



Kate Bornstein.
Courtesy Kate Bornstein.

Bornstein, Kate (b. 1948)

by Elise Chenier

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Kate Bornstein is one of the best-known contemporary transgender activists in America. Born male in Neptune, New Jersey, on March 15, 1948, Kate grew up as Albert.

In 1985 Bornstein began living part-time as a woman and one year later underwent a sex change operation and began living full time as a woman. However, ze soon came to the conclusion that ze was neither male nor female. Like a number of other Western feminist and transgender activists, such as Leslie Feinberg, Bornstein favors epicene over conventional gendered pronouns.

In 1969 Bornstein became the first person to graduate from Brown University with a major in theater arts. Shortly thereafter ze joined the controversial Church of Scientology where ze became a highly successful spokes- and salesperson. Twelve years and three marriages later, Bornstein abandoned masculinity, heterosexuality, and Scientology for phone sex work, erotic dancing, and Buddhism.

Bornstein's first theatrical work as a gender activist drew on history--hir own as well as that of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite. *Hidden: A Gender*, first performed at the 1989 First International Lesbian and Gay Theatre Conference and Festival in Seattle, employs a talk show format to challenge "gender terrorism," the everyday practice enforcing conformity to the two-sex gender system. Included in the program as the result of a last minute cancellation, it proved enormously successful and was subsequently staged on university campuses and in local queer and other theater venues.

In 1994, Bornstein published *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Part-autobiography, part "mind-altering manifesto," and part fashion guide, it pushed through some of the boundaries that constrained gender politics, and secured hir place in the emerging queer theory canon.

Bornstein maintains that the medicalization of transsexuality, the only condition for which the therapy is to lie about one's biological past, precludes the possibility of building a community. By contesting the forced erasure of one's own history and the refusal to acknowledge gender as more fluid than fixed, *Gender Outlaw* vitally contributed to the political mobilization of transsexuals outside of medical ideology.

Bornstein also sought to bridge the increasingly bitter divide between transsexuals and the gay and lesbian communities, who at the time were embroiled in controversial practices of political and social exclusion. Hir claim that gender oppression united the two groups regardless of sexual practices immediately resonated with queer theorists and activists who rejected identity politics in favor of an anti-oppression framework.

Both *Gender Outlaw* and *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely* (1998), an interactive text filled with quizzes, games, and exercises, consistently link gender with class, race, and other systems of social, economic, and political inequalities and social injustice.

Bornstein continues to challenge audiences to buck the gender system with new theater pieces, workshops, and more recently, fiction. Since *Hidden*, Bornstein and her partner Barbara Carrellas co-wrote and performed in *Too Tall Blondes in: LOVE* (premiered in Boston in 2001), and more recently she wrote and performed in *Strangers in Paradox*, which premiered at the Theater Rhinoceros in San Francisco in 2003.

Another of Bornstein's books is the lesser known *Nearly Roadkill: An Infobahn Erotic Adventure* (1996), co-authored with cyber-friend and public radio broadcaster Caitlin Sullivan. Works in progress include a fictionalized autobiography, *Hard Candy: The Tragic Lives and Comical Deaths of Candy Bromowitz* and *Hello Cruel World*, a children's book aimed at combating teen suicide.

Currently based in Spanish Harlem, New York, Bornstein travels extensively. She has performed her work throughout the United States, and in Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

In the highly theoretical field of gender studies, Bornstein's characteristically humorous, playful, and compassionate style makes her work among the most accessible and entertaining. Her *oeuvre* continues to influence the entire field of gender studies.

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About the Author

Elise Chenier teaches history and women's studies at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Her research subjects include butch-femme bar culture in 1950s and 1960s Toronto, the history of criminal sexual psychopathology, and sex in male prisons. Her most recent publication is "Segregating Sexualities: The Prison 'Sex Problem' in Twentieth-century Canada and the United States."