

# Beyond The Binary

a keynote by Kate Bornstein

Transcending Boundaries 2011

*dictated into text from hand-scribbled notes, then edited with one pass*

Hello and thank you to the organizers, sponsors, volunteers, vendors and attendees. Thank you Melissa Kaplan thank you Mary Jo. I'm honored and so pleased to be giving the keynote this year at Transcending Boundaries 2011. The topic you've chosen this year is "Beyond the Binary." At first glance that's almost too easy to talk about.

But on closer inspection, what is a binary... really? A binary is an either/or. A binary is two and two only equal elements—like man and woman, or Homo and hetero. Those are supposed to be the only two choices in gender and sexuality respectively. Here at Transcending Boundaries, we know that sex and gender binaries mask vast numbers of components, elements that are masked by the agreed upon imaginary binary. When you unmask a binary, when you deconstruct it, what have we got? A hierarchy—like the gender hierarchy, Which is roughly man, woman, trans man, trans woman, drag king, drag queen, tranny, and cross-dressers.

Hierarchies, like binaries can also be deconstructed, leaving us with vast numbers of people and groups, all in need of some organization within a safe space. That safe space is called a dialectic: lots of people & groups of people, none of them at each other's throats, all willing to talk things out, and reach consensus. That kind of space is called a third space or a dialectic. Like us in this room for example. We represent, right now, a large number of people who speak and negotiate gender and sexuality with the intent to reach consensus.

So, what lies beyond the binary?

You do! Really, you are something new in the world. You are amazing. You and I are rare in our existence through recorded history. So hooray for us. That's what lies beyond the binary: hooray for us. Done now. Ah, if only—we've only just begun.

Thirty years ago, getting beyond the sex and gender binaries was difficult, and those who did it kept themselves hidden away from public view. Now, people are leaping over sex and gender binaries a lot! Right out in the open for all to see! Two difficult tasks still face us beyond the binary:

- \* Dismantling the hierarchy that invariably lies beyond every binary.
- \* Fending off the impact of other binaries on the resulting dialectic or third space.

For example, here at TBC, there's still evidence of hierarchies of sexuality and gender. People are still left out, even here, and looked down upon—sex workers, cross-dressers, asexuals, to name just a few. And even here, other binaries along with their hidden hierarchies are fucking up our sweet, safe space.

In addition to gender and sexuality we've got race, age, class, religion, looks, ability, citizenship, family and reproductive status, language, habitat, politics, and mental health. Each one of these spaces is represented in the culture by a binary, and the hierarchies they are masking are working right here, right now. So now, we've got another answer to the question what's beyond a binary: another binary, and another, and another, and another, and another. No, there are probably not an unlimited number of them but there sure are a lot of them.

The nature of binaries, where they come from, why they stick in place, and what is it they cause us to do that is bad for us.

### **So, where do binaries come from?**

We live in a Judeo-Christian culture, here in the United States. I think that's where many of our binaries come from. In fact I think that's where the whole notion of binary as important comes from. Kindly permit me to act the part of devil, quoting the Scripture for my own purposes. Let's look at the book of Genesis.

OK, let's pick up a few verses in to where God is sitting there in heaven. He's made everything there is, including the heaven he's sitting in. He's made stars and oceans and planets and light and mountains and bunny rabbits and marijuana, but he thinks to himself... something is missing. Being God, no sooner does He pose himself a problem, He solves it. God gets the bright idea to create a woman named Lilith. She's a hot babe. This is one smart God. Then he creates Adam, and Lilith tops Adam. She rides that cowboy. Well, cool as God is, way back in those days, he was not having any part of that. He turned Lilith into a demon, and created Eve. Eve was also a hot babe.

