags at the massive Day Without an Immigrant marches of May 1, 2006?

In the conversation below, five thinkers and activists reflect on the immigrant-rights movement as they've seen and participated in it in four different spots on the literal U.S. map—and lots of different (and shifting) spots on a more metaphorical one.

Ruth Blandon is a graduate student looking at transamerican modernisms (among other things) at USC and the daughter of immigrants from Nicaragua. Aura Bogado is a Los Angeles-based print and radio journalist and an immigrant from Argentina. Vanessa Huang is an Oakland-based, first-generation Chinese American organizer and writer who was in Providence, Rhode Island, during the major immigrants' rights actions of spring 2006. And Mariana Ruiz is a progressive, first-generation Cuban American who works as a union organizer, often organizing with recent immigrants, in New York City. I, the facilitator, am an L.A.-based writer and fourth-generation (I think) descendent of Austrian Jewish and German and British Protestant immigrants.

Jessica: Often the first thing that comes to mind when we think about passing and immigration is the daily passing that happens for people who are living without documentation in any given country, so let's start there.

Mariana: One of the things that comes to mind for me is how, in the actual, physical act of having to cross borders [as an immigrant], you

have to become part of the "underground"—that is, to become invisible and quiet when you get here. You have to force yourself to become acceptable to pass. [And then], you know, whenever people go into restaurants or a bodega or whatever, people walk in and I don't think that they acknowledge or recognize that the folks that are waiting on them, serving them—the busboys, the back of the house—those are often immigrants and oftentimes undocumented immigrants.

Aura: Personally, there was another kind of passing where—I'm an immigrant from Argentina, and there weren't any immigrants from Argentina where I grew up. It was mostly Mexican and Central American. There is a massive immigrant population here . . . from other countries that don't always come because—you know, we didn't come from Argentina because we had a lot of money, we came because of a dictatorship there that the U.S. was involved with. So, there's that type of thing that happens, too, even within immigrants.

Jessica: *So how are you seeing majority/minority dynamics playing out within the immigrants' rights movement?*

Aura: My experience has been that the Mexican community—this may have to do a lot with where I live—it's just really well networked and going on a few generations now, so I think that that [community] often is sort of the front for not only other Latin American immigrants but immigrants from other parts of the world as well.

Mariana: In New York—granted, at the [May 1] immigrant-rights

rally, it was predominantly Latino, but there were a lot of Puerto-riquenos and Guatemaltecos and a large South Asian population. In New York, a lot of the immigrant-rights organizing has been pretty diverse in terms of folks from lots of different countries, but also folks coming here, like Aura pointed out, not just for economic reasons but also because of political persecution. That actually broadens the movement quite a bit because it includes people from lots of different sectors of work, but also it means that this movement seems really owned by immigrants—documented and undocumented, recent immigrants and immigrants that have been here for a long time.

Vanessa: One thing that's interesting for me is the different messaging that has come out of the immigrant-rights movement [in terms of] the passing of the criminalization of immigrants in the context of the War on Terror as distinct from the ways that other people of color in the U.S. have historically been criminalized, [when in fact] the ways that immigrants of color have been constructed as enemies after 9/11 and even before is really similar to the ways that black and brown people and indigenous people who were forcibly brought here or who were here before have been constructed as enemies.

Jessica: You're saying you see the expansion of state violence against immigrant communities being presented as something different from state violence against other people of color in the United States. How, specifically, do you see it being constructed as something different?

Vanessa: In the marches in Providence in May, people were making signs that said We Are Not Criminals. Or you see people saying, "We are not the real criminals"—but even without the "real," I think it can have the implication [that] the people that we currently lock up—almost 2.2 million people in U.S. prisons and jails—are real criminals. I think it plays out, at least in Providence in the organizing around messaging, as whether or not to be flying American flags.

There were certain people who were pretty insistent on, "We need to have American flags to show that we are," I guess, "assimilable and nonthreatening." My question is: Is that in order to be seen as, to be passing as, nonthreatening to a system of white supremacy that is premised on racial oppression against indigenous people and people of African descent who were brought over by slave traders?

Ruth: There were a lot of ways where the whole waving of the—and I'm saying this very specifically and very deliberately—U.S. flag, rather than the American flag—when it was seen being waved by either immigrants or people who have been born here but absolutely are aligned with immigrants, that's also seen as an act of defiance. A lot of people who are against the immigrant movement were really frightened by this. Because, after 9/11, the U.S. flag was definitely hijacked for very specific, political, neoconservative, pseudo-Christian purposes, and I thought it was so interesting that so immediately with this immigrant movement it all of a sudden took very different connotations. While you can argue that it might be construed as a sign of willing assimilation, it's also a sign of defiance, that regardless of who you're gonna say we are, how you're

gonna tag us, no, we're gonna carry this flag because we've also built this country.

Vanessa: I want to highlight the specificity of the whos and hows of building this country. So again, I'm talking about colonialism, genocide, racial slavery. And since the U.S. flag was created out of this moment of imperialist expansion, [the idea that it was] "hijacked" after 9/11 doesn't seem appropriate. The flag has always represented and continues to represent these histories, whether they're the first thing that comes to mind or they're what people don't realize or refuse to acknowledge, and thus benefit from at varying degrees.

Aura: There was a good amount of U.S. flag-waving [at the March 25 march in Los Angeles], but there were a lot of different flags being waved that day, and a lot of people that weren't waving flags at all but were just wearing white T-shirts—the white T-shirts, that was the thing that the mass Spanish-language media was telling people to do, and then, by Day Without an Immigrant, [the DJ] El Piolin and [other] popular Spanish-language stations were on this whole "Bring the U.S. flag. If you work here, make this your country. Take it, it's yours." So to me it just signified, wow, it's so powerful. First we're all told to wear white shirts and then we do, and then we're all told to bring the U.S. flag and then we do.

Jessica: *I was reading an article last night about something completely different, and in it Yvonne Rainer talked about flags as "icons of presumed consensus." I wonder whether it can be*

said that the flag-waving we've seen at these marches is really a sign of presumed consensus, and if so, what the consensus might be?

Ruth: I always have a problem when there's an attempt to homogenize and simplify the meaning of any kind of a movement or a people. [I recently heard a radio show where] they talked about this fissure between the generations, how it seemed like the older generation was carrying the U.S. flag, whereas you saw a lot of the younger kids running out of school carrying flags from different countries. [The interpretation was] that the parents had very specific, assimilationist aims and there was a clear message, whereas the youth seemed to have a more romanticized view of a country that maybe they had never been to. I thought it was very interesting that these assumptions were made without going to the source, sort of like an exoticized interpretation without ever getting the facts, or even asking. So, in terms of consensus, I have a really hard time with that sort of concept.

Mariana: As I talked to some of the workers that I organize with and that are my colleagues—so many of them did not go into work that day, and it's not like they make a whole lot of money, and it was actually a very long trek into Manhattan for a lot of workers. And yet, they felt compelled to go—Latinos, South Asians, Jamaicans, Caribēños—all types of folks went in for the marches. One in particular said to me, "I need to be there because I am an American and my presence here counts, but I'm also a Cubano and I really want to represent that here." I think that there is a lot of power in using the American flag. I don't think

that it's helpful to make a blanket or generalized statement about how people identify based on a choice of flag.

Vanessa: As a Chinese American daughter of immigrant parents, it's been interesting for me to think through how immigration and whiteness fit together—like when my mother says "mei guo ren" in Chinese. The literal translation is "American" or "U.S. person," but she uses that term to refer exclusively to white people. Raising my sister and I in a white-dominated neighborhood and adopting some of the customs of that culture, my mother would sometimes ask if I identified as "mei guo ren" or Chinese—basically, do I identify more with the Chinese or the American part of "Chinese American." But "mei guo ren" still is used to refer to white people, [so that] "American" means white people.

Jessica: That speaks to how some people are reading this U.S. flag-waving, that it's coming from a place of. "What does this flag mean if it includes us?" If it really, substantively includes everybody standing out here waving it, what does it then mean? Is that different from what some of us on the left, or some of us who are critical of U.S. hegemony, may think it means? Could it mean something else? I think that brings up the question of the goals of this movement. Are people organizing for belonging in dominant U.S. culture? Or are they aiming for a transformed United States that meaningfully and justly includes all the different people marching? I know there are big splits in the movement on these questions . . .

Ruth: Immigrants, even people who have been here for generations—if you're of color you are not seen as "American." You are seen as having a hyphenated identity. Always. Unless you're white enough to somehow pass into American-ness. So I think this brings to the forefront something that has already been a fact: that being an American does not translate as being white, and that it's always been about [different people] being a part of the fabric of this country, if that's the analogy you want to use, because this country has been built on the blood of many.

Vanessa: I definitely agree that this country was built on the blood of many, but that's been premised on the invisibility or some strange holding of the contradiction of whose blood that is. While European-descended immigrants without Anglo blood (i.e., the Irish, Italian, and Jewish) were, over time, able to become white and today access white privilege—and thus become "American"—indigenous folks, enslaved people, and immigrants and refugees from the global south—from Asia, Africa, most of the Middle East, and the Americas—have not.

Ruth: Unless they'll go ahead and work in some subservient way. For instance, being an illegal immigrant, going to fight in Iraq, and then being made a citizen.

Mariana: That's the only way that there is visibility, right? Through guest worker programs, whether it's going to Iraq and then getting citizenship posthumously, or it's coming here through the *bracero* program, and now, any guest worker program. Seasonal labor, for

example. They'll allow a certain amount of folks to come into the country to work seasonally, but then once that season's up, it's time to get out. And so there is visibility for a moment, and there's visibility as long as folks are being taxed—because anybody that works is being taxed, [even when] they're getting paid wages that are not livable. As long as we're able to take folks' money and take folks' labor, then there's some sense of visibility.

Jessica: So let's talk about how this movement is being framed in terms of what the "face" of the movement is looking like. What can we make of the narrative of "We are just humble, nonthreatening, hardworking people doing the jobs you don't want to do . . . "?

Vanessa: Well, part of that narrative is, "The guest worker programs aren't enough; we want a path to citizenship." [People keep bringing] up the idea of a voting bloc, and I think if we're working for transformation, we can't transform our lives or our communities or the United States without confronting the entirety of the structural violences that we're standing on, and the fact that black people for so long were denied the vote, and that today so many black people and other people of color and poor people of all races are denied the right to vote under felon disenfranchisement because they're in prison and—even if you are a citizen, the ways in which the loopholes of legal language can count you as not human.

Aura: In terms of the "humble worker," it's really interesting be-

cause I don't have to pick crops, right? So there's this reality that we can do other jobs, and we can have places in academia, we can have places in media . . . I think a lot of people that do other jobs that other people might want, that has to go by the wayside a lot with this thing of "Look, you don't want it anyway, we're just taking what nobody else wants." Which I think is offensive, anyway, because a lot of different people like to do a lot of different work. . . . I think there are different things that are being put out there because of fear.

You could change the argument, of course, and say, "Look, it's not yours to have to begin with." But I can align myself with why people are saying what we're saying right now, because we've already lost so much ground that I think it's hard to say, "Oh, you're right, but—" So I think, possibly, the more strategic argument is, "We're taking what nobody else wants."

Jessica: *Do you see the humble-worker narrative as being gendered in any way?*

Ruth: This is definitely a heterosexist narrative in that the thrust of it is: "Let us do the work that you will not do so that we can feed our families, so that our children can have a more promising future than the one they may have in Country X."

Jessica: *It's interesting how that has informed what the movement looks like on the ground. Overwhelmingly at the May 1 marches in L.A., the people I saw and spoke to were walking as families. While it was inspiringly more intergenerational than other marches I've participated in, I wonder how these "for our*

families" messages not only rely on but might reinscribe hetero-sexist family norms.

Ruth: It absolutely reinscribes heterosexist family norms. The narrative is all about the nuclear family. Not only is it strategic (keeping the message streamlined and simple), the narrative is also true—[immi-grant] families are torn apart and reunited. There's a way in which [the "for our families" narrative] also taps into the U.S. militaristic/colonial/imperialist "missionary" impetus about doing something "good" for the "poor and pathetic" of Country X so that Country X's citizens can be-come enlightened, now be civilized, and attain a better future for them-selves and their progeny. [So] this also bleeds into the Enlightenment narratives that inform so much of U.S. ideology. There doesn't seem to be much room for alternative forms of the family in this narrative, for reasons of (a) homophobia in Latino communities and consequent fear of violence, and (b) obvious marketing strategies—it would complicate the narrative and mar the Christian/missionary foundation on which this narrative rides.

Jessica: *I saw minor—but very intentional—queer visibility at the May 1 march here in L.A. Here and there, small groups of young people, mostly Latino and Asian/Asian American, marched wearing stickers that said—all in the same font, in pink—things like "Queer. Immigrant. Worker." What are you seeing in terms of queer visibility in the immigrants' rights movement where you're standing?*

Mariana: In New York, the queer visibility that I saw was very,

very small. And it was mostly young. As a queer Latina, it was something that I really noticed and that made me really feel sad. Not just sad, but, like, Shit, this isn't a space where I feel like I could be out. And I think part of it has to do with the fact that, for me, it just didn't seem like the number one priority that I needed to be out in that space.

Vanessa: I think all of these different forms of visibility and invisibility are intimately connected. The silencing as it relates to safety—safety from queerphobic violence, safety from state violence—it all intersects so deeply.

Jessica: *It does. And when I hear some of you articulating this “humble worker” narrative as a strategic choice that serves a purpose, my first reaction is similar to what Vanessa has said—that saying “we’re nonthreatening” implicitly perpetuates the idea of an actual threatening Other. Even if it’s being used strategically, who is it being used against? And the image of the “humble worker” feels racist to me—patronizing, romantic. Is my reading of it as racist coming from listening to class-privileged white lefties romanticizing working people and communities of color, and maybe the immigrants’ rights organizers who are using this narrative strategically are not romanticizing it in the way that I hear some white progressives doing?*

Vanessa: I’ve been thinking about the vulnerabilities of identity-based visioning and messaging. If we’re stuck on the immediate, this reactionary tip of, “They’re attacking us, so we have to just fight back

with this message," and that's all we're gonna do, without seriously considering the implications of how we're not pushing the frame of the message far enough if we're really truly about liberation and a fundamental social transformation, then I think it's not enough. We have to be really careful about what we're willing to compromise on, which audiences we're engaging with that make us want to compromise, and whether reaching those audiences and building those relationships is where our energy should be spent right now, in terms of long-term vision and political integrity.

I recently returned from [a conference] with folks who also saw the problems of responding to the slew of increasingly daring anti-immigrant legislation over the past few years seeking to criminalize immigration with [the message that] "we are not criminals." We need to respond on our own terms, and shift the very terms of the debate, rather than responding to the frame the legislators have already created, and conceding that the surveillance and imprisonment of other people of color and poor people within our criminal legal system is legitimate.

Ruth: I think this thing of "Oh, I'm the humble worker, I'm non-threatening" also represents the post-9/11 attack on the borders and how there was this strange conflation between securing the borders—"This is dangerous; national security"—and somehow conflating that with illegal immigration of workers, how somehow the whole national threat of terrorism was conflated with crossing borders.

Vanessa: That was what the language of the different legislation

that we've seen since 9/11 was meant to do, and that's how they framed it. It was strategic. That's the way that they're framing it, and I've seen the ways in which different organizing networks I've been a part of respond to that without shifting the terms of the debate.

Ruth: The narrative [of the nonthreatening, humble worker] works to distance yourself from the whole 9/11 collapsing of these issues, and these terms.

Vanessa: And then when the war on terror and all of that rhetoric is feeding into an expansion of a system of state violence and imprisonment and detention, that narrative [of the nonthreatening, humble worker], then, implicitly also is saying that all the rhetoric and discourse around public safety within a domestic context is okay, as well, when we're saying that we're not the real criminals.

The terms of the debate being constructed [around] "homeland security" are very similar to those in the "public safety" debate [around the prison system].

Both necessitate a process of distortion involving racialized enemy production in order to legitimize the state violence and military aggression required to maintain and continue an imperialist project. Maintaining this project requires increasing exploitation and repression and growing insecurity for our communities, but under the guise of "security" for people who benefit from capitalism and white supremacy.

As marginalized communities, we really need to pay attention to each other when some of us cannot and/or will not participate in this nationalist project.

UNDERMINING GENDER REGULATION

DEAN SPADE

I recently consulted with my friend Jessica, a brilliant astrologer-psychic, and one of the things she told me was that my job was preventing me from expressing my gender. I think that would surprise most people. After all, I work at a nonprofit that is one of the leading voices for gender deregulation in the country, and my job is to provide legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people and to fight for changes in policies and laws that fuck us over. The thing is, doing this work puts me at the crux of debates within trans communities, and within government bureaucracies, about which gender expressions and identities merit recognition. Sadly, these debates frequently echo one another and involve horrendous distortions of trans realities and dangerous enforcement of regulatory norms.

Yes, all communities that come together around shared identity traits regulate each other through ideas of realness. Yes, every time someone walks into the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and says, "You're Dean Spade?" with a disappointed and aghast tone and then tells me *ze* thought I'd be older, taller, more confident looking, look like a lawyer, and, most importantly, look like a man, it's a little bit of a bummer. On some days it's funny, and the part about not looking like a lawyer I take as a compliment, but I can't say that this obvious disappointment in my inadequate masculinity doesn't sting just a touch.

My emergence into public trans politics was hastened by my arrest for trying to use a men's bathroom in Grand Central Station in 2002. Immediately following that, I was slammed on several trans listservs by people writing about how I must not pass if I'd been arrested and I probably didn't even take T and I was an asshole and not a real trans guy for getting myself and my friends arrested. It felt horrible. I remember being afraid the first time I went to a big trans conference after that, of having people see me and know my name and judge me for how I looked. As much as I didn't believe in a vision of trans politics that required me to be traditionally masculine and passing in order not to be blameworthy for my illegal arrest and twenty-three hours in jail, I still felt insecure, and I remember trying to "butch it up" in community spaces where I might come under fire. People were pissed that I was representing myself in public as trans and was not passing as a non-trans man. Folks were concerned that the legitimacy of trans identity in the eyes of a transphobic culture is frequently tied to how normal and traditionally masculine or feminine trans people appear. I was ruining it for everyone.

But I am far less concerned, overall, about the authenticity hierarchies operating through social and political networks in the trans communities in which I participate than I am about the hierarchies operating in government policies and practices. The level of coercion in prisons and shelters, the level of violence and the vulnerability of the trans people in those contexts, is far more appalling to me. State gender coercion disproportionately affects poor people, people of color, people who don't pass, people without educational privilege, people without healthcare, and immigrants. I have spent the last four years getting intimately acquainted with the variety of ways that coercive gender norms are worked into the policies and practices that the government applies to low-income people, and developing strategies for how to resist and undo these coercive mechanisms. There are a few different threads that run through all of the battles we have been fighting, whether those battles are about drivers' licenses, name changes, Medicaid, or juvenile justice facilities. All of these threads are about the authenticity of trans identities, and all are based on the idea that the state should determine people's gender identities using binary gender as the standard.

A primary premise running through policies that endanger trans people is the belief that no matter what trans people say or do or how we understand ourselves or act, we are male if we were identified as male at birth, female if we were identified as female at birth. You can see the enforcement of this regulation in prisons, juvenile justice facilities, foster care group homes, and homeless shelters. Trans women are held in men's facilities, trans men in women's facilities, and gender-nonconforming people in whatever facility matches their birth gender. You can also see this discrimination when facilities that are

gender-based, like women's drug treatment facilities or domestic violence shelters, refuse to admit trans women. Their logic is often that other women will be triggered or made uncomfortable by trans women. This is what is called the "bigot's veto" in the law—a policy that allows the misunderstandings or biases of a general population in an institution to excuse the exclusion of a person with a characteristic that marks him as different. By shaping policy around the presumed biases or beliefs of the women in these facilities, administrators and other bureaucrats are verifying those biases or beliefs and saying that yes, trans women are not really women and do not deserve access to women's services.

Another theme running throughout the policies we are working to change is the idea that gender-confirming healthcare for trans people is not legitimate healthcare. Sometimes this healthcare is determined to be "experimental" or "cosmetic," even though the same procedures and medications are readily provided for nontrans people to confirm their birth gender identities. Sometimes this healthcare is partially available, with extra regulation and arbitrary rules governing its availability, in a way that suggests that this kind of care should be discouraged. Other times hormones or surgery are framed as something that may be legitimate for some people, but that people under a certain age are incapable of making decisions regarding this care.

Many states explicitly exclude gender-confirming healthcare for trans people under their Medicaid plans. So, even though they provide the same procedures and medications for other conditions, if your reason for needing a particular drug or surgery involves trans identity, the care is excluded. Federal law prohibits this type of "diagnosis discrimination" by state Medicaid programs: They aren't supposed to give

care to people with certain conditions and refuse care to people with other conditions just because some medical diagnoses are associated with politically unpopular groups—but nonetheless most states do just that. Prisons are the same way. Many state correctional systems provide no trans care at all, but several states have a stranger rule. These states have written policies that will allow a person to access hormones in prison only if ze can show that ze was receiving hormones with a prescription from a doctor before ze was locked up. Granted, prison healthcare is atrocious for every prisoner, but the oddity of this policy illustrates the belief that this care is somehow not meeting a real need.

This thinking is also reflected in the majority of juvenile justice and foster care systems that still deny trans youth access to hormones or any other gender-confirming care, forcing folks to get their care in informal and criminalized economies. You can also see this thinking reflected in the policies of “community” clinics that refuse to give trans healthcare to people under eighteen because they don’t think that young people have the capacity to understand and make important decisions about their own gender. This sets up a situation where young trans and gender-nonconforming folks who want hormones end up locked up after trying to get these medications on the street or trying to raise money to buy them on the street, or they get HIV from using unsafe injection methods through lack of access to clean needles or basic supplies. These transphobic clinics see themselves as “saving” young people from making “unhealthy” mistakes, but only further endanger these young people by neglecting to address their healthcare needs.

A final thread that runs through many of these policies is the notion that gender realness must be verified by medical doctors. The most

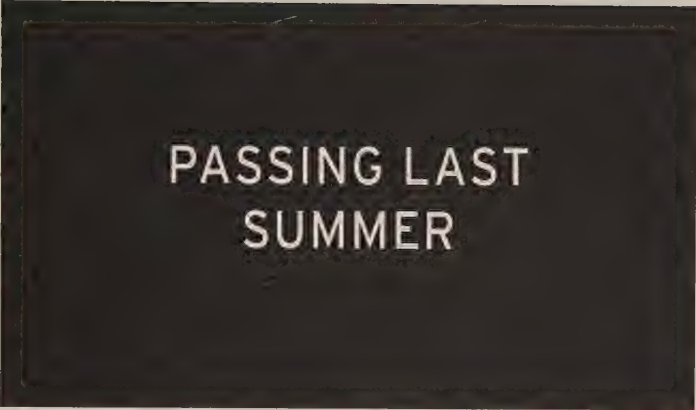
blatant examples of this are the myriad institutions that will only recognize a trans person's gender identity if ze can prove ze's undergone surgery, usually genital surgery. The Social Security Administration, the State Department (which issues passports), and the health departments of various states (which issue birth certificates), and many state departments of motor vehicles (which issue drivers' licenses and non-driver IDs) will only allow a person to change hir gender on record if ze can show ze's had genital surgery. Of course, most trans people will never undergo those procedures, either because they do not want to or cannot afford to, but will have to live day in and day out with an ID that does not match their gender identity or expression.

The irony of these policies is that they usually have been made by people who know nothing about trans healthcare, and you can see that in their inconsistencies. For example, right now, if you were born in New York City, you can only change your birth certificate if you can prove you've had a vaginoplasty or phalloplasty. However, if your neighbor who was born just over the city line, in New York State's area of authority, wants to change hir birth certificate, ze will have to prove ze's had a penectomy or a hysterectomy and mastectomy. The bureaucrats who came up with their policy in the city wanted to see people with penises and vaginas to prove they'd become *real men* or *real women*. The bureaucrats up in Albany wanted to see people who had removed their most gendered body parts (in the eyes of those bureaucrats). From a layperson's perspective, meaning genital-obsessed binary-gender-loving transphobia, both arguments make a lot of sense.

From what I have seen working at Sylvia Rivera Law Project over the past four years, where we've provided legal help to over eight

hundred trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people, the tangled bureaucratic web that the state and the social services it pays for spin around gender is killing trans people, especially poor trans people. The contradictions don't seem to matter to the state. Sure, they refuse to recognize the legitimacy of trans healthcare for Medicaid purposes, but then require it for ID purposes. Sure, they punish you for not having medical authorization to be yourself, but then refuse to see that medical authorization as legitimate when you need help paying for the care. Yes, being trans is real enough to get you falsely arrested and beaten, raped, or killed in prison, but not real enough to get you access to a domestic violence shelter, a drug treatment program that provides an alternative to incarceration, or a homeless shelter that recognizes your gender.

We need to do more than hope that an antidiscrimination law passes in our state. We need to look at where binary gender is being required and enforced in the administrative institutions in our states and cities, and take local action to weed out such discrimination. How are trans people faring, not just in your school or office, but in the shelter in your town? In the jail down the street? In the prison out in the country? If we examine how the most highly regulated and surveilled people are doing—immigrants, folks on welfare, people who are locked up, youth, people living in communities overexposed to the police—we'll see where gender regulation and coercion operate most sharply and we can form shared analysis and coalitional activism to undermine those operations.



PASSING LAST SUMMER

DOMINIKA BEDNARSKA

I want to write about last summer and passing but I don't know where to begin. It's tempting to begin at the dyke march, rolling through in my scooter (read: a type of electric wheelchair) with a painful hickey on my neck, procured the night before from N, a gay man I hardly knew. I let that butch dyke marching next to me think the hickey came from another woman.

I won't pretend that this decision had nothing to do with the disdain so many lesbians feel toward queer women who express any kind of desire for men. But the decision was more about not wanting to enter into a complicated discussion about queerness and identification with a total stranger, while marching. My experience the night before had

been my only sexual encounter with a man since I began to identify as a lesbian. I couldn't imagine it erasing that identity, but there was a small part of me that felt fraudulent.

Yet in order to talk about passing and sexuality, first I must talk about being a crip.

I've started to say crip to nondisabled people now, the way I call them AB without offering an explanation. AB means able-bodied, and is used interchangeably in this essay with nondisabled. Some people use crip as short for cripple. I used to use the word crip only to mean a disabled person willing to claim that identity, but now I also say cripple to refer transgressively to other disabled people who are wheelchair users. I have always been both a crip and a cripple.

Disabled all my life, I distinctly remember threatening to sue a restaurant owner for demanding I sit in the back of an empty restaurant. I was seven. It was three years before the Americans with Disabilities Act, thirteen years after the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which did the same thing as the ADA but was never enforced. I didn't have this context then. I had no idea there was actually a law that protected my civil rights; I was talking out of my ass, but we got reseated. It seems weird that I want to talk about disability and passing, because I use canes and an electric scooter for mobility. This equipment makes it obvious that I have some difficulty walking. For me to pass for AB, you would need to see me sitting at my desk or hear me on the phone, and even then the illusion would be short-lived. Eventually I would need to get up or roll away and you would know that I was disabled. Though once at a Halloween party, some guy asked me, "You don't really need those, do you?" I was dressed as a cat, but I guess my youth and skimpy clothes cast my canes as suspect.

I remember a conversation with a friend of mine who talked about the difficulty and stigma of outing oneself as disabled. I am rarely in situations where I get that choice. Unlike with my friend, people assume that I have some sort of disability. They stare or avoid eye contact. They challenge my own assessment of what I can do. They condescend. They become defensive when I raise the issue of wheelchair accessibility. They force me to accept help I don't need by manipulating my body, picking me up, or grabbing my arm. They sometimes refer to me as simply "the wheelchair."

Occasionally, people anticipate my need for a ramp or a curb cut because of my scooter. This, however, is rarely the case. Usually I need to remind them. I think about what a friend of mine, with an invisible disability, describes as "coming out": the difficulty of explaining exactly how her disability affects her and what her needs are in relation to the other person. But I have to do that as well.

I recognize that my claims of disability are met with less skepticism than hers because I use equipment and she doesn't, but I am forced to out myself because the scooter and canes don't express the exact specifics of my mobility. Can I walk? How far? Up stairs? My hands look fine, but I have bad tendonitis. Then there are the spasms, pain, and fatigue, all of which vary from day to day, hour to hour. The barrage of questions I am met with on a regular basis regarding my abilities is staggering—ranging from what my disability is to whether I take medication, drive a car, date, or have sex. These questions show how little is actually explained by the visibility of my scooter or canes. If outing has anything to do with understanding something about someone, explaining one's disability the way my friend described, I am always

outing myself. Unfortunately, the stigma I experience as a result of moving through the world chiefly while sitting down does little to help others to understand my needs and abilities. I am not spared the talks about the parameters of my body, my functionality, or my mobility. Visible disability does not avoid these conversations. It means that first I have to erase what so-and-so thought she knew because her aunt's friend had MS or MD (which I don't have, and even if I did, what information would that give her about my body?).

Last summer, the same body began dealing with bad tendonitis alongside cerebral palsy, which impacted not only my ability to type and write, but also to walk, stand, and dance on my feet. I was instructed by my doctor to avoid these activities because I might lose function, strength, and even sensation in my hands. To an observer, it didn't look like anything was wrong, and I could still do these things myself, but putting weight on my hands through my canes caused my hands and arms to hurt, tingle, burn, and go numb. Still, I felt like a fraud—with attendants in my room helping me to transfer in and out of bed, tie my shoes, and take a shower. I had worked for years in physical therapy to learn to do these things independently. Sometimes I would cheat by doing them myself anyway, because it was faster, cheaper, and easier. Or by masturbating (very hand-intensive stuff). But particularly by having sex with N.

The night I went home with N, we chatted for a few hours, there being a kind of foreplay in his complaint that lesbians always hit on him at the local gay bar. I made the same complaint about gay men, particularly one guy who just wouldn't leave me alone. He kept dancing with me by wrapping his arm so that my throat was in the crook of his elbow,

our height differential such that he was choking me. I kept pulling him off of me, and he kept replacing his arm. I went to sit down, but I got back up because I wanted to continue dancing. It was my whole reason for going out that night. Eventually this guy collapsed on top of me. The force of his fall knocked off my shoes. I had a bruise for several weeks, but I wasn't upset about that; I was upset about the fact that all of this happened in public, that more people would apologize as they simply brushed past me, and I would be treated as fragile for the rest of the night, even though I was not necessarily any less capable of staying on my feet than the guy who fell on top of me.

Another time, a man began dancing with me and grabbed my canes, lifting the ends up into the air and moving them back and forth as though they were arms. I had five seconds to prepare. I thought about tucking my head and pushing all of my weight forward to minimize the chance of cracking my head open on the dance floor. It worked pretty well. I fell in something of a cannonball position. In both of these cases, the men were thrown out of the club. In both cases, I remember being more upset about how I was being perceived than about the actual event itself, but I still felt attacked both times. I can't remember whether I told N these stories. They certainly came to mind when I made that comment about gay men coming on to me.

I remember explaining that my attraction to men ranged from sporadic to nonexistent and was not something I acted upon because I had no desire to be in relationships with men. Most of my emotional and intimate connections were with women. N said he felt the same way about women as I did about men. Looking back, I can see that we were negotiating our unexpected attraction. At the time, it felt like little more

than small talk. But I guess the real proposition came with N's "I'm gay, you're gay; wanna make out?"

During sex, I could not avoid using my hands. Or maybe I could have, but it didn't make me feel sexy to ask for help I didn't "need," especially in bed. There are certain orgasms that would not have happened without me using my hands—many of which were rightfully mine. Or were they? It is strange to talk about entitlement to sexual satisfaction as a lesbian involved with a gay man.

A gay male friend of mine kept trying to understand this unprecedented turn of events by putting us into different boxes. He described me as an experimenting lesbian and N as a bisexual or N as experimenting and me as frustrated or confused. Perhaps, my friend said, we were both bisexual, but my friend just didn't see me that way because I am so interested in women. I think of myself as a lesbian and I feel I have no right to put someone in a different box than the one that they claim, even if the boxes seem to make a logical contradiction. My friend accepted this contradiction, but he did feel it was unfair that, of the two of us, I was the one sleeping with a gay man. I told him that if he ever wanted to sleep with a lesbian, I would fully support him. We both laughed, but I reminded him that sleeping with a woman who's queer allows for mutable gender possibilities that he may not have considered, at which point my comment seemed less funny and more like food for thought. Several of my lesbian-identified friends expressed shock that I had started seeing a man, but when I added that he was queer they seemed relieved. Some added, "Oh, well, I would sleep with a gay man."

It seemed rather arbitrary to choose this one relationship, which was primarily sexual, as transformative of my identity. I am very at-

tracted to masculinity—butch, trans, and sometimes, rarely, even the most cliché of all: actual scrotum-toters. I draw the line somewhere, though: I have never had intercourse. I have nothing against it. There are just so many things that are more interesting to me sexually. Does this prove I'm a dyke? Does it minimize the importance of my relationships (all two) with men? Or would you call me bisexual? I felt like I was passing as bi when I talked about N. One friend invited me to her bi women's group. N began to refer to himself as bisexual and would get angry when I didn't follow his lead, though eventually he gave up. Did he chalk it up to semantic differences or denial?

I am aware, as I tell this story, that it is easier to talk about the ill-fitting nature of categories in relation to my own sexuality than it is to talk about disability in relation to sex. It is one thing to talk about parallels between the two identities and another to talk about how one identity affects the other. I don't know what it says that I have waited this long to reveal that N, like me, is disabled. He also uses a wheelchair and does not walk at all. Have I waited this long because I anticipate some sort of misunderstanding, a sense of "Oh, I see" from my imagined reader, as if our unlikely coupling is explained by the fact that we are both disabled?

Did I wait because of the stereotype that all disabled men are impotent or in some way lack the ability to satisfy sexually? This stereotype is so pervasive that it frequently becomes the only burning question with regard to disability and sexuality. In MTV's recent *Murderball*, a movie about two wheelchair rugby teams training for the Paralympics, an entire segment had to be devoted to how disabled men have sex, and specifically whether or not they can get it up. In fact, in a workshop

I attended for queer women on sexuality, after a "discussion" of disability and sexuality that basically consisted of me talking about the ways in which disability informs sexuality, the only question I received was, "Can my wife's brother, with a spinal cord injury, still have sex?" Of course this woman ignored everything I'd just said, and despite being lesbian-identified, had reduced sex to an act that centered around erection and ejaculation. But even if she had asked the more specific question behind her question, there was only one person who would have been able to answer it. Perhaps I fear that the reader will ask the same question about N. Or assume that I chose him as a partner because I was less interested in traditional penetrative sex.

Perhaps I've waited because I fear that when people see me with a disabled partner they think that disability is the reason we are together. Perhaps I've waited because, in some sense, I fear that this is true. Not in the sense that I date people because of their disabilities, but in the sense that my scholarship, my writing, and my activism have often focused on disability issues. N and I met at a discussion on sex and disability. We had more flexibility about going home together because we both lived in accessible apartments. We both used accessible transportation. It made certain things easier.

But what did N and I really have in common? There were significant differences in our politics. N was interested in working within the establishment; my political beliefs are more socialist than capitalist. I had already tried the establishment route and had found it stifling. Unlike N, who expressed implicitly and explicitly that he did not want to be poor, I had been poor. I was raised by first-generation immigrants who managed—with racial privilege, luck, and hard work—to make a relatively

clean departure to the middle class. I did worry about money from time to time, but I wasn't anxious about maintaining a particular class status. I deliberately chose a career that did not make people wealthy in order to effectively work on disability issues. I imagined N's family was more in line with the educated, well-off, white student body that I went to college with, but always felt slightly outside of and different from.

I distinctly remember N informing me that he tried to spend only a third of his social time with disabled people. I was disturbed by this proclamation, and we had a long conversation about it. N clarified that what he meant was that most of his social time was spent doing some kind of political organizing and he didn't want to be pigeonholed as someone who dealt only with disability issues. He also explained that when he first moved to the Bay Area he'd spent a lot of his time with disabled people and had felt he was losing his ability to relate to the nondisabled.

The ability to relate to the nondisabled was something I had to consciously develop, after attending a "special" (read ability- or crip-segregated) school until seventh grade (unlike N, who had always been mainstreamed). When I switched schools, I had to anticipate stigma and stereotype to a far greater degree. I was no longer allowed to walk in the halls without an adult; rumors were spread that my grades were high because teachers felt sorry for me; when the elevator broke, I was almost forced to leave. I wanted to be mainstreamed primarily because I was bored in all my classes (I was being forced to do work way below my grade level, and quickly losing any chance at getting into an academically challenging university, or a university at all). But another reason was that we didn't live in a world that was as segregated as my old

school. I had to learn how to deal with increased prejudice and stigma. I had to learn how to live in an able-bodied world.

N is younger than me, and when I was his age I distinctly remember feeling resistance to other people with disabilities, especially in terms of dating. There was a point where dating an able-bodied person felt like the ultimate sign of normalcy and acceptance. I couldn't get past my own internalized sense of lack with regard to disability, at least in my most intimate relationships, even though this did not stop me from being vocal about ableist oppression, having disabled friends, and advocating disability pride. I remember feeling that same need to distance myself from people with disabilities, afraid that it would consume my identity, and further restrict me even more than ableism already had. Although, of course, this was a restriction I was imposing on myself as a result of ableism. I feel embarrassed to admit that I felt this way. Even now I occasionally worry that my widespread interest in disability makes me come across as a one-trick pony, not only in terms of the academy, but in terms of relating to people who have no interest in disability. Yet despite this residual internal resistance, I have had several relationships with disabled partners. The longest was with someone who had the same disability as N. Is it significant that both the women who N had been sexual with before me were disabled? Did he feel more comfortable with these women because of their disabilities? Or did they feel more comfortable with him because of his disability?

After all, disability can impact sex. In my case it requires more careful logistical negotiation in terms of positioning, due to my spasticity and lack of balance. If both partners are disabled in ways that limit their physicality, it makes certain positions nearly impossible.

Hence, when someone asked me recently how my disability affected me, I replied, "Well, it sure does make me wish I paid more attention in high school physics to things like vectors and leverage." Having sex with someone who's both disabled and queer makes me feel freer, both from expectations around the body and around gender norms. My disabled queer lovers and I understand that the genitals are not the be-all and end-all of sexual pleasure. Sex is not centered around performing a prescribed set of acts, but around finding pleasure.

I'm fully aware that my desires around the kind of sex I want could change over time, depending on the partner and the possibilities and the mutability of our own desires. So many women I know who self-identify as lesbians express a desire or openness to having sex with men, but no desire for emotionally intimate relationships with them. I'm not sure what kinds of boxes it's most convenient to put these women into, or if acknowledging that desire confuses or misleads. Is it useful to use the term bisexual? And to what extent can we really know our desires, if what we want changes over time, and when sometimes we don't know what we want until we are presented with it?

I cringe as I write these words because I'm fearful of their misinterpretation. Have I just given ammunition to every sleazy, disrespectful man who trolls online posing as a lesbian, or goes to lesbian clubs and harasses women, attempting to get them to go home with him? I don't want to do us all that kind of disservice, but I want to acknowledge that one's feelings may change over time, and that feelings are not always possible to anticipate.

Similarly, I can't anticipate how my body will function, look, move, and feel with complete accuracy today. It may improve or get worse.

Activities that didn't bother me today may begin to bother me tomorrow. I may experience sensations that take on new meaning. For instance, I used to just take the prickly numb feeling in my fingers as my hands falling asleep. Now, it means blood is not reaching my nerve endings properly and if I don't change position, if my circulation doesn't come back soon, I may very well be doing permanent nerve damage to my hand. It is impossible for me to know whether I will always have tendonitis in the way I experience it now, or even at all. Much in the same way, it is impossible to know what sorts of partnering and sexual activity I will choose in the future based solely on what has happened in the past. All I can do is speak from what appears to be true, from my experiences so far, with an understanding that they may not be indicative of the future.

INNOCENT VICTIMS AND BRAVE NEW LAWS:

*State Protection and the
Battered Women's Movement*

PRIYA KANDASWAMY

The contemporary battered women's movement emerged in the 1970s. Through practices like consciousness-raising, second-wave feminists of this period began to theorize domestic violence as not simply an individual problem but as something women experienced as a class. Feminists saw domestic violence as part of the larger problem of patriarchy and understood it as primarily a problem of male power and control over women, specifically through violence within heterosexual relationships. The first domestic violence shelters emerged in the early 1970s, first in England and then in the United States. These shelters were originally women-run and women-centered, and often were simply composed of members who would take battered women into their

own homes. The emphasis of these early efforts was on empowerment instead of rehabilitation and reflected a belief that violence against women was a social and political rather than psychological problem. As the founder of one of the first U.S. shelters for battered women, Women's Advocates in Saint Paul, Minnesota, argued, "[A] shelter is not a treatment center, residents are not described as clients, battering is not described as a syndrome. Women are not thought of as victims except as victims of a crime requiring redress."¹

By the 1990s, battered women's shelters had grown tremendously both in number and in size, but this growth was accompanied by a shift away from structural critiques of patriarchy and toward more therapeutic models that emphasized rehabilitating victims of abuse. Notably, *battered women's syndrome* became a term used frequently by battered women's advocates, and shelters increasingly resembled treatment centers. The element of the early philosophy that remained central, and even increased in importance within the movement, was the idea that violence against women was a crime. In a relatively short period of time, collective empowerment-based approaches receded, and approaches that emphasized rehabilitation and criminalization flourished.

In conjunction with this shift, the state has begun to take much greater interest in combating violence against women. This trend is most clearly reflected in the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, perhaps the most significant legislative victory at the federal level for battered women's activists in U.S. history. The Violence Against Women Act, which was signed into law in August of 1994 as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, established a federal Office on Violence Against Women within the Department of Justice,

started the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and created new penalties for gender-related violence. Additionally, the act encouraged states and tribal governments to address domestic violence through the creation of several grant programs. Among other things, these grants were designed to increase enforcement of laws targeting violence against women, to encourage the arrest of perpetrators, to foster the development of collaborative efforts between victims' advocates and the police, and to increase funding for shelters and services designed to protect battered women. The Violence Against Women Act directed unprecedented amounts of federal money and attention to the plight of battered women at a time when most social programs were being cut, a fact that says a great deal about the battered women's movement's effectiveness in gaining legitimacy and recognition from the state. In addition, while feminist claims to sexual autonomy, reproductive freedom, and economic justice have been steadily eroded in recent years, domestic violence has gained increasing national attention.

However, the "success" of the battered women's movement has proven to be a double-edged sword. In order to gain public support, domestic violence advocates portrayed abused women as innocent victims who suffered at the hands of particularly deviant men. While this narrative perhaps sought to combat the idea that abuse was a woman's own fault, it drew upon dominant ideas of "innocence" and "victimhood" and required that women represent themselves in particular ways in order to be recognized as deserving of assistance. This requirement to pass as a "good victim" reinforced dominant gender norms and also marginalized women of color, immigrant women, working-class women, homeless women, lesbians, gay men, transgender people, and anyone

who did not or could not fit these norms. Perhaps even more insidiously, these kinds of legislative engagements with the state have increasingly come to pass as the only kind of "real" or acceptable politics. Under the rubric of helping "real" victims of "real" crimes, approaches that emphasize criminalization and rehabilitation have usurped critiques that sought to change how power is distributed in society and have naturalized the process of criminalizing violence against women and seeking expanded state funding for services for battered women as the only available political approaches to the problem.

This shift is largely a product of how domestic violence advocates have chosen to engage the state and is not unique to the battered women's movement. Thus, I would like to use the example of the U.S. battered women's movement to reflect on questions that have plagued many contemporary social movements. What kinds of identities are we forced to adopt and police when we engage in state-centered politics? What acts of passing are required to gain state protection? What are the problems and pitfalls of passing (strategic or not) as a kind of politics? And, finally, what passes as politics in an era when incarceration and/or normalization are increasingly represented as the only solutions to social problems?

The shifting emphasis toward rehabilitation and criminalization within the battered women's movement is clearly evidence of state co-optation. However, the point I want to emphasize is the way that the seeds for state co-optation can be found within the way the movement itself conceptualized the problem of domestic violence and defined abused women as innocent victims of a crime. A number of critics have pointed out that the battered women's movement's exclusive focus

on gender in isolation from other categories of difference necessarily marginalized the experiences of women of color, immigrant women, lesbians, working-class women, and transgender individuals.² The very premise of the movement, that domestic violence is symptomatic of universal gender oppression, excluded a more complex analysis of how domestic violence is shaped by structures such as race, class, citizenship, and sexuality. The effect of this was to universalize the particular experiences of the relatively privileged white upper- and middle-class women who dominated the second-wave feminist movement. As such, the movement focused almost exclusively on violence within the home, advocated for greater state protection of women within their homes, and failed to make connections between interpersonal violence and state violence. The centering of a particular group of privileged women's experiences of violence structured feminist practices ranging from public awareness campaigns to the development of shelters and services for abused women to the increasing emphasis on criminalization and the forging of alliances with the criminal justice system in efforts to stop domestic violence.

