Undesirable Desire Work

A Historical Analysis of Lesbian "Genders" and the Detrimental Effect of Gender Roles

Introduction

Despite identifying as a femme[1] lesbian, for much of my life I've known little about the history behind this label. As I started to finally investigate the identity, what I found was overwhelming —femme was a term that seemed to have little history and an overwhelming history at the same time. A term that was heteronormative to some, but subversive of gender roles to others. A term so vague it often appeared absent from lesbian history and historical analysis. I was perplexed to find perceptions of butch/femme[2] relationships in the 20th century so different from how I (and many others) engage in this "gendered" dynamic[3] today. Thus, I decided to explore conflicts at the origins of the butch/femme community, to understand better the historical definition of a word I try to reclaim today.[4]

[1] Also spelled 'fem'; there are no differences between the two spellings asides from personal preference or community opinion at a given time.

[2] Throughout this paper, butch/femme will be used as an adjective and noun to describe the subset of the lesbian community that identifies as butch or femme, and relationships between these lesbians. Specifically, it describes butches that participate in sexual/romantic relationships with femmes, and vice versa.

[3] The initial goal of this paper was to investigate whether butch/femme qualified as "heteronormative," and the more research I did, the more I realized this was not a productive topic. If being heteronormative just means a relationship with polarized genders, then sure, butch/femme is heteronormative. The feminist discussions I found were using this proximity to heterosexuality as a means to frame butch/femme as less queer than other lesbian relationships –we shouldn't have to prove or defend our queerness because it's not a competition. Instead, this paper will focus on how gender roles operated in a community where the gendered options were not male and female, but instead butch and femme.

In this paper, I establish working historical definitions for butch and femme and how the identities were shaped by politics inside and outside lesbian bar culture (and before the introduction of lesbian feminism). Butch and femme were distinct social and physical roles that dictated interactions in the lesbian bar, and many felt forced to strictly align themselves with either the butch or femme role. This pressure is characterized by what former Professor of Sociology at the University of Buffalo, New York Natasha Kraus called "desire work." Desire work, as described by Kraus, created a binary for the working-class lesbian bar community through a positive feedback loop of social reinforcement; I argue the concept of desire work, while historically accurate, was a phenomenon that ultimately harmed the community.[5] The strict structuring of butch and femme gender roles, and the corresponding desire work required to engage as a part of the lesbian community, aided in the radical-feminist-led silencing, but not dissolution, of the subculture in the 1970s and 1980s.

Butch/Femme Origins: Creating a Cohesive Community

(Nancy Tucker and partner in Butch-Femme t-shirts, 1970)

"What the butch/femme tradition consisted of is not easy to discover, to understand, or to explain"

(Smith, 1989, p. 399)

[5] This is not to say that butch/femme gender roles as they exist *now* harm the lesbian community, but to say that forcing the adoption of a butch/femme identity as a rite of passage into the community *was* harmful.

The butch/femme tradition, as it's known today, has roots in house parties and working-class bar culture; it's an oral history, recorded long after its birth. Many lesbians who identified with the subculture at the time left no written record of their or their community's existence (Smith, 1989, p. 399). The primary sources utilized in this analysis principally include *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader*, an anthology arranged by Joan Nestle, and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis. *The Persistent Desire* is a collection of essays, interviews, and poetry by femme and butch lesbians spanning from the late 19th century to the early 1990s. "Tired of past and present attacks on the integrity of [butch/femme] desire," Joan Nestle, a femme lesbian, created *The Persistent Desire* as "an exploration, a celebration, a discussion, [and] a revelation" of the longevity of butch/femme culture across time and nationality (1992, pp. 18; 17). As for *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, it is considered "the first comprehensive history of a working-class lesbian community," consisting of 45 oral histories of lesbians from Buffalo, New York, ranging from the 1930s to the 1960s (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 2). Although this represents a case study of a single community, the book gave a retrospective voice to a group whose history was at risk of being completely unrecorded; *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* provided detailed primary accounts of a common lesbian culture seen across America in this period. The importance of these two works is paramount, as there is a distinct lack of primary sources surrounding the butch/femme identity at the genesis of popular lesbian culture; these collections did the difficult work of obtaining decades of oral history from working-class lesbians and "captur[ing] the memories of those days while [they] still ha[d] women (and men) around who lived them." (L. Davis, 1992, p. 52)

