

SECTION THREE: COLUMNS ABOUT GENDER BENDING

HOT & SWEATY IN BETWEEN: The new androgyny

Whilst in New York, putting together pieces for my chapter on the new female sexual revolution, I spent a lot of time visiting clubs for women. As I explained in my first chapter, many were clubs where women of all sexual persuasions could go for a dance and a good time.

But one night I stumbled into a club that wasn't so welcoming. A quick look around the room told me that this was a club for gay women. "Bull-dikes" was how a gay friend of mine later described the women who frequented this particular watering hole. My friend was not surprised by what followed given that the women who run this club are very rigid. Not only is it an exclusively gay club, but only a certain type of lesbian need apply - your classic "butch" lesbian.

In the other clubs I had visited, it was impossible to tell straight women from bisexual women or gay women. There was a celebration going on that blurred the lines. But in here, the name of the game was politics. The women all sported a sort of uniform - shaved or cropped hair, tattoos, pierced things, torn-off T-shirts and faded denims. Most were overweight - a statement against having to look erotic or sensuous in any way.

I ordered a drink and was immediately approached by a gaggle of really tough-looking broads who took me for either a straight woman, or a "lipstick lesbian" which in butch terms is even worse.

"We don't want you're kind in here," one of the rougher dikes growled at me as the others formed a circle around me.

"What is my kind?" I asked in genuine curiosity, as more angry women surrounded me in an ominous manner.

Having discovered in New York that there is nothing - and I mean nothing - as fascinating to Americans as Australian accents and in-depth discussions about Koalas, I did my best-ever Australian-girl-lost routine. "Oh. I'm just new around here. I just wandered in here by mistake," said I, looking sweet as cherry pie.

"Oh, you're from Australia?" one truck-driver type bounded over with great enthusiasm. The girls all seemed to relax. I wasn't threatening their territory. I wasn't one of those contemptible dikes, part of the trendy new movement to make Lesbianism a hip fashion statement. I gathered they got a lot of "that kind" in the club - femme babes with big hair and jewellery that wasn't stuck through their faces, who believed that they could be whatever they wanted, or drink where-ever they pleased.

I was curious to know how they immediately picked me as "the wrong kind". I knew the long hair was a dead give away but I was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. I hardly looked that much different.

"The lipstick," said one. "The handbag," said another whilst they all gleefully poked at my handbag. "The way you held your glass of beer!" they laughed, very amused by this stage as they parodied the way my little finger shot into the air in a most feminine, and delicate fashion.

"The way you sit on the stool," said a woman who was straddling the stool like a horse. I looked down at my crossed legs with horror. And then with even more horror at my white high-heels. "Mini-mouse shoes," mocked one woman in heavy, black, army boots. The rest of them, all in military boots, fell about roaring with mirth.

After a while a great bonding started happening. I told them what I was writing about. They explained to me why they were so agitated by the new breed of lesbians, many of whom condoned sleeping with men. "They want to come in both doors but they don't pay at either end," one of the dikes sniffed resentfully, telling me about the struggles and battles the old-guard had to fight in order to be accepted as lesbian.

"They use us for experimentation," huffed another. The pain in the room was palpable. It was clear that these women believed lesbians had to be committed to one way of life only. There was one way of dressing. One way of acting. One way of existing. You used language to name yourself: I am a bull-dike. I am a butch. I am a leather dike. And then you lived under the noose of the proclamation for the rest of your life.

The new breed of lesbians had broken the mould of language. Famous lesbians including Camille Paglia have started pushing off the shackles of role, allowing themselves to be lipstick lesbians one day and maybe a bit butch the next. Paglia has gone further than most others, writing recently about her fondness for the penis. Other lesbians have talked of maybe getting married one day and having kids, some confessing to having slept with men and having loved the sex.

The feeling of confinement in this club reminded me very much of the straight world. Where we call ourselves something and then live under that tyranny. Women particularly have always defined and confined themselves: "I am a mother", translation "I am therefore clean-living, responsible". "I am a career women", the connotations being "cold", "unable to nurture". Men have never suffered these word shackles to the same degree.

