

The Lesbian Community and FTMs: Détente in the Butch/FTM Borderlands

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In 1998, Dr. Jacob Hale wrote “Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands” (Hale 1998). He discussed the competing claims by lesbians and FTMs regarding the gender identity of historical figures. The title refers to a ‘borderland’ between butch lesbian identity and FTM masculinity, which consumes the living, ‘disremembers’ the psychological identity of the dead, as well as ‘dismembering’ their physical status as FTMs or lesbians (depending on which side of the line you reside). Hale suggests that, although the border cannot be eliminated, nor the concerns and emotions of those on both sides reconciled easily, perhaps a ‘demilitarized zone’ should be created. My thesis is that the intervening years have brought no ‘demilitarized zone’. There is no evidence that the combatants have changed their positions, or their fervor. The line is real. It is sign of difference, a line of demarcation, and an identity distinction of great importance to both lesbians and FTMs. Nonetheless, I contend that the border may not have a long future.

There are converging trends in sexual identity that suggest such a result. These changes primarily affect the younger generation in their teens and twenties. First, the old labels are shifting in meaning. ‘Lesbian’ is moving away from a primarily political discourse of ‘woman-identified woman’. ‘FTM’ is moving away from a primarily medical discourse of ‘sex change’. Second, sexuality and gender among the younger generation have changed and begun to blend. Many young people now identify as ‘genderqueer’, a word suggesting the conjunction of both gender and gayness, and pluralistic challenges to the gender binary (Weiss 2004a). ‘Lesbians’ can have sex with men – can even *be* men (born male-bodied or female-bodied). ‘FTM’ can mean ‘female towards male’ and refer to a lesbian, a woman and/or a man. Such a person may have sex with women, or men, or either. Third, differences among sexuality and gender are regarded as personal differences, not identity differences. Being a woman who has sex with women, but who considers oneself masculine does not require identification as ‘butch’. Being a woman who considers herself transgender does not mean abandoning one’s identity as a lesbian and taking on an FTM identity.

These trends are moves away from essentialism, though in different ways, and towards the ‘universalizing view’ suggested by Sedgwick (1990). In my experience, a majority of the older members of the lesbian and transsexual communities was raised with and will likely continue to espouse essentialist positions, continuing the long history of GL vs. BT politics (Weiss 2004b). The younger members of these communities, however, have been raised on these universalizing principles, and that has formed their consciousness. I have no data to suggest that the attitude changes discussed herein are rapidly proliferating or will dominate in the future. Nor is there space in this limited format to explore fully the diverse landscape of lesbian feminism. I hope only to shine a light on these nascent trends.

Welcome to the Borderlands

The borderlands opened in the 1950s, when Christine Jorgensen burst into the headlines, and the term 'transsexual' moved into popular culture. From the beginning, the homosexual movement was uncomfortable with 'transsexuals'. This was not simply a question of whether transsexuals should be included in the community. It was a situation of active disapproval of the identity itself. (Meyerowitz 2002:183)

Some lesbian feminists theorized transsexuality as driven by an essentialist, patriarchal conception of women (Raymond 1979). They considered transsexuality an abdication of the need for social change. They derided FTMs as gender-conformists grasping at male privilege (Cromwell 1999:40-41). They understood the gender identity of FTMs as internalized misogyny. Transsexuality was part of a continuum that includes the beauty industry, heterosexist propaganda and economic pressure, foot-binding, genital mutilation, pornography, and "other institutions whereby men shape women to conform to their needs and fantasies" (Henry 1978; Sturgis 1979). Lesbians moved to erect a wall between lesbians and FTMs (Nestle 2002).

The feminist discomfort with FTMs, however, was not a logical outcome of identity difference, because the women's movement centered on a successful challenge to Freud's dictum that "anatomy is destiny". Rather, it seems to have derived from socio-historical factors surrounding the rise of the lesbian feminist movement: its largely white, middle-class composition, the desire to appeal to the larger feminist movement, and the stigma of female masculinity (Califia 1999:89-91). Lesbian feminists argued vigorously that the lesbian feminist community was not a sexual community, but a political one. (Radicalesbians 1970).

