

# Touching the Terror and Loathing of Difference

An Open Letter About Our Use of the Master's Tools

Omisore Dryden

**D**ear Sistahs/Sisters, In the past few years, there have been increasing amounts of incidents receiving public attention regarding trans bodies who have been evicted from "women and lesbian/dyke-only spaces." Vancouver Rape Relief took a case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada to ban a (trans) woman from volunteering at that centre. Additionally, many women's centres have developed policies to clarify which "woman" bodies are welcome within their domain. The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee has a trans inclusion policy, however this has not mitigated the hostile and antagonistic reception with which trans bodies, and their play dates, are met in these bathhouse spaces. Lesbian dances exclude trans bodies, and Michigan Womyn's Music Festival continues to exclude trans bodies. Sometimes these excluded trans bodies are "male-to-female" bodies — post / pre / non-op bodies. Sometimes these excluded trans bodies are "female-to-male" bodies — post/pre/non-op bodies. However, there are some occasions in which "male-to-female" trans bodies are mistakenly included in these spaces, by virtue of the fact that they are not visually identifiable as trans bodies. There are also occasions in which "female-to-male" trans bodies are mistakenly included in these spaces, by virtue of the fact that "we" are unable to conceive of these "female-to-male" bodies as anything other than merely woman bodies (though masculine looking).

Sistahs/Sisters, we have a complicated and varied history with this space. What is evident is that not only did we construct these women's spaces, we also constructed their meanings. However,

*... for my baby; for my sistahs*

"This clinic is for women," the receptionist smiled.

I nodded. "I know. I have a vaginal infection," I whispered.

"A what?" she asked.

I took a deep breath and spoke in a stronger voice. "A vaginal infection."

Stillness fell over the crowded waiting room. The silence punished me. The receptionist looked me up and down. "Are you kidding?"

I shook my head. "I have a vaginal infection. I came here for help."

The receptionist nodded. "Have a seat, sir."

*Jess, Stone Butch Blues (Feinberg, 1993, 234-235)*

their meanings are neither static nor unwavering. As we have seen, whether it has been race, sexuality, or (dis)ability, these spaces have shifted, been modified, and trans-formed (if you will). These changes have not been smooth, nor easy, nor (in many cases) even welcomed, but they have quite necessarily occurred. Yet here we are taking up the very roles that were once used so viciously against us — that of border guards. Do we still believe that only "men" perpetrate patriarchy and misogyny against "women?" Are we still convinced, that trans bodies are the secret operatives maliciously breaching our borders to continue this vile practice?

For some time now many of us have felt this to be true. It is presumed that trans bodies are terrifying, loathsome and alien (creatures) bodies whose presence is adversely invading women-only and lesbian/dyke-only spaces. The hostilities present at the threshold of these spaces have, like most border wars, resulted in unnecessary violent encounters resulting in injury, destruction and impairment —

"our" impairment. And I wonder... what are we doing?

Injustice is our rallying cry — against racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, poverty, and violence. We demand protection, policy changes, access and recognition, not only to be heard, but also to be seen, on our terms and in no uncertain terms. We know our silence will not protect us, that the master's tools will betray us, that only we can define who we are, as others' definitions would be detrimental to us. We are confident that our noise, our tools and our own definitions will liberate us. We've taken to the streets, to the courts and to the academy, to the open mics, to the bathhouses and to the play parties. We've met at coffee houses, at our kitchen tables and in our women's/community centres. And somewhere in this mix our experiences with racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia fueled our identities as "black," "of colour," "woman," "female," "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian." We believe that our pursuit of liberation, freedom and emancipation are affiliated with

these very names and labels. As much as these names and labels provided us a sense of identity and purpose, they also effectively differentiated who were inside these movements and who were outside, who belonged and who didn't. The labels effectively constructing an "us" and a "them."

