



Binary Operations

the struggle to redefine gender
at barnard and columbia

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“SAY YOUR NAME, YEAR, PGP, AND SOMETHING GENDEREVOLUTIONARY you did over break,” says Miranda Elliot, a senior in CC and president of GendeRevolution. She shoots a glance in my direction from her perch next to a fake tree decorated with condoms and explains, “Your PGP is your preferred gender pronoun.”

Made cozy with colorful couches and Harvey Milk posters, the Stephan Donaldson Lounge in the basement of Furnald is the ideal setting for LGBT students to come together, united by the impulse to question societal gender norms, and the drive to do something about it. One member jokes that his PGPs are “Homeric,” then elaborates on his newfound knowledge of classical language grammar. The members of GendeRevolution may stand on the fringe of campus activism, but the second they start making jokes that necessitate a thorough knowledge of both modern queer theory and languages from antiquity, it becomes clear that they are thoroughly Columbian.

Modern notions of gender on Columbia's campus have recently been challenged by last fall's gender-neutral housing debate. While the national media has used Columbia's proposition as a scapegoat for asserting conservative opinions (*The New York Post* referred to the proposition as a way for students to "live in sin on their parent's dime"), the proposition has received unanimous support from the Columbia College Student Council and campus administrators. The four authors of the policy—Elliot, Sean Manning Udell, a junior in CC, vice president of the junior class, and treasurer of the Columbia Queer Alliance, Avi Edelman, a junior in CC, president of Everyone Allied Against Homophobia, and Sarah Weiss, a senior in CC, and CCSC vice president of policy—are strongly optimistic that it will be in place for the Fall 2010 housing selection.

In addition to discussions of gay students who fear tense relationships with homophobic or conservative roommates, the debate has referenced the struggles of transgender and gender-nonconforming students. As Edelman says, "We don't inhabit these boxes [of male and female] that the previous housing system is based on." But what would seem to be a victory for transgender students and their allies actually reveals Columbia's and Barnard's history of less-than-progressive institutional support systems for students who don't fall clearly on either side of the gender binary.

Working Backwards

In a monitored interview, Will Simpkins, Program Director of Community and Diversity Initiatives and leader of Queer Central, maintains that Columbia and Barnard are neither behind nor ahead of your peer institutions on the issue, but the numbers tell a different story. All of our fellow Ivies (with the exception of Yale, which is currently considering a similar proposition) and many of our New York peer schools, including Vassar College and New York University, have had gender-neutral housing options available since last fall. "There had never been a student push for it before, which is also significant," Manning Udell says.



**"PEOPLE HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH THE TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE THAN THEY THINK. IT'S NOT SO COMPLICATED OR DIFFERENT THAN OTHER TRANSITIONS IN LIFE."
—REY ASHER**

Inextricably linked to this issue is both Barnard's and Columbia's mixed track record of accommodating transgender students. Barnard was the subject of debate in 2007, when the *Columbia Daily Spectator* and later, the *New York Times Magazine*, ran features on student Rey Asher (commonly known as Rey Asher), a junior in GS, who says he was pressured by the administration to transfer from Barnard to the school of General Studies.

**"AN EASY GRAB PHRASE IS 'I'M JUST A BOY IN A GIRL'S BODY,' BUT IT'S REALLY MUCH DEEPER THAN THAT."
—HARVEY**

Anna Steffens, a senior in BC, co-president of Q Club, says about Barnard's track record, "Barnard has made mistakes in the past, but admits them. They are trying to learn from those mistakes." However she qualifies this with, "I wouldn't say this is true for every administrator, though."

Steffens is not alone in this sentiment. Many members of the queer community, have criticized both Columbia and Barnard's past actions in dealing with transgender students, including Asher. "There's no typical way Columbia deals with trans students—its kind of more of a 'find your way on your own' thing," says Elliot. "The system kind of assumes that everyone isn't trans, and then you have to sort of work backwards to fit trans people in."

