

Trans Politics in the United States

A cross-cultural survey of gender expression and sexuality would seem incomplete if the present-day United States were omitted. What's happening here, where I write from, today? I believe what's interesting here is that, all around us, new social categories are emerging to hold the people who formerly lived invisibly in the closet. This birth comes with pains and leaves stretch marks. The pain comes from the extraordinary threat of violence that transgendered people face just living their daily lives. The stretch marks come from the efforts to bend existing categories to encompass people whose reality is grudgingly being acknowledged.

VIOLENCE AND THE GAY-TRANSGENDER RELATIONSHIP

Trans people launched the U.S. gay rights movement with the famous Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village in 1969. The New York police had harassed drag queens and other transgendered people in a gay bar to a point where violent rebellion broke out and spilled over into the streets.¹ Yet, in the following decades, gay political advocacy groups formed that did not include transgendered people in their mission statements. Soon the sheer numbers of gay and lesbian people crowded out transgendered

people and their issues. Organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a powerful gay lobby, sponsored legislation covering job discrimination and hate crimes that didn't mention gender identity, only sexual orientation.² Time and again, the initiative and experience of trans people have been ignored or appropriated by gay organizations. Nonetheless, violence against transgendered people continues to demonstrate that the political futures of gay and transgendered people are intimately intertwined.

Soon after the terrible murder of a gay student, Matthew Shepard, in Wyoming, a trans girl was killed in Austin, Texas, under similar circumstances.³ Eighteen-year-old Lauryn Paige, born as Donald Fuller, was found murdered in a wooded area of southeast Austin. Lauryn was dressed as a woman. Lauryn's father said, "He's been that way all his life. We always knew he was a little different, and we pretty much accepted it, but we didn't allow it around the house. We just knew he wasn't happy unless he dressed up." Lauryn had often been seen walking along South Congress Avenue, where police regularly conduct prostitution raids. Police Commander Gary Olfers said, "We are dealing with sadistic killers. There was more than one [stab] wound, and they were brutal in the application of those wounds." The autopsy revealed a cut across Lauryn's throat 9 inches long and 3 inches wide.

"The police description of this murder is heartbreakingly familiar," said leading transgender activist Riki Anne Wilchins of GenderPAC. "Sadistic killers, multiple stab wounds, bludgeoned and/or shot repeatedly . . . it's a familiar litany of brutally violent acts done to gender-different people: Chanelle Pickett, Brandon Teena, Christian Paige, Deborah Forte, Vianna Faye Williams, Jamaica Green, Jessy and Peggy Santiago, Tasha Dunn . . . and the list goes on." Yet Lauryn's murder received hardly any mention in the press, and no gay organizations followed up, even though the events parallel the well-publicized murder of Matthew Shepard.

Lauryn's death was not an isolated incident. The transgender activist and columnist Gwendolyn Smith maintains a website for a project called "Remembering Our Dead" that contains the names of the transgendered people killed every day. Each year, a moving ceremony of remembrance is held in cities worldwide.⁴

Another recent example is the tragic murder of Barry Winchell, a

twenty-one-year-old private at Fort Campbell on the Tennessee-Kentucky border in the summer of 1999. Winchell's death was used by gay advocacy groups to force the U.S. government to reevaluate its don't-ask-don't-tell policy in the military. Yet, as the *New York Times Magazine* eventually reported in a cover story, "The fact is that Winchell, killed for being gay, wasn't gay."⁵ He was straight. He had dated only women in the past, nontransgendered women. At the time, he was in love with a beautiful transgendered woman, Calpernia Addams. The Nashville-based Lesbian and Gay Coalition for Justice paid Addams a visit and suggested that "for the sake of clarity" she should tell reporters that she was really a he, because "how can you say he [Winchell] was gay-bashed if he was dating a woman, you know?" Addams agreed, and in subsequent news accounts, she was Winchell's "boyfriend" or "cross-dressing friend." This devastating lie erased Addams's existence and the basis of her relationship with Winchell. A Nashville gay activist concluded, "We don't have a vocabulary for dealing with these issues."

