

Power and Subversion

by Caitlin Mulvihill

In writing this essay, I wanted to be sure that I was meeting Aoki's work at a place where her firsthand experience was validated. I am not trans, and it was important for me to not insert myself into a conversation so that my own voice did not overshadow those who need to be heard. When I first read "On Living Well and Coming Free," I had a strong reaction to the author's equation between gender and power, a reaction that comes across in my essay. As a queer person growing up between a major U.S. city and the American South, my relationship with femininity has always been complex, and the varying double standards that I've been faced with forced me to confront that relationship from a young age. I wanted to interact with Aoki's vision for the future, and explore more deeply the ways in which other activists and scholars are considering problems of reforming systems from within versus tearing them down completely. As I continued to revise my essay, I found myself engaging more and more with these activist voices and reflecting on what their visions would look like in the lives of everyday people.

—Caitlin Mulvihill

On January 21, 2017, six days after my sixteenth birthday, I stood on the streets of Pittsburgh at the Women's March, the first big protest I had ever attended. There was an undeniably angry, revolutionary feeling in the crowd. I looked to my right and saw a sign that said, "The System Is Broken: Here's Proof." The sign had a point. Of course the system was broken; millions of people would not have taken to the streets if it was not. For the next few days, news outlets were flooded with pictures of all the signs people had brought to marches around the country. One website, *The Current*, published an image in which a man holds a sign that reads, "The System isn't Broken, it was Built That Way" (Perez). Both he and the person next to me in Pittsburgh had been marching for the same cause, yet they approached the same issue of systemic inequality from seemingly opposite sides. Is one of these views more productive than the other, or perhaps even more true?

Transgender activist and author Ryka Aoki's essay "On Living Well and Coming Free" is a part of a larger compilation titled *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Her essay, in the spirit of the compilation's title, discusses the definition of an "outlaw" and what trans activism should, and more importantly, should *not* entail. She rejects the notion that there must be a checklist of steps in order to be considered a real activist or "gender outlaw." She places the utmost value in simply living the life a person wants to live as an act of defiance, writing "I am not going to stop cooking rice porridge or hoping for a comfortable house with a garden simply because . . . it's not subversive enough" (150). Her activism also rejects the idea of completely dismantling

systems, including systems that are not so concrete, like gender. “Should the structures be torn down, and gender mean nothing, then nothing will protect the weak from the strong,” Aoki writes (147). However, by insinuating that women are part of “the weak,” she perhaps inadvertently categorizes gender as something that is inherently tied to power in a way that is not conducive to eliminating gender-based violence and discrimination.

Gender discrimination has long held women back from amassing power, but is there a way that our current understanding of power can reconcile itself with gender? Classicist Mary Beard considers this question in her book *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, a compilation of two essays exploring the relationships between femininity, masculinity, and power structures, beginning with the ancient Greeks. “You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure,” writes Beard (105). This characterization of power as a male-coded structure is not directly contradictory to the ties Aoki makes between gender and power, yet the two thinkers diverge on the correct way to transform this patriarchal structure. Beard’s conclusion, that power is an inherently masculine concept and therefore must be entirely reinvented in order to be accessible to non-masculine people, is in tension with Aoki’s belief that gender can, and should, be reformed from within. The laws of power—whether it be political power, economic power, or otherwise—are not constructed to include women, and therefore they are living outside the law. Women are thus, by Aoki’s definition, outlaws: “No group of law can encompass the varied desires and actions of an individual and when any law omits or excludes us, we are by definition outlaw” (145). The group of “laws” Aoki discusses, in this case masculine coding, dictates the definition of power and places all women outside the law (145).

However, where Aoki invites her reader to consider the goal of “living well” and how it requires us to look “beyond oppressed and oppressor” (105), Beard is concerned with remaking power entirely, writing that the treatment of power “as a possession” must be rejected, and that we should instead “[think] about power as an attribute or even a verb (‘to power’)” (106). Aoki rejects this, arguing that the “romanticized goal of erasing structures” is a black hole for the energy of activists (146). Beard’s solutions unabashedly take the radical approach, hoping to reinvent power in its entirety, making no attempt to rethink the current definition as inclusionary of feminine presenting people. That attempt, in her eyes, is futile. “We have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man,” she writes (68). While Beard’s essays do not explicitly address the experiences of trans people, in this case, we can assume that her imagined system of power is based on the image of a cisgender, heteronormative man. Although Aoki believes in “thinking beyond oppressed and oppressor” (150), she never squares this with her concept of gender as an inherent power structure. Although she recognizes a significant imbalance of power within institutional structures, she suggests it might be possible to use that imbalance to generate other types of power.

