



# GENDERNAUTS

FROM LIPSTICK LESBIAN CHIC AND SEX-POSITIVE FEMINISM, TO THE QUEERING OF GENDER IDENTITY, THE '90S WERE A MELTING POT OF SEXUAL DIVERSITY, OUT OF WHICH ROSE THE 'BOI' CULTURE THAT IS PREVALENT TODAY

During the 1980s the Grim Reaper AIDS campaign warned people off sex, stigmatised gay men and old-school 'anti-sex' feminist rhetoric was routinely espoused in the media. All that changed in the '90s, the era that saw an explosion of sex-positivity – from online porn and lap-dancing clubs to lipstick lesbian chic and the birth of the transgender liberation and 'genderqueer' movements.

"Women's magazines in the '90s became much more open to queer sexuality, even those which were ostensibly 'straight,'" Kath Albury says, lecturer in Gender & Cultural Studies at Sydney University. "There was a boom in erotica – *Australian Women's Forum* was very popular. The Mardi Gras Parade was televised nationally during this period too, and I think there was a certain increased awareness of queerness."

## MAINSTREAM QUEER

That increased awareness led to what became known as 'lipstick lesbian chic' – in which images of lesbians as pretty and feminine made their way into the mainstream – the August 1993 *Vanity Fair* cover featuring supermodel Cindy Crawford draped around a butch-looking k.d. lang being an example.

This trend had both positive and negative effects for the lesbian community, according to Merryn Johns, editor of *LOTL*, Australia's national lesbian magazine. "It was positive in the sense that glamour and

lesbians had not gone together prior to this, outside of mainstream heterosexual pornography," she says. "The increasing incidence of attractive, feminine and high-functioning lesbians gave lesbianism a new kind of visibility, which was political in its own way. On the other hand, it also caused a kind of neo softcore porn spillage into popular culture where society's curiosity about lesbian chic was played out in endless TV shows and sitcoms with 'the kiss' and gossip columns were filled with girl-girl dalliances, even amongst the Hollywood A-list."

## EROTIC LIBERATION

Lipstick lesbian chic went hand in hand with the increasing acceptance of 'sex-positive' feminism – a branch of feminism developed in the early '80s that promoted sexual freedom in all its diverse forms as key to women's liberation. One of the main proponents of 'sex-positive' feminism was author and academic Camille Paglia who caused a storm with her controversial 1994 book of essays, *Vamps and Tramps*, in which she celebrated striptease and pornography as forms of art.

According to Paglia, Madonna "made it all happen". Speaking with *YEN*, Paglia says: "From the moment she burst onto the music scene in 1983 with her erotic dance videos, she had an electrifying impact on young women worldwide. The Stalinist feminist commissars lost their grip on the major media in the US, as the young Madonna 'wannabes' swept

into power in the 1990s. Upscale strip clubs suddenly flowered in the early '90s – a trend I applauded.”

As well as lap-and-pole-dancing clubs, online porn also began to flourish in the '90s, and women took advantage of the anonymity of the online world to experiment with cybersex. “Porn star fansites and forums became popular, and the first glimmers of ‘porno-chic’ emerged, such as ‘Pornstar’ T-shirts,” Albury says.

#### “BOI” CULTURE

These trends formed the backdrop to the transgender liberation movement which kicked off in the '90s, with male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals demanding not only hormones and gender realignment surgery, but equal rights in law. Others went further, taking the concept of gender outside the male/female binary to create new terms, such as ‘polygendered’ or ‘spansexual’ to describe their gender identity or sexual orientation, and gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘hir’ or ‘zie’. One of the trends to come out of this ‘genderqueer’ movement was the rise of ‘boi’ culture, which is prevalent today, both in Australia and overseas.

So, what is a boi? For some, it’s simply another term for “butch” (a woman who dresses and acts in a traditionally masculine way), which is considered by some younger lesbians to be old-fashioned, while for others it’s a woman who doesn’t want to grow up. US author, Ariel Levy, in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, paints a more sinister and misogynistic picture of boi culture, in which the bois refer to themselves as ‘bro’ and their women as ‘hos’. Although the book caused a stir in some quarters, Merryn Johns, who’s lived in the US for the past 18 months, says Levy’s views are accurate.

“Lesbians in the US who frequent bars will witness some startlingly aggressive ‘male’ behaviour from other lesbians: you can be assaulted with a pool cue, vomited on, sexually harassed and offered cash for sex,” she notes. “I have witnessed all these incidents in bars in Chicago and New York. Strippers, wet T-shirt comps and circulating trays of vodka shots are commonplace and to some extent, while sex-positive, create an environment where aggressive gender behaviour can be acted out.”

