

Finn Mackay. 20th August 2018.

Who's Afraid of Female Masculinity?

In November 2017 Ruth Hunt, the Chief Executive of Stonewall, the national LGBT human rights organisation in the UK, stated in [Huffington Post](#) that butch lesbians are all woman. Rightly defending trans rights, she did so with reference to the differences between trans people and butch lesbians like her.

"I have never – regardless of the way I present who I am – questioned my gender identity. Dressing 'like a boy', wearing a suit, having short hair, is my way of being a woman" (Hunt, 2017).

Skip forward to the tinderbox Summer of 2018 and everyone is in love with comedian Hannah Gadsby and her outstanding show '[Nanette](#)', screened on Netflix and quickly becoming something of a sensation. Part way through her show, Gadsby recalls appeals from audience members who contacted her to urge that she declare herself to be transgender; she recounts that this was news to her. Clarifying that she is not trans, she explains that she is a different kind of woman, and seen as such, often to the detriment of her own personal safety as many lesbians will unfortunately recognise.

Continuing this theme, Tabs, the founder of "[Butch, Please](#)" in the UK, organiser of successful London club nights and other cultural events, shared a video [interview](#) for *Pink News* about her identity and experiences, arguing that for her, butch is not masculine, but another form of femininity, and another way of being a woman. "*Why can't you see me as a woman?*" she challenges, aiming this riposte at those who ask her why she wants to be a man, or dresses like a man or any other of the myriad of scrutinising questions people feel entitled to ask lesbians ad infinitum.

Accounts such as these, in the public domain, draw a very clear line between a trans identity and a butch lesbian identity, but it is not always this simple. It certainly is not that simple for me, I still haven't worked it all out and I've identified as butch since my teens. This is partly why I've wanted to study this area in my academic work, and in 2017 I conducted research on lesbian and queer masculinities in the UK. I surveyed over 200 people, including 30 self-identified butch individuals, on their sexuality, sex and gender identities. While the majority did indeed see themselves as proud lesbian women, several spoke of a sense of discomfort with terms such as 'woman' and 'lesbian'. There are many butch lesbians who would shudder at the thought that anything about their gender identity and gender presentation is feminine, preferring to define themselves as masculine and to make masculinity their own.

The idea of butch masculinity is, of course, not new, and the topics of female masculinity and lesbian gender run through many classics on any Gender Studies bookshelf or University programme. Back at the height of the queer zeitgeist that was the 1990s, academic and author Professor Jack Halberstam wrote in 1998 about a spectrum of masculinity, in an article titled 'Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum'. Professor Halberstam argued that rather than a clear line, there is actually a lot of grey territory between the borders of trans and butch. Identities and experiences can be similar between those who would identify as trans men or

transgender masculine individuals and those who identify as butch; gender dysphoria comes in degrees, and is not only experienced by trans people.

These themes also featured in the responses people gave to my survey, those who took part used a variety of terms to describe themselves and their masculinity, such as: masculine of centre, transmasculine, butch, stud, boi, faggy butch, gender non-conforming, soft butch or tomboy for example. Some found the term 'lesbian' too female for them, with its connotations of same-gender attraction or women-loving-women definitions; they did not reject it, due to their politics, but several said that they preferred terms like 'queer' or 'gay' for these reasons.

For some, the border, or line, between trans and butch was one they drew themselves and in many cases they felt that act of self-definition was the main difference, in a landscape of numerous shared experiences. The point is that what separates trans and butch might not, in fact, be feelings of identity, sex or gender dysphoria, but simply a line in the sand – that line is whatever people need, can or are willing to do to make a home in their body. Some people choose to transition, and may pursue a tapestry of various surgeries, hormones and legal recognition as trans men, and will self-identify as trans, and some do not. The former are trans men, the latter are not.

But, those who hold this line do not always do so because they are innately wedded to womanhood or femaleness, sometimes far from it; and this needs to be more widely acknowledged, not least because of the consequences it brings, in terms of harassment, of course, but also in terms of alienation, of a sense of not fitting in with communities on offer, neither lesbian nor trans. The individuals who took part in my survey were no strangers to the sorts of hostilities and violence mentioned at the start of this article, they were stared at in public toilets, harassed on the street, assumed to be men or boys (the queering or transing of age is another issue not discussed enough!), and, also, sometimes, assumed to be trans. While they did not identify as trans, or as trans men, they often did not identify as women either, or as female.

