BUTCH AND FEM TO BUTCHY-FEMME AND FEMMY-BUTCH:
THE IMPACT OF LESBIAN FEMINISM ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF BUTCH
AND FEM IDENTITIES FROM THE 1970s TO THE PRESENT

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Masters of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
1996

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ABSTRACT

Butch and fem distinctions have been prevalent throughout much of modern U.S. lesbian history, but how they are defined, expressed, and lived is not only contingent upon the class, race, and ethnicity of the subjects, but also changes over time. A fem lesbian from the 1940s is not the same as a fem lesbian in the 1980s because the societal conditions that shape each period of lesbian culture are so different. World War II was one harbinger of change for butch and fem women; in this paper, I argue that the second wave of feminism was another great catalyst for transformation. Because of the women's movement the construction, function, and composition of the butch-fem dyad underwent great upheavals between the 1950s and the 1980s.

The rhetoric of the women's movement rejected the butch-fem relationship because anything reflecting or resembling masculinity was deemed oppressive. At the same time, the dominant lesbian feminist style appropriated, at least superficially, butch characteristics. To chart the changing conception of butch and fem, I explore discourses of sexual identity in feminist and lesbian journals and magazines, personal ads, published personal writings about butches and fems, past and present, and in personal interviews. I analyze the shifting constructions of butch and fem from the original working-class conception to those of the 1970s lesbian feminists and 1980s sex radicals.

This story of the transformation of lesbian identities in recent U.S. history calls attention to the continuities and disruptions in the construction of modern sexuality. The traditional butch/fem emphasis on the eroticization of difference, the orthodox lesbian feminist eroticization of sameness, and the contemporary sex-radical blurring of the boundaries of difference and sameness are all an important part of the history of sexuality.
in the twentieth century U.S. This essay will extend the scholarship on butch-fem history into a time of transition and change, and it will focus on the reframing of the "public lesbian" by white, middle-class lesbian feminists through their reaction to a working-class phenomenon.
Dedicated to Joan Nestle
and all of the butches and fems of the
past, present, and future.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Leila J. Rupp, for her tremendous amount of encouragement and support and for her numerous readings, comments, and suggestions. Her enthusiasm helped make this process possible.

I thank Joan Nestle and Madeline Davis for taking time from their busy schedules to share their stories with me. I learned more from talking with them than I did reading a book.

I am indebted to Marla Mayerson, a soft-butcher, for the use of her computer and her emotional support.

An extra special thanks to Scully the cat for helping me type, warming my lap, and sticking by me when any rational human being would not be caught dead with me in the same room.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Butch and fem identities have been prevalent throughout much of modern U.S. lesbian history, but how they have been defined, expressed, and lived is contingent upon the time period in which they are studied and the class and race of the subjects. A fem lesbian from the 1940s is not the same as a fem lesbian in the 1980s because the societal conditions that shaped each period of lesbian culture are so different. World War II was one harbinger of change for butch and fem women; in this essay, I argue that the second wave of feminism was another great catalyst for transformation. Because of the women’s movement the construction, function, and composition of the butch-fem dyad underwent great upheavals between the 1950s and the 1980s. Butch and fem identities in the 1950s came out of a working-class bar subculture that required women to choose a specific and rather rigid identity, whereas the new 1980s dyad was a loose, playful relationship that women of all classes might participate in at will, choosing either identity or both.

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1 In this essay, I follow Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993) in using the spelling “fem” rather than “femme” because “fem” is indicative of the working-class nature of the butch-fem dyad and is less academic and more American in nature (p. 391, n.9). But when I use a direct quote, I will keep the original spelling.

2 In the 1980s, there were two worlds of butch and fem women: one that was composed of still living butch and fem women from the 1950s and 1960s who identified much as they did in their earlier years, and a new world which was composed of lesbians who mainly claimed a butch or fem identity after the women’s movement. In this paper, it is the latter group I will be focusing on in the 1980s.
Scholars trace butch and fem communities to an urban, working-class bar subculture dating to the 1930s. By the 1950s, butch and fem lesbians of all races fought for and sought to claim public space as their own for social gatherings, but what was more important was the need for a setting for the formation of intimate relationships. The original butch-fem dyad was built on the interconnection between the need for personal intimacy, public socializing, and community organization during a period of U.S. history marked by the Cold War abroad and the repression of Communist subversion and the "homosexual menace" at home.

Some scholarship interprets butch/fem distinctions as a male/female polarity and charges that these women were imitating heterosexuality; other scholarship, which I find more persuasive, presents the butch-fem dyad as a complex statement about sexuality, social identity, and resistance within working-class lesbian communities in the mid-twentieth century. The definition of butch and fem is often oversimplified by focusing entirely upon the women's physical appearance: the butch wore pants, men's shoes and shirts, and had short hair; conversely, the fem wore dresses/skirts, make-up, and had long hair. Although this was true for many butches and fems, some fems did in fact wear pants, and some butches sometimes dressed in "drag" (e.g. a skirt) during the day at work. To be

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3 The butch-fem dyad was a working-class phenomenon because working-class women did not have the economic resources for private parties, therefore they had to venture into the public arena to meet other lesbians.
4 Kennedy and Davis, 5.

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a butch or a fem went beyond one's appearance. Joan Nestle, a lesbian scholar and a self-identified fem who came out in 1958, does not see her fem-self as a role, but as an identity, an expression of the self. When asked, What is it like to be a fem?, she replies, "It's like you asking me what it's like being a Jew. I mean, it's just how I move through the world. [It is a] fem specificness and . . . it has in some sense little to do with butches, little to do with women." For Nestle, being a fem was and is a way of being. For her, that way of being was played out in terms of appearance, gesture, and language.

Butch and fem women shaped the public image of "the lesbian" through their individual appearances and through public displays of their relationships. Working-class lesbian desire was accentuated through role differentiation -- "masculine" and "feminine" -- which became the basis for a working-class lesbian erotic system. The adoption of masculine and feminine attire, in turn, shaped their lesbian desire. The butch-fem dyad gave public expression to women's autonomy and their romantic and sexual interest in other women by co-opting masculine and feminine gender roles. This became the key structure in organizing against heterosexual dominance at a time when no political groups existed. Through the butch-fem dyad, lesbians moved into the public world and developed a unique form for women's sexual love. 8

There were rules of propriety that governed all facets of the working-class lesbian community: butches could only go with fems and fems could only go with butches. A woman had to adopt an identity or else she was seen as suspicious or dangerous. The butch-fem dyad was organized around lesbian intimacy that created and expressed a distinct

8 Kennedy and Davis, 5-6. The discussion of 1950s butch and fem is taken from Kennedy's and Davis' work unless otherwise noted.
lesbian eroticism: the butch (the "masculine" one) was the doer in lovemaking, the "giver," while her fem partner (the "feminine" one) was the desired one, the "receiver" of pleasure. The core of this emotional/sexual exchange can be seen in the ideal of the "stone-butch." A stone-butch is untouchable, she does all the "givin'" and does not allow her fem partner to touch her. Instead, she gains pleasure through giving pleasure.

Despite these rules, actual behavior varied among individuais. Sometimes a person had to suppress parts of herself in order to fit in; but in return, she could be part of a community that actively and effectively resisted lesbian oppression. Butches and fems physically constructed themselves to draw attention to differences because differences were the standard of the day. They modeled themselves on heterosexual norms, but transformed them into an expression of lesbian sexuality. Through physical and sexual differences, butches and fems knew who was available for an intimate relationship or a one night sexual encounter, whether they were in the bar or on the street. The codes were obvious to those who were in the community and were a form of protection from police infiltration and harassment.

The butch-fem dyad cut across most racial and ethnic lines. The origin of butch and fem lesbians can be traced to "passing women" of the nineteenth century and before and to the black public lesbian world of the Harlem Renaissance.9 Passing women were individual women, mostly from the working class and of all races, who "passed as men by dressing and acting like them for a variety of economic, sexual, and adventure-seeking

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9 The similarity is that both passing women and butch women transgressed gender boundaries. But this does not mean that passing women were butch women. To be butch meant to be part of a lesbian community that organized around gender differences. In the U.S. lesbian communities did not begin to form until the first decades of the twentieth century, thus making more of a connection between the butch-fem dyad and the Harlem Renaissance than with passing women.
reasons." 10 Harlem, during its Renaissance in the 1920s, provided a public world for black butch/poppa/stud and fem/mama women to announce their lesbianism or bisexuality because in this era of artistic and sexual experimentation, Harlem was more tolerant of differences than mainstream society. 11 Gladys Bentley, a Harlem entertainer, appeared in men's suits both on and off stage, and the blues song "BD's [bulldyker's] Dream" was one of the "most frequently heard songs in the rent party repertoire." 12 The stud-mama relationship was adopted by many working-class black lesbians and was predominantly carried out in the private sphere, at house/rent parties (an African American tradition many lesbians held on to as a way to deal with racism). Gradually, the dyad worked its way into the lesbian bar cultures of the 1950s.

Because of their visibility, butch and fem women came to define the "public lesbian." To people outside this distinctly lesbian institution of butch and fem -- both straight people and middle-class lesbians -- butch-fem couples were seen as simply replicating heterosexuality: the butch wanted to be a man and the fem really wanted a man. To counter this public display of lesbianism, Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian homophile organization, founded in 1956, adopted a politics of assimilation. DOB was a predominantly white, middle-class lesbian organization that sought to dispel the myths,


"Poppa" and "stud" are African American terms for butch, and "mama" is a term for fem. All five of these terms were used in the African American working-class community in the mid-twentieth century.

12 Ibid., 78.
misinformation, and prejudice surrounding lesbians and to improve lesbians' status in society. Acceptability by straight society became the goal of DOB, as proclaimed in the "Statement of Purpose" of the DOB periodical, The Ladder: "education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological, and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society...by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society." The only difference between lesbians and straight women, for DOB, was that lesbians loved women. DOB's assimilationist politics put middle-class lesbians in direct contrast to working-class butch and fem women in the lesbian community.

With the flowering of the women's liberation movement in the early 1970s came a redefinition of the "public lesbian." The rhetoric of the women's movement rejected the butch-fem relationship because anything reflecting or resembling masculinity was deemed oppressive. At the same time, the dominant lesbian feminist style appropriated, at least superficially, butch characteristics. To be an acceptable "dyke" (a positive term for lesbian feminists in the early 1970s, pejorative two decades earlier), one had to be butch-looking, but not in the traditional sense. The required uniform for lesbian feminists was masculine, redefined as "unisex," clothing: dungarees, t-shirts or flannel shirts, and work boots. To lesbian feminists, this was not butch, but androgynous. I argue, however, that lesbian feminists appropriated butch attire as a form of political resistance. This appropriation,

14 Scholars have also noted that The Ladder subtly suggested role differentiation and that some middle-class lesbians partook in role behavior in the privacy of their own homes, paralleling that of the butch-fem dyad. See Elizabeth A. Smith, "Butches, Femmes, and Feminists: The Politics of Lesbian Sexuality" and personal interview with Joan Nestle, December 16, 1994.
along with lesbian feminists' ideological preference for sensuality over genital sexual activity (because of the association of genital sex with orgasm-oriented, oppressive masculinity), set the stage for a change in the construction, function, and composition of the butch-fem dyad in the 1980s.