Rather than develop an all-encompassing timeline of butch/femme history —which exists uniquely across different races, continents, socioeconomic classes, and times— it is more productive to describe the function of the butch and femme gender roles as they related to a highly visible lesbian bar culture in the United States. The essence of the butch/femme identity was the visual proclamation of sexuality; butches achieved this through masculine dress and femmes achieved this through association with their butch lovers, and this is something preserved by modern interpretations of the identities. This central dynamic of visual association is put eloquently by butch lesbian Sandy Kern –"[the femme] wasn't obvious by a long shot, but the two of us together —they knew right away that we were lesbians." (Kern, 1992, p. 58)

The 1940s Lesbian Bar Scene

Lapovsky and Davis identified the 1940s as the time when "bars were the only possible place for working-class lesbians to congregate outside of private homes," cementing bars as the center of white working-class lesbian social life (2014, p. 101). The butch lesbian of the 1940s was characterized by traditionally masculine dress, using "the inversion of gender roles to announce gayness." (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 62) Butch lesbians took great pride in their masculine clothing and paid overwhelming detail to their appearance; "ritual" was used many times in the essays of *The Persistent*

(Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, p. 355)

A butch/femme lesbian couple circa 1940.

Desire to describe butches' engagement with their appearance, referring to the importance placed on authentic and passionate self-expression. The dress code was more formal, and reserved for the weekends: perfectly pressed button-downs, sleek hair combed neatly into a "duck's ass", and suit jackets and cuff links for those who could afford them. The forties butch demeanor was "masculine, but not aggressive or rough," which is distinct from the 1950s butch (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 64). A core tenant of "butchness", as mentioned above, is queer visibility and the rejection of heterosexual norms. As Lapovsky and Davis described their butch narrators[6], "to appear butch meant that [the narrators] were "not denying" who they were," and they used this unapologetic self-expression to find community, even though it made butch women a "visible target" in a time where violence against queer people was common (2014, p. 64).

(Inside Mona's, n.d.)

Butch lesbians at Mona's 440, a popular lesbian bar in San Francisco from 1936-1950s. Both butches have their hair done in the duck's ass style.

The femme lesbian of the 1940s was visually identical to a straight woman and, for this reason, takes a backseat in lesbian literature –the butch is the true lesbian, and the femme is the non-lesbian object of the butch's erotic desire (Kraus, 1996, p. 37; Nestle, 1992, p. 15). I had a difficult time defining femme, as most of the narratives worked to establish "butch" under appearance, but broadly considered femme to be any feminine presenting woman –straight,

[6] Narrators refer to the 45 oral historians in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold.*

bisexual, or lesbian—who were sexually motivated to frequent lesbian bars to be desired by butches.

(Mabel, c. 1940)

(Lillian Foster, c. 1940.)

Mabel Hampton, a masculine lesbian (left), and Lillian Foster, a feminine lesbian (above) circa 1940. The two were lovers for 46 years beginning in 1932.

(Wide Open Town' Photographs, Slides, Captions, Photocopies of Photographs, 1930s-2002 1, c. 1945)

(Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, p. 355)

"Butch Night out at Ralph Martins, 1940s"

Violence Shaping 1950s and 1960s Lesbian Identities

The 1950s was a decade marked by increased police violence towards homosexuals, as Senator McCarthy's vocal campaign to associate homosexuality with communism and the moral panic of the Lavender Scare[7] gained traction within American society. Narrators in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold,* and authors of *The Persistent Desire* affirm the use of a "three article rule"; although no evidence exists of the three article rule as a true law, police increasingly used the rule as a justification to arrest and abuse butch women for not wearing "three pieces of female clothing" (L. Davis, 1992, p. 49). Butch women faced constant harassment by law enforcement[8] for their masculine dress and many refused to comply with the three-article rule. Thus, the ideal butch toughened and became more aggressive; a butch should be able to protect her femme and her community from physical violence. Not only did butches fight with the police, but they would also brawl with each other over femmes or if they felt their social status in the community was threatened (Feinberg, 1992, p. 82).

(Butch/Femme couple at Mona's, circa 1950s, n.d.)

