

BOOTS OF LEATHER

Chorus

For she walks in boots of leather
And in slippers made of gold;
She will be a child forever
And forever, she'll be old.
She's the heroine of legends;
She's the eagle and the dove.
She's the daughter of the moon;
She's my sister and my love.

She was born in winter's fury,
with the wind about her ears.
She was raised on strife and sadness,
and the city-dweller's fears.
She was nursed on wine and bloodshed
and she cut her teeth on steel;
and she wept alone in darkness
for the pain she was to feel.

Chorus

Many nights can fill a cavern;
many days can dry the seas;
many years will dull the longing
and erode the memories.
Ever more the granite forests
make a place for her to dwell.
And the streets of sleepy dreaming
Make a story she can tell.

Chorus

—Madeline Davis c. 1974

*Boots of Leather,
Slippers of Gold*

THE HISTORY OF A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

*Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy
Madeline D. Davis*



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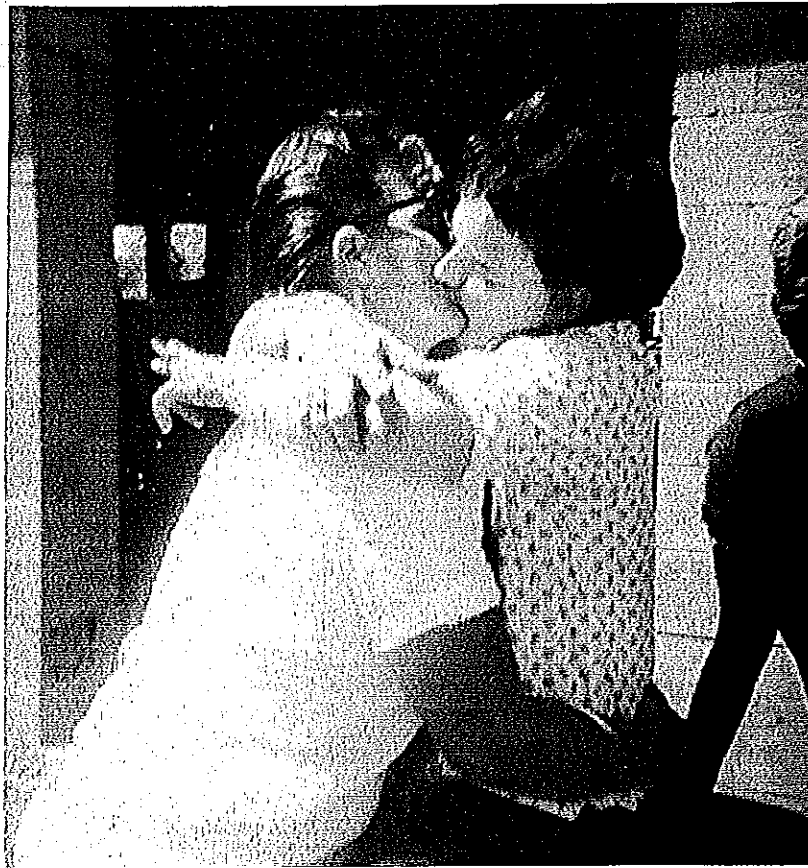
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To the women who have gone before us, brave women, outlaws,
who sought only to find a life of love and dignity, and some of
them did.

**"NOW YOU GET THIS SPOT RIGHT HERE":
BUTCH-FEM SEXUALITY DURING THE
1940s AND 1950s**



16. The kiss, early 1960s

Women who were new to the life and entered bars have reported they were asked: "Well, what are you—butch or femme?" Many fled rather than answer the question. The real questions behind this discourse were, "Are you sexual?" and "Are you safe?" When one moved beyond the opening gambits, a whole range of sexuality was possible. Butch and femme covered a range of sexual responses.

—Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s"

... all they had to give was themselves & they gave that. Judith felt the tension in the butch's body—she wanted to release that tension. And the butch's only thought was that she wanted to please her femme.

—Red Jordan Arobateau, *Jailhouse Stud*

The meaning of butch-fem roles during the 1940s and 1950s was multidimensional. In addition to the political implications embedded in butch-fem appearance, butch-fem roles organized lesbian intimacy, creating and expressing a distinctive lesbian eroticism.¹ Intrinsic to the butch-fem dyad was the presumption that the butch was the physically active partner and the leader in lovemaking. As D.J., who has given this much thought, explains, "I treat a woman as a woman, down to the basic fact it'd have to be my side doin' most of the doin'." Insofar as the butch was the "doer" and the fem was the desired one, butch-fem roles did indeed parallel the male-female roles in heterosexuality. Yet, unlike what transpires in the dynamics of most heterosexual relationships, the butch's foremost objective was to give sexual pleasure to a fem. It was in satisfying her fem that the butch received fulfillment. "If I could give her satisfaction to the highest, that's what gave me satisfaction." As for the fem, she not only knew what would give her physical pleasure, but she also knew that she was not the receptacle for someone else's gratification. Charlie remembers her pleasure: "I really didn't do anything, just laid there and enjoyed it." The essence of this emotional/sexual dynamic is captured

by the ideal of the untouchable butch, or the "stone butch," that prevailed during this period. A stone butch does all the "doin'" and does not ever allow her lover to reciprocate in kind. To be untouchable meant to gain pleasure solely from giving pleasure.

The erotic was as important as the political in the system of meanings created by butch-fem roles. When explaining how they recognized a person's role, narrators regularly referred to sexuality as well as image, even though sexual posture was less immediately apparent. In most instances, although not in all, image and sexuality were congruent, in the sense that the more masculine appearing woman was also the more aggressive sexually:² "You can't tell butch-fem by people's dress. You couldn't even really tell in the '50s. I knew women with long hair, fem clothes, and found out they were butches. Actually I even knew one who wore men's clothes, haircuts and ties, who was a fem" (Reggie). In these exceptional cases, sexual posture was usually taken as the primary indicator of a person's role. This is consistent with the fact that sexual posture had the most important implications for daily socializing in the community, indicating with whom a person might find sexual satisfaction.