Domestic violence advocates' failure to consider the intersectional experiences of all women, but particularly women of color, led them to adopt public awareness campaigns and strategies that centered the concerns of white middle-class women. Kimberlé Crenshaw notes the ways that appeals to universalism—the often stressed point that domestic violence cuts across racial, ethnic, class, religious, and educational lines—in fact served the particular interests of white women. These efforts, which were designed to counter the prevailing idea that battering was something that happened in the poor, less educated, socially

backward households of people of color, implicitly made the argument that domestic violence should matter because it does happen in white, affluent communities. Rather than take seriously the specific concerns of women of color, the battered women's movement opted for political strategies that in fact distanced themselves from women of color and constituted the experiences of a relatively privileged group of women as universal.³ Similarly, scholar-activist Beth Richie argues that the "every-woman" approach adopted by the battered women's movement served to marginalize less privileged women. As Richie argues, "when the national dialogue on violence against women became legitimized and institutionalized, the notion that 'It could happen to anyone' meant that 'It could happen to those in power.'"⁴

As a consequence of these strategies, the battered women's movement succeeded in making the effects of domestic violence more visible when it happened to women who were white, affluent, straight, and, above all, sympathetic victims. However, this success came at the expense of women who did not fit this image of the deserving victim. In making violence against some women visible, the battered women's movement reproduced the invisibility of violence against women who were seen as undeserving. Not only were these women constructed in the discourse as unworthy of help, but because their experiences did not conform to feminists' universal model of domestic violence, their victimization was most often not understood as a result of gender violence at all.⁵

In conjunction with increasing public awareness of domestic violence as a problem, locally based domestic violence shelters began to seek and receive funding from external sources, particularly the federal

government. While external funding guaranteed the longevity of organizations and contributed to the continued growth of these organizations, this guarantee was accompanied by a shift away from the initial focus on violence against women as a political issue and toward professionalized service provision for victims. As the small-scale original shelters grew into the large-scale nonprofit organizations that dominate the battered women's movement today, grassroots organizing was increasingly replaced by professionalized social work. This increased focus on individualized treatment for victims of violence resulted in the marginalization of earlier efforts to treat domestic violence as a political problem and in the institution of hierarchical relationships between paid professional service providers and battered women.⁶ As Elizabeth Schneider notes, under the service provision model, domestic violence organizations came to "perceive battered women as 'clients,' not 'sisters'—as persons to be helped, not participants in a larger struggle."⁷

Professionalization within the battered women's movement, combined with the tendency to universalize the experiences of relatively privileged victims, has contributed to the construction of an "ideal type" victim who the shelter is imagined to serve. For example, in her study of shelter workers' perceptions of battered lesbians, Michelle VanNatta found preconceived ideas of who is "a real battered woman" often made it difficult for victims who did not conform to this ideal type to access services and affected how these women experienced services that they were able to access. VanNatta found that shelter workers "often see a battered woman as someone with a particular set of traits." These traits include low self-esteem, passivity, visible suffering, feeling a commonality with other battered women, and a desire to participate in shelter

rehabilitation programs designed to "help." While the first three traits in this list work to exclude women who fight back and women who don't conform to prevailing white middle-class norms of femininity, the last two traits exclude women who may feel marginalized by shelter workers or other women in the shelter because of their sexual orientation, race, class, immigration status, language, et cetera.⁸

For example, VanNatta found that a primary concern for shelter workers during intake was to distinguish between battered women who often become homeless because of the abuse, and "nonbattered homeless women." In making this distinction, shelter workers implicitly make judgments about who deserves safe housing and operate under the assumption that domestic violence is clearly separable from other social problems. The exclusion of homeless women who were not battered first is often justified by the claim that domestic violence shelters are designed to help specific kinds of victims and that "nonbattered homeless women" are simply using the shelter for housing rather than rehabilitation. As VanNatta notes:

Many shelter workers stressed that domestic violence shelters are different from homeless shelters in the programming they provide, particularly the forms of counseling targeted to survivors of violence. Because "real" battered women are constructed as women in pain who would want to seek help and support from staff, as well as to connect with other residents with whom they are assumed to have many common experiences, women who do not actively participate in these programs may come under workers' suspicions.⁹

The idea that domestic violence shelters are fundamentally different from other shelters reproduces and reinforces the ideal type victim. The demand that "real battered women" must not only desire to be helped, but must desire to be helped in the way that the shelter sees fit, demonstrates the normalizing practices performed by domestic violence shelters. Increasingly, the goals of shelters have moved beyond providing safety for battered women and toward reintegrating battered women back into society through programs like job training and life skills classes. Organizations that once sought to change a society that fostered violence against women now focus on changing women instead.

Although it is undeniable that shelters have saved many individual women's lives, it is important to note that one of the reasons that shelters have gained legitimacy and support in recent years is because, as Annanya Bhattacharjee points out, "they do not threaten important principles of straight bourgeois society: individualism, ideas of privacy, reluctance in naming the oppressor, a belief in the legal system, and a desire for feel-good benevolence."¹⁰ With the shift toward professionalized social work approaches, domestic violence shelters increasingly focus on rehabilitating victims and helping them reintegrate into society as good citizens and workers. These nongovernmental organizations increasingly perform normalizing functions of the state and decreasingly take antagonistic stances toward state and/or structural patriarchy. In particular, the centering of experiences of more privileged women made the specific concerns of women of color and low-income women marginal to the movement. The professionalization of battered women's services positioned battered

women's advocates in a hierarchical relationship to their clients and increasingly privatized and depoliticized analysis of domestic violence as a public and political problem.

In addition to rehabilitation, efforts to criminalize domestic violence have become increasingly central to the movement. While the idea that domestic violence should be treated as a crime was one of the early principles that defined the battered women's movement, this idea also sat alongside ideas about empowering women and undoing structural patriarchy. However, because of hostility toward social programs and women's rights during the Reagan administration, battered women's advocates found it increasingly necessary to align themselves with the administration's emphasis on controlling violent crime, in order to maintain government support. As a result, during the 1980s, law enforcement perspectives came to dominate the battered women's movement. More resources were directed toward research and policy efforts that treated domestic violence as a crime, and national and local battered women's organizations alike came to support mandatory arrest policies and the development of collaborative efforts with police.'

This increasing emphasis on criminalization redefined domestic violence as an individual crime rather than as a symptom of patriarchal structures. Not only did this redefinition marginalize earlier efforts to treat domestic violence as a political problem, it relied upon the idea that perpetrators were simply criminals and women innocent victims in need of protection from the criminal justice system. This monolithic representation of domestic violence erased the complexity of people's experiences and institutionalized the "ideal case" of domestic violence within the legal system. The effect of this was to further marginalize

women who experienced the criminal justice system as an oppressive force in their lives. As Beth Richie notes, looking back on the trajectory of the battered women's movement, "[b]y likening [violence against women] to other forms of assault . . . what we did was categorically exclude women who were involved in illegal activity from the services they need as battered women."¹²

Building on Richie's argument, I would emphasize that it is important to think critically about the category "women involved in illegal activity" in its broadest possible sense. "Illegal activity" includes a whole array of activities ranging from undocumented migration to illegal substance use to sex work to fighting back against your abuser. In addition, because of the racialized-gendered discourses through which we imagine criminality (i.e., the Latina face painted on undocumented immigration or the black face painted on the "welfare queen"), women of color are often seen as always already breaking the law, regardless of what they do. The emphasis on criminalizing violence against women depends heavily not just on the idea that perpetrators are criminals, but also on the idea that women are innocent victims—a woman's innocence becomes the basis for her right to safety. Women who are not seen as innocent by virtue of their race, immigration status, addiction, welfare receipt, etc., are categorically denied protection from the state and the movement. In many cases, the emphasis on criminalization has done these women more harm than good.

The increasing emphasis on criminalization within the movement also facilitated the incorporation of feminist demands within the hegemonic discourse of maintaining law and order and the state-building projects associated with that discourse. The consequences of this

crime-control model for people of color in the U.S. have been well documented. Increasing incarceration rates of blacks in the U.S. and the shift toward treating immigration policy as a crime-control issue are two of the most notable effects. In using the paradigm of crime control to advance their cause, the battered women's movement aligned itself with the apparatuses of state violence. The relative success of the battered women's movement in engaging state institutions has depended upon abandoning the principle that all people, regardless of what they do and who they are, ought to have safe housing, freedom from violence, meaningful relationships with other people, and community support.

Efforts to challenge the emphasis on rehabilitation and criminalization within the battered women's movement are often met with deep hostility. Even when the limitations of these approaches are acknowledged, the approaches are often defended either on the grounds that they still help "real" victims of "real" crimes or on the grounds that they reflect the compromises necessary for gaining state and public support. These responses reflect the way that, in order to pass as politically successful, social movements often feel compelled to adopt the language and goals of the state, a phenomenon that is particularly disturbing in an era when the state increasingly defines "fixing" individual behavior or putting people in prison as the only solutions to social problems. Undoing the requirement to pass as innocent means more than attempting to build an inclusive battered women's movement. Rather, it means that we must also challenge the belief that state recognition constitutes the measure of success for a movement and the requirement that our demands pass as palatable to state interests.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HUNGER:

*Finding My Way Through Generations
of Okie Migration*

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

White Trash. I believe the first time I heard that term was when I saw *Gone with the Wind*. It referred to some pretty creepy people—dirt-poor, sneaking, conniving, violent tenant farmers, or perhaps migrant cotton pickers. At the time I saw the movie in the 1940s, my father was alternately a tenant farmer, migrant cotton picker, and ranch hand, but I did not for one minute identify with those whom the planters and the enslaved Africans called "white trash."

I identified with Scarlett, with the O'Hara family, the original Scots Irish settlers—my father's ancestors were also original Scots Irish settlers, and this made me feel superior. But those characterized as "white trash" in *Gone with the Wind* were surely also descendants of Scots

Irish settlers. Their sons would die fighting to defend the very slave-owning ruling class that kept them poor. Their greatest heroes would be Confederate irregulars during the war, and afterward mythologized outlaws like Jesse James.

Often I asked my mother why my father's family name, Dunbar, was shared by a black person. In English class, we read the poems of African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. I hoped my mother would say he was a relative of ours because I loved his poetry. But she said that my Dunbar ancestors were "Scotch Irish" and had once owned huge plantations and many slaves and that slaves took the names of the masters.

"How do we know we're related to the masters and not the slaves?" I would ask.

"Because you are white," my part-Indian mother would answer.

I grew up in rural Oklahoma. We Okies are those tough, land-poor losers whose last great hope in the American dream was born and died with the "opening" of Oklahoma and Indian territories. Our great shame, like all "white trash" and colonial dregs around the world, is poverty, "failure" within a system that purports to favor us. The dregs of colonialism, those who did not and do not "make it," the majority in most of the United States, represent evidence of the lie of the American dream.

The core group of those designated as "Okies" are descendants of Ulster Scots—"Scotch Irish"—colonial settlers.¹ Usually the Ulster Scots descendants say their ancestors came to North America from Ireland, but their trek was more complicated than that. The Ulster Scots were a people born and bred of empire. They were Protestant Scottish settlers in the English "plantation" of Ulster in Northern Ireland in the early 1600s. A bitter war with the indigenous Irish of Ulster in the last years

of the reign of Elizabeth I had ended in an English victory. A half-million acres of land in Northern Ireland were settled ("planted") under English protection; these settlers who contracted with the devil of early colonialism came from western Scotland.

By 1630, the English and Scots population settled in Ulster was larger than British settlement in all of North America—twenty-one thousand English and one hundred and fifty thousand Lowland Scots. In 1641, the indigenous Irish rebelled and killed ten thousand settlers. The response of the Puritan English revolutionary government of Oliver Cromwell was fierce. The Puritan policy of exterminating Indians in North America was similar, historian Richard Slotkin argues, to Puritan policy in Ireland, "where systematic assaults were made on Celtic tribalism, native bardic myth-historians were forbidden to sing, isolated clans were exterminated, and the rest of the population was ravaged. Cromwell even attempted to establish a wild Irish reservation in western Ireland."²

So the Ulster Scots were already seasoned colonialists before they filled the ranks of the British settlers in North America. Before ever meeting American Indians, these Ulster Scots had perfected scalping for bounty on the Irish. Later, during the early nineteenth century, after the United States was independent of Britain, Irish Catholics would immigrate in the millions, but the Ulster Scots were another breed—they were the foot soldiers of empire; the Ulster Scots and their progeny formed the shock troops of the "westward movement," that is, empire.

This was the trek of my ancestors. Breaking every treaty with the Indians, the federal government allowed the settlers to overrun Oklahoma and Indian territories. Millions of landless farmers made the Run

to stake their claims, but only a fraction acquired land, or held on to it. Oklahoma was where the American dream had come to a halt. For nearly three hundred years, the English crown and then the United States had offered free or cheap land to British and Ulster Scots settlers, then to Germans and Scandinavians, then to Polish and Czech peasants. If a farming family fell on hard times or wanted greater opportunity, they picked up and moved on, homesteading newly "opened" territory. By 1880, all the arable land of the continent was owned—much of it by larger operators—and millions were landless. While many of those pushed off the land poured into the cities to work, most stayed in rural areas as tenants, sharecroppers, migrant farmworkers, cowpunchers, and miners, and later as roughnecks and roustabouts in the oil fields.

Okies and other descendants of the trekker culture do not think of ourselves as foot soldiers of empire, nor is that the image of us that dominates the popular imagination. We consider ourselves the true native-born Americans, the personification of what America is supposed to be, and we know that means being Scots Irish original settlers, those who fought for and won the continent.

Okies are thus the latter-day carriers of America's national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempts to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settlers into an "indigenous people," the true natives of the continent.

But above all it's that dream and the ideology, the "sacred" origin myth—the religion of "Americanism"—which keeps us doped and harmless, that and alcohol and drugs and cheap consumer items, especially sex and violence. But without the dream/ideology, none of the other tricks would work. Self-blame and a sprinkling of white-skin privilege

serve to mobilize us as cops and soldiers, redirecting our anger against people of color and other "enemies."

I consider myself fortunate to have been thrown into the volatile 1960s civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and women's liberation movements, in which I came to understand the nonbenign nature of Americanism. Yet through it all I have tried to figure out the role that working-class whites play. On the night of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., alienation from my own past and from everything about the United States and its history ravaged my mind. Of course my vitriolic negation of my people was a negation of myself and was by no means the final word. My ambivalence toward my heritage remains alive and well—maddening as ever—today in my middle age.

The poor whites I come from, Okies and their descendants, were those who formed the popular base for the post-World War II rise of the hard right in Orange County, California. Richard Nixon, the anti-communist, was their man. They were the "little people" and "silent majority" addressed by Nixon as president, then by Ronald Reagan. They were among the bigots, including my father, who supported George Wallace. During the 1980s, they helped swell the ranks of the Christian Coalition, promoting antiabortion and antigay initiatives. They fall in and out of the owning and working class, unreliable in union struggles. Depending on economic times they may be self-employed or reluctantly working for a boss, but their dream is always to acquire land or property. We are descendants of peasants and cling to that worldview, mixed with a common history of fighting to acquire land, blood for land, to seize the promised land, implement the Covenant. We are the true Chosen People.

A populist tradition is associated with poor whites, yet often they hate the rich only out of envy. Hostile to "big government," they are in the vanguard of defending their country, claiming to want to "save" it, or to "restore" it. As Okie country artist Merle Haggard sings: "When you're runnin' down my country, hoss, you're walkin' on the fightin' side of me."³ Many have been eager cannon fodder as well as officers in U.S. foreign wars, believing they are the designated beneficiaries of the theft of land from Indians and to the booty of empire, the whole world their stage.

The only tangible advantage for most has been the color of their skin and the white supremacy, particularly toward African Americans, that pervades the culture; what they are not—black, Asian, foreign-born—is as important as what they are—white, "true" Americans—in their sense of propriety and self-esteem. These are not insignificant rewards.

Survival dynamics are acknowledged and well-known about communities of color in the United States, but are hardly known to exist with poor whites. That hasn't always been so; during the three periods of leftist surges in the twentieth century (the first two decades, the 1930s, and the 1960s), great attention and tribute were paid to the internal dynamics of poor white families and communities, to the point of romanticization. Because social and economic status is so shaky for poor whites and self-blame or scapegoating so prevalent, many find that just being white and a U.S. citizen provides their only sense of worth.

Despite fantasies of and occasional success in becoming a movie or sports star, or hatching some other get-rich-quick scheme, the two most successful means of class-climbing for poor whites, like other poor groups in the U.S., are marrying up and out and/or education. Marry-

ing up and out is probably more possible for women than men, and is certainly something my mother preached to my sister and me. Indeed, marriage was my way into the middle class. It was during those six years of marriage and that transformation that I slowly comprehended the class question, and realized, as in Merle Haggard's lyric, "another class of people put us somewhere just below."⁴

I was eighteen and Jimmy was nineteen when we married. Jimmy had grown up on the family estate outside Oklahoma City. The house, which his father had built himself, was to me a fantasy world, the kind of place I could only imagine from reading Jane Austen novels—a rambling five-bedroom, two-bath, native-stone structure with a stone fireplace, thick carpets, fine antiques, chandeliers, and cut-glass crystal and bone china displayed in mahogany "breakfronts," as they called the glass-front display cabinets. The place was surrounded by a stream and woods and gardens. At the end of a long stone path was a huge stone patio and barbecue pit. Unlike in a Victorian novel, however, there were even two working oil wells on the property.

As Jimmy showed me around during my first visit to meet his family, he was suddenly a stranger to me. I could not even comprehend growing up like he had, and, of course, he could not even imagine how I'd grown up. The land had been homesteaded by his mother's Scots Irish family, who farmed it. When his mother married his father, who was descended from Dutch Calvinists, they lived there, and then inherited it. They were simple farming people, potentially poor whites, but during the Depression and World War II the construction company Jimmy's father worked for grew huge and rich off New Deal and war contracts, and he climbed from journeyman carpenter to an executive

as chief superintendent. After the war, he sold some of the land to the state to build the Tulsa Turnpike, invested in real estate, then built the new house. Jimmy grew up rich, no doubt about it. I suppressed a tiny warning signal that I now interpret as the fear that I was repeating what my mother had done—marrying into a better family and never being able to be as “good” as the mother/matriarch; because she was dead, Jimmy’s mother shone all the brighter, her angelic and righteous presence never absent. She was the model I was supposed to imitate.

Jimmy’s father fit my image of a patriarch, or an English country gentleman out of one of my favorite novels at the time, John Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*—a man of property. He wore a fine cashmere overcoat and a fur cap. I had never seen anyone with a fur cap. He greeted me by shaking my hand, a gesture I had never before experienced. A strange thought passed through my mind as I walked down the aisle holding my father’s arm. It occurred to me that my father might have had my new father-in-law for a boss when he worked for the WPA during the 1930s. The thought made me feel like a traitor and haunted me during the marriage.

At my wedding, if my father had asked me if I really wanted to go through with it, maybe I would have said, “No, Daddy, oh no, please save me from this fate.” I knew I was not getting married for anything but protection and class-climbing. But Daddy did not ask. Years later, he would tell me that indeed he’d come close to objecting.

One reason I married Jimmy was so I could continue at the university where we had met. His father offered to pay our tuition and provide a free place for us to live and a car. Yet, within a week after the wedding, Jimmy announced that he wanted us to be self-supporting and

persuaded me to work, saying that otherwise his sisters would regard me as trying to get a free ride off the family. What Jimmy's older sisters thought of me mattered a great deal, to him and to me. I agreed to work. So began the pattern that would doom our marriage.

Jimmy and I lived in the three-room garage apartment—near the “big house”—that had once been servants’ quarters; now they hired day laborers and housekeepers to maintain the house and the grounds. I idolized Jimmy’s family and adopted them as my own, especially his sister Helen, who lived with her husband in a cottage they had built nearby on the family property. She called me “a diamond in the rough.” I accepted the role and submitted to being polished. Helen said that I was from good peasant stock like Tolstoy’s characters, that I embodied the nobility of the peasantry, enriched by being part Indian. I shivered with pleasure when she told me those things.

They were New Deal liberals, my new family, not very common in Oklahoma during the 1950s, when integration and trade unions were considered the twin pillars of communism. Jimmy’s father had hired black laborers on projects and invited his workers and their families, including blacks, to his famous barbecues. And they weren’t strict churchgoers, belonging to the most liberal Christian denomination. I left the racial bigotry and Southern Baptist Bible-thumping far behind.

I began to wonder about the price I had to pay for my new status when, one really hot summer Saturday afternoon, Jimmy and I went with his sister and her husband to drink beer at a joint we hadn’t been to before, attracted by the air-conditioning sign. The barmaid turned out to be a woman from my rural community whom I hadn’t seen for nearly two years. I was surprised by my joy in seeing her. She wore

a tight-fitting red sundress and looked different, not so much older but somehow hard, her skin rough. She remained strikingly beautiful, with her mane of thick black hair and smoky skin. She hesitated and I thought she didn't remember me, but she was studying my companions. I introduced her. Suddenly I was aware that Jimmy didn't approve of her. He glared at me as if I were a stranger. After she had served us, he said, "You got some outstanding old friends." Later he berated me for associating with a prostitute: "You associate with lowlife like that and you will become like them."

Other warning signals alerted me to the class chasm between Jimmy (and his family) and me. On a driving trip to Colorado, all along the highways were broken-down cars and pickups with women and children and old people sitting in the shade while men worked under the hoods. They beckoned for us to stop and help. Jimmy passed them by. No one in my family would ever have passed up a stranded motorist, but then we never strayed far from home.

When I asked Jimmy why we didn't stop, he said, "They're hustlers, rob you blind, highway bandits." I asked how he knew that, and he said, "I just know. They use the kids and old people for bait to get you to stop, then rob you. They're transients, fruit pickers, white trash." I stared into the sad faces as we passed by and tried to see the con artists and criminals behind the masks. But they merely looked familiar, like my own relatives.

Yet we got plenty of help on the highway. Each time we had a flat tire or the radiator overheated, someone stopped to help us or gave Jimmy a ride to the next station and brought him back. The cars that stopped were old and the people looked much like those who'd tried to

get us to stop. New cars whizzed on by. I asked Jimmy why they weren't afraid of us, and he explained that they could tell.

Then, one autumn day in the third year of marriage, I was home sick and found myself the only person on the grounds. I had never been alone there before. The place was so serene and lovely, the oak leaves bright yellow, a maple tree flaming red, the blackjacks burnished copper. The huge lawn that sloped down to the creek was still a carpet of green, thanks to the sprinkler system. I sat down on the stone bench in the patio that was halfway between the creek and the big house. Although I was only thirty-five miles east from where I grew up it was so different—rolling hills with trees rather than flat and barren, no cannibalized old cars and junk around.

"How lucky I am," I said aloud and felt like yelling it since no one would hear. I could never have dreamed of being a part of that kind of life three years earlier. Jimmy's family had taken me in as one of their own. Forever and ever I would be safe and secure and loved. I loved my sisters-in-law and father-in-law as if they were my own flesh. I would never be poor or want for anything again. I tingled with happiness, tears of joy streaming down my face.

The sound of a car startled me out of my reverie. The mail carrier: He always brought everyone's mail to the big house and put it on the back porch where we could each fish out our own. I strolled up the hill to check. There was a letter to Jimmy's sister Helen from another sister who had recently moved to California. The envelope was barely sealed. I slipped the letter out of the envelope and unfolded the two pages. My eyes fell on the middle of the first page and the words hit me like a blast of icy wind: *I think you are right that it remains to be seen if*

Roxie will drag Jimmy down to her level or if he can pull her up to his. Coming from her background she may be beyond rescue. I wish Jimmy would leave her.

I had to sit down to keep from falling. I could not believe what I was reading, and that there had been other letters and conversations, letters about me ruining Jimmy. The letter was almost entirely about me, mostly a discussion of the condition of "white trash," whether it was genetic or social, and the "complication" that I was part Indian. I read the letter a second time, telling myself they were concerned about me because they loved me and wanted to help me. But it wasn't there—only concern for Jimmy and the wish that I would disappear or had never appeared. The letter ended by saying that Jimmy had met me at a vulnerable time in his life, just after their mother's death, and I, being a devious gold digger, had entrapped him and pressured him for a quick marriage.

I have made my home in California for nearly all of the past four decades. Until recently, California had felt to me like a foreign country, a place of exile, which was exactly what I wanted of it.

When my husband and I moved to San Francisco in 1960, our Oklahoma license tags provoked angry honking, obscene gestures, and hisses of "Go home, Okies" and "Dumb Okies" from some other drivers. We changed the tags and I began working on getting rid of my Okie accent and usages. I called the elm tree "ellum," an aerial "er-rol," an inch and a fish "eench" and "feesh." While I said "prolly" they said "probably," and I "renched" rather than rinsed. I knew how to spell almost faultlessly, and although I thought I spelled phonetically, my ear heard differently than San Franciscans. I stumbled through

what I thought was my own language, trying to find my bearings, saying "shadder" meaning shadow, "small" meaning smile, and "chimley," which they called chimney. I called a female sheep a "yo."

I was aware that out there just over the Coastal Range lay a vast valley, stretching from Redding in the north to Bakersfield in the south, populated by people like me, or like I didn't want to be—"Dust Bowl Okies." And I was aware that in the Santa Clara Valley in northern California, and in the San Bernardino Valley and in Orange County in Southern California, there were dense pockets of people like me, or like I did not want to be—"defense Okies," those who came during World War II to work in the war industry. And although I supported the United Farm Workers movement, I did so from a distance and did not venture into that valley where Mexican farmworkers and descendants of Okie farmworkers lived at odds. I must have traveled Highway 99, and later I-5 when it was built parallel to 99, up and down California's Central Valley a thousand times, passing through, headed for L.A. or Portland, Mexico or Canada, New Mexico or Oklahoma. But I stopped in the Central Valley only if necessary. I did not want to talk to the people I knew were there, people I didn't want to be like.

When I was at UCLA in the mid-sixties, I was well aware that most of the cops in the Los Angeles Police Department were people like me, or like I did not want to be. And I was embarrassed and secretive about that knowledge, particularly during the Watts uprising in the summer of 1965, after white LAPD cops shot a black man in cold blood.

In 1967, during the height of the anti-Vietnam War and counterculture youth movements, a friend and I were walking away from a movie theater in West Los Angeles around midnight when an LAPD patrol car skidded to a stop beside us, red lights flashing. There had been a 9 PM

curfew for anyone under twenty-one since the Sunset Boulevard police riot against celebrating street youth the year before. We were over twenty-one, but never got a chance to prove it. My friend, a foreign student, was clearly terrified; he had a student visa but was from a country where being stopped by the police or army meant pain and suffering if not death, especially if a bribe wasn't offered, and he had little money on him. He reached inside his jacket, he told me later, to calm his pounding heart. In a flash, the two cops drew their weapons and crouched into firing positions. My friend had the good sense to raise his arms, palms open, way above his head, and I followed suit. However, the cops remained in firing position, apparently unimpressed by our disarmed helplessness. They finally stood up, rammed their revolvers into their holsters, stomped around us, kicked at the trunk of a palm tree, all the while calling us "hippies," "communists," "peaceniks," and they tried to scare us with threats while discussing between themselves what to do with us.

But they gave themselves away: I recognized the way they moved, the way they talked—not just their Okie accents but the way they moved and talked in slow motion, compared with most Californians I knew, managing to appear humble and arrogant, graceful as cats and that dangerous all at the same time. I was no longer scared. I said, "Where y'all from? I'm from near El Reno." The effect was immediate. Suddenly the two cops, probably a decade older than me, became friendly Okies. We chatted, with me mostly letting them talk because my Oklahoma accent did not come back easily, about our origins and family ties—their parents had been Dust Bowl Okies from Choctaw and from Prague in southeastern Oklahoma—then about the weather, and they apologized for the trouble, and asked if they could give us a

ride—"No thanks!" I said—and then they drove away. They never even checked our identification.

It was hard to explain to my foreign friend what magic I had performed. I can't say that I really understood it myself at the time. But that was a moment of necessity, of survival; it wasn't often that I revealed my roots, and other rootless Californians like myself rarely asked, "Where are you from?" or if they did, they really meant, *Where do you live?* not *Where do you come from originally?* or *Who are you really?*

Even when I began working on my first memoir, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*, I still had no desire for any relationship or interchange with those people like me out there beyond California's cities. I was interested in Oklahoma history, in the radicalism my grandfather was part of, that legacy. I identified myself as working-class, part poor white, part Indian, anything but "Okie."

Then I met Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, the poet known throughout the California Central Valley as the "Okie bard" and "Okie poet laureate," and found myself at home among California Okies for the first time. Wilma's poems and stories made me realize that I could not write a memoir about growing up in Oklahoma without acknowledging my ties to those who had left and who have, through their struggles, their music, and their stories, preserved and reinvented our history as a people.

Soon after Wilma and I met, we decided to visit Weedpatch, the migrant labor camp set up by Roosevelt for the Okie migrants, where Steinbeck's Joad family lived, and where Dorothea Lange took so many of her classic photographs. The hundred-mile trip down Highway 99 from Wilma's home in Tulare to Weedpatch, which is south of Bakersfield, took about two hours. As we drove that stretch, Wilma told me stories

about the people, the hardships, the courage, the tragedies, about her own family and the many stories she had heard from others. Every place had a story—Tipton, Pixley, Earlimart, Delano and McFarland (whose history I had known only through the UFW movement), Rosedale, Oil-dale, Lamont. Then we arrived at Weedpatch.

To our surprise, we found that it was still a functioning farmworker camp, nearly deserted in the middle of a weekday while the workers were in the fields. Signs were in Spanish and English. The weather-stripped wooden buildings at the camp entrance must have been the original ones, no longer in use, but there was no museum, or any markers to explain the history. Most of the small cabins had been built since the thirties, but were fairly shabby. The camp was bounded by a tall chain-link fence and I could almost imagine a guard tower with armed security officers, like a low-security California prison. As Wilma and I poked around, the camp manager approached us, alert with suspicion. The sign at the entrance clearly stated: This center is for residents and visitors of residents only. Others are trespassers and will be prosecuted. Another sign read NO CREDIT. I tried to explain why we were there; the manager was Mexican so I tried in Spanish, too, but the suspicion in his face only melted into bewilderment. He told us to go ahead and look around and went back inside the building.

There was not much to see, just a barren, rundown labor camp in the middle of plowed-up cotton fields on a chilly and windy December day. Yet Wilma and I stood there in awe, as if at a sacred site. Later we confided in each other that we each thought we had heard voices, Okie voices, and we were each overwhelmed by a sense that that place was profoundly connected to who we've been and who we've become.

Later, Wilma wrote a poem about that visit:

*I went there
and walked on the years
ever so carefully
as if on broken glass
yet my feet bled
through my shoes
seeping from my heart*

*And my hands blistered
from imaginary hoes
thrust into them
from the rawness of the past*

*And there was no mistake
I felt hunger
it started from a sign
that read NO CREDIT
and increased the length
of Weedpatch Highway.*

Back in San Francisco, I called my father in Oklahoma and told him about the Weedpatch camp—he'd read *The Grapes of Wrath* several times. He said, "Yeah, them poor folks sure did suffer, couldn't even grow their own food. Least you kids never went hungry like them." For the first time, I felt unashamed, and even proud, that the defining fact of my life was that I'd never had to go hungry.

WHAT I LEARNED FROM BEING G MINUS IN THE WORLD OF HOMOHOP COMMERCE

RALOWE T. AMPU, DDS

I mean, what the fuck was I thinking? It is not a successful intervention to scream, "Anal mucus!!" onstage at the allotted black component of a massive corporate kegger (2002's San Francisco Gay Pride, in this case) during the intramural song-to-song lull in your posse's homohop set. The posse: There may have been two other people onstage, but I can't remember.

But who the fuck am I, and what am I talking about?

My rapper name is G Minus, which stands for "God's Motives Is Never Understood" (especially right now, reading this), but my for-real slavename is Ralowe. You might've guessed that if you've read the credits to this essay. But, seriously, folks, I'm Ralowe Trinitrotoluene Ampu

to you, and I am from suburban Southern California, an only child who grew up in a charming little receipt-shaped beachish wasteland of conservative values and office parks called the city of San Buenaventura, up to my neck in the Caucasian peoples. 'Twas a glum desert of blacklessness, save for church, where I remember constantly being ridiculed. In retrospect, this might have happened either because I was a hyperactive mess, or because the church people knew I was adopted before I did, or because I lived in the white part of town. In further retrospect, I'm pretty sure I received ridicule everywhere (especially at the mostly white elementary school I attended), but I was a lot less tolerant when ridicule came from my own people. It hurt more.

But we're talking about rap, my own private *terra incognita*. I captured what I would call a black sense of self within the Afrocentric overtones of "conscious" rap music when my cousin dubbed me Ice Cube's *Death Certificate* and X Clan's *To The East, Blackwards*. Until then I'd only heard rap from the mouths of white kids reciting N.W.A. lyrics like: "I'm a nigga, he's a nigga, she's a nigga, we some niggas: don't you wish you was a nigga, too?" Hoping for revenge, I quoted X Clan and Ice Cube, who talked about killing white devils.

Line by line, I memorized another dub my cousin made of the early alternative rap classic *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, while beating kids who were younger than me at a video game called Herzog Zwei, where I was a robot-plane trying to take over the other robot-plane's bases and blow him up. It was really grounding. I honed my sense of rhythmically reciting someone else's rhymes, inflections, and cadences, although it would be a while before I figured out how to do that with my own lyrics. I'd transpose words, rap in different

accents. I liked to practice getting to the end of the line before the line's own author. I started listening to rap tapes with divergent and contradictory styles (the fuzzy bourgeois of De La Soul's *Buhloone Mindstate* and the ghetto satanism of Ganksta NIP), and tried to imagine some space in the mix.

In the fall of 1996, when I was twenty-one, my first girlfriend, Nima, a Kurt Cobain maniac who lived with her Shiite parents, convinced me to move from Ventura to San Francisco with her by telling me that I would have a chance to find myself a boyfriend—once she'd seen *My Own Private Idaho*, she'd determined that faggy boys were the hottest. She and I had sex a total of three times and then I did in fact discover the alternate dimension of San Francisco's gay male sex clubs. After two months, Nima threw me out. I can't remember exactly why, but it probably had something to do with those sex clubs. Newly homeless, I found four part-time jobs to pay rent in cash to the clerk at a rundown residence hotel with filthy carpet from the '60s. Okay, guess what happened next? I quit all four jobs and became full-time cadre with the Commemoration Committee for the Black Panther Party. They supplied me with housing and food, but I wasn't supposed to leave the compound. I lasted a week. I got really horny and returned to the capitalist superstructure.

My wandering led me to an annual board of directors soiree, at the Oakland Marriott, for the Sexual Minority Alliance of Alameda County (SMAAC), a drop-in center serving predominately black queer youth; I'd heard they'd be serving free food. Tim'm T. West was some kind of supervising coordinator at SMAAC, and I got into an argument with him about whether there were any out gay emcees, which Tim'm won: He was an out gay emcee. Tim'm, Juba Kalamka, and Phillip Atiba Goff had

birthed Deep Dickollective (D/DC) on the Stanford University campus during a recorded freestyle improv session. I was told that the name "Deep Dickollective" had emerged as a parodic response to female spoken word troupe Punany Poets. To this day I remain uncertain as to the point of the joke: challenging homophobia or attacking women?

Living in a white supremacist world, I've listened to and continue to listen to a great deal of misogynist rap music. I'm not interested in writing an essay that scapegoats black culture for holding the copyright on patriarchal violence, but I've chosen to focus on the forces within myself and specific subcultures that I have passed through and have personally witnessed consume the misogyny in rap music. When I attempted to start a discussion about the stereotypical rap swagger of my bandmates onstage, Tim'm responded that obviously I hadn't read Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*.

Just recently, a friend showed me a new essay by Professor Halberstam, where she lauds D/DC for creating our own space and writing lyrics that present our own histories, apparently reproducing the PR copy on the D/DC website. It seems like I've found where street cred (Tim'm) meets academia (Judith) and they launder each other's privilege. This must be the alternate dimension where masculinity can exist unchallenged. It is critical for a queer politic to explore as many opportunities for gender subversion as possible, but not everyone seeks a masculinity that's installed in such a particular place as the "not-that-deep-ness" of the group's name. Despite having ample access to feminist discourses, as I will indicate by briefly sketching the D/DC members whom I first met, the group's naming is one example of a conversation that went nowhere about the space masculinity takes

up. This is something I later came to understand more clearly; at the time, I also thought the naming was brave and clever.

Everybody's D/DC rapper code name was a joke about standards of authenticity. 25percenter (i.e., Tim'm, because he had a kid somewhere, and so was a quarter heterosexual) was four years older than me and a spoken word gospel baritone who had gone from growing up with an outhouse in the backwoods of lower Arkansas to attending Duke University before transferring to Stanford to major in modern thought, and later earning the dubious honor of becoming obscure object of desire for ex-president Bill Clinton's daughter Chelsea, whom Tim'm tutored at Stanford. Pointfivefag (Juba's moniker, because he was bi) was obsessed with quoting old Ultramagnetic verses, had grown up on Chicago's South Side celebrating Kwanzaa instead of Christmas, and told me he had moved out to the Bay Area to write for the bisexual magazine *Anything That Moves*, but wound up in D/DC's predecessor Rainbow Flava. He knew the most about the rap industry. Lightskindid (Phillip, for his complexion) also attended Stanford, where he'd labored under the tutelage of our people's premier intellectual, Cornell West (who was apparently preparing to drop some rhymes on vinyl as well, and would later cop a cameo in the sequels to *The Matrix*). Lightskindid was hardly ever around—he was in a graduate program at "the Stanford Prison Experiment" (a joke between Tim'm and he) working on "the race bomb" (my coinage). Lastly, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, whenever I laced the microphone device I asked to be known as G Minus because I identified as a negative gay person (in almost every sense, but particularly in the case of the scene that opens this thing you're reading). In many ways, my relationship with D/DC was a continuous argument from the get-go.

If it weren't for D/DC, I probably wouldn't have had any black friends. I did maintain a superficial, pseudoconspiratorial office friendship with my supervisor at Wells Fargo, a black woman, who liked having me around because I brought diversity to the bank (uh . . . I'll get back to this in a minute). I wasn't really doing a great deal to foster any relations outside of the workplace-and-sex-clubs consumption cycle. My guess was that it was a fear of getting too close to everything and then having it all abandon me. Perhaps being in D/DC was about finding some place where redemption could occur between myself and those niggas at church. In retrospect, it is certainly interesting to consider that my personal insecurities would contribute to my ready participation in, and selling of, the myth of a unified black nation. It was important to me to riff gay black filmmaker Marlon Riggs as part of a group of hiphop authenticity outcasts while ripping onstage with, "Queer boys doing hiphop is a revolutionary act!"

One day, I went to meet Tim'm at SMAAC and he told me "my people" were here. There were two white crusty kids sitting in the drop-in quasi-café that SMAAC ran. They had come to ask if D/DC wanted to get on a program called "The Trash Hour," on their pirate radio station, RadioActive Queers. Nobody from D/DC seemed interested, so I went. This was when I first became exposed to the anarchist scene—leading to my involvement with the radical queer direct action group Gay Shame (which I'll talk more about later in this essay)—and what began to further alienate me from my bandmates was my commitment to a personal interpretation of anarchist principles. My understanding of anarchism manifested in transforming my need to be a troublemaker into the desire to challenge power—I

was learning to see how race, gender, class, and other forms of oppression operate and are interconnected.

Um . . . anarchism waged from my cubicle at Wells Fargo. My golden handcuffing had begun back before I joined D/DC, when I met Jo-ey, my first boyfriend, an art student from Hong Kong who had grown up in Oakland, and I lost my job at an independent bookstore called Cody's Books. Distraught and clutching my last check, I told Jo-ey I was going to buy a plane ticket to Japan to make video games. I was serious. Jo-ey said relax, and got me on the temp-to-hire track. Jo-ey had already crash-coursed me through his premillennial über art school cultural benchmarks of the moment with feminist theorist bell hooks and drone music and Hong Kong diva Maggie Cheung and public installation provocateur Jenny Holzer and laptop music and biracial multimedia artist Adrian Piper and time-lapse filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang. The fact that I was even able to engage my bandmates in a discussion about patriarchy was due to meeting Jo-ey, who said that she didn't identify as male or female, yet encouraged me to get into the corporate workplace.

I floated briefly from my job at a financial advisory and anchored at the Plymouth shore of the unrepentant Wells Fargo Rec Mgmt-SF Loan Center, MAC A0187-084, for three years, at first mostly to ground my chaotic mind in a city riddled by illegal evictions where most of my friends couch-surfed and all I heard on the bus were people bitching about their roommates. I knew that I needed to live alone—in a \$500-a-month residence hotel shoebox with an airshaft window in North Beach, San Francisco's epicenter of suburban tourist honeymoon heterosexuality.

Working at Wells Fargo brought my hatred of capitalism into its

full glory, while I guided coworkers through twisted tales of the types of gay assimilation that Gay Shame exposed: things like gay-owned Zephyr Real Estate advising property owners on how to evict long-term tenants such as elderly queers and people living with HIV/AIDS. Or mainstream established gays calling the cops on homeless youth in front of their fancy homes in the Castro, even though those same property-owning gays might have faced the same situation when they fled their own abusive families. My analysis stunned the office. It failed to woo any fellow D/DCers. After reading the fabulous wording on a Gay Shame flier, Juba illuminated that "campy hyperbole gets you shot."

Long before I got heavily involved in Gay Shame planning work, I'd often bad-mouth capitalism; one time Lightskindid remarked how from the way I talked about it, the worst thing one could do to somebody was say: "I commodify you." Commodification to me is something worse than death, like the radioactive clouds in zombie movies that bring the dead back to life. Tim'm insisted that even countercultural events like Gay Shame rely on the corporate media machine and that such a compromise was necessary to spread D/DC's message: It made "sense/cents." Tim'm tried to segue to an offer that had been made to D/DC on behalf of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation's Black Brothers Esteem project, which commissioned us four grand to combat the urban juggernaut of "drug/sex/money exchange" in the impoverished Tenderloin neighborhood amongst the MSM (men having sex with men). This was when DLism (being on the DL = being on the down-low, or being discreet about one's sexuality or gender—especially among men of color) began captivating the imagination of the LGBT world. D/DC would take on alter egos for the project and put on our DL homothug caps. The idea

was that we'd use a more Bay Area gangster sound than our usual stuff and refrain from using words that you'd have to look up in a dictionary. Tim'm stressed that we would be getting paid and that we needed to be cognizant of our audience.

At first, Ralowe got caught up in a very bad Joycean moment, and reverted to old-school fixations on the literary imitations of consciousness. Hold up—I could totally do what they wanted, but didn't this contradict my anticapitalist critique? Could I honestly perform the Tenderloin minstrelsy that D/DC was expected to produce by delivering the nigga-talk to seal the deal? I wrote something that my bandmates somehow never managed to respond to. I didn't really get a chance to follow up on it. The CD exists somewhere. Tim'm has a song on it. Black Brothers Esteem ran a billboard campaign around this "issue" of people choosing to repress their sexual identities while exchanging sex acts for drugs and money. I'm not aware of a section of society where this does not occur. The real issue is how a nonprofit can waste money on billboards and rappers while saying that they're helping to build the self-esteem of black men in the Tenderloin. The real issue is the poverty caused in the Tenderloin by such a misdirection of priorities, like nonprofits that draw up insane budgets to conduct focus groups and research the proper vernacular to speak to their "clients" in order to put up flashy billboards to spook gentrifiers tearing down Sixth Street in Hummer H3s.

The members of D/DC were combining extremely divergent ways to approach "revolution," that hideously loaded word, and our apparent attempt to duplicate the context of urgency in Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, that seminal 1990 video about black gay life, had lost something during

the press kit dispersal into hands reaching out to book a flowing side-show for corporate keggers. The original quote D/DC had modified was, "Black men loving black men is a revolutionary act."