But God didn't make the same mistake twice. Unlike Lilith, Eve is cute and dumb, which—with only a few exceptions—is just how most all sexy femmes are seen by people who read the Bible with all their hearts. But stuffy as he was, back in those days, God really loved Adam and Eve. He loved them with all His heart, and remember this is God's heart so it's a really big heart, and He loves them with all of it. He says to them,

“Look what I made for you. It's a beautiful garden. There's everything you could possibly want to make yourself happy with. There's birds, and waterfalls, and lily pads, and chipmunks, and over there...” God pointed with a Godly forefinger, “that's a whole acre of marijuana.”

“All of this is yours,” God continued when Adam and Eve finally managed to quiet down their excitement at the idea of chipmunks and lily pads. “All I want is your happiness. I've created harmony, and you are part of it, so you get to do anything you want to do. Anything at all. Well, there's one exception.”

Adam and Eve looked at each other nervously. God continued, reassuringly.

“You can do anything, touch anything, play with anything, heck, you can even fuck anything.” God paused and looked down at His shoes, and kicked the dirt with his toe. Then he continued in a low voice, behind which he was barely containing his rage.

“There's just this one little exception. Do not eat the fruit of that tree.” He lifted another Godly finger and pointed to an awesome tree. No, really, it was an awesome tree. It changed color every time you looked at, every time you blinked, that tree changed color. It was silver and gold, then red and blue—always two colors, of all of God's infinite colors—it even turned itself into black and white. Only one thing stayed the same about the tree: it was always cloaked in colors that were opposite one from the other.

“That's a really cool tree,” says Adam.” What's it called?”

“Yeah, it's so pretty,” says Eve.” And the fruit looks so delicious.”

Did I mention the fruit? Some people think it was an apple. To say that the fruit of that tree was an apple would be like saying the Taj Mahal is a No-Tell Motel, which in fact it was. So yes, maybe the fruit looked like an apple, but oh what a scent it had, oh what a taste! First it was sour, then it was sweet. That fruit smelled at first sun-kissed, and in the next moment it smelled of new rain. The fruit from that tree always tasted like two opposite tastes, and smelled like two opposite smells.

Nothing like that existed in the garden—everything else just was what it was. This tree was a true wonder!

“It’s called The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” muttered God, “and if you know what’s good for you, you won’t eat the fucking fruit.”

Of course, Eve did *not* know what was good for her, because she hadn’t eaten the fruit yet—so it was really easy for the sexy, attractive serpent to seduce her into taking a great big bite of that delicious fruit—the fruit from the tree called The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And because Eve was so gosh darned cute, Adam was an easy mark to take the next bite and that’s exactly what he did. The two of them blinked and looked at each other.

“You’re a man,” said Eve.

“You’re a woman,” said Adam.

“It’s hot today,” said Eve.

“Yes, it’s always either hot or cold,” agreed Adam.

“I’m happy,” said Eve.

“I’m sad,” Adam replied.

“You’re naked,” said Eve.

“Right—we’re clothed or we’re naked,” said Adam, and at once the two of them scrambled to find some clothes. They found fig leaves. Fig leaves? Really?

You know the rest. God finds them out. He’s heartbroken. He casts them out of the garden. Why, why, why was that tree so important? It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God knew that Good and Evil have no place in paradise. Good and evil is the big Biblical binary. The knowledge of good and evil is what God warned us away from. Binary thinking is what God warned us away from. And so we do not live in paradise anymore. Thus endeth the Bible lesson.

Not only is the knowledge of good and evil the most basic binary, it’s also the basis of all morality. All morality, all moral codes, are good and evil, right and wrong—these are binaries that are believed to be true and unquestionable. So we got kicked out of paradise for buying into a binary and making a big moral deal out of it. What’s the real message God was trying to tell us?

“Anything, my children, except good and evil, either/or.”

## “Throw Out Morality and People Will Do The Right Thing” Lao-Tse

Okay, so now the culture is stuck with morality. What’s so harmful about that? Well, morality as either/or robs us of the need to use our wise minds to imagine the harmony of difference. Morality as either/or teaches us to mistrust our good hearts to decide for ourselves what’s good and bad, right and wrong. What’s more, morality as either or serves as a template for all these categories of of existence, all these spaces in which we can be regulated, all these vectors of oppression:

Gender, sexuality, race, age, class, religion, ability,, looks citizenship, family and reproductive status, language, habitat, politics, mental health, and humanity.