The key to understanding the butch-fem erotic system is to grasp that it both imitates and transforms heterosexual patterns. The obvious similarity between butch-fem and male-female eroticism was that they were both based on gender polarity: In lesbian culture, masculine and feminine imagery identified the objects of desire; aggressiveness and passivity were crucial to the erotic dynamic. There were also more subtle parallels. Even the butch's concern with pleasing her fem was not an idea original to lesbian culture. The middle-class marriage manuals of the 1930s and 1940s emphasized the importance of husbands pleasing their wives.³ On the whole, these books treated women's sexuality as something mystical and hidden, which had to be awakened by a committed and loving man. They urged husbands to please their wives and extolled the joys of mutual—especially simultaneous—orgasm. In addition, the ideal of the untouchable bears a striking resemblance to male sexuality as it was characterized during most of the twentieth century, in which the focus was exclusively on the penis's sexual prowess, ignoring the sensuality of the entire male body.⁴

Despite these similarities, other features of lesbian erotic culture sharply distinguished it from that of the heterosexual world. First and foremost, gendered lesbian eroticism was rooted in the similarity of two female bodies, and as such was not governed by the demands and rhythms of the penis.⁵ Second, the butch-fem erotic system did not consistently follow the gender divisions of the dominant society. The active or "masculine" partner was associated with the giving of sexual pleasure, a service usually assumed to be "feminine." Conversely, the fem, although the more passive partner, demanded and received sexual pleasure and in this sense might be considered the more self-concerned or even more "selfish" partner.⁶

Third, the butch's pleasure was defined solely in terms of pleasing her fem. Her activity was first and foremost directed toward giving pleasure. This was not true of men. The heterosexual advice books and columns were "taming" the "true" male sexuality by foregrounding the woman's pleasure. The unique sexual desire of the butch opened the pathway for the exploration and enjoyment of the fem's sexual potential. Fourth and finally, butch-fem erotic culture contained few sanctions against women's expression of sexuality. Sexual expression was associated primarily with pleasure. The dangers inherent in sex for heterosexual women in a male supremacist society—loss of reputation, economic dependency, pregnancy, and disease—did not exist and the community did not develop substitutes.

Lesbian culture, while drawing on heterosexual models, unquestionably transformed them into specifically lesbian interactions. Through role playing, lesbians developed distinctive and fulfilling expressions of women's sexual love for women. On the one hand, butch-fem roles limited sexual expression by imposing a definite structure. On the other hand, this structure organized and gave a determinant shape to lesbian desire, which allowed individuals to know and find what they wanted. Despite the dominant society's taboos, the vitality of lesbian sexual expression was such that members of the community developed rich and satisfying sexual lives.

Butch-fem erotic culture was in the process of creation and change during the 1940s and 1950s. Two somewhat contradictory trends in lesbian sexual expression emerged. The community became more open to the discussion of sexual matters, the acceptance of new sexual practices, and learning about sex from friends as well as lovers. The language used to discuss sexuality expresses this change. Narrators of the 1940s seem most comfortable using the word "intimacy" for the discussion of sexual matters, while those who came out in the 1950s use the words "sex" and "sexuality" with freedom and ease. At the same time, the rules of butch-fem sexuality became more rigid as community concern for role-appropriate behavior increased.

These contradictory trends in attitudes and norms of lesbian sexuality parallel changes in the heterosexual world. Movement toward open discussion of sex, acceptance of oral sex, and teaching about sex took place in the society at large, as exemplified by the publication of and the material contained in the Kinsey reports.⁷ In *Intimate Matters: The History of Sexuality in America*, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman identify the 1920s as the turning point in which a system of sexual liberalism—one that values the heterosexual expression of sexuality in its own right, at least inside marriage—came to predominate over the nineteenth-century emphasis on sexual control.⁸ From this point on, there was a consistent trend toward valuing heterosexual sexual expression in all segments of society, despite minor setbacks during the Depression and the postwar return to domesticity. The movies and other media explicitly conveyed the importance of heterosexual

expression. Youth culture encouraged heterosexual petting. Birth control became more acceptable and more readily available, allowing the pursuit of sexual pleasure without the fear of pregnancy.

Similarly, the lesbian community's stringent enforcement of role-defined behavior in the 1950s occurred in the context of the postwar retreat to a stricter gender division of labor and the specifically sexual ideology that accompanied it. Like heterosexual society, the lesbian community experienced a temporary step backward in a trend toward less rigidly defined gender roles. These parallels indicate a close connection between the evolution of heterosexual and homosexual cultures. Our research suggests, however, that it is misleading to assume that the heterosexual world unilaterally determined the culture and behavior of the lesbian world or that the lesbian world was simply a reflection of the heterosexual world.

As an integral part of lesbian life, lesbian sexuality developed as one facet of the community's changing resistance to sexism and lesbian oppression. The lesbian community had to forge its own sexual culture, defying social norms about heterosexuality and gender. Even though society was becoming more liberal about heterosexual expression, it continued to condemn homosexuality, even instituting new prohibitions.¹⁰ But it was not only lesbian sexual identity that was difficult to achieve. Despite the new sexual liberalism, the sexual identity of women was fragile. Developing sexual subjectivity, therefore, was a harder process for lesbians than for gay men, because, in the heterosexual world, male sexual expression was unabashedly recognized and in many cases glorified. The heterosexual double standard toward women discouraged women's sexual expression, not to mention its celebration. Women tended to be less precocious sexually and learned about sexuality through men.

The evolution of the lesbian community's sexual mores was integrally related to its move toward pride and defiance. In the community of the 1940s, which was just beginning to support places for public gatherings, the majority was reticent about sexuality. As bar culture became more elaborate and open, lesbians gained pride and consciousness of kind. They exchanged information about all aspects of their social lives, including sexuality, more freely. Discussion of sex was one of many dimensions of an increasingly complex culture. The instruction of newcomers even came to include sexuality. This public recognition of sexuality gave lesbians the support to affirm their own sexuality and explore new horizons. At the same time, the community's growing public defiance produced an increased concern for enforcing role-appropriate behavior. To deal effectively with the hostility of the straight world, and to support one another in physical confrontations, members of the community developed rules of appropriate behavior and forms of organization and exerted pressure—particularly on butches—to live up to these standards. Because roles organized intimate life as well as the community's resistance to oppression, sexual performance was

a vital part of these 1950s standards. For the tough butches, being able to please a woman more than a man could was as important in the defense of the community as were their skills in fighting.

The sexual revolution of the 1920s had a mixed impact on women. Although it affirmed the existence of women's sexual desire, the result was to define women's sexuality in the service of men, the family, and the state. Atina Grossmann concisely characterizes this legacy:

We are only now beginning to pick up where they, our grandmothers, left off. We are confronting the multiple ways in which their sexual revolution (like ours of the 1960s?) freed women only to please men or reject them, liberated women in terms women themselves did not determine, and finally subordinated women's freedom to the interests of family and state. They provided us with no solutions. They did, I think—if we find and listen to them—identify the terms of the argument and raise the essential questions.¹¹

Like most scholars writing on women's sexuality in the twentieth century, Grossmann overlooks the contribution of lesbians during the 1940s and 1950s in affirming and defining women's sexual desire. Essentially, as lesbians came to their sexual subjectivity, they were pioneers in women's struggle for sexual autonomy—that is, their ability to decide what they want and their power to obtain it—as well as in the struggle of homosexuals for the right to a decent life. They embodied the new ideas that women had sexual desires, that sexual pleasure was separate from reproduction, and that sexuality could exist outside of marriage. Above all, in lesbian culture, women's sexual expression was something powerful and pleasurable.

