

The Insult of Transgenderism

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We need to move on to the next stage in our struggle against transgenderism, that is moving beyond confronting individual challenges such as men entering women's spaces, sports and opportunities to opposing the idea and practice of transgenderism itself. I am going to talk today about how the concept and expression of something called 'gender identity' on the part of men who impersonate women is an insult to us. You may wonder what is new about that, so many women now recognise that today after the great activism and successes of the now worldwide movement for women's sex-based rights. But I do not think that the insult of transgenderism to women is fully realised. There is an inclination on the part of many feminist activists to find an acceptable reason for the exclusion of men with gender identities, such as women's safety, without opposing the very idea of transgenderism. This is completely understandable. It may seem to make sense tactically since most of the public understands such emergencies as the threat to women if men with gender identities are in women's prisons or masquerading as women as leaders of the girls' scouts on overnight trips. The public, we may feel, are not yet ready for understanding why it is a problem that men impersonate women at all.

It is also understandable because of a desire for safety against the intense fury and hatred that result if women do speak out. In the UK after all the police will arrest women and visit their homes to raid their bookshelves and, as in the case of a woman in the UK recently, who put up stickers saying that men cannot be women, confiscating an academic book critical of the transgenering of children as if it was Mein Kampf. Except that they would probably have left Mein Kampf behind. If women mute their fury and concentrate on criticising specific egregious examples of men's intrusion and threat rather than the very concept of transgenderism, the idea that men can become women itself, they may escape the most severe forms of punishment.

I am hugely impressed by and appreciative of the work of my feminist sisters in defending women's sex-based rights. It worries me though to see some feminists who describe themselves as 'gender critical' saying on social media and websites that they are not 'transphobes', and saying that they support something called 'trans' rights. I do understand that these feminists are seeking to protect themselves from the very real fear of being punished. They are probably lying because I find it hard to believe that they are really in favour of something called trans rights. Trans is an invention, a form of sexual fantasy for the majority of the male hobbyists who adhere to it. Men who play act a 'gender

identity' in public are not an oppressed minority in the way that others who are oppressed on the grounds of sex, race, class and sexuality are. The idea that their identities should be taken seriously and enshrined in law is not just insulting but detonates a bomb under all the huge amounts of work that feminists and all those concerned with social justice have been doing for decades. I do think that all those involved in feminist activism against the demands of men who impersonate women know all of this, and I shall say more about the dangerous way in which the concept of identity is eroding social justice later.

The term 'gender critical' itself, though it may appeal because it is unthreatening, implies that there are just some bits of gender that are problematic and some bits, perhaps, that can be saved. Radical feminists, on the other hand, understand that 'gender', which means 'sex role stereotypes', needs to be abolished in its entirety. Radical feminists are not 'critical' of gender, we work towards the world where it no longer exists. 'Gender critical' is a polite term used so as not to sound too confrontational. I argue that the very existence of the idea that men can be women, let alone its expression in public, is insulting. This is generally recognised in relation to transracialism and even transableism, in which mostly men seek sexual excitement by pretending to have a disability, but not in relation to the different ways in which men imitate women for sexual excitement or for entertainment.

It is interesting to consider why the behaviour in which members of the ruling class of men imitate and mock members of the subordinate class of women, is seen as positive or at least something that needs to be respected and to earn its practitioners the status of a rights bearing category. Similar behaviour, after all, in which white people adopt and act out stereotypes of Black people for their own amusement, which is called blackface, is despised and called out by all people who see themselves as right thinking and progressive. The men and women who imitate other cultures and ethnicities do not pose a threat of physical or sexual violence to women and girls and their number is small, but their practice even in just going to a fancy dress party in the costume of an equality category which is not their own, is excoriated. I argue that this distinction is false.

