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ABTACT



PLUS:

Dykes
Behind
Bars

Dungeon
Etiquette

Child's
Play

Violence
Against
Men

Race in
the
Leather
Community

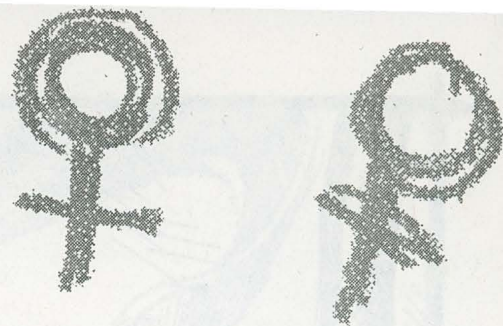
and more

TENDER GENDERS

Gender Tripping by Christine

"Thank goodness the gender binary has begun to collapse and the old body binary is changing... it was so boring and predictable, wasn't it?"

— Kate Bornstein



is it a boy or a girl?" An innocent question when asked of new parents. A threatening gesture when asked by a gang of street thugs. What are you? The answer is important, isn't it, boys and girls? The implications of the answer are definitive, endless, all-encompassing. And you don't even get a choice. Biology is destiny.

Or is it? Some people are choosing which gender they want to be, and it has some other people very upset. But for a lot of us out here on the cutting edge of the tectonic neighborhood, multiple-choice gender folks are just another part of our every day life, like major earthquakes that shift the landscape. We get used to the ground moving under our feet.

"Wimmin born wimmin only" is the rule in some lesbian feminist separatist circles: *HE was not born a woman, so HE will never be a woman. Woman have struggled for every inch of ground they stand on, and some MAN using HIS ill-begotten social privilege to become whatever HE wants to be will never stand on this holy, bloody ground, no matter what HE cuts off.*

I think differently. Gender-bending is not just about the boys who want to be girls, or the girls who want to be boys. It's about everyone who ever felt they were not *man* enough, not *woman* enough—probably everyone reading this right now. We're all casualties of the socialization process, some more brutalized than others. Kate Bornstein said almost the same thing at the Fierce Sisters benefit for the Lesbian Avengers, where she read from her upcoming book. Her piercing question brought the house down: "What is so important about being a man, about being a woman?" A little question like that, like a tiny hit of acid on the tongue, can unravel the world. Take a gender trip with me, and I'll try to answer that question.



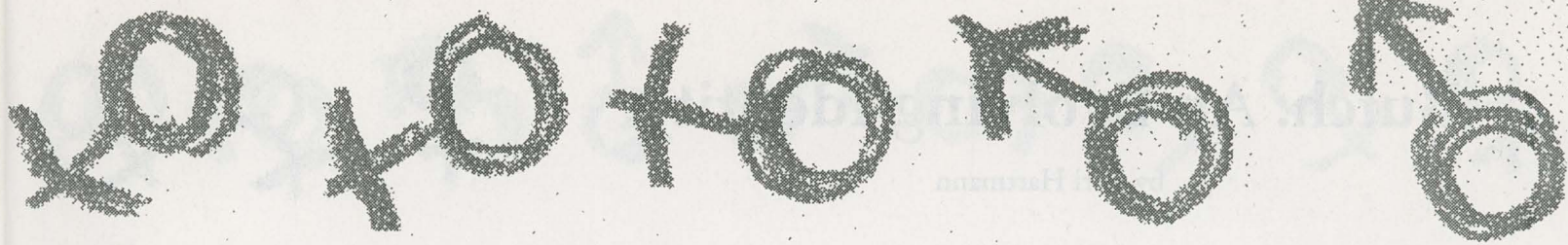
There's this woman I have a crush on. She's extremely tall for a woman, like me. When I can look someone in the eye, I get this raw sexual thrill. It feels intimate way up here, just us two. I'm very shy around her, barely talk to her. She's incredibly beautiful. She looks like a movie star, or maybe like a painting. She's always dressed in the hippest of fashions, and her hair

changes every week. Her makeup is always perfect, of course. As with most of my crushes on beautiful women, this one is part envy. I wish I could look like that. I'm a femme, but this girl makes me look butch. "This girl" is a transsexual.

I'm a lesbian—or am I?



I've been having dreams about boys. In my dreams I am younger, thinner, long-haired, the neo-hippie Deadhead chick I was at the age of nineteen. I am hanging out with a boy around my age—nineteen, maybe twenty. It's a classic hetero-hippie seduction scene, boy meets girl, boy smokes pot with girl, boy gives girl back rub. It becomes apparent that he wants me, that things are going to flow naturally into an encounter of a sexual nature. And just when I am feeling confident that this miracle is really going to happen, the dream skews, drifts slowly and maddeningly away from the brink of the fuck. I never get any. I wake up wet and frustrated. Just like I was when I was a desperately horny nineteen-year-old virgin.