To illuminate the connections between lesbian sexuality and the cultural and political developments in lesbian community, this chapter explores the changing dynamics of the butch-fem erotic system in the 1940s and 1950s, paying particular attention to the social meaning of the "stone butch." Since coming to sexual subjectivity was such a major step for women of that period, we also document the way lesbians learned about sex and examine the place of sexual pleasure in lesbian culture. This chapter on sex and sexuality, like those which follow on relationships and identity, is not organized around distinctions between the Black and white communities; nor around the distinctions between the upwardly mobile and rough and tough communities. From our narrators' life stories we were unable to discover significant differences between subcommunities on these topics.¹² This has the effect of homogenizing the social positions of narrators, and in an inherently racist society this creates the illusion of whiteness. We ask the reader to remember that narrators who are identified by name and known, therefore, from preceding chapters, are Black and Indian as well as white, and we will restate this occasionally throughout the text.

LESBIAN SEXUALITY IN THE 1940s

During the 1940s, the forms of sexual expression for butch and fem were expected to be different, with the butch being the more active or aggressive partner. This difference was part of the moral fabric of lesbian culture, as D.J. explains: "There can always be a change of love, the caressing, but only to a certain degree. Not the same as a butch, there would be a limit. . . . As I say, my morals are high, and what a butch does and what a fem does is . . . a different thing." When asked if other butches would agree with her, she replies:

"Yeah, if they had any respect for the woman they were with. I mean this is the way I look at it, I treat a woman as a woman, not as, I don't know how the hell you put it. I mean there had to be love on both sides, but I mean down to the basic fact, it still had to be my side doin' . . . most of the doing. [Fems didn't do the same things] not right down to the last nitty-gritty. Oh a few things, you know, but . . . see a true fem at that time really didn't do things [that] sometimes the butches do. How they do it now I have no knowledge of that at all."

In the 1940s most butches—Black, white, and Indian—were "aggressive" and did not allow their partners to "reciprocate" in lovemaking. (This was the language used for butch sexual behavior at that time. The terms "stone" and "untouchable" were not yet part of common usage.) Their satisfaction came from pleasing the fem. "Oh yeah. If I could give her satisfaction to the highest that gave me satisfaction. And her putting her arm around me and the necking back and all this, to a certain degree, it was beautiful" (D.J.). The language other butches use to explain their sexual behavior is strikingly similar. In response to our question about why her sexual relationships were not reciprocal, Arden says: "For me satisfying women was very important."

Joanna, who had a long-term, nonreciprocal relationship, tried to challenge her partner's behavior but met only with resistance. Her butch's whole group—those who hung around Ralph Martin's—was the same. "Because I asked her one time; I said, 'Do you think that you might be just the only one?' 'Oh no,' she said. 'I know I'm not, you know, that I've discussed with . . . different people.' [There were] no exceptions, which I thought was odd, but, I thought, well, this is how it is." For Joanna, the sexual restrictions were a source of discomfort. "It was very one-sided, you know, and . . . you never really got a chance to express your love. And I think this kind of suppressed . . . your feelings, your emotions. And I don't know whether that's healthy. I don't think so."

Although Joanna was interested in being more active, contradicting D.J., many fems did want to be the less aggressive partner. When asked if butch and fem had different roles Charlie replies:

"Years ago, definitely. . . . But I haven't been around that much either, like fifteen years with one and eleven years with the next one. That takes care of a quarter of a century. But I haven't tried enough of them probably. . . . The [butch was the] aggressive person, just their attitude I guess, 'I am boss. And you do what I tell you.' There's a stronger want that a butch would have years ago for a fem, to just try and overpower you. . . . [In my first relationship] she was the aggressor and liked it. . . . I guess I was having too much fun to ask her [how things were supposed to be]. I never asked. Nobody told me anything. . . . I didn't understand how she could have such great desires for me without me having some act in this except to be on the other end I guess you call it. I enjoyed it. . . . I didn't ask questions, I just went along with the whole thing."

She did not try to reciprocate: "No, I was scared to death of that part. . . . Making love to her. Yeah, I was scared to death, 'cause it wasn't in me. It wasn't me to do this and she never let me do anything." Pearl has similar memories: "The fem didn't do anything at the time. . . . I didn't want to and I didn't." She characterizes the attitude of butches: "Just don't touch me. Let me do what I want with you but don't you do anything with me, except maybe kiss you, and hug and stuff like that, but not anything very personal. . . . If you would do anything that they didn't want you to do they would kind of let you know in the way they acted that you shouldn't do that." Although fem narrators, including Joanna who had been interested in taking a more active role in lovemaking, understand the butch as the more aggressive partner, especially in regard to the expression of sexual interest, in their minds butch aggressiveness is related to erotic desire and pleasing, and not to violence or pain.

Butch and fem sexualities were strongly internalized and were not easily discarded as times changed. Even though in the 1960s and 1970s more and more lesbians practiced mutual lovemaking, most butches who had been active in the 1940s did not alter their patterns. Fems were more likely to make some changes, especially when going with younger women. Joanna, who had been interested in more reciprocal sex in the 1940s, was in a relationship, twenty years later, based on mutual lovemaking. Charlie, when requested, hesitantly began to make love to her partner.

"[I did] not for a long time. . . . 'Cause I was told, you just don't do that. . . . That's a tough question. I don't know, I never changed, I was always scared. But then I met someone that was a little more commanding, more demanding, you know, 'This is the way you do it.' And I guess I just went along with that too. But I mean as far as for myself to go out and look to find somebody to—I never have. That would have to be a very rare occasion. In fact, all occasions, when we get older, get rare."

Although difference between butch and fem in intimate life was the norm, deviation was neither censured nor stigmatized. The underlying reality of two

women together made reciprocal sex an ever-present possibility. Two butch narrators did not strictly follow the butch-fem pattern, which means, of course, that there were fems who did not follow it either.¹³ Reggie questions whether there really was a difference between butch and fem sexuality. She is ambivalent, affirming that lovemaking was mutual, while at the same time stating that one person had to be more aggressive. "You distinguished the difference of the two people . . . [by] the parts you played. But what part is it? Because basically if you want to get technical when you hit that bed you make love to one another. But I guess there's always got to be someone to be a little more aggressive, so to speak."¹⁴ Her memories suggest that while there was a cultural logic to butch-fem behavior, there was also a compelling logic of the similarity among women. Dee claims that her relationships were mutual except for one. She guesses that for most women at the time sex was reciprocal but she is not sure because sex wasn't talked about that much: "As far as the gang I knew at that time . . . it was equal. But of course that was not discussed too very much at that point, in the '40s and '50s. It was quiet then. There would be . . . much more [discussion] in this more modern day and age, you know, with freedom of information." The reticence about discussing sexual matters made it difficult for the community to inculcate or enforce sexual norms.

