



Masculine, Feminine,
or Fourth of July

Babe the Dog was a lab and golden retriever mix, born on the Fourth of July, or at least close enough that I could claim the parades and fireworks as a celebration of that auspicious event. At home the dog would get an extra Milk-Bone treat, and the people would get a mint chocolate chip ice cream cake with chocolate fudge icing from Baskin-Robbins. When the local Baskin-Robbins closed, it was replaced by another ice cream franchise. What could we do? Janet called to place the order.

“We don’t have fudge icing.”

“What do you have?”

“Masculine, feminine, or Fourth of July.”

“What? But . . . ,” Janet stumbled, “but, we want *fudge*. And, and . . . it’s for the *dog*—we have a dog, and it’s her birthday.”

Janet pressed the point but ended up just saying, “Whatever.” I don’t remember the icing, other than that it was disappointingly *not* fudge. Nor can I recall ordering again from that particular shop. I have, however, many times used the line “masculine, feminine, or Fourth of July” to teach both the absurdity and the normative power of gender. There in a list of choices are its two wholly naturalized categories and a comically out-of-place national holiday, but the seem-

ingly misplaced Fourth of July serves to remind us that a laughably simple and punishingly binary notion of gender is enforced by the powers that be, including the state. Gender, which is a state of mind and embodied attitude, is a site of volatile power, pleasure, and subtle coercion, often used to discipline our thoughts and bodily affects. Normative gender is certainly wielded as a weapon by children anxious to shore up their own selfhood by challenging someone else's. Consult your memory and you'll find that this is true.

Sadly, madly, every birth certificate offers two—and only two—sexes, and only one may be declared. Sex is the first question in every mouth after a birth, and infants are quite ruthlessly assigned to one body or the other, despite the fact that intersex births are far more common than you would think, as the important work of biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling has demonstrated.¹ If innate biology offers no firm foundation for a superstructure of twos, neither does the social world. Parents, teachers, siblings, peers, physicians, pastors, psychologists, and those who enforce the law, all solicit a child to shelter itself under one gender or the other, but many kids refuse, sometimes at considerable cost to themselves.

Gender can also afford embodied pleasures, if one is confident in instantiating it and pleased with the results. It's now possible to modify your body to conform to your felt sense of gender. I've taught students who came to Wesleyan sexed and gendered as (more or less) feminine women, but graduated as trans men (FTM) with deepened voices and beards, their bodies modified by top surgeries—the removal of breasts—and shots of testosterone (T). There's no necessity dictating that a bodymind sexed female at birth will present itself to the world as feminine in adulthood, and no necessary sexuality tied to either sex or gender. “[T]he longer I hang around the various crossroads and deltas of gender, the more I notice that nothing is clear enough to be easy,” writes S. Bear Bergman, a trans man who's hung around long enough

to be well recognized in the queer-trans community as an author of first-person accounts.² Today young people who transform their official gender may be accepted, even celebrated—more than one transgender girl has been elected homecoming queen—but transgender teenagers have been murdered in school, too. Larry (Latisha) King, a slight, effeminate fifteen-year-old boy relentlessly hounded as a “fag-got,” was killed, shot in the head by a high school classmate offended by Latisha’s feminine bearing, flirtatious manner, makeup, and high-heeled boots.³ Children yoked with a gender they don’t recognize as their own or who are confused can be made to suffer cruelly in a world that naturalizes and links together binary sex and gender. If you make it into young adulthood, you may be able to use the force field of gender for your own pleasure and toward your own ends, but straight is the gate and narrow the way.

Once I got to college, I didn’t give much thought to my gender and devoted lots to my sexuality. Most of the time I wore flannel shirts and jeans, sneakers and boots. The first lesbian activists in the gay liberation movement whom I met in 1972 declared themselves relieved that they now could go to the bars liberated from the felt necessity to identify as either butch or femme. So those gendered sexualities seemed to me and my friends a thing of the past, something to be playfully gestured toward but not seriously taken up. In the spring of my senior year, for instance, I picked up a black tuxedo jacket at a yard sale and stepped out to a big party wearing it with my freshly washed white painter pants. I stopped on the way to pick a white rose from the president’s rose garden for my buttonhole, and joined my friends feeling quite dashing.

This sort of “soft butch” style was not, however, to be taken seriously, because we were lesbian feminists who thought that asserting masculine/feminine anywhere, by anyone, was a patriarchal dead end. Butch/femme was something to sport with rather than a deeply

felt commitment to honor. Lesbian sexuality seemed to me to have nothing to do with masculinity—or femininity, for that matter, though lesbianism was integral to a feminism that sought to liberate all women. Sex was just sexy. Commitments to explicitly feminine and masculine styles were to my mind outmoded and irrelevant. I’ve done a lot of reading and talking since then, and have come to regret this position so insensitive to the complexities of desire and the stylizations specific to race and class, but such was my youthful understanding. When several years ago I read Amber Hollibaugh’s book *My Dangerous Desires*, I recognized myself as one who would have discounted her and her sweetheart had we met in the 1970s. She’s a big, beautiful, dedicated femme who showed up with her decidedly butch lover at a meeting where they were both written off as relics of a superseded past. She was rejected by a movement for sexual liberation she’d been a part of from the first. Amber, please accept my apologies.

