Are Lesbians Women?

Jacob Hale

In this article, Hale analyzes Monique Wittig’s paradoxical claim that, because lesbians do not live in a binary relationship with men and because doing so is a necessary feature of being a woman in this culture, lesbians are not women. He begins by developing an articulation of the concept of “woman” as it presently exists in the United States. He argues that the concept “woman” has thirteen distinct characteristics, none of which are necessary or sufficient. He concludes that, given his account of woman, some lesbians are women and some are not.

"Lesbians are not women" was the sentence with which Monique Wittig ended "The Straight Mind" at the Modern Language Association’s annual conference in 1978. A moment of stunned silence followed (Turcotte 1992, viii). Eighteen years later, this claim often is first greeted with surprise, confusion, nervous giggles, disbelief, dismissal, disdain, or “the incredulous stare” (as we call it within analytic philosophy).

It is no surprise that this claim excites such reactions. One reason for negative reactions is that it flies in the face of the dominant culture’s definitions of the categories of both gender and sexuality, which do not differ relevantly from those used by lesbian and gay activists. Thus, one of my gay students initially responded by saying, “I would have thought that that [woman] was the one thing a lesbian had to be.”

Although taking “lesbians are not women” as a truth-claim may not be accurate Wittig exegesis, it is this construal that I examine in this essay. I believe this approach is fruitful because it illuminates the descriptive elements of the concept woman in our culture now, which in turn gives us a better basis for political strategizing, including strategically refusing categorization as women; bluntly: one needs to understand what one is up against to go up against it successfully, unless one is blessed with dumb luck.

"YOU’RE NOT A REAL WOMAN"

One argument Wittig gives for believing that lesbians are not women is based on the observation that lesbians are often accused of not being real women or of being “not real women”; heterosexuals mean this both as insult and as threat. Wittig uses the principle “to be one, one has to be a ‘real’ one” to derive the conclusion that lesbians are not women (Wittig 1992, 12).

It is plausible to believe that this is the use of “not real” in the accusation that lesbians are not real women. On this reading, it does not imply that lesbians are not women; instead it implies that lesbians, while women, are not good women because they do not behave in relation to men in the ways that are valued positively for women. Of course, “real” need not have the same meaning in every use of “not a real woman,” so my argument leaves open the possibility that when non-lesbian women are told that they are not real women this is intended to imply that they are bad women, whereas being a lesbian is incompatible with being a woman at all. However, analyzing the accusation that lesbians are not real women hardly seems a promising way to answer or dissolve this question.

WHAT IS IT TO BE A WOMAN?

The second of Wittig’s arguments relies on her analysis of interconnections between the category of sex, heterosexuality as political regime, and the concept woman and man. Here are three quotes in which Wittig argues for her view that lesbians are not women.

From “Paradigm”:

Insofar as the virtuality “woman” becomes reality for an individual only in relation to an individual of the opposing class—men—and particularly through marriage, lesbians, because they do not enter this category, are not “women.” Besides, it is not as “women” that lesbians are oppressed, but rather that they are not women." (They are, of course, not “men” either.) And it is not “women” (victims of heterosexuality) that lesbians love and desire but lesbians (individuals who are not the females of men). (Wittig 1979, 121)

From the end of “The Straight Mind”:

Let us say that we break off the heterosexual contract. So, this is what lesbians say everywhere in this country and in some others, if not with theories at least through their social practice, whose repercussions upon straight culture and society are still unobservable. An anthropologist might say that we have to wait for fifty years. Yes, if one
wants to universalize the functioning of these societies and make their invariants appear. Meanwhile the straight concepts are undermined. What is woman? Pand; general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women. (Wittig 1992, 32)

From the last paragraph of “One Is Not Born a Woman”:

To destroy “woman” does not mean that we aim, short of physical destruction, to destroy lesbianism simultaneously with the categories of sex, because lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (“forced residence,” domestic corvee, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (Wittig 1992, 20)

Following Judith Butler to some extent, I propose the following reconstruction of Wittig’s argument (Burler 1987, 136–37):

(1) The category of sex presupposes a discourse in which sex is binary, man and woman are exhaustive, and man and woman are complementary opposites.

