

## Lesbian: See also, woman

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**Abstract** The gender one is and the gender one desires are often thought of in psychoanalysis as disparate strands of experience that materialize in different identity registers. This brief communication suggests that transgender experience can illuminate the porosity of these two categories; insofar as lesbian indexes both subject and object of sexual attraction, sexual orientation is not only about sexual desire but also subject to gender politics.

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‘Sexual orientation,’ the old adage goes, ‘is who you go to bed with. Gender identity is who you go to bed as.’

In its confident articulation of the precise boundaries of the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, this dictum summons us seductively. Like the purloined letter that is impossible to find precisely because it is hidden in plain sight, this statement crisply states – and in so doing also conceals – its driving assumption. As it makes its bee line for explicating the difference between sexuality and gender, it takes as uninterrogated truth the idea that gender and sexual orientation are distinct strands of experience, a distinction psychoanalysis often takes for granted (see, for example, Drescher and Byne, 2013). In that paradigm, who one is – gender-wise – and who one wants – also gender-wise – seem then to materialize in different identity registers.

Transgender experience, however, unsettles the clarity with which wanting and being are construed as separate. In this brief communication I want to take up that issue in relation to lesbian identities. As a term that we use to describe sexual orientation, lesbian indexes both the subject and the object of

sexual attraction as gendered female, erotic desire directed to a woman that issues from a woman. Who does and who does not meet the criterion of lesbian, then, does not only pertain to sexual desire; it is also a matter of one's own gender and, thus, of gender politics. Today, we might say, the question of sexual orientation hinges not only on homoerotic desire but also on gender identity – not only as it is experienced but also in how it is legitimated by others.

Take, for example, my 30-year-old patient, Hazel, a queer transwoman who is often read as not having been born in a female body. Hazel, who identifies as a lesbian, longs to date and to settle into a relationship with another woman. However, she dreads lesbian spaces, from which she feels routinely excluded, wary of being seen – and rejected – as a 'man.' This is a problem transwomen confront quite often and over which Hazel often agonizes as she tries to develop relationships with other women (Serano, 2013, but also see Cvetkovich, 2003, for a discussion of the gender politics of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which maintains a strict 'women-born-women' only policy).

In a recent session, she comes in, her self-esteem crumpled. The previous evening, it turns out, Hazel did the unimaginable: she attended a lesbian party. The stuff of her nightmares happened: as she was hanging out with her friends, a strikingly beautiful woman who appeared to my patient to be somewhat tipsy seductively danced toward Hazel. 'You are really hot,' she whispered into her ear, grabbing her hand to pull her onto the dance floor. Dancing quickly turned into making out. My patient, who under fully sober circumstances would have instantly fled this kind of flirtation, surrendered to the experience, captivated by the excitement of being found sexually desirable. Soon, the two women were grinding, their hands all over each other until the seductress reached toward my patient's crotch. My patient, who routinely tucks her penis, instantly sobered up. But it was too late to impede her seductress. Already feeling her up, the woman paused and asked Hazel the question she had been terrified of all along: 'What's that? You are a boy, then, aren't you?' Mortified, Hazel excused herself and fled the club in a panic.

As we discussed this incident together in my consulting room, the benefit of time and reflective space brought forth a different possibility. Hazel now recalled that there had been a swirl of delight rather than of accusatory reactivity in the woman's tone, perhaps even a sexually playful tinge. Might the woman, Hazel now wondered, have not meant the appellation 'boy' as accusatory? Had she, perhaps, not understood her to be a transwoman? Had she, rather, assumed that Hazel was packing? The possibility had not even occurred to her in the moment. Hazel was struck to even conceive of the possibility that her penis might have been construed not as threatening to disrupt homosexuality, but, rather, as securing a particular variant of female-to-female eroticism. Or, might Hazel's seductress have been aware of my patient's anatomy, and, rather than unsettled by it, have found the possibility arousing? Might she have imagined a certain kind of erotic potential that had been previously unimaginable to her had the penis been encountered in a man?

How do we read this scene, which is replete with immediate complication for Hazel, but which also promises to complicate our own understandings of homoerotic desire? The enigmatic moment (Laplanche, 1999), we might say, when my patient's crotch is touched, is saturated in unconscious meanings which exceed either woman's full conscious understanding. There is no way, of course, to draw solid connections between any of the possible interpretations described earlier and the discursive or identitarian bounds of the category lesbian. Do any of them compromise either of the two women's lesbian identities? Or, conversely, do any of these, or the multiple others one could generate, bolster them? What is the role of history in this encounter between these two women, one of whom continues to live in a natal male body, yet whose gender affect has been dysphorically de-linked from her body? What is the role of the body's material surfaces in defining, delimiting or expanding our notions of gender and, thus, our notions of sexual orientation? In a world where the body no longer spells gender's verdict, what happens to sexual orientation? Does sexual orientation then follow natal body or gender identity? For instance, are you still a lesbian if your desire becomes organized around a transfemale partner? If your partner is transmale?

Joy, who is married to and has children with Max, met Max when Max was still in his natal, female body. At the time, she describes, 'We were lesbians together,' but now that she is partnered with a transman, Joy wonders whether she is still a lesbian. She struggles greatly with this question because 'lesbian' has been so important to her experience of herself and she fears both losing and abusing the term. Recently, she has found herself attracted to other transmen and continues to be powerfully drawn to women, but cisgender males continue to yield no erotic feelings whatsoever. Would you think of her as a lesbian if I told you that Max retains his genitals but has had a mastectomy? What would it shift in your understanding of Joy's sexual orientation if I told you that Max has had a phalloplasty and that he and Joy enjoy penetrative intercourse? The range of answers to these questions signals how sexual orientation and gender entwine. As gender is unsettled, so is sexual orientation, and the clarity with which one talked about and fought for it becomes drenched in debates over gender's verdict. Does that make the category lesbian defunct? How might you be inclined to think of Joy's and Max's sexual identities if I told you that Joy is acutely aware that experiencing herself as a lesbian is painful and discrediting to Max's self-identification as a heterosexual male? That she is hard at work to figure out how to support her partner, whom she loves dearly, while also maintaining her core experience of her own self? What is at stake here is that Joy's self-identified sexual orientation can play a role (limited, but existent nonetheless) in actualizing Max's gender, can offer Max some of the much coveted recognition that he craves and rarely gets from others, yet Joy has and continues to experience herself as a lesbian.

As gender melts the boundaries of sexual orientation, is it possible for Joy to be a lesbian who is partnered with Max, a heterosexual male, without either losing their footing?

### About the Author

Avgi Saketopoulou is faculty at the NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and at the Stephen Mitchell Center in NYC. She serves on the editorial boards of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, and has published several articles on race, gender, sexuality, class and consent. She has received several awards including the Ruth Stein Prize for promising scholars in the study of sexuality, the Ralph Roughton award from the LGBT committee of the American Psychoanalytic Association, the 2014 Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association's prize and most recently the Symonds Prize from *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* for her work on sexual perversions.

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