

(Last time Margo told us that Lesbians and transsexuals do not understand each other. This week she explains some of the reasons and opts for a better relationship between native and transsexual Lesbians.)

By MARGO

## MISINFORMATION ABOUT TRANSSEXUALISM

To some Lesbians, transsexuals are essentially men who enjoy donning dresses, going out on the street for five minutes, and then claiming the honor of being women. Of course, it is argued, such men have no business equating themselves with women who have suffered from male oppression their entire lives.

And I agree that men of this type *do not* have a place in the women's or the Lesbian movement. But I add that men of this type, whatever they are, *are not transsexuals*.

Male-to-female transsexuals are essentially people who, although born with male genitals, feel themselves from a very early age to be female. In my own case the feeling began around 4 or 5; sometimes it begins even earlier.

When I would play with my female cousins, we would sometimes be very vigorous and "masculine" together; but I wanted to be female like them.

In early adolescence I began to develop breasts and mixed secondary sex characteristics; I took pride in having to wear a T-shirt in the swimming pool. Later on, medical tests revealed some degree of female development, perhaps due to yet unknown enzyme processes governing the use of sex hormones.

At a boarding school I fell in love at the age of 17 with my chemistry teacher; she was one of the few people there who did not denounce me as a coward and communist for my pacifism and opposition to the Vietnam war. People commented that I wanted to *be like her*, and it was true. It was essentially a Lesbian passion.

During the end of my junior year in college, I read some Lesbian literature and I discovered that this was what I was and what I wanted to be. By November of 1971, I declared myself a "cross-gender Lesbian." In September of 1972 my medical treatment began; just one year later, I legally changed my name and began living full-time as female.

In presenting my own experience of what transsexualism is, I want to stress: (1) That transsexualism is a *lifelong* situation from *early childhood*, not something that happens for five minutes; (2) that total *gender identity* is the issue, not sex roles or sexual preference; and (3) that society *oppresses* transsexuals in the same way it oppresses native women, through psychiatry, through social ridicule, and through physical intimidation.

The last thing in the world I want to do is to play the game of "more oppressed than thou" with native women, either Lesbian or straight. My point is that both male-to-female transsexuals and native women suffer a *similar degree* of oppression.

An understanding of transsexualism as a deep and life-long identity crisis concerning one's most basic gender identity will distinguish it from the kinds of impersonations which Lesbians reject, and reject rightly, as a basis of female identity. Once this distinc-

tion is made, much of the ground for anti-transsexualism will suddenly vanish.

## OVERLY NARROW CONCEPTS OF LESBIANISM

Within the Lesbian movement, there is a current of thought which holds that male-to-female transsexuals may be acceptable *after* genital surgery but not before, even if they are living and working full-time as women, and are naturally accepted as Lesbians by all those who do not know of their transsexualism.

It is argued that no one without female genitals, no one who cannot engage in female genital sexuality, can be called a Lesbian.

However, the operation does not make one a woman. The crucial turning point is changing socially from a man to a woman. Many transsexuals spend years living as a woman before they have the operation. And about the operation; there are few hospitals offering the surgery; there are all sorts of complicated screening and rules; there are many practitioners doing the operation in the shortest amount of time for the highest possible fee. The surgeons are almost all male with a male-oriented view of female sexuality.

The emphasis in reconstructive surgery is entirely on the vagina, with little

genital sexuality between women (although this is one beautiful Lesbian expression), but rather as *love between women, no matter how it is expressed*.

Lesbianism, or *love between women*, may be celebrated in different ways in different relationships and at different times. Without trying to exhaust or pigeonhole all the possibilities, I would see at least three levels of Lesbian expression: (1) Genital sexuality; (2) nongenital but physical lovemaking and affection; and (3) nonphysical lovemaking such as emotional, artistic, and psychic empathy and sharing. None of these levels is higher or lower, more or less pure or radical, than the other levels; and many relationships may involve two or even all three of them.

For me, Lesbianism means caring about another woman, sharing experiences with her, loving her as I love myself. It means that rather than endlessly analyze, judge, or even applaud her past, I will reach out to her wherever she may be *now*, even if that place is beyond all known landmarks, just so that I may give her a big hug.

What form that hug takes, exactly how we embrace, is not that important; our love and sharing are all-important.

While saying all this, I realize that the genital focus of many Lesbians is understandable. Patriarchal thought,

person *can* be Lesbian, and *should* be admitted to Lesbian organizations and activities without discrimination.

## MISGUIDED NOTIONS OF POLARIZATION

Another anti-transsexual argument goes something like this. At the present moment in history, the essential sexual conflict is *women vs. men*. A successful feminist movement (and the Lesbian movement in particular) must *polarize* these two categories, and draw together all *women*. Androgyny will be fine after the revolution, but right now to admit transsexuals into the movement (who are androgynous people) would only confuse the main issue.

To this argument there are three replies: the first is moral, the second is social and political, and the third is profoundly ideological.

First of all, as was discussed in the last installment, radical people have often labored under the illusion that they can be free while others are still slaves, and that the true test of revolutionary virtue is the willingness to trample over people who do not fit one's neat little scheme of history.