The subject of both campus and national politics in the past few years, some have called the fight against discrimination based on gender expression the next frontier of the civil rights movement. Though commonly grouped together, transgender people deal with a distinct—and frequently more complicated and difficult—set of

barriers from those who struggle with discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Erin Meyer, a student at Columbia Law School and former intern at Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund, describes the essential problem of a society organized around gender: "We're still operating on a gender binary. We still have sex-segregated bathrooms, and that makes it very difficult for a student who doesn't identify with either gender to choose. Or, it could be difficult for a student who does identify as one gender to be forced to use a bathroom that doesn't match with their sense of identity." For transgender people, routine affairs like using a rest room and choosing between male and female on standard documentation can be painful reminders of the struggles they face everyday to fit into a cis-normative society.

Dean Spade, Barnard class of 1997, founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and current assistant law professor at Seattle University, says these everyday challenges can be heightened in a university environment: "There are so many obstacles for trans people in higher education. ... having prior education records in an old name, not having family support or safety net, having dropped out of high school because of harassment and violence, and day-to-day issues like dealing with going into a classroom and having a professor have a roster that doesn't say the name you go by and 'outs' you to the class. A lot of trans people don't go to school, or drop out of school because of these challenges." Universities have traditionally been organized by gender, leaving little space for people who don't perceive themselves to fit neatly into either category. Consequently, transgender people are underrepresented at every level of education, and overrepresented in the homeless youth population of New York City. Columbia—a university where education has been geographically divided into male and female realms by a main Manhattan artery for most of its existence—is no exception.

While this is not surprising given the national status of transgender students, two of our peer New York schools—New York University and Hunter College—boast thriving transgender communities. Ash Fisher, a senior in New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, co-president and co-founder of BodyQueer, and office assistant at NYU's Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Student Services, says of the NYU culture: "The people in the community tend to be political and activist-oriented. We have a group called T-Party which is for transgender and gender nonconforming students. ... Historically, NYU has

been a really liberal and a really queer-friendly place." Fisher credits this to the active LGBT Center on NYU's campus—a resource that Columbia lacks—and says she knows 10 or 15 openly trans students off the top of her head.

A Hunter College sophomore—who wishes to be known as Harvey—describes the community at Hunter as equally vibrant. With lively mannerisms and an infectious laugh, Harvey tells me about his group of seven friends: "I call it my trans—my trans gang ... for whatever reason, we happened to meet and collect and connect."

How does Columbia compare? According to Steffens, Barnard currently has no openly trans students, and according to Asher, Columbia has approximately three openly trans undergrads, all of whom live off-campus. These are by no means accurate statistics, but they don't paint an all-inclusive picture for Columbia's reputation either. Simpkins explains, "While other colleges have more robust [transgender] communities, it's more of a numbers thing."

A preview article on *Bwog* for the upcoming issue of the *Blue and White* touched upon this, citing the existence of "stealth" students, or students that simply pass as their preferred genders. And indeed, this is a possible explanation. Meyer says due to many stealth students, "it is hard to get a sense of the population." This still raises the question: why do trans students feel more comfortable being open at our peer schools?

Harvey thinks the issue at Columbia is one of critical mass. "If there were three more kids out, they would find more transgender kids coming out to them, and then the community would grow. I don't think I and the other four would be out [at Hunter] if it wasn't for the original three," he says. "I'm sure there are a handful of kids at Columbia and Barnard, but they can't come out when it's so hard to articulate."

"WE ARE PROTECTIVE OF OUR SUPREME COURT-BLESSED PREROGATIVE TO DISCRIMINATE BASED ON GENDER."

Strong, Beautiful, Card-Carrying Barnard Women While no undergraduate school at Columbia is an exemplar of a thriving transgender community, the problem is especially pertinent at Barnard due to its gender exclusion policy. Simpkins explains that under New York City law, it is illegal for Barnard to discriminate on the basis of gender expression in employment; however, this law does not cover the realm of admissions. He states, "My understanding is a student must be legally female"—or, a "card-carrying woman," as Elliot terms it.

Dorothy Denburg, dean of Barnard College, expressed ambiguity about the ramifications of Barnard's gender exclusion. While the general impression on campus and among queer leaders is



that Barnard only accepts women with legal status, Denburg says, "The application does not ask for legal gender status. ... Our admissions policy is that we admit women."

