

TRANSGENDER LIBERATION

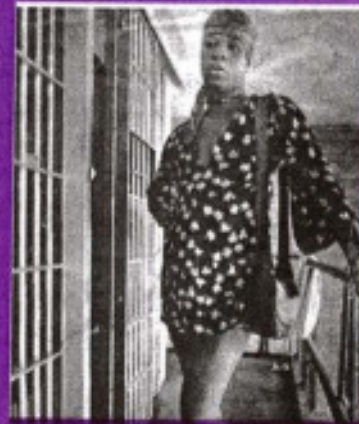
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TRANS GENDER LIBERATION

*A movement
whose time
has come*

By Leslie Feinberg



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whose time
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By Lealie Feinberg



Dedicated with love to Dotty Ballan
who urged me to forge my anger
into a language of persuasion,
but who defended me long before I had the words.
I wish she'd lived to read this pamphlet.
For me, her memory resonates in every word I've chosen.

Acknowledgment of thanks:

To Bob McCubbin for showing me how
to use an old key to unlock new doors.
To Preston Wood for his consistent
understanding and encouragement.
To the transgendered members of our Party
for their clear vision and tensile strength.
And to the Buffalo branch of Workers World Party
for tirelessly raising consciousness about transgender
and for creating a "liberated territory"
where I rejuvenate when I feel battered and raw.

Illustrations:

Front cover (clockwise from top left): "cross"-dressing Mummies, rural England, c. 1900, (see p. 16); Hareheempe (Crow "Woman Chief"), c. 1850, (p. 7); Jack Bee Garland (born Elvira Mugarieta), c. 1897, (p. 19); transgendered prisoner, Walla Walla, c. 1970; "cross"-dressed South Indian Bhonta dancers; Conquistadors setting dogs on Native herdache, (p. 8); title page; Craig Klose; photo of author: Eugene Charrington.

Back cover (clockwise from top left): modern-day Singapore transvestites; two photos of Ralph Kerwinco (born Ezra Anderson), South American Indian, c. 1914, (p. 20); Osh-Tishe, Crow Nation, c. 1900, (p. 8); Joan of Arc, executed for transvestism in 1431, (p. 12); Stella (Ernest) Boulton and Fanny (Frederick) Park, 1890, (p. 18); "cross"-dressed celebrant in Brazil honoring transgendered deity; jazz musician Billy Tipton, died 1989, (p. 6); "cross"-dressed priest in Abomey, West Africa, c. 1950.



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Breaking the silence

This pamphlet is an attempt to trace the historic rise of an oppression that, as yet, has no commonly agreed name. We are talking here about people who defy the "man"-made boundaries of gender.

Gender: self-expression, not anatomy.

All our lives we've been taught that sex and gender are synonymous—men are "masculine" and women are "feminine." Pink for girls and blue for boys. It's just "natural," we've been told. But at the turn of the century in this country, blue was considered a girl's color and pink was a boy's. Simplistic and rigid gender codes are neither eternal nor natural. They are changing social concepts.

Nevertheless, there's nothing wrong with men who are considered "masculine" and women whose self-expression falls into the range of what is considered "feminine." The problem is that the many people who don't fit these narrow social constraints run a gamut of harassment and violence.

This raises the question: Who decided what the "norm" should be? Why are some people punished for their self-expression?

Many people today would be surprised to learn that ancient communal societies held transgendered people in high esteem. It took a bloody campaign by the emerging ruling classes to declare what had been considered natural to be its opposite. That prejudice, foisted on society by its ruling elite, endures today.

Yet even in a society where there are harsh social penalties for not fitting, a large part of the population can't or won't change their nature. It is apparent that there are many ways for women and men to be; everything in nature is a continuum.

Many of the terms used to describe us are words that cut and scar.

When I first worked in the factories of Buffalo as a teenager, women like me were called "he-shes." Although "he-shes" in the plants were most frequently lesbians, we were recognized not by our sexual preference but by the way we expressed our gender.

There are other words used to express the wide range of "gender outlaws": transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bulldaggers, stone butches, androgynes, diesel dykes or berdache—a European colonialist term.

We didn't choose these words. They don't fit all of us. It's hard to fight an



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Two of her short stories about gender oppression are included in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. Her novel on the same subject, *Stone Butch Blues*, is due to be released by Firebrand Books in 1992.

oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us.

In recent years a community has begun to emerge that is sometimes referred to as the gender or transgender community. Within our community is a diverse group of people who define ourselves in many different ways. Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions. The language used in this pamphlet may quickly become outdated as the gender community coalesces and organizes—a wonderful problem.

We've chosen words in this pamphlet we hope are understandable to the vast majority of working and oppressed people in this country, as a tool to battle bigotry and brutality. We are trying to find words, however inadequate, that can connect us, that can capture what is similar about the oppression we endure. We have also given careful thought to our use of pronouns, striving for both clarity and sensitivity in a language that only allows for two sexes.

Great social movements forge a common language—tools to reach out and win broader understanding. But we've been largely shut out of the progressive movement.

It was gay transvestites who led the 1969 battle at the Stonewall Inn in New York City that gave birth to the modern lesbian and gay movement.

But just as the lesbian and gay movement had to win over the progressive movement to the understanding that struggling shoulder to shoulder together would create a more powerful force for change, the transgendered community is struggling to win the same understanding from the lesbian and gay movement.

Many people think that all "masculine" women are lesbians and all "feminine" men are gay. That is a misunderstanding. Not all lesbians and gay men are "cross"-gendered. Not all transgendered women and men are lesbian or gay. Transgendered people are mistakenly viewed as the cusp of the lesbian and gay community. In reality the two huge communities are like circles that only partially overlap.

While the oppressions within these two powerful communities are not the same, we face a common enemy. Gender-phobia—like racism, sexism and bigotry against lesbians and gay men—is meant to keep us divided. Unity can only increase our strength.