The "sex wars" of the early 1980s, a reaction to the sexual limitations put in place by lesbian feminist rhetoric, furthered the change that started a decade earlier by resurrecting the supposed dead identities and returning them to the public lesbian discourse. The advances made by the second wave of feminism for all women altered the meaning of butch and fem in the 1980s and 1990s: society became more androgynous through the lessening of strict boundaries between women and men in clothing as well as in the workplace, therefore identities were more fluid; bars were no longer the only public space available to meet other lesbians; and butch and fem identities were no longer the only way to express lesbian desire in the public realm. Thus, the butch-fem dyad changed as the role of women changed and as lesbians gained more visibility.

Scholars have noted the lesbian feminist rejection of butch and fem, but no one has explored the complex impact of the women's movement on the construction of lesbian butch and fem identities after the swell of the second wave. To chart the changing conception of butch and fem, I explore discourses of sexual identity in feminist and lesbian journals and magazines, personal ads, published personal writings about butches and fems, past and present, and in personal interviews.¹⁵ I analyze the shifting constructions of

¹⁵ I realize that personal ads reflect a particular subset of the lesbian community, those interested in meeting strangers and willing to advertise publicly. Although they are not representative of all lesbians, personal ads do reveal changing uses of language and categories across time. Psychologists Marti Gonzales and Sarah Meyers note that "[p]ersonal ads...provide researchers with an intriguing source of information about self presentation strategies, relationship goals, and contemporary societal definitions of what is attractive or
butch and fem from the original working-class conception to those of the 1970s lesbian feminists and 1980s sex radicals. This essay will extend the scholarship on butch-fem history into a time of transition and change, and it will focus on the reframing of the "public lesbian" by white, middle-class lesbian feminists through their reaction to a working-class phenomenon.

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desirable, and about gender stereotypes as well" (Marti Hope Gonzales and Sarah Meyers, "Your Mother Would Like Me: Self-Presentation in the Personal Ads of Heterosexual and Homosexual Men and Women," in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19:2 (April 1993). Existing scholarship on personal ads is mostly comparative (between lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men, or some combination thereof) and focuses on likes and dislikes of the advertisers along with self-presentation strategies (e.g. what percentage put an emphasis on their own physical appearance). But no one has looked at how lesbians present themselves in relation to traditional gender roles, which is my focus. For research done on personal ads, see Mary Riege Laner, "Media Mating II: 'Personals' Advertisements of Lesbian Women," in *Journal of Homosexuality* 4:1 (Fall 1978) and Kay Deaux and Randel Hanna, "Courting in the Personal Column: The Influence of Gender and Sexual Orientation," in *Sex Roles* 11:5/6 (1984).
CHAPTER 2

LESBIAN FEMINISM: THE "BUTCH" WITHOUT THE FEM

The women’s liberation movement got its start in the late 1960s when groups of women gathered to discuss the problems of male supremacy. By 1969, these groups of radical women had become a vital force in the women’s movement. Radical feminists rejected both the male socialist idea that women should wait for the revolution to bring them equality and the liberal feminist idea of integrating women into the existing system. Instead, their solution included the articulation of the idea that women were a sex class, that gender relations needed to be cast in political terms, and that gender oppression was the root oppression. These women viewed gender roles as a social construction and sought total elimination of prescribed roles, including butch and fem. It was a movement of liberation, a call for a total restructuring of the system, not an integration into the existing system. But the irony is that at the same time that radical feminism critiqued gender roles, including pre-movement lesbianism, it was also providing an all-women’s environment in which women could bond with one another and even define themselves as lesbians later resulting in some women adopting a gendered physical appearance and attitude.

Radical feminism, as defined by Alice Echols, was a "political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system." It put forth a rhetoric that viewed sexual freedom,

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17 Ibid., 6.
and sex itself, in terms of male irresponsibility, misogyny, and violence.\textsuperscript{18} The voice of radical feminism can be heard in the newspaper \textit{off our backs (oob)} which began publication in 1970.\textsuperscript{19} The title \textit{off our backs} is symbolic of women's position in society and reflects three things: "We wanted to be off our backs in terms of being fucked. We wanted to be off our backs in terms of being the backbone of America or every society and culture with no power. And we wanted the flack we would get from everyone about being strong to roll off our backs."\textsuperscript{20} Reporting on an experimental two-week women's commune, \textit{oob} writers showed support for all-women's communes as a sanctuary from "sexual mindfucks."

Many women have become alienated from the sexual functions of their bodies because sex has been used to keep us in our place. As a step toward wholeness, mustn't we withdraw from the oppression of sexual mindfucks and build all female collectives? Some may include sex between women, but for many, these collectives will probably be a period of celibacy -- probably the first time in most women's lives.\textsuperscript{21}

Sex was seen as a key area in women's oppression by men, resulting in most sexual activity being seen as masculine. \textit{Anti-sexism became anti-sex.}\textsuperscript{22}

This critique of sexual activity, although obviously not monolithic, was translated into a hostility towards lesbians because public lesbians up to this point were working-class butch and fem women who defined themselves, in part, by their sexual attraction to other

\textsuperscript{18} Ellen Willis, "Introduction," in Echols, xii.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{off our backs} was established by Marilyn Webb and her supporters in 1970, as way to stay involved with the movement after she was expelled from the coordinating committee of D.C. Women's Liberation on the grounds that she permitted the press to single her out as a leader, at a time in the movement when women became phobic about leaders (Echols, 205).
\textsuperscript{20} Marilyn Wickes quoted in Echols, 343 n.10.
\textsuperscript{22} Wendy Clark, "The Dyke, the Feminist, and the Devil," in \textit{Feminist Review} 11 (Summer 1982), 31.
women through role differentiation. "The lesbian" was thus defined as sexual and mimicking patriarchy; therefore, she was not considered a political ally of radical feminism. To be accepted by radical feminism, one had to critique sexual role playing as oppressive, both in one's own life and in society at large. In essence, one's sexual activity was supposed to match one's politics. Anne Koedt stated the radical feminist position very succinctly in her 1972 article "Lesbianism and Feminism": "All role playing is sick... The fact that there has occurred a role transfer, and that now is being acted out by the 'wrong' sex, does not change the nature of what is being acted out" (her emphasis).23 To be a healthy lesbian, in Koedt's opinion, one had to "have chosen not to fall into imitative roles, but instead [explore] the positive aspects of both 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior beyond role forming."24 Many radical feminists critiqued butch and fem women as playing male and female roles and as such, they argued, lesbianism perpetuated the system that controlled women: heterosexuality. Ti-Grace Atkinson, a radical feminist and founder of The October 17th Movement, later renamed The Feminists, announced that "because lesbianism involves role-playing and, more important, because it is based on the primary assumption of male oppression, that is sex, lesbianism reinforces the sex class system."25 This critique also hindered an alliance between radical feminism and the assimilationist DOB. Susan Brownmiller, a leading member of New York Radical Feminists, "reportedly refused an invitation to speak to DOB because she thought lesbians were hypersexual and

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24 Ibid.
25 Ti-Grace Atkinson quoted in Echols, 211.
oppressingly male." Radical feminists sought to overturn the institution of butch and fem as they also sought to liberate women and men from prescribed gender roles.

As women problematized heterosexuality and lesbianism, they also found strength and pleasure in the company of other women because women's groups provided an atmosphere in which women could act upon feelings they may have felt for years and provided them with an atmosphere in which they might consciously decide to turn away from men. Kathie, a women who attended the Antioch lesbian conference in early 1972, had this to say about her experience in an all-women's environment in a letter to the editor of *oob*: "At Antioch, I saw and accepted old feelings in a new context. Yes, I do love women. Never have I felt from any man the acceptance and strength given to me by another woman. Never have I loved with passion and totality except with another woman. Never have I given of myself to another human being except in loving another woman." In an article in the Chicago newspaper *The Lavender Woman* entitled, "Lesbian Head Changes," Leigh Kennedy wrote, "Having gotten the courage to leave my husband and face my gayness, and just being with and caring for other lesbians, I felt as though I'd pulled out the stopper and this rich flow of feelings had begun. Anger, violence, passion, affection, tenderness, sorrow, insecurity, strength, weakness, child-like playfulness, exuberance, strutting bravado, pleasure, etc. A new energy, lots of feelings, and all of it was okay. I was and am free to be myself." In an interview with *oob* co-founder Marilyn Webb, Echols reveals some of the initial ignorance about the connection between

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26 Echols, 211.
radical feminism and lesbianism. Talking about the all-women's commune mentioned earlier, Webb said:

What we actually did on the retreat was talk about theory and practice, eat, clean, cook, take one group mescaline trip, which had the effect of welding us together in an intense and inexplicable closeness. Lesbianism was not on the agenda, although in retrospect it should have been obvious that homosexuality would be a future for some of us.29

Certainly addressing the issue of lesbianism was fraught with peril, as radical feminists who pioneered lesbian feminism would soon find out.

Sharon Deevey, for example, later a Furies Collective member, fell in love with a woman while she was involved with the Women's Liberation study group in Washington, D.C. in 1969. About this experience and her feelings she wrote, "I had fallen in love with Joan and was scared shitless that I would be kicked out of Women's Liberation if anyone found out."30 Deevey's fear was real because this desire for other women was often not supported by non-lesbian radical feminists. Roxanne Dunbar of Cell 16 suggested "that the task of feminism was to get women out of bed rather than change the gender of their partner."31 Taking this stance further, Abby Rockefeller believed that lesbianism "muddles what is the real issue for women by making it appear that women really like sex as much as men - that they just have sex with men" (her emphasis).32 Radical feminism's problematizing of sex demanded a redefinition of the public lesbian from that of a sexual being to that of a political being in order for lesbians to be seen as partners in the women's movement.

29 Echols, 221.
31 Echols, 211.
32 Ibid.
While some women were coming to terms with their emotional and sexual desires, small groups of women were gathering to expand the scope of radical feminism to include lesbianism. But not in the style of lesbianism practiced by butch and fem women. These new lesbians, called lesbian feminists, were generally women who chose to become lesbians as part of their political critique and attack on gender roles and the institution of heterosexuality. The Furies Collective -- formed in Washington, D.C. in 1970, and probably the most famous and influential lesbian feminist collective -- argued that heterosexuality was the cornerstone of male supremacy and lesbianism was "the basic threat" to its existence.33 "Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference," wrote Ginny Berson, a Furies Collective member, "but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy."34

In order to make radical feminists realize that lesbians were not that different from other women, and as a reaction to how male society defined lesbianism, lesbian feminists redefined the lesbian as political and not just sexual. "Male society defines Lesbianism as a sexual act, which reflects men's limited view of women: they think of us only in terms of sex. They also say that Lesbians are not real women, so a real woman is someone who gets fucked by men. We say that a Lesbian is a woman whose sense of self and energies, including sexual energies, center around women -- she is woman identified," wrote Charolette Bunch, a Furies Collective member. "The woman-identified-woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support. Women

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are important to her. She is important to herself."35 Lesbian feminists coined the term "woman-identified woman" as an expression and an identity to deemphasize the sexual nature of lesbianism and to emphasize the political power of a lesbian identity. Jennifer Woodul, a member of the New York group Radicaledsians and also a Furies member, explained that the concept was used to alleviate the fears that lesbianism evoked in many radical feminists. As a means of legitimizing lesbianism, sexual activity was removed from its definition and lesbian from the description, and "the lesbian" was recast in political terms and located within the discourse already established by radical feminists.36 "What is a lesbian?" is the opening line of Radicaledsians' position paper, "Woman-Identified Woman." A lesbian is defined as "the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."37 All women have the potential to be a lesbian defined by political and emotional, rather than sexual and emotional, relations with other women. White, middle-class lesbian feminists reframed the definition of the public lesbian as a reaction to the working-class phenomenon of butch and fem in order to be seen as a valid, legitimate force in the larger white, middle-class women's movement. Lesbianism was transformed from the 'practice of sex' between a woman and another woman, to the 'politics of sex' between women and society. Lesbian feminism moved sexual politics into an analysis of sex itself as an institution.38

35 Bunch, 30.
The political lesbian became the new public lesbian in the 1970s, and she consciously chose to be a lesbian as a political statement. Combining lesbianism and feminism Bunch explained how lesbianism was political:

Lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal and economic basis of male supremacy... The Lesbian's independence and refusal to support one man undermines the personal power that men exercise over women. Our rejection of heterosexual sex challenges male domination in its most individual and common form. We offer women something better than submission to personal oppression. We offer the beginning of the end of collective and individual male supremacy.\(^{39}\)

By changing the definition of lesbianism from sexual to political, lesbian feminism made lesbianism a viable option for all women.\(^{40}\) While at the Antioch lesbian conference, Kathie realized "that being a lesbian doesn't mean that all physical attraction to another woman is sexual attraction. I've often held back in reaching out to a woman because I was afraid that those desires were too heavily sexual. I never wanted that as my only basis for touching someone else."\(^{41}\) Lesbian feminism provided Kathie with a positive, nonthreatening, and less sexual-oriented atmosphere in which to accept her lesbianism.

