

# **Will the Real Lesbians Please Stand Up? Butch/Fem and Creations of Authentic Lesbian Identity**

by

**Kristen Nummerdor**

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**Signature of Author.....**

**Kristen Nummerdor  
Department of Humanities and Social Science  
May 16, 1994**

**Certified by .....**

**Professor Elizabeth Wood  
Thesis Supervisor**

**Accepted by .....**

**Professor Evelyn Fox Keller  
Director, Program in Women's Studies**

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# Dedication

This thesis and all the hard work I put into it is dedicated to my grandma Opal Nummerdor, who passed away last summer. I wish you could have been here to see it.

## Section 1: Introduction

To raise the question of identity is to reopen the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations. Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not-I, other. ...The further one moves from the core the less one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, the real Black, Indian or Asian, the real woman. The search for identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized.<sup>1</sup>

It can be said that a great deal of lesbian feminist discourse over the past three and a half decades has been devoted to delineating and clarifying "the lesbian" as an identity category. That is to say, writers of "lesbian theory" have attempted to describe and encapsulate exactly what being a lesbian is and what that being entails—how we as lesbians can be sure that we are lesbians, how we can and should relate to one another as lesbians, how we can and should relate to heterosexual and bisexual women, and how we may or may not relate as lesbians to feminism and feminist theory. In a process much like the one Trin T. Minh-ha describes above, a good portion of this discourse has been invested in demarcating the nature of the "true lesbian"—her real, genuine, and authentic self, as opposed to her fake, corrupted, or heteropatriarchally-allied self.

Arguments about the specifics of the true or authentic lesbian have raged since the second wave of feminism crashed upon lesbian shores. From the lesbian-feminist discourses which began in the late sixties and early seventies, to the various positions (pun intended) occupied by feminists

during the "Sex Wars" of the eighties (including "anti-porn" and "pro-sex" feminists), to the recognition of postmodern fragmentation within feminist discourses as we enter the nineties, what various lesbian theorists have described (or not described) as the true or real lesbian has consistently been a site of trouble and contestation. How does the real lesbian look? How does she dress? How does she have sex? Will she or will she not associate with men? Where does she spend her time, and what does she do there?

It is not surprising that a factor consistently present near the heart of lesbian identity politics has been the butch/fem issue. Whether butch or fem lesbians can be considered authentic or true lesbians, and whether butch and fem as erotic partners can be thought of as an acceptable feminist dyad have been subjects of lengthy debate, debates which started back in the late sixties and early seventies within lesbian-feminist<sup>2</sup> writings. Discourse within lesbian-feminism sought to exclude butch/fem "role playing" from the definition of the authentic lesbian. Butch and fem roles were considered to be artificial, backward, male-identified, an imitation of heterosexuality. The roles were argued to be corrupt and antithetical to finding and expressing one's true "woman-identified" nature. Within this context, the more masculine appearing butch was often accused of being male-identified; by analogy, she was thought to control and dominate fems in much the same way that a straight man might treat women. Another strain of this discourse sought more specifically to exclude the fem, and hence the butch/fem erotic dyad, from what was defined as the authentic or truly female-identified lesbian. Femininity was considered to be a male-created, heteropatriarchally orchestrated plot which kept women from recognizing their true female and lesbian natures. Such lesbian-feminist theories devoted a great deal of energy

and ink to the careful delineation of authentic lesbian identity, placing butch/fem, for the most part, outside of the bounds of that identity.

Writing by butch/fem proponents began to appear around the mid-eighties, and has flowered dramatically over the past three years. Indeed, there has been a discursive re-explosion around the subject of butch/fem—this time, arguing for the inclusion of butch and fem as viable or real lesbian identities. Much of the writing in support of butch/fem has been centered around the personal testimony of butch and fem identified women who explain to the reader the intricacies and secrets of their identities: how they came to identify as butch or fem, what those identities mean to them, why they think that those identities are real and valid (or “authentic”). Whether in the form of the theoretical essay, the novel, the short story, or the poem, most of the writing on butch/fem contains some form of this testimonial, written with a sense of urgency and purpose, as if the author were trying to convince the reader of her own validity, as if there were someone standing over the shoulder of the reader, whispering to her that butch and fem women are not real lesbians, that what they say cannot be trusted, that they are simply the dupes of a false consciousness (which has already been defined and understood by feminist writing), that they should be dismissed. There is a sense in these works that butch and fem women feel that they must prove themselves, that they must counteract an energy which has sought to *disprove* them, that they are telling a story that must be heard, by lesbians and feminists especially. The specter that haunts these butch/fem writings is the lesbian-feminist discourse which has grounded butch/fem as being outside of true lesbian identity. Pro-butch/fem writing is inevitably informed and shaped by the history of those criticisms, and often presents itself as a critique

of anti-but<sup>ch</sup>/fem ideology, contesting the definitions that have become ingrained within lesbian feminist circles of what a lesbian can or cannot be.

While examining the lengthy debates around but<sup>ch</sup>/fem, it is important to question the methods that have been used to create and legitimate lesbian identity, and to consider what the purposes might be for delineating and constraining authentic versus non-authentic lesbians. What was the authentic lesbian identity posited by lesbian-feminist discourse? How was that authentic lesbian defined within the discourse—with what language and symbolism? Was she merely an illusory figure, defined by the negative outlines of not-but<sup>ch</sup> or not-fem? How did the anti-but<sup>ch</sup>/fem discourse operate? That is to say, what methods were deployed to posit and confirm that but<sup>ch</sup> and fem were non-authentic lesbian identities? In what manner was but<sup>ch</sup>/fem portrayed and defined by lesbian-feminists, and to what ends? Who was doing that defining? What assumptions about gender and sex roles were relied upon or reinforced in order to prove the inauthenticity of but<sup>ch</sup>/fem, or guarantee the authenticity of a “non-role playing” lesbian? Who articulated the authenticity or non-authenticity of these identities—who got to say which were the real lesbians and which were the fakes? What was at stake, and who really cares? Section two of this essay examines the nature of lesbian-feminist writing on the subject of but<sup>ch</sup>/fem throughout the seventies and eighties: how it is written, what symbols and narratives were employed by detractors of but<sup>ch</sup> and fem roles, and to what ends.

It is also interesting to examine the role of recent pro-but<sup>ch</sup>/fem discourse in responding to and critiquing anti-but<sup>ch</sup>/fem theories. Does the new but<sup>ch</sup>/fem writing find points of resistance to the anti-but<sup>ch</sup>/fem ideology of the seventies and eighties? Is the writing merely a defensive response, moving within the original constructs of the lesbian-feminist

debate, or have butch and fem theorists moved to discuss the issue using a different set of assumptions? How has pro-butch/fem discourse responded to the definitions of the authentic and inauthentic lesbian? Have butch and fem theorists redefined the authentic lesbian to include butch/fem under the auspices of a "real lesbian" or "real woman" banner? Or have they challenged the notion of authenticity itself? Section three of this essay examines recent pro-butch/fem literature in an attempt to answer these questions by determining the relationship between these works and the older anti-butch/fem discourse. Considerable emphasis is placed on Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, a novel which provides a rich example of how recent pro-butch/fem writing has not only responded to the accusations of anti-butch/fem critiques, but has also resisted the boundaries delineated by lesbian-feminist theory—Feinberg insists that there are still complex questions and answers at discursive sites which lesbian-feminists of the seventies and eighties had deemed officially closed and already explained.

**Section 2:**  
**Butch/Fem in Lesbian-Feminist Discourse**  
**or**  
**You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman**

Much of the fuss and frou frou over butch/fem within lesbian-feminist discourse was focused on articulating the claim that butch and fem women were participating in a pattern of "role playing," and on the accompanying assertion that such role playing was an ultimately oppressive expression of gender and sexuality. The delineation between the role playing lesbian versus the non-role playing lesbian was to become a discursive site within lesbian feminist theory at which notions of authentic or inauthentic lesbian identity were to be argued.

But what did the lesbian-feminist mean when she accused butches and fems of role playing? What exactly was role playing? How did one go about it? How was role playing defined and described in lesbian-feminist discourse? The term role playing itself is murky; it seemed to exist in the discourse as an all-encompassing term, a catch phrase which contained many of the more specific accusations hurled at butches and fems: role playing as imitative of heterosexuality, role playing as a backward expression of gender from a bygone era, role playing as a byproduct of a destructive, working-class bar culture, role playing as "male-identified" (a catch phrase in itself), role playing as enforcing power imbalances in sexual relationships, role playing as a (false) mask which prevented a lesbian's (true) female nature from emerging.

It is worthwhile to examine in detail the way that lesbian-feminist writers formulated their arguments against role playing and its many

manifestations—what language was employed, what symbolism was evoked—and how these arguments were linked inevitably to assertions of authentic or inauthentic lesbian identity.