So, (2) The category of sex is subsumed under the discourse of heterosexuality.

So, (3) To be a man means to be in binary relation with a man.

(4) No lesbian is in a binary relation with a man.

So, (5) No lesbian is a woman.

I want to assume that premises (3) and (4) are true and ask: Under what interpretation of binary relation with a man are they true? At first, it seems that the answer must be that one is in binary relation with a man just in case one is in a sexual/affectional (though not necessarily monogamous) relationship with a man. Paradigmatically, this would be a heterosexual marriage (Wittig, 1992, 6–7; Wittig 1979, 121).

There is nothing in Wittig to suggest that heterosexual marriage is the only relationship that counts as a binary relation between a man and a woman, nor would this restriction be plausible. Further, she has not said that a heterosexual marriage always counts as a binary relation between a man and a woman; this would not be plausible either. Imagine that the man who posted the following personal ad in Deneuve (a national lesbian glossy) finds what he’s looking for:

ATTENTION CALIFORNIA DYKES
My GAM boyfriend needs a green card through marriage. If your girlfriend needs one too, this CWM can reciprocate. (Deneuve 1994)

Apparently, heterosexual marriage is a paradigm example of a binary relation between a woman and a man, but being married is neither necessary nor sufficient for being in such a relation. Even reading binary relation with a man as a fuzzy concept, a number of “problem cases” arise: I will not examine all of these apparent counter examples.

A number of my colleagues and students have asked if Wittig would say that Catholic nuns, simply in virtue of being nuns, are not women. Although in “One Is Not Born a Woman” Wittig writes, “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically” (Wittig 1992, 20), in “The Category of Sex” she writes, “Some lesbians and nuns escape [the category of sex]” because they are not “seen [as] and made [to be] sexually available to men” (Wittig 1992, 7). This contradiction reflects an inadequate specificity in Wittig’s work about the degree and types of participation in heterosexuality necessary for membership in the category woman.

While being a nun may be a way of resisting or escaping marriage, nuns are symbolically married to Jesus Christ. Some lesbians’ gender self-presentations are indistinguishable from those of heterosexual women whose self-presentations, arguably, signal their sexual availability to men. Many lesbians and Catholic nuns participate in institutions that help maintain the political regime of heterosexuality. Sometimes they are highly subservient to individual men in these institutions, and must make themselves sexually available to individual men who have institutional power over them. Lesbians and nuns are not entirely free from male control of their reproductive labor, even if this is not controlled by an individual man in the same way it may be within a heterosexual marriage. A lesbian may be barred from adopting children or be denied custody or visiting rights to her children, simply because she is a lesbian (Calhoun 1994, 564–65). Nuns and lesbians are both vulnerable to male control of their reproductive labor if they are impregnated through rape.

A distinction between ideological components of the categories lesbian and woman and their (imperfect) instantiations might avoid these difficulties. Things get much worse for Wittig’s view, however, once we attend to the lives and experiences of people who do not fit clearly into the binary distinction between heterosexuals, on the one hand, and gays and lesbians, on the other hand.

The problem, then, for Wittig goes well beyond the point that the concepts woman, man, and lesbian are inherently vague. The problem is deeper: her analysis is too simplistic to handle the variety of ways in which people, including lesbians, are gendered. Since Wittig’s view is that the concepts man, woman, and lesbian each rest on a single defining characteristic, her view does not have conceptual room for the multiplicity of genderings present even only among contemporary U.S. lesbians.

In the next two sections, I develop a view more complex than Wittig’s of the dominant culture’s concept of woman, while retaining what I consider to be the important contributions she has made to our understanding of the categories of sex.