A femme and her butch at Mona's 440 club in San Franciscos; the butch is wearing less formal masculine wear, but still has her hair slicked back.

[7] The Lavender Scare refers to the movement to denounce and remove homosexuals from American government and society, and is considered an off-shoot of McCarthyism.

[8] The police not only harassed, but were excessively violent towards black butch lesbians (studs) in a way that was not experienced by white butches (Lapovsky and M. Davis, 2014, p. 252).

Another difference is that well-respected butches of the fifties frequented the bars most days and presented as masculine in every circumstance, whereas in the forties many dressed more conventionally at work and in public and went to the bar only on the weekends (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 66). The white bar dyke adopted the dress code of blue jeans and a white t-shirt, with the same slicked-back duck's ass haircut from the forties. The concept of stone butch —a masculine lesbian who did not want to be touched by her partner and received pleasure solely by pleasuring her partner— was established, and this became the sexual ideal for butches in the 1950s bar scene (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 72).

I propose that although there is less of a difference between a 1940s and a 1950s femme, the 1950s femme was more centered on being a caretaker and a pillar of comfort. With their lovers increasingly the target of police violence and engaging in violent encounters with other butches, femmes were the ones to post their butch's bail and tend to their wounds. Sandy, a butch lesbian from *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* described the role of a femme lover in the fifties and sixties as "nine times out of ten she'd be with you to help you with your black eye and your split lip." (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 1992, p. 70) Comparatively, in black lesbian spaces, black femmes were seen as leaders in their communities, unlike white femme lesbians; many black lesbians gathered at house parties instead of at bars, and these parties were often organized and facilitated by femme homemakers (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, p. 255).

(Lesbian house party, circa 1960s-1970s, n.d.)

Four black lesbians at a house party, circa 1960-1970. Desegregation of lesbian bars began in the 1950s, but black lesbians continued to prefer socializing at house parties. The parties were attended by black gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals, and the drinking, dancing, and food "lasted [for] several days." (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, pp. 250, 247-257) The parties were highly visible, and thus police often harassed party-goers and took the opportunity to arrest black lesbians for "disorderly conduct." (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, p. 252)

Butch/Femme Eroticism

A core component of the butch/femme identity in these three decades was their connection to desire; this concept will help us to better define femme, as its understanding was largely erotic, compared to butch, which found roots in both self-expression and eroticism. *Boots of Leather, Slipper of Gold* pulls upon a common theme from its narrators to state that "intrinsic to the butch-fem dyad was the presumption that the butch was the physically active partner and the leader in lovemaking;" the butch was the desirer, and the femme was the object of the butch's desire (2014, p. 368). While the femme may forgo sexual control physically, Amber Hollibaugh, a femme lesbian featured in *The Persistent Desire*, frames this as an emotionally active process: "I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting." (1992, p. 246)

The Butch/Femme Gender Binary

Upon entering a lesbian bar, to be accepted by the prevailing bar culture, one had to assume either a butch or femme gender. A butch could not desire another butch and must desire a

femme, and vice versa. The pressure for butches to commit to a strictly defined role was especially great. Doris Lunden, a butch lesbian that engaged in 1950s bar culture, described the strict gender roles in an interview with lesbian author Elly Bulkin:

> *"If you didn't pick a role —butch or femme—and stick with that, people thought you were mixed up and you didn't know who you were and you were laughed at and called "ki-ki"—a sort of queer of the gay world." (1992, p.116)*

(Blue Lunden, 1956)

Butch and femme lesbians in 1956. From left to right, Doris King ("Big Daddy"), Stacey Lawrence ("Stormy"), and Doris Lunden ("Dubois"), whose perspective on the butch/femme binary is featured above.

She went as far as to say the butch role was enforced through community gossip and fear of losing status, that "if you slept with a woman and let that woman touch you, she could turn around and brag about that to everybody and ridicule you publicly" (1992, p. 116). During the 1950s, the stone butch became "the standard that young butches felt they had to achieve to be a "real" or "true" butch," and butchness became a competition, a competition over who could be the most butch (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, pp. 391, 395).

