

Transfixed in Lesbian Paradise

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Abstract

This narrative essay reflects upon experiences at the Toronto Women's Bathhouse to think about asymmetrical conditions of trans inclusion in lesbian erotic and cultural spaces. It queries the affective disjunctions between formal policies of trans-inclusion in women's spaces and "on the ground" interpersonal recognition of trans women as women and of trans men as men.

Résumé

Cet étude narrative se penche sur les expériences à la Women's Bathhouse de Toronto, pour penser aux conditions asymétriques de l'inclusion trans dans les sites culturels lesbiens érotiques. Elle questionne les disjonctions affectives entre les politiques formelles de l'inclusion trans dans les sites de femmes à raison de la reconnaissance inter personnelle de femmes trans en tant que femmes et d'hommes trans en tant qu'hommes.

Ginger has hair like wings folded round her face. I want to go there but even on a cot this small it isn't going to happen. Not because she won't let me. Not as far as I know. I rationalize: she's tired; she's been working all night; she and Dev are celebrating an anniversary tonight; we're both femmes. As I mark identity, it's in differences: she's beautiful, I'm not; she's genetic, I'm - what? A machine?

I don't know if she would let me. Let alone, if she would want me. To do - what?

It's a small cot and in places we're touching. But we're not. We're next to one another. Suppose it wasn't a kiss? Suppose it was just the comfort of two bodies easy with one another. Suppose we were simply holding one another, comfortable as possible on a cot this size. Suppose it were just a concession to the size of the cot and our being sleepy and similarly impatient with how slow the night is to pass and the show on the other side of the door.

If Ginger's eyes were open - not ginger, dark chocolate - I think I could ask her - what? Ginger, can I hold you? Ginger, will you rest your head on my too flat chest? (My too small breasts?) Ginger, if I could get comfortable with you - get you comfortable with me - could I begin to want to kiss you, without that feeling fucked up? Could you want me to?

Ginger, I think you are too pretty and too real for me. Is that just me?

We hear things. In every tiny cubicle on this floor some girl is getting fucked, or licked, or pinched, or massaged, or strapped, or so it sounds. In the coat check the girls sound exhausted and irritable. Fair enough. It's 3 am. 3 am at the Pussy Palace and we've been here forever or six hours or so. Docs or bare feet scuff by the door every few minutes and sometimes there is the low murmur or rough laughter of women colliding.

The bois and the butches are doing especially well tonight.¹ In the sauna I saw one young stud with a fist in her cunt, a tongue up her ass and two dashing androgens supporting her from either side, while deliberately working her tits. In the weights room this pretty girlfag was going so hard, with so many helping hands, I hear the fire alarm went off and the

sprinkler system turned on. What I'd have given to be a part of that scene.

Boys are the hot ticket item at the lesbian Bathhouse. Lounging about the pool they look like your highschool's swim team, only buffer, smoother, with better lines.

Ginger, what if I just brought my face close to your hair? Lay my hand by your cheek? Maybe you are asleep. From your breath I'm sure you're not. I've got nothing against dyke bois, or butches. I just find it ironic that masculinity in a genetic girl is such a turn on when I was practically turned away at the door. I had to wave my invite in the bouncer's face and have him summon a member of the organizing committee before he would let me in. But, of course, he was a man.

Pussy Palace

A Women's Bathhouse Night at Club Toronto
Monday, September 14

Transgendered Women Welcome

Thank you. You're Welcome.

And it's not that I don't understand the appeal of these bois and butches. Butches, in particular, know the knack of making me feel safe, seen, unique. Like any genetic femme. (Try not to dwell upon how repulsive, assimilationist and self-hating a thought that is. I'm well aware of it, and it indicts your dyke culture as much as my psyche.) I used to fall for butch boys almost as often as I fell for dyke femmes, though it's bi girls who take the prize. Still, a soft butch is good to relax with.

Every genetic dyke I spoke to about the Bathhouse urged me to come out. Every genetic dyke to whom I confided my anxiety - that a transsexual woman, a pre-operative transsexual woman, would not be welcome at a women's Bathhouse - empathized with my insecurity, understood where it came from, acknowledged that I ought not do anything that I was uncomfortable with, and then gently reminded me that the lesbian community "has come a long way" since Mary Daley described transsexuals as Frankenstein's monsters and a "necrophilic invasion of women's space"

(Daley 1990, 69-72). Almost every genetic dyke in whom I confided pointed to the part on the pamphlet that said, "Transgendered Women Welcome." Thank you. You're welcome. So I began to believe, almost, that my apprehension was a result of my internalized transphobia and that the lesbian community actually had come to embrace transsexual women. Several assured me I would have more offers than I'd know what to do with. Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink. After all, trannies are hot this year. Look at all the Trans books that are getting published.²

Uh huh. I may be blonde but I do know how to read.

