

A Look Back at *TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism*

by Jessica Xavier (written in late 1996)

It's truly an impossible (and thankless) task to write a retrospective on a journal that meant so many things to so many transsexual women in so many different ways. But as a former *TransSisters* staff writer, I suppose I've stepped into it before. When Davina Anne Gabriel called it quits for health reasons in March 1995, many transsexual women, readers and staff writers alike, and myself included felt a keen sense of loss after reading her letter apprising us of the demise of *TransSisters*. Perhaps we took its quarterly appearances in our mailboxes for granted, but its existence proved to be as tenuous as our own lives. Now six months later, I'm reminded of Joanie Mitchell's rueful admonishment that "you don't know what you've got 'til its gone".

When I was early in my transition, I had heard about a new journal written by and for others like me. Eventually I subscribed and Issue # 3 arrived in the mail. The first articles I remember reading were called "The Importance of Being Outspoken" followed by "Transsexualism and Transcendence". Both were written by Davina, and these essays literally changed my way of thinking about myself. At the time, this was heady stuff for me. It was a hop on a witch's broom, flying in the faces of conventional MTF wisdom and traditional non-transsexual feminism as well. Each new issue opened new doorways to a political and spiritual sisterhood. It was the elixir of the Goddess. Wiccan Wine.

Transsexual feminism. Once regarded as an oxymoron, now suddenly a reality, and fed by a chorus of great writers led by our editrix herself. Like other long-time post-operative women, Davina had been scarred by her ostracism from her local women's community for her transsexualism. Her own turning point came when reading Sandy Stone's magnificent essay *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto*. Davina envisioned a journal that would extend Sandy's ideas, offering us a means of redefining ourselves in our own voices.

TransSisters' mission became an exploration of the uncharted middle ground between two radically different perspectives of transsexualism. At one extreme sat the real Transsexual Empire, the male-dominated, modern medicalized world that psychoanalyzed us and then surgically created us. To the doctors, transsexual women were medical marvels, Stepford Wives with dirty little secrets that forced us to feel perpetually paranoid, living our lives one step ahead of our shame-filled pasts. At the other extreme, with daggers for eyes, was a cultural feminist viewpoint that condemned us and sought to cast us out of its midst, with its mistaken, immoral mandate. These academicians and their disciples saw transsexualism as the triumph of male arrogance, patriarchy's plot to subvert feminism, diluting and polluting the women's movement from within. *TransSisters* would fill in the gaps between the two extremes, creating some new understandings of our selves and our own place in feminism.

So when Issue #1 appeared in the fall of 1993, transsexual feminists suddenly found something that crystallized our thoughts, focused our rage and gave us a voice. Rather than quietly acquiescing to the self-hatred implied by cultural feminists like Raymond and Daly, we could explore some ways and means of resisting them. Rather than seeing ourselves as enemies of feminism, it became possible to be empowered through articulating our own version of it. Issue # 4's exploration of our ancient, hidden history, once obscured by millennia of patriarchal, heterosexist, and cultural biases, was a response to the sterility of the medical model of transsexualism and gave us strong, spiritual ground to stand upon. Rather than just surgical creations, we could trace our lineage to a long tradition of *Gallae* priestesses. By de-constructing and debunking the two external viewpoints of ourselves, pride, at long last, became a possibility for us.

But the rejection of Raymond and Daly, Money and Meyer, and Benjamin and Biber, was only a point of departure. As it progressed, our little magazine was giving birth to a whole new school of emerging thought. Rather than some vague understandings through a glass darkly of a feminism once removed, transsexual feminism became fully formed in the pages of *TransSisters*. Rather than a few essays scattered about in some forgotten, hard-to-find or out of print nontranssexual feminist journals, our flesh became word therein. Rather than just paying lip service to feminism, we extended it, and in so doing, we made it our friend, not our foe.

While the crossdressers had IFGE's *Tapestry* and the academicians had AEGIS' *Chrysalis*, transsexual women seized upon *TransSisters* as our own. It became food for our fight against assimilation into... transgenderism. The TG word was spoken carefully here, if at all, for everywhere else transgenderism seemed to be on the rise, trampling our transsexual identities into the earth. With the emergence of the transgender identity and its community, transsexual women were being dismissed as "assimilationists", with our sex reassignment surgeries recast as the ultimate pandering to the bipolar gender paradigm. While others claimed victory by louder voices and still others claimed transsexualism without surgery, this journal became our last bastion, our tower of strength, our chief resource in a war to stop the "Incredible Shrinking Transsexual Identity" from disappearing altogether. In spite of its short life span and its limited number of subscriptions, *TransSisters* became the principal battleground for many of the wars fought over gender identity politics within the transgendered community.

Accordingly, *TransSisters* hosted many controversies, some of which became quite personalized and plainly nasty. Some staff writers and letter writers seemed to take delight in trashing each other with a zeal found only in... other contemporary feminist publications. Especially in the later issues, the dark side of transsexual feminism emerged as our writers exercised their right to commit the same mistakes of non-transsexual feminists all over again. Certainly every transsexual woman feels strongly about her identity, since each of us ends up paying such heavy price for it. Some of us were fortunate enough (or unfortunate, depending on your point of view and the length of your enemies' list) to write about it in *TSisters*.