I shall talk today about all of the forms of what can reasonably be called womanface, the behaviour in which men impersonate women. It takes three forms. The majority of the men who impersonate women are what used to be called in sexology, the science of sex, transvestites, i.e. heterosexual men who are sexually excited by acting out what they understand to be women's

subordination through clothing, hormones or surgeries. A minority of female impersonators are gay men who are unhappy about loving men without pretending to be women. I will also cover another category of gay men, those who perform as drag queens. This is now a serious career path as drag becomes more and more dominant in western culture and drag queens appear on TV competitions, on panels and talk shows, as celebrities, all through the mockery of women. All of these men are included under the umbrella of transgenderism in the definitions of organisations devoted to what they call 'transgender rights'. All of these men do womanface.

Those who are gender critical but nonetheless respect what they refer to as 'trans rights' do not define exactly what they respect and what they do not, but there seems to be a dividing line between men simply expressing their 'gender identity' in public space, which is seen as OK, and men's behaviour of masquerading as women in order to gain entry to women's protected spaces, toilets, prisons and refuges, or trying to steal women's opportunities through entering women's sports, or winning women's quotas in politics or women's literary prizes, which is not. But the insult of transgenderism does not stop at practices which have such manifestly harmful effects upon women and children. The expression of 'gender identity', I argue, is insulting in and of itself. The problem is that men doing womanface are insulting to women when they are just walking down the street or sitting in a café, activities for which they need an unwilling audience of women in order to get sexual excitement. But we do not have language to enable us to express the insult and anger we feel every time a man pretending to be a woman intrudes himself into our sightlines. I want to talk today about what kind of language is available to describe the injury we experience.

Consider men's roleplaying of 'gender' in the workplace. Because the right to 'gender expression' is now commonly recognised in workplaces, it is likely that women have no right to object to their male workmates playing dress up with stereotypes of womanhood at the next desk. Men doing this insulting behaviour may be their bosses and women may have to 'respect' them in meetings. Women's rights go out of the window in such situations. When a man transitions in the office his female workmates must now refer to him by a woman's name and pronoun. They must suppress their feelings. Indeed, there is no language for their feelings and they are likely to experience inchoate resentment or anger. Women may even feel that they are the problem if they cannot accept that Jack is now Daisy. I do not imagine that white men would be able to play act being Black in the workplace or indulge their identities as wolves, as those men who are into transspeciesism might like to do. They would

not have their rights to play act protected in the same way. It is useful to look at the language and concepts used to teach people what is wrong with Blackface to see if this can help to provide a language to describe the injury to women when men play act at being women.

An article in *Vox* magazine advising people not to dress up in blackface for Halloween parties provides some useful language. It says, for instance, ‘Put down the black and brown face paint. Step away from the bronzer 12 shades darker than your skin. That is, if you're at all interested in *not* being a walking symbol of racism this Halloween’. The language here is useful. We should be able to say to a man doing womanface, ‘take off the high heeled shoes if you want to avoid being a walking symbol of sexism’ (Desmond-Harris, 2014).

There is a problem with the word sexism though, because women are seen as having less than human status compared with men, the term is often treated as a joke, certainly not taken seriously in the way that the term racism is.

Womanhating or misogyny are stronger words.

The article argues that blackface contributes to cultural prejudice against Black people rather than being harmless behaviour, ‘We have blackface performances to thank for some of the cartoonish, dehumanizing tropes that still manage to make their way into American culture’. We should be able to say this about drag, for instance, which mocks women for entertainment in the same way as blackface mocks Black people. We should be able to argue that drag disseminates poisonous prejudice against women into the culture. But drag is currently seen as just wonderful fun and is increasing in ubiquity in western culture. The *Vox* article quotes an academic, David Leonard, saying, ‘Blackface is never a neutral form of entertainment, but an incredibly loaded site for the production of damaging stereotypes...the same stereotypes that undergird individual and state violence, American racism, and centuries’ worth of injustice’. The same man says that blackface can serve to support ‘implicit bias and discriminatory treatment and in areas from law enforcement to employment’. All of this could be argued against womanface, that it supports implicit bias and discrimination against women.