I've grown to need hip-hop to survive in a lot of ways, but in the context of the bigger world that brought us all together, black men loving each other is worlds away from queers doing hip-hop. This diminution had become my mission statement, as well as D/DC's main selling point. We had our "revolutionary" game down, bottled and sold. People were loving it. Nobody asked any questions. At the time, I couldn't watch *Tongues Untied* all the way through without laughing—I found it maudlin and overwrought. Watching it again recently, I realized the gulf between the expansive possibilities for hope and loving in the video, and the disposable commodity D/DC manifested. The notion that we were attempting to represent a legacy with a certain amount of political urgency had become merely a marketing strategy.

This brings us back to "Anal mucus!!" onstage in the colored section of the corporate kegger. I wanted to disrupt this big business bonanza by foregrounding sexuality in a way that was graphic. I predicted that the audience would be scandalized. At Pride, part of the spectacle was an inexplicable tension between sexual repression and sexualized advertising. Gay people were consenting to be regulated by this dissociation. Everyone seemed obsessed with how others looked and acted in response to their looks and how they acted. I had to do something.

Church is apparently very important to black people. I mean, that's what I've been told. It's a chance to see other black people one would otherwise never see. People never act like themselves at church. They act like they're at church. Gay Pride felt like church.

At this point, I'd stood before tons of gay audiences doing this gay rap shit. The churchiness of gay propriety always seemed incongruent and oppressive. I suspected that the black gay people who were churchin' out on me also knew that church was not made for them, but they couldn't find the words to say or even think it. I lacked the language to articulate my feelings on these things, so I shouted, "Anal mucus!!"

Nothing happened. What did I expect? Were all these black LGBT folk supposed to start digging in each other's butts and making out and flipping over police cars? Is such an idea totally insane? My impression was that a loving and riotous public orgy of gay black people would perhaps seem offensive or weird to lots of gay black people. My own internalized racism can barely grapple with the notion. Racism is so tricky to talk about that I am hesitant to name it directly because of my involvement in white antiracist circles where persons of color are often probed for the service of providing hard data. While I wanted to confront the sexual hypocrisy of my bandmates, the audience, and Pride, my own imagination is owned by a desire for white bodies that stand for everything I loathe. I've never even had a satisfactory sexual relationship with someone of my own race.

Earlier this same day, Gay Shame had tried to enter the Pride parade with couches to interrupt the parade where the route turned at Eighth and Market. I dressed up as a mix between a dog, an army underwear model, and Björk. I was Destroyer Dog. I was the enemy of Bartender Dog, the dog that had been genetically designed to pour beer, which I made with a friend out of cardboard. We were the servants of the evil Gay Gay Gay (say it out loud—what does it rhyme with?). There was a whole street theater tableau set up, but I couldn't get the stilt-

walkers in rainbow Klan outfits to work out. Plus, everyone thought I was a nutcase. We got attacked by Pride monitors. Friends were hauled off to jail. Everyone was depressed. I had to change out of the camouflage circuit-boy underwear because it was freezing, and then reappear on the Pride colored-section stage in rapper mode. Nobody noticed.

I got lectured by D/DC. Tim'm informed me that it wasn't cool for someone who worked with at-risk queer youth of color to sing about things like anal mucus in public. His boss at SMAAC had given him heat. Somehow being in a band that had "Dick" in the title was cool with whoever was (just barely) funding SMAAC's overhead for the drop-in resource and vocational center in downtown Oakland, but someone saying, "Anal mucus!!" in a hip-hop context wasn't. I always got shade from the "clients" at SMAAC. I don't think they listened to D/DC. Who was our music for, anyway? Before my life would spiral into its next major upheaval, I tried to bring the band together to figure out some answers to that question. This discussion never took place. Jo-ey once said that D/DC was like a family that doesn't care. I look at other homohoppers now, and I worry that homohop will never oppose patriarchy and capitalism, despite the claims of *Pick Up the Mic*, a 2005 documentary with a tagline that assumes homohop is innately revolutionary; the film's promotional materials visually reference propaganda posters from communist Russia. Though barely a footnote on pop culture, this new genre is a slowly burgeoning international franchise staking its claim to rainbow bling.

D/DC would eventually get off that little-nothing stage and perform at the for-real Pride Main Stage after I had left the group in 2003. October the following year, D/DC would perform at the dedication of

a gay business-improvement district in Oakland, which, if developed, would displace generations of long-term residents, mostly low-income Asian immigrants, with a prepackaged East Bay version of San Francisco's Castro district. Juba would appear as a keynote speaker at an expensive national LGBT nonprofit job fair called Creating Change, sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, at the same Oakland Marriott where I first met Tim'm. During his speech, Juba would continuously invoke Marlon Riggs on his deathbed, in order to congratulate the industry whose focus on legalizing gay marriage has left HIV/AIDS activism behind.

Something that D/DC never seemed interested in dealing with was what it felt like to be owned by a desire for propriety and economic privilege. Though I have grown not to crave the symbols of white privilege, I have maintained fantasies for redemption through a desire for white love, acceptance, and sperm. It's a conflict of interest that Marlon Riggs identifies as a "blessing/curse" in *Tongues Untied*, though footage of his actual white boyfriend is missing from Riggs's existing body of video work. Despite our media image as an all-black queer rap crew, when D/DC were scrambling around trying to figure out how to put our beats and vocals down, it was through Russell Gaddis (Archie Smooth), a white person with a very fancy home studio that featured a nice \$300 mike, that our initial LP, *BourgieBohoPost-PomoAfroHomo*, miraculously sprang forth, on his donated hard work and time. When I, a young black teenager, lived in the white suburb of Ventura, I became fond of the notions of "Operation Snatchback" reparations expounded by X Clan. It is interesting how this rhetoric alone allays white guilt if one is not willing to challenge the legacy of

white supremacy on a deeper level, which may explain how I was able to access the black militancy of X Clan in Ventura, California.

Rap music wouldn't be such a profitable institution if it did not provide safety for the many permutations of white consumers, including me and my art school consumption. In Ventura, one of my favorite KRS-One lines was, "There could never really be justice on stolen land." I've since grown to firmly believe that justice is completely impossible, mostly because people will not listen to anything that exposes the comfortable lies that power structures are built on. In 2003, I suggested D/DC's nomination for a Gay Shame Award in the Model Minority category, but they lost to Eminem. I hear the mostly white crowd greeted the nomination with boos when D/DC was taken to task for "being radical enough to stay trendy but not enough to question their own masculinity or resist marketing themselves to a largely white audience."

Gay Shame started as a group with a clear agenda of exposing the hypocrisies of the gay and queer "community"; this agenda is never very popular. I'm reminded of something that black feminist author Michele Wallace says in Riggs's *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* (1994), when she refers to critiquing misogyny in the black nationalist movement as the work that nobody wants to do. I can't see how it is possible for us to sustain any lasting culture between one another without doing the work of accountability. Dedicating time to this work is especially incompatible with mainstream hip-hop scenes I've witnessed, where one is expected to target market. What I learned from being G Minus in the world of homohop commerce was that if I must be a spectacle whenever my body enters the public, I'd prefer to be a freak than a billboard.

Ooh! Something else I've learned from being G Minus is that it's

practically impossible to talk about white supremacy, or make revolutionary acts against it, from a position of purity. D/DC seemed to suffer amnesia around how racial categories are constructed and why. It's very similar to the consensual race-play cybersex I've been exploring recently online, something like an ambivalent transaction of fatal contradictions. With me there's the false hope that something that feels right will be conveyed and understood. It's obvious at times to me that no market exists for what I really feel.



NO LONGER JUST AMERICAN

STEPHANIE ABRAHAM

When I was growing up, my Syrian and Lebanese great-grandmothers and I were inseparable. I spent hours by their sides, mostly in their kitchens, inhaling the scents of garlic and thyme; I knew how to make hummus and stuffed grape leaves before I learned to read and write. As Arabic rolled off my great-grandmothers' tongues, they filled my belly with kibbeh naye and tabouleh, and my imagination with tales about what life was like in our homeland. I can recount their stories word for word—how they left the Middle East as young women, what immigration at Ellis Island was like, how no one should ever have to raise their kin so far from home. Of course, the first word I spoke as a babe was *habibti*. Arabic for "beloved." My great-grandmothers instilled

in me the importance of carrying on our culture and taught me to be a proud Arab American woman.

I must confess (being the “good Catholic” my family raised me to be) that this autobiographical snippet is make-believe. Certainly, some Arab Americans have experienced childhood in this way. However, this is one fourth-generation, mixed-heritage Arab American who did not. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t make it all up—the basics are true: My people did come from Lebanon and Syria, but by the time I was born my great-grandparents had passed away. My father’s decision to leave Detroit, which I call “the Arab American homeland,” to settle in sunny Southern California (the quickly growing Arab American homeland), meant that I only met his family once or twice as a child and, unfortunately, I have no memories of meeting his parents. I spent years wishing the imagined details in this introduction were true because I thought it would make me more “authentic.” In the past few years I have met many other Arab Americans who, like me, grew up with an authentic experience of assimilation, and through hearing their stories I have come closer to accepting my own.

I grew up in the suburbs speaking English Only and eating Kraft macaroni and cheese. I didn’t “look” Arab, and most people read me as white. The only Arabic food we ever ate was pita bread. The only Arabic I heard was when my dad was on the phone with his siblings at Christmas. He would hang up after saying, “Take it easy!” emphasizing the “t” and *easy*, in order to say *tizzi*—which sounds like *tizzo*, a not-so-proper word for a person’s behind.

Although I find it hard to believe, I don’t think anyone ever said the word *Arab* in my house when I was young. To be sure, it was never

used to refer to my brother or me. It wasn't until my early twenties that I found out that *Ay-rab* and *camel jockey* were racial slurs. I had heard them occasionally thrown around amongst grownups, directed toward my father, always in front of him and always with a chuckle. So I understood them as fun descriptions of what seemed to me to be our mythical past. One day in particular, I remember standing in the kitchen and hearing someone poking at my dad about riding around the desert on camels. I remember he laughed with them. Then he explained to me what he had been told by his elders: "Our Syrian family was from the Humpsey tribe." As a seven-year-old, I was intrigued by the prospects of cruising on camels through the desert, but I never thought about my "Arabness" apart from these occasional conversations.

In 2002, I went back to Detroit with my dad to visit relatives. We went to a family restaurant called Ike's, and indulged in a spread of Arabic dishes. As I dipped my pita bread into a bowl of kibbeh naye (raw meat ground as fine as smooth peanut butter), I realized that I had been eating kibbeh naye my whole life without realizing it, but in an assimilated, passing kind of way. When I was a little girl, if my dad was hungry and wanted a quick snack he would go to the fridge, grab a hot dog, put it in pita bread, and dig in. I didn't know anyone else who ate raw all-beef hot dogs. When my mother fixed hot dogs, she cooked them in boiling water and served them in a bun with ketchup, which I loved. My mom thought my dad's concoction was gross; I thought it was kind of weird, but once I tried it I was hooked. He was happy to share his indulgence with another person in the house; it was our special treat.

That night at my auntie's house in Detroit, the more I thought about my relatives, the more conscious I became of how hard they must have

worked to fit in and how much they had to let go of. Assimilation does not just happen overnight. It seemed as though my dad had assimilated to the point that his children passed without even realizing we were passing, yet the traditions of his foremothers and forefathers were obfuscated, not erased. They certainly morphed as my pops made do with what he had. However, they continued to the extent that when he and I ate hot dogs—possibly *the* national food of the United States—we were reenacting the Middle Eastern feasts of his childhood. Cultures are not static. They adapt and shift in order to survive. People do, too.

: ***Not Quite White*** :

Orientalism is a specific kind of racism that targets the Middle East and Asia—the geographic region known as “the Orient.” Edward Said’s influential work on Orientalism pointed out that “European imaginative geography” drew a line between two continents so that the West was powerful, articulate, and masculine while the East was defeated, distant, and feminized. Through this lens, the geographic boundary of the region within Asia called “the Orient” is open to the interpretation of the Western imagination.¹ It is easy to see this dynamic at work today, especially with U.S. foreign policy, wherein Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran are represented as enemy nations that are conflated into one, despite the fact that all three regions have distinct cultures, languages, and histories.

Since September 11, 2001, the paradoxes of Arab American identity have only become more defined. Describing the perception of Arab Americans in a post-9/11 world, Evelyn Alsultany asserts, “Arab bodies are marked with pre-assigned meanings in the United States: suspected

terrorist, presumed religious fanatic, backwards; Arabs are 'other,' existing outside of the ideological scope of 'belonging' within the United States. Located within a racial paradox, Arab-Americans are simultaneously racialized as white and non-white."²

Which identity to take, however, remains heavily debated. Some Arab Americans are comfortable with an identity invested in whiteness. Others, in particular many Arab American feminists, identify as women of color even though the census does not allow for this, and even when other women of color do not always acknowledge them. Of course, what determines if a person is "of color" is open to debate. Other mixed-heritage Arab American women I have met who look white acknowledge their privilege while at the same time asserting their ethnicity; if forced to choose, they identify as women of color. Some days I am one of them. Other days, I look in the mirror and cannot deny how I look. How can I choose an identity that has substantive meaning in the world, that acknowledges my privileges and losses, and honors the internal and external complexities of who I am? This question brings home Michael Omi and Howard Winant's point that racial projects are subject to the cultural and political landscapes of a nation and are constantly being recycled and redefined.³

In my household there was never really any discussion of our race; it was just assumed we were white. My experience of "othering" came in my early twenties, when I started being confronted with the questions that mixed-heritage people and people of color often get asked: "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" These really mean "What is your national, ethnic, and/or racial background?" Oftentimes these questions are well-intentioned; folks are simply "curious" or are trying

to make conversation. I think I get these questions because I am fluent in Spanish and because I often wear bright-colored shawls, not necessarily because of how I look, although some of my friends would suggest that my curly hair and curvy *tizzo* locate me within the Middle East.

Like most people who get asked these types of questions, I have a plethora of answers depending on my mood: *Arab American* (most direct); *Lebanese/Syrian/Scotch/Irish/English* (way too long); *from L.A.* (so vague they fluster to find a follow-up question); and *bully human* (take that, categorizer!). In these five-second interactions, if I do reveal my Arab background, I usually do not mention that I am of mixed heritage, because when I do I inevitably hear, "Oh, that explains it," as if my features can only be explained by my northern European roots, because I don't "look Arab." Most people don't realize how problematic the concept of "looking Arab" is, or that it is rooted in preconceived notions of race and authenticity. "Those who 'look' Arab or Muslim" has become an even more highly controversial and dangerous political concept since September 11, 2001, as communities and individuals have been targeted based on an Orientalist "lookism."⁴ Given the history of colonialism in the Middle East, it is inevitable that there will be Arabs who are light-skinned and blue-eyed, like my Lebanese *sittos* and myself, for example. Figuring out "who I am" is an ongoing process that is constantly shifting.

: 9/11 :

The yoga routine I did in my living room before work was interrupted on the morning of September 11, 2001. I looked at the TV screen and watched the second plane crash into the New York skyscraper. Immedi-

ately afterward, a female newscaster reported, "Yes, it seems that Yasser Arafat has taken responsibility for these attacks." About ten minutes later, she retracted the comment. I knew that it was going to be an especially tough day for Arabs. I wanted to make it known that I would not tolerate any anti-Arab racism whispered in my ear, so I wore a *kafiyeh*, the black-and-white Palestinian head scarf, around my shoulders to work.

A few days later an Egyptian man was shot and killed in his store, the "International Market," less than a half mile away from the house I grew up in. I didn't even know there were Arabs in my neighborhood. I heard that he walked toward the door, calling for help, but fell on the sidewalk and died in a pool of his own blood. Although no merchandise or money was taken, the police did not record it as a hate crime. When I went to the store two days later, flowers and candles filled the sidewalk from hundreds of community members. Now, his sister runs the store. Sometimes I buy baklava from her, greeting her with my rudimentary Arabic. She calls me a "good girl" for wanting to learn her language. Once she told me, "He was my brother, you know." I didn't. I have been wanting to ask her about him for years now, but who am I to inquire?

Even if I never ask, I would like to figure out how to tell her how much her brother's death affected my life. Within a week of the attacks I increased my involvement with the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, serving as the Spanish-speaking spokesperson for the West Coast regional office. Most of the work involved combating clichéd portrayals of Middle Easterners in the media. As I became more politically active at that time, people wanted to know why I was there. "Are you Arab?" they asked. Flooded by the feelings of not

being authentic enough, being mixed, being Americanized—being able to say no—I felt like I did not have the right to say yes. However, I could not negate my family's Arab heritage. In many ways, that identity had been negated my whole life, yet I had never been taught to lie about it. So I fumbled to find the words to name it: "Um, yeah, well, I'm mixed heritage, but yeah, I'm Lebanese and Syrian, which technically makes me Arab, so yeah. I mean, yes. Yes, I'm an Arab American." For years, I had longed to resolve what that meant; world events made it so that I could no longer afford not to.

: **Sitto Centennial** :

As I'm writing this essay, I'm making plans to visit Lebanon and Syria. It's been almost one hundred years since my grandmothers arrived in the United States, and no one from my family has ever been back. I've decided that it's time for me to be the first. Erika, one of my best friends, is going with me, excited to go back to what she calls her "sister's homeland." I feel awed by her determination to be my ally, her desire to be by my side. Erika listens to me on the phone as I explain to her our possible itineraries. When I take a breath she uses the opportunity to state plainly, "You seem worried."

I purse my lips, although I want to scream at her, "*Worried!?* Of course I'm worried! You would be too if your people had come here and taught you never to look back!" I am determined not to make my loss her fault, so I sigh loudly, letting her know I'm still on the line. Erika is an immigrant; she remembers what it was like to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. at age six, running as fast as she could to keep up with her mother and two older siblings. She grew up with Spanish in

the household, hearing the stories of her homeland being told, watching it being remembered. Now, when she travels back she sees family, her mom's *comadres*: she still has connections to the people there—something I've spent so long wishing I had. Still, I know that as a Chicana she has had her own struggle with figuring out her "home." Lately she's taken to calling herself a "citizen of the world."

I feel pressure building behind my eyes as tears try to break free. I decide not to dramatize, but am not ready to have the conversation I truly need. We agree to talk later. What I really want to ask is, *Who am I to go back? Who I am to bridge this chasm between their past and my present?*

I spent years feeling ashamed that I did not look Arab enough, could not speak Arabic, and did not grow up immersed in "culture." I felt like my life did not resemble a real Arab's life, yet I keep reminding myself that I won't be more "authentic" after visiting our village because I already am authentic—in that "I'm me" sense. In spite of three generations of whitewashing, I have not forgotten my people's past and identify as Arab American. Even if it's more about my "imagined community" than my actual one, it feels really important to claim both the land and the people as my own. Even if this doesn't make a difference in anyone else's life, it does in mine, for some reason I can't really pinpoint.

My dad recently told his brother, "I didn't know I was Arab American until I met my daughter." He explained that he had always thought of himself only as American. Then he saw me speak at the Mapping Arab Diasporas conference at the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan, Dearborn. There he felt proud to be an Arab American and realized he could no longer see himself without

that identity. Even though I didn't get a chance to learn directly from my Arab grandmothers, I figured out how to embrace my Arab American heritage, and how to open up the space for my dad to as well. I don't understand how I managed to be the transmitter of culture in my household. However, in this way, it seems my *δittos*' legacy lives on in me.

THE END OF GENDERQUEER

ROCKO BULLDAGGER

I've been conflicted about writing this essay. Horrified, actually. I wish to deal with the topic of gender in a queer context, but for the piece still to remain readable and interesting. I want to write for all of my friends, for those who are passionate about gender and for those who are thrilled just by the thought of discussing how words acquire and change meaning. But I also want to write for those who do not spend every spare moment agonizing over the use of language. Most of all, I wish to avoid launching into the jargon-heavy, divisive monologue that usually accompanies the word *genderqueer*. I do not want to produce yet another queer writing sample that spends time debating the minute details that distinguish one subidentity from another. I

don't want to assert all kinds of distinctions that alienate queers from one another and guarantee that any potential ally will be turned off by a mind-numbing litany of neologisms and self-aggrandizing swill. You could take "The End of Genderqueer" as a call for an end to the use of this word. I am sick to death of hearing it. However, I cannot be so easily rid of it. Whether I like it or not, and whether genderqueers can stand to have me or not, I've got a foot in the genderqueer identity.

A few weeks ago, I was wondering if I should bother to finish this essay. Then something happened, that reminded me why I needed to. I was riding my bike down the street when an old man sitting outside the off-track betting place near my house called out, "Is that a boy or a girl?" People have been reprimanding me with this question for as long as I can remember. If people haven't stopped asking me this question at the age of thirty-two, I doubt they ever will. So I can't resist writing about this topic. I can't resist risking all the booby traps of writing about identity politics and the so-called queer radical scene. In calling for the end of genderqueer, I am considering the purpose of this word. I am also writing about myself, my personal history, and my problematic relationship with both the word and the subculture in which it is frequently used.

: *Between Genders or Overly Gendered?* :

From *The New York Times's* Sunday Styles, March 7, 2004: "Some transgender students aren't moving between sexes; they're parked somewhere in the middle and prefer to describe themselves as 'gender queer'—signifying that they reject the either-or male-female system."¹

From *Time Out New York*, February 3, 2005: "Genderqueer: This

umbrella term refers to anyone who doesn't fit into the traditional binary male-female system—from androdykes to trannyboys.”²

My own personal definition of *genderqueer*: (1) A person who is painfully deliberate and consciously political in their gender expression. (2) Someone who identifies with efforts to subvert oppressive power dynamics by undermining traditional gender expectations. (3) A person whose gender presentation is overdetermined by traditionally gendered signs—somebody who displays excessive femininity or masculinity. Conveniently, this definition could potentially include me, my girlfriend, radical straight people, all our transsexual friends, and anyone else who actually wanted to identify as such.

Why doesn't my definition focus on being in the middle, or outside the male-female binary? Because I want to pull genderqueer back into my own camp, where I first met it, as one of many pragmatic political identities that aspiring queer revolutionaries can use to explain who we are. I want *genderqueer* to be a true “umbrella” term that includes all of us who fuck with gender, who have gender on the brain, and who never take gender for granted.

: ***On Alienation and the Cutting Edge of Gender*** :

From the *Village Voice*'s 25th annual queer issue, June 23, 2004: “But the genderqueer generation poses a new reality in which the world doesn't label our identities and our bodies; we do. If you spot these transmales at the Pride parade, or in your local bar, you have seen the future—and it's very queer indeed.”³

From *Gay New York*, by George Chauncey: “In 1929, for instance, a conservative village paper attacked bohemian women for being 'so

ashamed of their sex that they do their best to appear like men . . . ' It went on to charge that 'the majority of that type manifestly endeavor to create a third sex.'"⁴

If we have documentation showing that queers were endeavoring to label their own identities and create a third sex back in 1929, when exactly does this smug queer future begin? It seems like a long time to be seated on the cutting edge . . .

: *On My First Contact with Genderqueer* :

I don't remember the exact time when I first encountered the word, but I am sure it was sometime in 1999, at the now defunct annual True Spirit conference. True Spirit was a transgender conference primarily for masculine-identified, female-born people. I met a whole bunch of folks who, like me, were alienated from gender and committed to reclaiming, valorizing, and politicizing our differences. Mostly, though, it was just refreshing for each individual attending this conference to connect with a whole community of (hot) queerly gendered, activist-minded deviants. We stayed up late talking and hooking up and planning the revolution, or at least planning panels for the next conference. We formed immediate and intimate bonds.

The following year, at the same conference, some comrades and I held a panel we called "Queer as Fuck." The purpose was to discuss how punk was a way to find strength in difference, a way to refuse societal definitions of how a girl should act, and a way to turn being an incorrigible freak into an actual lifestyle choice. It was also to discuss how, for many gender deviants, a punk identity was a first step on the lifelong road of opposition to normality and complacency. Among other

things, this was a conversation about how all of our personal experiences with our own unique forms of defiance have been as empowering as they have been difficult. It was an opportunity to laugh together at how people perceived us, and congratulate each other for surviving harsh and sometimes abusive treatment. Most importantly, this panel affirmed how gender malcontents need to care for each other and affirmed our shared commitment to gender liberation and social justice. There was so much energy, ambition, and dedication to revolutionary change—all in a genderqueer context!

: *On Changes I Have Witnessed in the Media* :

A reporter from the online magazine *Salon* attended and covered the "Queer as Fuck" panel. The article she wrote had more in common with the 1929 "so ashamed of their sex" article than it did with the recent *Village Voice* "queer future." The crux of the article was that transgendered people either have a spiritual vision or a delusional psychiatric condition, and it varied in tone from uncomfortably describing the range of masculine appearances to uncomfortably dismissing their masculinity. "The ways the conferees transcended their fleshly limits sounded like a shared hallucination or a vision," wrote Virginia Vitzthum. Her article referred to conferencegoers as dykes, which was in contradiction to how the majority identified themselves.⁵ This was March 2000, and nowhere in the mainstream or even liberal media could you find mention of anyone permitted to define their own gender. But I didn't care, because I was so happy just to see the conference and particularly our panel mentioned in a way that seemed powerful and noteworthy, even if negative.

Fast-forward four years to November 2004. The *Metro*, a free daily paper that is not especially progressive, prints an interview with author JT Leroy. The *Metro* asks, "Do you consider yourself male or female?" JT replies, "I don't know. What do you think? It can be whatever I'm in the mood for. It changes day to day." And the interviewer takes JT's word for it. I can't help but think that's a major step forward. We know now that JT himself is a work of art, but I didn't care about that either, because I was just so happy to see the way media representation of gender has shifted toward allowing self-determination.⁶

It seems genderqueer is a concept whose time has finally come, rising up out of the ashes of twentieth-century village bohemia to a media where somewhat famous people are permitted to name, or decline to name, their own gender.

: *On Avoiding Divisiveness* :

Many of us went on to adopt "Queer as Fuck" as a motto for any and all subversive activity in any context. That could mean women wearing pants to their conservative workplaces, or androgyny in general, or facial tattooing, or your top-secret girlie panties. The motto connected all of our divergent and previously unrelated activities. It allowed us to feel a part of something larger than ourselves. Most importantly, "Queer as Fuck" did not have any room for a hierarchy of most radical to least radical. There was never any formal structure other than to say that any subversive action could be included. *Revolutionary* meant fucking shit up productively—not just being provocative and offensive, but being provocative and consciousness-raising. To this day my personal approach is to meet people where they are and to try to gradually in-

roduce them to my life experiences and beliefs surrounding my gender instead of assuming everyone needs to meet me where I am before we can connect. And that's what I think the evolving genderqueer scene is missing. There is too much focus on dividing the world into who gets it and who doesn't.

: *On My Own Inclusion and Exclusion* :

But maybe I myself have contributed to some of the unsatisfying ways genderqueerness has evolved. It could be argued that the whole "Queer as Fuck" thing was the beginning of the end for True Spirit. This panel and its subsequent incarnations overflowed conference rooms, and always spilled out messily into the host hotel's lobby and bar. Because it was somehow a gender-autonomous zone, and because of sheer sexual energy, True Spirit seemed to double in size every year through 2003. It spawned as many ideological arguments as it did new vocabulary words. It drew homeless queer youth, straight-identified transsexual men, punks of every variety—the pierced, the tattooed, and the truly broke who slept too-many-to-count in a single hotel room. Pissing off every available hotel in the Washington, D.C., area, gleefully exposing the underaged to sexually explicit material, chain-smoking in the lobby, arguing loudly, wearing SM gear shamelessly, sporting ridiculous hickeys . . . this was beautiful and consequently could never last. Yet it was no utopia. Expressions of femininity were less than welcome and masculinity was sometimes expressed through sexism. Half the time I felt like shit when I was there, isolated, depressed, angry, unattractive, and stagnant because I didn't opt for testosterone or surgery; but I never lost sight of the fact that the existence of this conference was

a miracle. Anyway, the thing that broke True Spirit was the question of exclusion. Could one conference meet the needs of both transmen and underage, overpierced genderqueers? Alas, no, nor could it meet the needs of all of us who fall into more nebulous territory. But it was great while it lasted, and to this day I am grateful to have experienced it.

Now I find article after article in the mainstream media attributing new meaning to the word *genderqueer*, meanings with which I feel less and less connection. I read increasingly narrow definitions of the concept, and hear from folks who have no sympathy for those who do not "get it." Is my participation in creating the meaning of genderqueer over? I used to feel that this was my word, my subculture, my movement. Now I see genderqueer articles in newspapers and magazines that I can't relate to at all.

The media has granted genderqueers trendiness and certainly contributed to the transformation of the word. In January 2004, *New York* magazine ran an article entitled "Where the Bois Are." *Boi* is a genderqueer variation on *boy*. This article screwed up people's pronouns and I am sure inspired many angry letters, but it also aired quite a bit of dirty laundry that I couldn't ignore.

New York magazine, 2004: "What all bois have in common is a lack of interest in embodying any kind of girliness, but they are too irreverent to adopt the heavy-duty, highly circumscribed butch role. To them, butch is an identity of the past, a relic from a world of Budweiser and motorcycles gone by."⁷

Should I lie to you and say these insults have no effect on me because I know who I am, and fuck what everyone thinks? Yes, of course. The problem is that genderqueers aren't "everyone." They're my own,

and somehow all the new media attention always finds them disowning butchness, because the identity itself comes with too much baggage. So here I have the mainstream media telling me what people in my own community think of me. For bois, *butch* contains too many expectations, too much tragedy, and too much drama. For me, *butch* contains my connection to a long history of fierce queers who made it possible for me to be as free as I am today with both my gender expression and my sexuality. The word also suggests a mature, confident, warm, sexy masculine energy that suits me just fine. Being butch used to be my way of being genderqueer, but now it seems to make my inclusion under the genderqueer umbrella impossible.

: **On Attitude** :

From the *Voice* (same issue as above): "Riley, on the other hand, wants to date biological men (called bioguys), a hopeless prospect, he says, because of 'male ignorance' about transmen."⁸ I have nothing but sympathy for the loneliness he is expressing and I have witnessed gay bioguys' transphobia. It's the dismissive attitude that gets to me. Biomales are not an entirely hopeless prospect, yet they are guaranteed to be hopeless if never given a chance. Attitude can keep us safe from rejection, but it can keep us safe from connection, too. Preemptively rejecting those who do not understand your gender insures that they never will.

Once I was introduced to a transguy at a sex party, and the very first thing he did was complain bitterly to me about how a lesbian had just hit on him, mistaking him for a dyke. I said, "Uh-huh," and moved on, but why protect this person's feelings? Did the weight of gender lend him priority in my shameful subconscious inner ranking of queer

radicals? (Drat that internalized misogyny.) Why didn't I just say what I thought? *Be flattered when someone is attracted to you!*

So, men are too ignorant and butches are dinosaurs. Lesbians don't get it. What is with this more-radical-than-thou attitude? I saw a drag king in Philly whose entire shtick consisted of asserting that no one could possibly understand his complicated gender identity. Between being tragically misunderstood, perpetually on the cutting edge, and more radical than everyone else, when do genderqueers have time to connect with others? (I would feel more sympathetic if I weren't actively being excluded and looked down upon.) Before somebody even has a chance to be interested, they are dismissed as ignorant or convicted on charges of a mistaken pronoun. So many strict rules about how to be what you are, what to call it, and how you can expect others to relate to it! Somehow we've lost our tolerance for those who do not understand us, regardless of their intentions. If our language and sensibilities are too refined for other homos to get, can we still share a movement for social justice?

**: *Top Ten People Most Excluded from
Your Genderqueer Scene* :**

1. People of color
2. Femmes
3. Transwomen and others who insist on continuing to use female pronouns in this day and age
4. People who do not wear the uniform: work pants, trucker hats, et cetera
5. People over twenty-seven, unless they have contributed to your top surgery fund

6. People who express hetero attractions
7. People who do not speak the latest activist lingo
8. People who aren't kissing your ass right now
9. Transsexuals who have "fully" transitioned, however you define that today
10. Cross-dressers

: **Conclusion** :

I always wanted genderqueer to unite me with other transgressive queers. Note that I said to unite, not to find people who identify exactly like me. People don't get me, and that is okay. I am not holding my breath for a place where I do not have to explain myself. I am just working on creating a space where the explanation is welcome. That's what I want genderqueer to be about. I want *genderqueer* to be not only an umbrella term for those who reject M or F, but also an umbrella term for all those who queer their gender. And remember that thing I mentioned about caring for each other and sharing a commitment to gender liberation and social justice? Maybe these qualities are lacking and that's where the movement has become a scene. Exclusivity and attitude are qualities of a scene, not a revolutionary subculture. Genderqueer was my movement, but it's definitely not my scene.

Despite all of this, I will always think of my friends and myself as genderqueer in one way or another. Our queerness can't be pried away from that extra-special gender spectacle we live in. It's our gender that's always troubling, always calling attention to itself, always acting like a dowsing rod drawing out sexuality all over the place. (I could write a whole other story about how much I learn about people just from their

reaction to my appearance.) Genderqueer is ours in a sense, because we're wholeheartedly engaged with the politics of gender, because microscopic examination of gender has shaped who we are, and because gender is the stuff of our sexual identities.

I could conclude by claiming: We are genderqueer because we fuck with gender, and this may include the refusal of both M and F, but on a good day it includes a whole hell of a lot more! But the truth is, I rarely use the word, and I don't intend to start using it again just because I've launched all these thoughts out into the world. This is quite an unsatisfying conclusion! I suppose that if I have left you with an up-in-the-air, inconclusive discomfort with the word *genderqueer*, then you understand where I'm coming from.

MY KIND OF CRUISING

LIZ ROSENFELD

: *Virgin Cruiser* :

When I was a freshman in college, I fell desperately in love with a straight man who was in a monogamous relationship with one of my close female friends. At the time, I was regarded as high femme, which, as a fat woman, I felt was the only way I could be sexually recognized. By bringing attention to my wide hips, breasts, and butt, I could reinvent myself as a voluptuous object of desire. However, the only time my crush gave me any sexual attention was the evening I dressed in boy drag for the first time, as a cowboy.

On my way home that night, I happened to run into my crush. Without words, he led me to a tree, where I proceeded to give him a

blow job. As I kneeled before him, adjusting my belt buckle, I tried to pull off my facial hair before proceeding. He stopped me, and without saying anything, patted my mustache securely in place and guided me to continue. In this moment I was neither a woman, a man, nor a woman dressed as a man. In that moment I remember tasting the possibilities of existing within an indefinite queer body. It did not matter what I was wearing, or how I was role-playing, calling myself, or acting upon; I was able to transform myself into anything I wanted to be.

The next day, it was as though nothing had occurred. I was back to dresses, and he returned to his girlfriend.

: *Our Queer Bodies* :

It is in a delirium that I name myself gay. It is in the act of sex with my same sex that I am named homosexual. And it is within the multiplex that I can at particular moments escape the delirium of self-naming and of being named, in spite of the differing decorations of security cameras and warning signs within the labeled space of the cinemas. For within such a structure, men who could quite easily opt for other less public environments in which to gaze, flock to perform for one another's selves, fluidly defying the boundaries of their ethical self.

In the essay "Multiplex," artist James Sweetbaum writes of his experiences cruising in a porn cinema, where male bodies engage in contact without having to adhere to definitions of sexual identity. Sweetbaum describes two screening rooms; one shows heterosexual porn, the other homosexual. Entrance to both straight and gay cinemas costs thirteen pounds, and purchasers have their tickets marked with two lines so that their right to move freely between the up-

stairs and the downstairs can be verified by attendants as they move through the in-between area of the foyer where the ticket booth and entrance lie. Cruisers within both cinemas avoid self-classification through complex and fluid responses to the environment to which they have gained access. Sweetbaum goes on to describe how the men he encounters in the cinema, if asked on the street to identify their sexuality, would almost certainly define themselves as straight, but in the multiplex these men allow themselves to be jerked off by other men. Furthermore, though these men would most likely respond violently toward any type of sexual advance by another male outside of this space, they "overlook" the men masturbating one another nearby. They might even watch. Watching another dick engage in sexual acts in the ambiguous space of the multiplex is no different than watching someone jerk off or suck cock onscreen. In this instance the subject within the space of the multiplex is able to disconnect himself from the realities of social sexual labels.

In a seminar at the Art Institute of Chicago, artist and video activist Gregg Bordowitz declared, "All sexuality is queer sexuality." But where does this queer sexuality take place? In his essay "Let's Get Physical: A Quantum Look at the Queer Space-Time Continuum," Joseph P. Goodwin writes:

I must distinguish between space and place. Place, for my purposes, refers to a physically bounded area. Space, on the other hand, describes a conceptual area that may not have physical boundaries, may consist of areas that are not contiguous, or may have no physicality at all.²

Goodwin suggests that queer space can exist within a physical and conceptual space, as queerness is not a definite, fixed existence. In relation to Goodwin's theories, I also consider queer space as both an act of personal and political intervention, as well as a state in which we are able to transport our physical and conceptual bodies through modes of performance, actions, thought, and magical thinking. One outcome of queer approaches to understanding culture and history is that we may believe in the political potency of a *less*, rather than a more, certain world, one that takes us beyond a binary thinking of "gay" and "straight" and opens up a space for considering the familiar and unfamiliar in ways we don't always expect.

: *It's a Girl* :

Recently I was chased out of the cruising stalls of a pornographic bookstore, the owner yelling behind me, "It's a girl . . . it's a girl!" A large part of my cruising experience consists of silently training myself to read body language and social codes, and keeping myself safe and undercover in the process. Even though in the moment I am cruising I may not mentally relate to a female body, it is impossible to forget that I must cover my female identifiers in order to pass, as well as to ensure my own physical safety. Protection becomes part of the turn-on. I mostly watch, stroke my strap-on, and occasionally, when it's dark enough, jerk someone off. Many people ask me how I physically get off from this experience, as I do not touch my cunt, or come. I get off the same way I do when I receive a blow job while packing or wearing a strap-on. I slip into a body that is of another faction within my queerness, and I push myself to discover this mental state of arousal.

: **The Male and Female Cruiser** :

In *When Men Meet*, Henning Bech opens with the description of the experience of a woman trying to pass as a man in a male bathhouse:

She notices how the usual social hierarchy is replaced here by another—condition of body, size of penis, age—and the tension, competition, anxiety that go along with it; but also the possibility of total abandon in the darker rooms, of losing oneself in anonymity and carnal desire . . . she wants to have this option for herself as well.³

Bech brings up an important distinction concerning the politics of touch in relation to gender. In the above quote, the female figure thinks about her ideal bathhouse cruising space as a place where women have the option of not just engaging in anonymity and sexual contact, but also as a space where intimate touch and erotic gazing occur. This brought to mind my experience at an all-female spa located in Chicago. Although many women attend this spa knowing that it is owned by lesbians, and that this space embraces an "all body types welcome" ideal, a tension exists between nude women who are sharing this public/private atmosphere. My experiences there have not been ones of sexual/erotic cruising, but rather of a type of cruising where participants silently compare the image of one body to the next. Picture being in the locker room after gym class, and all the girls are examining the way your stomach hangs.

Returning to Bech's female cruiser, I am reminded of the way my heterosexual-identified male friends embrace; they hug either with humor, arousal, anxiety, or all three. They flirt with each other by exchanging

stories about who has made out with the most girls, or who has worked out the most that week. They find a common ground where they are comfortable being together without having to explain why they crave a certain intimacy from one another. Their touch seems to be charged with a type of *potential* that is generally ignored by both parties. Thus, I imagine them standing as still as possible on crowded subways, so as not to accidentally brush arms with the man standing next to them, for fear a woman might see. Similarly, whenever the subject of anything relating to the anus is brought up, I have noticed my straight-identified male friends often freak out, as if even talking about the anus labels them homosexual.

We are always cruising. Whether we are sizing up each other's bodies at the gym, looking for a fuck, or people-watching at a café, the cruising body is everywhere. The idea of cruising is sexy, exciting, and irresponsible. In the moment of the cruise itself, cruisers may transcend the physical space they are inhabiting. In this moment I believe gender and sexual identity can (and should) be left at the door, allowing bodies to mesh into a blinding transcendence.

: ***The Cruising Artist:***

Katarzyna Kozyra and James Sweetbaum :

I would like to further investigate and compare the perspectives of female and male cruising by turning to the example of artists Katarzyna Kozyra and James Sweetbaum. To film in a men's bathhouse, Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra disguised herself as a man, using fake body hair and covering her breasts with a towel draped over her shoulders. The disguise was reasonably good, and although she drew a few stares, she was not discovered.

To the viewer, however, the pretense is obvious. Kozyra describes the premise of her multichanneled video installations, *Women's Bathhouse* and *Men's Bathhouse*, as a behavioral study that begins with men and women and how they tend to conform to stereotypes of gendered behavior and appearance in public, while in private they behave more comfortably, as there is less pressure to perform social codes of female and male when surrounded by members of one's presumed sex. An example of this is the comfort of men being nude with other men and women with other women without having to deal with stifling social labels. In the end, the installations raise additional issues of voyeurism and narcissism, as well as concepts of beauty and aging.

Both of Kozyra's videos were filmed at the male and female bathhouses of the Hotel Gellért in Budapest, and both were filmed using cameras hidden in plastic bags and placed on or below benches in the bathhouses—without the knowledge of those being filmed. At one point Kozyra coyly outs herself to the camera by opening her legs and showing us her prosthetic penis, the climax of her video, one could say, a risky feminist act that is directed at the camera (her audience). Kozyra's video installations take us through her journey from a female perspective, and touch on the intimate behavior of both men and women when they are alone and naked in single-sex situations.

In *One Turkish Please*, James Sweetbaum, a London-based artist, takes us on an undercover exploration of his trip to a Victorian Turkish bath through the use of spy cameras, which he places in a toiletries bag. The viewer follows Sweetbaum through mazes of naked men hanging out, jerking each other off, or bathing together as the volume slowly increases and we hear the men talking about their anxieties regarding

women (or rather, as they say in the video, "birds"), prostitutes, and HIV, while also reassuring each other about their anxieties by listening openly and without any apparent preconceived notion of what is right or wrong. It seems that these men are talking about issues they would never speak of in front of women. As in Kozyra's video, Sweetbaum also has a moment of outing himself to the camera. For a moment the audience's view is directed up Sweetbaum's towel, revealing his penis, reminding us he is able to pass in this space as male, leaving his sexual identity as a gay man at the door. Sweetbaum's video emphasizes the privilege of a male space, as well as the nondefined lines of sexuality within it. Through the conversations and actions we observe, his video lets us in on what goes on in the "boys' club."

While using similar strategies in their work, Kozyra and Sweetbaum's experiences of bathhouse spaces are radically different. Kozyra's images, with fixed horizons, are cautious and still, while Sweetbaum moves through the baths with a wandering eye, searching for what comes around each corner. Sweetbaum's camera is surveying and spontaneous, as opposed to Kozyra's camera, which documents scenes with a still eye, like photography or painting. These two artists exemplify the socialized dichotomy between the female and male gazes by the way their cameras (eyes) travel. Kozyra cautiously passes in a male space, and Sweetbaum must pass as a man who is neither gay nor straight in the Turkish bath, a sexually ambivalent masculine-gendered space. By entering these specific spaces in which they must pass, both artists end up queering these spaces, as their fluid identities confront and bring in new bodies and meanings to rigidly defined situations.

: *My Kind of Cruising* :

In the summer of 2004, I visited San Francisco for the first time. I went on a pilgrimage to seek out what I had heard of as the only "real" female bathhouse in the United States. Tucked behind a small street, the Osento bathhouse for women seems as though it is hidden in the same way gay establishments once were. Situated in an old Victorian house and marked only by a small plaque placed by the buzzer, Osento blends in with its predominantly residential surroundings. It felt like I might need a special password to enter. After I was buzzed in, the woman at the desk gave me my locker key, explained the rules of the bathhouse (shower before entering the hot tub, place a towel down before sitting on anything, etc.), and made sure that I was aware that full nudity was required. Located in a space formed by several old adjoining apartments, the Osento bathhouse takes you through a maze of options, private crevices, and compartments. From my past research and personal accounts of male cruising spaces and bathhouses, I could tell that Osento had been designed with cruising in mind.

As I slipped into the giant communal tiled bath, which occupied the center of the complex, I began to gaze and cautiously cruise the other women bathing beside me. I thought about what would happen if we were to proceed along the lines of men. Would we engage in a female version of a circle jerk? Or intensely watch each other masturbate in silence? Unfortunately, none of this occurred. All I received that day was a massage from a woman who cleansed my aura, and a couple of dirty looks from a few women in the sauna. Why was this? A couple of hours later, on my way out, the woman at the desk asked me how I had heard of the Osento bathhouse. "You're new," she said, by way of following up on her

question. "Usually we only have regulars." I explained to her that I was visiting from out of town and many friends had suggested that I check out her establishment. "So did you get what you came looking for?" At this moment I realized she knew why I had come so far. She explained to me that Oseito had originally been founded as a cruising space for women in the late 1970s in response to the abundance of all-male bathhouses popping up around San Francisco. "We wanted to offer the same option for the ladies," she said. Oseito was only open for a short time before it was closed down due to city public health laws, and forced to reopen as a self-described "spa" for women. "It was never the same again," she said. The male bathhouses in San Francisco soon met a harsher fate—by the late 1980s, they were all shuttered in response to fears of HIV transmission, though other cruising spaces developed in their wake.

