

Transgender Lesbian

By Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev

November 2000

As we near the turning point of this century, issues of identity politics and diversity have reached a point of near explosion. No where is this more evident than in examining the newly emerging transgendered liberation movement. Cutting across all other identity issues of class, race, ethnicity and sexual identity, transgendered activists are raising new questions about biology and socialization. These questions have challenged me in the deepest part of MY identity issues: as a raised working class Jewish mom, a lesbian feminist therapist and a radical femme activist. In examining some basic feminist principals, the trans movement has stretched my understanding of gender identity and sexual identity, and caused not merely a paradigm shift, but a paradigmatic upheaval; the bipolar universe of male and female has been replaced by an ever shifting landscape of gender expressions.

There is a place where sexual and gender identity meet, that has been unexplored and uncharted. For me to begin this journey I had to be willing to honestly examine two constructs of gender that I held dear: one was my relationship to gender as a lesbian-feminist, and the other, my relationship to gender transgressive behavior in the lesbian/gay community.

Gender through the eyes of lesbian-feminism

In order to explore transgendered behavior I had to start by examining my understanding of gendered behavior. The traditional bipolar division of the sexes has defined male and female into a world of opposites, i.e. males are strong/females are weak, women are nurturant/men are unemotional, etc. This division of gender is not merely role oriented, but has been role constitutive, defining, not only how human beings see the world, but how they can see the world. Although this bipolar view is most extreme in Western cultures, and the particulars may vary from era to era, this basic yin/yang perspective invariably creates an immutable paradigm. Even the concept of the "opposite" or "other" sex, describes our sense of diametrical distinction, the inability to exist as "both/and."

Feminism has given me a powerful analysis in which to examine the limits of a gendered world and an even more powerful set of tools in which to dismantle a patriarchal power structure that has disempowered females. Feminism helped me to deconstruct what it meant to be female and to reconstruct the concept of woman to include a full range of human behaviors, emotions and capabilities. Feminism had not, however, called me to question the actual bipolar nature of gender itself. Feminism assumed that there are two sexes -- males and females -- and has protested the power imbalances and duality of gender role assumptions based on physiology but it never challenged me to question the limited structures of a two-gendered system. I had never asked the questions, "Are there really just two sexes; are there only two genders.?"

This bipolar view of gender assumes that not only are males and females sexually "opposite" but that opposites always and naturally attract, creating an inherent heterosexism that permeates our culture. Even our most compassionate modern medical responses to transsexual people, has involved a "changing sex" paradigm, where one must abandon one sex, and "become" the other and, until very recently, being heterosexual post surgery was a requirement to be approved for sexual reassignment surgery. Sexual reassignment surgery, in other words would take a gender dysphoric homosexual and remake a "fixed" heterosexual.

In western culture and throughout much of modern European thought the relationship between sexual and gender identities has been a confusing issue. In the 19th century, homosexual desire was understood as a kind of gender dysphoria and distinctions were not made between homosexuals and transgendered people; it was assumed that gender variant people were homosexual and they were called "inverts." Inverts were men and women who transgressed the proper societal parameters by crossdressing and behaving as the "other" sex. People who engaged in gay sex, but who did not transgress gender expectations, were actually not considered homosexual. This rendered all "straight appearing" gay people essentially not gay (a theory, by the way, this femme's mother would find appealing!). Homosexuals who did not transgress expected gender expression were considered "perverts", meaning they were somehow seduced by real homosexuals (i.e. inverts). Inverts were definitely considered more pathological than perverts. As we deconstruct our psychological history it becomes unclear whether these "inverts" were people we would today call homosexual or transsexual, or somehow both

Although the term "invert" is clearly imperfect, this word may more adequately define some dykes I have known better than either homosexual or transsexual. Let me try to explain..

I have always known myself to be a femme, even before I had language for myself. In the early days of lesbian feminist liberation, when the word femme was still synonymous with "not a real lesbian," I always knew that I was not like the other dykes. The things that seemed to define my community, -- soft ball and flannel shirts --, just didn't speak to me, though the political tenets of feminism, and a passionate desire for women sexually, most certainly did.

