

Playing Peter Pan

Conceptualizing “Bois” in Contemporary Queer Theory

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L'auteure nous initie à l'émergence du dialogue qui se pose à la jonction de l'orientation « boi » et avoue l'évidente complexité de la situation de ces femmes-femmes qui chevauche celle des lesbiennes-butch dans les communautés « trans » sans oublier leur relation à l'intérieur de l'hégémonie mâle.

As a queer and gender-queer individual, my relationships to both lesbian as an identity and to Toronto's lesbian communities have been marked by a strangely productive ambiguity. While “coming out” as a lesbian was and continues to be empowering, I have become increasingly aware of my own emotional and intellectual tensions with respect to the signifier, “lesbian,” as it purports to simultaneously describe and produce me. Noticing my developing affinities towards the city's various trans¹ communities, I began to imagine myself as tenuously located in the liminal spaces between “lesbian” and “trans”—indeed, between “butch” and “boi.” As such, in the midst of my undergraduate career at York University, I became keenly interested in the “boi” identity as it gained subcultural currency and began to shift the meanings that circulated around pre-existing identities such as lesbian, transgender, butch, and tranny-boy. I intend to interrogate the spaces which the term “boi” opens up for self-fashioning in con-

temporary North America's queer communities.

The January 2004 edition of *New York* magazine includes an article by Ariel Levy (“Where the Bois Are”) heralding the arrival of the “boi”—an identity and/or label being taken up by “female”-bodied people in some lesbian/dyke, queer, and gender-queer communities in urban North America.² The increasing visibility of gender-queer lives and politics, including the drag king cultures which are thriving in many urban centres, is just one of the historical conditions from which the boi emerges. Underlying this historical moment is a combination of theory and activism that has been carrying on the work of de-pathologizing gender “dysphoria,” foregrounding the various erotic combinations that constitute queer communities, and challenging what Gayle Rubin has termed the “sex/gender system,” the system by which chromosomal sex is turned into, and processed as, cultural gender” (Sedgwick 28). Equally important is the cultural capital accruing to contemporary “boy culture.” This is a culture marked by, among other things, the popularity of “boy bands,” the recent explosion of video game cultures and markets, and the resurgence of interest in comic books as cultural artifacts. The contours of this culture are not shaped by age, but by a playful accessorizing that insists upon dis-

rupting the teleological continuity between “boy” and “man.” The boi announced by *New York*, then, is in dialogue with queer communities as well as with mainstream constructions of boyishness. As such, he is in complex negotiation with hegemonic masculinity. Bois emerge into the paradoxical position of subverting the ontological “reality” of normative masculinity even as they negotiate its imperatives in an effort to remain/become legible as masculine subjects.

As Levy's article suggests, the term “boi” can reference any—but is reducible to none—of the following: a torsion of the man/boy dichotomy in gay male sado-masochistic play (meaning that bois are submissive and have sex with dominant butches); female-to-male (FTM) transgender or transsexual subjectivities; bois who mostly date other bois and thus self-identify as “fags”; and bois who mostly date femmes or “grrls” (25). What is consistent about these social/sexual positions is a particular aesthetic, a performance of masculinity that resignifies and redeploys an otherwise “female” body. Levy points to such superficial accessories as the prevalent newsboy cap as well as to the more explicitly masculine effects achieved by packing (wearing a dildo or sock inside one's jeans), binding (flattening one's breasts with a medical/tensor bandage), or various kinds

of surgery. In Levy's words, what is common among bois is "a lack of interest in embodying any kind of girliness" (25). More than any other kind, "Where the Bois Are" focuses on "a particular camp of bois who date femmes exclusively and follow a locker-room code of ethics referenced by the phrase 'bros before hos' or 'bros before bitches'" (Levy 26). It should be stressed that this charac-

demarcates a boundary within which hegemonic masculinity is "shored up" against the threat of incoherence posed by excess. Or, in Eve Sedgwick's terms, "the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B" (10). Within this framework, bois whose identities depend upon being read as masculine have the potential to take up the

the masculinist project of containment depends upon representational economies that displace the "messy" question of the body onto the feminine. Drawing upon both a history of dualisms—male/female, mind/body—in Western philosophy and a psychoanalytic tradition that produces masculinity as universal and femininity as gendered, Thomas writes that

femininity becomes the repository not only for the bodily but for the excessive as such, for everything that masculine subjectivity cannot admit or accept about itself. (2)