: ***A Kaleidoscope*** :

Cruising is an essential activity in my own exploration of how I negotiate queer identity. I am not necessarily interested in abolishing sacred male space, but rather in quietly existing within it. I engage occasionally in what I deem "safe sexual acts" within all-male spaces, as I would prefer not to go unnoticed as a passing male body. As a queer female who lends a large part of her sexual identity to fag culture, I cruise to inform and push the boundaries and definitions of my own queerness. In my mind, the act and space of cruising is like a kaleidoscope, unfocused, where everything is morphing and continuously changing. Like the cruising woman Bech describes, I too am in search of a space where women may exist through erased boundaries of sexual definitions and gender binaries. Is this possible?

PINO'S FATHER

TOMMI AVICOLLI MECCA

I had reservations about going to Pino's house that day. I had heard many stories about his father, about him being completely out of control all of the time. Pino's father had reportedly put his fist through the kitchen wall on more than one occasion and thrown a plate of hot spaghetti out the living room window at a neighbor who had crossed him.

Pino insisted we work at his house. Mine was off-limits since Mama was doing spring cleaning that week. No sooner had I gotten up out of bed than she had my room pulled apart, with the rug ready to be vacuumed and shampooed. I suggested our usual spot, but Pino didn't feel like hanging out at Day's Deli. This one, he said, required a

quieter environment. Besides, I think he liked getting on his father's nerves. We were preparing a major manifesto for the city's first gay conference, which started the next day. We were cofacilitators of a workshop on religion.

Pino's house was dark. Someone was sitting in the corner of the living room by the window when I got there, but I couldn't make out the person's face because the blinds and drapes were drawn shut. From the hallway it smelled rancid, as if the place had not been aired out for a long time. The small house was crowded with furniture and all of the many shelves were filled with books and various objects.

"Who's there?" a husky voice suddenly asked, as if its owner had been jolted awake.

"Go back to sleep," Pino replied, annoyed.

"Tell me."

"You're drunk, leave me alone. You been bothering me all day."

"I know what's going on, I ain't stupid. What did I tell you before? Huh?"

"Go to hell."

The man grumbled something and was silent.

The second floor of the house was just as bleak. There was no window in the narrow hallway. The old floorboards creaked. The smell of mold was overpowering. With my allergies, it was probably not advisable to stay long. If we concentrated, we could finish the manifesto in no time at all.

Pino's room was tiny. The twin bed took up most of the space. Clutter was everywhere. In one corner, books and clothes were piled high. Various objects were scattered on the rug: pens, paper clips, pennies, et

cetera. In the corner near the window was a small desk with an electric typewriter and above it a shelf filled with more books. The room was lit, unlike the rest of the house. The drapes were drawn and the blinds pulled up, though the view outside was of the side of the house next door and a sliver of the yard below. Sunlight streamed into the room, exposing the shabby condition of the paint. It was a pale yellowish white that was cracked and peeling in places.

"Who was that?" I whispered.

"My father."

"Is it okay for me to be here?"

"Don't worry about him, he'll probably sleep till tomorrow morning. He's pretty wasted already."

"Where's your mother?"

"Working. He don't work. He's out on disability."

"What happened?"

"Some accident. It's not important. He's no more disabled than I am."

"Let's get to work," I said. "I wanna get outside. It's too nice to be inside."

I sat at the typewriter and Pino paced. He threw out lines. My fingers sped across the keys.

"It don't sound right," Pino said when we had drafted a good bit of the manifesto. I agreed. I pulled the paper from the typewriter. The afternoon sun was moving out of range of the tall, narrow window. Its last bit of light hung off the edge of the desk.

"What if I read it out loud," I suggested.

"Sure."

I read it. We both shook our heads.

"I've got an idea," I said. "What if we start with something like, 'As gay pagans and atheists we believe that religion is the problem, not the solution'? Direct and to the point."

He thought about it for a moment. "Okay. Then we should say, 'Even the gay churches are merely replicating oppressive modes of belief, such as in a father god who demands strict obedience to a Bible that condemns gays to death and' . . . let me think . . ."

I put in a clean sheet of paper and started pounding away. I was on a roll. I finished an entire page before I stopped. I had incorporated some of the old draft with our new ideas. "Whaddaya think?"

"Yeah! Good."

"What's that?" I interrupted, hearing something outside Pino's door.

"What?"

"Sounds like something dragging in the hallway . . ."

There was a pounding on the door. "Pino? You got somebody in there?" Pino's father asked in a loud voice.

"None of your business!" Pino shouted back. He didn't seem concerned. I was worried, but I told myself that Pino knew how to deal with his father. He had been telling me for years how, time after time, he'd put his father in his place.

"I don't want nobody in your room." It was a command from Pino's father.

"Drop dead."

"I ain't kidding. You better listen to me."

"Get outta here," Pino yelled to his father.

Had Pino's father seen the way I was dressed? I was in radical drag:

pink jeans, T-shirt, platform sneakers, and a long dangling earring in my right ear. My hair was long and curly, my face painted with a touch of makeup, my eyebrows were tweaked thin. I was doing the Lady Stardust look. There were parts of the city where that might be appreciated, even admired, but not in South Philly.

"Maybe we should . . ." I started to say, becoming more nervous. Dressing in drag, I'd learned that it was often best to retreat at the first sign of trouble.

"Don't pay no attention to him," Pino whispered to me, then said out loud, "Are you still out there?"

"I'm waiting for *it* to leave."

"There's no *it* in here."

"I want *it* out of my house."

"This ain't your house."

"Don't get smart with me. You don't pay the bills. I'll toss you outta here on your ass."

"You try and Mama's gonna kick you out."

"Your mother's not gonna put up with this crap. If she knew what you were doing right now, she'd call the police. Maybe that's what I should do."

"What're the police gonna do?"

"They'll drag *it* outta here."

"Go ahead, call 'em."

"Pino, maybe you shouldn't encourage him." I was shaking. Pino was still calm. He seemed to be enjoying the confrontation. Obviously he had been through this many times before. I should trust that he knew how to handle his own father.

"I will," his father yelled outside the door.

"What're you waiting for?"

"I'm going right now."

"Go ahead. Want the number?"

"I know the number."

"Just thought you might be too drunk to remember it. What're the cops gonna say about your being drunk? Maybe I should show them the hole in the wall you made in the kitchen?" Pino said it like a lawyer in a courtroom. It was all a performance to him. Maybe it was for his father, too. It was a comforting thought. They would play out their routine and then we could finish up and I could get the hell out of that madhouse.

"Your Jew did that. They'll believe that. They don't like Jews neither."

I knew Pino's father was referring to Pino's boyfriend. "Stan's been here?" I asked. I was surprised Pino would bring him home. But then, he invited me over.

"What if the cop's Jewish. They got Jewish cops, you know."

"No, they don't. Stop lying."

"You think they discriminate? They're not allowed to do that. We got laws in this city." Pino wasn't backing down. He was provoking his father to continue this bizarre closed-door conversation.

"Laws? Who gives a damn about laws. Only the lawyers, and they're all a buncha greedy Jews . . ."

Why was Pino arguing? He couldn't win. An argument of this sort could go on for hours. Maybe that was the idea. Wear down the old guy. Go back and forth with him until he was too exhausted to fight.

As if he were reading my thoughts, Pino said, "I ain't gonna argue with you no more, you anti-Semitic creep. Call the cops. We got work to do. Go away."

"Okay, I'm going down to call 'em." He sounded as if he really meant it.

"Let me know when they get here."

His father grumbled something I couldn't understand. Then I heard him making his way down the hall. It sounded as if he were dragging his foot behind him.

"Pino, maybe we should try my house. Mama might be done with her cleaning."

"We're not going nowhere. He ain't gonna call the cops. He ain't gonna do nothing. By the time he gets downstairs, he ain't even gonna remember why he went down there in the first place." Pino seemed really confident in what he was saying.

"If you say so. I can't believe you brought Stan here."

"He stays here a lot."

"And he doesn't freak out?"

"Yeah, but who cares? Mama's great. She cooks us breakfast and everything."

"Does he eat with you? I can't imagine that. Too scary."

"No. He sits in the living room talking to himself. Says he doesn't wanna eat with a Jew."

"I thought my father was bad."

"Forget about him. Let's get this manifesto done."

I was a bit jittery as we returned to the task at hand. We managed to get most of it finished before the next interruption. We were arguing over the last few sentences—wasting our time over grammar.

"Pino!" His father battered at the door. It might have been fists. It sounded more like a hammer.

"What now? I thought you were calling the cops." Pino was surprised but still not jolted as I was. I almost hit the ceiling.

"You know what I got?"

"If you got sense, you'll get outta here." Did I sense a bit of worry on Pino's face just then?

"I got a gun." He pounded it against the door again.

"Does he really have a gun?" I asked, terrified. I thought about crawling out the window. We were on the second floor, but broken legs seemed preferable to facing a gun in the hall.

"Yeah, but he ain't gonna do nothing with it," Pino told me. He didn't seem as sure of himself as he had been before. To his father, he yelled, "The cops're gonna arrest you for that. You ain't got a license and I'm gonna tell 'em."

"They ain't gonna care. Not when they see *it*. They wouldn't want something like that in their houses. They'll probably give me a medal for shooting *it*. Now you're gonna do what I tell you. Right now."

"I ain't doing nothing," Pino responded defiantly. I was sure he was nervous now. But he wasn't going to let on to me that he couldn't handle his father.

"Pino, I wanna leave," I said, feeling as if I were about to shit my pants.

"No. You ain't goin' out there," Pino said, his voice shaky.

"Why not?" I looked at him. "You're scared, too. You don't know what to do."

"Don't panic," he scolded, as if I were a child.

"He's got a gun!" I said in a louder voice than I intended. Pino put his finger on his lips to signal me to talk softer.

"I know he does. But he's never used it. He just likes to threaten people." Pino whispered, trying to resume his calm demeanor. I wondered how he could live like this.

"He's done this before?!" I exclaimed.

"Once. With my uncle."

"He pulled a gun on your uncle?" I couldn't keep my voice down.

"You gotta understand, they don't get along . . ."

"Pino?" his father said, impatient. "I ain't gonna wait all day."

"Shut up." Pino was really angry now. It was the fear.

His father tried the door for the first time. It was locked. He tried again, more forcefully. It sounded as if the lock were about to give in. "I want you to open this door right now and come outta there," his father commanded.

It might have worked when Pino was five, but not now. "Are you nuts? I ain't opening nothing as long as you got that gun. Put it away and we'll leave." I could tell that Pino had just thought of that strategy. It was as good as any. I didn't think it would work, though. Maybe we should call the cops. Of course, I didn't trust that they'd be on our side after they saw how I was dressed.

I was beginning to wonder why I continued making myself into such a freak. Sure, there was a political point to be made in doing radical drag, but that message didn't resonate with the mostly working-class southern Italians and Irish Catholics in that neck of the woods. After almost a decade of long hair and do-your-own-thing, they barely understood the counter-culture, let alone the radical elements of the gay liberation movement.

"I ain't putting nothing away," his father said.

"Then we ain't leaving," Pino responded, folding his arms over his chest. He was being stubborn now. Or was he just trying to buy time?

We were at a stalemate.

"Pino, is there another way outta here, like the window?" It was a stupid question. But I felt like I had to say something.

"We can't jump out the window, are you nuts?" He glanced at the window as if he were considering the idea.

"Whadda we gonna do then?" I was feeling desperate. I didn't want to spend another second in that room.

"I could call Mama." It was like he was thinking out loud.

"What's she gonna do?"

"Come home and calm him down." The thought made him calmer.

"Call her." I shoved him toward the table with the phone. Desperate times and all that.

"Hello? Mrs. Palmetti, please. Yeah, I'll hold."

"Pino?" It was the voice from the hall. "I'm waiting."

"You still out there?" Pino said, as if he were intentionally trying to provoke him again.

"You know I could blow open that door."

"Go ahead."

"Stop daring him," I whispered. I wanted to kill Pino. Why didn't he just keep his big mouth shut? I kept staring at the door. *Please, lock, hold up. Don't fail us now.*

"Mama? It's Pino. Yeah, something's wrong . . ." Talk about understatement.

"Whaddaya doing? Who're you tawking to?" His father was getting riled up again.

"It's that crazy guy you married, he's got his gun and he's . . ."

"Pino!" his father yelled, grabbing at the doorknob again. He started shaking and pulling it frantically. "Get off that damn phone."

"I didn't do nothing. He's flipped out again like with Uncle Joe. You gotta come home . . . no, I can't put him on . . . Just get ovah here now!"

"Pino!" his father screamed. He was about to explode. The next time he yelled out his son's name, he kicked at the door. Then he kicked again.

"Mama, he ain't gonna calm down . . ."

His father let out a primal sound, as if he were yelling down a castle gate. Then he fired. The shot came through the door. Pino and I ducked. He dropped the phone. We could hear his mother on the other end: "Pino, what happened? Pino, are you all right?"

With a loud crash, his father's foot slammed against the door. It swung open and smashed against the wall. Pino and I remained where we were, crouched on the floor by his desk. His mother's voice was still coming out of the telephone. In the open doorway stood Pino's father. A short, thin man with one leg slightly shorter than the other. He had barely any eyebrows and a chin that seemed too large for his face. The gun was dangling from his right hand. He remained there for a few moments. Then he stepped into the room.

Pino got up. I stayed where I was.

"Get outta here."

"You're gonna listen to me or someone's gonna get hurt," his father said. He was out of breath but he wasn't shouting. He felt victorious, I could tell from his face.

Pino was shaking but he wasn't going to let his father know he was terrified. He motioned for me to get under the desk. I did.

"Mama's on her way home." Pino said it calmly, holding up both hands in front of him, palms out. He spoke to his father the way one would talk to a hovering bear.

The phone went quiet.

"You," he indicated me. "Get outta here. Now." I didn't budge. I was frozen to the spot.

"He's not going nowhere."

He raised the gun and pointed it at me. My heart did somersaults.

"It goes or I shoot."

Pino stepped into the line of fire. "Me first."

"Outta the way."

"What? You don't have the guts to shoot me?" Pino challenged, trying to act brave. His face told another story. "I'm the one who invited him ovah here. I'm the one who's responsible." Was he trying to buy time until his mother got home? I prayed that she didn't work far away.

"I said move!" his father bellowed.

"C'mon, if you're gonna commit murder, why not your own son? Huh?" He was talking fast, trying to distract his father from me. "You're gonna go to jail for a long time anyway, why not make it even more sensational for the tabloids? I dare you."

"I know what you're doing. It ain't gonna work." His father was suddenly glaring at Pino, trying to stare him down. Neither man moved. It was like a gunfight in the Old West.

"Now you put down that gun and we'll leave."

"I don't take orders from you." Pino's father took a step to the left; Pino took one to the right. They were both holding firm.

"You wanted us to go. We'll go," Pino said, still trying to negotiate. "But not with that gun pointing at us. I don't trust you."

"You got no choice." His father was still staring. That man was locked onto his son like a predator on his prey.

"I'm gonna come and get that gun, and then we're gonna leave."

His father shook his head. "Don't."

"You don't wanna do nothing stupid." Pino took a step toward his father. The old man stepped back. The gun was still pointed.

"C'mon, just give it to me," Pino insisted, trying to sound reasonable.

Pino advanced a little more. His father hesitated then moved backward out the door. Pino came another step closer.

"You don't want me to do it," his father said. He didn't sound as sure of himself as he had been.

"You ain't gonna."

"Don't test me, 'cause you'll fail."

Pino put out his hand. He was within reach of the gun. I couldn't look, but I had to. I didn't know what I was going to do if he fired. I dared not move. His father might take any movement from me as an excuse to pull the trigger.

"No closer!" his father warned.

"I just want the gun."

"No."

Pino reached. His father cocked the gun. I was sure he was going to fire. A woman's voice called up from below and Pino grabbed the

weapon the moment his father's head turned. Pino quickly turned the gun around and pointed it at his father.

"Now get outta here. Or I'll shoot you, you asshole," Pino said angrily. "No court would ever convict me."

I was shaking so much I had to hold on to the desk for support.

"Pino, what're you doing?" his mother yelled as she reached the top of the stairs. "Give me that thing!" Pino shook his head. His face was red with rage. I thought it was going to burst.

"No, I'm turning this over to the cops."

"Son of a bitch!" his father yelled, waving his fist in the air.

"Wish I were. Then you wouldn't be my father."

"Go on, get outta here," Pino's mother said to her husband. Pino's father moved away, dragging his foot behind him.

"I can see what upset him," she said, looking at me and shaking her head. "I'm not saying he was right, but, Pino, what were you thinking?"

"Don't start," Pino muttered and put the gun down on his desk.

I didn't want to stick around for another family argument. "Uh, I just wanna go," I said, brushing past his mother on my way out of the room.

As I walked out, Pino asked me to call him later to discuss the manifesto. I promised him I would. The manifesto didn't seem important anymore. As I hurried away from the house, the streets never felt safer.



TERRE THAEMPLITZ

Are you tired of long lines and delays at airport security and passport checkpoints, caused by transgendered passengers whose appearances don't match the gender indicated on their identification?

What is up with that?

Of course, chances are you've never experienced such delays, because the majority of transgendered people travel incognito. When traveling, dressing for the occasion means downplaying our gender-bending by dressing to match our documented genders. Many fully transitioned transsexuals whose countries prohibit them from legally changing their genders resort to wearing asexual sweatpants and other antifashion statements as a kind of devolutionary drag, all in hopes of passing as

the men or women they once were. In some cases, they resort to using false passports showing genders that match their appearances. It all gives new meaning to the term "pass control."

In October 2003, a terrorist drag queen alert was issued across the United States. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued an alert to law enforcement agencies, urging authorities to be on the lookout for al-Qaeda suicide bombers dressed in drag. The alert warned, "previous attacks underscore al-Qaeda's ability to employ suicide bombers," and, citing the queer propensity for showmanship and the arts, went on to say, "Terrorists will employ *novel methods* to *artfully* conceal suicide devices. Male bombers may dress as females in order to discourage scrutiny." (Italics mine.)

The alert prompted the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) to issue a statement warning members to expect "unwitting abuses" both at airports and anywhere else they go dressed up. NTAC advised (with unfortunate male-to-female-centricity): "Crossdressers should seriously consider doing any air travel in male garb until reaching their destination. With a focus on soft targets, even more casual pursuits such as shopping or going to restaurants could also potentially draw scrutiny."

I have to admit, I personally have always found it unnerving to enter a country with a suitcase filled with ladies' delicacies and apparel, not so much out of fear of disclosing my transgenderism as a fear of being accused of thievery, having taken someone else's bag, or even having to talk my way out of paying import taxes on my personal belongings. Already I fear that my used personal belongings will be treated as new items purchased abroad with their price tags removed in order to se-

cretly import them for resale. After all, why would a man have so much ladies' clothing? (Unfortunately, since first writing this text my paranoia about facing a "tranny tax" on clothing was recently proved valid when I was stopped by customs agents in Barcelona. I was eventually able to avoid paying taxes by convincing the customs agent of my transgenderism through sheer insistence, despite my behavior lacking the "queenishness" that would have made things easier for both of us.)

On a recent trip from Vienna back home to Japan, with the announcements from the Department of Homeland Security and NTAC compounding my usual concerns and paranoia, I decided to try and ask some airport and airline staff about their experiences with transgendered passengers—if they had even seen any, and if we warranted any special attention on their part. Of course, the operation of recording devices is frowned upon at airports these days, and nobody wants to go on record, so I made these recordings by secretly plugging my portable MiniDisc player headphones into the microphone port—cross-dressing the microphone input as headphone output, as it were.

I wanted to speak with the passport inspectors who make the judgment call as to who can and cannot enter or leave a country . . . but they were busy, and quite frankly too intimidating. First, I set out to talk with airport police, but the offices were empty, so I approached a patrolling airport security officer, and got this response:

[Field recording starts]

Terre: Excuse me, are you with security, or are you with an airline?

Guard: Security.

Terre: My name is Terre Thaemlitz, and I'm doing some research around transgendered people traveling. Could I ask you three or four questions real quick? Just short ones?

Guard: No, no, no, no.

Terre: No? I tried to speak with the police, but there wasn't anybody around. Do you know where there is a security office or something?

Guard: The security office is not in the airport here. It's outside, so . . . it's not the right time for this.

Terre: Okay, sorry.

[Field recording ends]

By now it was time to pass through a secondary security search to enter the boarding gate area, so I decided to try and ask the staff of Austrian Airlines about their experiences with or views on transgendered passengers. I spoke to a male, English-speaking employee who ended up relaying my questions to a middle-aged woman security officer who only spoke German. She was the only person I met during my entire journey whose response at least took into consideration the *possibility* of the existence of transgendered passengers. But toward the end of the conversation she started to ask the English-speaking employee if the questions were about myself personally, and some confusion ensued:

[Field recording starts]

Man: It's only dressed as a man, or . . . ?

Terre: Yeah, or if somebody is surgically post-SRS [sexual reassignment surgery] like if they've been surgically altered but their passport is still showing their previous gender . . . that sort of situation?

[The man and the woman speak in German.]

Man: Then they have to ask if he wants to visit as a man or woman, but it's no problem.

[The man and the woman speak in German.]

Man: They have to ask him if he wants to have the security check of a man or a woman.

Terre: Oh, I see. So you mean that would just affect if the buzzer went off, and how they would check the body . . .

Man: Yes.

Terre: Okay, thanks.

[Man and woman speak in German—woman is asking if this is about myself, moving closer and looking me up and down.]

Man: *[Signaling me to go away]* No, it's no problem.

Terre: Okay, thanks.

[Field recording ends]

So this larger environment—of, on the one hand, people who don't want to answer, and on the other hand, people who start to get nervous

and concerned if it's possible that these questions are about myself individually—really shows the dynamics that help contribute to the internalized fear that many transgendered people travel with. In the end, we don't know who we can put these kinds of questions to, and basically we're just afraid of bringing trouble upon ourselves.

Once in flight, I continued my experiment by asking the cabin attendants if they had ever noticed any transgendered passengers. By this time I was concealing my own transgenderism by prefacing the fact that my inquiries were related to a research project. I think this helped distance the questions a little, and put people at ease. It seemed to help them to know that we were just talking generally, and not talking about something that could be a personal, defensive issue:

[*Field recording starts*]

Terre: Could I ask you a question that's related to a project I'm doing about travel and gender?

Stewardess #1: Yes.

Terre: Have you ever noticed any transgendered passengers, ever?

Stewardess #1: Trans- . . . ?

Terre: Transgendered, like a woman dressed as a man, or a man dressed as a woman, or transsexual?

Stewardess #1: No, no.

Terre: Thanks.

[Next recording]

Terre: I'm doing a project about gender and travel, and I'm asking people in the travel industry a question. . . . Have you ever noticed any transgendered or transsexual passengers over the years?

Stewardess #2: No, never.

Terre: Have you ever thought about it?

Stewardess #2: No, never, actually.

Terre: Okay, thanks.

[Next recording]

Terre: Could I ask you a question related to some informal research I'm doing about gender and travel?

Steward: Yes.

Terre: Have you ever noticed seeing any transgendered or transsexual passengers during your years?

Steward: No, I don't think so. Within the last sixteen years or so I saw some of them, but not on board.

Terre: Where did you see them? Like, just at the airport?

Steward: New York or somewhere, but not travel related.

Terre: My project's about mobility and this sort of thing . . .

Steward: Oh. I never noticed any of them on board.

Terre: Are you familiar with this warning issued by the American government for security people to be more on the lookout for suspicious types, which would be men dressed as women to cloak terrorist bombs . . .

Steward: I never heard anything about it. No, not really. I mean, I was in New York one and a half weeks ago, but they didn't give any notices like that. Never in this direction.

[Next recording]

Terre: Excuse me, could I ask you a question I was asking him and some of the others?

Stewardess #3: Okay.

Terre: I'm doing a project about issues of gender and mobility, and I'm wondering if you've ever seen or noticed any transgendered or "new half" [Japanese expression for *transsexual*] passengers?

Stewardess #3: Never. I don't realize it.

Terre: Are you familiar with a notice from the American government to watch out for suspicious people, including men dressed as women who might be terrorists?

Stewardess #3: No, because on Japanese flights we have almost only Japanese passengers, so I don't think those are really terrorists. If I see a suspicious passenger I will take care of him, but . . .

Terre: Do you think seeing somebody who was cross-dressing would be considered suspicious for you? Or not necessarily?

Stewardess #3: *[Long pause]* Sorry, um . . . no.

Terre: No?

[Field recording ends]

I spent a lot of time on the flight thinking about how to ask Japanese immigration officials questions around reentry and transgenderism without jeopardizing my own status or triggering some kind of investigation into myself. I knew that, in the end, this would not be possible to do in a way that would satisfy the kinds of questions I wanted to ask. So, what follows is simply documentation of my nervousness and discomfort around dealing with the process of reentry:

[Field recording starts]

Steward: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Tokyo.

Terre: I just arrived at Narita, heading toward immigration, and hopefully I'll have big enough ovaries to ask some questions to the immigration officers . . . but I don't know, I'll probably chicken out . . .

[About twenty seconds without talking while I pass through passport control]

Terre: I just silently passed through immigration with no troubles.

[Field recording ends]

Once I passed through immigration I did go back and try to ask Japanese immigration officials if they had ever seen or noticed any transgendered people entering the country. In particular, I wanted to ask if the transgendered people they had noticed were Japanese nationals, or people from East Asia, or . . . basically, what types of people did feel comfortable enough to reenter the country as transgendered? I spoke with an officer who specialized in the trouble cases of people pulled off to the side of the immigration line, but my questions didn't get very far. He said that he didn't see enough people on an individual one-to-one basis to know if he had ever seen or noticed transgendered people, and that was the end of the conversation.

When traveling, gender bias is often entwined with sexual bias. As many transgendered people have experienced, issues of gender expression are easily confused with issues of sexual expression, further affecting how we are received in different nations. We are assumed lesbian or gay, with little understanding of how our transgenderism often complicates and/or disavows the relationship between gender and sexual identity. Within a binary heterosexual/homosexual paradigm, what is a transgendered person's gender opposite? Or better yet, why must we define our sexuality in relation to gender object choices rather than in relation to sexual acts themselves?

As anyone who has connections to transsexual sex-working communities knows, most clients are heterosexually identified. During my days as a resident DJ in a New York tranny sex-worker club during the early '90s, it was clear that the heterosexual "johns" could not be simply dismissed as "not yet out of the closet." The singular clarity of announcing one's "identity" fails to reflect the fluidity and diversity of

human sexual behavior, which is not simply a condition of the body, but inseparable from influences of time and context. Unfortunately, our legislated rights to behave and interact in certain ways are typically obtained through arguments that we are socially enslaved to biologically predetermined bodies devoid of choice (no choice of race, no choice of gender, no choice of sexual orientation, etc.), all of which perpetuate age-old myths of purist identities, birthrights, and other fascistic utopianisms.

Binary gender requirements limit the mobility of transgendered people, and the vagary of transgendered bodies places us unwittingly in conflict with nearly every social system in which we participate. Preconceptions about the relationships between gender expression and sexual expression can result in special fears and complications for transgendered people entering a country on spousal visas. Immigration officers are trained to weed out "fake" marriages, and any doubts in one partner's or both partners' heterosexuality sends up major red flags. This is a bit of a panic button for yours truly, Ms. World-Renowned Queer, who fucking hates the marriage system, but just so happens to be living on a heterosexually tainted visa in Japan right now.

Although the visa is legitimate in that my partner and I are an actual couple, and we are of opposite legally registered genders, an investigation into my visa status could easily take any number of wrong turns given the well-documented nature of my career and interests as a media producer, educator, and lecturer on themes of identity, gender, sexuality, and the gaps between. For example, countless magazines have failed to understand the nuances of terms such as "queer pansexuality" (including gay and lesbian publications, many of which still refuse to print

the term "queer" because they consider it a defamation), consequently describing me as the "gay musician Terre Thaemlitz." Needless to say, attempting to deconstruct stacks of such headlines (available at the click of a mouse) for immigration officials, and then proceeding to convince them that my sexual fence-walking should firmly place me on their side of the border-fence, would only be a nightmarish exercise in futility and self-effacement (not only for myself, but for my partner as well).

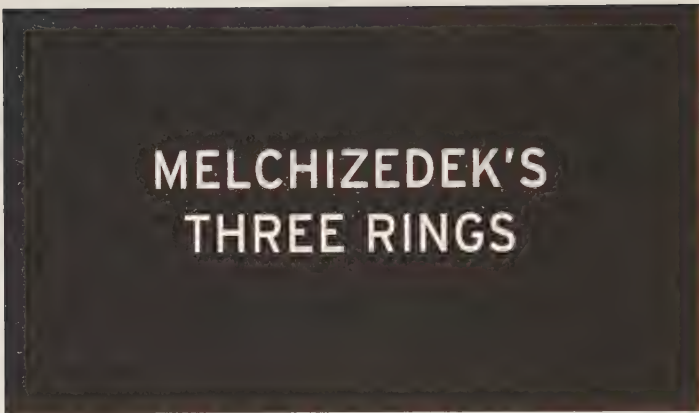
The issue of who can and cannot marry—and hence, who can and cannot apply for a spousal visa, let alone obtain one—gets very complicated. For example, this year in Japan they finally passed legislation allowing people who have undergone sexual reassignment surgery to legally change their gender, and thereafter legally marry partners of the opposite legal gender, to obtain the rights and privileges therein. Unfortunately, this totally screwed over anyone who, after changing their gender, would thereafter be considered lesbian or gay (such as a female-to-male transsexual who sexually prefers men). Despite these problems, the legislation worked out well for Aya Kamikawa, a male-to-female transsexual who was recently elected to Setagaya Ward's municipal assembly and was a major advocate for the legislation. As fate would have it, Kamikawa's partner is a female-to-male transsexual, and the two of them therefore continue to constitute a legal heterosexual couple after changing their gender registrations.

All of this territory around marriage and visas leaves a sour taste in the mouth. In the end, the act of legally changing one's gender is not so much about self-actualization as hiding one's transition—keeping the transgendered community invisible, registered, and statistically miscounted as "men" and "women." And, in a country like Japan, this

is an economic necessity since full-time employment requires the presentation of federal identification showing a job applicant's gender. Until now, most passing full-time transsexuals in Japan have only worked part-time jobs in order to avoid disclosing their registered genders.

Of course, it has a tremendous economic impact when we can only work part-time. It affects our benefits as well as our income (consequently leading to our unending bondage to the fields of sex work and "hosting" in bars). Around the world, the overwhelming majority of transgendered people live in poverty, and therefore lack the funds and business connections necessary to buy our way into countries through income-based visas. Those of us who are able to legally marry must do so by hiding our transgenderism. At the airport, or at the immigration bureau, the story is the same: In order to protect our residence status, we officially capitulate to the bureaucratization of secrecy around transgenderism.

Both marriage and visas are systems of economics—not romance. They are neither about the loving romance between individuals nor the patriotic romance between an individual and her nation of choice. They are means of social entry and participation. And, although one might wish to conclude that participating in the matrimonial system somehow standardizes a transgendered person's relationship to dominant culture and economics, the reality is that matrimony and the spousal visa system still bind us to stereotypes of transgendered subsistence and labor revolving around sex work—in this case, the spouse as whore. Unable to buy our way into a country, we find ourselves fucking our way in.



MELCHIZEDEK'S THREE RINGS

CAROLE MCDONNELL

I once belonged to a literary group. We were a lovely, open-minded, kindly bunch who liked watching movies and reading world literature. Our members included the unemployed and retired, freelance writers, teachers, and a dentist. We included a German-born agnostic Jewish woman whose father had been killed in Auschwitz, a New Ager, and a born-again Christian. We were international, including among ourselves a Greek woman, a French woman, and myself, a Jamaican. The members of the reading group were my friends, but, unlike me, they were white, middle-aged, fairly well-off, and not particularly religious. And yet there were points on which we often agreed, and it was because we agreed that I often resisted the temptation to simply keep my mouth

shut and accept their interpretation of the books and films as the "true" and "real" interpretation.

I knew all too well how difficult it was to tackle a sea of faces united in the opinion that I simply did not see the real point of a story. My difficulty was often accompanied by amazement: How could they not see what I had seen? And was I really going to start trouble by speaking my mind in that little group, when I could go to another friend's house and be among like-minded people? Certainly, a battle wasn't really required. After all, I wanted to be liked.

When the 2005 *King Kong* film appeared in theaters, many black reviewers noticed its inherent racism. But my friends, like many white reviewers and audiences, happened to consider this a "misinterpretation." I had found myself on one particular day with good-hearted liberals who were simply fed up with black folks seeing racism in everything. One person even went so far as to insist that the first version of *King Kong* had nothing to do with race. Of course, a culture does not wish to see its basic fears analyzed—especially when a beloved classic icon is being attacked. The annoyance and petulance that reared its head when we read *King Kong* reviews citing the racism in the movie was enough to silence me and remind me that even friends cannot entirely be like-minded. Or, at least, to make me attempt to find any other "real" or interesting interpretation that did not have to do with race.

I tried to forget that Western civilization creatives have always used "dark primitives" to represent the uncontrollable savage "beast" within humans. But it was difficult. That blond captive woman still bugged me. Why must the "beauty" be so Nordic, so like something out of *The Birth of a Nation*? I tried my best to engage the story, to re-create it

emotionally (without cultural references), to imagine a world where something beautiful, good, and white was the powerful, destructive force worshiped by the islanders. Or that the dark, primitive, savage beast/id symbol was the thing that needed protection. Or that the protectors were dark-skinned. I suppose this creative exercise could have worked if I had gone at it wholeheartedly. But I wanted to be honest. Why twist myself out of shape simply to seem open-minded and not chained to my race? Why go out of my way to pretend the culture I lived in was nonracist? Why try to prove to my friends that I was unlike those other blacks who were so inclined to "play the race card" and see racism in everything? Isn't that why some of my white friends liked me? Because I understood their world and was not suspicious of their heartfelt benevolent goodwill toward blacks?

As it also happened, we were simultaneously reading *The Decameron*. We had traveled the world through *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Racine's *Phaedra* (in the original French, mind you), *Hamlet*, *Washington Square*, and tons of Western poets. *The Decameron* is a book of stories, adaptations really, by Venetian citizen Giovanni Boccaccio. The stories are told over the course of ten days—ten stories a day. The stories have different themes, and Boccaccio explicitly declares that the stories of the first day deal with discretion, specifically the ability to respond to ethically complex situations in a discreet manner. One can of course imagine that discretion would be very important in a city as multicultural as Venice, where many races, religions, and classes mingled. Our little group had also studied Shakespeare's *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice*, and had gone to see the latest film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, and we considered ourselves "well-versed" in the cultural complexities of Venetian life.

I was no stranger to discretion. Nor was my group. We had recently seen M. Night Shyamalan's film *The Village*, and I had noted how the villagers had created a world of like-mindedness. I had stated that being safe was often one of the chief talents of a Shyamalan character. But back to *The Decameron*.

Decameron . . . first day, third story: The tale is that of Melchizedek, his three sons, and three rings. It is one of Boccaccio's most famous adaptations. To paraphrase the story: When the Muslim king Saladin finds that because of his many wars and overly generous acts, his treasury is depleted, he calls Melchizedek, a wealthy but miserly Jew, to his palace in Alexandria. Saladin knows that Melchizedek will not give him any money voluntarily, so he devises a plan. When Melchizedek arrives at the palace, Saladin asks him, "Which of the three great religions is the truly authentic one: Judaism, Christianity, or Islam?" Melchizedek immediately realizes he has been put into a dangerous situation. The Jews and the Christians are living peacefully in Saladin's kingdom because the Islamic kings are very tolerant. Melchizedek cannot deny his own religion, nor can he in good conscience praise another. But, being discreet, he tells Saladin a story about an old man who had three sons and an inherited ring. For succeeding generations, the favored son of the family would be given this ring as a sign from his father that he was the principal heir. But the father in Melchizedek's story loved each of his sons equally, and since all the sons were obedient, worthy, and virtuous, he was unwilling to give the ring to only one. He therefore made two duplicates, and gave each son a ring. When the man died, the true ring could not be authenticated and each of the sons' claims remained unresolved. Melchizedek then adds that the same can be said of the

three religions: Like the three rings, their claims too remain unresolved. Praising his friend's discretion, Saladin spares Melchizedek's life.

It was clear—to me, anyway—that the story was essentially about using discretion to avoid a trap. Boccaccio had grouped this story with others that also dealt with discretion; he had even stated that the story was about discretion. However, I soon discovered that my fellow readers, like many modern white critics, thought the story of Melchizedek's three rings was Boccaccio's way of pleading for religious tolerance. They considered this the only interpretation. My interpretation of this, as the only religious person in the group, was that the only people who would think that *that* specific interpretation was the *only* one were people who lived among their own kind and who could never understand the real contemporary dangers of declaring one's heartfelt religious beliefs.

My group mates all thought that all religions were equally true, and had taken Boccaccio into their corner. One of them, a woman from a small Greek island who had been raised Greek Orthodox, had told me of her medical school days in Belgium, a land of blue-eyed, pale-skinned people who, back in the sixties, had treated the Greek student community as if they were uneducated, diseased peasants. This friend had long ago internalized her oppressors' scorn for religion and uneducated peasants. And, having capitulated, she had forgotten the fear of losing livelihood, life, or peace of mind. In Belgium and in the United States, being nonreligious was the enlightened, acceptable way of being, and she was now a free, modern, and hip suburbanite with no strong unpopular convictions that might once again make her an outcast. Like the daughter of the man killed in Auschwitz, she simply found those who held an extreme

religious viewpoint to be dangerous. This was an understandable position, of course, but I was not about to endanger anyone.

I insisted that the story could be interpreted in another way. Couldn't Boccaccio be saying that in a multicultural world, those with strong, heartfelt beliefs might have to learn to mince words, even going so far as to pretend that their religion is equal to all others? Such an opinion goes against the grain of both multiculturalism and democracy. All across the United States, adults and adolescents, teachers and students are taught that not only do those in a multicultural society feel free to express themselves, but they also understand the "other" more because they are truly listening with open minds. I was arguing that, in a multicultural society, the emotional and financial consequences of speaking honestly about our hearts may be so harmful to the speaker that heartfelt beliefs are rarely discussed. The ideal of open-mindedness only works when we know we have nearby allies who will stand up for us.

I remember an incident that occurred in a church I attended, another clear case of misinterpretation. At least I thought so. The minister stood up and delivered a sermon from the book of Numbers. The storyteller, traditionally thought to be Moses, begins: "Miriam rose up against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had married an Ethiopian woman." The white minister proceeded to give an entire sermon about "speaking against the Lord's anointed." True, that was part of the story. But why did he choose to share the words Moses used to relate the episode? Moses clearly implied that Miriam rose up against Moses "because of the Ethiopian woman he had married." Now, whether Miriam was merely being clannish and prejudiced, or whether

she simply disapproved of the woman for other reasons, this minister, who was known for speaking out against interracial marriages, simply sidestepped an incident where God apparently didn't care that His appointed leader had married a woman from another race. I wanted to call his attention to this, but I knew I would only be accused of being too race-conscious.

The freedom to speak one's opinion is a thorny one. In a multicultural society, it's often necessary to be careful in unknown company. If one isn't careful, a conversation might reveal what others interpret as narrow-mindedness, or as being unenlightened, or selfish, or paranoid, or exclusive. If his or her money, work, or peace of mind depends on it, the nonracist in a room full of racists will learn to "pass" in much the same way that a racist in a room full of nonracists will quickly learn discretion. Same, too, for the Christian in a room full of atheists, or an atheist in a room full of Christians. Freedom of speech depends on a person's willingness to stand apart from the herd, and suffer the consequences.

Back to M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*. One of the major talents of Shyamalan's characters is their ability to keep their hearts emotionally safe. The occupiers of the village have become experts at emotional safety. They choose words wisely. They seek out allies. But Shyamalan exhibits this trait in other characters, too. Haley Joel Osment's character in *The Sixth Sense* knows how to appear sane. He draws pretty pictures about rainbows instead of pictures of suffering ghosts. Samuel L. Jackson's very breakable guy in *Unbreakable* feels allied to the unbreakable hero, yet he throws in a few extra murders in order to evade detectives who are after him. Emotional and psychological safety often make these characters quite skilled at passing.

The Village is an odd film. One of the major problems with the people who live in the village is that they don't like "city folks," because city folks killed their relatives. Before entering the village, the residents had two problems that required them to pass: They had to pretend that they were healed and had attained "closure" (after all, that is what mature people do after the deaths of loved ones), and had to pretend to like "city folks." They had lived in the city, pretending not to be depressed. But depression, like other social taints, needs to be hidden. And so after finding allies, they decided they could no longer continue passing. They could have roamed the world shouting, "I am breakable!" "I see dead people," or "I'm in an emotional crisis and unable to deal with society as it is." But they chose something less controversial and more controlled. They created their own reality by living in a village closed off from the world. (Luckily, they had the wealth to create it as a gated community.)

Many things—congenital, political, religious, emotional—can turn a person into a minority among the herd. Shyamalan is an East Indian, a minority in the United States. His isolated characters are minorities in their own worlds. Passing is always a matter of safety, and there are always truths to be revealed or left untold.

Why? Because there will always be people, like Saladin, who seek to see our hidden truths, who bait the indiscreet in order to destroy them. There are, in short, folks who want to know if you talk to dead people, who want to know if you're fragile and breakable, who want to know if you hate city people, who want to know if you're an ignorant, cruel, religious jerk; folks, in short, want to know what you think so they can either put you away forever or feel safe with you.

Some people don't mind living in the world in a duplicitous

manner. Some seek safety. They do not take up the pen or the sword to destroy the "other." They do not preach to "the other." They do not befriend "the other." They live in a strange truce where, to the best of their abilities, they pretend "the other" does not exist. Like the characters in *The Village*, they live in their version of cultural or emotional gated communities.

Artists desire to communicate, and those who belong to certain nonparadigm communities must learn to deal with this complex issue of passing. They ask themselves: Am I to be an ambassador, mediator, or guardian? Should I discuss those matters that cause me to be on the outskirts of the dominant society? Should I be discreet? Should I develop a "live and let live" attitude? As a black writer, I've been taught for years that we black creatives are infiltrators who are supposed to subtly fight the power. The poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—Success in Circuit lies." Circuit is what made Melchizedek successful, and many beloved writers have remained beloved simply because they told their truths slant.

It is clear, however, that in a multicultural, democratic world, there will always be those who disagree with us. Often, like Saladin, they will be more powerful than we are. The person who finds herself in a group where she clearly does not fit in must decide if she will choose safety or self-expression. There will be those who don't know how to be discreet and will accidentally "out" themselves. A religious person might, in an unthinking moment, mention her Bible in a group full of Bible-haters. Or a gay person might accidentally speak of his partner in front of a homophobe. There will also be those who are simply tired of being discreet and who feel their souls crushed under the weight of all that secrecy.

These will want to drag some hidden truth into the light, disregarding the possibility that not passing will create major heartache. Truly, each individual is an amalgam of many peoples, a person who might fit into different societies, cliques, bands, and tribes.

I recently had a white friend in a writers' group ask me, "Why do you always write about mixed couples? That's a very bad habit of yours. Can't you write about normal couples in regular same-race relationships?"

I suppose I could, but I don't want to. I want to write love stories that heal my soul. I am married to a white man and I want to tell love stories about black women and white men. The white writer either did not want to see the importance of my life experiences, felt uncomfortable with interracial relationships, or perhaps (I'll give her the benefit of the doubt) didn't realize that by asking me to write in a "normal" way she was trying to nudge me and my writing toward a little space she considered proper and appropriate.

But she was speaking from her privileged status as a "normal" person, someone who—like the "majority" of people in the world—is in a same-race relationship. I suppose I should have challenged her, but the emotional fact is that when among the normal, the nonnormal person often forgets how different he or she is. An accusation or call to normality does the trick of getting the nonnormal person in line.

The nonnormal will always interpret stories and films differently than the herd; and the herd, because of majority privilege, will always consider the nonnormal a bit paranoid, touchy, or contrary. But there are enough allies out there who will understand us and enable us to speak, breathe, and interpret freely.