The first time I realized I could never be a “real” woman was when I was fifteen. I had been over six feet tall since I was twelve years old, and one day it hit me. My classmates were never going to catch up to me. I understood that I could not and would never be an acceptable “normal” woman. At fifteen, normal was the holy grail to me. I remember sobbing hysterically for hours that night. It was a different level of despair than my usual fat-girl pain. I felt desolate, like the poor fool in some Greek tragedy, laughed at by the gods. It had finally sunk in that I was a freak, a giant. I couldn’t believe that God would do this to me. Not only was I fat; I was also very tall for a woman—six foot two, to be exact, and big boned, with feet that barely fit into men’s size thirteen triple Es. So even if a miracle happened, and I was somehow able to “get thin,” I would still be too big. I was caught in a dimensional hell.

At that time, all I knew about gender was the unremitting doctrine of male-or-female. The world was classified into strictly gendered possibilities. I was cast out. What was my big crime against the nat-

ural order of things? Like some rejected piece of Papa Bear’s furniture, I was simply too big.

You know that classic feminist

**I’m not knocking
drag queens—
without them I’d
never have found
a pair of high heels
to fit me.**

retorical question: what if all the energy women spend on molding their bodies to conform to some monolithic and inhuman idea of beauty was used to transform society? Remember that one? There is always something about the thing you can never have... it becomes the definition of value. I always wanted to be a girl, a real girl. And for me, being a girl meant being small and thin.



That was then. Since then I’ve learned a little about being a

woman—notice I didn’t say girl. The girl that I felt like I never got to be is still around, but she lives in the realm of fantasy. And despite all my feminist education, all the positive things I’ve heard from other women about my big body, and all the safety advantages to being big—I still feel like I’m in another dimension a lot of the time, somewhere beyond gender. I revel in my femme nature now, and dress accordingly when I want to, but sometimes when I’m walking down Castro Street in a dress and lipstick, I wonder if people think I’m a drag queen.

I’m not knocking drag queens. Without them I’d never have found a pair of high heels to fit me. Now think about that.

Because of my size, I can’t get a pair of shoes that I, as a woman in this society, am supposed to wear, unless they are made by and for men. Tell me that isn’t twisted.

The other night the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* was on prime time TV. Well, it was on the Fox Channel, but still. Transvestites from Transsexual Transylvania tap-dancing into the living rooms of

CONTINUED ON P.29



only dykes who “looked like dykes,” I would at least look like a fag. Unfortunately for this plan, I continued to be attracted to femme women. When I moved to San Francisco, I began dating a woman who was so femme I didn’t even believe she was a dyke! Compared to her I was positively macho.

Up until this time, I had never thought of myself as a butch, only as a dyke. The first time I’d heard the word “butch” was when I was about ten. My mother, who was 5’9” and a big-boned gal, cut her hair quite short. My dad started making fun of her new look and calling her “butch.” Quickly, she grew her hair out (and never let it get above shoulder-length again). From this experience, I gathered that “butch” had to do with looking or acting like a male, and that it was shameful and bad. At best, I thought “butch-femme” a quaint part of dyke history and not relevant to me, the vanguard of young dyke sexuality in the ’90s. At its worst, “butch-femme” was a heterosexist way to deal with being queer. I thought femmes were “self-hating closeted dykes” and butches were “self-hating women” who were trying to fake it as men.

But my lover and I were clearly a “butch/femme” couple. Because my lover was so femme, I was ashamed about dating her. I did not want her to meet any of my

**I was a dyke,
not some sort
of boy-girl
freak of nature.**

friends because, next to her, it was quite obvious that I was butch. I assumed she was a self-hating dyke and that I, clearly butch, was like a man. My fear of being identified as a butch severely hindered my ability to be present with her, to love her, and to respect her.

This lover was also extremely out as a lesbian. She wanted to be really physical in public. But this time it was I who balked. I did not want to be seen in public with her because people kept mistaking us for a straight couple. And not only did I really hate being mistaken for a man, I also hated interacting with men who would refer to my lover as a “babe” and want to bond with me about it.

Some time after the relationship ended, I became friends with this ex-lover. And as friends, amazingly, I could really see and hear her. I found her to be a talented writer with a brilliant mind and fucking right-on politics. I decided that, if she could be all this and femme too, maybe it was okay for me to be butch. Primarily through discussions with her and other self-identified femmes who were into butches, I learned that butch is not the same as male and that butch was what they wanted. It was wonderful, like coming out all over again. It was a glorious, but brief, honeymoon.

