

Gender Outlaw

*For Rebecca -
years outside
the law
Kate*

On
men,
women
and
the
rest
of us

Kate Bornstein



**LIFE WITH FATHER
AND MOTHER
BEGAN FOR**

**ALBERT
HERMAN**



**MARCH
15th**



first things first

I keep trying to integrate my life. I keep trying to make all the pieces into one piece. As a result, my identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I've written in an effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion.



My mother was so proud to have given birth to a son. Today, our friendship is more than either mother-son or mother-daughter.

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TRANSGENDER STYLE

Some Fashion Tips

People are starting to ask me about fashion. I love that! Maybe they think the doctor sewed in some fashion sense during my genital conversion surgery.

I see fashion as a proclamation or manifestation of identity, so, as long as identities are important, fashion will continue to be important. The link between fashion and identity begins to get real interesting, however, in the case of people who don't fall clearly into a culturally-recognized identity—people like me. My identity as a transsexual lesbian whose female lover is becoming a man is manifest in my fashion statement; both my identity and fashion are based on collage. You know—a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing.

And that's the style of this book. It's a transgendered style, I suppose. I can see it in the work of Susan Stryker, Sandy Stone, David Harrison... the list goes on and on.

But the need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity—these are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender

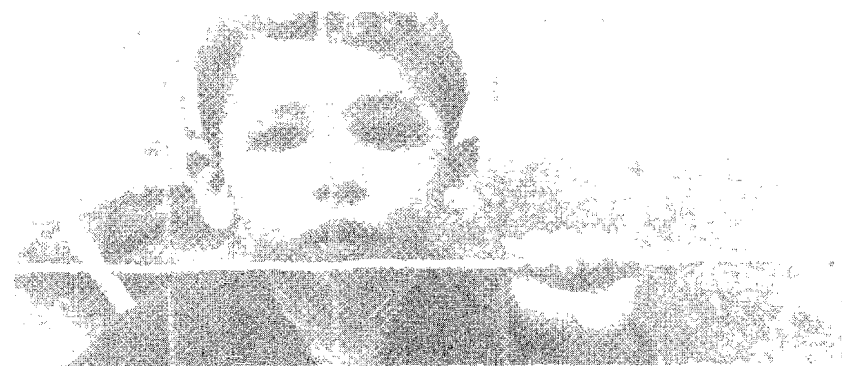
and sexuality. Hence the clear division between fashion statements of male and female, between the fashions of queer and straight.

In my case, however, it's not so clear. I identify as neither male nor female, and now that my lover is going through his gender change, it turns out I'm neither straight nor gay. What I've found as a result of this borderline life is that the more fluid my identity has become, and the less demanding my own need to belong to the camps of male, female, gay or straight, the more playful and less dictatorial my fashion has become—as well as my style of self-expression.

Will the identification with a transgendered writing style produce an identification with a transgendered experience?

Anyone who knows fashion will tell you that the operative word is *accessorize!* That's how I dress in the morning. That's how I shift from one phase of my life to the next—first I try on the accessories. And that's also part of the style of this book: I've added some accessories here and there to spice it up a bit.

Welcome to my runway!



sorting seeds

The very first task that Psyche had to accomplish in her search to be reunited with her lover, Eros, was to sort, by type, a roomful of seeds. According to the myth, these seeds covered the floor, and rose to nearly the height of the ceiling. I spent the first thirty years of my life sorting out the cultural seeds of gender and sexuality.



*In the backyard of our house on the Jersey Shore.
I'm about four years old.*

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THE HARD PART

The novel being dead, there is no point to writing made up stories. Look at the French who will not and the Americans who cannot. Look at me who ought not, if only because I exist entirely outside the usual human experience...outside and yet wholly relevant for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities (shall I ever be free of the dull lingering pain that is my peculiar glory, the price so joyously paid for being Myra Breckinridge, whom no man may possess except on her...my terms!).

—Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge*, 1974

The hard part was sorting it all out. The hard part was taking a good look at everyone else and the way they looked at the world, which was a lot different from the way *I* was looking at the world!

There are some transsexuals who agree with the way I look at the world, and quite a few who are really angry with me for writing this stuff. Every transsexual I know went

through a gender transformation for different reasons, and there are as many truthful experiences of gender as there are people who think they have a gender.

I know I'm not a man—about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing. The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other—a world that doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other *is*.

When I was a kid, everyone else seemed to know they were boys or girls or men or women. That's something I've never known; not then, not today. I never got to say to the grownups, "Hold on there—just what is it about me that makes you think I'm a little boy?" As a kid, I just figured I was the crazy one; I was the one who really had some serious defect.

All my life, my non-traditional gender identity had been my biggest secret, my deepest shame. It's not that I didn't want to talk about this with someone; it's just that I never saw anything in the culture that encouraged me to talk about my feeling that I was the wrong gender. When I was growing up, people who lived cross-gendered lives were pressured into hiding deep within the darkest closets they could find. Those who came out of their closets were either studied under a microscope, ridiculed in the tabloids, or made exotic in the porn books, so it paid to hide. It paid to lie. That was probably the most painful part of it: the lying to friends and family and lovers, the pretending to be someone I wasn't. Going through a gender change is not the easiest thing in the world to do, but I went through it because I was so tired of all the lies and secrets.

It was a strange kind of lie. It was a lie by action—I was always acting out

something that everyone assumed I was. I wonder what it would have been like if someone had come along and in a quite friendly manner had asked, "Well, young one, what do you think you are: a boy or a girl?" What would it have been like not to have been afraid of getting hit because of some wrong answer? See, "sex changes" never were an appropriate topic of conversation—not at the dining table, not in the locker room, not over a casual lunch in a crowded restaurant.

Nowadays, I try to make it easier for people to ask questions. I tell people that I've never been hurt by an honest question, and that's true: it's a cruel opinion that hurts, not a question. But people still don't ask questions easily; maybe that has something to do with manners or etiquette. Folks seem to naturally back off from inquiring as to the nature of someone's—my—gender. It seems to need some special setting. Like in my living room, or on television, or from behind a podium at some university. It's "good manners" to say and ask nothing, and that's sad. But the children still ask.

Two days after my lover and I appeared on *The Donahue Show*, the five-year-old child of our next door neighbor came up to me and asked me, "So, are you a boy or a girl?" We'd been living next door to these folks for over two years.