Reading the flyer I knew that even the Bathhouse committee didn't really know exactly who they were inviting to the party. I mean, "transgendered;" who isn't, these days?³ Of course the committee wanted to be inclusive, but you can imagine the concerned conversations that must have taken place for the invite to be issued in the first place: What if men showed up, pretending to be wom - umm, transsexuals? What if a pre-op tranny accidentally showed her dick and there were (real?) women present who found this traumatizing? It could happen. A risk to the committee's vision of the Bathhouse as a safe space.

"Safe," that's an interesting word. Safe.

Earlier in the evening, sitting on a wrought iron stairwell and looking over the pool I heard one woman enthuse to her friends, "Oh my god! It's just like Michigan! It's just like Michigan!" Over and over, and her friends chorused back, "It is. It's true!" Over and over.

It's true. Not that I've ever been. Not that I'd want to go. I'm sure you know there's a camp set up outside the Michigan Women's Music Festival for the women they won't let into lesbian paradise? How many bois, butches, trans guys and ftms suffer through or embrace being called "transgendered womyn" to pass through those gates? How many convince themselves they're not supporting bigotry and discrimination when they use that ambivalent "privilege" to attend the Festival and "work for change, from within?"

Next to me, Ginger's fidgeting. It's hard to get comfortable on these cots. These cots really aren't made for sleeping.

So if this is a safe space, why am I paralyzed? Why can't I risk cuddling with a friend, let alone cruising her? Because if I could get over this

paralysis I might actually want to do what every genetic dyke here at least halfway hopes to do tonight. How many women here would say, "you're welcome," to that offer?

If a pre-op mtf transsexual dyke fucks a genetic dyke at the Pussy Palace, is it gauche for her to use her dick? Suppose we weren't in a rented room? Suppose we were in the weights room? Would the sprinklers go off? The fire alarms?

If a genetic dyke fucks another genetic dyke at the Pussy Palace, is it gauche for her to use her dick? If an ftm transgendered man (who also identifies as a dyke - after all desires are plural and nobody's saying boo to that) fucks a dyke of any stripe at the Pussy Palace, is it gauche for him to use his dick?

Not to fixate on dicks.

Aside from the well meaning asshole at the door, my right to be here has been verbally queried five times while I was in earshot: "So, like, are you the token fag?" "Are you an honorary woman for the night? A friend of the committee?" "He must work here." "Don't you know that this is a womyn's Bathhouse?" "Is that a man?" I can't really know whether (or when) the scowls that only sometimes greeted me when I entered a room were in fact occasioned by my entering that room. Call me paranoid.

For a while Dev comes into the room and sits on the edge of the cot. She is sweet and gentle as a butch should be, and she and Ginger are two of the friends who have taken care to note that this night is royally fucking me up. But they're both bushed themselves, and anyway there's only so much a friend can do.

Ginger, I didn't reach out to you, and that's my bad. But the cot was fucking tiny, and the fact that skin barely grazed skin as we lay there, that wasn't simply my restraint. What were you afraid of? What was I afraid of?

From the other end of the pool someone declared more than asked, "Is that a man." I said, all apologetic-like, "No, it's a transsexual." But what I meant was corpse. Apologizing for being transsexual - apologizing for being - brings me near to what a corpse is. Instinctively you know that, because in the pool when she said "man" and I said what I said, you didn't hear anything. Not hearing, you swam away.

Scattered Reflections on being Trans-Fixed -
September, 2006

It has been a while since I wrote those words, in the immediate wake of the first Toronto Women's Bathhouse. There have been many more Pussy Palaces, some of which I attended, against my better judgement, but hopeful. One of which, thanks to a very loving and uncommonly thoughtful and delightfully perverse partner, I enjoyed immensely. That Bathhouse was the one the police raided, and since that time much has been written about the Palace, largely focused upon the courageous battle of a group of sex radical women to create a space for the (semi) public expression of queer women's sexuality. And that is fair enough, and well deserved.

Thank you. You're Welcome.

At the time of the trials there was an attempt made by members of the police to justify sending male police officers into women's space by suggesting that the presence of transgendered women indicated that the female population of the Bathhouse should not have a problem with the presence of men in their space. After the testimony of several very sharp and sharply dressed butches and masculine females unearthed the referential terrain of that claim, I remember the pleasure with which people in the courtroom announced that the cops just didn't get it.

I've been turning over the question of what it was that the cops didn't get ever since. The question turns on whom the cops were referring to as men. Masculine women? Pre-op or non-op ftms? Or mtf's, either pre- or post op? What do you think?

