

No Woman's Land? ReVisiting Border Zone Denizens"

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ABSTRACT

This article presents empirical data from survey research into lesbian and queer masculinities in the United Kingdom, conducted in 2017, which garnered over two hundred responses. Dominant themes emerged which addressed the differences between the sexed body and gender identity; the contradictions of identifying with masculinities while critiquing hegemonic masculinity; a sense of anxiety or loss around a perceived decline of lesbian community and identities within it, particularly the identity of butch lesbian; and, finally, the variety of trans identities and how they are defined and distinct. The focus in this paper is on the latter theme, the variety of trans identities, and particularly the shared experiences of individuals across different identifications. Namely, I consider how butch, non-binary and queer individuals reported possible areas of resonance and recognition with transgender or transmasculine experiences or the experiences of trans men. I argue that rumors of 'border wars' have been exaggerated as these territories are often overlapping. In addition, some individuals inhabit multiple sites of identity or shift between and across shared sites. Degrees of sex and gender dysphoria were not only reported by trans-identified individuals and while not all such individuals adopted a trans identity, this was not necessarily because these border zone denizens felt a strong connection to femaleness or womanhood, often far from it.

KEY WORDS

Trans; Lesbian; Butch; Transgender; Identity

INTRODUCTION

“Different border zone denizens are, of course, differently located: not only do we exist in the areas of overlap of different gender categories but also we differ in our placements in those areas of overlap. Only by speaking quite specifically about those located elements of our dislocatedness can we who dwell in border zones speak at all. Such lengthy, detailed specifications do not provide the discursive material for full occupancy of social existence,

which at present requires more central, less multiple instantiations of social categories”

(Hale, 1998:336).

What has changed since Jacob Hale wrote these words twenty years ago? Back in the midst of the 1990s queer zeitgeist, everybody and every body was seemingly ripe for deconstruction; narratives of anxiety began to emerge on the shifting sands of identity categories. Minority communities within minority communities started to raise concerns about their foundations, as a tide of fluidity seemingly threatened to wash them away. The borders in question, referenced in the above quotation from Hale, were those between trans man and butch lesbian in particular. Hale argued that rather than clear lines of separation, there was much shared territory between these categories, and in those spaces were potential new categories of their own, in these overlapping border zones, where citizens, or denizens, made their homes.

In this article I will explore some of these border zones, investigating how they are inhabited today and by whom. I will use data from survey research I conducted in the UK in 2017 into lesbian and queer masculinities. In this paper I will use the terms trans and transgender as umbrella terms, which include a huge diversity of identities and expressions that could be referred to as ‘queer’ (Duggan, 1992) - itself another umbrella term for LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex) identities - that is, they are not sex/gender/sexuality normative. By that, I mean identities that do not follow the presumed, and policed prescriptions (Rich, 1980) of male/masculine/heterosexual or female/feminine/heterosexual; what Ingraham (1996) refers to as “heterogenders.” Trans is often used as an umbrella term that also includes transexual people, that is, trans men and trans women. While frequently used in this way, the umbrella term can be unclear, as it

includes such a multitude of identities; in order to be more specific, when referring to trans men or trans women, I will use the terms trans men or trans women.

MUD ON YOUR HANDS: RESEARCHING YOUR OWN FIELD

This research was motivated by my interest in lesbian masculinities broadly, and in the lesbian gender identity of 'butch' specifically. This enquiry holds personal meaning for me, as I have identified as a butch lesbian since my teens. I can still recall finding a copy of Feinberg's (1993) famous book *Stone Butch Blues*, and realizing, with relief, and pride, that the way I felt and presented had a name, and a valiant history. In a fast changing landscape, where terms for sex, gender and sexuality are expanding (Renold, Bragg, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018) and perhaps being de-coupled from any notion of a fixed sex or sexual orientation (Innovation Group, 2016; Ditch The Label, 2017), I am curious as to the meaning of butch today, and how popular or otherwise this category is in the UK context. Historically, most of the research on lesbian masculinities and butch gender identity has come from the United States, and although there was somewhat of a proliferation of this in now classic publications from the 1990s (Halberstam, 1998b; Munt, 1998; Burana, Due, & Roxie, 1994; Nestle, 1992) there has seemingly been less scholarship in this area more recently (Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Bergman, 2006; Gibson & Meem, 2002).