THE "NATURAL ATTITUDE" TOWARD GENDER AND THE CONCEPT WOMAN

In this section, I develop some themes necessary to articulate my proposed reconstruction of our culture’s concept woman. I begin by asking: What are the commonly held presuppositions that constitute our dominant cultural attitude about what gender is?

The landmark essay from which I draw to answer this question is Harold
Garfinkel’s “Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sexual Status in an ‘Inter-sexed’ Person, Part 1” (Garfinkel 1967), which was based on Garfinkel’s 1958 case study of Agnes. “Agnes” is the pseudonym of a patient who presented at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles to obtain sex reassignment surgery. Agnes was generally recognized to be a boy until age 17. However, by the time she presented at age 19, she had achieved a convincing self-presentation as a woman. U.C.L.A. psychiatrists, including Robert Stoller, were charged with determining whether or not Agnes was a suitable candidate for sex reassignment surgery. Garfinkel “used her case as an occasion to focus on the ways in which sexual identity is produced and managed as a ‘seen but unnoticed’, but nonetheless institutionalized, feature of ordinary social interactions and institutional workings” (Heritage 1984, 181).

Garfinkel came to see the “institution of gender…as a densely woven fabric of morally accountable cultural practices which are throughout both accountable, and accountability treated, as natural” (Heritage 1984, 189). Garfinkel attempted to identify the primary threads of this fabric, the primary components of the natural attitude toward gender, and follow Kate Bornstein’s reformulation of Garfinkel (Bornstein 1994, 16–50, Garfinkel 1967):

1. There are two, and only two, genders (female and male).
2. One’s gender is invariant. (If you are female/male, you always were female/male and you always will be female/male.)
3. Genitals are the essential sign of gender. (A female is a person with a vagina; a male is a person with a penis.)
4. Any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously. (They must be jokes, pathology, etc.)
5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones (masquerades).
6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another. (There are no cases where gender is not attributed.)
7. The male/female dichotomy is a “natural” one. (Males and females exist independently of scientists’ or anyone else’s criteria for being male or female.)
8. Membership in one gender or another is “natural.” (Being female or male is not dependent on anyone’s deciding what you are.)

Garfinkel’s reconstruction points out that there is not a unique concept of gender held even by the dominant members of our culture. He argues that those who hold the “natural attitude,” dubbed “normals,” are suspicious of some medical and scientific claims about gender. Since “normals” regard the gender binary as a “natural matter of fact,” they find claims made by scientists such as zoology, biology, and psychiatry “strange,” because “these sciences argue that decisions about sexuality are problematic matters” which require “a procedure for deciding sexuality” (Garfinkel 1967, 123–24). The general point here is that specialized discourses about gender do not agree entirely with the “natural attitude” toward gender, nor with one another. These specialized discourses include distinct medical discourses, other scientific discourses, psychotherapeutic discourses, and legal discourses (which vary state-by-state in the United States). Although all of these discourses share regulatory aims, they have somewhat distinct aims and often attempt to regulate differently. Hence, it should be expected that these discourses would differ to some extent in their claims about gender, especially since there is a wide variety of evidence which appears to contradict the “natural attitude.” While “normals” who hold the “natural attitude” must continually adjust their attitude to claims about gender which appear to contradict their attitude, or ignore these claims, or explain or laugh or ridicule or beat them away, specialized discourses about gender are by no means immune from the influence of the “natural attitude” either. Rather, they are shaped by the desire to hold as much, or the most crucial elements, of the “natural attitude” in place, insofar as this is consistent with their specialized aims; indeed, their specialized aims may, sometimes, take less precedence than upholding some aspect of the “natural attitude.”

