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Part coming-of-age story, part mind-altering manifesto on gender and sexuality, coming directly to you from the life experiences of a transgender woman, *Gender Outlaw* breaks all the rules and leaves the reader forever changed. 26 black-and-white illustrations.

Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us Details

Date : Published April 25th 1995 by Vintage (first published 1994)

ISBN : 9780679757016

Author : Kate Bornstein

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Glbt, Queer, Nonfiction, Gender, Lgbt, Feminism, Autobiography, Memoir

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From Reader Review Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us for online ebook

Zeo says

There's a lot of problems with the book (see the appropriation of the term "shaman" in a quote below, although this edition includes some commentary about the politics around that) but the good stuff is so so good.

There's a strength in knowing we have our own comics, our own jokers. But here it gets tricky. The pressure and temptation is to create art or politics for a particular group, which is in turn based on some inflexible identity: special interest groups, identity politics, whatever you want to call it. The group becomes loyal audience, supporters, and followers, if for no other reason than the fool is speaking their language, performing their lives.

But this is so important: the fool becomes a fool by flexing the rules, the boundaries of the group, and this is antithetical to the survival dynamic of most groups. A group remains a group by being inflexible: once it stretches its borders, it's no longer the same group. A fool, in order to survive, must not identify long with any rigidly-structured group. When more and more of the fool's work is done for a particular identity-based group, then the fool becomes *identified* with the group. The fool is indeed foolish who serves a special interest, and will quickly cease being a fool...

Like the fool, the shaman can't take sides or be part of any identity politics. The shaman needs to seek broader and broader groups of people to serve—by staying in a fixed time and place, the shaman's message will only be repeated over and over to those who've already heard it, and then the madness sets in.

Most of us assume that there *is* gender; that there are only two categories of gender; and that we are (have the identity of) one or the other. We have a lot invested in this belief—it's very difficult to imagine ourselves genderless. It's difficult to the degree that our identities are wrapped up in our gender assignments. We need to differentiate between having an identity and being an identity.

I write when nothing else will bring me peace, when I burn, when I find myself asking and answering the same questions over and over. I write when I've begun to lose my sense of humor and it becomes a matter of my life and my death to get that sense of humor back and watch you laugh. I write in bottom space. I open up to you, I cut myself, I show you my fantasies, I get a kick out of that—oh, yeah. I perform in top space. I cover myself with my character and take you where you never dreamed you could go...my instrument is my audience and oh how I love to play you.

duck reads says

The "collage" style is not pleasing to me -- among other things, I fail to see why Beatles lyrics are relevant or necessary to the points being discussed. I'm also finding that too little support is given for the assumptions underlying most of the book's prescriptions: in one instance there is a mention that the author began to wonder if gender was socially constructed, and then the next paragraph assumes that gender is socially constructed, as do all subsequent paragraphs. There is a step missing there: it is the step between wondering and taking as read: "proving it". (Or putting a line in to indicate that while it is unproven it is going to be the basis of all subsequent points.)

I'm uncomfortable with the use of colonialist descriptions of Native American practices in re: gender being used as examples of alternative cultural attitudes to the subject. If the goal is to illustrate that contemporary Western customs are not the only option why are Native American practices the only alternative systems mentioned? And why are only accounts by white settlers (and terms coined by white observers) used to describe them?

The sweeping statements made about transsexuality seem largely generalised from Bornstein's own experience. I don't know how much of this appearance is produced by the fact that the book is fifteen years old. Perhaps some of the topics that seem unduly fixated on from my perspective were commonly presumed to be widely applicable in 1994?

There is a section that lists some common "myths" about transness and proceeds to disavow their relevance or accuracy. One of these is the idea that transpeople are the chosen people of some particular higher power. A few chapters later, Bornstein seems to suggest that the proper role of a transperson in society is that of a "shaman" or a "fool." The "shaman" idea--the idea that gender transition gives trans people some kind of mystical knowledge or exceptional insight that they then have a responsibility to share with the world--seems to stray awfully close to suggesting that transpeople are "chosen" for a mystical task, IMO. The "fool" idea is offensive on almost every level: it suggests transpeople are freaks and fitting subjects of exploitative entertainment, and that their obligation is to laugh first at what other people may perceive as laughable in them -- to make light of their own mistreatment by others. (Of course, the idea that there are certain specific roles that are somehow the only (or most) fitting roles for transpeople is ridiculous and offensive in itself. Urk.) This section is in fact so weird and transphobic that I almost think it must be meant to say that this is what society thinks, and to denounce it, except that there is no indication of that whatsoever. But hey, maybe that part's like the bit where socially constructed gender is proven, i.e. MYSTERIOUSLY MISSING.

