


# **BOUND BY DI ERSITY**

  
Unity emerges from a  
chorus of different voices.  
Contributions by members of the  
lesbian, gay, bisexual and  
transgender communities

  
James T. Sears, Editor

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# You're Strange & We're Wonderful: The Gay/Lesbian and Transgender Communities<sup>1</sup>

*Dallas Denny*

The organized gay and lesbian community is often dated from the Stonewall riots, which took place in 1969. The transgender community is much younger. No definitive event serves as a marker for transgendered persons, though we were at Stonewall, too. In fact, transgendered persons actually started those riots and remained most violent and most vocal throughout. In a sense, gay white middle class males who were liberated by Stonewall, and through the efforts of masculine women and feminine men who started who led the riots.

For a time, I thought that this story of Stonewall might be a bit of clever revisionist history. But recently, from a stack of vintage drag magazines, I found the first issue of Lee Brewster's *DRAG Queens*, which contained the following:

The (Christopher Street Liberation Day) parade was a result of the homosexual uprising caused by a raid on a gay bar, The Stonewall, also a drag hang-out. The entire gay liberation movement started as a result of that raid. For the first time in history, the homosexual stood up and said, "Hands off!" It was the effeminate or drag queen who stood up and yelled first and the loudest. It was *their* place! The so-called "straight" looking, manly homosexual stood back and watched the police hammer the effeminate boys... finally they joined in. Gay Pride was founded.

Brewster's magazine was published in 1970. So much for revisionist history.



It has become clear to me that the long history of men who sleep with men and women coincides with an equally long history of men who dress and act as women, and women who act and dress as men. Often the lines become blurred. Only in recent decades has the distinction between gender and sexual identity begun to be understood and discussed. Most Americans still don't understand the difference; to the Great Unwashed, everyone who isn't heterosexual is queer.

The transgender community is exceedingly diverse. It includes transsexuals who completely live as members of the other biological sex. Transexuals submit their bodies to painful procedures such as surgery and electrolysis and take hormones as part of their process of self-invention. Transgenderists differ. While their commitment to physical change is perhaps less extreme, they identify predominantly and often entirely with the other biological sex. There are heterosexuals who dress up in the privacy of their homes or congregate with others like themselves at transgender conventions and gay bars, as well as cross-dressers who identify as gay. Prostitutes, too, cross-dress both to please themselves and to make money. Within each of these categories are biological females and males.

In short, it's impossible to separate gay, lesbian, and transgendered people into two distinct groups: gender variance is common among gay men and lesbians, and transgendered persons run the gamut in terms of their sexual orientation. If you see someone in extravagant drag, it is impossible to tell if he or she identifies as gay or transgendered, or both, or neither. It would therefore seem to be to their mutual advantage for the gay/lesbian and transgender communities to join forces to fight a discriminating public which links them anyway.

In fact, this often happens. The Transgender Caucus of the 1993 March on Washington worked to have its constituents featured prominently in the various planks of the March, and organizing committees in several states changed their names to include transgendered persons, just as they had previously changed them to include bisexual persons.

Yet despite the March's transgender contingent, the two-thirds vote needed to include the word transgendered in the name of the march did not materialize — and it is just as unlikely to materialize in the name of the Stonewall 25 celebration. To date, too much misunderstanding of and animosity toward transgendered persons by gay men and lesbians exists for transgendered persons to be allowed more than marginal inclusion.

The alliance which does prevail between the gay/lesbian and transgendered communities is characterized by suspicion and misunderstanding on both sides. In many ways, it is the age-old story of an enfranchised group

overlooking the needs of or, as happened at the 1991 and 1993 Michigan Women's Music Festivals, actively excluding a less empowered group.