"I'm a girl who used to be a boy," I replied. She was delighted with that answer and told me I'd looked very pretty on television. I thanked her and we smiled at each other and went about our days. I love it that kids will just ask.

Adults don't ask. Adults are afraid to ask, "What *are* you?" so we ask "What do you *do*?"...in hopes of getting a clue to someone's identity—gender identity seems to be an unspeakable thing in our culture, just as names are considered unspeakable in some other cultures. By the same token, we hardly ever ask outright "What kind of sex do you like?" When it comes to work, we can ask. When it comes to sex and gender, we're supposed to observe discreetly and draw our own conclusions.

Instead of asking directly, adults look in roundabout ways for answers to their questions about me and my people. Like reading transsexual and transvestite pornography which, judging by much of its content, must be written by people who have never met one of us, but who have certainly fantasized about us.

There's this entire wonderful underground genre of erotica. You may have seen some of the titles, they're terrific, like **He's Her Sister! (Get it?) Or Transvestite Marriage or Transvestite Trap**. My personal favorites were **Captive In Lace**, and **They Made Him Love It!**

Reading those stories came in handy when I was doing phone sex for a living, because a lot of the men calling in wanted to be cross-dressed as women, or they wanted to know what it would be like to be a woman and have sex with another woman—guys want to know that sort of thing. They want to know, "what do lesbians *do* with one another." It's a sad question really: it shows how little thought they give to exactly what pleases a woman.

There's another whole group of people who really **like** gender ambiguity, it turns them on. I remember a group of sailors in the audience on **The Geraldo Show**. After it was announced who and what I was, they kept on looking at me, they kept on wanting something. I could feel

their eyes traveling up and down my surgically-constructed, hormonally-enhanced woman's body. What's the pull? What is it about a sexually-blended, gender-bended body that lights those flames? I know it gets me going!

For the most part, people cautiously observe and don't ask questions, and there are plenty of opportunities in today's world to look at people like me. The talk show ratings go way up during sweeps month when they trot out the transsexuals and the cross-dressers. Then there are the drag shows and the female impersonator spectacles—even though we began them for our own entertainment and enjoyment, their widespread popularity seems to grow and grow; you've probably got one of those shows in your city, or in a nearby town. Comedy skits, like "It's Pat" (a skit based on a person whose gender is not clear) on *Saturday Night Live* are real popular. I'll have more to say about that later.

If I look past the ghettos of the drag bars and standup joints, both popular music and cinema reflect my transsexual face back to me. Glance discreetly, if you will, at some of the brightest deities in our cultural heavens. At this writing, some friends of mine are truly interested in seeing if Michael Jackson (all his other issues aside) will actually become Diana Ross. I've heard bets being placed on the gender of some of Madonna's lovers in some of her videos. And what really made *The Crying Game* the smash hit that it was? It's interesting that we can ask questions about transgender issues when there's some distance between us and the person we're asking about—we just don't ask directly.

There's a lot of writing about gender now. I keep reading the magazine articles, the newspaper columns, and the text books, pre- and post-modern. I read, watch, and listen to all the ads and commercials. You can learn a lot about gender from those commercials. I've also been watching the talk shows, listening to the call-in programs, and browsing the electronic bulletin boards. When I was very young, growing up in the 50s, I read the medical texts, devoured the tabloids, and hoarded the pornography—because I was intensely interested in me and my people. I was scared, though, shaking scared, to see what I might actually find

out. But I couldn't stop reading.

See, I was a lonely, frightened little fat kid who felt there was something deeply wrong with me because I didn't feel like I was the gender I'd been assigned. I felt there was something wrong with me, something sick and twisted inside me, something very very bad about me. And everything I read backed that up.

The possibility missed by most of the texts prior to the last few years, and by virtually all the various popular media, is this: the culture may not simply be creating roles for naturally-gendered people, the culture may in fact be *creating* the gendered people. In other words, the culture may be creating gender. No one had ever hinted at that, and so, standing outside a "natural" gender, I thought I was some monster, and that it was all my fault.

In living along the borders of the gender frontier, I've come to see the gender system created by this culture as a particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of the culture to *question* gender, its own creation. The studies conducted by the duly-appointed representatives of the culture were still done on the basis of observation, not conversation. I want this book to begin to reverse that trend. I want this book to be the conversation I always wanted as I was growing up, and never had the chance to have.

The time for discreet and distant observation of transgendered lives seems to be coming to an end. There's more and more evidence that transgendered folks are making a place for themselves in the culture. I'm writing this book, for example, and it's getting published because there's been a shift. Up until the last few years, all we'd be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women. Stories by and about brave people who'd lived their lives hiding deep within a false gender—and who, after much soul-searching, decided to change their gender, and spent the rest of their days hiding

deep within *another* false gender. That's what we could get published about ourselves—the romantic stuff which set in stone our image as long-suffering, not the challenging stuff. And it always seemed that the people who would write *about* us either had some ax to grind or point to prove, or they'd been hurt and needed someone to blame it on. People like Janice Raymond, Catherine Millot, and Robert Stoller have ultimately perpetuated the myth that transgendered people are malevolent, mentally ill, or monsters. We got left holding the cultural bag. We ended up wearing the cultural hand-me-downs.

But there's another kind of trans(gressive)gender experience going on in this culture, and nowadays we're writing our own chronicles of these times. Our stories all tie together, our stories overlap; and you can hear lots about me in the stories of other transgendered people. My story weaves through Caroline Cossey's story. My story lies within the story of late historian Louis Sullivan. Christine Jorgensen and Renee Richards wrote chapters of my story in their autobiographies. Sandy Stone teaches her story, my story, our story in any number of her classes. Rachel Pollack paints it into her tarot cards. Christine Beatty belts it out in heavy metal and whispers it in her poetry. Melanie Phillips makes it available in on-line cyberspace. Leslie Feinberg travels back and forth across the country to make our story heard in the political arena. Loren Cameron captures it in his black-and-white stills. Kristienne Clarke brings us into her made-for-television films. David Harrison performs our story live on stage, Wednesdays through Sundays. We're all of us speaking in our own transgendered voice these days: editor and publisher JoAnn Roberts, essayist and fiction writer James Green, activist and writer Susan Stryker, publishers Dallas Denny and Davina Anne Gabriel, poet Rikki Ann Wilchins, poet and essayist Max Valerio, publisher Marissa Sheryl Lynn, playwright and composer Omewenne Grimstone, performance artist Celie Edwards—the list keeps growing. We're talking to each other in meeting rooms, through newsletters and journals, and on electronic bulletin boards. It's an exciting time, here at the beginning of a movement. It's a time when we've begun to put down the cultural baggage. We've begun sewing sequins onto our cultural hand-me-downs.

