

Article

SEXUALITIES

Abstract This is a reflection on the state of lesbian identity politics, focusing on claims that lesbian subcultures are shrinking and even dying. Current fears focus on the increasingly permeable boundaries between butch lesbians and female-to-male transgender individuals, but its history is much longer. What we are seeing, quite possibly, is the exhaustion of a particular historical construction: a group of individuals who are defined primarily on the basis of their sexuality, and the rise of more specific identities which combine sexual preference, gender presentation and other modes of identification. This was the first annual Sally Miller Gearhart Lecture in Lesbian Studies, sponsored by the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oregon, in May 2009.

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The Incredible Shrinking Lesbian World and other Queer Conundra

Once many people believed that if everyone who ever had same-sex desires were to come out, the stigma surrounding homosexuality would be erased, and compulsory heterosexuality would come crashing down. Today we are living in a rather less idealistic moment. It is a moment of mixed signals, of a country lurching toward marriage equality that is in the throes of a massive economic crisis, when university curricula are increasingly reflective of the diversity in our midst, while institutionalized inequalities of all sorts persist. It is a less utopian time, to be sure, but one that is filled with possibility. And still anxieties abound, shaping the way we speak about the past, present and future of sexual politics.

During the past few years, for example, there has been a lot of talk about the decline of the lesbian world. Three years ago, the *New York Times*, a newspaper that is typically not on the vanguard of reporting on the intricacies of sexual politics, ran a story under the provocative headline, 'The Trouble When Jane Becomes Jack'. It described a brewing

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controversy surrounding the increasing numbers of lesbians who have come to identify as transgender, some of whom undergo sex reassignment surgery. A sense of unease is emerging among lesbians who feel that a growing sector of the community is abandoning them, the newspaper reported. These women see the decision on the part of some butch lesbians to transition to maleness as an act of betrayal, a desire to claim male privilege and power, and they fear for the future of the lesbian world. 'It's as if the category of lesbian is just emptying out', a prominent gender theorist and professor of literature, warned (Vitello, 2006).

The controversy came to a head a year later, when the San Francisco LGBT Film Festival accepted and then banned a satirical sci-fi fantasy short called 'The Gendercator'. The film tells the story of Sally, a sporty dyke who falls asleep in 1973 after too much partying and then awakens, Rip-Van-Winkle-like, in an America where gender reassignment surgery is compulsory for butch lesbians. Sally's short hair and propensity for softball make her a viable candidate for 'gendercation' (or sex reassignment surgery). So she's locked in a room with an expert gendercator named Tork, who was born a woman but is now a heterosexual male. In this future American police state female masculinity – and softball – are prohibited. Tork tries to convince 'Sal' that she should turn in her Birkenstocks and change her sex. At the risk of ruining the ending, a butch rescue squad saves the day and helps poor Sally escape the clutches of the gendercator, and makes the world safe one again for softball, and Birkenstocks. Lest there be any confusion about the filmmaker's stance, director Catherine Crouch's website offers the following explanation:

More and more often we see young heterosexual women carving their bodies into porno Barbie dolls and lesbian women altering themselves into transmen. Our distorted cultural norms are making women feel compelled to use medical advances to change themselves, instead of working to change the world. (Crouch, 2005)

In interviews, Crouch explains her position further. 'I wonder about the shared agendas of right wing Christians, medical/pharmacy industry, popular culture,' she says, 'and out of that wonder comes my film.' 'If the politics of the world go the way I describe in the film,' she suggests, it will 'do away with gay people totally' (Epstein, 2008–9: 15). Such claims are not new ones, of course. In 1979, Janice Raymond decried that male to female transsexuals were in collusion with politically reactionary forces, and were part of a plot by men to infiltrate the women's movement and 'to colonize feminist identification, culture, politics and sexuality' (Raymond, 1979: 104).

Crouch's promotional materials try to strike a universal chord, lamenting gender polarization in general, including the fact that many feminine

women must alter their bodies to be appealing to men. But the film reserves its sharpest critique for female to male transsexuals – FTMs. When transgender activists and their allies heard about the plan to screen ‘The Genderator’ at the annual LGBT film festival, they initiated an email campaign to ban it on the grounds that it demonized trans people and promoted bigotry. The campaign was successful, and the film was removed from the program – the first time that had ever happened in the 33-year history of the film festival.

