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TransSisters

The Journal of Transsexual Feminism

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Should Preoperative Transsexual Women Be Allowed to Attend the New Woman Conference?: Conflicting Views

Plus: Transsexuals at Stonewall 25 • She's Baaa-aack!:
Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* reissued •
Transsexuals Allowed to Enter MWMF • and more

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COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF
TransSisters: the Journal of
Transsexual Feminism:
TRANSSEXUAL WOMEN AT
THE 1994 MICHIGAN
WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL

Introducing Dallas Denny

Beginning with this issue, *TransSisters* is pleased to add Ms. Dallas Denny as its newest staff writer. Dallas has dual credentials as a woman of transsexual experience and a mental health professional. She is a Licensed Psychological Examiner and a member of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc. and of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. She is founder and executive director of the American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc., a national clearinghouse for information about gender dysphoria, publisher of *Chrysalis Quarterly*, and founder of Atlanta Gender Explorations, a support group for



Dallas Denny

persons who are exploring nontraditional gender roles. She also works as a Behavior Specialist with persons with mental retardation. She has more than twenty years of experience working with persons with mental and physical disabilities.

Dallas has a Master of Arts degree in psychology, and is completing a doctorate in special education at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. She has been previously published in many magazines and a number of peer-reviewed professional journals. She has written four novels, and is a songwriter as well. Her books *Gender Dysphoria: A Guide to Research and Identity Management in Transsexualism* were published in early 1994.

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You're Strange and We're Wonderful: The Relationship Between the Gay / Lesbian and Transgender Communities

*(Editor's note: This article was originally published in **Bound by Diversity**; [James Sears, ed; Columbia, S.C.: Sebastian Press, 1994] and is reprinted with permission of the author.)*

by Dallas Denny, M.A.

(I would like to acknowledge Ms. Tinechan Egan of Hove, England as a co-conspirator. Many of the ideas in this essay first surfaced in our conversations during her recent visit to the United States.)

The organized gay and lesbian community is often dated from the Stonewall Riots, which took place in 1969. The transgender community is much younger, and has only in the last several years reached the point of even being identifiable as a community. There is no definitive event, no Stonewall, to serve as a marker for transgendered persons, but they were at Stonewall too, and in fact were the ones who actually started the riots, and who were most violent and most vocal during them. It is possible to make a case that it was gay white middle-class males who were liberated by Stonewall, at the expense of the masculine women and feminine men who started and led the riots.

I've read a lot lately about the "queens and butches" of Stonewall, and their prominent place in the riots. For a time, I thought that it might be a bit of clever revisionist history, but recently I was lucky enough to acquire a stack of vintage drag magazines, and in the first issue of Lee Brewster's *DRAG Queens*, I found this quote:

"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 hangout. 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 there is a long history of men who sleep with men and women who sleep with women, but

there is an equally long history of transgenderism, of men who dress and act as women, and women who act and dress as men. Both can be traced as far back as there are written records. Oftentimes the lines become blurred. Only in recent decades has the distinction between gender identity and sexual preference begun to be understood and written about. The majority of the American public still doesn't understand the difference; to the Great Unwashed, everyone who isn't heterosexual is queer.

Both the gay/lesbian and transgender communities are exceedingly diverse. The gay community is comprised of a subset of small communities which band together because of common interest -- gay men and lesbians, but more than that, leathermen and leatherwomen, sissies, dykes, drag queens, drag kings, and the more assimilated types living in the suburbs. The transgender community is equally diverse. There are transsexuals, people who have made a total commitment to living as members of the other biological sex; they submit their bodies to painful procedures such as surgery and electrolysis and take hormones as part of their process of self-invention. There are transgenderists, whose commitment to physical change is perhaps less extreme, but who identify predominately 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. There are crossdressers who identify as gay. There are prostitutes who crossdress both to please themselves and to make money. And all of these categories include biological females as well as males.

It's impossible to separate all of these people into two distinct groups, for 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 as 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 discrimination by a public who links them together anyway. In fact, this often happens. Because of the work of the Transgender Caucus of the 1993 March on Washington, transgendered people were featured prominently in the various planks of the MOW, and the organizing committees of several states changed their names to include transgendered persons, just

as they had previously changed them to include bisexual persons. There was transgender contingent in the march. But the two-thirds vote needed to include the word "transgendered" in the name of the march did not materialize, just as it did not in the name of the Stonewall celebration. There is just too much misunderstanding of and animosity toward transgendered persons by gay men and lesbians for transgendered persons to be allowed more than marginal inclusion.

The alliance 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 Womyn's Music Festivals, in which transsexual persons were forced to leave the event, actively excluding a less empowered group.

