



Fierce Dyke Caught Doing Husband's Laundry Marriage: The New Frontier Jessica Pettitt

I am a diehard, activist dyke. My former students even went so far as to call me a “Fierce Dyke”, a title which I wore with boastful pride in the streets of New York City. It was when I worked professionally as “gay for pay” on a college campus as the point LGBT person for faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding community that I really understood who I am in regards to my sexuality, gender expression, and passion for social justice. Now I bring my “Fierce Dyke” crown to the stage while doing trainings and speaking engagements focusing on LGBT Advocacy and Inclusion. Who knew that from my office swivel chair, I would meet my *husband*?¹

I was born and raised in Texas and got out as soon as I could. I didn't understand sex or gender or identity let alone the social construction of these concepts and how they in themselves uphold heterosexism, sexism, and heterophobia. I did know that gays (now I would say Lesbian and Gay men) weren't treated equally and became a loud (and I mean a loud!) ally in high school and middle school. “Why does anyone care what anyone else does romantically or sexually? If consent is given, then it shouldn't be anyone's business,” I argued. I continued to question authority on my college campus, an elite private liberal arts school in Arkansas. While attending graduate school in South Carolina, I researched Ally Identity Development². I came out

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as a lesbian in my late twenties; no one was shocked except me. I continued doing LGBT service work which led to a number of typical and atypical lesbian relationships. Like most advocates, I began focusing on the “L” and the “G” of the “LGBT” acronym, but it was lessons from my students that really got me advocating for the Bisexual and Trans populations. Fluidity of sex and gender made so much sense to me once I understood the terms and applied them to my own life, relationships and identities. The more I understood about gender and sexuality the more freedom I had to express myself. I realized I am attracted to what I like to call “checked masculinity” and he/she/sie are usually wearing a hoody, carrying a book, wearing glasses, and walking around lost but enjoying the view. My attraction has nothing to do with hormones experienced at puberty or later in life or genitalia. So, one fateful day, before packing up the office and going home to the stereotypical U-Haul girlfriend at home, my appointment walked into my office and changed everything – including my views on marriage forever.

Loren told me that he had started transitioning and had been on hormones for a month or so. He was doing fine, and wanted suggestions on how to edit his name and gender marker on his faculty and student records. Reading him as male, I assumed he was transitioning from male to female; I am sure he was flattered at this gender validation on my part. The direction of Loren’s transition is female to male, he is a

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transman. Motorcycles, Peace Corps stories, home cooked meals, and long dog walks, later, I can confidently say that I married the man of my dreams; dreams I didn't know I had or even wanted to have for that matter.

We got married, legally, in Las Vegas as the true romantics tend to do. Nevada only requires two legal documents of those of the "opposite" sex when applying for a marriage license. He and I plopped our Arizona issued driver's licenses on the counter of the court house, paid our money, and without hesitation, reserve, or even a second glance, we got our marriage license. Somewhere between the woman behind the bulletproof glass at the courthouse and Elvis's stand-in at the Chapel (Elvis had the day off), we marched down a white gauzed aisle and unexpectedly grabbed heterosexual privilege with such gusto that watching the wedding video somewhat saddens me. Neither of us wore political t-shirts or interrupted the service demanding equity for all. I just smiled and cried; I said "I do" and we kissed. I instantly became a certificate carrying member of an institution that is historically based on ownership, sexism, capitalism, dowries, property, enslavement, and other evils that I have spent most of a lifetime fighting against.

I am troubled now with using the word "partner." Some LGBT folks feel that when an Ally uses the word "partner," they may be forgetting their heterosexual privilege or by saying "husband" or "wife," they are being insensitive and showcasing a socially

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constructed norm. I find I'm stuck in a contradiction too. What term should I use? I am more comfortable using the word "partner," but I don't want to out my husband for my own identity's benefit. I am growing accustomed to, if not proud of, the fact that I am his wife. I even like that stranger's validate my relationship by making comments about my wedding ring. There seems to be a weight given to my relationship that seems to mean that I am a success as a woman in my 30's. I do get asked in these conversations about children that I didn't get asked when open about my committed relationships with women. When I choose to say that we aren't going to have children, I feel my success as a woman begin to recede a little in other's eyes. We also don't identify as heterosexual, but *heteroqueer*. Depending on who I am talking with and the context, I am fluid with my personal identities, respectful of my partner's preferences, and vary the language used to describe the multiple areas of "outness."³ Because of my attachment to the lesbian and queer community, I find that I am literally heterophobic and had to really work on the fact that I will be perceived as straight by others. When visiting regular dyke bars, we have been questioned if not warned prior to entry and in straight venues welcomed in a "look how progressive we are at this place" over the top lesbian inclusive language. Neither feels welcoming to both of us. Transmen and women are stuck between full disclosure and guarded privacy, as are their family members, partners, etc. Is language at my disposal or yours?