Although there is currently confusion among the administration and student body about applicants officially sanctioned by Barnard, Denburg justifies her policy, "We are protective of our Supreme Court-blessed prerogative to discriminate based on gender. ... That's [women are] who we've set out to educate."

Despite an unclear position on transwomen and genderqueer applicants, Denburg makes it clear that the school does not actively recruit such a demographic. "I don't know that it's an element of diversity for which we specifically target our initiative."

Denburg concedes that Barnard may not have the support systems necessary to accommodate gender-nonconforming individuals. "I don't know what would happen when such a person [trans woman] got here," she says. Denburg later clarified that she means "female identified male." "I could see some difficulties in the housing arena," says Denburg. "[Many] students choose Barnard because it is a women's college, and they expect to have a female roommate."

Not only does this policy force Barnard to question who fits best with the current student body, but it also raises questions about Barnard's purpose as an institution. "The question is, what is the point of a women's college? Are they trying to address gender discrimination? Because if so, they shouldn't discriminate based on gender expression. But if it's a space specifically for women, then I think everyone who identifies as a woman should be there," says Elliot.

"From my perspective, the best way to comply with anti-discrimination laws would be to have women's colleges admit all women, including trans women," says Spade. He describes why he thinks women's colleges should be more in line with the transgender rights movement: "They're both feminist projects, and they're both about making higher education accessible to gender-oppressed people."

It is interesting to note that Barnard does not differentiate employment from admissions in its official non-discrimination policy. Under New York City law, both Barnard and Columbia are forbidden from discriminating on the basis of gender identity and expression in employment. Columbia reaffirms this in its own non-discrimination policy, while Barnard does not. Barnard's policy states, "In accordance with its own values and with Federal,

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the English language, gender flexibility and correct grammar are often mutually exclusive. For a while, adding a string of more specific Q's and T's to the original LGBT acronym seemed en vogue, while today many activists prefer the umbrella term "queer."

queer: What started as a derisive slur has since been reclaimed as a politically-charged all-encompassing umbrella term. Harvey describes this term as meaning "anyone who recognizes that gender and sex aren't black and white, on and off, either/or."

transgender: Generally used as an umbrella term for any individual whose self perception varies in some way from birth gender assignment. This includes trans men, trans women, and genderqueer individuals.

cisgender: Connotes gender assignment that aligns with self-perception.

trans man/trans woman: Refers to someone assigned one gender at birth that now presents him- or herself as the other gender; however, Asher states "many trans people have issues with this language because it implies a gender binary."

genderqueer: Connotes a flexible gender identity.

State, and City statutes and regulations, Barnard does not discriminate in admissions, employment, programs, or services on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, sexual orientation, or disability.” Gender (including gender identity and expression) is not listed under this policy because, as a women’s college, Barnard does discriminate on the basis of gender in admissions. Denburg says, “We certainly don’t discriminate on the basis of gender expression [in employment].”

Stuck in the Second Wave

Also under scrutiny is Barnard’s repeated emphasis on womanhood. This was one of the reasons asher immediately felt isolated upon coming to campus: “I thought there would be other masculine-presenting women, and I thought there would be trans people.” He was disappointed. “A lot of what happens at Barnard is a declaration of womanhood over

lens, questioning gender binarism and the notion that ‘biology is destiny.’” And indeed this was one of asher’s reasons for leaving: “This school does not foster post-structuralist ideas of gender by any means.”

GendeRevolution and CounteRevolution

Revolutions are rarely without infighting, and GendeRevolution is no exception. In fact, a long-standing feud between asher, one of Columbia’s few openly transgender students, and Elliot, GendeRevolution’s leader, may have contributed to the lack of a united front for transgender rights on campus. asher maintains that he was unrightfully ejected from GendeRevolution: “I’ve been exorcized from my own trans rights group, and I’m the only activist that’s actually trans ... I want to help, but I am not allowed. I am definitely, definitely not allowed.” Elliot denies that GendeRevolution ever

rent leadership graduates—a counteRevolution, if you will. He plans to present the issue of transgender rights in a way that communicates the experience to students through events that emphasize creativity and freedom of expression. “I want to apply it to art and music and be fun, and have intelligent exchanges with different people. ... The idea would be to make people feel less alienated from the experience, to show people that it’s the same type of feeling somebody would get moving from Alaska to Indonesia. You can relate without being trans. I want to bring together all different thinkers, and not just ... friends.”

