

Of Catamites and Kings

Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries¹

GAYLE RUBIN

GAYLE RUBIN IS JUSTLY FAMOUS FOR HER ARTICLES “The Traffic in Women” and “Thinking Sex”—the latter often cited as a foundational text of queer theory. A lesser-known piece, reproduced below, shows every bit as much of Rubin’s trademark brilliance in its thoughts on the varieties of female masculinity.

Writing in 1992, Rubin offers a candid assessment of the extent of gender dysphoria in lesbian communities, and suggests that issues of gender variance and what later came to be called female masculinity were “strangely out of focus in lesbian thought, analysis, and terminology.” In breaking this silence, and in pointing out the areas of overlap between lesbian and transgender concerns, Rubin helped chart the course of transgender scholarship in the decade ahead.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Rubin’s article is her call for lesbian communities to tolerate the presence of FTM transsexuals, rather than expel them, during their transition from woman to man. Categories like woman, man, butch, lesbian and transsexual, Rubin contends, are all “imperfect, historical, temporary, and arbitrary. We use them and they use us. . . . Instead of fighting for immaculate classifications and impenetrable boundaries, let us strive to maintain a community that sees diversity as a gift and anomalies as precious.”

WHAT IS BUTCH?

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Lesbian Gender

Attempting to define terms such as *butch* and *femme* is one of the surest ways to incite volatile discussion among lesbians. “Butch” and “femme” are important categories within lesbian experience, and as such they have accumulated multiple layers of significance. Most lesbians would probably agree with a definition from *The Queen’s Vernacular*, that a butch is a “lesbian with masculine characteristics.”² But many corollaries attending that initial premise oversimplify and misrepresent butch experience. In this essay, I approach “butch” from the perspective of gender in order to discuss, clarify, and challenge some prevalent lesbian cultural assumptions about what is butch.

Many commentators have noted that the categories “butch” and “femme” have historically served numerous functions in the lesbian world. Describing the lesbian community in Buffalo from the 1930s through the 1950s, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis comment that

these roles had two dimensions: First, they constituted a code of personal behavior, particularly in the areas of image and sexuality. Butches affected a masculine style, while fems appeared characteristically female.

Butch and fem also complemented one another in an erotic system in which the butch was expected to be both the doer and the giver; the fem's passion was the butch's fulfillment. Second, butch-fem roles were what we call a social imperative. They were the organizing principle for this community's relation to the outside world and for its members' relationships to one another.³

While I do not wish to deny or underestimate the complexity of its functions, I will argue that the simplest definition of butch is the most helpful one. Butch is most usefully understood as a category of lesbian gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols.

Butch and femme are ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women.⁴ Among lesbian and bisexual women, as in the general population, there are individuals who strongly identify as masculine or feminine as well as individuals whose gender preferences are more flexible or fluid. "Femmes" identify predominantly as feminine or prefer behaviors and signals defined as feminine within the larger culture; "butches" identify primarily as masculine or prefer masculine signals, personal appearance, and styles. There are also many lesbians (and bisexual women) with intermediate or unmarked gender styles. In the old days, terms such as *ki-ki* indicated such intermediate or indeterminate gender styles or identities. We appear to have no contemporary equivalent, although at times, *lesbian* and *dyke* are used to indicate women whose gender messages are not markedly butch or femme.⁵

Butch is the lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities than with feminine ones. The term encompasses individuals with a broad range of investments in "masculinity." It includes, for example, women who are not at all interested in male gender identities, but who use traits associated with masculinity to signal their lesbianism or to communicate their desire to engage in the kinds of active or initiatory sexual behaviors that in this society are allowed or expected from men. It includes women who adopt "male" fashions and mannerisms as a way to claim privileges or deference usually reserved for men. It may include women who find men's clothing better made, and those who consider women's usual wear too confining or uncomfortable or who feel it leaves them vulnerable or exposed.⁶

Butch is also the indigenous lesbian category for women who are gender "dysphoric." *Gender dysphoria* is a technical term for individuals who are dissatisfied with the gender to which they were assigned (usually at birth) on the basis of their anatomical sex. Within the psychological and medical communities, gender dysphoria is considered a disorder, as were lesbianism and male homosexuality before the American Psychiatric Association removed them from its official list of mental diseases in 1973.⁷ I am not using *gender dysphoria* in the clinical sense, with its connotations of neurosis or psychological impairment. I am using it as a purely descriptive term for persons who have gender feelings and identities that are at odds with their assigned gender status or their physical bodies. Individuals who have very powerful gender dysphoria, particularly those with strong drives to alter their bodies to conform to their preferred gender identities, are called transsexuals.⁸

