

# **OUR BODIES – NOT OURSELVES**

## **Reclaiming the Lives of Intersexed People from Feminist Theory**

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May 2002

### I. Introduction.

Only since the middle 1990's has attention been drawn to the problems faced by intersexed persons, those persons whose physical development has not been consistent with their chromosomal sex. While dozens of television programs, magazine and newspaper articles, scholarly journals, and books have been published in North America and around the world, both the general public and academics are only beginning to comprehend the unusual challenges faced by intersexed people. Though the current focus continues to be on nonconsensual surgery performed upon the genitals of intersexed infants and children, I am convinced that scholars have scarcely glimpsed the profound impact upon the personalities of children, adolescents and adults of intersexed development, impacts caused mostly by negative reactions of parents, doctors, teachers, employers, peers and strangers to the physical anomalous development of intersexed persons.

I am just as convinced that feminist theory has much to gain by taking cognizance of intersexed lives, particularly because intersexed persons provide the best empirical evidence of how biology and socialization interact to shape the personalities of individuals within the social institution of gender. For example, Diane Hales recently wrote regarding intersexed persons:

These uncommon individuals raise intriguing questions about what it really means, at a fundamental physiological level, to be just like a woman. Is a chromosomal male with androgen insensitivity, who looks and lives as a female, a "real" woman? Is one genetic female, her body and brain shaped by male hormones in the womb, any less womanly than another? What is it, ultimately, that determines whether we come to see ourselves as female or male? The answers may begin before birth, with our genes, chromosomes, and hormonal mix. But they certainly don't end there. (1999, p. 72-73).

In asking normative questions like what does it mean to be “a ‘real’ woman?,” Hales foreshadows that this discussion will involve the centuries-old biology/socialization debate in feminism, with the crisis point being the biological essentialist strain of radical feminism that reached full flower in the early 1980's.

#### A. My Body, My Self.

From an epistemological standpoint, a major source of this work is knowledge unavailable in any published source; knowledge gained through personal experience. My primary source is my life. Moreover, the writing of this article constitutes a conscious attempt to reclaim power for intersexed persons as a group from feminist scholars who, along with doctors and psychologists, opportunistically seized from intersexed persons the power to define themselves.

In decrying this consistent pattern of intellectual colonization, unless the effort had practical importance, it would be labor lost to attack a host of writings by women published between the late 1960's and the middle 1980's that, while reflecting the mainstream of feminist thought at the time, are of peripheral importance in today's post-modern multi-cultural Third Wave feminist world. As explained earlier, confronting these writings in a historical context is a necessary step in claiming for intersexed persons a place as not only subjects but actors in contemporary

feminist dialogue. Moreover, so long as extant feminist thinkers cling to hidebound concepts of biological essentialist feminist thought, confronting these ideas is an unavoidable prerequisite to involving intersexed persons in the creation of feminist thought--a project with great potential for helping to accomplish the purpose of feminist thought, ending sexist oppression.

## B. Thesis and Methodology.

In this paper, I shall endeavor to show that feminist theorists have consistently used information about intersexed people opportunistically and superficially to support their own preconceptions regarding sex and gender. A side effect of this intellectual colonizing of intersexed lives is that radical feminist theorists through the 1980's uncritically accepted the conclusions of doctors who perpetrated a large scale campaign of physical and emotional abuse against intersexed people. The flip side of this indictment is that I will show that feminist writers only began using information about intersexed people in a sophisticated and critical manner when after biological essentialism was rejected.

While a comprehensive survey of radical feminist writing as to their use of intersexed lives is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, I will review a succession of leading representative works that will be spaced closely enough in time as to trace the evolution of ideas and understandings. The specific works, spaced five to six years apart, are:

1969: Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*.

1973: Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*.

1979: Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.

1984: Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*.

1989: Holly Devor, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*.

These authoritative works will obviously reference a wide range of other contemporary sources. After 1989, it is impossible to do more than sketch the outlines of the dynamics that marked the debunking of biological essentialist feminist thought and led to today's post-modern multiply-streamed Third Wave feminist discourse.

## II. Intersexed lives and the biology/socialization question of feminism.

While women have written about their oppression as women with passion and cogency since at least Mary Wollstonecraft, Kate Millet's 1969 work, *Sexual Politics*, marked the first attempt to study gender within the discipline of political science. In using the term "sexual politics," Millet's used the term "sexual" not in its erotic meaning but rather as the emblem that marks the division between the privileged and disadvantaged halves of society. While Millet allowed that due to the complexity of modern life, truly pure patriarchy was hard to find in any industrial society, Millet pointed out that the undeniable fact that "the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance... every avenue of power within [U.S.] society, including the coercive power of the police, is entirely in male hands." (1969, p. 34).