Kraus' Theory of Desire Work

Given the strict butch/femme binary of the forties and fifties, those who did not strongly align with butch or femme had to convince themselves to embody roles incongruent with their inner desires, in order to be included in lesbian bars and the community at large. In her essay *Desire Work, Performativity, and the Structuring of a Community: Butch/Fem Relations of the 1940s and 1950s*, Natasha Kraus calls this "convincing" desire work. She defines desire work as the process of realigning one's desire with one's identity, "a continual process necessitated by contradictions inherent in butch/fem identities and practice." (1996, p. 32) Desire work was reinforced primarily by community gossip and a desire to belong at the bar, the only place for working-class white lesbians to engage in the lesbian community. I expand upon this by noting that although the policing of gender roles may have helped create a predictable pattern of social and sexual interactions in bars from the late 1930s to the 1960s, the concept of desire work was an impetus for the marginalization of butch/femme culture with the rise of radical feminism.

Desire work could be especially traumatizing for those identifying as butch (Penelope, 1993, p. 5). As insinuated above, to have social clout as a butch lesbian in the fifties, one had to be a stone butch; a number of butches in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* felt that in the late fifties, "to be a respected leader…a butch had to be untouchable." (2014, p. 395) Women who previously enjoyed receiving or had never received sexual pleasure felt the need to distance themselves from this enjoyment or curiosity, as being untouchable was seen as part of being butch. There was also a pressure to conform to the butch/femme dichotomy –even if a butch was sexually and romantically attracted to other butches, there was a stigma against those types of relationships, in favor of butch/femme relationships.

Femme lesbians were also negatively affected by desire work. As discussed briefly above, femmes were often not considered to be real lesbians because they did not reject femininity. For femmes with a strong connection to their lesbian identity, the failure to be perceived as a lesbian led to the adoption of a butch persona, and subsequent engagement in desire work to rationalize this change (Laporte, 1992, p. 216). Despite perhaps wanting to be desired, to dress femininely, or otherwise engage in the traditional femme role, to be validated as a lesbian meant to dress androgynously or masculinely, and to accept the butch gender role.

Some viewed this harsh categorization of butch and femme as necessary to build a strong lesbian community where one previously did not exist (Kraus, 1996, p. 34). Emphasizing again that bars were the only spaces where white lesbians of this era could find community[9], many lesbians conformed to a butch or femme role to gain access to these spaces. It created a standard of predictability; one could enter a lesbian bar presenting butch and know exactly who to court and exactly how to act in a sexual situation (Penelope, 1993, p. 2). This predictability was enticing to some, even if it conflicted with their true desires. This contradiction, Kraus claims, was an expected sacrifice of joining the lesbian community before the shunning of butch/femme roles by radical feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. It is likely many lesbians experienced euphoria dressing as a butch or being desired as a femme, but it was equally proven many lesbians did not identify entirely with these labels and performed desire work to convince themselves they did (Lapovsky & M. Davis, 2014, p. 395; Penelope, 1993, p. 2). These lesbians were especially susceptible to the rhetoric of radical feminists trying to liberate butch and femme lesbians from

[9] Again, the black lesbian community did not organize so strictly around bars –and the black lesbian community did not see this drop off in identification with stud/femme the movement against butch/femme identities lead by radical feminists. Perhaps this is because there was already a strong community of black lesbians –as described in "Boots of Leather," black lesbian house parties emerged as a result of being ostracized from society on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality— and there was no artificial need to adhere to gendered roles to feel a sense of belonging (255).

their binary gender roles, and I argue this is why butch/femme relationships moved out of the public eye and to be a less present, but not eradicated, private identity.

The Lesbian Feminist Perspective on Butch/Femme

Lesbian feminism emerged as part of radical feminism[10], as a reaction to the alienation of lesbians from the feminist movement of the seventies and eighties (Westerband). Radical feminists held strongly that heterosexual gender and sex roles perpetuated violence against women through their sexual objectification of women (Ferguson, 1984, p. 108). They emphasized emotional over sexual intimacy and dismissed erotic role-playing as a harmful byproduct of the patriarchy. Emerging from this anti-eros ideology, lesbian feminism denounced overt sexuality in favor of subtle sensuality, and framed the lesbian identity as objectively political. They believed lesbianism was the purest form of feminism because it did not involve men on any level, and for that reason, the existence of lesbians resisted male societal and sexual dominance (Westerband; MacCowan, 1992, p. 310). Lesbian feminists rejected the femme identity because they associated any conventional expression of femininity with "helplessness, lack of analytic ability, weakness, frailty, inferiority, …servility," and the sexual oppression of women (Ruby, 1993, p. 3). They associated the increasingly violent tendencies and macho attitude of the bar dyke with the violence and aggression of men. Thus, the ideal lesbian feminist was androgynous, rejecting both masculine and feminine stereotypes. Lesbian feminists rejected the roles of stone-butch and femme because they thought they were relics of an unliberated