The lesbian community is organized along an axis of sexual orientation and comprises women who have sexual, affectional, erotic, and intimate relations with other women. It nevertheless harbors a great deal of gender dysphoria.⁹ Drag, cross-dressing, passing, transvestism, and transsexualism are all common in lesbian populations, particularly those not attempting to meet constricted standards of political virtue.¹⁰

In spite of their prevalence, issues of gender variance are strangely out of focus in lesbian thought, analysis, and terminology. The intricacies of lesbian gender are inadequately and infrequently addressed. *Butch* is one of the few terms currently available with which to express or indicate masculine

gender preferences among lesbians, and it carries a heavy, undifferentiated load.¹¹ The category of butch encompasses a wide range of gender variation within lesbian cultures.

Within the group of women labeled butch, there are many individuals who are gender dysphoric to varying degrees. Many butches have partially male gender identities. Others border on being, and some are, female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs), although many lesbians *and* FTMs find the areas of overlap between butchness and transsexualism disturbing.¹² Saying that many butches identify as masculine to some degree does not mean that all, even most, butches “want to be men,” although some undoubtedly do. Most butches enjoy combining expressions of masculinity with a female body. The coexistence of masculine traits with a female anatomy is a fundamental characteristic of “butch” and is a highly charged, eroticized, and consequential lesbian signal.¹³

By saying that many lesbians identify partially or substantially as masculine, I am also not saying that such individuals are “male identified” in the political sense. When the term *male identified* was originally used in early seventies feminism, it denoted nothing about gender identity. It described a political attitude in which members of a category of generally oppressed persons (women) failed to identify with their self-interest as women, and instead identified with goals, policies, and attitudes beneficial to a group of generally privileged oppressors (men). Though such women were sometimes butch or masculine in style, they might as easily be femme or feminine. One typical manifestation of male identification in this sense consisted of very feminine heterosexual women who supported traditional male privilege. On a more contemporary note, some of the feminine right-wing women whose political aims include strengthening male authority in conventional family arrangements could also be called male identified.

There are many problems with the notion of male identified, not the least of which are questions of who defines what “women’s interests” are in a given situation and the assumption of a unitary category of “women” whose interests are always the same. But the point here is not a political critique of the concept of male identification. It is simply to register that a similarity in terminology has often led to a conflation of political positions with gender identities. A strongly masculine butch will not necessarily identify politically with men. In fact, it is sometimes the most masculine women who confront male privilege most directly and painfully, and are the most enraged by it.¹⁴

VARIETIES OF BUTCH

The iconography in many contemporary lesbian periodicals leaves a strong impression that a butch always has very short hair, wears a leather jacket, rides a Harley, and works construction. This butch paragon speaks mostly in monosyllables, is tough yet sensitive, is irresistible to women, and is semi-otically related to a long line of images of young, rebellious, sexy, white, working-class masculinity that stretches from Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954) to the character of James Hurley on “Twin Peaks” (1990). She is usually accompanied by a half-dressed, ultrafeminine creature who is artfully draped on her boots, her bike, or one of her muscular, tattooed forearms.¹⁵

These images originate in the motorcycle and street gangs of the early fifties. They have been powerful erotic icons ever since, and lesbians are not the only group to find them engaging and sexy. Among gay men, the figure of the outlaw leather biker (usually with a heart of gold) has symbolically anchored an entire subculture. During the late seventies, similar imagery dominated even mainstream male homosexual style and fashion. There are many rock-and-roll variants, from classic biker (early Bruce Springsteen) to futuristic road warrior (Judas Priest, Billy Idol) to postmodern punk (Sex Pistols). The contemporary ACT UP and Queer Nation styles so popular among young gay men and women

are lineal descendants of those of the punk rockers, whose torn jackets and safety pins fractured and utilized the same leather aesthetic.

Within the lesbian community, the most commonly recognized butch styles are those based on these models of white, working-class, youthful masculinity. But in spite of the enduring glamour and undeniable charm of these figures of rebellious individualism, they do not encompass the actual range of lesbian masculinity. Butches vary in their styles of masculinity, their preferred modes of sexual expression, and their choices of partners.