On June 2, 2001, newspapers carried reports that more people were dismissed from the military in 2000 than in any other year since the don't-ask-don't-tell policy was initiated. Nearly half of the discharges were from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 101st Airborne Division, where Winchell was beaten to death with a baseball bat in 1999. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described Winchell as someone who was "thought to have been gay," thus recognizing that he wasn't gay. This description wrongly suggests, however, that the attack was simply a case of mistaken identity. Winchell was dating Calpernia Addams, who was known to be transgendered and sometimes worked as a performer in a drag bar. The murderer, who frequented the bar himself, was feeling genuine homophobia misdirected toward a straight fellow soldier.

The implications of this instance of homophobia for the military are still unclear. After the September 11, 2001, attack, the Pentagon issued an order suspending discharge proceedings against service members who disclosed their homosexuality. A similar order was issued during the Persian Gulf War. Apparently gay and lesbian troops are just fine in time of war.⁶

Just as trans women have been converted into cross-dressing gay men, trans men have been converted into cross-dressing lesbians. Billy Tipton was a jazz musician who married a woman, and adopted and raised chil-

dren with her. Upon his death in 1989, he was discovered to have female genital anatomy. Yet the lesbian community refers to him as “her.” Similarly, Brandon Teena, a young trans man who was raped and murdered in Nebraska in 1993 when he was discovered to be transgendered, is referred to in the lesbian press as a cross-dressing lesbian who passed as a straight man. This validates what the rapists were trying to show: he could be raped like a woman, so he was a woman. In fact, Brandon Teena went to great pains to be taken seriously as a man and referred to himself using masculine pronouns. He wasn’t passing as a straight man, he was one.⁷

A recent transgender killing occurred in, of all places, the San Francisco Bay Area. A seventeen-year-old transgendered girl, Gwen Araujo, was killed during the night of October 3–4, 2002, although her body was not found until mid October. Born Edward Araujo, Gwen was living as a girl and was romantically involved with several guys. Two of the boys she had been intimate with began to suspect she was born male, and plotted to ascertain for sure what genitals Gwen had. They planned to punish her if she was discovered to have male genitals: “I swear, if it’s a fucking man, I’m gonna kill him. If it’s a man, she ain’t gonna leave.”⁸ At a party on October 3, 2002, in Newark, a girl pulled up Gwen’s skirt and outed her to the crowd: “It’s a fucking man.” One of the boys with whom Gwen had been intimate then cried out, “I can’t be fucking gay.” The girl who had outed Gwen then tried to console the boy, saying, “It’s not your fault. I went to high school with you, and you were on the football team. Any woman that knows you after this, it’s not going to matter. Just let her go.”⁹ Nonetheless, the four boys proceeded to beat Gwen into a bloody pulp, strangled her with a rope, put her in a truck for a four-hour drive to a spot in El Dorado County near the Sierra Nevada mountains, dumped the body in a shallow grave, and covered it with heavy rocks, dirt, and a tree trunk. Then the four boys got back into their vehicle, drove to a hamburger stand, and ordered breakfast from the drive-up window. The murder went unreported for days.

Many nontransgendered people seem to have trouble acknowledging that this type of violence occurs regularly in their backyards. These crimes are not ordinary crimes, but genuine hate crimes. They show that being outed as gay or transgendered is not merely discourteous and insulting, but seriously compromises personal safety. The crimes also

show how closely intertwined trans and gay violence is—criminals don’t draw clever distinctions between gender identity and sexual orientation, they go for the jugular and don’t ask why.

COALITION-BUILDING

After decades of turbulence, the political landscape within the lesbian-gay-bi-trans-intersex community is starting to stabilize. Since the 1969 Stonewall riots, the gay political stance has usually been that the public isn’t ready for transgendered people: best to establish rights for gays, then move on to the transgendered. I believe this political analysis is wrong. The general public doesn’t want to be bothered with a new category of people to protect each year. In excluding transgendered people, gay advocacy organizations lose the moral high ground. They can be attacked for representing only “special rights” rather than human rights. The Human Rights Campaign seems to think that transgendered people are too few in number to contribute financially or at the ballot box and that politically they are a liability. The trans position is that we were there at the start, and we’re there for the heavy lifting. Much of the violence passed off as gay-bashing is really violence against gender-variant people. Legislation to protect sexual orientation without mentioning gender identity misses the point. Gay people are often gender-variant too—it’s their gender variance that places them at risk more than their sexual orientation, because their sexual activity is carried out in private, whereas their gender variance is publicly visible.

