

Who Did You Say You Are?:

An Interview with Riki Anne Wilchins

by Isa Leshko

Riki Anne Wilchins is trying to bring gender deconstructionist theory to the streets. Its not just a matter of putting theory into practice. To hir, the theory is the practice.

Identity Politics

Isa: In an interview with Cindy Martin of Transgender Forum, you said: "A 'gay rights' movement, whatever its successes, will have failed in some fundamental ways since it has been co-opted at the outset by the terms of its oppressors." What did you mean by this statement?

Riki: We are waging an entire movement based on the fact that we are homosexuals or transexuals when these terms are essentially diagnostic categories thought of by Havelock Ellis. Straight society invented labels to stigmatize and marginalize identities based on what one does with ones body. As Foucault says, prior to the 1800s there was no such thing as a homosexual. There were certainly same-sex acts, but it wasn't until after the 1800s that the homosexual had a name, face and identity. transexual is a name that doctors decided to create for something that occurred between my legs. I also had a rhinoplasty, so I suppose that means that I also have a rhino identity disorder, whose treatment is to live full time for one year with a smaller nose. Its ridiculous isn't it? Yet because I went for a dick job, I have a gender identity disorder. It would be funny if it wasn't so serious.....I'm also still uncertain how it is that where somebody parks their genitals for the night becomes the fundamental basis for their primary social identity. I may be gay, but is that all I am? Is that all I want to be? Does that really describe me?

And I'm still not sure what happens when someone wants to screw me. Does that make them gay or lesbian or bisexual or trisexual?...A lot of lesbians sleep with men, what does that make them? One lesbian friend recently said to me, "I'm thinking of breaking up with Gene because he started hormones and people think hes a guy. I don't want to be taken for a straight couple. Am I still a lesbian?" So I asked, "Why do you care?" She said, "Because now I'm invisible. I'm very proud of my lesbian identity."

But the problem with trying to make an identity visible is that it requires you to continually speak for that identity. To speak ones name in public is a very powerful act. On the other hand, it can entrap one within the name.

Isa: In what ways has this "co-opted identity" diluted the efficacy of the queer movement?

Riki: The queer movement seems entirely unable to inquire how these identities were generated and what maintains them. There's a tremendous impotence in this community to look to issues of its own existence. This is because the gay community by and large is brain dead, as is the trans community, I'm crushed to say. The only kind of theory coming out of either community is now coming at such a high level of academic abstraction that it can only be followed by people in philosophy departments.

...What all groups do as they become philosophically inert is resort to the last best refuge: a rights-based rhetoric. Increasingly, all queers can talk

about is their rights—not that we don't use it in the trans community. It's a very selfish philosophy; it's basically "you got yours, and now I want mine." People should have their rights but it can't be all of what you are about.

...Before the Tyra Hunter demonstration in front of Marion Barry's office in Washington, DC, one of the people in our group called the NAACP and asked them to make a statement on Tyra, who was a person of color. They said, "This is awful, but we're not about gender expression, we're about race."

Rights-based movements tend not to go very far because they're one-note sambas. They don't engage the best in people. They don't ask you to look beyond your own narrow self interest. Part of the reason you don't see many demonstrations and other actions happening is that there's nothing to engage people's moral focus.

Isa: How would you restructure queer identity to be less constrictive and divisive?

Riki: Right now we have two cages for sex or gender. The rules are: everyone has to be in a cage, no one can be in both cages, and no one can occupy the middle ground. By being transexual, you break one of those rules, you go from one cage to another. But you still enforce the rule that you can only be in one cage or the other.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could open the doors to the cages and allow people to move freely back and forth? That would allow us to occupy the middle ground. This is what Judith Butler means when she talks about letting the boundaries float free.

The first step is to leech identity of its essentialism. By essentialism, I mean we have no choice (in who we are); we cannot change. For example, people say to me, "you're still a guy, you're just a guy with a vagina." That essentializes my identity in unpleasant ways. The second step is to allow for more variety. There are very few sexed or gendered identities to choose from. Even if there was a free market, we wouldn't be able to choose from very many possibilities.

The final step is to allow the boundaries to be porous, enabling us to change freely from one identity to another. If we do that, then I think we can still have identities but people would not be punished for going from one identity to another.

Isa: One common interpretation of this theory is that gender is a linear spectrum with the binaries of maleness and femaleness as its anchors. Do you agree with this assertion?

Riki: If we start talking in those terms, we have naturalized the concept that there is a binary out there and that trans people fall along it. Maybe trans people are actually at the end, and the rest of y'all fall along the spectrum.

