

BOUNDARIES: Gender and Transgenderism

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Genderplay has become the rage of the nineties. Instead of dying out like the typical fads that breeze through our community only to be replaced by the next passing fad, it shows no signs of becoming *passee*. At least not yet.

Even before gender play became fashionable, many dykes had fantasies of having facial hair. Not all of them are butch. Most certainly, not all of them wish to change their gender. Then one day, wearing fake facial hair to play parties became the rave.

The prevalence of these occurrences led to greater acceptance for diverse gender expression and we were off and running. The women's SM community became a safe space for us to explore our fantasies and perceptions of masculinity and male personas. Now butch and femme alike could act out their fantasies of being gay men, cruising each other, and having hot, sleazy sex in some back room with a stranger.

In a sense, gender play and other forms of expression allowed us to break away from certain expectations, just as lesbianism has allowed us to break away from societal expectations of how women should behave. Now, almost everyone is engaged in Daddy-boy, Daddy-girl "relationships" or other gender specific play.

For some it is just that, play. It is a fun and sometimes an erotic exploration of power exchange. In some instances our explorations have led to the discovery of deep seated and repressed emotions about gender identity and/or expression.

There are those of us for whom gender is more than just a hot sexual fantasy. It is the core of our lives and of our being. Some of us have cut through our own veil of denial and started taking male hormones. We run the gamut of human existence coming from all walks of life, races, sexual orientations and spiritualities. Some preferred to be called FTM while others prefer the term transgendered. We call ourselves queer, lesbian, gay, pansexual, bisexual, heterosexual or any other phrase which more adequately describes us. In some cases we are asexual by force or choice. Some require strict adherence to the "proper" gender pronouns. Others could care less. Some believe that they are strictly male and there is no room for anything else within them. Others believe that they are all of both or neither of either. A third gender so to speak, pioneers in their own fashion, navigating the waters of a turbulent bipolar society, where you are forced to choose the gender box in which you will reside. Some FTMs have left our community and not looked back. Others staunchly believe that this community is our home and that despite a change in the welcome wagon, this is where we belong.

Long ago there were dykes who discovered that they were transgendered and during transition were ousted by both the women's and leatherwomen's communities. Not more than four years ago gender play was frowned upon. To engage in a "male stereotypical" behavior whether it be a dyke emulating straight or gay male was

unheard of in public. Like the allure of any other taboo, we could not help but to practice it in private, out of the way of prying eyes and ears. There was a time when we were shunned for engaging in Daddy-boy and Daddy-girl play or for butch-butched and femme-femme relationships. These types of expression have now become socially acceptable within the SM community.

With more and more dykes taking male hormones the issues of inclusion and exclusion have once again reached the forefront. It's all about boundaries. Where should the line be drawn and who gets to draw it? Questions such as who gets to come to the party and why are loaded issues. Various camps exist, both pro and con. The "get out and stay out" policy has been replaced by women willing to tackle, discuss and address the emotional issue of who belongs in our community. Yet there appears to be no viable solution which is acceptable to all. No matter what choice is made, someone always cries foul and the event boycotted by some faction of the community.

Fortunately that the thoughts, opinions, and beliefs of individuals change with time and experience. In turn these changes result in shifts of acceptance within in our community. I believe that in part this is due to a change in the way which we perceive gender play and in part due to a desire not to lose members of our community just because their gender expression is becoming more noticeable. We have come a long way baby, but we have a hell of a long way to go.

We live in a bipolar society where people are either identified as male or female. No other options remain open at the present time. I do not want to perpetuate the bipolarity of this society by the use of certain language, but the topic of gender is confusing enough without trying to maintain a neutrality. Based on the nature of our language and the bi-polarization of our society, a truly gender-neutral discussion can not be had. This bipolarity seeps into the discussion of who gets to come.

The identification of gender becomes remarkably difficult for purposes of women's only space. There is no consensus about who is considered male and who is considered female. Biology may no longer be an accurate indicator. To make matters worse our language is not adept at dealing with the vast differences in expression. For example, FTM has been a term used to define total transition from female to male and at other times has been used loosely to define gender fluid individuals.