Unfortunately, in that small world (the writing group), that writer

friend had a large say. She was quite a mocker, and I remembered all too well how she had railed against my "idiosyncratic, touchy misinterpretation of such a silly little children's story as *The Little Mermaid*." (I had said that I didn't like the Disney version of the story because the mermaid gave up her culture and her people merely for love.) Realizing that I had accidentally revealed myself, I quickly retreated and therefore did not challenge her interpretation of my "habit." I kept quiet and seethed at her call to normalcy, knowing that—whatever her wishes—I would write what I wanted to. Being quiet was easy because in a world larger than that writing group I had allies. I was writing for them.

BEHIND THESE MASCARAED EYES:

Passing Life in Prison

NIKKI LEE DIAMOND

From the moment of my arrest in 1976, and then through my stay at county jail and the California Institution for Women (CIW), I was pointed at and whispered about by both staff and inmates. It seemed that their personal goal in life was to inform anyone who would listen, "There's the girl who used to be a guy," casting doubt as to whether I belonged in a women's prison. It made no difference that in county jail I had been locked in the women's facility. And when I was sent to the women's penitentiary, it was apparently beyond their cognitive abilities to accept my presence as legitimate.

I entered the reception center at CIW and gave my name to the nurse who would take my vital signs and perform a physical examination

and a Pap smear. Instead of examining me, she immediately exited the office. A few moments later, a female guard came into the room and told me to follow her. When I asked why, she stated, "That is none of your business. When you are given a direct order here in this prison, you obey it without hesitation. Do you understand?"

I responded that I did, but that I also had the right to know where I was being taken. She remained silent. I followed her down several hallways and through several doors, into the parking lot. Then she led me through the gate, toward a building that looked like a hospital. Again I asked her where we were going. She replied, "It is for your own protection, because we have had several threats made against your life."

I knew that she was lying and I confronted her. "I don't know how that could possibly be the case, because no one even knows that I am here."

"Oh, if you only knew how many people know you are here," she said.

She led me into the hospital and took me to a caged-in cell, unlocked the door, and ordered me to enter. Inside sat a bed frame with a mattress on it, what looked to be an open shower stall, and a toilet and sink. I sat down on the bed with my back to the doorway. I wasn't going to let anyone see me crying. Nearly an hour later, a man came up to the door and started talking to me. I remained silent.

He said, "Do you know who I am?" Again I did not answer. He continued, "I am the chief medical officer here. I am also the chief psychiatrist, and I am here to tell you that this is a prison for women, not for those who just think they are women."

I stood up on that note, turned and faced him, then very quietly said, "And psychiatry is a profession for qualified doctors, not just those who got their licenses out of a Cracker Jack box." Then I turned my back to him.

About an hour later, another man came to the caged doorway and said, "I am the chief deputy warden here in this prison and your fate rests in my hands. I can and will send you to the Vacaville medical facility. They'll know what to do with you there." Vacaville was the men's prison.

I stood and faced my adversary. "You may be the chief deputy warden, but I am the great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter of the chief medicine woman of the Huron tribe of the Iroquois nation, and I am certain that the superior court judge who sentenced me to this seven-to-life sentence at the California Institution for Women would not take too kindly to you snubbing his decision and sending me elsewhere. He ordered me to be examined by a doctor and a nurse, who deemed me female, and I was housed with the other females in that county jail for my nine-month stay. If you insist on negating his decision, I will advise my attorney to inform the judge." I turned my back and sat back down on the bed.

My next visitors were two guards who told me to approach the door and turn around with my back to them. I was to be escorted elsewhere. I did as I was told. They handcuffed me and took me to a doctor's office. A doctor and two nurses entered the room and told me to disrobe, so they could determine if I qualified for placement at CIW.

"I will not disrobe with two male officers in the room," I told them. "You can read the report submitted by the doctor and nurse at

the county jail. I will not be subjected to this treatment just to satisfy your morbid sense of curiosity."

The two male guards exited the room, and were replaced by two big, burly female guards. I was instructed to remove my clothing, or else they would remove it for me. I knew I would be charged with two cases of assault on prison guards if they forced themselves on me; I would be found guilty, and receive a great deal more time added to my sentence. I knew that I had to decide which battles to fight. I removed my clothing and was subjected to a complete physical examination, including a cavity search. Humiliated, I clamped my mouth shut, locked my jaw in place, and refused to allow them to see any emotion play across my face. Once the search was completed, I was ordered to get dressed again, and was rehandcuffed and taken back to the caged room in the hospital. Three weeks passed, during which I was verbally harangued. One of the inmates threw food at me, and guards who walked past my cage uttered the vilest remarks, making sure I could hear them. I did not eat. I did not respond to anyone.

One day, a male guard came to my cage and said, "Nikki, my name is Smitty. I have been on vacation for the past three weeks, but I hear that folks around here have been giving you a pretty rough time. Then again, I also hear that you've given them hell back. I will take you outside to the hospital yard so you can get some sunshine on your face if you come with me. There's a nice breeze blowing and I think you might enjoy some time away from this depressing cage."

I got up and extended my hands to Smitty so that he could handcuff me, but he told me that wasn't necessary. He opened the door. I

walked with him down the hallway and out the side door into the sunlight, where the sun was so bright that I had to keep my eyes squinted.

Smitty offered me a smoke. We talked for a couple of hours and smoked his whole pack. Smitty told me that he had worked at CIW for nearly fifteen years and, to his knowledge, I was the first sex change that CIW had seen in its twenty-six years of existence. He told me not to worry, that some of the guards and medical staff had made complaints about the manner in which I had been treated and that I would probably be returned to the reception center sometime that afternoon. He told me, "Girl, you just buckle up for the ride and don't give them anything. They may not like your being here, but they've got to admire your spunk." Then he took me back to the cage, apologized for what I'd gone through, and said to hang tough. I knew that I was destined to endure all that was thrown my way in whatever manner I could best handle it. But handle it, I indeed did.

During my brief time at the reception center, I had met Terry, an inmate cook. She approached me one day and told me that she had a sister named Michelle who was also a sex change and she wanted to be able to relate better to her. It was obvious that they had once been very close, until Michelle pulled away, went to San Francisco, and isolated herself within the community of those who were also in various stages of "changing." Terry and I became very close, especially once I was also assigned to work in the kitchen. We talked for hours at a time. As a result of our interactions, she wrote a letter to her sister and told her about me. When Michelle responded positively, I began to write to her as well.

After I had been properly evaluated and passed all my medical examinations, I was allowed to be transferred to the main yard,

affectionately referred to as "the campus." Because Terry's friend Kim was a clerk for one of the lieutenants, I was moved into the housing unit where they both lived. They showed me the ropes and initiated me—showing me where things were located within the prison and how the system worked. I grew to love these women for taking me under their wings and schooling me.

Approximately three weeks after I moved to the campus, Kim told me that there was a job coming available, where I could work in the clinic as a lab technician. Since I had received medical training as a corpsman in the Army (yes, I served in the military for a while, after taking my oath of allegiance on my seventeenth birthday), Terry and Kim thought I was a shoo-in for the position. They walked me to the administration building on the day of my interview. They hugged me and kissed me, and wished me well. I waited for nearly forty-five minutes before I was called into the office for the interview. When I walked into the room, four male guards were positioned in the corners of the room. Needless to say, all of my survival instincts went into high gear just as the interview began.

"Miss Diamond," the interviewer declared, "since it is obvious to us that you are having a homosexual affair with two of the women on this campus, we have decided that you will not be given the job for which you are applying, and you will instead be taken to the psychiatric treatment unit, where you will stay until a complete psychiatric evaluation and work-up have been performed. We will not allow this type of behavior to continue on your part."

I interjected, "I am *not* involved in any type of relationship like that with *anyone*."

"We saw you kissing and hugging those two women when you approached the building. These guards have been called in to escort you to PTU. This interview is concluded."

As I got up from the table, I walked out of the room and slammed the door behind me. It was immediately opened by one of the guards. I was handcuffed and escorted down the hallway and out of the building.

Terry and Kim, who had been waiting outside, were stunned when they saw me being escorted in handcuffs. "Girl, what in the hell happened?"

"They accused the three of us of having an affair," I told them. "They are taking me over to PTU. Pack my things. Don't let them take anything!" I yelled out my last request as I was pulled along by the guards.

I fought the transfer to PTU for nearly a year, without success. During that time, I received a "pass" that allowed me to go to the main campus during the day to work in the garment factory known as PIA (Prison Industry Authority). One evening, while I was in the dayroom watching TV, one of the girls began screaming in the hallway, hands clasped to her face in abject terror. I ran from the TV room to see for myself the horror of what she had witnessed.

An officer named Clarence was holding the hands of a woman named Dee and had her pinned to the wall. The entire floor was covered in her blood. She had slit both of her arms from wrist to shoulder and shards of glass were scattered across the floor. I saw that Dee's eyes were glazing over; she was going into shock. I ripped off my T-shirt (even though I was braless) and told one of the women who had gathered at the doorway to grab the towel off the towel rack by the

sink. I tied my T-shirt into a tourniquet around Dee's shoulder. As I prepared to tourniquet Dee's other arm, I issued an order to two prisoners standing nearby.

"Go down to the nurse's station and tell them we need the gurney. Hurry! Run!" The women did as I ordered.

Officer Clarence directed his attention toward me. "Nikki, I'll handle this."

"Clarence, hon, I don't mean to be pushy, but I think you had better lie down on that bunk right there because your color has gone ashen." He sat down on the bunk, all the while keeping his hands pressed against Dee's body in an attempt to hold her stable. The gurney arrived a short time later. I hoisted Dee onto it and tied the security straps. I told Clarence, "Call OPHU [the outpatient housing unit] with the emergency arrival of a suicide attempt. Have them send the ambulance to the clinic. Tell them to send the medical cart immediately or Dee is going to die."

The three of us rushed down the hall, holding the sides of the gurney. I screamed for someone to unlock the door at the end of the hallway. However, by the time we got to the end of the hallway, the staff had only made it a quarter of the way down the long hallway. "Hold her sideways," I yelled. "We have to break through that window." And we did just that.

We got through the broken window and ran to the gate as the medical cart pulled up. Seeing that we were carrying the gurney, the nurse unlocked the gate. We went through and put the gurney onto the cart.

"Hurry, or she is going to die." I sat beside the gurney on the back of the medical cart.

"Nikki, get down off the cart!" one of the staff members yelled at me. "You are close custody and not even supposed to be out of the housing unit at this time of night."

I went back into the housing unit reluctantly, and over to Dee's cell. There were two staff members near her doorway. One of them was vomiting; the other was taking pictures of the carnage.

"I don't know who's gonna clean up this mess, but it certainly ain't gonna be me," the vomiting officer stated with contempt.

"It ain't gonna be me, neither," said the cameraman, shaking his head.

Nurse Fourcand finally arrived at Dee's cell, looked in, and said, "Nikki, I'm sorry I couldn't get here any sooner. I had two patients in full seizure. If Dee lives, it will be due to your heroic efforts."

"Thanks," I replied. I offered to clean up Dee's cell, but it was past lockdown time. The nurse offered to call the watch commander and let him know that she would stay to supervise me.

The watch commander approved my offer to clean up the cell. I cleaned with as little noise as possible so as not to disturb the other inmates, often pulling the cell door nearly closed so that when I wrung out the mop it wouldn't echo down the hallway. When I was done, Nurse Fourcand complimented me on my expediency. "And Nikki," she said, "I am going to see to it that you are not charged for breaking out that window either."

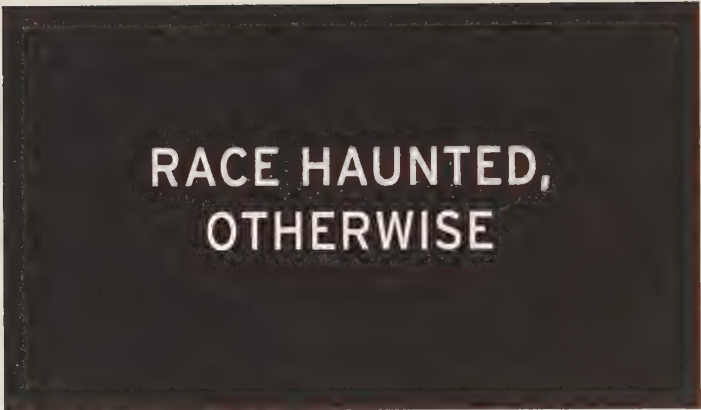
A few days later, I was given a copy of two "chronos" (commendations), which had been written by Nurse Fourcand. One credited my actions as having been instrumental in saving Dee's life. The other commended me for the manner in which I had cleaned up the cell. A

few days after that, I was taken before the inmate classification committee, wherein my application to be moved back to the main campus was not only approved, but where I was again commended for the actions I had taken with regard to Dee's suicide attempt. I was moved to the campus the next day. Dee survived her ordeal, and would later write a letter on my behalf, addressed to the Board of Prison Terms, stating how much it had meant to her that I'd saved her life.

During the early years of my incarceration, I dealt with being called every derogatory name in the book. I was in my mid-twenties, and had already survived a lifetime of brutality—incest and rape by first my father, then my older brother, then the jocks at high school. Then I'd survived an abusive relationship where my boyfriend had ordered me at gunpoint to tie up a man who he later killed. That was what had landed me in prison. I was convicted of murder, even though I hadn't taken anyone's life, or known that a murder was about to take place.

In prison, I was determined to earn my respect the hard way. I talked tough. I looked people straight in the eye when they made comments about me. Faced with yet another ignorant guard, I would exclaim, "Obviously you haven't yet grasped my opinion of the male of the species." Then I would grab some air at the level of my waist, and make a swiping motion as if cutting through something. There were also those rare occasions with other inmates, when I was not in the mood to be the gracious lady I had worked so diligently to become. I would walk up to those who were snickering or talking behind my back and say, "Believe every word of it. There's a whole

lot more you aren't being told, though. Maybe you'll figure it out in time. Then again, you might not have enough time hanging over your head to even come to know yourself, let alone figure out anything about anyone else."



RACE HAUNTED, OTHERWISE

ERIC STANLEY

Cobblestones slope toward the river where tobacco warehouses fence the water's edge. The crumbling bricks and mortar map out a story of an antebellum past, when tobacco harvested from the surrounding plantations was dried, packed, and shipped down the James River to markets in the North and for export to Europe. These tobacco warehouses stand today as memorials to African blood and transnational capital; white masters and black slaves. Their ghosts, still dwelling in the floorboards, speak in sticky-sweet smells of tobacco haunting the air. Gusts of watery wind blowing off the river's edge offer us a trace of the deaths these slaves were forced to live.

I tell ghost stories because Richmond buries its racial history deep

under piles of dogwood leaves, Confederate statues, and gallons of sweat tea. I want to avoid cauterized narratives, the ones we all know, of the Southern slaveocracy and easy Emancipation. At the end of those stories, Lincoln becomes a savior of black folks and the horrors of slavery are replaced with the joy of waged labor. Race becomes parsed into discrete categories, biologically bound, intelligible, and ahistoric. The stories I want to tell don't ascend into redemption and revival, they collapse into the worked soil from which they grew. My accounts are quilted together using tattered remnants of what others threw out or thought too stained to use. Histories failed, lives unremembered, graves never marked; this is the fabric of my Southern patchwork.¹

What better guides are there than the ghostly disembodiments of the living dead to walk us through these grounds? After all, slavery was morally constructed on the racist *common sense* that black slaves were already good as dead. I summon ghosts as my guides because they, themselves, trouble this life/death divide that seems to stabilize so much of what we believe(d) "race" to be. Just as ghost stories are methodologies for speaking the impossibility of invisible subjects, this story should be equally unbelievable. Unbelievable, not so much because ghosts are child's play, but because hundreds of years later the racist structuring of the United States has changed so little.²

: ***Betrayer in White*** :

If I am going to tell of haunted racial passing, poverty, gender transgression, and the Southern tobacco fields then I must trace a first sighting. This story, like all quilts, could have a different pattern, an alternate arrangement of fabrics whose blanket would look and feel much different.

What I want to think through is how whiteness, like the larger category of race, is always a meeting of markers of difference, and thus passing as white, and embodying white privilege, may be a bit muddier than thought. The question of passing has long since animated national hysterias around race, gender, and sexuality. These national panics have materialized as antimiscegenation laws, which intended to build juridical barriers between racial mixing, in hope of preserving knowable, and easily readable, racial categories. The crises that racial passing produces are also disciplined by fictions like the figure of the black male rapist, a representation of black men as hypersexual and in a constant state of sexual aggression directed toward the bodies of coveted white women. Perhaps the prison industrial complex is among the most visible manifestations of the continuance of these racial panics. Prisons, like tobacco plantations, are places where surplus labor can be extracted and racial segregation is crystallized.³ But segregation always leaves gaps where other lives are lived, and other types of "race" are performed, resisted, terrorized, and restricted. If we look toward these ghost stories as alternative genealogies it may help us to understand whiteness and white privilege in ways still unimagined. These ghostly genealogies of what has fallen out of dominant narratives will also force us to come up with new readings of "race" that can understand difference as surface, and also as more than skin deep.⁴

: *Down River* :

This Bessie Smith lived the blues but never sang them. Bessie was born to South Carolinian sharecroppers, one of the youngest of nine children. Her family soon lost their small plot of land and shack of a house,

and like many poor people of the Deep South, moved north in search of manufacturing work in the larger cities. Hopewell, Virginia, was a bustling river town boasting the 1915 opening of the DuPont plant, which made much of the dynamite used in World War I. The James River supplied the chemical plants, like DuPont, with an ample supply of water to cool machinery as well as a convenient and free disposal site for chemical waste. With no environmental restrictions in place, and a surplus of unskilled, mostly black, and all poor labor force, Hopewell became fertile with the dreams of life written in the body of death.

The family's move to Hopewell was prompted by the death of Bessie's father, a hard-faced man who dominated with divine brutality learned in the tent revivals of Southern Baptist summers and rehearsed in the horrors of his children's bedrooms. Once he died, supporting the family became the responsibility of the nine children, all of whom were sent to work as soon as they were able to wash.

Bessie and her siblings all found work at one time or another in the chemical plants and in the small community that had fashioned Hopewell into a holding cell of available labor. Bessie and her sisters worked sweeping floors in the chemical plants or in local shops and tending lunch counters. Women's work, as it were, taught Bessie of the domestication she was supposed to inherit, a way of life demanded by the pulpit and taught by waged labor. Bessie grew along with the Hopewell skyline. Smokestack after smokestack announced the productivity of the newly synthesized United States economy.

In the 1920s and early '30s, Hopewell was an assemblage of clashing cultures. Black families moved from surrounding cities and towns, and rural white folks also laid claim on the coveted chemical industry

jobs. The abundance of bodies and shortage of work maintained a permanent low standard of living and offered racial differences as one of the few easy targets of white supremacy and class domination.⁵

Bessie, now in her late teens, rejected the fire and brimstone of her pulpited past for the Navy boys at nearby Fort Lee. The alienation of a life spent in unconsensual labor pushed Bessie to leave the sermons and search for salvation in the flashy smiles of boys returning from the Second World War.

The first of these flashy smiles gave Bessie bruised eyes through which to see her newborn child. With the anchor hoisted, Bessie's abusive hope was gone before David was born. Alone, a single mother in her late teens with a family as poor as she, Bessie managed to make ends never meet. The church "food boxes" her family grew up with were reborn into food pantry dinners, government cheese, and late nights sweeping floors aisle by aisle.

Her second flashy smile was also a white Navy boy who promised to be different than the last. They were going to move downriver to Norfolk and get a house; he was going to support them, provide for them all the privileges of a white life she had rarely known. Again, the black eyes and baby came as rhythmically as the man left. Again alone, now with two small children, Bessie moved her two boys, David and Bubba, back to Hopewell. The Hopewell she returned to was a different place than that which she had left. The "good" jobs at the plants were quickly disappearing and the small bungalow houses, previously inhabited by factory workers, had been replaced with squat brick housing projects.

Unlike the urban housing projects of the early 1960s, these were built on the city's edge, by the now-abandoned chemical plants and

industrial junkyards. Each "neighborhood" was composed of cul-de-sacs of small one- and two-bedroom duplexes with patchy crabgrass in the front and high fences in the back. Gangs of stray cats begged at screenless screen doors, alongside the structures' equally hungry human inhabitants.

Bessie's tiny two-bedroom unit housed her, the two growing boys, and colonies of roaches, rats, and Navy men. The furnishings were a miscellaneous sight of broken chairs and cracked tables. The signal fires Bessie burned from the tips of her GPC cigarettes stained the walls mustard brown.

David and Bubba grew older, learning what it meant to live a welfare youth and the isolation of an unthinkable future. Just as it had for their mother, work became their leisure time. Collecting Coke bottles turned into pushing the same brooms in the same stores their mother did some decades before. A family legacy of hard labor, poverty, and government housing—the seasons had not changed.

The pressure of confined dreams produced a vicious culture where the most kids had to live for was the arrival of each other's deaths. David and Bubba grew up fast and bloody, as they had nothing to lose and even less to win. Home offered little rescue, as Bessie beat them in the only language she knew, a way of communicating more familiar than speech and more comfortable than love. Yet project life was not all horror. Hopewell was a depressed city, so poverty was more an indicator of normalcy than its double. David and Bubba never really knew they were hungry because they had never felt full.

The amber skies of Tuesday and Thursday's sulfur burns at one of the remaining chemical plants calibrated the calendar of Hopewell. On

these days, sulfur, a byproduct of chemical manufacturing, lit the sky in a smoggy haze of glowing poison. Fridays were known by the truck that sprayed DDT through the project streets, masquerading as an answer for the hungry Southern mosquitoes. David and Bubba would chase fast behind, hoping to appease the summer's sun through the misty breeze of liquid death.

As more and more manufacturing plants left, citing the "stranglehold" new environmental regulations were having on business and "economic growth," Hopewell, not surprisingly, became more visibly black. It was not that new black folks were moving in, but that the whites who could get out left in search of more work. But the poorest of the poor had nowhere left to go, no second plan, no more flashy smiling sailor boys. When Hopewell's economy was booming, the plants and the city made sure to keep the city itself underdeveloped. After all, it was not Hopewell they needed; it was only its continuing stream of heartbroken labor. This underdevelopment became even more apparent when all that was left was a contaminated river, housing projects, and violence.

Bessie saw both her boys get drafted into Vietnam, fighting to uphold the same systems of global capitalism, racism, and classism that had left them and their neighbors in Hopewell to die. Too poor to seek the safety of university exception, as-good-as-dead project boys fueled the war effort and filled the body bags. Both Bubba and David returned; they were fortunate. Most of the boys in the projects were not.

The third smile Bessie met was not so flashy. The excitement of youth and an emerging city was now the swell of sorrow and poverty as a way of life. Bessie gave birth to her third child, Joey, at the age of forty-three. Both David and Bubba had left Hopewell for the capital city

of Richmond, in hopes of outrunning their futures like the generations before. It was Bessie and Joey in the two-bedroom project, living out their deaths, punctuated by more men, card games with neighbors, and deep gusts of GPC smoke.

When Joey turned eighteen, the state forced Bessie to move into a one-bedroom unit a few blocks away. This unit was as anonymously devastated as the last, with apple-patterned contact paper peeling from the kitchen walls. Rattraps lined the walls, creating an ornate Victorian base molding of balsa wood and broken necks. Bessie spent her summer days slumped into the worn-out weaving of an aluminum lawn chair. A large coffee can kept guard at her feet, offering itself as receptacle for the flow of ash and butts. Her whitish skin became less so with hours spent on the cement stoop. Bessie, like many poor folks in the Deep South, had a genealogy created more out of folklore and fantasies than double helixes. Her family Bible, which now hides among my father Bubba's memories of her, offers but a single photo of her mother. Taken on the front porch of their South Carolinian clapboard house, her mother's face signifies a mixed history, where the lines between colonizer and colonized, master and slave, black and white were not so easily understood.⁶

: ***Remembering to Forget, and After*** :

Long summer Sundays spent sitting on Bessie's front stoop, I felt even then, in my tiny body, the weight of despair that hung heavy in the Hopewell air. *You smell, I smell, we all smell Hopewell*, was the more memorable rhyme the neighbor girls would sing with each twirl of the long double Dutch ropes. Hopewell's newer smell would welcome us

miles before we would get to Bessie's house, as sewage treatment plants had replaced the chemical manufacturing jobs of the past.

Distance was all I really remember of Bessie. That, and the sharp sounds of fatback crackling before she would empty the frying pan into her pot of soup and stir.

Alone, Bessie died of lung cancer in 1995 at a state-run nursing home. The four packs of GPCs she smoked a day were the obvious cause of the nonoperable cancer that eventually conquered her body. But this is surely not the only logic; after all, tobacco also signified a return to her history. A history haunted by both the whiteness of the master's whip and the scars on the slave's back. Cancer carved her body and filled it with excessive possession.

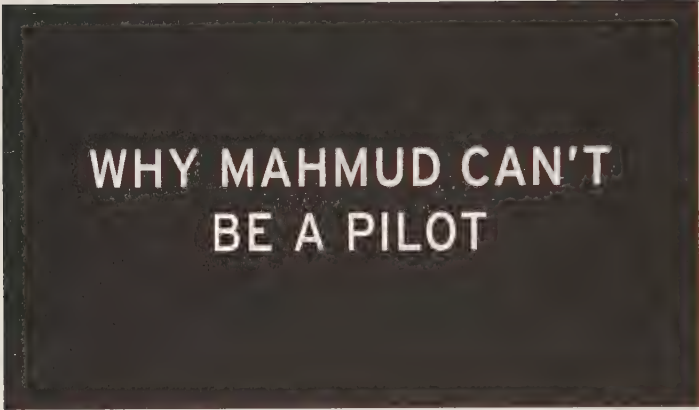
Bessie Smith, my grandmother, haunts me with questions whose answers seem impossible. I look toward her history, in hopes of an alternative history of failing—a resistance not born in political struggle or revolutionary consciousness but planted in tobacco fields left unharvested, grown into another kind of whiteness.

She stood no more than five feet tall, with dark skin, woolly black hair, and glassy cocoa eyes. Her skin, which bore traces of a brutal historicity, remembers the true secret of Southern living. The legacies of white men raping black women are this past that sweat tea and Southern hospitality want us to forget.

Telling the story of Bessie's ghost is, in a way, an attempt to bring into representation histories that cannot be told. This haunted space, between memory and forgetting, is at once passed over and also made wider with each word I conjure. However, I tell this story not simply to remember the dead, my dead, but also to deepen what whiteness might,

or might not, be. After all, Bessie's racism ran deep. For Bessie, a claim to whiteness, although failed, was both a way to deny the future of sorrow she was to inherit, as well as a disavowal of the history that made her. The irony is, of course, that Bessie, in her daily life, had little to no contact with other lighter-skin folks. Her neighbors were all black, and were among her only friends.

Her haunting symbolizes the impossibility of intelligibility, or at least intelligibility without suspicion and doubt. This impossibility surfaces with the shiver I feel, like a spirit drifting past my neck, every time I try to write Bessie's race: *white*, *black*, *mixed*? Indeed, Bessie's race lived and died outside and past the limits of my language or my ability to comprehend. The story her ghost makes me tell is not one of answers or even theory, only one of feelings and questions: How can an alternative practice of resistance be mined from these phantoms of failure?



WHY MAHMUD CAN'T BE A PILOT

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

First warm spring day in New York. A group is gathered at a West Village Italian: Bangladeshi professionals around the table, not my usual crowd of activists, artists, and troublemakers. Bonuses, overtime hours, conference calls, performance reviews, commodities, emerging markets, derivatives. As I listen to the flow of chatter, I search for words to hold on to—a mnemonic device to keep me in the conversation.

The occasion is the return of a few people from holiday vacation in Bangladesh. One banker had gone home to get married and we are celebrating his return with new bride. Two decades back, when I came to the U.S., this sort of winter migration was very common. People in Dhaka joked that these returnees were "winter birds returning for a

bride." Over time this has shifted, as more and more women are also coming to the U.S. on their own, rather than waiting to arrive as somebody's partner. Of course, a sell-by date for marriage comes up for them even before they leave Bangladesh. There are myriad other restrictions and double standards as well.

Even with all these restrictions, we have a roughly gender-equal table. Except for the new bride, every woman here originally came to the U.S. to study. But there are still strange rules about "appropriate jobs" for the women. Most of the men work on Wall Street; many of the women seem to be in marketing jobs. Temperamentally, the men are a bit removed from Michael Lewis's "big swinging dick"¹ archetype, but they dominate the conversation.

Everyone is bullish about things back in Bangladesh. Those freshly returned from vacation bring back excitement about a country going through rapid industrialization. *Things are happening in Dhaka now, I'm thinking of going back. Our classmates are all becoming CEOs. The Indians are doing it, why not us?* First India Shining, now Bangladesh Shining. A recent *Time Asia* cover story, "Rebuilding Bangladesh,"² seems to have done wonders. There's some grumbling in the politically savvy corner of the table that a Washington, D.C., PR firm was hired by the Bangladesh government to plant stories like this. But still, good press is good press . . . even if it is potted news.

I enjoy the loose talk. They may all be masters of the universe, but it's hard to feel threatened by any of this. A Bengali Wall Street high-riser is not quite the standard testosterone cowboy. Besides all the colonial baggage (the ethnic group selected as "gentle" and "bookish" by the British colonial project and raised to be the Empire's accountants,

not its fighting force), there is also a latent cultural distrust of overt enthusiasm and energy. These are factors that serve to dampen any aggression emanating from the macho Wall Street ethos. Soon enough, many of these Bengali professionals will hear the "call" and depart the trading floor to return to Bangladesh and start their own companies.³

At some point during our dinner, we discover that our headwaiter is Bengali. After listening to our banter for a while, he finally decides to break cover and reveal that he's from the town of Chittagong. His name is Mahmud and he's thrilled to find the restaurant's largest table occupied by compatriots.

"This is an Italian place," he explains. "We don't often get Bengalis here. Actually, never. Not spicy enough. *Fika*."

Everyone takes a shine to Mahmud. He's self-assured, especially when explaining various wines to the table. *Yes, the pinot is good, but not that year. Hmm, that other one has a smoky flavor. It won't go well with the fish. This one is from Coppola's vineyard. He's better at wine than film!* Mahmud has no hang-ups about showing off his expertise to a table full of Bengalis. Some people at the table drink, others don't. But there's no pretense that some Muslim "standard" has to be kept. I'm reminded of the *New York Times* profile of one of the oldest bartenders in a stately Manhattan hotel—a man who proudly told the reporter that studying chemistry in Bangladesh gave him the knowledge to mix drinks. But though he was quite comfortable talking to an American reporter, I wondered if he would be horrified if that story made it back to the Bengali press.

Bangladesh is Bangladesh; appearances must be maintained.

Throughout the evening, Mahmud keeps coming back and giving us

little tips. Yes, that fish is good. No, you won't like the asparagus dish. "It's fine for others, but you'll find it very bland." *Fika* again. He keeps up a steady line of questioning about what each of us does. Mahmud is particularly taken with the people who are senior management, especially the women. The presence of male executives is not a surprise. But female executives holding their own, while looking and sounding like a wife or sister he may expect to stay at home, is scrambling some part of his brain.

Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch. CBS and Ogilvy.

"*Bap re bap*. Our people are making it there, too?"

"Yes," laughs one woman. "Not just Indians anymore."

A confident laugh. The world is someone's oyster.

The dinner almost over, I lean forward and ask Mahmud what he does.

"I'm studying at City College. Second year."

"What's your major?"

"Oh, aeronautics. I'm studying to be a pilot." He goes on to other topics: course load. Favorite classes. Chinese TAs. Difficult accents. Tuition.

But I'm still on that phrase. *Pilot. Studying to be a pilot.*

After he leaves to get dessert, I turn to our host. "*Kothin obostha!* That's a tough situation. Does he really think he can get hired as a pilot with that name?"

"Don't be silly. Why should it matter? He'll be fine. Anything is possible." This is coming from a man who's a vice president at his company. Equities or something—I forgot what he said at the beginning of dinner.

Flash back to a recent quote from Raju Narisetti: "Becoming the

Deputy Managing Editor of [the *Wall Street Journal*] in the U.S. suggested that being South Asian is no hurdle or bar to get there."⁴

Anything is possible.

I was recently at a South Asian conference in Michigan. Halfway through the weekend, I realized the unintended dual track of the speaker selection. The Muslim speakers were all in the "angry activist" ghetto—the rapper, the comedian, and the filmmaker were talking about racial profiling, war on terror, civil liberties. The rest of the conference seemed to be on a planet called "Spelling Bee Champion Honors Student Most Likely to Succeed." High-profile speakers included a former White House CFO, bankers, TV reporters, and a physical trainer. This half of the conference stayed on message: We're not just gearheads in Bangalore call centers. We can do anything. "It's the best time for South Asians in America," one speaker said.

A triumphant narrative of a dream life. No time to talk about the other half of South Asian America. No space given to conflicting narratives.

Still, there were some moments of unintended comedy. The former White House CFO gave the keynote and talked about how "decisive" George Bush had been since 9/11. A few moments later, the Muslim comedian followed and started railing against the "war on terror." An awkward silence descended on the room. A lone smile on my face.

Later, I searched through the speaker bios and organizer names. There were hardly any Muslim names. Of course, my Muslim-dar is hardly foolproof. Before it became the vogue at the turn of the century for Bengali Muslims to have identifiably Muslim (read: Arabic) names, most people had Bengali names rooted in Sanskrit. Then there is of course the sizable Arab Christian population, perpetually miscat-

egorized. But with all those caveats, I felt reasonably certain I could identify Muslim students here by name.

I tracked down the one Bangladeshi student on the organizing committee—one of those solitary Muslim names.

"Where are the Muslims on campus? Aren't they involved with these events?" I asked.

"Well, there are a lot of competing organizations and events. This conference is called 'South Asian' but the Muslim students see this as an Indian thing. So they just stay away and do their own events," he replied.

Self-selection. I thought, further back into self-imposed ghettos. On their way to becoming a permanent underclass. And why did the Muslim students feel 'Indian' meant it wasn't their space?

Scanning the conference catalog for Muslim names felt like an unexpected act of essentialism. Growing up in Bangladesh, religion was linked in our collective psyche with obscurantism and repressive state power. If you were a progressive of any stripe, organized religion was the enemy. You identified as Bengali or *manush* (human), not as Muslim. You said *Joi Bangla* as a patriotic salute, not the more Islamicized *Bangladesh Zindabad*. You said goodbye with *Khoda Haḥez*, not the Arabicized *Allah Haḥez*. But transplanted across the globe, and facing many other cultural-ethnic vacuums that have developed over the last three decades, many Asian migrants seem to have slowly slipped into "Muslim" as a form of supraethnic identity.

The Michigan episode seems trivial, but when I look at those students, I see contours of the future "best and brightest," and there are no Muslims in sight. Pre-law, pre-medicine, or pre-business by their

second year, they are preternaturally professional and self-assured. A "summer job" is an internship at top-of-the-heap consulting firms like McKinsey. In fifteen years, these overachievers will be running corporate America. But the missing names on that roster make me wonder who is being left behind.

Or are they leaving themselves behind?

On the other side of the Atlantic, the underclass positioning of Muslim migrants is even more sharply visible. A 2005 survey found British Indians and West Indians outperforming their white working-class peers in education and jobs. This was especially visible for the "1.5" generation, children of the great wave of postcolonial migration. But in the same survey, two other Asian groups came in at the bottom: Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. For Asian Muslims, there are conjoined problems of spiraling unemployment, societal disenfranchisement, and voluntary self-isolation. The ghettoization is particularly marked for women. Unemployed men still find gathering spaces in local clubs, community centers, mosques, and streets. For the women, however, absence in the workplace is conflated with a larger absence from daily life. The Muslim woman in a Western city has lately become an all-purpose signifier. For Muslim men, she needs to be "protected" from a sexually curious and omnivorous society. For Western liberals (and lately, conservatives), the woman in *hijab* is the ultimate missionary project. Simultaneously mysterious, exotic, sexual, and repulsive, Muslim women are shrouded figures ("ninjas" to some Bengali wags) needing a rescue mission to free them from the clutches of tradition and Muslim men.

Pop sociologists look to religion for an easy formula to explain the stratified Asian underclass. But these equations obscure more than

they clarify. In London, Bengali women are rarely seen working in non-family-owned stores. Yet, in New York, they are a familiar presence in the service economy. Differing migration patterns are a bigger influence than religion. The bulk of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi migration came from rural and working-class communities in underdeveloped areas (Pakistanis from Mirpur and Kashmir, Bangladeshis from Sylhet).⁵ By contrast, the Asian migration to the U.S. went through a restrictive filter of job categories, student visas, or family reunification, resulting in a more educated immigration pool.⁶

The *Economist* recently concluded that, even after 9/11, Muslims have better opportunities in the U.S. than in Europe. In line with its ideological stance, the magazine lays the blame for Europe's "Muslim problem" on the mammaries of the welfare state.⁷ The problem, it seems, is the "excessive generosity" of the European state, which "encourages" Muslims to be lazy loafers. Dutch law professor Afshin Ellian posits,

*Five years ago, my Afghani sister-in-law emigrated to the United States, where she now works, pays taxes and takes part in public life. . . . [I]n Europe, she would still be undergoing treatment from social workers for her trauma—and she still wouldn't have got a job or won acceptance as a citizen.*⁸

These formulations fit smoothly with the apocalyptic fears of British journalist Melanie Phillips, who talks about the growing danger from "homegrown Jihadis."⁹

More nuanced writers, such as Sukhdev Sandhu, also detect signs

of a transcontinental divide in opportunities. Exploring the devastated town of Bradford (scene of 1995 and 2001 race riots, with Asian youth fighting police and white gangs), he documents the pervasive sense of dead-end life for Pakistani migrants:

Ambitious local kids feel themselves orphaned, doubly anachronistic. . . . So they flee. . . . In New York last year I found myself in a cab driven by a Bradford Pakistani who had spent the previous four decades working in a factory [in England]. "Why did I stay so long there?" he cried. "No opportunity, no future. Pure waste."¹⁰

Maybe things will be all right for Mahmud, after all? At least he's not in Europe? More of a future on this side? American dream, land of endless opportunity?

Mahmud's would-be profession is one rare instance in which being a woman could reduce potential friction. In spite of the example of Leila Khaled and other female hijackers, the "terrorist profile" remains the Muslim male. This is not to say women are not checked at airports, but within a different calculation—an "unknowing" mule or a seduced naif. So a Mahmuda may have a slightly easier time becoming a pilot. But then again, crazy patriarchy and power insecurities will trip up a female pilot in other ways.

Back to our dinner. The evening ends well. We have a nice bit of banter with Mahmud and promise to return. *Yes, please make a reservation in advance. I'll make sure you get the best table.* We move on in search of nightspots. The out-of-towners want to go to a club. The

rest of us pooh-pooh the idea of paying to get in. *Only tourists do that.* Our splendid unity is abruptly broken up by the cool factor.

Meanwhile, what about Mahmud? Is he a crucible or an exception? Will he sail ahead unencumbered by a name, a presumed religion and national origin, or bump into a glass ceiling? If there is a growing societal consensus that Muslims, especially men, cannot be trusted with jobs in national intelligence, biological research, airport security, or air travel, how will he even know? Job discrimination no longer needs to be clearly enunciated. Quiet execution and a gradual sidelining is more likely.

To take the long view, systematic race-based discrimination did not begin in 2001. Antiblack profiling is the original, well-worn template. The addition of a new "other" is only a slight variation in the formula. There is a slight shift in context as well. From drug dealer, criminal, and lazy worker to security threat, disloyal citizen, and ticking time bomb. From driving while black to flying while brown. A short, strange trip.

How does it feel to be a problem?



F2MESTIZO

LOGAN GUTIERREZ-MOCK

"You better not start thinking you're a man." This was my mom's official intervention in my transgender identity. She was helping me to pick out a dress shirt in the boys' section of a department store. I'd been binding my chest around my family for a year, and my mother was finally able to talk about it. She grabbed me, ran her hand down my back, and then my chest. I thought she saw my tattoos and I was sweating buckets, ready to run away in fear. Nope. She just lectured me about how I'd better not chop off my breasts and start thinking that I was a man.

"I never would have guessed." That's the response I usually get when I tell people I'm biracial. I guess that's a reasonable answer to give

a person with white skin privilege. But every time it cuts me. It erases my heritage, my experiences, everything I grew up with. When people use female pronouns with me it doesn't hurt like this. I get annoyed, frustrated, check what I did "wrong" in the mirror when I get home; but this discomfort doesn't separate me from my male identity. The people who read me as only white never ask me to prove that I'm trans. However, they constantly express their suspicions that I'm not actually biracial, and sometimes I feel like I need to carry pictures of my family in my wallet so that people will believe me.

In many ways, my mixed heritage served as a primer for my transgender identity: Being perceived incorrectly was nothing new. The fact that I was mixed also pushed me away from my family in a sense, because I was different (whiter) and they wanted me to assimilate. It was only through coming out to my family as transgender, and reclaiming my heritage, that I began to feel at home with my family.

"How far back did you have to go to find a person of color in your lineage?" read a question in an online forum after a workshop for female-to-male (FTM) transgender people of color at a national FTM conference I attended recently. I cried when I read this because it implied that I wear my mestizo/biracial identity like an accessory I can casually place around my neck when I want to access spaces for folks of color. This statement also cut me because it hit home: Some people in my family don't accept that we're of color. Even my mother insists that we're white, that we have Spanish blood. The few Spanish ancestors in our mestizo past somehow make my family white. Meaning better than *los indios*. Ignore *los morenos*, *mis tíos y primos*.

My *abuelitos* were the lightest-skinned people in their families,

and their children all have light(er) skin. They wanted the best for their family, which, in the 1940s, meant blend in, use your lightness, pass, be proud but don't be too loud. Marry white people.

My mother had three half-white children. Only one of us "looks" Mexican. And that sister is, conveniently, *la malinche* (the betrayer) and the fucked one, the addict who turned her back on her family and didn't talk to any of us for years. We grew up with my father, my mother, and my mother's family. *Tamales para las navidades. capir-otada* during Lent, *frijoles y arroz* with every meal. Spanglish at the dinner table.

Spanish was the secret language I treasured in *la casa de mis abuelitos*. Spanish was for a session *del chisme* (of gossip); it was the language my family laughed in, the language they used for the stories we in the younger generation were not supposed to hear. English could not hold those emotions. English was for passing in the world that told my family to go back to Mexico (never mind how long they'd been here)—the world that held them back for the heritage for which they felt both pride and shame.

Spanish was for loving, for remembering, for *la familia*. It was spoken around me, but never directly to me. My family prided themselves on how well I spoke English, how blond my hair was, how *white* I was. I was the baby, *la princesa*, definitely the spoiled one of the family. Of course I would go to college and then on to graduate school. The class privilege that I experienced within my family was linked to my white skin privilege. The most "successful" people in my family are my middle sister (who can also pass as white) and myself. Neither of us were taught or encouraged to speak Spanish. And our unaccented Eng-

lish, our white skin, and our Anglo surnames all set us up to be better (whiter), to go to college, to have *good jobs*.

Recently, my (white) dad told me how sorry he is now that he didn't learn Spanish after he married my mother in 1970. After thirty-six years of marriage to a Mexican American woman, after countless family conversations not understood or spent waiting for translations, after raising three biracial children, he finally realizes what my sisters and I were denied. He watches me struggle with my identity, with what it means for me to be a white person of color. I know that it hurts him to think that he could have done something different, that he could have stopped the enforced assimilation.

For years, I passed as white and I made fun of my heritage, invoking Cheech and Chong jokes about eating refried beans and getting a B in Spanish class; when I, too, got a B in Spanish, my friends thought my imitation was hilarious. My heart aches now to think about who I was then—a closeted queer woman with white skin privilege who hadn't done any work around her background or her own internalized racism. I had so much hate for myself that I couldn't begin to acknowledge my heritage.

I was a "Mexi Melt," a mutt, Mexican American, unsure of how to describe myself or voice my experiences. It wasn't until I became friends with folks who actually had some sort of racial analysis that I began to feel comfortable identifying as mixed. Those were all friends that I made through the Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC) when I came out as a lesbian. In 2000, I participated in the Youth Talkline training through LYRIC; one of the activities separated people into two groups—white folks and folks of color—in order to discuss race. I didn't know which group to join, so I asked one of

the facilitators. She was mixed, and thankfully she suggested that we form our own mixed group—she and I. For the first time *ever* in my life I had a discussion about mixed-race identities. That moment began an analysis of my identity and signaled a turning point in my life—the reclaiming of my family’s history, the history that was suppressed.