This process of desexualization took place throughout the women's liberation movement. In an article entitled "I Was Oppressed by the Big 'O',' published in the journal *Sisters* in 1973, Pat Hardman explained why she had lessened the importance of sexual relations in her life.\(^{42}\) Having been conditioned as a child to believe that sexual satisfaction arose from "that erect-penis-enters-the-vagina thing," Hardman traded her body for some hash. In the process, she wrote, "he got a little pissed because I dug my nails into his

\(^{39}\) Charolette Bunch quoted in Echols, 232.
\(^{41}\) Kathe, 24.
\(^{42}\) Pat Hardman, "I Was Oppressed by the Big 'O',' in *Sisters* 4:6 (June 1973), 25-27.
back. That puzzled the hell out of me because I was only hurting back." Her later sexual experiences were more of the same. "I was really curious to see if fucking could feel any better than masturbation. It didn't. And it never did. It started okay, then I wound up either suffocating under some sweaty, heaving body or perched precariously on top of same." After these experiences, Hardman started attending Women's Liberation meetings and wound up having an affair with a butch. This experience was also not pleasant. "First of all," she wrote, "it wasn't really cool for me to make love to her. That would destroy her ego. I could also destroy her butch image if I didn't have five orgasms every time she stroked my palm." Both experiences left Hardman feeling objectified.

Hardman's sexual experience with a butch did not make her a lesbian. She was instead a "head queer"; a lesbian because she was happy working for other women. "Being intimate with someone felt like being sandpapered. I was very sensitive to the pressures of lesbian sex. I didn't want my body to be used to prove to another women that her lifestyle was just as good as her straight sisters!" Revolting against pre-movement lesbian sex, Hardman subscribed to lesbian feminist sensuality. "It delights me so much to hold hands with someone that I don't need to wonder how I'll do in bed with them. I am sensual. I enjoy my own skin, climbing trees or walking barefoot on the sand or rubbing my face against someone's hand. That's all I want to be responsible for. If my lover isn't happy with my pleasure, she can leave. I do have orgasms. I also find money on the sidewalk." Hardman redefined sexual pleasure to be less goal-oriented and more activity centered. The activity of climbing trees or rubbing her face against someone's hand brought pleasure as opposed to having pleasure centered only in the end result of an orgasm. Thus, the orgasm was released from its pinnacle position and relegated to a position of lesser importance.
Like Hardman, Sue Katz viewed lesbianism as sensual rather than sexual, communicative rather than conquest. In response to the renaming of her widely reprinted article "Smash Phallic Imperialism" by the leftist Liberation News Service (renamed "The Sensuous Woman"), Katz wrote:

For me, coming out meant an end to sex . . . Physical contact and feelings have taken a new liberatory form. And we all call that sensuality . . . . Physicality is now a creative non-institutionalized experience. It is touching and rubbing and cuddling and fondness . . . Its only goal is closeness and pleasure. It does not exist for the Big Orgasm. It exists for feeling nice. Our sexuality may or may not include genital experience. . . . The sensuality I feel has transformed my politics, has solved the contradiction between my mind and my body because the energies for our feminist revolution are the same as the energies of our love for women.\textsuperscript{43}

Lesbianism became "sanitized" so as to be palatable to the rest of the women's movement.

The cleansing of lesbianism can also be seen in the content and language of lesbian personal ads. The \textit{Gay Community News (GCN)} (Boston, Massachusetts), a political paper inspired by the emergence of the gay liberation movement, began to run lesbian ads from its inception in 1973.\textsuperscript{44} The majority of the ads from 1973 to 1980 were non-sexual in content rather than coded or explicitly sexual. Lesbians tended to express their desires primarily through terms such as 'in search of' "companionship" and/or a "caring relationship" with other women, and to describe themselves as "sincere" or "sensual." The following are typical:

\textsuperscript{43} Sue Katz quoted in Echols, 218.
\textsuperscript{44} Gay male personal ads begin earlier, e.g. the mid- to late-1960s in \textit{The Advocate}. 

18
GAY FEMALE FEMINIST
GF (age 18-30) for companionship & a caring relationship with GF (21) to enjoy art, music, sports, books, nature and each other.45

NORTH AND WESTERN MASS.
GWF 24 seeking GWF 25 to 35 yrs old who's intelligent; warm and sincere and looking for a long, permanent relationship. I like music, the outdoors and movies.46

GF seeks other for sensuous romantic times. I am sensuous and straight-forward, easy to get along with. All replies answered.47

Wanted LF romantic, sensuous, sensitive, mature, monogamous, attractive, active, affectionate. Maybe you even live west of Boston and enjoy sailing and skiing! At any rate, a blind date might be fun!48

On the opposite end of the spectrum were a very few women who were up front about what they were looking for and how they described themselves:

45 Gay Community News (GCN), 1:34 (February 16, 1974).
46 Ibid., 2:22 (November 23, 1974).
48 Ibid., 7:13 (October 20, 1979).
Fat, fem. S/M types are people too, some you might enjoy meeting, having sex with and loving too.49

I am a lesbian seeking to escort other Lesbian women, explore your sexual fantasies, sensual massage. Let me model your desire.50

WONDER WOMAN SEEKS
Wonderful women for casual sex and comedic interludes. Tired of men pawing, want women stroking instead.51

LESIANS ONLY
Feminist (M) lesbian yearns to exercise her orability, would like to meet a gay female for a truly warm lasting relationship.52

Woman tender dove-like moans at 3:00 AM, ceaseless polishing hidden priceless "mother of pearl" - agony, ecstasy, crashing of thighs -. . . Gentle, lovelorn woman 27 needs to reach out & feel - into feminine ladies - abhors "butch-bitch" syndrome. Intelligent, conversationalist, into the arts, people, dinner & wine. Superficially "Bon Vivant" - incurable romantic underneath, values "mental" & "social" companion-ship.53

49 Ibid., 2:14 (September 28, 1974).
50 Ibid., 3:13 (September 2, 1975).
51 Ibid., 6:6 (August 26-September 2, 1978).
52 Ibid., 3:36 (March 6, 1976).
Out of the 270 lesbian ads placed between 1973 and 1980, only these five women were explicit about their desires, and four were noticeably influenced by lesbian feminism. While they did express their desire for sex, they also used language that is similar to the "sensual" and non-sexual ads and earlier testimonies: "want women stroking instead," "would like to meet a gay female for a truly warm lasting relationship," "sensual massage," and "incurable romantic underneath." The woman who placed the "LESBIANS ONLY" ad can be considered even more of a rebel because she identifies as a feminist and is publicly expressing her sexual desire. No others were equally bold.

Women who fit between these two polarities used a coded language to express their sexual desires:

Accepted my lesbianism very recently. Want intimate friendship with mature woman, 28-34, to satisfy my needs and hers. Must live near. Please send picture.\textsuperscript{54}

GWF 28, would love to meet fem, or sexy appr. GWF for a very warm & affectionate relationship! [italics in original].\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 2:39 (March 22, 1975).
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 5:7 (August 20, 1977).
The phrases "want intimate friendship with mature woman . . . to satisfy my needs and hers," "a very warm & affection relationship," and "would like to meet a mature, aggressive, lesbian" mean more than what they say on the surface. They suggest a deeper sexual desire, a way of expressing the self when the politically correct language and ideology of the period eschewed expression and even discussion of women’s sexual desire for other women.

The most significant point to be made about the contrast between the sexual desire of butch and fem women and the sensual nature of lesbian feminists is that they came to lesbianism at two different points in time. Butch and fem women dominated the definition of the lesbian at a time when there was no homosexual political movement and no political rhetoric or feminist analysis available to counter their oppressed place in society. Many women who came to claim a butch or fem identity had feelings of love and sexual desire for other women and identified this as a natural progression of the self. Baby butches and young fems then found the lesbian community and learned to construct their identity to fit the specifications set for community survival.\(^5\) In this way they also engaged in what

\(^{56}\) (Ibid., 3:20 (November 15, 1975)).

Kennedy and Davis term "prepolitical resistance." Lesbian feminism, also a socially constructed identity, grew out of gay liberation, the New Left, and the women's movement and was thus rooted in politics. The political atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s provided a climate for lesbian feminists to formulate rhetoric and analyses of their oppression as women. Their form of resistance was to connect their political analyses to an identity that threatened heterosexuality: lesbianism. They critiqued coercive heterosexuality, calling attention to the role that sexual violence and prescribed gender roles played in sustaining patriarchy, and they sought a new more egalitarian sexuality. Looking at the differences in identity formation between butch and fem women and lesbian feminism lends credence to the idea that lesbianism is socially constructed.

