

Can Cis Lesbians and Trans Women Learn to Get Along?

By Evan Urquhart and Parker Marie Molloy

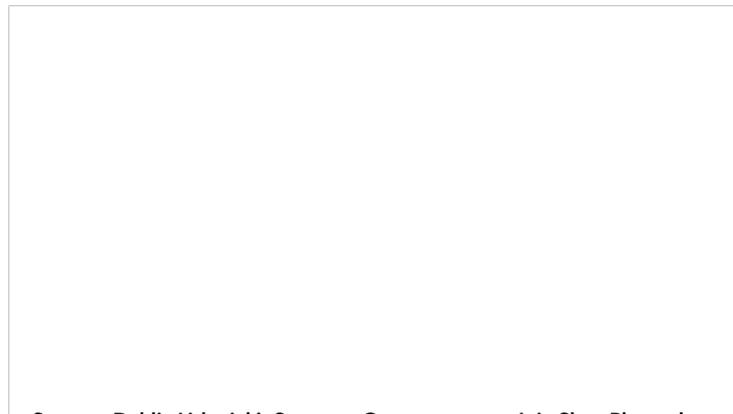


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In theory, our multifaceted, multilettered queer community is all about alliance, solidarity, and mutual support. Though we've seen advances in areas like marriage equality and nondiscrimination ordinances, systematic oppression of LGBTQ individuals continues in the form of disparate treatment in health care, employment, criminal justice, and public accommodations such as bathrooms and similar sex-segregated spaces. With so much to fight against outside our coalition, divisions within it have largely gone unchecked, with destructive rifts continuing to grow. One of the widest of these rifts exists between the L's and T's, particularly between cisgender lesbians and trans women.

Even among queers, trans women are particularly vulnerable and subject to harassment and violence. According to the **Anti-Violence Project's 2013 report**, 72 percent of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims were transgender women (with more than 90 percent of those being transgender women of color). So, standing in solidarity with those women ought to be a no-brainer. Unfortunately, not all lesbians got that memo: In particular, one group of radical lesbian feminists has made a habit of loudly and insistently espousing extreme transphobic ideas of the type that are more usually found among religious conservatives and those ignorant of the struggles for trans acceptance. While we prefer not to bring further publicity to the hateful sites maintained by this community, many of which are dedicated to outing trans individuals and mocking their bodies, a look at the **comments on articles about trans women** should be more than sufficient to give the reader an idea about of the behavior they engage in. Although they're referred to by some as trans-exclusionary radical feminists (or TERFs—a label that, although it describes their ideology, is rejected by many within the category), they can go far beyond simply excluding trans women from their events and organizations, and actively harass, mock, and out trans women. That such harassment is supposedly done in the name of **protecting cis women from trans women** makes this behavior all the more ludicrous.

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TERFs are small in number, but they make up for that in visibility (and obnoxiousness). Their existence puts a strain on relations between trans women and cisgender lesbians, but it is not the only area of tension between the two communities.

Even lesbians who aren't intentionally transphobic can still harbor fears and stereotypes based on their lack of familiarity with trans women (the same goes for trans women, who can be suspicious and fearful of cis lesbians). One persistent stereotype in the cis lesbian community is of trans women presenting a narrow, old-fashioned sort of femininity of the type that many lesbians have dedicated themselves to dismantling politically and socially. Media portrayals that show trans women in this light **have added to this perception**, despite the fact that trans culture itself has long since opened itself up to a range of female presentations as varied as those among cis women.

Because **many trans women** are themselves lesbian or bisexual, cis and trans lesbians are forced into regular social contact, making the misunderstandings and mutual ignorance particularly likely to lead to conflicts, hurt feelings, or exclusion. Although some long-established lesbian organizations, such as the National Center for Lesbian Rights, **have been growing steadily more inclusive**, the constant need for trans women to explain, educate, and advocate for themselves in the very spaces that are supposed to be safe and friendly can be highly alienating.