### **“Imitations” of the “real”**

Butch/fem was described in lesbian-feminist discourse as imitative of heterosexuality, a pathetic aping of traditional male and female roles. Such imitation was declared to be a thing of the past, a coping mechanism that “old gay” (often working-class) lesbians used in order to identify one another during a bygone era. Consider the following statements from two lesbian-feminist publications of the early seventies:

In the fifties or even the early sixties the reasoning behind the acting out of roles was more readily understood than it is now. In a heterosexually dominated society women who wanted other women saw the need to pattern themselves after straights. They had to pretend to be men, to look like men in order to attract a woman who had been oriented towards a male/female society. No one was lurking in the background to tell them that if they waited a few more years it wouldn't matter because the liberation movements would make people see them as women....

But today this has changed. Women can be more open about their sexuality and the need for roles has diminished. For women to continue to get into role playing is to shut themselves off from the changes that have come with movement, and to close themselves to the varieties of lesbian experience.<sup>3</sup>

[Role playing] exists among unevolved women. With evolved women the roles (society's roles) are shared.<sup>4</sup>

The above quotes illustrate a popular butch/fem fairy tale that was common in lesbian-feminist writing of the seventies. It typically read something like this: Once upon a time, before the enlightenment of feminism was to shine upon women, lesbians were forced to get involved with butch/fem role playing because it was their only option in a heterosexually dominated society. Since the rise of the women's movement,

we have learned that butch/fem is no longer necessary; in fact, to remain involved with such roles after being introduced to feminism is to proceed backwards, away from evolution, progress, and equality in lesbian existence.

This lesbian-feminist explanation of role playing denied “old gay” women the agency and power to choose butch and fem roles, or to shape and bend those roles to suit the needs of their communities. Rather, butches and fems were presented as dupes of straight society, who copied heterosexuals simply because they were not insightful enough or intelligent enough to think of a better and less oppressive way to express their gender and sexuality. There were no lesbian-feminists “lurking in the background” to help them, and they certainly were not equipped to help themselves.

So perhaps the lesbians of the fifties and early sixties could be forgiven by lesbian-feminists for their participation in butch/fem; after all, it was explained, without the enlightenment of women’s liberation, we can understand that those lesbians did not know better at the time. And young role playing lesbians might be forgiven as well, since they, like their old gay counterparts, often lacked positive lesbian role models.

Because of the absence of role models in working out her way of life, and because the only marriage she has known is that of Mom and Dad, the young Lesbian usually gets hung up in the “butch-femme” syndrome in her early relationships.<sup>5</sup>

At any time in her life the Lesbian may fit [the butch] stereotype—usually when she is very young and just finding out about herself. After all, the Lesbian is a product of her heterosexual environment and all she has to go on is... society’s image.<sup>6</sup>

The young and the old, the working-class women of the bars, the uneducated and unenlightened who simply did not know what they were doing—those were the women who could be at least partially forgiven, if not pitied, by

lesbian-feminists for their involvement with role playing. But to continue to be involved in butch/fem after being introduced to women's liberation was to remain in a state of false consciousness, to remain brainwashed by copying the roles of an oppressive heteropatriarchal system, to remain "fucked over by the values of the majority culture."<sup>7</sup> It is clear in all of these descriptions of role playing that butch/fem was *not* a choice that the liberated, intelligent, or evolved lesbian would make.

Stereotypical masculinity and femininity—dad/mom, man/wife-type role playing—was considered by lesbian-feminists to be an artificial gender role system set up to benefit straight men and to keep women subservient to them. The roles, it was argued, were artificial and empty, and they kept us from experiencing our full humanity. So when lesbian-feminists called butches and fems imitators of heterosexuality, they were arguing at the same time that straight people were playing roles as well.

Implied in the language of butch/fem "imitation" of heterosexuality is the idea that there is something more original, more primary about the heterosexuality which is being "imitated." Heterosexuality, via the presence of a butch/fem copy, is set up as a kind of original. But what do words like "original" and "copy" mean if heterosexuals themselves are said to be playing roles, if they themselves are aping ideals of masculinity and femininity which are inevitably unattainable? Who is performing which roles, and to whom do those roles "belong," from whence do they originate? Lesbian-feminist arguments were formulated by assuming the priority of the heterosexual role player, and the implied secondary nature of the butch/fem copy.<sup>8</sup> They did not see the gender role performance of butches and fems as having any kind of subversive or liberating value for women or lesbians; rather, they insisted that such "copying" was backward and oppressive, and went further to

delineate that butch/fem copying was outside of what could be thought of as authentic or real lesbian identity. Authenticity was instead constructed on the basis of another role—the androgynous role (defined as rolelessness), the not-but, not-fem role. Androgyny was asserted to be the truth before roles, it was what our natural selves would have been, and still could be, if not for the corrupting presence of butch/fem roles. In a sense, androgyny was able to become authentic because it was not-but, not-fem. It was via these assumptions that “androgyny” was able to be created and maintained as the lesbian authentic, and butch/fem as the inauthentic.

### **The bar ghetto: Where the working-class pick up their nasty habits**

Working-class bars have historically been the site for celebration of butch/fem as an erotic choice for lesbians, in both pre- and post-Stonewall times.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, then, that lesbian-feminists often wrote of working-class bar culture with particular disdain. If the young lesbian had not already been forced into role playing by her heterosexual surroundings, then the working-class bar was the next place that she might be coerced into being butch or fem.

How does a woman go about [seeking out other Lesbians]? She usually falls into role-playing based on those same “straight” image roles she was brought up with. If a woman has not yet become aware of the women’s liberation movement through Gay Women’s Liberation, she is left with the only alternative society will provide—the “Bar Ghetto”. The bar culture often merely reshapes the role-playing of the dominant culture. Now the Lesbian must fit into the role in order to relate to other women. She must be Butch or Femme.<sup>10</sup>

It was at the bars that Ashley learned to be a ‘big shot, stomping butch.’<sup>11</sup>

Lesbian-feminists believed the bars to be destructive and backward, a “ghetto” culture which was the only social alternative for lesbians who had not yet become familiar with women’s liberation and the options it could provide. The bars were portrayed by lesbian-feminists to be a sort of last resort, a place that lesbians were forced to frequent only because they had no other place to meet women. While it is certainly true that the bars were a place to go if one wanted to meet other lesbians, lesbian-feminist discourse presented the bars as unattractive, unhealthy places which had very few redeeming qualities.

At first the bar, like a drug, can give a high: a moment of reassurance, a sense of security, a surge of confidence. But the security is false, the confidence dissipates, and the reassurance is groundless....

The lesbian who goes to the bar to find community, freedom, love, and ego support, finds instead competition, exploitation, degradation, and frequently loveless sex.<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to deny that bars do fill a large void in the lives of gay women.... Yet, this would hardly explain why women keep coming to the bars, even after they have found security in other facets of their lives. Women who are actively involved in politics, sports, or other lesbian-group activities would not seem to be in such desperate need of a shelter.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the lesbian-feminist might ask, why continue to frequent the bars? After one has found security, politics, and healthy lesbian-group activities through the women’s movement, what attraction could the bars possibly provide? After all, the bar culture was a center for butch/fem role playing and other forms of exploitation; the bars were also said to be havens for lesbians with alcoholic tendencies. The women who returned to the bars were assumed to be *insecure*, desperate, and worst of all, uninformed by the possibilities of feminism.

Once again it was working-class lesbians, who had shaped bar culture for a number of decades, who were portrayed as backward and in need of

evolution. Descriptions of bar culture and butch/fem roles frequently dripped with virulent classism. It was not uncommon for lesbian-feminists to assume that if a lesbian was into butch/fem roles it immediately implied her working-class background, which in turn evoked negative images of oppressive and backwards gender relations. Consider the following quote from a reader's forum on butch/fem in a 1986 issue of *Lesbian Ethics*:

When I started to go out with her it immediately became apparent that she wouldn't let me pay for anything and opened doors for me. I was taken aback because I thought only working class women, which she wasn't, were still into roles (this was 1979). I bought her the poetry of Olga Broumas and Adrienne Rich to make up for the money she spent.<sup>14</sup>

The author is obviously surprised that her upper-middle class lover could be into roles. It seems that she believed women of higher social classes would be educated enough, intelligent enough, *feminist* enough, (lesbian enough?) to know that roles are oppressive, whereas it was expected that working-class women were not to understand the import of feminism. Working-class bar culture was thus placed outside of the feminist realm; no real resistance against the patriarchy was being practiced in the bars, no struggle against homophobia or sexism could be realized by working-class butches and fems. And as the butch/fem bars were perceived to be anathema to feminist struggle, the lesbian culture shaped in those bars was considered by lesbian-feminists to be less female-centered, less authentic than the "woman-identified" lesbian culture born of the second wave of the feminist movement.

