

Fighting a Winning Battle  
Enemy: Those Assumptions in which we are Drenched.

Interestingly, in *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* Kate Bornstein consistently employs a war motif in reference to gender politics. From her dream of a battlefield divided into men and women to her use of the term “gender terror,” allusions to war vividly illustrate her discussion of the ongoing struggle for gender equality (Bornstein 25, 71). If we are to accept this metaphor and divide our society’s “war on gender” into distinct battles, then it might be that one battle, to some degree, has been won: that for equality between men and women, so valiantly fought by feminists in the sixties and seventies and by Adrienne Rich in her essay “When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision”. Today we are on the frontier of a new battle: a battle (in which Kate Bornstein is on the forward line of troops) for equality not only between men and women, but between everyone else as well.

Whether we refer to the work done by these authors as battles or excerpts taken from different decades of an ongoing conversation of gender theory, *Gender Outlaw* and “When we Dead Awaken” are texts that approach shockingly similar issues – namely the relationships between gender, oppression, and identity – in intriguingly dissimilar, sometimes opposing, ways. I am interested in the assumptions under which Rich tackles these relationships as made clear by Bornstein’s text. “It’s exhilarating,” says Rich, “to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful” (Rich 522). And just as the seventies were a time of awakening consciousness for female rights, today consciousness is awakening in a whole new slew of gender related issues. There are ideas floating around in the academic world today – ideas

addressed in Bornstein's book – that were unheard of in Rich's time. Modern texts have a way of putting historical texts into perspective; how do topics covered by Bornstein (such as the disparity between nature's and culture's consequences of being born into one body or another, the tendency of society's definition of gender to dilute our individual identities, and the possibility of a society free from the constraints of non-consensual gender, to name a few) shine new light on the arguments made by Rich? And if Rich's battle *is* still being fought (who am I, really, to assert that our society is no longer male-dominated just because there is a lack of proof in my own life?) then surely the introduction of Bornstein's combat strategies to dismantle the construct of gender itself will aid in fulfilling those 1960's feminist goals of equality.

One of the most glaringly obvious assumptions that pervades Rich's essay is that men and women exist as the only two genders, exclusively from one another. Not once, in fact, does she acknowledge the possibility or implications of differently gendered writers. "Personally," responds Bornstein, a living exception to this binary, "I think no question containing either/or deserves a serious answer, and that includes the question of gender" (46). Bornstein's entire book, in fact, is written around the notion that the two-way system of gender classification is an oppressive construct of society, and that we would do best to rid ourselves of it entirely (105). The mutually exclusive choice between male and female, however, remains the most prominently accepted gender system in our society as well as in "When we Dead Awaken".

Let us not be too hard on Adrienne Rich – the either/or outlook is to be expected in her text considering the politics and consciousness of the seventies. In hindsight, though, how could Rich have developed her essay by addressing the possibility that there

is more to gender than men and women? It seems to me that Rich's thinking is in fact based on the understanding that men and women are distinctly separate entities with their own innately male and female "energies" (523). What Rich does not seem to realize is that patriarchy – the domination of males – might be a direct result of this way of thinking. The repercussions of the bimodal class system in Rich's text is obvious: oppression (522). It is a natural tendency when presented with two of something to want to choose one or the other, in this case resulting in decades of men and women struggling for the upper hand. It might be that before we can win Rich's battle – before women can finally be treated with equality in society – we need a society that sees gender in a new light by developing an understanding of exactly how and why we even classify each other into genders in the first place. That is to say, by changing the way we see gender, we can change the way we interact with gender. When we no longer divide the population in half, there can be no dominant sex. A good place to start in a search for this understanding is a consideration of alternative systems of gender classification.

It might help to think of gender as a gradient from man to women; some people fall on one extreme or the other and some people fall within various shades of grey. This system leaves room for chromosomal or other biological diversities as well as individuals who do not strictly identify as "male" or "female," none of which coincides well with our previous system. An XX chromosome, high levels of testosterone, or the existence of (or lack of) a penis are grounds for being a man or a woman, and variations on any of these (An XX chromosome alongside a penis, hormonal imbalances, a sense of gender identity that does not match your body, etc) leave you somewhere between the two. Bornstein, a transsexual lesbian whose lover is soon to become a man, fits more nicely into this

classification system (4). She promotes that “there are as many truthful experiences of gender as there are people who think they have a gender” (8). Indeed, seeing gender as a gradient leaves open infinite opportunity for gender experiences and significantly less opportunity for the formation of a hierarchy that leads to gender oppression.

Had Rich considered this far less constrictive system, the dynamics of her arguments might have been drastically different. Some of the male and female labels that she puts on specific actions and feelings, for example, would make less sense. How might we interpret some of her statements given the understanding that gender might not be black and white?