The recasting of the "public lesbian" by lesbian feminism was not only sexual to political, but also encompassed physical appearance. As butch-fem identities were cast away and seen as oppressive, so too were distinctive clothing differences -- "masculine" and "feminine" -- between women. The second wave of feminism redefined the role of clothing in the life of the public lesbian from functioning as an expression of sexual desire, a means of organizing the community, and a form of resistance, to functionality and resistance against traditional standards of femininity. The attire, or uniform rather, of lesbian feminism was jeans, flannel shirts or t-shirts, and work boots. Many feminists donned this style and rejected traditional feminine clothing because traditional clothing was physically constricting and allowed for objectification by men. These feminists also wanted pockets in their pants and shirts to carry their belongings on their person and not in a purse, and eschewed unhealthy and uncomfortable high heels in favor of sturdy and

58 Kennedy and Davis, 390 n. 3.
comfortable work boots to escape potential attackers. Not to mention that they were more durable and cheaper. These clothes, once worn mainly by men and butches, were now the required attire of all lesbians in the movement. The uniform was justified because it was functional and comfortable.\textsuperscript{59}

The goal of many lesbian feminists was to appear strong and self-sufficient, but not masculine.\textsuperscript{60} In its September 30, 1970 issue, \textit{oob} did a two page layout describing Amelia Appletree's need to "free her[self] from the chains of fashion and create a look of today."\textsuperscript{61} The first photo is of Amelia in her pre-feminist clothing posing in her Oscar de La Renta frock, of the finest ebony cashmere with a white silk collar, with a Spanish flamenco hat (imported from Paris), wearing fifteenth century Italian Renaissance jewels, and Gucci boots. With the help of radical feminism, Amelia Appletree became Amelia X. The caption read:

Now that you've found the truth, Amelia X, you trashed your artsy-cutesy costume and out-fitted in right-on bomb throwing clothes. No more made up you. The real male-society hating you emerges. Your wrinkled army surplus levis give you new karate kick freedom. Showcase pockets on your Uncle Sam shirt -- a haven for those little can't-do-without things. That far out (ripped-off) hand woven headband permits clear vision of advancing pigs. Your bare feet tingle with the sensations of the city streets. Your outta sight buttons hardly begin to express the real you, but you know . . . you put the \textit{rev} in revolution!" (italics in original).\textsuperscript{62}

While \textit{oob}'s layout was comical and satirical, Patricia Fullerton was more serious in her discussion of clothes. "We're being looked at by other gay girls, (how nice!)," she wrote, "and we seem to want to dress the role, to belong, to be a part of something. Think how

\textsuperscript{60} Faderman, 231.
\textsuperscript{61} Unsigned, Untitled, in \textit{oob} 1:2 (September 30, 1970), 8.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 9.
we all wear the delightfully comfortable [sic] pants, at all Gay functions. This is our uniform, our Badge of Glory." 63 As lesbian feminists were adopting masculine clothing, they were shunning feminine clothing and the women in them. Irene, a self-identified fem, remembers walking into a feminist group in the 1970s in the clothes that made her feel comfortable and becoming angry. "I was very uncomfortable and so was the group. Not only did they treat me as if I couldn't possibly be intelligent, they actually asked me to alter the way I dressed. It didn't work out." 64 The "Badge of Glory" became more like a police badge that kept everyone and everything in order.

In describing their physical appearance, lesbian feminists did so using androgynous, not masculine, rhetoric despite the fact that their clothes were traditional men's clothes. This suggests that lesbian feminism appropriated butch/masculine clothing and a form of butch resistance (women wearing men's attire), but not the complexities of sexual desire that went along with it. 65 Lesbian feminists did so for some of the same reasons butch women had decades earlier: such clothing provided freedom of movement and gave women power and modes of resistance to counter the oppressiveness of patriarchal society. Although butch lesbians applied this tactic first they were not given credit for their acts of resistance because as working-class women they were not seen as political because, according to lesbian feminists, they reinforced heterosexuality through role playing. Middle-class lesbians could wear men's clothing; but when working-class

65 Joan Nestle takes issue with this idea and says that lesbian feminists were not like butches because butches wore their best clothes when they went out -- suits or chinos with a shirt pressed and starched to the point of breaking, and polished shoes -- whereas lesbian feminist wore dungarees, t-shirts, and work boots. While I agree that the articles of clothing differed between the two groups, they were similar in that they both wore traditionally men's clothing (personal interview).
lesbians did the same, they were being male identified. The rejection of butch and fem identities by lesbian feminists was not only a gender issue, but also a class issue.

With all the "real" lesbians, along with many straight women, now wearing men's clothing and looking the same, butch and fem lesbians were often seen as "painfully archaic." Candi McGonagle, in a letter to the editor of Maiden Voyage (DOB-Boston) regarding the discussion of the placing of a butch-fem couple on the cover of the August 1970 issue, wrote, "Many heterosexual women [and lesbians] have short hair, wear tailored clothes, appear everywhere in pants. Neckties are part of today's 'Mod' fashion scene. Yet, at one time, these things marked a woman 'butch' without question. The term butch as a physical connotation is no longer accurate, due to the liberation of women in terms of fashion and comfort." Now that most women were wearing men's attire, butch women were less identifiable, and gender differentiated clothing styles were becoming a thing of the past. The "'Mod' fashion scene" took some of the pressure off of butches by allowing them, in a sense, to blend in with 'normal' women, an option once only available for fems, and gave more freedom to fem women to wear comfortable, less restricting clothing. By adopting a masculine/unisex uniform, lesbian feminism highlighted masculinity and deemphasized femininity, whereas in the butch-fem relationship both genders were given equal importance.

67 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

OLD WORLD BUTCH AND FEM IN THE NEW WORLD OF LESBIAN POLITICS

As we have seen, "butch" characteristics existed in the white, middle-class, lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s, although in altered form. But what about the old time butch and fem women? Just how "archaic" were the traditional butch and fem women in the 1970s? Old time butch and fem women existed in a community separate from but sometimes touched by lesbian feminism. Although not much research has been done on butch and fem women in the 1970s, there are avenues to be explored: surveys, personal ads, and their own words.

Four surveys from the 1970s focus on the "butch-femme question," although they vary in method and representation. The first was a "survey of gay women by gay women" published in Sisters in the spring of 1973. To my knowledge this was the first survey focusing specifically on the "butch-femme question." Sharon Crase distributed 300 questionnaires to those on the Sisters mailing list, participants in San Francisco-DOB meetings, and at local bars. On the questionnaire "several questions were asked," wrote Crase, "but the purpose of the survey was to determine the Lesbians who are still into role

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68 Joan Nestle, interview. Nestle does not use the term "old world" in a demeaning way, but as a way to distinguish between 1950s butches and Dems and contemporary butches and Dems.
69 Joan Nestle and Debra Edel, founders of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City, started the Archives in the early 1970s as way of bringing together pre-movement butches and Dems at a time when their lives and their very existence was being criticized (personal interview with Joan Nestle).
70 Taken from the title of the article, "The Butch-Femme Question," by Rita Laporte in The Ladder 15 (June-July 1971).
playing. It was my hypothesis that role playing (i.e. butch-femme) is a phenomena [sic] of the past; that today's Lesbians who are under 40, are more 'themselves' than the previous generations." Skeptical whether lesbians would be truthful about their actions on this survey, Crase regards the survey as "one of 'conscious attitude.'" Since the survey was geared towards one thing -- "role playing" -- "the most important question," according to Crase, was:

Do you consider yourself:

a) Butch
b) Femme
c) Neither
d) Both
e) Other (specify)

Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 94 were returned; 44 of those were from the Bay Area (San Francisco and vicinity) and 50 were from outside the Bay Area. Here are the results:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bay Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butch</td>
<td>1 (age 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femme</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 - &quot;woman&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 - &quot;me&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 - &quot;alive and well&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 - &quot;human being&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
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</table>


Crase's interpretation is worth repeating: "My hypothesis was correct. Role playing is almost a thing of the past. Out of ninety-four respondents, only five women considered themselves 'butch' and five considered themselves 'femme.' That leaves eighty-four women who considered themselves removed from role playing." Assuming that her interpretation was correct, just over 10% of the respondents identified in gendered terms. Although 10% is a distinct minority, it is not so small as to conclude that "role playing is almost a thing of the past." If 10% is insignificant, then the 10% of the population that is homosexual in the U.S. is also insignificant. However, Crase's data can be interpreted differently.
Crase interpreted the "both" category as a rejection of butch and fem identities. In other words, she assumed that the respondents were indicating that they possess masculine and feminine qualities. But if one interprets the "both" category as an embracing of both butch and fem identities -- from the wording of the question, it appears she is asking about identities not personal characteristics -- then her conclusion ignores another 16 respondents who identified in gendered terms. If the percentage is adjusted for this category, a total of almost 28% of the respondents identified in gendered terms. The adjusted result is interesting not only because a significant number of lesbians identified in gendered terms at a high point of lesbian feminist visibility, but also for what it suggests about butch and fem identities and DOB. DOB women vocally eschewed "role playing" -- as the "hypothesis" of this survey suggests, Crase being a member of DOB herself -- but their actions are called into question by this survey. Crase was aware of this contradiction, given her description of this survey as "one of 'conscious attitude.'"

In 1979, three more surveys on lesbians appeared: two 'informal surveys' in Lesbian Tide and one more 'formal,' scientific study published as The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak about Sexual Experiences and Lifestyles by Karla Jay and Allen Young. In their first survey, Jeanne Cordova, Penny Grenoble, Sharon McDonald, and Paula Facine set out to interview informally a cross-section of lesbians in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego because they "wanted to know about their [lesbians'] experience with roles in their lives: were roles still operating, were there any significant changes in the way they see roles affecting their relationships, what the traditionally butch/femme roles mean to them [sic]." Since this survey was done

72 Jeanne Cordova, "Are Roles Really Dead?" in The Lesbian Tide 9:1 (July/August 1979), 4-6.
through interviews, quantitative data is not available. However, the authors were able to see patterns of responses emerge out of which they classified the interviewees into three categories: "old gay (women who are not feminists), radical lesbian feminists (who were staunch feminists before coming out), and a third group of mixed background."

When asked if roles were good or bad, old gay women saw roles as stabilizing in a relationship and radical lesbian feminists gave them a thumbs down. One lesbian feminist is quoted as saying:

Because most of us have put our energies into expanding our choices and opportunities as women, we aren't about to get into femme roles. And with all of our basic contempt for men's violence, noisiness, brutality and incompetence, the worst insult is to be called male-identified or butch... We tend to dress androgynously, combining the comfort of "men's" clothes with the diversity of color and style available in "women's" clothes.

This attitude is not surprising, nor is a quote from an "old world" lesbian:

Roles are directly related to the longevity of a relationship, and are necessary to keep a good relationship going. When roles are undefined there tends to be psychic, emotional and sexual confusion, which results in a confused relationship. And when you have confusion operating as a basic premise in a relationship... you're going to break up.

The language used by each of these respondents is characteristic of the different definitions of lesbianism. The lesbian feminist used a language of politics, of power, an analysis of gender relations that sees butch behavior as male-identified and related to "violence, noisiness, brutality and incompetence." The old world lesbian's focus on roles is personal, a way of organizing her personal life, keeping together a relationship that is hard enough in a society that stigmatizes love between two women. Butch and fem women did not have the language or luxury of feminist analysis to apply to their lives, and lesbian feminists rejected the structure of an organized, localized community from which they might have been able to draw support.
Along with the published results of the survey, the authors included a short questionnaire for readers to answer. Unfortunately, the authors do not provide the number of questionnaires returned so a precise quantitative analysis is impossible. However, they do give general quantities for some of the questions. Here are the results:73

* All respondents agreed that roles were not dead in the old gay community, but divided on the question of roles in the lesbian feminist community.
* Two-thirds thought that there were no roles in their own relationships, and almost all answered no to the question of whether they identified as butch or fem.
* The majority equated butchness with maleness, and saw fem women as straight identified.
* A minority thought butch and fem was only the woman's "appearance."
* Fifty percent believed that roles were "not good" and the other 50% felt that roles were "all right for others" or "OK if they're not oppressive."

The results support the fact that two parallel worlds existed and that to a certain extent roles were a part of the lesbian feminist community, as they had been in the DOB community almost a decade earlier, despite the zeal to eliminate these "oppressive" qualities. If two-thirds of the respondents felt there were no roles in their relationships, that means that one-third (33%) did, even though "almost all answered no to the question of whether they identified as butch or fem." Butch and fem characteristics existed even if butch and fem identities did not. Despite the benefits of feminist analysis (or because of feminist analysis), many people still equated butchness with maleness and femness with passing as straight. If lesbian feminists could see two women together as radical and having political implications, why could they not see butch and fem women as two

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women together and equally, if not more, radical? By usurping a male role with a female body, butches were more of a threat to men's masculinity than an androgynous female.