If the latter, which I rather suspect is the case, one might answer that sex is not gender, that transgendered women are women by virtue of our gender identification, and are accepted, indeed valued, as such by the women's community. Well, transsexual women are women, and should be valued as such in women's communities and in my experience many non-trans dykes do concur on this point. However my experience at the first Bathhouse, comparable experiences by most of the trans women I've spoken to who hazarded attending the first few Bathhouses, not to mention the ongoing barring of transsexual women from the Michigan Women's Music Festival and the ongoing participation of many non trans dykes, including butches, bois and self-identified trans-allies in Michigan,

also suggest that the inclusion of trans women in women's communities is far from a done deal.

On the other hand, though there may be some hold outs, from where I'm sitting the inclusion of trans men into women's spaces appears to be pretty much a fait accompli, much to the consternation of many female-to-male transsexuals for whom masculine-identification is accompanied by a strong desire to be seen and treated as men. Of course not all ftm trajectories are the same, or need to be, and some masculine-identified, female-bodied folk feel variously comfortable with, painfully and/or pleurably attached to or politically engaged by, articulations of lesbian, boy, boi, female, butch, ftm, masculine, and man as portmanteau terms, compound, implicated, and complicated identifications, rather than as singular and exhaustive identifications.

This makes sense in a variety of ways. Language is arguably always indexical rather than referential, and it may well be the case that no label ever exhausts, or even precisely approximates, the subjective experience of being it obscures as well as nominates. Coming out of lesbian communities, many masculine-identified female-bodied folks carry histories of emotional, erotic and social support, as well as of ambivalence and hostility towards their masculine identifications from their time within those communities and as a result their masculine identifications may be powerfully, if not always positively, inflected by lesbianism and feminism.⁴ The contemporary reconfiguration of lesbian identity and desire to engage with, and in some ways to include, transgender or even transsexual masculinity promises the possibility of a countercultural, counterhegemonic home for the practice and performance of masculinities that may feel or be fragile, sheltered not only from the heterosexism and transphobia of mainstream society but from the isolation and alienation that is often the lot of men who occupy non-hegemonic masculinities. Not to mention, a hot dating pool. Finally and perhaps most fundamentally, it is important to keep in mind the simple fact of diverse experiences of masculine identification, and the importance of allowing folks the room to live out their identities in ways that are individually, as well as collectively, viable.

However, in the present political and theoretical moment, the proliferation of female masculinities as a practice of (lesbian) gendered

sexuality proceeds hand in hand with the explicit endorsement of the right to bar transsexual women from women's spaces such as the Michigan Women's Music Festival by high profile transfeminist icons such as the band Le Tigre and mtf post-transsexual Kate Bornstein and, to return to the Bathhouse, the tacit approval of all of those transfeminists, genderqueers, butches and bois who for whom the phrase "transgendered women welcome" chiefly references the expansion of women's space to include masculine females, who are at least willing to identify as women when it is situationally convenient. Though some read this as disarticulating sexed embodiment and gender, it also does the work of grouping and separating out bodies on the basis of anatomical sex of assignment. In other words, for many in queer women's communities, this proliferation of female masculinities is not about a revolutionary challenge to the idea that males need to grow up to be men, or that females need to grow to be women; it is a double move that foregrounds the sexualization of masculinity as a lesbian erotic practice and engages the discursive and imaginative practice of redescribing gender roles, while affirming as an unspoken priority the distinction between the sexes. Clearly it also performs contrary functions for some female-assigned persons living as lesbians but contemplating or engaged in the process of becoming, or externalizing their being as, transsexual or transgender men.

So what was it that the cops didn't get during the bath house trials? Perhaps that, regardless of what was said in words, the performative effect of having butches, bois and possibly pre-op ftms in suits testify to the non-contradiction between a women's Bathhouse policy and a policy that welcomed transgendered women was a redescription of "transgendered women" as masculine females and an erasure of the possibility of transsexual women. Which begs the question, is this performative reiteration of female masculinity as the "real" referent of the formulation, "transgendered women" at the Bathhouse an anomalous instance, or the unspoken ground of the "new (trans) gender politics"?

This is a difficult question to pose, and to pose in any way other than a complaint - women's complaint, perhaps, or perhaps transsexual lesbian women's complaint. More worrisome for me is the extent to which my posing this complaint appears as a

demand for recognition, for the conferral of status as a woman, one that localizes the power to confer or deny that status in non-trans women's communities. Not only does this contribute to the problem of queer and feminist discourse being privileged as the locus of negotiating the meaning of transsexual women's identities, optics that have been alternately inimical to identity per se and/or transsexuality, but in figuring trans identity as a melancholy demand put to the other, it capitulates to accounts of transsexuality that have actually worked to delegitimize our lives and aspirations, and it forgets the history of transsexual women and men making community and sharing resources amongst our selves.⁵ In this, however, I think the complaint also critically echoes the problem which it is intended to address, the disappearing of transsexuality, mtf as well as ftm, performed within the recent celebration of lesbian trans-masculinities.

