

## Table of Contents

- I. Growing Up Strange
- II. Set in Stone
- III. People are Weird
- IV. You've Made Your Bed, Now Quit Lying in It!
- V. Art is Cool and Stuff
- VI. Moving On

## I. Growing up Strange

When most people walk into a store it's pretty obvious as to where they're supposed to be shopping, the men's department or the women's. Almost everything is sold like that, from the clothes we wear to kid's toys. For a lot of people this doesn't really trip them up. It doesn't ruin their whole day to live in a culture with such a strongly ingrained gender binary. But it's not that easy for everyone.

Growing up I spent a lot of time confused about my gender; being in a female body was frustrating for me; it felt wrong. Simple things like having to wear dresses on Easter Sunday were painful parts of my childhood. Because of the two-gendered mainstream culture I didn't even know there were people like me until I was about thirteen; people who didn't fit in their biologically assigned sex/gender.

The world and culture we live in is dominated by the strict gender binary of male and female. As a trans person, I have to deal with living in a system where there is little room for anyone who can't neatly check one of those two little boxes on their birth certificate. That left little room for the way I felt growing up. It was hard trying to have any kind of happy life before I could understand how fluid things really are.

The worst part of it is the questions. Everyone always asks something I'd rather not answer: "Are you a boy or a girl?" It's a hard answer to give to myself, much less others. I never know what to say; am I in a place where I can answer truthfully or am I going to have to lie here for the sake of ease? Once I tell people I'm transgendered it's pretty much expected that I should answer all sorts of questions about my body and how it *feels* or what kind of treatment I'm going to have.

I wish I lived in a place where I could just present myself as I am and just be accepted. I don't want to have to answer the invading queries of cis-gendered<sup>1</sup> people who are living in a world that's tailored to their genders. People who don't have to think about what it means to be like me.

## II. Set in Stone

A common misconception is that a person's sex and gender are the same; the two words are often used interchangeably. However not understanding the difference causes quite a few problems. Your sex refers to whether your genitalia are male or female. Gender is something else, something much more subjective and harder to define; while sex can often be told by looking at someone, gender is what's on the inside that only individuals can tell for themselves. It's how you identify yourself. Sex and gender can be in alignment but they don't always match up. But somehow people have gotten it stuck in their heads that your sex equals your gender and that's just a permanent part of life.

Why is it that people make gender so permanent? Do they look at the world and see a majority that is one way then ignore everything else? There are many exceptions to the biological argument that everyone's body is either male or female. Sometimes a baby is born with "ambiguous" genitalia—something that looks neither male nor female. Are these people then used as an argument for a third gender? Maybe more? No. Instead, doctors and parents who can't

---

<sup>1</sup> Cis-gender is a term that refers to people whose gender matches their sex assigned at birth.

comprehend that a child might be born outside a binary system operate on them instead, assigning them into whatever sex characteristics appear to be most prominent.<sup>2</sup>

The mentality that goes along with this practice is amazing. People are so set in their beliefs that they're willing to surgically change newborns, not always for the better, in order to fit them into the predetermined boxes of boy and girl. It makes you wonder what it really means for something to be permanent. Many people would consider gender to be determined at birth, even earlier, when you were just a tiny sack of cells in the womb. Little do they know...

Many believe that your gender is pretty much set in stone. And that's that; it's as solid and unchangeable as the ground beneath your feet. Stone is a strong, unchanging force of nature and can be the model for all things permanent; nothing that is equitable to stone can be fluid. Or can it? The very ground you walk on, which seems so solid, is really moving and changing all the time: earthquakes are common occurrences in some places; the continents and tectonic plates are drifting around as we speak, as they have for a long time. On the surface water carves through mountains. The Grand Canyon was formed by water; something so fluid and changing, yet it cut through the earth.

When you tell me that gender is like stone, you are correct. Not because both are something permanent but because they are not. On the surface when you look at the earth or gender they seem so very cut and dry, a simple and true fact that gives you comfort in the stability of the world around you. But both of those things, once you bother to look deeper, are some of the most fluid and dynamic parts of our lives.

### III. People are Weird

It's easy to see why people have such strongly ingrained beliefs. This way of thinking stretches back to our beginnings. As hunter-gatherers, there wasn't such an enormous gap, only the different roles people played in reproduction, but things got interesting once we started getting "civilized." After the Agricultural Revolution happened people's roles started changing. As we settled down in one place, women had more time for having babies and men had more time to build their status.