In support of her position that the domination of females by males was largely in response to socialization, and not biology, Millet used then-recent research upon intersexed children published by Doctors John Money and Robert Stoller as to the development of gender identity. (1969, p. 40-42). For instance, Millet cites a 1965 article of Dr. Money's 1965 in stating, "John Money... believes that gender [is] first established... at about eighteen months. (1969, p. 42).

Dr. Money's position that gender identity is, in his words, "plastic" at birth (1965, p. 12) was a crucial element in his position that the bodies and minds of intersexed children should be molded through surgery, hormones, therapy (and *sotto voce*, coercion) to be congruent with patterns set by biologically normal males and females. This led to the tragedy named by groups like the Intersex Society of North America as Infant Genital Mutilation (IGM). Millet's use of Dr. Money's work in her extraordinarily widely-read book lent indirect support to the IGM-based program of Dr. Money.

Millet's blockbuster was the classic example of an idea whose time has come, playing a major role in launching Second Wave feminism. A flurry of books flowed from the intensely creative early 1970's period of feminism, including Carolyn Heilbrun's 1973 book, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*.

Heilbrun's exceedingly erudite book was a visionary call for liberating women by freeing both women and men from the chains of gender:

...our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. (1973, p. ix-x).

Tracing what she called "the hidden river of androgyny," (1973, p. xx), Heilbrun focused on Greco-Roman mythology and literature to show that even in Western tradition, gross discomfort with blurring of the sex/gender division and is a relatively recent development. (1973, p. 3-45).

Two elements of Heilbrun's essay are relevant here. The first is that even though Heilbrun was extraordinarily conscious of the dynamics of gender, she explicitly avoids conflating biological sex with gender traits; placing "masculine" and "feminine" in quotes to underline her position that chromosomes and hormones are not iron determinants of personality and values:

Because “masculine” traits are now and have for so many years been the dominant ones, we have ample evidence of the danger the free play of such traits brings in its wake. Unless we can effectively check the power of manly men and women who willingly support them, we will experience new Vietnams, My Lais, Kent States.... So long as we continue to believe the “feminine” qualities of gentleness, lovingness, and the counting of cost in human rather than national or property terms are out of place among rules, we can look forward to continued self-brutalization and perhaps even to self-destruction. (1973, p. xvi).

Driving home the biology/social distinction soon to be blurred by cultural feminism, Heilbrun said, Obviously, not all women embody “feminine” characteristics... But for the most part... the “feminine” impulses are most frequently embodied in women. (1973, p. xvi).

Heilbrun’s call for “androgyny” was really a suggestion that more of the traits labeled as “feminine” be incorporated into the personalities of men. Anticipating anti-feminist attacks on her ideas, Heilbrun wrote:

If the argument on behalf of androgyny sounds... like a feminist or “women’s lib” cry, that is because of the power men now hold, and because of the political weakness of women. If “feminine” resounds throughout this essay with the echoes of lost virtue, while “masculine” thuds with the accusation of misused power, this is a reflection on our current values, not on the intrinsic virtues of either “masculine” or “feminine” impulses. Humanity requires both. (1973, p. xvi-xvii).

Suddenly, Heilbrun has turned the corner and united her ideas with the political approach of Millet. The “feminine” side of humanity, and with it, “women,” have been denigrated because of the power imbalance of the “masculine” side of humanity, mostly composed of men.

The second relevant element of Heilbrun’s argument is that she is both very conscious of the existence of intersex people (1973, p. xii), and of the tendency to conflate emotional hermaphroditism with physical hermaphroditism, and even opposite-sex twins. (1973, p. 28, 34-45). The importance of Heilbrun’s distinguishing between biology and culture will be keenly apparent in the next section.

Another contemporary writer, Shulamith Firestone, synthesized the ideas here and implicitly returned them back to those of John Money. In her 1970 book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone placed de Beauvoir in her perspective of Engels and Marx, reaching the conclusion of Millet that the status of women is a political dynamic reflecting the disparity of power between women and men. Next, she unites politics and biology with a statement of brilliant clarity:

[T]he end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the *sex distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. [emphasis in the original] (1970, p.11-12).