Sexual difference, upon which normative masculinity depends, is reified through the policing of borders between self and Other, same and different.

terization arises from a small number of interviewees, almost exclusively New York-based (though one interview takes place in San Francisco), and mostly from bois who take active and frequent part in the city's bar culture. This is not to dismiss Levy's representation as somehow too specific; on the contrary, this "particular camp of bois" opens up possibilities for interrogating the connections between normative, misogynistic masculinity and the conceptualization of boi subjectivities. As such, these are the bois with whom this essay is primarily concerned.

In its claims to authority and authenticity, hegemonic (white) masculinity must, as Judith Butler famously notes, "conceal its genesis" (1999: 178), establishing itself as an ontologically fixed category that therefore can and *must* resist challenges made by women's movements, Black Power movements, etc. to its universality and dominance. In the critical and psychoanalytic text, *Male Matters*, Calvin Thomas argues that normative masculinity is (tenuously) maintained through a compulsive project of semiotic containment. Such a project works through the expulsion of "Others," especially feminine subjectivities, so that the abjection of queers, women, and people of colour

project of containment/expulsion outlined by Thomas in order to assuage the anxiety of unintelligibility, an anxiety (arguably) more pronounced for "female"-bodied subjects. The final interview in "Where the Bois Are" takes place in San Francisco, where "Kim"—"pretty, punky 24-year-old" (Levy 27)—outlines what she perceives to be bois' general approach to women:

they are so very predatory about it... Clara [her boi-friend] won't just touch on it, like: *That girl's hot*. She will talk and talk and talk about how she wants to get them home and fuck them. (27)

From this interview, it is clear that Kim views Clara's objectification of women as not only troubling, but also compulsive. Like the boi who cannot take his eyes off the nearby go-go dancer at the start of the article (Levy 24), Clara objectifies femmes and grlls in an effort to secure and shore up the boundaries of "her" masculinity.

The conceptual paradox that characterizes bois' relationships to normative masculinity, however, becomes evident when Thomas highlights the body as central to the issue of boundary anxiety. He argues that

Normative masculinity accedes to a position of power and privilege through the disavowal of the body in all of its messy permeability; it cannot be self-reflexive about embodiment except in the most rigidly codified representational circumstances (e.g. the male body as weapon).

Coming from a similar theoretical position, Lee Edelman argues in "Tea-rooms and Sympathy" that the institutional bathroom is a site of extreme anxiety for heterosexual men, especially when figured as "the site of a loosening of sphincter control" (159). Thus, it invokes "the anxiety of an *internal space of difference within the body*, an overdetermined opening or invagination within the male" (Edelman 160, my emphasis). Sexual difference, upon which normative masculinity depends, is reified through the policing of borders between self and Other, same and different. As such, the body as a site of openings and entry/exit points lies within the realm of the dangerously feminine. It is here that one begins to see the points of connection between biological boys—whose fascination with the grotesque and with excess is demonstrated by such cultural phenomena as the television show/movie, *Jackass*—and queer "bois." Both play and present in a way that challenges normative masculine imperatives vis-à-vis the body.

