QueerLikeUs

When transgendered people entered the LGB movement, lesbian feminist E.J. Graff didn't think they belonged there. After delving into tranny politics, she changed her mind. Why?

WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR the word *transgendered*? Think carefully—I'd bet it was within the past five years. And yet suddenly transgendered folks are everywhere: *Boys Don't Cry* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Ally McBeal* and *The Drew Carey Show*, from battles over the language of the Employee Non-Discrimination Act to lawsuits over whether a boy can wear a dress to school. That's because during the 1990s a new transgender identity started to form and grow at warp speed. It's an identity that grew from the ashes of mid-20th-century transsexuality, was drawn out of isolation by the Internet, and gained

hope and direction by watching the '90s success of the lesbian and gay movement.

Transgendered is a blurry umbrella term that's been taken up by an unlikely array of allies: cross-dressing heterosexual truck drivers; transsexuals who may or may not opt to alter their genitals; dykes thrown out of women's rest rooms for their masculinity; high school queens bashed for wearing nail polish and makeup. Increasing numbers of queer young people and lesbian activists identify more strongly as transgendered than as gay. In gathering under the new "trans" banner, they're saying that they're tired of being made to suffer because they're too masculine or too feminine for their sex.

My first reaction to the trans emergence was annoyance. I couldn't see why trans people wanted to muscle in on the few inches of ground that feminists, lesbians, and gay men had so painstakingly won for ourselves. But after spending some time studying our intertwined histories, the overlapping hatreds aimed at trannies and homos, and the political approaches growing out of the transgender emergence, I've changed my mind. Now it seems obvious that what trannies and homos have in common by far overshadows our differences, just as our enemies believe. And the political efforts and rhetoric coming out of the trans branch of the queer world strike me as perhaps the best way to advance us all.

Once upon a time, what identified you publicly as queer was not the sex you had but the sex you appeared to be. Historian George Chauncey has shown us that fin de siècle fairies were regarded as such as much for their rouge and frippery as for their (bottom) sex; tops were seen as the real men who'd take pleasure anywhere—"sodomy" itself being no more or less sinful than other extramarital fornications. Things were similar for women: Stephen, the stone butch heroine of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, was an invert, while her femme girlfriend was "normal"—and so could be saved by an actual (today's transgendered folks would say "genetic") man. That analysis fell away as Freud colonized the popular mind and Westerners started to define themselves less by how they were gendered and more by which sex they desired. The invert and the fairy disappeared; *hetero* and *homo* became the 20th-century poles of sexual identity.

The medical establishment busied itself by sorting us into new taxonomies of perversion. By mid century, homos, who wanted to have sex with others of the same sex, were carefully distinguished from transsexuals, who wanted to have a body of a different sex (which would presumably make them heterosexual), who were carefully separated from cross-dressers, who merely wanted to wear the clothes of a different sex (while remaining safely heterosexual). Get it? Nobody else did either, except the doctors—because in practice, gender identity and sexual desire aren't so easily separable. The really notable effect of the newly defined gender/desire tracks was that it divided the queer community, separating us from each other. Queers found themselves choosing among the available slots according to which desire was more internally pressing: the homo desire or the desire to be regendered. Through the '50s and '60s, as lesbians and gay men were beginning to scrape together a homo-based sociopolitical movement, genderqueers who were overwhelmed by the discomfort of their bodies (primarily, males who wanted to be women) were tracked into an experimental medical protocol that forced them into silence.

To get gender identity clinics to admit them, transsexual candidates had to tell a tightly prescribed story: I'm a woman trapped in a man's body, never liked my penis, can't wait to wear gingham and serve meat loaf to my man every night. Once in, they were counseled in the most sexist stereotypes of womanhood: After graduation they were told to live by a code of silence—changing pronouns (sound familiar?) when talking about the past and telling no one except a potential spouse that they'd once been differently sexed. Academic doctors were too interested in their patients' complete and "successful" disappearance into the woodwork of womanhood (hence the tranny slang *woodworking*, the equivalent of the homo *closeted*) to let transsexuals actually build a community to support each other—or define their lives and genders for themselves.

In regular life, of course, many genderqueers kept living as homoqueers in a world that didn't make the same fine distinctions as did the good doctors. Police raiding gay bars singled out butches and queens for attack—resulting, at the end of the increasingly politicized '60s, in the now-mythic eruption at the Stonewall bar with its chorus line of drag queens alongside the penny-loafer crowd.

Ironically enough, that's when our queer family began to split up. As years of underground homo organizing became visible, lesbian and gay communities developed the cartoonishly exaggerated pride common to groups that have long been kicked around. Gay men started butching it up like little Ken

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dolls, proving belatedly to their childhood tormenters that they weren't sissies after all but real men who wanted other real men (nelly queens need not apply). Early radical feminism in all its earnest and romantic wackiness shaped a new lesbian culture that snubbed butches as "male-identified," rejected dildos as evil and retrograde, and held cervix-gazing events like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival that refused to let men enter even our word. It was a phase of exaggerated separatism, a separatism that celebrated homoqueerness and enforced a different kind of gender conformity than had our childhoods.