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I find that I am comfortable with the word "husband" since I am more comfortable with that gender role in the context of lesbian relationships. Like a discount bra, "wife" doesn't seem to fit (yet). I associate the word "wife" with my Texas upbringing and the expectations placed on a "good woman" that I rejected long before coming out as a lesbian. I remember asking my dyke friends, quietly, the ones I could really trust, if it was bad that I liked to do laundry, keep a clean house, cook meals, and pack a healthy lunch. They would be surprised at my domestication, but then that seemed to be ok with both of us – because I certainly was still a dyke. I realized that I could still be accepted as a dyke to my close friends because they didn't see my husband as a straight man. When my identity is validated, Loren's isn't. This works both ways.

Upon the announcement of our marriage or maybe the 48 hour engagement, people were shocked to say the least. I really thought folks were surprised that we would do something so quickly, spontaneously, but it turns out that their reactions were more about sex and gender politics. Where his friends and family, and to a large degree he himself, are dealing with gender validation both legally and socially, I am seen as no longer a part of the lesbian community. Loyalties, respect, friendship, camaraderie within my lesbian community seemed to slip through the hands that at one point were locked with mine in a movement towards equity for all. Luckily, I have my partner's hand as we support each other in our on-going fight for equity.

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There was an article recently about butch lesbians transitioning and its impact on the lesbian community⁴. I hear people talk about when “butch isn’t enough.” One woman even had the audacity to refer to Loren as a “butch who just couldn’t cut it.” Judith Halberstam continues this conversation in her book Female Masculinity, in her chapter *Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum*⁵. Transitioning, much like being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer isn’t something someone would ordinarily choose in our society. Due to transphobia, homophobia, fear, hate, bias, and other yummy elements instilled in western culture, coming out as well as transitioning is arduous at best and painstakingly difficult. For some transmen, who were once labeled “lesbian”, becoming a man is seen as being a traitor; as being disloyal to his feminist roots.

Just as transmen are sometimes thought of as traitors to lesbianism or womanhood, so, too, is the “traitor” description leveled at a Fierce Dyke who legally marries a man? I am still the Fierce Dyke that marched in New York. I would think it might even be easy for some to justify my legally marrying a transman as a form of activism, being that our union must be recognized in all states, or better yet, as a political loop hole to show how stupid marriage laws are in the first place⁶. I am not getting this reaction. There is a similar conversation internally too. I find myself financially dependent on a man, compromising, taking his direction, and at times

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following his lead. This is hard to grapple with personally and even harder when I wouldn't want to be any where else.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Marriage laws currently address a union between a man and a woman. How is a “man” or a “woman” defined? Who else is limited by these definitions outside of the trans community?**

(Those with birth defects, breast, ovarian, testicular, etc., cancer survivors, hormone imbalances, menopausal hormone therapy patients, etc.)

- 2) Each state has its own process (or lack thereof) for transmen and women to change their names and gender markers on social security cards, state issued identification cards, birth certificates, and passports. Who develops these processes and systems? Who has access to these systematic changes and who doesn't?**

(Cisgendered lawyers, medical providers, and politicians (white, upper class, well educated, English speaking, US citizens) for the most part write the policies. Very little training is provided to these gatekeepers including the staff that actually implements the procedures and policy changes. Those that have access are also usually white, well educated, upper class, English speaking, and US citizens)

- 3) What degree of responsibility does either person in this relationship have to fully disclose their identity and that of their partner to their family practitioner, real estate agent, neighbors, co-workers, new friends, etc?**

(I don't know the answer to this.)

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Definitions:

Cisgender

A descriptor for those people who experience satisfaction and comfort in their birth assigned sex and the gender roles that are socially aligned with this sex assignment.

