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Author

Kafai, Shayda

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“Dissemination of Sexual Signifiers: Transgressive Hair”

Performance artist, clown, and juggler Jennifer Miller exists in self-defined liminal space: “Liminal means: an ‘in between place.’ It means ‘in a doorway, dawn or dusky’ ... In the theater, it’s when the lights go out and before the performance begins.” Living as a woman with a beard since her late teens, Miller began to actively challenge sexually codified spaces and stereotypes. Miller created Circus Amok, a circus that confronts heteronormativity and social and political injustices, as an extension of her body and the message it carries. Aware of the traditionally conflicting images of breast and full beard, Miller uses her physical appearance as a conduit to perpetually challenge the hegemonically established borders of man and woman. Simultaneously, the essential female category is also deconstructed; the validity of these categories is questioned. It is important to note that the essentialist terms “man,” “woman,” “female,” and “male” are used in this paper maintaining Judith Butler’s notion of strategic provisionality.

Hair is symbolic, is power. According to sociologist Anthony Synnott, author of *The Body Social*, “Hair is one of our most powerful symbols ... powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because although personal it is also public, rather than private” (103). When Miller’s beard started to grow in, she was 17. During the 10 years it took for her beard to fill, Miller was able to sculpt and define her own identity as a lesbian artist, and activist. In this way, her physical body became an intimate part of her understanding of social and gender issues. A body that does not replicate heteronormative appearance asserts

courage, a need to break open spaces of marginality. Miller states that, “What’s important, beautiful, and useful and ultimately productive and strongest *is* many ways of being ... the idea to become one of the same with the rest of the world, in fact that will fail” (*Juggling Gender*). This personal conviction empowered her to such a degree that she felt she didn’t have to shave her beard, to conform to compulsive normality, the dictated image of “woman.”

The growth of Miller’s beard was fraught, however, with negotiation. Initially, the beard became the center of discomfort, a stigmatic presence she did not voice to her friends. She quickly realized how difficult it was to get a job, particularly as a woman who was intentionally transgressing visual female norms. The firmly established theory that sexual signifiers such as the beard, short hair, and the mustache are associated with men, while long hair and a clean face are associated with women, haunts and demands gender conformity. Anyone who transgresses these established binaries is viewed as Other. It can be understood, however, to be doubly problematic if the transgression occurs on the face. Synnott suggests that the face, in particular, “symbolizes the self, and signifies different facets of the self” (73). Miller is a woman carrying male sexual signifiers on her face. She examines this paradox, arguing that “if a woman has a beard, then she’s breaking a gender defining line. A beard is a really specific gender defining line and so, it is treading on male territory, which is treading on male power” (*Juggling Gender*). Miller’s face, then, represents a multiplicity of genders, a physical manifestation of her border existence.

Since Miller herself is negotiating varied sexual signifiers on her face, the issue of personal identification arises. She defines herself as a woman, a lesbian. The social definitions, however, are less certain. Documentary filmmaker Tami Gold follows Miller on the streets of New York. As Miller speaks, a man suddenly walks up to her and rubs his face to hers. He wants

to know “if [the beard is] real.” The clash of a feminine voice and masculine signifiers creates confusion; Miller’s body becomes space for others’ bewilderment. Synnott argues that “Beards are rarely regarded simply as beards. They always seem to symbolize something else” (121). The additional symbolism of the beard, in this case, can be understood as essential masculinity. The predetermined idea that a beard is essentially male gets reclaimed, however, on Miller’s face. Simultaneously, the essential female category also gets deconstructed; the validity of these categories is questioned. Transgressive hair, then, by nature of its subversion, carries power.

Because of the way she complicates gender, Miller’s definition of gender is more inclusive. She understands gender to be, “Not only who I am, but my interaction with society, so I would sort of be glad to think of myself as woman *with* a beard, even though the category of woman I’m speaking of is not what we rigidly think of as woman” (*Juggling Gender*, my emphasis). Theorist Judith Halberstam’s chapter entitled “Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum” further contextualizes Miller’s gender hybridity. Halberstam sites Michel Foucault’s concept of “reverse discourse” when speaking of the nonlinear existence of gender identity: “There is, Foucault suggests, a ‘reverse discourse’ in which one empowers a category that might have been used to oppress one—one transforms a debased position into a challenging presence” (Halberstam 159). Miller uses the beard to empower the feminine. The inversion of the beard defies the subjugated position placed on woman while concurrently pointing to the artificiality of both genders. The fluidity of gender, of the body politic, arises from performativity. Further, the choice to keep and wear the beard challenges the meaning of beard as a male sexual signifier.

