

I HATED BEING A GIRL (OR, HOW I BECAME A TRANSFEMINIST)

By Emi Koyama

Growing up, I hated being a girl.

Of course, it may have never occurred to adults around me that I was feeling that way; after all, they thought I was a boy.

It is difficult to explain how I could grow up completely convinced that I was a girl, neglecting how my body looked and what my parents must have said to me. There are many things I still do not understand myself. But being raised (or left to raise myself) in a household where violence was the norm, my little gender identity confusion was least of problems.

I remember those days when my Mom and I were the worst enemies. "I want to leave him," my Mom would say to me, "but I can't possibly support three of us." This was back in the late 70s, and my Mom knew it was practically impossible for a Japanese woman with two children to divorce her husband and leave the abusive relationship. There simply was no escape, or so she was convinced. On bad days, she would tell me it was my fault that she could not leave. "If you weren't born," she would say, "I would be free by now." I believed her.

For my part, I learned to blame her, too. I desperately wanted my Mom to take me away, take me to somewhere else, somewhere safe. Not understanding the harsh economic reality surrounding a Japanese woman who had no college education nor professional career, I concluded that it must be her fault that I was getting hurt. I was too young to comprehend how powerless and trapped we both were in that circumstance.

When I got old enough to leave house by myself, church became my safe refuge. Neither of my parents were Christians, but they sent me to a Christian school because they feared I was turning gay. I was not particularly religious either, but I liked the idea of going to this Southern Baptist church if that meant I could legitimately leave the house for hours on weekends. Soon I joined every church meeting I could attend: Saturday study groups, Wednesday night meals, and Thursday night choir practices, along with two services and the bible study on Sundays.

All throughout this time, my identity as a girl somehow was not negatively affected by the fact I was using boys' restrooms or I was assigned to sing tenor in the choir. Years of domestic abuse trained me to become excellent at repression and dissociation, which must have helped. But that does not mean that I did not have any gender issues.

While my gender identity was solid, I resisted the idea that I would grow up to become a woman. I never questioned that I was someday going to get married and have children just like my Mom did, but the vision of marriage that I was familiar with did not appeal to me at all. At home, I had learned to associate womanhood with victimhood; at church, I was made to believe that women were to submit and follow men's leadership. I became depressed at the prospect because that was not what I wanted. Strangely, it did not really occur to me that perhaps I could fool everyone and live as a man for the rest of my life.

Like many other young women from rural area, starting college away from home was an important turning point in my life. Naturally, I was quickly drawn to Women's Studies and feminism, which I did not know anything about before. I met real, live feminists who taught me that being a woman did not have to equal to being a victim. They also taught me that women did not have to follow the traditional heterosexual marriage path by being open about their own lives, which often involved lesbian relationships or otherwise non-traditional arrangements.

But at the same time, I was increasingly made aware of my "maleness," as the effects of my late puberty finally became apparent. "You are the most feminist guy I've known," my friends would tell me, supposedly as a compliment. Many people just did not understand why I felt so passionate about learning about feminism or working against violence against women, but they mostly thought I was just exceptionally enlightened compared to the rest of men. I was visibly gender-deviant because I dressed myself in a way that expressed my internal confusion, often mixing boy stuff with girl stuff. Fortunately or unfortunately, people viewed this not as the evidence of my identity crisis, but rather, a political statement, a sign of my commitment to destabilizing and deconstructing gender.

It was not necessarily that my identity as a young woman was shifting; it was the sense of feminist guilt that made me want to hide and deny it. Armed with radical feminist theories, I tortured myself by questioning what right I had to claim the title of womanhood after all that were done to women. As a radical feminist, I wanted pro-feminist men, if there were such a thing, to respect our space and leave us alone; I felt the obligation to enforce this

rule by shutting out a "man" that was me. It was not that I was ever asked to stay away; I was more rigid in my defense of "women's space" than any other women around.

I had heard the word transsexual from television, but I never considered myself one because I associated it with colonialist appropriation of women's lives and experiences. I knew nothing about transsexual feminists or female-to-male transsexuals at the time. Mary Daly and Janice Raymond wrote that transsexuals are monsters who symbolically rape women's bodies, and I believed them. I felt guilty for ever pondering that I was a woman when my anatomy clearly indicated otherwise.

So what rescued me from this misery? Many, many things. First, I started attending the campus queer organization to connect with other lesbians, many of whom were not into this particular branch of radical lesbian-feminism. A bisexual woman I met there told me one day, out of the blue, that she would treat me as a woman and a lesbian. "What do you mean?" I asked, because I was ashamed that she tapped into the part of me I was trying to bury. She did not tell me exactly why she knew I was a woman, but I had a feeling that she, too, had dealt with gender identity issues in some way. I started hanging out with my lesbian friends all the time. I still did not view myself as a transsexual, but it was obvious that others treated me as one of them, which made me feel good.

Around the same time, I encountered writings by newer generation of feminists, who were not as rigid as the older one and valued wide diversity of women's experiences rather than emphasizing on the common victimization. At first, I resisted embracing this branch of feminism because of the same old feminist guilt, but as I continued to read and talk with my friends about different kinds of feminism, I found myself unable to deny any more how much it fit my thoughts and feelings.

Today, I live as a woman, a radical lesbian feminist. It is almost funny because I became less gender-ambiguous than I have ever been in my life since I accepted who I am. My presence itself may be less threatening to the existing gender hierarchies because I am not as visibly "in-between," but I am happier now and ready to do things that actually changes things instead of wallowing over my feminist guilt.

Living as a woman in this society has taught me some additional insights that I did not learn from reading feminist theories. I now know how it makes me feel to be whistled or harassed on the street, for example. I know how overly self-conscious I feel when I walk down a street, especially if it is dark or if I am walking with my girlfriend. There are things I still hate about being a woman.

I hate being a woman when I catch myself hating my body, or calculating my own worth by how much I can please other people. I hate how I let others, especially men, manipulate and violate my boundaries so easily. You might think someone like me would be free from such negative effects of female socialization, but I somehow managed to learn *What Women Are Supposed To Be Like* by observation and role-identification.

But the point is not to hate being a woman. I am learning to honor my womanhood and to redirect my anger and frustration toward what really is responsible for teaching women and girls to hate who they are. I do not want to blame myself or my mother any more. I have plenty of anger and pain that I am slowly unloading, as I begin feeling safe and comfortable with who I am. The more I honor who I am, the more I am learning to like myself, as a woman, and as a worthwhile human being.

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Note: A version of this essay will appear in the special Trans/Scribe issue of *Fireweed*, a Canadian feminist journal.