I’ll turn now to examining a second theme in the dominant cultural attitude about gender. Marilyn Frye reminds us that women continually find themselves in “double bind” situations, as an effect of the nature of oppression:

One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found “difficult” or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one’s livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilition. (Frye 1983, 2–3)

We can, I believe, draw two morals about the concept woman from the pervasiveness of double bind situations in women’s experiences, first the concept woman is internally incoherent; this incoherence arises from the following: a woman is devalued according to how different she is from the white non-transsexual male heterosexual middle-class able-bodied Christian norm, for this norm provides standards of evaluation of human worthiness, and a woman is also devalued according to how close she is to this norm, for it dictates that those people who should have the positively evaluated characteristics it upholds as standards are white non-transsexual heterosexual middle-class able-bodied Christian men.

Second, the concept woman is, at least in part, an essentially normative concept. My use of the word “essentially” here should not be understood as implying that the concept woman is a natural concept, for a thoroughly cultural construct, such as the game of baseball, can have essential characteristics: without a ball, it isn’t a baseball game. The characteristic of woman which Wittig takes as uniquely definitional is essentially normative, and the double bind situations of which Frye reminds us arise partly because of prescriptive and proscriptive claims about how women should behave and be. Of course, the myth that Wittig is showing for what it is—mythical—tells us that the normative elements in the concept woman follow from purely physical descriptive “natural facts” about women considered as females; so one element of the myth is that the concept woman is, fundamentally and essentially, descriptive.

Since the concept woman functions prescriptively and proscriptively, we should expect it to include both positive and negative exemplars; hence, its defining
characteristics should allow for the possibility of both. There is no one paradigm of womanhood; rather, at the very least we should expect one positively and one negatively evaluated paradigm. However, there is more than one culturally recognized way to be a good woman. One is by participating in heterosexuality in the way Wittig vaguely describes and takes to be the crucial defining characteristic of woman. However, there are other ways to participate in heterosexuality, that is, to aid in its perpetuation, which certainly do not require and sometimes preclude sexual/affectional involvements with men. A few such roles are schoolteacher, librarian, nurse, and avowedly celibate, religious devotee.

Further, we find multiple candidates for contemporary negative paradigms in the dominant culture’s representations of, for example, sex workers, pregnant women, whose behaviors could cause harm to their fetuses, “single welfare mothers,” domestixxes, women who cut off their abusive husbands’ penises, mothers who kill their children, and, perhaps, lesbians.

Given the pull of the “natural attitude” toward gender, it cannot be the case that many bad girls are, thereby, in some gender category or categories other than man or woman. This “natural attitude,” according to which there are exactly two genders and one’s gender is invariant and determined by one’s genitals, would be severely undermined if many bad girls ceased being women simply by being bad. Maintaining the “natural attitude” requires that there are so few exceptions that they can be clearly demarcated from “the normals.” Otherwise, exceptions could not be treated as pathologi
cases, as freaks, as jokes, or as some other kind of negatively evaluated aberration or abnormality; rampant anomaly would destroy the “natural attitude.”

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CATEGORY WOMAN

In this section I offer my reconstruction of the dominant culture’s concept of woman. There are a number of defining characteristics of the category woman. None of these characteristics is a necessary or sufficient condition. My list includes thirteen characteristics, clustered into several groups, differently weighted; some of these characteristics may be satisfied to differing degrees. Any adequate reconstruction of the dominant cultural concept woman needs to include all the elements I list, though this list may not be exhaustive.

The first cluster includes five characteristics generally regarded as sex characteristics by those who subscribe to a sex/gender distinction. In our culture, this cluster is more heavily weighted than any of the other defining characteristics.

1. Absence of a penis.

Although presence of a vagina plays a role here, absence of a penis is primary. Initial gender assignment is typically and normatively made by a doctor who does not examine genitals but, instead, takes a quick glance between an infant’s legs. If that doctor sees tissue that seems to have the potential to develop into a penis within the “normal range,” the announcement is made: “It’s a boy!” If that doctor does not see such tissue the announcement is: “It’s a girl!” (Kessler [1990] 1994, 223–24, 227–28). Such announcements are peremptive in the strictest Austrian sense; the announcement constitutes initial assignment, yet the moral accountability of the “natural attitude” requires that this assignment masquerade as a report of an already existing, purely natural fact.