## **Mal(e)-identification: The case against the butch**

The butch role was often considered by lesbian-feminists to be an attempt to imitate men; indeed, many asserted that butch women even desired to *be* men. Early in the rise of lesbian-feminist discourse, it was the butch who was attacked the most viciously. Butches were often said to have been conditioned into their male roles by heteropatriarchal society, an explanation which evoked both contempt and pity from lesbian-feminists.

Because we are conditioned for definite man or woman roles, many Lesbians begin to question where they are as women. After all, only men are supposed to turn on women. ...Therefore, the logical solution to your identity crisis is to cut your hair short, wear T-shirts (with a pocket to keep your cigarettes in), flatten your chest, and wear tight Levis and leather boots. There's a Butch any Femme would be proud of!<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the assumption was that butches who became familiar with lesbian-feminism would immediately abandon their roles for a more natural, less patriarchally-centered mode of representation. Butches who remained in their roles were usually considered to be “male-identified”—it was presumed that those who enjoyed dressing and acting like men did so because they were able to garner an equivalent to heterosexual male privilege within lesbian communities. Part of the role play for the unrepentant butch, they argued, was to be able to have power and control over the fem, just like in traditional male and female roles. Butches were denounced on the grounds that they treated fems and other lesbians in an oppressive, “male chauvinistic” manner. They were often characterized as aggressive, abusive, and misogynist.

I hated her persona when she was with her stud friends. They acted like my adolescent boyfriends—loud, raucous and obvious in their comments about women.<sup>16</sup>

I have known butches who call the women in their lives their wives, who demand women wait on them, who are ardent readers of men's magazines and pornography.... They simply want power, and in lesbian femmes they find willing accomplices.<sup>17</sup>

Butches were sometimes accused not only of imitating men, but of bonding with men, getting chummy with the enemy, in order to gain more power. By doing so, butches were thought to be separating themselves from other women in a way that was not only oppressive and sexist, but self-hating as well.

[B]utches are...practicing butchiness...to join up in some mystical way with what they perceive to be the winning side: men. Sometimes these butches are accepted by the men so that they become one of the guys and are able to partake in male identified occupations from which other women are barred and in bonding rituals men devise (such as the viewing of pornography and the telling of conquest stories and misogynist jokes) to assure their separateness from women. At least some of this could be called butch privilege.<sup>18</sup>

Lesbian-feminists declared that real lesbians were "woman-identified;" that is, they stated that lesbians tended to focus their energies and love on women, not men. They offered that woman-identified lesbianism allowed for love between equals and a freedom from patriarchal expectations.

Woman-identified self-loving Lesbians can dedicate our bodies to ourselves and then can actively share our love. We can autonomously express our sensuality, not just serve a partner or prove someone else's superiority. We can love someone who is our equal and remain a whole person in that relationship.<sup>19</sup>

Imitating men, wanting to be a man, attempting to gain privilege by bonding with men and taking part in their misogynist rituals—all of these accusations proved to lesbian-feminists that the butch was allied to the oppressive system

of heteropatriarchy. She was not woman-identified, she was not interested in a relationship among equals, she was not “self-loving,” she did not “remain a whole person.” Her allegiance to men, her desire to be the oppressor, clearly indicated that the butch was *male*-identified. She was clearly not in touch with woman-identification or feminism, and hence she was not connected to the true nature of lesbianism.

### **Mal(e)-identification: The case against the fem**

As the butch was often considered in lesbian-feminist discourse to be emulating the heterosexual man, the fem was portrayed as emulating the heterosexual woman. She was thought to have been inundated by the patriarchy’s definition of the feminine ideal, an ideal that the women’s movement was trying desperately to move away from. Femininity was said to be constraining to women; it was what men convinced women that they should look like and act like—it was most certainly not what women would be like if they were left to their own devices in a world free from gender oppression. For a lesbian to participate in such a male invented role play as femininity was to exist in a state of false consciousness and internalized oppression.

Phyllis, being completely brainwashed in society’s role of woman anyway, decided she must be the “femme.”<sup>20</sup>

**Femininity!** A patriarchal super-hype if there ever was one; a phoney ideal created by men, not by Lesbians; an ideal that heterosexual women embody to please men.

Femininity is in no way an inborn aspect of femaleness: our most innate, essential qualities as females can never be developed through the restraining, artificial posing, and mirror-gazing that is femininity. Men have taught women what they want women to be—they call it “feminine” or “womanly”; as Lesbians we need to be awake enough to realize that a male invention, a male fantasy trip is *masculine* to the core, no matter what it is named, no matter how

many women go along with the lie. Femininity is not truly female; the similarity in the words is a lying male trick.<sup>21</sup>

The fem was thus defined by lesbian-feminist discourse as “not truly female,” and hence not truly lesbian, if she continued to wear skirts, heels, or makeup after she had been introduced to the feminist movement. If she took pride in wearing such feminine garb, she was considered to be consciously partaking in an oppressive, male invented plot to keep women subservient and in control—she was a traitor to her sex. She was thought to be allied with patriarchal values, and imitative of heterosexual women, which obviously alienated her from true lesbian identity.

[P]olitically-aware Lesbians must understand that femininity cannot be a desirable behavior among Lesbians.<sup>22</sup>

I call feminine clothes “drag” because they are a male-invented, phoney, game-playing het costume. Het women’s lives are based on lies that are repeated so often, and acted out so often, that the truths about themselves as females and potential Lesbians are buried deeper than deep: het women are dead to themselves as true females. ...they don’t know what the needs of a female soul are, or they wouldn’t be het.... So why are so many Lesbians imitating het women?<sup>23</sup>

It is very difficult to realize and accept that being “feminine” and being a whole person are irreconcilable.<sup>24</sup>

The clothes that I wear are not the kind men designate for women: they are the cheaper, sturdier, warmer in cold weather, less constricting and more protective clothing that men would like to reserve for themselves. ...My Dyke clothes also free my movements to be more natural to myself, because they don’t create or require the artificial constraints that feminine clothes do: the smaller steps, the legs kept together, the restricted shoulder movements, the fussing with hair, jewelry, and makeup that we’re used to seeing in women.<sup>25</sup>

If one was a politically aware lesbian, then she would know that femininity, a type of heterosexual posturing, hid one’s true female (and lesbian) nature from her. She would know that feminine clothes such as

skirts and heels were torture devices which kept her from experiencing her natural self, and that she could become more in touch with her natural female/lesbian self if she would free up her movements, her body, her soul by putting on a pair of jeans, workboots, and a loose-fitting man's workshirt. In the above quotes, the female nature—"the female soul"—was stated to exist in direct opposition to both femininity and heterosexuality. Via this reasoning, the lesbian-feminist was placed at the center of what was said to be the essence of the authentic female, while heterosexual women and fem lesbians were placed squarely outside of the definition of true female essence. Het women, and the fem lesbians who imitated them, "were dead to themselves as true females;" they were even dead to themselves as whole persons. Fem lesbians were once again defined to be taking part in an inauthentic lesbian identity.

In early lesbian-feminist discourse, butches were often the ones who bore the brunt of accusations of being "male-identified." Later strains of lesbian-feminist discourse, particularly ones that arose from lesbian separatist theorists, declared that it was not the butch, but the fem who was the most male-identified of lesbians. Those theorists posited that butches were women who had resisted feminine training since childhood; they were not trying to be men, they were simply acting out their natural female inclinations to resist the femininity which was forced upon them by the heteropatriarchy. Fems, however, did not resist their heteropatriarchal training to be feminine. Since femininity was obviously a male invention, fems were thought to be more male-identified, particularly if they clung to their "feminine privilege" throughout their lives. Fem lesbians were said to oppress butches, who, since they had resisted feminine training, bore the brunt of society's hatred of non-

feminine women. Again, fems were placed outside of the definition of the real lesbian.

The fact is, Lesbian butches are more truly female-identified than the femmes who criticize them: it's butches rejection of femininity—that very male invention—that offends these femmes. Never does it occur to such femmes that they themselves are the ones who need to become more female-identified, that is, more Lesbian-identified.<sup>26</sup>

In a Lesbian context, FEMININITY = HETEROSEXUALITY = CLOSETED = PRIVILEGE = LESBOPHOBIA.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of male-identification, which was used by many lesbian-feminists to attack and invalidate butches, was now being used by others to attack and invalidate fems. Whichever partner in the dyad was being attacked, the method of disavowing their roles was similar: the condemnation of the butch role or the fem role as “male-identified” and hence inauthentic, as opposed to another form of lesbian representation which is defined to be natural, real, evolved, authentic.