On one hand, bois who desire to be read as masculine subjects may become implicated in the oppressive and violent refusal of fem(me)inity; on the other, the boi's *embodied performance* is one position from which to trouble normative masculinity. Not only do bois rupture the supposedly synonymous relationship between "anatomy, identity, and authority" (Noble x), but in so doing, they (re)construct masculinity as prosthetic: it is something to be "put on" through various combinations of accessories, acts, and other signifying practices. In other words, bois situate masculinity firmly within the realm of the body. They lay bare its existence *as* representation (thus open to disruptive re-articulation) as opposed to an ontologically fixed category. The subversive potential of bois lies not only in the queer juxtaposition of "female sex" and "masculine gender," but more importantly in the *theatricality* with which they infuse their masculinities. Thomas writes that "masculinity does not exist outside representation, yet in the processes of self-representation it risks losing itself, seeping out through its own fissures and cracks" (16). It is exactly this risk that bois take as subjects performing masculinity. At its most conservative, the anxiety caused by such potential unintelligibility is (provisionally) assuaged through the radical expulsion and disavowal of fem(me)inities—through the compulsive objectification evidenced by some of the bois whom Levy interviewed. However, according to Thomas, if one refuses to foreclose this anxiety, it may be mobilized "as [a] disruptive, interventional force, even if (or perhaps precisely because) *the disruption necessarily extends to identity politics itself*" (7, my emphasis). Conceptualizing bois in terms of a rigid identity category not only reproduces the impulse toward exclusion already at work, but also circumvents the contradictions and tensions that overdetermine the term, "boi."

Instead, I am suggesting thinking

through the boi as an "event"—a subject position emerging in its historical and cultural context—rather than an identity category that suggests certain constitutive features. In "Friendship as a Way of Life," Michel Foucault writes that

homosexuality is a *historic occasion* to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much

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through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the "slantwise" position of the latter..., the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light. (138, my emphasis)

Bois emerge at the intersection of, among other things, a lineage of erotic identities and gender performances whose history is intelligible as a history of female masculinities and/or butch-femme relationships, as well as a (North American) cultural fascination with the economies of boyhood, a fascination that must be contextualized in terms of the post-war deconstruction of monolithic masculinity. Re-directing the argument made by Foucault, the boi reopens erotic, gendered, and embodied virtualities, among others. Conceptualizing the boi as an "event," inextricably linked to and in negotiation with a series of historical and cultural threads, begins to de-emphasize the binary structures that produce the boi in an oppressive repetition of the refusal of Others.

In her article, Levy notes that for bois, "butch is an identity of the past, a relic from a world of Budweiser and motorcycles gone by" (25), before going on to quote a number of bois

who share this opinion. However, in defining themselves *against* butches, bois invoke a complex history of female masculinities and erotic subjectivities that become part of their self-definition; the butch becomes one of the Others, a definitional reference without whom descriptions of "boi" flounder. In *Masculinities Without Men?*, J. Bobby Noble argues that in the mid-1980s, cultural

work in both theory and fiction explored "butch-femme as embodied resistance to the sex/gender system" (xi). On the heels of lesbian feminist criticisms that butch-femme reproduced the power imbalances of heterosexual relationships, texts such as Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country* repositioned butch and femme as erotic identities that challenged the "'naturalness' and biological essentialism of the sex/gender system" (Noble xii). In pressing on the unproblematic mapping of gender identity onto biology, butch subjectivities have been and *are* integral to the deconstruction of a singularly authentic masculinity and to the subsequent proliferation of recognizable masculinities. As Noble points out,

more recently, debates around butch-femme have widened to overlap with those of trans-gender, trans-sexuality, gender performativity, and drag "kinging," thus necessitating a similar shift in language from "butch" ... to "female masculinity." (xii)

What Noble highlights here is that even while each of these subjectivities or practices has its own politics and

history, they are nonetheless conceptually linked. Insofar as the boi is understood to be in conversation with “female masculinities,” his relationship to the butch is not and cannot be one of straightforward refusal. As the abjected “relic,” butch identity is always already one of the boi’s definitional terms.