Choosing to take testosterone is what really pushed a reclamation of my background, and not in an I’m-scared-of-being-a-white-man-and-want-to-claim-some-sort-of-oppression kind of way. I don’t experience oppression based on my (white) skin; I experience privilege, and loads of it. In starting to think about what it would be like to be perceived as a white man, however, I actually started thinking about my heritage, the race dynamics of my family, the internalized racism, the reasons why I was pushed to be as white as I could. In many ways my heritage was denied through assimilation, silence, and invisibility. Being Mexican is a source of both pride and shame in my family—hence the insistence on our Spanish lineage and the lack of acknowledgment of our indigenous ancestors. I had to reclaim my heritage in order to move past the assimilation of my family.

In exploring the type of man I wanted to become, there was never a moment where I imagined becoming a white-only man or choosing to pass as white. I consciously chose my faggoty, divalicious, pink-is-my-favorite-color/trans masculinity. At the same time I also consciously chose to stop assimilating as white. I found my voice and began to speak Spanish. I focused my thesis on transgender mixed-race identities. I joined the board of directors for a mixed-race/transracially adopted youth agency, and I began to understand the importance of my family.

Coming into my mixed heritage was a homecoming for me that was intimately tied to my transgender identity. Sitting on the dividing line between male and female forced me to realize that my entire life I'd sat on a similar dividing line between Mexican and white. This dividing line, *esta frontera*, created a new identity in me: I am half and half, I am both, I am something different entirely:

Quando lives en la frontera people walk through you, the wind steals your voice. You're a burra, buey, a scapegoat. Forerunner of a new race, half and half—both man and woman, neither—a new gender.'

My whole life I have sat on the border between Mexican and white—pushed out of the Mexican side for not speaking Spanish and looking white, pushed out of the white side for being half-Mexican no matter how white I look. Twenty-six years spent between races prepared me for what it would feel like to be between genders—pushed out of femaleness for looking male and having facial hair, pushed out of maleness for having a vagina and breasts.

I struggled for many years with where I could fit in as a biracial FTM. Firmly placed within the borders of both race and gender, I have finally learned to recognize home. Home for me is in my mother, and the idea of my mother, *la Madre*. I was afraid of going home for years, afraid of owning my identities: mixed, transgender, Chicano, my mother's son who looks exactly like her white husband.

When I came out to my parents as trans, they didn't talk to me for a month. In that month I wanted to die, *porque sin mi madre, soy*

nada. My fear of going home was realized—I was not accepted, I was such a freak that they couldn't even speak to me. My boyfriend tried to hold me through that time, but I didn't want him, I wanted my mother. I wanted Chanel No. 5, long red fingernails running through my hair, soft hands rubbing my back, silk shirts and soft breasts to bury my face in. *Sin mi madre, soy nada*.

My mother and I have begun to heal since then, although this is a slow process. She still uses my birth name and mostly uses female pronouns when she talks about me. We talk on the phone every day, and I can honestly tell her what I'm doing in my life instead of the idle chat that occurred before I came out to her as being trans. We are healing because I allow her space: space to grieve for her daughter, space to be freaked out, space to deal with her internalized racism, space to fear her son, space to face her fears of Chicano men. She remembers my *abuelito*, who cheated on my *abuelita* and spent all the money with which he was supposed to feed seven mouths on card games and alcohol. She remembers her oldest brother, who forced himself on her prepubescent body. She remembers her *tios*, the ones who used to tell my *abuelita* that her family would never amount to shit and why even bother sending her children to school.

My transition from female to male is also a transition from an assimilated Mexican American into a biracial Chicano with white skin privilege. With my female-to-mestizo transition I challenge my mother's ideas of machismo and heteronormativity within my family. I didn't grow up to be the nice white woman she wanted me to be. I've grown up to be a faggy queer boy who paints his nails pink. I've created a new male identity within my family—an identity that embraces my female

past while insisting on my biracial transgender present: queer/mestizo/trans machismo. My mother needs space to accept *all* of my transitions so that she can welcome me home with open arms.

I want to tell my mother that I speak Spanish because I love her. I am trans because I love her. I am queer because I love her. I love women because I love her. Everything I am that makes me *hermoso* is because of her and my love for her. I have found my way home. *Gracias, mamá.*



PERSEPHONE

HELEN BOYD

Betty's gender is in the eye of the beholder. She butches up for a day at work, getting permission from union guys and security guards to photograph a building in midtown—no easy feat in these days of storm troopers on every corner—and despite her best upstate corduroy, Doc Martens, and loose jeans, they say, "This way, ma'am." She IMs me later in the day from the office she works in and asks me what it is, and I don't have any answer; it's anybody's best guess. It might be her shaped eyebrows, full lips, big eyes, manicured nails, almost no facial hair. And it always puts her head in a funk, worrying that her inability to pass as a man might disable her from being a husband to me.

One night we run into an old acting friend of hers when we've been

out socializing, she in spike heels and tight jeans and me in trousers. They haven't seen each other in ten years so I recede, nodding, waiting to be introduced, then receding again, listening, getting a little cold watching empty cabs pass. Her friend didn't know her fellow actor ever put on girls' clothes and last saw her playing Henry V onstage. When she says, "So what have you been up to?" it sounds to me like, "So other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?" Because even when she's fully *en femme*, as the cross-dressers say, old friends see the leading man she was when they met. Eventually Betty says something about her gender, instead, and then I stop receding, just in case she'll need backup, or help with Transgender 101, or just some kind of elbow squeeze that tells her I still love her and don't care what anyone thinks. Then the old friend asks, "Are you still acting?" and I recede again. Nothing else matters to actors but acting, anyway.

When I started being able to predict that as soon as Betty got up from the table I would be asked, "Which pronoun? Which name?" I realized that people don't trust what they see, anyway: They want to know the right answer, and they insist that only one can be the right one. If you don't tell them, they just pick one, anyway.

I see most of my partner's genders most of the time, so I'm as bad as she is at predicting what others will read, which side of their mental coin will land faceup when they flip it to decide if she's male or female. I care where she lands since I'm on the other side of her coin: How they read her foretells how they'll read me. Standing in a boutique store in Park Slope with her one day while the clerk chatted her up about a pair of pumps she was trying on in guy mode, I inserted myself by commenting

that the heel was a bit high for casual wear, even for Betty. They both looked up at me as if I'd been beamed in at that moment. Betty was just her usual self, focused on the shoes, confused that I'd even have something to say about them, or shopping, since I dislike both. But the clerk looked at me as if I couldn't possibly exist, as if Betty were that rare piece of vinyl that had been accidentally stamped a double A side. Betty was a drag queen to this woman, which meant I couldn't possibly be her partner, or even his.

I'm always surprised when people see Betty as a femmey gay man and disappear us, since for me—and for us—we are plainly visible, all the time, and more than visible, actually tangible, and not just to me. We are so obviously of a pair that we're also often asked if we're siblings. Narcissus and his reflection, maybe, but I don't know which of us is the real thing, which of us the reflection, or if our selves can be cleaved so easily into you/me or him/her. We don't divide evenly by two.

When we left the store that day I left feeling lacking. It was a huge revelation that other people could disappear our romantic relationship so quickly, and it chafed. I passed that day as her—shopping companion? Fag hag? Lesbian friend? I could probably tell you which if I could remember what shoes I was wearing, but I can't. I hadn't intended to pass as anything except her partner, but sometimes it just doesn't seem relevant to explain to a clerk that this is the person I have sex with, and live with, and plan my life with. A clerk doesn't really need to know, so I passed on clarifying.

When I'm with Betty I'm twice as many things twice over: I'm an actor's wife, a newlywed; for a time I was a fiancée and before that a girlfriend. I've been accused of being her beard (and she occasionally

mine), a closet case, her *domme*. (A cross-dresser guessed the last one, when I made the mistake of admitting that I liked cross-dressing when it meant instant wood. Does a woman have to be a *domme* to decide when a couple is going to have sex? Apparently.) So much of who I am is based on who I'm with, which means, because of Betty's many-gendered self, some of what I am is based on what she's becoming and some of what I am is based on what she has been.

The way gender lingers over time, in people's minds, remaining stationary even while the gender markers change, is remarkable. A person can have electrolysis, gain breasts, grow their hair, their nails, and their wardrobe, and the people who knew her when she was he will see *him* even when *her* breasts get in the way of hugs hello. I'd like to chalk it up to some basic inability for human beings to see and accept change, but I can't even convince myself of that. It's something more along the lines of how animals know their spawn by smell. Gender is like a tattoo—you can't really erase it but you can alter it by adding things, obscuring the original, creating something new out of what's there already. You see what's there and what was there, but you can't see the old tattoo or the new one distinctly.

So it goes for the partner of a transperson.

I used to be something you might call heterosexual—not straight, because *straight* carries connotations about picket fences and children and normalcy that have never been up my alley. It is awkward being monogamous around the poly set and legally married when I'm in queer crowds, but both of those things are as true as my heterosexuality, even if it's not easy to see any of them. They are the old tattoos, or the memorabilia that tells me how I ended up in this new place, with this

new tattoo, the same way a transwoman might see her penis as a reminder that she came by womanhood in a slightly different way than the expected route. Some women change their names when they get married; I changed my public identity instead: *queer though formerly known as heterosexual. queer though married. queer due to binary. queer in context. queer by association. queer due to no fault of my own, queer as a result of cupidity.*

Other female partners of transitioned transwomen tell me they're straight, and laugh when I ask if they've adjusted to being publicly perceived as lesbians. "But I'm not a lesbian," the partner insists, and I wonder about clarity like that. I wonder if she can't register that in most people's minds, *two women together = lesbians*, or if in some odd way she doesn't realize she's a woman who loves a woman. I wonder if she sees her partner's transitioned gender at all.

Maybe she does and she's just more authentic than I am, more able to remain steadfast in an identity she's sure of. I wonder if I'm the one who is hung up on what other people see instead of knowing at all times what I am.

When I'm not with Betty, I pass—as a dyke one day, maybe a rocker chick or a hippie chick gone urban the next. When the kids call me "ma'am," I know I'm passing as a middle-aged lady (which bugs me, though I'm beginning to use it in my favor on the subway with after-school gangs of garrulous teenagers). I know that if I put on a suit and lipstick I get treated better at the bank. If I'm wearing a bowling shirt, the guys at the hardware store assume I know something. If I'm wearing a bra with straps I haven't tightened recently, I'm simply a pair of breasts to the guys who sit on crates outside the 99-cent store. It doesn't re-

ally occur to me to think about what I am all the time, or to make sure others are clear on what I think I am. I assume the NYC subway is an underworld of passing, with me among many Persephones who are both wives of hell and daughters of earth. (Who was Persephone in her mind? Did anyone care to ask her? No. They don't ask me either. No one would even know the story of Persephone if she hadn't been torn in two; the whole point of her story is that her story isn't about her, but about her mother and her husband, fighting over how much time she would spend with either of them, underground or above. She brought spring as her mother's daughter, merciful judgments as her husband's wife. Would she have chosen to be only one or the other? Would her story have been told so many hundreds of years later if she had?)

I've stopped caring about what I think I am, and not because I've rebelled against some kind of essentialism; I've just realized that who someone else thinks I am has little to do with who I actually am, and that I have almost no control over what a person might see when they see me. Sometimes they don't have the language or the labels or the imagination to be accurate; some people think "masculine" excludes "woman" or that "heterosexual woman" excludes "masculine." Long before Betty, I figured out that I would be called things I didn't think of myself as. Mistaken for a boy at nine, called butch at seven, a lesbian at twelve, homeboy at seventeen. I knew myself as a daughter and a sister and a friend and an aunt. Maybe it's a function of being from a large family, but I can't imagine growing up the youngest of six without seeing myself in relation to others. It was like I was born into a contextualized identity, so it was only natural to marry into one, as well.

My family could never leave anything alone. Somewhere along the

line, the phrase "everything is relative" became, in our little clan, "everyone has relatives." It was just one way that we played with language, letting assonances elide into puns, or using backwards English to invent rhymes where there were none: Strangers at our table might wonder what skim klim was until someone got it out of the refrigerator. We were hyperv verbal, our dinner table a regular sparring match in sarcasm, so many jokes only relevant as responses, unable to stand on their own. Still, my parents and siblings never expected "everything is relative" and "everyone has relatives" to collide the way they did. The kids run with it—they call Betty "Jetty" because her guy name starts with a J—but it's entertaining to watch everyone else try to parse her relationship to me, to the family, since terms like "child-in-law" or "partner-in-law" would only baffle anyone who heard them. "This is my sister, Helen—and this is her, um, her . . . this is Betty." They were used to saying "husband," but most people don't see Betty and think "husband." They think a lot of things, but not "legally married heterosexual male."

Really, it's the one thing she doesn't pass as anymore, and on the other side of that coin, I don't pass as "the wife" anymore, either. But we still are those things. I have a piece of paper that says so.



TUCKER LIEBERMAN

A few months after finishing my master's degree program, I wound up wearing a customer service apron at a grocery store. It paid the rent and gave me time alone with my thoughts.

Customers say the darnedest things to people in aprons. The customer is always right, of course, so there is no embarrassment, no awkwardness, no question too stupid and no topic too inappropriate. Because I am only five foot five, customers had a great view of the top of my head. If I wanted to know what people thought of my *yarmulke*—no, what they *really* thought of it—I couldn't have made a better choice than to stand all day in a grocery store in an apron.

As I finished bagging one man's groceries, he asked me, "Is there

such a thing as kosher barbecue?" I told him yes, and then he wanted the full rundown on how and why it must be kept free from bacon, shrimp, uncertified hot dogs, blood, and American cheese, oblivious that the next customer's items were zipping down the conveyor belt straight at me.

One customer took me aside and told me excitedly that he was half-Italian and half-Jewish. Another had a Jewish girlfriend in South America and found it urgent to confide in me.

One couple carried a bag personalized with a dozen variations of the same blurry, poorly composed photo of themselves under the chuppah (wedding canopy). The woman edged down the register and approached me with one important question, one fellow Jew to another: "Do you know the Winkelmans?"

A Christian man who said he loved Israel and hoped to market his paintings to Jews came across to me as emotionally needy. I assumed the paintings were amateurish. The next time he came to the store, he brought photos, and I was surprised to see large canvases smeared with rainbow oils, buildings come alive like trees, suffused with light, majesty, and hope. One of these paintings was probably worth more than my biweekly paycheck. Yet I, the grocery bagger, was esteemed as this artist's marketing adviser and potential customer, because I wore a hat.

There was the eccentric woman with a British-accented mumble who had a daughter in Israel. There was the customer who gave me the warning—or underhanded attempt at finding out how observant I was—that Shabbat was coming and I had better punch out soon. There was an elderly Orthodox man who would gently quiz me on the current

holiday, and from whom I learned that there are fewer dietary restrictions on fish than on meat and that on Tisha B'Av one may work but not eat. There was a man on the street, around the time of Israel's disengagement from Gaza, who politely said hello and suddenly became irate, asking, "Why are you people giving up your land?" I shrugged, saw to it that he was getting on his way, and turned to get on mine.

Then there were those who wanted to convert me. One seized an opportunity to speak when he caught me in the parking lot. He droned on at length about "Precious Lord God Almighty" and said the coming of Jesus is prophesied in later Isaiah, but "the Jews don't read it, and I wish they would." I have, in fact, studied later Isaiah, and am content with one scholar's opinion that the text promoted the contemporary King Cyrus. But I had my apron on, so I only thanked the man and wished him a nice day. He looked hurt. I'm sure he felt he'd failed at "witnessing" to me and lamented that I was stiff-necked, hard-hearted, and bound for hell. Whenever I bagged his groceries after that, he avoided eye contact, which was easy because his eyes naturally fluttered toward the ceiling anyway.

Several customers told me the name written on the tag on my apron wasn't Jewish enough for their liking. One of these asked me my Hebrew name and indignantly said it was no good either. "Meir? Meir? What is this? I never heard of such a name. My son's name," he said proudly, "is Moshe Froim Hershel ben Ari Y'hudi v' Rivka Shlomit." It was pronounced like a mouthful of ramen noodles. "Now *that* is a good Jewish name," he opined for himself. Meir, in fact, is a common Hebrew men's name. A younger woman on the staff of my tour group in Israel had several friends who were also named Meir.

It took months for the grocery store manager to ask what kind of Jewish I was. "Just Jewish," I said, noting that I belonged to a Conservative synagogue up the street. I hadn't studied kabbalah with Madonna or served in the Israeli Defense Forces, and if I had, I wouldn't have had the energy to tell him the story. I was eating lunch, and I was off the clock.

I was commonly asked of my hat, "Where do you get those?" (A Jewish hat store, I'd say.) More rarely, "What is it called?" (*Kipa* in Hebrew, *yarmulke* in Yiddish, which probably means, as far as I care to surmise, "hat.") And also, "How does it stay on?" (Thumbtacks.)

I generally found these interactions more amusing than offensive. The mental record I kept became a way to entertain myself while bagging groceries. Most hat-wearing Jews would, I think, spend more energy on the study and practice of their religion than on the collection of other people's comments about it, and I do not want my admission of idiosyncratic interest to contribute to a stereotype of Jews with victim mentalities. I catalogued comments not as a form of complaint, but as the beginning of a search for patterns, to get at the meaning of these one-liners, and to understand how I was perceived by others.

As Christmas approached, the questions did not let up. They ranged from, "When are you going to get a Christmas tree *yarmulke*?" from the annoying support staff, to, "We couldn't get ahold of you before the stockings went up to ask if it was okay to write your name on one," from my caring boss.

My favorite of all time was a loud woman stuffing her face at the outdoor seating area of the grocery store with a girlfriend. Without so much as a "Hello" or "Excuse me" to get my attention, she hollered over to me: "Where do you come from?"

All four of my grandparents were born in this country. I had not fielded anything like that question since a Belgian graduate student studying with me in Boston ferreted out the same information, but she had far more tact.

"Smith Hill," I said.

"What?" she asked, smacking her food.

"Smith Hill." My Providence neighborhood was best known as the place where a Cambodian fourteen-year-old allegedly shot a black fourteen-year-old in the face over a ten-dollar haircut.

She paused, reflecting on my opalescent silk hat. "The Smith Alps?"

My most memorable customer never mentioned my hat at all. He was the man with neuralgia who routinely called the store to ask what temperature it was, as he could not tolerate cold air, nor lift more than a pound or two. While I carried his groceries, he confided in me that he was embarrassed of what the other customers thought of his wearing a sweatshirt in summer, and he looked to me for reassurance. "Everyone wears what they wear," I replied. We were solid after that. I saw the weight lift instantaneously from his bones. I guess I had known all along that although my customer service apron and *yarmulke* drew certain responses from people, aside from the interpretations we put on them, they were, after all, nothing more than pieces of fabric.

When not in the grocery store, and when the weather was cool, I would often wear a larger, embroidered hat that pulled down an inch or two over the sides of my head, ending just above my ears. It didn't look particularly Jewish; it could have been Muslim or African.

I liked that people didn't know what the heck it was. I felt safer on the street knowing strangers would have trouble pegging me as a wizard

or weakling, and that I could successfully pass as "other," leaving them mute. I felt safer in restaurants because I could order clams without criticism. The waitstaff didn't know that my hat indicated that I was not supposed to eat them—or, if they did know, they kept their mouths shut. They wore aprons. I tipped.

One Friday evening I ran an errand at the local mall. Business transactions are forbidden on Shabbat. A male vendor of skin care products yelled over to me with an Israeli accent: "Hey! Shabbat Shalom!"

"Shabbat Shalom," I answered, continuing on my way.

He gave me a dose of attitude. "What are you doing in the mall?"

"What are you doing in the mall?" I asked him back.

"Well, you don't see a *kipa* on my head," he said.

Is the religious one supposed to be the standard-bearer for all, the carrier of the burden of observance, subject to critique by others if he fails at his obligation?

People of all religions are willing to help me bear the torch. My simple black *yarmulke* blew over the fence into a Catholic school basketball court where a nun was directing a basketball game. I waved, and she brought it over to me with a big smile and said, "God bless!" I would have done the same for her if she had dropped her wimple.

I began transforming my body from female to male during my senior year of high school. Before gender transition, and even after, I never felt the need for a *yarmulke* in temple, although it is required of men. My twenty inches of hair were burnished gold by the sun. Hair used to be called a woman's crowning glory before flapper girls of my great-grandmothers' generation began to bob theirs. I felt the hair retained

my femininity, releasing me from men's ritual obligation. Keeping my long hair after becoming a man was like standing in a threshold and keeping my foot in the door so it wouldn't close on me. Besides, even if I considered myself masculine in the eyes of God and therefore a person who required a hat, my head was already covered with its own golden streamers.

Six years after my hormonal and surgical transition, I did get a men's haircut, but short hair didn't make me normal. One of my graduate school professors, who happened to be Jewish, asked me, "When did you start wearing a *kippa*?" He was forgetful of students' names, and my abatement of my sun-bleached golden hair to a roots-brown Army PX high-and-tight *cum yarmulke* didn't help.

When did I start wearing a hat? His question still resonates with me as: When did I accept my Jewishness after years of fighting it? More fundamentally, why am I in this love-hate relationship to begin with? How is it that millennia of devotion and despair found me, and what do they want?

Identifying this quest for self and society through dress can both help and hinder my ability to find answers. Dressing as a member of a group has helped me network in unexpected situations, much as sharing an alma mater has helped me strike up conversations with people who graduated years before I did. Once, due to wearing the "networking hat" to the grocery store, I received an invitation from strangers to Rosh Hashanah lunch at their table. They evidently expected me to be Orthodox and to live nearby. Neither was the case, and, because driving is forbidden on the High Holy Days, I parked a couple blocks from their house. After the meal, they wanted to walk with me in the direction of

my home. I had to walk past my car as if it were not mine, looking over my shoulder until I saw my new friends disappear on the horizon. Then I retraced my steps and sped off. The hiding of the driving, more than the driving itself, felt dirty. Since then, I walk when it feels inappropriate to drive, and admit to driving when I do.

My hat is a symbol, meant to signal ethnic tribe by birth and to imply particular attitudes toward people of other faiths and philosophies. It is anthropology and linguistics. It is old and not innocent at all. It is fire. That's why people make such curious, pregnant comments about it. Their brief comments aren't stupid so much as one-dimensional or reflected in a single fragment. Just as the number eighteen represents life and the Torah gives 613 commandments, there are many threads in every garment with multiple levels of meaning.

Most people who wear a *yarmulke* are observant Jews. Their covering of the head *is* the practice of their faith and simultaneously implies to others that they practice additional fundamentals of Judaism such as dietary laws, Sabbath observance, and regular Hebrew prayer. If I am not as observant as strangers take me to be, am I transforming the symbolism of the hat, or am I just using the symbol incorrectly and misrepresenting my being? My wearing of a hat does not feel like a disguise. Bearing the symbol of a Jew (observant or otherwise) lifts the veil that mainstream society has placed over me to make me appear nondescript, tabula rasa white, or, more disturbingly, white that is complicit in the erasure of myself and others.

For one moment in my life I was a real Jew and a real man. I chose that moment, and could and would choose it again. It happened when a few men from my tour group in Israel wanted to visit the *mikveh*

(ritual bath) of the Holy Ari in Tzfat. A men's ritual bath? Me, with my half-and-half body? Me, putting girl cooties in the sacred water? I only had a few hours' warning to prepare how I would disrobe discreetly, but I decided I would do it no matter how difficult it was. In the process, I would dispel my fear that the revelation of my neither-man-nor-woman body would aggravate those near me and cause them to reject me and cave inward upon me with sticks, stones, and all the ideology that had ever been used against gender-deviant people.

Tzfat is a religious community where the men wear black, the women wear pants under their ankle-length skirts, and opposite genders don't touch each other even to shake hands. Outside the building is a freestanding banner that reads, in Hebrew and English, NO WOMEN ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT. The building is a cave above ground, a single egglike room carved out of stone, where we removed our clothes. In the back was a small, frigid pool fed by a natural source of running water. We lined up single file, climbed down a ladder into darkness, heard the roar over our heads as we immersed ourselves—cold enough to be disorienting, enough to pretend our hearts have stopped—and climbed out facing the rest of our party stark naked. By a miracle, I wasn't stoned. It actually felt unthreatening once I was there and I considered that maybe no one noticed that my body was different. The youngest member of the tour group, however, felt compelled to fulfill his quota of a hundred juvenile jokes a day. "I guess now we all agree I have the biggest penis!" he boasted to the group, who ignored him. Then he turned to me and said, "A little shrinkage going on there, eh, Tucker?"

A *kippa* on a man's head implies he has been circumcised. I was

never circumcised, but I immersed myself together with Jews who were, and no one seemed to notice.

They say the *mikveh* of the Holy Ari is a place where wishes are granted. Mine came true. I now change in the men's locker room at my local gym with a minimum of fuss. That small act, never more than five minutes a few times a week, changes how I feel about my body and consequently affects my general mood. I don't take extra fabric to drape on my lap, I don't wait for a toilet stall to free up so I can change in hiding, and I don't think of the other gym patrons as underground police nor of myself as an extraterrestrial on the run.

I used to be afraid even to be seen clothed at the gym because I felt like a weakling. I would change the pin on the weight machine before leaving it to the next person, suggesting I'd lifted at least twenty to forty pounds more weight than I actually had. This is like parking a few blocks from your host's house on Rosh Hashanah. It is like a female-to-male transsexual raising the toilet seat after he's peed sitting down. Look, God: No car. No seat. A hundred and fifty pounds!

I kept this weight lifting scheme up until I saw the reaction of one kid who got on the machine after me. In his eyes, I read: "Don't tell me that you, a short, husky kid with concave pecs, actually lifted 150 pounds?" He moved the plug to half that amount for his own use. I realized that, in acting out of my own fear of what others thought of me, I had intimidated someone else. That snapped me out of my solipsism and woke me up to the reality that I was capable of inflicting the same intimidation on other people. How stupid and pointless it is—a roomful of people with the intelligence, pluck, and determination to get ourselves to a gym to pursue our own health and fitness, and we're all terrified of each other.

Once one sees the futility of this war—the use of the machine gun of normalcy against the struggling spirit trying to break free—how can one be anything but a pacifist? We wear religious hats or go to the *mikveh* or the gym for our own self-development. Only one thing should interrupt us from helping ourselves, and that is the opportunity to help others.

Wearing the hat isn't about passing as any particular thing to anyone else. It's about passing to *myself* as spiritual and responsible. Part of this is because, when I put on a hat, I become accountable as a representative of Judaism. (Okay, I really shouldn't be ordering clams in restaurants, and I know it.) But I knew I was getting it a little bit right when I helped someone to her car at the grocery store and she noticed my hat and asked me what religion I was. *Way to represent the Jews*, I told myself. And as for all the odd things people say to me, questioning who and what I am? It's the alarm clock I've set to remind myself that I have a special mission and that I should be trying harder every day to earn the life that the trees and the sun give me anyway, to help the Earth turn although it would turn without me, and to set some new and as yet unthinkable processes into motion.

It helps to feel part of something larger than myself, whatever it is; something that elevates, inspires, sustains, enlarges. It can be a constructed race, religion, or gender, as long as there are other people constructing it with me, and someone or something else who sets the bar higher while I jump. Through all this tumbling with God, I'm just trying to stay upright, *kippa* side up.

"AND THEN YOU CUT YOUR HAIR":

*Genderfucking on the Femme
Side of the Spectrum*

AMY ANDRÉ AND SANDY CHANG

Is "femme" a genderqueer identity? What happens when two feminine-appearing, female-bodied people of color cut their hair short? How do femmes and those perceived as femmes take gender presentation and race politics to the next level? One day, Amy, a mixed-race bisexual African American Jew, and her friend Sandy, a genderqueer Chinese American, met for tea and conversation.

Amy: I recently started thinking about femme as a queer gender, as something that can fall within the rubric of what genderqueer identity is all about. But my own identity as femme is not something I've really analyzed as genderqueer before. So I was excited to go through this process with you.

Sandy: When you asked me to have this conversation, I had to think about my identity and what I think of *femme*. It's such a big topic. I view femme as a very queer concept. My straight friends, when I say "femme," don't know what I'm talking about. They think I just mean feminine.

Femme is a term that other people have often labeled me, especially when I was first coming out. Automatically, people were like, "You're femme." And I was like, "Okay, I guess I am, if you say so." Then I started thinking a lot more about gender, because I saw so much gender variability within queer circles. I started feeling my own conception of gender freeing up. I started challenging the notion of being *inherently* femme.

I think some people might consider *femme* as meaning: conforming to traditional gender roles or socialization, in terms of the way female-bodied people are encouraged to present themselves to the world. By this, I mean not only in appearance but also mannerisms and character traits, such as tone of voice, language, hobbies, and interests. Some people may understand *genderqueer* as specifically not conforming to traditional or stereotypical gender role expectations. So, I had to ask myself: How is it that I'm able to view myself as simultaneously femme and genderqueer? Don't these two identities seem like they might be contradicting each other?

For me, the way that I came to understand my own genderqueer identity—and also came to understand what it is for me to embody femmeness—is that being genderqueer means that I don't fit simply *male* or *female*. Neither of those terms fully resonates with me. So, I think of my gender as existing on a spectrum. One time, someone that I

was dating told me that I was both butch and femme at the same time. I took that as a compliment, although I've never seen myself as fitting into the butch-femme dichotomy.

So, within a genderqueer identity, I can choose to have a more femme presentation, and it doesn't have to mean that I'm choosing one side of the spectrum over the other, or conforming to tradition without examination.

Amy: What originally got me thinking about this topic was hearing a femme friend identify herself as a genderqueer femme. That was about a year ago, and I had never heard that phrase before. I thought, "A genderqueer femme?! I don't even know what that means!"

Then, sometime later, I met my girlfriend, who's a documentary filmmaker. She's working on a film called *FtF: Female to Femme*. It's about women who identify as femme and describe a sense of transitioning from female to femme identity. I love the concept, because transitioning is so often associated with masculinity in our community, which is mostly made up of queer/lesbian/bisexual people and femmes, butches, transgender men, and genderqueer people around our age of mid-twenties to mid-thirties.

While all this was happening, I first started seeing you around town; you had longer hair than you have now. And I thought, "Oh, she's a femme." I just automatically did that.

And then you cut your hair. The first time I saw you after that was at a birthday party of a mutual friend, where you were performing a dance. You had short hair, and I hadn't seen you since you had cut your hair; so I was kind of doing this reevaluation of things, like, "Oh, is she femme?" But, at the same time, the association that I tend to make with

dance performance—sensuous movement of the body—is something that I see as femme or feminine. So I thought, "Okay, she's a femme with short hair, just like me."

So, all these things began to coalesce: hearing about a genderqueer femme, learning about the film, seeing you change your appearance. I began to question that notion of femme as existing outside of the concept of genderqueer, and I began to think more deeply about femme gender presentation.

Sandy: The hair issue is so interesting. Hair has been considered such a symbol of sexuality throughout history and especially in my field, psychology. I very consciously did not cut my hair for a long time. Because I was in this queer community where so many people have short hair, I didn't want to also have short hair and conform. But, as I started to challenge my own gender and learn what being genderqueer meant, I realized that it really resonated with me; I also realized that I wanted to perform as a drag king. That's when I decided to cut my hair. And because I had never cut it before, I thought it might be liberating. When I cut it, the experience made me have to reflect a lot upon how people were treating me. Because I definitely got treated differently. I felt more recognized. I felt less invisible.

Amy: In what context?

Sandy: Among queers, actually. I could pass as straight very easily when I had long hair. I could look like a feminine Asian woman. I never really felt like I fit that role.

Cutting my hair made me aware of how people treated me, and it also made me aware of my own sense of masculinity. When I started doing drag, I felt like I pushed the borders of what my gender spectrum was. Because I was able to experience more masculinity, I was then able to consciously choose to experience more femininity. I don't think that I femmed myself up as much before I cut my hair as after. I now feel like I can move across a fuller spectrum. A parallel to that is: If I am able to experience more pain or negative feelings in my life, then my capacity for joy is a lot greater, too.

How does having short hair and being a femme affect your gender identity or the way you perceive your gender?

Amy: I notice that when my hair is long, I receive qualitatively different, but possibly as much, attention, from African Americans, especially African American men. When I have long hair, I feel that African American men are somewhat more aggressive or assertive in terms of how they hit on me or how they approach me on the street. When my hair is short, the approach is softer. Men are a little bit more respectful, but just as proprietary.

With men of other races, I haven't really noticed differential reactions. White men in particular, I've noticed, seem to feel that they can approach me or talk to me about whatever. I'm talking here about straight, nontransgender men, by the way, whom I don't have a lot of contact with. So, it's more just if I'm walking down the street.

I did say earlier that I identify as bisexual, but I'm a bisexual who has little interest in men, and zero interest in straight, nontrans men. When I have short hair, I use it to signify queer identity; but I

find that straight people don't really pick up on that. I would imagine that if straight men, in particular, did pick up on that, then they would stop hitting on me—and they don't! I guess that even though I have the short hair, I also have whatever feminine signifiers, like wearing dresses or having my nails done, that they notice. There's some way in which straight men develop a (false) notion that I'm available to them; I don't see straight men hitting on butch women the way they hit on me.

Whether I have short or long hair, I don't see much of a difference in the way queer people respond to me. On rare occasions, I have been asked by lesbians—not by bi women, but by lesbians—if I am straight. The last time that happened was about a year ago. "What are you doing here? Are you straight?" "No." The significance of my short hair is again not always picked up on.

Sandy: I can relate to the idea of hair as a signifier of being queer. However, when it comes to having straight people pick up on that queerness, I think that makeup and clothing trump hair! I have short hair and that doesn't change from day to day. It's whether I'm wearing a skirt and makeup, versus baggy jeans and a T-shirt, that will determine if people pick up on my queerness. I do get attention from straight, nontrans men when I'm wearing makeup and feminine clothing. I don't get any attention from them whatsoever when I'm wearing a T-shirt and jeans and look more androgynous or masculine. I also notice the difference in queer communities. I get more attention from feminine women when I look more masculine, and I get a lot more attention from people with a masculine presentation when I am presenting more femme.

Amy: When I think about femme identity, I think that because of the ways in which I get approached [by] but am not attracted to nontransgender men, I'm unattainable but I'm still seen as approachable. That's the kicker. That's the beautiful conflict about being femme; we have the opportunity to serve, through our presentation and through our bodies, as potential bridge-builders. I feel like, in being femme, and in knowing that I'm going to be seen as someone who a man can approach and talk to, it's almost like it's my job to be setting that boundary, and to introduce men to the idea that women who have feminine appearance can have as much of a boundary as butch women. But it's a weird role.

Maybe it ultimately makes things safer for feminine straight women, or women of all different gender presentations, to walk through the world with men who know that women are sometimes going to set a boundary. But I have an awkward relationship to that concept, because I think, *Why should I have to teach about that idea?*

I feel the same way in terms of being a person of color. When I enter a predominantly white environment, I don't necessarily want to be the bridge-builder. I don't want to be the one to explain: Here's what my life is about, here's what you can and can't ask of me. So I feel like living my life as a femme, interacting with men, has some parallels to my identity as a person of color, and to the barriers I put up between myself and other people as a way of navigating through the world. I don't really know what to do with that; it's just there. It's not always pretty to be femme. It can be a job!

Sandy: Exactly! Why should it be your job to educate people about your identity?

Amy: But, having said all that about not being a bridge-builder, I was wondering if you would like to talk about your experiences as an Asian American in the San Francisco Bay Area. I find the queer circles in San Francisco where you and I see each other to be predominantly white. How does your experience of being genderqueer play out in the context of being Asian American?

Sandy: Complicated. I see myself as part of so many different communities, kind of like a Venn diagram. The overlap is very small. Other people who stand with me in the overlap—there are very few. Let me find someone who is queer and Asian, active in the San Francisco Mission District and Castro neighborhoods' mainstream queer communities, sober, and genderqueer. I don't feel that there's anyone who has the exact same identity type or gender. That was something I struggled with a lot—my parents immigrated from China, but I was born here in California. I was surrounded by Asian Americans, with most of them sharing a similar experience of having to negotiate the cultural gap between immigrant parents and mainstream America.

I have had a hard time finding a visible queer Asian community. There is a small one. There are some queer Asian events and there are some listservs that I have been a part of, and that has helped me find some sense of belonging. But I always feel that I'm kind of standing on the bridge. And in the queer circles that I'm a part of, I am one of the only people of color. For example, in one of my drag king troupes, the Fly Guys, I'm the only person of color. In the other drag king troupe, the Transformers, there are three of us. At a lot of the events where we perform, I don't see a lot of people of color, and

I'd like to see more. I'm wishing for more integration, because I often feel tokenized.

On a slightly different note, I have a friend who is genderqueer and Asian. She told me that when she was an Asian femme, she felt invisible. She said this to me when I still had long hair and was perceived as an Asian femme; I immediately knew exactly what she meant. So, there's this weird intersection between race and gender here. In the straight world, an Asian femme, or an Asian feminine woman, is often fetishized by white men.

You see that dynamic a lot. But, in queer communities, the Asian butch is more coveted than the Asian femme. It's so different, because Asian men in straight communities don't get that much attention and aren't as sought after as Asian women. So, I've often wondered what that was about. I still can't figure it out. It's just the phenomenon that I've observed.

Amy: I get the sense that invisibility is happening for femmes of color in general. Take the Lexington, San Francisco's main dyke bar, for example. If a white femme were to walk in, people would look at her and say, "Oh, she must be a femme." But I could imagine a femme woman of color, like an Asian femme, walking in, would probably get a double take. People would wonder—

Sandy: *Is she straight?*

Amy: *Did she wander into the wrong place?* This might not happen as much with blacks or Latinas. But, with Asians, I get the

sense that people are thinking, "Does this person speak English? Is she lost?" And I don't think that your average white femme would garner any of those responses.

Sandy: In the predominately white queer community, I think with queer women of color, the more feminine the presentation, the greater the likelihood of being seen as straight, rather than as femme.

Amy: If gender is performance—which I think is how the story goes, so to speak—why would I choose *that* performance, especially given all the obstacles, like racial issues, and [the] straight world's obliviousness to femme identity, and invisibility within this predominately white queer community for people of color who present as femme?

In terms of my own gender presentation, one of the things that attracts me to femme identity is my fear about what it would be like to move through the world as a masculine black person. That's huge. The weight of emotion that comes over me when I think about how the world responds to black masculinity is one of the reasons that I move toward femme. There are multiple reasons behind my choice to express femme presentation, but that's definitely in there. It's really intense. I grew up in the South, and lived there until my early twenties; if I had grown up somewhere else, I might have a different opinion.

I can remember being in the South in my late teens and early twenties; I would often get pulled over for driving. I noticed that if I had long hair, I would get stopped less often by the police. I imagine that a cop, at a distance, seeing a brown-skinned person with long hair, assumes that

they're looking at a woman; and a black woman can drive more freely around the South. But if they saw me when I had short hair, they would assume that I was a black man. When the cops pull someone over for driving, they might make you get out of your car, they might make you get into their police car, they might want to search your car, et cetera. They put you through whatever they want. Very often I would have the experience of being told to get out of the car, and then they would see that I was wearing a dress, and then it's like, "Oh, okay, ma'am, it's fine. You can get back in."

It reminds me of that question: When I pass as something, who fails? Well, when I passed as a black man, I was the one who failed. I was failed by society.

I feel those particular experiences around my racialized gender identity hinder my ability to throw myself dispassionately into a display of masculinity. When I think of gender and sexuality in general, I think, *Who has permission to do what?* I haven't given myself permission to try on being butch, because I already know what it's like, in a sense, to be responded to as a masculine black person, and it's been such a source of stress for me.

Those experiences have given me a sense of empathy and connection to black butches and black men, and yet they are also one reason I veer toward femme. But, I don't want it to sound like femme identity is the default, because I think there's a lot of femmephobia in queer communities and yet it's something that needs to be celebrated as an identity choice. I also don't want to discredit black women who choose to express masculinity, either, because black masculinity is worthy of its own celebrations as well. Phew!

Sandy: I feel like my choices in gender presentation and performance have so much to do with race. The stereotypes are different for Asians than for blacks, in terms of masculinity, so I find myself on the flip side. Whereas black men get so much negative attention, Asian men don't get very much attention at all. One of my goals in doing drag is to personify strong Asian men. I definitely do think of gender as performative. I will do performance, as a drag king, and explore masculinity through that. But I'm also exploring feminine masculinity through drag. My troupes will perform routines where we're perceived as gay men because we're very feminine.

Amy: It's interesting to think about performing as a feminine drag king, because I think one stereotype that's out there about Asian masculinity is that Asian men are inherently feminine. I think Asians in general have been feminized by white Western culture. I think of drag king performance as a way to fuck with things as much as it is a way to play with things. So, the idea of appearing as a feminine Asian man begs the question: Is that gay?

Sandy: "Are you gay, or are you just Asian?!"

Amy: Right! Is it just acting out the stereotype? Or is it critiquing the stereotype?

When you talked earlier about strength, I was reminded of a conversation I had recently with my girlfriend and a friend of hers. My girlfriend is not Jewish, but her friend and I are both Jews. My girlfriend was talking about the fact that she's dated a lot of Jewish femmes. She

jokingly said something like, "Are all the femmes in San Francisco Jewish?" We started talking about why there are so many Jewish queer women who gravitate toward femme identity, because all three of us had observed that. I was thinking about archetypes of strength in femininity. In Jewish culture, the archetype of the strong female is fairly ubiquitous. My theory is that women who grow up Jewish, and who are exposed to that archetype, have a sense of the power of femme identity, even prior to possibly coming out as queer or constructing a femme identity for themselves. I don't know if that happens as much in non-Jewish realms, in other religions or other ethnicities, but, for me, my Jewish identity has definitely shaped my femme identity.

For you, when you present yourself with a femme appearance, what are the things that appeal to you?

Sandy: When I was femme by default, and hadn't really considered the role of socialization in my gender, I didn't feel very powerful. I didn't feel that being femme was very powerful at all. When I started to make choices about my gender presentation, that was when I felt powerful, and could finally own femininity. As soon as I was able to take on masculinity, I was also able to acknowledge my own femininity and try to hold both of those at the same time.

I feel more comfortable in casual clothes that make me seem more androgynous or genderqueer. Sometimes when I perform, I embody a very extreme form of femininity that I probably would never carry with me as I walk down the street. But there's something really empowering about being onstage and playing the role. I'm consciously getting attention by using my body as feminine, as a tool. The whole performance

is a piece of art, and my body is a vehicle through which I express my art. It feels good to consciously solicit and receive positive attention and reinforcement for being femme. Whereas walking down the street, when I was young and in my default-femme mode, or before I was out, I did not like the attention. I particularly did not like the attention I got on the street from random men who were walking or driving by. I didn't see it as a good thing, but now I really enjoy the attention I get while performing, because it's in a different context.

Amy: It's an appreciative objectification, as opposed to an entitled one.

Sandy: I'm making this choice and I'm sharing this with you, rather than you are taking it from me and making it something of your own.

Amy: When I was a little girl, I think my mom wanted me to be a tomboy. She's a feminist, and she raised me to be a feminist. I remember she would always get me boys' toys or more androgynous toys, like little science labs. I was like, "I want a Barbie!" I think that was a little disappointing for her. But I knew that was the kind of toy I wanted. I think of that as a baby femme period.

I feel like I'm constantly learning how to be femme and what it means for me to be femme.

Sandy: As a kid, I did a lot of stereotypical little-girl things. I played with Barbies, I took ballet and gymnastics. I was a cheerleader. So, I fit the role a lot. But I didn't ever feel like it fit completely for me.

I found a sense of freedom when I started doing hiphop, in junior high, because that's when I started wearing baggy clothes, to perform. It was a unisex dance style, and I could look like a guy. That dance form is less gendered than others. It felt like this was the dance form I could relate to the most, because there was a lot of strong, sharp movement. There was a lot of masculine movement, like hitting, locking, popping, things that were not soft and delicate. I was, in a way, performing masculinity unconsciously. Today, I perform gender consciously by thinking about what drag performance means, what it says in terms of gender.

If my gender exists across a spectrum, then being femme is as much a part of my gender as being androgynous or being masculine. I consciously try to fuck with gender. I might do a drag king performance and then come out of the dressing room afterward, totally dressed up as a femme; I want to mix things up. I want to challenge people.

What do you think is the future of femme identity, within queer communities and within the scope of genderqueer? Where do you think we're going?

Amy: I hope that our society is getting wiser about race politics. My fear is that we're not, but my hope is that we are. So, maybe a generation from now, there wouldn't be a femme black woman such as myself who would have part of her femme identity linked to a fearful experience of presenting masculinity, but would only have it linked to its own core strength.

Sandy: I think we're moving toward a place where people have greater access to a range of gender expressions. This could go both

ways, with more expression of masculinity and more expression of femininity. I would hope that there's more freedom for people to do that, without fear of judgment. That's the direction I hope we're heading in, one of more fluidity.