### **Sex and power, like oil and water...**

Overtly defined erotic roles were a distinctive element of working-class butch/fem cultures throughout the 50s and 60s.<sup>28</sup> The butch's role was to be the openly visible sexual aggressor. It was customary for her to “be on the top” during sexual encounters—she was to take great pleasure in sexually satisfying the fem that she was with. Some butches consented to being sexually pleased by their fem partners, others did not allow it—they were said to be “stone butches.” The fem's role was not the sexual aggressor per se; hers was not as “forward” as the butch's role. For this reason, fems were often viewed as passive, not the initiators of sexual activity. It was customary for

her to “be on the bottom” during sexual encounters--she was to be satisfied by the butch. Butch/fem sexuality sometimes included the use of dildos, and couples often enjoyed penetrative sex.

Lesbian-feminists argued that butch/fem lovemaking reinforced the oppressive sexual roles that had been created by the heteropatriarchy to objectify women. They viewed the sexual exchange between the butch and fem as being unequal, especially in the case of stone butches who would not allow themselves to be touched. Some lesbian-feminists argued that butches were on a male power trip in bed, which was evidenced by the fact that they used dildos to “fuck” fems. This behavior further supported their hypothesis that butches simply wanted to be men; they obviously were using dildos as penis substitutes.

I feel that only those women with hangups about their sexual identity and desire to be as much a “man” as possible use [dildos] consistently.<sup>29</sup>

For the butch to be “as much a ‘man’ as possible” during sex meant a number of things to lesbian-feminists. It meant that she was attempting to dominate and control the fem sexually; “the butch does what she wants, the fem does what she’s told.” It meant that she was doing the fucking, and that she derived power from fucking. Lesbian-feminists believed that penetration was something that heterosexual men did to objectify women (or that butches did when imitating men), and they hoped to move lesbian sexuality away from such practices. One lesbian-feminist writer, in a 1975 article entitled “Nobody Needs to Get Fucked,” had this to say about how lesbian sexuality should progress:

Lesbianism is, among other things, touching other women—through dancing, playing soccer, hugging, holding hands, kissing.... Lesbians need to free the libido from the tyranny of orgasm seeking. Sometimes hugging is nicer.

If we are to learn about our own sexual natures we have to get rid of the male-model of penetration and orgasm as the culmination of lovemaking.<sup>30</sup>

Penetration—fucking—was stated to be male-identified and hence unnatural for lesbians. In order to learn about their own “sexual natures” (their authentic sexuality), lesbians needed to avoid penetration and other male-centered forms of sexuality, including goal-oriented, orgasm-seeking sex. To play roles in sex, or to place too great an emphasis on sex—those things, too, were considered to be destructive, patriarchally invented patterns. Pure, untainted lesbian sex was to be focused on love, caring, caressing, and kissing.

Loving another woman offers the rare possibility of stepping out of those sexual roles that the patriarchy has taught us from childhood: madonna and whore, butch and femme, slave and master.<sup>31</sup>

Men who are obsessed with sex are convinced that lesbians are obsessed with sex. Actually, like any other women, lesbians are obsessed with love and fidelity.<sup>32</sup>

Women base their relationships on love, whereas men base theirs on sex.<sup>33</sup>

In another strain of lesbian-feminist discourse, it was the fem who was thought to be on an oppressive power trip during sex. She greedily demanded that butches sexually service her, forcing her partner to fit the stereotype of the stone butch so that she would not be forced to reciprocate in bed. The fem was considered to be a manipulating, heterosexist woman who really wanted a man, so she demanded that butches be her male substitutes, complete down to the dildo.

[M]any Fems are attracted by the stereotype of the “stone butch” ...Many Fems want to believe that Butches enjoy their role and that they get something out of inequality in lovemaking....  
By never making love to their lover, but only being made love to, they can fantasize that they’re really with a man.<sup>34</sup>

Power tripping in sexual encounters, whether enacted by the butch or the fem, was definitely out of the question in the lesbian-feminist vision of equality. They hoped to free sex from the corruptions of power; as if sex would flow freely and naturally if power were not there to constrain, stifle, or repress it. It was thought that the overt power dynamics in butch/fem sex repressed a more “natural” lesbian sexuality. If lesbians were to be true to themselves sexually, then they would have to rid themselves of the false dynamics of butch/fem roles in bed.

**I was lost but now I’m found...**

#### **The lesbian-feminist conversion and the butch/fem confession**

One of the most common devices used by lesbian-feminist writers to convince their readers of the evils of butch/fem was to include the personal testimony of a lesbian who used to be into role playing—who used to identify as butch or fem—but was trying to break free from her old, oppressive habits. These women, who were obviously so moved as to be propelled to confess their personal transformations publicly in lesbian-feminist newsletters, were butches and fems who had come to realize, through introduction to the women’s movement and lesbian-feminism, that role playing was oppressive and unevolved. Feminism had changed their lives, they typically confessed, and now they were trying to transcend their roles to become more in touch with their womanhood, and with their true female and lesbian selves.

The pattern in these stories was one of conversion and confession. The butch or the fem, blundering unhappily along in her shallow role playing existence, has a conversion experience with feminism, in which she is enlightened and introduced to truth. She then comes to share her new found knowledge in the form of a confession to those who had converted her in the first place. The truth about role playing, the truth about butch/fem, and the truth about lesbian-feminism, are produced in her confession.

Consider the following example from a 1974 lesbian-feminist publication. The woman who tells the story is a recovering butch. She pointedly explains to the reader what her life was like in the past, how she used to feel and act during her day of role playing. The picture that she paints is one that was clearly meant to shock the feminist sensibilities of the non-role playing lesbian, and confirm her suspicions that butch/fem was indeed a destructive imitation that should be eliminated. Consider the language our ex-butch narrator uses in the following passages:

I was a butch. I cut my hair short and combed it as much like a man's haircut as I could. I walked bowlegged—guess it made me feel tough.

...

I wanted to be a stud—in other words, I wanted to please many women. I wanted one woman to love, support and defend. Of course, she had to meet certain qualifications. She had to be tiny, good looking, and blonde. She had to be able to cook, wash, iron, and keep house—also handle financial affairs—I hate that! Most of all she had to want only me, jump at my slightest command, and never look at another butch, liable to severe punishment.<sup>35</sup>

The former butch confesses that in her role playing past, she emulated men—she tried to look as much like a man as possible, she wanted to be tough, to be a stud, to sexually conquest many women. When she searched for a romantic partner, she judged the candidates on what were thought to be oppressive male standards: how good she looked, how well she could “keep house.” It

was clear that our narrator did not plan on doing any of the housework; she planned to take the traditional male role in which she would not need to do “women’s work.” She wanted a partner who was willing to be commanded and dominated; she wanted a woman to hang on her every word; she was willing to punish her fem if the need arose. These descriptions are meant to convince the lesbian-feminist reader that roles are indeed oppressive. She learns that it is *true* that the butches treat fems like chauvinistic straight men treat women—a “revelation of truth” which confirms what was already suspected about butch/fem role playing in the first place.

We then learn that our butch was unsuccessful in her attempts to find fems who want to settle down. She describes how negatively things were progressing back then, how badly she was feeling. We are led to believe that her life was empty because of the artificial role she was playing—it kept her from being able to relate honestly with other women. At this low point in her life, the butch is introduced to a woman who she describes as “skinny, no make-up, her hair was a mess, flat chested, and not too friendly either.”<sup>36</sup> This woman is obviously not into roles, and as such the butch does not know how to deal with her. They go out a couple of times, but have trouble communicating. The butch is portrayed as being unable to conceive of relationships outside of clearly marked roles. Then, one fateful night, this unique woman begins the process which will change our butch forever.

Well we became pals and one evening under the stars she said to me, “What is this butch business anyway?” I damn near swallowed my tongue. This girl wasn’t a butch or anything, she just hadn’t been around. So I told her how I felt. She wasn’t about to be owned by anyone. I found out later that she was afraid of me because of my masculine, dominant, possessive traits. What she wanted was a woman. I did a lot of soul-searching and let a little of the softness in me come out. You know we started out new. She began to be less frightened of me and I began to really fall for her and so our relationship began.<sup>37</sup>

The butch begins to step out of her role, to let her “real” self show through, and because of it she is able to find love and a meaningful relationship. This contrasts her descriptions of the superficial and short-lived relationships that she experienced while heavily into butch/fem. Role playing is portrayed as an impediment to communication, a stifling mask which covers the true nature of the lesbian so that she can neither see anyone beyond it, nor be seen by anyone through it.

Then I was introduced to WLF and I learned how women were oppressed and how I was oppressed as a woman. You know—things were beginning to fit into place. I was a chauvinistic bastard. I was guilty of oppressing the woman I loved. After some consciousness-raising with the gay women in WLF, I started to change.

...