[10] Above, lesbian feminist and radical feminist were used synonymously. They are different (but overlapping) identities, but for all intents and purposes of this paper, lesbian and radical feminists share the same negative views of butch/femme relationships. This lack of distinction is partially to avoid initial confusion, because not all lesbian feminists were lesbians; this terminology can be confusing with the modern interpretation of lesbian as purely a sexual label, as opposed to a political label.

society (MacCowan, 1992, p. 311). They labeled butch/femme couples as traitors to their feminist and/or lesbian identities for engaging in role-playing, which was interpreted to be oppressive and perpetuating heterosexual standards (Nestle, 1992, p. 14). If the personal was political, as touted by radical feminists of the seventies and eighties, then sexual was also political, and butch and femme lesbians were apolitical[11] for continuing to engage in the eroticization of gender polarity.

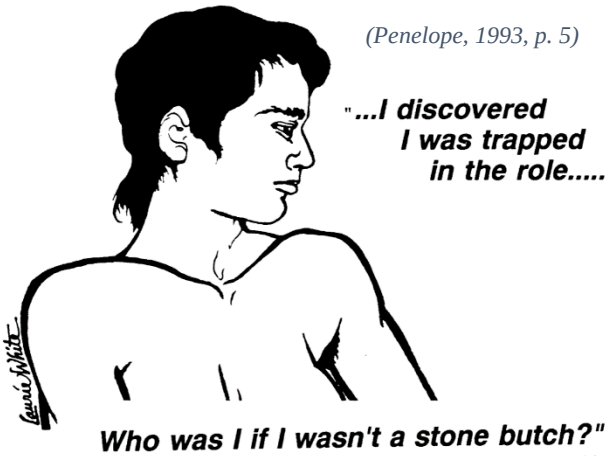
Desire Work as a Community Weakness

The denial of and repression of desire is negative in many cases[12]; whether it is desire work done by lesbians truly unaligned with a butch or femme gender role; by lesbians overcome with internalized homophobia forcing themselves to sleep with men; by bisexuals feeling pressured to "pick a side"; even by straight women who despise the role of being a passive housewife. No one should have to pretend to be something they're not. It's a core component of being queer, that no one should deny their true self, and no one should not have to mask or hide their desires in the closet.

[11] And, as famously quoted by Desmond Tutu, "If you are neutral in situations of oppression, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Radical feminists believed butches and femmes to be traitors to women's liberation for not choosing to completely disavow the concept of gendered roles and relationships. Although, couldn't it be said that butch/femme relationships, where the "power imbalance" distinctive to heterosexual gender roles is absent, are still "political"?

[12] Initially, I was apt to say it was negative in all cases. But, what about pedophilia, rape, incest, etc.? In those cases, I would say the denial and repression of those desires is a positive thing for an individual and society. By using the wording above, I am asserting that the denial and repression of desire is negative in cases where the theoretical object of desire is consensually desired, and to act on that desire would be to do so in a mutually consensual manner.

Thus, the desire work done to reinforce the butch/femme binary exposed personal vulnerabilities that were validated by lesbian feminist ideology. Especially when considering butches who were not stone by choice, but by social pressure, a strong voice denouncing those pressures was a shepherd away this manufactured sexual repression. Take for instance, Julia Penelope, a lesbian feminist whose newspaper article criticizing butch/femme roles was used to inform my analysis above; she previously identified as a stone butch because others used this label to describe her and it was reinforced that this was the only way to be a proper lesbian in the 1960s (1993, p. 2). Her newfound connection to feminism challenged her desire work, and she directly references the influence lesbian feminists had on her abandoning the butch role.