The last survey was published as The Gay Report. In the mid to late 1970s, Jay and Young took a survey of the lesbian and gay community and published their findings.\textsuperscript{74} One of the lesbian questions dealt with "role-playing" and asked, "How often do you 'role-play' (butch/femme, masculine/feminine, husband/wife, dominant/submissive) in your relationship?" The 962 respondents gave these results.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} The average age of the lesbian respondents was 29.7 years old, 82% were white/Caucasian, with 36% having an income under $5000 and 29% earning between $5000 and $99999 (The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak About Sexual Experiences and Lifestyles [New York: Summit Books, 1979], appendix). The questionnaires were printed in numerous lesbian and gay magazines and newspapers, were mailed to people on purchased mailing lists (e.g. National Gay Task Force), were sent to lesbian and gay groups listed in resource directories (e.g. Gayellow Pages), were available at lesbian and gay community centers and hang outs, and people were informed by word of mouth. For further information about the questionnaires, see The Gay Report, pp. 6-11.

\textsuperscript{75} Jay and Young, The Gay Report, 319.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sexually</th>
<th>Other than sexually</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>always</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very frequently</td>
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</tr>
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<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>59%</td>
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</tr>
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</table>


These figures suggest that a small, but significant, number of women were at least "somewhat frequently" into "role-playing" - 17% sexually and 9.5% other than sexually. Although 59% described "never" "role-playing," 41% did at some point in their lives. This larger and more scientific survey supports the other three more informal ones by indicating that butch and fem identities, or "role-playing," co-existed along with and even within lesbian feminism and rejects the idea that butch and fem identities were relics of the past.  

But the co-existence of old time butches and fems and lesbian feminists was not necessarily a welcomed one, at least on the part of some lesbians. Lesbian personal ads

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76 The term "role playing" used in the surveys to describe butch and fem relationships and identities is indicative of a middle-class lesbian bias against such relationships and identities. Many old time women who participated in butch-fem relationships or identified as butch or fem, did not see themselves playing a "role," but expressing themselves in gendered terms. See Nestle quote on page 2.
attest to this. Apart from being seen as archaic, butch women were outright rejected in some personal ads. The rejection took various forms: "not into roles," "no masculine women," "no butch dykes," or "abhors 'butch-bitch' syndrome." Ironically, "feminine appearing" women were sought after by some women and some women even made "femininity a must" while others sought "discretion."

GF, sensual, athletic, humanist, water ski instr. into touch, fitness, health, food, scuba, tennis, pool, crafts. Enjoy cantoring bareback, own big Honda, wkngr on pilot lic., not into roles or bullshit. I need gentle, playful interesting friends, not necessarily sex.77

GWF 38-55
I am a quiet, single, educ mid age GWF, fairly new to G experience, skiing GWF 38-55. I enjoy music, nature, etc. My height is ave. weight just about rite, appear attrac. No masculine or married GWFs.78

GOTTA BE A SPECIAL LADY
GWF 23, prof, loving, deep thinker w/sense of humor seeks same for lasting relationship. Into nature, music, books, dining, talking, sharing. Not into drugs, lotta drink, games, butch dykes.79

77 GCN, 3:49 (June 5, 1976).
78 Ibid., 7:21 (December 15, 79).
79 Ibid., 7:47 (June 21, 1980).
. . . Gentle, lovelorn woman 27 needs to reach out & feel -- into feminine ladies -- abhors "butch-bitch" syndrome. 80

GWF, young, sincere. Must be into music and long term rel. Femininity a must. 81

PROFESSIONAL WOMAN, BOSTON
Attractive, feminine, well-groomed, has good taste, class, intelligent, educated, sense of humor, sincere. Strong character, emotional depth, gentle, loving personality. Seeks friendship and love with woman of similar qualities. Age, nationality, color un-important. Discretion necessary. . . . Typical masculine, four-letter-word singing lesbians stay away. 82

These ads not only reject relationships based on difference, but emphasize relationships based on sameness: "GWF . . . seeking GWF," "GWF . . . seeks same," and "Professional woman . . . seeks friendship and love with woman of similar qualities." This emphasis on sameness dominates the personal ads of the 1970s. There was even one ad of a fem seeking another fem.

GWF 33 attr intel fem seeks similar for friendship and pos rel. All sincere replies answered. 83

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80 Ibid., 4:18 (October 30, 1976).
81 Ibid., 2:52 (June 21, 1975).
82 Ibid., 3:1 (June 28, 1975).
83 Ibid., 5:48 (June 17, 1978). In some of the ads it was difficult to discern between the abbreviation of feminine, "fem," and "fem" as an identity. Sometimes context indicated which meaning was meant or the
Personal ads, in conjunction with lesbian feminist rhetoric, highlight the complexities of lesbian identities and politics in the 1970s. Some women rejected butch women in personal ads at the same time as they were usurping a form of butch resistance, namely donning masculine clothing; they were questioning femininity but yet requiring it. Did lesbians of the 1970s really give up "role playing" or did they just transform it to suit their own needs and the societal conditions of the time?

Lesbian feminism had a tremendous impact in shaping the image of 'the lesbian' in the 1970s and beyond. But what effect did it have on "old time" butch and fem women? Fortunately, butch and fem voices were not completely silenced in the early 1970s. Some lesbian publications ran articles acknowledging the existence of butch and fem women and discussed them as positive forces for change. Surprisingly, The Ladder published a positive article about butch and fem women, but it took 15 years for it to happen.84 Although Rita Laporte in "The Butch-Femme Question" agreed with lesbian feminists that butch and fem reinforced gender roles, she also suggested that butch and fem women broke traditional gender roles and in doing so allowed women to express their true selves. Laporte believed that for one to get a true understanding of butch and fem relationships and identities, one needed to explore the experiences of these women and not just judge them based upon their appearance.

Another lesbian publication, Echo of Sappho (by Sisters for Liberation in New York City), carried an article entitled "How Important is Role-playing to the Women Just

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84 Rita Laporte, "The Butch-Femme Question."
'Coming Out'? This unsigned article validated butch and fem women and gave them credit for advancing the lesbian cause:

Role-playing has a long history. These women were our pioneers of gay rights. They had the courage to politically and socially and economically defy the existing standards of the time when the consequences were far worse. They were of their day, what gay-marches are today. If it were not for the women who rebelled against society wearing men's clothing years ago, we would not be enjoying the beginnings of gay-rights today.85

Another unsigned validation came a year later in the same publication:

There seems to be a lot of conversation going on about, all because of a new breed of female homosexuals have arisen because of the Women's Liberation Movement. The position being taken by older members of this choice sect [butches and Dems] is that of doubt and confusion. This should not be. After all, the Butch is and always will be, even after the present fad is gone. Because we all know in our hearts that the Butch is the real front line fighter...86

At the same time that some lesbians were respecting butch and fem women, butch and fem women were attempting to add their analysis of gender to the public discourse. One woman did so by criticizing "political lesbians." She writes, "There are women who APPE [sic] to be lesbians, with mannish clothes and boyish haircuts, who are actually heterosexual women with fantasies of lesbianism."87 In the mind of this lesbian, lesbian feminists were not real lesbians, but women who were imitating lesbians.

The fantasy description is extended in another article by Katz (not the same Katz mentioned earlier), a member of the Media Collective in Cambridge, Massachusetts, entitled "Macho and Monogamy." She wrote:

85 Unsigned, "How Important is Role-playing to the Woman Just 'Coming Out?'" in Echo of Sappho 1:2 (August/September, 1972), 7.
87 Unsigned, Untitled, in Echo of Sappho 1:2 (August-September 1972), 7.
When the women's movement first started and a lot of us rejected traditional notions -- oppressive notions -- of what it meant to be a woman, of what was permissible female behavior, we were left with no identity. Like almost all of the ways we used to act just wouldn't do in the context of a life as a revolutionary feminist. So we took off on this incredible fantasy and made up an idea of what the 'new woman' would be and proceeded to almost destroy ourselves and each other trying to live up to our projection right now, immediately, here in the midst of the monster.  

Katz continues her analysis of lesbian feminism by stating that men and women cannot overcome their masculine and feminine conditioning overnight. Years of oppression is going to take years to undo. Offering an alternative approach to eradicating women's oppression, Katz does not worry about macho in women, in fact she encourages it. "I feel the thing we have to worry about the most is how we are going to get out of the behavior and gestures of femininity; how are we going to stop seeing ourselves as passive. Women who are trying to be strong and tough have a rough time of it, because we don't have any forms to be that in."  

Masculinity in itself is not inherently bad, contends Katz, but how it is applied is the problem.

A positive discussion of butch and fem did take place in some lesbian publications, and some butch and fem women even wrote "coming out" letters to the editor and shared their experiences of being deemed abnormal by their lesbian sisters at the same time these sisters were calling for women's freedom. In essence, butch and fem lesbians had to defend their very existence. In the May 1974 edition of Sisters (San Francisco DOB), Michael Lyn wrote, "I'm still into it [butch-fem life]. It feels right to me and that's what I consider to be where its at. I like me, I like being Gay, I like being Butch."  

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89 Ibid.
month later, wrote, "... I would like to say that there are indeed happy butch-femme relationships still in existence, and my lover and I, along with many friends, are still around to prove it."\(^{91}\)

Butch and fem voices can also be found in Dolores Klaich's book, *Woman Plus Woman*. In response to a survey about lesbianism, two women identified themselves in gendered terms. Both highlight the perceived need to explain their identity.\(^{92}\) The first one wrote, "My partner and I have a sort of butch-femme relationship in the sense that I like to do the heavy labor around the house, whereas she like the other things -- i.e., cooking, etc. But, since we both work, I sometimes do the cooking, etc."\(^{93}\) The other respondent wrote, "It definitely exists, but I feel it exists less and less with the younger lesbians than it did in years past. Personally, I could never last in a fifty-fifty relationship -- I am femme and I need someone butch. ..."\(^{94}\) No matter how hard lesbian feminists tried to eradicate relationships based upon gender differentiation or suppress the voices of old time butch and fem women by keeping them out of national publications, butch and fem women adapted to the situation, as they always had, and found their voices on the local level.

While some butch and fem women did raise their voices by writing letters to the editor, many must have been silenced. But another way to catch the words of butch and

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\(^{91}\) Jeannie, "To the Editors of 'Sisters'...," in *Sisters* 5:6 (June 1974), 9.

\(^{92}\) The nine responses listed are just a sampling. Dolores Klaich does not indicate how many questionnaires were distributed, nor where they were distributed (although she does indicate it was national in scope), nor how many people responded. The three lesbian women who conducted the survey "were curious about the lives of other lesbians as the public in general is curious about the lives of all lesbians." She also notes that "the questionnaire and the responses are not presented as scientifically or statistically valid; but from a humanistic point of view they are of value." Dolores Klaich, *Woman Plus Woman* (Tallahassee, Florida: Naiad Press, 1989), 221.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 242.

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
fem women is to read their personal ads. Like the lesbians discussed earlier, butches and fems used both succinct and ambiguous language to identify themselves.

