

MaNIfeSt aNd DesTInY AnXIeTiEs abOUt the bODy,

by Emmy Pantin

When women's health is considered, reproduction is often the only concern, and when reproduction is concerned, ableist language often prevails. We want "healthy," "normal" children.

Cet article cherche à imaginer différentes identifications basées sur des groupes qui ont des affinités, comme ceux qui résistent à l'exclusivité de la normalité et qui célèbrent la différence.

The following are narratives about "healthy" reproduction and bodies. I am trying to locate a body that resists forces that seek to repress and control, oppress and contain. I am trying to figure out how to make community without reinforcing sameness; a community based on the celebration of difference.

Get Your Culture Off My Nature

A quick guide to controlling reproduction in three centuries or less (guaranteed to produce results and become an invisible impetus):

If your concern is to produce more white babies, you need to make homosexuality sick and unnatural (ho-

mosexuals don't reproduce), you need to make the sexuality of coloured folks taboo, and design anxieties around it, you need to make sure that the proper type of white babies are born (not disabled, not poor) and you need to control who reproduces with whom. In order to create taboos about miscegenation, you must create racial categories in the first place, and these categories should be visible markers, the most visible of which reside in the body. It is of paramount importance that the site of reproduction, the female body, be regulated.¹

I never wanted to be one of the boys, but frankly, I never wanted to be one of the girls either.

Deformed Nature

Children in Love Canal began to contract blood diseases and strange forms of cancer.² Lois Gibbs, housewife and mother, emerged as a major crusader and eventually became a feminist and an activist through her efforts to save her family and her community. While appearing to be innocent mothers who were merely standing up for their families, the women of Love Canal contradicted images of themselves as passive through public displays of resistance and strength. While this type of activism on the part of the women of Love Canal did, in and of itself, destabilize popular representations of women and mothers as weak and docile, it did little to disrupt ideas of women as biological creatures whose primary function is to care for (and give birth to) healthy children.

The example of the former high school cheerleader who grew up, got married and settled into a comfortable life in Love Canal, who then had "retarded" (Kaplan) children plays upon our cultural anxieties around ableism, reproduction, and helps to entrench cultural ideas about women's biologically determined roles as reproducers of "healthy," "normal" children.

Catriona Sandilands problematizes anxiety-baiting forms of grassroots activism perfectly: "Heroic mothers defending home and hearth against a nature deformed by multi-nationalist corporations may be a compelling story," but what's at stake is "an insistence on problematizing the whole ensemble of discursive relations that surrounds the phenomenon in question" (xvii). Multinational corporations should be held accountable for contaminating the environment, and housewives and mothers shouldn't be responsible for cleaning it up. When women's health is considered, reproduction is often the only concern, and when reproduction is concerned, ableist language often prevails. We want "healthy," "normal" children.

Nature Will Always Return To Nature

It's the 1960s, and a lower-middle-class white couple gives birth to a healthy, normal pair of twins, both boys. They take them to get circumcised, and the doctor cauterizes little baby Bruce's dick right off. Everyone's horrified. Mommy and Daddy have no idea what to do, but it's the 1960's, and ideas about developmental socialization abound.

biOloGy and rePrOduCtiOn

They find Dr. John Money, who says they can raise baby Bruce as Brenda. All the other kids know something's weird about that girl Brenda, and Brenda/Bruce³ has a real hard time at school. Finally on or around her fourteenth birthday, her parents are gonna take Brenda for another session with Dr. Money.⁴

Dr. Money's gonna construct a vagina for Brenda on that day on that very day. Brenda says no way, if you take me there I'm gonna kill myself, don't take me there, I don't know what's wrong with me, but I know he's screwing with my head. So Brenda's parents say, ok sweetie, we'll cancel the appointment. We need to talk to you, we need to tell you something. And they tell Brenda/Bruce the truth, and the kid says she's gonna live her life like normal and she spends the rest of his life as a boy, with glossy lips and big wet eyes. Now, he's a guest on *Oprah*, and his name is David. He has a wife and two adopted kids, both boys, and he says what makes a good father is not a dick but a heart and discipline. Our bodies define us, and that definition is all about cultural context.

Blood, Bone and Birth

Black bodies are contextualized in North American culture as being foreign, and Native bodies are contextualized as indigenous. Imagine these two disparate identities existing in one body. I went to a conference last spring at an Ivy League university in the U.S. The conference was called "Eating Out of the Same Pot: Relating African American and Native-American Histories and Identities." The presence of Afro-

Indians disrupted the conference and undermined the idea that these two bodies exist as inherently separate from one another. An Afro-Indian woman in the audience continually interrupts the proceedings to say, "You talk, but the medicine is in the skin..."