But the political situation is improving. On March 10, 2001, the HRC finally added transgender rights to its mission statement, although it hasn’t yet included gender identity in its legislative proposals. Many gay organizations have added a “T” to their name, to signify the inclusion of transgendered people. In San Francisco, the Harvey Milk Democratic Club included transgendered people a few years ago, followed by the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club—a rare unity among these rival progressive and centrist political organizations. More important, Mark Leno, a courageous political leader who represents the largely gay Castro district in San Francisco, sponsored legislation to include transgender medical needs in the city health insurance plan. On April 30, 2001,

the Board of Supervisors passed the proposal with the necessary nine out of eleven votes, accompanied by thoughtful and articulate public debate. National news media covered the event, which was the result of unified action by gay, lesbian, and transgendered people on behalf of transgender issues, one of the few since Stonewall. The action set a new legislative standard in the United States for inclusion of the full human rainbow in gender expression and sexuality.¹⁰ Mark Leno has now moved on to the California Assembly, where he has become one of the most effective legislators in the state.

HOW MANY LETTERS IN THE ALPHABET?

The confusion over who belongs to the lesbian-gay-bi-trans-intersex community no longer seems a major issue. For a while, each year seemed to bring some new group needing recognition: first gay men, then lesbians, then bisexuals, then transgendered people, and finally intersexed people. People have wondered whether this alphabet-soup approach to including sexual and gender minorities would ever stop. Do we have to amend our laws every year, as a new political constituency clamors for recognition and protection?

I believe the present list is now coherent and complete, and the game of gender scrabble may be over. Theoretically, gays and lesbians affirm traditional binary distinctions in gender identity and body, but flip the directions of sexual orientation. Bisexuals challenge the binary in sexuality, trans people challenge the gender binary, and intersexed people challenge the body binary. Collectively, all these identity categories seem to span the body-gender-sexuality space, and if any one category is omitted, the remaining group shows a gap. Perhaps we've finally attained a body-gender-sexuality community where anyone, I hope, can now find their spot by combining the elements they need from all these categories.

I believe all of us in the body-gender-sexuality community have more in common than the rhetoric of our identity politics sometimes suggests. First, each of us "comes out." We come to terms with ourselves, our family, school or employer, friends and colleagues, and society. We accept, often after years of denial, the stigma and danger of being ourselves. We differ in detail: a gay man realizes his sexual attraction to another man,

a lesbian woman realizes she's not just a tomboy, a trans woman braves an obstacle course of hecklers on her first appearance in public, and an intersexed person forgives. Traumatic moments. Compare: A girl tells Dad she won't go into engineering. A boy tells Mom he won't be a doctor. An unmarried woman tells her family she's pregnant. A man tells his family he's marrying outside of their race or religion. These too are serious moments of self-definition, but they rarely equal what someone who's queer goes through when coming out. Second, each of us is told we're impossible. We're not supposed to exist, our reality is denied by science, religion, and custom. We're theoretically problematic. Yet we do exist. And we're good.

HOW MANY GENDERS?

The lesbian-gay-bi-trans-intersex community may seem complete, but there is a larger question to be addressed. Trans people must continually locate themselves within the traditional binary distinction between man and woman. Many trans people affirm traditional gender norms in their personal lives, while not wanting to impose such norms on others. Many transgendered women identify simply as straight women and lead lives little different from other women of similar age and occupation, regardless of their unusual history. Similarly for transgendered men. Short profiles of successful transgendered people, usually conforming to gender norms, have been assembled by Lynn Conway.¹¹

Other trans people transgress gender norms. The most outspoken is the transgendered author and activist Kate Bornstein, who writes, "I know I'm not a man . . . and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman, either. . . . The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other."¹² Some people feel they inhabit a space between man and woman—a third gender.