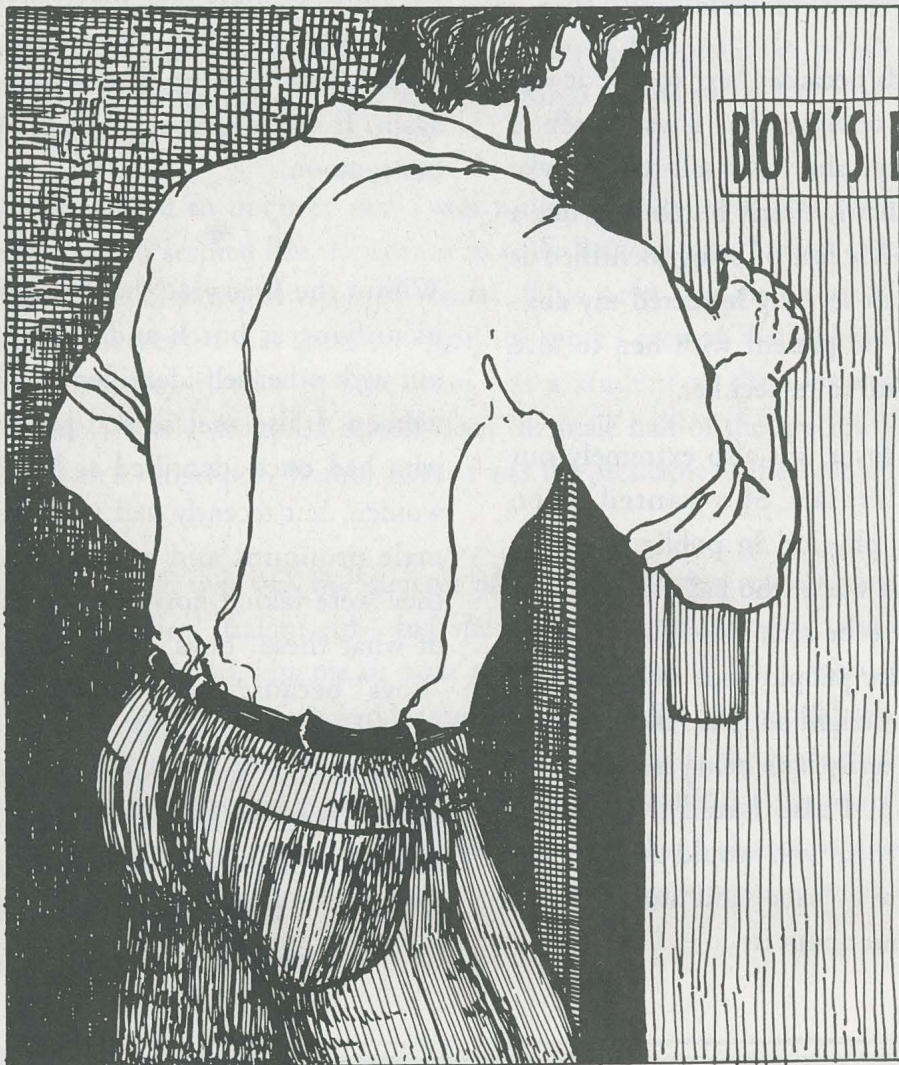
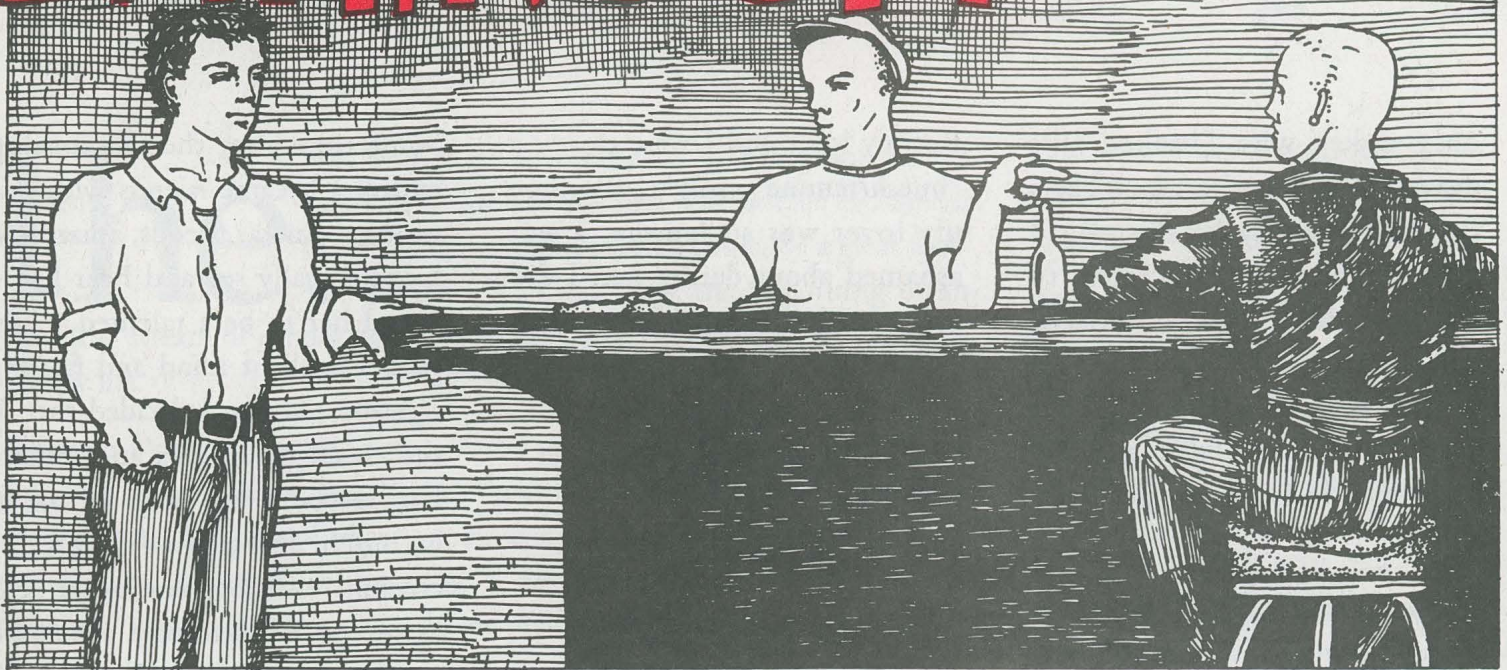