In “Where the Bois Are,” one of the interviewees asserts that the dif-

This queering of the teenage boy is evident at the textual level in the altered spelling taken up by bois, leading Levy to write that “it’s no coincidence that the word is boi and not some version of man” (25). In another analysis of filmic representations, Steven Cohan identifies Hollywood’s fixation on (biological) boys as beginning with the post-war generation of actors including James

test and legitimate the late capitalist system(s) from which they emerge? Or, what are the salient concerns around bois’ racialized identities or bois’ relationships to racialized biomasculinities?³ For instance, can the spaces opened up by bois within and around hegemonic masculinity be mobilized in a way that disrupts that masculinity’s implicit whiteness? Further, while this essay focuses spe-

Conceiving of the boi as an event rather than an identity begins to open up possibilities for imagining bois both within their historical and cultural continuities as well as in the discontinuities that manifest their difference.

ference between bois and butches is organized around signifiers of age, or “play”:

That sense of play—that’s a big difference from being a butch. To me, butch is like adult. If you’re butch, you’re a grown-up: You’re the man of the house. (Levy 25).

This explanation of difference clearly situates the boi, as I have been arguing, at the intersection of two registers. Not only is he “anti-butch,” but he is also “anti-man.” The post-war fascination with biological boys is at least partially located in their refusal of the imperatives of masculinity; the refusal to “grow up,” as it were, is shared by the boi who is in dialogue with queer cultures. In his analysis of the film, *Boys Don’t Cry*, Noble conceptualizes Hilary Swank’s performance as Brandon Teena in terms of the representational economies of boyhood:

Swank’s portrayal of Brandon both relies on and queers the new teenage “boy,” the “not-male” pin-up, whose appeal is similar to that of Leonardo Di Caprio or the proliferating boybands. (147)

Dean, Marlon Brando, and Montgomery Clift. He argues that the refusal to be a “he-man,” a role epitomized for Cohan by John Wayne (202), threatened to disrupt a “long-standing tradition in American culture of securing the position of hegemonic masculinity by representing it as the top of a generational hierarchy” (237). In Cohan’s analysis, the boy could slip across both sides of binary structures such as “masculinity/femininity, straight/gay, authentic/theatrical, young/old” (252) that organized and authorized normative masculinity. If bois are read as queer(ed) “boys,” they have the potential to increase the stakes of this challenge to masculinity as dominance.

A relatively new subjectivity, the boi’s fraught relationship to hegemonic masculinity suggests a number of possible interactions and theorizations. Thus, I intend this essay to be part of a necessarily larger conversation, addressing only a handful of the pertinent sets of concerns and questions that circulate around bois. While this is a beginning, it is equally important to engage with frameworks that I have left out of this analysis: situated at the intersection of mainstream boyishness and queer subcultures, how do bois both con-

specifically upon bois who date femmes/grrls, more work needs to be done around the different kinds of “bois” that I listed towards the beginning and the equally productive ways in which each can destabilize hegemonic masculinity, opening up spaces in which various kinds of masculinities might proliferate.

As Levy’s article suggests, while bois do destabilize masculinity’s “legitimative ideological grounding in biologically based narratives of the ‘natural’” (Sedgwick 28), this does not preclude their implication in the oppressive ideologies that underpin that same masculinity. However, Thomas’ argument that anxieties about masculinity may be re-deployed to effect social change and to re-imagine masculinities speaks to bois just as much, albeit differently, as it does to men. Levy’s “particular camp of bois” view their masculine self-preservation in terms of dominating Others through exclusion; however, conceiving of the boi as an event rather than an identity begins to open up possibilities for imagining bois both within their historical and cultural continuities (thus, not as simply refusing butches and fem(me)inities) as well as in the discontinuities that manifest their difference. In laying bare the performativity of mascu-