“*Genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.*” Suddenly, Firestone transcended Dr. Money’s focus on changing genitalia—the better answer, for *all* people, is to make genitals irrelevant politically, if not culturally and emotionally.

### III. Intersexed Lives Under Biological Essentialism: Two Approaches.

In the late 1970's, the distinction explored earlier between biology and culture was largely lost by feminist writers. A new era in which biology was used to define the cultural existence of women, biological essentialist feminism, arose. However, intersexed bodies were not forgotten, but manipulated by feminists for other uses.

That said, many feminist writers forgot the intersexed, even when distinguishing between the biological and cultural origins of women and men. For instance, Susan Brownmiller, even when arguing that the physical characteristics of men and women overlap to a surprising degree, said nary a word about intersexed persons or the fascinating result of mixing chromosomes and hormones in different ways. (1984, p. 28-35). Even though Brownmiller was excruciatingly

conscious of just how the shape of one's body affects one's social acceptability, she said nothing about how drastically one's body shape and chromosomes can clash within the spectrum of human existence. (1984, p. 25-26). Of course, there was little information about such issues at the time.

Yet not all feminists were silent as to how intersexed lives illustrated feminist issues. Unfortunately, the writers of this time tended to colonize and exploit intersexed bodies for their own ends, while showing zero concern for the people whose bodies they used.

The high-water mark of this strain of thought was the 1979 book by Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*. The specific purpose of her hate-filled screed was to attack the acceptance of *transsexuals* within the feminist women's community. Within the arsenal she used were intersexed persons. This passage encapsulates how she related transsexuals, intersexed persons and women:

No man can have the history of being born and located in this culture as a woman. He can have the history of wishing to be a woman and of acting like a woman, but this gender experience is that of a transsexual, not of a woman...

What of persons born with ambiguous sex organs or chromosomal anomalies that place them in a biologically intersexual situation? It must be noted that practically all of them are altered shortly after birth to become anatomically male or female and are reared in accordance with the societal gender identity and role that accompanies their bodies. Persons whose sexual ambiguity is discovered later are altered in the direction of what their gender rearing has been (masculine or feminine) up to that point. Thus those who are altered shortly after birth have the history of being practically born as male or female and those who are altered later in life have their body surgically conformed to their history. When and if they do undergo surgical change, they do not become the opposite sex after a long history of functioning and being treated differently. (1979, p. 114-15).

Within the passage above, these statements I find particularly objectionable:

*“No man can have the history of being born and located in this culture as a woman.”*

Perhaps no *man* can be so, but in my experience, something very close to this can be experienced by an intersexed person who is assigned male sex.

*“...practically all of them [intersexed persons] are altered shortly after birth to become anatomically male or female and are reared in accordance with the societal gender identity and role that accompanies their bodies.”* Raymond says this without any commentary as to whether it is right to perform surgery on genitalia, and betrays no thought as to what slicing the glans of one’s phallo-clit does to their ability to experience sexual pleasure.

*“those who are altered shortly after birth have the history of being practically born as male or female and those who are altered later in life have their body surgically conformed to their history.”* Raymond says nothing about whether it is right to force societal norms as to gender identity and role upon anyone. What is feminism for if not to criticize imposed gender roles? Moreover, had Raymond bothered to look, she would have seen that intersexed children were under a degree of pressure to conform their personality to sexist and heterosexist stereotypes as to what the personalities, values and interests of women and men are to be. The full ramifications of this misconception would become apparent in just over a decade.

As indicated, Raymond seized definitional power over intersexed persons to bash her *bête noire de année*, transsexuals. This necessitated distinguishing transsexuals from intersexed persons to the strictest degree possible, because Raymond knew that any blurring of the line meant death for her commitment to making chromosomal sex an absolute criteria requirement of membership in the “womyn-only” space she sought to frame for radical feminism.

Not only did Raymond attempt to wall-in the power of intersexed persons to define themselves, she also attempted to wall-in the idea of women and men, as her campaign required accepting wholesale the patriarchist division of society between women and men, if not the specific definitions as to what “a woman should be.” Furthermore, Raymond’s cultural feminist campaign attempted to wall-in feminists themselves, as her theory discouraged any examination of the biological and cultural *similarities* between women and men, not to mention the influence of other systems of oppression like class, race and ethnicity upon the ramifications of gender.

