

Vaginal Politics

In Defense of Freedom of Choice

by Dallas Denny

My man-made vagina is warm and wet and wonderful. Sometimes, when I am walking in a skirt, wearing only panties underneath, I can feel the labia pushing together as I walk, giving just a little bit of stimulation to my clitoris, making me feel feminine and sexy. Sometimes I sit in my office with the door closed, my index finger moving rapidly inside me, my cheeks flushed, my clit hard again the ball of my finger. Sometimes I lie in bed and make love with a vibrator, or with a partner, arching my back and moaning and panting as orgasm approaches.

Sometimes, at a business meeting or in a movie theater, I get the slightest whiff of my vagina. It is an earthy, musky scent, a woman-odor, not unpleasant to me, although I confess that a lifetime of exposure to feminine hygiene product advertisements makes me

cedure which created it with any mystical significance. I realize its limitations, and its differences from non-surgical vaginas. I don't mind that it is made from penile and scrotal tissue, and that it doesn't have infinite depth. I'm proud to have a transsexual vagina. But mostly, I'm just glad it's there.

Getting my vagina was a major event in the course of my life, just as were being born, graduating from college, and getting married. Acquiring it was certainly a milestone, but it was not the end of a journey for me, or the beginning of a "new life"; it was just a stop along the stagecoach route to change the horses. Having it has made me happy in little and important, but not earth-shaking ways. Having it has not magically changed my life, or even opened any doors that were closed (except in the sack, and, oh yes, the New Woman Conference, which is closed to those without vaginas or neovaginas). And yet, if my old equipment were to grow back, I would be back in Brussels as quick as you can say "four thousand dollars."

What I am saying here is that having a vagina was and is of personal importance to

Having a penis can be a blessing or a curse. It's a relative thing. Those who want a penis or vagina should be allowed to have one, and no one who wants one should be forced to have one. It's as simple as that.

It's when penises and vaginas (or lack of them) are used as political tools to oppress people and as weapons to attack them that I begin to have a problem. And that is being done in the transgender community. It happens when pre-operative or non-operative transsexual people and transgenderists and crossdressers and non-gender-transgressing men are excluded from forums like the New Woman's Conference because they have penises. It happens at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which excludes people born with penises, people who used to have a penis, people who used to not have a penis but now do, people who do not have penises but look as if they might, and people who have something that might be a penis, but nobody is sure. It happens any time those who have acquired vaginas use them to exclude those who do not have them, and when certain (i.e. surgically created) classes of vaginas or penises are defined as undesirable. It happens also when people are attacked for making the decision to acquire a vagina or a penis.

Mary Daly has called transsexuals "Frankensteinian", and her disciple Janice Raymond considers transsexual women to be giant walking penises who violate women's bodies and spaces (*Gyn-Ecology* and *The Transsexual Empire*, respectively). Lesbian separatists have attempted to steal away our powers of self-definition by attacking transsexual people in a variety of forums and excluding transsexual women from woman-only events. Psychoanalysts have called sex reassignment surgery "psychosurgery," "collusion with delusion," and "collaboration with psychosis." They believe that transgender identification is a mental illness, and should be "cured," not by changing the body but by eliminating the wish. Behavior therapists and psychiatrists attempt to give them tools with which to do that: aversion therapy and psychoactive medications, respectively.

It's bad enough that genital surgery has so enemies from without the transgender community— but it also has enemies from within. Surgically altered genitals have also come attack from those in the transgender community who have made the decision to live without them. This usually manifests

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apprehensive that others might smell it and leads me to douche more frequently than I might otherwise.

I'm very proud of my vagina, the more so because I wasn't born with it. It is a human-made vagina, a neovagina, a product of cooperation between my flesh and the scalpel of a Belgian surgeon named Michel Seghers. I bought it with money and sweat, and it is part and parcel of who and what I am. But it took entirely too much mountain-moving to get it.

There were other things which were more important to me than having a vagina—namely, getting rid of the facial hair which I did not feel belonged on my face, and the testosterone which I did not feel belonged in my body— but getting it was important enough for me to play surgical roulette, exchanging a bird-in-the-hand penis, testicles, and scrotum and my reproductive potential for a bird-in-the-bush bush.

As much as I appreciate my vagina, I do not imbue it or the three-hour surgical pro-

me. To me. It might not be to other gender-transgressing people, and I can appreciate that. And I know that to some people born vaginally handicapped, having a vagina is a matter of life-and-death, and I can appreciate that, too.