There are many different ways to be masculine. Men get to express masculinity with numerous and diverse cultural codes, and there is no reason to assume that women are limited to a narrower choice of idioms. There are at least as many ways to be butch as there are ways for men to be masculine; actually, there are more ways to be butch, because when women appropriate masculine styles the element of travesty produces new significance and meaning. Butches adopt and transmute the many available codes of masculinity.¹⁶

Sometimes lesbians use the term *butch* to indicate only the most manly women.¹⁷ But the equation of butch with hypermasculine women indulges a stereotype. Butches vary widely in how masculine they feel and, consequently, in how they present themselves. Some butches are only faintly masculine, some are partly masculine, some “dag” butches are very manly, and some “drag kings” pass as men.

Butches vary in how they relate to their female bodies. Some butches are comfortable being pregnant and having kids, while for others the thought of undergoing the female component of mammalian reproduction is utterly repugnant. Some enjoy their breasts while others despise them. Some butches hide their genitals and some refuse penetration. There are butches who abhor tampons, because of their resonance with intercourse; other butches love getting fucked. Some butches are perfectly content in their female bodies, while others may border on or become transsexuals.

Forms of masculinity are molded by the experiences and expectations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, subculture, and individual personality. National, racial, and ethnic groups differ widely in what constitutes masculinity, and each has its own system for communicating and conferring “manhood.” In some cultures, physical strength and aggression are the privileged signals of masculinity. In other cultures, manliness is expressed by literacy and the ability to manipulate numbers or text. The travails of Barbra Streisand’s character in *Yentl* occurred because scholarship was considered the exclusive domain of men among traditional Orthodox Jews of Eastern Europe. Myopia and stooped shoulders from a lifetime of reading were prized traits of masculinity. Some butches play rugby; some debate political theory; some do both.

Manliness also varies according to class origin, income level, and occupation. Masculinity can be expressed by educational level, career achievement, emotional detachment, musical or artistic talent, sexual conquest, intellectual style, or disposable income. The poor, the working classes, the middle classes, and the rich all provide different sets of skills and expectations that butches as well as men use to certify their masculinity.¹⁸

The styles of masculinity executive and professional men favor differ sharply from those of truckers and carpenters. The self-presentations of marginally employed intellectuals differ from those of prosperous lawyers. Classical musicians differ from jazz musicians, who are distinguishable from rock-and-roll musicians. Short hair, shaved heads, and Mohawks did not make eighties punk rockers more studly than today’s long-haired heavy-metal headbangers. All of these are recognizably male styles, and there are butches who express their masculinity within each symbolic assemblage.

Butches come in all the shapes and varieties and idioms of masculinity. There are butches who are tough street dudes, butches who are jocks, butches who are scholars, butches who are artists, rock-and-

roll butches, butches who have motorcycles, and butches who have money. There are butches whose male models are effeminate men, sissies, drag queens, and many different types of male homosexuals. There are butch nerds, butches with soft bodies and hard minds.

BUTCH SEXUALITIES

Thinking of butch as a category of gender expression may help to account for what appear to be butch sexual anomalies. Do butches who prefer to let their partners run the sex become “femme in the sheets”? Are butches who go out with other butches instead of femmes “homosexuals”? Does that make femmes who date femmes “lesbians”?

Butchness often signals a sexual interest in femmes and a desire or willingness to orchestrate sexual encounters. However, the ideas that butches partner exclusively with femmes or that butches always “top” (that is, “run the sex”) are stereotypes that mask substantial variation in butch erotic experience.¹⁹

Historically, butches were expected to seduce, arouse, and sexually satisfy their partners, who were expected to be femmes. During similar eras, men were expected to inaugurate and manage sexual relations with their female partners. Both sets of expectations were located within a system in which gender role, sexual orientation, and erotic behavior were presumed to exist only in certain fixed relationships to one another. Variations existed and were recognized but were considered aberrant.

Though we still live in a culture that privileges heterosexuality and gender conformity, many of the old links have been broken, bent, strained, and twisted into new formations. Perhaps more importantly, configurations of gender role and sexual practice that were once rare have become much more widespread. In contemporary lesbian populations there are many combinations of gender and desire.

Many butches like to seduce women and control sexual encounters. Some butches become aroused only when they are managing a sexual situation. But there are femmes who like to stay in control, and there are butches who prefer their partners to determine the direction and rhythms of lovemaking. Such butches may seek out sexually dominant femmes or sexually aggressive butches. Every conceivable combination of butch, femme, intermediate, top, bottom, and switch exists, even though some are rarely acknowledged. There are butch tops and butch bottoms, femme tops and femme bottoms. There are butch-femme couples, femme-femme partners, and butch-butcht pairs.

Butches are often identified in relation to femmes. Within this framework, butch and femme are considered an indissoluble unity, each defined with reference to the other; butches are invariably the partners of femmes. Defining “butch” as the object of femme desire, or “femme” as the object of butch desire presupposes that butches do not desire or partner with other butches, and that femmes do not desire or go with other femmes.