Weighting penises more heavily than vaginas in attributing gender is not limited to attributions to neonates. In their overlay study, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna found that: “the presence of a penis is, in and of itself, a powerful enough cue to elicit a gender attribution with almost complete (95% percent) agreement. The presence of a vagina, however, does not have this same power. One third of the participants were able to ignore the reality of the vagina as female cue” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 151). Garfinkel’s formulation of the “natural attitude” toward gender is mistaken in this regard. It is not quite accurate that, according to the “natural attitude,” a female is a person with a vagina and a male is a person with a penis. Instead, as Bornstein writes, “It has little or nothing to do with vaginas. It’s all penises or no penises…” (Bornstein 1994, 22).

2. Presence of breasts.

After absence of penis when a body is unclothed, presence of breasts tends to be the most heavily weighted of the thirteen characteristics in gender attributions. This is evidenced by Kessler and McKenna’s findings in their overlay study (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 148–53), by the importance of breast growth to MTFs (male-to-female transsexuals) for achieving convincingly feminine self-presentations, by the importance of top surgery to many FTMs, including both many of us who never undergo genital reconstruction surgeries and many who do, for achieving convincingly masculine self-presentations. Presence or absence of breasts also plays a large part in producing and maintaining gender identity in transsexuals and in non-transsexual birth-assigned females who undergo mastectomy as treatment for breast cancer. Absence of breasts, in the latter case, can threaten an individual’s sense of herself as a woman, whereas absence of breasts can be crucial in producing and maintaining MTFs’ masculine identities.

Contemporary lesbian anxiety about whether or not butches will expose their breasts—during sex, at pride parades, at women’s music festivals, or as assertion of their right to use women’s rest rooms when challenged—is another facet of lesbian ambivalence about the relationship between the categories lesbian and woman. Pressure put on butches to expose their breasts reflects anxieties that butches are not women or are on their way to becoming men. For butch refusal to ground and elicit this anxiety, presence of breasts must be a very heavily weighted characteristic of woman.

3. Presence of reproductive organs (uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes) which allow for pregnancy to occur if the person engages in intercourse with a fertile man.

4. Presence of estrogen and progesterone in a balance with androgens within the “normal” range (as defined by endocrinologists) for females of one’s age group.

5. Presence of XX, or perhaps absence of Y, chromosomes.

Each of these five characteristics can vary somewhat independently, so no one of the five by itself is either necessary or sufficient for being within the category woman. An initial gender assignment, based on the absence of penile tissue, may be defeated by a number of nongenital characteristics. One is if chromosomal testing, done for some reason such as determining whether or not an athlete will be allowed to compete in women’s events in the Olympics, indicates the presence of a Y chromosome. Yet this specialized case does not show that chromosomes are the ultimate, essential bedrock of our culture’s concept woman, nor even that chromosomes are taken to be the most important of this cluster. Chromosomal testing is rare, even in cases of sex reassignment. Furthermore, insofar as MTFs fall within
54 Sex and Gender Identity

the category woman, most do so despite having XY chromosomes, despite lacking a uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes, and in some cases despite presence of a penis, though usually not without presence of estrogen in a balance with testosterone closer to that typical for women than that for men and sufficient to have caused some breast tissue growth.

6. Having a gender identity as a woman.

Do you feel yourself to be a woman? Then, according to this defining characteristic, you are. This characteristic is less heavily weighted by the dominant culture than are many others, though it is not entirely negligible, as is shown by the crucial role gender identity plays in definitions of and diagnostic criteria for adult gender identity disorder (the current diagnostic category under which transsexuals gain access to medically regulated technologies) and in transsexual experiences.

The next cluster of defining characteristics has to do with what traditionally have been called "gender roles."

7. Having an occupation considered to be acceptable for a woman.

8. Engaging in leisure pursuits (including hobbies, club memberships, lesser social affiliations, recreational activities, entertainment interests, and nonoccupational religious activities) considered to be acceptable for a woman, and pursuing these in ways considered acceptable for a woman.