Shawn says

my mind was BLOWN

Lots and lots of food for thought (aka just read it):

"But the need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity--these are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality"(3-4).

"I know I'm not a man--about that much I'm clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing. The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other--a world that doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other *is*"(8).

"Two days after my lover and I appeared on The Donahue Show, the five-year-old child of our next door neighbor came up to me and asked me, 'So, are you a boy or a girl?' We'd been living next door to these folks for over two years. 'I'm a girl who used to be a boy', I replied. She was delighted with that answer and told me I'd looked very pretty on television. I thanked her and we smiled at each other and went about our days. I love it that kids will just ask"(9).

"They [guys] want to know, 'what do lesbians *do* with one another.' It's a sad question really: it shows how little thought they give to exactly what pleases a woman"(10).

"I've no idea what 'a woman' feels like. I never did feel like a girl or a woman; rather, it was my unshakable conviction that I was not a boy or a man. It was the absence of feeling, rather than its presence, that convinced me to change my gender"(24).

"Variants to...gender-based relationship dynamics would include heterosexual female with gay male, gay male with lesbian woman, lesbian woman with heterosexual woman, gay male with bisexual male, and so forth. People involved in these variants know that each dynamic is different from the other. A lesbian involved with another lesbian, for example, is a very different relationship than that of a lesbian involved with a bisexual woman, and *that's* distinct from being a lesbian woman involved with a heterosexual woman. What these variants have in common is that each of these combinations forms its own clearly-recognizable dynamic, and none of these are acknowledged by the dominant cultural binary of sexual orientation: heterosexuality/homosexuality"(33).

"...in other words, the sexual encounter is queer because both partners are queer and the genders of the participants are less relevant. Just because Batman is male and Catwoman is female does not make their interactions heterosexual--think about it, there is nothing straight about two people getting it on in rubber and latex costumes, wearing eyemasks and carrying whips and other accoutrements"(36).

"In any case, if we buy into categories of sexual orientation based solely on gender--heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, we're cheating ourselves of a searching examination of our real sexual preferences. In the same fashion, by subscribing to the categories of gender based solely on the male/female binary, we cheat ourselves of a searching examination of our real gender identity"(38).

"As an exercise, can you recall the last time you saw someone whose gender was ambiguous? Was this person attractive to you? And if you knew they called themselves neither a man nor a woman, what would it make you if you're attracted to that person? And if you were to kiss? Make love? What would you be"(40)?

"I try to engage these folks by asking, 'What's a woman? What's a man?' I wish someone would answer me that--it would make my life a lot easier. I could get on playing some other kind of game. But no one has been able to answer that"(43).

"I never hated my penis; I hated that it made me a man--in my own eyes, and in the eyes of others"(47).

"I remember one time walking into Woolworth's in Philadelphia. I'd been living as a woman for about a month. I came through the revolving doors, and stood face to face with a security guard--a young man,

maybe nineteen or twenty years old. He did a double take when he saw me and began to laugh--very loud. He just laughed and laughed. I continued round through the revolving doors and left the store. I agreed with him that I was a joke; that I was the sick one. I went back in there almost a year later. He came on to me"(48).

"It doesn't really matter what a person decides to do, or how radically a person plays with gender. What matters, I think, is how aware a person is of the options. How sad for a person to be missing out on some expression of identity, just for not knowing there are options"(51).

"Are you a woman because your birth certificate says female? A man because your birth certificate says male? If so, how did *that* happen? A doctor looked down at your crotch at birth. A doctor decided, based on what was showing of your external genitals, that you would be one gender or another. You never had a say in that most irreversible of all pronouncements--and according to this culture as it stands today, you never *will* have a say"(57).