Maybe gender doesn't even exist. My definition lately is that gender is a difference engine. It creates difference between bodies based on their reproductive potential. It's a pretty ridiculous way to look at



photo: Mariette Patty Allen

Riki Anne Wilchins

the body. Butler's point is even more subtle. We assume that gender is the expression of what culture does with a sexed body such that bodies with breasts have to wear dresses.

But suppose that distinction is illusory. Suppose you turn it on its head and say sex is what culture makes of the gendered body. In other words, there is a culture that requires difference so it looks at the body and starts seeing difference. That de-essentializes sex and makes gender the engine for cultural expression (dresses, make-up) and explains why we differentiate bodies.

Isa: How can the queer movement transcend a rights-based approach?

Riki: We need to start organizing around functions instead of identities. Let me give you an example. It is arguably a fact that as many men are raped on any given day in the United States as women. But we do not discuss prison rape. NOW organizes around the rape of women, not around the rape of men. But if we're against sexual violence, why do we care on which bodies it occurs? If you're against rape, you're against it whether it happens on trans bodies, or on women's bodies, or on men's bodies, or on my German Shepherd. Sexism in the form of violence is wrong.

Over the last 20 years, we've had people like Tip O'Neil running Congress and the liberal left started taking it easy. We balkanized in these little communities so that NOW doesn't work with NGLTF, who doesn't work with HRC, who doesn't work with the trans community, and so on.

Meanwhile the right, as the party out of power, had done an excellent job in organizing around function. Groups like the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority don't have a lot in common except several key issues, but they are nonetheless very good at working together.

We need to follow this **continued on page 29**

example, and realize we have a natural commonality of interests across issues like employment discrimination, sexual violence, hate crimes, and medical care. We need to stop looking for our own little slice of identity pie.

The experience of having gay identity teaches you very profound lessons about outsiderdom. If you really understand that lesson how can you only stand for your right to be gay? If you cannot make the connection that this happens to others then I don't think you've learned very much from the oppression that you've experienced.

There is a machinery that takes groups which do not fit the norm and inflicts violence upon them. It squeezes them out to the margins and flushes them out to the bottom of the system economically. It has done this reliably with one kind of minority after another. If you don't try to dismantle the larger machine, then it just goes ahead and does the same thing with another group. I don't mean to argue that all oppressions are interchangeable. They each have distinctive features but there's also a tremendous commonality.

Within one month in New York City, I've been harassed as a dyke, as a fag-got, as a sex change and as a bitch. Unless I have four different people running around inside of my skin that experience tells me there is a commonality to these oppressions. We need to be engaged in fighting all of them.

Isa: Has your own activism employed a function-based approach?

Riki: The transgender movement is not about trying to cement and valorize yet one more marginalized people, leaving behind some smaller minority, like the intersexed, to wage their own struggle. It's not just about those minorities whom Kate Bornstein called "transgressively gendered," those identities inevitably corralled in the old gender binary zoo: the radical fairies, fag hags, the diesel dykes, transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers.

The transgender movement is also about the 17-year old Midwestern cheerleader who ruins her health with anorexia because "real women" are supposed to be supernaturally thin. It's also about the Joe SixPack who wraps his car around a school bus on the way back from the bar because "real men" are supposed to be "heavy drinkers." It's about an aging body, that suffers through a wholly unnecessary hysterectomy because certain kinds of gendered bodies just don't count as much. It's also about a young man who is repeatedly gang raped his first year in prison because within that environment he is perceived as a gender queer or gender vulnerable. Those are all examples of gender-based oppression. I organize around the function of that oppression, not an essentialized identity. I'm not at all interested in waging a struggle for trans identity. That's why the Gender PAC is dedicated to gender, affectional and racial equality.

Isa: Yet The Menace's actions that focus on trans inclusion (like adding the transgender name to the Stonewall 25 logo) are inspired by an identity-based approach.

Riki: They do. I think that part of the problem is that we have limited resources and that's an area in which almost no one is doing any work. That's a problem. If someone from another group gets killed, there's an outcry. If a transgender prostitute gets killed, this person is (considered) disposable. We end up doing actions that are more around trans-identified people because those are the ones that no one's looking at.

But we are looking for actions around other kinds of oppressions which are also uncovered. The Menace doesn't need to be doing something that 15 queer groups are already working on. Were looking for (groups and issues) that are not drawing any attention, like Stop Prison Rape, that we think are in line with our goals.

This is all new territory, which flows directly from the work of Judith Butler. To my knowledge, she has never talked about putting her work into direct action. And I've never heard anybody else try it. Every group that I know of has more or less organized around identity and a particular class of individuals. For me it's a real experiment.

