

Against the Current:
The Fluidity of Gender and Race
Transgender and Multiracial Identities

An Analysis of Just Evelyn's *Mom, I Need to Be a Girl*

By Lauren E. Spencer

In her biographical book, *Mom, I need to be a girl*, author Just Evelyn describes the journey that she and her child embarked on as her teenage son Daniel transitioned into her daughter, Danielle. Just Evelyn's story illustrates the ways in which she had to advocate for Danielle in order to make the system work for her transgender teen.

In addition to Danielle's identity as a transgender person, she is also multiracial. Danielle's identities as both transgender and multiracial are of particular interest because she challenges the widespread assumptions that race and gender are predetermined and unchanging. In reality, as Danielle's story illustrates, race and gender are, in fact, social constructs that can indeed be altered.

Although race and gender are both social constructs, they are both often the bases of social policy, legislation and discrimination. "Social constructs," by definition, "vary over time and place... [and] new categories come into existence (Waters, p.23)." Yet, race and gender are typically deemed as being limited, fixed and permanent; people are deemed to be male or female; black or white or another monoracial race- belonging to categories that do not intersect. Transgender and multiracial people dismantle these conceptions about gender and race.

Transgender is a term that applies to people who identify differently from the gender assigned to them at birth. They can identify entirely as a different gender, or as more than one gender, and in doing so, defy beliefs about the permanency and bounds of gender. In *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives*, authors Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore explain the ways that both transgender and multiracial people dispute rigid social constructs of race and gender. They describe transgender (as well as intersex) people as

“[challenging] the prevailing beliefs in two and only two sexes and genders. They are similar to people who are multiracial. We may think that racial categories,

especially Black/White, are clear and natural, but DNA testing shows that practically all of us are genetically multiracial. If many people were genetically sex-typed, we'd also find a variety of chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical patterns unrecognized by our two sex categories (Lorber, p.138).”

Thus, even based on science, rather than social concepts, race and gender are more accurately described as continuums, rather than having fixed poles.

Only recently has the ability to identify with multiple races been recognized and even now the race of multiracial people is often assumed to be a constant. However, as Mary C. Waters, a Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, explains, “the social construction of race and ethnicity means that rather than being immutable, racial and ethnic identities at the individual level are subject to a great deal of flux- both intergenerationally, over the course of a lifetime, and situationally (Waters, p.23).”

The struggles of multiracial people and transgender people are inextricably linked; both are identified by social constructs that result in real laws, policies and behavior. Both suffer from rigid classifications systems that recognize limited categories in which people are eternally classified. In short, both transgender and multiracial people face governmental, societal and even personal opposition while simply trying to be who they are.

Race and gender are social constructs, but what creates them? What are the bases of classifying people in these ways? Gender is largely based on sex, and although the two terms are frequently used interchangeably, they are in fact different. Gender, as a social construct, is merely the concept a person has of being masculine, feminine or something in between or outside of these realms. Sex, however, refers to the physiological differences between males and females. Linking sex to gender, or physiological

differences to social ones, results in gender roles and expectations which often lead to sex discrimination when people do not conform to the gender roles to which they were assigned.

The concept of race is based on far less tangible criteria. Race is a set of characteristics that make a particular group distinct. Yet these characteristics are rarely constant. For example, race is often based on skin color, and yet a light-skinned black person, a white person and an Asian person could all have similar skin tones, and be considered three different races. Conversely, members of the same racial group may have very different features. Race can also be based on ethnicity, a classification based on culture. Because race is so hazily defined, it is easily redefined. In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson explains, “Race is a palimpsest, a tablet whose most recent inscriptions only imperfectly cover those that had come before, and whose inscriptions can never be regarded as final (Jacobson, p.142).”

Despite being social constructs, race and gender are constantly used as modifiers. Many times when both multiracial and transgender people are asked to identify themselves according to race or gender (sex is more accurate, but is often inaccurately used interchangeably with gender), they are being asked in an official context, such as on government, school or census forms or passport or driver’s license applications.