(Penelope, 1993, p. 5)

> ***"If they [feminists] hadn't challenged my identification as a 'butch,' I might never have started trying to change the way I thought and acted, and I might never have learned to love."*** *(Penelope, 1993, p. 6)*

Because desire work is anti-intuitive, there must be a compelling reason for it to be done —and if that reason no longer holds credibility within the community, in the case of butch/femme, there is no impetus to continue the work. The natural consequence here would be that some lesbians no longer identify with butch or femme because, with the introduction of the lesbian feminist, there was a "degendered" way to present as a lesbian and interact with the community. This new acceptable way of being a lesbian held tightly that butch/femme culture was a lowlife imitation

of heterosexuality, and lesbians could stop engaging in desire work to be butch or femme and perhaps engage more naturally with the androgynous lesbian feminist identity.

A Final Consideration: Privilege

It must be noted that specifically the *lesbian feminist* movement was overwhelmingly white and middle class, while butch/femme was multiracial and almost exclusively a working-class phenomenon during this time period (Smith, 1989, p. 414; Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1992, p. 253). Elements of shame and classism were perpetually present in the lesbian feminist critiques of butch/femme, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

In a similar manner to how gossip was utilized as public shaming to motivate butches into assuming an untouchable role, the rhetoric circulated in lesbian feminist publications and "consciousness raising" sessions publicly shamed many butch/femme lesbians relationships out of the public eye. This was achieved with the avid publishing of political doctrines, newspaper articles, and journals, and through participation in feminist conferences and think tanks, each which aimed to humiliate those who participated in the butch/femme subculture. There was simply far more media produced by lesbian feminists of this era than by self-identified butch or femme lesbians.

I propose lesbians who participated in butch/femme relationships did not completely disappear, but were simply less visible during the seventies and eighties. Lapovsky and Davis note it was sometimes difficult to obtain oral histories from butches and femmes because they did not have the privilege of affording time for an unpaid academic venture or did not think their history was an important history to tell (2014, pp. 79-81). Additionally, it was a popular sentiment among, not only middle and upper-class lesbians and lesbian feminists, but also among

medical professionals, that butches and femmes were “low-life societal discards and pathetic imitators of heterosexuality," and thus not historically relevant to lesbianism, so they were given less attention at the time (Lapovsky & Davis, 2014, p. 51).

The aforementioned lack of butch/femme primary literature, compounded with the shunning of butch/femme relationships from all aspects of society and complete disregard for their history, leaves me to believe that stories of happy butch and femme couples in the seventies and eighties were buried due to their scarcity. Perhaps these couples were less vocal about their desire than in previous decades due to being ostracized within their own already-marginalized sexuality, translating as the termination of butch/femme relationships, rather than the silencing of a social group.

Conclusion

Working-class lesbians from the 1930s through the 1960s found community by engaging in gendered bar culture. With a strict code of how to handle oneself with other lesbians, platonically and sexually, lesbians urban America established cohesive neighborhood gathering spaces. However, as the adoption of either the butch or femme gender role became increasingly emphasized, many lesbians engaged in desire work to fit more neatly into their lesbian gender and to keep in good status with the rest of the bar community. While Kraus argues this desire work was necessary for the solidification of the early lesbian community in the United States, I emphasize desire work more as a core component of the rejection of the butch/femme subculture in the 1970s and 1980s. The popularization of lesbian feminism acted as the catalyst for some lesbians to recognize and disavow their own desire work. Lesbian feminists led a crusade based on shame and classism to disrepute butch and femme lesbians, denying lesbian sexuality in favor

of lesbianism as a political sisterhood between women. As many butch and femme lesbians were working class, they left few records of their histories and were drowned out by lesbian feminists' prolific anti-role-playing rhetoric, and thus appeared to be absent from the 1970s and 1980s.

The early construction of the butch/femme roles was shockingly dissimilar to the way I perceive butch/femme lesbianism to be today. At some points during this essay, I felt as though the labels I engage with, love with, find community with, were overwhelmingly harmful. Instead of focusing on how the past conflicts with the present, I see the modern reclamation of the words as imbuing the subculture with more tenderness and more flexibility to sustain their use in a distinctly different time period. And, there is power in combatting the alienation and loneliness seemingly inherent to lesbianism by seeing elements of myself proclaimed proudly twenty, forty, or one hundred years ago.

(Lesbians Unite, 1968)

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