My voice on this subject is not representative of all transgendered people. But when a minority group has been silent for as long as we have, as disjointed as we have been, the tendency is for those in the majority to listen to the loud ones when they first speak up; and to believe that we speak for the entire group. More important than my point of view, than any single point of view however, is that people begin to question gender.

The voices of transgendered people are now being raised in concert with the voices of more and more people who are writing their work based on what we have to say. Suzanne Kessler, Wendy McKenna, Marjorie Garber, Jennie Livingston, Judith Butler, Wendy Chapkis, Anne Bolin, Walter Williams, Holly Devor, Pat Califia, and Shannon Bell are all asking great questions and making room for us to respond.

I've taken as much care as I could to encourage questions in this book, especially questions about my conclusions. I hope that soon after this book is published I'll have some more questions. Questions are the hard part.

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INTERLUDE

Nuts and Bolts

On the Surgical Process

Issues: *All right. We'd like to start with the biological/technical questions, the "nuts and bolts," as it were...*

Kate: [laughing]...I bolted from mine, that's for sure...

Issues: *...could you talk a little bit about the entire process of the surgery, and how it's done?*

Kate: It's a long process. It requires a year to two years of therapy, and then another therapist has to validate your therapist's opinion, for you to be qualified to go to a surgeon and say, "See, they think I'm a girl." During that time you can start hormones.

Before surgery you need to do what's called a "Life Test," which is living as another gender for at least a year, sometimes two years.

Issues: *What does that mean?*

Kate: Day and night. Before any kind of genital reassignment surgery. In other words, if *you* were going to do this, you'd have to live as a man for a year to two years to see if you could function socially, if you could make a living. For example, in *Hidden: A Gender*, the character Justin Bond plays [Herculine Barbin] couldn't function socially or economically as a man.

And so that would have been discovered and they would have said, "Hey, look. Give it up. Go back." And some people cannot get it together to function one way or the other. So you live that test, and then you go through with genital surgery. I know mostly about male-to-female surgery. There are two female-to-male techniques. Both are fine, except that sometimes they're not cosmetically up to snuff, so to speak.

Issues: *I was going to ask whether women can become men, because a lot more of the sex changes you hear about are men becoming women.*

Kate: Ah, the qualifier is that you *hear* about it; it's about 50-50.

Issues: *Where does the penis come from?*

Kate: Well, in one technique they take a skin graft, either from the inner thigh or the belly, literally roll it up, and attach it at the top of the thigh and the bottom of the belly. Then the patient has to lie in bed for four weeks or so while this heals up, to make sure the blood is going fine. So you've basically got what looks like a suitcase handle. They then remove one end from the thigh, so the suitcase handle is hanging down from the bottom of the belly. They don't have a way to extend the urethra through this penis, so the man must pee through the same urethral opening he had when he was a woman. Some men keep their vaginas, some have their vaginas partially sewn up.

Issues: *Okay. So what about men to women?*

Kate: The most common technique is the one I had: it's called "penile inversion." They lay the penis out, and make an incision down the length of it, pull the skin open, scrape out the spongy stuff, being very careful not to disturb the blood vessels and nerves. The scrotal sac is laid open, the testicles are removed and become compost, I guess [general laughter]. So then

they take the tip of the penis and start pushing it in. Kind of like turning a sock inside-out. Everyone has this natural cavity, right, so they just push it in...

Issues: *They invert it.*

Kate: Yah, exactly. So that the outside of the penis becomes the walls of the new vagina. The tip of the penis functions in the position of a cervix. They create a kind of clitoris, using the spongy material from the perineum. And then they hope for the best. The real tricky part of the surgery is the urethra. You're catheterized, because if you can't pee, you die. So that's real important. And they place this big pack in there while everything heals for about five days, and then they remove the pack and you have to keep dilating your new vagina by putting this little balloon thing in, and pumping it up, and letting it dilate for about twenty minutes, five or six times a day.

One of the comic things which you're told about before surgery, which is so frightening, but funny in retrospect, is that when the pack has been in there, it's pushed up against this new urethral opening, and the catheter's been pushing it, so the urethral opening is pushed over to the side, so you don't know in which direction you're going to pee when you finally pee. So when I sat down to pee, I shot straight up in the air, and I was like, "Oh noooooooo!" But eventually it gets itself into the right position and you pee in the right direction.

There's a doctor at Stanford who performs this penile inversion technique who takes a section, about half an inch, of intestine, which is a mucus membrane, and also grafts that in there, so that it will lubricate, because it is, in fact, membranous tissue. I don't lubricate, so if I'm going to have any kind of penetration I need lubrication. The disadvantage to that technique is that it never stops lubricating, so

you're kind of always wet and sloppy [smiles]. Which doesn't *have* to be a disadvantage.

Issues: *How much did all this cost?*

Kate: Remember, this was 1985-86: it was four thousand dollars for the nine days in the hospital, and four thousand dollars to the doctor. Then there was the round trip air fare, it was in Colorado...there's lots of fees involved in this. Blue Cross ended up paying for it. It took a while to process because of a computer fuck-up. They had put in "genital surgery" as a category, and they had my gender listed as female. Well, the only category that the computer could find vaguely near genital surgery was circumcision, and when it saw *circumcision* and *female*, it created a loop that it couldn't get out of. So it just spun around in the computer for a while.

On Hormones

Issues: *So this actual surgery happens after taking the hormones for a while? It's the last step?*

Kate: It's what they consider the final step, yah. And what happened with me was I got my surgery about seven months after I'd started taking hormones, because the hormones have different effects on people. Yes, they can cause breast growth, but this [referring to her chest] mostly grew after surgery. What happened with me is that my penis started shrinking incredibly while I was taking hormones. And the doctor said, "If I don't do the surgery now, we're going to have to add a skin graft from your butt or your thigh, so that you can have some kind of depth." I'd already told him that I didn't need much depth; [smiles] that wasn't what I was concerned with.