As we know, words and language have always been a struggle. The detrimental results of what we have been named and labeled have often fueled our own attempts to get out from under the imposed labels in order to claim ourselves for ourselves. Names and labels have many meanings, sometimes similar, sometimes conflicting. They have shifted, changed, evolved and even devolved over time. However, problems arise when we forget that names and labels have multiple and at times conflicting meanings and usages and we assume not only what is meant by the names and labels, but also *how* they are being used.

Having said this, while we may challenge and confront some of the assumptions evident within these names and labels, at the same time, we also willingly accept and submit to assumptions which pass as self-evident truths. For many of us, we believe that "female" = "girl" = "woman" = "feminist"; that "heterosexual" means "opposite" sex/gender attractions (man and woman) and "homosexual" means "same" sex/gender attractions (man and man / woman and woman). We believe that women who have sex with men are "heterosexual" (straight) and women who have sex with women are "homosexuals" (lesbian/dykes). The words "lesbian" and "dyke" have been used interchangeably, even though there are lively debates on whether or not these words have the same meaning, herstory or symbolism. Sistahs/Sisters, we emphatically believe that our identities (how we know ourselves) are bound up in these very words, names and labels. We feel these words are the absolute essence of who we are.

Bodies were excluded based on scientific/medical racism that dictated that "raced" bodies were not human — creating "us" ordinary bodies (white) and "them" abhorrent bodies (not white).

Bodies were excluded based on scientific/medical misogyny which dictated that "sexed" bodies were not fully human, too weak to be fully human — creating "us" usual bodies (male/men) and "them" unusual bodies (female/women). Bodies were excluded based on scientific/medical homophobia which dictated that "homosexual" bodies were defective humans — creating "us" normal bodies (heterosexual) and "them" abnormal bodies (homosexual). Naming ourselves as normal, ordinary and usual was/is important.

However self-naming, while important, is an initial step, not a concluding one. Names and labels effectively function as borders resulting in similarly disturbing phobic exclusions that, once again, target the vulnerable among/of us.



Omisoore D. D.

I have found familiarity in a variety of words, however I do not use or write simply, cleanly or unthinkingly. I understand and attempt to disrupt the conventions and honour the tensions surrounding these words. When called upon to describe myself strategically, I use and write these words — "woman," "lesbian" and "dyke" to trouble the spaces and conventions they mark, just as I use and write the names/labels to disrupt the conventional uses of "black," "african," "femme," "stone," "top," "caribbean," "jamaican," "canadian," "feminist," "womanist," "of colour," "with a disability" and "student." Sistahs/Sisters, what, if anything, do you know of me when I describe myself as a Jamaican-Canadian Dyke, Stone Femme-inist Top of African descent?

The "us"/"them" border is seductive.

Why wouldn't we want to be included, to belong and to benefit from being a member — to be on the inside (not the outside), in the centre (not on the margins)? The benefits of human rights, citizenship, person-hood, freedom and shelter are traditionally reserved only for the "us" and modified or withheld from the "them." We've challenged the practices and assumptions that only a select few deserve the best at the expense of others.

Sistahs/Sisters, I'm sure you'll remember, we fought the master narratives in order to have our voices heard and our herstories accounted for. We fought the destructive ideas that said we were alien and that our alien-ness was dangerous. We fought to be included in the national record - to be considered citizens, to have our political voices heard and to be out of the margin and into the centre.

We fought to reconstruct that centre... or so I thought. Were we fighting to be considered members of the "us" or to have our "them" tolerated and respected? Did speaking of double and triple jeopardy, who was more discriminated against than whom and who had it harder than who, really legitimize our voices or did it just pit us against ourselves? Weren't we justifiably offended when asked to indicate if

we most identified with our "race," "sex," or "sexuality" as if we should and could prioritize, as if our bodies were these simplistically constructed puzzle pieces?

I thought we fought for the right to live our lives without apology — for more than just rights, but for systemic change, and for more than just tolerance, but for inclusion. It seems, though, that we have become women, lesbian/dyke nationalists, patriotically policing "our" borders against a "new" insidious threat.