Butch identity, with its strong connection to sexuality and its similarity to heterosexual patterns, affronted these ideas. Lesbian feminists disapproved of a gender identity that included masculine characteristics in personality, appearance and dating roles. "[I]t must be understood that what is crucial is that women begin disengaging from male defined response patterns. In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core. For irrespective of where our love and sexual energies flow, if we are male-identified in our heads, we cannot realize our autonomy as human beings" (Id.). It was made repeatedly clear in the 1970s that butch lesbians were no longer welcome within the lesbian feminist movement. (Meyerowitz 2002:178; Rubin 2003).

At this time, most FTMs distanced themselves from the lesbian community. Most FTMs felt strongly that they were men, and could not therefore be lesbians, though they may have had ties with lesbians and the lesbian community. They made it clear that, unlike lesbianism, theirs was not an issue of erotic desire. Rather, their issue was internal gender identity, that part of the mind that makes one feel like a man or a woman. They felt strongly that they were neither homosexual, nor properly part of the homosexual community. Unlike lesbian feminism, their issue was avowedly not political, but strictly medical (Devor 1997: 312, 333, 338, 342; Rubin 2003). Most FTMs were uncomfortable with the feminist idea that they were supposed to take on the burden of changing society. This would have entailed championing the idea that they were females who had taken on a non-heteronormative gender role. The whole point of FTM identity, however, is that it is a male identity, *not* female. Most FTMs formed relationships with women, assuming the role of a man within a heterosexual relationship as then understood. They found it hard to relate to the strongly anti-male stance of lesbian feminism. Even those that could relate were completely disqualified them from the ranks of lesbian feminism. Some FTMs *were* more

open to acknowledging a lesbian history, and thereby a past female identity, but the lesbian feminist community generally did not find this to be sufficient to qualify for membership in lesbian feminist identity. Thus, they alienated even those possibly open to the idea of championing social change.

The medical establishment also played a central role in reinforcing the separation by requiring that FTMs demonstrate essentialist male attitudes in order to receive medical assistance for the change. Any FTM that identified as 'gay' or 'lesbian', or felt identification with 'female' identity was not considered a good candidate for medical assistance (Califia 1997:186; Cromwell 1999:104-105). The medical establishment counseled them never to disclose a female or lesbian identity (Green 2004). Without a strong essentialist ethic (or at least a strong pretense), FTMs were denied a fundamental rite of passage of FTM identity by the medical establishment.

Signals of Change

These essentialist attitudes among some advocates of lesbian feminism and FTMs fueled the border wars, and created the borderlands. These debates have not disappeared, with each side charging the other with rabid gender essentialism (Wilton 2000, 2002, Hird 2002, Jeffreys 2003, Sweeney 2004). However, the socio-historical circumstances that gave power to anti-trans feminist attitudes and trans rejection of lesbian identity are disappearing. There has been some relaxation of the social attitudes in the U.S. and U.K. that punished openly lesbian identity through downward mobility. This relaxation is not equivalent to acceptance, as evidenced by the furor created in the recent U.S. Presidential election by the mere utterance of the word 'lesbian' by candidate John Kerry, and President George W. Bush's successful harnessing of public sentiment against gay marriage. At the same time, it should be noted that the furor resulted because Mr. Kerry responded to a gay-rights question posed at a presidential debate with a reference to Vice President Dick Cheney's lesbian daughter. The resulting furor did not cause outrage against Dick Cheney or his daughter, as it might have in the past, but against Mr. Kerry. Lesbian identity, while not socially 'approved', is no longer generally understood as a dysfunctional gender inversion, as it was in the 1970s when many lesbians fought for acceptance by constructing lesbianism as primarily political, disavowing female masculinity. Many middle-class lesbians have been able to come out without losing their middle-class lifestyle, particularly in large city environments. Medical attitudes towards FTMs are less also essentialist, permitting FTMs to identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian' without the concern that they will not be 'real' FTMs. A new generation has grown up with these changes, and the universalist ethic has shaped their attitudes. This universalist ethic and the fluid sex/gender system stemming from it do not require a border.