I was writing very little, partially from fatigue, that *female* fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of *female* life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo . . . (527)

This passage introduces a section of Rich’s paper that really expresses the crux of her dilemma, a section that delves deep into her search to balance two energies in her life and thereby find a way of understanding her very identity (528). In introducing these basic human struggles with the repetition of the word *female*, Rich is (perhaps unintentionally) creating a divide between the sexes that carries over into the rest of her narrative. Is she suggesting that men never experience the crisis she is about to outline? That women simply experience it more often than men? That men are *responsible* for the anger and discontinuity experienced by women? I also wonder if she believes that her fatigue and discontinuity in life are innately female, or whether they are society’s consequences of being born into a woman’s body. Most importantly, though, I wonder what it is that leads

Rich to perceive her circumstance as female, and indeed what factors lead to the development of any individual's sense of gender in their lives and in themselves. An underlying theme in *Gender Outlaw* is the absurdity of the concept that the shape and function of our bodies – our physical gender – over which we have never had any say, could act as the basis for classification of how we present ourselves, how we behave, and even who we are as people (30).

The social model of gender suggests that we are born with little or no gender related pre-existing restraints or dispositions, but rather that difference in gender is the direct result of observation, interaction, and social learning. If Rich's "male dominance" and Bornstein's "male privilege" are society's reaction to its own self created bimodal system, then this theory implies that different socialization could potentially give birth to a genderless society of the sort Bornstein describes (111). A society, that is, free from any form of gender dominance. "The culture may not simply be creating roles for naturally-gendered people," Bornstein explains, "the culture may in fact be *creating* the gendered people" (12). Socialization took its toll on Bornstein, as it does on every man, by providing her with a sense of privilege that she didn't even know she had until she began life as a woman (110). After her surgery, a lesbian community rejected her on the basis that, through the overwhelming influence of socialization, she still possessed a sort of masculine presence. "People wouldn't know I was transsexual," explains Bornstein, "and then they'd find out and they'd be like 'Oh, I knew all along: it was *male energy*, I felt that!'"(43). Perhaps socialization – the tendency to treat boys and girls differently just because – is the cause for the key differences between genders. Could socialization, then, be the cause of not only men's "self-generating energy of destruction" but also the

retaliatory “female energy” that, according to Rich, we must strive for by speaking through our anger (533)? If this were the case, what would we stand to gain by recognizing the assumptions in which society has drenched us (assumptions that have lead us to produce these rather hateful gendered energies)? In her exploration of gender’s significance in the history of writing, Rich discusses two poets she admires, Sylvia Plath and Diane Wakoski. I am interested in what effects the social model has on her observation and interpretation of their poetry:

It seems to me that in the work of both Man appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and terror is, simply, Man’s power – to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman. The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him. And, in the work of both these poets, it is finally the woman’s sense of *herself* – embattled, possessed – that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy. (523)

It seems to *me* that Rich is setting up a distinct divide between the genders here in which it is obvious who is the antagonist. In her conclusion, Rich pins Western male poets down as “woman-hating,” and I can’t help but perceive such a statement as slightly hypocritical after this subtle yet vicious attack on men (533). I appreciate her recognition of these women poets and their ability to directly confront the position of men in their lives, nonetheless her hostile language and her illustration of men as tyrannical and forcefully charismatic alongside her illustration of women as ready for battle might be unnecessary and might even cause a man to feel slightly affronted.

Also note her use of the term “female energy.” The implication here is that it is something for which to strive. In the context of Bornstein’s text, “female energy” and “male energy” are the result of gendered socialization, and if anything to be avoided rather than valued (50). Rich’s tendency to draw these lines between men and women seem counterintuitive in the context of the social model of gender. If we are finally coming into a consciousness in which we recognize the disastrous effects of socializing one sex – male – to put so much store in their power and energy, why are we retaliating by having the other sex do the same?

I do want to make clear that just because we have come to believe a certain thing or behave a certain way through the forces of socialization does not always mean that we should change our thoughts or behaviors. In fact, we have to remember that it is quite possible that *every* aspect of who we are, gender aside, is a direct result of socialization. When Rich defines our drive to self knowledge as a process of “understanding the assumptions in which we are drenched,” she is referring to a close evaluation, but not always a removal, of our socially constructed ways of seeing (522). I wrote in an earlier essay that Rich’s term “re-vision” was could be defined as an act of “conquering . . . assumptions and societal constraints” that necessarily lead to a changing of mind, to “discoveries.” I recognize now that socially constructed ways of seeing exist inevitably and always will, and that it is our job not to strip ourselves of them (such a process would be impossible) but to weed through them and thereby understand the roots of our own thinking: *why* we have been lead to believe what we do. A lens through which we see, through which we write, is simply a way of thinking. No matter how many times we revise the way in which we view our world, we will always be thinking in some *way*,

seeing through some lens. That is to say, there is no “pure and undiluted” way of seeing. Our beliefs are the outcome and accumulation of our entire lives. We have all been socialized in different ways, and we all therefore have our own unique lens through which we view the world. Our job is to recognize what influences, what socialization, lead to our ways of seeing and thereby understand why we see the way we do. We can then make an educated choice on how to continue seeing, and even if through the process we have not changed a single opinion, at least we have developed a more thorough knowledge of ourselves. As this process of re-vision applies to the issues at hand, we must recognize what social influences have lead to our senses of gendered selves, and decide from there how to perceive and interact with gender.