At present, there are perhaps 10,000 transsexuals in the United States (or about .005% of the population). Such a small and repressed minority can



concern about constructing a sensitive clitoris. In other words, at this time, surgeons are doing transsexual surgery according to male and heterosexual ideas of what a female body should be.

In these circumstances, for financial and feminist reasons, I am taking a careful approach to surgery, and, in the meantime, celebrating my Lesbianism in non-genital ways.

Now we come to the great question: What is Lesbianism? From a patriarchal point of view, it is a genital relationship between two women. But should we, as radical Lesbians, accept this as the *total* scope of Lesbianism?

From my own knowledge of Lesbian literature, I find a constant stress on *love, affection, commitment, and empathy* between women; also, I find a constant *opposition* to the male obsession with centralized genital sexuality. In other words, Lesbianism is not exclusively to be defined as

to which everyone has been exposed, offers only the extremes of totally centralized and "phallic" sexuality for the male, and totally passive and non-phallic (i.e. nonclitoral) sexuality for the female. The stress on strength and freedom of female sexuality at the genital level is a response to the patriarchal myth of female diffuseness.

However, the solution is not to switch from one exclusive extreme (only nongenital love between women) to the other equally exclusive extreme (only genital love). Rather the solution is to celebrate Lesbian love no matter what form it takes, and to affirm all levels of expression as equally valid.

Turning back to the three categories of expression (see above), we find that there is no reason why the preoperative transsexual cannot take part in levels (2) and (3), which include both physical and non-physical lovemaking except for genital sexuality. Therefore such a

hardly win its own liberation alone. The idea of ignoring or even crushing such a group of sexually oppressed people in the name of a feminist revolution shows the kind of patriarchal ruthlessness which male chauvinists confuse with strength and commitment.

Secondly, such an argument neglects the fact that male-to-female transsexuals *are women* if they are living as such, from the social and political as well as the personal angle. When I fill out a job application or census form, I put myself down as *female*, not as *transsexual*. I face the same discrimination, harassment, and physical intimidation as other women.

In short, on the level of cold political strategy, absorbing perhaps 10,000 transsexuals (more likely 10% of this, since most are not Lesbian) into a Lesbian movement of millions can do little harm, and only serves to unite all

women in a common struggle. On the other hand, trying to exclude transsexuals from the movement does a great deal of harm, by dividing apart those people who are objectively treated as women by society, and by fostering an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia in the Lesbian movement (there might be a transsexual under your bed, or even in it!).

Finally, the narrow concept of polarization stated above perpetuates *male* definitions of sex and gender.

About four years ago, there was a demonstration in Los Angeles against sexism, in which a woman was arrested. At the police station, she was examined, and was found to have mainly female genitals (she even menstruated), but also a stump of penile tissue. She was ruled a male, and thrown into a prison cell where she was raped and beaten.

Last year, one Lesbian wrote that the crucial polarization is between "penises and vaginas"; from a feminist point of view, I would at least have mentioned clitorises. But regardless, such a definition of polarization would put Lesbians on the same side as the police, and would require that they ignore the torture of this woman who is their sister. As a radical Lesbian, I say that true polarization means lining up *in support* of this woman, and *against* the ideology which permitted her rape and beating.

#### CLINGING TO PATRIARCHAL DEFINITIONS

As we have seen, it is easy in a new situation to cling to old sexist definitions. Lesbians sometimes clinged to the heterosexual roles of the butch/femme trip; transsexuals still often cling to the male definition of being a woman enacted in the femme trip. There is a danger now that the Lesbian feminist movement will cling to sexist definitions of femaleness and maleness in dealing with transsexuals.

The sexist definition may be summed up by these three rules: (1) All people can be classified physically as either male or female; (2) all people have gender identities which match their physical sexes; and (3) it is impossible for a person to change sex.

Elsewhere I have referred to this complex of attitudes as *two-genderism*, a form of oppression which belongs beside male chauvinism and heterosexual chauvinism in the overall category of sexism. When Lesbians and other feminists treat transsexuals in a simplistic way (e.g. "no one born a man can really be a woman"), they are clinging to these patriarchal definitions. After dealing with each of the three rules as false and oppressive, I will turn to the question of *why* radical native women should cling to them.

First of all, *not* everyone is so clearly female or male, even on a purely physical level. True hermaphroditism, pseudo-hermaphroditism and intersexuality are all realities.

Given these realities, it is indeed pitiable that a certain feminist should define the scope of the movement as including "women who have lived their entire lives as women in women's bodies." What is a woman's body in the first place? Where is the line drawn? Why should it be drawn at all, except by patriarchs who are out to defend two-genderism?

In fact, Lesbians knew better as early as the 18th century. In Paris of the revolutionary age, there was a group called the Anandrous Society (to give the title in English)—literally the maleless society—which consisted of Lesbians. A very active member was a *true hermaphrodite*.

Also, to confront the second rule, physical sex does not necessarily determine gender identity. For example, in one study a number of children were born with pseudo-hermaphroditism; they were all gonadally female, but with masculinization of the external genitals. Some were raised as female; others as male. It was found that most of these children became the gender they were assigned to either way; but for some reason a few developed the opposite identity.