"*We are trapped in the wrong body*. I understand that many people may explain their preoperative transgendered lives in that way, but I'll bet that it's more likely an unfortunate metaphor that conveniently conforms to cultural expectations, rather than an honest reflection of our transgendered feelings...It's time for transgendered people to look for new metaphors--new ways of communicating our lives to people who are traditionally gendered"(66).

"I really *would* like to be a member of a community, but until there's one that's based on the principle of constant change, the membership would involve more rules, and the rules that exist around the subject of gender are not rules I want to obey"(69).

"Ladies' are the kind of people who won't let my girlfriend use that public ladies' room, thinking she's not a woman. Oh, but they're not going to let her use the men's room either-they're not going to let her be a man either. If she's not a man, and she's not a woman, then what is she? Once I asked my mother what fire was: a solid, liquid or gas? And she said it wasn't any of those things-It was something that happened to things: a force of nature, she called it. Maybe that's what she is: a force of nature. For sure she is something that happened to me.-Holly Hughes, Clit Notes, 1999 (102)."

"The preferred gender in our patriarchal society is male, and so males mostly take gender for granted, most men do not try and analyze what it means to be male. Even the men's movement seems more predicated on a desire to not be drawn into some web of femininity, rather than a desire to **question** the construct of male identity. Women, on the other hand, have been taught that they're the 'second sex,' the distaff gender, so their lives are an almost daily struggle with the concept of gender. The trap for women is the system itself: it's not men who are the foe as much as it is the bi-polar gender system that keeps men in place as more privileged"(106).

"Please--don't call it 'biological sex,' or 'social gender.' Don't call it 'sex' at all--sex is fucking, gender is everything else"(116).

"Let me tell you what happened, the way it looked from inside my head. The world slowed down...The words echoed in my ears over and over and over. Attached to that simple pronoun was the word *failure*, quickly followed by the word *freak*. All the joy sucked out of my life in an instant, and every moment I'd ever fucked up crashed down on my head. Here was someone who'd never known me as a man, referring to me as a man"(126).

"Straights and gays alike demand the need for an orderly gender system: they're two sides of the same coin, each holding the other in place, neither willing to dismantle the gender system that serves as a matrix for their (sexual) identity. Because of the bi-polar nature of both sexual orientation and gender, one system strengthens the other. Bisexuality and androgyny also hold two sides in place by defining themselves as somewhere in the middle of two given polar opposites"(133).

"So let's reclaim the word 'transgendered' so as to be more inclusive. Let's let it mean 'transgressively gendered,' Then, we have a group of people who break the rules, codes, and shackles of gender...It's the transgendered who need to embrace the lesbians and gays, because it's the transgendered who are in fact the more inclusive category"(135).

"I've come to see gender as a divisive social construct, and the gendered body as a somewhat dubious accomplishment. I write about this because I am a gender outlaw and my issues are gender issues. The way I see it now, the lesbian and gay community is as much oppressed for gender transgressions as for sexual distinction. We have more in common, you and I, than most people are willing to admit. See, I'm told I must be a man or a woman. One or the other. Oh, it's OK to be a transsexual say some--just don't talk about it. Don't question your gender any more, just be a woman now--you went to so much trouble--just be satisfied. I am so, not satisfied"(144-145).

"I grew this body.
It's a girl body.
All of it.
Over the past seven years every one of these cells became girl,
so it's mine now.
It doesn't make me female.
It doesn't make me a woman.
And I'm sure not a man.
What does that make me"(234)?

"'My grandmother,' he said, 'told me something I've never forgotten. 'Never fuck anyone you wouldn't want to be.' The room went silent for a long time"(245).

"And I'm looking forward to the day when people look at this book and say to themselves, 'How curious to have put all that energy into talking about gender. I wonder what the world must have been like in those days for folks with only two choices'(246).

Ross says

Don't let my review fully influence you. I'm sure this book is very enlightening and empowering for some genderqueer out there, but I just couldn't get through it. I just too fundamentally disagree with her on the value of science and biology, disagree on the most basic terminology and have no sympathy for how often she conflates the multiple meanings of words in different contexts as if they all shared the same context.