But that sword cuts both ways, for many in the transgender community are white males with the prestige and power associated with being white and male, and the hangups as well. Heterosexual crossdressers are notorious for their homophobia, and in the past, organizations like Tri-Ess, the Society for the Second Self, were considered to be homophobic. Leadership has become more enlightened of late, so that it is no longer necessarily the case, but on the whole, heterosexual crossdressers 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.

An example of such homophobia can be seen in an article entitled "The Evolution of Madelyn," which appeared in October, 1993 in *Secrets*, the magazine of Virginia's Secret, a support group for crossdressers. The author is describing his behavior in 1957, but his modern-day attitude comes through: "There were even specialty costume designers that catered to the female impersonators and made costumes for them. However, I quickly found that they were all homosexual so I stayed away from them." Obviously, Madelyn still has some evolving to do.

The homophobia of crossdressers most often manifests as an emphatic denial of homosexuality. Leslie Feinberg, a genetic female who identifies as both lesbian and transgendered, said in an interview in the premiere issue of *TransSisters: the Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, "I have heard transgender people say, 'I am not gay,' but in an anti-gay world saying that sounds loaded." Feinberg continues, "So there's got to be a way that we as a gender community can say, 'Yes, many of us are gay, but not all of us are.' I think the gender community needs to be good strong fighters against gender oppression, and that in the long run is going to win the most solidarity."

Feinberg's sentiment is by far the most common in the transgender community. Except for homophobic statements made by the occasional unenlightened crossdresser, 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 some imagined 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 two years.

Of course, a considerable number of gay men and lesbians are sensitive towards transgendered persons and their plight. But most gays and lesbians have only superficial knowledge, gleaned from the points of intersection between the two communities. They do not see and often are totally unaware of the larger transgender community which is separate and distinct from the gay community. They don't understand the diversity of the transgender community, and certainly give little or no thought to the advantages of working together. 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. These issues are of critical importance to transgendered persons, obviously, but most gay persons just never consider that that might be the case.

But there is much more going on than mere indifference. There is a pervasive distrust of, antagonism towards, and even hatred towards transgendered persons. Many of the more assimilated types 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 has been going on for a long time. In a discussion of Lee Brewster in *The Female Impersonator # 8* in 1974, the unnamed author pointed out that the money Brewster raised by giving drag balls kept the struggling Mattachine Society solvent. While Mattachine was: ". . . 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 that drag in no way reflected the attitude of the homosexuals. Also, 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 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 drag in the interest of appeasing the straights."

This attitude has remained at or near the surface since that time. It has recently been an issue 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 -- actively hate transgendered persons, and seem determined to mandate them out of existence. This attitude surfaced at the time of Stonewall (one of Brewster's magazines from the early '70s 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 1979 with the publication of 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," and Mary Daly, who Raymond quotes extensively, has called transsexual persons "Frankensteinian." And Daly and Raymond are the moderates. Other separatists have not been so kind. They 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 more it's been full of separatists screaming for the heads of transsexual persons, of transsexual persons demanding their rights to be women or men, and from others in the gay and lesbian communities who have for the most part sided with the transsexuals.

It's clear that the majority of lesbians do not agree with the separatists. It's all right with them if transsexual people dare to exist. At the 1992 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, Janis Walworth and Davina Anne Gabriel conducted a survey of 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 realities 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 levels of understanding and attitudes of most gay men and lesbians towards transgendered persons can be characterized as ignorant, indifferent, embarrassed, or hostile, it becomes puzzling how and why the gay community would accept transgender behavior to the extent that it has. Female impersonation is frequent at bars and at parties, and many valued members of the community have gender presentations which vary far from the usual stereotypes. The acceptance is partial and sometimes grudging, resulting from ignorance by the gay/lesbian community that many in their community are transgendered. Just as happens with many heterosexuals, transgendered persons are assumed to be gay, and that's that.

This has resulted in an enormous amount of what I call Gay Imperialism, in which the accomplishments and the very identities of transgendered persons are collapsed into the gay community. Perhaps the most obvious example of this 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 press quickly proclaimed him to be a woman who had masqueraded "for her art." The gay/lesbian community claimed him as a lesbian.

Marjorie Garber has written eloquently about Tipton in her

book *Vested Interests*. She 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 to the gay/lesbian community, both who claimed him and exploited him after he was conveniently dead.

Stonewall is another example of gay colonization of transgendered persons. After being instrumental in the rebellion, they 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 gay female. When entertainment is needed and when it is important to raise money, transgendered persons are sought out. 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 that the most profound things are often said 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 and William Roscoe, 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. And it's clear that it is a reclamation and not a revision, for they were stolen from the transgendered community, which wants 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. The transgender community is eager for discourse. It has much to learn about politics, self-discovery and self-acceptance from the gay/lesbian community. And 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.