For indeed language imprisons us. The minute we pronounce ourselves as something, we are then forced to behave in a way that is in keeping with that illusion. The feminism ideology and political correctness of recent years has only further narrowed our options of what it is to be a woman.

There are many things we cannot change. If one is born Black then unless you are Michael Jackson you remain Black. You will always be Italian. At least by birth. But sexuality is not something we need limit. It can be a fluid experience. We have every opportunity to experiment and evolve our sexual personas over the course of our lives - from submissive to dominant, kinky to vanilla, straight to bent. Sexuality as a journey not a given. As gender is a journey, not a given.

This is what this chapter is about. The new Androgyny. I have realised, that as the end of the decade draws to a close, we are witnessing, perhaps more than any other time in recent history, a fluidity of sexual and social roles. By this I mean that the chasm between 'male' and 'female' is fast closing. Men are becoming more like women in behaviour and in appearance, women are taking on all the characteristics of men from the boardroom to the bedroom. And advertisers, marketeers, image makers and movie moguls - sensing the winds of change - are capitalising on the trend.

And so back to the my dike club. The women all wanted to know how I defined myself. In terms of gender. In terms of role. In terms of sexual identity. They were pushing me to explain what I was doing in their club. "What are you really exploring in your book? Are you exploring us, or yourself?" asked one bull-dike, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Are you heterosexual? Are you homosexual? Are you bisexual?" the women prodded, all milling around, curious at this creature who had inadvertently wandered into their lair.

I had been asked this many times over the years, hanging out as I do with a very mixed crowd. Sexual orientation was once described as a continuum with “one” being straight, “three” being bisexual, and “five” being gay. Surprisingly, most of the seemingly “straight” middle-class friends - male and female - I have asked over time have identified themselves as a 2, even a 2.5. I have never answered the question on principal. No free spirit could wilfully climb inside a prison-cell of words and slam the door on possibility. Or maybe I have just never known the right answer.

What are you? What are you? Define yourself..... the bull-dikes affectionately bullied. Heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual.....?

I sat for a moment pondering the impossible question. And then on that hot steamy night in New York city, inside one of Manhattan’s most notorious gay clubs, surrounded by a group of total strangers, I heard the answer come out of my mouth. An answer that surprised me and shook me to the core.

“I am sexual,” I suddenly said, realising that that was the most powerful and liberating thing I had ever allowed myself to say. “I am sexual,” I said using language to suddenly throw open the door on my narrow life, on a narrow club, in a narrow world. “I am plain old sexual,” I said, feeling freer than I ever had felt in my entire life.

GENDER BENDERS

In a recent series of controversial advertisements by Calvin Klein, a gaggle of teenagers parade their bodies in front of the camera. Dressed in a mish-mash of denims, overalls, and t-shirts, they strut about promoting a new fragrance by the designer. It is impossible to tell the girls from the boys.

The point of the ad is to blur the lines between male and female given that the fragrance is ambi-sexual. But although Klein has again proved himself the maestro of ambiguity, he is not the only one pitching products this way. A whole rash of advertisements, products, clothing and movies are flooding the market in a bid to appeal to the boy-girl or girl-boy in all of us.

I remember the shock of picking up Vanity Fair and discovering my favourite singer kd lang shaving the lovely Cindy Crawford on the cover. It was an infamous shot that got the world talking. I thought it was one of the raunchiest, bravest marketing exercises I had seen in a long time and sales of the magazine went through the roof.

Not long after I was sitting in a movie theatre watching what I thought was one of the most extraordinary moments in recent film history, Tom Cruise, with hair cascading down his back, scoops Brad Pitt up into his arms and with orgasmic zeal plunges his teeth deep into his objet d'amour who is quivering on the brink of agony and ecstasy thousands of feet above planet earth.

In another scene from the same movie Interview With A Vampire, Cruise and a smoulderingly beautiful Antonio Banderas with long hair and longer eyelashes, gaze longingly into each others eyes, inches away from a erotic kiss and a million miles away from what would have been acceptable Hollywood imagery a few years ago.