linity even while he desires to be read as such, the boi hazards unintelligibility as he becomes implicated in the project of proliferating non-essential masculinities. The anxiety that marks these negotiations can be mobilized to effect anti-racist and feminist boi subjectivities—a theory that must be put into practice if bois are to avoid repeating the oppression of fem(me)inities that is constitutive of hegemonic masculinity. The potential for a politicized boi is evident, if not explicit, in this quotation from “Sienna,” one of Levy’s interviewees: “We’re not in the clean, pressed, button-up world—you’d never see a boi cop” (26). Where the cop stands in for various permutations of “Man” (adult male, metonym for the state, “Establishment,” cultural Father, etc.), the boi’s radical political potential lies in his refusal to embody these regulatory regimes. However, as some of Levy’s bois demonstrate, these radical politics are inherent in the boi’s definitional terms only *as potential*; they must be actively and critically engaged in order to avoid what Butler terms “recolonization by the sign” (1991: 14) under which he performs: masculinity.

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¹I intend the term “trans” to loosely reference the collectivity of those identities and communities that self-identify as trans-gender and/or transsexual, among other terms.

²I use “queer” and “gender-queer” at their most ambiguously inclusive in this paper; these terms are meant to encompass any (or all) of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual identities/communities without limiting the “list” to just these terms.

³The use of the term “biomascu- linities” and, later, “bio-boys” references those boys and men whose genders are “appropriately” aligned with their biological sex.

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Reconsidering the Socio-Scientific Enterprise of Sexual Difference

The Case of Kimberly Nixon

AJNESH PRASAD

L'auteure aborde le cas Kimberly-Nixon pour critiquer la construction socio-politique de la différence sexuelle. En confrontant nature et culture je vois que les transsexuelles lancent un défi au modèle prévalent qui est fondé sur l'assomption que le sexe détermine le genre.

When I first viewed *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), I was struck by conflicting sentiments. On the one hand, I lauded the fact that issues pertaining to the experiences of a particular sexual minority group were finally making its way into popular culture. Hillary Swank's portrayal of the life, rape, and murder of Brandon Teena, vividly illustrated the lived reality of a female-to-male trans man. On the other hand, I could not help but ponder what impact Teena's legacy would have—and perhaps, more importantly, should have—on feminist and queer theorizing. At the crux of my inquiry rested the question: Was Brandon Teena reifying or transcending the male/female binary?

In this paper, I use the Kimberly Nixon case to consider the impact transsexuals have on the conventional socio-sexual paradigm. Nixon was prohibited from working at the Vancouver Rape Relief Centre—a women's only organization—after it was made known that she is a male-to-female trans woman. As a result, there was a complaint lodged with the British Columbia Human Rights Tribu-

nal (BCHRT), and two judicial cases were taken before the provincial court. Central to each of these proceedings was the question of the corporeal ontology of MTF transsexuals.

This analysis is primarily rooted in understanding that “sex” and “sex differences” have been intricately constructed through science and other cultural discourses. I provide a brief but critical account of how sex differences have been construed since the Enlightenment. Thereafter, I use to Nixon case to elucidate the fallaciousness of the nature/culture and male/female binaries and rethink the culturally-marked, scientifically prescribed ideology of sexual difference.

Constructing Sexual Difference

Since the Enlightenment, social relations in the West have pivoted on a paradigm of sex dichotomy (Laqueur). Cohesive with liberal democratic theory and dictated by modern science (Schiebinger 1989: 244), sex dichotomy has become crystallized in language and pervades every institution signified by human authority. Its ideological fixation has proved so hegemonic that sexual difference is commonly experienced as part of ontology rather than epistemology, as part of nature instead of culture. Even many prominent feminist scholars have relied upon the two-sex model to endorse the project

for gender egalitarianism (Firestone; Chodorow; Gilligan; Dworkin, MacKinnon).