We have been taught to believe that gender and sex are one and the same. That is just not the case. Sex refers to physiological genitalia (male or female) while gender is an expression and perception. Gender identity is how we perceive ourselves irrespective of what the biological gender is. For instance, Suzie, a physiological female, can be large breasted and her gender identity can be male. For those of you who scoff at this statement, some of the biggest baddest butches that I have ever met are large breasted. If breast size does not preclude a butch identity why would it preclude a male gender identity?

Gender expression is how we express or portray ourselves to others and the world at large. Gender identity and gender expression are different from sexual preference. Sexual preference is whom we prefer to have sexual relations with (e.g., male, female, etc.). Sexual orientation is how we identify as sexual beings based on our

preferences (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) Sexual orientation does not indicate gender identity. One can be a lesbian and femme (thank the Goddess).

The confusion in identifying gender stems from what others perceive us to be. The perception of others as to our biological gender, sexual identification, sexual preference, gender identity, or gender expression to be is called labelling. Confused yet?

For instance, Suzie is a biological female. She is a butch who is clear that she is a woman. Her sexual preference is women. When having sex with femmes she identifies as a lesbian, but when having with other butches she identifies as a faggot. Irrespective of whether she sleeps with butches or femmes her friends perceive her as a lesbian. In this hypothetical situation, Suzie's gender expression is masculine. Her sexual preference is women. Suzie's gender identity changes from lesbian to gay depending on whether her partner is butch or femme. Despite how she feels or perceives herself, her friends perceive her as a dyke and thus use the label lesbian to set the boundaries for their interaction with Suzie.

Labelling has been a way for us to find a common thread with which to bring us together. At the same time it has created expectations as to what constitutes appropriate behavior. We in a sense have created our own boxes and our own limitations.

If these various concepts and terms do not complicate and confuse matters enough, we have the people who are gender fluid. Gender fluidity meaning that their gender identity and/or expression encompass both masculine and feminine. Gender fluidity is becoming commonly known as transgenderism. The ability to transcend gender whether biological, emotional, political, or otherwise truly mixing male and female.

Also the term "transition" varies from person to person. Some people use the term to delineate that they are moving from one polarity to the opposite, such as from female to male. Some are in a constant state of flux, shape shifting along the gender continuum so to speak. There is a whole gamut of other identities which are political and social in nature, but they are too numerous to discuss and too confusing for this short trek into the gender jungle. Enough with the semantics.

I believe that we learn from our interactions with other people. In that regard, people who have diverse opinions, expressions and experiences are potentially the greatest opportunity for growth. By the same token, I also acknowledge and believe that there should be time and energy spent with like minded people. In this sense, I have come to accept the fact that there is a need for SM women's only space. My reluctance to reach this conclusion stems from the fact that labeling is often the criteria (i.e. someone else gets to identify what I am) for inclusion in this space.

Labelling tends to result in transgendered and transsexual individuals being excluded from both women's only and men's only space, ending up with no space at all. Some people say, let transgendered people make their own space. This however is not a viable alternative for several reasons. A majority of transsexuals tend to be

heterosexually inclined. They remain a part of the transsexual community until such time when they deem their transition to be complete then go on to live what they consider to be "normal" lives. There are fewer transsexuals who identify as homosexual and even fewer transsexuals who are involved in SM. There are even fewer who wish to remain as part of the women's community. Look around the next time that you are in a play party and count the number of ex-lovers in the room and realize how small the community really is. The transgendered community runs in even smaller circles. So basically on the west coast we are talking about approximately a half dozen people. Sort of wreaks havoc with the dating pool.

If physiology is the criteria, then I meet the criteria for women's only space and would be allowed to attend, but an MTF who has done everything except the last surgery to remove her penis, would not. If outward appearance or hormone levels are the criteria then I will not be allowed to attend, but many MTFs would. Handling matters on a case by case basis depending on the people who desire to attend gives the appearance of favoritism. Complicating these discussions further is the intense emotional response that the issue of exclusion raises.

Without a doubt there are differences in the way that our society treats men and women. There remain disadvantages for women such as lower wages, discrimination, higher cost of clothing and accessories and for lesser durability. There is also the fear for our personal safety. While the struggle for equal rights is being fought slowly and painstakingly, there is no forward motion to terminate the wage disparity that exists between the sexes. Its no wonder that some women get pissed off at the inclusion of FTMs at women's only events. We who wish to remain become the convenient targets for the crimes of the patriarchy. The cries of "traitor" and "male privilege" ring throughout the coliseum and the battle is about to begin.