Issues: *What other effects did the hormones have?*

Kate: They changed the texture of my skin—my skin's a lot softer. They caused breast growth. I'm on a

hormonal regimen now of what they would give most women after a hysterectomy, who still have a uterus. I take Premarin every day, which is estrogen, and then seven days a month I take progesterone.

Issues: *You're going to be taking that forever?*

Kate: Forever. Unless I want to go through menopause again...I went through all the "classic symptoms" of menopause when I was getting onto hormones initially. While I was still producing my own testosterone, I had to take these massive doses of estrogen to overcome that. I'd sit at my desk at work and cry a lot. And now, I've got seven days a month of raging PMS. The only thing I don't ever do is have cramps or bleed. But I get the water retention, the mood swings, and all that.

On Orgasms

Issues: *What is actually stimulated during orgasm? And where is it?*

Kate: There are different kinds of orgasm. My vaginal walls are more sensitive than your vaginal walls, your clitoris is more sensitive than my clitoris. I can be stimulated to clitoral orgasm. That's a lot of fun. Actually much more so than with a vaginal orgasm. It's been changing. But I can have a vaginal orgasm just by the stimulation of the vaginal walls. That's kind of nifty, too. I do have a lack of sensation in my labia. I can feel pressure, but the surface of the skin does not have any sensation. So there was a certain amount of nerve damage there.

NAMING ALL THE PARTS

For the first thirty-or-so years of my life, I didn't listen, I didn't ask questions, I didn't talk, I didn't deal with gender—I avoided the dilemma as best I could. I lived frantically on the edge of my white male privilege, and it wasn't 'til I got into therapy around the issue of my transsexualism that I began to take apart gender and really examine it from several sides. As I looked at each facet of gender, I needed to fix it with a definition, just long enough for me to realize that each definition I came up with was entirely inadequate and needed to be abandoned in search of deeper meaning.

Definitions have their uses in much the same way that road signs make it easy to travel: they point out the directions. But you don't get where you're going when you just stand underneath some sign, waiting for it to tell you what to do.

I took the first steps of my journey by trying to define the phenomenon I was daily becoming.

There's a real simple way to look at gender: Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, "On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman." It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple.



My Bar Mitzvah: March 4, 1961, "Today I am a man."

Gender means *class*. By calling gender a system of classification, we can dismantle the system and examine its components. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in their landmark 1978 book, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, open the door to viewing gender as a social construct. They pinpoint various phenomena of gender, as follows:

Gender Assignment

Gender assignment happens when the culture says, "This is what you are." In most cultures, we're assigned a gender at birth. In our culture, once you've been assigned a gender, that's what you are; and for the most part, it's doctors who dole out the gender assignments, which shows you how emphatically gender has been medicalized. These doctors look down at a newly-born infant and say "It has a penis, it's a boy." Or they say, "It doesn't have a penis, it's a girl." It has little or nothing to do with vaginas. It's all penises or no penises: gender assignment is both phallogentric and genital. Other cultures are not or have not been so rigid.

In the early nineteenth century, Kodiak Islanders would occasionally assign a female gender to a child with a penis: this resulted in a woman who would bring great good luck to her husband, and a larger dowry to her parents. The European umbrella term for this and any other type of Native American transgendered person is *berdache*. Walter Williams in *The Spirit and the Flesh* chronicles nearly as many types of *berdache* as there were nations.

Even as early as 1702, a French explorer who lived for four years among the Illinois Indians noted that berdaches were known "from their childhood, when they are seen frequently picking up the spade, the spindle, the ax [women's tools], but making no use of the bow and arrow as all the other small boys do."

—Pierre Liette, *Memoir of Pierre Liette on the Illinois Country*

When the gender of a child was in question in some Navajo tribes, they reached a decision by putting a child inside a *tipi* with loom and a bow and arrow—female and male implements respectively. They set fire to the *tipi*, and whatever the child grabbed as he/she ran out determined the child's gender. It was perfectly natural to these Navajo that the child had some say in determining its own gender. Compare this method with the following modern example:

[The Montana Educational Telecommunications Network, a computer bulletin board,] enabled students in tiny rural schools to communicate with students around the world. Cynthia Denton, until last year a teacher at the only public school in Hobson, Montana (population 200), describes the benefit of such links. "When we got our first messages from Japan, a wonderful little fifth-grade girl named Michelle was asked if she was a boy or a girl. She was extraordinarily indignant at that, and said, 'I'm Michelle—I'm a girl of course.' Then I pointed out the name of the person who had asked the question and said, 'Do you know if this is a boy or a girl?' She said, 'No, how am I supposed to know that?' I said, 'Oh, the rest of the world is supposed to know that Michelle is a girl, but you have no social responsibility to know if this is a boy or a girl?' She stopped and said, 'Oh.' And then she rephrased her reply considerably."
—Jacques Leslie, *The Cursor Cowboy*, 1993

Is the determination of one another's gender a "social responsibility?"

Do we have the legal or moral right to decide and assign our own genders?

Or does that right belong to the state, the church, and

the medical profession?

If gender is classification, can we afford to throw away
the very basic right to classify ourselves?

Gender Identity

Gender identity answers the question, “who am I?” Am I a man or a woman or a what? It’s a decision made by nearly every individual, and it’s subject to any influence: peer pressure, advertising, drugs, cultural definitions of gender, whatever.

Gender identity is assumed by many to be “natural”; that is someone can feel “like a man,” or “like a woman.” When I first started giving talks about gender, this was the one question that would keep coming up: “Do you feel like a woman now?” “Did you ever feel like a man?” “How did you know what a woman would feel like?”

I’ve no idea what “a woman” feels like. I never did feel like a girl or a woman; rather, it was my unshakable conviction that I was not a boy or a man. It was the absence of a feeling, rather than its presence, that convinced me to change my gender.

What **does** a man feel like?

What does a woman feel like?

Do **you** feel “like a man?”

Do you feel “like a woman?”

I’d really like to know that from people.

Gender identity answers another question: “to which gender (class) do I want to belong?” Being and belonging are closely related concepts when it comes to gender. I felt I was a woman (being), and more importantly I felt I belonged with the other women (belonging). In this culture, the only two sanctioned gender clubs are “men” and “women.” If you don’t belong to one or the other, you’re told in no uncertain terms to sign up fast.