Members of the Seminole Nation are going to hold a vote to make certain decisions about membership codes. There is a community of people who had escaped slavery and joined the Seminole Nation over a hundred and fifty years ago called the Freeman Seminoles. The vote would basically decide the amount of blood quantum necessary to be a member of the Seminole Nation, effectively banishing the Freeman out of the Seminole Nation (Micco).

We are scrambling for scraps from the same pot.

Ellie Weisle tells a story in his book, *Night*, about Auschwitz and being stuffed into a cattle car on the way to the camps.⁷ The train stops in a small town, and the local people throw scraps of bread into the car. Ellie describes how he watched in horror as family and friends trample and attack each other to get at tiny scraps of bread. Ellie steps out of the Auschwitz narrative for the first and only time in the book to tell us a story about how years later, on a trip to India, he is touring with another woman. The woman throws coins at the street children. Ellie watches in horror as the children scramble for the coins, and he begs the woman to stop. I am reminded of this story during the conference in New Hampshire.

A Stone

We silence, deny, refuse to acknowledge different bodies. Sometimes we can't even make sense of different bodies.

A stone is a non-reproductive entity, and what can we do with a stone? We can shape it, move it, control it. When you control reproduction you control the person, the group, the race. The problem is that human reproduction is a nightmare; extremely difficult to control. Teeming hordes of coloured folks are featured in our culture as the ultimate nightmare, aliens and nanotechnology on Star Trek, reproducing unchecked and unbalanced on the SS Enterprise.⁵

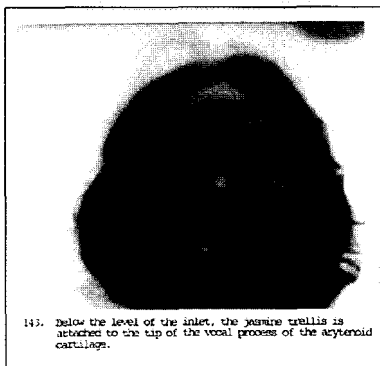
David/Brenda/Bruce was on *Oprah*, along with another person who was once named David too, except now s/he's⁶ named Dana. Dana/David was a highschool

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teacher, a real butch, voted best highschool teacher in Orange county of all places, and we are shown pictures of him as he goes white water rafting, the most macho thing you can do on water next to being a pirate, and s/he was married and had a daughter, and s/he decides to tell his grade twelve class that s/he's getting a sex-change operation. The school board fired him/her, and s/he sued, and settled out of court with a handsome/beautiful settlement package, as long as s/he agrees never to teach again. Now Dana/David is living on a ranch, and gets an occasional visit from his/her soon to be ex-wife, who saw her white picket fence explode. Dana/David tells Oprah, I've never been happier, and Oprah has no idea what to make of it.

At my workplace there are two bathrooms, both with only one toilet and a lock on the door. One has a men's sign on the door, the other a women's sign. I always use the women's bathroom, without even thinking. It never occurs to me that I can use the other bathroom. What does occur to me is that the only time I have seen public bathrooms that aren't gendered are the ones that are intended for disabled people to use. Disabled bodies are often marked in ways that supercede gender.

I am the patient; the viewer is my doctor – my attendant – my lover – is myself, the patient.



143. Below the level of the inlet, the pessary trellis is attached to the tip of the vocal process of the arytenoid cartilage.

How Did You Know You Were a Woman?

Dana/David says, I just knew it, I could feel it.

There's no way to understand David/Brenda/Bruce and Dana/David as being the same. David/Brenda/Bruce fulfills the narrative that nature will always return to nature: Biology returns to perform its destiny. But Dana/David is freed from nature and she has never been happier in her life. Oprah asks Dana/David how she knew she was a woman, and Dana/David tells her she just felt like it. Oprah never asks David/Brenda/Bruce how he knew he was a man, because it seems obvious, it would be a stupid question, and Oprah is not like Barbara Walters, she never asks stupid questions.

I want to know what it feels like. If Dana feels like a woman, what does it feel like?

A piece of *Menstrual Wisdom* offered as an addendum to a magazine piece on the harmful effects of tampons tells us that, "By reclaiming the menstrual cycle instead of downplaying it, Slayton [executive director of The Menstrual Health Foundation] states that women can get a renewed sense of their unique

power" (Finn). What power is it that we have that is so unique? Is it the ability to fly? No, of course not. It's the unique power to give birth. A simple disruption of this universal "power:" What about women who can't have babies? Women who choose not to have babies?