I have not specified the content of (7) and (8), nor will I do so for (10)-(12) below, so as to allow for embodiments of these criteria to vary in relation to intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, regional location, and other such modalities. (8) leads naturally to a defining characteristic similar to that which Wittig takes to be the essential defining characteristic of the category woman.

9. Engaging at some point in one's life in some form of sexual/affective relationship with a man who is commonly recognized as heterosexual, whose life history is consistent with that placement of him, and who either self-identifies as heterosexual or who does not self-identify as gay or bisexual, and not later renouncing one's status as heterosexual.

I agree with Wittig that being heterosexual is part of what it is to be a woman. However, this is not the one and only defining characteristic of the concept woman, nor is satisfying this characteristic necessary or sufficient for being within the category woman.

The next cluster of defining characteristics are ones that would often be taken to have to do with gender attribution by measures other than those that I have put into the first cluster (genitals, breasts, reproductive organs, hormones, and chromosomes), though some of these would be considered secondary sex characteristics by those who endorse a sex/gender distinction. (10)-(12) are very heavily weighted in defining gender in our culture, for were we uncertain of our culture, for were we uncertain of our gender attributions very often, or if we were to doubt our attributions, would be undermined in any way other than a profound disturbance in our ability to rely on (1)-(5). Indeed, if much divergence were found in the classifications produced by these two clusters, this divergence would seriously undermine the "natural attitude" toward gender more radically than such belief would be undermined in any other way.

10. Achieving and maintaining a physical gender self-presentation the elements of which work together to produce the gender assignment "woman" in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. These behavioral cues include movement, posture, facial expressions, mannerisms, decorum, etiquette, protocol, and deportment considered to be within acceptable ranges for women. For example, this may include degrees and styles of aggressiveness in communicating with others, and, more generally, how one uses and negotiates power in interactions with others. This also includes styles of verbal expression which are taken to reflect styles of thought: for example, women are more intuitive or emotional and less rational than men; women engage in less linear thought than men; women are more supportive and cooperative and less competitive in conversation than men, and so on.

11. Behaving in ways that work together to produce the gender assignment "woman" in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. These behavioral cues include movement, posture, facial expressions, mannerisms, decorum, etiquette, protocol, and deportment considered to be within acceptable ranges for women. For example, this may include degrees and styles of aggressiveness in communicating with others, and, more generally, how one uses and negotiates power in interactions with others. This also includes styles of verbal expression which are taken to reflect styles of thought: for example, women are more intuitive or emotional and less rational than men; women engage in less linear thought than men; women are more supportive and cooperative and less competitive in conversation than men, and so on.

12. Giving textual cues that work together to produce the gender assignment "woman" in those with whom one interacts (including children and transsexuals), unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment. Textual features include citing a continuous, unambiguous history as a woman who was a girl before adulthood, referring to an unambiguous future as a woman interrupted only by death, having only documents bearing the designation "F" (for example, birth certificate, driver's license, passport) or bearing no gender designation (for example, employee or student identification card, credit card) and bearing either no photographs or photographs consistent with (10), using, answering to, and having documents bearing only a name consistent with the assignment "woman," using only feminine pronouns to refer to oneself whenever making third person singular pronominal references to oneself, quoting only others' third person singular pronominal references to oneself, quoting only others' third person singular pronominal references to oneself which use feminine pronouns, and, in general, displaying only photographs, drawings, or other pictorial representations of oneself which are consistent with (10).

13. Having a history consistent with the gender assignment "woman" as produced by (10)-(12) which provides an unbroken line of descent from female infancy through girlhood to womanhood.

Do people, including children and transsexuals, with whom you interact think you're a woman? Do they think this all the time, unambiguously, and without ever thinking about thinking about it? If so, according to (10)-(12), then you're a woman.