The homo-eroticism did not go unnoted by film critics the world over. But what has is the extent to which films, magazines and billboards are displaying and pushing a new cultural role model. The gender bender. The androgynous icon.

Whereas androgyny has always been accepted, if not mandatory, for rock stars and avant garde fringe dwellers, it is now being picked up by the mainstream. Even

actor Jaye Davidson who played the boy-girl in *The Crying Game* managed to score a lead in the recent mass-market, macho thriller *Star Gate*.

It seems to me that as the behavioural differences between men and women are rapidly breaking down, the image makers are capitalising on our shifting consciousness. Or maybe they are further fuelling the flame. The connection is unclear, but the evidence of a complete repackaging of gender roles undeniable.

For the past couple of years Hollywood has literally been spewing out films in which women have taken on swashbuckling, action roles formerly reserved for males. Whereas Sigourney Weaver's feisty role in *Aliens* was once regarded as extraordinary, it is now boringly commonplace to see gun-slingin', hard drinkin', hard livin' gals as is evidenced by the latest craze towards the female Western with Uma Thurman and Sharon Stone amongst the big names donning cowboy hats.

Recently, the trend to female androgyny in film has taken an even more extreme form. A spate of new films out have the heroine doing what men do - quite literally. It's called lesbian chic, and its androgyny taken to its ultimate conclusion. Just as *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is a film about women who are more than just friends, so too do films like *When Night is Falling*, *Reality Bites*, *Sirens* and *Love and Other Catastrophes* throw up images of same-sex erotica.

Lesbian chic is spreading like wildfire in the fashion world with androgynous or sexually ambiguous images dominating the fashion pages of overseas women's fashion magazines.

British magazine *The Face* recently featured a cover where waif super-model Kate Moss lying vulnerably in the arms of another supermodel Helena. British *Elle* recently put Nadja Auermann and Claudia Schiffer together on the cover beneath the playful headline "Nadja and Claudia in bed". The same edition featured a story "Women who live as Men". Naomi Campbell let it be known that she recently stripped for gay women at a New York nightclub.

Meanwhile the catwalks of high fashion remain a showcase for androgyny forcing one British commentator, author of *The Designer Scam*, Colin McDowell to comment that the current decadent state of haute couture is the result of the misogyny of top designers - most of whom are homosexual, or an expression of their fantasies about women as adolescent boys. In fact, in many fashion shows, tall women have been replaced by beautiful boys in drag as a testimony to this fact.

I have been very curious to understand the profound changes we are witnessing and the implications for us all. So I contacted a number of social observers to find out what is happening. Many told me they believe the increasing trend is as a direct result of power shifts for women, and hence new role opportunities for men. Some call it "the new equality".

But psychologist Desiree Saddik from the Canterbury Family Centre in Melbourne says the trend to androgyny reflects a new form of malcontent. As relationships between man and woman fall deeper into murky waters, as the divorce rate soars, people particularly the young and impressionable are looking for a new way of being, she says.

"It is a trend borne out of suffering and unhappiness in relationships. People are saying "if I can't have the other sex then I'll be the other sex"." She says to protect themselves people want to be omnipotent. "They wish to be everything - male and female."

Feminist theorist and lecturer in critical theory and philosophy at Monash University, best-selling author Elizabeth Grosz agrees with Saddik that the trend is stemming directly from people's attitudes. "The image makers are not manipulating our attitudes. The attitudes are guiding image makers," she says. "Androgyny appeals to something deep inside us."

Like Saddik she sites dissatisfaction with conventional roles, relationships and ways of being as a reason for the trend. "Androgyny is not new in history. We see forms of variation in times of upheaval and crisis. We are in crisis now, which is a good thing. The world as we know it is breaking down. Feminism is slowly achieving the impact and change it has agitated for.

"The trend to androgyny reflects more choice in roles. It is very hip, very cool, very groovy amongst my students and among youth culture to be bisexual. The image makers are playing on the demand for role choices that rather than creating them."