Our love has grown and matured. We have found that there is no reason for the butch and fems—that we are women in love. We feel none of the guilt that society has tried to inflict us with. As a result we can contribute more to society separately and together.<sup>38</sup>

Through her introduction to feminism, the butch is enlightened. She learns that her masculine persona was a false disguise that she had been using to oppress women. She begins to transcend her role through consciousness raising, and she comes to realize that roles are both oppressive and unnecessary. By breaking through the cover of acting butch, she has found her true identity as a woman and as a lesbian. Everyone is clear of the lessons learned; the authenticity of woman-identified lesbian identity has been upheld, and the inauthenticity and backwardness of butch/fem role playing has been proven yet again. And all of this is known to be “truth,” because it is supported by the confession of a real live ex-stud butch.

Such conversion/confession stories were not uncommon in lesbian-feminist discourse. The image evoked by these descriptions is one that smacks of a Christian conversion mission, where the heathen (butches and

fems) are approached by the missionaries (lesbian-feminists) who come bearing the truth and light (feminism) which will lead to salvation and heaven. Salvation is the acquisition of true lesbian existence, heaven the promise of liberation. Lesbian-feminists were the embodiment of that truth, of that authentic lesbian existence; butches and fems were those who lived in darkness, caught in the throes of inauthentic lesbian identity.

That butches and fems were portrayed as heathen, or as savages living in a backward culture, is fairly clear—one need only look as far as the imagery and language used to describe butch/fem role playing in lesbian-feminist discourse. Role playing was often said to be a practice of “old gays” before feminism was known, of the young, confused and uninitiated, and of the working-class with their rudimentary cultural practices. Each of these groups was characterized as taking part in a role playing ritual that they, by themselves, could not fully understand; it was only through the assistance of the objective, educated, liberated, civilized lesbian-feminist that these unknowing role players were able to find the road to salvation. The lesbian-feminist came to the land of the afflicted carrying the truth of feminism. She knew the truth; in fact, she embodied the truth of true female/lesbian identity. The truth was mapped upon her body, her self; it was defined as an innate part of her. As the butch or fem was introduced to this truth, she went through a circular process of self-evaluation, confession, and transformation to become aware of the inauthenticity of her role, and of her own potential authenticity hidden away within her true female nature, trapped beneath her role. She experienced a conversion via lesbian-feminism, a conversion from role playing to non-role playing, from unreal to real, from lies to truth, from darkness to light. And it was through the weight of her confession—since we

expect that the confession itself will produce truth—that the reader was once again confirmed in the authenticity of lesbian-feminism.

### **Constructing the real and the fake**

Lesbian-feminists had provided a deceptively simple theory as to why butch/fem role playing was destructive to the Lesbian Nation. Their criticism was based on the hypothesis that butches and fems were role players, and on the assertion that whether or not one role played was what distinguished the conscious lesbian from the unconscious, the corrupted lesbian from the pure, the real lesbian from the fakes. To qualify and quantify their accusations of role playing, they posited exhaustive examples. They argued that butches and fems were imitators of oppressive heterosexual roles; they noted that butch/fem role playing was a syndrome often developed as a side effect of a destructive and unhealthy bar culture; they accused butches of being misogynist and power hungry in their emulation of heterosexual men; they claimed that fem lesbians who wore the accoutrements of heteropatriarchally defined womanhood were either brainwashed or traitors to the cause; they asserted that butch/fem sexual roles were oppressive because they linked power with sex and encouraged penetration. All of these accusations made against butches and fems, all of these crimes that were listed, were steadfastly asserted as being oppositional to the true female nature, healthy lesbian culture, and real lesbian identity. The roles, they declared, were false and inauthentic. What was “underneath the roles,” what was said to be present before their application, what had hence been sullied by their application, what would exist on its own if it hadn’t been corrupted by the power of patriarchy—what was defined to be a type of androgyny or rolelessness—was named as real and authentic. A real lesbian was androgynous, roleless; she

was not-butch, not-fem; she was nurturing, loving, not obsessed with power and sex; she focused on woman-positive recreational activities such as consciousness raising and political struggle; she was woman-identified, in touch with her true female self. A fake lesbian was the sum of her roles; she was butch, fem; she was overly focused on sex and fucking; she reveled in the seedy and unhealthy working-class bar culture; she was male-identified, in touch only with the heteropatriarchy, which made it impossible for her to be in touch with her true female nature.

This “role playing as unnatural” theory was easily graspable for most lesbian-feminists who chose to wield it—it was appealing because it explained the rules neatly in essentialist terms of natural versus unnatural. Any complications thereafter lay in how thoroughly one wanted to apply the rules, how strictly one wanted to interpret what a role play was, how invested one became in naming a particular behavior as butch or fem, as male-identified or woman-identified. It gave lesbian-feminists a working theory as to what a real lesbian was, what a real identity consisted of, and it gave them a butch/fem other to oppose that identity against, to separate themselves from, to place themselves above using the terms of authenticity to buttress their definitions, classifications, and lines. The butch-fem other that lesbian-feminists so carefully separated themselves from, that they so vehemently sought to exclude from what they defined as real lesbian identity, conspicuously and unfailingly consisted of working-class women, women who frequented bars, women who liked to fuck and said so, women who looked too much like men and the women who desired them.

Lesbian-feminist theory about the values of role playing versus non-role playing was not presented as an argument of the pros and cons of one resistance strategy versus another. The argument was not couched in the

terms of “androgyny or rolelessness as a political strategy,” where androgyny as a method of resistance was thought to exceed the capacity of butch/fem in its ability to overturn the patriarchy. Rather, the argument was couched in the terms of “androgyny as essential,” and “androgyny as truth,” and hence it was posited to be the only real strategy to freedom. And so a category of truth, authenticity, and freedom was born, a role play of truth if you will, in which those who insisted that they had not/would not become caught up in the inauthenticity and oppression of butch/fem roles began to police themselves so that they would not fall into those patterns. They began to carefully monitor themselves so as to assure that their true lesbian and female selves would exist. Naturalness and authenticity was assured, through the careful monitoring of behavior, through the separation of role playing from non-role playing behavior, through the delineation of what was male-identified or woman-identified behavior, through constant self-evaluation, through the differentiation between self and other, through confession of truth (a confession which was thought to free us from the pressures of power which repressed that truth), through the interpretation of that confession, and so forth.

Lesbian-feminists claimed to have the answer to the question of what a real lesbian was. They had successfully cornered the market on lesbian identity. They had created an androgynous ideal—a mode of self-representation that one was to aspire to which was not too butch or too fem. Some of the androgynous terrain was clearly mapped out: one would wear pants, a workshirt of some sort, no makeup, no jewelry, hair cropped short, sensible shoes or work boots. But not everything was so certain as it seemed—the terms of this “natural” androgyny were constantly being mapped and re-mapped. What else, besides the clothes they wore, did

lesbians have to police, define, and control in order to ensure that they remained lesbians? Their choice of words? Their sexual activity? Their choice of recreation?

Lesbian-feminist discourse promised a direct line to the truth—the truth of female nature, the truth of lesbian identity, the truth of freedom. But the truth of lesbian identity—what it was, what it was not—was produced as an effect of the discourse itself. That is to say, the discourse shaped what truth was, and that truth was constantly refined and re-invented through the discourse. The truth was further and more carefully delineated; the authentic lesbian identity was created, recreated and refined through the careful application of a discourse which classified and confessed, incited subsequent re-evaluation and adaptation in order to embody the truth, which was followed by further classification, confession, and so on—circling, adapting, and further inventing the real.<sup>39</sup>

The lesbian-feminist discourse around role playing versus non-role playing lesbians had created, delineated, and refined what was said to be true lesbian identity. It appeared that this definition of lesbian authenticity had been sent directly from the goddess—the truth had been stated, a lesbian people were born, and feminist liberation was their lifeblood. But the goddess, and the “true” lesbians that she smiled upon from above, had really been created from below—by lesbian-feminists themselves.

**Section 3:**  
**Pro-Butch/Fem Writing**  
or  
**If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to be a Part of Your  
Revolution**

They're right about needing a revolution, but they're  
wrong to think they can do it without all of us.<sup>40</sup>

Over the past decade, there has been a steady proliferation of pro-butch/fem writing within feminist discourse, including a marked flowering of writings over the past few years. To say that pro-butch/fem authors have been influenced by the lesbian-feminist critique of butch/fem would be a dramatic understatement. Most pro-butch/fem work contains some element of response to the lesbian-feminist discourse of the seventies and eighties, be that response explicit or subtle, stated or implied. Pro-butch/fem writing—critical essays, novels, poetry, or short stories—is inevitably informed and shaped by the history of lesbian-feminism, and is often an open critique of the assumptions and assertions of anti-butch/fem discourse.

