

# MEN SPEAK OUT

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Views on Gender, Sex, and Power

Second Edition

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# THE ENEMY WITHIN: ON BECOMING A STRAIGHT WHITE GUY

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I've seen the enemy, and he is me. But it hasn't always been that way. From the time I was in preschool, I've been agitating for social change. I accompanied my mother to women's rights rallies, and door-to-door campaigns for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. In high school, I joined anti-nuclear protests. In college, I worked against apartheid and marched in support of women's reproductive rights. After graduating, I canvassed for the anti-nuclear group SANE/FREEZE and made phone calls on behalf of NARAL Pro-Choice America before turning my attention to gay and lesbian rights, then joining the environmental fight against the destruction of the natural world. The demographic of most protests leaned heavily toward the female gender, while those being protested almost always shared their own set of characteristics: They were primarily straight white men. At the time, I was a white lesbian woman.

Today, when I look in the mirror, I find a man looking back and I wonder if, in the coming years, I will lose my feminist sensibilities. I recently read *The Testosterone Files*, the memoir of Max Wolf Valerio, a man who, like me, is a former lesbian feminist. A writer featured in the influential work by feminists of color, *This Bridge Called My Back*, Max's hormones have now engulfed him and he can't remember these days what it felt like to be a woman. Max now gets accused of being sexist—a charge he *never* thought would be leveled at him. In a lot of ways I am just beginning my own journey, and I wonder if I will follow in Max's footsteps or blaze my own trail.

My own struggles with gender identity and expression, my discomfort with my physical body, and my attempts to come to term with the labels assigned me, started early and continued for decades. I was born a girl, but I like to say that I was raised a boy. My parents didn't seem to care that I was a

tomboy and they allowed me to wear boys' clothes, roughhouse freely, and play with action figures and cars instead of dolls. At home, especially after we moved to a small farm in rural Idaho, I was allowed to be pretty much as masculine as I wanted to be.

The same could not be said about my experience at school. Our move to the farm dropped us into a conservative religious community to which we didn't naturally belong and to which we failed to assimilate. We were uninvited to most social functions and children were directed by their parents to avoid us. But there was also an incredible increase in the communal pressure for me to conform to gender expectations. When I was ten years old, for example, I was called into the school's administrative office where the district psychologist proceeded to interrogate me. He demanded to know why I only hung out with a group of boys and suggested that I would be much happier if I had female friends. I experienced the confrontation as an implicit threat: Stop hanging out with the boys or start seeing the shrink more often. I quickly became a loner.

Influenced by my mother's spirit of social justice, I chose to attend a small Quaker college. I took women's studies classes and majored in Peace and Global Studies. I adored Audre Lorde, the writings of Barbara Smith, and Adrienne Rich's theory about compulsory heterosexuality. I learned to recognize the oppressive patriarchal system, to acknowledge my own privileges, and to view straight white men as the oppressive enemy.

Although I came out as a lesbian in college I wasn't comfortable with this identity until I blended my college's compulsory academic-feminist-androgynous-lesbian look with dive-bar, old-school, blue-collar dyke and found solace in the guise of a butch-identified lesbian. Dating women and dressing in men's attire, I finally felt at home until I'd pass a mirror and notice that my reflection didn't reveal the physical person I felt I was.

In graduate school, I co-founded a student LGBT organization, ran for homecoming king, met my wife, and continued to inform my studies with a feminist perspective. I wrote my master's thesis, "Lesbianism as Confrontational Rhetoric," in which I argued that it was not just the words lesbian women used or the political actions they took, but lesbianism itself that was confrontational. In the study of social movement rhetoric, the level of institutional response can be a fair indicator of the threat that is perceived in a group's confrontational actions. Now I recognize that it's not merely sexual orientation, but gender variance, that provokes discomfort in individuals and institutions. This discomfort and perceived threat result in violence and discrimination against gender non-conformists.

The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" could have been written about transgender people rather than black women. To paraphrase their argument, cataloging the cruel, often murderous treatment black women and transgendered people receive indicates how little value and how much fear has been projected on our lives.

Gender variance doesn't just threaten patriarchal gender/sex roles; it seems to intimidate some feminists as well. Transgender people might undermine the argument that gender is socially constructed. Transpeople, along with intersex people, threaten conservative assumptions that there are two, and only two classes of human beings—men and women—and radical assumptions that gender classes are entirely socially created, rather than having some biological roots. Although studies of transgender individuals are sparse, findings seem to indicate that hormone-disrupting environmental pollutants may impact the development of a fetus's brain and their gender identities by producing, for example, male-brained persons with female genitalia.

