

Borderlands

by Caitríona Reed

If I begin by declaring that I am a transsexual woman will I get your attention? What must I then write to sustain it? I am as uncomfortable with the assumption that I have particular viewpoints based on my gender identity as I would be if the assumption were made that I have particular viewpoints based on my class and race. It presumes that I have led an entirely unexamined life and have become altogether lost within the narrow confines of queer identity. A friend and fellow dharma teacher made the assumption that my students would now be made up principally of other trans folk. It is as if someone expressed the assumption to my friend, who is a psychotherapist, and who happens to be African American, that his clients must be mostly other African Americans.

I live where chaparral forest meets the rolling grassland so characteristic of inland California. Before I came here I lived beside the Pacific Ocean. I learned that in transition zones such as these, there is a variety among the animals and plants that does not exist where the environment is singular. But singular environments are rare. Monocultures do not exist in the nonhuman world, and completely closed ecosystems are likely to be unstable and vulnerable. Transition zones—those places where differences in topography, soil, climate, and flora meet each other—proliferate. Mountain ranges, river valleys, and deserts blend into each other by degrees—tide pools, clearings at the edges of forests, slopes where trees gradually give way to grasslands. Creatures living where habitats meet take advantage of the diversity. They shelter in one and feed in another. Even when there appears to be a fixed border, its fixity is contradicted by those who cross it.

Given the weight of observable evidence in the world at large, I marvel at how the dominant culture has come to insist on boundaries with such vigor. I am thinking not only of forests and deserts but of all the ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion are packaged and defined. Perhaps it is the enduring legacy of classical culture obsessed with hierarchies and fixed order; perhaps this is just what we do as primates to protect the fragile ground of imaginary tribal identity.

During retreats at Manzanita Village we often speak of the land here and reflect on transition zones as fertile places, places of unpredictability and promise. This becomes a powerful guiding metaphor, suggesting that we can trust transitions and ambiguities in our own lives. So, too, through our practice of the Buddhadharma, we come to see samsara and nirvana (conditioned reality and liberation)—understood initially as oppositional—as mutually interdependent.

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa explores “the border” as a place to inhabit rather than merely a line of demarcation. Her experience as a tejana—not fully

Indian, nor fully Mexican, nor gringa, even though she has spent her life in the U.S.—was of coming to wholeness through accepting a multiplicity of intersecting identities. If others always experience you as being either one thing or another when you are in fact both, you develop a tolerance for ambiguity. If we are willing to tolerate ambiguity, we challenge the assumptions of the dominant culture, which insists that everything be definable. A tolerance for ambiguity also challenges those who stand outside the dominant culture and oppose it (or survive it) by means of a politics of identity. When we inhabit the border we stand both inside and outside. We are nomads who belong everywhere or nowhere. Our survival depends on our tolerance for ambiguity. And there is always a part of us that remains hidden.

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As a “woman of transgendered experience,” I was born and socialized as a man. I am now functionally, socially (and legally), a woman. I have friends and allies who have said that as a transsexual I must have somehow always been a woman. There are others, no doubt, who would say that I am a mutilated man. All of them assume that I must be one or the other. They are uncomfortable with having the immutability of gender challenged. Changing your sex can be a serious inconvenience, a major interruption to your life. For the vast majority of transgendered people I know, the business of dancing between genders or transitioning from one gender identity to another is fraught with uncertainty, fear, shame, economic deprivation, physical danger, and loneliness. Yet I, like other trans people I know, am filled with gratitude. My life seems to be my own in ways that it was not when I lived as a man.

At one time I was eager to disclose the adventure of my transition. It was a way to make myself known after hiding for so long. It was also a means of self-preservation. Some people distanced themselves from me, others celebrated with me, and others turned me into a kind of token, the official transsexual dharma teacher.

As a teacher I began to use the experience of my journey from repression to openness as an encouragement for others to trust their instincts, to take risks, to find their own authenticity. It had very little to do with identity politics, or with creating a safe space for others merely because they happened to be transsexual.

I always assume, perhaps a little idealistically, that everyone is looking to live with authenticity, that everyone is looking to make their lives and their bodies their own. Whoever we are, we all have choices we must make, and transitions we must undertake. I am still not altogether clear what it means to be either a man or a woman. Once it seemed to be about external expression, the theater of illusion, and how I presented myself in the world. Then, as my body changed through the use of hormones and surgery, my focus was more on the body itself. Now that I have learned to question the classifications by which the bodies and lives of both women and men are oppressed and colonized, it is harder for me to distinguish between the societal and subjective aspects of the experience of gender. I have friends who appear to be men or women but whose inner identity contradicts their outer presentation. I have friends who reject binary identity altogether. I try to accept people for who they say they are.

