

The Identity Trap



by Phyllis Chesler

Part 1:

I have always wrestled with and rejected the demand to identify myself by one descriptor—and by one descriptor only. Way back, in the Dark Ages, one was either “gay” or “straight.” One’s genitalia or rather, whom one slept with (or sexually desired), was the measure of all things. I thought that this simplistic balkanization of identity would make it very hard to act collectively for the greater good, especially when working with those who are not at all like oneself.

Who am I? Damned if I know. Can a single label define me? Or anyone else?

I have never described myself primarily in terms of my sexual identity. That is so absurdly reductive. Like Walt Whitman, we each contain “multitudes.” Virginia Woolf put it this way: “I am not one and simple, but complex and many.”

We are daughters/sons, mothers/fathers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues; we belong to religious, ethnic, racial, and class groups—but we also belong to our dreams, which may be ever-changing, and to the work we do. We are of a certain generation, have grown up on one continent, not another, enjoy good health or poor health, feel responsible to our blood relatives or to our country or to some ideology which might also be ever-evolving.

Who am I?

Well, I'm a writer, a feminist, a Jew—but since there are so many different kinds of writers, feminists, and Jews, defining myself in these ways would hardly convey who I am.

Perhaps who I am is the work that I do, the ideas that I have. If you look for me you may find me in my books and articles—but not really. Once I've finished a book I'm no longer there, I've moved on.

Perhaps who I am is what I love, how I spend my time, what moves me.

I love: People who are brave, smart, and kind. I love helping those who are worthy or in need, I also love a good laugh, a sparkling conversation. I love my family, my friends, studying Torah, old Broadway musicals, great films, great books, cabaret music, doo-wop, blues, gospel, jazz, and classical music, especially opera. But none of this defines who I "am."

How about my sexual identity?

Is it possible to have been outrageously boy crazy, to have had two husbands, a number of serious boyfriends, and scores of love affairs with men—and still be counted as gay?

Bisexual, eventually, perhaps; gay, no. Being "bisexual" doesn't convey who I am.

I may have lusted for men, but women also had the power to

“stir my imagination.” I was drawn to the “boy” in the girl, and the “girl” in the boy. I’m not talking about transgender performances but about naturally fluid wonders: butch dykes, beautiful boys—outrageously butch boys, too.

I have now lived with another woman for more than thirty years. Is this union my “identity?”

I think not.

To me, being homosexual once meant that you were an artiste or a revolutionary. Whom you slept with was important, but not as important as whether you were witty, original, interesting—outrageous. The historically bohemian nature of homosexuality (which was a mainly male phenomenon) attracted me.

But today, being “gay” has come to mean defining yourself purely in sexual terms, as if how you have an orgasm or whether or not you wear frilly dresses or men’s suits, i.e. conform to sex-role stereotypes, which is supposed to constitute your identity. You’re not a promising actor, scientist, lawyers, painter, politician, or scholar. You’re gay, bisexual, etc.

Being “gay” or gender fluid has become so democratized that it’s bourgeois. You don’t have to do anything other than identify as “gay” or “trans” to be entitled to both victim status and to the same rights that straight people have to marry, receive tax and inheritance benefits, become parents, etc.

For God’s sake: I favor equal legal rights, but for single and asexual people too.

I’m disabled. Does that tell you who I really am? Not really. I’m still “myself.” And yet... I’m also not who I once was, and not who people need me to be. Being walking-disabled means that I have to strategize all my out-of-door activities. There

are certain things that I can no longer do—like walk for hours, aimlessly, effortlessly, through cities or parks; comfortably visit more than one museum exhibit at a time. Traveling alone out of town or abroad is impossible. Oh, how my wings have been clipped!

However, if one is lucky enough to live a long life, and I have, this (and so much worse) can happen. I try to accept my limitations and work around them. I have fewer distractions, hence, more time to read, write, and think.

I've always been reluctant to generalize about female psychology as a function of race or religion. Are Jewish-American women really all "pushy?" Are African-American women really all "angry?" Are Caucasian-Christian-American women all cold—and do they all have high self-esteem because they're not racially oppressed?

Individual differences are as important as what people have in common.

For its time, (1972), my first book, *Women and Madness*, was politically correct in every way. I wasn't writing only about Caucasian women. I included both African- and Hispanic-American faces and interviewees. I talked to Third (and Fourth) World women about their experiences with psychiatry, psychotherapy, race-based liberation movements, feminism, and lesbianism. I quoted Toni Morrison, Frances Beal, Joanna Clark, and The Fourth World Manifesto, among others.