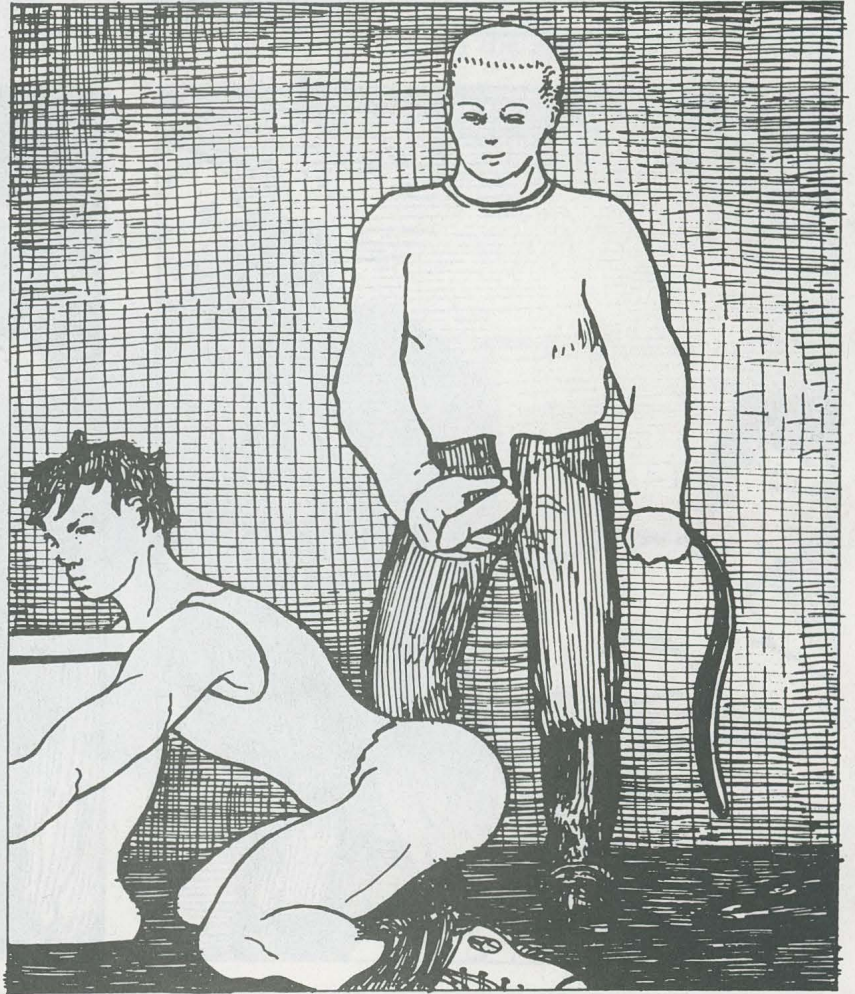
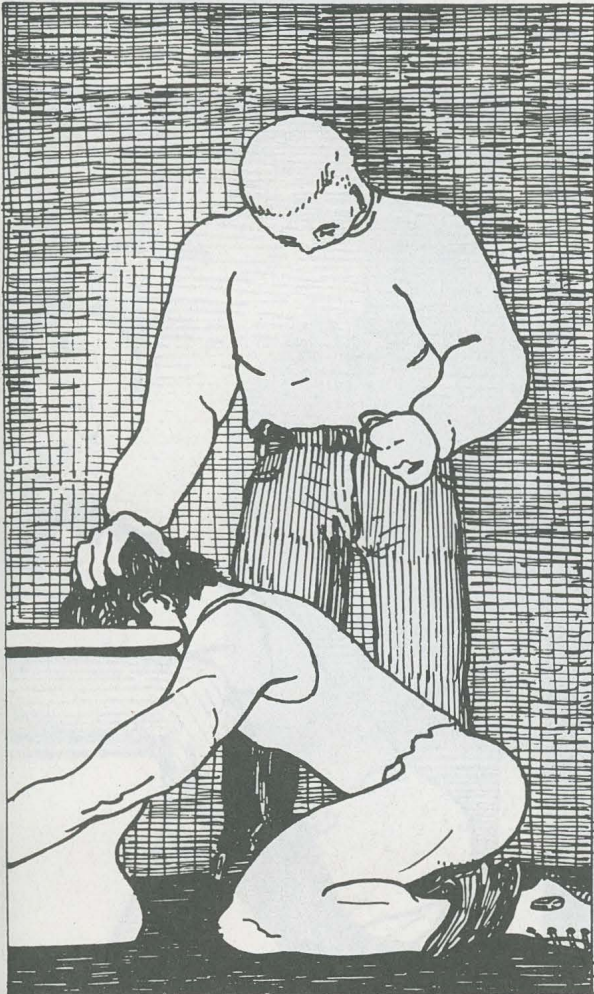
Within the first year that I began identifying as butch and hanging out with other self-identified butch women, I also met several people who had once identified as butch women, but recently had taken on male pronouns and names. And they were taking hormones. A lot of what these “boys” (I call them “boys” because that’s what I call men) had to say was disturbingly similar to my own experience as a child. I didn’t want to consider the possibility that, after finally arriving at “butch,” I might not be “home” —