Some women used the terms testosterone poisoned and traitors to the matriarchy to refer to FTMs. While some of us are testosterone poisoned, I am tired of taking the rap for the number of bridges burned by someone else who happens to be on male hormones and wants nothing to do with the women's community. Or of the vendetta by a disenfranchised femme for the loss of her true love to a transgendered person. And since when have all biological females been automatically included in the matriarchy? It has been my experience that the women who are complaining the loudest about traitors to the community do not regard heterosexual or bisexual females as part of the matriarchy.

So why is the FTM who seeks total and complete transition and leaves to community considered a traitor? The obvious answer to this question is that the woman screaming "traitor" labeled the FTM as being a lesbian and as a female in gender identity. The FTM perceived himself to have a male gender identity and gender expression. He seeks a variety of surgeries to alter the female biology to appear as a that of a male (or as biologically correct a male as surgical techniques will allow). So in this situation, how can this FTM be a traitor if he never identified as a female in the first instance? And, why should FTMs who consider themselves to be gender fluid be held to the same standard? Just as there are varying degrees of expression between butches, there are varying degrees of expression and beliefs within the FTM community. The gender fluid FTM seeks neither total biological transition nor to

remain chemically female.

Finances are at the heart of the exclusion melee. In some peoples eyes being male automatically means more money. While maybe true in the world at large, this does not equate to FTMs. People seem to forget that anyone applying for a job is required to disclose a work history. The transgendered applicant is faced with a dilemma. They either (1) fail to disclose certain work experience (in essence lying), practically assuring that they will not be hired or be hired, later found out, and fired under a convenient pretext OR (2) truthfully disclosing all information and guaranteeing that someone else will be hired for the job. Imagine if you will the blatant discrimination that lesbians are subjected to within the work place. Some cities are enlightened enough to have protection based on sexual orientation. They are in the minority. There are no protection whatsoever afforded to transsexuals, although the City and County of San Francisco recently amended a proposed human rights ordinance to include gender identity as a protected class. This ordinance is presently pending before the Board of Supervisors.

How can anyone believe that being transsexual or transgendered be the easy way out? It is not a "cop out" by any stretch of the imagination. The peace of mind that you gain from finally being comfortable with yourself is traded for other discomforts such as the exclusion from certain events, loss of a lover and the rejection and fear of being unable to find another lover.

Another argument that has been raised is that the presence of FTMs either invalidates butch identity or it promotes the taking of hormones among the "baby dykes". There have always been varying degrees of butchness within our community. No one manner of expression is better than another. Gender fluid FTMs just happen to be at one extreme and androgynous butches at the other. Facial hair does not define the butch and this belief, if it does exist, should not prevail. The presence of the FTM should not be to blame for the personal decisions of women coming to terms with their transsexuality or transgenderism. Just as lesbians do not choose whether or not they are lesbians, transsexuals and transgendered individuals also have no choice. Just as there is relief, peace and freedom in coming to terms with ones sexual preference, so is there relief, peace, and freedom in coming to terms with being transgendered. Asking a transgendered person to forgo their gender identity or expression is tantamount to asking a butch dyke to wear a skirt and act like a femme. With a few rare exceptions, it can't be done.

If the objection of an FTM presence is "male energy" then what about all of the butches who have a masculine gender expression? Is that not also an exhibition of male energy? I know of no one who has been able to draw a bright line between behaviors and experiences of butches and those of FTMs (with the exception of hormones).

We have been taught to think in a linear fashion, but life does not necessarily evolve in such a way. As such all things are in a constant state of change or flux. Therefore, self identification appears to be the fairest criteria as it allows the individuals and not the organizers to make the decision of whether or not they will attend.

Self-identification was the criteria used at the first "Power Surge" in September of

1992. When I first heard about it I was worried that I would not be allowed to attend. When I found out that a meeting had been held by the conference organizers and that I was welcome as well as having been asked to co-moderate the gender panel, I was felt honored, relieved and excited. As the date approached, I became more and more worried about the type of reception that would be received. Would it be cool? Would there be overt hostility or animosity? Would I be automatically treated with contempt due to actions of biological males over which I had no control over and who's conduct I do not sanction?