We've built our culture around these ideas of gender differences and anyone of us now could probably name off the stereotypical traits; males are big, strong, breadwinners and females are more supportive, sensitive homemakers. However, the Women's Rights movement changed how a lot of those ideals affected life in America. Women could be independent, vote and didn't feel as much pressure to get married and start popping out babies. It went the other way too. Men didn't have to live by a set of rules for how to be a man. Now you can be a nurse, or have long hair or, be a stay-at-home-dad. As we evolved so did our gender roles.

Even though mainstream society has made what seems like a huge breakthrough in the wall between genders, that barrier is still there. There are still expectations based on gender that starts from before birth. Parents paint their nurseries blue or pink, and the toys you're given also depend on what you're expected to do and like. Girls get baby dolls and boys get action figures, regardless of what your actual preference as an individual is. For some reason there's still the

---

<sup>2</sup> There are many types of intersex people, not all of them display a 'mixed' appearance of their genitals for some it's only visible in their chromosomes. The total number of people who differ from standard male or female is about one in 100.

idea of the dominant male gender; it's more acceptable for a little girl to be a tomboy, but if a boy were to be feminine in any way, that would be looked down upon.

The book *Bodies of Subversion* by Margot Mifflin is an interesting example of changing how sex and gender defined bodies by looking at the history of women and tattooing. Traditionally a male phenomenon, tattoos were adopted by many women as a way to be circus or sideshow performers. These women caused a sensation and fascination with tattoos in other women, and, as they grew more popular, so did the idea of tattoos on female bodies. Members of "high society" got tattoos, including Winston Churchill's mother. These women changed how people viewed parts of the female body and nowadays it's perfectly normal for a woman to get tattooed.

Talking about these gender differences only scratches the surface of our current problem. I could talk about all the problems around cis-gendered folks without even mentioning non-binary conforming people; transgender, intersex, no gender, etc. Most people don't even really understand all the different ways of looking at gender or how it can affect people.

#### IV. You've made your Bed, Now Quit Lying in it!

What people have to get into their heads is that gender is nothing more than a construct of the society and culture that you live in. It can change with the wind; it doesn't define you, you define it. When you look at it that way you can track the changes in gender views over time. Every set of people had their own way of doing things, their own views on gender and since the way gender is viewed changes so much you can conclude that there isn't one right way; gender isn't fixed.

Some of the most interesting gender structures to look at, in contrast to our own, are those of Native American and Ancient Rome and Greece. They offer a look at different standards within a binary, how arbitrarily ideals of the masculine and feminine can be changed, and how easy it is to accept people outside of a binary.

Certain Native American tribes, such as the Navajos had ways of looking at gender that contrasted our ancestors when they met long ago. Women could hold important roles of respect and power within the tribe. My favorite part of these cultures was the term two-spirits. Native Americans were able to recognize that a person could exist outside the boundaries of man and woman. A two-spirit was someone who between the lines of gender, and instead of being ostracized and marginalized, as many people would be in our society today, they were celebrated and respected.

A film called *Two Spirits* by Lydia Nibley gives a look into modern Navajo culture regarding two-spirits, which are being revitalized after influences from western culture left a bad mark on the alternative genders in Native cultures. The gender values that European colonists brought with them were strong enough to change perceptions about gender that had been around for generations. The story of Fred Martinez is told during the film, a male-bodied two-spirit who was a victim of a hate-crime. Martinez was murdered because he didn't bother to follow a system that was unnecessarily restrictive. It's good to see that despite the influences that brought in gender restrictions, Native people are able to bring back their roots that allow for more freedom between genders. If only Western society could make such changes.

The Greeks were also very fluid in their views of gender and sexuality. The greatest insight into their views is through their myths. Greek mythology is filled with transformations

that offer a blurry look at traditional male/female relationships. Zeus, the head god, was famous for his transformations and subsequent relationships. He kidnapped Europa as a white bull and seduced her. As a reverse of that story, Zeus turned one of his lovers, Io into a cow. Zeus also transformed into a swan to attract the affections of Leda. These tales bring in major elements of transformations regarding sexuality and, by extension, gender roles. The myths and gods they created were manifestations of how their own culture related to gender.

The best example in Greek mythology of their views on gender lies in the form of Hermaphroditus. A god who had sexual characteristics of both males and females, Hermaphroditus is an ancient symbol of intersex people. The fact that he was a god is an added bonus; people in Ancient Greece actually worshiped a divine being that wasn't confined by human ideals of gender. In most depictions of Hermaphroditus the god is shown with a female figure and male genitals. The most famous image of Hermaphroditus in a marble statue, the *Borghese Hermaphroditus*, which displays his nude reclining figure.