The sex dichotomy hinges on laws of gender, which have been succinctly abridged by Harold Garfinkel in his 1967 seminal text *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. These laws conclude that:

1. There are two genders, and everyone is/has one.
2. Gender is lifelong, invariant, and unchangeable.
3. Exceptions to two genders are jokes or abnormalities.
4. Genitals (penis, vagina) are the essential sign of gender.
5. The categories are created by nature, and membership in a gender category is assigned by nature.

In short, Garfinkel concludes that sex dimorphism is dictated by the presumption of genitalia; often understood to be immutable, stable, and above all “pre-social.” Indeed, since the mid-eighteenth century western civilization has been witness to an epistemic shift; a transition from the understanding that all individuals are “positioned on a single axis of ‘sex’” (Hird 18) to the rigid inference that two distinct sexes produce two essentialized genders. This epistemic shift, undergirded in the *natural* sciences, negated the ques-

tion of cultural agency in creating categories of “male” and “female.”

During this period there was a socio-political agenda supported by Cartesian and other classical liberal values which actively discredited previous appreciation for the one-sex continuum, denied alternative assertions for sex diversity, and strategically brought into mainstream focus what one scholar refers to as “The Triumph of Complementarity” (Schiebinger 1989: 214-244). Refuting the one-sex model of the human body that existed from antiquity to the Enlightenment was quintessential in cultivating a rationale that permitted, if not encouraged, the subordination of women while remaining consistent to the emerging creed of universal, inalienable, and equal rights (Shilling 44). In other words, providing scientific explanations for sex differences rooted in the natural world effectively eschewed demands for the rectification of social, political and economic injustices that emanated from being female without “self-constitution” (Scheman 350).

Moreover, the ontology of sex post-Enlightenment became a segment of a much broader endeavour. It relied on transcendental reason of the monadic subject to demarcate categorical truths from corporeal experiences.¹ Within this schema, science became posited into the privileged realm of nature, severed from cultural variables of subjectivity, interpretation, and nuance, and ultimately became mystified as the repository possessing factual answers to all questions human. Those who challenged science, and in this case ontological sex, were either dismissed, labeled “uppity,” or persecuted.

In recent years, academics from within and outside the feminist community have attempted to configure how and why we understand sex and the sex dichotomy. Historians Londa Schiebinger (1989) and Thomas Laqueur each provide a genealogy of sex construction in the past few centuries. Anthropologist Emily Martin

examines the reification of orthodox gender roles in research concerning the sperm and the egg, and sociologist Alan Petersen cites how sex differences are perpetuated in a seminal anatomy text. What is amplified by each of these scholars is the idea that the scientific understanding of sex differences is a corollary not of the Archimedean model of disembodied knowledge but rather of specific cul-

nial policies through the logistical enactment of the discourse, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 296). In short, the intersection between the enabling paradigms of racism and sexuality that underlies the imperialist project, manifested as a crucial technology of colonial rule (Stoler; Yuval-Davis).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, distinguishing one

Providing scientific explanations for sex differences rooted in the natural world, effectively eschewed demands for the rectification of social, political and economic injustices that emanated from being female.

tural manifestations. As such, the corporeal can never be defined solely within the domain of nature, as even nature’s very parameters—that is, what constitutes nature—have been circumscribed by cultural precepts.

This analysis shares an intricate nexus with power, righteousness and the politics of imperialism. Several postcolonial theorists, including Edward Said, have noted the methodical and, at times, discursive registers through which the racialized Other is produced at the interface of sexuality discourses. Ann Stoler has taken this examination further in her critique of Foucault. Borrowing from the thesis-claim put forth by Anne McClintock, among others, Stoler describes how during Western imperialism the governance of sexual relations was central in classifying the colonizer and the colonized into spheres of “distinct human kinds while policing the domestic recesses of imperial rule (145). This move was both strategic and calculated, and resulted in two occurrences worth mentioning here. Positioning the colonizer and the colonized into *distinct human kinds* on the one hand engendered “corporeal malediction” (Fanon 258) on the psyche of latter, and on the other hand, played a seminal role in implementing colo-

race of individuals from another—which would serve as the justification for imperialist conquest—was supported by *evidence* from scientific disciplines. This evidence, however, was encumbered by the fact that naturalists were unable to develop a universal criterion from which to categorize races into neat taxonomies. As John Haller Jr. explains,

