

Commentary

Blue Collar and Butch

by Darcy Brazen

I'm a lesbian working in a trade in a small Vermont community. I do my damndest to keep my dyke self, health, and well-being strong and gleaming within a capitalist economic system that is lesbian-hating, classist, ableist, fat-oppressive, racist, and imperialistic to the core: you know - the white heteropatriarchy (HP) that uses up our bodies, our labor, for profit.

I work so I can eat, have a roof and warmth, so I can buy lesbian books and music and travel to visit lesbian friends and talk and strategize about the revolution we're creating for ourselves to get ourselves out of this demeaning hell. I work in a traditionally white male job because I have to, because I cannot pick my apple off any tree and be sustained; somebody (who?) always gets more apples.

In my community there are four lesbians and a straight feminist ally who, whenever we meet, ask if I'm "still working" or "still _____" (fill in name of trade). There seems to be an implication that the job I have is somehow now a "real job." This question always comes from teachers and professional-type administrators, that is, from white-collar lesbians. I know of two carpenters, a cook, a painter, a truck driver, and a tree farmer who have been asked this same question many many times by a number of different lesbians.

I've never heard anyone ask lesbian teachers, nurses, therapists, attorneys, or computer programmers if they're "still working." This is deeply offensive to blue-collar dykes. I say blue-collar because I feel my present socio-economic circumstances are synonymous with low-income and working-class peoples, but I grew up with middle-class privilege.

I'm also ex-het, so I had heterosexual approval, strokes, validation, and a sense of being normal, right, straight, and not queer for the first 22 years of my life. Because I'm fem, I still get a lot of privilege from the heterosexual hierarchy. I say I'm fem in allegiance to butch lesbians who, from girlhood on, have resisted the constraints of imposed femininity, who have defied the socially-constructed definition of woman.

Butch lesbians aren't in a role; they're the radical ones who break down culture's restrictions by refusing petticoats, crippling heels, crotch-biting pants, therapeutic rape, shaving, make-up, electrolysis - anything that restricts, binds, or maims

women. Wearing pants is normal enough today, but Amelia Bloomer was called a disgrace to her gender, less than woman, when she invented the pantaloons that freed women's movement.

Being in solidarity with these most radical of dykes means not conforming to sexist expectations of what women should look like, and instead means defying woman-hating beauty standards in every way we can: by not buying razors, by not supporting the diet industry, by not buying movement-restricting clothing.

At work, butch lesbians are often the most visible of dykes. It's incredibly difficult for them to find "good" jobs when such absurd standards of feminine beauty are enforced. As long as there's a more acceptably "feminine" female available, butch lesbians are the last to get "good" jobs.