But that sword cuts both ways, for many in the transgender community are heterosexual white males with the prestige and power associated with being homosexual white and male — and the hang-ups, as well. Heterosexual cross-dressers often are notorious for their homophobia, and in the past, organizations like Tri-Ess, the Society for the Second Self, were considered homophobic. Leadership has become more enlightened of late, so that is no longer necessarily the case, but on the whole, heterosexual cross-dressers rarely show understanding for gays and lesbians, and may often even argue for their exclusion from the military and from teaching in schools—even while they sit around with shaved legs, wearing dresses, makeup, and wigs.

Except for homophobic statements made by the occasional unenlightened cross-dresser, about the strongest statements that are made have to do with keeping the transgender and gay/lesbian communities separate in order to deal with separate issues or to avoid "contamination." There are almost none of the more virulent forms of homophobia in the transgender community, and certainly not among the community's leaders, who almost unanimously support gay rights. Men in dresses and women in tuxedos are not cruising the streets with baseball bats, looking for faggots. In fact, it is transgendered persons who get bashed because they are so visible. They face anti-gay sentiments at work and on the street. The regularity with which transgendered persons turn up dead on the street is astonishing and depressing; there have been at least six such unsolved murders here in Atlanta during the past several years.

Of course, a considerable number of gay men and lesbians are sensitive towards transgendered persons and their plight. Though the knowledge of most remains superficial, gleaned only from the points of intersection between the two communities. They do not see or know the larger transgender community which is separate and distinct from the gay community. Nor do they recognize its diversity. Consequently, they rarely think of transgendered persons when affirming their own rights to serve in the military, to love whomever they please, and to work in discrimination-free settings—issues of critical importance to transgendered persons.

But indifference is only a part of the problem. Distrust of, antagonism, and even hatred towards transgendered persons seems pervasive. Many of the more assimilated gay men and lesbians are embarrassed by transgendered persons and try to sweep them under the carpet, even while they exploit them as sources of entertainment and as fundraisers. This paradox has

existed for a long time. In a discussion of Lee Brewster, an unnamed author points out that the money Brewster raised by giving drag balls kept the struggling Mattachine Society solvent. While members of Mattachine were

more than happy to accept the income that the balls brought in, they were quick to point out that this was something done only in camp, not seriously, and the drag in no way reflected the attitude of the homosexuals. Also, the drag was removed from those occasions that were considered to be important. No drag was represented at any press parties, for instance. But more hideous than that was the fact that the drag was considered an archaic embarrassment; they did not deserve the work necessary to guarantee their rights. In fact, in the interest of rights of the other gays, the leadership was more than willing to sacrifice the drag in the interest of appeasing the straight. (in *The Female Impersonator*, 1974, p. 60)

This attitude remains at or near the surface, recently becoming an issue once again because Christian fundamentalists have chosen to use videotapes of the more flamboyant drag queens in their hate campaigns against gay men and lesbians.

A few gay men and lesbians — typified by a small group of radical separatist feminist lesbians — hate transgendered persons, and seem determined to mandate them out of existence. One of Brewster's magazines from the early '70s, for example, includes a news item about feminist lesbians abandoning and picketing an event because of the inclusion of drag queens, who they considered demeaning to women. The philosophy of this group was laid out in Janice G. Raymond's book, *The Transsexual Empire*, a violent diatribe against transsexualism. Raymond has said that surgical treatment of transsexualism should be "morally mandated out of existence." Mary Daly, who Raymond quotes extensively, called transsexual persons "Frankensteinian" — an epithet recently noted by Leslie Feinberg in *TransSisters* (Gabriel, 1992). And Daly and Raymond are moderates! Other separatists deliberately misuse pronouns, force transsexual persons out of gay and lesbian events, and on more than one occasion have been physically violent towards transsexual persons. The name-calling has been very shrill, as is apparent from the letters column of the gay and lesbian newspaper, the *San Francisco Bay Times*. For the past year or so it's been full of letters from separatists screaming for the heads of transsexual persons, or letters from transsexuals demanding their rights to be women or men, and of letters from others in the gay and lesbian communities who side for the most part with the transsexuals.