Does having a vagina make me any more a woman than if I had a penis? No. Women are not judged by their vaginas, nor men by their penises, except when in bed with their lovers, and most people are not their lovers. Being a woman has to do with self-identification as a woman, and with living as a woman. And the same goes for being a man. After all, in social situations, people interact with people, and not vaginas and penises.

Genitals are a personal matter, and there is no legitimate reason for differentiating people into categories because they lack or possess a vagina or penis. After all, the same person can have one set of genitals during one part of life, and not at another, a fact to which I can attest. Having a vagina can be good, if you want one, or bad, if you don't.

itself as concern about "self-identified transsexuals" who "don't know what they're getting into," but the transphobia which underlies it is not difficult to detect, whether it comes from the mouth or pen of Virginia-don't-cut-off-your-options-Prince or from Olga Gordene, who has written that "'Happy' endings rarely occur in transsexuals who undergo surgery." (*Transgender Nation*, p. 19).

The literature of the transgender community is full of articles about those who wish to have surgery, defining them as impulsive, out of touch with reality, unstable, unable to distinguish between sex and gender, and otherwise diminished in intelligence and common sense. Invariably, those arguments are written by people who do not have and have never had vaginas, or who do have a vagina and are married or otherwise in a relationship with someone who does not have one, but wants one.

Excuse me. If it is politically incorrect for white people to write about the Black experience, and for straight people to write about being gay, what makes it appropriate for the neovaginally and neopenilely deficient to write about the surgical experience, thank you very much?

It is certainly true that many transsexual people are ill-prepared for and perhaps even unsatisfactory candidates for surgery— but that is an area for discussion between transsexual people and those who provide medical and psychological services. Others have no place in the dialogue.

Transsexual people as a class are perfectly capable of making choices about their lives and their bodies. We really don't need nontranssexual persons attempting to limit those options by attributing negative characteristics to us. I'm very happy that this is a world in which women can have penises and men can have vaginas, and I am very happy for those who value and cherish their genitals, and hope they never malfunction and that the possessors have a good time with them. But I am entirely supportive of those who wish to change their genitals, and of those who have actually done so, and I am fed up with those who attack others for what they do or do not do with their genitals.

There is room enough in the world for all of us to be what we desire and need to be. None of us should be excluded or feel superior to other persons because we have or have not modified our genitals with surgery.

Some Representative Transsexual-Bashing

In the December issue of a nationally circulated support group newsletter, we found these gems:

... As the euphoria of the (SRS) experience wears off and the reality and enormity of it all sinks in, depression often becomes overwhelming.

We know and have known dozens of post-op transsexuals... we have NEVER known a consistently happy post-op! Most of the post-ops we know have no relationships, no career, and not much of a life. All this is not to mention the physical problems which come with SRS!

An interesting fact about most TS's is they refuse to live "full time" for any length of time... I will guarantee if you actually live... as a woman for at least the amount of time the Standards of Care suggest... you will think twice about SRS! You see, if SRS did what it promised to do, hell, I'd get it!

Had this been written by someone outside the transgender community, we would consider it the worst sort of transphobia. Well, it is the worst sort of transphobia! It shows absolute disrespect for the ability of transsexual persons to decide upon surgery, and in fact seriously questions their wholeness as reasoning beings. It is a tragedy that such stuff is being written, and from now on, authors of such rubbish can expect to see themselves in the Antidefamation Rag!

Did you Know?

- Contributions to AEGIS are tax deductible under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code
- AEGIS maintains a telephone help line and provides free referrals and information to transgendered persons, their families, and helping professionals
- AEGIS is publisher of *Chrysalis Quarterly*, a provocative magazine about transgender issues, and a variety of other materials
- AEGIS has an ongoing commitment to inclusiveness in the transgender community
- AEGIS has a special interest in developing services for female-to-male persons and family members of transgendered persons
- AEGIS maintains a national minorities facilitator so that all portions of the transgender community can have access to our Board of Directors
- AEGIS is actively involved in the training of caregivers
- AEGIS maintains a speaker's bureau
- AEGIS is the successor to the Erickson Foundation, the Janus Information Service, and J2CP Information Services
- AEGIS provides direct services to transgendered persons. For example, we started and work closely with the Atlanta Gender Explorations support group, an open social and support group
- AEGIS maintains the National Transgender Library and Archive
- AEGIS has a Board of Advisors which it consults on a regular basis.
- AEGIS regularly releases advisory bulletins and position statements
- AEGIS has special seminars and functions (examples are lectures by helping professionals like Dr. Eugene Schrang and our Tula Day Celebrations)
- AEGIS maintains a comprehensive database of service providers and support groups
- AEGIS is working for you!