I had learned that many African-American women had grown up in all-female households in which mothers, grandmothers, and aunts often headed the family and that this was a different experience than that known by most white children in male-dominated households. I interviewed, counseled, taught, and befriended African-American women, many of whom carried themselves with enormous dignity—and some of whom suffered from profoundly damaged self-esteem often masked by an outward

show of “toughness.”

And so—would this heightened sensitivity to racism (for that time), help me understand a particular patient or a student? I did not find that this was so.

Class is a tricky issue. I’m of working-class origin, and that will never change no matter how many books I may read or write. However, given my education and professional accomplishments, my class is hard to define.

As to religion/race/ethnicity: What a tragic mess! As a Jew, I know how deep racism cuts. I “get” why African-Americans (or First Nation peoples, or Asian-, Hispanic-, and Muslim-Americans), might want to work with their own kind. Sometimes, so do I.

I’m named after my paternal grandmother, a woman who was hacked to death by Cossacks in Ukraine! I bear her name and some part of her DNA. How can I ever forget? She ran a tea-shop. Did her killers come for her in the morning—after she’d prepared the first samovar for the day, or was it a midnight raid? Were the unarmed Jews asleep—did she have time to recite the Sh’ma before the laughing, drunken men cut her down?

I carry the DNA of all my relatives whom I never got to meet because they were murdered in pogroms and in the Holocaust. My missing, extended family—all up in smoke.

Now that I’ve made it through all the checkpoints of intersectionality—do you think you really know me? Would you know me as well if I’d only listed one descriptor?

Part 2:

On the day that Justice Alito announced the Supreme Court had overturned Roe, my gay friends and colleagues overwhelmingly denounced the decision. Some, though, were more concerned with the potential loss of gay marriage and the re-criminalization

of the sodomy laws than they were with the possible loss of birth control and abortion for women. Many statements from LGBTQ+ organizations and articles specified subgroups like trans-men (biological women) and bisexuals (also women) as groups that would be targeted by the anti-abortion new laws many states were already moving to put in place.

When I mentioned this to a friend, he immediately criticized me. Language has evolved, he insisted, and that trans-men could also become pregnant and might need an abortion. The word "woman" is old-fashioned, regressive, and "trans-exclusionary," I was informed.

I asked him how much Kool-Aid he'd been drinking.

According to M.K. Fain in an article published earlier this year in 4W, even many abortion clinics in Texas (home to some of the most draconian anti-abortion laws in the country) have stopped using the word "woman" to describe their services, lest they leave out trans-men. They have opted for the phrase: "pregnant people."

A woman-identified lesbian told me that at a demonstration against the Roe decision in a Mid-Western state, some men had joined with signs which read "Reproductive Rights are Human Rights." She told them: "Glad you're here but why not also sign "Women's Reproductive Rights are Human Rights?" "No," the now-gathering group of men shouted, "because trans people are excluded when you only talk about women."

The transgender issue has become as toxic as that of Israel/Palestine.

Both the Palestine True Believers and Trans True Believers value their narrative or their ideology over and above historical and geographical reality, and certainly over and above biology. In their view, human beings can and therefore must change all that has gone before; they can re-interpret it "in their own image." Everything in Nature, all that God and

humanity have created, can be improved upon by human beings via science, medicine, technology, even war, especially revolutionary war. Such improvements are justifiable in the name of progress and fairness.

Surreal—yes?—but not surprising given that our language itself has been hijacked so that it both reflects and enforces the disappearance of womankind. Somewhere, both Orwell and Huxley must be weeping.

For example, we are now supposed to say “pregnant people” not “pregnant women;” “chest-feeders” not “breast-feeding mothers;” “parents” or “intended parents,” not “mothers” (and not “fathers” either); “surrogate uteruses” not “mothers” or “birthmothers.”

How many trans-men can there be? Perhaps more than we know. It seems that an increasing but unknown number of teenage girls are opting to become boys via surgery and hormones. We are losing our tomboys and butch dykes. At first, this may seem puzzling since we live in a post-feminist era—but many feminists valorize gender identity over sex identity and thus, offer little feminist “backbone” to struggling teenage girls.

Reader: These are the times in which we now find ourselves. How did we get here?

The idea of women’s sex-based rights has been increasingly and dangerously disappeared. Although the Second Wave of feminism achieved advances for some women economically, legally, politically, socially, educationally, reproductively, and sexually, we did not abolish incest, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, pornography, prostitution, trafficking, commercial surrogacy, sexism among both men and women, or the most profound economic and racial disparities. We raised these issues, we fought for solutions, but globally, the patriarchal world continued on largely unchanged; no, it actually got worse.