Blk aggressive woman looking for fem woman for a relationship. Gay women only in Lynn and Boston area.95

GAY BLACK FEMALE --HELP!
In Boston 1 yr. Met very untogether people. I'd favor friendship with together studs, fems, or cpls. Also seek fem for meaningful rel.96

GWF 40, honest, warm, professional, seeks North Shore friend, 30-50. I like music, conversation, beaches and quietly butch women.97

It is not known if the women placing these ads identified as butches or fems since they use the generic language of "GBF" or "woman." But what these ads do tell is that butch and fem women were the objects of desire by some women. Other women were precise about their personal identities:

29 Yr WF w/6 yr. son wants GWF age 30 to 40. I'm butch want fem, no drug users, likes dancing, dining out, sincere.98

96 Ibid., 1:42 (April 13, 1974).
97 Ibid., 7:44 (May 31, 1980).
98 Ibid., 3:52 (June 26, 76).
DO YOU FIT THESE DESCRIPTIONS?
GF not taller than 5'3", nice looks, firm 38 bust line or more, 30 to 40 years, 130 to 160 lbs. Single, no children, but like children. No heavy drinkers or drug users. Compatible with Taurus, affectionate, intellectual, employed. I'm butch want fem. I'm Taurus, 30, lonely.

Another way to understand shifts in lesbian identities across time is to explore the categories employed in personal ads. From the period of June 1973 to July 1980, 270 different lesbian personal ads appeared in the GCN. Of these 270 ads, most women (78%) did not give any economic indicator while 23% indicated that they were either educated or a professional; 59% noted their race, with the majority being white (95%), 4% Black, and one advertiser, .6%, Hispanic. Over two-thirds of the lesbians (69%) mentioned their ages with 5% in their teens, 48% in their 20s, 31% in their 30s, 12% in their 40s, 4% in their 50s, and .5% (one ad) in her 60s. In these 270 ads, ten different ways of conceptualizing identity emerge:

gay female 75%
female 11%
lesbian 6%
lesbian feminist 3%
butch 2%
feminine 2%
feminist .7%
fem .3%

lesbian femme .3%
dyke .3%

It is striking that only 5% identified in gendered terms (butch, feminine, fem, lesbian femme).\footnote{It is important to remember that this is a really small sample of the personal ads that existed in the 1970s (and in the 1980s) and should not be taken as representative of the nation as a whole. The use of lesbian personal ads to determine identity is a new concept and my data might raise more questions than can be answered at the moment. It is my hope that other scholars will pick up where I have left off.} The number might be low because not many lesbians identified in gendered terms any longer, thereby suggesting that lesbian feminism had succeeded in eradicating role-playing among most lesbians. However, this is questionable considering that the voices and surveys of butch and fem women heard earlier indicate that an old time world still existed.\footnote{See Kennedy and Davis.} Perhaps butch and fem women did not place ads. Their traditional means of finding each other were by going to a bar, not placing an ad in a gay and lesbian newspaper. Since gay and lesbian newspapers were a result of gay liberation and the women's movement and butch and fem women felt ostracized from both, maybe the newspapers did not play a significant role in their lives.\footnote{GCN, 2:6 (August 3, 1974).} Finally, before the women's movement butch and fem women did not identify as lesbians, but as gay females or gay women.\footnote{It is important to remember that this is a really small sample of the personal ads that existed in the 1970s (and in the 1980s) and should not be taken as representative of the nation as a whole. The use of lesbian personal ads to determine identity is a new concept and my data might raise more questions than can be answered at the moment. It is my hope that other scholars will pick up where I have left off.} So perhaps butch and fem women account for some of the 75% of ads that identified as gay women. One personal ad, reading "GWF, 24 YRS. OLD Providence area, wants to meet other fems/butches," suggests that "gay female" may have been a generic term that included butches and fems.

These numbers also suggest that not many women used the term "lesbian" in the 1970s (only 10% used "lesbian", "lesbian feminist", "lesbian femme"). What may also be surprising is the small number of self-identified lesbian feminists -- only 3% -- considering
that lesbian feminists were now the "public lesbian." This may be because lesbian feminism was, overall, a minority contingent in the larger women's movement. While lesbian feminists were the most vocal proponents of lesbian rights and liberation, their radicalness and strict propriety may have alienated women who might otherwise have supported their causes. Second, in placing a personal ad a lesbian is announcing her sexual desires (either implicitly or explicitly) and defining herself sexually. A sexual definition of the self, or even the expression of sexual desire, was not supported by some strands of lesbian feminism. Thus, the ideology of feminism may have prevented women from placing personal ads.

Looking at personal ads confirms the existence of two lesbian worlds, both "public" but in different ways. Lesbian feminism was public through political analysis and action, whereas women who identified in gendered terms were more public in the sexual realm. What made both generations of lesbians public was their decision to stand out, to defy the norms of the day. Butches did it through their masculine dress and their resulting expression of sexual desire for fems, fems stood out by walking arm in arm with butches, and lesbian feminists defied the norm by rejecting femininity. When the two worlds came together, their world views sometimes clashed. A personal story printed in *The Lesbian Tide* in 1979, illustrates this point. Christine, a "femme," told of attending a radical lesbian feminist conference in 1978. The most fascinating thing for Christine was that "there didn't seem to be any femmes! Everyone looked butch! [E]veryone was dressed in the butch uniform: boots, jeans, men's shirt or t-shirt, short hair, and aggressive behavior, constantly interrupting each other."103 One woman, according to Christine, purposely

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103 Jeanne Cordova, "In the Board Room & the Bedroom," in *The Lesbian Tide* 9:1 (July/August 1979), 4.
dressed in "Chic Dyke' so she could pass and be heard when she got up to speak. The woman said that she usually wore earrings but had purposely left them at home."\textsuperscript{104} By the late 1970s, the "unisex"/"butch uniform" seemed to be central to lesbian feminist identity. If one did not wear the uniform, one was not taken seriously. Christine wrote,

I don't think the butch uniform is sexist itself, what's sexist is the attitude that comes out toward femmes in these environments. My lover Judy and I had the same job during that conference. She came in her butch uniform and got an enormous amount of respect, and was not challenged very much in what she said. But when I spoke, the atmosphere of the group changed. I was wearing white women's pants and a yellow women's t-shirt. When I spoke, they weren't listening. They didn't hear me, and that made me angry.\textsuperscript{105}

Christine had encountered this attitude also in her own lesbian community and she likened it to heterosexual sexism. "The only difference is that we lesbians talk about equality a lot, but in reality, there is no equality."\textsuperscript{106} To cope with this, Christine started dressing and acting as Judy did. "I wore sloppy or men's clothes and lowered my voice tone, and trained myself to talk differently," wrote Christine, "to state my conclusions first and reasoning and process second."\textsuperscript{107} Christine kept up the changed attitude, but went back to her more comfortable feminine clothing. By the end of the decade, many lesbian feminists not only adopted masculine clothing, but also some adopted a masculine attitude. It appears that "butch" characteristics, but not necessarily identity, had become a permanent part of the modern "lesbian community." In the 1970s, "butch" characteristics crossed class lines, transmuting a working-class phenomenon to both a working-class and a

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 7.
middle-class phenomenon. Thus, lesbian feminism of the late 1970s can be seen as the beginning of a new construction of butch identities.

Lesbian feminism did not give fems the same space it unconsciously did to "butches," read androgynous, women. Christine's story is testimony to that. Instead, fems had to find their own voice in lesbian feminism. They had to take from lesbian feminism what they could and create their own space. That is exactly what Joan Nestle has done. Nestle was one lesbian feminist who talked openly of gendered sexual activity between women. In her classic article entitled "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," originally published in *Heresies* 12, \(^{108}\) Nestle broke the silence around butch and fem women in feminist discourse and celebrated female femininity and masculinity and, through it, demanded a space for fem women. Nestle wrote: "For many years now, I have been trying to figure out how to explain the special nature of butch-femme relationships to Lesbian-Feminists who consider butch-femme a reproduction of heterosexual models. My own roots lie deep in the earth of this Lesbian custom, and what follows is one Lesbian's understanding of her own experience." \(^{109}\) As a continuation of her lesbian feminism from the 1970s, Nestle's personal writings -- describing how fem and butch lesbians made lesbians of the 1950s culturally visible because the dyad was based on the erotic, and how this public display of sexuality angered and frightened many lesbian

\(^{108}\) In her original manuscripts Joan Nestle used the spelling "fem," but the editors of *A Restricted Country* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1987) and *Persistent Desire* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992) told her that her spelling was incorrect and that "femme" was the correct spelling. Nestle uses the "fem" spelling for the same reason that Kennedy and Davis do, see note 1. (Alex Cofield, telephone conversation with Joan Nestle, February 24, 1995).

feminists decades later -- became her political statement. When asked why she wrote "Butch-Femme Relationships" she replied:

> Because, you figure, remember I came out in 1958, I've been active in gay liberation and my own version of women's liberation from 1970, I figure all together that's 20 years and I felt it was time. I had been doing the archival work since 1973 [Lesbian Herstory Archives]. My own personal journey. But I just felt, I had been doing bits and pieces of it, subversive bits and pieces at early conferences on pornography, on prostitution in the 70s. I just felt it was time. I was just tired. I think the rage built up in me so, the sense of betrayal built up in me so that I just said now it's time. I don't know why it was 1981. About 10 years of the 70s was enough. Ten years of my building a lesbian feminist movement, I was never a leader, no, I served the coffee, I marched in every picket line in every demonstration for gay rights, for women's rights. I was never a leader though. I just felt, I have mined lesbian feminism for everything it could give me. And one of the most important things it gave me was the personal is political, that my life was important. I was angry.110

Nestle channeled that anger and energy into numerous essays and public speaking engagements. At times she was well received and at others she was publicly shunned. But she kept forging forward, as fems always have had to do, but now with a new twist. Before the movement, fems talked about sex with other fems and maybe with a baby butch; but a generation later, Nestle was writing, protesting, and screaming loudly the pleasures of sexual expression. The irony is that lesbian feminism gave Nestle the tools to liberate herself from the confines of lesbian feminism. She added a new twist to the feminist phrase, "the personal is political."

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110 Nestle, interview.
CHAPTER 4

THE SEX WARS: THE NEW FEM AND BUTCH LESBIANS

The collision of these two worlds in the late-1970s was like the beginning of a volcanic eruption; a little rumbling here and there with some small particles bursting forth later resulting in a full blown explosion that polarized the lesbian community. But the participants in this collision were not only old time butch and fem women and lesbian feminists, but lesbian feminists embracing old time butch and fem sexuality versus traditional lesbian feminists. This conflict in the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s has come to be known in lesbian history as the "sex wars."

