

IS THERE AN i IN LGBT ?

MALE OR FEMALE? GAY, STRAIGHT, OR TRANS? INTERSEX PEOPLE ARE FIGHTING TO DEFINE THEMSELVES, IN THE FACE OF LABELS FROM BOTH THE MAINSTREAM AND QUEER COMMUNITIES. CINDRA FEUER INVESTIGATES.

DURING THE DESOLATE MONTHS of last winter, Betsy Driver, holed up in her apartment above a general store in rural Western New Jersey, did what any self-possessed dyke would do: She sought hot dates on the Internet. Given her assets, one would think her quest a foregone conclusion. Driver is a successful TV producer with confidence and wit. Her posted pictures reveal a slight, athletic woman with an easy smile and silky, shoulder-length black hair—a catch, to say the least. But time and again, as quickly as the e-mails flew back and forth promising a weekend of raunch and romance, her romantic prospects cut off contact. Her inbox became a harbinger of disappointment.

"Once I tell people what I do—*poof!*—I never hear from them anymore. It's amazing what happens," Driver explains. She's not referring to her day job but to her status as founder of Bodies Like Ours, an organization committed to intersex activism. Driver has become a poster girl for the burgeoning intersex movement and speaks candidly of her own sexual-assignment surgery as an infant. But even lesbians, a most gender-savvy, oppression-wary group, often don't get it. "So-called feminists misunderstand what intersex is; they think it's 'trans,'" says Driver, referring to transgender individuals. "It's one of the biggest things we work on, especially in the lesbian community."

Intersex is a physiological category that's been slowly coming to the consciousness of mainstream culture in the past decade, due largely to the activism of individuals like Driver. In popular culture, the term *hermaph-*

rodite has long been used—and misunderstood. Intersex refers to individuals whose bodies can't be clearly identified as absolutely male or female; instead, they have a combination of physiological characteristics from both recognized sexes. There are myriad manifestations of intersex, including ambiguous genitalia or secondary sexual characteristics, brought on by puberty, that don't match those present at birth. And within the intersex spectrum, there's a plethora of gender and sexual identities. Depending on how loosely intersex is defined, between one in every 150 to one in 2,000 people fits the bill.

Naturally, there's an allegiance between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and intersex (I) folks: Both groups live outside the boundaries of the gender binary with its stereotypical male and female roles, and both share an experience of stigma and discrimination. Perhaps it is inevitable that LGBT will become LGBTI, just as queer organizations have "trannied up" in the last decade and added a T to the rainbow flag. That growing visibility has been matched by trans advocacy, education, and community services. Still, while the broader gay and lesbian movement has made progress in carving out a space in mainstream society and culture and assuring basic civil rights, transgender people still struggle for acceptance, even within the gay community.

The LGBT movement has now begun to absorb intersex issues as well, and the process is fraught with its own particular struggles. Frontline intersex advocates welcome their queer allies but caution against posturing and

other pitfalls. Attempts at inclusion can be empty gestures, and unique intersex issues can get obscured in the LGBTI alphabet soup. The LGBT movement, founded on the principal of equal rights for sexual minorities, has long strived to ensure basic rights for its members: access to jobs, housing and education; and freedom from discrimination. But some intersex advocates don't feel that legal reforms such as hate-crime legislation are relevant to their primary goal of educating doctors and parents to stop the violence of sex-assignment surgery. While they're aware that most legislation regarding sexual orientation and gender-identity expression potentially protects intersex individuals, they worry about losing their issues in the process of being translated into the larger discourse of equality.

Those who attach intersex issues to the LGBT movement claim common ground, acknowledging that homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny motivate the surgical sex-assignment treatment for intersex conditions. "Western medicine defines functional male and female genitalia in terms of the ability to participate in heterosexual intercourse, rather than how much sexual enjoyment patients can receive," writes Emi Koyama, founder of Intersex Initiative. "Which is why removing a woman's clitoris is medically acceptable according to doctors, as long as her vagina is deep enough to be penetrated by a penis." Or from another angle: "Parents think that a girl with a big clitoris will grow up to be lesbian, or a boy with a small penis will grow up not knowing whether he's a boy or a girl," Driver says. "There's so much homophobia and transphobia in this country, it's easy to for parents to think they could keep their daughter from becoming a lesbian if they shorten her clitoris."

A lost-in-translation moment occurred in 1996, when the nascent Intersex Society of North America staged a seminal action at the Academy of Pediatrics in Boston. A few brave intersex women decided to confront the medical experts about their compulsive practice of sexual assignment of intersex infants. Their action signaled the birth of the intersex movement. They strategically tapped →