Lastly, Raymond acceptance in bulk of the sexist and heterosexist attitudes of doctors and psychologists then manipulating intersexed bodies and lives buttressed the work of the doctors and psychologists. This was particularly ironic, given the border war that had sputtered between feminism and medicine since the birth of the Second Wave feminist movement. Thus, through the work of biological essentialist feminists like Raymond, Mary Daly and Catherine Millot, a crucial opportunity to liberate intersexed persons from the violence routinely performed upon their bodies and minds was lost.

I criticize Raymond harshly because she her appropriation of intersexed persons was done solely to bash an equally stigmatized and oppressed group, transsexuals. A literally graphic example of such exploitative colonization was the cover of a book by one of Raymond’s contemporaries, the French writer Catherine Millot. According to Pat Califia, at least the English edition of her book *Horsexe* featured the “titilating nudity of a hermaphrodite” (1997, p. 110), to sell her book propounding the same biological essentialism trafficked by Raymond. Personally, I would be outraged if any book used a nude photo of *my* body to promote ideas to which I strongly object.

#### IV. Intersexed Lives in the Post-Modern Era: Factors for Positive Change.

After 1989, the biological essentialist feminism of Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* ceased to mark the leading edge of feminist thought. Instead, the pre-1975 focus on the contradictions between biology and cultural influences upon women returned. By the mid-1990's, feminists were finally comprehending intersexed persons, not to mention women and men, in a respectful and liberating way.

The first step past biological essentialism was multiculturalism. Alone, multiculturalism would have changed nothing regarding intersexed persons, but by the mid-1980's, multiculturalism was knocking out the underpinnings of the idea that women have a shared political status, symbolized in the cry, "we are all women."

Once people like bell hooks and Audre Lorde had raised class, race and ethnicity as challenges to the Universal Woman, the door opened to women challenging the power of elite women to define what women are even within one race. Suddenly, radical women could openly express their discontent with the model of the fiercely woman-identified, unfeminine, yet not excessively masculine, "politically-correct" woman that the cultural feminists had erected.

Holly Devor seems to have written the first book in this area, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*, published in 1989. In *Gender Blending*, Devor directly addressed the conflict between socially-imposed gender norms and the diverse personalities of women. Through words and pictures, Devor breached the then-extant feminist taboo of crossing, or just straddling, the line between female and male physically and emotionally. Furthermore, in a

development that is still grossly under-examined, Devor documented numerous cases of apparently normal females whose physical appearance was seen by relatives, friends and strangers as confusingly similar to that identified as male. (1989, p. 107-42).

As cogent and well-written as was Devor's book, this facet of it should have put cultural feminist concepts of "what is a woman," and "what is a man" under even greater pressure. At any event, what followed then, particularly as the children of the Second Wave feminists came of age, was a flood of ideas challenging the cultural feminists who had hegemonized feminist thought through 1990.

One immediate change was better science. Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling was one of the first medical doctors to write on feminist topics as a feminist. In 1985, her book *Myths of Gender* attacked ideas then being pushed mostly by doctors, primarily male, that the hormones in women influenced women's brains so that they were poor at math, emotionally unstable, and all the other charges flung at women by "scientists" since at least de Montaigne. (1985, p. 3-8). In 1993, Dr. Fausto-Sterling published in *The Sciences* an extremely influential article titled, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are not Enough." "The Five Sexes" marked Fausto-Sterling's new interest in intersexed persons and in the feminist implications of their lives, and also her arrival as an authoritative expert writing as a feminist, from a feminist perspective on topics of interest to cultural feminists, reaching conclusions diametrically in opposition to biological essentialist feminist thought.

The flood broke culturally, as dozens of feminists redefined what it means to be a feminist "womyn-born-womyn." The first step was the first ever serious analysis of "butch" female existence within the context of masculinity and femininity. Proof that thousands of radical

women were questioning cultural feminist norms by the early 1990's is the thick anthology compiled by Joan Nestle in 1992, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. The first 200 pages, even excerpts from nationally-circulated lesbian publications like *The Ladder*, revealed masses of historical evidence undercutting the cultural feminist doctrine against overt masculinity by radical women. (1992, p. 13-219). Suddenly, masculine women had a history and heroines to inspire them.

The political implications of butchness were starkly apparent to the contributors to *The Persistent Desire*. For instance, Jeanne Cordova, in “Butches, Lies and Feminism” wrote:

Feminist don't want to define butch because any true definition of butch must include recognizing yang energy as positive. For two decades all male energy has been damned as destructive, invasive-wrong. I believe yang energy is also implementive, manifestive, and yes, necessary... Some have said feminist butch is an oxymoron. I say it's a paradox. A feminist butch is a dyke who has survived the Cuisinart blades of a feminist rhetoric. (1992, p. 273).