Grosz believes: "The current spate of flirtation with the images of lesbianism is good marketing because it appeals to women's increasing image of themselves as the strong, active female, whilst still appealing to the male fantasy."

She says "Androgyny is a clever strategy. Both audiences are attracted to Calvin Klein ads. Like Mapplethorpe's art they open up all sorts of opportunities and choices for us. But are we ready for the choices?" she asks. And can the sexes ever really merge? "Men can't have babies and women can't impregnate," so its all very superficial she warns.

Lecturer in sociology at Macquarie University, Gary Dowsett, says he believes the notion androgyny is a very positive thing for both men and women. He is fascinated by the homo-erotic ads in magazines and on billboards that depict men as languid, sexual, sensuous creatures but which appeal to both sexes. Many straight men don't even know that they are being subconsciously aroused.

"In many ways what we are now seeing is a return to 60s and 70s - the unisex movement that came after Woodstock, where everyone had Afros or long hair, crushed velvet shoulder bags and wore caftans or flared jeans. But back then it was a political movement. Now it is a social movement.

"There is more fluidity of roles in society being explored. The rigid lines between homosexuality and heterosexuality are dissolving. The youth of today are asking who invented these lines? People are slowly breaking away from the notion of two sexes - heterosexual male and female.

"Meanwhile gender roles have changed. Women are no longer seen in ads doing the ironing while husbands mow the lawn. The definitions of what it is to be masculine are rapidly changing."

He says that while it is difficult for people to deviate from the so-called "norms" and what we've been conditioned to believe, the sheer volume of information and ideas filtering down from new technologies will guarantee at least an awareness of our options.

BACKLASH

In hot contrast to the trend to androgyny the blonde bomb-shell is making a come back. Stilettos and kitten heels are back. Pamela Anderson from Baywatch is the hottest new role model for hundreds and thousands of teenagers in what social observers are hailing it as a "feminine backlash".

Outraged at what some describe as the defeminisation of women the hyper-femmes are coming out to fight, says one fashion doyen referring to the sudden trail of Hollywood films like Showgirls which are putting big breasts and bigger hair back on the map.

Big bums are also making a come back in this catfight. Everywhere you look over here in the United States, there are bums wiggling, wobbling and bopping to the beat. The latest dance craze features wildly gyrating hips whilst many of the rock clips rocketing up the charts talk about the joys of large posteriors. Film clips feature well-endowed beauties flashing their finer points at the camera.

The fashion is big but tight, offered one social commentator I caught being interviewed on TV recently. Clothes, particularly on the west coast of America, are cut to show off the big bum. Shorts are shorter than they have been since the 70s, with torn-off jeans provocatively revealing plenty of cheek.

Meanwhile in Australia there is a continued interest in anything which celebrates the female form in all of its fecundity.

A brisk walk down shopping strips in any of the trendy suburbs of our main cities tells the tale of the image war that is being fought between women who want to embrace the new androgynous chic and the ultra femmes.

At lunchtime on a crowded Friday afternoon, I see two young women sitting in a cafe on Sydney's hip Oxford street looking like they've just paid a visit to an S&M joint - leather, chains, PVC corsets, cropped hair - all the latest accoutrements of the "warrior woman" fetishist look. Next to them a woman is wearing a business suit over a transparent, mesh top. When she moves to read the paper and lift her coffee, her right breast comes into view. Her garments are part of the fashion range described as "strip-tease fashion" which is designed to show off female flesh.

The trend to strip-tease fashion came into vogue when a cutting-edge designer chose a New York strip joint to show his collection which included sequined nipple caps, satin slips and snakeskin clothes. Since then the whole lap-dancing, stripper culture has won renewed popularity.

The reason why large-breasted, big-hipped, bigger-haired "classically" feminine women in figure hugging or transparent clothes are asserting themselves so aggressively is not just as a backlash against androgyny and the waif-like bodies which have for so long dominated our catwalks and our consciousness. But also against the startling news that top designers in America and Europe have started using men in drag to model their creations both on the catwalk and on the cover of leading fashion magazines.