There is also not such a wealth of work from a UK perspective, and this is something I was keen to address. Another possible influence on the lack of recent scholarship in this area could be the current, somewhat tense, environment around ascending trans rights movements and the backlash from some elements of society. In particular, backlash to this ascendancy has come from some feminist and lesbian feminist groups, resulting in a situation where, unfortunately, these two minority communities of lesbian and/or lesbian

feminist and trans activists are frequently perceived, in said communities and increasingly in the public sphere, as being pitted against one another and diametrically, violently opposed (Hines, 2017). I find myself in the curious, and often challenging, position of having a background in both warring camps, so to speak, in these gender wars. I am a longstanding feminist activist, and have written a book on radical feminism (2015), and I have also been active in the LGBTQI+ rights movement most of my adult life.

The opposition between some lesbian/feminist groups and some trans activist groups is not just in theory, but in practice too. In the UK there have been protests against anti-trans-inclusionary or gender-critical feminist events, such as those organised by 'A Woman's Place' or 'We Need To Talk,' which mobilized in response to the UK Government's review, in 2018, of the Gender Recognition Act created in 2004. There were also protests organized by anti-trans-inclusion feminist groups, such as 'Get The L Out' which disrupted the London Pride march in the UK in 2018 (Gabbatiss, 2018). Given this tense context, I urge that it is even more important to conduct research in these communities and breathe air into silos and borders, rather than watching from the sidelines as they become ever more insular and conflicted.

WHY DO THIS RESEARCH? MAPPING THE MARGINS OF THE MARGINAL

There is a history of so-called 'border wars' between butch lesbians and trans men (Prosser, 1995). This adds to the charged climate outlined above. To publicly identify and vocalise what (warring) communities may share in common, could be seen as unhelpful, or unproductive to communities who feel under attack and are therefore seeking to shore up their borders, rather than open them or acknowledge overlaps (Beemyn & Eliason, 2016; Bettcher, 2014). As Beemyn and Eliason underline, the history and current status of this field

makes for a contentious climate to investigate butch lesbian and queer masculinities: *“The discourses around cis lesbian and trans identities and communities have been represented almost exclusively in negative terms – framed as border crossings, trespassing, battlegrounds, and conquests”* (2016:2). The term ‘cis’ is often used in LGBTQI+ communities and by scholars in this field to refer to individuals who do not identify as trans.

Contemporary debates in 2018 spoke directly to this research; these took place in the public sphere as well as within LGBTQI+ communities. These were debates around the supposed oppositional and immutable differences between the identities of butch or trans, and the public debate in the UK unfolded in a typically binary form. This bolstered my concern to return to a question posed by Jack Halberstam in 1998: *“What is the relation, if any, of butch to FTM? How and where to lesbian and transexual definitions overlap?”* (1998a:288).

In November 2017 Ruth Hunt, Chief Executive of Stonewall, the national LGBT human rights organization in the UK, stated in the *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).

Screening on Netflix in 2018, the comedian Hannah Gadsby, in *Nanette*, recounts appeals from audiences that she declare herself to be transgender. Clarifying that she is not trans, she explained that she is a different kind of woman, in her view, and seen as such, often to the detriment of her own personal safety.

In August 2018, self-defined butch lesbian Tabs (2018), the founder of “*Butch, Please*” in the UK, produced a video interview for *Pink News*. Quoting Gadsby’s *Nanette*, she argues that for her, butch is not masculine, but another form of femininity, and another way of being a woman.

Accounts such as these, in the public domain, present a very clear line between trans and butch, but what if it was not that simple? What if Hale’s (1998) great cartographic work is yet to be realized, and there is still not enough of a wide open space for the border zone dwellers to speak their lives, let alone live them comfortably and congruently?

THE SURVEY

I set out to research such questions with a survey conducted using the surveying software Qualtrics, on a secure account provided by the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK in the Summer of 2017, receiving 247 responses. The survey received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences (full survey schedule available from the author by request). The title of the survey was ‘Lesbian/Queer Masculinities’ and it called for respondents who were lesbian, bi, queer or gay women, or those who identified in a broader sense with those terms or had identified with those terms in the past, who were over eighteen years old and living in the UK.

The qualitative survey was distributed mainly using social media. It utilized open-ended questions and open text box responses (cf. McInroy, 2016; Punch, 2005; Seale and Filmer, 1999). I analysed the survey data using the qualitative method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The majority of respondents were 35 – 50 years old. The majority identified as White English (N=85). Nine respondents checked ‘Mixed/Dual Heritage’ and 62 respondents chose to write in their own ethnic identity. These demographics clearly show some limitations; the responses are made up of overwhelmingly White respondents and mainly middle-aged. I assert that this piece of qualitative research nevertheless introduces important insights into under-researched communities and lives, but is only a beginning, in a field with much more to be brought to light.