One might ask, why should anyone care if Jane decides to become Jack or chooses to embrace her inner *femme fatale*? Isn’t feminism supposed to be about self-determination, and women’s right to do with their bodies what they wish? These kinds of debates barely register in my New Jersey suburb, and others like it, where the most pressing issues on the minds of gay men and lesbians are the quality of their children’s education and the robustness of their property values (Seidman et al., 2002). But in more politicized urban queer centers, these issues can at times seem like matters of life and death. I know this because I lived in San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s and followed many of these debates with keen interest. And as I reflected on the current controversy over transgender, I realized that it echoed an earlier conflict that occurred over 20 years ago about lesbians who were going straight. One woman I knew expressed fears about the number of friends she had lost to heterosexual conversions, having become convinced that more and more women were forsaking their lesbianism in exchange for heterosexual privilege. As the panic spread through the community, the alleged turncoats were given a name – ‘hasbians’.

It was true that a number of women who had been captivated by lesbianism through their involvement in feminism in the 1970s came to decide, during the following decade, that they were in fact primarily attracted to men. I interviewed a number of these women for my book *Sex and Sensibility* (Stein, 1997). And I concluded that for many self-defined lesbians, particularly those who came out in the heyday of feminism, sexuality or affectional preference is often very malleable. Of course, lesbian feminists, and gay liberationists knew this all along, but they saw the process as unidirectional: one would renounce one’s false, heterosexual self in order to come out as gay or lesbian. They believed that those who would come out would do so permanently. They didn’t imagine that individuals might choose to reverse the political logic of coming out, and that for some women, lesbianism might only be a phase on the way to heterosexuality – or even maleness.

As a sociologist, I am interested in these kinds of conflicts because I think they tell us a lot about how a community attempts to define itself. In researching my book, *The Stranger Next Door*, I talked to people in a

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small town in the state of Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest region of the USA, that became embroiled in a bitter battle over gay/lesbian rights in the early 1990s, in the wake of a series of Christian-right sponsored ballot initiatives (Stein, 2001). I wanted to figure out what that controversy might tell us about how ordinary Americans think about sexual difference. What I found was that sexuality became a resonant symbol upon which a group of citizens projected their fears about the disappearance of jobs, and the influx of outsiders. Their community was in the process of losing a sense of small town identity. Defining gay people as strangers was a way for them to articulate who was familiar and welcome, and to try to re-establish that sense of familiarity. It was, as we all know, ultimately a misguided and unsuccessful effort. Controversies divide communities and by revealing their fault lines they frequently tell us what their members hold dear. And one of the things the controversies I am describing today reveal is that lesbian communities highly value solidarity. Today's conflict over transgender, like the earlier one about lesbians going straight, triggers anxieties about the loss of community, of people leaving the lesbian world, and the fear that it is shrinking and even possibly dying.

A friend used to joke that after having published a book about East Germany, she specialized in countries that no longer exist. Lately, after hearing a lot of talk about the decline of the lesbian nation, I have similarly wondered whether studying lesbianism was a very wise career move. Maybe, I have come to specialize in dead countries as well. But I am here to tell you that these fears are premature, or at least misplaced. We are not seeing the end of women who fall in love and make their lives with other women. We are probably not even seeing a demographic decline. What we are seeing, quite possibly, is the exhaustion of particular historical construction: a group of individuals who are defined primarily on the basis of their sexual identity.

Like all oppositional subcultures, lesbian feminism was an imagined community, one that was built upon political will, common passions – and dedication to Birkenstocks and softball. It was about the art of possibility. One could become a lesbian simply by calling oneself one, and by making women central in one's life. This was a profoundly universalizing gesture. It declared that, contrary to the so-called experts, lesbianism was not in fact fixed at birth or in early childhood. It was a potential that existed in every woman. It certainly seemed that way. Writing of this period several years later, one woman recalled: 'Those of us who were active in 1971 and 72 witnessed the tremendous influx of formerly heterosexual women into the Lesbian Movement. They came by the thousands. Just yesterday, some of the most ardent [new lesbians] were HOUSEWIVES!' (Stein, 2006: 92). But that utopian energy, that breaking of boundaries, could not sustain itself over time. The impulse to tear down boundaries and let

everyone in gave way, eventually, to new boundaries and new prohibitions. At various times, there were prohibitions against bisexuality, against bringing boy children to women only events, against wearing makeup, and even prohibitions against scents – to name but a few.