Rather than opting for the super tall, super thin female, they have gone the step further and are putting make-up and wigs on beautiful boys and sending them out in high-heeled shoes to face wildly applauding crowds who are apparently lapping up the pantomime.

Indeed, in New York, on the west coast of America and in parts of Europe, it is more super-hip than ever before to be transsexual, lesbian, gay, bi, androgynous or "gender mobile". And that is what is being thrown up to the public.

Female rock singers are getting stronger and bolder on stage whilst it is rare to see a male on stage who hasn't got the marketing advantage of androgyny. "Being straight" is out of vogue which has sparked what can only be described as a conservative attempt to put things back the way they were.

But it there is not just a backlash against women that we are witnessing. Bob Connell professor of sociology at Santa Cruz University in California and author of the book "Masculinities" believes the trend to androgyny has also sparked a backlash against the new, more sensitive, sensual male. He believes that men's movies, and boys computer games are becoming more violent, children's films from Hollywood are pushing the same old stereotypes, and the large-muscled small-brained man is more popular the ever. It's Rambo, the Testosterone kid, fighting back.

Social observer and corporate trainer Christine Maher of Celebrity Speakers does not believe that a return to the past is possible. "The 80s were the time of the entrepreneur. The 90s are the time of the nice guy. And now we're moving towards the 20s, the year 2000, which will be the time of the twin.

"Those people who can balance both sides of themselves: the Yin with the Yang, the male with the female, work with recreation will be our new heroes in all aspects of life."

One thing is certain, the gender war will hot up as we hurtle towards the end of the millennium. Women are going to keep pushing those tits and childbearing hips on to centre stage, men will be flexing their muscles, as others fight to redefine what being "feminine" and "masculine" really means. Whether the tides of change can be stemmed by the backlash is yet to be seen, but it will be an exciting battle. May the best "Man" win.

READER'S LETTERS

Dear Ruth,

To Anon, QLD, who's friend wears ladies underwear. I don't think there is anything wrong with any fella wearing ladies knickers. I am a married woman with seven children and I wear men's jocks, because I find them very comfortable. I reckon there would be many others doing the same. Mrs J (for Jocks), Brisbane, QLD

Dear Ruth,

If a female decides to openly demonstrate the masculine side to her personality in public, by wearing male clothing, society accepts her right to do so. To many, she is making a fashion statement. However, should a male decide to openly demonstrate the feminine side to his personality in public, by wearing female clothing, all hell would break loose. Why do we have such double standards? Anon, QLD

Dear Ruth,

I am a cross-dresser and without the support of my wife, life would be very hard for me having to hide an important part of myself. I want to tell your readers not to be afraid to confide in their partners. To be different is not bad, but to keep the real you locked away is not healthy. If she loves you unconditionally then she will understand. S.H Burwood, VIC

Dear Ruth,

I am a straight man in his early twenties who, although he does not wear ladies' knickers, possesses many items of female clothing that he frequently wears in public including PVC pants and a brilliant ladies' silver jacket that I have worn on innumerable occasions. I feel great freedom in being able to wear whatever I like regardless of whether society deems it appropriate for me as a man or not. "B", Adelaide, SA

Dear Ruth,

To Anon QLD, take heart. Your friend who wears ladies underwear is not the only one. It is estimated that in Great Britain alone, there are 500,000 heterosexual married males who cross-dress either regularly or occasionally. It is a known fact that cross-dressing

is a strong antidote for stress. If the wearing of ladies underwear brings out himself then why not? He is not demonstrating weakness. Femininity is about love, loyalty, affection, gentleness caring and so on. Alison, Sunshine Beach, QLD.

Dear Ruth,

I want to tell Ms C from Mill Park that having been married to a bisexual man for twenty years, I would urge you not to go ahead with this marriage. Your boyfriend can't and shouldn't be asked to change his sexual orientation. Please save yourself a lifetime of heartbreak and unhappiness. I love my husband, but it's not a good choice to marry a gay man unless you want your marriage to be severely compromised. Mrs R, WA.