Sweet Loretta Martin

Thought she was a woman

But she was another man.

All the girls around her

Thought she had it coming

But she gets it while she can.

Get back, get back.

Get back to where you once belonged.

Get back, Loretta.

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney,

Get Back, 1969

I remember a dream I had when I was no more than seven or eight years old—I might have been younger. In this dream, two lines of battle were drawn up facing one another on a devastated plain: I remember the earth was dry and cracked. An army of men on one side faced an army of women on the other. The soldiers on both sides were exhausted. They were all wearing skins—I remember smelling the un-tanned leather in my dream. I was a young boy, on the side of the men, and I was being tied down to a roughly-hewn cart. I wasn’t struggling. When I was completely secured, the men attached a long rope to the cart, and tossed the other end of the rope over to the women. The soldiers of the women’s army slowly pulled me across the empty ground between the two armies, as the sun began to rise. I could see only the sun and the sky. When I’d been pulled over to the side of the women, they untied me, turned their backs to the men, and we all walked away. I looked back, and saw the men walking away from us. We were all silent.

I wonder about reincarnation. I wonder how a child could have had a dream like that in such detail. I told this dream to the psychiatrist at the army induction center in Boston in 1969—they’d asked if I’d ever had any strange dreams, so I told them this one. They gave me a I-Y, deferred duty due to psychiatric instability.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are collections of factors which answer the question, "How do I need to function so that society perceives me as belonging or not belonging to a specific gender?" Some people would include appearance, sexual orientation, and methods of communication under the term, but I think it makes more sense to think in terms of things like jobs, economic roles, chores, hobbies; in other words, positions and actions specific to a given gender as defined by a culture. Gender roles, when followed, send signals of membership in a given gender.

Gender Attribution

Then there's gender attribution, whereby we look at somebody and say, "that's a man," or "that's a woman." And this is important because the way we perceive another's gender affects the way we relate to that person. Gender attribution is the sneaky one. It's the one we do all the time without thinking about it; kinda like driving a sixteen-wheeler down a crowded highway... without thinking about it.

In this culture, gender attribution, like gender assignment, is phallogocentric. That is, one is male until perceived otherwise. According to a study done by Kessler and McKenna, one can extrapolate that it would take the presence of roughly four female cues to outweigh the presence of one male cue: one is assumed male until proven otherwise. That's one reason why many women today get "sirred" whereas very few men get called "ma'am."

Gender attribution depends on cues given by the attributee, and perceived by the attributer. The categories of cues as I have looked at them apply to a man/woman bi-polar gender system, although they could be relevant to a more fluidly-gendered system. I found these cues to be useful in training actors in cross-gender role-playing.

Physical cues include body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement.

I'm nearly six feet tall, and I'm large-boned. Like most people born "male," my hands, feet, and forearms are proportionally larger to my body as a whole than those of

people born "female." My hair pattern included coarse facial hair. My voice is naturally deep—I sang bass in a high school choir and quartet. I've had to study ways and means of either changing these physical cues, or drawing attention away from them if I want to achieve a female attribution from people.

Susan Brownmiller's book, *Femininity*, is an excellent analysis of the social impact of physical factors as gender cues.

Behavioral cues include manners, decorum, protocol, and deportment. Like physical cues, behavioral cues change with time and culture. *Dear Abby* and other advice columnists often freely dispense gender-specific manners. Most of the behavioral cues I can think of boil down to how we occupy space, both alone and with others.

Some points of manners are not taught in books of etiquette. They are, instead, signals we learn from one another, mostly signals acknowledging membership to an upper (male) or lower (female) class. But to commit some of *these* manners in writing in terms of gender-specific behavior would be an acknowledgment that gender exists as a class system.

Here's one: As part of learning to pass as a woman, I was taught to avoid eye contact when walking down the street; that looking someone in the eye was a male cue. Nowadays, sometimes I'll look away, and sometimes I'll look someone in the eye—it's a behavior pattern that's more fun to play with than to follow rigidly. A femme cue (not "woman," but "femme") is to meet someone's eyes (usually a butch), glance quickly away, then slowly look back into the butch's eyes and hold that gaze: great, hot fun, that one!

In many transsexual and transvestite meetings I attend, when the subject of the discussion was "passing," a lot of emphasis was given to manners: who stands up to shake hands? who exits an elevator first? who opens

doors? who lights cigarettes? These are all cues I had to learn in order to pass as a woman in this culture. It wasn't 'til I began to read feminist literature that I began to question these cues or to see them as oppressive.

Textual cues include histories, documents, names, associates, relationships—true or false—which support a desired gender attribution. Someone trying to be taken for male in this culture might take the name Bernard, which would probably get a better male attribution than the name Brenda.

Changing my name from Al to Kate was no big deal in Pennsylvania. It was a simple matter of filing a form with the court and publishing the name change in some unobtrusive “notices” column of a court-approved newspaper. Bingo—done. The problems came with changing all my documents. The driver's license was particularly interesting. Prior to my full gender change, I'd been pulled over once already dressed as a woman, yet holding my male driver's license—it wasn't something I cared to repeat.

Any changes in licenses had to be done in person at the Department of Motor Vehicles. I was working in corporate America: Ford Aerospace. On my lunch break, I went down to the DMV and waited in line with the other folks who had changes to make to their licenses. The male officer at the desk was flirting with me, and I didn't know what to do with that, so I kept looking away. When I finally got to the desk, he asked “Well young lady, what can we do for you?”

“I've got to make a name change on my license,” I mumbled.

“Just get married?” he asked jovially.

“Uh, no,” I replied.

“Oh! Divorced!” he proclaimed with just a bit of hope in his voice, “Let's see your license.” I handed him my old driver's license with my male name on it. He glanced

down at the card, apparently not registering what he saw. “You just go on over there, honey, and take your test. We'll have you fixed up soon. Oh,” he added with a wink, “if you need anything special, you just come back here and ask old Fred.”

I left old Fred and joined the line for my test. I handed the next officer both my license and my court order authorizing my name change. This time, the officer didn't give my license a cursory glance. He kept looking at me, then down at the paper, then me, then the paper. His face grim, he pointed over to the direction of the testing booths. On my way over to the booths, old Fred called out, “Honey, they treating you all right?” Before I could reply, the second officer snarled at old Fred to “get his butt over” to look at all my paperwork.