For those with stouter tolerances, have at it, but don't be surprised if you find yourself alternatively horrified and throwing it against the wall in anger.

Simon says

'Gender Outlaw' is in my opinion a must-read for anyone who wants to be actively involved in gender theory. Although I disagree with a lot's Bornstein's points and conclusions, she expertly challenges us to re-evaluate what identity and gender really mean.

A lot of the points she makes are a bit scattered around the book and it's not a very cohesive book, but considering the way she looks at things I guess that makes sense. Kate Bornstein is a very intriguing person and I very much enjoyed the way she questioned everything and constantly highlights that no conclusion can be 100% certain when it comes to such complicated topics as these.

Raven says

I've had this book since I was fourteen and somehow never got around to reading it until now. Anyways - it was FANTASTIC. Very interesting, although sometimes quite a bit outdated (I didn't agree with all of Bornstein's ideas, and some of them likely wouldn't fly in modern times, but the writing was all so thoroughly original and thoughtful. I would absolutely recommend it to anyone willing to spend time thinking about the complexity of gender - though they should probably have a decent understanding of modern gender theory before starting this book).

I really enjoyed Kate Bornstein's ideas about the gender binary and gender roles, and how she felt distanced from them even after her transition. And just reading all of the experiences that she went through as a transgendered woman - so much of it is unchanged since she was writing this in the 80s and 90s. I found myself very interested in her thoughts on all kinds of subjects.

And, lastly, my favourite passage:

"Experts agree that we don't even think about gender in terms of ourselves. No, it's not until we see someone walking down the street and we can't tell if it's a man or a woman. Ever wonder why you can't stop staring until you decide one way or another? It really bothers you, doesn't it!

We don't have to know someone's age. Their race may be somewhat indistinct, and we might be mildly curious. We may look at someone and think they are gay or straight, but we don't have to know. We can wonder. Yet we insist, and this is the curiosity, we insist that a person must be one gender or the other and we remain unsettled until we assign one gender or another."

Cat says

I have a lot of thoughts about this book and I wanted to review it when I had them more in order. when I started reading it, I was really, really into it. I loved the authors voice and I thought they had great insight on gender. They didn't ignore the privileges they did have and they stated quite a few times that their experience of being neither male nor female did not speak for all non-binary people. having said that, there were parts of the book that really confused me. the more philosophical discussions of gender did not entirely make sense to me. I am genderfluid so it was refreshing to read about gender from someone else who is too but some of it i found culturally appropriative and off-base. I think those were the unaltered chapters from when the book

was published in the 90s. I think the beginning got updated for language and more nuanced social views. still, I would recommend this book. I thought the parts that were good, were very insightful and interesting. it is definitely a book that starts discussion. I am glad this book exists and I hope to see more like it in the future.

Joanna says

MIND BLOWN. Completely fucking brilliant. I want to buy this book for everyone in my life. As someone who feels pretty informed around issues of gender (IT IS PERFORMATIVE!), I need to write about, think about and unpick this all loads more. Which is brilliant, particularly as this book is over 20 years old. It still has so much resonance.

Some questions:

“What’s your gender?

When did you decide it?

How much say do you have in your gender?

Is there anything about your gender or gender role that you don’t like, or that gets in your way?

Are there one or two qualities about another gender that are appealing to you, enough so that you’d like to incorporate those qualities into your daily life?

What would happen to your life if you did that?

What would your gender be then?

How do you think people would respond to you?

How would you feel if they did that?”

"There is most certainly a privilege to having a gender. When you have a gender, or when you are perceived as having a gender, you don't get laughed at in the street. You don't get beat up. You know which public bathroom to use, & when you use it, people don't stare at you or worse. You know which form to fill out. You know what clothes to wear. You have a past."

"The first question we usually ask new parents is: is it a boy or a girl? There's a great answer to that one going round: 'We don't know; it hasn't told us yet'. Personally, I think no question containing either/or deserves a serious answer, & that includes the question of gender."

“One answer to the question, ‘Who is a transsexual?’ might be ‘Anyone who admits it.’ A more political answer might be, ‘Anyone whose performance of gender calls into question the construct of gender itself’.”