What helps me to feel like a woman is oppression. When Dana was David she couldn't have ever felt like a woman because she wasn't being oppressed, and is that what makes women *Women*? Sexism Misogyny Patriarchy? There's something to be said for experience.

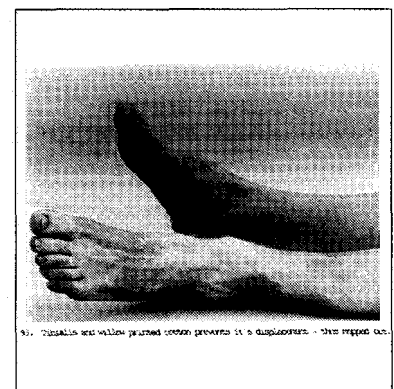
But I believe Dana/David, I believe that she feels like a woman. If she doesn't feel it from experience having never been a woman before, then what is it? If it's not external experience, maybe it's entirely internal, but it can't be biology because she's not biologically female. Are we talking about an essentialism based on nothing but a feeling? A feeling that can't even be described?

Keep Your Laws Off My Body

We have all these identity groups based on biology. Franz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, talks about how "the Negro" is identified as a biological creature.⁷ The Black man becomes an object, whereas the White man gets to have an identity



137. At the end of the fifth day after the subject has been placed upon its face, the genital and thigh regions must be thoroughly moistened with fluid.



90. TISSUES ARE WELLED BY ARMED COTTON PREVENTS IT'S DISPLACEMENT - THEN REPOSE ON.

that is about the intellect, the mind, the spirit, the passion, the genius. Everyone else gets an identity based on biology.

Plato wrestles in *Phaedo*. That's the one where he speaks from Socrates' point of view, and he struggles over the nightmare of being captured in a human body, which suffers and thirsts and hungers and desires. Socrates is actually looking forward to being executed, so that he can escape the infernal foil that is his body.⁸ And Buddha encourages us all to follow the eight fold path, so that if we're good enough we will eventually reach the ultimate in enlightenment, the nirvana that grants us freedom forever from our bodies. Being without biology is the ultimate desire. Reproduction is the site which reminds us that we are always biological creatures.

Perhaps I am participating in, rather than resisting, anxieties about reproduction because I desire to escape the biological inscriptions placed upon my coloured queer female body every day. Except when I meet another coloured queer female body, in which case I find a point of reference and familiarity.

Kate Bornstein⁹ talks about being accused by lesbians or feminists or both of having "male energy". What the hell does that mean, she wants to know.

The Michigan Women's Festival¹⁰ has transgendered male-to-female people picketing outside it every year, because only those "born womyn" are allowed in. I'm roaming around this festival, the most famous North American annual gathering of womyn, mostly lesbians, and I come across a boy, of all things. Except he was born a girl and identifies as a boy, and he definitely has "male energy," and he was born a woman, so I guess it's okay. Except I really don't think it's okay, because it returns us to biology as destiny: Once a woman always a woman, and the real problem is *pick one, you have two choices, pick one and even if you pick something else, you will always be what was decided for you.*

Biology Is Not Destiny

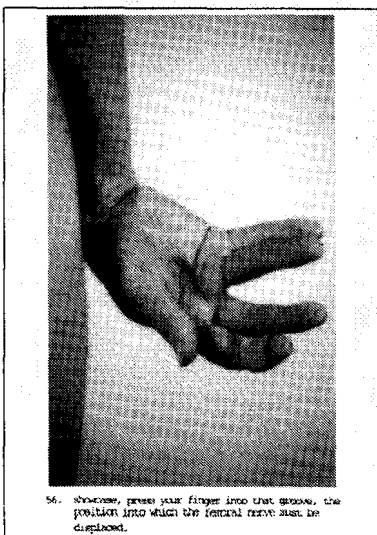
The question of coalescence that Stephen Duncombe brings up in the book, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, when talking about Riot Grrrl comes to mind. Riot Grrrl was a feminist movement in the early 1990s which dissolved as soon as it received mainstream attention, in order to avoid becoming co-opted. This meant that the more girls heard about Riot Grrrl, the harder it became to get involved. How do we identify as a community without playing into

dominant ideas about difference? How do we come together as a group without excluding others? We are groups that identify with each other based on what oppresses us: queers, coloured folks, girls. Despite a multiplicity of identities, we are still left with biology as a common denominator, and my frustration grows by the minute.