Butch-butcht eroticism is much less documented than butch-femme sexuality, and lesbians do not always recognize or understand it. Although it is not uncommon, lesbian culture contains few models for it. Many butches who lust after other butches have looked to gay male literature and behavior as sources of imagery and language. The erotic dynamics of butch-butcht sex sometimes resemble those of gay men, who have developed many patterns for sexual relations between different kinds of men. Gay men also have role models for men who are passive or subordinate in sexual encounters yet retain their masculinity. Many butch-butcht couples think of themselves as women doing male homosexual sex with one another. There are “catamites” who are the submissive or passive partners of active “sodomites.” There are “daddies” and “daddy’s boys.” There are bodybuilders who worship one another’s musculature and lick each other’s sweat. There are leather dudes who cruise together for “victims” to pleasure.²⁰

FRONTIER FEARS: BUTCHES, TRANSEXUALS, AND TERROR

No system of classification can successfully catalogue or explain the infinite vagaries of human diversity. To paraphrase Foucault, no system of thought can ever “tame the wild profusion of existing things.”²¹ Anomalies will always occur, challenging customary modes of thought without representing any actual threat to health, safety, or community survival. However, human beings are easily upset by exactly those “existing things” that escape classification, treating such phenomena as dangerous, polluting, and requiring eradication.²² Female-to-male transsexuals present just such a challenge to lesbian gender categories.

Although important discontinuities separate lesbian butch experience and female-to-male transsexual experience, there are also significant points of connection. Some butches are psychologically indistinguishable from female-to-male transsexuals, except for the identities they choose and the extent to which they are willing or able to alter their bodies. Many FTMs live as butches before adopting transsexual or male identities. Some individuals explore each identity before choosing one that is more meaningful for them, and others use both categories to interpret and organize their experience. The boundaries between the categories of butch and transsexual are permeable.²³

Many of the passing women and diesel butches so venerated as lesbian ancestors are also claimed in the historical lineages of female-to-male transsexuals. There is a deep-rooted appreciation in lesbian culture for the beauty and heroism of manly women. Accounts of butch exploits form a substantial part of lesbian fiction and history; images of butches and passing women are among our most striking ancestral portraits. These include the photographs of Radclyffe Hall as a dashing young gent, the Berenice Abbott photo of Jane Heap wearing a suit and fixing an intimidating glare at the camera, and Brassai's pictures of the nameless but exquisitely cross-dressed and manicured butches who patronized *Le Monocle* in 1930s Paris.

Some of these women were likely also transsexuals. For example, several years ago the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project produced a slide show on passing women in North America.²⁴ One of those women was Babe Bean, also known as Jack Bee Garland. Bean/Garland later became the subject of a biography by Louis Sullivan, a leader and scholar in the FTM community until his recent death from AIDS. Sullivan's study highlighted Garland's sex change in addition to his relations with women.²⁵ It is interesting to ponder what other venerable lesbian forebears might be considered transsexuals; if testosterone had been available, some would undoubtedly have seized the opportunity to take it.

In spite of the overlap and kinship between some areas of lesbian and transsexual experience, many lesbians are antagonistic toward transsexuals, treating male-to-female transsexuals as menacing intruders and female-to-male transsexuals as treasonous deserters. Transsexuals of both genders are commonly perceived and described in contemptuous stereotypes: unhealthy, deluded, self-hating, enslaved to patriarchal gender roles, sick, antifeminist, antiwoman, and self-mutilating.

Despite theoretically embracing diversity, contemporary lesbian culture has a deep streak of xenophobia. When confronted with phenomena that do not neatly fit our categories, lesbians have been known to respond with hysteria, bigotry, and a desire to stamp out the offending messy realities. A “country club syndrome” sometimes prevails in which the lesbian community is treated as an exclusive enclave from which the riffraff must be systematically expunged. Everyone has a right to emotional responses. But it is imperative to distinguish between emotions and principles. Just as “hard cases make bad law,” intense emotions make bad policy. Over the years, lesbian groups have gone through periodic attempts to purge male-to-female transsexuals, sadomasochists, butch-femme lesbians, bisexuals, and even lesbians who are not separatists. FTMs are another witch-hunt waiting to happen.²⁶

For many years, male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs) have vastly outnumbered female-to-male individuals. A small percentage of MTFs are sexually involved with women and define themselves as

lesbian. Until recently, lesbian discomfort was triggered primarily by those male-to-female lesbians, who have been the focus of controversy and who have often been driven out of lesbian groups and businesses. Discrimination against MTFs is no longer monolithic, and many lesbian organizations have made a point of admitting male-to-female lesbians.