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Endnotes

1. There is, at present, considerable overlap between and confusion of vocabulary employed by female-assigned and woman/lesbian/butch-identified masculine women, female-assigned trans- and woman/lesbian/butch- identified masculine women, female-assigned persons whom identify as in-between, trans, butch, boi, boy, genderqueer, etc. and who dis-identify with femaleness, womanliness and/or maleness and transsexual masculinity, and ftms and trans guys at any stage in their transition (whether it be social, surgical and/or hormonal).

2. The '90s saw a veritable explosion of books on transsexuality, transgender and transvestitism, though a much smaller proportion of those publications was authored by self-identified trans people. For the first time one might find sections or at least bookshelves devoted to texts by and/or about transgender and transsexual people in feminist and lesbian and gay bookstores. Of course with representation comes

questions of representational politics. Complicating the standard difficulties (tokenism, misprision, appropriation, authenticity) is the question of the reception of texts by authors who at the time of (first) publication are not out as trans, and/or whose location among trans identities is plural and/or shifts over time. As well, given the important role lesbian and feminist contexts have played in providing at times ambivalent homes to trans men prior to self identification as trans and/or transition, there is the complicated matter of a possible or perceived imbrication of post-lesbian ftm discourses with transphobic strands of radical, cultural and queer feminist thought. Crossing-trans representations present something of a new kink in the old problematic of positive (self) representation. If one were to visit the transgender shelf of the Toronto Women's bookstore in the months immediately prior to the first Toronto Women's Bath House these complexities and complicities (as well as others) would be borne out in the texts you might find there: Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* (1994) and *My Gender Workbook* (1998), Mildred Brown's *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism* (1996), Lily Burana's *Dagger: On Butch Women* (1994), Phyllis Burke's *Gender Shock* (1996), Pat Califia's *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (1997), Loren Cameron's *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (1996), Richard Ekins and Dave King's *Blending Genders* (1996), Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), *Transgender Warriors* (1996), *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998), Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992), Claudine Griggs' *S/He* (1998), Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998), Gary Kates' *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman* (1995), Sheila Kirk's *Medical, Legal & Workplace Issues for the Transsexual* (1995), Diane Middlebrook's *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (1998), Zachary Nataf's *Lesbians Talk Transgender* (1996), Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), Mark Rees' *Dear Sir or Madam* (1996), Annick Prieur's *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* (1998), Lawrence Schimel and Carol Queen's *Pomosexuals* (1997), Daphne Scholinski's *The Last Time I Wore a Dress* (1997), etc. Canadian offerings at the time would have likely included: Holly Devor's *FTM: Female-To-Male Transsexuals in Society* (1997), *Taste This' Boys Like Her: Transfixions* (1998), and possibly, Alexandra Highcrest's *At Home on the Stroll* (1998).

3. During the 1990s the term transgendered came into

relatively widespread use as an umbrella term for a panoply of sex and gender variant identities (ftm and mtf, transsexual, transgender, crossdresser, drag king or queen, intersex, genderqueer, etc.) Prominent, queer identified writers such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg at times argued that transgender describes or encompasses all gender variant behaviour and that by extension, transgender conceivably encompasses all identities and behaviours but the most normative of heterosexualities, in some sense becoming equivalent to queer. By the late '90s, however, criticism of these umbrella and quasi- universalizing usages had been made by transsexual and intersex academics and activists who claimed little connection to the term, articulated concern with its dilution of specific political agendas facing transsexual and intersex people by a utopic and abstract campaign to "deconstruct the gender binary," and objected to the negative ramifications of this queer and feminist inspired project upon transsexuals' access to healthcare, and other social services. For representative critiques see Viviane Namaste's *Invisible Lives*, Rubin's "Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies" (1998a) and the webpage of The Intersex Society of North America - <http://www.isna.org/> (Herndon 2006).

4. For some accounts of ftm transitions in and out of lesbian (and) feminist contexts see Christopher Lee and Elize Hurwitz's "Trappings of Transhood," Jean Bobby Noble's *Sons of the Movement*, Henry Rubin's "Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man" (1998b) and Max Valerio's *The Testosterone Files* (2006).

5. That is, it makes of transsexuality an encounter with the non-trans other, adjudicated by and for that other, doing a massive disservice and violence to the history of transsexual women and men, some of them lesbian, bi or gay identified, and many of them not, who have set up support groups, social and healthcare resources, worked for transsexual and transgender legal rights, and as Viviane Namaste points out, done the daily and unremarked upon work of caring for one another in the small ways that allow lives to be lived, transitions undergone, and communities to grow (2006, 65).

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