Solidarity is built on understanding how and why oppression exists and who profits from it. It is our view that revolutionary changes in human society can do away with inequality, bigotry and intolerance.

In the spirit of building that fighting movement, we offer this view of the sweeping patterns in history, the commonality of women and men who have walked the path of the berdache, of the transgendered—walked that road whether we were held in high esteem or reviled.

Look at us. We are battling for survival. Listen. We are struggling to be heard.

Transgender predates oppression

Jazz musician Billy Tipton died in 1989 at the age of 74. He will be remembered most not for his music, but for the revelation that Tipton was born a woman. Tipton died of an untreated bleeding ulcer rather than visit a doctor and risk exposure.

After his death this debate began: Did Tipton live as a man simply in order to

work as a musician in a male-dominated industry or because of lesbian oppression?

It is true that women's oppression, especially under capitalism, has created profound social and economic pressures that force women to pass as men for survival. But this argument leaves out transgendered women—women who are considered so “masculine” in class society that they endure extreme harassment and danger. Many of these women are forced to “pass” in order to live. Of course transgendered women also experience the crushing weight of economic inequity and, in many cases, anti-lesbian oppression. These factors also play a role in forcing “masculine” women as well as non-transgendered women to pass.

If “masculine” women are acknowledged at all, it is implied that they're merely a product of decadent patriarchal capitalism and that when genuine equality is won, they will disappear.

It's “passing” that's new

Transgendered women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is *passing* that's historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today.

There are legions of women and men whose self-expression, as judged by Hollywood stereotypes, is “at odds” with their sex. Some are forced underground or “pass” because of the repression and ostracism they endure.

Today all gender education teaches that women are “feminine,” men are “masculine,” and an unforgivable river rages between these banks. The reality is there is a whole range of ways for women and men to express themselves.

Transgender is a very ancient form of human expression that pre-dates oppression. It was once regarded with honor. A glance at human history proves that when societies were not ruled by exploiting classes that rely on divide-and-conquer tactics, “cross-gendered” youths, women and men on all continents were respected members of their communities.

“She is a man”

“Strange country, this,” a white man wrote of the Crow nation on this continent in 1850, “where males assume the dress and perform the duties of females, while women turn men and mare with their own sex.”

Randy Butts, a founder of the modern group Gay American Indians, wrote that GAI's History Project documented these alternative roles for women and men in over 135 North American Native nations.

The high incidence of transgendered men and women in Native societies on this continent was documented by the colonialists who referred to them as *berdache*.

Perhaps the most notable of all berdache Native women was Barcheampe, the Crow “Woman Chief,” the most famous war leader in the history of the upper Missouri nations. She married several wives and her bravery as a hunter and warrior was honored in songs. When the Crow nation council was held, she took her place among the chiefs, ranking third in a band of 160 lodges.

Today transgender is considered “anti-social” behavior. But amongst the

Klartach nations transgendered women were given special initiation ceremonies by their societies.

Among the Cooupa, Edward Gifford wrote, "female transvestites were called war'hamah, wore their hair and pierced their noses in the male fashion, married women and fought in battle alongside men."

Wewha, a famous Zuni berdache who was born a man, lived from 1849 to 1896. She was among the tallest and strongest of all the Zuni. When asked, her people would explain, "She is a man." Wewha was sent by the Zuni to Washington, D.C., for six months where she met with President Grover Cleveland and other politicians who never realized she was berdache.

Osh-Tische (Finds Them and Kills Them), a Crow berdache or badé who was also born a man, fought in the Battle of the Rosebud. When a colonial agent tried to force Osh-Tisch to wear men's clothing, the other Native people argued with him that it was against her nature and they kicked the agent off their land. They said it was a tragedy, trying to change the nature of the badé.

A Jesuit priest observed in the 1670s of the berdache, "They are summoned to the Councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice."

But the missionaries and colonialist military reacted to the Native berdache in this hemisphere with murderous hostility. Many berdache were tortured and burnt to death by their Christian conquerors. Other colonial armies sicked wild dogs on the berdache.

Why such hostility?

Why were the European colonialists so hostile to transgendered women and men? The answer can be found back on the European continent in the struggles that raged between the developing classes of haves and have-nots.

Ancient societies on the European continent were communal. Thousands of artifacts have been unearthed dating back to 25,000 B.C. that prove these societies worshipped goddesses, not gods. Some of the deities were transgendered, as were many of their shamans or religious representatives.

We have been taught that the way things are now is roughly the way they have always been—the "Plintstones" school of anthropology. The strong message is: Don't bother trying to change people. But a glance at history proves that human society has undergone continuous development and change.

A great debate has raged for more than 150 years about the role of women in ancient societies. To hear Jesse Helms and his ilk rant, you'd think that the patriarchal nuclear family has always existed. That's not true.

Twentieth century anthropologists recognize that matrilineal communal societies existed all over the world at an early stage in social development. Women were the heads of *gens* or clans that bore little resemblance to today's "family."

But many argue that matrilineage could co-exist with the subjugation of women, and that there is no confirmed documentation of any culture in history in which women consistently held leadership positions. This ignores the relationship between male domination and private property, and implies that women's oppression is merely a result of "human nature."

This ideological argument is as much a weapon of class warfare as prisons are.

Rosalind Coward offers an invaluable overview of this debate in her work *Patriarchal Precedents*. Coward shows that most 19th century European scholars held the patriarchal nuclear family and male inheritance to be universal. But by the latter part of the century, European colonialists studying the peoples of Southern India and Southwest Asia disproved that view.

In 1861, Johann Bachofen published his famous book *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother Right)—a scientific study of the family as an evolving social institution. His work was regarded as a fundamental contribution to modern anthropology.