As I had hoped to illuminate, there were many considered responses on the changing meaning of the butch lesbian signifier, from self-identified butch lesbians as well as from those identifying with other terms. Themes emerged on some older, and obviously stubbornly persistent, issues, such as what is termed ‘butch flight’ (Brownworth, 2011) relating to the border wars under focus in this article; also, the so-called lesbian ‘sex wars’ (Healey, 1996) and fears around sexist stereotypes still being attached to butch and femme relationships (Jeffreys, 2018) within and outside of lesbian communities. Respondents also commented on the--sometimes rocky--relationship of butch identity to the newer terms being used today, such as masculine of center (MOC) or non-binary (Cole, 2011).

EXPLORING THE SURVEY DATA

Respondents used a variety of terms to describe their gender. Thirty participants identified as butch; 28 as queer; 18 as gender non-conforming; 17 as non-binary; 16 as androgynous; 10 as masculine of center; eight as masculine; five as transgender; four as transmasculine, and one as stud. Surveys were completed anonymously, and thus pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

One survey question inquired to what extent respondents identified with the categories of woman and lesbian. Of the 204 respondents who answered the question on whether they identified with the term woman, 129 answered yes; for 75 respondents it was not a simple question. Twenty one answered no, 35 sometimes, 10 not sure and nine used to.

From the 75 respondents, the most common stated identity in this group was queer, which was mentioned by 15; additionally 12 identified as non-binary or NB, 11 as butch, seven as gender non-conforming (GNC), six as androgynous, and five as MOC. There were four counts each of masculine, transmasculine, and transgender. The remainder chose to write their own definition in the open text box provided.

A minority of these respondents indicated that they did not identify with the category of woman because this was a social construct of what adult females are supposed to look like and behave like, a construct that they did not wish to comply with.

VOICES FROM THE SURVEY DATA: EXPLORING THE BORDERS

For those respondents who felt that the term 'woman' simply described an adult human female, it was not something they felt they could choose to identify with or not; it was simply a descriptive term to describe the sexed and reproductive features of their body, rather than a source of identity or identification. These responses spoke to the tense environment in the background, sketched out earlier in this article, between some feminist/lesbian and some trans activist groups.

This was expressed by Ellen, a lesbian in her late twenties, who chose to identify as GNC:

"I don't think it's an identity. I don't wear womanhood. I am a woman, as in I am an adult female" (Ellen).

This particular question on the survey was therefore a non-question to those participants.

This was the somewhat frustrated view of Jender, in her late forties who identified as queer, and stated she was bisexual but currently in a lesbian relationship:

“I am a woman because I am an adult human female. I don't identify with it, it's my biological lived reality” (Jender).

For other respondents however, the question was indeed a very live issue, often a painful one, and it was one they gave great thought to in their responses.

VOICES FROM THE BORDERS – IS WOMAN HOME?

Stephen, aged in their late twenties, identified as a Soft Butch or Tomboy; they preferred queer to gay and did not feel comfortable using the label of gay woman. Stephen did not identify with the term woman, and did not like female pronouns applied to them:

“Female pronouns and titles don't fit for me I feel like daddy for example fits better than mummy” (Stephen).

Rae, in their early forties, identified as GNC and as queer rather than lesbian, noting that they were uncomfortable with the term lesbian being applied to them as it felt limiting of who they were. Rae did not identify as a woman:

“I just don't. I mean I don't deny that I have 'female parts' and they are a part of me, whether I like it or not, but on some levels I don't really feel connected to them”

(Rae).

The feeling of not being connected to women was mentioned by several respondents. Ivor, a butch in their early thirties, stated that they did not usually associate themselves with the word 'woman':

"I have the empathy of growing up female, but a different mentality in my adult masculinity....I think it's because I feel outside of most female conversations and concerns" (Ivor).

Lois, in their late fifties, identified as a female man. Lois also described feelings of alienation in women's spaces, such as toilets or changing rooms; indeed several respondents testified to being challenged in women's toilets or receiving harassment in those sites, an experience probably not unfamiliar to most butches, MOC or transmasculine queer individuals, or lesbians presenting as masculine or GNC to varying degrees (Riggle, 2018; Bender-Baird, 2016).

"Nowadays, when I'm in female changing rooms, I look around and think 'I shouldn't be here. I am not the same gender as these people'. But I can't use the male changing rooms. Most of my friends are women and on the whole I like women better than men because they're socialised to be in touch with their feelings, but I feel less and less like a woman myself" (Lois).