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

Erin says

While Bornstein raises interesting points (the idea of a third sexuality, neither male nor female), her arguments against recognizing gender suffered from her nearly complete ability to ignore that one key signifier....the ability to bear children, and her failure to discuss this issue within her theories made the whole premise rather circumspect.

In addition, this is an entire book that might have really been two magazine articles; the first would cover Bornstein's thoughts on gender, summarized above, and the second, a discussion of gender as it relates to Bornstein's true love, the theatre. She also includes one of her plays, which takes up nearly a quarter of the book.

I probably wouldn't recommend this to someone looking for a clear study of transsexuality - it's dated and seems like a fair amount of repetitive ramblings, with little substance.

Ana says

Read this a while back (twice!) and I still own my copy. Decades ahead of its time when it came out in 1994. A no apologies, in your face book about gender assignments, feminism, cultural assumptions, identity, labels, and so much more. Add this to your list of BOOKS THAT WILL CHALLENGE MY THINKING AND I PROMISED TO STAY OPEN MINDED WITH EACH PASSING PAGE. Happy reading.

Alison says

I read excerpts from this in college fifteen years ago and I thought I should actually read it all the way through sometime and it took me a while, but I finally did. Kate Bornstein is a trailblazer and an icon and a vivid personality and this book was a pleasure to read. This is an engaging and candid memoir and examination of gender identity that discusses plenty of things that, even now, let alone in 1994, are pretty radical. This book is almost twenty-five years old (1994!) and it is a bit dated, but Bornstein tackles complex gender theory in a very personal, fun, and offhand way. Her writing is very easy-going and casual, but it's still very powerful and moving. I think it's a good, accessible introduction to the idea that gender is not as simple as "one or the other" and she challenges her readers to really examine their own gender identity and not just blindly accept what they've been told. It's a very thought-provoking book, but its tone is affable and personal and upbeat while still being fiercely unapologetic. I read the 1995 version and it has some issues and I gather a new, updated edition is in the works now (2017), so I look forward to reading it again someday. This book is vivid and fun and unique and hopeful and still so relevant today. It's a classic.

Audacia Ray says

Here's the thing: when I was in college, I read Judith Butler's Gender Trouble, and it made me feel crazy. That book was my first intro to gender deconstruction, and it left my head spinning and heart hurting. I felt like I was trapped in the gender system, and that was a miserable miserable place to be.

Then I read Gender Outlaw.

Gender Trouble is the problem, Gender Outlaw is the solution.

Re-reading this book after 10 years, it was just as fun and fabulous as the first time I read it all those years ago in college. Kate Bornstein gives readers a sense of hope, encouragement, and plain old fun when thinking about and experimenting with gender. And it doesn't hurt that I've gotten to know Kate a bit since reading this book for the first time, so now I smile and picture her gestures and hear her voice as I read.

I. says

this is a really engaging, witty read. kate bornstein must be a blast to hang out with. however, bornstein misinterprets basic radical feminist arguments & continually conflates sex/gender, thus betraying a lot of assumptions that i find troubling as a gender nonconforming woman.

what i see time and time again is the assumption that for cis people, gender isn't an issue, and of course it is! particularly for cis women! and the failure to acknowledge that in so many of these texts is an issue for me that i find hard to overlook. bornstein eventually acknowledges that gender roles are enforced to benefit men and oppress women but fails to examine/understand the implications of this. for example, bornstein has a list of the different type of gender outlaws and never mentions the possibility of gender nonconforming 'cis' people; we're just in the privileged group of 'cisgender, binary-identified men and women.' (pg 85)

i do like that she views the whole lesbian separatist vs trans women debacle with some level of nuance (pg 104). and how she acknowledges and discusses male privilege (in some places (pg 140), in others the text implies bringing it up is transphobic (pg 61)) but other things - saying that gay bashing is more about gender performance than sexual orientation (pg 135)... these things aren't divisible. being gay is to be in a sense, gender non-conforming.... (see: wittig) tbh, some of the thing she says are kind of homophobic i.e. calling LGBT people straight if they don't identify as 'queer' (pg 172).

i just find her thoughts a bit scattered, and not very rigorous.