Lewis Henry Morgan, the great ethnologist and one of the founders of anthropology, wrote his significant work *Ancient Society* in 1877—an exhaustive study of communal societies with kinship systems based on women. He studied the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) on this continent, and numerous indigenous peoples in India and Australia. His research on social evolution confirmed that the patriarchal form of the family was not the oldest form of human society.

The research of Bachofen and especially Morgan was the basis for Frederick Engels' great 1884 classic, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels argued that early societies were based on collective labor and communal property. Cooperation was necessary for group survival.

Engels, Karl Marx's leading collaborator in developing the doctrine of scientific socialism, found that these ancient societies showed no evidence of a state apparatus of repression, large-scale warfare, slavery or the nuclear family. Engels and Marx saw Morgan's studies as further proof that the modern-day oppression of women was rooted in the cleavage of society into classes based on private ownership of property. The fact that oppression was not a feature of early communal societies lent great weight to their prognosis that overturning private ownership in favor of socialized property would lay the basis for revolutionizing human relations.

Research in this century, particularly by women, has further disproved the view that women have always been considered "inferior." The extensive research of Marija Gimbutas and Gerda Lerner revealed that prior to 4500 B.C. goddesses, not gods, were worshipped throughout Europe and Western Asia.

As Jacquetta Hawkes concluded in her *History of Mankind*: "There is every reason to suppose that under the conditions of the primary neolithic way of life, mother-right and the clan system were still dominant, and land would generally have descended through the female line. Indeed, it is tempting to be convinced that the earliest neolithic societies throughout their range in time and space gave woman the highest status she has ever known." (It's interesting to note that this progressive woman researcher, writing in 1963, still found it necessary to use the term "mankind" to describe humanity.)

When bigotry began

In the fertile river valleys of Eurasia and Northeast Africa, during the period of about 4500 B.C. to 1200 B.C., human labor became more productive and abundance accumulated as wealth. The old communal systems were gradually and unconsciously transformed.

A tremendous societal change took place. The desire to pass on wealth to male heirs demanded wifely monogamy; the patriarchal family became the new

economic unit of society.

But the respect the ancient communal societies accorded transgendered men and women, and same-sex love, endured long after these societies underwent dramatic changes.

An Egyptian sculpture of a bearded Queen Hat-shepsut dressed in the garb of a pharaoh (1485 B.C.), for example, shows the persistence of popular folklore about the bearded woman as a sacred symbol of power and wisdom.

A link between transvestism and religious practice is also found in ancient myths associated with Greek gods and heroes. The myth of Achilles notes that he lived and dressed as a woman at the court of Lycomedes in Scyros before he acquired his martial skills.

"Macrobius reports that male priests dressed as women in honor of the Bearded Aphrodite of Cyprus; on the same island, the cult of Ariadne (originally a fertility cult) was marked by a ceremony in which a boy was dressed in female clothes and proceeded to enact all the symptoms of labor and birth." (*Dressing Up*)

Herodotus noted that Scythian religious shamans spoke and dressed as women and were highly revered. "The priests of Artemis at Ephesus were reported to have worn "women's clothing." (*Dressing Up*)

"Men had to dress up before they could take part in the rites of Hercules at Rome (Hercules himself spent three years dressed as a woman at the court of Omphale, Queen of Lydia). ... At the vine growers' festival, the Athenian Oschophoria, two boys dressed in women's clothes and carried a vine stock in procession. At the Argive festival of Hyhristika, the men adopted female clothing. At the feast of Hera at Samos, the men wore long, white robes and placed their hair in golden nets." (*Dressing Up*)

To "justify" the new economic system and break the spirit of people who had lived and worked communally, a systematic downgrading of the status of women and an assault on the transgendered population began.

An early prohibition against transgender was codified in the Mosaic Law of the Hebrews, one of the earliest patriarchal societies: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God." (*Deuteronomy*, 22:5)

The rise of the Greek city-states during the 8th to 6th centuries B.C., is another example of the subjugation of women. The new patriarchal economic system couldn't co-exist with matrilineage. But in many areas transgender, same-sex love and many of the old religious practices of transvestism continued to flourish, because they didn't yet threaten the new ruling order.

The slave-owners developed an ideology degrading women in order to justify overturning women's equality in society. Many of the early Greek myths and the numerous depictions in artwork of battles against Amazon warriors symbolized the overthrow of matrilineal communal societies and their replacement with patriarchal slave societies.

Patriarchal gods like the Greek deity Dionysos arose to overpower the pre-class goddesses. Dionysos was one of the Greek gods that replaced goddess worship. But Greek painters and writers portrayed Dionysos as feminine or dressed in women's apparel. Transvestism also persisted in the rituals of Dionysos, which endured even after Christianity became a state religion of the ruling elite.

The attitude toward women partly accounts for the growing hostility of the ruling classes toward transgendered men. But another aspect of the campaign against "effeminate" men, and Dionysus in particular, might have been to create a Rambo mentality, like the extreme appeal to "manhood" of the Nazi war machine or today's Pentagon. These were "expand or die" militaristic societies. Unlike the war god Ares, Dionysus was a "make love, not war" god who encouraged soldiers to desert their posts in battle.

The Christian writer Clement of Alexandria authored a book in the third century A.D. called *Exhortation* that demanded pagan Greeks recognize the error of their beliefs. "If one goes around examining pictures and statues, he will at once identify your gods from their disgraceful depictions, Dionysos from his dress."

The persistence of transgender

Although ruling attitudes toward cross-gendered expression were changing and becoming repressive, ancient respect for transgender proved difficult to eradicate and transgendered women and men continued to be present in all classes of society.