Lois explained what they meant by the identity of female man, again referring to receiving challenges in sex-segregated toilets:

"I've recently decided to call myself a female man. I have a female body but have always felt male. For a long time I tried to live as a fairly radical lesbian feminist and I'm still mostly attracted to women. Most of my friends are women, but I don't dislike

men as I once did. Since menopause (a couple of years ago), I've felt increasingly male and am also slightly more sexually attracted to men than I was. I intend to keep my female body, but I'm considering looking into maybe taking hormones. I work out at the gym and look male enough that I regularly get hassled in female toilets” (Lois).

For some, there were political considerations around the term woman. Although they did not feel a connection to it, as illuminated above, they nevertheless expressed political commitments to the term. Indeed, in some senses that was their only connection to the term. This was highlighted by Sneja, a butch in their early thirties:

“Politically I feel like a woman because I have been socialised as one. Personally I feel neither female or male but me, and I feel butch” (Sneja).

VOICES FROM THE BORDERS – IS LESBIAN HOME?

As introduced above, several respondents found the identifier of lesbian problematic as well as the category of woman. Lore elaborated on this, in their late twenties, Lore identified as queer and NB:

“When I first came out about my sexuality I used the word gay because I didn't feel connected to the word lesbian. Lesbian indicated two women, but even before I could articulate gender stuff I didn't feel like it fit for me” (Lore).

There was also, as with the term ‘woman,’ a political component to identifying as a lesbian, with some respondents stating that they would do so for political purposes, even though they personally felt it did not resonate on some levels. Jazza, in their late thirties, identified as queer, and testified to these tensions:

“I will always choose and tick the box lesbian, as a political gesture on any tick box census style survey. To be counted. I know what has gone before. I do not wish to dishonour that or detract from it. But I’m feeling less affiliation with it, in my heart”
(Jazza).

VOICES FROM THE BORDERS – ARE THE BORDERS HOME?

As has already emerged in some of the testimonies above, several respondents expounded on their feelings towards a trans identity or trans identities of some sort, such as Lois for example, who was considering taking hormones to further masculinize their appearance. Lucy, aged in their late forties, identified as butch and queer; Lucy used to identify as a woman, but now problematized that term and saw butch as a gender identity in itself. Lucy also spoke about diversity in butches and in those on a masculine spectrum, but pointed out that this diversity is often not recognized and that these individuals are sometimes all seen as being trans, that is as trans men:

“People think I'm male. I am female but present in a masculine way. People do not recognise Butch as a gender identity...one particular trend I have witnessed is that people assume you are somewhere en route to transitioning” (Lucy).

Jez was aged in their late forties and identified as MOC; Jez had taken hormones and started to transition some years ago, but then chose to stop taking hormones because they reported that although they had felt alienated from womanhood, upon transitioning they then found that they felt alienated from manhood also. Specifically addressing new terms and potentials for a variety of different trans or queer masculine identities, Jez asserted that:

“I don’t think all ‘butches’ are FTMs-in-waiting, but some are, some might’ve been under different circumstances and some aren’t and perish the idea; it’s taking T and/or having surgery that eventually makes the difference, not necessarily how we feel inside. I think of the other terms as being for people who want to remain socially flexible since ‘butch’ and ‘FTM’ are both quite limiting” (Jez).

Like Jez, other respondents also worked hard to embrace a more fluid identity and be positive about that status. Jazza concluded their remarks by saying that although they were not sure about their identity or their relationship to the identity of woman anymore, they were trying to find freedom in that unmarked space:

“I am no longer sure what is me, but the uncertainty feels ok. It feels like a space to breathe” (Jazza).

Tam, aged in their late forties, similarly emphasized this position. Tam identified as NB, but highlighted that this was in the absence of any other word they could find to describe themselves; they identified as feeling neither female or male:

“I guess it’s nice to be liminal. Liminal is a good word. I will describe myself as Liminal. I think it’s hard for others to make assumptions about you when you’re liminal (particularly straight people) as you’re not fitting into expected norms; that can leave some space to manoeuvre” (Tam).