We are a long way off being able to make such arguments against the influence of drag and transvestism on the status of women but that, I argue, is where we need to get to. The academic in the article talks of blackface causing harm in terms of ‘eliciting anger, or sadness, or triggering various emotions’ and describes the behaviour as ‘the chance to mock, dehumanize, and to dismiss the feelings and demands of others’ and that it ‘perpetuates’ a racist society’. All of these are good words that women should be able to use to describe our reactions

to men in womanface because whether in the supermarket or on stage, their behaviour dehumanizes us and creates anger and sadness.

He says that those who do not understand what is wrong with blackface should be asked what is right about it. He says that fans of blackface should ask themselves, "Why do I derive pleasure from this? What's the investment in doing it, and what's the investment in defending it?" This is a question that is not asked of the transvestites that have gained credibility with some feminists for seeming to support our cause by arguing that men cannot become women. A number of men have become celebrities for feminists because they publicly state their opposition to much of current transgender politics. They are often lauded for that, and for their ability to criticise the most outlandish behaviours and claims of transvestites from an insider perspective. I will not name names here but many of you will know exactly who I mean. These men need to be asked how they dare to continue with this hugely insulting behaviour and they need to desist and apologise. That would be disappointing to them though because it would remove the only reason for their celebrity and they would fade into the woodwork of the male population once more.

The unacceptability of blackface is now well understood in popular culture. There is even an article in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, for instance, on why blackface is wrong, which is also helpful in understanding why womanface is insulting (Schumer, 2020). It says, 'But the impact of blackface is no laughing matter.... the practice depicts Black people as unworthy of human dignity.... It's not a stretch to say that caricaturing Black people creates a moral justification for violence, so it should not be taken lightly'. Seeing drag as a 'moral justification' for violence, though, is the complete opposite of how it is celebrated now.

Arguably the version of womanface that is drag, is closer to blackface than the other main version, transvestism is, in that drag and Blackface are usually practised as forms of entertainment. Transvestites, on the other hand, roleplay women for sexual excitement and a part of their fetish is being able to do this in the company of and in front of women. They may engage in impersonating women just on weekends or as a more permanent lifestyle choice. There is a form of blackface, however, which is closer to what is now called expression of 'gender identity'. A rather small group of white people do roleplay aboriginality in Australia or Asian or Afro-Caribbean people in the US. This is unusual behaviour and is as commonly practiced by women as by men, which is in itself interesting and needs to be analysed in the context of the oppression of women because whilst for the men it is likely to represent a sexual fetish, for the women

the motivation will be different. But this behaviour is usually decisively rejected and seen as reprehensible as in the case of Rachel Dolezal, a white, female academic in the US who pretended to be Black even to the extent of establishing quite a reputation in the discipline of Black Studies. She lost her career and reputation.

Transracialism, though, in which men impersonate other ethnicities or cultures for excitement, is usually seen as completely different from transgenderism and it is interesting to see why that is the case. An article last year in *The Conversation*, an academic blog platform, by a Pro Vice Chancellor and an Equity Projects officer from Edith Cowan University in West Australia sternly rejects the idea that there is any similarity whatsoever between blackface and womanface on the grounds that people who transgender have no choice, it is involuntary, whereas blackface is a choice (Hill and Lane, 2021). This implies that transgenderism is somehow innate. That is not true of course. Men who engage in transvestite behaviour have a choice not to do it. They may feel impelled to do it because they have been much affected by the transvestite pornography they consume, but that is not the same as having no choice.

The example that the article's authors use to illustrate their argument that blackface is entirely different, is the UK influencer Oli London who has come out as non-binary Korean. London has received considerable criticism, including from Korean critics, who excoriate him for appropriating their culture. The concept of 'appropriation' is frequently used in the critique of men and women impersonating ethnicity. It can be equally well used to describe the insult of men doing womanface, but it is not. Women are not seen as having a culture. He uses precisely the same language and concepts as men with 'gender identities' do to justify his behaviour. He says he is 'transitioning from white to Asian', for instance, and talks of being born in the wrong body, "It feels so good to finally come out as a Korean non-binary person after being trapped in the wrong body and wrong culture my whole life". The idea that you can be trapped in the wrong culture as well as the wrong body is a new twist. He has had 18 surgeries to shave his jaw and change his eye shape costing \$250,000. This month he announced that he was going to reduce the size of his penis because the average size of a Korean penis is smaller than his appendage (Chong, 2022). He wears feminine clothing and identifies as 'non-binary' but no appropriation of womanhood is seen in this fact. He uses They them pronouns so does not identify as female, just not male.