Like most lesbian-feminists I have had an ambivalent relationship to gender expression. On one hand, masculinity was a synonym for patriarchy so all forms of maleness was abhorred. On the other hand, lesbians celebrated sisterhood by taking pride in doing traditionally male tasks. However, I was also always attracted to butches. Or perhaps I should say I was always attracted to gender, and particularly gender transgression. I have always found the extremes of gender fascinating from high high heels, to man tailored shirts. I have a button that says, "I like my men in dresses and my women in combat boots," and frankly that is true. Since feminine clothing was "outlawed" in lesbian nation, most of my friends, and myself, were wearing various versions of men's clothing, and frankly I found this, well, appealing (at least on other women).

This bipolar view of gender assumes that not only are males and females sexually "opposite" but that opposites always and naturally attract, creating an inherent heterosexism that permeates our culture. Even our most compassionate modern medical responses to transsexual people, has involved a "changing sex" paradigm, where one must abandon one sex, and "become" the other and, until very recently, being heterosexual post surgery was a requirement to be approved for sexual reassignment surgery. Sexual reassignment surgery, in other words would take a gender dysphoric homosexual and remake a "fixed" heterosexual.

In western culture and throughout much of modern European thought the relationship between sexual and gender identities has been a confusing issue. In the 19th century, homosexual desire was understood as a kind of gender dysphoria and distinctions were not made between homosexuals and transgendered people; it was assumed that gender variant people were homosexual and they were called "inverts." Inverts were men and women who transgressed the proper societal parameters by crossdressing and behaving as the "other" sex. People who engaged in gay sex, but who did not transgress gender expectations, were actually not considered homosexual. This rendered all "straight appearing" gay people essentially not gay (a theory, by the way, this femme's mother would find appealing!). Homosexuals who did not transgress expected gender expression were considered "perverts", meaning they were somehow seduced by real homosexuals (i.e. inverts). Inverts were definitely considered more pathological than perverts. As we deconstruct our psychological history it becomes unclear whether these "inverts" were people we would today call homosexual or transsexual, or somehow both

Although the term "invert" is clearly imperfect, this word may more adequately define some dykes I have known better than either homosexual or transsexual. Let me try to explain..

I have always known myself to be a femme, even before I had language for myself. In the early days of lesbian feminist liberation, when the word femme was still synonymous with "not a real lesbian," I always knew that I was not like the other dykes. The things that seemed to define my community, -- soft ball and flannel shirts --, just didn't speak to me, though the political tenets of feminism, and a passionate desire for women sexually, most certainly did.

Like most lesbian-feminists I have had an ambivalent relationship to gender expression. On one hand, masculinity was a synonym for patriarchy so all forms of maleness was abhorred. On the other hand, lesbians celebrated sisterhood by taking pride in doing traditionally male tasks. However, I was also always attracted to butches. Or perhaps I should say I was always attracted to gender, and particularly gender transgression. I have always found the extremes of gender fascinating from high high heels, to man tailored shirts. I have a button that says, "I like my men in dresses and my women in combat boots," and frankly that is true. Since feminine clothing was "outlawed" in lesbian nation, most of my friends, and myself, were wearing various versions of men's clothing, and frankly I found this, well, appealing (at least on other women).

We link cross-gendered behavior and assume/insist it is related to homosexuality, but yet when we are accused of cross-gendered behavior by the straight world we adamantly deny it stating emphatically, "We are just like everyone else!". We own gender transgressive behavior as ours own, and indeed often use it as a way to identify and define gay and yet we publicly deny that there is any relationship between our queer sexual identity and our gender presentation.

Certainly most gay people, like most heterosexual people, are not gender deviant or dysphoric. Most gay people experience their physiological sex and their gender identity to be congruent, and most of these people dress, more or less, within the expectations of their gender role. I suspect, however, that for many gay and lesbian people the overlap of sexual identity issues and transgenderism may be more linked then we have previously assumed.

As we explore these gray areas of gender and sexual identities, I am finding that the old paradigms of gay or straight, man or woman simply might be too restricting for many people. It is really no wonder that there has been so much resistance to the words "bisexual" and "transgendered" in the queer liberation movement; these words shift the entire system of "us" and "them," and show us how permeable the boundaries of identity can be. We are living in a time when the transgendered community is beginning to find its voice and I suspect, in part, we are concerned that as transgendered people articulate their experience, we will find that some of "them" are really some of "us," and that some of "us" have always been some of "them." Many lesbians play with and explore gender as a transgressive act. At what point does transgressing gender as lesbian put one outside of the lesbian rubric?