DISCUSSION - MAPPING ROUTES TO HOME

The testimonies above highlight the difficulties of being what Hale (1998) called a border zone denizen. My respondents attempted to map out their bodies and identities; Jez established a border between trans and other MOC or queer identities through emphasizing

physical interventions--for example, those who took hormones and accessed surgery became trans men, those who did not, were not. In some ways, respondents arrived at their identities via a strong sense of what they were not. They buttressed their borders through a lack of connectedness to or relation to womanhood and femininity. For example Ivor and Lois underlined that they did not share a gender with most women, or indeed an agenda, with Ivor exclaiming that they did not connect with what they saw as women's conversations and concerns. Some respondents drew borders around their identity by constructing their own new terms for their unique identity, when they could not find an available category that fit, such as Lois defining themselves as a female man.

Such a fluidity of sexed and gendered identification, is, in Prosser's (1995) essay, a temporary state for some, inhabited before the trans individual reaches a stable point where they are legally, socially, medically and culturally recognized as the sex they identify as. Prosser calls this journey a homecoming, using 'home' to indicate a place of security, safety and refuge, connoting, as he describes: "*familiarity, safety, fixity*" as well as: "*very powerful notions of belonging*" (1995: 486).

But what of those whose voices I have amplified here, who do not reach a 'home' in this linear sense? What of those who do not transition (medically or legally) in any final or finalized manifestation, and therefore, for a variety of reasons that may not always be personal choice, bivouac in the shifting sands they find themselves in? As Scheman (2016) so eloquently summarizes, some paths go from here to there, but there is also the possibility of "*an unlimited number of places in between – places where one might stop for a while or return to, places where people might even live*" (Scheman, 2016:214). Lorber (1999) cautioned that trans men and women may, in some ways, struggle to belong in what she

called their new status of *"immigrants, not natives"* (1999:359). But as my respondents described, there are also those who may *not* adopt a 'new status,' in terms of sex crossings or affirmations, but who also do not feel like 'natives' in their 'old' or 'existing' status either. There are those, like the queer, MOC and butch individuals I have showcased here, who were born and remain female bodied, but who feel like an alien when it comes to femaleness, womanhood and femininity.

These respondents troubled the clear line that is often presented between trans and other identities and identifiers, such as the public statements from Hunt (2017) and others, at the commencement of this article. For some individuals this line in the sand is in between lesbian and queer, between female and woman, between gender and sex; traversing territories that may also, arguably, be well-worn by fellow travellers identifying as trans men, transmasculine or transgender masculine individuals. Halberstam (1998a) argues for a greater understanding and recognition of the similarities shared across borders, surmizing as Hale does that *"Borders between gender categories, then, are zones of overlap, not lines"* (Hale, 1998:323).

This was the case for the survey respondents I platformed here. Their bodies were not 'home' if that means experienced as secure and familiar, not least due to external threats of transphobia and homophobia as they moved through and were read in the world, particularly in toilets and changing spaces as detailed above; but also due to varying, and changing, levels of dysphoria with their sex and gender marked bodies. Their bodies were not always 'home' if that means places of powerful belonging; nor were the categories and communities that they found available to them, such as 'woman,' 'man,' 'lesbian,' or 'trans.' These terms did not map neatly onto their bodies or their own personal self-definition, and,

as Hale rightly draws our attention to, "*Living as a nearly unintelligible creature is no easy task*" (Hale, 1998:337).

CONCLUSION – ARRIVING AT DEPARTURES

In conclusion, I wish to assert that the phrase, or cliché (Noble, 2004) of the so-called border wars between butches or masculine queers and trans men is arguably too strong a wording for complex and often interdependent, mutually reinforcing and overlapping domains of habitation. There are many individuals who are living lives that necessitate the negation of exclusion, misunderstanding, misreading and threat, as well as actual violence, on a daily basis. It can be argued that those who may identify as butches, queer, MOC or as trans men, despite different identities, perhaps have some of these experiences in common.

The masculine individuals I have platformed in this article did not (now) identify as trans men; they chose not to do so, but they nevertheless expressed varying degrees of sex dysphoria, and did not identify as women. Their unique identities are the flags they carry as they march through their often challenging days; these labels therefore matter, and they should matter. But that is not and does not have to be in exclusion of other identities, nor should it mean that some identities become subsumed under others, as in the stereotypical case of butches being assumed to be trans men, or on a trajectory of becoming so, as respondents Lucy and Jez both addressed.

The challenge is to avoid a situation where identifications must be made against and in contrast to others. It often seems the case that this is one of the main ways identities are expressed and understood, and upon which cases for human rights and recognition are encouraged to be built if they want to be seen. Within such a zero-sum game 'border wars'

perhaps become almost inevitable, and can fester. The point is to take back the ground, not out from under each other, our fellow travellers, but from the structures of power that make the journey so hard for everyone in the first place.

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