Late Friday night I got a one-line text message from a very dear friend of mine:

“What are your thoughts on the ‘cotton ceiling’ theory?,” she asked.

Although I assumed it was a riff off “glass ceiling,” I replied “I’ve never heard of it,” while simultaneously googling “cotton ceiling” on my laptop. One of the first hits was to a piece on femonade explicitly about the “cotton ceiling” theory:
The cotton ceiling is a theory proposed by trans porn star and activist Drew DeVeaux to explain the experiences queer trans women have with simultaneous social inclusion and sexual exclusion within the broader queer women’s communities. Basically, it means that cis queer women will be friends with us and talk day and night about trans rights and ending transmisogynny, but will still not consider us viable sexual partners.

The term cotton ceiling is a reference to the glass ceiling that second wave feminist identified in the workforce, wherein women could only advance so high in the workforce but could not break through into positions of power and authority. The cotton represents underwear, signifying sex.

The theory of the cotton ceiling is useful in identifying the dynamic trans women are experiencing, and is meant to open up conversation around desirability’s intersections with transmisogynry and transphobia.

While the allusion to “cotton” baffles me, and, therefore, while I don’t feel the metaphor to be apt, I do comprehend what the author is saying: how inclusive are queer women of transwomen if said queer women refuse to have sex with them?

The concern as it is articulated comes across as petulant and, ironically, a tad misogynistic. This individual believes that lesbians won’t sleep with her because she’s trans, but how can she make that judgement? Her feeling smacks of the “all homos are sex maniacs” argument. But just because I’m a homo it doesn’t mean that I want to hump everything with a vagina, “born” or “made.” To be honest, I don’t want to sleep with 99.9% of the women out there. Why? Because my standards are such that it takes more than simply having a vajayjay — although a vajayjay is required — to get into my knickers, and, to boot, when I’m with someone I only fantasize about and desire that woman. My point is that we all have our own unique sexual way(s) of being. Or, as my therapist might say, this woman should think about the type of woman she’s attracted to — clearly the type she’s attracted to doesn’t seem to be attracted to her, for reasons that probably have to do with her character than solely upon what’s in her pants.
I think, rather, that the writer’s frustration is a symptom of an underlying cultural problem of how women treat other women, cis or otherwise — from the Michigan Women’s Music Festival to dinner table small talk. Read anything by my queermother Kate Bornstein to get a sense of how ze gets flack from both trans and feminist circles. Why are we policing each other so heavily? What is this fear? This hate? Is it an internalized misogyny? Self-loathing?
Even though women statistically outnumber men, patriarchy is irrevocable. As such, we all have to want to be women — we have to accept and love our woman status — in a world structured and powered by and for men.

My friend who asked me for my thoughts on the “cotton ceiling” did so because the term came up during a dinner conversation that she and her wife had with a much older, second wave feminist, lesbian couple. My friend — a very handsome butch, who, like all contemporary butch women, frequently contemplates and negotiates her own identity in relation to trans — became upset at the couples’ continual transphobic and transmisogynistic comments.

Exasperated from the dinner conversation, she vented, “I sort of just wish women of a certain age would shut up about trans issues. I’ve been around a bunch of 50 and 60-year-old folks lately and I just want to tell them that ‘No one is f–king oppressing you. It’s not the ’70s anymore, for god’s sake. Be out and [stop] all the trans bashing.’”

This couple, not surprisingly, did not know any trans people. We agreed that actually meeting some trans folk and realizing that they’re not a threat to feminist and, furthermore, a monolith — meaning that some prescribe to culturally created, rigid gender conceptualizations, some continually go between genders, and others refuse gender altogether — would be enlightening. All these variations of being are what the umbrella of “trans” holds within, but this older couple, clearly, feels threatened by transwomen they don’t even know.