The academics state that, 'no you can't identity as transracial but you can affirm your gender'. 'At their core', they say, 'London's words and actions are a prime

example of racism, cultural appropriation, and transphobia, enacted from a perspective of considerable privilege. Trans and gender diverse experiences don't equate with someone deciding to change their appearance to be part of a group whose experiences, community and struggles they can't fully understand'. Men, they imply, do not fully understand the 'community and struggles' of women. Arguably, being able to understand what it is like to have the body and experience of the opposite sex might be even more different, so this is a strange distinction to make.

Despite such vehement rejection by critics of the idea that transracialism and transgenderism could be seen as similar, there are some who are prepared to make that argument. Back in 2017 an article was published in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* which occasioned huge controversy (Singal, 2017). Rebecca Tuvel, an assistant professor at a US university, compared the cases of two persons who pretended to be members of an equality category that was not their own, Caitlyn Jenner, the athlete who in old age started to impersonate a woman, and Rachel Dolezal who I mentioned above. Tuvel argues that 'considerations that support transgenderism extend to transracialism (Tuvel, 2017). Given this parity, since we should accept transgender individuals' decisions to change sexes, we should also accept transracial individuals' decisions to change races'. There was a big campaign on social media to get the journal to retract the article which split the editorial board. The article stayed, up and Tuvel got a tenured position as an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Rhodes College in Memphis. But this clearly demonstrates the dangers that face feminists presently if they wish to make such an argument.

Whereas Jenner and Dolezal do womanface and blackface as lifestyle choices, some men do blackface just as part of drag queen performances, that is just for entertainment and as part of their careers. They are routinely condemned for this, but of course not for their impersonation of women. One who has made a good career out of blackface is Chuck Knipp, a gay, white male comedian from Canada (Holthouse, 2007). He has attracted criticism and cancellations of his performances because of his portrayal of a Black woman in a character called 'Shirley Q. Liquor' in a cabaret act for white audiences. Shirley Q. is 'a welfare mother with nineteen kids who guzzles malt liquor, drives a Caddy and says in an "ignunt" Gulf Coast black dialect, "I'm gonna burn me up some chitlins and put some ketchup on there and aks Jesus to forgive my sins." Shirley also shops at "Kmark," eats "Egg McMuffmans," visits her "gynechiatrist" and just loves "homosexuals"'. There have, apparently, even been demonstrations against him from black, gay and transgender activists, but, none, yet, from feminists because the mockery of women that is the basis of drag is so normalised that it is

invisible. Many forms of mockery of other cultures and ethnicities are acted out by drag queens and they are controversial, though their impersonation of women is not. In Australia there are white drag queens who do aboriginal drag such as the Australian drag queen, Scarlett Adams, a competitor in Drag Race Down Under in 2021 (Kumar, 2021). Photos came to light showing that he had performed 'not only in Blackface, but in a burqa, Aboriginal dress, and more' but he suffered no penalty. He apologised but pointed out that 'a lot of the other queens' did blackface.

The aboriginal drag queen Felicia Foxx, objected fiercely to Adams' pretence of being aboriginal but had no awareness that women might find mockery of their bodies, culture and personhood objectionable (Kelleher, 2021). Mockery of women is the foundation of drag, but it is only the admixture of race and ethnicity that occasions any complaint. All these men have built careers on the mockery of women but there is no harm to be seen in it because women are not understood as fully human, not seen as capable of being insulted or offended against.