However, such discrimination has not disappeared. It surfaced in 1991 at the National Lesbian Conference, which banned “nongenetic women.”²⁷ Transsexual women became the *cause célèbre* of the 1991 Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Festival organizers expelled a transsexual woman, then retroactively articulated a policy banning all but “womyn-born-womyn” from future events.²⁸ After decades of feminist insistence that women are “made, not born,” after fighting to establish that “anatomy is not destiny,” it is astounding that ostensibly progressive events can get away with discriminatory policies based so blatantly on recycled biological determinism.

The next debate over inclusion and exclusion will focus on female-to-male transsexuals. Transsexual demographics are changing. FTMs still comprise only a fraction of the transsexual population, but their numbers are growing and awareness of their presence is increasing. Female-to-male transsexuals who are in, or in the process of leaving, lesbian communities are becoming the objects of controversy and posing new challenges to the ways in which lesbian communities handle diversity. A woman who has been respected, admired, and loved as a butch may suddenly be despised, rejected, and hounded when she starts a sex change.²⁹

Sex changes are often stressful, not only for the person undergoing change but also for the network in which that person is embedded. Individuals and local groups cope with such stress well or badly, depending on their level of knowledge about gender diversity, their relationships with the person involved, their willingness to face difficult emotions, their ability to think beyond immediate emotional responses, and the unique details of local history and personality. As a community goes through the process of handling a sex change by one of its members, it evolves techniques and sets precedents for doing so.

Though some lesbians are not disturbed by FTMs, and some find them uniquely attractive, many lesbians are upset by them. When a woman’s body begins to change into a male body, the transposition of male and female signals that constitutes “butch” begins to disintegrate. A cross-dressing, dildo-packing, bodybuilding butch may use a male name and masculine pronouns, yet still have soft skin, no facial hair, the visible swell of breasts or hips under male clothing, small hands and feet, or some other detectable sign of femaleness. If the same person grows a mustache, develops a lower voice, binds his breasts, or begins to bald, his body offers no evidence to contravene his social signals. When he begins to read like a man, many lesbians no longer find him attractive and some want to banish him from their social universe. If the FTM has lesbian partners (and many do), they also risk ostracism.

Instead of another destructive round of border patrols, surveillance, and expulsion, I would suggest a different strategy. Lesbians should instead relax, wait, and support the individuals involved as they sort out their own identities and decide where they fit socially.

A sex change is a transition. A woman does not immediately become a man as soon as she begins to take hormones. During the initial states of changing sex, many FTMs will not be ready to leave the world of women. There is no good reason to harass them through a transitional period during which they will not quite fit as women or men. Most FTMs who undergo sex reassignment identify as men and are anxious to live as men as soon as possible. They will leave lesbian contexts on their own, when they can, when they are ready, and when those environments are no longer comfortable. It is not necessary for gender vigilantes to drive them out. Some FTMs will experiment with sex change and elect to abandon the effort. They should not be deprived of their lesbian credentials for having explored the option.

The partners of FTMs do not necessarily or suddenly become bisexual or heterosexual because a lover decides on a sex change, although some do eventually renegotiate their own identities. An attraction to people of intermediate sex does not automatically displace or negate an attraction to other women. Dealing with their sex-changing partners is difficult and confusing enough for the lovers of transsexuals without having to worry about being thrown out of their social universe. Friends and lovers of FTMs often have intense feelings of loss, grief, and abandonment. They need support for handling such feelings, and should not be terrorized into keeping them secret.

In the past, most FTMs were committed to a fairly complete change, a commitment that was required for an individual to gain access to sex-change technologies controlled by the therapeutic and medical establishments. To obtain hormones or surgery, transsexuals (of both directions) had to be able to persuade a number of professionals that they were determined to be completely “normal” members of the target sex (that is, feminine heterosexual women and masculine heterosexual men). Gay transsexuals had to hide their homosexuality to get sex-change treatment. This has begun to change, and transsexuals now have more freedom to be gay and less traditionally gender stereotyped after the change.