Gender

The social construction of masculinity or femininity as it aligns with designated sex at birth in a specific culture and time period. Gender identity claims individuality that may or may not be expressed outwardly, and may or may not correspond to one's sexual anatomy.

Gender Variant/Queer

People who find other gender categories constraining. Their gender identities and/or expression is consciously not consistent with conventional standards for masculine or feminine behavior or appearance. Some identify as a blend, as androgynous, or as neither gender.

Heterophobia

The irrational fear of being perceived as heterosexual.

Heterophobic

A person that internalizes and/or externalizes an irrational fear of heterosexuals.

Heteroqueer

A person, couple, or multiple partners in relationship that identify and/or are perceived as queer yet, one or more of those partners has heterosexual privilege.

Heterosexism

The norm of heterosexual sexual identity being the dominant socially accepted romantic, sexual, or emotional based relationship that then places all other forms of attraction as subordinate.

Lesbian

A person who typically identifies as a woman who is romantically, sexually, and/or emotionally attracted to other people who identify as women.

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Sex

The medical assignment of ‘male’ or ‘female’ based upon the external genitalia that an individual possesses at birth. The biological sexes are commonly seen as mutually exclusive, and it is often believed that a person’s assigned sex dictates their gender expression, chromosomal, and hormonal make-up (those born with “male” genitalia should behave in a masculine way and those born with “female” genitalia should behave in a feminine way).

Sexism

The socially constructed system that creates a dominant group and subordinated groups based on how one is labeled at birth, anatomy, and other biological factors that then determine social privilege. In the United States culture, men are the dominant group while women are subordinated. Gender queer, transgender, and people during transition are further subordinated.

Sexual Identity

A person’s self description of the romantic, sexual, and/or emotional relationships with another or others such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, etc. Much like gender identifications, sexual identity labels are constantly being created to both unite communities and divide members from others.

Transgender

An “umbrella term” for someone whose self-identification, anatomy, appearance, manner, expression, behavior and/or other’s perceptions of them challenges traditional societal expectations of congruent gender expression and designated birth sex.

Transexual

Individuals whose designated sex at birth does not match their personal sex/body identity and who, through sex reassignment surgery and hormone treatments, may seek to change their physical body to match their gender identity. Transsexuals can be male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM). Transsexuals’ sexual identification can be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

Transition

The period of time when a person is electing to move from one gendered category to another via social expressions, labels, clothing, mannerisms, voice control, as well as but not limited to taking hormones, accessing surgeries, and other such changes until

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the individual feels comfortable with their body, expression of their gender, and are perceived by others consistently and correctly.

Transphobia

The irrational fear of trans and gender queer people by gender conforming people.

Biography:

Grounded in Social Justice and Diversity, Jessica Pettitt is a highly interactive, individualized, and flexible speaker, consultant, trainer, and facilitator focusing on gender and white privilege, specializing in audiences with low knowledge levels. To continue the conversation, visit www.iamsocialjustice.com.

1 Boylan, J. F. (2009. March 11). Is My Marriage Gay? New York Times. Retrieved July 27, 2009 from the World Wide Web:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/opinion/12boylan.html?_r=1

2 I read a lot of James Sears work as well as Wall, V. A. & Evans, N. J. (Eds.). (1991). Beyond Tolerance: Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals on Campus. American College Personnel Association, University Press. Wall, V. A. & Evans, N. J. (Eds.). (2000). Towards Acceptance: Sexual Orientation Issues on Campus, American College Personnel Association, University Press.

3 I believe this statement to be more true for me than for Loren. He is male, a man, and occasionally may identify as a transman to bring visibility to that community. I am much more fluid in identifying myself, my partner, and/or labeling my relationship with language based on the context of the conversation.

4 Vitello, P. (2006. August 20). The Trouble When Jane Becomes Jack. New York Times. Retrieved July 27, 2009 from the World Wide Web: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/fashion/20gender.html?_r=1 For a good rebuttal visit:

<http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2006/08/21/stupid-new-york-times/>

5 Halberstam, J. (1998). Female Masculinity. Durham and London: Duke University Press. Chapter Five, Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum, page 141 – 174.

6 Cannon, L. (2010). Trans-marriage and the Unacceptability of Same-Sex Marriage Restrictions. Forthcoming In J. Rowan *Ed.). Social Philosophy Today, (Vol 25). Charlottesville, VA: Philosophy Documentation Center.

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