But as one branch of the family was becoming ecstatically visible, another branch was experimenting with invisibility because medicine was offering to help it disappear into the mainstream. Our identities were once again as separate as they had been for the fairies and their sailors. This split was most painful for those who stood right on the fault line: gay male queens no longer welcome in Castro-clone bars; butches in their bindings, flattops, and irony-free ties, or male-to-females (MTFs) of any description, unwelcome in the tightly prescribed world of lesbian-feminist androgyny.

But a series of changes led to the regrouping and reuniting of those identity refugees under the new label *transgendered.* The word itself was coined early on by Virginia Prince, a heterosexually married cross-dresser. Prince, who was born male and lived as female without surgery, invented the word as a way to identify herself as neither homosexual nor transsexual—making it especially ironic that the word has expanded to include both.

The first change was the collapse of transsexuality's uniform code of silence. A few MTFs decided that the medical narrative was nonsense—that in becoming women they hadn't lost their desire for women. When that handful tried to find political solidarity (and dates) among lesbians, it triggered a political earthquake; lesbian feminists split furiously over whether to admit MTFs to women-only events. What was the definition of *woman?* Who was feminism for? These, it turned out, were central questions—and no one agreed on the answers. Like Jews who had flocked to Israel for politically incompatible reasons, lesbians had been building a refuge whose principles no one could agree on. The MTF debates were just the beginning of many such skirmishes over the female and feminist credentials of others, including butches, femmes, and S/M practitioners. Eventually lesbians gave up policing each other's feminist credentials—but, unfortunately, news of this internal political shift didn't make it out to the MTF transwomen themselves, whose intimate sense of injury still simmers as a strain of anti-gay anger in transgender politics today.

Second, the gender identity clinics' protocol for sex reassignment collapsed under the weight of its own hubris. In 1979 an infamous paper appeared in the *Archives of General Psychiatry,* written by Jon Meyer, the head of the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic, and his secretary, Donna Reter, purporting to show no advantage to sex-reassignment surgery. MTFs who'd been unhappy before The Operation, in other words, were still unhappy afterward. Although the data was found to be methodologically flawed, the real flaw was hidden in full view. If you had to lie about your entire life, might that itself not make you just a teensy bit unhappy? Nevertheless, in the wake

of the report, Johns Hopkins's and most of the other gender clinics closed. Transsexuality didn't go away, of course. But people who wanted to alter their bodily sex had to seek surgical and hormonal interventions from individual doctors rather than from a clinic that asked them to swallow an entire theory first—leaving them to figure out the meaning of their queerly gendered desires without a script.

Then came a shot heard round the transsexual world. In 1987, Sandy Stone—an MTF sound engineer who'd left the lesbian feminist Olivia Collective due to separatist outrage—wrote an article titled "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." Stone called for an identity that didn't parrot the "trapped in the wrong body" line. It was time, she argued, to admit that trannies weren't exactly the same as born-men or born-women and urged people to discuss their real, gender-crossing lives as people who were just a little bit...queer.

Once Stone seeded the clouds with this radically obvious idea, the heavens opened and it began to pour. Transsexuals, cross-dressers, and other gender deviants started to talk about not ever quite fitting their assigned boxes, with or without hormones or surgery or makeovers. Support groups, resource centers, magazines, and conferences mushroomed, provoking discussions of identities that would have made the gender docs cringe. Maybe you could be a full-on surgery-and-all transsexual and stay queerly married to your legal spouse. Maybe you could "transition" —switch your name, clothes, and public identity to that of the other sex—without genital reconstruction, as genderqueers had before medicalization. Maybe—and this was essential for political activism—you didn't have to "woodwork" but could be transgendered for all to see.

By the mid '90s the Internet had arrived—and spread these new ideas like wildfire. Unlike the transsexual pioneers, many of the newly emerged "transgendered" had plenty to lose: They were people safely rooted in jobs, families, and communities. And lose they did. When individuals come out as transgendered they're often treated like gay folk were 40 years ago: stripped of their jobs, brutalized on the street, harassed by police, left to die by paramedics. Horror stories abound: the Chicago cross-dressing man whose face was smashed into a telephone pole by strangers and was left for hours in the ER, only to be rushed into emergency surgery when he went to a different hospital the next day. The transitioning MTF who, working in a South Dakota government facility, occasionally had "accidents" because someone locked her out of the only bathroom she was permitted to use. The female-to-males (FTMs) denied health coverage by providers who define every fever or scrape as somehow related to their (excluded) transsexuality. The transwomen who, when they step outside New York's lesbian and gay community center to smoke, are regularly jailed for "soliciting." These are the ordinary stories of indignity and distress—so ordinary, they don't hit the news.