Most lesbians do not agree with the separatists. Last year, at the Michigan Women's Music Festival, Janis Walworth, Wendi Kaiser, and Davina Anne Gabriel gave a questionnaire to several hundred attendees. At an event which many women value and attend because it is free of men, an overwhelming majority of respondents felt that transsexual persons should be included. Those who objected gave reasons which were clearly outside the reality of those who live transsexual lives. No man is going to undergo hundreds of hours of painful electrolysis, take hormone tablets which reduce his libido, give up family, friends, and employment, and get rid of his penis and testicles in order to infiltrate a group of women. Yet that's an entrenched notion of the separatists.

If the variation in understanding and attitudes of most gay men and lesbians towards transgendered persons can be characterized as ignorant, indifferent, embarrassed, or hostile, one must wonder how and why the gay community would accept transgender behavior to the extent that it has. Female impersonation is frequent at bars and parties, and many valued members of the community have gender presentations which vary greatly from the usual stereotypes. The acceptance is partial and sometimes grudging, resulting from ignorance within the gay/lesbian community that many in their community are transgendered. Just as many heterosexuals assume transgendered persons to be gay, so too, do many lesbians and gay men.

I call this attitude "gay imperialism," wherein the accomplishments and the very identities of transgendered persons are collapsed into the gay community. Perhaps the most obvious example of gay imperialism is what happened with Billy Tipton.

Tipton was an accomplished jazz musician, a husband, and father of two adopted sons. After his death, in 1989, it was revealed that he was biologically a woman. The mainstream press quickly proclaimed him to be a woman who had masqueraded "for her art." The gay community claimed him as a lesbian.

Marjorie Garber, writing eloquently about Tipton in her book, *Vested Interests*, points out that the facts of Tipton's life make no sense except when looked at in a transgenderal light. His life was much more than a means to express himself via his music, and much more than a way to live in a lesbian relationship. Neither his wife nor his sons were aware that he did not have male genitalia. He was a husband and a father to them and a man to his neighbors and fellow musicians; he was a woman only to the press and the gay community, both of whom claimed and exploited him after he was conveniently dead.

Stonewall is another example of such gay colonization efforts. After being instrumental in the rebellion, transgendered persons are excluded in various ways from participation in the liberation movement. The movement, in fact, uses transgendered persons in many ways, so long as they are convenient, even while distancing itself as much as possible from them. When a transgendered person is a victim of bashing, the hate crime statistics show an attack on a gay male or lesbian. When entertainment is needed to raise money, transgendered persons are sought. But when a serious statement is to be made to the mainstream press, it is made, in most cases, by a male in a business suit — despite the fact more profound points are often made by drag queens and drag kings who use their outrageousness to make powerful political statements.

Gay scholars have similarly exploited transgendered persons, even while specifically writing about them. Both Walter Williams (1986) and William Roscoe (1990), in their books about the transgendered American Indians called berdache (*The Spirit and the Flesh* and *The Zuni Man-Woman*, respectively), look at their subjects through gay-colored spectacles. It's true that the sexual orientation of many and perhaps even most berdache was to those of the same biological sex, but both Williams and Roscoe interpret berdache from a gay perspective, even as heterosexual anthropologists have interpreted homosexual behavior in various cultures from their own points of view.

With its newly-found voice, the transgender community will no longer tolerate such colonization by the gay community. People like Billy Tipton, Radclyffe Hall, and Joan of Arc are being reclaimed as transgendered — queer, but not gay. They were stolen from the transgendered community; we want them back. And make no mistake about it: the murmur of today will be a roar tomorrow.

The gay/lesbian and transgender communities have much to learn from each other, and the transgender community is eager to begin for it has much to learn about politics, self-discovery, and self-acceptance. But the gay/lesbian community must come to understand that the voices of transgendered persons will forever after be in their ears.

It's a marvelous opportunity for both communities. Here's hoping that the cannons will be pointed outward, towards those who would deny "queers" — all of them, transgendered or gay — the right to live, and not inward, towards those who are more like us than we would like to think.

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#### Endnote

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