[t]o visually identify differences is one thing, but to determine a method for measurement and an index for tracing affinities among various races is far more vexatious undertaking. (3)

By the nineteenth-century, anatomic measurement emerged as the preferential, albeit, essentialist source for the study of racial difference—interestingly, analogous physical traits were employed to champion the case for sexual difference.

Since the decolonization and civil rights movement, many of the premises of racial difference have been debunked. Indeed, it has been commonly accepted that “[s]tudies which purport to demonstrate the genetic basis for this or that behavioral characteristic observed among persons who make up popularly defined races are essentially non-scientific and

should be labelled as such” (Marshall 125). While racial difference has been adamantly repudiated, and the nexus between ontology and race similarly dismantled, differences relating to sex have unfortunately only gone reinforced.

This is perhaps because, in addition to being derivative of epistemological and political transformations, sexual difference is functional to the

on genital determinism. They can be read as follows:

Penis → Male → Masculinity
Vagina → Female → Femininity

Sex complementarity’s stability is inherently dependent on society’s adherence to these equations; divergence from them is, as a result, portrayed as aberration. What requires

been a woman, and thus, had not been subject to those experiences—presumed monolithic—associated with being a woman. Nixon, subsequently, retained the services of Barbara Findlay, a legal and gay rights advocate, and filed a complaint with the BCHRT. In 2000, prior to the BCHRT releasing its decision, the rape centre went to provincial court—*Vancouver Rape Relief v. B.C. Human*

By attesting that her gender identity did not reflect her genitalia, Nixon refutes biological determinism and provokes disorder and anxiety to a cultural ideology that is reliant so heavily on *a priori* scientific and metaphysical claims.

socio-sexual paradigm of heteronormativity. As one scholar notes, “[h]eteronormativity, the hegemonic discursive and nondiscursive normative idealization of heterosexuality, played a leading role in establishing and then maintaining sex complementarity” (Hird 27). It is precisely heteronormativity and its institutionalization through patriarchal marriage that sustains dominant ideals of “family values,” which privileges and vigorously demands for “two biological parents” with a “stable relationship to male authority” (Stacey 69). Within this framework, often described as the “sexual contract” (Pateman), sex differences are reproduced whereby men and women *naturally* undertake distinct, however, complementary roles. Women are relegated to the private economy fulfilling domestic responsibilities, while men occupy the public sphere where decisions of popular morality, social norms, and public policy are debated and subsequently validated.

For sex complementarity—and thus, heteronormativity, family values and the patriarchal marriage—to stay intact, two strict equations that conflate biological sex with cultural gender must be maintained. These equations are structured by the laws of gender described earlier and pivot

acknowledgement here is that resistance to these equations in fact poses substantial challenges to the entire scientific enterprise that attempts to decipher and instill sex differences. Indeed, such challenges vividly disclose that “bodies are not static slaves to their biology” (Fausto-Sterling 31). Kimberly Nixon, a transsexual woman, is central to this resistance campaign.

Contextualizing Kimberly Nixon

Kimberly Nixon was born a biologically-read male in 1957. At an early age, it was clear to Nixon that her gender identity was not congruent with her *naturally* assigned genitalia. After years of living as a woman, in 1990 Nixon underwent sex reassignment surgery, and had her birth certificate altered to indicate her sex as being female.