A sign of this universalist ethic is that many young people do not identify their sexuality in the same ways the previous generation did. The previously all-consuming question of whether or not butch and femme identities are compatible with feminist aims is less relevant in such an alternate universe. The "lesbian continuum" described by Rich seems quaint from this vantage point. Younger queers of all kinds are taking seriously Judith Butler's suggestion to un-moor identity from bodies and to seek more personal and individual ways to be themselves, and thereby challenge fixed gender regimes (Wilchins 2005). The labels 'lesbian' and 'FTM' do not mean the same thing they did a generation ago.

Many young people are embracing a more fluid role in terms of their sexual orientation and gender identity. They may or may not identify as someone who is attracted to women, or as FTM, but their self-definition often includes 'gender queer' or 'trans' as a means of challenging the gender binary (Gilliam 2005). The sexuality based on this new identification is also fluid, and defies past expectations of lesbian and gay sexuality. Queer-identified young women are likely to have sex with queer-identified young men, and consider it a queer relationship. Masculine labels such as 'boy' and 'daddy' are not considered taboo by women's communities. Queer-identified young women have twice the rate of pregnancy of their heterosexual peers. In another study, twenty percent of lesbians reported having high-risk sexual contact, including sexual intercourse with men who have had sex with men (Szymanski 2005). Here is how one lesbian described herself and her friends in 2002:

One of my friends identifies as a female-bodied butch. He says he is neither a woman nor a lesbian, and he takes only woman lovers. Another friend says that s/he is a lesbian and also a man. Yet another says s/he is a masculine woman. I know two people who identify as transgendered woman – one is a biological man and the other a biological woman. The bioman dresses and lives as a woman; the biowoman dresses and lives as a man. Both call themselves lesbian. I have come to understand that, although there is not yet a name for my desires, I am a woman, a lesbian woman, and a femme, who deeply desires male presence in female bodies. I love men on top of me and inside me. This is my kind of lesbianism. (Lionhart 2002).

There are also lesbians who consider themselves transgender but want to remain women (Baird 2002). "I routinely speak before groups of young queers like Jesse who refuse to identify as gay or straight because they don't want to leave any of their friends behind, because they don't want to be known by something as simplistic as who they sleep with, or because they don't even select their partners by sex" (Wilchins 2002).

These moves away from essentialism and towards universalism may signal the beginnings of the disappearance of the 'border' between lesbian and FTM. I refer to 'border' here as a sign of difference, as a line of demarcation, and as a distinction of pure identity. This is not to say that we are 'post-lesbian' or 'post-transsexual'. The writers quoted here do not represent a majority of lesbians or FTMs today, but they may represent an emerging trend. I do not claim that no one in the future will identify as lesbian or FTM. Nor does it mean that young people have abandoned all differences between sexualities and genders. Nor is the work of feminism complete – women and girls all around the globe are treated as second-class citizens and property. However, it may indicate that the "Butch/FTM Borderlands", as a 'real' line as written about by Hale and Halberstam in 1998, is now perceived as increasingly unstable and unreal by many in the younger generation. Among academics of this new generation, the effort (and perhaps the ability) to distinguish clearly a field of 'lesbian' studies, or any sexuality-based disciplines, may diminish. Among activists of this new generation, the need and desire for identity politics may wane. It is not that heteronormativity is splintering, but perhaps 'homonormativity' has lessened its hold on the younger generation. A vivid example is the recent turnabout at the Human Rights Campaign, the largest U.S. gay advocacy group, which had staunchly resisted the idea of including transgender identity in its legislative agenda for federal employment protection. It has now said it will not support such legislation without trans

inclusion. The fight for rights may be moving to an arena in which the tension between identities, the need to distinguish clearly between them, and the arguments about who is 'really' lesbian or 'really' FTM may be of supreme unimportance to the next generation. Time will tell.

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