Despite their lack of transgender members, it’s hard to deny Elliot’s animated passion for the group and the cause. “Since then [the founding of GendeRevolution] everyone is much more aware that there are trans people on campus,” she says with a slight smile.

The group’s current main event is GenderF*CK, a gender-bending extravaganza for anyone who likes to question norms: “GenderF*CK is a queer and trans underwear party that seeks to create a sober space, specifically for people of all gender identities and gender expressions, to feel comfortable, and to feel sexy. I think a lot of times, queer people and trans people are told that their bodies and their looks are not attractive in the larger world,” Elliot describes. “The idea is celebrating people’s bodies, and people’s gender expressions.”

Transcending the Binary

Despite Columbia’s various gender woes, many queer leaders feel that the lack of a strong transgender community is not necessarily indicative of the ideals of the student body. “I’ve definitely found that there are students and professors [who] both have ideas about gender that are pretty radical. ... That image [of the ‘Barnard woman’] isn’t necessarily what Barnard is,” Steffens says.

Despite personal tensions within the queer community, and the inability on the part of the administration to accommodate students, the student body continues to question gender norms and push for change with initiatives like gender-neutral housing and GendeRevolution’s transgender resource guide.

Moisés Esparza, a junior in CC and co-coordinator of Q House, is optimistic about the state of queer issues at Columbia: “People are becoming a lot more savvy to queer theory and the gender construct. ... Growing up in San Diego, there was lesbian, gay, bisexual, and that was it. Being here has really opened my eyes to all the different branches of identity.”

It’s ultimately up to students like Esparza to determine what the campus culture is. Manning Udell retains faith in the student body. “It’s not like everyone understands gender flexibility and gender nonconformity at Columbia, but most are open to it.” ●

GendeRevolution will be mapping out bathrooms on campus on Friday, February 5th for their transgender resource guide. All students interested in helping out should meet in the Stephan Donaldson Lounge in the basement of Furnald at 4 p.m. Transberry juice will be provided.



and over, and I think that’s really uncomfortable. Places like Smith have a gender-neutral constitution, so when freshmen come they don’t say ‘strong women’ they say ‘strong people.’ I don’t think that’s good for women, and I don’t think it’s good for trans people.”

Steffens attributes this focus on feminine-based image partially to Barnard’s efforts since 1983 to differentiate itself from Columbia: “Since Columbia went co-ed, Barnard has felt the need to define itself more strongly. It has made administrators work to craft the image of the ‘Barnard woman’ ... The way Barnard appears from the outside really affects our ability to attract queer students.”

Rather than offering a women’s and gender studies or gender and sexuality studies major like many of its peers (including Columbia College and NYU, respectively), Barnard offers a women’s studies major. Simpkins justifies this gap with caution: “We are careful about how we change ... We would never want to adopt something we weren’t sure fit with what we were.”

According to Spade, this second-wave-feminist approach contradicts more modern ideas of gender. He describes, “A lot of feminist activism today is about conceptualizing gender through a different

officially kicked asher out, yet alludes to the origin of the dispute: “We have a policy of being respectful of organizers of events and making sure you don’t cross people’s boundaries ... we discussed his [asher’s] actions and how they were disrespectful.”

asher’s accusation hits a sore spot for GendeRevolution—a group whose mission statement as a transgender rights group is somewhat hypothetical due to their lack of transgender members. Elliot states that they have members who identify as genderqueer, and members who question their gender; however, currently the group has no open transgender members. “We want trans people to be involved, we want trans people to be the leaders, but we can’t just put a trans person at the head who doesn’t know how to lead,” says Elliot. She admits that “non trans people don’t fully understand what it means to be trans, but I do think that it was better for my friends and I to start the group than to not.”

“I’ve always been an activist, and I’ve definitely been very, very disappointed with the activism here ... When I was a freshman, I spent all year doing that [GendeRevolution], and at the end of the year it was this stupid social club,” says asher. He has a takeover plan for fall of 2010 when the cur-