When divergence from the social norm was noticed, it was not considered problematic. Leslie and Arden, who had strict standards for butch sexuality, reminisce fondly about a friend who they described as being "*comme ça, comme ça*." "She had a great social life and was more like the kids today." They remember asking her, "What the hell are you?" She responded, "A lavender butch." This meant she was a butch, but "femmy." The term was not pejorative; it was self-descriptive rather than a stigmatized community label. Such persons were easily integrated into community life.

The 1940s was a transitional time for lesbian intimacy in Buffalo. Within the common framework of butch-fem sexuality, the community contained significant variation in sexual mores—attitudes about sex as well as actual techniques of lovemaking. The patrons of Ralph Martin's adhered to more conservative sexual values, while those in Winters were more radical, presaging what were to become the sexual norms of the 1950s.¹⁵ Since Ralph Martin's was the biggest and most popular bar of the period, it is fair to say that most people held conservative values. However, since the attitudes and values of the Winters' patrons came to predominate in the next decade, their importance in the culture of this period was greater than their small numbers would suggest.

The lesbian patrons of Ralph Martin's did not discuss sex openly. "People didn't talk about sex. There was no intimate conversation. It was kind of hush, hush. . . . I didn't know there were different ways" (Leslie). By contrast, this narrator recalls a visit to Winters, where other women were laughing about "sixty-nine." "I didn't get it. I went to [my girlfriend] and said, 'Somebody says "sixty-nine" and everybody

gets hysterical." Finally, her girlfriend learned what the laughter was all about. At that time Leslie would have mentioned such intimacies only with a lover; and even then she would not discuss the actual experience of sex. It wasn't until later that she got into bull sessions about such topics. D.J., who was a regular at Ralph Martin's, also emphasizes how sexuality was never discussed.

"In fact this is the first I've ever really talked like this even about it. 'Cause I've always figured what I did with a woman, and this is why I always respected the fem, what I did with her was with me. I kept it that way. I wouldn't go out and broadcast, 'Oh geez, I had Nelly Belly last night and we did this.' That would be showing no respect for the woman you were with. And I never talked about what I did when I was with someone. I always figured that was personal; something between us that no one could talk about, knock her, or anything else about it."

The predominant form of lovemaking, at least for the core group of patrons at Ralph Martin's, was what clinicians called "tribadism" or what most narrators for this period call "friction." Another narrator remembers women from this period calling it "banging." (Not all narrators from this group could easily come up with words for their sexual practices, which must be a function of not discussing them with one another at the time.) Most narrators who frequented Ralph Martin's did not engage in oral sex and Joanna says it was never discussed.¹⁶ Some may have practiced it, but her butch of the time certainly did not:

"Oh my God, [she] wouldn't even discuss [oral sex]. Would never discuss it. . . . The group she hung around were very straight laced. . . . Bet she thought it was a little more heterosexual in making love her way. Maybe she, maybe she thought it was her way of, you know, her way of expressing her [self]. I don't think she in fifty million years could ever have oral sex. Really. I know she couldn't."

Becoming a sexually active lesbian did not mean that a person cast aside other sexual prejudices. This group of friends had a reputation for sexual conservatism that continued into the 1950s and 1960s. Whitney, a fem of the younger generation, remembers that one or two held on to their aversion to oral sex: "When they would see mouthwash in somebody's bathroom, that person was automatically oral, and they were a dirty person."

The Winters' patrons had a more open, experimental attitude toward sex. They discussed it unreservedly and accepted the practice of oral sex. These women threw parties in which they tried threesomes and daisy chains. "People would try it and see how it worked out. But nothing really happened. One person would always get angry and leave, and they would end up with two" (Arden). Even if their sexual adventures did not always turn out as planned, the Winters crowd was unquestionably innovative. In this atmosphere partners talked together about sex, giving a little advice, "a little to left" (Arden). They did not, however,

experiment with dildos or sex toys. No narrators from either Ralph Martin's or Winters had ever used a dildo, although most had heard that some people did. Arden did not feel that they were necessary for pleasure: "I thought it was silly. If a woman wanted the male apparatus she might as well be with men." Nevertheless, the Winters crowd was expanding the possibilities for women's sexual satisfaction and beginning to find and enjoy sex without love, a radical undertaking for their time. Arden reminisces that it was always a contrast to go home to the serene life of her religious family.

This greater freedom of sexual expression was developed within the framework of butch-fem eroticism. Mutual lovemaking was not part of this group's freer approach to sex. In fact, Dee, who states that the majority of her lovemaking was mutual, did not go to Winters and, like most patrons of Ralph Martin's, was conservative on sexual matters. She and her friends did not engage in discussions of sex, and she never tried oral sex until the 1960s, when she was introduced to the practice by a lover. In addition, she strongly disapproved of the sexual experimentation of the Winters crowd. She had been invited to some of their parties but never attended.¹⁷

"[A friend] wanted me to go to this daisy chain gang on Lexington Avenue, and I was not interested. I have never been at all intrigued by multiple sex or sex orgies or groups of people having sex at the same time, because to me that is not love. It is reducing sex to an animal level and I consider myself above an animal. I love dogs, but I don't think I'm an animal, and to me sex should be intimate between two people with love involved. . . . I never went. . . . I just said, 'Thanks but no thanks.' I didn't go for that type of thing."

Inasmuch as pursuing lesbian sex itself implied a divergence from traditional social norms, the predominance of the more conservative sexual mores in this community indicates how hard it was for women to make a complete break with their upbringing. Just as for heterosexuals, lesbian sexual morality was in transition during this period. But the different sexual morals existed side by side arousing personal curiosity in some, moral judgment in others, but nothing more that might engender conflict or division within an otherwise homogeneous community. Lesbian culture was not yet at a stage where it was reaching out and educating newcomers. There was not, as yet, the assumption of a common culture that supported all women in exploring their sexuality.

Distinctive aspects of the Winters group shed light on the complex process of changing sexual norms for women. Arden emphasizes that these women were older; in her view they knew more and were less shy. In essence, she is assigning women in their thirties and forties a leading role in sexual innovation. This contradicts most of the dominant ideas about women and sexuality. Yet there is substantial evidence that at that time, and even today, women continued to expand their capacity for pleasure as they aged.¹⁸ But age alone cannot explain the

difference, since very few, if any, of the Ralph Martin's patrons became as sexually experimental as the Winters crowd as they aged. Other factors also shaped the sexual mores of the Winters group. Some of its members may have been exposed to the sex education available in middle-class marriage manuals.¹⁹ The leader was a private secretary who had a little more money than the rest. She is remembered as a very charismatic person who talked a lot about sex. Her social position may have familiarized her with new middle-class attitudes about heterosexuality. In addition, this group had quite a few members who had been married and active heterosexuals. Arden identifies the married women as her best teachers. Perhaps through the process of leaving their marriages, these women gained enough confidence in themselves as sexual beings to create an environment that encouraged sharing information on sex among lesbians.