Sistahs/Sisters, why are we using the same colonial/imperial systems of inclusion and exclusion with and against trans bodies? Trans bodies are born of us. They are quite literally born of our bodies, born of our herstories and born of our political work. Why the repulsion, hostility and antagonism? Sistahs/Sisters, I just don't

get it, especially since trans bodies are neither new nor a phase. Trans bodies are here with us in the present because trans bodies were there *with us* in the past.

Have we gotten so caught up in our belief that names and labels accurately and appropriately capture the essence of our bodies and our selves that we have forgotten our struggles for the protection of our bodies, against *all* phobias?

Perhaps it is difficult to conceptualize gender, sex and sexuality as being more diverse than the simplicity of these words leads us to believe. There are more diverse options available to us even beyond the limits of the misleading binary of "male" and "female." Are we unable to acknowledge that "male" is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of possibilities and "female" is another umbrella term that also covers a wide range of possibilities? Are we doomed to thoughtlessly and ferociously believe that "male" and "female" are separate, clear, and distinct opposites of a singular, solitary pole?

There are no easy answers, yet we continue to seek, invent and formulate them. Conservatism and fundamentalism are founded upon the simple easy answer. Sistahs/Sisters, doesn't this make us gender/genital conservatives and gender/genital fundamentalists?

There is a lot of confusion and consternation about how trans bodies become trans bodies. Are they truly trans bodies if they are surgically altered? Is a trans body more or less trans depending on the amount of surgery the body has endured? Are trans bodies selling out to heteropatriarchy when they engage in surgically altering their bodies, or are they challenging heteropatriarchy by surgically altering their bodies? Can trans men be "men" if they don't have scientifically/medically declared penises? And don't they become *the* man? Can trans women be "women" if they do have scientifically/medically declared penises? And aren't they still *the* man? The answers to these questions do not matter. These questions are a diversion from what they represent. These questions represent our gender/genital conservatism and fundamentalism. In other words, they represent our use of the

master's heteropatriarchal tools. And these heteropatriarchal tools effectively erase the intersections of racism, homophobia, poverty and misogyny with and through trans bodies.

Sistahs/Sisters... in our hubris, we have betrayed ourselves.

Instead of seeing new possibilities and opportunities of masculinity through trans male bodies and new possibilities and opportunities of femininity through trans female bodies, we instead see fraud, betrayal, misappropriation and danger. Sistahs/Sisters, could it be that our ambivalence is showing? It seems that trans bodies are a mirror to our own contradictory attitudes and feelings we have not only with our bodies, our gender ("masculinity," "femininity," and everything in-between), but also with our sex ("male," "female" and everything in-between). We also may be having difficulty acknowledging the bargains we have made with heteropatriarchy and the master's tools. It's time we set-down our seething denials and our not so repressed fascinations with the "penis" instead of conveniently pimping out trans bodies by treating them like the abject. Perhaps it's time we reclaim our agency and take responsibility for our anxieties, fears, confusion and doubt. Sistahs/Sisters, the politics of gender, sex and sexuality continues to change, whether we want it to or not. If we cannot acknowledge this, we

will become melancholic. We must continue to think of new ways of belonging. Anti-racism queer feminisms have paved the way for trans bodies (our trans sons, our trans daughters, and our trans children), so that they can step into the authentic-ness of themselves. It doesn't make sense to violently discard bodies we have loved, played with, desired and fucked, simply because they have now 'come-out' as trans. As Judith Butler (2004, 9) states, in *Undoing Gender*, "... phobic violence against bodies is what joins antihomophobic, antiracist, feminist, trans and intersex activism".

We owe it to ourselves — all of ourselves — to not only remember this, but to begin (perhaps continue) to act on it — without apology!

In solidarity,  
Omisoore

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#### Further Reading and Resources:

Butler, Judith [2004] *Undoing Gender*. New York and London: Routledge.

Feinberg, Leslie [1993] *Stone Butch Blues*. New York: Firebrand Books.

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