In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler examines the inclusiveness of drag arguing that all gender is drag:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original...* (313)

The notion that there is no original identity at once undoes the mythic and essentialist powers of the categories male and female. Miller acknowledges this when she states, “How does a dyke, bearded lesbian perform herself? I don’t know ... I don’t know how to perform in public as a lesbian anymore ... We’re all drag queens” (*Juggling Gender*). Miller’s ambivalence towards how to perform, towards what dominant discourse requests, suggests that she is aware of drag’s most effective quality: revealing the performativity of gender. In order to understand the complicated nature of Miller’s performance, camp, the aesthetic practice, needs to be examined. Susan Sontag states that, “Indeed the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ... It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (Sontag). Miller’s body contextualizes what Sontag refers to as “the metaphor of life as theater.” On the streets of New York, Miller’s body is theater as she performs, or to use Sontag, role plays male and female. While camp is seen as an aesthetic, the more impactful result of existing in an active, boundary space is that the beard and the exaggeration of camp allow Miller to have the option of existing in a pluralistic, ambiguous space filled with possibility.

This flexibility speaks to Sue Ellen Case’s argument in the essay “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic.” Case states that the roles butch and femme, “provid[e] [one] with at least two options for gender identification, and with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it” (Case 301). This subversive flexibility allows Miller to transgress gender specific boundaries while appearing as though she is inside either the role man, woman, or both.

Following Butler's concept that "*imitation* does not copy that which is prior, but produces and *invents* the very terms of priority and derivativeness," (313) the argument that Miller *imitates* the bearded woman is complicated. She is in fact merely imitating the symbol, while appropriating the traditional, phallogocentric role of the bearded woman. Bearded women were part of the sideshows and freak shows organized by P.T. Barnum and other showmen during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Due to her physical difference, to her possession of a male signifier, it became crucial for the bearded woman to confirm her femininity. The cabinet style photographs that were taken of bearded women and then sold often depicted them in traditional Victorian dresses, her long hair combed and exposed. Robert Bogdan, author of *Freak Show* states that bearded women "typically appeared in straightforward status-enhancing motifs—except for the beards, these women represented the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood" (224). Because of their incongruent sexual signifier, the bearded woman's gender needed to be reaffirmed because gender ambiguity evokes terror. As a result, the bearded woman's physical representation was socially coded to represent the normate: woman in dress, woman with long, combed hair gazing into a mirror. Miller reverses the mythic role of the bearded woman as she identifies herself as a woman *with* a beard. This rephrasing returns agency to her body as she is no longer defined by a monolithic name; she is not merely defined by a sexual signifier. The beard as signifier becomes secondary to the woman and identification via sexual signifiers is dislocated.

Miller's body exists in a state of transition, as it is at once, a personal and public body, one that is constantly changing and challenging the dangers of essential femininity. Just like the stranger who came up to Miller in the streets of New York, who rubbed his face onto her face to define the nature of her beard, and her sexuality, we are at once in awe of the body of physical

difference, while we are simultaneously challenged and in fear of it. With a body that inspires curiosity, and at times fear, Miller challenges traditional implications of hair, deconstructing the lineage of femininity that finds its origins in the sideshow/freak show. Who defines how much hair equals man and how much hair equals woman is vigorously challenged by Miller. The connotations associated with the beard are also questioned and problematized; the beard is no longer a word solely connected with masculinity.

The specificity and rigidity of gender is altered through Miller's body. Difference is welcomed and the fracturing of normalcy is encouraged. Hair will continue as a mythic, at times transgressive, and powerful symbol in a social and private context. Miller's urgency to live as herself regardless of hegemonic standards, however, highlights the possibilities of existing in the liminal, marginal spaces.

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