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In the 1950s and 1960s, one place butch/femme genders were elaborated was working-class bar culture—you can get a vivid sense of the stakes by reading *Stone Butch Blues*, an autobiographical bildungsroman that recounts how a young butch comes of age in the bars and factories of Buffalo, New York. For another approach to the same scene, read *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, an oral history of working-class lesbian life that famously dedicates itself to “understand[ing] butch-fem culture from an insider’s perspective.” (Both books have been recently reissued, clear evidence of ongoing interest in how gender is stylized.)⁴ My lover in graduate school was older than I, and had grown up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood surrounded by New Jersey affluence. She wanted to have

nothing to do with the culture of those bars. When I was in graduate school, Elizabeth and I once went to a bar in Pawtucket, a worn-out working-class town just north of Providence. The place was mostly empty, though several women were playing pool, most of them large, all with short haircuts, wearing shirts and pants. It seemed sad and lifeless to Elizabeth, though I could imagine having fun drinking Miller High Life and hanging out in a place so far distant from my library carrel. I drank a Miller and she had a bad glass of wine. We never returned.

Elizabeth's dislike was, I think, solidly grounded in a refusal to be identified with a lower-class stylization of life. Her mother, a gifted seamstress, conspired with her daughter to transform Elizabeth into a girl who could, without any faltering and with no misstep, date a boy who belonged to the Windy Hollow Hunt Club and rode to hounds. He invited her to the annual Hunt Ball, and had the pleasure of a beautiful, fashionable date on his arm. Elizabeth said he was handsome, but dumb as a brick. Things started looking up her first year in college, when she fell in love with a Jewish girl from New York City—a striver like herself, but from a world entirely different from suburban New Jersey. I don't know what her girlfriend studied, but Elizabeth was a French major who longed for the elegance and intellectual sophistication of Paris. When they graduated in 1962, they were off to the City of Lights.

Elizabeth was to return to Paris again and again, first as a graduate student studying the most experimental of experimental French novels, and then as a professor of French language and literature. When she spoke to me of those years, she told me that the Katmandou, a nightclub at 21 rue Vieux Colombier, was fabulous, and when we went together to Paris in 1990, we hoped to find it still open, only to be disappointed. I discovered an Internet site memorializing its history when I googled the name.⁵ It was “a sophisticated place,

patronized by relatively well-heeled women and celebrities, whether lesbian or not: the place was therefore quite exclusive socially,” and promised attractive decadence. As the club’s publicity pointedly announced, “The girls are young, modern, [and wear] miniskirts, [not the] antique male costume of the other clubs.”

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When Janet and I took up gender in the waning years of the 1990s, I once again sported with “masculinity,” while Janet elaborated a fabulous “femininity” for her amusement and mine. In those years, lesbian genders often reprised butch and femme styles in a purportedly “postmodern” sort of way—it was the era of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* revival on Broadway and doing the time warp dance (“Oh, fantasy free me . . .”).⁶ We dressed for our own pleasure, certainly, but also as a way of being quickly legible as lesbians. Butches have it easier, in that regard, than femme lesbians, who are almost always read as heterosexual—except when in a butch-femme couple. When we would “go to New York,” as we called it when going to some cultural event in the city, we’d dress up, as we did once when heading out for a decidedly feminist/queer musical put on by the rock ’n’ roll band Betty. I vividly remember leaving the apartment, because the lobby had a huge mirror that reflected our happiness and high style—I was in a white silk shirt with French cuffs, gold and silver cufflinks (Janet’s gift, from Tiffany’s no less!), black velvet jacket, red leather boot-cut pants, and black cowboy boots. Janet wore a long-sleeved white shirt that you could see right through, a sleeveless shirt with an icon of the Virgin Mary on its front, a short gray skirt, and gorgeous red pumps with four-inch heels. Off to the first show, we were walking together in the evening light, and on the busy sidewalk passed a homeless

man. We dropped our loose change in his cup, and as we walked away he called loudly after us, “You’re *both* lesbians!” That short sentence quickly became shorthand for the pleasures of dressing up and stepping out.