Within a decade, the most radical feminist work of my generation, as well as feminism itself, were replaced by a politically correct focus on imperialism, colonialism, racism, and slavery, all written in a pseudo-Mandarin language that no one can understand. Such post-modern language functions as a disincentive to both activism, comprehension, and democracy.

In my time, Women's Studies, which I co-pioneered, was swiftly replaced by Gender Studies, then by Lesbian, Gay, Transgender Studies (LGBTQIA)—and by a searing obsession with racism, over and above sexism and, oddly enough, by the demonization of Israel as an alleged apartheid state. Many Western feminists became more obsessed with the alleged "occupation" of an imaginary country (Palestine), than they were with the real occupation of women's bodies world-wide. Femicide (honor killing), forced child marriage, compulsory face-veiling, the violence involved in prostitution— even FGM, were not talked about as much as Palestine was.

That's not all. An anti-feminist and anti-woman concept of gender identity was increasingly adopted by the academy, the media, and by governments and international organizations—as well as by liberal, "progressive" feminists. And then pro-trans propaganda/information flooded daily reality.

Transgender/transvestite identities now trump sex identities so much so that legal and medical forms in America currently ask you first if you are a "trans-woman" or a "trans-man"—before they ask you whether you are a "man" or a "woman." Bathrooms everywhere have signs stating: "This is a gender-inclusive bathroom" or "All genders are welcome."

I have no problem with individuals who identify as trans. I view them as fully entitled to the same civil liberties that others enjoy. I am not in favor of censoring or silencing them. My problem is with their overly aggressive silencing of all dissent, especially radical feminist fact-based challenges to their hormonal and surgical choices, especially for

children. I am also appalled that “politically correct” anti-capitalists do not view this phenomenon as being fueled by Big Business in terms of Big Pharma, Big Surgery, and Big Mental Health.

There is something questionable about biological men becoming women and in so doing, seeking to outperform women in every way, both in terms of stereotypical glamour, but also in terms of athletics. Thus, transgender/transvestite women, with intact height, weight, and male-muscle power are competing against biologically born female athletes—and winning every competition. Something is wrong with this picture.

Some biologically born men who become trans-women, retain their genitalia; the female hormones that they take do not seem to restrain them in terms of raping biological women. There are some lawsuits concerning such trans-woman who have been imprisoned for raping or even murdering women—and who have, unbelievably, been housed in women-only prisons and in formerly all-female domestic violence and homeless shelters.

This outrage is well documented by WoLF (The Women’s Liberation Organization), who have launched a lawsuit about this in California, and by Dr. Karen Ingala Smith in a forthcoming book: *Defending Women’s Spaces*. Smith also notes that in the UK, 90-95% of transwomen still have intact male genitalia. She writes:

“Women-only spaces created by woman are not the reverse of men-only spaces and exclusionary boys’ clubs. Women created those spaces as a response to sexism, a space away from male supremacy, rather than imitation of men and male culture...When transwomen clients came into a women’s hostel and started acting aggressively, the women were absolutely terrified... There was no room for debate. To even suggest you had an issue with that, that’s it –you were out. Mixed-sex toilets, like unisex changing rooms, increase women’s fear and risk of harm and reduce women’s access to use of facilities...Just

under 90% of complaints of sexual assaults, voyeurism and harassment in changing rooms took place in mixed-sex facilities and two-thirds of sexual assaults in pools and leisure facilities took place in mixed- sex changing rooms."

And yes, this is also happening in the United States and in Europe. Schools are also being mandated to have boys who identify as girls share bathrooms and showers with biologically-born girls.

Here's my question: Sexually or physically attacking someone who is gay, trans, or a member of a racial or religious minority constitutes a "hate crime" and increases the possible sentence. As well it should. However, the rape of a biologically-born woman does not yet count as a "hate crime." One must wonder why. Is it because there would be too many such cases; that biological men would be held accountable for their sexual violence; or is it because girls and women just don't matter that much?

In America, the Democratic Party, the media, and the academy favor gender identity language and want to pass a Gender Fairness Amendment, not a sex-based Equal Rights Amendment for Women, something we still do not have. According to Dr. Janice Raymond in *Doublethink: A Challenge to Transgenderism*, language is also being used to hide who is doing what to whom.

