

# SEX and GENDER: REALITY and FANTASY

## An Introduction to Gender Queer Theory and Tales

BY TANIA KUPCZAK

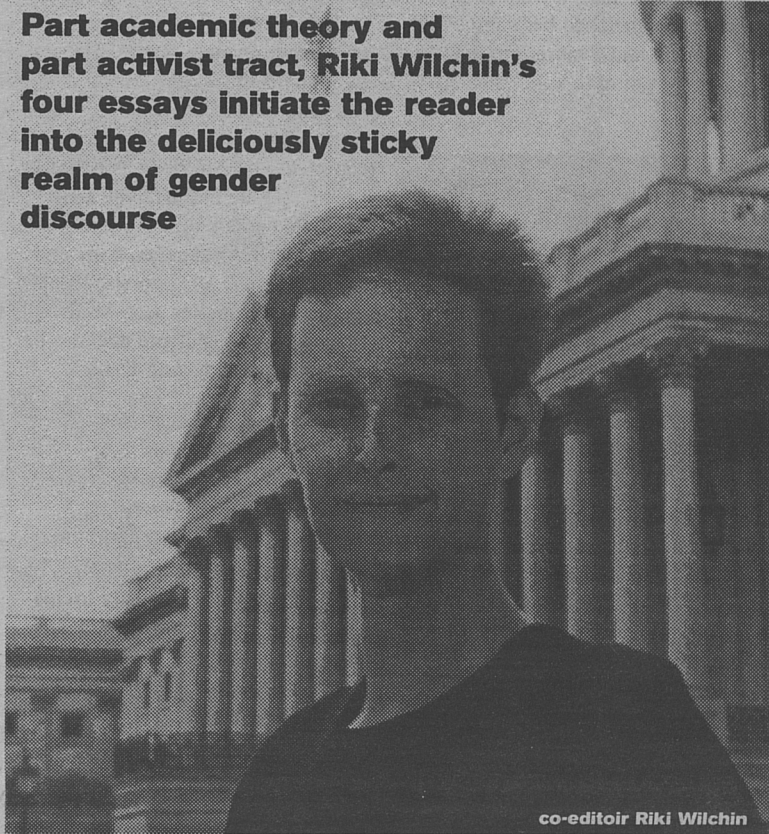
I was happy to end my six-month fantasy fiction marathon with *GenderQueer*, a new anthology of "voices from beyond the sexual binary" published by Alyson Books. I tend to be mistrustful of collections that promise both a solid grounding in critical thought and entertaining content. There are few books that successfully straddle the tricky divide between theory and fiction. It's a difficult task, particularly in the realm of gender critique. Genre-spanning anthologies generally fall short on one or both ends of my satisfaction. However, *GenderQueer* delivers all aspects of a well-rounded collection of essays that precisely describe the imprecision of gender identity by the very multiplicity of voices within the pages.

The anthology begins with three introductions, one from each editor, which orients them in the discussion of gender with respect to their own experiences. Joan Nestle speaks of her years as a lesbian activist, author and self-identified femme. Her honesty in admitting she isn't sure if her voice is valid in *GenderQueer*, since she has always identified as a woman, becomes a kind of permission for any concerned person to enter the conversation. Immediately, certain readers, perhaps those unfamiliar with gender theory, are invited to delve deeper. The subsequent introductions by librarian Clare Howell and Riki Wilchins, the executive director of GenderPAC, speak from inside the genderqueer community and provoke a further participation in the creation of gender theory.

Despite the intellectual overtones, this is an intensely personal collection of stories. It begins with Riki Wilchins' four essays grouped under the heading "A Certain Kind of Freedom." Part academic theory and part activist tract, they initiate the reader into the deliciously sticky realm of gender discourse. Although the language is sometimes trite, I can easily forgive a little misplaced humor with such weighty substance. No matter if you respond with feelings of curiosity, recognition, or utter confusion, Wilchins' essays leave you desirous for more first-person narratives.

The main body of writings is simply titled "Stories" but the breadth of experience represented by the works is incredibly powerful. Sylvia Rivera, the late veteran of the Stonewall uprising and long-time political activist, tells a painful history of erasure of trans issues from the gay and lesbian rights movement in her moving essay "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones." Equally important in marking out domains of misrepresentation is Cheryl Chase's story of her awakening as an inter-

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co-editor Riki Wilchins

### review

**GenderQueer:  
Voices from Beyond  
the Sexual Binary**  
Edited by Joan Nestle, Clare  
Howell, and Riki Wilchins.  
Alyson Books, 2002.

sexual person. As she candidly reveals her struggle for identity in a society that offers only two mutually exclusive categories, it becomes clear that her voice is empowered because of her biology and her consciousness.

Interspersed with many other valuable autobiographical narratives are works of fiction; haunting prose that reveals subtle shifts in identity. Among the many outstanding works, Aaron Link's exquisite piece "Scars" drew me back again and again. Drawing lines between his own chest scars from top surgery, his brother's scar from heart surgery and his mother's scar from a mastectomy, Link describes a family bound together by the pain that has transformed their bodies. The companion piece by Link's mother, Gilda Raz, bears the same title and echoes the bittersweet loss and gain of mothering a trans child.

In Wilchins' essay "A Continuous Nonverbal Communication," s/he writes that gender is like a lens that we're so used to looking through that we can't even remember what the world looked like before. In this respect the story-tellers in this anthology are true visionaries, affirming a world that reveals a myriad of ways of being. When I mentioned I was reviewing *GenderQueer*, a friend commented that she had heard the book was poorly organized. My immediate

response is that it's a matter of choosing not to group the narratives by style or content. Instead of categorizing, the editors leave each voice to stand on its own, following and leading into equally valid stories. For me, this editorial decision reflects a new direction in genderqueer theory: the form is entirely up to each individual to create and only gains from the strength that surrounds it.

While some of the stories enter the realm of erotica and others reflect emotional fantasy, there is no doubt that all are earnest voices. Of course, there were stories that didn't move me, but I think this merely reinforces the conscious editorial decision to represent the genderqueer community as completely as possible. As a scholar, I tried to deconstruct the rhetoric of academia and find some humanity in the language. As a woman who has not been mistaken for a boy in many years, I still felt a deep compassionate resonance with the stories unfolding in *GenderQueer*. There are some struggles that transcend theory, and in these narratives of bravery I found myself inspired reconsider certain aspects of cultural vision that I take for granted.

It's difficult to not find yourself, whatever your gender identity, in one or more of the narratives in *GenderQueer*. It is an anthology that addresses the acute need for immediate and intense attention to gender issues while also providing some measure of comfort in the fundamental commonality of all people, revealing that we are all somewhat above the gender binary if we only learn how to see it. ▼

Tania Kupczak is a biogirl who lives in Jericho and respects her friends' rights to choose their own pronouns.



Julie Walters Jamie Bell Jamie Draven

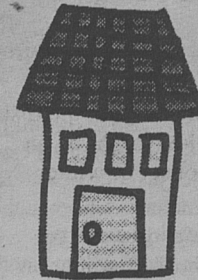
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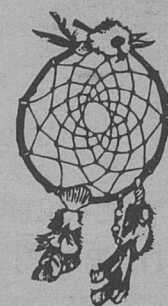
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