JEN CROSS

After nearly ten years of working actively to be seen and recognized as not just *dyke*, but as *butch*. I've put on a skirt again, and not just because I like how it looks, but because I want someone bigger and more masculine to bend me over, push the skirt above my hips, and fuck me with it still on. Someone like my lover. Someone who, coincidentally or not, is, like my stepfather, also bigger and more masculine than me.

A decade is a long time to shut down the body.

I pass as a white, heterosexual woman, and do not pass as a victim/survivor of sexual abuse. Or maybe it all depends on which direction you're talking: passing "in" to visibly marked identity, or passing "out"

of awareness, moving stealthily? Part of passing as a straight woman is not showing your wounds (you won't attract a man that way). No, wait. Straight girls are supposed to show their wounds, are at least supposed to be weaker-than, just not too needy—not so wounded that they can't still take good care of someone else.

Anyway, after not passing (as straight) and passing (as a vaguely masculine dyke) for many years, it has been difficult and painful for me to step back into the mainstream, heterosexual, heteronormative view—to become the seen and unseen thing, the remarked upon and the unmarked/unremarkable, that most abhorred by and pitied by dykes (more so even than straight men): the straight girl. As my lover is a passing butch, we are often read as a straight couple, possibly even by other queers. This peculiar invisibility, juxtaposed all over me with the ostensible safety of hetero-privilege (however questionable that privilege becomes, given that we are an interracial couple), drapes across my shoulders and weighs me down.

When I first came out, I slowly moved from girly-feminine to as masculine as I could make myself without giving up hoop earrings and the occasional night on the town (for the drag ball) in full girl dress. My hair got shorter and shorter, my clothes got boxier. I bought men's shoes, sports bras, longed to rid myself of my breasts and hips, and wanted to become the boyish butch dyke, the passing boy, the *boy*. I loved it when I got called *sir*, and never got upset when someone was confused at my entering the women's bathroom. I was delighted. I thought I'd accomplished something, had successfully passed as the kind of dyke I so longed to be and thought I was supposed to be.

As a teenager, the femininity I learned was entirely shaped by my

stepfather and his racist, classist sexism (and what sexism isn't racist and classist and more, all informing the others until we're tied together in knots of oppression that shape us, pull us side to side, or side by side?). I wanted to put as much distance as possible between my surviving, queer self and the construction of my stepfather's that (I believed) I'd been. I thought feminine belonged to him. I took off my girlskin. I wanted to slice off all the curves, remove the breasts, take off the ass that he'd touched. This desire just happened to mesh smoothly with the longing to fit in as a dyke.

See, I wanted to pass as *marked*. Moments of recognition, of queer visibility, snared me into my desired sense of self. After my stepfather decided to teach me how porn stars please their men, I learned to hide in plain sight, became the hyperheterosexual/super-sexualized smart teenaged girl. "Maybe a little eccentric," thought the teachers at school, the acquaintance-friends, the guidance counselors; it never crossed their minds to ask if I was being raped at home nearly every day. During that time, I was invisible in the ways I wanted to be seen, invisible as someone being tortured at home, as a captured child. After coming out (from under him *and* as queer), I wanted to be seen; if I wasn't going to be marked as a survivor by how I looked and moved through the world, by god, I was going to be seen as a dyke: and that meant becoming a butch. I internalized the identity, came out as trans, even, to various people and communities. I got read as a teenaged boy or young man now and then and loved it. This was what I understood dykeness to mean; I felt the femmes were frauds, clueless, and, most problematic, *not marked*.

I hoped that homophobia would come to my aid in this scheme of

visibility, and wanted, just once, for someone to ask me if my stepfather had "made me this way" when he raped me. Made me gay. Turned me queer. I had all my defiant, indignant, glorious answers ripe and ready, but no one ever asked.

I wanted to believe in my surface and yours, I wanted to be brutally exposed and I wasn't, as it turns out, but I was: Every time I walked down the sidewalk, I assumed a queer visibility that others may or may not have actually perceived. My queerness was never yanked out and flung upon me: I was no threat to anyone in that enacted self. I wanted to perform the flaw that my stepfather had engraved within me. It was a scene. It was something possible, at least, that tension between who I was hidden internally and who I was on my surface.

These days, I no longer pass as gay, unless I'm at a dyke event with my butch lover close by, and even then I don't pass as inherently gay, but gay by association. I very often find that my attempts to make eye contact with a stranger who I read as a dyke are misread (as the staring of yet one more confused straight girl?). How many femmes did I ignore/dismiss/remain ignorant of during my first ten years as an out dyke? Now I know.

When I was a boy, even though I still had to actively come out as a survivor, at least I was (I thought) seen as *something*. These days, I have to come out as survivor *and* come out as gay. Now, what's seen first are all the things my stepfather remarked upon, lavished attention upon, built, and formulated himself. I want to vomit them off my body sometimes, instead of just battenning them down with tight undergarments: breasts, hips, ass, neckline—body. These days, I am again the unhappy recipient of all the trappings and charming indications that I pass as a

female: smacky kissing sounds from random men, "Nice big tits" come-ons, invitations out on dates, eye contact that isn't simply received as *Hello* but as *Let's go fuck right now*, gazes that stroke across my body: *How you doin', baby? Where's your man?*

What about the whole incest thing? What does it mean to pass as a survivor? I mean, to be *read* as a survivor? Given that so many of us in this fucking culture have survived some kind of sexual abuse—do we all pass? Is it the norm? And still, the experience/identity is silenced, unless you're crying all the time, can't have sex, are unable to be intimate (and who doesn't have intimacy issues in this time of torture, television, and target marketing?). If you're relatively functional, forget it. No one wants to talk about survivorhood except your therapist, and she's getting paid.

What does it mean to be marked *survivor* in the same way we're marked with our gender, or sexuality, race, class? Is it possible to wear the identity like clothing? Is it all in the speech, a lingo peppered with words like "triggered" and meetings and group references and self-forgiveness? Would a stranger ever be able to identify this identity without someone having to take on the disheveled defeated defective head-bent-down shuffle of ashamed victim? Can you walk with your head held high and shoulders back and still be read as a survivor?

Can you wear a dress and still be read as a dyke?

The answer to these questions, I think, is No.

Victims of sexual abuse learn to pass as *something*—perfectionists, inherently damaged persons, or both. Both draw the attention away from the abuse. Like leeching.

You can't see what this is that's hiding me. It's a weird shroud coloring my vision, but not yours. I learn to pass as a human being, as not-a-molester, as not-a-rapist.

How can I claim for myself what is lost? How can I be alone in this cadence? Outside it is crisp, clean, lonely blue-grey night turning into morning, turning the regressive forgetting, aggressive outstanding faces of night, surely sleeting.

The survivor has nothing but her body to put between herself and the captor/rapist. My body passes between us while I escape elsewhere (sometimes) during the assaults themselves. My body is the only thing of danger, and the only thing I have to wield. I learn to pass it elsewhere, learn to pass it between myself and others, learn to control its passing, its deliberation and consideration.

The armor is like safety. The armor is like rock and we have no walls to hide behind. We become the armor. We become the rock. We pass ourselves as we would have you take us. We create ourselves in our own image and decry liberalism and defy licentiousness and take on ourselves as our own best enemy and call ourselves something like whole and declare our own names true. And some of us are still hiding. To be rid of him and acceptable to you, to the sense of you that we have integrated in ourselves.

Lots of femmes describe "the nod"—the look, the smile of recognition—that acknowledgment they don't receive. The "What are you doing here?" look that they get in its place. Just recently, another self-identified butch says, *Hey, if I see you in the video store, and you look feminine to*

me. *I'm gonna assume that you're straight.* Meaning, of course, *I'm going to exclude you from my community.* And this from someone who supposedly has some understanding of butch and femme—the history, the reality, and the *existence* of femme dykes.

It takes *work* to continue to ignore the fact that some self-identified dykes/lesbians/queer women are not masculine-acting/masculine-appearing or, in some surface appearance/visual way, gender nonnormative. We are many of us gender nonnormative behaviorally, and when those actions/behaviors are noticed and taken into account, we might be given the benefit of some doubt (or maybe just taken for a "right-on straight girl"). But it's surface I'm talking about, the embodied body and the tactics of exclusion, of defining community with a glance, calling you in or out.

I often come to the decision to exclude butches and other masculine-gendered dykes/lesbians/queers from my gaze. I will not allow them acceptance into my community. Granted, my little individual protest doesn't matter when my eyes aren't attended to in the first place (and, you know, my protest comes to a quick end when I choose to acknowledge my butch lover). Still, it gives me a little stab of pleasure to willfully not see these demanding revelations of recognized/recognizable queerness. It's true that, for a split second, I want every butch I see, silently dripping desire only momentarily because, outside of that quiet vault, I don't want to give them the power of my satisfaction, the visual cues of my desire, while they're ignoring me with such precision. I watch them, though, when I think they're not looking, like they're a silent salient separate species, like they don't belong to me: They've become some remote tribe, or they always were. And when I say I wouldn't give

them the satisfaction, I mean that I don't want to give them any more power over me: the power of recognition, of surety, the power of the masculine over the feminine.

But move away from my lust and get back to the tactics of exclusion and inclusion: to ignore, to consciously and willfully avoid acknowledgment—is that also a survival skill, internalized by those who are more consistently noticed and attended to by society at large, demonized, hated; a desire to protect, as well as internalized self-hate? *She can't be like (as bad as) me; look at her.* Or is it self-protective, like: *The last time I hit on a woman I wasn't 100 percent certain was queer, or who didn't look gay like me, I got the shit kicked out of me by (insert your choice of misogynist male "protectors" here).* Or is it the (identity) politics of similarity: *We're just like everybody else, and if you want a piece of this pie, you'd better be like me.* Is it really just an internalization of the wholesale '70s rejection of all things apparently and ostensibly patriarchal, the gender-neutral (read: butch) rejection of femininity that the whole community was supposed to conform to—notice how the masculine leads the charge again? And didn't I do it too? Who is to blame here when we flow through the gendered this way?

I'm trying to figure out the root cause of this active denial, on the part of so many in my dyke "community," of the existence of femmes, of dykes who look like everything that various foremothers fought against. And that I fought against, as well. Didn't I ignore and even despise femmes? How can I come up now with an *I* and a *we* and an *us* and a *them* and put myself on the side of the girls? I'm lost here, in my indignance and fear.

It's one thing to have a man (straight? apparently—he passes as straight, to me) assume that I am straight. It's a different enaction of power (over? under?) for a visibly read dyke to assume that I am not gay.

In becoming a boy, I had a desire to be seen in all the ways my stepfather would hate, everything he would oppose: unfemininity, nonselection of men. I espoused everything I thought my mother should've, in her claim to feminism. I wanted to be everyone's stereotypical lesbian. When I described myself as looking like *an average dyke, just like every other lesbian in town*, it was a thoughtless statement, betraying my willful blindness to femme dykedom (and all the other dykenesses that don't look like the currently popular close-cropped-boi thing) and revealing a desire to become that which I described myself as.

It was a mistake, and it wasn't. I enjoyed the visibility, calculated and treacherous. Queerness was, for me, the opposite of my survivorhood, which no one could see, because as a part of surviving itself, I had to learn how to pass as unproblematic.

I created my dykeness as a problem, wore it like a skin, made it visible. Masculine or butch dykeness was a salve, something put on, protective and predatory. I was turning the tables.

We're not supposed to do that, and if we do, we're not supposed to say it. The party line in femme-butch communities is the (still, continued) sense and representation of an innate gender, something we've always known about ourselves (even if we didn't have the words for it) and always held true to, never betrayed. Betrayal. I am that betrayer. I talk about when I was a boy, and how I've shifted. I lay claim to *both/and*.

I kept a copy of Joan Nestle's *Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* on my bookshelf for seven or eight years before I read the femme parts. I found them offensive, suspect, inconsequential, weak, catty, whiny. Damning stereotypes that could be applied only to me, the too-vehement displacement of my own internal judgment. And now, I am unlearning all that I trained myself into with respect to dykeness (that, yes, began with straight stereotyping, the stepfather's hostility toward dykes, my own desire to become what it was I was attracted to, having conflated those, unable to separate my own power as distinct and unique from that which I desired).

Does it make sense to be angry with "my" community because I don't pass in *my own eyes*?

It occurred to me last night that I just feel resigned about my gender, resigned to my sexuality, like I'm tired of fighting (for) something I can't have. I'm petulant and scared but mostly off-the-side resigned, out in the way-back machine, deep shuffling into the fact that I didn't win: I am a girl, and I am seen and hidden as a girl, off to the inside, far in the guts of gender. I no longer "work" as queer, and I am tired of trying and being disappointed. The everyday reach for eye contact, for *Hello*, for recognition, like it's somebody else's business to accept me, into my own tribe. These are my tired eyes. Leave me the cues and I'll use them, but I'm wrecked on my own shores.

It's like that old saying: You can't please anybody, so you might as well be alone. (Actually, I don't think that's the saying. I think it's actually, You can't please everybody, so you might as well just please yourself. Whatever. They're both exhausting.)

I am so tired of disappearing after I say, *This is how I am and feel*, and those others reply, *No, we don't think you really fit*. How do I unlearn that undeliverance?

We're jaded, shaded, judged every day by everyone else's eyes, given pass or fail, a glance over, an examination. What I feel now, think, sense, and have had shown to me is that I pass as a straight white girl with long hair and a thinnish and roundish body, with paint on my fingers toes eyes lips. What do I base this on? The fact that men are the only ones who will make eye contact with me? The fact that I look more now like women I see in the magazines or on TV (or around me everywhere) than I did when I was a boy? The fact that my attempts to flirt with or be recognized by women I read as gay are often passed by? Maybe these women aren't gay. It's my own conflation of masculine with womanhood that makes dyke in my eyes, anyway; I'm still unlearning that myself. What I see are the boidykes, the butches, the ones I was (trying to be): the flamboyant excursion into queerness.

It's true that I appreciate, viscerally, how my lover passes (as butch *and* as male, thereby already accepted into the community I longed for), and at the same time, sie constantly battles through society's antagonism in response to hir gender ambiguity, the blurring confusion that sharpens to anger through fear when someone has assumed hir male and then reads hir as female. As black male, that is, and then as black female, that is—and all the threats to hir safety that slam up on one side of that wall and fall down on top of hir on the other.

We two face physical threats emanating from the same bema of power, that solid rise of sexism and racism. They are not the same threats. They are the flip sides of one another.

I question myself regularly in my need for that deviation from whatever a norm could mean. It's true that I am outside of things and my lover, sie is more so, and so we are more familiar with the fringes, with looking for the blades of grass in a current of sludge.

A single experience of visibility and uninvisibleness breaks the ice and anger of me. Someone, a stranger to me, reads and approaches me, assuming queerness. But is it my burgeoning comfort with myself that allows for the connection?

I've recently gone through a mourning period for my passing-dyke-hood and have come out on the other side of resistance, to resignation. I don't pass (and I do). I want to stop trying to make friendly communal eye contact, that establishment of casual community, the thing that extends home into the body, onto the bus, onto the street, or into the straight bar or the doctor's office or the mall. The look that says, *Sure, you're safe here*. Not that I'd know that would ever be true. But as a survivor, I was looking for safety and home. I wanted the strangers who would first read me and then protect me, wanted "family" that meant more than devastation.

Thus the mourning period. I'm unmarked now and, as before, as when I was a high school student being regularly raped and held psychologically captive (but read at school as only a slut or excessive or eccentric, but not "troubled"—it was the white-skinned and class privilege that got in my way there), I am unseen. I pass away. I pass into the nothingness of white, middle-class straight normality, of invisibility.

Once again, I decide I will defy my own training and offer my looks and smiles only at the apparently feminine-gendered beings I see around—we will pass into each other through our own swollen eyes. But they are swollen shut. Feminine-gendered beings don't look at one another; we have been taught that we must look to the masculine-gendered beings for approval. We look to make sure we pass with them. And, okay, it's a safety issue—not passing (which way?) can mean violence: You must be the right balance of gender and body. Too much feminine is dangerous, even on an XX body, but particularly if the body is XY.

There is nothing cautious or delicate about the fact that I pass as a straight woman. It's the default setting, brute force algorithm: yes or no. Check it against the model, and if it looks all right, throw it in that bin over there. I pulled out of it for a while, but I have fallen back.

I am resigned to being read as more normal than I really am. I learned that passing lesson during the mornings I came to school still sticky with my stepfather all over me, the days I knew I'd have to go back home to more of the same. Not allowing my terror to be read was a survival skill, a life-saving necessity: It's true. And, for christ's sake, I passed to the *mother*—why shouldn't I pass to the guidance counselors and teachers? I thought I was that good. I thought I could do it again and again, reincarnate again and again.

But I got tired. And lonely.

Hir black passing butch and my white femme: We make quite a calculated couple. Newly visible, but what do they see, and how much does that matter? Our passings are entirely different. We walk through two completely different consignments of our body, the public designation

of myself and yourself. How sie is seen as vagrant and threat and I am seen as property and waste.

I have been fighting for many years against (becoming) how I am seen now. When do we know what we are is not how we see(m)? When did I know I was being seen as my stepfather crafted?

I get so tired of trying to explain what I'm talking about. I say the same things over and over and I don't care anymore, in this bedroom, in this office, on this bench. Did the door to my deep desire click open when I was seen, clocked as both gay and feminine, or did it click when I set myself free with hir, or when I just knew why I was doing so? I *am* this gay queer entity, even if sie is a man, even if I am pressed in skirts. It's not a straight thing, and it doesn't matter if it is. I've grown tired of wanting to be masked. I don't know if you will see me and I don't know if I will care anymore. You never see me; I never see you. Behind your surfaces are all of your multiplicities. It takes time to be there.



ORIGINS

KIRK READ

Over the years, I've developed an Adam and Eve story of my working life. I believe in story—whether it's to describe what you ate for lunch or how old you were when your mother died. Stories are one of the few things I trust because you can draw your own conclusions. I once trusted journalists, but their forum has been so contaminated by the marketplace that unmitigated truth is barely possible.

Who's the story for? Conversations about sex work, for me, vary from person to person. When I talk to my mother about sex work, it's very different than when I talk to my boyfriend or my therapist or fellow sex workers. I want my mother to be assured of my physical safety. I want my boyfriend to be reassured about my emotional well-being. I

want my therapist not to dwell on sex work because I have other concerns that are more pressing. With other sex workers, I want to talk shop or trade helpful advice.

If I'm telling my story to someone in the healthcare industry, especially a mental health person, I feel a responsibility to be a goodwill ambassador for all sex workers, to single-handedly dispel the stereotypes that we were all sexually abused, even though some of us were. I feel like I need to disabuse clinicians of the notion that we have low self-esteem, whatever *that* is. (People have way too much self-esteem these days.)

When I'm talking to anyone, really, I turn into a lobbyist for sex workers. I start worrying that this person could somehow affect the lives of other sex workers. Maybe this person will be in a position to vote on a bill decriminalizing prostitution. Maybe this person has a family member who is in the industry. Maybe my presentation of a likable sex worker—a *human face*, as they say in the nonprofit world—will help the person I'm addressing to treat other sex workers with respect.

The consequence of wanting to be liked as a sex worker is that I scrutinize my speech and edit the stories I tell. For instance, let's say I have a stressful client situation. Maybe a client tries to bargain me down over the phone, leading to fiscal tension once we're together. Maybe I'm feeling self-conscious about my weight and the client says something about how I look different than my pictures. Maybe the client makes rude comments about homeless people who live near his hotel. When I'm with the client, I try to maintain a neutral demeanor so that our interaction will be smooth. I suppress whatever irritation, body shame, or anxiety I'm feeling. Then, later, if I talk about the interaction with

someone else, I take on an additional responsibility to reframe the situation so that I'm ultimately untroubled by it. I don't want to hear a non-sex worker tell me that s/he's concerned about me or that I should think about leaving the business. I don't want people to think that every client causes that sort of anxiety. Every job causes a certain degree of social friction, and I feel a relentless duty to normalize sex work as an occupation so that non-sex workers are less threatened and are shielded from my day-to-day concerns. It's exhausting.

So where did this sense of obligatory public relations come from? Why can't I just maintain a baseline of Absolutely No Bullshit? I was given extensive training in how to be presentable in my Southern family and got a graduate degree in niceness in the LGBT movement—especially the smiley-face gay '90s—when everything became camera ready. Suddenly the mantra of "We're your sisters, we're your neighbors, we're your teachers, we're everywhere," closed in on us and queer people started walking around on their best behavior. At least I did. I remember being twenty-two years old and delivering a version of that "We're just like you" speech to various committees of the Virginia General Assembly. The jury is still out on how effective these mainstreaming strategies are. Gains in likability have deep costs in personal integrity.

What if I just narrated the stories as I remember them? It's not a perfect method. I'm inevitably going to hide details or reconstruct memories inaccurately or change things or collapse three people into one character or conceal some of the times I went into a client's wallet and tipped myself an extra sixty bucks. I'll do what it takes to make a more compelling story or tweak things to make myself seem more heroic.

After I've told these stories once or twice, I get confused about the original truth. I become convinced that the way I arrived at the story is the way it actually happened. Sometimes the messy, complicated details of a story get altered so that they will fit into a three-minute anecdote. I grew up surrounded by masterful Southern cocktail party storytellers. We'd be in a room with eight people drinking. You had maybe thirty-five seconds to hook people into a story. If you didn't succeed, either by virtue of your charisma or the drama of a fresh tale, someone would change the subject. They'd enter your story midstream and make an associative leap into their own story. But if you were a good storyteller, people would let you finish. Part of being a good storyteller is knowing the difference between an anecdote and a story. I'm still learning that one. Sometimes being a good storyteller is as simple as knowing when something isn't going well, when it's time to stop in the middle of a paragraph and let someone change the subject. That's a real benchmark of human evolution, that sort of self-awareness. *Enough analysis, already.* I'll leave that to the clinicians. I'm not a clinician. I have no letters after my name. I'm a hooker. I'm good at it. Most of the time, I still enjoy it.

Thanks to my utter compulsivity, I have documentation of much of my sex work history. I have day planners with appointments and what I was paid. I have all the America Online instant message chats I had with clients, other sex workers, and fuck buddies. I have photos of most of these men. I have every email I've sent and received at the various screen names I've had over the years. This is a digital black book, but its footprint stretches into the gigabyte range. So when I think I might be fudging my story, I can go back and look. The dates and numbers, the

screen names and places—those are all there. The details—the couch covered with cat hair, the guys who cranked the volume on their hotel television sets, the one who took me to dinner and forgot to wear a belt—all that stuff is archived.

I started doing sex work in December of 1998, a few weeks after I moved to San Francisco. Even that point is arguable. *Very* arguable. So arguable that it's untrue. That's the first line of my sex worker narrative and I've already misspoken.

In various ways, I've been doing sex work for years. I went on dates with older men who I knew would pay for dinner, who gave me presents or sent me plane tickets to visit them. There was a man in Canada who read one of my self-published books when I was twenty-one and started sending me money, like \$200 and \$400 at a time. He sent me a plane ticket on two occasions. I flew up that first time and he handed me \$500 in cash as we stepped into a motorboat to go to his summer house, which was built on huge rocks in a remote lake region. The second time I went to see him, when I was twenty-four, he bought me a laptop. It wasn't a clearly stated sex-for-money relationship, but it was understood that we'd play when we got together.

There was a time in Norfolk, Virginia. It was two in the morning and I was negotiating with a man who wanted to come over to my house and fuck me. He mistakenly thought I was a sex worker simply because I was a twentysomething guy talking to a fiftysomething guy. He wrote me an instant message that said, "How much?" I almost corrected him, but I just went along with it. He wrote another message: "Is 100 okay?" I said, "That would be great!" and sent him my address. I don't remember the sex. I was probably playing Shawn Colvin or Sarah McLachlan, be-

cause those were frequent sex-music choices of that time. It was the late '90s. Lilith Fair and all of that. I didn't tell anyone about my first incall.

When I moved to San Francisco, I continued to do cater-waiter work, which I'd done in New York City, D.C., and Virginia. I got paid less in San Francisco than ever, even though it was the height of the dot-com boom and mad money was everywhere. I worked for three weeks as a cater-waiter upon arriving in San Francisco. I was living rent-free in a tiny room under the stairs in an apartment with my new adopted family, a gay couple named Richard and Asa. I was working at catering jobs, then going online to hook up with men over forty. That was my age boundary. I'd loved older men from the time I was a teenager. In San Francisco, I'd come home from a catering job, then go to South of Market bars to hunt for sex. I went to sex clubs. I went to arcades. I picked up guys on the street. I met guys at Safeway. I was fresh off the plane from Virginia and I was up for anything.

One night I was finishing work at a twelve-dollar-an-hour catering gig. It was December, which is the season of office parties. There were all these drunk yuppies at the Exploratorium, this hands-on science museum for children, and adults on drugs. The yuppies were making a total mess—spilling beer on the floor, leaving empty cups and bottles all over the place. Those of us on the catering staff had spent several hours rolling in heavy round tables and arranging place settings. Caterers always overcharge their clients for waitstaff. It's the ultimate fuzzy math. Like they'll charge \$25 an hour per waiter for fifteen waiters on an eight-hour shift. They'll pay the waiters \$12 an hour, only use ten waiters, then cram all the work into a six-hour shift. The companies never pass along tips. No one in catering is happy. They smoke cigarettes, drink too

much, and do drugs they can't afford. At the end of the night, everyone becomes a thief, taking it upon themselves to self-tip with stolen bottles of red wine, votive candles, flower arrangements, plastic containers of food. The catering companies would rather throw food away than give it to homeless people, let alone their own employees. When people talk about prostitutes being exploited, abused, and violated, they're really talking about the catering industry.

It was the end of the night, and I was being chatted up by this drunk thirty-eight-year-old yuppie. He gave me his card. I knew I'd never call him, but I was being polite. I looked around at the other waiters and realized I had yet to roll all those heavy tables out to the event equipment rental trucks. I had yet to lug milk crates full of generic white dishes onto the loading platform. I had yet to gather up all the stained linens into garbage bags. This would all happen under duress—some cranky failed actor would be barking orders at us the whole time. We'd all be scared that we wouldn't be hired again, so we'd move quickly.

This drunk yuppie lightly smacked my ass after he gave me his card. He said, "Call me later." I looked down at his card. He'd written down his cell phone number, presumably so I could call him later that same night. The cuffs of my white shirt were covered in red wine. It looked like blood. Earlier, I'd had to bus sludge trays from the bar. My shirt was ruined.

I knew I wouldn't call this man. I knew it would take me an hour to get home on the bus. I knew this catering company would shave my paycheck. I looked around at all the round tables yet to be broken down and rolled away, then back at the drunk yuppie who was looking me

up and down like he was staring into a soft pretzel machine. I thought, almost out loud, *I should get paid for this.*

I ended up getting a ride home in one of the catering vans. All of us were exhausted. Sore feet, insufficiently padded black socks, black tuxedo pants, and splattered white shirts. The man driving spoke very little English. I can only imagine what the catering company paid him.

That week, I had been kicking around the idea of becoming an escort. I did what I always did, which was to research and gather information like I was doing a term paper. I sat in the gay and lesbian reading room at the public library and read John Preston's book *Hustling: A Gentleman's Guide to the Fine Art of Homosexual Prostitution* in one sitting. I went to A Different Light bookstore and bought *Hustlers, Escorts, and Porn Stars: The Insider's Guide to Male Prostitution in America*, by Matt Adams, which was a more up-to-date how-to guide. I'd made lists in my diary about what I would need: a pager, business cards, a little bag for supplies. I'd looked in the weekly papers to find out how much these things would cost.

I got home from my catering gig and went online. I created the screen name sfescort25@aol.com because I was twenty-five at the time. I probably could have passed for younger but I didn't want to be dishonest. Which strikes me as sweet, in retrospect, because it is a sex worker's prerogative to self-market as s/he deems fit. Everyone is creative with objective truth. Why should we be any different? I was naive enough to use my real first name, thinking that I didn't want to create a persona that would compartmentalize my psyche. I headed into the AOL chat rooms of San Francisco. That was the moment I first self-identified

as an "escort." This was no longer about me being a broke student that some guy was "helping out." I was now a *professional*.

For years I told people the apocryphal story of my first client. He was an extremely kind man. He smoked Benson and Hedges 100's. My client apologized for smoking but I quickly reassured him that it was fine, that I wanted him to feel comfortable. We didn't fuck, just cuddled and sucked and kissed. He took me out to Ruth's Chris Steak House after we played. I had no idea how expensive that place was. I didn't really understand why, either. It was just steak. You can get that at a buffet place like Country Cookin. When we got back to the hotel, he gave me \$200, even though my rate was \$150. I wouldn't have thought of charging for dinner. I just figured it was really nice of him to take me out for a meal. He put his hands on my shoulders and said, "What you're doing is healing work. Don't let anyone tell you different." It was a perfect first-client experience.

Over the years, I've been able to offer people this story as heart-warming proof that sex workers are healers, that I was a good person, that I was a sort of community servant, that clients were uniformly kind and compassionate people, that I wasn't in any physical or emotional danger, that I was legitimate, that I was appreciated by my clients, that the world is a place of perpetual serendipity and harmony.

Armed with this poignant narrative, I became a one-man revival for emancipation from stereotypes of both sex workers and clients. I could see how moved people were when I'd tell the story. I could sense how lucky I was when other sex workers told me the often awkward stories of their own first clients. Non-sex workers would hear the story and somehow, I was assured, Earth would be a better place.

But this is the thing. My first client was actually my *second* client. I turned him into my first client because it made for a better story—a more attractive story to non—sex workers. It took less time to tell. For seven years I actually convinced myself that he *was* my first client. I didn't discover the truth until I sat down to write about my initial sex work experiences.

Here's my recovered memory of my real first client. On the night of my last catering gig ever, I was in the San Francisco AOL chat room with my new screen name. I was getting asked voyeuristic questions by a lot of men who either wanted to be with an escort, or wished they'd been an escort at some point, or both. Chat rooms in San Francisco are lousy places to hang a shingle. Everyone's there to give it away for free.

I got an instant message from this guy saying, "Looking for an escort." This is not from memory. This is based on saved documents. He typed in a large yellow outlined font and his grammar was so bad that I couldn't determine much about him. He said things like, "How long you do it for, me, pig, you?" I started calling *him* "pig" because I thought that was the scene; I thought that *he* wanted to service *me*. He spoke in clipped phrases like "long time" and "just like to lay back." I couldn't really tell whether he meant *me* or *him*. Either way was fine with me—I just didn't know. He asked me whether I liked to party. I had no idea what that meant. I said, "Sure thing." He said, "Party here." We didn't negotiate a solid rate. He knew I wanted \$150, but we didn't determine how long I'd stay for that amount. I arrived half an hour later at his basement studio in the Castro.

This guy, Nate, had told me to let myself in. He was sitting in front of a small television that was playing porn. He had a dog, this sleepy

golden retriever. The place was crammed with boxes and stacks of papers. The room felt like it had been slept in a lot. It felt like the kind of place where you hibernate during rainy months.

As soon as I arrived, he pulled his sweatpants down to his knees and sat back down on the couch. He leaned against the back of the couch and closed his eyes. No words. No acknowledgment. Nothing. Which is actually one of my favorite ways to proceed.

I sucked on his cock for about ten minutes. He was semihard, which made sucking a lot easier. It's the really hard cocks that tire out your jaw, stretch your throat, and cramp your neck. When a guy's not fully hard, you can do miraculous things with the muscles in your throat, the roof of your mouth, your tongue. It's like the difference between ballet and breakdancing.

He pulled out a pipe and we each smoked a few hits of pot. Pot has never been my thing. It can get me paranoid. I just never know. It's a long story. I'll just tell you the anecdotal version. My brother was the commonwealth's attorney in my hometown. In the early 1980s, he led a huge grand jury investigation to root out all the drug dealers and users in the entire county. He put a lot of people in prison. I was around ten at the time and my parents told me that journalists would try to get me to smoke pot so that they could write a huge expose that would destroy the entire family. From preadolescence, I internalized the message that my experimenting with drugs could bring down my family altogether. Thank God they never said the same thing about sucking cock.

After we smoked pot and I sucked on him for another fifteen minutes, I started taking little breaks and working his cock with my hand, hoping he'd come or at least give up and send me on my way. Maybe

the "work" part of sex work was going to be more intensive than I'd initially envisioned. He brought out a little wooden cutting board, the kind you put Brie and crackers on. He sprinkled a little powder on it and handed me a piece of a plastic straw he'd cut from one of those flexi-straws. I thought that was incredibly smart. People who do drugs are so resourceful.

I was so excited to be trying cocaine. I'd always wanted to try it but had been too afraid of getting hooked. I'd read *Less Than Zero* when I was thirteen and those cokeheads were a mess. A lot of my favorite people had been on cocaine. On the Stevie Nicks *Behind the Music*, she says, "The doctor told me if I did cocaine one more time, I would die." But I was in San Francisco. I'd been here for two weeks. I was trying all sorts of new things. Why not try cocaine? The journalists who were looking for me all lived on the East Coast, anyway. I took the end of the flexi-straw and snorted some of the powder. It tingled. I thought about how people do so much cocaine that the mucus membrane between their nostrils rots out. They start bleeding when they sneeze. I certainly didn't want to be like that.

He snorted a bit of the powder, which was a little yellowish. Cocaine with jaundice. I thought maybe it was cheap or something. Maybe it was the lighting? Cocaine in the movies is white. Everyone knows cocaine is white. What was wrong with his cocaine?

I went back to sucking his cock. After a few minutes, I started really getting into it, putting his entire cock and balls into my mouth and looking up at him like I was a puppy. He wasn't looking down at me at all. He was totally fixated on the television. This only made me more devoted. After about an hour, he started putting Vaseline on his cock,

maybe because it was getting rubbed raw from all the contact and saliva. I thought that was strange. Who uses Vaseline for lube, other than teenage boys? A kid I grew up with was a drummer in a heavy metal band. Everyone knew he used Vaseline. He had a plastic tub of it right by his bed. He had a pet rat who didn't have a cage. The rat would shit all over the carpet, then Scott would walk in and out of the room and track rat shit all over the house.

After my initial bewilderment, I went right to it. Suddenly, I liked the taste of it in my mouth. Every ten minutes or so, I'd get a few fingers full of Vaseline and slather up his cock so I could get back on it. It was 4:30 AM by this point. He was falling asleep intermittently. I'd keep sucking his cock, even when he was asleep. Every now and then he'd push my head away from his cock, sometimes even say, "Stop."

At 5 AM, there was a knock on the door. He motioned me to stay where I was. He went to the door. A guy stepped in and the door closed, but not all the way. Nobody was talking. After forty-five seconds, Nate closed the door and returned to the couch. He reached behind the couch, presumably to stash what had just been dropped off. He reached for his dick and shook it in my face. I noticed that behind me, the television had gone to snow. I don't know how long it had been like that. Probably hours. Nate didn't do anything about it.

At 5:15 AM, we did another bump of cocaine. I was amazed at how long cocaine lasted. I'd heard it only got you high for fifteen minutes. This was very good cocaine. Maybe Colombian or something. No wonder people could go through their life's savings snorting that stuff. If I'd tried it in college, I would never have left my dorm room.

I sucked him for another three hours. Again, he was falling asleep,

pushing my head away. I'd wait long enough for him to stop resisting, sitting there like a dog who's been told no, like a dog who knows if he sits there long enough he'll get a treat.

At 8:30 AM I was still sucking him. It had been eight hours. Usually I would have gotten tired by this point. Usually I would have gotten bored. Sucking cock had never been more interesting. This man was kind of an asshole, but drugs turn assholes into brothers on the road.

He woke up one last time and looked at the clock. He said, "You've got to go." I just sat there. Didn't get dressed, didn't move. He went to the phone to tell his boss, I guess, that he was going to be late. He put down the phone and said again, "You've got to get out of here. *Go!*"

I said, "Do you remember inviting me over here?" He said he didn't.

"You said you were going to pay me," I said. I hadn't figured out an overnight charge. I was starting to calculate eight hours at \$150 an hour. I figured it was going to be a *lot* of money.

He started rifling through drawers. "I don't know what I have," he said.

I looked around the apartment, thinking about what I could take. There wasn't much of obvious value. A half-empty jar of Vaseline, a bag of drugs, and a shitty little TV. The place looked even worse in the daylight.

He walked over to me with sixty dollars. Two twenties and two tens. Barely minimum wage. I thought about causing a scene. He could sense that was a possibility. He sat down on the couch and said, "Please just go. I'm sorry."

I got dressed and left. I didn't slam the door. I walked home to my little room under the stairs. I got online with my hooker screen

name and looked for a guy who wanted his dick sucked. I found a guy who wanted that but didn't want to pay. He said he had a nine-inch dick. I told him I wouldn't charge him and got his address. I'd been online for an hour, jerking my limp dick with the door open. Richard and Asa weren't awake yet. Any moment, they could have walked by and seen me.

I took a cab to this man's place in the Outer Mission. He lived with his twin and kept a bottle of Jim Beam at his bedside. He took intermittent sips and smoked Winstons while I serviced him. His dick was so hard that it hurt my throat. I was longing for Nate's soft cock. With this guy, I knew I wasn't going to last very long. The guy talked about how he liked going to Puerto Vallarta and finding teenage boys to fuck in the bathrooms on the beach, using just spit. He said the last time he'd done that, the kid had bled all over his dick. He said he wanted to fuck me like that, with just spit. I wanted him to fuck me, but I insisted on him wearing a condom. He couldn't get hard inside the condom and we gave up.

As I was leaving, he said, "Have you been doing crystal? I can taste it in your spit."

"What's crystal?" I asked. "I did some cocaine last night."

"Crystal is speed. *That's* what you did last night."

"Oh," I said.

He'd given me something to think about.

I went home and got online again. It was 7 PM. I was still buzzing really hard on whatever it was I'd snorted. I'd never heard of crystal. Did Stevie Nicks ever do crystal?

I saw Nate online and apologized to him for how awkward things had gotten. I offered to come over and service him some more. He must

have been surprised, and said, "Come on over." In that moment, I rewarded the bad behavior of every client who's ever fantasized about an escort throwing up his hands and saying, "You're so hot, I just want to have sex with you for free!"

When I got there, we smoked a little pot but didn't do any crystal. I sucked him for about five minutes. His dick was too hard. It was hurting my throat. I had a really panicky reaction to his penis. I started shaking. I curled up in a ball on the floor and made primal whining sounds.

"I need to go," I said, worried that I would be disappointing him.

"Okay," he said.

I dressed, then walked home. On the way home, I remember thinking what a huge mistake it was to have moved to San Francisco. I was going to kill myself in this city. I wasn't strong enough. Maybe I'd just get it over with. I thought about ways I could do it: I could overdose on over-the-counter sleep meds; I could step in front of a bus. I reached Church Street and turned left. I started jogging home, feeling like if I didn't get home in the next five minutes I was going to freeze to death or get beaten by a lynch mob or expire in some humiliating public spectacle. I ran the rest of the way home.

Richard was making dinner—one of his trademark dinners where he takes all the leftovers in the fridge and turns it into something magical. I told him a little bit about what had happened to me in the past twenty-four hours, but not all of it. Not even close to all of it.

He said speed was a hard drug, that it had taken people who'd lived in the very room where I was sleeping. People who could have been famous. People who might have been, should have been. He made me a cup of tea in the oversized mug he usually used himself.

After a lot of frenzied writing in my journal, a lot of compulsive online cruising, I finally got to sleep.

*That was my first client. It's not a short story. It doesn't play well at a cocktail party. If I'd told that story at my parents' cocktail parties, someone would have interrupted me. The man who took me to Ruth's Chris Steak House called two days later. He was my second client. When he told me that I was doing healing work, I did not yet feel like any sort of healer. His words were a source of great comfort to me. At the time, I felt reassured that I wasn't just some aimless waif with a looming drug problem. "Healing" sounded respectable. I was a good Southern boy with a degree from the University of Virginia; it was my second day on a job that struck me as far from respectable. If I could see myself as a healer, I could head off some of the tremendous shame that was bubbling up. The first few days of sex work are emotional enough without the physiological impact of crystal meth comedown—depleted levels of serotonin, dehydration and low blood sugar from not drinking or eating enough, mania and exhaustion from not sleeping. I was a mess and this man, God bless him, was telling me otherwise. He gave me a useful mantra: *You're doing healing work.**

In the months that followed, I would begin to disclose to family and friends that I'd started doing sex work. If others could see me as a healer, maybe my family wouldn't disown me. Maybe my friends wouldn't be disappointed in me. Maybe someone would tell me I'd made a good decision. The story of my second client provided a much more attractive set of talking points for these conversations.

Over the years, as I told the story of my second client, he turned into my first client. The tale took on a mystical, archetypal quality, like

the universe had sent this man to deliver a message. It became my creation myth. There was a clear hero (me, of course—what good is storytelling if you can't be a hero?), a kindly wizard figure who helped me along, and a clear moral trajectory. Gone were the scary complications that distinguish a story from an anecdote. My first client . . . now, *that* was a story. My second client was an anecdote. Anecdotes are comforting, emotionally contained. They feel complete at the end of their telling. Stories ring in your ear. Stories reverberate after the telling is done. Stories get away from you.

The two clients got mixed up in my mind and it wasn't because I willfully neglected the truth. It just made for a cleaner, more compact story, one with an upbeat ending, an emotional punch line, a moral outcome that was compatible with my new profession. I don't know when I started calling him my first client. I just know that it made people feel better about my sex work, thinking I was a healer and that my first client had confirmed this fact. It made *me* feel better about sex work.

On some level, I still see that man as my first client. He wasn't. He helped me recuperate from my real first client. I can still see the scene of us in that hotel room, even though his face has gotten blurry—I'm not going to lie and say that his features are burned into my memory, even for the sake of a better story.

He *did* put his hands on my shoulders. He *did* take me out to dinner. He *did* tip me. He *did* say, "You're doing healing work." Didn't he?

LACK OF CLOSE FRIENDS OR CONFIDANTS

JENNIFER BLOWDRYER

Schizotypal Personality Disorder: *A pervasive pattern of social and interpersonal deficits marked by acute discomfort with, and reduced capacity for, close relationships as well as by cognitive or perceptual distortions and eccentricities of behavior, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts.*

The other day, a youngish, well-coiffed man was interviewing me for gay television.

"How long have you been doing this?" he asked.

"Since I was seventeen. Half my life." I replied.

"Why?!" he queried, lips curling involuntarily in disgust.

Turns out he was asking me how long I had been a "faux queen," the theme for the nightclub event I was loosely participating in. I had forgotten all about the putative theme, and understood the question as a much broader one about how long I'd been a countercultural type. In either case, my answer would have been the same:

"Because I couldn't play volleyball."

Which is how it happens. A gal like me can't pass as normal in a North Kingstown, Rhode Island, junior high school, or even at Hamilton Elementary in the same vicinity, and it goes on and on until she sees a magazine picture of other people who would for sure never pass in Kingstown, or even nearby Wickford. An indifferently emancipated sixteen, she slathers on some Flame Glo eye shadow, figures out how to take public transportation to a New World, and that's it, she's gone.

I was mean, I was an idiot, I was absurdly loyal to volatile sociopaths, I screamed 'til my voice was forever shot, fucked for food, for attention, for \$30, for the money you lost in bed, for a trip to Tahoe, in front of a video camera, and in order to betray anybody who thought they had half a chance of me as a partner (a word that makes me practically gag), because I, I was not normal.

By the time I tried to reenter society, in my thirties, with some half-baked idea of being a paralegal, the rehabilitation official from VESID, CHANCES, OPTIONS, or whatever the name of the freaking program was took one look at my wrinkled clothes and half-shut eyes and advised me to seek government assistance, SSI, Social Security Income. Sounded good. I did, in fact, feel ready to retire, and had for a long time.

Many of the first people I'd met in the New World—the one I took a

train and a bus to find—were on SSI, so it made sense that decades later I was on the same “journey” (another word that makes me want to gag. In fact, let me say rather that I was on the same “path”—no, that’s even worse). I wanted to apply for SSI as well, and hoped I, like them, would be deemed sufficiently incompetent.

Fortunately for me, I was visiting Gouverneur at the time, in order to keep getting the pills to which I’d become accustomed. It’s a great socialist-style hospital at the edge of the Chinatown projects in Manhattan, and though I was broke and uninsured, they helped me anyway: *Pending Medicaid* was how the forms put it. On the third floor, in a section called Young Adult (I was not), I was regularly chatting it up with the young and handsome Dr. Goodman. As usual, I was committing numerous social gaffes, even in the course of therapy, and had no idea. I read the doctor in training as an obvious young queen, and talked to him in a clubby manner, filled with the outdated idioms that mark a fag hag of a certain age. He had what was probably, in retrospect, a nervous laugh, but I chose to interpret his punctuating chuckles in a manner favorable to myself. I was a big hit, I gathered, and my verbal patter got more outlandish by the minute.