Because third-gender spaces exist in other cultures, many wonder whether U.S. culture is too rigid to allow for a third (or fourth) gender—forcing people to locate in one or the other of the two main genders—or whether people actually choose to identify with the main genders. The biggest difficulty with affirming a third-gender identity is knowing what that means. Those transitioning from one traditional binary gender to the other have a clear sense of where they want to end up and a clear un-

happiness with where they started. Moving to a third gender requires lots of exploring and trying different combinations, some harmonious blends of both genders, others glaring and provocative declarations of resistance.

One experimental genre is called gender-queer, or gender-fuck. One of the first groups to pioneer a gender-fuck presentation was the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of men who dress in nuns' habits while sporting beards or mustaches.¹³ Founded in 1979, they have established chapters in many cities throughout the world, and are active in charity. They are outrageous and eagerly sought after for parades and as master of ceremonies at public events. They successfully taunt many religious leaders, who can't seem to resist swallowing the bait.

Young butch lesbians and young trans men are exploring interesting and appealing new combinations of the masculine and the feminine as full-fledged lifestyles. These new models of gender suggest that a third gender may become more of a real option in coming years.¹⁴

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN RAINBOWS

To repeat: lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and inter-sexed people all exist. But why do we exist? Can we theorize about how gender and sexuality diversity evolved in humans, as we did earlier for animals? I don't think so. Methodologically, one can't study human evolution the same way one studies animal evolution. Humans cover the globe. Animals can usually be pinpointed to one type of environment and traits tied to a particular function in that environment. Instead, our species has evolved in response to all the physical and social environments that our gene pool encounters. The social bonds built through same-sex sexuality might keep one alive in ancient Greece but cause death during the Catholic Inquisition. Our species' evolution reflects both positive and negative pressures.

The relatively short history of same-sex sexuality as an identity category may spring from how common same-sex sexuality is. Policing same-sex sexuality as a distinctive category in the face of this commonness, and in the absence of any visible phenotypic markers, takes society's constant energy. Just witness how much time and money is wasted

⇒ KIN SELECTION?

on legislative and legal activities to repress gays, as though they will just disappear someday if enough is invested into stamping them out. Transgender categories seem to have a longer history, perhaps because transgendered people are both visibly distinctive and relatively uncommon, and therefore require less energy to maintain in descriptive boxes. I sometimes wonder if the identity categories of gay and lesbian will simply dissolve someday because no one wants to bother with the distinctions anymore, whereas transgender categories may persist longer.

Transgender expressions are seemingly tied to occupations, and the earnings from the occupation can benefit either the transgendered person directly or their extended family. In antiquity, being a eunuch qualified one to work in the private space of men and women, out of the public sphere of male-male competition. The parents of eunuch slaves presumably benefited from the sale of their child into slavery, and perhaps this enabled them to raise additional children. Similarly, Native American two-spirits sometimes directly helped raise relatives, and some Mexican vestidas give money to their families. These family benefits may be significant for evolution through kin selection, especially with an already-high reproductive skew in the population. Because people with transgendered identities were valuable in particular occupations, they may have helped perpetuate their presence in the human gene pool by benefiting their families. Furthermore, throughout history, transgendered people have often produced children of their own. Their occupation and temperament may be directly advantageous in some circumstances, and they may be sought as mates accordingly. Overall, the evolution of transgender expression, like same-sex sexuality, reflects both prosperity in positive times and repression in negative times.

We'll probably never know why any particular color occurs in human gender and sexuality rainbows. Nonetheless, our species, like others, clearly does contain natural rainbows of gender expression and sexuality. [These rainbows emanate from our gene pool, our shared humanity.] Society carves these rainbows into categories like a cookie cutter carves a marbled cookie dough into cookies. We shape our cookies through our policies on human rights. Should we have just two very broad categories, man and woman, accommodating same-sex sexuality and gender crossing—two huge cookies filled with chocolate chips, raisins, nuts, colored sprinkles, and more? But would two large categories still allow discrim-

GENE POOL ↑

↳ BUT EVOLUTIONARY ↓

ination against those who wish a third gender? Or should we have lots of tiny cookies, each with special flavors—the M&Ms approach, a proliferation of identity politics? Or maybe some big cookies plus some little ones? I don't know. I do know that what won't work is stuffing our species into two small categories of gender and sexuality.