continued on page 30

BATHROOM

CALLAGHAN





Gender Tripping
continued from page 23

America. Talk about doing the Time Warp—maybe it's true what Kate says about the gender binary collapsing. Oh, I know what you're thinking. It was, after all, supposed to be a *horror* movie. Besides, the cross-dressing queer serial murderer, so shocking in the seventies and now so predictable and passé, is not exactly a harbinger of sweeping social change and diversity.

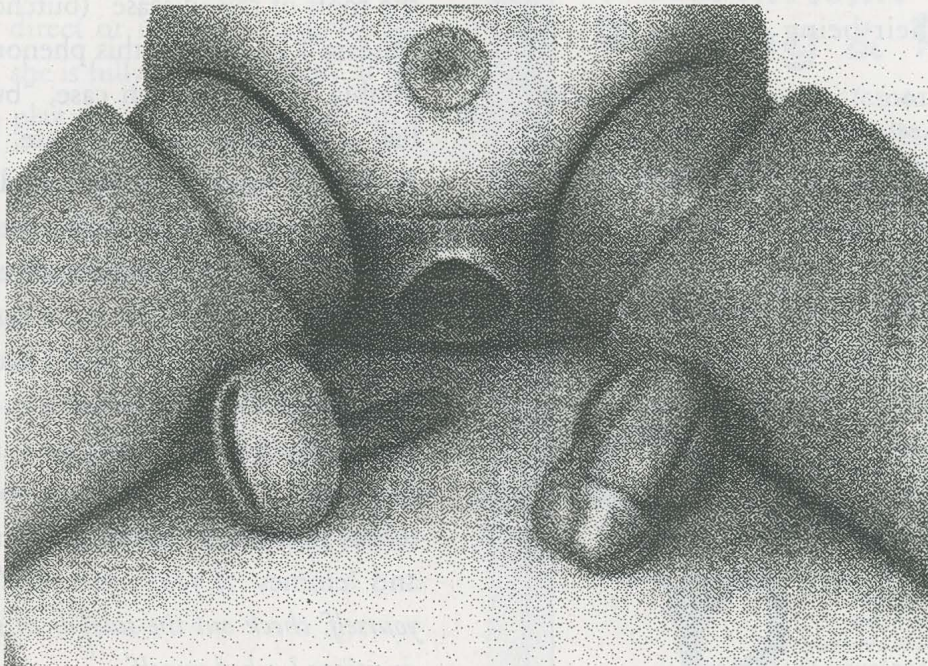
But doesn't it show that gender-bending has surfaced in the mainstream media, at least in the voyeuristic talk show sense? Maybe they really are changing, the

**Feminism saved my life,
but it's the gender outlaws
that turn me on.**

strict pink or blue laws. Am I being arrogant to think that we see these changes first here in SF, that we're light years ahead of the rest of the country? I'm getting used to the transgender concept. I like it. The personal struggle of a specific group of people to attain their human rights sends ripples through the

constantly calcifying status quo. And that's always good. While I know that feminism saved my life and laid the foundation upon which I understand gender, it's the gender outlaws that turn me on—

whatever they were, are, are trying to be, or want to be. Instead of the cement blocks I was sentenced to wear, I'm very grateful to the gender pioneers for my high heels. ♦



this

is a test:

How do you identify—butch, femme, butch queen, glamor femme, dandy, tomboy femme, femmy-butch, butchy-femme, sissyboy, princess, scruffy punk femme, androgyne, fagdyke, other?