It is interesting to examine the relationship between pro-butch/fem writing and lesbian-feminist discourse. In what ways have butch and fem writers entered the discourse around lesbian identity? What methods have they used to legitimate themselves within a feminist and lesbian discourse which has largely written them off as inauthentic and non-viable subjects? In what ways has pro-butch/fem writing challenged the assumptions and assertions of lesbian-feminism? Is the writing simply defensive against

lesbian-feminist attack, or does it move beyond the original constructs of the debate to introduce a different set of rules or ask a different set of questions?

This section provides an analysis of only a few of the many pro-butch/fem writings which have been published to date. Considerable emphasis is placed on Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*, as it provides an interesting and complex example of how recent pro-butch/fem writing has responded to lesbian-feminist discourse and has begun to question the methods that have been used to create and legitimate lesbian identity.

### **Butch souls, fem souls**

The logic of the lesbian-feminist argument which posited butch/fem as oppressive and inauthentic was painfully self-consistent. To try to find points of resistance within the confines of its essentialist assumptions was like punching one's way out of a paper bag. One method of challenging the lesbian-feminist critique of butch/fem has been to accept the essentialist nature of the discourse and argue that butch and fem *are* natural lesbian identities; that butches and fems are the way they are because they are born into butchness and femness, that butch or fem is a part of the lesbian soul.

The so-called uniform of boots, jeans and flannel shirt is a butch uniform. The uniform has served me well at times. However, it is not my first choice for myself when in a safe (non-male) atmosphere. When I wear flowing cotton dresses on a hot summer day I believe it is a femme choice coming from my authentic lesbian self.

Today I believe my femme lesbian self is part of a natural style authentic to me.<sup>41</sup>

Being a butch—like being a woman, a lesbian, having a soul—is not something I can dismiss. I believe that butches are born, not made. Since this is my birthright, I choose to glory in it. When I comb my hair back and strut out my front door, being butch is my hallelujah.<sup>42</sup>

The authors of these quotes deal with the terms of authenticity and naturalness that were so often wielded by lesbian-feminists to discredit butch/fem. This time, though, it is butches and fems who are claiming their authenticity, their realness, on the assertion that their roles are not artificial, that they are not a cover for a truer and more androgynous self. Paula Mariedaughter, the fem quoted above, argues that it is not the false mask of femininity which hides her true self, it is the enforced uniform of lesbian-feminism which has stifled her. The role that she has been forced to play is not that of the fem, but that of the androgynous dyke. This argument of born butches and natural fems seems especially attractive because it turns the tables on lesbian-feminists. It refuses to accept the lines of natural-ness drawn by lesbian-feminist discourse and simply redraws new lines to include butch and fem as authentic. It does not, however, challenge the assumption of authenticity as being necessary for identity.

### **Lesbian-feminist gospel and *Stone Butch Blues***

A number of pro-butuch/fem authors have avoided making the essentialist argument that butches and fems exist naturally and have instead moved into a more complicated analysis of the historical constructions, deployment, and meanings of butch/fem in lesbian and feminist contexts. These writers usually insist on a butch/fem presence in shaping queer and feminist movements, and as such they must deal head-on with the history of lesbian-feminist attack on butch/fem.

A rich example of how pro-butuch/fem writing has come to resist the effects of lesbian-feminist discourse is Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. The novel is the life story of Jess Goldberg, a stone butch. It

traces the events of her life from her childhood in the fifties, to her coming of age as an adolescent butch in the early sixties, to her acquaintance with butch/fem bar culture through the late sixties and early seventies, to her experiences passing as a man during the late seventies and early eighties, to her re-emergence as a butch in the eighties and nineties. The novel describes how changes in the economic and political forces of history affect Jess and the working-class butch/fem community that she is a part of. The reader watches Jess as she is introduced to the civil rights movement, black power, the anti-war effort, labor union organizing, Stonewall and the gay rights movement, and, of course, lesbian-feminism.

Feinberg's novel is clearly shaped and informed by the lesbian-feminist critique of butch/fem; indeed, many of the characters and subplots within the book seem to be responding to the invisible lesbian-feminist accusations which haunt its pages. The same familiar questions linger, constantly begging to be proven or disproven. Are butches and fems really like heterosexuals? Were the bars really oppressive and unhealthy? Do butches really want to be men? Are they sexist pigs? Are fems really confused heterosexuals? Are they dominated by butches? Is the sex riddled with negative power dynamics? Feinberg's story and characters provide responses to these criticisms, but the answers that she offers are often not the simple "yes" or "no" that the ardent lesbian-feminist might demand. Feinberg complicates the questions by redefining the arguments which surround them. She refuses to accept many of the assumptions of lesbian-feminist discourse, while remaining acutely aware of what those assumptions have been and how they have been deployed in anti-butch/fem critique. Feinberg's novel ultimately insists that there are more choices, more answers, and even more questions, than lesbian-feminists have allowed us to believe.

To fully explore the ways in which Feinberg's novel responds to the countless assertions of lesbian-feminist discourse would take considerable time and effort. Rather than embarking on an analysis which would "prove" how Feinberg refutes each point of lesbian-feminists, it is my intention to explore the ways that *Stone Butch Blues* comes to trouble the debates of authenticity and realness that swirl within lesbian-feminist definitions of lesbian identity. That is to say, I would like to move beyond simply providing answers to stock lesbian-feminist questions and explore the ways that Feinberg questions the notion of authenticity itself, and what new challenges this might raise when re-thinking how we define lesbian identity and community.

Perhaps Feinberg's greatest challenge to notions of authentic identity in *Stone Butch Blues* is the way she presents the categories of man and woman, butch and fem. She contests the notion of distinct lines between these categories—she presents no "authentic woman" or "authentic man" in her novel, nor does she essentialize, encapsulate, or quantify what it means to be butch or fem. As the book progresses, and as Jess's consciousness grows, those identity categories become more troubled. Living in a world that constantly asks if she is a woman or a man, and experiencing a lesbian-feminist dogma which insists that she must be woman-identified or male-identified, Jess ultimately comes to believe that those questions simply do not account for all of the answers that she can provide.

Man or woman? That is a question that haunts Jess Goldberg throughout the pages of *Stone Butch Blues*. Her experiences of gender trouble begin when she is quite young, as she recognizes in herself a child that is not easily categorized as a boy or a girl.

I didn't look like any of the girls or women I'd seen in the Sears catalog. The catalog arrived as the seasons changed. I'd be the first in my house to go through it, page by page. All the girls and women looked pretty much the same, so did all the boys and men. I couldn't find myself among the girls. I had never seen any adult woman who looked like I thought I would when I grew up. There were no women on television like the small woman reflected in this mirror, none on the streets. I knew. I was always searching.<sup>43</sup>

Discovering a working-class butch/fem community during her adolescent years in Buffalo, New York, provides at least a temporary sense of relief from the nagging question of woman or man. It is there that Jess finds women whom she feels are like herself; they are strong, muscular women who dress in men's clothing and desire fem women. However, after spending a number of years in this community of butches, fems, and drag queens, Jess comes to realize that the category "butch" is just as tenuous and complicated as the categories "woman" and "man." Jess questions throughout the novel what it means to be a "real" butch—what a butch looks like, who a butch loves, what a butch desires, how a butch has sex, and so on. Later in her life, when she is grappling with the idea of taking hormones and passing as a man, she must again ask herself a familiar question: is a butch a woman or a man? If she begins to pass as a man, will she still be a butch? Was she ever really a butch to begin with? Or a woman? Will she become a man, or is she a man already? She discusses these questions with a number of her butch friends who are also considering hormones:

"You know Ginni? She got on a sex change program, now she calls herself Jimmy."

Edwin glared at Grant. "He asked us to call him he—remember? We ought to do it."

Jan put her beer bottle down on the table. "Yeah, but I'm not like Jimmy. Jimmy told me he knew he was a guy when he was little. I'm not a guy."

Grant leaned forward. "How do you know that? How do you know we aren't? We aren't real women, are we?"

Edwin shook her head. "I don't know what the hell I am."

**"What happens? Does it just last for a little while? I mean can you go back to being a butch later, when its safe to come out?"**

**"How do you know you're not a transsexual? Maybe you should go to the program and find out."**

**I shook my head. "I've seen about it on TV. I don't feel like a man trapped in a woman's body. I just feel trapped."**

**Grant sipped her coffee. "I don't know. Maybe I am really a guy and I was just born wrong. That might explain a lot of stuff."**

**"So why don't you go to the program?" I asked her.**

**She smiled wistfully. "Because what if I'm not? What if it turned out I'm something even worse than I thought? Maybe it's better not to know."<sup>44</sup>**

Jess and her friends are forced to grapple with the confusion and anxiety which surrounds their conceptions of gender identity, their notions of being butch. Are they men, women, or transsexuals? Can they ever know for sure, and if they can't know, is it really better not to know? Can anyone ever really know if they are a man or a woman? If so, how can they be sure?