## V. Art is Cool and Stuff

Marble statues are some of my favorite ways to study human figures, apart from the real deal. It brings up the relationship between our bodies and stone. It's incredible how well you can capture the texture and movement of humans in rock. It's also a way to look into how people are displayed. One of my favorite pieces is by Auguste Rodin is his statue "*Am I Beautiful*."<sup>3</sup> The rippling muscles of the male figure seem to radiate strength as he holds the female above him. Her pose appears to be one of vulnerability in comparison. Something is definitely going on between the two figures but the interpretation of what that is going to be different, and change from person to person. "*Am I Beautiful*" is named after the line, "O mortals, I am beautiful, like a stone dream," in the poem *Beauty* by Baudelaire—a line I feel ties in nicely with how I see this work, another connection between our physical state and stone.

Many artists are directly addressing the differences perceived in genders; Rion Sabean did a series of photos of men in stereotypical pin up poses while still engaged in "manly" activities and in men's attire. He was raising important questions about how men and women are seen in our culture and how their sexual roles are viewed as well. By placing men in poses

---

<sup>3</sup> The piece was originally part of a large piece; The Gates of Hell then removed. It consists of The Crouching Woman being held up by the Falling Man (both of them are their own separate pieces put together here.)

considered attractive with women, he makes you wonder why that is not considered attractive with men as well.

Some of the poses that Sabean used were similar to the works of Gil Elvgren, a pin up artist who created images of widely accepted attractive women. However, when compared to the original reference photos, many things about his models were altered; from hair color and style to eye shape and size. The shape and pose of the models were almost always changed to create more slender and bendy figures. It's amazing to look at the before and after shots that give you an early view of photo shopping and airbrushing. The "ideal" women are just created and made up instead of reflecting reality. The purpose of pin-ups was to have an image of a beautiful woman, but the women that appeared weren't real. Was it just that there wasn't a model that was already beautiful? Or did male artists just decide to ask the impossible of women: to look like a fantasy.



If society creates images and ideals of gender, then doesn't it create gender itself? It makes you wonder why we even bother having such differences in the first place. People have over time, overcome these constructs and changed gender, so it would only make sense for us to remove the arbitrary walls the separate and define gender as a binary. Where along the way did we decide was a man was, what a women was? And why is it that we can't change it now? Why don't we just swap it around everyday? We could.

## VI. Moving On

It's very easy to look at gender explained in a paper and think you can understand it, but it's an entirely different thing to have to live with the struggles that come with gender non-

conformity in today's world. It's not easy and it's not fun but it's a reality for a lot of people and we're not going anywhere anytime soon. Even now in the US where gay and lesbian cultures are rising in acceptance, the trans community is falling by the wayside.

Transgender people have been around probably as long as you have, but in today's modern culture they suffer just for being themselves. Trans people have the highest murder rate in the country, three times that of African American males, the next highest. Discrimination is found in nearly every aspect of life, school, work, medical care, legal situations and just out in public. These stories should be on every major news media and talked about by the general public, but unfortunately most people will never even know. The most important thing to do is educate yourself, keep your mind open to other people's lives and struggles and maybe it won't always be so hard to grow up as a little boy or girl in the wrong body.

I don't know how to change the world. Things are already in motion, barriers are breaking and I guess the only thing left to do is help. Do something that society tells you not to; wear a dress if you think you shouldn't. Forget what people say is beautiful and make up your own definition, but don't just sit back and let things be. Make a change, do *something* and try to give the next generation a world where they can do the same.

## Works Cited

Miffin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* Margot Miffin. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Pinsent, John. *Greek Mythology*. New York: P. Bedrick, 1983. Print.

Rodin, Auguste, Rainer Crone, and Siegfried Salzmann. *Rodin: Eros and Creativity*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 1992. Print.

Sabean, Rion. "Men-Ups." *Rion Sabean Photography*. N.p., n.d. Web. Nov. 2012.

Stampler, Laura. "These Incredible Pictures Show How Pin-Up Girls Were 'Photoshopped' In The 1950s Read More: [Http://www.businessinsider.com/these-incredible-pictures-show-how-pin-up-girls-were-photoshopped-in-the-1950s-2012-5?op=1#ixzz2EJ0ZSCio](http://www.businessinsider.com/these-incredible-pictures-show-how-pin-up-girls-were-photoshopped-in-the-1950s-2012-5?op=1#ixzz2EJ0ZSCio)." *Business Insider*. N.p., n.d. Web.