Who are you attracted to? Is there a connection between who you're attracted to and how you identify yourself? E.g., *do you call yourself a femme because you are attracted to butches?*



How do you define butch or femme or whatever term you choose to identify yourself?



What are some of the beliefs you have about butches/femmes? E.g., *butches don't have feelings, femmes are histrionic.*



If you're butch, do you resent femmes for their access to heterosexual privilege because they can be mistaken for straight women? If you're femme, do you resent butches for their ability to pass for men or their being easily recognized as dykes?



Do you feel that FTMs are more butch than butch women? What value do you attach to "degree of butchness"? Is there such a thing?



In your personal experience, what is the relationship between maleness and butchness? (masculinity and butchulinity?) Between femaleness/femininity and femmeness?



Write about your experiences of being neither or both genders. Describe any characters you might use during role play.

Butch: An Evolving Identity

continued from page 25

and I knew I didn't want to be a man. But I still started questioning myself. How many "male" characteristics was I allowed to take on before I became "male-identified" rather than "butch-identified?" Was butch going to be enough for me? Was my butchness just another step in the continuum from tomboy to dyke to butch to FTM? Or was it necessarily a continuum?

I also found myself faced with the recent discussions that have been happening in my San Francisco community about the dreaded "butch's disease." Personally, I understood "butch's disease" to be a disrespect for femmes that manifests itself through thoughts, words, or actions. And personally I couldn't argue that "butch's disease" existed. After all, my own attitudes could be classified as symptoms of "butch's disease." But personally, I decided that, since the "diseased ones" are not always butch, and the term doesn't really clarify the roots of the "disease" (butches didn't cause the "disease") I'd refer to this phenomenon as "femme phobia." (In my own case, "butch-femme phobia" is probably more accurate, but it's too long!) At first, I reacted somewhat defensively to the news that "femme phobia" existed—I'd spent my entire life being ashamed of being butch. I was also reluctant to examine my butch identity critically. But I'd heard what my femme friends were saying and I'd recognized myself in their complaints (ouch). So I began to analyze my relationships and I started talking about some of my (often ridiculous) beliefs and fears about butches and femmes. *If you're interested in doing this for yourself, check out the sidebar at left for some of the questions I asked myself...*

What I ended up realizing by going through this self-examination was that the only constant feature of my identity over the years has been change, and that my identity will always be a work in progress.

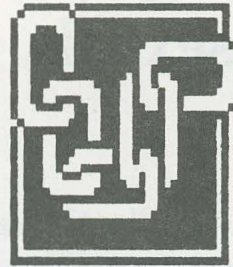
The fluid nature of my identity makes it difficult for me to capture on paper. After all, the expression of this

My identity ranges from teenage hood to sissy dork to cynical bar dyke.

identity is influenced by (but not limited to) whom I'm with and where I am. It is thoroughly episodic, ranging from teenage hood to sissy dork to cynical bar dyke.

But lately... I've been fancying myself a "gentleman butch." I drive, open doors, carry packages, and offer my coat to femmes. (Of course, this assistance is always offered with the direct or implied acknowledgement that, on her own, she is fully capable!) But... if it's pleasurable for her to play this game, then I too am a willing participant.

And that's the main point, I think—you get to create your own identity. Have fun with it! ♦



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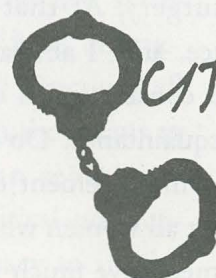
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Dykes and (Ugh!) male to Female Transsexuals

by Tala Brandeis

i'm an out S/M leather dyke. My sexual relations are with other leather dykes. Some time ago I made a transition from male gender role to female gender role. Claiming identity as woman, as dyke, angers certain lesbian separatists. Other people are delighted.

As a dyke I too am tolerably uncomfortable with some male to Female transsexuals claiming identity as lesbians, as separatists. I am appalled and embarrassed by the lack of social ethic and manners of many of the women who have made a transition from the male gender role.

I'd like to comment on the difference between self-identity and recognition by others as that entity. One may enter into the psychology of metamorph woman, what some call transsexual, and implicitly understand gender identity as an *internal* representation with an external representation. If that internal personification has been relatively stable over the whole of one's life, then presumably a transsexual is woman even if she's never ingested hormones or had surgical procedures. However (this is a BIG however), for a transsexual to be accepted by her social peers as female, she must learn how to interact, how to communicate with the world as a functioning member of the class of women. She needs to be recognized by dykes as a dyke to function as same. Some are. Many aren't. Some are still working on it.

