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Only a Cross-Dresser

Awaiting the Rise of the Truly Revolutionary Force

by Riki Wilchins

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Riki Wilchins

I wish I could count the times I've heard the phrase "... only a cross-dresser." And not just from transsexuals, but also from cross-dressing-identified people themselves. The reasoning seems to be that changing your very body, making a commitment to one sex or another, is somehow more sincere, more consequential, more (dare I say) radical than ... well, just dressing up. I freely admit to subscribing to this belief myself for a number of years. Until one morning ... I awoke, and with horror found myself trapped, absolutely trapped, in a bias cut, pleated silk, backless Halston evening gown not of my own design.

Once cross-dressers ... really come-out, and begin to enunciate the politics of the direct, head-on challenge their very existence poses to gender regimes, I think we will have a truly revolutionary force on our hands, a potent force!

No, wait a minute. That's not right. Where was I? Oh, yeah, I think it's arguably the case that cross-dressing is the more radical identity, although I ought to state up front that I don't believe in either the identity of "transsexual" or "cross-dresser". This is not to say that I don't acknowledge and defend anyone's right to identify as either, for I do. But I regard both as

political accomplishments, invented to contain various kinds of disreputable gender-queers and transgressors, rather than names which recognise any naturally-occurring identity.

In short, for me, just categories are inevitably not about truth, but about power: who has it and who doesn't; who gets to decide what's "normal" and what's "perversion"; whose ox gets gored and whose frock gets stored.

Now it's one thing to change one's body, as I have, to travel from one sex to another within the socially anointed binary. But in doing so, especially with the doctor's blessing ("You know, inside, your daughter Riki is really a woman, Ms Wilchins"), I fear I struck a Faustian bargain, I legitimated myself, but I accomplished this feat through an axial proposition that looks something like this - "I am really a woman inside / I am willing to change my body to be female / I am willing to commit my whole life to this / I don't do this because it is erotic but because it's my identity / therefore I should be a socially legitimate and respectable subject".

Unfortunately in the zero-sum game of gender politics, this logic succeeds to the extent that it delegitimises its converse. "You are not a woman "inside" / you are not willing to change your body, just your clothes / you are not even willing to commit your life to it / you are aroused by it (you pervert, you!) / you are such a social dipstick" Granted this equation raises me up, but at a price paid by those who cannot make similar claims. They, of course, go down. And those are ... you guessed it: your friendly, neighbourhood cross-dressers.

So it seems to me that cross-dressing is some kind of ultimate act of gender politics. It does not have a single thing going for it: not the doctors, not the binary, not a full-time commitment, not even a pledge that they're not doing it because it turns them on. Because of this, cross-dressing identified men confront conventional requirements for heterosexual male masculinity head-on. They stand on its head all that we're supposed to know about big, hairy guys being, well, guy-like. This brings on endless trouble with their jobs, wives, children, courts, military and so on. Frankly, despite all the times I heard someone say "I only do this to relax," it never sounded like a very relaxing thing to me at all. Every one of them put their life on the line when they walk out the door, perhaps down the wrong street, past the wrong patrol car, or into the wrong bar on the wrong night.

I sometimes amuse myself with the differing social legitimation of transsexuality and cross-dressing at work when people ask me, "So when did you have your surgery?" I respond, "Surgery, shmurgery. Hey, I just love wearing ladies' clothes." Gawd, you should see their faces fall ... at about three feet per second. All that compassionate understanding evaporates. Suddenly, instead of visions of a "woman trapped in man's body" they're seeing a weirdo pervert in lacy panties.

Now that I mention it, I remember years ago getting busted by the cops for using the women's changing room in a clothing store. They were distinctly unfriendly, looking me up and down like I was something they'd discovered after six months in the back of the freezer. That is, until I showed them my doctor's "carry letter" explaining that I was just a patient with a genuine diagnosis of "gender identity disorder". Then, of course, they both became amused, condescending, and at last middling friendly. They let me off with a lot of snickered warnings.

Now, granted I'm trying to focus on the politics of things here, because you can't focus on what the cross-dressing community is actually saying about itself publicly. Because the unfortunate fact is, most of the rhetoric coming-out of the cross-dressing community is banal to the point of tears. It's often along the lines of, "I dress but my wife won't accept me", "I dress, and my wife does accept me", "I dress, and I'm okay", "I dress, does that mean I'm queer?", "I dress, does that make my wife a lesbian?", and my personal favourite, "I dress and it gives me an erection but I'm still a regular guy relaxing, here, have a Bud six-pack, let's watch the Packers and kick some butts after the game". I mean, really!