Anecdotal accounts of transmen also seem to indicate that biology can out-manuever socialization. Despite being raised female, years on hormonal treatment seem to produce men as diverse as the rest of the world's guys including those who are sexist jerks.

In order to transition from one sex to another, you first spend a great deal of time speaking with a psychiatrist about your gender issues. The first time I verbalized my feelings about my gender to a shrink, I said, "I'd hate to be the woman that proves Freud right." It's hard to admit to penis envy when women, especially lesbians, have been struggling against that misconception for over a century. I was worried about being seen as a gender traitor and losing a twenty-year relationship I had with the lesbian community—a community to which I still feel a great deal of allegiance.

When I was younger, I spent many years with little or no interaction with straight men. My friends were women and gay men. I worked in women-only businesses. My mother used to worry that I'd never meet a nice guy by hanging out in all-lesbian venues. She was right. When I was a woman, I didn't meet a lot of so-called nice guys hanging out with straight people either. Every time I thought I was making a friend, guys apparently thought I'd just given them permission to hit on me.

For me, men's advances were as unwanted and unappreciated as they would be to a homophobic man. I found their sexual gaze offensive. I didn't understand why they didn't see the man inside of me. Now that I live as a man, I don't mind at all when the gay boys think I'm hot. I know they're seeing me as a *man*, and that makes all the difference in the world.

I didn't decide to transition because I was thrilled by the men I met. I accepted my masculinity despite the bad examples. After thirty years trying to convince myself that I was just a different kind of woman, I've found comfort in defining myself as a different kind of guy.

As a transman I still see myself as a little queer, but now my queerness, my *otherness*, isn't readily visible. Straight men assume I'm one of them and suddenly treat me as a member of a special club, swapping inside jokes and slapping me heartily on the back. In the lesbian community that has been my home for twenty years, some now view me as a straight white man and reject me as such. I am no longer a welcome contributor to certain publications. My

trans status threatens to give my lesbian wife a bad name and could even cost her her career. Now that the woman she married is a man, my wife hears up-front doubt that she's still a lesbian and vocal criticism about the fact that she edits a lesbian magazine. Like an estranged family member, I find myself defending my personal sense of allegiance to the lesbian community. Other transmen have accused me of discounting my own masculinity by repudiating my alignment with straight America, and some lesbians doubt my ability to be an ally in this new man's body.

Masculine transpeople are assumed to be renouncing femininity by their transition; they are often accused of gender treachery. Gender theorist Judith "Jack" Halberstam argues that even for female-to-male transpeople, misogyny goes hand-in-hand with masculinity.

I don't *think* I'm a misogynist. So far, even under the influence of testosterone I continue to believe that institutions of patriarchy and the minutiae of male indoctrination are in place to deny women's power. I believe that women have natural power that comes not only from their sexuality, but also from their ability to make life. Men, on the other hand, have institutional power that comes from controlling the governmental, medical, religious, and educational institutions. Indoctrinating socialization distracts women from recognizing their own power and keeps them at the mercy of men. And it disguises its real purpose from men, so most men have no idea that their actions promote the current patriarchal regime. They're just being men.

As a white person I've always had racial privilege and I know my life and options would have been entirely different if I hadn't. Although the trips to thrift stores and the reliance on our homegrown food might have confused me as a child, my family was first generation middle class. I haven't always lived up to my economic heritage—I've been a carny making less than a dollar an hour, I've lived out of our vehicle, I've worked as a day laborer—but I do have resources unavailable to the working poor and outright destitute.

As a transperson who appears male and straight I now have even greater privilege. It doesn't evaporate just because you don't want it. And I do want it. After twenty years, I am tired of being a starving lesbian writer. I want to be well paid and make the full dollar instead of eighty cents. Don't we all want that? I want that for all of us. But what's the appropriate, feminist response to this added privilege? What are my responsibilities? What should I do if I'm offered more for a job now than I was as a woman? And will I stop noticing these differences at some point?