The phallicious assumption that one can emerge from a lifetime of living in male gender role, however short or long it may have been, and be a woman is ludicrous at best, and fraught with false and arrogant presuppositions. Being a woman is more than an announcement to the world concurrent with a bit of cosmetic surgery. When a transsexual is accepted within her culture and recognized as woman, she has a different status from someone who never eats hormones or has surgery. At that point her class has changed. This is a profound difference, and, I am sad to say, a difference which escapes the sometimes limited consciousness of many, but not all, male to Female transsexuals of my acquaintance. Do all women automatically attain the standing of dyke on announcement of same? I think not. There is a definite learning process. Not all women who come out as lesbian attain status as dyke. Transsexual women have much further to go in their

coming out processes. That any transsexuals at all are recognized as lesbian is remarkable, given the negative level of public support provided, and says something profound about some transsexuals' level of commitment to women. The extent to which some transsexual women have integrated their lives with other dykes indicates obvious personal support and constructive criticism from many dykes.

Here in San Francisco over the past year we've had some angry letters to editors, debates, rantings and replies from both sides about access to separatist's/women's space by former members of the class "male." Dana Schwartz of Oakland wrote a letter from the perspective of lesbian separatist in response to a letter from a transsexual from the South Bay, Jennifer Farrar. I enjoyed Dana's cutting wit, and was delighted with her logic.

Following are portions excerpted from Dana's letter:

Like many men, he [referring to Jennifer Farrar] seems to have a hard time accepting that some lesbians do not welcome his company. The prob-

lem is not simply that he had a prick—it's that he is a prick. Alas, this cannot be surgically altered. In fact, I have found that one of the most persistent sex-linked traits of men is precisely this refusal to accept the word "no" from women.

Finally, I suggest that Mr. Farrar try to work toward some sense of proportion regarding his rejection by a few lesbians. Someone who says she'd rather not hang around with you is not the same as someone who held your head underwater until you started to drown. Someone who writes a letter to the editor that makes you feel bad is not the same as someone who murdered six million people. These recent affronts to his limitless sense of entitlement are not the same as oppression.

As a dyke I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiment and content of Dana's letter. On another level I was hurt by her use of male gender pronouns when referring to Jennifer Farrar.

Do all women automatically attain the standing of "dyke" on announcement of same?

It is possible to correct Jennifer's problem surgically. With the removal of her head. Of course, this is utterly frowned on in the

state of California, while not necessarily frowned on in the state of some lesbians' consciousness. Male-patterned behavior and the surgical removal of any head are both reprehensible behaviors.

The comparison of lesbian separatists with Nazis in some letters (including Jennifer Farrar's) to the editor of *The Bay Times* worries me. In Jennifer's and other transsexual's letters we have formerly privileged individuals trashing victims, and evincing political naiveté of monumental proportions. Nazis were bank-rolled by the ruling classes of Europe, and had state-sponsored systems of hate, destruction and death aimed directly at all of us concurrent with the means to carry it out. Lesbian separatists have neither the political nor economic means necessary to implement such horror.

Every known cultural system has rules of behavior and methods for handling identified deviant behavior and temperament. Given the

desire of society to constrain individual behavior, what can we make of the desire for individual social identity and self determination?

Who in the lesbian community would deny any woman the right to her own identity?

And what of socialization, the history of growing up female? No man ever experienced, nor will any ever experience, what it is like to have lived as little girl in this society. Most transsexuals have limited understanding of girls' lives. Many transsexuals believe little girls' lives to have been rather idyllic. Only after coming out female do some transsexuals begin researching what living as woman actually entails. Other transsexuals never truly take on the identity of woman, continuing to identify as a third/fourth/fifth/nth sex, transsexual or transgendered.

How are we, any of us, to determine someone's gender? Genitalia?

Hormones? Bleeding? History? Socialization? Genes?

If we use genes for gender determination asserting only those with XX chromosomal patterns are women, what will we do with Turner's syndrome women who have X chromosomal patterning? Using genitalia as criteria, what do we do with intersexed people, those born with morphologically mixed genitalia (having characteristics of both sexes. i.e., vagina and penis—

it could be a large clit, but male doctors, ever focused on their own genitals, will probably be more likely to call it a penis, don't you think?). Employing socialization as the criterion, how do we explain the extensive numbers of transsexuals running around now? Bleeding? What of women who have stopped bleeding? What of girls yet to begin bleeding? What of women who may never bleed?

There are problems with all these methods, with any method seeking to secularize unequivocally. There will always be those never fitting neat descriptions. Dykes know this. Ask yourself: how many dykes ever fit the majority paradigm?

Anatomy is not destiny. If we apply this to women, how can we not apply it to transsexual lesbians, to

metamorph dykes? It is pathetic that transsexuals who have been socialized as male, who had genitalia resembling a penis and testicles will be identified as male and/or as transsexual whether or not she, her friends, lovers, co-workers and family identify her

Ask yourself: how many non-transsexual dykes ever fit the majority paradigm?

as female. The notion that anatomy is destiny is deeply programmed within the individual and collective unconscious of our culture.