When I wake up in the morning, what sex I happen to be is not usually on my mind, though if I catch a glimpse of my naked body in the mirror I may have a moment of, “Hmmm, so that must be me!” (Don’t we all?) In the end, it may be that being tall is more important than what sex I happen to be. This is certainly the case when my shorter friends need me to change a light bulb. Am I a man with a vagina, a woman with a bizarre history, or a tall person with a long reach?

There was a time when I fluctuated between daring and fear, between the closet and all sorts of inappropriate public spaces. Against all odds, I wanted the world to give me permission to be a woman. One Sunday morning in the early 1980s, in a moment of bravado, I walked into a busy diner in a working class neighborhood in Long Beach, California, to meet a friend. As I walked the length of the restaurant, in high heels and makeup, you could have heard the famous pin drop. I was providing a moment of inadvertent theater for several dozen families out for their Sunday brunch. Perhaps it was that tall thing again, or the long legs, combined with my appalling fashion sense and flair for the dramatic. I laugh now, but at the time I was filled with an odd combination of exhilaration, shame, and fear.

These days, as a Buddhist teacher, if I speak of my transition, it is to point out that we all undergo changes as part of living. Sometimes they are difficult, life-transforming changes. Even then, certain aspects of who we are remain the same, while other aspects are utterly transformed. To be whole, we must always take the risk of trusting what is difficult. Our lives are given to us for free, and to limit ourselves out of fear would be a sorry waste. It is not our desires that cause our suffering, as Puritans (and some Buddhists) would have it, but our attachments.

In truth, I do not need to know what it means to be either a man or a woman. Or if I do know, it is for a moment, in context—changing a tire, buying clothes, making love—and even then I welcome inconsistencies. I stand outside that binary fabrication. My experience is my own. If I feel awkward discussing such things in a Buddhist publication (or anywhere else) then perhaps my awkwardness is symptomatic of my recognition that there is general discomfort with ambiguity. People of mixed race were once reviled as the product of an unnatural union. Even in places where it is acceptable to be gay, bisexuality can still make people uncomfortable. In the current mood of fundamentalism, to admit that you are a Christian-Moslem-Buddhist is taken to mean that you are not really any of those things, that you are merely eclectic. If you are an artist who works in a bank, then you can’t really be an artist, but must be a banker with a hobby. If you are transsexual your very existence may be dismissed as indecent.

Binary opposites are rarely equal. In a racist society it is safer to be white. In a heterosexist society it is safer to be straight. In a sexist society it is safer to be male. Hierarchies are implicit. Therefore to inhabit the borderland is a betrayal, an unauthorized vertical mobility in both directions that threatens the status quo. Transsexuals are beaten and murdered simply for being who they are. Of course, the same is true for all gender/sexually variant folk, people of color, and women. But those who inhabit the borderland between easily accepted definitions of identity are especially suspect. Others

who inhabit more solid ground may wonder: What do they get up to? What do they know that we don't? Are they spying for unknown others?

Those who choose to inhabit borders may be liberating themselves from oppression by redefining their position within an inherently oppressive society. I see this choice as both inherently transgressive and inherently dharmic. The true test of our practice is how we negotiate the contradictions and ambiguities of living in a society that is systematically dehumanizing and violent on such a grand scale.

If I find it difficult to write about my own experience as a transsexual from a purely personal point of view, it is not that I am bashful or prudish—quite the opposite. I am not ashamed. I celebrate the erotic fact of my human embodiment and I no longer feel a need to justify myself. Nor do I wish to explain something I do not, and will never, completely understand. Like Chuang-Tzu, who, after dreaming he was a butterfly, wondered whether he was butterfly or man, I wonder: Am I a man who dreams he is a woman, or a woman or who dreams she was once a man?

I have learned that wholeness is to be found in the least likely places and that we can find power even when it seems that all power has been taken from us. I have learned that we all have indigenous roots, and that we can all draw from the natural wisdom of the Earth, which is a celebration of variety and diversity. I do not speak as a Buddhist, nor as a transsexual. Thus have I learned.

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