“I think there’s a misconception that all trans people believe in rigid gender and that,” I continued, “correlatively and somewhat consequently, second wavers feel ‘ripped off’—like gender discrimination no longer is their battle or legislated on their behalf but is discussed as pertaining to trans people alone.”
In other words, these women are probably feeling bitter because — to appropriate a phrase that has recently attained a lot of cultural currency — there’s a belief out there that women have achieved equality and that, therefore, there is no “war on [cis gender] women.”

Trans issues and feminist issues are fundamentally gender issues. In this regard, I feel the trans and feminist communities have more in common — for political coalition building — than, say, the trans community and the LGB communities, the latter of which is grounded upon sexual orientation. For political advancement, and to create new directions and new strategies for empowerment, I truly believe that the fight for gender equality and the fight for sexual equality should be fought separately. Granted, each of us has both a gender (or genders) and a sexuality (or sexualities), but what I’m wondering, and what I’d like your thoughts about, my dear readers, is if you think it might be more politically efficacious (not to mention educational—because I can’t tell you how many times my family has asked me, a queer femme, if I think about “transitioning”…you know, because I am a lesbian, and, well, it’s all one queer jumbly mess, ammi right?) to delineate the generic fight for equality into terms of gender and sexual orientation.
What are your thoughts about “cotton ceiling”? Do you think it would be more politically efficacious to adopt a strategy of “divide and conquer” in regard to gender and sexuality? If so, what might be the ramifications of doing so?

Tags: lesbian, LGBT, Pop Theory, transgender

Comments

Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

It's about validation. No, it's not about definition. It's about validation.
So if no one can or wants to define what a woman is,
My other question still remains.

If you will not have sex with a woman who has a penis, do you see how this is invalidating to a trans person who knows they are fully female?

Every trans person does not think alike. They don't all want to have surgery.
Everyone does not t... more

Show all 3 Comments

Rusty replied on this | 1 year ago

Not my job to validate anyone's womanhood
and it's no one else's job to validate mine. I have been turned down by other lesbians for being 'too butch.' Does this invalidate me as a woman, lesbian, or butch? No. I accept the fact that some lesbians will not consider me as a partner and instead focus my attention on those that will.
Your friend, Rusty
Anonymous replied on this | 1 year ago

I think we're going to have to agree to disagree now!

A couple of last things before I bow out of the conversation. I've been thinking more about what being a woman means. Of all the things to consider there are biological factors (reproductive organs, and genetically XX), physical factors, and psychological factors where you identify as a woman. I don't know which is... more

Latane_Blu added a comment on this | 1 year ago

As a lesbian I have an aversion to penis, period. Whether it is functional or not is irrelevant it is still there where it shouldn't be on someone I want to have SEX with. Yes SEX! Isn't that what sexual orientation is all about?

How the hell did this **** get so complicated?

Aligning my Libido with my Values

Most of the people commenting aren't suggesting that anyone date someone they are not attracted to. In my case, I wholeheartedly believe that my preferences for physical beauty are subconsciously affected by society. I want relationships of depth rather than superficial ones. I tried dating two people who I wasn't physically attracted to but who I thought were great...

Anonymous replied on this | 1 year ago

is it necessary Do you feel like you have to have sex with someone in order for the relationship to have depth?

Would it be OK to have an intense emotional relationship with your friend without it being sexual?

As for developing sexual feelings...It depends.
I've been sexually attracted to people I wasn't in the past. I've lost attraction to people I was attracted to in the past. For me, it all h...

Latane_Blu added a comment on this | 1 year ago

As a lesbian I have an aversion to penis, period. Whether it is functional or not is irrelevant it is still there where it shouldn't be on someone I want to have SEX with. Yes SEX! Isn't that what sexual orientation is all about?

How the hell did this **** get so complicated?
Big question Are people assuming that pre-op trans women want to have penetrative sex or even want you to interact with, touch, or even look at their genitalia?