Perhaps all of the trashing was unavoidable, as the clash of impassioned ideas about our idealized identities spilled into ad-feminen attacks. Perhaps it was a necessary phase of our growth as a community. Perhaps it just made for good reading. But more often than not, the truth behind a contentious issue would eventually emerge, eliciting some hurrahs and a few dismays. I expect this journal to age very well, in part because it will likely serve as a reminder of the importance of humility. At some point far in the future, any one of us may pick up a well-thumbed copy of any single issue, read it, laugh and become amazed at how seriously we all managed to take ourselves.

The covers of *TransSisters* featured Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Rachel Pollack, Sandy Stone, the New Women's Conference and the Michigan Women's Music Festival protests (three times). Indeed, with its in-depth coverage, *TSisters* came to embody our obsession with access to women-only space and particularly with Michigan's infamous "womyn-born-womyn" only policy. Issue Number 5 is a classic remembrance of the 1994 Camp Trans, at the time the single greatest collective action taken by a group of transsexual/transgendered activists. Therein lies the whole story, from raising the first tent, to Janis Walworth's rules of engagement, to Leslie Feinberg's impassioned plea for real sisterhood, to the Transexual Celtic Modal Band from Hell (with yours truly on bass guitar) singing the Ballad of Nancy B., to Leslie, Jamison Green and Kodi Hendrix gender-confusing the MWMF Security Staff, to our triumphant march across The Land on the last full day of the festival.

TransSisters later became the unofficial publication of the New Women's Conference after its own newsletter, *Right of Passage*, ceased publication. NWC had its own exclusionary policy (post-op women and their nontranssexual women partners only) excoriated by Denise Norris and Riki Wilchins and then staunchly defended by Davina in Issue # 6. Although this divisive conflict wounded many transsexual women, airing both sides of contentious issues, no matter how shrill the voices, was always Davina's policy. Regardless of how strongly she disagreed with her staff writers, to my knowledge she never killed a controversial story nor failed to print a letter. Her journalistic integrity made her journal work, setting the highest standards for her staff writers to follow.

And what writers we had! Christine Beatty, Candice Brown, Cheryl Chase, Rene Chinguapin, Adrienne Davis, Dallas Denny, Leslie Feinberg, Jamison Green, Kristine Holt, Merissa Sherrill Lynn, Denise Norris, Anne Ogborn, Margaret O'Hartigan, Rachel Pollack, Lisa Rose, Mustang Sally, Lynn Walker, Janis Walworth, Riki Anne Wilchins, and please-forgive-me-if-I've-overlooked-you. My own contributions were few, save for the very last issue (#10) in which I postulated a methodology for (re)organizing transgendered groups using feminist process and the consensus method for making decisions. But I received an amazing number of comments from those two articles. It's astonishing that a journal with only 250 subscribers became so widely read, to the extent that a Russian transsexual woman living in Great Britain read Issue #10 and wrote me how much she liked it.

Davina stated in her March 1996 letter to her former subscribers that beyond her concerns for her health, she had become "increasingly disillusioned with the course of the 'transgender movement'" and that "the overwhelming majority of the transsexual community is simply not interested in feminism or feminist values." While most non-transsexual women also are not feminist, we are a young movement, growing in numbers and awareness, and it is simply too early for me to abandon my hopes for transsexual feminism. As a transgendered activist, I wrote in Issue #10 that the key to success for the larger transgendered political movement lies in the ways of feminist process and consensus-based decision-making. But as a human being who happens to be a transsexual woman, I see an even greater future role for transsexual feminism. It can afford us the means to build a true community that loves and affirms all of us, rather than the current pseudocommunity that serves only the few. While transsexual feminism has been dealt a blow by the passing of *TransSisters*, reports of its death are indeed premature.

Although I do not share Davina's pessimism, I most certainly understand it. We transsexuals, women and men alike, are very individualistic persons with complex and wildly diverse conceptualizations of our selves. We are a people for whom agreement is rare and contention ubiquitous. Since we can never be understood by the nons, we must promulgate our identities under continuous oppression, which requires a strong force of conviction, of a belief in one's self. For most of us, that is impossible to sustain alone. Left with nowhere else to turn for support, we have sought to obtain this validation of ourselves from each other. And so naturally, many of us become quite frustrated and angry when our own kind *who should know better* fail to agree with us.

After reading the first hundred or so Letters to the Editor, in which so many disagreed with so many others over so many undotted i's and uncrossed t's, Davina surely must have realized the truth of this, and the absurdity of it all. Still, by stubbornly continuing to put her journal and herself in the middle of the crossfire in these identity wars, Davina succeeded in planting many seeds of feminist thought amongst us, which may yet grow into forests some day. She took enormous risks to publish it alone, a tenacious act of courage that must have come with a terrible

price. I hope no other transsexual sister will ever have to repeat it. And I pray that her despair over transsexual feminism, and that of others who feel as she does, is only momentary.

All of us who read *TransSisters* probably did Davina and her journal a great disservice by simply taking both of them for granted, when as transsexual women, we should have known better. Beyond the temerity of our convictions in our own identities, nothing in our lives is a surety. Yet sadly, we somehow managed to treat *TransSisters* as a given, when in truth, from the first issue to the last, it was a gift from the Goddess.