I reached the testing booths and looked back just in time to see a quite crestfallen old Fred looking at me, then the paper, then me, then the paper.

Mythic cues include cultural and sub-cultural myths which support membership in a given gender. This culture's myths include archetypes like: weaker sex, dumb blonde, strong silent type, and better half. Various waves of the women's movement have had to deal with a multitude of myths of male superiority.

Power dynamics as cue include modes of communication, communication techniques, and degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence, and ambition.

Sexual orientation as cue highlights, in the dominant culture, the heterosexual imperative (or in the lesbian and gay culture, the homosexual imperative). For this reason, many male heterosexual transvestites who wish to pass as female will go out on a “date” with another man (who is dressed as a man)—the two seem to be a heterosexual couple. In glancing at the “woman” of the two, an inner dialogue might go, “It's wearing a dress, and it's hanging on the arm of a man, so it must be a woman.”

For the same man to pass as a female in a lesbian bar, he'd need to be with a woman, dressed as a woman, as a "date."

I remember one Fourth of July evening in Philadelphia, about a year after my surgery. I was walking home arm in arm with Lisa, my lover at the time, after the fireworks display. We were leaning in to one another, walking like lovers walk. Coming towards us was a family of five: mom, dad, and three teenage boys. "Look, it's a coupla faggots," said one of the boys. "Nah, it's two girls," said another. "That's enough outa you," bellowed the father, "one of 'em's got to be a man. This is America!"

So sex (the act) and gender (the classification) are different, and depending on the qualifier one is using for gender differentiation, they may or may not be dependent on one another. There are probably as many types of gender (gender systems) as could be imagined. Gender by clothing, gender by divine right, gender by lottery—these all make as much sense as any other criteria, but in our Western civilization, we bow down to the great god Science. No other type of gender holds as much sway as:

Biological gender, which classifies a person through any combination of body type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporal or chemical essence. Belief in biological gender is in fact a belief in the supremacy of the body in the determination of identity. It's biological gender that most folks refer to when they say *sex*. By calling something "sex," we grant it seniority over all the other types of gender—by some right of biology.

So, there are all these *types* of gender which in and of themselves are *not* gender, but criteria for systemic classification. And there's sex, which somehow winds up on top of the heap. Add to this room full of seeds the words *male, female, masculine, feminine, man, woman, boy, girl*. These words are not descriptive of any sexual act, so all these words fall under the category of gender and are highly subjective, depending on which

system of gender one is following.

But none of this explains why there is such a widespread insistence upon the conflation of *sex* and *gender*. I think a larger question is why Eurocentric culture needs to see *so much* in terms of sex.

It's not like gender is the **only** thing we confuse with sex. As a culture, we're encouraged to equate sex (the act) with money, success, and security; and with the products we're told will help us attain money, success and security. We live in a culture that succeeds in selling products (the apex of accomplishment in capitalism) by aligning those products with the attainment of one's sexual fantasies.

Switching my gender knocked me for a time curiously out of the loop of ads designed for men or women, gays or straights. I got to look at sex without the hype, and ads without the allure. None of them, after all, spoke to me, although all of them beckoned.

Kinds of Sex

"Can you orgasm with that vagina?"

—Audience member question for Kate
on the *Geraldo Rivera* show.

It's important to keep *gender* and *sex* separated as, respectively, *system* and *function*. Since function is easier to pin down than system, sex is a simpler starting place than gender.

"Yah, the plumbing works and so does the electricity."

—Kate's answer

There are so many sex manuals on the market—the how-to kind—and depending on where you look, there's bound to be one that talks about what you like to do. That's great, and I own several of them, but it's

beyond the scope of this book. The purpose of talking about sex here is to disentangle it from gender.

Sex does have a primary factor to it which is germane to a discussion of gender: *sexual orientation*, which is what people call it, if they believe you're born with it, or *sexual preference* which is what people call it if they believe you have more of a choice and more of a say in the matter.

[W]e do not need a sophisticated methodology or technology to confirm that the gender component of identity is the most important one articulated during sex. Nearly everyone (except for bisexuals, perhaps) regards it as the prime criterion for choosing a sex partner.

—Murray S. Davis, *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology*, 1983

The Basic Mix-Up

A gay man who lived in Khartoum

Took a lesbian up to his room.

They argued all night

Over who had the right

To do what, and with what, to whom.

—anonymous limerick

Here's the tangle that I found: sexual orientation/preference is based in this culture solely on the gender of one's partner of choice. Not only do we confuse the two words, we make them dependent on one another. The only choices we're given to determine the focus of our sexual desire are these:

- » *Heterosexual model*: in which a culturally-defined male is in a relationship with a culturally-defined female.
- » *Gay male model*: two culturally-defined men involved with each other.

- » *Lesbian model*: two culturally-defined women involved with each other.
- » *Bisexual model*: culturally-defined men and women who could be involved with either culturally-defined men or women.

Variants to these gender-based relationship dynamics would include heterosexual female with gay male, gay male with lesbian woman, lesbian woman with heterosexual woman, gay male with bisexual male, and so forth. People involved in these variants know that each dynamic is different from the other. A lesbian involved with another lesbian, for example, is a very different relationship than that of a lesbian involved with a bisexual woman, and *that's* distinct from being a lesbian woman involved with a heterosexual woman. What these variants have in common is that each of these combinations forms its own clearly-recognizable dynamic, and none of these are acknowledged by the dominant cultural binary of sexual orientation: heterosexuality/homosexuality.

Despite the non-recognition of these dynamics by the broader culture, *all these models depend on the gender of the partner*. This results in minimizing, if not completely dismissing, other dynamic models of a relationship which could be more important than gender and are often more telling about the real nature of someone's desire. There are so many factors on which we *could* base sexual orientation. Examples of alternate dynamic models include:

- » *Butch/Femme model*, however that may be defined by its participants.

Butch style, whether worn by men or women, is a symbol of detachment. Dressing butch gives the wearer the protection of being the observer, not the object. A femme-y look, by contrast, suggests self-display, whether in a quietly demure or sexually flashy fashion. Butch is a style of understatement: "I don't need to show flesh because I am in a position to choose. Butch

is no coy "come hither" look, but a challenge—"I see you and maybe I like what I see."

There is something about femme-y style that in itself produces insecurity, a sense of vulnerability and exposure. The femme invites the gaze and it takes a great deal of feminine self-confidence to risk that kind of scrutiny.