Anonymous replied on this | 1 year ago

It is not sex if it does not involve genitalia. It is just making out isn't it. And I agree with the gal above that I like to get naked and explore my partner's body. Otherwise she would just be a one sided affair. How would I return the favor? I don't think I'd actually mind penetration, I'd just think of it as a strap on, but I won't do oral on a penis. For me it is about being a woman vs man. It...

more

Reply | |

Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

Talking out of both sides of your mouth I don't understand people who say that they won't have sex with you because you have a penis but They acknowledge you as a woman

What is your definition of a woman? And can you see how this dissonance can be invalidating to a trans woman?

To me, it sounds like, I respect your right to identify as a woman and be acknowledged as such by society, but you're not ...

more

planetmars1 replied on this | 1 year ago

No I don't think its that.

No I don't think its that. They respect their identity but are just not physically attracted to them.

more

Reply | |

I.encourage.the.impossibl added a comment on this | 1 year ago

I'm sure, of course, that it
I'm sure, of course, that it varies per person.
In general, though, I do see a bit of a societal issue with how much of the LGBT movement treats trans issues--because, unlike the rest of the movement, trans and genderqueer refer to gender rather than sexual orientation. I've run into a lot of people who are working for LGBT rights but don't really understand what being...

more

Reply | |
Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

In response to your question, I identify as lesbian and admit I would not date a person pre-op, but might post-op if I was attracted to her. I know this is hurtful and probably offensive to some people. I would be really uncomfortable with male body parts and it is this reason alone. It is not because I don't consider trans women real women. Most other lesbians I know...

Reply |

Sierra added a comment on this | 1 year ago

Cotton Theory
What I believe Drew DeVeaux is referring to is that some queer women stop feeling attracted to a woman once they find out they are trans women. She may have put it in the wrong words though.
To put it in perspective, let's say a Woman 1 doesn't smoke (which many like), is queer, has a great personality, and is attractive overall. A Woman 2, queer also, likes the woman and asks her ou...

Reply |

Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

It's not about me I hate using pop culture references, but on Degrassi, there was a story line of the lesbian girl dating the trans boy. They broke up because the lesbian girl considered the trans boy a sort of best of both worlds. This hurt him because he is not both. He is a man. Completely.
As a person who's attraction has little to do with gender, I know that you have to respect a person for...

Reply |

OutOfRange added a comment on this | 1 year ago

I confess I haven't read a whole lot about it, but I think that society in general ignores the existence of gay transmen and lesbian transwomen. There's this idea that if you have a male body and you're attracted to women, then why go through the pain of transitioning? But the fact is, being true to yourself is the most important thing in the world. And obviously we all are well aware that gender...

Reply |

planetmars1 replied on this | 1 year ago

As a bisexual woman... Its complicated. I recently saw a picture of Lea T semi-nude and while she is definitely gorgeous, I don't think I could be attracted to someone who had top surgery and hormones but still had a penis. However, I guess you never know.
This is a small sample size
This is a small sample size to make a generalization from (ha), but a bi trans guy friend of mine has said that he's faced a LOT less transphobic **** from bi-identified people than from gay or lesbian-identified men or women. I think a lot of gay and lesbian people get really caught up in 'what does being attracted to you mean for my identity?!?!?!', whereas that might ... more

 Reply | |

Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

I don't see it First, i want to ask who you are talking about when you refer to the 'author'? Are you talking about Drew, because she is not directly quoted in your link. Are you talking about the trans activist in the link? Are you speaking directly to the concept of the 'cotton ceiling'? Could you point out the author's use of essentialism because i don't see it. I read the exchange and som... more

 Reply | |

Anonymous added a comment on this | 1 year ago

Marcie, This is where you went off the tracks 'The concern as it is articulated comes across as petulant and, ironically, a tad misogynistic. This individual believes that lesbians won’t sleep with her because she’s trans, but how can she make that judgement? Her feeling smacks of the “all homos are sex maniacs” argument. But just because I’m a **** it doesn’t mean that I want to hump everything w... more

 Anonymous replied on this | 1 year ago

It's harsh Even I had a visceral reaction to that passage. I had to step back and take it all in context because my original response wasn’t as reasoned as what I wrote.