One of the most pressing themes in Bornstein’s book is the possibility that we as a society do not have this understanding of the effect socialization has on our identities as they relate to gender, but rather that we depend too strongly on our gendered bodies to provide for us a sense of self (117). Bornstein herself has come to terms with an understanding that her identity is constantly in a state of fluctuation; it makes sense that her gender, a representation of that identity, should be too. “I love the idea of being without an identity,” she explains, “it gives me a lot of room to play around; but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on” (39). Here Bornstein is addressing an issue that is absolutely *terrifying* for most people. We like to feel secure in our identity; we like to believe that there is a certain “me” factor that will never go away. This, I believe, is why Rich identifies so strongly with women. She felt her career (her energy of creation) was being threatened by men, and in defense reached out for something strong and powerful to identify with:

*female energy*. It may be this uncertainty that leads us to cling to the gender binary, under which we can call our identities safe. Does this clinging, though, oppress our very understanding of ourselves, as Bornstein seems to suggest (115)? If we are afraid to play with our identities, we leave ourselves no room to develop and reshape our senses of self for the better. Indeed, Rich's identity as a wife and a mother left her no room to "conceive of alternative," to play around with her identity as a poet (528). Bornstein maintains that the use of gender roles as a sort of safety net might be keeping us from discovering who we are without such constructs: who, arguably, we *really* are. Rich, on the other hand, does not seem to have a problem interweaving facets of her identity with gender stereotypes:

The choice still seemed to be between "love" – womanly, maternal love, altruistic love – a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egoism – a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. (530)

Rich's inharmonious motifs of gender as related to identity show themselves again in this passage; men are the driving forces of creation, women of relation. She eventually discovers that the binary between creation and relation is a false one – that there are ways in which the two can be united – but she never acknowledges that the connections between love and women and egoism and men are false ones (528). If we take creation and relation to be essential defining features of our identities (they certainly were for Rich and they certainly are for me), then these ties that Rich draws between creation and masculinity alongside relation and femininity suggest that our gender (whether in her opinion innately or thanks to the "oppressive nature of male/female relations," it is hard

to tell) becomes an essential defining aspect of our identity. This connection between non-consensual gender and identity is exactly the oppression against which Kate Bornstein so vehemently warns us (117).

The theory that that obeying the laws of the gender binary stunts our sense of self and the flexibility thereof seems to have rang true in the case of Adrienne Rich's marriage. Is it a universal truth, though? Is this where we should abandon our exploration of gender, with the conclusion that as long as we play the gender roles game we are not being true to ourselves? In discussing androgyny, Bornstein states that by abiding too strongly to a male or female identity we blind ourselves to the "beautiful shades of identity of which we are each capable" (115). I am not sure, however, that the causal relationship always works in that direction. There are alternative theories that just as effectively explain Rich's relationship with gender and identity. What else might have caused Rich to experience the choice between creation and relation as mutually exclusive, as well as cause her to interpret that choice as one between poetry and *womanhood*? She describes a prerequisite to be able to think well, to make genuine art, to truly engage in the energy of creation:

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite of to call experimentally be another name. For writing is renaming. (528)

But Rich found that she was unable to rename, and frantically searched for a reason why, for a “synthesis by which to understand what was happening” (527). What she found was that her energies of relation required a “holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity,” and that those energies came into conflict with her creative energies just at the same time she began fulfilling traditional roles of female life (528). The conflict between her two senses of identity caused her to feel as though she had to choose one or the other. Maybe it is not that obeying gender laws leads to conflicts in one’s sense of identity, but rather conflicts in one’s sense of identity (i.e. conflicts in balancing our energies of creation and relation) lead to more strictly obeying gender laws. Correlation, after all, does not mean causation, and perhaps what we are seeing in Rich’s story is not an identity crisis that is *due to* “trying to full traditional female functions,” but rather an identity crisis that *leads to* the analysis of female energy and the positioning herself as a victim of the “political and psychological consequences of life in a patriarchal society” (517). Her struggle to maintain a balance in the energies of creation and relation – a struggle that in turn threatened her very identity both as a poet and a family member— might have caused her to cling to the gender binary, under which she could call her identity safe.

I will draw this essay to a close in a style reminiscent of Adrienne Rich. In an essay she wrote long after “When we Dead Awaken,” she concludes, “This essay, then, has no conclusions; it is another beginning, for me.” As is this essay for me. Just as modern texts can shine new light on historical texts, so can the opposite happen. Just as Rich inspired women to pursue understanding in the form of “refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society,” Bornstein is now inspiring us to ask

challenging questions that will lead us to the refusal of the destructiveness of a *gender-*dominated society. After understanding the incredible success of the late twentieth century feminist movement, I am more inspired than ever to listen when someone has something to say, questions to ask, windows of consciousness to open. Also, in light of such a victory, I am confident in my belief that we are fighting a winning battle.

#### Works Cited

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**Judges’ Commentary on “Fighting a Winning Battle”**