"The Roman Caesars were reported to show a fondness for wearing women's clothes and Caligula, according to Suetonius, often adopted female clothing." (*Dressing Up*)

But the ruling class repression began to demand increasing conformity—even among the elite. "The most famous example is that of Elagabalus..." wrote Arthur Evans, "who became emperor of Rome in 218 A.D. As Emperor he often appeared in public in drag, practiced ritual sex with members of both sexes, and publicly declared one of his male lovers to be his husband. The sentiments of the ruling classes were outraged. He was assassinated by an indignant Praetorian Guard in 222 A.D. His body was mutilated, dragged through the streets of Rome, and thrown in the Tiber River." (*Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*)

In the fourth century A.D., the Bishop of Amasia in Cappadocia denounced the New Year's Day practice of men cross-dressed "in long robes, girdles, slippers and enormous wigs." Bishop Isidore of Seville (560-636 AD) railed against New Year's dancers "womanizing their masculine faces and making female gestures."

The worship of a god in a dress so enraged the Christian hierarchy that in 691 A.D. the Council of Constantinople decreed: "We forbid dances and initiation rites of the 'gods,' as they are falsely called among the Greeks, since, whether by men or women, they are done according to an ancient custom contrary to the Christian way of life, and we decree that no man shall put on a woman's dress nor a woman, clothes that belong to men..." (*The God of Ecstasy*)

The natural becomes "unnatural"

Ancient religion, before the division of society into classes, combined collectively held beliefs with material observations about nature. Christianity as a mass religion really began in the cities of the Roman empire among the poor, and incorporated elements of collectivism and hatred of the rich ruling class. But over several hundred years, Christianity was transformed from a revolutionary movement of the urban poor into a powerful state religion that served the

wealthy elite.

Transgender in all its forms became a target. In reality it was the rise of private property, the male dominated family and class divisions led to narrowing what was considered acceptable self-expression. What had been natural was declared its opposite.

As the Roman slave-based system of production disintegrated it was gradually replaced by feudalism. Laborers who once worked in chains were now chained to the land.

Christianity was an urban religion. But the ruling classes were not yet able to frisk their new economic system, or the religion that sought to defend it, on the peasantry. The word pagan derives from the Latin *paganus*, which meant rural dweller or peasant. It would soon become a code word in a violent class war.

Even after the rise of feudalism, remnants of the old pagan religion remained. It was joyously pro-sexual—lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight. Many women were among its practitioners. Many shamans were still transvestites. And transvestism was still a part of virtually all rural festivals and rituals.

In the medieval Feast of Fools, laymen and clergy alike dressed as women. The Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris reported priests, "who danced in the choir dressed as women."

But in order for the land-owning Catholic church to rule, it had to stamp out the old beliefs that persisted from pre class communal societies, because they challenged private ownership of the land.

Ancient respect for transgendered people still had roots in the peasantry. Transvestism played an important role in rural cultural life. Many pagan religious leaders were transgendered. So it was not surprising that the Catholic church hunted down male and female transvestites, labeling them as heretics, and tried to ban and suppress transvestism from all peasant rituals and celebrations.

By the 11th century, the Catholic church—by then the largest landlord in Western Europe—gained the organizational and military strength to wage war against the followers of the old beliefs. The campaign was carried out under a religious banner—but it was a class war against the vestiges of the older communal societies.

Joan of Arc

Almost everyone has heard of Joan of Arc. Yet today few people realize that in 1431, when she was 19 years old, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake by the Inquisition of the Catholic church because she refused to stop dressing as a man.

Almost 500 years later, in 1920, the Catholic church canonized "Saint Joan" because it needed a popular figure to connect to the church at a time of revolutionary upheaval worldwide. Because Joan of Arc had been from the common people, she was still enormously popular, especially among peasants and workers. But the church and France buried the fact that she was a transvestite—an expression of her identity she was willing to die for rather than renounce.

Joan of Arc was an illiterate daughter of the peasant class. The courage with which she defended her right to self-expression was as extraordinary as the brilliance of her military leadership, which contributed to the emergence of the nation-state of France.

What was there about the social soil in which she was rooted that would account for such a remarkable personality?

Joan of Arc was born in Domrémy, in the province of Lorraine, about 1412. Beginning in 1348 the bubonic plague had ruptured the fabric of the feudal order. By 1350 half the population of Western Europe had died and whole provinces were depopulated.

France was then in the grip of the Hundred Years War. The armies of the English feudal lords had been attacking France for almost a century. The peasants suffered plunder at the hands of the marauding occupation army as well as heavy taxation by the French nobility.

The immediate problem for the peasantry was how to eject the English army, something the French nobility had been unable to do. But on a broader scale peasant rebellions—including the significant Revolt of the Jacquerie (Commoners)—were shaking European feudalism root and branch.

The leadership of Joan of Arc emerged during this period of powerful social earthquakes. In 1429, this confident 17-year-old woman, dressed in garb traditionally worn by men, presented herself and a group of her followers at the court of Prince Charles, heir to the French throne. Her stated goal was to forge an army of peasants to drive the occupation army from French soil.

Religion permeated all aspects of feudal life. Joan asserted that her mission, motivation and mode of dress were directed by God. She must have been an impressive young woman, because the court agreed to support her efforts. Joan was placed at the head of a 10,000-strong army.

On April 28, 1429, Joan led a march on Orleans. The next day, she entered the city at the head of her peasant army. On May 8, the English were routed. Over the next months, she further proved her genius as a military strategist, as well as her ability to inspire the rank and file. With Joan as its leader, her army liberated other French villages and towns, forcing the English to retreat.

Joan then persuaded Charles to go to Rheims to receive the crown. It was a long and dangerous journey through territory still occupied by the English army. Her troops were embattled and famished along the way, but the trip was successful, and forced the English army to yield more turf. As Charles was crowned king of France, Joan stood beside him, holding her combat banner. The nation state of France, soon to be fully liberated from occupation, was born.

Captured

Joan was captured in Compiègne by the Burgundians, who were allies of the English feudal lords. Had she been a knight or nobleman captured in battle, the expected practice would have been for king Charles to offer a ransom for her freedom.