In response to BAS
On the religion note. I'm talking about preconceived notions. Not wanting to be with someone because they are Jewish, yet not taking the time to know them and find out what they really believe. Not all Muslims a... more

 Reply | |

amberbeth84 added a comment on this | 1 year ago
I can see points on both sides. I know what it's like to be turned down for a date because I'm trans and for that reason alone. I cannot tell you how many times a woman has contacted me through an online dating site, thought I was cute, and didn't read my profile all the way through to where I say I'm pre-op. It hurts a lot when that happens, but I try to accept it as best I can. And I get wher... more

LolitaVida replied on this | 1 year ago

Pitch-Perfect
Hi Amber,
I realize this thread it a bit stale but I've just been linked to it via Tumblr. I agree with everything you've said. I don't, at all, consider transwomen 'not women.' I just identify as a lesbian who is not sexually attracted to people with penises. I'm just not. This truism about myself, I don't think, makes me any less of an ally for trans*folks, nor does it make me cisse... more

BAS replied on this | 1 year ago

I still don't get it... Everyone wears underwear...is it just that you'll be friends with them, but not go past underwear?

Mobec added a comment on this | 1 year ago

Cotton Celing:
Wait-Marcie, do you still not understand the allusion to cotton? It is in reference to underwear. Many lesbians don't want to cross the cotton ceiling to have sex with trans* women.
I disagree that this is because of girl hate. This is because we live in a cis-supremecist culture that many cis lesbians perpetuate by failing to even consider trans* women as what they are-women.
I've enj... more

Marcie Bianco replied on this | 1 year ago

Hi Mobec, Hi Mobec,

Well, no -- not all underwear is made of cotton :)

I think people who are feeling defensive about my piece need to re-read it: I said the concern was unfortunately articulated (as being sexually rejected) but was indeed symptomatic of a larger issue within the community: the treatment of transwomen by cisgender women, which I am not at all dismissing. I'm not quite sure how the p... more
Hi katek, Hi katek,
I actually did not say anything you take issue with above -- what you write above, especially with the misquotations, is inaccurate. But I'd be happy to talk about this more with you, if you'd like.
My best,
Marcie

THANK YOU. The privilege and condescension dripping off this post and so many of the comments is at such ridiculous levels it makes me want to scream.
"Polish": Your Androgynous Style (Ep. 2)

Watch! "The Big Gay Sketch Show" (1.1): Blair and Jo get frisky, lesbian speed dating
Vintage comedy gold from Kate McKinnon, Nicol Paone and Julie Goldman.

Watch Now! Mary Lambert's video for "She Keeps Me Warm"
The out singer releases her debut video.

The Hottest Stories

Most Viewed / Most Discussed

1. "Pretty Little Liars" recap 4.12: Dancing Away with My Heart - AfterEllen.com
   VIEWED 60759

2. "Rizzoli & Isles" Subtext Recap (4.09): Take your son to work day - AfterEllen.com
   VIEWED 50293

   VIEWED 34508

4. Paige McCullers' 20 most McCullers moments on "Pretty Little Liars" - AfterEllen.com
   VIEWED 28528

What's so hard to understand about bisexuality? - AfterEllen.com
VIEWED 18666
Afternoon Delight: Jodie Foster's acting advice for “OITNB” star Uzo Aduba

Watch Now! HuffPost Live on “Lesbian Love Lexicon”
Feminist Friday: Melissa Explains it All

Watch now! The LGBT-themed episode of “Young Americans”

Morning Brew: Heather Peace ties the knot (and “The Fosters” will too!)
Pop Theory: Is the "Cotton Ceiling" Theory All Fluff? - AfterEllen.com

View our story archive here >