

suspect thoughts

a journal of subversive writing



Watermelon on Her Head by Casey McKee

twisted urges :
where society and
the sexual meet
by
jamie joy gatto

#5 Gray Areas of Gender: America's Dirty Little Secret

[With a special essay, Sex by Gigi Raven Wilbur]

In our black and white world of good or bad, straight or gay, Republican or Democratic, caff or decaf, it is so easy to forget, or to maybe not even be aware of the fact that there are people on this earth who are something other than simply boys or girls, men or women, who may or may not own either pussy or cock, and yes, they may own a bit of both, either externally or internally. Of course there are the obvious T-Girls, she-males, and other gender fucks, but let's not overlook the variety of nature's own genetically created sexes that don't fall into the gender-bending arena of exotic sexual fetishes, gender identity self-expression, or self-chosen medically altered sex-either by chemical and/or surgical intervention.

I'm talking biology. I'm talking physiology. I'm talking genotypes. I'm talking real live hermaphrodites, although most folks now politically choose the term "intersex" to refer to their ambiguous gender. Intersexed folks are neither he nor she, but a genetic mixture of both. Intersexuality is a set of medical conditions that feature some type of congenital anomaly of the reproductive system. That is, intersex people are often born with specifically different sex

chromosomes, possibly with altered external genitalia, or perhaps internal reproductive systems that are not considered medically or aesthetically standard for either male or female genders. These are people who are often forced shortly after birth to live a lifetime of lies, shame and gender dysphoria or confusion, simply because we as a society dictate that "it" must be a he or a she. Period. Gender seems to be that important to us. And at who's expense?

Lots of people. Well, you may wonder, you may think, "I've never met a hermaphrodite, or an intersex person that I know of..." But the statistics prove, you definitely have, you just may not know it. According to the **Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)**, the total number of people whose bodies differ from standard male or female equals **one in 100 births**. The total number of people receiving surgery to "normalize" genital appearance equals one or two in 1,000 births. That's a lot of people.

Intersex Society of North America is an important force in battling problems related to intersex medical intervention to "correct" genitalia in infants. The group is devoted to systemic change to end shame, secrecy, and unwanted genital surgeries for people born with an anomaly of the reproductive system. They are an active political and educational group working to end the idea that intersexuality is shameful or freakish. In the U.S. alone, five children are subjected to harmful, medically unnecessary sexual surgeries every day. That is why ISNA urges physicians to use a model of care that is patient centered and not based on the assumption that intersexed genitals are in need of medical treatment.

Still don't believe you've met or know of an intersex person? A famous chromosomally different celebrity is Jamie Lee Curtis. She has been upheld in more medical texts and referred to by more medical school instructors as the epitome of having a condition referred to as **testicular feminization, or AIS: androgen insensitivity syndrome**, than any other subject. Why? Because she's famous, we can relate to her.

Jamie Lee Curtis has one X chromosome and one Y chromosome. For those of you rusty in biology, XY means that she is chromosomally, literally, biologically male. What Jamie Lee wasn't born with were the receptors for her male hormones, so she went back to the genetic sexual default appearing female. Her penis and testicles were never able to be developed.

"How did she get such great tits?" I hear you wonder aloud. At puberty, the testes start to produce a large amount of the male hormone testosterone but, in the absence of its receptor, this has no effect. However, testosterone is converted to estrogen, and so normal to enthusiastic breast development occurs. It's not uncommon for those with complete AIS to have rather large breasts. There's also little to no pubic or axillary hair, and of course, no periods, as there is no uterus present to produce a lining which to shed.

Often a "woman" who has AIS, while genetically a male, is completely, aesthetically female. AIS is often not discovered until puberty, when the person does not start to menstruate and a gynecological examination reveals the syndrome, and the fact that "she" has undescended testes internally rather than ovaries. Many of these AIS people also have short vaginal-type canals of half the normal length of a true vagina, and require surgery if they feel they need to lengthen the partial "vagina" for satisfactory intercourse.

But that's a whole lot different than being forced by mutilation at birth to live one's life as a female simply because your genitals looked a little off to your attending physician at your birth. Chop! Chop! Off goes the penis, neatly shaped, shortened into a cute little clitoris. It sounds

ridiculous, frankly atrocious, the stuff of horror stories, and yes... some form of genital reassignment surgery is done to about five infants every day in North America. This often occurs when partial, rather than complete, androgen insensitivity is the case. The genetic abnormality in the receptor produces an incomplete, but not total, block of male hormones. In this case, the child is usually born with ambiguous genitalia—meaning it looks as if they have either a very short penis, or a very long clitoris and likely nothing resembling testicles—yet—maybe never. The child may be brought up as either a male or a female.

What happens when these children grow up? Usually not much until puberty. But puberty is the big deal—that's where the hormonal fireworks tend to begin. Dating, opposite sex attraction, same sex attraction, development of breasts or not, facial hair or not, changing voices, changing texture of hair, height, weight, genitalia, and so much more. All these confusing body issues are hard enough on a person of a decided gender, but imagine the pressures on a person who has already been met with decidedly ambiguous genitalia, or has been tailor made *permanently* by the medical community to have genitals that simply don't fit with one's internal feelings of gender. You can plainly envision a world of psychological and physical problems when faced with the simple act of dating. And that's just the beginning.

Of course there are many other types of syndromes and congenital medical conditions that affect humans and can create an intersex type of situation. The ones I have covered are only the more common ones. Regardless, they can all create a real identity problem in a world that seems to only allow for two choices in gender: male or female.