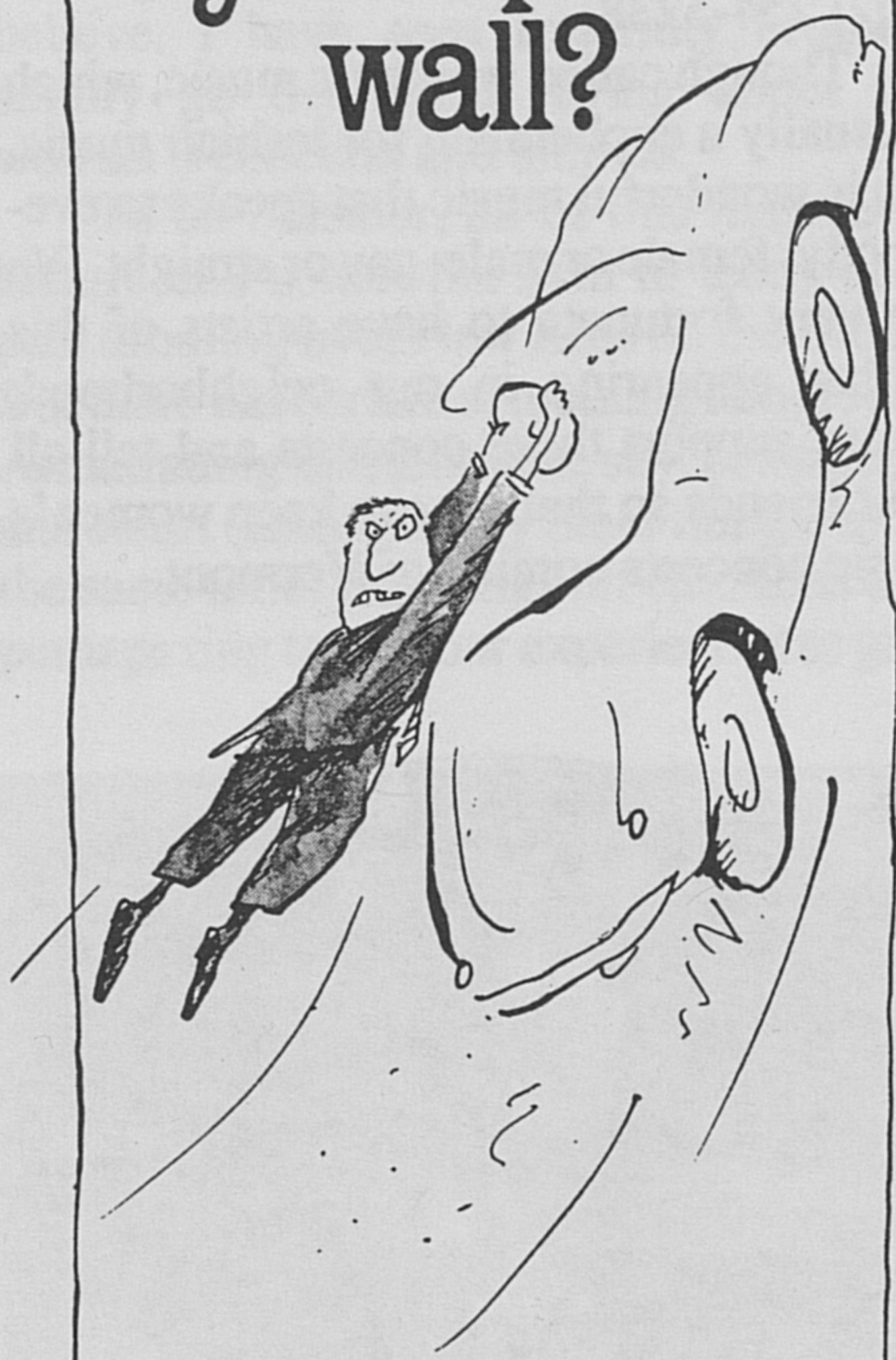
I also feel that within our own lesbian community and specifically at lesbian activities, lesbians are welcomed or not on the basis of a "certain look." I know a dyke who quit going to her weekly lesbian support group after she became a plumber-pipefitter. She didn't have time to shower and change before meetings, and she really felt she wasn't welcome in her work overalls.

When we define each other by the work we do in the system or the professional cut of our clothes, what does that say to lesbians who, because of illness, disability, or choice, don't work in the "system?" What about the thousands of lesbians collecting welfare or unemployment who commit themselves to full-time, unpaid radical political work?

I feel that the lesbian community in general judges and awards status according to the work or job done in heteropatriarchy, and not according to the quality and honesty of our relationships with each other, what we do to keep mentally, physically, and spiritually balanced or whole, or the activities and happenings which are most dear to us. Lesbians contribute to the HP's hierarchy when we judge each other by what we do in a system that will never like, accept, or fully integrate us: the whole maintenance of capitalism hinges on categories of workers who have been labelled "other" and "less than." Lesbians clearly have been named "other" and "less than."

Let's gaze anew and instead judge each other by the community we create and the work we do with, by, and for the lesbians we love and befriend.

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