As soon as I changed my name from Susannah to Jacob, I started to be treated differently. It started even before I began hormone treatment; commencing in cyberspace and slowly rippling out into the real world until now I pass in almost every arena. Men grant me greater respect and are willing to see me as an authority. Women and men alike stopped being courteous. Women no longer appreciate me expressing my opinion. Traits like being outspoken that were formerly lauded as feminist, are now seen as just another guy's

propensity for interrupting and valuing their own opinions over women's. I wonder how long it will take before being treated differently will make me a different person. I have more questions than answers and I'm not exactly sure how to bridge my feminist past with my male future. Coming to terms with my place in this oppressive patriarchal system means learning how to balance being a feminist with being a man. Maybe that means constantly evaluating the manner in which I'm expressing my masculinity.

Recognizing the inherent privilege in my situation doesn't mean that privilege can't be taken away because of my trans status. I'm always at risk for my biological beginning being discovered and held against me. My place in the power hierarchy can always be reiterated through rape or other violence. In most locales in America it is still legal to discriminate against trans people. Like women, a lot of transpeople are being shafted—just differently. In fact, as the authors of the 2006 anthology *Transgender Rights* explain, the same institutionalized, sexist assumptions that keep women down are used in legal settings to deny transpeople their rights. For example, in determining which binary sex to ascribe a transsexual defendant, some modern-day courts have relied on antiquated notions of femaleness like defining female sex as the ability to be sexually penetrated within the confines of “normal” heterosexual intercourse.

Becoming a man has opened my eyes and I no longer see all men—even straight, white, natal men—as inherent enemies to women or peace or the environment. That's not to say that it isn't mostly men who are controlling the political and economic power in this country. They are. Those holding the axe over our collective heads are more likely to be men. That said, there are a great number of men who are suffering intensely from our current economic woes: men who are imprisoned by their masculine roles; men who are sent to their death in the name of freedom; men who long for women to take on more responsibility.

A patriarchal system keeps our country in the control of men, and that male domination clearly denigrates all things feminine. But the male-centric nature of our society doesn't—by itself—explain America's racial and economic stratification. If patriarchy is not the sole cause of men's oppression (be these men minorities in race, religion, class, sexuality, gender identity and expression, or ability, etc.), then there is certainly something else going on here as well. This deserves our attention especially since the difficulties that some men face these days don't seem like signs of patriarchy crumbling. (If patriarchy was the only source of oppression, and if it was collapsing, there would presumably be a leveling out of privilege, wealth, and power. And I don't think we can argue this has happened.)

There are a lot of awful problems in the world today, and to solve them we need to make allies and build bridges to other movements seeking change. We need to accept the problems of others as our own. Until we understand that the unbelievably high rate of African-American incarceration is an American

tragedy not just a black one, we won't be addressing racial inequities. Until we see that rape, domestic violence, and childcare are not women's issues but our issues, we won't improve women's status or win their respect. Until we truly accept same-sex marriage we are not honestly striving for sexual equality. Until we demand universal healthcare we will continue to allow people just like us to die on the streets.

To start, here's what I have to say to all my brothers: Until being called pussy, girl, fag, and pansy isn't the worst thing in the world, we won't eliminate misogyny. We do have different expectations for women and men, although there is some leeway for women to be masculine because our society values masculinity. But the fact that men can't be feminine without being punished by our society is proof that we still don't value femininity: It's treated as reprehensible—at least when it appears in men and boys.

One day when I was walking my dogs in the local park, I passed a group of Little League boys running sprints while their coach yelled motivational phrases. "*What are you? Pussies? Is that all you can do, girls?*" This shit stuns me. I can't believe that we're still teaching our boys to push themselves harder by threatening that if they don't, they'll be girls and that being a girl is a terrible thing. If we really believed that the sexes are equal, this wouldn't happen.

When we respond violently to those who question our (hetero)sexuality—say with taunts of "sissy" or "pansy"—isn't that just another example of fearing our own femininity? Homophobes fear nothing more than being feminized by another man's sexual gaze. To avoid being seen as woman-like, they are willing to deprive fellow citizens of their civil rights and even, in some cases, their lives. This again begs the question: What's so awful about being women?

I have one advantage in this arena: I'm a man who was called a girl, not occasionally, but every day, for decades. Even when I excelled at sports or academics. Sure, it felt wrong, because it wasn't accurate, but it wasn't a put down. Not then, not now. I'm comfortable enough in my masculinity to not have to prove it. When someone calls me a pussy I don't get offended. I've had one. I've been one. Being a girl wasn't right for me, but it sure as hell wasn't the worst thing in the world.