Given that most of the community did not discuss sexuality, and given that the lesbian community during this period did not reach out to or educate newcomers, how did lesbians become sexually active and develop themselves as sexual subjects? How did they learn about appropriate butch-fem behavior? The majority experienced their sexuality as something private and "natural," which did not need instruction. Butches took their own paths toward sexual expression, a difficult experience for some but not all. For fems it was easier, because they most often became sexually active with a more knowledgeable butch. In any event, when both were inexperienced the butch had the responsibility of knowing or figuring out what to do.

Arden and Leslie, the oldest butch narrators, who were teenagers in the early 1930s, were the ones who emphasize how difficult it was for women to become active sexually.²⁰ They did not have sexual relationships with women until their late teens and describe their early high school attractions as "innocently flirtatious" or "romantic." Leslie remembers that the objects of her affection would playfully encourage her: "[Two friends] and I would play a game. They would hold something over their heads and if I couldn't guess what it was I would have to go into the garage and kiss them." Although her interest in women was definitely sexual, the transition to having a sexual relationship was very hard for her. Since she was completely ignorant and inexperienced, she remembers being amused, when she first started going to the bars, by heterosexual women who were afraid that lesbians would attack them for sex: "It's funny I was kind of shy at that time. I did not know what to do anyway. It was hard for women, we did not have a sex education." She had no instruction and never had an affair with someone who was older or more experienced. But once she took the plunge, she had no difficulty. "The first time I was scared to death and then realized it was natural. . . . I did what I felt like doing."

Arden, who agrees with how difficult it was for women to know about sex, adds that her education was belated. "I had some good instruction at parties, but that was much later." Her instruction came when she joined the Winters crowd,

and provides yet one more example of its distinctive attitude toward sex. She cannot rave enough about her two teachers who were both older than she was and had been married. She also takes great pride in herself, commenting: "I was an apt pupil." Her assumption that one needs to be a student of sex was unique to the Winters crowd during this period, although it became basic to lesbian culture during the next decade.

Dee, who was of this same age group, had her first sexual experience in a short-lived marriage and then had no trouble expressing herself as a lesbian. After leaving her husband, she had continued to date men. Then, without any contact with the lesbian community, her relationship with a woman friend whom she met through the bowling team at work easily took on a sexual dimension.

"Well I was very fond of her. We started being friends in October when the bowling season opened, and New Year's Eve we had double dated, and the one fellow went home and the other one took me up to her apartment. We took her home, and he got drunk in the kitchen while we went to bed. And at that point I knew nothing about sex with a female, it just all came naturally. I hadn't read any books, I didn't know what to do, it just happened. . . . And after I got up we woke him up, we took a cab home. He lived a few doors up the street from me. Isn't that ridiculous? Heloise and I laugh about it to this day."

Narrators who were teenagers later, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, all became sexually active in their early teens, before they entered the lesbian community, and experienced no difficulties. The attraction to a woman led easily to sexual activity. Debra knew what to do in a relationship that became sexual when she was thirteen years old. "I felt I knew exactly what I was doing. It was what I wanted to do, and I did it. And we did it the whole time I was there." D.J. became sexually active in a girl's reform school, but again with no real instruction, learning it as she went along.

"The first, that goes way back. Well see, the main really right down to the nitty gritty, I was in Good Shepherd and I had the whole dormitory all by myself. There was no one else in there but me, and all the girls. I mean [no one] that was lesbian or homosexual, I was the only one. They thought I was a man running all through the place. And I had all the girls in the place! . . . Well as far as my dress, my haircut so forth and so on [they thought I was a man.] And you figure a dormitory as long as this house, beds on all sides and coming up the center, I had a good time. . . . I snuck out a few names, which you weren't supposed to. . . . Couldn't even use your own name there, we had different names they gave us. But I snuck out a few addresses and seen people afterwards. But that's really when I did everything right down to the works."

Before this she had only kissed girls, but she still had no trouble figuring out what to do when girls approached her.

"Well as far as kissing, put my arm around them and that, but the actual intimacy not till I got in there. . . . It just came natural. I woke up and some girl was leaning over me and that was that. 'Cause she thought I was a boy. . . . I don't know how the girls thought then, but they figured that was the closest looking thing to a man in the place. . . . She just leaned over and gave me a big smooch. And that was it. So I took over from there. . . . We used to sneak in the hall, and as I said news got around and there was quite a number."

When asked if any one of the girls had ever told her she was doing it right, she replies, in typical butch manner, by pointing to the successful results. "They seemed to enjoy it, so. . . . That was it. Everyone has their own way of doing things as far as that goes. . . . Satisfaction's there. . . . you ain't gonna knock it." The ultimate test was her partners' pleasure.

This story illustrates that butch-fem sexuality often existed without women having had contact with a lesbian community. There is evidence to suggest that popular culture of the first half of the twentieth century represented sexuality primarily in terms of attraction between masculine and feminine. In this conceptual system what was anomalous about lesbian relationships was the gender inversion of the butch rather than the interest of a feminine woman in a masculine woman. The former's sexual interests were following gender prescribed sexuality.²² Thus, when the young girl in the reform school leaned over D.J., she was not acting abnormally according to her cultural expectations, but responding to a masculine image that was familiar. Teenage passion allowed her to take the initiative, but did not fully break her feminine training. The young butch had already broken with feminine tradition, taking on more masculine attributes in her appearance and actions. Using a framework of gender roles, they nevertheless managed to transform the expectations of heterosexuality. They created a structure within which both could achieve fulfillment; the more masculine woman satisfying herself by becoming the active giver, and the more feminine woman; by being the receiver of pleasure.

THE SYSTEM OF BUTCH-FEM SEXUALITY IN THE 1950s

In the 1950s, the more experimental sexual mores of the Winters crowd came to predominate while those of the Ralph Martin's group virtually disappeared. Sex became a topic of conversation among all social groups. Oral sex became an accepted form of lovemaking, so that an individual who did not practice it was acting on personal preference rather than on ignorance or social proscription. In addition, most butch narrators for the 1950s recall having been teachers or pupils of sexual practices. Lesbian community and the resulting consciousness and pride had developed to the point where it could help all its members to leave their traditional women's upbringing and embrace these new sexual attitudes and practices. The new sexual mores had both a freeing and a repressive effect. They

expanded and developed ideas about sexuality, and validated sexual feelings. At the same time they set rigid standards of correct sexual behavior for members of the community.²³ This is vividly evidenced by the developments around butch-fem eroticism. Social pressure to conform to the stone-but^{ch} ideal and to be consistent in following the butch-fem erotic system increased throughout the decade.

As in the 1940s, narrators from all social groups agree that the butch was the leader or the aggressor in lovemaking, and the fem was the focus of pleasure. This was true by definition. If a person's behavior were otherwise she would not be butch or fem. "Butch, . . . whatever, that's just a monogram, it's just a—you got to call it something. No really, this is how I feel. I mean you could call me a door, I mean it just doesn't matter. I'm an aggressive sort of person with a woman" (Sandy).