All in the Family

Isa: What are the underlying causes of transphobia in the queer movement?

Riki: There are a lot of queers who are afraid of being queer. It's a shame, but the truth is that the people who are the most straight looking get the most power at the soonest possible moment. As a result, there is a tendency to try to disenfranchise those who are queer in the wider sense.

It used to be that gay people said to the straight world that we will not go straight until you go gay. In the 1980s that message transmogrified into "gay is as good as straight." At that precise moment, the gay movement lost its radical potential and became just another 'me too' movement. And so instead of trying to remember Audre Lorde's dictum that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, we have instead become content to merely try to build a small but tastefully furnished addition out back.

I need to underscore this is not any different in the trans community. For example, some straight white male cross dressers say, "I'm not a homosexual, I

have nothing to do with them, don't use the word queer about me. I just like to try on a dress now and then." They've got to be kidding. I tell them, "When they beat you up on the street, they're gonna call you a fag. Are you going to explain to the basher that you're just a straight white guy who has a wife and two kids and likes to wear dresses occasionally?"

Isa: Some of your opponents assert that a rejection of the gender binary invalidates their identity. For example, some transsexuals feel very strongly identified to one gender. Gay and lesbian identity is also largely dependent on the existence of this gender binary. How do you respond to this criticism?

Riki: There's a lot of truth to that. A lot of people look at the claims of post-modernism or even post-identity politics and they feel a void opening up at their feet. If I am not x, what am I? If one literally follows Judith Butler's injunctions, let the categories flow free and let the boundaries be porous, what does this mean? This is a problem.

I have found that the gay community at large feels that letting in trans people will deprive them of their identity. But no one's saying you shouldn't identify that way. Were just saying you shouldn't essentialize that identity. I don't think when God looks down God sees gay people and straight people or white people and Black people. I don't think that dogs see us that way. There's a litmus, if a weiner-dog doesn't see you as a trans person, it's not a real identity.

HRC/ENDA

Isa: Opponents to trans inclusion of ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act) claim that the bill's sexual orientation provisions already protect you. Why do you disagree with that claim?

Riki: Let's say that I am a butch lesbian and I show up at work in a three piece suit and a tie. They can still fire me because that is considered to be an expression of gender. They can say, "We thought she was married with kids. This is not about her being gay. We consider showing up in a suit and tie to be totally inappropriate."

I'm always interested in the argument that sexual preference is different from gender expression and is not part of gender oppression. I looked this one gay man in the eye and said, "excuse me, are you trying to tell me that inserting a penis into your body is not a fully gendered act which is reserved and regulated onto female bodies? It seems to me that inserting a penis into your mouth or any orifice is a fully gendered act that is reserved for only female bodies."

And if we take the other end, there is an enormous underground community of millions of people who are your average straight white cross-dressers. No one is speaking to their issues at all. In some ways they are more empowered because they can hide. In other ways they are the most disempowered because it's possible to maybe keep your job if you are a gay person or transsexual. It's impossible to keep your job if you're a cross dresser.

Occasionally, at work, people try to be friendly and ask, "When did you get your surgery?" They have a nice expectant look in their eye. So I say, "Surgery, smurgery, I just really get off on wearing women's clothing." And all of a sudden their faces fall off because I've slid from being a nice trans person to being a sex pervert who probably has an erection right then at that moment.

Isa: Given the current hostile rightwing climate on Capital Hill, do you think trans inclusion would actually hurt ENDA's chances of passing?

Riki: I understand the demands of real politics. I would have been personally less distressed had the powers that be made a last ditch do or die effort for trans inclusion and then said, "Look we can't do it. It's not going to happen, let us off the hook." But that's not what happened. I think we were looking for at least a good faith effort [instead of] being left by the wayside a priori.

Isa: In March, HRC Executive Director Elizabeth Birch testified on behalf of adding transgendered people to the Hate Crimes Statistics Act (HCSA), which is under review for renewal. Does this mark a truce between The Menace and HRC?

Riki: We are pleased that HRC has come around to be more trans inclusive and in working closer with the trans community. However, there is a lot of ground that needs to be covered. We look forward to working with them on this.

HRC has already extended their boundaries a bit. But I don't think we are more legitimated yet within HRC's normal scope of activities except ENDA and Hate Crimes, about which we have specifically asked them. I look forward to the day when HRC, like NGLTF, starts to look at the larger queer community as that which it is chartered to serve. And I think in order to do that, they're going to have to look seriously at redefining their mission to include bi people, s/m people, drag-identified people and trans people and not just those who identify as gay or lesbian. NGLTF has already made great strides in that direction. I think HRC needs to follow in that same vein.

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