

Interlude – From the Journal of Sarah Jones - December 15th 2019

Seeing Gender for What it Really Is

I'm pregnant. I can't believe it. What timing! I'm trying to finish my PhD. I don't quite know how to do cap it all off. I wanted to say something about how we resist the conditioning, what is it Jim called it – the 'haunting' of gender? But suddenly the world takes a turn and catches me completely by surprise. What I'm trying to say *matters* much more. It's less theoretical. The whole world seems to have changed, from the inside out. This last couple of years have been a whirl; meeting Steve, deciding to give up my job and go for the research work full time, still trying to finish this PhD, getting nearer to a constantly receding end point. Then I find out I'm pregnant! Gathering my thoughts, the really significant thing I suppose was meeting Jim again. He seemed so different. He was *different*. I want to recall the conversation...it was about a month ago: I'm walking down the corridor in the Institute, on my way to library. The place is so familiar now, in all its cosiness. It still seems so cocooned from the outside world. And what a world! I think it was just *after* the eco-shocks. Those unbelievable pictures. President Obama announcing the move of the Capitol to Denver. Washington abandoned. London in a state of emergency. Travel bans were just being imposed, so I made a dash for the Institute, and made it just in time.

I pass this man. At first I wasn't sure if it was a man. He was wearing a sort of Arabic robe, long, white and flowing, and his hair was so long. But he was so tall, and his hands so big. They made me do a double take. His eye catches mine. In that moment of uncertainty, I turn my head and he smiles. I say hello and he stops. His smile was the thing that caught me. I'd never actually seen him smile before.

- Hello, aren't you... Sarah?
- Yes that's right, Sarah Jones. You're Dr. Porter, aren't you?
- Yes, that's right. Jim.

He holds out both hands, which I take in a sort of double handshake, awkwardly.

- Jim. Yes, hello Jim.
- Hello Sarah.

His eyes sparkle a bit. They are still that cool grey blue but he seems so much softer. Is it just his clothes, or is there something else? An awkward silence passes between us. He breaks it.

- So, how are you getting along? Are you...
- ...Yes, still finishing. It's more of a marathon than a sprint, isn't it?
- Oh yes, I remember that feeling well.
- And I've given up my job. It seems so pointless now, what with what's happened, plus I felt restricted there. I've written about it: having to be more of a man than any of the men to be any good. That's the gist of it, at least. How are you?
- Oh. You know. Bothered by what's going on...
- Yes, that's understandable. But you look... *well*.

He flaps his arms and the long white cloak billows out. He continues:

- This? Ah yes. I'm experimenting.
- Experimenting?
- Yes, I've been meeting with this group of people. They feel there's a link between what's going on...and, how we are, in ourselves, how we think...
- Ah! I've heard about this! Your one of those...'dragsters'...?
- Yes, but we prefer 'mystical adrogynes'. Yes. Well. I'm just experimenting with it really. I'm not really a 'joiner'. I just like what they have to say. They're looking a little deeper for the answers.

He looked really uncomfortable, for the first time. Was he was sizing up my reaction to this? He seemed so vulnerable. That's something I'd never seen before in him. I felt the need to reassure.

- I think it's...really interesting. An interesting response. And really relevant, to my ...research I mean.

I feel awkward that I may have offended him by turning him into a curiosity. But he looks relieved.

- Good. Thanks. Peoples' responses have been very...varied.
- I'll bet they must have been!

Oh God! Not the thing to say! I blush and rush to cover my embarrassment

- Actually, I'm on the way to the library, to look at your PhD, amongst other things.

He seems really thrilled by this, but it was true, so worth saying, I think?

- Really?!
- Yes, actually it has been quite an inspiration to me, in my own work. I really like the stuff around the 'hegemonic haunting' – how gender might be, like a ghost or spectre...what did you call it...?
- *Sheyd*, in Yiddish, *Sheydim* - plural, almost like a kind of demonic possession.
- Yes that's it. That's a really interesting idea. Like a mind virus, it kind of takes us over and we find ourselves performing in certain ways, even if they are against the very things we say we want.
- That's right. I mean, yes, that's the way I look at it.
- I'm working on that from a woman's point of view. I'm interested in how women even with feminist views still end up acting out performances of gender that can seem to contradict them.
- Did you read Amanda Sinclair's stuff on that?
- 'Body Possibilities'? Yes. It's good. But, actually you might be able to help me with a question. Do you mind, have you got a moment? I really need to say something about this.
- Yes as a matter of fact I do. What is it?
- I am trying to find out what we can do about it.
- Ah! Your pragmatic streak, Sarah! You always did want an answer to that!

This takes me back. He seems to know me better than I'd realised. I hadn't thought I'd made that much of an impact.

- Yes, I suppose I did. I do. It seems really important, and I know that in post-modern research we aren't just trying to isolate cause and effect but to look at the subjectivities etc. etc. blah, blah, blah. But there must still be things we can do. I don't know...sort of, practices, even rituals that help us...to...immunise ourselves...escape...?
- There's so much I can say about that. And of course, I am still struggling with it. Perhaps more so now than I did when I was working on my own PhD. That's why I am doing this...The truth is, I'm still looking.

He gestures to his clothes once again. I am struck by a change in him that seems more than sartorial. It is his whole demeanour. He is still very tall, of course, but he seems, somehow less imposing, more accessible and definitely less sure of himself. But rather than finding that off-putting, I find it draws me to him. He seems to have less of a shell around him. He isn't trying so hard. He continues

- But there's one thing I think really helped me. It was drawing.
- Drawing?
- Yes, life-drawing. It helped me to see beyond the obvious. It helped me to really look at people, to see their bodies in all their variety. When I really looked, it's as if gender just seemed to drop away. You start to see the uniqueness, and how superficial the gender haunting is. There's a small section of my thesis, in the appendix, tucked away so not to offend anyone. Have a look at it.
- I will

And so I did. And this is what I found:

The Practice of Really Seeing Beyond Gender

In my journal, 1/2/07, I wrote, next to the faces of some people I had been drawing:
"But that doesn't look like me!"
"Maybe not quite, but I think I've caught something of you, an essence perhaps, and besides it has helped me to really see you and how beautiful you are."
"Beautiful? I'm not beautiful!"
"Everyone being drawn is beautiful."



We tend to think that people come in just two types. Gender is such a pernicious programming that we overlook the individuality, the humanity of people. Just look at them: their bodies just don't fit the black and white category, when you really look. Beyond the superficial layer of clothes, or even hairstyles, when you really start to look at it, everyone is so unique, so utterly themselves; and this bi-polar view of human types is disrupted by it. We live with this myth all the time. It catches us before we've had time to really see. But just take a moment to stop, really look, and see the unquieness of an eye, an ear, a hand... That's when people stop being just 'two types'.



Everyone being drawn is beautiful. Around that time, I began to draw people. In meetings, I would scribble doodles, trying to catch their features, expressions, postures. I briefly took up life drawing. I wanted to really learn to see people. I had a hunch it would help me in a couple of ways.

- Firstly, it would help me really look at them, and learn to be a better researcher this way.
- Secondly, I wanted to look beyond the bi-polar view of gender.



Another surprising thing happened when I did this. When I really started to look at people in this way, everyone, without exception, became beautiful. The details seemed to make them shine. Really seeing people made me gasp with their beauty. And I had to stop doing it in meetings, because they would notice that I was really looking at them. And they would want to see what I had drawn. And they were usually disappointed and I was sorry that they were. I felt like I had let them down. But I didn't do it because I wanted to become an artist, but because I wanted to see beyond superficial dichotomies, such as the difference between a man and a woman.