—Wendy Chapkis,

Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance, 1986

>> *Top/Bottom model* which can be further sub-classified as dominant/submissive or sadist/masochist.

The bottom is responsible for being obedient, for carrying out her top's orders with dispatch and grace, for being as aroused and sexually available and desirable as possible, and for letting her top know when she is physically uncomfortable or needs a break....The top is responsible for constructing a scene that falls within the bottom's limits, although it is permissible to stretch her limit if she suddenly discovers the capacity to go further than she ever has before.

—Pat Califia, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*, 1983

There are also:

Butch/Butch models

Femme/Femme models

Triad (or more) models

Human/Animal models

Adult/Child models

Same-aged models

Parent/Child models

Multiple partners models

Able-bodied models

Differently-abled bodies models

Reproductive models

Owner/Slave models

Monogamous models

Non-monogamous models

I'm sure I'm leaving models out of this, and someone is going to be really upset that I didn't think of them, but the point is there's more to sex (the act) than gender (one classification of identity).

Try making a list of ways in which sexual preference or orientation could be measured, and then add to that list (or subtract from it) every day for a month, or a year (or for the rest of your life). Could be fun!

Sex Without Gender

There are plenty of instances in which sexual attraction can have absolutely nothing to do with the gender of one's partner.

When Batman and Catwoman try to get it on sexually, it only works when they are both in their caped crusader outfits. Naked heterosexuality is a miserable failure between them....When they encounter each other in costume however something much sexier happens and the only thing missing is a really good scene where we get to hear the delicious sound of Catwoman's latex rubbing on Batman's black rubber/leather skin. To me their

flirtation in capes looked queer precisely because it was not heterosexual, they were not man and woman, they were bat and cat, or latex and rubber, or feminist and vigilante: gender became irrelevant and sexuality was dependent on many other factors....

You could also read their sexual encounters as the kind of sex play between gay men and lesbians that we are hearing so much about recently: in other words, the sexual encounter is queer because both partners are queer and the genders of the participants are less relevant. Just because Batman is male and Catwoman is female does not make their interactions heterosexual—think about it, there is nothing straight about two people getting it on in rubber and latex costumes, wearing eyemasks and carrying whips and other accoutrements.

—Judith Halberstam, "Queer
Creatures," *On Our Backs*,
Nov/Dec, 1992

Sexual preference *could* be based on genital preference. (This is not the same as saying preference for a specific gender, unless you're basing your definition of gender on the presence or absence of some combination of genitals.) Preference could also be based on the kind of sex *acts* one prefers, and, in fact, elaborate systems exist to distinguish just that, and to announce it to the world at large. For example, here's a handkerchief code from the Samoian Collective's *Coming To Power*. The code is used for displaying preference in sexual behavior. Colors mean active if worn on the left side, or passive if worn on the right.

Left Side	Color	Right Side
Fist Fuckee	Red	Fist Fuckee
Anal Sex, Top	Dark Blue	Anal Sex, Bottom
Oral Sex, Top	Light Blue	Oral Sex, Bottom
Light S/M, Top	Robin's Egg Blue	Light S/M, Bottom
Foot Fetish, Top	Mustard	Foot Fetish, Bottom
Anything Goes, Top	Orange	Anything Goes, Bottom
Gives Golden Showers	Yellow	Wants Golden Showers
Hustler, Selling	Green	Hustler, Buying
Uniforms/Military, Top	Olive Drab	Uniforms/Military, Bottom
Likes Novices, Chickenhawk	White	Novice (or Virgin)
Victorian Scenes	White Lace	Victorian Scenes, Bottom
Does Bondage	Grey	Wants to be put in Bondage
Shit Scenes, Top	Brown	Shit Scenes, Bottom
Heavy S/M & Whipping, Top	Black	Heavy S/M & Whipping, Bottom
Piercer	Purple	Piercee
Likes Menstruating Women	Maroon	Is Menstruating
Group Sex, Top	Lavender	Group Sex, Bottom
Breast Fondler	Pink	Breast Fondlee

I love this code! It gave me quite a few ideas when I first read it. But despite the many variations possible, sexual orientation/preference remains culturally linked to our gender system (and by extension to gender identity) through the fact that it's most usually based on the gender of one's partner. This link probably accounts for much of the tangle between sex and gender.

The confusion between sex and gender affects more than individuals and relationships. The conflation of sex and gender contributes to the linking together of the very different subcultures of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, leather sexers, sex-workers, and the transgendered.

A common misconception is that male cross-dressers are both gay and prostitutes, whereas the truth of the matter is that most cross-dressers that I've met hold down more mainstream jobs, careers, or professions, are married, and are practicing heterosexuals.

A dominant culture tends to combine its subcultures into manageable units. As a result, those who practice non-traditional sex are seen by members of the dominant culture (as well as by members of sex and gender subcultures) as a whole with those who don non-traditional gender roles and identities. Any work to deconstruct the gender system needs to take into account the artificial amalgam of subcultures, which might itself collapse if the confusion of terms holding it together were to be settled.

In any case, if we buy into categories of sexual orientation based solely on gender—heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual—we're cheating ourselves of a searching examination of our real sexual preferences. In the same fashion, by subscribing to the categories of gender based solely on the male/female binary, we cheat ourselves of a searching examination of our real gender identity. And now we can park sex off to the side for a while, and bring this essay back around to gender.

Desire

I was not an unattractive man. People's reactions to my gender change often included the remonstrative, "But you're such a good-looking guy!" Nowadays, as I navigate the waters between male and female, there are still people attracted to me. At first, my reaction was fear: "What kind of pervert," I thought, "would be attracted to a freak like me?" As I got over that internalized phobia of my transgender status, I began to get curious about the nature of desire, sex, and identity. When, for example, I talk about the need to do away with gender, I always get looks of horror from the audience: "What about desire and attraction!" they want to know, "How can you have desire with no gender?" They've got a good point: the concepts of sex and gender seem to overlap around the phenomenon of desire. So I began to explore my transgendered relationship to desire.