Of course all groups police their boundaries. The ancient Hebrews wrote the book on this – literally – as I was reminded recently when I sat in a synagogue and listened to a rabbi read from Leviticus, that much maligned portion of the Old Testament which specifies a series of exacting laws which distinguish the Jewish people from those around them. There are laws about what kind of food they can eat, laws concerning the types of sacrifices they can make, laws about ritual cleanliness after childbirth, laws about bodily discharges, idolatry and incest. Some of these laws make good practical sense, but most of them are wildly arbitrary, and clearly designed to do little else but to define the Jews as a group apart from the rest. As sociologists and anthropologists tell us, groups are not natural facts. They will themselves into existence partly through language, and they sustain their sense of identity by establishing rules that distinguish themselves from others (Gamson, 1995; Lamont, 2002; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Lesbians are no different.

So the panics about lesbians who become men, and lesbians who become heterosexual are about something much more complicated than merely demographic decline. They are about anxieties about the loss of identity – the blurring of boundaries and the loss of a sense of what sets the group apart from others. As Rubin has written, ‘the processes by which erotic minorities form communities and the forces that seek to inhibit them lead to struggles over the nature and boundaries of sexual zones’ (1984: 221). Put simply, if they can agree on anything, lesbians tend to agree that they are not straight and they are not male. That’s the bottom line. If lesbians can become men, or love men, then what is a lesbian? And what, by implication, is transgender?

Transgender natures

In the lesbian-transgender border wars the question of the etiology or the origin of transgender has been a central theme. Do individuals make a choice to become transgender, or are they born that way? Here’s what one woman, who wrote to the *New York Times* in response to the story about transgender, had to say:

As a lesbian who came out in the late 70’s, the trend of young women ‘transitioning’ into men raises a profound concern for the well-being of impressionable youth who surgically alter their bodies and ingest powerful hormones in an attempt to resolve their anxieties about gender identity . . . However many real cases of gender dysphoria there may be among young women, there is

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undeniable pressure in the alternative queer subculture to prove one's authenticity by joining the ranks of female-to-male transsexuals. Meanwhile, the mainstream culture pushes teenage girls to extremes of femininity. In a world where the manicure-pedicure is being marketed to 13-year-olds, how is a tomboyish girl to understand herself? (Ettinger, 2006)

Her position is close to that of filmmaker Catherine Crouch, placing butch lesbians and pre-operative FTMs on a continuum rather than seeing them as two separate groups. Crouch, in an interview questioned why we are seeing more and more women decide to transition. 'They are women, or they were women, and now they are not', she lamented. 'They seem like me, so I am not understanding what is the difference between them and me' (Bajko, 2007: 16). Reflecting the longtime ambivalence many lesbian feminists have had toward transgender, she and others see the decision that some younger lesbians are making, to physically become male, as a repudiation of the feminist belief that we must change society rather than change our bodies. But most transgender activists have a very different take on things, Writing to the *New York Times*, one transman declared:

one of the primary myths surrounding coming out as a transgender man – that making this transition is a choice . . . In my own transition from female to male, I made it clear to my family and friends that I wasn't a woman choosing to become a man. I was a person finally discovering my true gender identity and changing my body accordingly. (Lunine, 2006)

And another suggested:

As a transsexual, one of the most common ways in which I am marginalized within the gay/lesbian and feminist communities is by the accusation that I (and other transsexuals) transition either because we are 'dupes' (who are misled into transitioning by a patriarchal/heterosexist medical establishment) or as 'fakes' (who are so distressed by our own exceptional gender expression and/or sexual orientation that we are willing to go to the extreme lengths of surgically altering our bodies and unquestioningly embracing sexist ideals in order to fit into straight, mainstream society). These accusations are an attempt to portray transsexuality as 'false consciousness'. (Lawless, 2008: 139)

In other words, the differences between butch lesbians and transgender men are real, and rooted in nature. Transsexuals are not really changing their sex; they are simply aligning their sexed bodies with their true gender identities. As these letter writers suggest, there are some individuals who live in bodies that they find so out of sync with their felt sense of self that they feel compelled to surgically alter them. I cannot know how this feels, but I believe those who say that this is their experience. It seems to me that changing something as fundamental as one's sex or gender is not something which is done lightly.

At the same time, it is important to remember that 'transgender' as a category, like all categories, is socially constructed. It is a relatively new label that emerges at the nexus of the medicalization of sex and gender, feminism, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and therapeutic culture. Like the term 'queer', it straddles minoritizing and universalizing discourses, signifying transsexuals but also a host of others, including cross-dressers, intersex people, and much, much more. That does not mean that identifying as transgender is simply a fashion statement, as the first letter writer I quoted suggested. Individuals have different motivations for affiliating with this category. For some individuals who were born women, becoming a man is the only way they feel they can live in their bodies; for others, the element of transgression probably plays some role: without the formation of an affirmative transgender culture and politic, it would never even occur to them that changing sex is a viable option. The growth of transgender activism since the 1990s, and the proliferation of books, films and discussion, has made this more and more possible.