But Joan was a peasant. The French nobility refused to pay, revealing not only their arrogance but how anxious they were by then to get rid of her. For as a military leader of a popular peasant movement, she could pose a threat to the feudal class.

The English urged the Catholic church to condemn her for her transvestism. The king of England, Henry VI, wrote, "It is sufficiently notorious and well-known that for some time past a woman calling herself Jeanne the Pucelle (the Maid), leaving off the dress and clothing of the feminine sex, a thing contrary to

divine law and abominable before God, and forbidden by all laws, wore clothing and armor such as is worn by men."

In November 1430, the Burgundians turned Joan over to the dreaded Inquisition. The church levied 70 charges against her—from sorcery to horse theft. Those charges were then condensed to 12.

Joan's judges accused her of being raised a pagan. Church leaders had long charged that the district of her birth, Lorraine, was a hotbed of paganism and witchcraft. Peasants there still clung to some of the old beliefs and matrilineal traditions, even in the period of Joan's lifetime. The custom of giving children the mother's surname, not the father's, still survived.

The feudal landlords were involved in an ongoing war against communards who held out against enslavement as serfs. Scapegoating Joan of Arc and the area of her birth fed this counter-revolutionary campaign.

On April 2, 1431, the Inquisition dropped the charges of witchcraft; they were too hard to prove. It was not until 1451 that the Inquisition was fully authorized to deal with witchcraft.

Crime of transvestism

Joan was condemned because of her assertion that her transvestism was a religious duty and that she regarded her visions as higher than the authority of the church. Many historians and academicians have seen Joan's transvestism as inconsequential. In the verbatim proceedings of her interrogation, however, the court records show that Joan's judges found her transvestism repugnant and demanded that she wear women's clothing. Joan refused, knowing her defiance meant she was considered damned.

Joan of Arc's testimony in her own defense revealed how deeply her transvestism was rooted in her identity. She vowed, "For nothing in the world will I swear not to arm myself and put on a man's dress."

Joan was taken on a terrifying tour of the torture chamber and its instruments of agony. She was brought to a cemetery and shown a scaffold that her tormentors said awaited her if she did not submit to them. After suffering this psychological torture and the threat of being burned alive, on April 24, 1431, Joan recanted by accusing herself of wearing clothes that violated natural decency. She agreed to submit to the church's authority and to wear women's clothing. She was "mercifully" sentenced to life in prison in women's dress, on bread and water.

Within days she resumed male dress. Her judges asked her why she had done so, when putting on male clothing meant certain death. The court recorded her reply: "She said, of her own will. And that nobody had forced her to do so. And that she preferred man's dress to woman's."

The Inquisition sentenced her to death for resuming male dress, saying "time and again you have relapsed, as a dog that returns to its vomit." Joan of Arc was immediately burned alive at the stake.

Why was the charge of transvestism so significant?

The real reason can be found in the decree issued by the faculty of the University of Paris on May 14, 1431, which condemned Joan's transvestism and urged that she be burned as a heretic. These church theologians declared that Joan's cross-dressing was "following the custom of the Gentiles and the Heathen."

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The church was now the only powerful institution that cemented all of
feudal Western Europe into one political system. More important, the church
was by far the most powerful feudal lord, claiming ownership of one-third of the
soil of the Catholic world.

The Inquisition, and later the witch trials, were weapons of terror and mass
murder that took a staggering toll in human life—from Ireland to Poland. Many
peasant women, including many lesbians, who followed the older rural based
religions were accused of being witches and tortured and burned. Transgendered
people, gay men, Arabs, Jews, scientists, herbalists, healers: anyone who
challenged or questioned the ruling class and the church was considered a threat
and exterminated.

This was counter-revolutionary terror by the land-owning class. It was
aimed at the restive and rebellious peasantry as well as the small new bourgeoisie
that was to become a challenge to its class rule.

Torture was the rule. The Inquisitors didn't come armed with just the
Bible—they arrived with swords and fire to put down peasant uprisings. The
impending collapse of feudalism only heightened the reactionary suppression.

Transgender endures

Yet despite centuries of this murderous campaign transgender was not
eradicated.

In medieval Italy and France there were actual transvestite male festive
societies known as "Abbeys of Mistrole."

Naogeorgus wrote in *The Popish Kingdoms* (1570) that at the Shroveport
festival: "Both men and women change their weede, the men in maydes aray,
And wanton wenches drest as men, doe trauell by the way..."

Transgender still existed among the ruling classes, as well. For example,
when Queen Christina of Sweden abdicated in 1654, she donned men's clothes
and renamed herself 'Count Dohna.' Henry III of France was reported to have
dressed as an Amazon and encouraged his courtiers to do likewise.

Throughout the Middle Ages and into early industrial capitalism,
transvestism continued to play an important role in many militant struggles as a
form of social and political rebellion against class rule.

In 1630, for example, the Mere Folle and 'her' troupe attacked royal tax
officers in Dijon; in Beaujolais in the 1770s, male peasants put on women's
clothes and attacked their landlord's surveyors; in Wiltshire in 1631, bands of
peasants, led by men dressed as women who called themselves 'Lady
Skimmington,' rioted against the King's enclosure of their forest lands; in April
1812, two male weavers in female clothing—'General Ludd's wives'—led a
crowd in the destruction of looms and factories in Stockport; the Welsh riots of
the 1830s and 1840s, against turnpike tolls and other scartory taxes, were led by
'Rebecca' and other transvestites; the Porteous riots of 1736 in Edinburgh were
led by men disguised as women, and their male leader was known as 'Madge
Wildfire'; in Ireland the Whiteboys, who were active in the 1760s, dressed in long
white frocks 'to restore the ancient customs and redress other grievances' in
the struggle against the British landlords. (*Dressing Up*)

As the old land-based feudal order was replaced by capitalism, the very

existence of transvestite and other transgendered women and men had been largely driven underground. Many were forced to pass as the opposite sex in order to survive. Transvestite women passed as men and became soldiers, pirates and highway robbers. Yet transvestism continued to emerge culturally throughout Europe in holiday celebrations, rituals, carnival days, masquerade parties, theater and opera.