In the 1950s, the stone butch became a publicly discussed ideal for appropriate sexual behavior, and by the late 1950s it was the standard that young butches felt they had to achieve to be a "real" or "true" butch. In contrast to the 1940s, a 1950s fem who was out in the community would not have to ask her butch why she was untouchable and if there were others like her. She would have known it was the expected behavior for butches.

There is some disagreement in the community over the definition of a stone butch. In the intimate moments between two women, how untouchable was she? Some butches claim that they were absolutely untouchable. That was how they were, and that's how they enjoyed sex. When we confronted Stormy, who referred to herself as an "untouchable," with the opinion of another narrator, who maintained that stone butches had never really existed, she replied: "No, that's not true. I'm an untouchable. I've tried to have my lover make love to me, but I just couldn't stand it. . . . I really think there's something physical about that." Sandy, another stone butch, explains:

"I wanted to satisfy them [women], and I wanted to make love—I love to make love. I still say that's the greatest thing in the world. And I don't want them to touch me. It spoils the whole thing. . . . I am the way I am. I'm not doing this because I'm pretending. This is my way. And I figure that if a girl is attracted to me, she's attracted to me because of what I am."

Other butches who consider themselves, and had the reputation of being, untouchable claim that it was, as a general matter, impossible to be completely untouchable. When asked if she were really untouchable, Vic replies, "Of course not. How would any woman stay with me if I was? It doesn't make any sense. . . . I don't believe there was ever such a class—other than what they told each other." Vic preferred not to be touched, but she did allow mutual lovemaking from time to time during her long-term relationships. A first time in bed, however:

"There's no way in hell that you would touch me . . . if you mean untouchable like that. But if I'm living with a woman, I'd have to be a liar if I said that she hadn't touched me. But I can say that I don't care for it to happen. And the only reason it does happen is because she wants it. It's not like something I desire or want. But there's no such thing as an untouchable butch, and I'm the finest in Buffalo and I'm tellin' you straight, and don't let them jive you around it—no way."

Vic's distinction between her behavior on a first night and her behavior in long-term relationships appears to have been accepted practice. The fact that some—albeit little—mutuality was allowed over the period of a long relationship did not affect one's reputation as an untouchable butch. Her perspective also indicates an undercurrent of pressure from fems to be permitted to make love to their butches.

In keeping with the ideal of untouchability, many butches did not take off their clothes in bed. Most butch narrators remember wearing a T-shirt and underpants to bed. If they were full-bosomed, they would take off their bra or binder, but they always wore a T-shirt. Little Gerry remembers: "If you wanted that close skin contact, you would take them off when you had sex. But you would put them on immediately afterwards. And you would not take them off every time."

The satisfaction stone butches experienced through pleasing their lovers was complex and not easily described. Since "friction" was no longer the dominant form of lovemaking, butches' genitals were not usually stimulated by direct physical contact. Many butches were and remain spontaneously orgasmic. Their excitement level peaks to orgasm while they make love orally or digitally to a woman. The nature of this orgasm is unclear. Some describe it as physical, while others think it is mental.²⁴ When asked if she had an orgasm while making love to her partner, Sandy said at first. "Not really, no. I'm satisfied, I'm happy. If she climaxes that's it for me." But pushed to describe her experience, she struggles to find the appropriate words.

"I experience something like that [an orgasm], but it's not—I don't know, it's really not a physical thing. I'm not lacking anything, don't want anything more. I can't say that I'm never satisfied, maybe not quite to what they [fems] want. . . . Like I feel a great excitement and a great joy. But not like they say they get. . . . I don't know how to explain. Like when they go off, like when it's there, I am just so enthralled, I just . . ."

The connection between her own sexual needs and those of her partner was so strong that Sandy does not consider physical satisfaction something which is necessary for herself. "And it's like when I'm in between affairs or whatever, oh what did this one girl say, 'Geez I haven't had it in so long I got to.' I don't have that, I don't need it. But if I meet someone I like, naturally I want to make love." Several other spontaneously orgasmic butches claim that masturbation gives them

no pleasure. These butches' sexuality was completely defined in terms of pleasing their fem.

Being an untouchable butch became an increasingly important part of community values as the decade progressed. For those coming out in the early to mid-1950s, it was possible to be respected yet touchable. For women coming out at the end of the decade, being butch and being a stone butch became the same thing. Several narrators, both Black and white, who came out early in the decade, recognized the ideal of the stone butch but paid it little attention. This attitude did not affect their respected position in the community. They were unquestionably the aggressors in lovemaking and that sufficed for their butch identity: Their reasons for not following the stone butch ideal indicate the vitality of lesbian sexual expression at the time. Matty, a touchable butch, suspects that most of the butches she knew in the 1950s were not stone butches, no matter what they said. In her mind, relationships require mutuality to survive:

"Once you get in bed, and the lights go out, when you get in between those sheets, I don't think there's any male or there's any female or butch or fem, and it's a fifty-fifty thing. And I think that any relationship... any true relationship that's gonna survive has got to be that way. You can't be a giver and can't be a taker. You've gotta both be givers and both gotta be takers."

Others, like Bert, who came out at about the same time, recognized the stone butch ideal, but left it behind for new found pleasures.

"When it came to sex [in the 1950s] butches were untouchable, so to speak. They did all the lovemaking, but love was not made back to them. And after I found out how different it was, and how great it was, I said, 'What was I missing?' I remember a friend of mine, who dressed like a man all her life... and I remember talking to [her] and saying to her, you know you've got to stop being an untouchable butch, and she just couldn't agree. And I remember one time reaching over and pinching her and I said, 'Did you feel that?' and she said, 'Yes,' and I said, 'It hurt, didn't it? Well, why aren't you willing to feel something that's good?'"

Lonnie also questions the stone-butch ideal, emphasizing that people should do what they feel:

"And these studs, talking about how 'I don't take the sheet.' You know what I mean, 'don't take the sheet,' don't you? That mean a stud make up to a fem all the time, a fem did not make up with a stud all the time. I don't believe in that. Don't nobody know what's going on when you close that door. If I kiss your body I want you to kiss mine, perhaps. You understand that?"

She goes on to point out how illogical it is to associate butchness and masculinity with not being touched, because certainly men like to be touched. "There's no

such thing as stone. You touch me. Hey, a man likes to be touched doesn't he. O.K. then, so what's the difference?"