A lot of this is because cross-dressing is the more socially-despised identity. And the more despised and oppressed a group, the more assimilationist and conservative their rhetoric and politics. For when groups are radically disempowered they have no choice but to take an assimilationist conservative stance.

In other words, the experience of being a cross-dresser is still sufficiently dislocating, both socially and psychologically, that much of the community is still completely engaged in merely coping, rather than analysing, organising and confronting the systematic oppression which maintains and even mandates such dislocations.

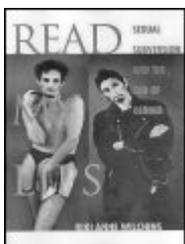
But as they find their voice, the stridency, the demands, the political awareness and the organisation to contest that oppression will emerge. It's going to happen, just give it time. Once cross-dressers ever really come-out, and begin to enunciate the politics of the direct, head-on challenge their very existence poses to gender regimes, I think we will have a truly revolutionary force on our hands, a potent force. The only question is, how long will they think of themselves, and allow so many of us to think of them, as "... only cross-dressers?".

Riki Anne Wilchins



From Wikipedia and **Amazon Books:** Born in 1952, Riki Anne Wilchins is an activist whose work has focused on the impact of gender norms. While she started out as a transgender leader — founding the first national transgender advocacy group (GenderPAC) - her analysis and work broadened over time to include discrimination and violence regardless of individuals' identity. While this perspective has been widely accepted, its breadth has provoked criticism by some in the transgender community. Wilchins' work and writing has often focused on youth, whom she not only sees as uniquely vulnerable to the gender system's pressures and harm, but whom she sees as capable of "looking with fresh eyes". Wilchins' work has been instrumental in bringing transgender rights into the mainstream L.G.B.T. movement, and has helped bring awareness of the impact of gender norms to a wider audience. In 2001, Wilchins' work resulted in her being selected one of just six community activists named by *Time Magazine* among its "100 Civic Innovators for the Twenty-First Century". A founding member of Camp Trans, since the mid 1990s Wilchins has been highly active in founding a number of organizations and events focused on gender issues, including:

- The Transsexual Menace - the first large direct action group for transgender rights, which was modelled along the lines of Queer Nation and which at one point boasted representatives in over forty cities (co-founder Denise Norris).
- Hermaphrodites With Attitude - the first direct action group for the intersex (co-founder Cheryl Chase, Executive Director of the Intersex Society of North America).
- New York City Gay Community Centre Gender Identity Project (co-founder Dr. Barbara Warren, Director of Social Services).
- New York City Gay Community Centre Transgender Health Empowerment Conference, an annual event (co-founder Dr. Barbara Warren, Director of Social Services).
- Camp Trans, an annual educational event outside the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival that contests the exclusion of anyone who is not deemed a "womyn-born womyn" (co-founders Janice Walworth, Nancy Jean Burkholder).
- National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (co-founder Susan Wright, its first Executive Director).
- National Gender Lobby Day, an annual event on Capitol Hill (co-founder Phyllis Frye).



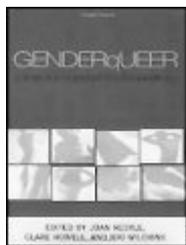
Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender
Author: Riki Anne Wilchins
Publisher: Firebrand Books (1997)1563410907
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1563410907

From Amazon Books: Over the course of the past decade transgender politics has become the cutting edge of sexual liberation. While sexual and political freedom of homosexuals has yet to be fully secured, questions of who is sleeping with whom pale in the face of the battle by transgender activists to dismantle the idea of what it means to be a man or a woman. Riki Anne Wilchins' *Read My Lips* is a passionate and extraordinarily intelligent look at how society not only creates men and

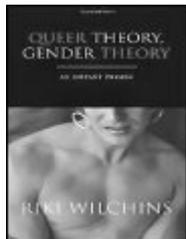
women - ignoring the fluidity of maleness and femaleness in most people, but also explains how those categories generate crisis for most individuals. It is impossible to read Wilchins's ideas and not be provoked in fundamental and mysterious ways.

GenderQueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary
Author: Riki Anne Wilchins, Joan Nestle and Clare Howell
Publisher: Alyson Books (2002)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1555837301

From Amazon Books: Perhaps more than any other issue, gender identity has galvanized the queer community in recent years. The questions go beyond the nature of male/female to a yet-to-be-



traversed region that lies somewhere between and beyond biologically determined gender. In this ground breaking anthology, three experts in gender studies and politics navigate around rigid, societally imposed concepts of two genders to discover and illuminate the limitless possibilities of identity. Thirty first-person accounts of gender construction, exploration, and questioning provide a groundwork for cultural discussion, political action, and even greater possibilities of autonomous gender choices. Noted scholar Joan Nestle is joined by internationally prominent gender warrior Riki Anne Wilchins and historian Clare Howell to provide a societal, cultural, and political exploration of gender identity.



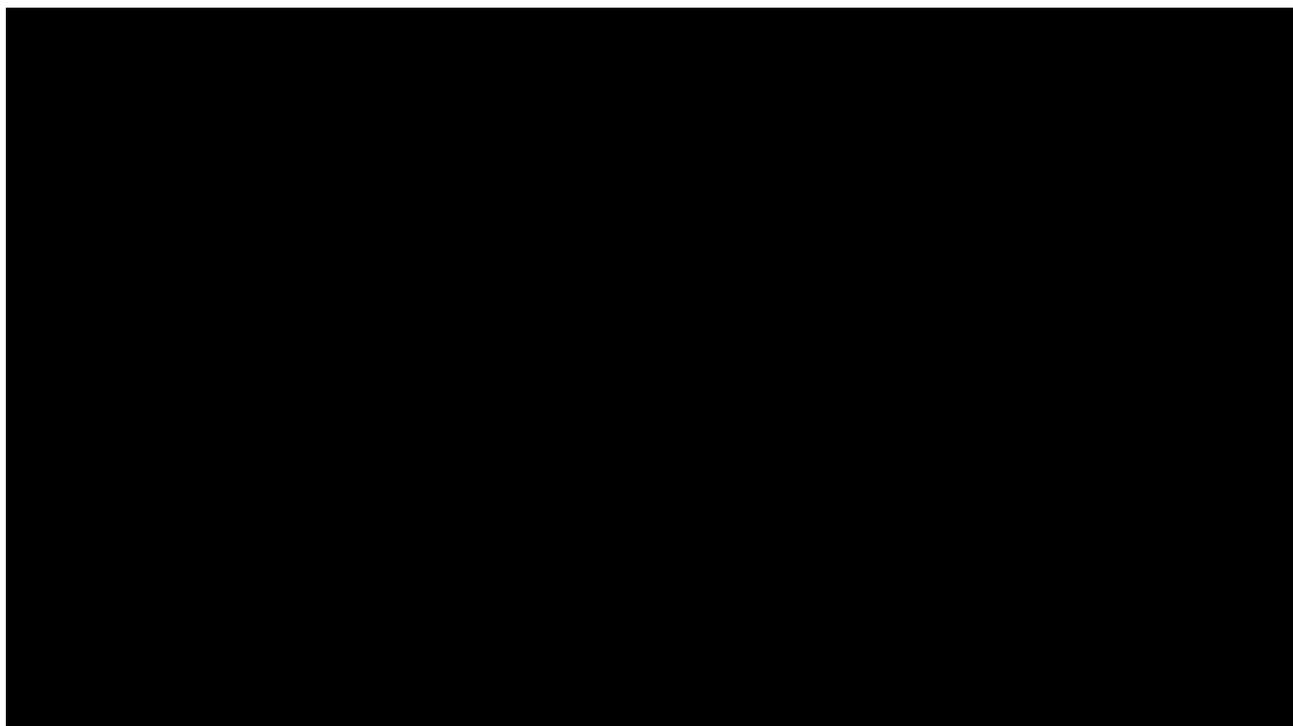
Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer

Author: Riki Anne Wilchins

Publisher: Alyson Books (2004)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 1555837980

From Amazon Books:  A one-stop, no-nonsense introduction to the core of post-modern theory, particularly its impact on queer and gender studies. Nationally known gender activist Riki Wilchins combines straightforward prose with concrete examples from L.G.B.T. and feminist politics, as well as her own life, to guide the reader through the ideas that have forever altered our understanding of bodies, sex and desire. This is that rare post-modern theory book that combines accessibility, passion, personal experience and applied politics, noting at every turn why these ideas matter and how they can affect your daily life.



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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.