In the book, Danielle encountered such forms when applying for a driver’s license and filling out school forms. Just Evelyn explains her frequent encounters with school forms and how she was able to use her children’s ambiguous racial identities to best serve them. When Danielle decided to transfer schools after coming out as transgender, her

mother once again manipulated an ambiguous identity on school forms to once get her child into the school she wanted. Just Evelyn explains:

From past experience I had learned some secrets about getting a child into a specific school in our district...if you were the right race you might be bussed from one neighborhood to another, depending on the racial balance the school was trying to achieve. I had played the race game several times with the older boys. Since my children are one-half Hispanic and one-half a mixture of other European races, I would choose whichever race was needed for a given situation. On several occasions I tried to do away with race questions altogether, for I objected to choosing either Hispanic or Caucasian. A student could not be registered as mixed racial origin even though he was, nor could he be just American (Just Evelyn, p.26).

Just as the school form left no room for racial ambiguity, most other official forms leave no room for gender indistinctness. Besides situationally varying her race, Just Evelyn explains that when Danielle registered for school, they altered some of her information. Enrolling with her new name and gender, Danielle altered her name on her immunization records and changed her birthday to avoid suspicion if both names appeared together. Although this worked, when Danielle applied for a driver's license, the risks she took could have had much more serious consequences. Not wanting to be labeled as transgender, Danielle altered her birth certificate. Just Evelyn explains that, "...with a pencil, she put the two extra letters after her male name to feminize it. She wrote 'Fe' in front of 'Male' (Just Evelyn, p.58.)" In doing so, Danielle committed a felony.

In hir¹ book *Trans Liberation*, author and transgender activist Leslie Feinberg explains the difficulty that legal forms present to transgender people. Feinberg explains how, like Danielle, ze² became a felon with hir self-identification.

"It's actually a felony to check off the "M" box if you were born female (Feinberg, p.21)." Ze writes:

¹ "Hir" (pronounced "here") is the indirect pronoun with which Feinberg identifies

² "Ze" is the direct pronoun with which Feinberg identifies

I – and millions like me- are caught in a social contradiction. It’s legally accurate to check off the “F” on my driver’s license. But imagine if a state trooper pulls me over...sees an “F” on my license but when he shines his flashlight on my face he sees an “M.” Now I’m in the middle of a nightmare over a traffic infraction. So I marked down “M” on my driver’s license for application for my own safety (Feinberg, p.20).

For Danielle, Leslie and many more transgender people, a choice must often be made between obeying the law, ensuring one’s own safety and self-identifying.

Often times, as authorities hasten to force people into one demographic or another, they fail to realize that such classification is unnecessary. Feinberg raises an excellent point, asking “why do we have to have an M-or-F box on an application for a document that has a photo? Isn’t that the most complex and compelling form of identification (Feinberg, p. 21)?” Because race and gender do not necessarily indicate appearance or any other tangible identifiers, why are they the most common ways to identify people?

With such a major emphasis on race and gender, people who fall outside of the social constructs often have difficulty determining how to identify themselves. For both multiracial and transgender people, family often plays an important role in how they are able to come to terms with their identities. In *Mom, I need to be a girl*, Danielle had varying reactions to her decision to live as a woman. Danielle’s father refused to see her, and even relatives that accepted her did not completely understand. Danielle’s older brother David, though supportive, struggled to adjust to having a new sister, saying “I feel like my brother has died and I don’t know who this new person is (Just Evelyn, p.13).” For many transgender people, it can be difficult to find similarly identified role models, let alone family members, especially parents, who also identify as transgender.

Similarly, multiracial people, particularly first-generation biracial people, do not always have parents who can identify in the same way they do. In her book, *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me?* Donna Jackson Nakazawa writes, “Expecting a multiracial child can spark a wide range of complex feelings...concern over how to help [the] child achieve a strong sense of identity (Nakazawa, p.43).” Like Just Evelyn, parents of first-generation biracial children are unable to relate to what can be an important part of their child’s identity. Multiracial children, however, often have siblings that may identify similarly, an advantage many transgender people do not enjoy. In Nakazawa’s book, Louise Lazare explains the importance of siblings for a multiracial child: “It’s so important to try to make sure a child has siblings who look something like them, so they have another child who is different in the way they’re different (Nakazawa, p.74).” Realizing that while she could be supportive, she was unable to understand her daughter, Just Evelyn sought out other people in the transgender community, including people from the Gay and Lesbian Center, and another male-to-female transgender student at Danielle’s new school. For all identities, it is important to be able to meet and relate to people similarly situated, which may prove challenging for unique identities, particularly transgender ones.