One lesbian separatist suggested that transsexuals obtain emotional support from men. Insinuating that transsexuals' gender identities are really male, she proposed they be helped through transition by their brothers. I wonder what type of woman that mentoring would produce? Was this suggestion a demonstration of her rapier wit, or was this implied sarcasm? Perhaps just a desire for transsexuals to learn what support or lack of same she/they could expect from men? Zero support, I'd wager. Perhaps this woman was simply pointing out the obvious, that most women

are pressured, beaten, raped and if necessary, killed into submission by men. Perhaps as a woman the transsexual should learn this first hand from men as other women have learned it? What an interesting way to demonstrate anger. How long would such a woman have to spend in male company before she could become part of lesbian culture? How much and what types of abuse would she have to suffer?

I reject men as knowledgeable of women's issues, women's consciousness. If I had had the availability of men with whom to discuss my process as woman, I would certainly have rejected male advice, support and/or wisdom as insufficient to my consciousness and needs as woman. No man can understand what it is like to live as woman. Virtually all my sustained personal experience with men in respect to women's consciousness is negative. When given a choice of supporting women or furthering their own agenda, men of my acquaintance followed their own program: maintenance of the status quo. Men trained me. I trust men to hurt, abuse, rape women and blame women for the abuse. I share every woman's fundamental status in social relations with men.

I identify as woman. Having metamorphosed my physical body and not so incidentally my gender role in society, my experience is clearly different than most women raised as girls. How could it not be? Consider my experience of the last thirteen years as female, as dyke.

Irrespective of privilege accorded me in the first part of my life I now have over thirteen years experience as woman. How could one not have some measure of consciousness as woman over such a period of time? In terms of connecting, of working to create a saner society, what is more important at this time in my interaction with other women, my former experience in the male gender role, or my subsequent experience as a woman? Which is more profound? May you consider the latter of greater significance. If someone has lived as woman, experienced life as woman, someone must have recognized her as female. Kind of begs the question, doesn't it.

Is women's space separatist-lesbian space? Not necessarily. The conjectures: 1) that women's space is inevitably separatist-only space or; 2) that women's space is funda-

mentally transsexual-free space; are contrived presuppositions at best. Both contain an agenda.

Women's space may have little room for discussion of transsexual issues except as it impacts women's lives, and only if transsexuals are

If you are going to exclude transsexuals for overbearing and intrusive behavior, be willing to exclude all dykes guilty of the same behavior.

Fair is fair.

part of lesbian culture. Since both of these are true, discussion will obviously continue. Transsexualism and gender identity is an issue that is being hotly debated now in the women's community.

The demand of some transsexual women for discussion of transsexual issues in women's space can be viewed as invasive and may tend to point out former male privilege.

I believe it necessary for women to have space in which women can be free of the overbearing, intrusive and privileged male in all his

guises, both mundane and profane. Anyone behaving in a manner even suggestive of fascist intent may need to be separated from dyke company. OK, do it. Label it as such. Call it privileged male behavior. Exclude the person. If you are going to exclude transsexuals for these transgressions, be willing to exclude all dykes guilty of the same behavior. Fair is fair. Please be so kind as to delineate the behavior to the individual guilty of the faux pas if at all possible.

Are transsexuals to be allowed at women's events and who decides who goes to women's events? Well, women decide. Principally those women who are staging the event, hopefully those who are attending the event, certainly those who may bring political support or pressure to bear. In supporting the need to ban those whose behavior is unsupportive of other women and having a desire for more accurate language, here is a suggestion: if the event is excluding certain types of individuals, state the exclusion: "Male to Female transsexuals are not welcome at this event." Conversely, when appropriate, state the inclu-

sion: "Male to Female transsexuals are welcome at this event." Announce same in all flyers, correspondence, and communications. There are women who want to exclude and there are those who wish to include transsexuals. There is room for both groups of women to exist, be safe, feel supported. It is absolutely necessary now to let women know when and where transsexuals are welcome.

We are growing a new social structure, a new culture, all of us. We are still in the process of defining it. We can make it as similar or as different from majority culture as we want it to be. Given the abuse we have all suffered as women it may still take some time. (I'd

dearly love to be wrong about that last statement.) What does it take to make a great leap forward? Please understand, I enjoy asking questions, provoking thought. I

Recognized as female, I have status as woman.

Recognized as dyke, I have status as pervert.

Recognized as S/M leather dyke, I have status as outlaw.

want us all to ponder these and many more questions and find inclusive solutions. I want to promote dialog and critical thinking while supporting us all in our process as women whatever we explore or create. I want us, women, to have elegantly crafted language tools, tighter linguistic concepts and brighter syntax with which to communicate our support, our needs and beliefs.

As a woman, anything pertaining to women economically, politically, socially, or personally pertains to me. It can't not pertain to me. Recognized as female, I have status

as woman. Recognized as dyke, I have status as pervert. Recognized as S/M leather dyke, I have status as outlaw. Necessarily, I must be concerned with

what happens to, by, with and for my sisters. It happens to me in concert. As women we need to know our allies and identify those we may enlighten, productively criticize, educate, and constructively argue and work with, to at least obtain parity for women. Instead of dissension, let us create and nurture mature coalition. ♦