I believe the rainbow always has more colors than society has categories, and that society is always trying to cram humanity's rainbow into the few categories it does have. Social scientists have the opposite perspective; they think diversity results from society producing difference among people who are biologically the same. I don't agree. The biology I know tells of endless variation, not of a few universals. This endless biological variation is always poking through social categories, spilling over the borders, fudging the edges.

Still, the rainbow isn't static. When we modify society, its institutions and categories, our species' substance slowly changes in response to new forces of natural selection that now reside within society, leading to new rainbows that then flow back into society again, a glacially slow cultural-biological back-and-forth.

A MORAL IMPERATIVE

Until now, I have focused on empirical grounds for affirming the full human rainbow of diversity. I now turn to a moral imperative for embracing diversity taken from one religious tradition. The Bible doesn't approach diversity by affirming selected categories one by one. It's true that today we might wish the Bible were more direct in affirming homosexual people. But in another thousand years, we may discern more categories of identity that we don't presently recognize, whereas others will have coalesced. What will the Bible have to say then? The same as it says now. The Bible affirms all of biological diversity—even unnamed or rearranged categories—in the story of Noah's Ark, a story that spans three chapters of Genesis.

Let's look again at this story: "The earth was filled with violence. And God said to Noah 'Make yourself an ark.' " Noah was told "Of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark. . . . Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to

their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep them alive. . . . Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and his mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive upon the face of all the earth."

Genesis continues: "And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him went into the ark, to escape the waters of the flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, . . . every beast according to its kind, and all the cattle according to their kinds, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth according to its kind, and every bird according to its kind, every bird of every sort. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life."

After forty days of flooding, the waters receded. "And God said, 'Bring forth with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply upon the earth' " (Gen. 6–9, RSV).

These passages make clear that all organisms belong on the Ark, both the "clean" and the "unclean," and each "according to its kind." Yet the Ark is usually depicted as having only one male and one female from each species. "Kind" means more than simply a species. "Kind" includes the varieties within a species. "All the cattle according to their kinds" means all varieties of cattle. All cattle belong to the same species because they all interbreed. So "all the cattle according to their kinds" indicates that the Ark contained all the varieties of cattle, and by extension, all the variants within every species. God didn't tell Noah to pick and choose, including some varieties and excluding others. Therefore, the Ark would have harbored full rainbows of gender expression and sexuality, as well as all other dimensions of biological diversity.

In the story of Noah's Ark, the Bible gives a single overarching protection for all biological diversity. The message is comprehensive in its inclusion, and without qualification. We should not look to the Bible for affirmation of each new category of diversity that we distinguish. The

Ark covers all, now and forever. The message of Noah's Ark is to conserve all biological kinds.

THE TRANS AGENDA

I went to dinner once with a public speaker who, upon learning that I was transgendered, showed annoyance at my existence. "What do you people want?" he insisted. One would have thought the answer obvious: to enjoy the rights everyone else has. But that answer wasn't specific enough. In response, and to conclude this chapter, here is my list of "what we want." My trans agenda consists of six points:

1. We want to be cherished as a normal part of human diversity.
2. We demand the freedom to offer our own unfiltered narratives—we demand our own voices.
3. We want to be treated with courtesy and dignity. We don't want to lift our skirts to show we're female or drop our trousers to show we're male. We want to be respected as people, not bodies.
4. We demand that the killing of transgendered people stop. We support extending existing anti-hate crime legislation to include gender identity as a protected category.
5. We want equal participation in public social institutions, including employment, education, housing, marriage, adoption, military service, and religious life. We support extending any existing antidiscrimination legislation to include gender identity. We support legislation to allow any two people to enter into marriage. We support rescinding the don't-ask-don't-tell policy in the U.S. military. We support baptism and ordination, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.
6. We want full-service health plans to cover gender-transition medical services, similar to the coverage of pregnancy benefits. Although some health plans cover only catastrophic illness, others cover many procedures, from acupuncture to physical therapy, and these comprehensive plans should not exclude transgender benefits.

Of these six points, the first is the most important, and the rest follow from it. I feel we have earned these rights by our collective contributions to family and society, and I know we can be even more productive if we were not laboring under threats to our personal safety, or diminished by stigma. I also feel that a contemporary society must grant these six points if it wishes to be considered moral and civilized.