

@ Creating Change 09: Butch (Re)defined

Posted by Miriam - January 31, 2009, at 02:00PM | in Queer Issues

From the moderator: Even looking for panelists was hard, because some people I reached out to, who I thought would be masculine or butch identified, and then they weren't.

This panel was made up of reflections from 6 butch identified women. Notes from their remarks are below the jump. I really appreciated that there were two Latina butch-identified woman on this panel. I think race plays a big role in the formation of these identities and I appreciated seeing that reflected.

Lisbeth Melendez-Rivera--

Being Puerto Rican is a big part of my journey into butchness. The first time that I was called masculine, I was four years old and my mother told me I had "blue balls." In Latin America, the idea of female masculinity is an immediate isolating factor. The main word for gay men in PR is "pato" (duck). A person who is seen as male identified is called "pata" (female duck). As a child, you look at that and ask do I want to be the point of ridicule? Because of all of those questions I left PR and landed in Boston, where I lived for 16 years. Don't believe the hype, it's not a liberal place. To be lesbian and to be of color, the good jobs came very hard. You were held to a different standard. For 16 years I struggled to survive. It has impacted where I went to work. I still know that I will never be the executive director (maybe a gay org, but definitely not a straight one). You struggle with what it means to be a masculine identified dyke. I live in a level of comfort with my body as a woman that our trans brothers don't feel and I respect that. I would also ask that our trans brothers respect my relationship with my femininity as well. The fact that I have longer hair again, it does not mean that my masculinity is changing. My wife tells me that I am her big rainbow sign. We honor the invisibility of our femme sisters. "How I live is comfortable, how you live is brave."

Carmen Vasquez--

I've been talking and writing about this for a very long time. I am butch, as I am lesbian, as I am Puertorican. Dress me up or dress me down I am still the captain of the rocketship. The emergence of a more public butch identity happened at a time when the intersections between class, race, gender became more clear to me. These things are about autonomy. It's when I understood that I could no longer address racism in white communities, or homophobia in straight communities of color, or classism without embracing my butchness. I was a butch at 6 when I threw my dolls out. I had to defend that identity in a white led feminist movement that saw that identity as sexist. It is NOT sexist. I'm not a boy anymore, at 60, Sir is more appropriate. I was never a stone butch but I was definitely someone very afraid of the vulnerability that comes with surrender. This butch has been flipped by a beautiful femme top whom I've learned to trust. What I've learned is that part of pleasing your partner is allowing for the full range of her desire and expression of it. A really difficult two years have taught me to learn to cry, within this very male identity. I think butch is always redefined, by race, class, age, cultural change. Every generation's expression of female masculinity changes. But butch remains.

Moderator: Jessica--identifies as a masculine woman, a lesbian, legally married to a trans man

Kathy Bouche--

Getting dressed for a butch panel, already the thoughts were there. I brought my thermos, because that's pretty butch. (laughter). A year after I came out, at 26, my ex-boyfriend (who was

closeted too) called me butch. At the time I had all these negative associations with the term. The next time that I ran up with the word butch, someone I was dating told me I should read Stone Butch Blues. I ended up getting a motorcycle after that and it led me to other books about gender. My gender presentation is really what shapes my daily experience. Being told she was not butch enough, but also that she would eventually become trans. "Butch glass ceiling"--are there limitations for butch people? Can they be visible leaders? Would people (rich white gay men) donate to an organization with a butch leader? I feel that I have a responsibility to be mentored and to mentor.

Hope Wisneski--

I really didn't think I was butch enough to be on the panel either. I have gone through the process of being pregnant. I have a two year old son who I actually carried. Ooooh. I really felt that breaking of gender norms when I came out. It didn't matter who I presented anymore, I stepped out of that expectation. My biggest problem with the whole pregnancy thing was maternity clothes. Seriously. Stop in a maternity store and look around to see how the clothing would fit with your wardrobe. When I was pregnant it was assumed I was straight everywhere I went. It's a constant personal choice whether to come out or not. The pregnancy has shifted by gender identity. My identity as a mother has shifted how I see myself. Before pregnancy, I had more men's clothes than women's clothes. Now it's the opposite.

Sheri--

I feel like this is a topic I don't get to talk a lot about. In my community, there aren't many people I get to have these conversations with. Tattoos are also part of my gender presentation and identity. I identify as queer, butch, as a white woman. For me, butch is a way to define my identity as a woman, separate from straight men. I'm not equating myself with a masculine man. I do drag king performances, which has been a way to express a part of me. Also in terms of butch/femme relationships, there is nothing hetero about them. The line between passing as male and being super out as queer is blurry, and scary.