These transgender traditions persist today in the Mummer's Festival, Mardi Gras and Halloween. In contemporary imperialist Japan cross-gendered roles are still at the heart of ancient Noh drama and Kabuki theater. But these are not merely vestiges of tradition. Transgendered women and men still exist, no matter how difficult their struggle for survival has become.

Transgender around the world

Our focus has been on European history, and consciously so. The blame for anti-transgender laws and attitudes rests squarely on the shoulders of the ruling classes on that continent. The seizures of lands and assets of the "accused" during the witch trials and Inquisition helped the ruling classes acquire the capital to expand their domination over Asia, Africa and the Americas. The European elite then tried to force their ideology on the peoples they colonized around the world.

But despite the colonialists' racist attempts at cultural genocide, transvestism and other transgendered expression can still be observed in the rituals and beliefs of oppressed peoples. It is clear that they held respected public roles in vast numbers of diverse societies in cultures continents apart.

Since the 16th century, "transvestite shamans have ... been reported among the Araucanians, a large tribe living in southern Chile and parts of Argentina. ... Male transvestite shamans have also been reported for the Guajira, a cattle-herding people of northwest Venezuela and north Colombia, and the Tehuelche, hunter-gatherers of Argentina." (*Construction*)

"Transvestism also used to be practiced by shamans in the Vietnamese countryside, Burma, in India among the Pardli, a hunting people, and in the southeast, by the Llionssis, as well as in Korea." (*Construction*)

"Transgender in religious ceremony is still reported in areas of West Africa. "One of the principal deities of the Abomey pantheon is Lisa-Maron, a figure which incorporates both man and woman; the great god Shango can be represented as either male or female; and contemporary shamans in Brazil worship Yansan, who is the 'man-woman.'" (*Dressing Up*)

"The mugawe, a powerful religious leader of the Kenyan Meru, is considered a complement to the male political leaders and consequently must exemplify feminine qualities: he wears women's clothing and adopts women's hair-styles; he is often homosexual, and sometimes marries a man. Among the Kwayama, a tribe of Angolan Bantu cultivators and herders, many diviners, augurers, and diagnosticians of illness wear women's clothing, do women's work, and become secondary spouses of men whose other wives are female. South African Zulu diviners are usually women, but roughly 10 percent are male transvestites." (*Construction*)

Male-to-female transgender that doesn't appear to have a special religious

significance has been reported in the pastoral Nandi of Kenya, the Dinka and Nuer of the Sudan, the agricultural Konso and Amhara of Ethiopia, the Ottoro of Nubia, the Fanti of Ghana, the Ovimbundu of Angola, the Thonga farmers of Zimbabwe, the Tanala and Baka of Madagascar, the Wolof of Senegal, and the Lango, Iteso, Gisu, and Sebei of Uganda. *(Construction)*

Cross-dressing is still a feature in Brazilian and Haitian ceremonies derived from West African religions. *(Construction)*

The Chukchee, Kamohadal, Koryak, and Inuit—all Native peoples of the Arctic Basin—had male shamans who dressed as women.

"In India, the Vallabha sect, devotees of Krishna, dressed as women. ... Reports, of the 1870s and 1930s, describe the priests (*hisra*) of the Celebes who live and dress as women." *(Dressing Up)*

In his ground-breaking book *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer noted that in the Pelow Islands, "a goddess chooses a man, not a woman, for her minister and her inspired mouthpiece. ... He wears female attire, he carries a piece of gold on his neck, he labors like a woman in the 'lano field.'" Frazer reported that this custom was widespread among indigenous peoples.

Passing for survival

By the time the Industrial Revolution in Europe had forged plowshares into weapons and machinery, prejudice against transgendered women and men was woven deep into the tapestry of exploitation.

But mercantile trade and early industrial capitalism created opportunities for anonymity that seldom existed under feudalism, where the large serf families and their neighbors lived and worked on the land.

Capitalism unchained the peasants from the land—but chained them to machinery as wage slaves, or sent them off in armies and armadas to conquer new land, labor and resources.

Not only transgendered women but men now had the opportunity to pass. The oppression of women under capitalism forced many thousands of women who weren't transgendered to pass as men in order to escape the economic and social inequities of their oppression.

The consequences for passing were harsh. At the close of the 17th century the penalty in England was to be placed in the stocks and dragged through the streets in an open cart. In France as late as 1760 transvestites were hanged to death.

Despite the criminal penalties, women passed as men throughout Europe—most notably in the Netherlands, England and Germany. Passing was so widespread during the 17th and 18th centuries that it was the theme of novels, fictionalized biographies and memoirs, art, plays, operas and popular songs.

One of the most famous passing women of the 17th century was Mary Fritli—known as "Moll Cutpurse." This boldacious character fought and drank with the men in the underworld districts of 17th century London. They never realized she was a woman. She supported herself by reading fortunes, lending stolen items and relieving passersby of their purses and wallets. After her exposure as a woman, Moll Cutpurse published her diary and was twice portrayed on the stage before her death at the age of 74.

Angélique Brulon passed as Liberté and was a decorated officer in

Napoleon's infantry, serving in seven campaigns between 1792 and 1799 that liberated much of Europe from feudalism.

Charley Wilson was born Catherine Coombes in 1834 in England and lived as a man for over 40 years. At age 63, Wilson was forced into the poor house and her sex was discovered. The authorities made her wear a blue-print dress and red shawl. "If I had money," Wilson reportedly told a visitor, "I would get out of here in men's clothes and no one would detect me."