What moved me to write about these issues is both political and personal. On Thursday, July 12, 2001, the group Alliance for Marriage, led by Matthew Daniels and various church leaders associated with assorted Christian churches, the African-American church community, the Jewish community, and also Church of Islam and Muslim organizations, announced their proposal for a constitutional amendment they are calling "The Federal Marriage Amendment." The purpose of this act, according to the AFM, is "to strengthen American families and reintegrate the role of a strong father figure." Actually this is a lame and misguided attempt to federally ban gay marriages in the U.S.

According to the Alliance for Marriage, this Amendment would add the following two sentences to our Constitution:

"Marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman."

"Neither this Constitution or the constitution of any state, nor state or federal law, shall be construed to require that marital status or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon unmarried couples or groups."

The proposed amendment, if instated, would immediately eradicate Vermont's Civil Union bill and the future that any states have to institute a similar bill. This could also open legal action to the elimination of domestic partner benefits in the future. Let's face it: the definition of "one man and one woman" to be joined as marital partners is too thinly assumed that our gender is reflective of what our genitals and bodies look like outwardly, not who or what we are- the person we live each day as human beings. If we based gender on scientific fact by genetic testing alone, then perfectly "normal-looking women" like Jamie Lee Curtis could not legally marry a man. Is this the "family values" the AFM are after? What about people who choose complete or partial gender reassignment surgery? What about people who choose not to be

male or female, either literally or spiritually? Or those who may be genetically both or neither?

I believe what the AFM is after is the perpetration of a radical, supremacist ideology that purports that someone out there, particularly of The Church, understands the "way things should be." The ignorance of this proposed act is based upon the "fact" that there are only two genders. How completely wrong, and how sad.

Another reason I'm covering these issues is that I recently read an article written by a dear friend, an intersex person whom I have grown to know and love through his activism and political efforts with respect to bisexuals. He shared this in a letter to me and I felt I had to create an introduction for it, and include it with his permission in my column.

Sex by Gigi Raven Wilbur

Sex. No, I do not mean copulation. I am referring to the box on forms, surveys, and questionnaires.

Here I have a major dilemma: they rarely give more than two options, female or male. In surveys, a basic assumption is that one is female or male. I have noticed that most forms have you circle one or the other. They don't leave room for user inputs. In taking a recent survey, I had some problems. In many of the questions, it was assumed that I was either female or male. I am intersex-neither female/male, and both female/male. I was not sure how to handle it in some of the questions, so I went ahead and put down that I am "other" when asked what sex I am. (This particular form included "other" in a pull down menu, most only offer two choices.)

Yet, that box marked "sex" was not the end of it. Later, when asked, I put down that I am a bisexual male, since the question did not allow for an option which reflected who I am (in this case, the options were on a pull down menu). This is clearly a lie, but the truth was not offered as an option. I am bisexual, it was the male part that I have problems with. I was surgically reassigned to look like a male when I was an infant. This is purely an illusion. The illusion is maintained in most areas of life: I have to pick male or female. Yet, I have to lie every time I answer one of these questionnaires. It is a social structure that helps maintain the illusion that there are only males and females in existence.

With the internet growing, with more and more questions having a pull down box, sex on many computer forms not only is female/male options only, but a required field. Forms won't submit without answering the question. Whichever I pick is a lie.

I was never accepted by peers as male or female when I was growing up. The scalpel does not cut deep enough to wipe out being a hermaphrodite. Even if people do not say the word, they still respond to my gender differently than if I had been born a female or a male. Even when I tried to pass as a male when I had jobs in the past, I never was able to fit in as a male. I got passed up for promotions and have even been fired for not being manly enough. Part of it may be physical. I have a bone structure that is neither female nor male and both. Part of it may be energy. I put out both female energy and male energy. Even dressed in male clothing, with short hair, facial hair, and all the trimmings, store clerks still asked me, "Can I help you Madame?"

Many times I come across a question that asks me to make a decision based on the concept of

"opposite sex" For me, there is no "opposite sex". These options should be added for those of us who identify as two spirit and/or intersex. Perhaps this will help, women are not the opposite sex for me. Men are not the opposite sex for me. Because I am both female and male, an opposite sex does not exist for me.

I mention this because I feel it is an important distinction in how one is socialized and accepted. This has a great impact, even more impact than my sexual orientation. One of the first things people want to know about someone they just meet is if they are female or male. It is usually the first question asked when one is born. Being such, it is an important question. Just think about it for a moment. "Is it a boy or a girl?" We are an "it", not even a human being, until given one label or the other.

When one is of the third gender, things get complicated real fast. Currently, I use both public restrooms, the boys' room and the girls' room. Depends how I am dressed. Even clothes are for the most part male or female, but how I wear them can really stir things up. When I wear a dress, I have all the poky out parts in the "wrong" places. There have even been a few times when I wore "men's" clothes with false breasts and my penis tucked away, but I'd never do that in a dress.

I personally know several bisexuals who identify as two spirit, being both female and male. Some of them do not identify as intersex, nor is there evidence to support that they were born intersex. But, they do identify as two spirit and being androgynous. They too feel great frustration being lumped into slot male or slot female. We are not transsexual, as that gives only two options as an outcome—female or male. In no way am I knocking the transsexual movement, it has opened many doors. But I would like to have the option of having my vagina without losing my male parts.

This may seem a picky item, but I see too many questionnaires and surveys that do not reflect who I am and what I am. They do not allow the option for me to exist as a hermaphrodite. They do not allow for two spirits to exist. They do not allow an outcome of being both female and male when doing transgender surgery. Maybe part of the problem is that until we name it and include it in our questions and surveys, it does not exist. Maybe I do not exist, as "it" is not an option for adults when asked what sex one is. But I refuse to contribute to this illusion any more.