Transgendered lesbians

Transgendered has been used as an umbrella term to describe people who do not identify with the gendered assumptions placed on their physiological bodies. There are lesbians who seem to embody a kind of transgender, which includes a broad spectrum of masculine embodiment in females and a sexual attraction to women. Wading through the quagmire of language I have seen and heard numerous terms for people who might be included in this rubric of identity including butch, tomboy, stonebutch, transgendered butch, female man, s/he, guys, boychick, bigendered, f2m , transmen, and most recently mandyke. Even among clearly identified female to male transsexuals, a distinction is made between f2m and ftm. Ftm is used as a synonym for transsexual and f2m describes a broad array of people labeled female at birth and who are masculine identified and/or moving in that direction.

Although it is tempting to describe this as a continuum from butch lesbian on one end to female to male transsexual on the other, in reality there are butch lesbians with a strong male identification and transmen who still maintain a sense of themselves as female/woman/ and/or lesbian. Some transgendered lesbians enjoy the fluidity of shifting gender identities, and others express a very delineated boundary defining their identity. Most do not see themselves as women, some do not see themselves as men, and others do

not see themselves as either men or women preferring to identify as bigendered or "other" gendered -- essentially, a third sex. Many do not see themselves as lesbian, -- since for them lesbian connotes a "woman-to-woman" sexuality -- although have previously lived and identified as lesbians, and are often partnered with women who still do identify as lesbians.

The line where butch/woman identity ends and trans/man identity begins is a territory still being mapped out and the heated debate over identity boundaries has been called the "butch/ftm border wars." Certainly there are lesbians who are secure in an identity as a masculine (butch) woman, and there are female to male transsexuals that are clear about their identity as a man and desire to fully transition into the "other" sex. However, there are many people whose gender and sexual identities exist within a broad spectrum of masculine embodiment in females. In the words of Gary Bowen, a gay FtM of Native descent, " people can park anywhere along the gender highway and stay there as long as they like."

It is like having each of one's feet in two different rowboats -- one labeled lesbian, and the other labeled transgendered. It is easy to imagine why some people would be committed to seeing that these boats don't float off in different directions. This is a powerful image that can serve as a container to hold the experience of female-bodied people, who experience a male gender identity and who are sexually and romantically attracted to women, but do not themselves identify as women.

Within the butch/femme community as butches engage more in conversations about transgenderism, their femme partners are experiencing an interesting dilemma. If the butch transitions, or identifies as a man, where does that leave their lesbian lover? As I move through the world as a femme, I am invisible as a lesbian. When I walk through the world with my butch partner, we are seen as lesbians, as an erotic unit in a way that two androgynous lesbians would not be seen -- clearly transgressing the approved gender roles and sexual identities proscribed. If I walk through the world partnered with a transman, I am once again invisible, passing through the world as an apparent heterosexual couple. One femme lesbian says, "I didn't live my whole life as a radical lesbian queer, to wind up living in the suburbs with a husband and kids." This raises the question: is a lesbian woman, who is lovers with a transgendered stonebutch, still a lesbian? Some resolve this by saying, "Yes, my partner can't determine my identity." -- a nice feminist reframe; others broaden their relationship to the larger queer community, saying, "OK, I'm not a lesbian anymore, but I sure ain't straight either," a nice queer reframe.

The feminist and lesbian communities are being challenged now to reclaim masculinity, and honor females who live in this world empowered and embodied in masculine identities. Letting this in, has been a fascinating journey; I am struggling to understand how this impacts on my identity. I have spent many hours trying to understand how I somehow managed to never "notice" before that my lovers were "inverts." I am reclaiming now my lesbian desire that has very little to do with sisterhood..

Arlene Istar Lev LCSW, CASAC
Choices Counseling and Consulting
321 Washington Ave.
Albany, NY 12206
518-463-9152
info@choicesconsulting.com
www.choicesconsulting.com