More transsexuals also now exist who do not pursue a complete change. Increasing numbers of individuals utilize some but not all of the available sex-change technology, resulting in “intermediate” bodies, somewhere between female and male. Some FTMs may be part women, part men—genetic females with male body shapes, female genitals, and intermediate gender identities. Some of these may not want to leave their lesbian communities, and they should not be forced to do so. They may cause confusion, repelling some lesbians and attracting others. **But if community membership were based on universal desirability, no one would qualify. Our desires can be as selective, exclusive, and imperious as we like; our society should be as inclusive, humane, and tolerant as we can make it.**

LET A THOUSAND FLOWERS BLOOM

In writing this essay, I have wanted to diversify conceptions of butchness, to promote a more nuanced conceptualization of gender variation among lesbian and bisexual women, and to forestall prejudice against individuals who use other modes of managing gender. I also have an underlying agenda to support the tendencies among lesbians to enjoy and celebrate our differences. Lesbian communities and individuals have suffered enough from the assumption that we should all be the same, or that every difference must be justified by a claim of political or moral superiority.

We should not attempt to decide whether butch-femme or transsexualism are acceptable for anyone or preferable for everyone. Individuals should be allowed to navigate their own trails through the possibilities, complexities, and difficulties of life in postmodern times. Each strategy and each set of categories has its capabilities, accomplishments, and drawbacks. None is perfect, and none works for everyone all the time.

Early lesbian-feminism rejected butch-femme roles out of ignorance of their historical context and because their limitations had become readily obvious. Butch and femme were brilliantly adapted for building a minority sexual culture out of the tools, materials, and debris of a dominant sexual system. Their costs included obligations for each lesbian to choose a role, the ways such roles sometimes reinforced subservient status for femmes, and the sexual frustrations often experienced by butches.

The rejection of butch-femme was equally a product of its time. Feminism has often simply announced changes already in progress for which it has taken credit and for which it has been held responsible. The denunciation of butch-femme occurred in part because some of its premises were outdated and because lesbian populations had other tools with which to create viable social worlds.

Yet wholesale condemnation of butch-femme impoverished our understandings of, experiences of, and models for lesbian gender. It subjected many women to gratuitous denigration and harassment, and left a legacy of confusion, lost pleasures, and cultural deprivation. As we reclaim butch-femme, I hope we do not invent yet another form of politically correct behavior or morality.

Feminism and lesbian-feminism developed in opposition to a system that imposed rigid roles, limited individual potential, exploited women as physical and emotional resources, and persecuted sexual and gender diversity. Feminism and lesbian-feminism should not be used to impose new but equally rigid limitations, or as an excuse to create new vulnerable and exploitable populations. Lesbian communities were built by sex and gender refugees; the lesbian world should not create new rationales for sex and gender persecution.

Our categories are important. We cannot organize a social life, a political movement, or our individual identities and desires without them. The fact that categories invariably leak and can never contain all the relevant “existing things” does not render them useless, only limited. Categories like “woman,” “butch,” “lesbian,” or “transsexual” are all imperfect, historical, temporary, and arbitrary. We use them, and they use us. We use them to construct meaningful lives, and they mold us into historically specific forms of personhood. Instead of fighting for immaculate classifications and impenetrable boundaries, let us strive to maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious, and treats all basic principles with a hefty dose of skepticism.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Jay Marston for the conversations and encouragement that led me to write this essay, and to Jay Marston, Nilos Nevertheless, Allan Berube, Jeffrey Escoffier, Jeanne Bergman, Carole Vance, and Lynn Eden for reading the drafts and making innumerable helpful suggestions. Kath Weston kindly shared some of her work in progress. Thanks to Lynne Fletcher for ruthless editing (my favorite kind). I am, of course, responsible for any errors or misconceptions. I am out on this particular limb all by myself, but I am grateful to them all for helping me get here.
2. **“Butch.”** 1. lesbian with masculine characteristics, see **dyke**. 2. non-homosexual man whose virile appearance both draws and repels the [male] homosexual. Syn: all man; butch number . . . stud. 3. [gay male who is] manly in speech, in fashions and in bed; submission impossible. **Butch it up.** warning [to gay man] to act manly in the presence of friends who ‘don’t know’ or the police who do. **Butch queen.** homosexual man whose virile activities and responsibilities make him hard to detect.” Bruce Rodgers, *The Queen’s Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (Straight Arrow Books, 1972), p. 39; see also **dyke**, pp. 70–71.
3. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, “The Reproduction of Butch-Fem Roles: A Social Constructionist Approach” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, edited by Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 244.
4. In this essay, I am taking for granted a number of things that I will not directly address. I am assuming two decades’ worth of sustained critique of categories of sex and gender, including the argument that gendered identities, roles, and behaviors are social constructs rather than properties intrinsic to or emanating from physical bodies. Gender categories and identities are, nevertheless, deeply implicated in the ways in which individuals experience and present themselves. I am also aware of the many critiques that make straightforward use of terms like *identities* difficult. In this article, however, I am less interested in a rigorous use of terminology or theory than I am in exploring lesbian folk beliefs regarding gender, and aspects of gender experience among lesbian and bisexual women. I do not intend to exclude bisexual women by speaking mostly of lesbians. Many bisexuals have similar issues and experiences.