Beard’s radicalism, while empowering in its ideals, could be alienating to even those who consider themselves activists, perhaps those who, like Aoki, see their activism in rice porridge and a house with a garden. In 1987, sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman published “Doing Gender,” one of the most influential papers in the field of gender studies, so much so that the title of the paper has become a common phrase in the field. In 2009, the pair published a follow-up titled “Accounting for Doing Gender,” in which they provided more

clarity on their conclusions as well as responded to criticism of the original work. The concept of “doing gender” revolves around the idea that the traits we associate with gender are a product of society rather than anything innate; the authors complicate the relationship between sex, sex categorization, and gender by explaining gender’s social dependence: “[the] relationship between being a recognizable incumbent of a sex category (which itself takes some doing) and being *accountable* to current cultural conceptions of conduct becoming to—or compatible with the ‘essential natures’ of—a woman or a man” (113-114). By presenting in a way that conforms to gender norms, people fall into the trappings of the patriarchy, a structured response to “masculinity and femininity . . . [as] social, properties of a system of relationships” (114).

Acknowledging that gender constructs have active, fluid definitions offers space for addressing issues of sexism, and would fall in line with Aoki’s desire to reform structures from within. West and Zimmerman write that “if the gender attributes deployed as a basis of maintaining men’s hegemony are social products, they are subject to social change (however challenging such change may be),” essentially concluding that if patriarchal power is a social product to begin with, then it can still be changed by society (114). They even explicitly say that “gender is not *undone* so much as *redone*” (118). Where Beard would disentangle gender and power by entirely subverting and “undo[ing]” gender entirely, West and Zimmerman, and Aoki, would suggest that we, over time, change how we perceive it. West and Zimmerman suggest that these changes are inherently linked to “historical and social circumstances,” and that complicating our understanding of gender will require us to interrogate the ways in which we may unwittingly perpetuate rigid gender norms (119).

This interrogation might also help us to circumvent a binary view of gender, and create a more inclusive definition of gender. Aoki does not entirely exclude non-binary people from her rhetoric, at one point asking, “How can we best help other genderqueer, trans, and gender variant people live better?” (147). However, the relationship she suggests between gender and power does not allow for a satisfactory answer to this question, because as long as those in power continue to be cisgendered men, anyone who does not identify as such cannot maintain full autonomy. Avory Faucett is a non-binary activist whose essay “Fucking the Binary for Social Change: Our Radically Queer Agenda” explores what the label “non-binary activist” means as well as activism’s strengths, shortcomings, and goals. Faucett writes of non-binary people that “rather than being recognized for who they are, these non-conformers are judged according to a rigid gender framework that ignores other aspects of self” (78). While Aoki does not necessarily adhere to gender essentialism, her statements surrounding the gender binary fail to recognize non-binary folks when put into practice—if masculinity is powerful and femininity tied to weakness, where do people who identify as neither male nor female fall? If the idea that cisgender hetero-masculinity as the pinnacle of power is to be reinvented in the way that Aoki suggests, there must be concrete ways to do this that are inclusive of trans non-binary people. Explaining the discussions happening in non-binary activist circles, Faucette writes, “a more radical practice is to use neutral pronouns in all cases where the subject has not specified a pronoun or gender identity” (79). What this does is eliminate a definition of gender formed by presentation and the assumptions of others, and “makes gender something that we actively have and claim, rather than something that is placed upon us” (80). This means that people are not gendered by other people based on their name or appearance, and yet binary identities are still validated. Unlike Aoki, Faucette rejects the idea that our concepts of gender can be rethought

within our existing systems: “Rather than working within state structures that oppress us and our allies, non-binary activists recognize that state structures are built on a discriminatory foundation” (83). Similarly to Beard’s reinvention of power, Faucette believes that these structures must be dug up from their roots. Where West and Zimmerman would work to redefine the requirements of interactional categories over time, Faucette writes that non-binary activists “believe that the answer to state control mechanisms that divide and label us is not ‘here’s how we would like to be divided and labled instead,’ but rather, ‘what gives you the power and authority to do this?’” (83-84) Aoki’s strategy of redefining gender within the structures in which it currently exists is a fruitless pursuit in Faucette’s view, arguing that the entire structure should be interrogated.

Aoki’s text is not straightforward in its vision of freedom. While she is clear in her yearning for a world where people who have historically been outlaws can simply live their lives free of oppression and resentment, she does not consider the ways her conceptions power and weakness may inadvertently reinforce the gender binary. In order to free gender outlaws, these rigid structures must be dismantled, because it is in these structures that the patriarchal power imbalance lies, not in the inherent existence of gender. This is by no means a simple goal. There is always more work to be done in forming an understanding of gender, power, and the interactions between the two that allows for fluidity. Perhaps this work is too complex to scrawl on a pithy protest sign, but it is essential nonetheless.

Works Cited

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