Now, add insult to injury. Just as the transgendered community was beginning to gather, lesbians and gay men were striding into visibility and respectability. Remember the '90s? Suddenly, it seemed the whole country was talking about homos: gays-in-the-military, Hawaii's same-sex marriage lawsuit, Melissa's babies, Ellen's coming-out episode, and so much more. Corporations and the media started treating us respectfully, and power brokers were answering activists' calls. And genderqueers—who were more likely to be fired, attacked, or murdered than the rest of us—were furious at being left behind. They were furious that "gender identity and expression" weren't included in proposed hate-crimes statutes or nondiscrimination laws at the federal, state, or local level. They were furious that Brandon Teena's 1993 murder—the first trans murder given national media attention—was covered by Donna Minkowitz at *The Village Voice* as that of a confused or passing lesbian, not as a transman. That the 1993 march on Washington and the 1994 Stonewall 25 march in New York looked like Gap ads—no genderqueers in sight. That the nation went into mourning over the murder of Matthew Shepard but barely gave a paragraph's attention to the murders of transgendered people like Debra Forte and Chanelle Pickett and Rita Hester and so many more [see sidebar on page 82].

The need to educate homos gave the nascent transgender community an organizing focus, a target for its first two major political actions. First came Camp Trans. After owners of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival expelled a transwoman in 1991, lesbian and transsexual supporters protested outside the festival's gates in 1992. Second was the trial of Brandon Teena's murderers in 1995. About 15 transgendered people converged on Falls City, Neb., where they picketed the courthouse. These were the first public demonstrations organized by and for transgendered people. Almost nobody else

noticed—but trans people themselves were electrified that they had stood up. Helped by the Internet, street activism spread fast: vigils for murdered transgendered people, protests when a gay paper referred to a dead transwoman as "he." Those efforts were given a big boost by the success of the lesbian-made movie *Boys Don't Cry*, which made Brandon Teena arguably the most famous FTM cross-dresser since Joan of Arc—and finally portrayed a transgendered life not as a joke or a psychosis (remember *The Silence of the Lambs*?) but as a nearly classical and very contemporary tragedy.

Trans activism has, since then, expanded like the universe after the big bang. Today, every major national lesbian and gay organization as well as most local ones give at least lip service to trans inclusion; each of the four major lesbian and gay legal organizations has someone dedicated to trans issues. Do we really belong together politically? I think we do. To most people there's only a short slide from Will to Jack to Priscilla, Queen of the Desert: Our community's finely parsed distinctions are invisible to the straights. When in 1999 the man who "randomly" murdered trans activist Tacy Ranta was asked why he had shot "that lady," his accomplice replied, "That was no lady, that was a faggot." And he was right—trannies are faggots like us. Is someone really a male heterosexual cross-dresser if, in a dress, he answers to "Courtney" and has sex with men? Is someone "heterosexual" if he was born female but masculinized his face and body via testosterone and breast removal yet still has a vagina and sleeps with women? Or are such people something a little more...queer?

And just as trannies are faggots like us, most homos are transgendered like them: schoolmates, family, friends, coworkers, and strangers often find us a little too masculine or too feminine for our sex. Like Tacy Ranta, none of us—lesbian, gay man, FTM, MTF, and in-between—can ever really be sure which part of our queerness is under attack at any given moment. Are 10-year-old sissies and 6-foot-6 transwomen called "faggot" because of their presumed sex lives or because they're an unfamiliar mixture of girl and boy? Legislators and judges who don't like trannies also don't like homos; if we can educate them on one queerness, they usually get the other. If we want hate-crimes laws and nondiscrimination laws, we better be sure those laws cover everything about us—both our sexual orientations and our gendered appearance—that's queer. ■

Day of Remembrance

IN NOVEMBER 1998, LESS than two months after the murder of Matthew Shepard, trans Webmistress Gwen Smith heard about the death of Rita Hester, an MTF strangled in her bedroom in a working-class neighborhood of Boston. To Smith this sounded numbingly like the murder of Chanelle Pickett almost exactly three years earlier, less than five miles away. But when Smith mentioned Chanelle in a trans chat room, nobody else knew the name.

Grieved that trans dead were so quickly forgotten, Smith started a Web site called "Remembering Our Dead" (www.gender.org/remember), where she listed every trans-related death she and others could document. To the shock of the trans community, she quickly found that people were dying at the rate of at least one a month because someone didn't like how they were gendered. Sometimes they were stabbed or shot or strangled. Sometimes medical personnel refused to help them or stood by laughing. The steadily increasing numbers—today, more than 200 names are listed on the site—pushed activists to do something more. Says Smith, "I don't like feeling that, any given month, it could be me, it could be a friend of mine. I really would like to not have to consider when I wake up one morning that there will be that call on my machine."

And so on November 28, 2000, the commemoration leaped from virtual to live. In 14 cities around the country, from Albany, N.Y., to Tucson, Ariz., trans activists marked a Day of Remembrance by holding candlelight vigils, speak-outs, and memorial services. San Francisco's was attended by more than 100 people, including out city supervisor Mark Leno and other politicians. Events for November 28, 2001, are planned in still more cities (see details at www.gender.org/remember/day). According to Smith, "The Day of Remembrance has two functions: keeping memory and anger alive and making sure these people didn't die for nothing." ■

VICTIMS OF HATE: BRANDON TEENA (LEFT), SUBJECT OF *BOYS DON'T CRY*; FRED MARTINEZ JR., MURDERED IN COLORADO IN JUNE.