About five months into living full-time as a woman, I woke up one morning and felt really good about the day. I got dressed for work, and checking the mirror before I left, I liked what I saw—at last! I opened the door to

leave the building, only to find two workmen standing on the porch, the hand of one poised to knock on the door. This workman's face lit up when he saw me. "Well!" he said, "Don't you look beautiful today." At that moment, I realized I didn't know how to respond to that. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. I really wasn't prepared for people to be attracted to me. To this day, I don't know how to respond to a man who's attracted to me—I never learned the rituals.

To me, desire is a wish to experience someone or something that I've never experienced, or that I'm not currently experiencing. Usually, I need an identity appropriate (or appropriately inappropriate) to the context in which I want to experience that person or thing. This context could be anything: a romantic involvement, a tennis match, or a boat trip up a canal. On a boat trip up the canal, I could appropriately be a passenger or a crew member. In a tennis match, I could be a player, an audience member, a concessionaire, a referee, a member of the grounds staff. In the context of a romantic involvement, it gets less obvious about what I need to be in order to have an appropriate identity, but I would need to have *some* identity. Given that most romantic or sexual involvements in this culture are defined by the genders of the partners, the *most* appropriate identity to have in a romantic relationship would be a gender identity, or something that passes for gender identity, like a gender role. A gender role might be butch, femme, top, and bottom—these are all methods of acting. So, even without a gender identity *per se*, some workable identity can be called up and put into motion within a relationship, and when we play with our identities, we play with desire. Some identities stimulate desire, others diminish desire. To make ourselves attractive to someone, we modify our identity, or at least the appearance of an identity—and this includes gender identity.

I love the idea of being without an identity, it gives me a lot of room to play around; but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on: it doesn't really matter what identity I take on, as long as it's recognizable. I can be a writer, a lover, a confidante, a femme, a top, or a woman. I retreat

into definition as a way of demarcating my space, a way of saying "Step back, I'm getting crowded here." By saying "I am the (fill in the blank)," I also say, "You are *not*, and so you are not in my space." Thus, I achieve privacy. Gender identity is a form of self-definition: something into which we can withdraw, from which we can glean a degree of privacy from time to time, and with which we can, to a limited degree, manipulate desire.

Our culture is obsessed with desire: it drives our economy. We come right out and say we're going to stimulate desire for goods and services, and so we're bombarded daily with ads and commercial announcements geared to make us desire things. No wonder the emphasis on desire spills over into the rest of our lives. No wonder I get panicked reactions from audiences when I suggest we eliminate gender as a system; gender defines our desire, and we don't know what to do if we don't have desire. Perhaps the more importance a culture places on desire, the more conflated become the concepts of sex and gender.

As an exercise, can you recall the last time you saw someone whose gender was ambiguous? Was this person attractive to you? And if you knew they called themselves neither a man nor a woman, what would it make you if you're attracted to that person? And if you were to kiss? Make love? What would you be?

I remember one time at a gay and lesbian writers' conference in San Francisco, I was on a panel and asking these same questions. Because it was a specifically gay and lesbian audience, an audience that defined itself by its sexual orientation, I wanted to tweak them on that identity. I asked, "And what if I strapped on a dildo and made love to you: what would that make me?" Without missing a beat, panelist Carol Queen piped up, "Nostalgic."

« 5 »

INTERLUDE

The Lesbian Thing

- Issues: *The thing that really fascinates me is that as a man, you were heterosexual, in the eyes of the construct, anyway. Did you feel like you were a man who was a lesbian?*
- Kate: I didn't feel like I was a man. Ever. I was *being* a man, but I never felt like I was. I was, in every aspect, fulfilling the gender role of "man." The societal role of man. And so socially, I was a man. No question. But I never *felt* like I was.
- Justin: *What is the difference between the way that heterosexual women related to you, and the way that lesbians relate to you now?*
- Kate: Real good question! When I was being a man relating with a woman, there was much more of an assumed "man role" and an assumed "woman role," and it was dichotomized. For the most part, there were certain constructs that were assumed, patterns of relating that are uniquely heterosexual that would be silly to try now. Now there's much more negotiating, much more talking, and much more fluidity in terms of roles in relating with women. Also, there's a distance in a heterosexual relationship. There can be a certain kind of getting together, but then there's always,

“What the fuck *are* you anyway?” It stops, it just stops. And in a lesbian relationship—and I’m assuming it’s the same in a homosexual male relationship, I don’t know—there’s much more familiarity. There’s just much more closeness.

Issues: *Were you ever attracted to men?*

Kate: I had fantasies about men. But was I ever attracted to a man? One [looks at Justin—they smile]. That was a crush, and I just couldn’t understand it. “What is this?!” I was just hopelessly crushed out on Justin. And it was so intriguing. I’ve gotten over that to the point where I just love him so dearly, I just feel really close to him. But beyond that, no. I was never attracted to a man. I’ve had sex with men, prior to my surgery, and certainly not afterwards, and did not enjoy it. I still have fantasies, though, and they’re fun, and sometimes during sex, my girlfriend and I would take turns strapping on dildos—which isn’t the same as being a man or playing at being a man—and I’d look down at this thing and say “Oh, I remember *that!*” [lots of laughter all around]. My lover says I’m more practiced than any of her other women lovers. It’s lots of fun [laughter].

Acceptance in the Lesbian Community

Taste Of Latex: *What’s the reaction in the lesbian community to your being a transsexual lesbian? Were you seeking acceptance, and did you find it?*

Kate: I sought acceptance in one lesbian community that had a bad experience with a transsexual lesbian five or six years prior to my being there. According to women who were there, she had attempted a power play to take over this huge lesbian organization in the city, and the reaction was very strong, very vocal. The reaction was very much, “Well that’s a man for you!”

Then I came along, and they were like “LOOK-OUT, another one!” People wouldn’t know I was a transsexual and then they’d find out and they’d be like “Oh, I knew all along: it was male energy, I felt that!” It was not very good acceptance. I [did find] acceptance with people much younger than me. People in their twenties and thirties were much more accepting than my generation who are major fuddy-duds.

Now, it doesn’t matter that much. I don’t hang where I’m not accepted. I still get some people who have problems, who say “Well, you’re not really a woman,” and I say, “Right...” And they say, “Well, how can you be a lesbian?” and to me that’s the heart of it—I try to engage those folks by asking, “What’s a woman? What’s a man?” I wish someone would answer me that—it would make my life a lot easier. I could get on playing some other kind of game. But no one has been able to answer that. There’s no hard and fast rule.

But there *are* rules. And there *is* a rulebook.