Jess makes the decision to take hormones, to begin passing as a man. Upon making that decision, she and her girlfriend Theresa discuss the possibilities for continuing the relationship while Jess is passing:

**"You're a woman!" Theresa shouted at breakfast.**

**"No I'm not," I yelled back at her, "I'm a he-she. That's different."**

**"This is the only way I can think of I can still be me and survive. I just don't know any other way."**

**Theresa sat back in her chair. "I'm a woman, Jess. I love you because you're a woman, too. I made up my mind when I was growing up that I was not going to betray my desire by resigning myself to marrying a dirt farmer or the boy at the service station. Do you understand?"**

**I shook my head sadly. "Do you wish I wasn't a butch?"**

**She smiled. "No. I love your butchness. I just don't want to be some man's wife, even if that man's a woman."**

**Theresa shook her head. "I don't want to be with a man, Jess. I won't do it."**

**"I'd still be a butch," I protested. "Even on hormones."**

**"If I'm not with a butch, everyone just assumes I'm straight. It's like I'm passing, against my will. I'm sick of the world thinking I'm straight."<sup>45</sup>**

What is interesting about this discussion is that Theresa realizes the potential for Jess to be not simply a woman or a man, but to be both and neither. She insists at first that Jess is a woman; she does not believe that Jess's butch identity opposes that womanhood. She believes that passing will change Jess into a man, and that being with Jess as a man will betray her desire for women. Theresa is a lesbian, and she will not be any man's wife, even if that man is a woman. The reader is left to wonder exactly what is it that will transform Jess from a woman to a man. The hormones? The fact that others will perceive her to be a "real man" if she passes? Will she then become a real man, or will she still be something else? Jess insists that if she cannot be a woman while she is taking hormones, she can still be a butch. Will the hormones not affect her butchness? Will passing not affect her butchness? What exactly does butchness mean if it is an identity which can transcend the categories of woman and man? And what of her lesbian identity? Theresa does not want the world to assume that she is straight because she is with a man. But will she be with a man, or a lesbian? Will Jess's lesbian identity become annulled by her attempts to pass? Is Jess even a lesbian at all?

When Jess begins to pass, she grows a beard and has surgery to flatten her chest. People begin to treat her differently; where she was once harassed in public, she is now smiled at and flirted with. But the initial excitement wears off quickly; she discovers that the same questions and struggles over her gender identity still linger in her mind. After passing has isolated her for a few years from her community, Jess reunites with an old fem friend who used to frequent the bars. They discuss what it has been like for Jess to pass as a man.

"There's never been many other women in the world I could identify with. But I sure as hell don't feel like a guy, either. I don't know what I am. It makes me feel crazy."

Edna nestled against my shoulder. "I know, honey, I really do. I don't think I've ever had a butch lover who hasn't felt torn up in the same way."

"Yeah," I shrugged, "but it's different for me because I'm living as a man. I don't even know if I'm still butch any more."

She nodded. "It's true that you and Rocco have a tough time figuring out how to be yourselves and still live. But believe me, honey, you're not alone in the feeling that you're not a man or a woman."

I sighed. "I don't like being neither."

Edna moved her face close to mine. "You're more than just neither, honey. There's other ways to be than either-or. It's not so simple. Otherwise there wouldn't be so many people who don't fit."<sup>46</sup>

Again, Jess's concern while passing is not simply whether she is a woman or a man; she also wonders if her butch identity has remained intact. In her previous conversation with Theresa, Jess seemed confident that she would still be a butch underneath the cover of passing, but now she is not so sure. Does one have to remain a woman to remain a butch? Does that category become meaningless in the context of passing?

Jess is pushed to re-think her definitions of butch even further when she discovers that Frankie, a longtime butch friend, has taken another butch for a lover. To Jess, butch and fem exist as a sexual dyad; she believes that one defining aspect of being butch is taking fem women for lovers. She is so shaken with Frankie's news that she refuses to speak with her about it. Frankie replies:

"What's your fuckin' problem with me? Are you really gonna cut another butch loose just because you can't deal with who turns me on?"

I wished someone had muzzled me because I was so worked up I couldn't control my mouth. "What makes you think you're still a butch?"

Her smile was cruel and defensive. "What make you think you're still a butch?" she countered.<sup>47</sup>

The questions that they ask one another are telling. How has each come to think of themselves as butch? How has each come to think of the other as butch? Why are those identities suddenly in jeopardy? Does one have to be a woman to be butch? Does one have to sleep with fems? Is it inner desire, or outward presentation that makes one butch?

It is years later, long after she has stopped passing as a man, that Jess is able to apologize to Frankie. Jess comes to the realization that the concept of butch does not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone, and she shares those thoughts with Frankie:

You know, Frankie, when we were younger, I thought I had it all figured out: I'm butch because I love femes. That was something beautiful. Nobody ever honored our love. You scared me. I felt like you were taking that away from me."

Frankie rested her hand on my arm. "You and I have to hammer out a definition of butch that doesn't leave me out. I'm sick of hearing *butch* used to mean sexual aggression or courage. If that's what butch means, what does it mean in reverse for femes?"

I shook my head. "I never thought about it like that. But I have to admit that when you told me about you and Johnny, the first thing I wondered was, who's the femme in bed?"

Frankie leaned forward. "Neither of us were. What you meant was who does the fucking and who gets fucked? Who ran the fuck? That's not the same as being butch or femme, Jess."<sup>48</sup>

Frankie and Jess come to the realization that although they might mean different things when they use the term butch to define themselves, they still find it valuable and useful to share that identity. The two agree to make an effort to "hammer out a definition of butch" which includes them both. This willingness to "rebuild" butchness opposes the notion that butch must be a static or authentic category in order for it to be useful in building community.

When she stops taking hormones, Jess returns to her former status of he-she. She returns to the life of a gender outlaw, continually facing harassment and physical attack in public. Feeling as though there is nothing to keep her in Buffalo (most of her friends from the old bar community have drifted apart due to harsh economic times), Jess decides to look for job opportunities and start a new life New York City. Upon moving into an apartment in Manhattan, Jess discovers that she has a neighbor named Ruth who is “different” like her; that is to say, Ruth’s status as man or woman is as unclear as Jess’s. Ruth is a male who cross dresses and lives as a woman. The two become friends and eventually fall in love with one another. The lines of Jess’s identity become further blurred—she is neither a man nor a woman, and she takes a lover who’s gender identity is equally complex. As they discuss how their sexual relationship might progress, Jess relays her fears to Ruth:

Ruth’s face was very close to mine. We became aware of the symmetry of our breathing. She slid her hand slowly along my body from my chest to my stomach. She dropped her eyes. I chewed my lip. “I’m afraid,” I answered the question she hadn’t asked out loud.

“Why?” she asked. “Because I’m neither night nor day?”

“Yes.”...“But that’s only part of it. If I really have to be honest, it’s because I’m afraid not to be with someone who is night or day. I guess I felt like the femmes I was with anchored me. It was the closest to normal that I’ve ever felt.”

We lay quietly. I kissed her hair. “Oh, Ruth, I haven’t had to navigate sex in a long time, with anyone. I don’t even know who I am as a lover anymore.”<sup>49</sup>

What does it mean that Jess has fallen in love with a man who lives as a woman—in terms of her identity as a woman, as a butch, as a lesbian? Because Ruth is a biological male and Jess is a biological female, does this now mean that they are a “straight” couple? Or, are they both women? Are they both men? Are they simply a butch and a fem together, while other gender categories need not apply?

It is while she is in New York that Jess experiences her most direct confrontation with lesbian-feminism. In perhaps the most ironic moment of the book, Jess visits a feminist women's health clinic after she has developed a yeast infection that can go no longer without treatment. The clinic is for women only; the reader is cued that its structure has been based on the ideals and assumptions of lesbian-feminism. As she approaches the reception desk, the women in the waiting room gawk at Jess. They assume she is a man, and when she tells them otherwise, they do not believe her. The passage is worth quoting at length:

"I have a vaginal infection. I came here for help."

The receptionist nodded. "Have a seat, sir."

I debated leaving, but the itching and burning were getting worse every day. I watched the receptionist greet the woman who arrived after me. "Just pull your own chart and have a seat," she said. "The doctor will be with you shortly. Help yourself to herbal tea."

Everyone in the waiting room was staring at me. I looked at the bulletin board: women's dances and rituals; therapists, masseuses, and accountants. New symbols: a two-edged hatchet, a circle with a cross at the bottom. New names: Goodwomyn, Silverwomyn.

I could hear myself being discussed in loud voices. "He's crazy."

"Well, why can't they be crazy in their own space?"

I found an empty chair and sat down. I noticed a book on the rack next to me called *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and made a mental note to buy it in a bookstore.