Systemic binaries regulate our identity, desire and power. How? Well, on a personal level, either/or sets us up for failure when we meet each other. Meeting a new person within the system off conditioned morality looks something like this:

*Hello, I see that you are... X.*

*I know what to expect from you now.*

*I know how to treat you now.*

The precise moment we’re hooked by a binary is what Tibetan Buddhist nun, Pema Codron calls shenpa. Literally, the Tibetan word means attachment. More subtly however the word describes the exact moment we get hooked. For example...

- \* You look at me, and see white. You’re hooked into treating me like a white person.
- \* You look at me and see old. You’re hooked into treating me like an old person.
- \* You hear my name and understand that I am a Jew. You’re hooked into treating me like a Jew.

These are all moments of being hooked that, with a lot of practice, we can learn to avoid. Why avoid them? Because it’s that moment of getting hooked emotionally into a binary, feeling the urge to act, and acting on the urge, that destroys the possibility of a harmonious dialectic. The moment we’re hooked into a binary, we are hooked into a debate with the aim of winning the debate: I’m right and better than you.

Knowing all this tells us how to act beyond the binary: we try our best to spot the moment we are booked into a binary of me versus you, us versus them. We spot those moments, and we replace them with,

*Hello, I welcome you into my space. Will you please welcome me into your space?*

That's what builds a dialectic of consensus and freedom beyond the binary. That's what deconstructs our hierarchy. That simple act of welcoming and asking to be welcomed. Active welcoming is the first step of an activism of love, a politic of desire.

## **OK, Time to Talk Politics**

We are at the beginning of an election cycle here in the United States. What does that mean? People in power will ramp up every divisive binary they can think of. This country and by extension the world will be awash with us versus them, good guys and bad guys, red states and blue states, my way or the highway. This is how the politics of power and identity politics have always operated.

I wrote in *Hello, Cruel World* about 3 spheres of life that make life more worth living: identity, desire, and power. In the best of all possible worlds, we'd be choosing our own identities, acting on our own desires, and acquiring and used our power, based on... if not morality, then what? Our own kind hearts, and God. Look, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in a separate creator God. But we all know there's something greater than us, right? We all know there's something really big in the world that we don't know about. And we all know there's a goodness that makes our hearts sing to feel or perform it. Some people call all of that God. Some call it The Tao. I call it The Great Big Good. It's what will guide the harmonious interaction of our identities, desires, and powers. But instead of listening to The Great Big Good, we follow rules from a set of intersecting hierarchies of oppression: gender, race, age, class, sexuality, religion, citizenship, looks, ability, family and reproductive status, language, habitat, mental health, politics, and humanity—each of these is used by the not-so-nice powers that be to categorize and regulate our identities desires and powers to their will.

For tens of thousands of years, humanity governed itself using a politic of power, in which a small number of people have all the goodies and they get to decide who to give them to, how much anyone might get, and which people won't get anything. That's the politics of power: the regulation of resources by unquestionable, enforced fiat.

Along came democracy, a politic of identity because ideally, each person's voice (identity) is recognized in the government. In the United States, that means one person, one vote. Well, that's what it used to mean. It's pretty much crumbling now. All these intersecting vectors of oppression have wiped out the most important elements of any politic: patience, compassion, and a simple desire to come together in joy with liberty and justice for all.

So we've lived under a politic of power, lots of politics of power, and we've lived under politics of identity, lots of identity politics. But never in the recorded history of humanity have people lived secularly under a politic of desire. Some religious leaders have tried to create that kind of politic.