The sex wars focused on a disagreement about the nature of sexuality. Can sex be pleasurable or is sex dangerous? What is politically acceptable sexuality? These questions were brought to the front lines in the late 1970s by the "sex radicals" who thought what they denounced as the "vanilla sex" rhetoric, or sensuality, of the 1970s was sexually limiting by rejecting sexual desire and sexual exploration. In times past, feminists have focused on women's sexuality, but only in relation to men: heterosexuality, rape, abuse, and pornography, at the expense of analyzing women's own sexual desires. Some lesbian feminists even went so far as to say that a woman who 'wants' another woman was objectifying her, and this was oppressive because this was one way that men oppressed

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111 I follow Joan Nestle in placing "fem" before "butch" when talking about the new dyad in the 1980s. In her introduction to *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, she wrote: "I subtitled this anthology 'A Femme-Butch Reader' to herald this new voice in identity politics and break the traditional rhythms of the phrase and image. Femmes are the Lavender Menace within our community" (18).
women. The full eruption occurred at the 1982 Barnard College Conference "The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality." The main result of the conference was a long awaited and much needed discussion about female and lesbian sexuality.112

The sex wars polarized the lesbian community. This can best be seen by juxtaposing the long-standing radical feminist publication off our backs with the newly established "pro-sex" feminist publication On Our Backs.113 A dialogue about what was permissible sexual activity took place within and between these two publications, as the titles suggest. This large debate sparked a discussion about role-playing and butch-fem identities that led to a resurgence of butch and fem women, but in a new mold.114 Many of the new fems and butches were greatly influenced by the politics of the women's movement; hence, these women reconstructed the butch-fem dyad to meet the social conditions of lesbians in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The debate about feminist sexual morality in the lesbian community was polarized with the pro-sex lesbians in one corner and "anti-sex" lesbians in the other. Anti-sex lesbians, lesbians who identify with a lesbian feminist community that rejects male-dominated heterosexual sex, argue "that sexuality in a male-dominant society involves danger -- that is, that sexual practices perpetuate violence against women."115 Practices

113 The sex wars also affected the non-lesbian feminist community, but for my purposes I will be focusing on the lesbian communities involved in the debate.
114 After speaking with a colleague, Tei Street (Spring 1995), she informed me that contemporary terms that black lesbians in Atlanta, Georgia use for butch and fem are actually "stud" and "bitch." She also informed me that terms like "butchy-femme" et al., are not used in her community.
such as S/M, fem-butch, role-playing, and pornography were seen as validating patriarchy by allowing one person to have power over another. The pro-sex lesbians/sex radicals, "tend to be . . . lesbian feminists who support[ed] any sort of consensual sexuality that brings the participants pleasure" and who felt that women's freedom included freedom of sexual activity: S/M, fem-butch, role-playing, dominance and submission, bondage and discipline. For the sex radicals, "the key feature of sexuality is the potentially liberating aspects of the exchange of pleasure between consenting partners." Thus, the war over sex: was it primarily pleasure or danger?

The debate, no matter what side one was on or if one was in the middle, affected many women's lives. Madeline Davis, a scholar and self-identified fem who came out in 1963, was one of the many women who actively participated in the debate. When asked what effect the sex wars had on her life she replied, "[the sex wars] strengthened my identity as a fem, made me go out and look for other fems, to work in coalition with, to be strong with . . . ." The strength that grew out of the debate was not only personal, but communal. "I feel almost grateful that the sex wars happened," said Davis, "even though it was a terrible time for many of us. But I found a lot of my fem sisters because of that. We absolutely grew in strength and in power and in great love for each other." The sex wars brought back the community that early lesbian feminism hoped was dead.

116 Ibid., 107.
117 "Sex radicals" also included heterosexual women who viewed sexuality and sexual activity the same way as pro-sex lesbians.
118 Ferguson, 106.
119 Madeline Davis, personal interview, Columbus, Ohio, November 13, 1995.
120 Ibid.
The sex wars not only allowed old time butch and fem women to resurface, but also allowed lesbian feminists to express their sexual desire. Two lesbians explain this transition in their personal ads:¹²¹

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?
I'm a well-adjusted dyke who's always been correctly lesbian feminist, just on the butchy side of perfect androgyne. My love life was orthodox, fifty/fifty, amazan style. Now I find myself playing all kinds of femme trips in bed. Getting penetrated was always something I could take or leave. Now it's the climax. I've started dressing for sex in beautiful lacy things I wouldn't have been caught dead in before. The sex is deep, emotional, and HOT! Somebody please explain what's going on.¹²²

SEX IN INDIANAPOLIS!
Yes, Virginia, there really is. . . No more settling for tasteful P.C. conversation and tentative belly bumping on alternate harvest moons. Brunhilde with legendary tits heels in bottom's lace one night and laughs, six feet tall, brandish top's leather the next. My limits? Broken skin. Yours? Your choice.¹²³

These advertisers capture the essence of the conflict between lesbian feminist politics and personal desire. They, like many others, did not express their sexual desires in the 1970s.

¹²¹ There were a total of 512 personal ads in OOB between Summer 1984 and July/August 1984 (with the exception of September 1989 to August 1990). Of these ads, 16.4% were educated or a professional; 83.6% gave no economic indicator. Roughly 8% of the advertisers indicated their race or ethnicity: 4% Black, 2% Hispanic, 1% Jewish, 1% Asian, 7% white.
¹²² On Our Backs (OOB), 2:3 (Winter, 1986).
¹²³ Ibid., 2:4 (Spring, 1986).
because it was not "politically correct," but when the times changed and the avenues were there, they began to express themselves. It was the suppression of certain kinds of sexual expression in the 1970s that made them radical, and even extreme, in the 1980s.

Davis' antithesis in this debate was Sheila Jeffreys, a British "orthodox" lesbian feminist. Jeffreys published an article entitled, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then" in the British lesbian feminist journal *Gossip*, in which she said that she was shocked that role-playing was making a comeback in the U.S. She wrote:

> It was a shock to many lesbians in the 1980s to find that some lesbians in the U.S. who could be seen as the leaders of their community, who were involved in recording our history, as novelists and writers on sexuality, were identifying themselves again as butch and femme. They were not only adopting roles cheerfully but reclaiming roleplaying in lesbian history as well as the lesbian present as revolutionary and positive.\(^{125}\)

In this statement, Jeffreys is referring to the work that Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis, Cherrie Moraga, Ester Newton, JoAnn Loulan, Pat Califia, and many others have done around the issues of butch and fem in the past and fem and butch in the present. These women, in the eyes of Jeffreys, are "detractors of feminism."\(^{126}\) They are not only proudly claiming a masculine or feminine identity and replicating heterosexuality, said Jeffreys, but they have more in common with gay liberation (i.e. men) than they do with lesbianism. Holin, a radical lesbian feminist, echoed Jeffreys thoughts. She sees her role as a feminist is to

create a safe space for women, free from the constrictions and restrictions placed upon them by the patriarchy. Women who wear tight short skirts, low-cut blouses and high heels are allowing male

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\(^{124}\) Because of the nature of the debate, I will mention only the two opposing arguments. There are, of course, people who are in the area between and accept and reject different parts of the arguments.  


\(^{126}\) Ibid., 78.
sexual access. And red lips are an erotic male trigger. It's like the
vagina that you can show on the streets. Clothes make you
vulnerable and ultra-femmes appear helpless to me. With rape
statistics up, my advice is: "If you can't run in it, don' wear it."127

Fem and butch women of the 1980s were both working-class, old time butch and
fem women and middle-class lesbian feminists.128 Lesbian personal ads from the pro-sex
feminist magazine On Our Backs illustrate this expansion. Of the 512 lesbian personal ads
placed between the summer of 1984 and fall of 1994 (with the exception of fall 1989
through fall 1990), 16% indicated that they were either educated or held a professional job.

Here are a few examples of those advertisements:

SHOWER ME WITH CRUELTY
Elegant, refined, WASPY, extremely pretty, intelligent, creative, 31,
slender, lustful, lesbian submissive is thirsty for stylish, fetish-erotic
servitude with attractive, exciting; GWF femme fatale, sophisticated
aristocrat, classy well-tailored career woman or tall, muscular bodybuilder.
Torrud, imagiaative domination obeyed.129

127 Parker-Blakk, 51.
128 For contemporary fem and butch voices see, Leslie Newman, ed., The Femme Mystique (Boston:
Alyson Publications, 1995); Minnie Bruce Pratt, S/He (Ithica, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995); Lily Burana,
129 OOB, 2:4 (Spring, 1986).
4-STAR FEMME
Seeks suitable butch. I'm 29, entrepreneur, high I.Q., very pretty, brunette, 5'7", 130 lbs, serious body builder. You're 30's, intelligent, handsome, financially secure, vague dangerous, slender yet muscular, and very strong. Non-smoker, not chemically dependent. We both live life on the edge, push to the limits, laugh at most of it, cry when we must. I love rough sex, light B/D, no pain or humiliation.130

EDUCATED
Professional femme seeks single femmes/couples for fun and hot times. Enjoy oral and sensual massage.131

SENSUOUS ROMANTIC
Artistic, intimate U.C.L.A. woman looking for hot summer romance in San Francisco. I'm 5'7", pleasingly androgynous femme. Let's see the sights, have adventures.132

A generation earlier, no professional or educated lesbian would have publicly expressed her sexual desires in this way, partly because of the conservative climate and the expectations put on middle-class women, but also because there was no avenue for middle-class women, let alone middle-class lesbians, to express publicly their sexual desire and still remain respectable.

Unlike in the 1950s, the new fem-butch dyad was no longer a required identity and a method of organizing the lesbian community. Fem and butch had became optional

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130 Ibid., 2:2 (Fall, 1985).
131 Ibid., 2:3 (Winter, 1986).
132 Ibid., 2:1 (Summer, 1985).
identities for women just coming out. Lesbian feminism had increased lesbian visibility, even garnered some acceptance for lesbians, created many other ways of socializing, and eroticized sameness. While accepting a gendered identity was optional, lesbians in the 1980s had many to choose from. Talking about lesbians after the sex wars, Madeline Davis noted that lesbians are "very diverse now. The range of 0 to 10 is incredibly broad now. There are now gradations of 10.1 and 6.3 and which was not allowed to exist when I first came out. Women are now able to function in the many variable versions of their roles with each other and I see that as only able to be a healthy thing."133 Michele Fisher, in her article "Butch Meets Femme, or Whose Side are You On?" published in Curve (April 1996), agrees and adds, "It seems like a new term is coined every minute."134 The gradations that Davis and Fisher are talking about are extensive. From ads in On Our Backs (1984-1994) the following descriptions emerge:

- butch
- butchy femme
- semi butch
- androgynous butch
- femmy butch
- soft butch
- stud
- stone butch
- feminist butch

- fem
- femme
- ultra femme
- lipstick lesbian femme
- femmy dyke
- semi femme
- girlie girl
- tomboy femme
- femme fatale
- dominant femme
- androgynous femme

Advertisements in the Gay Community News (1980-1988) also show variations from the original butch and fem identities, but with a twist.