The social pressure for achieving the ideal of "untouchability" became greater toward the end of the decade. To be a respected leader in this younger set, a butch had to be untouchable. And all butch narrators for this period claimed to have been that way and butches were competitive with one another about it. To this day, narrators still make jokes about whether everybody who claimed to be untouchable actually was. The standard of untouchability was so powerful in shaping the behavior of those butches who came out in the late 1950s that some women who had experienced and enjoyed mutual lovemaking before entering the community felt they had to renounce it. Jamestown Gerry learned about sex in her early teens, before having any contact with the lesbian community, from a very experienced feminine woman. All their lovemaking was mutual, which she found extremely satisfying. "It is something I never had in my whole life. I found something in that bed I had never found in my life. I found the warmth and release from the daily tension." When she entered the bar community, however, she willingly adopted untouchability as her sexual posture because she saw it as a logical component of the butch role. Her interest in experiencing the other kind of release never truly left her, and in the 1970s she returned to mutual lovemaking.

The social ideal of the stone butch meant many lesbians of this period never experienced mutual lovemaking. For some butches untouchability has remained their personal style until today.

"I just haven't changed, I have never changed. And I can say, I'll swear on this tape or on any bible you want, no girl has ever touched me. I mean the whole shot... You know they say, 'Well what do you get out of this?' I say, don't worry about me. Because I'm happy when they are, that is my specific role and I do my best." (Sandy)

Others became more experimental in the late 1960s and 1970s when community norms began to change. The standard of untouchability was so embedded in their identity that the change did not come easily. Black, white, and Indian narrators all describe having to reorient their ways of feeling and thinking. For Jan it came as a pleasant surprise that she enjoyed being touched. "For some reason... I used to get enough mental satisfaction by satisfying a woman... Then it got to the point where this one woman said, 'Well, I'm just not gonna accept that,' and she started venturing, and at first I said, 'No, no,' and then I said, 'Well, why not?' And I got to enjoy it." This change was not easy for a woman who had spent many years as an untouchable. At first, she was very nervous and uncomfortable about mutual sex, but "after I started reaching physical climaxes instead of just mental, it went, that little restlessness about it. It just mellowed me right out."

Piri describes that she had to rethink the way she viewed her role in order to make the change:

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Piri describes that she had to rethink the way she viewed her role in order to make the change:

"It was always just something that I don't know, came along with the role. That I felt when I first started that I do the touching. They don't touch me, and then as I got older and got into it, I felt that it was really unfair to me. It just took a lot of thought a whole train of thought, to think about it, and deal with it."

Piri began to change only in the early 1970s. Consideration of her fem's desires were important in her decision.

"It was in the early '70s. 'Cause then I began to feel like the whole thing is a partnership. And if you denying her what she want to do, then the whole thing is not complete, and it's really unfair to her, . . . it's not right. I began to think about it that way, but at first no. . . . Over a period of time, like I had been with different ones, right? And they'd expressed their feeling and I said, 'No, no,' and then I began to think about it. Well, why not try it, 'cause I could imagine how I'd feel in the midst of making love and be denied what I wanted to do. . . . I just put myself in that position, to think about how I'd feel if I want to do this, and you say 'no'; so then I started thinking the other way."

The stone butches of the 1950s, both those who remained so and those who changed, offer explanations for their preference that provide valuable clues about the personal importance and the social "rightness" of untouchability as a community norm in the 1940s and 1950s. Some women, as indicated above, continue to view their discomfort with being touched as physical or biological. Others feel that untouchability maintained difference. If a fem were allowed the physical liberties usually associated with the butch role, distinctions would blur. "I feel that if we're in bed and she does the same thing to me that I do to her, we're the same thing." Toni, reflecting on the fact that she always went to bed with her clothes on, suggests that "what it came to was being uncomfortable with the female body. You didn't want people you were with to realize the likeness between the two." Still other butches are hesitant about the vulnerability implicit in mutual lovemaking. "When the first girl wanted to make a mutual exchange sexually . . . I didn't want to be in the position of being at somebody's disposal, or at their command that much—maybe that's still inside me. Maybe I never let loose enough" (Cheryl). Piri describes the rightness of untouchability as a matter of control: "It was an ego thing, that's all it was. I know that now 'cause I was that way for a long time. Hey man, we making love, I'm supposed to do that, that's my job, and you don't touch me. I stayed that way for years."

The unique sexual posture of the stone butch of this period, while encapsulating the desire to please a fem fully, resonates with the complexity of butch-fem roles in lesbian culture. This erotic stance relies on and fosters the differences between butch and fem that pervade the culture. It also identifies the butch as more active, more aggressive, more in control, which she was in public lesbian life. Finally,

untouchability expresses discomfort with or at least ambivalence about the female body, which is consistent with the butch's pursuit of the masculine while remaining female.

How was a community able to monitor the sexual activities of its members, and how might people come to know if a butch "rolled over"—the community lingo for a butch who allowed fems to make love to her? The answer was simple: fems talked! A butch's reputation was based on her performance with fems. What went on in bed with the lights out was not always completely private. Fems "talking" today confirm that many butches were indeed untouchable, though certainly not all. "Let's say a couple of the butches, they're what you call untouchable. They would not allow to be touched. At all, even if you wanted to. So they did all the work" (Annie). Fem voices also convey the satisfaction achieved in lesbian sex during this period.

Black and white fem narrators recognized and accepted the standard of the butch as the doer, the aggressor, in lovemaking with the fem the center of attention. All fem narrators felt comfortable with this erotic system and liked being pleased.

"I enjoy the feminine role better due to the fact it's not as much hard work; see, being a stud, that's a lot of work. I have a tendency to be kind of lazy. So I'd rather stay fem. Every once in a while I might want to act a little boyish and say 'Lay down girl it's my turn tonight,' but I couldn't stand a steady diet of that. No, that's kind of hard work. If [she's] anything like me, they gonna have a job. You just can't snap your fingers on me, boy. So I'm gonna stay like I am . . . a lady." (Arlette)

The idea that pleasing a fem requires hard work on the part of a butch is widespread among fems. Curiously, no butches articulate it, which suggests that statements about work were the fems' way of affirming their control in sexual relationships as well as expressing their appreciation of butches.

Fems were divided over the rightness or importance of the ideal of untouchability. Like the stone butches who felt strongly about not being touched, some fems really disliked taking the more active role in lovemaking. Bell remembers one of her first relationships, which did not work out well:

"Well, she was trying to give me the impression that we were lovers, but she must have thought I was a real dumbbell or something, because it was like we didn't have sex too much, but it seemed like when she would want me to do something for her or when she would really need something, then we would have what she considered sex. It was like I would always have to do something with her, she never really seemed to want to do anything with me. [I had to be more] aggressive, yes I did, and I didn't like it."

Bell never became comfortable with more reciprocal sex. She particularly didn't like making love orally. In the 1970s this became a problem in her relationships,

and she went to a counselor to try to resolve it. She wishes that sexuality had remained more role-defined because in the past she never had problems sexually.