What would a politic of desire look like? Well, it would look like great sex. What does great sex look like? That's a question each of us in this room grapples with daily. Our sex and gender identities are rooted in a desire. We know how to express desire. We've given it a lot of thought. That's why we're here at the flocking conference talking about it. Desire is what we know better than anyone else. So a politic of desire would be like great sex: loving, consensual, surprising, empowering, and fun for everyone. It starts with the activism of love, which is radical welcoming.

### **So that's my key note for you today.**

For the rest of this conference, please practice radical welcoming. Oh, you will get hooked. We all will. Let's spot those moments and respond with welcome instead of rejection. How do you do that? I use a trick I learned from his Holiness the Dalai Lama. Along with 700 other people, I attended a three-day workshop with the Dalai Lama in New York City at the Beacon theater. He made the point that it is a belief of Buddhism that time is infinite, and the number of sentient beings is finite. With infinite time, and a finite number of beings, it stands to reason, the odds are good, that everyone you meet at one time has been your mother and has given you if only for a small moment unconditional love. If I can remember that point of view, the moment I'm hooked, I can unhook myself from the binary automatic response urge and instead respond with radical welcoming.

For the rest of this conference, and hopefully on into the rest of your life, please try to do that. And please try to help others spot moments of unconscious acting on the binary. Help them welcome you. We can develop a politic of desire, right here, right now, in this dialectic called Transcending Boundaries.

And when we leave tomorrow, we can take the activism of desire out into the world. And if enough of us do that, we will lay a strong foundation for a new politics of desire and compassion.

You are my family and my tribe.

I trust you to do good.

Fuck morality. Fuck the law.

Fuck the common wisdom.

I trust you even if you think you are not worthy of trust.

I trust you to do the right thing, exactly the way you are on your journey of sexuality and gender.

Together we are building a politic of desire right here right now.

### **Wrapping up now.**

Let's get back to what really matters within our dialectic: sex. The only way that the politics of power can deal with sex is to demonize, silence, and invisible lives sex.

The only way that the politics of identity can deal with sex is to police it.

The only politic that can liberate sex is your personal politics of conscious desire, your personal politics of love. These politics come from your kind heart, and your personal relationship with... well... The Great Big Good. That's what guides us on our loving journeys through sex, gender, and all that jazz.

I'm going to close with some practical advice from my book, *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws*. This section is called:

### **Hot Dating Tips and Sex Advice for Young Folk**

- \* Sex does not have to mean marriage, babies, or even I love you.
- \* Sex can be right this minute or next year some time. You get to decide. And you get to change your mind about that whenever you want to.
- \* Sex can be a passionless quickie.
- \* Sex can be any way you imagine it can be.
- \* Sex doesn't have to be any way you don't want it to be.

- \* Sex doesn't have to be with one person over a long period of time, or even with one person at a time.
- \* Sex doesn't have to be with anyone but yourself. You get to control the guest list.
- \* Sex doesn't have to happen with anyone of any particular race, religion, gender, age, class, education level or body type.
- \* Sex doesn't have to be for free. You can buy, sell or trade sex for things if you need and want to do that.
- \* Sex doesn't mean you're a slut or a whore, unless of course that's what you'd like to be.
- \* Sex doesn't have to be genital, and you don't have to do it in private.
- \* Sex doesn't have to end with an orgasm for everyone.
- \* During sex, you can be any gender, age, race, class, animal, object, or alien life form that you'd like to be as long as you both or all agree that that's what you're safely and respectfully being together.
- \* Sex doesn't have to be in the missionary position.
- \* Sex doesn't have to happen on a bed in a bedroom in the dark.
- \* Sex can be really yummy, sicko, gross, painful, scary, bloody, and/or degrading when you all or both agree to do it that way safely and respectfully together.
- \* Sex can be hilariously funny.
- \* Sex can be a lovely gift you give someone or someone gives you. Sex can be a blessing, a prayer, and a generous act of healing. Sex can involve costumes, props, and a script.
- \* Sex can be as soon as I put down these notes... or while I'm still talking.

Thank you for your kind attention.