In colder weather, instead of the velvet jacket I wore a butter-soft, mid-calf black leather coat with a white silk scarf. The coat had a beautiful satin lining that afforded scant protection in the winter-time, a fact that was borne in on me one January night when we were walking from the subway to a bar called Hell, in the meatpacking district where the wind whips off the Hudson River—but who cares? Janet had a delectable array of bustiers, filmy blouses, leather, velvet, and silk skirts, and many heels, including brown knee-high boots with silver tips from Barney’s and those red pumps—so elegant that they were long on display in our bedroom. In 2003 we went to Provincetown over Memorial Day weekend to celebrate Janet’s birthday. We were dressed up and on our way to a restaurant for a celebratory meal when a guy sitting on a porch set back from the street hollered out, “You sexy things!” Who’s to argue? We both loved making it clear that we were sexual partners, and that we were, as the phrase is, “sex-positive” and queer.

The last time I can remember dressing up this way was to go to a cocktail party Henry was throwing early in the fall semester of 2003, maybe three weeks before I broke my neck. Janet and I were apart, in Middletown and NYC. Because wearing black leather jeans requires a certain frame of mind, in the absence of Janet I was seriously considering how I wanted to dress up for the party. In the end, I decided that such an event hosted by one of the founders of the field of queer studies actually called for those leather jeans, which I chose to complement with a tight, silky, white sleeveless top that did a great job of showing off not only my breasts, but also biceps, triceps, deltoids, and pecs. Silver earrings, silver bracelet, silver rings. Fendi perfume. I

got to flirt with the girls *and* the boys—it was a great outfit and just the right gender for the occasion.

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I no longer have a gender. Rather, I have a wheelchair. I'm entirely absorbed into its gestalt. I'm now misrecognized as a man more often than ever before, almost every time I go out. I'm not surprised. I know that 82% of spinal cord injuries are suffered by young men, and middle-aged butchy women must be statistically negligible in that accounting. Besides, when I'm outside wheeling my chair, I'm belted in. For ten years, I used a three-inch belt that went around my chest and fastened with Velcro—I grabbed each end, pushed my torso against the seat back, and brought the belt together as high up on my chest and as tightly as I could, but it still did a pretty good job of flattening my breasts. This I regarded as a great irony and a perverse injury, because I've never wanted to bind my breasts, unlike some butch women. To the contrary, I used to wear my shirts unbuttoned at the top, as Janet likes to remind me, and my zippers pulled down almost to the cleavage. I like my big, gorgeous breasts. I now have a higher back to my wheelchair and a neoprene vest to hold me up, with straps coming down over my shoulders to keep them back, and straps at the bottom, just under my rib cage, that are secured to the side of the chair. There's a zipper up the middle. My breasts are not as smashed by this restraint, which I wear all the time. It's better for my posture, if not for my wardrobe. I joke with Janet that the vest reminds me of the old advertisements for Maidenform bras that "lift and separate." There's no "lifting" in this case, only a unisex sort of flattening, and indifferent separating. I love my breasts, and loved to show them off, but there's no way you'd know that seeing me now.

It's actually impossible for me to sit up straight, though it took me two years to understand that simple fact. My body is flat enough when I lie down, but when I sit up, my spine is shaped like a C. Not one of my "core" muscles is functional—those muscles that you work so hard in Pilates—the ones around your abdomen and back that support your torso. "Rake the seat of the chair from front to back," Danielle, my life-affirming physical therapist, said to me. We were talking about the wheelchair I was using in the Hospital for Special Care. "Look, it's built so that you can make the adjustment, using the holes that are drilled right here. You can raise the front so it dumps you on your tailbone. Let gravity work for you." I did as she instructed when I got my own chair, so when I'm seated, I'm always slightly reclined. Check out your own body, and imagine that the muscles below the breastbone have little functional power—you'd flop over without support, like I do. To make things worse, the C-curve of my back is accentuated because the surgery on my neck thrusts my head slightly forward, like a pigeon's when it walks. As I sit slumped in the chair, the chair is what you see. That's my distinctive profile.

I may have no gender, but the chair does. It's masculine. True, most of the time I offer little that would help you see me as a woman. I dress all in black—black pants or dark jeans, black T-shirt, black sweater. The chair is black, the vest is black, and I'm trying to make my body disappear as much as I can. When I am dressing for work, I'll wear a colorful scarf and earrings, but that's it. Maybe I am in permanent mourning. When somebody refers to me as a man, or calls me sir, and then realizes the mistake, profuse apologies follow, as if I had just suffered a grievous insult. The man stocking the grocery store shelves the other day, the shopper in front of me, the boy in the elevator, the barista at the coffee shop, the poll

worker where I went to vote—I say to them all, “That’s okay. It doesn’t matter.” The woman standing chatting on the sidewalk tells her friend, “Let that man pass.” Then, flustered, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I just didn’t realize, I didn’t see, I couldn’t tell . . .” “Don’t worry—it’s okay,” I say, as I pass by.

And it is. I just don’t care that much about my gender, which perhaps tells you all you need to know about how alien I find my body, how alien my life can feel to me.