"When the bullying and incitement to violence comes from those who claim to be women (but were born biologically male), many will minimize it because self-declared women are considered a victimized class. Appeasers will claim that trans violence against natal women is a small part of the trans activist community. But this claim is belied by the actual numbers of trans activists who reveal their trued hatred of women, blatantly displayed on social media... Attn cis lesbian TERF's. You ugly fucks deserve to be buried alive..."

Radical feminists, (and J.K. Rowling), who question any of this are treated as “traitors” to this New World Order and punished accordingly. They are called TERFS—trans-exclusionary radical feminists and as such have been followed, picketed, death-threatened, their lectures shut down, their jobs lost, their books cancelled. The most sexually violent death threats have been launched against them on the internet.

Sadly, this reminds me of what has happened to pro-Israel professors, lecturers, and student groups on campus.

According to Dr. Sheila Jeffreys in *Penile Imperialism: The Male Sex Right and Women’s Subordination*, we have been so gaslighted that even as we became more and more politically correct about not offending people on the basis of race, sexual preference, and gender identity, we became less and less sensitive about mocking women. In fact, we view it as enjoyable entertainment. She writes:

“Feminists understand that the elimination of sex stereotypes is a necessity for women’s liberation but the practice of drag is based upon them. Drag queens do not think that sex stereotypes and the harmful cultural practices that mark women under male domination—make-up, high heels, depilation, revealing clothing, sexualisation—are a problem because they are the basis of their lifestyle and profession. The practice of drag could be usefully referred to as “womanface,” meaning men imitating women, because of the similarity to the practice of white people seeking to imitate black people for entertainment which is commonly called “blackface”. Blackface, though, is universally condemned as politically unacceptable practice in a way that womanface is not.”

In such a climate, one in which violence against women is pandemic—but is also disappeared—we have an increase in the number of teenage girls who say they are/or want to become boys.

Although I at first hesitated to do so, (these noble feminists have been punished enough for their righteous views), I finally decided to “name names.” Credit where credit is due. I could not have written this article had not Drs. Sheila Jeffreys, Janice Raymond, Abigail Shrier, and Donna Ingala Smith, as well as the founders and editors at 4W and at WoLF (The Women’s Liberation Front), and Meghan Murphy at Feminist Current preceded me.

Others too, including Jennifer Bilek, Genevieve Gluck, and the many articles published at 4W and Feminist Current have educated me.

In *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, Abigail Shrier documents the phenomenon of teenage girls transitioning to boys.

And, is it any wonder that some teenage girls, struggling with normal anxiety about their changing bodies, (and in a culture so critical of women’s bodies), are opting to surgically remove their breasts and take dangerous hormones in order to avoid being classified as womb-men, as members of the denigrated and disappearing class.

It’s crucial to remember that Shrier’s book was not meant to see the light of day. Before anyone had read it, before it was even bound, her publisher, Regnery, was flooded with letters demanding that it not be published. According to Shrier, prominent journalists refused to review it, “even Kirkus...never reviewed it.” Then, Amazon barred her publisher “from sponsoring ads on the specious grounds that the book ‘claims to diagnose, treat, or question sexual orientation.’”

When Schrier was finally interviewed on Joe Rogan’s program, “employees of Spotify, which exclusively hosts the show, threw a fit, demanding that the interview be stripped from the platform. Spotify held ten meetings in an attempt to mollify its young staff...America’s science writers? Hiding under the

covers.”

On the basis of two twitter complaints, Target “pulled” the book from their shelves. More letters arrived, demanding that it be reinstated—and so it was. What turned this around? According to Shrier:

“Parents who’d witnessed this craze up close, seen what a hash it had made of their daughters’ lives—they were done listening to experts...Parents even started a GoFundMe to put up billboards across the country to promote the book. Go Fund Me—which at the time of this writing hosts over thirty thousand fundraisers...shut the parents’ efforts down.”

This kind of censorship campaign in the name of fairness and justice is chilling, isn’t it? Especially since Shrier’s work is calm, respectful, evidence-based, and supported by so many carefully executed interviews.

Are all teenagers who transition miserable? No, they are not.

But, according to Margaret Talbot in an article in *The New Yorker*, merely recognizing that they are trans-boys, gains a troubled teenage girl enormous social media approval, an instant and rather supportive community, an identity, and the status of victim-hero. In my view, many such trans-boys may have, essentially, joined a new religious cult, one with its own language and set of rules. For example, one can never, ever use a person’s former name which is now known as a “deadname.”

I’ve been told that some trans-boys (and trans-girls) live happily ever after. I want to believe them—but really, who among us lives happily ever after? There is also some evidence that the phenomenon may be hard-wired but only in those who insist they are in the wrong body and do so when they are four or five years old. Such children are not coached, their parents are not necessarily “progressive.” They may be unique

and in the minority.