I was pleasantly surprised when my presence did not result in stoning by an angry mob. I perceived that the response to our presence was favorable although somewhat tentative at first. Some woman, by virtue of the one comment on the rumor control board must have been visibly disturbed by our presence at the conference, but she did not make her feelings known in person, so I have no clue what the discomfort was about other than the obvious outward appearance. It is also possible that she was referring to the MTF's who were present. All of this is speculation on my part since, I do not know who she is nor did I have the opportunity to meet with her.

The gender panel at Power Surge was tactfully held on the Sunday afternoon near the conclusion of the conference. I had been a part of other gender panels which dealt with the how too's of passing, packing, and gender play. This one was devoted to how people felt, their thoughts, and opinions. It had the potential for being explosive with name calling and hurt feelings. There was none of that, although it was very emotional and difficult in places.

There was a lot of support from the conference attendees and a variety of topics were discussed, such as male privilege and the feeling that some biological women were making this choice based upon the fact that there was this fad of going from female to male taking place in San Francisco. I feel as if we could have spent an entire week talking about these things and that there still would not be enough time to cover everything. The panel more as a springboard for future discussion.

At the second Power Surge which took place in September of 1994, the criteria was slightly different, but still involved a level of self-identification. In order to be allowed into the conference the attendee needed a valid driver's license or identification card stating her gender as female. Due to another panel that I was on, I was unable to attend the gender panel. I understand that it was comprised of two gender fluid individuals (this is my perception of them) who started out as butch and femme. The butch transformed into femme and the femme into butch as the discussion took place.

On other side of the boundary discussion is the fact that organizing an event takes more work than anyone in their right mind can imagine. Since the organizers are doing all of the work, do they not then have the right to decide who may come and who may not? And what about the other women at the conference? If they have certain expectations about what the space will be like and who will be there, what will their level of comfort be with the presence of full beards and hairy chests? As previously stated, no one answer will be acceptable to all.

The most that we can do at this stage is talk to each other and discuss how we

really feel as opposed to screaming political dogmas at one another. Only in a context of honesty and openness can we truly come to terms with the changes which our community is undergoing and which our community will continue to undergo despite our reluctance to disturb "tradition".

I have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by a group of women who have been kind, considerate, and thoughtful about my feelings and opinions; who have expected and received the same in return; and who have embraced me with open arms. Others have not been so fortunate.

In deciding emotionally charged policies, we must keep in mind that our way is not always right for someone else. That for every opinion that we have there is someone with a contrary one. Instead of getting angry, invalidating the opinions or beliefs of others, and inflaming passions on both sides, we need to take a deep breath and hear each other out.

I did not have the privilege of knowing the late Sashie Hyatt, but from a reliable source I understand that she used to say: *There are many paths leading to the same place. No one path is better than the other. So we should not criticize someone who has taken a path different than our own.*

Isn't our time better spent trying to change how society perceives and treats women than in excluding individuals who happen to express themselves differently than what society and our community expects of women?

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Gender and Transgenderism: A Post Script

As publishing goes, it took more than a year from the time this article was accepted for publication to the time that it actually appeared in print and in that interim a lot happened. The "stoning" that I talked about delightfully not occurring sort of came to be. Policies were changed at the last minute, so that while Sky and I were able to attend the conference, the workshops that we were slated to present were handed off to others. The result was hurt feelings all around, lost friendships, betrayals, and a fracturous relationship within the Seattle leather community. And yet, there are two sides to every story.

A dear friend said to me, "when you are being run out of town on a rail, make it look like a parade." Painful as this all was at the time, in retrospect, it was exactly the shove that I needed to break out and explore the men's community with the assistance and gentle prodding of Hal Heller, the first gay man who accepted me as a fellow gay man.

Years later I attended a mixed leather event in San Francisco for women and FTMs. Although initially excited to be able to attend an event with a very dear and wicked friend, it became abundantly clear to me that I simply didn't belong here anymore.

But, that's just me.

I wish others to best of luck in finding their communities and comfort zones.