This alienation from 'woman' was due to a variety of reasons; the butches in my survey spoke about a longstanding lack of identification with femininity, often reported since early childhood, plus an indifference to or discomfort with their female body, a lack of interest in feminine clothes or styles and a feeling of difference from women they saw around them who presented as feminine. This feeling of difference was not just a feeling, they were usually visibly different to the majority of women, and so this was noticed by others, leading to the sorts of challenges in women's toilets that are so well-known; and someone screaming 'this is the LADIES!' at you, does not exactly scream sisterhood and inclusion.

Some butches therefore made a distinction between being 'woman' and being 'female', with the former seen as a political category and the latter a description of the features of their body. This is why they were able to identify as women and as lesbians in a strategic sense, emphasising that this was a conscious and political choice based on the fact that due to their female body they had usually been treated as women in society and therefore knew and understood what it is to be treated as women in a patriarchal society. As butch lesbians are mothers, employees, consumers and much more in every part of the fabric of life, they are not immune to the barriers that structural inequalities such as sexism, as well as racism, social class and homophobia, put in the way. We are all too aware that while we may be read as men, we are usually not paid as men, rewarded as men, or promoted as men.

While many butch lesbians will be familiar with being mistaken as a man, for some people this is not so much a case of mistaken identity; for some butches this is a case of their gender being read correctly, and their physical sex being assumed incorrectly. This is why I always avoid the term 'misgendered', because, for many who identify with and present as masculine, their gender is being read perfectly well by others, the error is to assume that only males can be masculine, and that therefore anyone who presents as masculine, must be male. Perhaps it would be more accurate then, to start using the, admittedly more clunky, phrase – 'mis-sexed' instead. This also serves to shine a light on problems with that other commonly (mis)used term: gender dysphoria. For those butches who identify as masculine and identify with masculinity, there is arguably no gender dysphoria, because their gender is not something they themselves question.

What is in question, for some, not all, might be the extent to which their body matches the current cultural expectations for what a masculine body is supposed to look like. As men's fashion and cosmetics industries continue down the well-worn road of objectification and self-loathing that has been the business model of women's products for decades, it is no wonder that this current context is one where most men worry that they can't match up to the increasingly harmful ideals of the masculine body beautiful. It can be even more challenging, therefore, for masculine identified females bombarded with adverts featuring perfect pecs, six packs and oily muscularity!

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge then, that for some butches their gender identity is a million miles from feminine, and their presentation is one way of being butch, not another way of being a woman. There are as many ways of being butch as there are butches. Butch can be a fabulous way to be a woman; it can be a flamboyant way to be feminine. But what if butch masculinity could also be one way of being masculine? It certainly has a lot to offer, not least, it is usually stylish and well turned out! It is surely no coincidence that the lesbian blogosphere is full of dapper butch fashion tips and tomboy styles on Instagram; tailors like the UK based [Butch Clothing Company](#) are now catering to men and women, 'best butches' and lesbian brides. Think Gareth Southgate for example, stoic, polite, sweating in a full three piece suit....and basically you have an idea of what daily life is like for hundreds of butch lesbians.

While too many men are not facilitated or encouraged to have this chance, butches do have time to reflect on the type of masculine they want to be and become, which, hopefully, should be a positive. The experience of feeling different, usually from an early age, and being treated as such, often aggressively, breeds an awareness of violence and a deep understanding of the importance of different ways of communicating, expressing and conducting oneself for example. Entering into our relationships there are few role models around; lesbian relationships of any sort are not regularly portrayed in films or on TV, we didn't find ourselves in teen fiction or the families in the story books we were read at school. The plus side of this is that there are less taken for granted rules; butch masculinity does not have to assume it will bring in all the money, or that it can't bake bread. There are a multitude of expressions of masculinity, from a multitude of individuals, not all of whom fit so neatly into available labels and categories. Butches have separated the wheat from the chaff in the playing field of masculinity, and by choosing their own path can demonstrate a winning formula.