In addition, I am not interested in engaging the argument that butch-femme roles are a noxious residue of patriarchal oppression or the claim that butch-femme roles are uniquely situated “outside ideology” and embody an inherent critique of gender. For a statement of the first position, see Sheila Jeffreys, “Butch and Femme: Now and Then,” *Gossip* 5 (London: Onlywomen Press, 1987), pp. 65–95; for the latter, see Sue-Ellen Case, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” *Discourse* 11 (Winter 1988–1989): 55–73. Oddly, Jeffreys and Case pursue similar agendas. Each argues that lesbianism in some form is a road to philosophical or political salvation. For Jeffreys, this can be accomplished only by the lesbian couple who “make love without roles” (p. 90) while for Case it is the butch-femme couple that lends “agency and self-determination to the historically passive [female] subject” (p. 65).

Case’s approach is far preferable to that of Jeffreys. However, both analyses are overblown and place an undue burden of moral gravity on lesbian behavior. Like lesbianism itself, butch and femme are structured within dominant gender systems. Like lesbianism, butch and femme can be vehicles for resisting and transforming those systems. Like lesbianism, butch and femme can function to uphold those systems. And nothing—not “mutual, equalitarian lesbianism” and not butch-femme—escapes those systems completely. Butch and femme need no justification other than their

- presence among lesbians; they should not be judged, justified, evaluated, held accountable, or rejected on the basis of such attributions of significance.
5. *Androgynous* is also sometimes used to indicate women somewhere between butch and femme. Androgynous used to mean someone who was intermediate between male and female, and many traditional and classic butches were androgynous in the sense that they combined highly masculine signals with detectably female bodies. Those who cross-dressed enough to successfully pass as men were not androgynous. This older meaning of *androgynous* is lost when the term is used to refer to individuals whose self-presentation falls somewhere between butch and femme.
 6. I should make it clear that I do not consider any behavior, trait, or mannerism to be inherently “male” or “female,” and that my operating assumption is that cultures assign behaviors to one or another gender category and then attribute gendered significance to various behaviors. Individuals can then express gender conformity, gender deviance, gender rebellion, and many other messages by manipulating gender meanings and taxonomies.
 7. Ronald Beyer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (New York, Basic Books, 1981). There was opposition to classifying homosexuality as a disease before the 1973 decision and there are still some therapists who consider homosexuality a pathology and would like to see the 1973 decision revoked. Nevertheless, the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III* remains a watershed.
 8. For an overview of gender issues, including some aspects of transsexuality, see Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). For female-to-male transsexuals, see Lou Sullivan, *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual*, 3rd edition, (Seattle: Ingersoll Gender Center, 1990); and Marcy Scheiner, “Some Girls Will Be Boys,” *On Our Backs* 7, no. 4 (March–April 1991): 20–22, 38–43.
 9. Not all lesbians are gender dysphoric, and not all gender dysphoric women are lesbian or bisexual. For example, there are many heterosexual women who sometimes attract (and confuse) lesbians. There are female-to-male transsexuals who are erotically drawn to women and identify as heterosexual men (even when they have women’s bodies), and there are female-to-male transsexuals who are attracted to men and consider themselves male homosexuals.
 10. For a discussion of “mannish lesbians” in the historical context of the early twentieth century, see Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Baum, Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, New American Library, 1989).
 11. Older lesbian culture had many terms in addition to *butch*. *Bull*, *bull dyke*, *bulldagger*, *dagger*, *dag*, *diesel dyke*, *drag butch*, and *drag king* are among the expressive terms that were once more commonly in circulation. See Rodgers, *The Queen’s Vernacular*, pp. 70–71.
 12. For discomfort with the association of female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) with butch lesbians, see a fascinating exchange that appeared in several issues of *FTM*, a newsletter for female-to-male transsexuals and cross-dressers. It began with an article in issue 12, June 1990, p. 5, and continued in the letters columns in issues 13, September 1990, p. 3, and 14, December 1990, p. 2. A related exchange appeared in issue 15, April 1991, pp. 2–3.
 13. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), especially p. 23. For a study of butch-femme that contains a critique of Butler, although not on this point, see Kath Weston, “Do Clothes Make the Woman? Gender, Performance Theory, and Lesbian Eroticism,” unpublished manuscript, 1992.
 14. The concept “woman identified” explicitly links sexual orientation and certain kinds of “political” behavior (Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” in *Radical Feminism*, edited by Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone [New York, Quadrangle, 1973]). The concept of the woman-identified-woman presents problems beyond the scope of this discussion. But while it equated feminism with lesbianism, “woman identified” did not at that time mean femininity or female gender identity. In contrast to “male identified,” it is rarely taken as a synonym for “femme,” although it has often been used as a synonym or euphemism for lesbianism. Although the apparent relationships between feminism and lesbianism were exciting and trailblazing when this essay first appeared in 1970, much of what has gone awry within feminist politics of sex can be traced to a failure to recognize the differences between sexual orientations, gender identities, and political positions. Sexual preference, gender role, and political stance cannot be equated, and do not directly determine or reflect one another.
 15. See, for example, *On Our Backs*, 1984–1991; *Outrageous Women*, 1984–1988; and *Bad Attitude*, 1984–1991. For a look at the evolution of lesbian styles in the eighties, see Arlene Stein, “All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go? Style Wars and the New Lesbianism,” *Out/Look* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 34–42, reprinted in this volume.
 16. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31. In addition, not only butches play with symbols of masculinity. Lesbian femmes can play with male attire, as do heterosexual women, for a variety of reasons. A suit and tie do not necessarily “make the butch.”
 17. This is similar to gay male usage. Gay men use *butch* to refer to especially masculine men (Rodgers, *The Queen’s Vernacular*). For a humorous send-up of gay male notions of butch, see Clark Henley, *The Butch Manual* (New York: Sea Horse Press, 1982).
 18. Several well-known butches of classic lesbian fiction exhibit some of the class spectrum of butch masculinity. Beebo Brinker is exemplary of white, working-class butchness (Ann Bannon, *I Am a Woman* [Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1959]; *Women in the Shadows* [1959]; *Journey to a Woman* [1960]; and *Beebo Brinker* [1962]). Randy Salem’s Christopher “Chris” Hamilton is an educated, middle-class, white butch (Randy Salem, *Chris* [New York: Softcover Library, 1959]). Two of the upper-class, aristocratic cross-dressers are Jesse Cannon (Randy Salem, *The Unfortunate Flesh* [New York: Midwood Tower, 1960]) and, of course, Stephen Gordon from *The Well of Loneliness* (Radclyffe Hall,