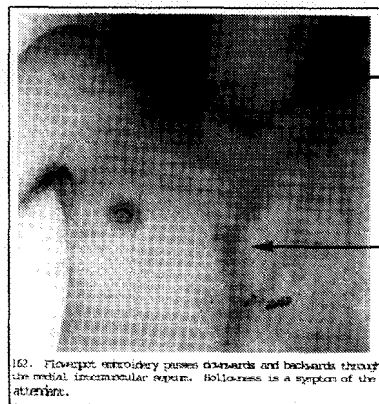
I came across a piece of writing by a girl who's responding to white middle-class lesbians for criticizing her for not being queer enough, and she says:

Third World Racial Exchange is Also an Oppositional Sexual Practice: Whang

Imagine identifying across biology, our common bond not being the biological definition of what we are, but identifying with resistance and contradicting those definitions. Queer becomes an affinity and a politic, a whole new way of identifying, of making community. Instead of blood, bone or birth, we're talking about a different kind of body; bodies that are always questioning, always resisting. Transgendered bodies. Afro-Native bodies. Disrupting discourses which reduce the body to a uniform biological entity. The ultimate destabilization of biology is not the opposite of body,

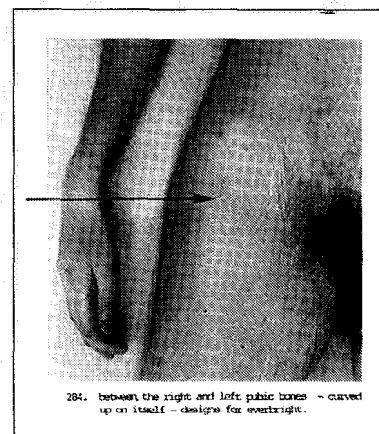


56. someone, press your finger into that groove, the position into which the central nerve must be displaced.



102. Flange: secondary pines downwards and backwards through the medial transverse region. Hollowness is a sign of the attending.

Jennifer Willett, Details, "Designs for Everbright," 1999.



204. between the right and left pubic bones - curved up on itself - design for straight.

but contradictions within the body.

Bodies exist as both means and ends at once. Dangerous and striving for liberation.

Emmy Pantin is a 24 year old feminist and media activist who lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario. She works with young people to make art a tool for activism. In her spare time, she enjoys sewing, knitting, and other revolutionary arts.

¹Check out *A History of Racism* by Tim McCaskell for the Toronto Board of Education, Equity Studies Centre, 1999.

²Love Canal was a suburban community in upstate New York that became famous for being built on a corporate toxic waste dump. The housewives and mothers of Love Canal lobbied the U.S. government to address environmental standards in business and housing. The grassroots activism that took place in response to the environmental crisis in Love Canal is often credited with being the birth of the NIMBY (Not In My BackYard) movement.

³The transgendered body is never a woman, nor is it ever a man, it is always a transgendered body. I do not want to erase the other genders/identities that people have had, so I decided to name the transgendered people with all their identities, hence the “/”.

⁴Based on the “John/Joan” case, which is Dr. John Money’s case study of David/Brenda/Bruce Reimer. The source of information for this essay comes from a July 26, 2000 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which featured David Reimer, his family, and John Colapinto, author of *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

⁵*Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Episode 150, “Evolution.” September 25, 1989. Wesley Crusher’s school project on nano-technology goes out of control as the little “Nanites” learn to reproduce and evolve into more intelligent creatures within minutes.

The *Enterprise* becomes endangered as a result of the proliferating the Nanites, but all is saved when Captain Picard and Data discover a way to communicate with the creatures and expel them from the ship.

⁶There’s an incredible lack in our language to escape those troublesome personal pronouns. There does exist the word “hir”, standing in for male/female. I decided to use the “/” again in this essay.

⁷Fanon was a Psychiatrist who wrote books about race and colonialism in the 1950’s. He was born in Antilles, educated in France and practised psychiatry in Algeria. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts his experienced of being alienated from himself, of being perceived as (black) object in a world of (white) subjects

⁸*Phaedo* is the last dialogue of the founding father of Western Philosophy. The mind/body split is entrenched in this text, a reoccurring discourse which continues to this day.

⁹Kate Bornstein is a transgendered writer and theorist. Her most well-known book is *The Gender Workbook*.

¹⁰The Michigan Women’s Festival is a music festival held in the Michigan Woods every year. It’s over 25 years old, and invites all “born womyn” to attend.

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Designs for Everbright imagines the patient as documented by clinicians highlighting cases of unusual interest for educational purposes. Each image bears a case study, a self-portrait, a body in various states of illness, injury and recovery. The figures are emaciated, damaged, fragmented and stripped of their individuality—rendered vulnerable to the gaze of the physician and the viewer. The photographs have been digitally altered; an otherwise healthy body is marked and marred by the hand of the artist. Here the exclusive and specialized language of the clinician is mastered and turned against itself rendering the system inert—undermining future instances of manufactured control.

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