133 Davis, interview.
134 Michele Fisher, "Butch Meets Femme, or Whose Side are You On?" in Curve (formerly Denaeve) 6:2 (April 1996), 54.
Femme
lesbian feminist butchy-fem
femme lesbian feminist
lesbian feminist semi-fem
semi-butch lesbian feminist

The ads in GCN are mostly a combination of lesbian feminism and a derivative of butch and fem, whereas in OOB there is not a mention of lesbian feminism. It is also striking that there are more fem derivations than butch derivations.\textsuperscript{135}

Some people also took these new identities less seriously than butches and fems from the 1950s by injecting them with humor. Nancy A. F. Langer does this in her piece entitled "The New Butch/Femme: The 80s Answer to Astrology." In this article she lists ten fem and butch identities accompanied by pictures for each. Her list includes: stone butch, Connecticut femme, old fashioned femme, aggressive femme, liberated femme, old world butch, courtly butch, princess butch, aggressive butch, and clone butch. Langer describes the "Connecticut femme" this way:

Wears underwire bras. Got hooked on tribadism while at Bryn Mawr. Her lovers shop at Brooks Brothers Men's Department. She drives a station wagon, plays with a Prince racquet, and wears turtle necks with teeny, tiny strawberries on them. Favorite sport: lacrosse and playing hard to get.\textsuperscript{136}

The "princess butch" is described this way:

When she travels, packs her pants and starched shirts in tissue paper, just like her mother taught her. Sits with knees apart, yet never holds her crotch. Likes to eat, but worries about her weight. Favorite sex toy: the eager beaver vibrator, because it's both quiet and hygienic, and it travels well.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{135} Please see appendix for a glossary of contemporary lesbian nomenclature.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 31.
These are obviously caricatures of fem and butch identities in the 1980s, but they are also indicative of the playfulness surrounding fem and butch for some people. It is important to remember that while some lesbians were identifying as the new soft butch, butchy-femme, or femmy-butch, there was still a parallel world of old time butch and fem women who took their identities very seriously. For them, it was not a game, but a way of life. Tracy Morgan warns readers to beware that one day these two worlds -- old and new -- may collide and there may be another split in the lesbian community around fem and butch issues.\footnote{Tracey Morgan, "Lesbian Sex Wars: Butch/Femme and the Politics of Identity," in NYQ 6 (December 1, 1991), 43.}

Not all new fems and butches injected humor into their gendered identities. In preparation for her article, Fisher interviewed a few new-school fems and butches in order to find out what it means to be, for example, a "soft butch." She concludes that she got all kinds of responses. Some, who looked very much like stone butches to me, said the mutual situation happening between the sheets is the determining factor between 'soft' and 'stone.' Others called themselves soft butches because they consider that to be their look; they tend to be the jeans, boots and flannel gals. Still others use the label because it leaves them open to attracting a wider variety of women than just obvious femmes.\footnote{Fisher, 55.}

The definitions of gendered identities in the late twentieth century are radically different from gendered identities decades earlier. Today, a lesbian can look the part of a stone butch, but the expectation to perform as such is not there. One's look, or physical appearance, does not determine how one performs in bed. While the original butch-fem dyad emphasized both the sexual and the social parts of the identities, some of today's soft butches claim an identity because it describes them socially. "For most of these new
breeds," wrote Fisher, "sexual behavior is not tied to their identity. Nor is it indicative of
the type of women they are attracted to."\textsuperscript{140} Contemporary butches are attracted to butches
and fems are attracted to fems. Due to the lessening of rigid gender roles, lesbians now
have the freedom to seek out whom ever they desire or exclude whom ever they desire and
this eroticization of sameness is a contribution of lesbian feminism.

Those who do see sexuality as a key component in this new dyad, can publicly
announce their desires without being ostracized from the lesbian community. In fact, the
discussion of lesbian sexuality has reached a new zenith in the 1990s. In the spring of
1995 \textit{The Advocate}, a national gay and lesbian political magazine, did its first survey of
lesbian sexuality and relationships. Over 8000 questionnaires were returned, but only one
third of them were able to be tabulated due to a lack of funding.\textsuperscript{141} Of the 2525 surveys
counted, the researchers estimate that "29% fall into the classic butch-fem pairing. In 32%
both parties were rated 'neutral,' and in 14% one was either butch or fem, while the other
was neither."\textsuperscript{142} Overall, 54% of the respondents were in gendered relationships. This
drastic increase, in comparison to Jay's and Young's 9% of respondents who identify in
gendered terms socially, may be due to the mainstreaming and even normalization of
lesbianism. As society becomes more accepting of lesbians, they are more willing to stand
up and be counted.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{The Advocate} is trying to secure funding to tabulate the remaining questionnaires.
\textsuperscript{142} Janet Lever, "Lesbian Sex Survey," in \textit{The Advocate} 687/688 (August 22, 1995), 28. Three percent of
the respondents have not had a relationship.
The mainstreaming of lesbianism can be seen in the June 1993 issue of *Newsweek* with its cover story, “Lesbians: Coming Out Strong. What are the Limits of Tolerance?” The accompanying article even included a glossary of five terms:

- **Femme**: Traditionally, the “feminine” partner; young women are not redefining the role as less submissive.
- **Butch**: Wears suit, motorcycle jacket or other “manly” gear.
- **Lipstick Lesbian**: Part of the Madonna esthetic. Dolls up, has long nails, wears makeup and skirts.
- **Sex positive**: Flaunts female-to-female eroticism, no-guilt, feel-good sex.
- **Vanilla**: Likes kissing, holding hands, no rough stuff.143

This list reiterates the pre-movement definition of lesbianism by focusing on lesbians’ physical appearance and sexual activities resulting in a more traditional, male-defined, less political portrayal of lesbianism.

Despite the feminization of lesbianism, the glossary does show the diversity of lesbianism in the 1990s. In the new model of butch and fem, the fem can be the "doer" and the butch can be the "receiver," or one can even switch, and a butch can seek out another butch and a fem can search for a fem. *OOB* personal ads provide numerous examples:

**WANTED: INTENSE SEDUCTION**
Black semi-butch professional psych student seeks intelligent soft butches and femmes who come strong and deep in bed.144

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144 *OOB*, 2:1 (Summer, 1985).
STRONG FEMME
Attractive, intelligent, feminine entrepreneur seeks partner, friend and lover. I'm 28, German/Mexican American, open to meeting women of all ages and races. No butches.145

CLASSY SLİM BUSINESS LADY
30 years old, would like to meet same. Luv to play top and bottom both. S/M on light side ok. Prefer workaholics like myself along with intelligence.146

CROSSDRESS A BUTCH TODAY!
I'm a butch who loves to crossdress, a bottom who loves to top. Large, strong, and voluptuous. I flood for tall, muscular butches; but imagination and style is of the essence.147

Fems and butches in the 1980s were not restricted to having a relationship with their opposite, but could now have a relationship with whomever they desired. Gender roles were no longer as strict as they had been in the 1950s and 1960s because of feminism's attack on gender roles and an increased blurring of the boundaries between "masculine" and "feminine" in American society.

The construction, function, and composition of gendered identities have undergone great change in a short time. Butches and fems are no longer only working-class lesbians, but also middle-class and professional lesbians; there is a large variety of self-identities and potential partners to choose from; and sexuality is less important than in the original dyad, but more so than in lesbian feminism. The most significant change, however, is that butch

145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., 2:4 (Spring, 1986).
and fem identities are no longer required as a way of organizing the public lesbian community or one's personal life, but are more a description of the self. There is less community interaction with the new gendered identifies, and more emphasis on the self. Fisher concluded "that this new butch-femme movement is not really a movement at all. It is not a political statement to the world or a sexual statement to our community. There are no clear roles or expectations of behavior. They are subjective terms that we use to describe ourselves."148

These new gendered women in the post-lesbian feminist era have found support in larger urban areas through organizations and newsletters created just for them. In Los Angeles, there is a butch/femme support group and the Butch/Femme Network. Started in 1988, the Butch/Femme Network "was in response to the andro community of the 1970s that had mutated to the lipstick lesbians in the 1980s. We wanted to make official the continuing presence of butch/femme."149 In New York City there is an organization called the Butch/Femme Society, and out of Indianapolis, Indiana comes a "nationwide newsletter for lesbian butches and femmes and those who love and appreciate them" entitled Swagger and Sway.150 One can even find World Wide Web pages devoted to fems and butches. In the 1950s and 1960s there was no need for specific social groups for butch and fem women because butch and fem women were the public lesbian community and could easily be found if one knew where to look. As lesbian feminism redefined the public lesbian it also redefined how lesbians organized themselves. One result was the ever-increasing number of social and support groups for specific interests or activities. In the back of any

148 Fisher, 55.
149 Parker-Blakk, 83.
150 Untitled, "What is This, Anyway?" in Swagger and Sway! 2:2 (Spring 1994)
local lesbian or lesbian/gay newspaper one can find an array of social groups and somewhere in there might be a group for fem and/or butch lesbians. Fem and butch women no longer stand out as different, as ‘radical’ lesbians, but now blend in with all the others.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Working-class butches and fems of the 1950s and early 1960s visibly laid claim to women's erotic energy by using an institution that was supposed to control women's sexuality: traditional gender roles. Butches and fems reinforced the stereotypical view of lesbianism as being masculine and concerned only with sex. As a result of the turmoil and politics of the time, lesbian feminism rejected the sexual definition of the public lesbian in order to free lesbians from the stigma of sexual deviance and from the reproduction of heterosexual gender roles traditionally used to keep women in the place of second class citizen. In place of butch and fem as the definers of the "public lesbian," lesbian feminist rhetoric recast this figure as a political entity devoid of sexual desire and role differentiation. Butch and fem women never really went away, for articles and letters to the editor of lesbian publications tell their stories and surveys count the numbers. The new lesbians were sensual women who were woman-identified, androgynous, and found relationships based on equality. This was the ideal, although individual experiences varied. Ironically, this new public lesbian eschewed the butch role -- being seen as physically masculine and having a masculine demeanor -- while she appropriated butch clothing and even butch attitudes as part of her defining character and as an act of political resistance.

Lesbian feminism was a great catalyst for transformation because it provided lesbians with a political voice, made them visible in a nonstereotypical way, and created tensions that erupted and split the community. One result of the sex wars was a much needed discussion about women's sexual desires and autonomy, a resurgence and
reconstruction of butch and fem identities, and a veritable plethora of writings on the subject. Without the activity of lesbian feminists, despite their contradictions, the lesbian community would not be where it is today. Just as a debt is owed to the butch and fem women who walked the streets and fought the police and suffered humiliation two generation ago, a debt is owed to lesbian feminism for giving lesbians a voice and a politic to combat oppression.

The conflict between old time butch and fem women and lesbian feminists and the story of the transformation of lesbian identities in recent U.S. history call attention to the continuities and disruptions in the construction of modern sexuality. The traditional butch/fem emphasis on the eroticization of difference, the orthodox lesbian feminist eroticization of sameness, and the contemporary sex-radical blurring of the boundaries of difference and sameness are all an important part of the history of sexuality in the twentieth century U.S. This essay is significant because it not only extends butch and fem history into a time of tradition and change, but it also provides a framework for the periodization of gender identities in postwar America.
APPENDIX
GLOSSARY

Androg - Although the true definition of androgyny is to have characteristics of both sexes, for most people today, an androg is someone who downplays role divisions.

Butch - A masculine lesbian.
   Baby Butch - A "boyish looking, youthful butch who is coming into her butch identity.
   Butch Bottom - A butch who is sexually submissive, or at least the sexual receiver.
   Soft Butch - A butch without an edge.
   Stone Butch - A butch who gives but rarely, if ever, receives sex.

Dom - Dominatrix or sexual dominant.

Dyke Daddy - A term in the S/M community used to describe a woman/top who role plays as a Daddy to femme or butch bottoms.

Femme - A feminine lesbian.
   High or Ultra Femme - A femme with a very yin energy and sexy trappings.
   Femme Top - A sexually dominant femme.

Gender play - Play, usually with sexual connotations, that involves a partner assuming the other gender.

He-she - A "passing" butch.

Kiki - A 50s term for middle- and upper-class women who did not identify as butch or femme or switched.

Lipstick Lesbian - The current lesbian chic. A femme who dates femmes.

Male-identified - A woman who has interests, mannerisms and ways associated with being male.

New-school - Butch/femme in appearance and label without the strict codes of the '50s.

Old-school - The codified decorum of butch/femme, pre-feminist movement (i.e., a take-charge butch and supportive and deferring femme).

Packing - Wearing a dildo under one's clothes.

150 Parker-Blakk, 82.
Passing - Usually a butch who passes as a man. Has been used to describe a femme who appears straight.

Pillow Queen - Also a “do me” queen, one who only receives sex.

Role Playing - Although butches and femmes say they are not role playing, it is often used to describe taking on a persona and playing it up.

Transgender - A woman who feels more male than female (vice versa for men).

Yin/yang - Masculine/feminine polarity.
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