Inadvertently, I was conveying one of the five hallmarks of a schizotypal personality disorder: odd thinking and speech. Grunge was in that year, or I felt it was in, and I took it as far as I could, achieving such a vagrant demeanor that cabdrivers often felt compelled to ask me if I had money the second I hopped in. This gave me another key symptom: appearance that is odd, eccentric, or peculiar.

Around this time, the early ‘90s, these shows I’d been producing, Smut Fests, were starting to take off. Initially they’d been a good idea, as

in the late '80s nobody was talking about their "sex work," not even the hack writers whose efforts filled sex magazines like *Penthouse*, *Adam*, and even *Swank*, so we'd started to run these shows where strippers, erotica writers, and assorted others were the stars.

By the time it was played out, the whole Smut Fest thing, HBO had come along and produced a glossy *Real Sex* special on the once-pre-scient phenomena, and I was subsequently flown to Germany to run shows in the red-light district of Hamburg. These trips to Hamburg, the costumes I claimed HBO had paid for, must have all seemed like delusional anecdotes to the young Dr. Goodman, and earned me another diagnostic criteria: magical thinking that influences behavior and is inconsistent with subcultural norms. Craaaazy.

Though my pals and I were on our own cultural tip, I would argue with the caseworkers and say that we were the very definition of a sub-cultural norm. It's true, however, that none of us could be relied upon to do much of anything for each other but possibly share a backstage with a minimum of ill will. *Lack of close friends or confidants* may have been the clincher as far as my psychiatric diagnosis went, giving me the requisite four symptoms.

I hang on to the diagnosis of schizotypal, and it's not even clear to me whether I'm just passing as mentally incapable of assimilation and employment, or if that is really true. A friend of mine, when asked by the Social Security official what kind of career he thought he might have, was silent for a minute and finally said:

"Well, maybe I could set up my drums at the beach, and just *play*."

He got full government benefits, as did I. Six hundred and fifty dollars a month, free medication, all the doctors-in-training I can pencil in,

and \$138 in food stamps. Cake! Sometimes I feel a little guilty, but the reality is that it's the least they could do.

I can't really make it on my own, anyway. After all, I couldn't play volleyball. The very thought of that inordinately heavy object lobbed at me by a classmate full of disdain, hurtling overhead toward me and my delicate hands, does not inspire competition, just a stronger than usual desire to duck and flinch from a crushing combination of physical and psychological defeat. It all continues to terrify me.

FROM HOT PINK TO CODE PINK:

*Notes on Passing for
Monolingual Folk*

IRINA CONTRERAS

Violent Vickie and I ride up Ninth Street on our jalopy bicycles, eager to jump onto Broadway and into the seemingly endless white-shirted crowd. We'd stopped arguing an hour or so ago, just in time to go to the demonstration against anti-immigrant bill HR 4437. Figuring out how to put my U-lock around both of our bikes amid the sea of people, we've already forgotten why we were bitching at each other so early in the morning. Wearing brightly colored, shredded band T-shirts, we immediately stand out among all the clean and crisp white shirts. I know that I, too, was supposed to wear white, but I've failed to keep the symbolic promise. It didn't seem that pertinent to the demo until now.

I hadn't imagined that I would stick out quite as much as I do this March 25, 2006. Some of the ways are obvious, or rather they exist as they always have for a *pocha* like me. As a third-generation "Americanized" brown girl who is a native English speaker, I often have to tell people who assume I know Spanish fluently, "*Repita.*" or "*Lentamente.*" as though it is really just a mistake that I don't understand them as well as I should. Certainly, it often feels like a mistake that I do not in fact understand the language or the position in which I often find myself. It's as if my tongue drags on the words and there isn't any escape. Critical theorists, intellectual revolutionaries, and "progressive" schoolteachers engaging issues like "hiphop as a social forum to bring the Man down" may tell me there is a *name* for my syndrome. I know it, you may know it, and depending on the words you use . . . well, they ain't so pretty. People in my family have called me whitewashed, which is ironic considering they sent me to an all-white conservative private school. Other people might call me assimilated. Still others might call me a cultural hybrid, though this doesn't seem particularly relevant outside of academia or the art world.

I arrived at the demo with literally the only Anglo, it seems, in the group we join. Wait, did I really just write the word *Anglo*? Is it okay for me to call her Anglo, or even to use the word *white*, when I am referring to my completely out-of-the-closet, feminist, anarcho-commie buddy? It's true that I've been called whitewashed by my own family, who've practically instilled it in me since I was a wee tot, starting with that right-wing school near the Encino-Van Nuys border. It would be an understatement to say that it took me a while to realize that we had "less" than others. If I was hot, I got to play in the sprin-

kler, and this seemed like a treat. I thought that air-conditioning was a very special accessory for automobiles, and I hadn't a clue that I was (gasp!) a different color until I was in third grade.

I am certain now that my father sent me to that private school not just so that I could gain a sense of entitlement and education in the world, but because of a self-hatred that is bred across the board in my culture and, most certainly, within my family. This self-hatred is still rarely talked about. Almost always, I hear and read about second- and third-generation peoples who refer to those who just crossed over as if they are criminals. I still hear this in my family, and the ramifications of their accusations echo in my head for days. Didn't we "come over" at some point, too?

Growing up, I thought of my family, and particularly my grandparents, as alternately total pilgrims or conservative right-wing types like the people at my school. The truth is more complicated. Those on my grandmother Dolores's side were all farmworkers. My great-grandmother Narcissa worked in canning factories in Cudahy and lived in the Chavez Ravine area when my grandmother was a little girl. My grandfather was a proud pipefitters' union man until the day he passed. My mother has worked for Vons since 1989, and my sister Stephanie and I joined her on the picket lines during the strike of 2003. By sending me to private school, my father made sure I would indeed get the individualized attention of faculty in a way that wouldn't have been possible at a public school. And there it became certain that my immersion in a privileged, white worldview would distance me from my own family, community, and heritage. For years, I wondered why my parents would knowingly connect me

to the intellectual world of possibilities while simultaneously distancing me from my own people.

My parents separated in 1991. My mother and grandmother scraped money together to allow me to finish junior high. I later started high school in a public school. I had hoped for years to be able to attend public school, but once I arrived I could see why my family had not wanted me there. My math class had fifty students at least. I sat on the floor and there weren't enough books for me to take one home. Already terrible at math, I flunked and had to go to summer school. Luckily, I flirted with some homie who let me cheat off him so I could pass. I spent much of high school either ditching class or waiting through the days until the adventure of punk shows in the city drew closer. By the time graduation rolled around, I chugged forties on random weekday nights and destroyed private property for fun without the slightest idea as to how on earth I would ever be able to get to college or even keep a job. All I knew was that I liked making collages and zines, taking photographs, and yelling really loud. Could I find a job doing something like that? Probably not, I thought.

I wanted to travel, which is exactly what I did. For my high school friends, our cross-country trip was a way for us to share time before they went to college outside of the city. For me, it was simply an escape from the future I did not want to face. It wasn't just apathy; it was the fact that kids in my demographic have to sweat bullets and climb mountains to get anywhere.

By the time I was back in school at community college, I only saw more evidence of my own assimilation. I didn't like it one bit, but I didn't

know how else to act. The MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán) kids hated me. Or was this simply the way I perceived my position at that community college? Probably both. Though I made a few random friends at school, I decided that school was just for studying. If I really wanted socialization, I could go to shows. I set out to get as close to a full scholarship to San Francisco Art Institute as possible. On my way home from shows at the PCH Club in Wilmington or the Smell in North Hollywood (two all-ages venues), I would stop at the closest diner and work on my courses. Still, this didn't prepare me for an art school with no MEChA at all. Can you imagine? A MEChA that spits and spews Baudrillard (critical theorist) and Zapata (Mexican revolutionary) within the context of the "white cube"? Yeah, right.

I transferred to San Francisco Art Institute in 2000, with that nice scholarship in hand. Such a "nice scholarship" that, amid the dot-com boom, I was completely unable to find a home nearby, and resorted to sharing a one-bedroom apartment in Berkeley with a man from Micronesia. He suffered from what my other roommate and I ultimately decided had to be severe acculturation anxieties. He decided to bring every stray carpet he found on the street into our tiny living room. The carpets bunched together, making the shelves and end tables lopsided. It seemed to me that if one tried to leave the ghetto, shit, a whole new one that you had never seen before would just grow in its place and follow you.

To save money, I ate burritos from the kids' menu of my local taco shop every day, and used a Onebox voice mail service instead of a phone. In my complete naïveté, I romanticized the idea that there were people at school who might encourage me to build and grow

conceptually. There were classes that taught me how to document performances, and others with names like "Artist as Citizen" or "Public/Private Practices." Needless to say, none of these classes prepared me to deal with a visiting professor who only called me "Beautiful Mexican Girl." If this wasn't enough, he once told me that I needed to be more grandiose with projections, nudity, and movement. I asked him coldly if I looked like Bill Viola, an installation-based artist known for various grandiose endeavors.

My time at the San Francisco Art Institute was short-lived. I transferred to Otis College of Art and Design in Southern California, a place that didn't make attempts to be connected to any kind of particular social movement or critical way of thinking about art and globalization. There, art was simply a business. The whole time I worked toward graduating with honors, I supported myself by working at nonprofits and/or as a youth organizer. The two areas of my life rarely mixed, even upon inquiry from the amazing mentors and peers whom I managed to find against the odds.

Back at the demonstration, a young man climbs to the top of one of the ramshackle green wooden newspaper stands. He takes off his shirt and throws it onto his shoulder, grasping his video camera. Looking onto the crowd, he screams, "*Que queremos? Justicia!*" An old ranchero, looking a lot like my grandfather, screams, "*Que queremos? Reggaeton! Reggaeton! Reggaeton!*" Violent Vickie and I giggle. The rest of the crowd cheers, sharing ideals and pigment but little else that day. Violent Vickie turns to me with this innocent expression and wonders aloud about all the white shirts. She tells me how her conservative suburban mother said that all the people waving Mexican flags

was a bad thing, but that being at the demo she's not noticing any Mexican flags, mostly just U.S. flags. She asks me what I think about it and I search inside myself for feelings centuries and seconds old and young that lay vacant and strangled without any hope of seeing the light of day. I give some overanalyzed but unfeeling and unaffected answer—an explanation that says very little about what I actually feel. I feel distant, and in a larger sense there's this grand hope and amazement.

Where would all of this leave us on the next anti-HR 4437 march, on May 1, 2006, walking down Broadway and Wilshire Boulevard? And later on? What is solved? There is this idea of displacement, but what does placelessness actually feel like? How many people like me are out there, people who have never felt like they had a home? I am not even trying to compare my placelessness to someone's daily existence without papers, everyday worrying about *la migra*. It's never been a fear that rested and settled in my bones, but rather a stillness—an inability to name the feeling or describe the lack of language that I have in my brain that is filled with a vastness.

This is the frustration that I felt so often as a teenager. I wanted it to be related to these other fights that I paired myself with: food for the homeless, riot grrrl and feminism, green space in Los Angeles, and the struggle to believe that there is a better way to conduct social and political people-based power. I was a green-haired and pierced queer girl with a crusty anarcho contingency, but none of the places where I looked could have prepared me for the continual not-knowing of becoming a working-class artist and virtual slave in my late twenties. Still without any answers. It is true: Knowing the mother tongue would never really hide what is me, and why would I want to hide it anyway? I don't

mind having to explain to people when I am traveling that L.A. is full of "us." *Pochos*. "Chicanos?" they ask me. "Well, something like that," I say. Except that some of us didn't take part in the '68 Chicano Moratorium walkouts because we were too young. And some of us didn't walk out in '94 during the protests against anti-immigrant Proposition 187, either. But many of us did walk on May 1, 2006.

There are many places in this world that are not supposed to be mine. After all, I went through private schools—not just in elementary school, but through two private art institutions as well. Sometimes I made those places my own, sometimes I just passed among the privileged students. But what about liberation, activism, and solidarity? Since the inception of my own rising consciousness as a member of riot grrrl, Food Not Bombs, and ongoing demonstrations in the streets (whether it was Critical Mass, World Trade Organization protests, or Reclaim the Streets), I have believed—or rather, I have wanted to believe—that these movements were in fact something I could call my own. But were they really? Riot grrrl was a movement organized around the needs of mostly white, privileged females. Food Not Bombs, as well as the rotating demonstration-in-the-streets student movements, have always assumed the privilege of getting arrested, discussing jail solidarity as a viable option for everyone. Did I have those options? Have my friends without papers had those options? Often I hear about and experience this generalization among my peers about our philosophies linking our experience. Just because we ride bikes together, go to demonstrations or shows together, it does *not* mean that we have the same experiences walking into a store, walking home, or filling out applications for an apartment. The same is true of the recent mobilizations: We marched together, but we do not walk together every day.

But apparently I have not been the only one in my family passing. Recently, my grandma told me about how my grandfather used to lie to immigrants in Pacoima about where he was from. She recalled that he thought that if the neighbors knew that my family was from the States, the family would be looked down upon, so he would tell them he was from this tiny town that only someone familiar with Zacatecas would know of. When he lied, he believed they nodded in approval.

As an employee for the Cultural Affairs Department, I worked as a gallery educator during a photo exhibit titled "Black Mexico" in which a photographer documented various black Mexican peoples. When I told members of my family about it, they shook their heads, saying such a thing was absolutely impossible. And yet a year later, at my family reunion, I met my uncle Rufus, who was most certainly black and Mexican. And yet, no one in my family said anything. My mom just laughed and said, "Well, yeah, of course he's black. His name is Rufus."

Later in the day during the May Day protests, I stop at my work, the L.A. County Museum of Art, to use the bathroom. It's one thing to be there during work hours, all excited about the Mrzyk & Moriceau symbolist drawing installation. It's a whole other thing to march all day long, and then to walk, sweaty and fired up, into your work because you want to go to the bathroom in a clean and cool place. Really, I could have gone to the port-a-potties like everyone else, right? By the time I stop in at the museum, I have become delirious from dehydration and lack of food (honoring the suggested boycott of purchases for that day—great idea!).

In the bathroom, my back sticks to the tile wall as I wait in line, listening to some of the other women wonder aloud about what's going

on outside. I immediately feel uncomfortable, like I am too sweaty and not dressed properly to be at work. Despite enjoying my job, I suppose it suffices to say that I am incredibly colonized there, as I imagine many of my cohorts might be. We watch our language, the way we look, the way we talk about the objects, always knowing that a collector might be in proximity. One woman in the bathroom, who appears to be in her early fifties, is dressed in very lightweight Banana Republic-looking clothing. She's wearing a big sun hat with fake flowers and antiwar pins on it, as well as a Code Pink pin on her jacket. She gives me the "look." It's the look that says, *I have been outside marching with you*. I have to say that even though this woman hasn't yet opened her mouth, I already sense my dissatisfaction. I am wondering if she is going to come up and talk slowly, enunciating every word to ask me, "What time is it?" Will she point to her wrist and open her mouth very wide with each syllable?

Banana Republic looks at the other women and says, "It's a march for all the Hispanics." I cringe as she says that word, and can't even bring myself to defend what she's saying. The pitiful thing is that I wish I had been wrong, but alas, it wasn't meant to be. I am not from Spain. And every time I hear the bloody word *Hispanic* I see *HISPANIC BUSINESS, THE NEW AMERICA!* or *CELEBRATE HISPANIC CULTURE!* in my head. This woman then proceeds to add something about "migrants" and I wonder if she might be testing words to see what I react to.

In that bathroom, I realize the way that we all step into other people's spaces and the way this woman has stepped into mine. She is looking to define and be a part of this movement, even though she can't quite explain what it is. We all seem to lack the words and the ability to truly use our language to say what we really want. I constantly stumble

upon my own words like this woman, like my grandfather, and maybe even like you. It becomes a math equation that not even a homie could help me with if I flashed or flirted a little. And so I embellish when I need to. And I subtract a little of me. Often, what I am left with—what we are left with—is far less than what we started out with. Perhaps, if I had the chance to explain this now to Banana Republic, I might just try.

NOT QUITE QUEER

BENJAMIN SHEPARD

*I want to be where the boys are
but I'm not allowed*

—"Boy," Book of Love, 1986

One of my favorite memories of high school is of hanging out at Daddy's, a gay bar in Dallas, dancing with the other "straight" guys to Book of Love. Although ecstasy had been rendered illegal since "Black Monday" the previous July of 1985,¹ Daddy's still offered "eve," a generic alternative that was sold at the bar in a shiny blue fluorescent box. The legions pouring into Daddy's for their little pills would find a spirit of fun and kink, margaritas and lust, bulging pupils and knowing

glances, which made the trip unique. I'd never been in a space where people were so open about their longings and no one seemed to be bothered. Quite the contrary—attraction was celebrated. On one occasion, I ran in while still wearing a prom tuxedo as my friends waited, double-parked outside. A laid-back African American gentleman wearing black sunglasses walked up, said hello, put his arm around my waist, and gave me a little pinch. A gentle pinch, but it suggested there was more where that came from if I was interested. I didn't really know whether I was. Throughout high school, from 1984 to 1988, my friends and I flocked to the Stark Club, Daddy's, the Wok, JR's, and the other venues within Cedar Springs, Dallas's thriving queer ghetto neighborhood, and we had a grand time.

Usually, we would buy our pills, and then get a bite at the Wok, a high-end Chinese restaurant that served us cocktails while we waited for the high to kick in. It was not hard to get lost in this illicit atmosphere of neon light and otherworldly music. Sometimes, we'd meander through the streets, browsing an indie record shop full of the latest imports, drinking frozen margaritas at JR's, or sniffing little jars of "rush" or "locker room" at a trash disco up the street. When the pills finally set in, a buzz meandered up and down the spine, creating a feeling of vulnerability, soothing tranquility, and intimacy. We soaked in an altered never-never space, where people, feelings, care, and ideas came from everywhere. Here, everyone put a premium on the sensual—you could touch, take stock, and feel. I was fixated on the music, the clothes, the cosmopolitan sensibility, the underground, the pleasure, the connection to culture, the dandiness of it all. These experiences completely altered my "straight" view of the world.

As the years went on, I continued to venture to Cedar Springs, even when I was not pursuing the eve. The space came to represent a sort of gateway into a different side of the city and the self. Here, what started as a curiosity opened a new democracy of pleasure and politics. These queer spaces offered new forms of camaraderie, legions of friends, and urban vistas. When heterosexual class hierarchies offered little but snooty country-club exclusion, queer spaces showed me more about community building than anything I had known. Rather than cliques, here the citizenry built community through pleasure and friendship.

As someone who in fact enjoyed contact with women, I did not see a point in trying to pass as anything but het; yet accusations still followed, sometimes to my advantage, sometimes highlighting my powerlessness. Texas social life offered any number of contradictions. While it rewarded a level of sameness, eccentricity also had its rewards. Dandy fabulousness often produced social capital for those willing to handle the inherent risks, especially if it was cloaked in preppy charm. Yet, in countless circles, condemnation accompanied displays of effeminate affect. People in Texas appreciate a good story or "character," but still you were either a ball player or a queer (or a blurry combination when the drinks flowed). Most of the time, there wasn't much room for nuance (especially during the day hours). My resentment (and insecurity) led me to conform, do high school butch masculine, play football.

Yet, even there, towels snapped; boys were boys; and a Spartan level of queer desire/repulsion helped many to bond. Sometimes it was through the constant flow of antiqueer jokes; at other times through quasi-homoerotic rituals of passage. (The guys at a nearby school were said to have shoved Oscar Mayer wieners up their bums before

they did sprints up and down the field in full pads during practice.) A couple of the guys on our team had even taken the talk of jockstraps and the endless array of queer jokes into play off the field. Doug,² a consummate preppy, sport, and all-around popular guy, was known to enjoy his trysts with Andy, an older boy who'd been to college and could always get you into the Stark Club. Even Grace Jones was known to cavort there during her annual stops in town. I was intrigued. When I confessed to have an interest in Andy, a friend warned, "Watch out if you approach him, or next thing he'll be knocking on your window at 3 AM with a martini in one hand and an ecstasy tab in the other." That didn't sound bad to me. Anything but a letch, Andy turned out to be a magnetic friend, full of stories, creativity, and wanderlust. Imports poured out of the stereo in his old Honda convertible as we talked and talked and zoomed through the Texas night, imagination brimming. That was it. And it was fine.

Summer of 1984, Rupert Everett appeared in *Another Country*, a drama about class politics and homosexuality at a British high school. I adored Everett's Merchant Ivory Oxford wardrobe, haircut, mannerisms, flair for self-expression, and inability to heed the practical advice, "Discretion is the better part of valor." Rather than blend in, Everett flouted tradition; he passed notes during military parades, snuck off campus, and generally advertised that he had slept with most every other boy at the school. When Everett set up a clandestine date with another boy and proposed, over lunch, "Shall we get terribly, terribly drunk," I was enthralled. Summer '86, I went to the movie two or three times with another boy, Peter. He had just been accepted to Brown. He looked like, and had the mannerisms and highly etiquette-conscious feel

of, the boys in *Another Country*. He was attracted to the movie as much as I was. Though he had a girlfriend, we exchanged mix tapes and went to movies all that summer. One of his tapes featured the Blancmange anthem, "Lose Your Love." "No, no, no, no, no, no, I don't want you to go . . . I don't want to lose your love," the emotional chorus concluded with a crescendo. Before the end of summer, he broke up with his girlfriend, who was frustrated with him for not putting out anyway. It was all very dramatic. I did not have a word for the sensibility between us. We got drunk ourselves on his final night before he was to go away to college and shared a clumsy make-out. I threw up—not from repulsion, but from too much vinegary warm white wine in my bloated stomach. And I ended up consoling Peter, who felt awful after the unsuccessful tryst (and perhaps a little guilty and frustrated—I didn't really know). The next morning was summer football. I was glad to leave the realm of dandydom for the camaraderie of the locker room.

The touch of the skin, the smell of the male body, failed to intrigue. Yet, the emphasis on connection among networks of bodies remained alluring. My appreciation for the spaces men created continued. It was refreshing to know that these worlds existed when hetero-mores grew too restrictive. Yet, Texas offered any number of its own surprises. Weeks before high school graduation, a bunch of the guys from our football team joyously danced naked in a circle, gyrating their hips and groins to "The Age of Aquarius" on my patio. It was a defiant, joyous, and very silly scene. Still, I remained fixated on queer space; after all, the coolest places in Dallas were the gay bars where hipsters, drag queens, and outsiders shared in a nonhomophobic culture. Those years left a deep, abiding appreciation for an exploratory approach to

churning pleasure out of one's body. There was still a lot to be learned from a queer body of knowledge.

While I generally passed as a ball player, cracks in my heteronormative veneer persisted. "I know you're one of us, that you love men," a guy from the college rugby team noted during one of our drunken post-game beer parties freshman year in college—a compliment, certainly. No need to cringe, but by that point, I was pretty sure I was playing for the other team. Yet, it was always intriguing to imagine another place.

Over the following decade, many of my friends from the club days would encounter police interrogations, social exclusions, and HIV-positive test results. Trips from one clinic to another robbed much of the innocence of those early lusty connections. Between alcohol, risk, stigma, pills, HPV, warts, scars, swabs, doctors, healthcare payments, judgments, and scabies, sex was messier than first imagined. And as a generation, we would go from ecstasy to ACT UP, and become a little queerer together. Yet, even with repression and sexphobia, pleasure remained an imperative. Much of this lesson became clearer for me in San Francisco, where sex and citizenship had long been interconnected.

: ***San Francisco*** :

In San Francisco, the very lines of the city are drawn around sexual struggles and stories. After failure at my chosen postcollege vocation of waiting tables, I worked graveyard shifts at an AIDS housing facility on Market and Van Ness in 1993. This was a couple of years after my godfather, Fred, had succumbed to HIV-related complications, including a descent into mania, hallucinations, car wrecks, and dementia in a desert town in West Texas. Dad had known him since college in the

1950s. In the years that followed, they hitchhiked out to join the beats in San Francisco and then skipped back east, where Dad went to law school and his best friend worked as a bartender at Keller's, a notorious leather bar facing the West Side piers in pre-Stonewall Greenwich Village, in between semesters of graduate work at Harvard. Upon completion of his PhD, Fred went back west to Texas, where he'd pass the final thirty years of his life. In the years that followed, Fred rarely discussed his queerness or the ecstatic abandon of his years floating between Cambridge and the West Village. These memories and related desires remained a quiet, irrepressible defiance to bourgeois mores of ambition, career, or convention. "Why should I have to work?" my godfather insisted defiantly in his bathrobe, regaling me with stories while rehearsing Chopin before the dementia set in again. I saw aspects of him in many of the guys who lived in the building where I worked in pre-protease San Francisco. The guys would come in late after being out at the sex clubs, cruising, or running to and from various illicit engagements. Here, eros served as defiance to illness. On their way, many of the guys stopped to chat about where they had been, what they had done, and what their San Francisco stories had meant. Some lived only a few months afterward.

If ever there was a town where people sought to make sense of the sublime between pleasure and infinity, it was San Francisco. I watched residents revel, swagger, lose themselves, find something else, and shuffle from this life to the next. One Saturday, I arrived for the swing shift, and asked about one of the tenants. "He died this morning. They just took his body away," I was informed. That was the first five minutes of my shift. The next eight hours were interminable. At midnight, I walked

out to smell the air, talk, look, touch, and ponder the epiphany, the mystery of a life in which some are lucky enough to hang around, while others disappear just as they are getting started. Never was I more fixated on the burlesque of street life. I wandered, watching the characters, dipping in and out, chatting, grieving, sensing, and experiencing, perfectly aware that so many were running out of time for such opportunities that spring.

If you walked down Market Street toward the bay and zagged left, you would stumble into the Tenderloin, one of San Francisco's queerest neighborhoods. Public sexual culture in the Tenderloin felt immediately dangerous and edgy. Kids dropped off from the bus station, who had often left desperate conditions, survived on tricks, speed, camaraderie, and the hazards of life underground. This public sexual sphere of San Francisco's Tenderloin was rife with sadness and hope, connection and separation, loneliness and pleasure. Writing, cruising, drinking, and hanging out there opened up an entirely different lens into urban experience. I mostly was a voyeur to the cat-and-mouse game of sex workers and johns: glances, strolls, nods, and negotiations. On occasion, I talked my way into a connection. Without cash, little else followed. But that did not matter. The intrigue remained. Here, street hustlers drew new story lines for the performative necessities of work, play, gender, labor, release, friendship, and the ways lust overlaps with a queer approach to commerce and pleasure.

While listening to the stories, I slowly started to reconcile the powerful desire and the cultural shame I associated with eros. Before returning home for the holidays in 1994, I picked up Pat Califia's *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. "Eros is arbitrary, bizarre, impeccably

honest, bountiful and so powerful as to be cruel," read one passage.³ Within this narrative, I reassessed the meanings of what was impossible to contain, what was messy and intriguing about social eros. Within the San Francisco stories, I started to put a distance between my experience and the toxic elements of heteronormativity with which I grew up. In San Francisco, citizens had created new ways to build family and community and democracy without having to divorce themselves from the body and senses. For the San Francisco sex radicals, the social and sexual imagination was not a liability, but rather a part of a lifelong excavation. Rather than being degrading, a different way of being could be found in its expression. In New York a few years later, I saw a gentleman in hot pants and high heels at a SexPanic! rally with a sign proclaiming, FREE YOUR ASS AND YOUR MIND WILL FOLLOW. He was onto something.

: *New York* :

"Don't move there—Rudy Giuliani is shutting down queer New York," my mentor in graduate school had advised me. I was determined to prove him wrong. For me, public sexuality was part of the very pulse of NYC. And I was anxious to get out of sex-negative Chicago, where I had been in graduate school. I had spent much of my time between terms dropping into and out of NYC. A sexual contact high rushed through me as soon as I set my foot on Eighth Avenue, just off the train at the Port Authority on Forty-Second Street. I christened every trip into the city with a visit to Show World, an emporium of sexual commerce at the corner of Eighth Avenue. Usually, I did not even get past the second floor before stumbling into one of the two-way closets where senses worked overtime. Once the translucent window opened between myself

and the dancer on the other side, I had like ninety seconds to get off before it would shut again. The entire place was a factory of expression, exchange, energy release, cum, clothes, smell, dance, and the ever-present guy with a mop there to clean the floors. Repeat. Show World rarely failed to please. Once done, I'd bound out through the Manhattan streets up to the Museum of Modern Art, feeling the wind of the city blow across my face, my heart pumping, sweat still on my forehead, the city's adrenaline running through my veins, the visceral aftershock lingering as low culture danced with high. By the time I moved to the city in 1997, the club, like much of New York's public sexual culture, was under attack from the moralists, big real estate, and a mayor who sought to shut it all down. His aim seemed to be to make New York as bland as the suburbs. Without sex, I could not imagine culture in NYC—no jazz, pleasure, controversy, democracy of desire, or street pulse. Yet, there was still a little fight left in New York's queer public sphere.

"Never pay attention to what straight people think," Robert scolded me after one of the SexPanic! meetings in the winter of 1997. SexPanic! was formed to fight the temperance-era logic of the moralists. We had been discussing Larry Kramer's predictably sexphobic rant, "Gay Culture, Redefined," an op-ed article in *The New York Times* in which Kramer condemned gay men for building a culture around pleasure and public sexual culture. Robert was probably right. But the exchange brought up a strange conundrum. After all, as I was a man who slept with women, one could consider me part of the camp Robert suggested should be ignored; yet as a sex-positive person who abhorred Kramer's attack on sexual self-determination and queer world-making and fought to spread a message of sexual liberation for all, I felt anything but

"straight." The word felt far too restricting for the bountiful sentiment I felt. The exchange with Robert revealed a very real conflict between an old-school brand of gay politics of identity and a contemporary queer politics based in a vaguely defined rejection of sexual shame, monoculture, and sameness. But *queer* never seemed quite the right term for myself or for all those who rejected prohibitive politics. It never quite fit. When I tried telling a gay coworker that I was "queer-identified," she thought I was a closet case. Many did.

I was certainly not the first to encounter this. "Being straight in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power [ACT UP] was like knowing what it was like to be in the closet," Allan Clear, who worked with the ACT UP syringe exchange, remembers. "I certainly pass in appearance of not being straight."⁴

On some days, I did pass as queer, simply by virtue of being a kinky man who was intrigued with the sex-positive narratives SexPanic! advanced as an alternative to the "turdz" such as Kramer, who condemned queer sexuality, and Andrew Sullivan, who suggested, "AIDS is over," once it no longer disproportionately affected economically privileged gay men.⁵ In the meantime, gay apologists were further distancing themselves from the notion of sexuality as something that could be a force for good. The closet and coming out, after all, came in many forms. From what I had learned about gay liberation in San Francisco, "coming out" meant more than coming out sexually; it meant coming out as who you are. In my case, it meant rejecting a politics of shame in favor of a lusty embrace of joy, justice, and rambunctiousness. Yet, it was still hard to say that participation in such a politics should constitute a level of authentic queer identification. For me, this was simply a politics of freedom.

There had to be a way to reject parts of one's connection with a system one abhorred without taking on an inauthentic shell or trying to pass for something one was not. The history of social movements is chock-full of stories of antiracist Caucasian activists who rejected their old selves, took on new identities, and acted out of a sense of guilt, which distorted their politics. Rather than being motivated by love and care, they acted out of personal ambivalence. And the results were mixed. The examples of the German Red Army Faction, who killed out of shame over their parents' apparent inaction during the Third Reich, and of Kathy Boudin, who participated in the 1981 Brinks Robbery with the Black Liberation Army without feeling she had the right to know the details of the action, are but two examples of guilt-motivating actions that produced mixed results and long jail sentences.⁶ The lesson of the gay liberation movement of the same era was that pleasure was a valid aim for movement activists. And it could not be separated from struggles for justice. Here, a politics of antimilitarism and antiracism melded with a raw politics of personal freedom.

I was drawn to SexPanic! because of just such an ethos. Here, queer politics was linked with a pursuit of pleasure and a rejection of the notion that play had to wait until the revolution was complete. Certainly, the discussion of SexPanic! in the press suggested the group was trying to create a different kind of queer politics rooted in a polymorphous pleasure and freedom, rather than an essentialist identity politics. To substantiate this ever-expanding queer politics, writers such as Douglas Crimp suggested that AIDS and connection with its stigma had transformed a gay politics of identity into a queer politics that encompassed the experiences of social outsiders, including injection drug

users and welfare moms.⁷ ACT UP brought together the most unlikely of coalition partners to queer the AIDS struggle. For sexual civil liberties activists such as myself, notions of soli-fucking-darity among perverts, anarchists, and outsiders remained intriguing. "The people perverted will never be converted," queers, adult entertainers, and kinky hets screamed in one of the rallies against Giuliani's "quality of life campaign" in the spring of 1998. Here, such a politics felt vital. From the streets, such an idea seemed possible.

Yet, these politics were difficult to write about without sounding contrived.⁸ Fall 1998, I asked Ann Pellegrini, a queer theorist who had been involved with SexPanic!, about the idea of "queer hets." She suggested the idea sounded dubious. It is easy for hip urbanites to claim a queer mantle as long as they do not have to do any of the gooey sex stuff or deal with the implications of giving up their subjectivity and rejecting heteronormativity. Some level of privilege would have to be left behind—not so easy. Instead, the queer het phenomena seemed to involve a new set of revolving doors between closets and social worlds. At some gatherings, hets could be queer; at others, it was best to put on the wedding bands and leave queerness in the closet.

In addition, there is little consensus about what "being queer" or "sexual freedom" really means for heterosexuals, queers, or the left. Certainly, the right has always known it hates sex for very specific reasons, having to do with social control of women, people of color, and social outsiders who make money and build communities with their bodies. On the other hand, the left has rarely articulated or cohered around a position on sexuality as part of a broader politics of personal freedom. With the exceptions of the women's and gay liberation movements, the

politics of sexual self-determination has not been a priority. The historic contribution of the gay liberation movement was the view that ironclad social categories are best rejected in favor of an abundant plurality. From there, ACT UP transformed the way activists experienced politics, political performance, and citizenship. And the group reconnected gay politics with a queer sensibility and broad social critique of the system that sent soldiers to war, incarcerated the poor, and left illness to run rampant as long as it affected only the junkies, homos, and low-income communities of color.

From ACT UP, queerness developed a new cultural currency that many wanted to be part of, including heterosexuals. While many viewed the phenomena of "straight queers" as a kind of identity politics nightmare, something was going on. One of the clerks at San Francisco's Good Vibrations bragged that *Bend Over Boyfriend*, a straight porn movie about guys receiving from their girlfriends, was a top rental at the sex-positive kink emporium in 1999. It might have simply been that the hetero world was just realizing what ten zillion gay men already knew—the prostate is too good a secret to be restricted to one sexual proclivity or another. Certainly phone sex advertisements in straight porn offered ample indication that social mores were shifting. "I will fuck you in your tight ass," a caption from a woman in leather proclaimed in one magazine.

Leo Bersani talked about "celebrating 'the homo' in all of us."⁹ Such a proposition, though, was anything but simple. As I continued with queer activism, the relationship between self and political identification remained messy. After I was arrested with members of SexPanic!, ACT UP, and Housing Works during the Matthew Shepard political funeral in the fall of 1998, I hoped my queer bona fides were in place. But

the strange looks I was getting about saying I was straight while doing queer activism still inspired curious bewilderment. So I tried saying I was bisexual. The identification felt awkward. In one case, it backfired when an old-school ACT UP member's bullshit detector went off, and he switched from attraction to hostility. Why was I there? he asked, before leaving me with a cold, angry shoulder. At this point, I would do or say anything to show I had some queer cachet. I was invited to write a story for a national AIDS glossy about a post I had made to the SexPanic! email list about sex and condoms, only to have the story turned down when the editor read that I was not talking about a boyfriend. "You're such a closet case," another friend scolded me after the post, in which I wrote about my "partner," rather than my "girlfriend." It didn't sound or feel real.

Even when a member of SexPanic! brought a newspaper clip about a similar "straight" man who chose to play on the gay rugby team, offering me a bit of solidarity, or "courtesy stigma" as anthropologist Erving Goffman would describe it,¹⁰ I was still on the outside. "The biggest influences of my life have been gay men," one straight man proudly declared in Michael Musto's *Village Voice* column that December, reveling in an appreciation for life-affirming lust for pleasure, style, and mentoring he'd enjoyed from his earliest years.¹¹ I wish I could have put it that way. Yet, inside and outside, the game was changing.

More than anything, one cannot really say she's queer if she does not practice it. For many, *queer* implies playful, defiant, and unscripted forms of direct action. So when it came time for invitations to the first meetings of Fed Up Queers (FUQ), a by-invitation-only group of New York's most daring queer activists, I rarely made the list. FUQ consisted

of many of the activists who'd originally come together to organize the Matthew Shepard political funeral, then deemed the resulting attempt at creating a broad-based queer activist coalition futile. Many members of FUQ had been politicized by ACT UP, and several had parted with SexPanic! over issues of ageism and misogyny. FUQ moved forward with a series of fiercely creative direct action spectacles, including the first of the hundreds of acts of civil disobedience in protest of the murder of unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo at the hands of the NYPD, which captivated the city and drew national news headlines. For a few months, FUQ was the hottest group in town. But they could not keep up the pace (no one could). And observers would come to call the Fed Up Queers "adrenaline junkies." A member of the old Weather Underground, who had spent years in jail, even warned one of the members to think through what she was doing or risk a similar fate.¹²

While the comparison between FUQ and the Weather Underground is tenuous, the similarities are instructive. Both groups were intensely aware of security culture and the threats to activists who utilize brash forms of direct action. Both weeded out those who sought to pass and infiltrate. FUQ simply held closed meetings, and only invited those with long histories of direct action to participate; to throw FBI counterintelligence programs off their track, the Weather Underground required that everyone sleep with each other. Inevitably, the cops who were unwilling to participate were found out and banished.

Even after failing to make the cut with FUQ, I still found queer world-making alluring. June of 1999, I dressed up for my first "drag march" with New York's Radical Fairies and Church Ladies for Choice. I had worked with them to support the theatrics of civil disobedience

to save another public sphere—the community gardens—that had been under threat from development that spring. Marching from the East Village, where Jackie Smith's flaming creatures distinguished themselves from the bland citizenry, toward the West Village, I spoke with another march participant in similar drag. When I told him I was "straight," he seemed bemused. "You're marching in the drag march," he gestured, chuckling, and strolled away.

Later in the weekend, FUQ blocked the parade route during the Pride festivities, as Rudy Giuliani marched. Shortly after the disruption, SexPanic!'s "Rudy's Sex Mobile," a 1970s hot-rod blue squad car, dubbed "Rudy's Sex Police," cruised down the parade route. On top of the car, a papier-mâché Rudy Giuliani puppet head leered below a sign reading, BECAUSE HE HATES YOU. Two lesbians made out on the hood. Go-go boys and hustlers danced and shot water guns from an accompanying float, while we led the crowd in chants of "More booty, less Rudy!! Keep New York sexy!" By the time we got to Christopher Street, police had ordered the Sex Mobile off the parade route.¹³

After the march, I rode the subway with the papier-mâché Rudy back to the Lower East Side. A woman who had watched the parade topless joined me. And a couple of stops later, she walked home and back to my apartment. It was the first and last time I would ever hook up with someone on the subway, but not for lack of interest. I never had the same luck again. The play of joining the Radical Fairies, the drag march, the theatre of Rudy's Sex Mobile, and cruising on the subway brought a different kind of joy and embodied experience to my politics. This playful feeling of exploration and wanderlust would continue to renew itself over and over again.

I did not pass for long with Robert from SexPanic!, who suspected something was amiss when he noticed that I did not wax the hair on my back. But passing wasn't really necessary. Something else was in order, and he appreciated what I had brought to the group. I live through public sexual culture. It makes me happy to know it looms on the other side of the city and imagination.

Just a few weeks ago, I joined a group of students and researchers on a trip to Slammers, a sex club in Hollywood, during the spring 2006 Pacific Sociological Association meetings, and we strolled about, looked around, and talked.

"This is no doubt one of the strangest trips to a public sexual space I have ever participated in," explained Ralph Bolton, an anthropologist who had come of age with the Stonewall boomer cohort. "It seems strange to walk through our sacred temple with infidels of non-gay people."

"I don't really agree with you. I like being in the company of fellow perverts," Matt Brown, a younger researcher, followed. Maybe that was it: While it is never so easy to conceal privilege or identity, a politics based on solidarity and pleasure requires few such deceptions. Rather than calling such a feeling *queer*, it may be better just to leave this space undefined. There are countless people across sexualities who aspire to be part of such an adventure. Rather than seeking to pass, or creating a new word or identity, a great many would just like to revel in a different kind of space to play.

NOTES

INNOCENT VICTIMS AND BRAVE NEW LAWS:

State Protection and the Battered Women's Movement

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5. Ibid.
6. Nancy Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
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11. Kathleen J. Ferraro, "The Dance of Dependency: A Genealogy of Domestic Violence Discourse," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 77-91.
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2. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 42.
3. Merle Haggard, "The Fightin' Side of Me," *The Fightin' Side of Me*, Capitol, 1970.
4. Haggard, "Mama Tried," *Mama Tried*, Capitol, 1968.

NO LONGER JUST AMERICAN

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
2. See in particular Evelyn Alsultany's 2005 Stanford dissertation, "The Changing Profile of Race in the United States: Media Representations and Racialization of Arab- and Muslim-Americans Post-9/11."
3. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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2. Beth Greenfield, "What's in a Name?" *Time Out New York*, February 3, 2005.
3. Elizabeth Cline, "Transmale Nation: Rethinking Manhood in the Genderqueer Generation" *Village Voice*, June 22, 2004.
4. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994).
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7. Ariel Levy, "Where the Bois Are," *New York*, January 12, 2004.
8. Cline, "Transmale Nation."

MY KIND OF CRUISING

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2. Joseph P. Goodwin, "Let's Get Physical: A Quantum Look at the Queer Space-Time Continuum," *New Directions in Folklore* 4, no. 1 (March 2000), 1.
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RACE HAUNTED, OTHERWISE

1. Capitalism needs an outside, sharp edges, and high walls. Marx argues this with his discussion of enclosures. These edges of capitalism helped assign the category of "nature" to its outside in the process of accumulating it. Eventually most everything was divided up and "nature" was securely situated within capitalism, and so new edges were needed. Capitalism is in this constant cycle of creating and marking

- new "outsides" in order to fuel its extraction of surplus value. I rehearse this shoddy reading of Marx because it shows us how capitalism oftentimes creates what we think to be "natural" or "biological" in opposition to what is read as cultural. Of course, capitalism did not "make" race or gender, yet capitalism seems to be remaking what they mean and how they function while disguising its own work.
2. I am also cautious of the work we make ghosts do. As haunting and specters are the hot topics for theories of subaltern knowledge, I sometimes think it is time to let our ghosts be buried.
 3. See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).
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2. Alex Perry, "Rebuilding Bangladesh," *Time Asia*, April 10, 2006.
3. For one example from Silicon Valley, see <http://backtobangladesh.blogspot.com>.
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5. Research by Tariq Modood and Richard Berthoud.
6. Until 1972, no visa was required for those coming to England from Commonwealth countries (this law was changed when Uganda's expelled Asians started arriving en masse). The United States' Diversity lottery visa, which began in the 1990s, widened the immigration pool from Asia, but even here there were minimum educational requirements.
7. Borrowing from the title of Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *The Mammarys of the Welfare State*, in a different context.

8. Afshin Ellian, quoted in "Look Out, Europe, They Say: Why So Many Muslims Find It Easier to Be American Than to Feel European," *Economist*, June 22, 2006.
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10. Usman Saeed and Sukhdev Sandhu, *I'll Get My Coat* (London: Book Works, 2005), 36.

F2MESTIZO

1. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999), 216.

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2. All names are changed to conceal the identity and protect the anonymity of the private figures referred to in this essay.
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4. Allan Clear, interview with the author, 2005.
5. Andrew Sullivan, "When AIDS Ends," *New York Times Magazine*, November 10, 1996.
6. Joel Stashenko, "Boudin: I Felt Guilty About Being White," *Newsday*, May 23, 2003; and Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
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9. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10.

10. Erving Goffman, quoted in Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 134.
11. Quoted in Michael Musto, "My Mirror," *Village Voice*, December 15, 1998.
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Rofes, who first encouraged Benjamin to write a draft of this essay in 1998, and later read a draft of this updated version in June 2006, just weeks before he died.

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