The Well of Loneliness [New York: Permabooks, 1959]). And butch takes many more forms than these few examples can express.

19. For a discussion of the differences between erotic roles such as “top” and “bottom,” and gender roles such as butch and femme, see Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, “The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
20. Lesbians, in turn, provide models for other permutations of gender, sex, and role. I know a technically heterosexual couple that consists of a lesbian-identified woman whose primary partner is an effeminate, female-identified mostly gay man. The woman once told me she has “lesbian sex” with the “girl” in him.
21. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, Pantheon, 1970).
22. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
23. Transgender organizations directly address issues of variant gender and how to live with it, understand it, and customize it. Some lesbian and bisexual women gravitate to such groups to sort out their gender questions in a context that provides a more sophisticated awareness of the subtleties of gender diversity than is currently available within most lesbian communities.
24. San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “‘She Even Chewed Tobacco’: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, New American Library, 1989).
25. Louis Sullivan, *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson, 1990). In addition to the Garland biography, Sullivan wrote prolifically on transsexual issues and edited the *FTM* newsletter from 1987 to 1990.
26. It is interesting to speculate about how gay men will deal with FTMs who are gay male identified. Traditionally, gay male communities have dealt relatively well with male-to-female transvestites and transsexuals, while lesbian communities have not. But gay men are now faced with women becoming men, who may or may not have male genitals whose origins are undetectable.
27. “Genetic Lesbians,” *Gay Community News*, May 19–25, 1991, p. 4.
28. “Festival Womyn Speak Out,” *Gay Community News*, November 17–23, 1991, p. 4. It is interesting to note that S/M was not a big issue at Michigan in 1991, nor was there controversy over S/M at the National Lesbian Conference. It saddens me that lesbians, from whom I expect better, appear so prone to need a target for horizontal hostility.
29. And if a woman who was disliked starts a sex change, the sex change becomes a convenient pretext to get rid of her/him. Obnoxious behavior that would be tolerated in a butch will often be considered intolerable in an FTM. Like other groups of stigmatized individuals, transsexuals are often subjected to particularly stringent standards of conduct.