Transgender activism emerges today partly because of the silence – and resistance – that preceded it. This silence about gender nonconformity emanates from the dominant culture, but it also comes from oppositional subcultures. Thirty years ago, feminist lesbians were ambivalent about the whole matter of gender variance. Publicly, they tried to erase gender binaries, promoting a politics of androgyny that they hoped would submerge gender distinctions. And yet these distinctions persisted. The butch lesbian, having a marked lesbian body, enjoyed privileged status within the lesbian world as the authentic lesbian – as long as she was recognizably female. The femme was an object of butch lust but also at times reviled for her ability to pass and for possessing 'heterosexual privilege'. Gender expression was tamped down.

That politic was challenged by the sex debates – those noisy confrontations around pornography, sadomasochism, and other matters that split feminists in the early 1980s. In its wake, we saw the revival of butch-femme as some lesbians reclaimed gender roles. But many women, particularly those who had come of age in the context of feminism, did not quite know what to make of this resurgence of gender performance within the lesbian world; for them it seemed to complicate and dilute what was once a more coherent political vision. Gender variance can be a Pandora's box for a politic that privileges sexual identifications. As a rule, identity politics can only function smoothly if it prioritizes one identity above all others. Once you introduce multiplicity and fluidity into the mix, loyalties become divided, and boundaries blurred.

The politics of specificity

Earlier I suggested that we may be seeing the exhaustion of a particular historical construction: subcultures defined primarily by sexuality. What I am predicting is that while the lesbian world will not fade away, it will probably look fairly different in the future. The vast majority of gays and lesbians will become more integrated into mainstream American life. Their homosexuality will cease to define their choices: where they can live, what kind of job one can have, whether they can have a conventional family, and so forth. For better or for worse, the LGBT world will probably look more like my New Jersey suburb. As homosexuality becomes more normalized, and as gays and lesbians become integrated into nuclear families, the notion that it is our sexuality that marks us as different will fade. Being gay or lesbian will probably become more like being Italian American, or being Jewish American – it will be like an ethnic status, with particular customs, rites and rituals-like Birkenstocks and softball – rather than a category that inevitably carries the weight of stigma or the promise of transgression.

More radical urban sexual subcultures will persist, in places like San Francisco, New York, and London, particularly among young people. Its members will continue to identify as lesbians and gay men, but these identities are likely to get much more specific. Several years ago, Halberstam predicted that

as gender-queer practices and forms continue to emerge, presumably the definitions of 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'transsexual' will not remain static, and we will produce new terms to delineate what they cannot'. (Halberstam, 1998: 193)

Consider some of the terms that have recently been circulating within gender-queer communities: 'transboi', 'boydyke', 'thirdgendered', 'bi-gendered', even 'multi-gendered'. There are many others, most of which are unfamiliar to me. The term 'lesbian' was once the identity of choice for those women who wanted to step outside of heteronormativity and gender binaries. Today's emergent categories are much more fine-tuned, combining sexual preference, gender presentation and other modes of identification.

This move toward specificity dovetails with some recent feminist and queer theorizing (Chodorow, 1995; Collins, 1990; Connell, 1987; Valentine, 2007). As Phelan suggests:

Specificity mandates conscious location of the self . . . and gestures to that in each of us which is irreducible to categories . . . Even after we acknowledge certain categories of difference, there will always be more to us than those categories. We are specific individuals as well as members of multiple groups. (Phelan, 1994: 11)

Specificity is something that was first theorized by psychoanalytically informed feminists and by feminists of color who argued for the importance of acknowledging the intersectional nature of race, class, gender and sexuality, and the irreducibility of these categories to one or another. Specificity acknowledges our multiple locations; it also acknowledges our individuality (Wrong, 2006).

