Gendercide

A Challenge to the Binary Concept of Gender

by Shorona se Mbessakwimi

I would like to establish as a preface to this article that as a principle of non-violence, I attempt to maintain an attitude of no blame/compassion. I believe that people are imperfect and make mistakes - often because of ignorance or past trauma - which we need to take responsibility for, but the idea of bad/evil people is misleading and closes us to dialogue and the potential for change.

In other words - no one’s perfect. I refer particularly to my understanding of how the medical community and others have (mis)treated intersex people. But we can’t let that fact and the possibility that we have made mistakes stop us from forgiving ourselves and continuing to strive for more understanding and a better future.

As I learn more and more about my ‘condition’, my past and the experiences of other intersex people, I am becoming more radicalised (getting to the root) of my intersex identity and perspective. I am wanting more and more to claim my intersex [1] identity and be ‘out’ (and proud) about who I am. To feel natural, attractive and lovable as intersex, rather than as a ‘passing’ womyn, or even a failed man.

"I am what I am and what I am needs no excuses" - Gloria Gaynor

They seem to assume that we would want to think we were virtually like everyone else rather than have to live with the ‘shocking’, ‘shameful’, ‘stigmatising’ truth ...

It has occurred to me that the way that intersexuality has been (mis)managed in the twentieth century is analogous to the assimilation policies the Australian Government had (and has) in regards to indigenous Australians - absorb them, hide them, deny their existence. This assimilation attempt is often stated to be a form of genocide. For indigenous Australians, the best known elements of the attempted genocide included; stealing their land; denying indigenous Australians the vote for most of the twentieth century; the stolen generations (taking Aboriginal children, particularly those with a white father, and putting them in white institutions/families. Many of the abuses committed against Aboriginal people were said at the time to be done in their best interest.

In the case of intersex people, the medical community has (in our ‘best interests’) gone to the extent of surgically reconstructing many of us without our consent because (to paraphrase my general sense of their rationale) “we look funny”. What is obvious though never stated, however, is that what really threatens clinicians, scientists and sometimes parents and others (including ourselves) is our essential challenge to the binary concept of gender [2]. They cannot imagine other people having to relate to such a stark challenge to that way of thinking (i.e. our intersex selves).

So, in a parallel to Aboriginal people being ‘assimilated’ to ‘improve their lives’ (meaning make their lives more like white lives), we have been denied our gender blending identities - and (often) bodies - to ‘make our lives easier’ (i.e. more like those of the medical professionals/our families etc.), rather than helping to create a space where we can safely be more fully ourselves.

The assimilation (gendercide) policy is clear also from the many examples of secrets and lies that pervade our lives and treatment. The secrets and lies are primarily designed to maintain the facade, even to ourselves, of us being either male or female in the assumption that that is what we would want.

They seem to assume that we would want to think we were virtually like everyone else rather than have to live with the ‘shocking’, ‘shameful’, ‘stigmatising’ truth. Sadly, this very behaviour contributes to the sense that there is something shameful and ‘diseased’ about our natural bodies.

Aboriginal people and experience also teaches us a term for our right to informed decision making about our own lives - ‘Self-determination’. As a humynist, I would say that self-determination, which includes fully informed consent, is a basic humyn right. And I think that since many of us are of the privileged white class, if we ask loudly and clearly enough (i.e. in the manner of the academic/scientific rationalist, Western tradition) we will get it. But what would our lives be like if we were allowed to grow up un(re)constructed?
In his recommendations for intersex ‘management, Professor Milton Diamond suggests an intersex child should be given a binary gender label which could be worn, removed, or changed as appropriate without having to be surgically (and therefore irreversibly and non-consensually) assigned a gender (my interpretation). A child/adult may at any time choose to explore surgical options, the full ramifications of which should be explained clearly and put in a context of all the other options. And further to that, I am calling for supportive counselling of parents and the intersex persyn as a freely offered option available throughout heir lives, including peer support (from childhood on) and clear explanations or creative education about the facts and issues involved.

Ultimately, it's nice to imagine a world where people whose only danger is the idea of binary gender could grow up openly as themselves and be loved for being just that. Lesbian and Gay people and their experience show us that what was once (only twenty - thirty years ago) highly stigmatised and pathologised (homosexuality) is now fairly well an accepted and supported part of society. (It is clear that homosexuality is not accepted always/everywhere, but the changes in the last thirty years are apparent. I point to the success of the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras as a classic example). So while we (as intersex individuals and as a community), like most oppressed groups, have to maintain our relationships with our past/present oppressors (the medical community and sometimes our parents/family/friends) we can start to challenge our invisibility and walk the path toward understanding, accepting and loving ourselves and being understood, accepted and loved by the rest of society.

Footnotes

[1] I am using the word intersex as a gender description rather than intersexual which has unnecessary sexual connotations, or intersexed which makes it sound like something that has been done to us.

[2] The term 'binary gender construct' refers to what I see as the artificially created and perpetuated idea that there are two distinct genders. One element of eco-feminist thinking points to gender as being a key symbol of the Western tendency to see things in stark binary/dualist terms which is over simplified and therefore generally inappropriate.