A stronger challenge to cultural feminist norms is hard to imagine.

In addition to a comprehensive reappraisal of lesbian appearance, culture and sexuality in the past and present, literature like *The Persistent Desire* led to the next step, adoption of male sex by chromosomally female persons that cultural feminists named “womyn-born-womyn.” Female-to-male transsexuals blew the doors off Raymondism by manifesting the contradictions within biological essentialist feminism's strict definition of “what is a woman.”

On a largely parallel track, by the late 1990's, intersexed persons themselves were opening up to themselves and others their unusual, and often tortured pasts. One reason this had to wait until after the butch revival, the FtM revolution and the Third Wave of feminism was that about 90% of adult intersexed persons on whom doctors had performed genital surgery had been

socialized as women—and a clear majority of those women had become women-identified lesbian women. Therefore, not until it was reasonable “safe” for a lesbian to reveal that she was chromosomally male and surgically altered was it possible for any organized intersexed movement to development.

To illustrate, keep Raymond’s strict notions of biological essentialism in mind while reading this part of a relatively early article by intersex leader Cheryl Chase, born, as she reveals earlier in her article, “Charlie:”

Who am I? I now assert both my femininity and my intersexuality, my “not female”-ness. This is not a paradox; the fact that my gender has been problematized is the source of my intersexual identity. Most people have never struggled with their gender, are at a loss to answer the question, “How do you know you are a woman (a man)?” (1998, p. 211).

Raymond would have probably accepted Chase as a woman, since that’s how she had been raised. But the minute Chase started suggesting any discomfort with a customary female identity and existence, I think Raymond’s hackles would be raised. No one, certainly not a “freak” like Chase, could dare question Raymond’s *a priori* presumptions as to the distinctions and definition of sex and gender identity, lest the entire biological essentialist-basis of cultural feminism be undermined and toppled.

## V. Conclusion.

In 2000, Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling effectively answered the implications of Raymondism in her first book after *Myths of Gender, Sexing the Body*:

In 1972... John Money and Anke Ehrhardt popularized the idea that sex and gender are separate categories... Meanwhile, the second-wave feminists of the

1970s argued that sex is distinct from gender—that social institutions, themselves designed to perpetuate gender inequality, produce most of the differences between men and women... Feminists did not question the realm of physical sex; it was the psychological and cultural meanings of these differences—gender—that was at issue....

In ceding the territory of physical sex, feminists left themselves open to renewed attack on the grounds of biological difference.... Indeed, feminism has encountered massive resistance from the domains of biology, medicine, and significant components of social science...

Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for “sex,” the more it becomes clear that “sex” is not a pure physical category... (2000, p. 3-4).

Fausto-Sterling not only summarized the pageant of history and feminist implications of same reviewed in this article, but she has reached a fundamentally post-modern conclusion: “I don’t know—it’s very complicated—no strict lines can be drawn.” Yet she also makes clear that the inquiry is worthwhile, managing to encompass the entire field and subject of queer studies in one sweeping paragraph:

I am deeply committed to the ideas of the modern movements of gay and women’s liberation, which argue that the way we traditionally conceptualize gender and sexual identity narrows life’s possibilities while perpetuating gender inequality... Feminists (and others) who study how scientists create empirical knowledge have begun to reconceptualize the very nature of the scientific process. As with other social arenas, such scholars understand practical, empirical knowledge to be imbued with the social and political issues of its time. I stand at the intersection of these several traditions. On the one hand, scientific and popular debates about intersexuals and homosexuals—bodies that defy the norms of our two-sex system—are deeply intertwined. On the other, beneath the debates about what these bodies mean and how to treat them lie struggles over the meaning of objectivity and the timeless nature of scientific knowledge. (2000, p. 8-9).

Tempting as it may be to embark on this journey without bothering to kick over the traces of the biological essentialism that post-modern feminism rejects, not to first examine the feminist

thought of the past 20 years is analogous to leaving a campsite without dousing the fire. At least, my being a natural-born optimistic compels me to want to draw in wisdom from the women who created the feminist thought that brought us up to our present time. As I have endeavored to show, there are timeless crystals of priceless value in their writings from the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. Such finely honed minds and experienced hands can surely interpret the new facts we uncover daily in way that less trained minds, even if younger heads might hold a more unbounded creativity and vision.

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