However, more such female-to-male transitioners seem to have been peer influenced to interpret their normal or abnormal psychological agonies as requiring a quick chemical and surgical “fix.” These girls may belong to another demographic entirely.

Some teenage girls who transitioned are coming forward with great regrets. We are now only just learning about these de-transitioners. Dr. Raymond quotes one such de-transitioner—Keira Bell, at some length. Please listen to her.

“I was adamant that I needed to transition. It was the kind of brash assertion that’s typical of teenagers. What was really going on was that I was a girl insecure in my body who had experienced parental abandonment, felt alienated from my peers, suffered from anxiety and depression, and struggled with my sexual orientation.”

Raymond notes:

“After a round of superficial conversations with social workers, Bell was given puberty blockers at age 16, testosterone shots at 17, and at 20, she had a double mastectomy. Five years later, she de-transitioned. The consequences were not superficial: infertility, loss of breasts with an inability to breastfeed, atrophied genitals and a permanently changed voice.”

Keira Bell sued the Tavistock Clinic for having allowed her to take puberty-blockers when she was only 16 years-old. She won—but the judgment has now been overturned by the Court of Appeal, and the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom refused Bell’s application for an appeal.

It’s important to understand that federal, state, and city protocols distributed to some schools across the country in

America, validate what under-age children want, not what their parents, not even what their doctors, might have to say. The child alone is in charge of making their surgical, hormonal, and gender identity decisions. In California, if a child tells a teacher that they really are the opposite sex, (or another sex), but that they do not want their parents to know—the teacher is not allowed to tell the parents.

What is one to make of all this? One teacher suggested that the child might be in danger at home if they revealed such information to a parent, who might beat or continually punish them in other ways.

Perhaps we might view this as the Great Children's Revolt, a culmination or a continuation of all those other ongoing "revolutions" in which tradition, history, and authority are being toppled. Down with the Dead White Male Canon, down with the white male statues of slave-owners, down with organized religion, down with the capitalistic, patriarchal, colonial, racist West, down with Radical Feminism. Re-name sports teams and universities if they are named after indigenous people or slave-owners. Have actors of color play white historical figures, have women play male roles, have visibly gay actors play lust-besotted heterosexual kings—as if doing so both erases and rewrites history.

And we wonder why the Republican Party's conservative positions on religion and tradition actually have a following? And why six Catholic Supreme Court judges have allowed the states to criminalize abortion if they wish to do so?

Let me be clear. One can criticize specific politics associated with a group (be it an LGBTQ or a feminist group) without disliking or rejecting individual members of that group, and without holding them responsible for group positions.

For example, quite recently, I was utterly charmed by a trans-

woman who came to see me as part of a film crew. "Audrey" was as tall as a tall man—but was otherwise as "feminine" as the most feminine of women. She was not wearing high heels or a frilly dress, not at all, but her very being, as well as her expressions, were so naturally "feminine." And, she made a fabulously feminist speech that surprised and pleased me. May she live long and prosper.

A decade ago, a very young admirer of my writing came to call. S/he turned out to be a breast-bound courtier in the midst of transitioning. S/he appeared at my door with a single rose and a poem. S/he was Octavian, straight out of the opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, one of the leading "trouser roles" always sung by a woman who is meant to be a man. This Octavian was a woman who was becoming a man, and a charming performance it was.

To summarize: The increasing disappearance of womankind, both linguistically, and actually, and the consequent desire of teenage girls to become boys, may be powered by:

- 1) the rise of gender identity which trumps sex identity, both in what used to be called Women's Studies departments, in feminist theory, and in the Democratic Party;
- 2) the incredibly well-funded and social media-fueled rise of the transgender movement;
- 3) the legalization of surrogacy in the United States;
- 4) an increase in violence against women;
- 5) an extraordinary rise of existential angst in the West.

I was recently interviewed about legalized surrogacy by Jenny Kleeman, a journalist for *The Guardian*. She gave me a copy of her latest book, *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat: Adventures at the Frontier of Birth, Food, Sex, and Death*. The work is excellent, one of the best works of journalism I have ever read. It is also coolly terrifying. Kleeman interviews

scientists, experts in technology and ethics, surrogacy “spin” doctors, and those who are working on babies grown in artificial wombs aka “biobags.” All are working towards a world in which women’s sexual and reproductive power—and perhaps biological women themselves—will no longer be necessary, a world in which technology and robots will provide all that patriarchal, woman-hating men might want.

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