In 1995, Nixon began training as a peer counselor at the Vancouver Rape Relief Centre—a non-profit organization that provides services to women who encounter male violence. While attending a training session, Nixon acknowledged that she was a post-operative transsexual woman. On the spot, a representative at the centre terminated Nixon’s training, concluding that Nixon had not always

Rights—in an attempt to eschew the tribunal’s authority. The case was ultimately dismissed. Two years later, the BCHRT ordered the rape centre to compensate Nixon \$7,500 for injury to her dignity. In response, the rape centre filed a second case. In *Vancouver Rape Relief Society v. Nixon et. al.*, the rape centre made a successful petition to overturn the verdict of the BCHRT (Findlay; Boyle).

Both cases initiated by the rape centre, invoked notions of ontological-sexual difference. They contended that being born with male genitalia involuntarily consigned Nixon to certain privileges and experiences not delineated to those individuals born female. They failed to consider how identification with the opposite gender may have precluded Nixon from taking advantage of privileges designed to benefit men. In short, by denying a transitioned transsexual woman from working at their institution, the rape centre’s argument relied upon socio-scientific knowledge concerning sex articulated in the post-Enlightenment, which renders innate differences between males and females.

Nixon’s Implications

Why is it important for feminists

to scrutinize the Nixon case? What value, if any, does it hold for feminist theory and practice?

Nixon's legal claim affectively "denaturalize[s] and resignifie[s] bodily categories" (Butler xii). It challenges the core of the traditional socio-scientific understanding of sex, as described by Garfinkel. Some may argue that that by undergoing sex reassignment surgery, Nixon simply moved from one end of the sex continuum to the other, thereby fortifying it. However, by attesting that her gender identity did not reflect her genitalia, Nixon refutes biological determinism and provokes disorder and anxiety to a cultural ideology that is reliant so heavily on *a priori* scientific and metaphysical claims. She exemplifies that *natural* genitalia do not have ontological meaning. Accordingly, Nixon becomes part of the feminist revolution, resisting masculinity and patriarchy, while simultaneously embodying "a subject of differentiation—of sexual contradictions" (Kristeva qtd. in Hekman 56).

In other words, Nixon affirms the claim that the scientific production of knowledge is congenitally affixed to the regulatory measures defined by cultural forces. Science, although it purports to otherwise, cannot think or act outside of culture (Schiebinger 1999). The dichotomies that science fabricates—nature/culture, male/female—are each part of a more conceptual political project that sustains the subordination of women through their relegation into devalued social spheres.

Science asserts that the dichotomies it supports are salient and pre-social. Nixon as a post-operative transsexual woman belies this claim. Her body, like other classified human aberrations, becomes the site of ambiguity for science. For this reason, when transsexuality was becoming more widely acknowledged in the modern West, the medical establishment rushed to discover its causes (Brown and Rounsley 22). After several endeavours to understand this

condition, the psychiatry discipline entered transsexuality as a psycho-sexual disorder into the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual III* (Whittle 197).

Patricia Elliot examines how the Kimberly Nixon case has divided members of the Canadian feminist community. From Elliot's argument, it is apparent that what has been neglected from feminist debate concerning this case is substantive dialogue on how science has created our understanding of what it means to be a woman, or man. If sex is a cultural manifestation, and the nature/culture binary is likewise a myth, then there is definitely great potential for alliance between trans and non-trans feminists. At a minimum, Nixon uses jurisprudence to illustrate the need for feminist scholars to engage with and critique the hard sciences, and reconsider their position on exclusion.

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¹During this period it was deemed that unlike men, women lacked the faculties to ascertain transcendental reason because "[t]he conditions of women's embodiment were ruled by natural cycles associated with pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation" (Shilling 43).

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FARIDEH DE BOSSET

Farewell

Leaning on her walker
she stepped out of her bed
to the window
looking at the snow falling
(as white as her hair)
and the snow-covered trees.
Her eyes laden with nostalgia
as if saying
farewell;
I will not see you again
until I am part of you.

*Farideh de Bosset is a poet who sees
the storm in each soul and the seed of
beauty in each cell and wants to share
it with the world.*



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