For cis lesbians, it can also be difficult to tell the difference between an honest lack of attraction and feelings of fear or disgust at the idea of a partner who they perceive as "really" a man—feelings that are rooted in transphobic cultural conditioning. While trans lesbians seeking romantic connections in the lesbian community are often frustrated by the knee-jerk resistance many cis lesbians have to dating trans women, hearing that one's individual reluctance to date someone may be based in transphobia can feel unfair and accusatory.

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Rumors of trans women who attempt to pressure lesbians to date them by insisting that it would be transphobic to do otherwise don't help matters—these stories may be apocryphal, but the fear of being pressured into a romantic relationship is hardly conducive to relaxed getting-to-know-yous. Rumors of predatory or pressuring behavior by trans women have been fanned by TERFs in order to paint trans women as violent and coercive.

Trans woman and activist Cristan Williams broke down the history of the "rape-y trans woman" myth in a **2013 blog post at TransAdvocate**. In it, she quotes a number of anti-trans activists, highlighting the way such people spread myths of trans women pressuring lesbians to date or have sex with them in order to frame trans women as men and as rapists.

In reality, navigating the dating world as a lesbian/bi/queer trans woman is far from the power play that anti-trans advocates make it out to be. Last year, trans writer, performer, and biologist Julia Serano wrote a piece for the *Daily Beast* about **the struggle of being trans and in search of romance within queer circles**, in which she observed:

While you would think that cis dykes (being more trans aware than the public at large) would take such coming outs in stride, this is not actually the case. Trans female friends of mine have had to suffer through cis dyke "freak out" moments, or even accusations of deception, that rival stereotypical reactions of straight people. ... [C]is dykes—many of whom pride themselves on their progressive politics and subversive sexualities—tend to be far more conservative and conforming to our culture's "yuck-dating-a-trans-woman-is-gross" mindset than their cis male counterparts, at least here in the San Francisco Bay Area.

And then, there are the butches. The word *butch*, and the identity it describes, dates from a time before modern gender identities and queer theory. As such, it's a somewhat awkward fit within the modern spectrum, falling right on the line where gender identity meets gender presentation. There are some butches who consider themselves trans and/or nonbinary in identity and others who embrace their identity as female, rejecting the idea that identity must align with presentation. This isn't to say that clothing, haircuts, and general style are divorced from one's identity, though; these aren't simply surface characteristics, at least not for many butches, for whom **masculinity is at least as important an aspect of their identity as femaleness is**. Nevertheless, trans women are prone to **brush off butch as a skin-deep identity**, demonstrating a lack of awareness of **butch culture** or the history of butch-femme dynamics among lesbian couples.

There will always be differences in the experiences of cisgendered women and trans ones, masculine people and feminine ones, and between each and every unique individual. Already, there are signs that the divide between cis lesbians and trans women is growing smaller, as more and more queer women's groups are **extending explicit welcomes to trans women**, women's colleges are **opening**

admissions to trans women, and more trans women are adding their voices to feminist campaigns. True, our differences can lead to misunderstandings and tensions, but the diversity that comes with difference can also be a source of great strength if we are willing to allow ourselves to learn from one another and support each other's individuality.

OUTWARD EXPANDING THE LGBTQ CONVERSATION

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Steven Universe Is “Purple Lesbians From Space.” It’s Also Love, Pain, Support, and Struggle.

By Rae Binstock



Garnet, Amethyst, Steven, and Pearl.

Cartoon Network

My little sister, Halie, and I are very close. She’s smarter than me, but I’m bigger than her, so everything balances out. At two-and-a-half years apart, we have enough distance between us to inhabit clear roles of oldest and youngest, even though in many ways we’re the same person: We have the same eyes, the same too-loud voice, the same off-balance humor.

A couple of years ago, Halie tried to get me into yet another weird show. I was reluctant, since the last thing she had tried to sell me on was a web comic about multidimensional trolls with no arms. But this show was different, she said. “Purple lesbians from space,” she said.

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