Satisfaction of (10)-(12) is frequently a primary concern in the gender performance activities of MTFs. This is also a common primary concern, though usually less consciously so, in the gender performance activities of birth-assigned females who wish to stay within the category woman. The difference is not necessarily in the amount of effort required, but rather in the degree of awareness that one is engaged in such an effort and in the degree of awareness of the specific dangers failure would bring on.

Application of this cluster of defining characteristics may sometimes be defeated by a contradictory but very clear classification according to the first cluster. I am unsure about whether or not application of this cluster may be defeated by another defining characteristic or a cluster of other defining characteristics. (10)-(12) are very heavily weighted in defining gender in our culture, for were we uncertain of our gender attributions very often, or if we were to doubt our attributions, would be undermined in any way other than a profound disturbance in our ability to rely on (1)-(5). Indeed, if much divergence were found in the classifications produced by these two clusters, this divergence would seriously undermine the "natural attitude."
ARE LESBIANS WOMEN?
REVISTED

Let me now return to the question: "Are lesbians women?" Anyone who expected an unequivocal answer has, I hope, abandoned this expectation.

Are lesbians women? Some are, some are not, and in many cases there is no fact of the matter. There are many differences among lesbians as to which of the defining characteristics of women they satisfy, which they do not satisfy, the extent to which they do satisfy those characteristics which they satisfy, and the extent to which they fail to satisfy those characteristics which they do not satisfy. No lesbian satisfies every defining characteristic of the category woman, since every lesbian fails to satisfy condition (9); yet, even in regard to this condition, the degree to which lesbians fail to satisfy it differs. But many lesbians do, fairly clearly and to a fairly great extent, satisfy each of the other defining characteristics. There is no principled reason to say that such lesbians are not women, given that they satisfy the most heavily weighted defining characteristics for being in that category, they satisfy all but one of the characteristics, and that characteristic which they do not satisfy is not one among the most heavily weighted.

REFERENCES


Discussion Questions

1. Hale questions the claim that no lesbian is in a binary relationship with a man. Why? What case studies does Hale describe to support his point? Do you agree with Hale that lesbians may participate in institutions that maintain heterosexuality as much as heterosexual women? Explain.
3. Hale identifies thirteen defining features of women. He claims that the first five are the most important and are usually regarded as sex characteristics, not gender characteristics. If they are sex characteristics, doesn't that lend weight to the notion that woman is a natural category?

4. Hale claims that the concept of woman is internally incoherent. What does he mean? Do you agree? Explain.
5. Hale claims that one defining feature of woman is "Achieving and maintaining a physical gender self-presentation the elements of which work together to produce the gender assignment 'woman.'" If a person considers herself a woman, what does she do to achieve her gender assignment? How much time, money, and effort does she put into maintaining that assignment? If she were to cease to engage in those activities, does she think those with whom she interacts would treat her differently? Explain.

Transgender Butch
Judith Halberstam

In this chapter from her book, Female Masculinity, Halberstam examines contemporary discussions of transgenderism and transsexualism. In particular, Halberstam focuses her analysis on female-to-male transsexuals (FTM) and butch lesbians. She rejects the claim that both FTM and butch lesbians are at the masculine end of a gender continuum and that the difference between the two is only a matter of degrees. Moreover, Halberstam regards as too simplistic the claim that the only difference between the two is that butch lesbians are satisfied with their female bodies whereas FTM are dissatisfied with their bodies to the point of surgically altering them. She also rejects the claim that the two are in opposition to one another since butch lesbianism is a fixed-gender identity whereas FTM make the transition from one identity to another. She argues that each of these accounts of transgenderism and transsexualism assume a conservative (and highly questionable) notion of masculinity. She concludes that a tenable account of the "border wars" between butch lesbians and FTM must take into account the transitivity in both groups and the ever-changing and permeable divide between them.

THE WRONG BODY

In 1995 the BBC broadcast a series called The Wrong Body. One episode in the series dealt