Cameron says

It seems very obvious to me that Bornstein became involved in trans thought and politics before being involved in feminist thought and politics; the lens is not a feminist one, and I do wish she had brought in more discussion about gendered power dynamics, masculinity and femininity. She says in at least a couple bits and implies in many others that upholding our gender system upholds misogyny; breaking it down is inherently anti-patriarchal, while I think that it's actually perfectly possible to have a society with fluid gender and a vast range of genders and gender expressions, and still have patriarchy in the form of femmephobia and misogyny. Really, trans women don't get a break from misogyny just because they transgress gender boundaries – they're hit with it very hard, because they're usually seen as choosing to be women, which is a giant middle finger to the patriarchy, and also means they're seen as asking for objectification and violence.

Again, and again, she groups all trans people into one massive lump – as gender outlaws, as people who should form a community separate from the lesbian and gay ones, as people who are defined in the largest part by their trans-ness and transgression of gender. (This is another way in which I think we can see that her trans politics precluded her feminist ones (although the two, ideally, are not separate.)) She specifically says she doesn't think it's wrong for trans women to be excluded from women's spaces; while I think current discourses tend to fall into the oppression Olympics (cis lesbians are more privileged than trans women, therefore they need to shut up and let us in!), I disagree strongly with this for a multitude of other reasons, and it threw me off very strongly. I also find the mindset that possessing one or several oppressed identities entitles one to not examine one's actions is a really troubling dynamic – it's the same one that is employed

by white women to avoid discussing racism, or black men to avoid discussing misogyny, or trans men to avoid discussing misogyny. She states in another section that anger has little place in activism, its main role being to reveal a need for action – I would have thought that this extended to many other emotions as well, and would end up with a model of activism in which all are rational about their actions, who is included in their groups, and who isn't.

It will probably come as no surprise that she also seems to fall into bits of discourse that would be labeled, without context, subversivist, and although if we take into account her viewpoint that very few people are "entirely men" or "entirely women," (oh, this is phrased badly), it isn't technically subversivist, it ends up having the same implications.

Her analysis of the oppressive gender binary ("gender system") entirely fails to address its patriarchal and colonial roots, and the misogynistic and racist dynamics it helps to perpetuate today.

Some of her analyses are simply lacking – in one paragraph, she's talking about *The Crying Game*, and how the guy who discovered that a woman was transsexual vomited. She says that it's "not so much as a sign of revulsion as an admission of attraction, and the consequential upheaval of his gender identity and sexual orientation." I mean – if the dude's throwing up, he's disgusted to be attracted to you, and that stems from degendering and misgendering the woman in front of him, the disgust with her deceit, the disgust with his own doubt at his sexuality, the disgust with something so unnatural that it disturbs every conception he's had about gender and sexuality and gendered appearances in general. Bornstein seems to view it as – well, his own identity was uprooted, therefore he's nauseous – whereas I think if he's vomiting, his own identity hasn't been uprooted in any meaningful way – he's desperately scrabbling to maintain his hold on them, he's still convinced that every previous conception of gender and sexuality he held is correct.

In one section, she also describes Navajo *nadle* as "sort of transgendered male-to-female persons," and I'm really, really uncomfortable with her projecting our vocabularies and notions of gender onto indigenous cultures and genders. She's already stated very early in the book that society constructs not only gender roles but genders; I expected better from her.

Joanna says

Kate Bornstein is so incredibly charming. This book is charming. But I'm already sold on most of what she is trying to convince me, uh... mainly "Let's not be defined by gender because it sucks being confined to stereotypes and anyway it's crazy." Agreed! Uh... now what?

But that question, "now what?" is difficult for this book to answer because it is an incredibly 90s book. Which I didn't think was too long ago but man, this book is nearly 20 years old. So "now" was 20 years ago. OMG i am so old. As a result the book's revolutionary tone strikes me more as a relic of its time than anything passion rousing. Man, time's an asshole.

She really shines when she talks about her personal experiences, which is why I much prefer her memoir, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She is Today*. In fact, reading that book before this one really helped me understand what she was trying to get across better.