A shadow fell across me—a woman with a clipboard. Her nameplate read Roz. Once inside the examining room Roz threw down her clipboard on the desk and nodded down toward a chair. "What's this all about?" All my words tumbled out. I tried to tell her everything—who I was, why I'd come.

Roz sat back in her chair and nodded as though she really understood. Then she said, "I don't know what your problem is, but this is a clinic for women who are sick and you're using up that resource right now."

"What?"

"You may think you're a woman," Roz continued, "but that doesn't mean you are one."

My anger ignited. "Fuck you," I shouted.

She leaned back in her chair and smirked. "What a very male thing to say."

I felt my face grow purple with rage. "Fuck all of you!" I got up to leave.<sup>50</sup>

What is it that Jess must do in order to be a woman in the eyes of Roz and the rest of the women at the clinic? Obviously, *thinking* that she is a

woman is not enough. Saying that she is a woman is not enough. Saying that she has a vaginal infection, and hence a vagina, is not enough. Does Jess need to drop her pants in the middle of the waiting room to prove her womanhood to the judges in this clinic? Or is having a vagina not enough to be a woman? Does Jess have more of what it takes to be a man than what it takes to be a woman? By whose standards will this be measured? Is her vagina the last claim to that which society—or lesbian-feminists—will accept as “proof” of womanhood?

But who was I now—woman or man? I fought long and hard to be included as woman among women, but I always felt so excluded by my differences. I hadn't just believed that passing would hide me. I had hoped that it would allow me to express the part of myself that didn't seem to be woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she though. I simply became a he—a man without a past. Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked.<sup>51</sup>

*Stone Butch Blues* does not present the reader with an authentic butch, an authentic woman, or an authentic lesbian. The identity categories that Feinberg presents are unstable, troubled, shifting, and constantly transforming. She forces the reader to stumble over familiar questions time and again: Is Jess Goldberg a woman? What is a real woman? Is she a man? What is a real man? Is she a butch? What is a real butch? Is she a lesbian? What is a real lesbian? The novel demands that we look for a right answer, but then confounds us by changing the rules, teases us by blurring the lines, and pushes us by demanding that we look for answers where we only find more questions. Feinberg contests the very notions of authentic or real identity that lesbian-feminist discourse so heavily relied upon, and challenges the reader to attempt to conceptualize identities and communities which are not based upon those terms.

## Section 4: Conclusions

Lesbian-feminist discourse of the seventies and eighties attempted to provide us with an authentic lesbian identity. The terms of that authenticity were based on distinctions between role playing and non-role playing lesbians. But who was to decide what was role playing? Who was to decide if and when someone was guilty of "unlesbian" practices? What was to happen if one was discovered to be a fake? Who was to police the real and the unreal? What was at stake? Who got to be the "realist"?

Leslie Feinberg contests such notions of authentic lesbian identity in her novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. She presents no authentic butch or fem, no authentic lesbian, no authentic woman or man. The identity categories she presents are ever-changing in their meaning and their deployment. She blurs the lines between the very same identity categories that lesbian-feminists sought to pinpoint, to freeze with relentless essentialist discourse. At the same time, Feinberg recognizes the historical importance of identity categories in the formation of communities or as rallying points for the oppressed.

Perhaps at this point it would be advantageous to raise questions for future feminist thought on the subject of identity categories. Do we agree that identity categories remain useful for the building of community? As political banners under which we can rally? If identity categories do remain useful, can we begin to conceptualize such categories which are not couched in essentialist notions of real and unreal? Is it possible to base identity categories on aesthetic appeals rather than essentialist ones? If distinctions and

exclusions must be necessary for the category to function, which distinctions shall be championed and which shall be dismissed?

Perhaps it is time to abandon altogether the idea of identity as a basis for feminist politics. For butches, fems, drag queens, he-shes and she-hes, this may be where the story begins.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Minh-ha, Trinh T., "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," *Making Face, Making Soul*, ed. Anzaldúa, Aunt Lute Foundation Books.

<sup>2</sup> By lesbian-feminist I mean to imply a particular brand of feminism which enjoyed its heyday in the late 60s, 70s, and early 80s. The term isn't meant to imply that all people who call themselves lesbians and feminists subscribe to the political beliefs which I hold lesbian-feminism accountable for within this paper. The hyphen between the words lesbian and feminist denotes a reference to a historically significant political movement.

<sup>3</sup> Brownworth, Victoria, "Butch/Femme: Myth/Reality or More of the Same?," *Wicce*, Number 4, summer 1975, pg. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Klaich, Dolores, *Woman + Woman: Attitudes Toward Lesbianism*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1974, pg. 241.

<sup>5</sup> Lyon, Phyllis and Martin, Del, "Realities of Lesbianism," *Motive Magazine*, March-April 1969, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Shelley, Martha, "Gay is Good," *RAT*, February 24, 1970, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 66.

<sup>8</sup> For an in depth discussion of the ideas of gender performance, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> For more about working-class butch/fem bar culture, see Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country*, *The Persistent Desire*, a femme butch collection edited by Nestle, and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lopovsky Kennedy's study on working class lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York. Full citations in bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Shelley, Martha, "Something it Means to be a Lesbian," *RAT*, February 24, 1970, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, Eleanor, "Metamorphosis of a Stomping Butch," *The Lesbian Feminist*, June 1977, pg. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Abbott, Sidney and Love, Barbara. *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, Stein and Day, 1972, pg. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Casey, "Women's Bars: Entertainment or Exploitation?," *The Lesbian Feminist*, January 1979, pg. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Bart, Pauline, "Femme and Butch, A Readers' Forum: My Brief Career as a Femme," *Lesbian Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 2, fall 1986, pg. 92.

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- 15 Shelley, "Something it Means...", *op. cit.*
- 16 Bart, *op. cit.*, pg. 93.
- 17 Crane, Mary, Letters to *Lesbian Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 1, spring 1986, pg. 102.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 Cooper, E., and Lilliandaughter, T., "Why Lesbian Feminists Talk So Much About Sex and Relationships," *The Lesbian-Feminist*, June 1982, pg. 3.
- 20 Martin, Del and Lyon, Phyllis, *Lesbian/Woman*, Bantam Books, New York, 1972, pg. 6.
- 21 Strega, Linda, "The Big Sell-Out: Lesbian Femininity," *Lesbian Ethics*, Volume 1, Number 3, fall 1985, pg. 73.
- 22 Penelope, Julia, "Heteropatriarchal Semantics: Just Two Kinds of People in the World," *Lesbian Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 2, fall 1986, pg. 77.
- 23 Strega, *op. cit.*, pg. 82.
- 24 Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," reprinted in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, eds. Jay, Karla and Young, Allen, Douglas Books, New York, 1972, pg. 176.
- 25 Strega, *op. cit.*
- 26 *ibid.*, pg. 78.
- 27 Penelope, *op. cit.*, pg. 80.
- 28 Again, for more about working-class butch/fem culture, see Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country*, *The Persistent Desire*, a femme butch collection edited by Nestle, and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lopovsky Kennedy's study on working class lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York. Full citations in bibliography.
- 29 Klaich, *op. cit.*, pg. 49.
- 30 Lipschutz, Barbara, "Nobody Needs to Get Fucked," *Lesbian Voices*, Volume 1, Number 4, September 1975, pg. 57.
- 31 Cooper, *op. cit.*
- 32 Grahn, Judy, "Lesbians as Bogeywomen," *Gay Women's Liberation*, January, 1970, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 35.
- 33 A Redstockings Sister, "I am 23, a Mother, and a Lesbian," *RAT*, August 1970, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 100.

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- 35 "Gay Experiences – The Sisters Speak Out: High School," *Ain't I A Woman*, July 1970, reprinted in *Lesbians Speak Out*, Women's Press Collective, 1974, pg. 53.
- 36 *ibid.* pg. 53.
- 37 *ibid.* pg. 53.
- 38 *ibid.*, pg. 54.
- 39 For a further analysis of confession and the production of truth, see Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*. Full citation in bibliography.
- 40 Feinberg, Leslie, *Stone Butch Blues*, Firebrand, New York, 1993, pg. 214.
- 41 Mariedaughter, Paula, "Too Butch for Straights, Too Femme for Dykes," *Lesbian Ethics*, Volume 2, Number 1, spring 1986, pg. 98, 99.
- 42 Cordova, Jeanne, "Butches, lies, and feminism," *The Persistent Desire*, ed. Nestle, Alyson, 1992, pg. 272.
- 43 Feinberg, *op. cit.* pp. 20-21.
- 44 *ibid.* pp. 144, 145, 159.
- 45 *ibid.* pp. 147-148, 151.
- 46 *ibid.* pg. 218.
- 47 *ibid.* pg. 207.
- 48 *ibid.* pp. 273-274.
- 49 *ibid.* pg. 270.
- 50 *ibid.* pg. 235.
- 51 *ibid.* pg. 222.

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