After identifying themselves to both themselves and their families, both multiracial and transgender people often face difficulty in identifying themselves to other social groups. Today, both multiracial and transgender people face discrimination from the larger minority groups of which they are a part. For example, as gay, lesbian and bisexual activists have recognized that sexism and gender stereotyping negatively impact

not only gay, lesbian and bisexual people, but also transgender people, a larger community- the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender) community has emerged. While all members of this group are oppressed by some of society's heterosexual majority, transgender members are often oppressed by the LGB community itself. While progress has been made in developing laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, much of this progress does not include protection for transgender people. In *Transgender Equality*, Paisley Currah and Shannon Minter theorize the reason for trans-exclusion. They speculate that trans-inclusive language may be missing from proposed legislation because community activists or legislators fear that trans-inclusion would "kill the bill," preventing gay, lesbian and bisexual people from securing civil rights in the same bill (Currah, p.51). They further hypothesize that that policy makers are simply uneducated about transgender-specific language (Currah, p.75).

Similarly, multiracial people face oppression by larger minority groups and are often excluded from one race for belonging to another or pressured to choose to which race they belong, particularly in regards to public policy issues. For example, as previously explained, multiracial people are often prompted to select only one racial category on government, school, employment, and census forms. While multiracial activists and allies, including Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), have petitioned for a multiracial category and the right to identify as members of multiple categories, several monoracial organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League and the National Council of La Raza, have vehemently opposed the establishment of a multiracial category. They argue that a multiracial category would result in a reduction in their numbers, which

could lead to debates about “‘protected status’ (Adams, p.78).” Attorney Alan Jenkins explains that such a category would make it “virtually impossible for courts or agencies to detect institutional bias, and anti-discrimination laws would go unenforced. (Williams, p.14)” In this regard, multiracial and transgender people are similarly situated; both are excluded from larger communities because of fear that their identities will diminish the larger communities strength, particularly in policy making.

As evidenced, self identities do not always fall within the social constructs that society has generated. While transgender people may be a minority, they deserve protection under the law. Laws, policies and behavior that exclude or discriminate against transgender persons violate the Equal Protection clause of the fourteenth amendment. The fourteenth amendment provides equal protection under the law for all United States citizens. Although the interpretation of “equal protection” has been debated, its meaning should be clear: all citizens are to be treated equally. Why should social constructs such as race or gender change this meaning? Transgender discrimination results from gender stereotyping- the beliefs that males and females should act masculine and feminine respectively. Laws and policies that allow biological females to act feminine or choose a female gender identity, but do not allow biological males to do so, deny biological males the rights granted to biological females, and vice versa. In the 2004 case *Smith v. City of Salem, OH*, the Sixth Circuit Court ruled that this equates to sex discrimination. In further explanation, “an employer engages in sex discrimination any time it prohibits individuals of one sex from behaving or appearing in a way that it permits from individuals of the other sex (Becker, p.866).” While this may differ from the more visible

types of sex discrimination, the inequity is the same: both are laws and policies based solely on sex. It seems only fair that this would extend to multiracial people as well. If monoracial people have the right to identify themselves according to race, multiracial people should be allowed to do so as well, regardless of how many racial categories are applicable.

In the United States, and in many other places around the world, policies, legislation and behavior have been largely based on race and gender, both social constructs. As people who identify outside of these often rigid constructs, transgender and multiracial people face numerous obstacles. Identifying themselves even to themselves can be difficult, especially when contact with people who similarly identify may be limited. This hinders networking and communication opportunities, which can make determining the way in which to identify difficult. Being forced to choose between multiple identities, or with an identity that is personally inaccurate reinforces the idea that their identities are not valid. In this day and age, with all of the various ways in which people can identify, it is time that the law and society recognize that “equal protection under the law” extends to all identities, whether or not they are embraced by the majority.

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