Many women became pirates and highway robbers.

Transgendered expression persisted among men, as well. German historian Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz described a London pub called the Bunch of Grapes in the 1770s: "On entering the room the guard found two fellows in women's attire, with muffs and wide shawls and most fashionable turban-like bonnets...it turned out that each member of the club had a woman's name."

At a transvestite ball in Paris in 1864, "there were at least 150 men, and some of them so well disguised that the landlord of the house was unable to detect their sex." (*Dressing Up*)

Transgender was central to one of the most famous 19th-century scandals in Victorian England—the Vere Street coterie. This 1813 account described the patrons of a pub: "Many of the habitues took on female appellations as well as female dress..." Hollingway said that the police raided one of their meetings but were so fooled by at least one of the patrons that he was discharged by the police and magistrates as a woman. (*Dressing Up*)

Many such accounts of widespread transgender "clubs" were reported in 19th-century Victorian London.

A famous case in 19th-century England was the arrest of Stella (Ernest) Boulton and Fanny (Frederick) Park outside the Strand Theater on April 28, 1890. They were tried on charges of "conspiracy to commit a felony." Boulton's mother testified in defense of her son and explained that he had dressed as a girl since age 6. Stella and Fanny were both acquitted.

While it is biologically easier for a woman to pass as a young man than for a man to pass as a woman, many transgendered men have lived successfully without discovery.

Mrs. Nash, for example, married a soldier at Forte Meade in the Dakota Territory. After her husband's transfer, Mrs. Nash married another soldier. After she died, it was discovered that she was a man. (*United Interests*)

Capitalism wields old prejudice

In capitalism's early competitive stage, when the new bourgeoisie were fighting feudalism and all its ideological baggage, they prided themselves on their enlightened and scientific view of the world and society.

But once in power, the capitalists made use of many of the old prejudices, particularly those that suited their own divide-and-conquer policies.

"Liberty, fraternity and equality" soon became a dead letter as hellish sweatshops expanded into the factory system. Colonized peoples were seen as subjects to be used up in the production of wealth. As the new ruling class established itself, it demanded conformity to the system of wage slavery, and shed its radicalism.

But despite long being termed "illegal" and "unnatural" and still carrying with it an "unofficial" death penalty, transvestism is still a part of human expression.

Transvestites and other transgendered people were leaders of the first wave of gay liberation that began in the 1880s in Germany. That movement enjoyed the support of many in the mass Socialist parties.

Magnus Hirschfeld, a Jewish gay leader of the first wave of gay liberation in Germany in the 1880s, was also reported to be transvestite. He wrote a groundbreaking work on the subject. Most of the valuable documentation this movement uncovered about transgender throughout history, along with research about lesbians and gay men, was burned in a pyre by the Nazis.

Lives rendered invisible

While, as we have seen, transgendered expression has always existed in the Western Hemisphere, the need to "pass" washed up on these shores with the arrival of capitalism. Many women and men have been forced to pass. Some of their voices have been recorded.

Deborah Sampson passed as a male soldier in the American War of Independence. She once pulled a bullet out of her own thigh to avoid discovery. She later published her memoirs entitled *The Female Review* and went on a public speaking tour in 1802.

Jack Bee Garland (Olivia Mugarriceta), born the daughter of San Francisco's first Mexican consul, was detained by police in Stockton, Calif., in 1897, charged with "masquerading in men's clothes." A month later the gregarious and outspoken Garland was made an honorary member of Stockton's Bachelors Club.

Jucy Ann Lobdell, born in New York State in 1829, was a renowned hunter and trapper. She explained her painful decision to leave her young daughter with her parents and venture out into a "man's world" as Rev. Joseph Lobdell.

"I made up my mind to dress in men's attire to seek labor, as I was used to men's work. And as I might work harder at housework, and get only a dollar a week, and I was capable of doing men's work, and getting men's wages. I feel that I cannot submit to see all the bondage with which woman is oppressed, and listen to the voice of fashion, and repose upon the bosom of death. I am a mother; I love my offspring even better than words can tell. I can not bear to die and leave that little one to struggle in every way to live as I have to do." Lobdell died in an asylum.

Harry Gorman lived as a man for more than 20 years, until hospitalized in Buffalo in 1903. The 40-year-old cigar-chomping railroad worker swore that "nothing would hire" her to wear women's clothing. Gorman alluded to at least 10 other women "who dressed as men, appeared wholly manlike, and were never suspected of being otherwise, also employed in the same railway-company; some of these being porters, train-agents, switchmen and so on. They often met together and made themselves not a little merry over the success of their transference from one class of humanity to another." (*Gay American History*)

Cora Anderson lived as Ralph Kerwin for 13 years before being brought up on charges of "disorderly conduct" in 1914 in Milwaukee after her sex was disclosed. After being ordered by the court to don "women's" apparel, Anderson, a South American Indian, explained: "In the future centuries it is probable that woman will be the owner of her own body and the custodian of her own soul.

But until that time you can expect that the statutes [concerning] women will be all wrong. The well-cared-for woman is a parasite, and the woman who must work is a slave. The woman's minimum wage will help, but it will not—cannot—effect a complete cure. Some people may think I am very bitter against the men. I am only bitter against conditions—conditions that have grown up in this man-made world." (*Gay American History*)

The struggle of James McHarris (Annie Lee Grant) for the right to live as a man was reported in a 1954 article in *Ebony*. McHarris, arrested in Mississippi on an unrelated petty charge, endured having to strip in front of the mayor and police, and was imprisoned in a men's jail.

Transvestism has continued to flourish in drama and comedy in the U.S. and in Europe. Cross-gendered performances were an integral part of burlesque and vaudeville in the U.S. during the 19th century.

The blues tradition in the 1920s and 1930s incorporated lyrics about transgendered expression in the urban African American communities in songs like Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Blues," and Bessie Jackson's "B-D Women" (bull-dagger women).

