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"The Emperor's New Gender"

by alix dobkin, originally published in [off our backs](#)
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"...disappointment takes out its knife..." Butch resisting the pressure to change gender – Elana Dykewomon

You know that glazed look certain born-again Christians get in their eyes when they're not listening? Or how voices of loud mouthed Republican politicians and TV pundits get even louder to out shout the opposition? To foreclose debate defends the fainthearted against attack, even when no attack is intended. Beloved tactic of cowards and bullies everywhere, shutting down discussion stymies challenges to the firmly held, vulnerable doctrine of the True Believer. Thus does insecurity unite with bluster to frustrate education's advance.

This brings to mind an incident occurring twenty years ago in Europe. At a concert in Zurich I identified myself as Jewish, whereupon a small group of women got up and left the theater. Why? They didn't say, but we can guess.

My deal with myself was that if I agreed to tour Germany and Switzerland it would be on condition that I declare my Jewishness at every show. Otherwise I could not have endured setting foot on those killing fields. But I was as unprepared for the shockingly defensive reaction that statement

would provoke in my audience ad they were to hear it. Naively assuming that German Dykes were as used to discussing sensitive race issues as we USA veterans were, it never occurred to me how personally they would take this (seemingly) simple declaration. If I hadn't immediately calmed my audience with friendly assurances they would have shut down and shut me out, and by the time I reached Switzerland I understood that going public as a Jew required the following instant affirmations:

1) that I did not believe in God

**2) that I did not necessarily support Israel's every action, and
3) that I did not blame any of them for the holocaust**

These three disclaimers usually relaxed most of the crowd enough so that they could sit through my show without excessive distress. Passionate English and German post concert dialogues proved wrenchingly difficult, but they moved everyone forward, and we were all glad to have stuck with it.

I hadn't thought about that old story for many years until Elana Dykewomon told me of a similar experience at a reading only weeks ago of San Francisco Jewish Lesbian writers. When she spoke the name of her new poem (Butch resisting the pressure to change gender) a group of transgendered individuals and their supporters got to their feet and left the theater. Had they stayed they might have learned what this award winning writer and long time survivor of Lesbian community struggles (since before some of them were born) had to say, proving that closed minds are not limited to anti-Semites.

Like my Swiss departees, this bunch also refused to listen. Too bad, they lose. Experiences such as these and others have prompted this extensive preface to my (next) column on transgender, particularly FTM (female to male). I am well aware of how volatile an issue it is in our community and how personal it can feel.

Jim Fouratt, long time activist, writer, independent thinker and faery has lately taken quite the trashing for his forthright critique of Genderpac's "ruthless and aggressive attack in the gay and lesbian community based on gender bias..." Jim and I agree that, "once again men are defining who and what women are."

That's our opinion and we are entitled to it without being called "nazi," "fascist" and the like, as we each have in the past when overstepping the party line on gender. Therefore, in the hoops of contributing more light than heat to the discussion, let it be known that I am aware that:

- 1) transgender issues present complex and difficult terrain loaded with quicksand and stumbling blocks which I approach respectfully and with an open mind.
- 2) Over the past decade I've accumulated masses of information and engaged in much study, reflection, thoughtful discussion and process with a variety of people representing diverse perspectives.
- 3) In conversations with transgendered individuals and their supporters, some of whom I like and some not, I am aware of their pain and try not to add to it.
- 4) Everyone needs a community where they feel respected and safe.
- 5) There is more to learn.

Further credentials are available upon request.

Now here is the question to my Queer/LGBT community, particularly young butch Lesbians who are considering "changing" genders: Is thoughtful, open discussion possible without personal attacks and hurt feelings?

**"A thousand years from now... the archaeologists who dig
up their bones will know that they were women"
– The Whole Woman, Germaine Greer**

"FTM" means women, usually young, who undergo hormone injections,

sometimes breast reduction ("top") surgery in their pursuit of "maleness." Reservations about this procedure, when voiced at all, are frequently answered with hostility and charges of "discrimination," discouraging even further candid exploration of the "transgender" vogue and its meteoric rise to the top of the "queer" order.

Transgender presence and issues dominated the 1999 "Creating Change" Conference. Notable and new, to me at least, was the spectacle of matronly gents dressing up as their mothers, aunts and schoolmarm in dowdy conservative outfits, cheerlessly dispensing disapproval over all. More unsettling though, were the sheer numbers of FTM's everywhere in evidence, their flight from womanhood conspicuously endorsed by the oddly invisible gay men and Lesbians running the show and bent on "inclusion."

When at the end of a butch/FTM panel I asked how constructed "males" felt about the lifelong commitment to the medical establishment and their utter dependence on doctors and drug companies for their identities, the only response was a noticeable chill in the room. If I was FTM I wouldn't want to think about that either.

Germaine Greer notes, in *The Whole Woman*, that, **"Born women are all too aware of a disharmony between who they are and what their gender role requires of them."** Everywhere at the conference young FTM's defied gender roles and "performed" "masculinities." But say, isn't "masculine" a construct preserving male rule? And isn't being/creating our own individual version of a woman what lesbians have always been about? So why would a Lesbian embodying infinite female potential ever think she needs to be - or actually could be - a man? Impatience for male power and privilege combined with monumental lack of faith in the future of women could explain it. But "woman" is much bigger and expansive than a stunted masculinist vision of female possibility.

Can you conceive a population more exquisitely groomed to "change gender" than the generation informed by deconstructionist Queer Studies? In the blur of "Gender," represented as little more than a "social construct," injustice might easily be confused with inconvenience. To girls confronting their powerlessness, scant attention paid to "gender's" political roots and historic consequences leaves "masculinities" looking good, and personal adjustment through technology even better. Hey, why not jump at the chance to escape "gender distress" - the universal female condition forever afflicting "the second sex"? How instantly gratifying, how perfectly consumer friendly. This postmodern all-American quick fix comes complete with academic sanction.

In today's "LGBT" hierarchy the last may indeed be first, but beneath the surface of lock-step acceptance lies an unspoken universe of discomfort. Doubts and qualms fill the closets of newly silent Lesbians and gay men now afraid of being labeled "bigoted." Rather than injure feelings or appear oppressive toward a sexual minority, many remain silent, unwilling to deviate "...from the politically correct gender rhetoric (which) subjects one to being called and dismissed as transphobic," as long time gay activist and independent thinker, Jim Fouratt, writes.

To my eyes and ears, young butch dykes walking the FTM path look and despite vocal alteration, sound, quite like the young butch Dykes many of us have been and known for decades. However, these days we hear mostly their echoes and see only their backs as they flee womanhood. But they are our line, and by rejecting their female bodies along with our shared history, they break our hearts.

they break our hearts.

Gays and lesbians have struggled for decades to be able to name ourselves and to BE ourselves. But now, in our own community we are expected to applaud Dykes rejecting womanhood and embrace men taking it over. In our smart, brave and compassionate community, being "different" is the unifying thread holding us together in a diverse crazy quilt of which queers are justifiably proud.

But while we're at it, let's also honour our identity and history. And our women. Then maybe our girls won't be so eager to run. So lets put away the knives. Can we talk?

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