The move toward specificity is driven by the relentless search for personal meaning, which characterizes modern selfhood. Modern individuals, Taylor (1989: 16–17) writes, ‘anxiously doubt whether life has meaning’, or wonder what its meaning is: ‘There is always something tentative in their adhesion, and they may see themselves, as, in a sense, seeking. They are on a “quest”’. This is very much of a piece with what Giddens (1991) calls the ‘late modern self’, with its emphasis upon reflexivity, flexibility and fluidity. Under late modernity, personal meaning determines communal attachments, not tradition or social obligation. The turn to specificity is in many respects the logical end of identity politics and the idea of liberation that inspired it. In the 1960s, authenticity – being true to oneself – was viewed as the antithesis of repression. This politic was informed by humanistic psychologies of personal growth and creativity that defined so much of American life and thought after the 1950s. One of the most important questions of the era was: ‘How do we locate the authentic person, the genuine self, beneath the layers of conventional behavior that family and society imposed on the individual?’ (Heinze, 2004: 267). Imagine an onion. You could say that the goal of identity politics was to peel back the onion, removing its false layers – outmoded social rules, family expectations, sexual repression – and reclaim the self within.

There are two possible ways of interpreting this turn to the specific. In the first view, if you keep peeling the onion, the more you peel it, the less there is left. In other words, the search for personal meaning threatens to destroy the solidarity of groups, such as lesbians, which anchor the self and give it meaning. It leads to the collapse of group identities. That’s what motivates the panic about transgender, I think. For those whose sense of self is so closely aligned with a certain vision of lesbian feminism, and the collective sense of identity it implies, the loss of solidarity signifies a loss of selfhood.

The move toward specificity will indeed challenge the notion of a lesbian world possessing clear boundaries. But one could see the turn to specificity as a source of possible innovation and cultural revitalization rather than decline. To extend the analogy I used earlier, a somewhat similar panic about demographic decline emerged among American Jews after a 1990 study showed more than half of new Jewish marriages involve a non-Jewish partner. Many communal leaders feared that intermarriage was leading Jews to renounce their Jewishness, and raise children who

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had little or no connection to tradition. They predicted the virtual disappearance of American Jewry if community boundaries were not reinforced and intermarriage shunned. But later studies showed that that nearly three quarters of intermarried couples were in fact raising their children to be Jewish (Fishkoff, 2008; McGinity, 2009). The meaning of the Jewishness these couples embraced varied; many individuals created hybrid forms that borrowed from traditions and in the process reinvented them. The culture they are creating is 'post-traditional' but it is not, I would suggest, any less Jewish.

A similar argument could be made of emerging forms of gender and sexual identification in an age of reflexivity, specificity, and fluidity. The sexual communities that are being created today look different than the lesbian community did in its feminist heyday. And as they change there will be those women who 'become straight' or 'become men', leave the community and never look back, repudiating their former selves and identifications. But for most individuals, their prior identifications will persist in the present, shaping their commitments. Most of the lesbians who 'went straight' that I interviewed 20 years ago continue to identify with their former lesbian selves to some degree. They have lesbian and gay male friends; they often raise their kids to question heteronormativity. Some are activists on behalf of gay/lesbian people. Likewise, even if they change their sex, many transgender individuals will remain affiliated with the queer world – if we allow them to do so. For example, a San Francisco transman recalled attending a lesbian organization's lunch a few years ago. He was welcomed by a woman who said she was 'pleased to see a man supporting us lesbians'. His reply, was quick and to the point: 'Of course I support lesbians', he said. 'I used to be one' (Vitello, 2006).

What all of this suggests is that we need a more complex understanding of identities. If we identify on the basis of race, class, sexuality, or gender alone we cannot make sense of the ways these identifications combine and change over time. The used-to-be-working class now professional woman, the woman of mixed racial parentage who appears white, the divorced mother who is now a lesbian, the former lesbian who is now straight, or the former lesbian who is now a man. Identities are always in motion; they are mobile (Ferguson, 1993). This is particularly the case for those who have been placed in identity categories that do not quite seem to fit; it is also true of many more of us, in varied ways. Just ask our current President, whose own origin story, of which he has spoken and written eloquently, is exceedingly complex. We need, I believe, a conception of identities that embraces this complexity, that takes into account temporality and also specificity.

Once we do this, we inevitably come to recognize that lesbian and gay identities are fictions. They owe their existence to our decision to

differentiate ourselves from the dominant culture, emphasize what we have in common and minimize the differences that divide us. That does not mean that these identities are not real, or that they are irrelevant or unnecessary. They are, as Weeks (1995) puts it, 'necessary fictions'. As long as heteronormativity persists, these identifications will be necessary. Thanks to the efforts of those who have come before us, lesbianism is a viable and even desirable option for more and more individuals. Today its emerging forms are broadening the possible modes of identification. The future will undoubtedly bring yet new and different possibilities.

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