Transgendered roles are still seen—most frequently as "comedy"—on television and in film, theater, literature, dance and music. But the social penalties for transgendered people who try to live and work in dignity and respect are still cruel and frequently violent.

Christine Jorgensen battled bigotry

The development of anesthesia and the commercial synthesis of hormones are relatively recent discoveries of this century. These breakthroughs opened the possibility for individuals to change their sex to conform with their gender. Since that time, tens of thousands of transsexuals in this country alone have made the same life decision that Christine Jorgensen made.

While Jorgensen was not the first person to have a sex-change, she was by far the most well-publicized. She died May 3, 1989, at age 62 after a battle with cancer. Jorgensen was remembered in mainstream media obituaries as George Jorgensen, the Bronx-born ex-GI and photographer who traveled to Denmark in the early 1950s to become Christine—the first reported sex-change.

These accounts admit to an "international fuss" over her life decision, but add that she was "transformed into an instant celebrity. She traveled the lecture and nightclub circuit, met royalty and celebrities and ended up rich." (*New York Daily News*, May 4, 1989)

Sounds like a Harlequin novel, doesn't it? This is sheer hypocrisy coming from the media—and the ruling powers guiding their pens—that made Jorgensen the object of universal ridicule. Not once during her lifetime did anyone who controls this society say that Christine Jorgensen was a human being deserving respect.

The news of Jorgensen's sex change was leaked to the press in late 1952— one of the deepest periods of political reaction in the history of the United States. It was the height of the notorious McCarthy witch hunts, when hundreds were dragged into court and put in prison simply for their political views. The Rosenbergs were sitting on death row, awaiting execution at Sing-Sing.

Pentagon planes bombed Korea and tested the hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific.

Jim Crow laws still ruled the South. Gay men and lesbians were fighting for survival without a movement. Transvestitism was only acceptable when it was "Uncle Miltie" Berle putting on drag for guffaws.

When the news about Christine Jorgensen hit, all hell broke loose. From appalled news commentators to cruel talk show hosts, she was attacked so viciously it seemed she was exiled from the human race.

What had been an important private decision was seized on by a hostile media and vulgarized. Her personal life was no longer her own. She was relentlessly hounded. Jorgensen told the media a year before her death: "I'm not that recognizable anymore. I can actually go into a supermarket and people don't know who I am, which is just wonderful and suits me just fine.

"Things don't hurt the way they did then," she added.

Somehow she paid this punishing emotional price and survived with grace and dignity. It took great courage.

The attacks on Jorgensen were part of a campaign meant to enforce conformity, but it was too late in history for this to succeed.

Jorgensen told the press in 1986: "I could never understand why I was receiving so much attention. Now, looking back, I realize it was the beginning of the sexual revolution, and I just happened to be one of the trigger mechanisms."

From Joan of Arc to Stonewall

In the last decades, the development of technology rendered many of the occupational divisions between men and women obsolete. Women were joining the work force in larger numbers, becoming a part of the working class in the most active and immediate sense. This shaped a whole new consciousness.

The contraceptive pill, first produced in 1952, virtually revolutionized social relations for many women, and allowed women to participate in all phases of life with the same freedom from unwanted pregnancies as men.

Rigidly enforced gender boundaries should also have been scrapped. But the motor force of capitalism still drives prejudice and inequity as a vehicle for division. It took monumental struggles—and still greater ones remain on the horizon—to right these wrongs.

The civil rights and national liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and the massive resistance to the Vietnam war, rocked the world and helped give rise to the women's liberation struggle as well.

In 1969, militant young gay transvestites in New York City's Greenwich Village led a fight against cops who tried to raid the Stonewall Inn. The battles lasted for four nights running. The Stonewall Rebellion gave birth to a modern lesbian and gay rights movement that will never again be silenced behind closet doors.

From peasant uprisings against feudalism in the Middle Ages to the Stonewall Rebellion in the 20th century, transvestites and other transgendered people have figured in many militant struggles, both in defense of the right of personal expression and as a form of political rebellion.

But from the violence on the streets to the brutality of the police, from job discrimination to denial of health care and housing—survival is still a battle for

the transgendered population.

Transgendered people are the brunt of cruel jokes on television and in films. Movies like "Psycho," "Dressed to Kill" and "Silence of the Lambs" create images of transgendered people as dangerous sociopaths.

In "Silence of the Lambs," a sort-of-transvestite, wanna-be-transsexual kills women and skins them in order to sew a woman's body for himself. The film turns reality upside down: It is actually transvestites and transsexuals who have been the victims of grisly murders.

This point was driven home by activists who disrupted the National Film Society awards in spring 1992. They passed out fliers highlighting the real-life murder of transsexual Venus Xtravaganza, who appeared in the documentary "Paris is Burning." Xtravaganza was murdered before the film on Harlem's drag balls was finished.

"Silence of the Lambs" swept the Academy Awards. "Paris is Burning" wasn't even nominated.

Fighting for a better world

The institutionalized bigotry and oppression we face today have not always existed. They arose with the division of society into exploiter and exploited. Divide-and-conquer tactics have allowed the slave-owners, feudal landlords and corporate ruling classes to keep for themselves the lion's share of wealth created by the laboring class.

Like racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry toward transgendered people is a deadly carcinogen. We are pitted against each other in order to keep us from seeing each other as allies.

Genuine bonds of solidarity can be forged between people who respect each other's differences and are willing to fight their enemy together. We are the class that does the work of the world, and can revolutionize it. We can win true liberation.

The struggle against intolerable conditions is on the rise around the world. And the militant role of transgendered women, men and youths in today's fight-back movement is already helping to shape the future.

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**TRANS
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*A movement
whose time
has come*



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*A Marxist view  
of when and why  
transgender  
oppression  
arose*