Finally, people *do* change physical sex and social identity, in order to live in accordance with their inner sense of self. Radicals who stress the importance of feelings and inner needs in feminism, and who seek revolutionary *change*, should not be intimidated by the fact that some people classified at birth as male live as women, and vice versa.

Tragically, there is a shameful ignorance about intersexuality and hermaphroditism, as well as transsexualism, within the Lesbian and feminist movements. We know now that masturbation does not cause sterility or pimples, that rhythm is not an effective birth control method, that Gay people are not generally perverts who molest children on the streets; we should also know that people cannot be absolutely and eternally pigeonholed as female or male.

Sheer inertia, or the tendency to cling to familiar rules for the sake of mere familiarity, can explain some of the anti-transsexualism in the Lesbian movement. However, it does not explain why transsexuals should meet *more* rejection from radical feminists than from many liberal straight people.

In my experience, and I say this with regret, most of the people who have been down on me have been radical Lesbians and feminists rather than liberals. For example, at the time of my social change I was a graduate student at a certain Jesuit institution; and this university changed my records without any hassle. The people in charge were not only tolerant but even helpful.

Now living as a woman, I naturally went over to join the campus Women's Center. Several of the members knew about my transsexualism, and they encouraged me to help out. I continued for five months without problems.

Then three of the members called me to meet with them and they declared that they were just not "comfortable" with me because of my transsexualism. Further, they argued that I could not really be a good staff person, because I did not have first person experience with birth control and abortion! Of course, neither would any exclusively Lesbian woman. If they had wished to participate in some kind of open discussion with me as a transsexual *and* as their sister in order to deal with their honest discomfort, I would have been glad to oblige. But instead, they were openly using the discomfort as an excuse to banish me rather than to banish (with or without my help) their



anti-transsexual prejudices.

In traditional patriarchal terms, women are defined both: (1) By being born with female genitals; and (2) by complying with "feminine" sex roles in general, and sexual preference for men rather than other women in particular.

Radical Lesbianism and feminism have challenged the second patriarchal definition of womanhood: women have dared to be aggressive, to break with all the fetters of "femininity," and to love other women.

However, breaking with old rules always leads to insecurity. The question arose: "If we no longer follow the traditional roles, then what actually makes us women?" The truly radical answer would be: "We are women because we have female gender identities, regardless of either our genitals or our adherence or nonadherence to sex roles; in short, we are women because we *feel* ourselves to be women in our own terms." Quite naturally, this answer would lead to the embracing of transsexuals as sisters.

But for many native feminists, feeling was too ambiguous and tenuous a peg on which to hang a thing as important as their femaleness. And so they turned to the security blanket of the sexist rule: "We are female because we were born with female genitals, regardless of our adherence or nonadherence to sex roles; and the devil take anyone who merely *feels* female without the proper native physiological credentials."

Having saved themselves from their own insecurities, they went one further by agreeing to ignore gender identity out of existence as a separate dimension of human conflict. As people who had never *experienced* the pain of being intersexuals or transsexuals, or having their own total gender identity in doubt, they found that this ignoring was not a difficult feat.

Now they could not only avoid dealing with two-genderism, but could actually charge transsexuals with trying to reintroduce sex roles. After all, by revived patriarchal logic, all people are from birth either one sex or the other as an absolute given; so why would anyone want to change sex? It must mean that the transsexual is hung up

about *roles*; transsexuals are just men who like "feminine" roles, and so try to become women so they can fit into society.

As I have explained from my own life, this is a totally distorted view of transsexualism. But it is a reassuring one for a feminist who wants to move toward a non-sexist society but cannot quite handle the insecurity which it involves.

In the short run, finding comfort in the two-genderism of Big Brother, and holding company with the patriarchs in ignoring the plight of those who are intersexual or transsexual, is the easy way out for native women. But in the long run, only confronting two-genderism can lead to a genuinely androgynous society. It is difficult to move toward the ideal of a borderless world while taking a callous attitude toward displaced persons in the meantime.

#### CONCLUSION ON LESBIAN ANTI-TRANSSEXUALISM

Although there are some differences between the reasons for transsexual sexism and the reasons for Lesbian anti-transsexualism, in both cases an incomplete concept of sexual liberation seems largely at fault as a source of conflict.

As a transsexual, I stressed that transsexuals should be totally direct and unapologetic in challenging sexism among transsexuals. As a Lesbian, I now emphasize that we, as Lesbians, must challenge anti-transsexualism in our midst. The sisterhood of all transsexuals, and of all Lesbians, does not and must not deter me (or anyone else) from challenging sexist attitudes whenever and wherever they occur in either of the overlapping communities.

Challenging these attitudes and assumptions is a long and hard process. But only by such challenging can Lesbians and transsexuals liberate their own feelings and lives from the ball and chain of patriarchy. Only by such challenging can Lesbians and transsexuals (including Lesbians who are transsexual) join as sisters to resist sexism rather than fight each other and aid sexism. Only by such challenging can Lesbians and transsexuals become part of the total movement for human liberation.