It is hard to understand why transracialism and transgenderism, or even transablism or transpeciesism are understood so differently when they are all fantasies, and, for the men involved, mainly sexual. There are two possible explanations. One is that women are seen as so unimportant, having no material reality, really just a trope, i.e. a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression, so lowly in status, barely human compared with men, that it is of no account if men just treat women as a figment of their imagination. It may even be that women have been so conditioned into accepting that they are of less worth than men that they would consider it ridiculous to suggest that they could be as worthy of respect as Black men should be. The other is that those who think there is a difference believe that though many identities are simply unreal and may be insulting, when men identify as women this does represent something real, that some essence of gender even if not biology, makes the men who claim it into some kind of real women. There is a great deal of propaganda from trans rights and gay organisations, through school programmes and the medical profession, to suggest that children and adults who claim to be the opposite sex really do possess some unique qualities that make them different from the ordinary boys and girls and men and women that they really are. And many, even gender critical, feminists may really believe this, though I find that hard to accept, when they exempt men who pretend to be women from the complete rejection that they would almost certainly extend to transracialists who are very clearly not possessed of any special qualities at all that make them different from anyone else except active imaginations.

The Concept of Identity

I want to finish by talking about the problematic notion of ‘identity’. The basis for all the acting out that is done in the name of transracialism, transgenderism, transableism and transspeciesism is the concept of identity. ‘Identity’ today mainly means a sexually exciting fantasy in a man’s head. It is a very dangerous notion politically because it destroys the meaning and use of categories of oppression in social justice politics, something that took decades in the building and that many feminists and lesbian feminists took part in. There is a history to the term. Back in the 1970s some feminists adopted the notion of identity in relation to what is now called ‘intersectionality’ and then came to be called ‘identity politics’. The Black feminists who promoted the term sought to explain that a woman could identify as both female and Black and her experience would be fundamentally affected by being in possession of two oppression identities which were intertwined. Identity, however, did not mean then what it means today when it has been emptied of political meaning. Back then, it meant something like class consciousness i.e. whether a person identified with being Black or being a woman, which were necessary bases for anti-racist and feminist political organisation and action. Many who were women or Black or both might not make a political identification, i.e. recognising how these identities affected their lives and deciding to take action, but being Black and being a woman were understood as material categories, based on biology, history and circumstances. You might not politicise the categories, but whether you did or not, the categories remained materially real. Now identity means something quite different, something entirely in the mind and with no connection with material reality at all. This changeover from ‘identity’ being seen as applying to something real to meaning a fantasy, took place largely in the 1990s as part of the move to poststructuralism and queer theory in the universities. Back in the late 90s at the University of Melbourne where I taught, I was horrified when my subjects were placed in the category ‘politics of identity’ which included psychoanalytic politics. No, I said, being a woman is not an identity. It is biological reality. This was not, of course, understood and I was just seen as being difficult.

The concept of identity as fantasy won out. Today, as we know, the concept of gender identity is being written into law and policy. Equality Acts which would once have applied to the material categories of race, class and disability, have now been extended to cover projections of the imagination. This is likely to have an effect on the very concept of equality. If men can claim to be women, why should not white men pretend to be Black, why should not men with disability fetishes pretend to have disabilities and demand to be accommodated

at the workplace for the wheelchairs or other equipment that they do not need because in fact they have no physical impairments. The determined undermining of all that we have built as feminists or other campaigners for social justice and equality is taking place. If the fantasy in which men pretend to be women is accepted politically as it is at present, why will the categories of race and disability survive as material realities rather than just being fantasies. The work of decades is being dismantled to service the whims of white, able-bodied men.

Conclusion

Presently we are far from the recognition that transgenderism is an insult to women. Today our failure to respect men's fantasies in the form of 'misgendering' for instance, can lead to huge penalties. We are in the position of the peasants who had to tug their forelocks to the Lord of the manor. But we should not mute the ambition to see women recognised as full human beings. We must work towards a situation where *Good Housekeeping* magazine will have an article excoriating womanface. We have to get there because anything else means forever accepting that women are inferior.

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