Australian boi culture on the other hand, appears to be less aggressive. “Australian bois in general seem less angry and more easy-going than their American counterparts,” Johns says. “Class and racial tensions are more extreme in the US and when you combine those with alcohol and sex you can get ‘female chauvinist pigs’.”

#### ‘FEMMES’ AND ‘BOIS’

Kate is a 39-year-old self-employed mechanic from Sydney whose boi identity is fluid. “Given that boi is very much a ‘genderqueer’ term, I fully identify as such and revel in it when I am submerged in the queer community alongside my ‘femme’ partner,” she says. “I do it to a lesser degree when my partner and I are together in public, even though we pass quite often as a male/female couple, and it then becomes more diluted in my workplace, the reason being that I work in a very male domain, wielding tools. So I still feel very boisy but I relate to the general public as a female mechanic.”

Kate’s partner of two years is Betty, a 27-year-old occupational health professional, who identifies as a ‘femme’ dyke. “Femininity is innate to me – as a way of relating to the world and as I choose it, a way of grooming,” she explains. “Eyelashes, seamed stockings, petticoats, the whole lot. Not only in my nature, I amplify this femme-ness as a girl by choice. My femme identity is essential to my sexuality.”

For Betty, boi-ishness is a quality of “youthful androgyny” which is what attracts her to dating bois. “I like the kind of person who really knows who they are and has accepted themselves as is,” she says. “Aesthetically, I think beauty that ambiguously transcends gender is perfect.” Her experience of boi culture has been varied. “I think there can be a real irreverence amongst a few of the very young dykes who on occasion have crossed my personal space boundaries because they are so fired up with hormones or trying to impress their friends or with lowered inhibitions from something-or-other,” she says. “But this could just be their youthful awkwardness. All of my boi-friends are gorgeous, gentle, smart and considerate.”

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#### GIRLS WILL BE “BOIS”

While Kate’s boi identity is fluid, others are more fixed in a strictly non-female-identified persona, such as Shannon Fletcher, a 29-year-old horticultural officer from Brisbane. “I am queer-gendered, the third gender,” Shannon says. “I identify as a boi and prefer to be called ‘hy’ or ‘hym’.” For me, boi is something I feel deep within myself. It’s what I see when I look in the mirror. I don’t see a girl or any girl parts. It’s like they don’t exist in my vision. I have also been told that I process thoughts in a typically masculine way and I have always identified as a boy from a young age.”

Yet Shannon is not an FTM or trans-man, with no desire to take male hormones or have surgery to make his body appear male. “I have dealt with the fact my childhood dream of one day waking up and finding a cock between my legs is not going to happen,” he says. “I have somewhat accepted that I have the body of a female and decided it works just fine, so why mess with it? I know what I feel and that’s what’s important.”

Sexually, Shannon is attracted to women, bois, trans-men and the occasional biological boy. He currently has a mistress in Melbourne whom he visits each month. “Unlike me, she does see my ‘girl’ parts and she really loves them,” he says. “I’m ok with that sexually, but I don’t think of those parts as they are, but more as good feelings in bed. We find we can satisfy each other’s needs with stories or fantasy. Then we/I can be whatever we/I want.”

So, is the increasing prevalence of bois a good or bad thing? In some quarters, charges of homophobia have been levelled at lesbians in relationships where one partner is a boi, with accusations that they are trying to appear in public as a heterosexual couple. Paglia is particularly concerned about the trend. “I’m fed up with klutzy, self-absorbed, self-maiming or rigidly ideological lesbians who can’t see past their own family problems and neurosis and who treat their sexual identity as a burrow in which to hide from the world,” she asserts. “By clinging to a juvenile phase of manhood – louché and boorish – the boi may be undermining her own credibility and stature.”

Kate, however, has a different perspective. “There is absolutely nothing ‘heterosexual’ about two women who enjoy having sex with each other but choose to get dressed up in a smart suit and sexy dress to feel good and maybe turn each other on,” she says. “Once all of us start seeing people around us as ever changing and fluid individuals, the less we will bemoan the fact that some individuals don’t fit the boring and constrictive moulds, whether gay or straight.” ☺

**LET IT RIP** Why do you think the increasing prevalence of bois is a bad thing? SMS YEN on 0448 265 175