"I don't know if this is going to make any sense or not, but it seems like then that I had no problem with that [sex] because of the role-playing thing. I mean people seemed to know where they were at and I didn't have to worry about [it]. . . . A lot of butches were what you would call untouchable . . . and I was comfortable with that. It's not saying that I never wanted to touch them or anything like that, I just never really cared for getting into that oral sex thing. I just didn't like it. And [now] I [feel] uncomfortable . . . knowing, God, you know, I'm going to have to be doing this to these women. It isn't that I found it dirty or anything, I just did not like it. So I was very comfortable [with their untouchability]. . . . I feel like I'm a warm person and I have no trouble in that area at all."

Some fems did feel moved to make love to their butches on occasion, although none wanted to do so regularly. Annie ventured into making love to her butch and met no resistance: "She wanted me to. . . . No, [she didn't ask] but she didn't stop me, O.K." Annie was surprised at her butch's needs but felt she could accommodate them because she cared for her a lot.

"Like the one girl I told you, she dressed very very butchy, she was an introvert, stayed very very much to herself, very nontalkative. She wouldn't mingle with the others, and tattoos on her arms, she really looked rugged. She looked rough. But when she got in bed she was just as feminine as any fem. . . . Well I happened to care for her, and naturally I wanted her 'cause I cared for her, so it really didn't bother me. It's not like something was pushed on me that I didn't want."

Arlette thinks of herself as quite flexible, and able to respond to different situations. In her experience many butches were not stone butches:

"There are some ladies that are a little more reserved and naive than others and there's one that's more outgoing, so she'll probably play the come-on part more than the other girl. But in bed it doesn't make much difference as far as I can see. 'Cause I have associated with some so-called studs; they were more fem in the bed than they were fellas on their feet. They were wearing them boy's clothes but in the bed I damn near have to become the boy, so don't mean nothing. Then I have a turn, that I might even want to act like a boy that day. There is a role, but I've found a lot of stud boys I've found have been fem at one time and found they were so aggressive that they couldn't carry that fem part, so they carried the other part. And still in the bed it doesn't make any difference, once you close the doors, no matter who's who. It's what you feel like doing that night."

But all of these women who did make love to their butches were not critical of the stone butch. They appreciated the full attention focused on their own satisfaction. Arlette confirms this:

"I've had some that I couldn't touch no parts of their bodies. It was all about me. 'Course I didn't mind! But every once in a while I felt like, well, 'Hey, let me do something to you.' I could never understand that. 'Cause I lived with a girl. I couldn't touch any part of her, no part. But boy did she make me feel good, so I said, . . . 'All right with me!' It kept me back though, 'cause I felt, 'Hey, I want to do something to you tonight.' 'Nopel' Well O.K. Fine with me. I don't mind laying down."

It is striking that our fem narrators' discussion of sexuality is quite self-concerned. It does not express the kind of intense sexual passion for their butches—the passion of response—that is conveyed in the essays and stories of fem writers and activists such as Joan Nestle and Amber Hollibaugh.²⁵ In their life histories fem narrators frequently and straightforwardly affirm their love for their butches. But we have no description of what excites them about making love. There is no fem equivalent to the statements of butches that describe how much they are turned on by their partners. We suspect that the self-centered aspect of the fems' sexual life is correct but comprises only one dimension of truth about the butch-fem sexual dyad.

Many factors combine to create this imbalance in fem stories. Fems' socializing together was not an institutionalized part of this culture. Fems might have had individual girl friends, but there was no network of fem friendship akin to the camaraderie of butches. Instead, there was a tradition of competitiveness. Because of this, there was no safe and supportive place in which fems could share reflections of their passion and learn from each other's joys and losses. By extension, the interview sessions, conducted by women who are self-identified fems or who have no role identification, might be suspect and might easily have set up a defensive atmosphere surrounding delicate issues of sexuality.

Due to the absence of a supportive environment, fems may have lacked appropriate words. In reflecting on her relationships in the 1950s, Joan Nestle points out:

"Fems may not have had a language with which to talk about sexual matters. I don't remember fem women discussing sexual lust in the '50s. That was part of butch play. . . . Public sexual language [for fems] was one of emotional need. . . . I also think that fem language was always coded language. . . . The loudest way of speaking was the offering of the woman's body to butch desire."²⁶

Therefore, words of love, appreciation, closeness, and even flirtation could have been coded substitutes for expressions of passion. Fems may only have spoken about sexual passion for their butches, to their butches, in the privacy of their relationships.

From the writings of Nestle and Hollibaugh we learn about aspects of fem desire that might be applicable to Buffalo fems in the 1950s. A fem wants the feeling that the butch's most sought after goal is to reach her femininity, the core of who she

is. The fem also wishes to validate the butch's existence by being responsive to her butch's desire. A fem's self-definition, insofar as it includes the conscious giving over of sexual control to ultimate desirability, is a major component of her power. Hollibaugh writes:

My fantasy life is deeply involved in a butch/femme exchange. I never come together with a woman, sexually, outside of those roles. It's saying to my partner, "Love me enough to let me go where I need to go and take me there. Don't make me think it through. Give me a way to be so in my body that I don't have to think; that you can fantasize for the both of us. You map it out. You are in control."

It's hard to talk about things like giving up power without it sounding passive. I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting. I expose myself for her to see what's possible for her to love in me that's female. I want her to respond to it. I may not be doing something active with my body, but more eroticizing her need that I feel in her hands as she touches me.²⁷

Fem satisfaction was at the center of the butch-fem erotic system. To give satisfaction was the butch's foremost goal, and the culture focused on her performance. There was social pressure for butches to attain the ideal of "untouchability" but no equivalent ideal of fem passivity. Fems upheld the standards of butch behavior in order to achieve their own satisfaction. This emphasis on their own fulfillment assured that fems developed sexual subjectivity, albeit differently from butches. It also balanced the power in butch-fem erotic relationships, making the pursuit of satisfaction legitimate for each partner.

In sexuality as in image, the 1950s community exerted strong pressure for consistent butch-fem role behavior. It had little tolerance for those lesbians whose sexual behavior was not consistently butch or fem. Such people were considered "ki-ki" (neither-nor), or more infrequently "AC/DC," both pejorative labels imposed by the community.²⁸ Not everyone in the community remembers such terminology, but all recall that those who regularly switched roles elicited negative comments and were the butt of jokes.

"They used to make little wise cracks . . . you know, like, 'Well I wonder which way she's gonna go tonight.' Little smirks like that. 'Oh I see she's playing fem this week,' or 'Oh she's playing the big bad butch this week.' . . . But to be very honest with you, [the person I told you about] that's really about the only one that I knew that was like that back then, and is like that today. . . . She's still like that. And I told her, I said 'Hey, your time has finally come.' . . . I says, 'You're right in the ball park now, kiddo.'" (Sandy)

From the perspective of the 1990s, in which mutuality in lovemaking and the absence of roles are emphasized as positive qualities, it is important to clarify that ki-ki did not refer to an abandonment of role-defined sex, but rather to a shifting

of sexual posture depending upon one's bed partner. It was thus firmly grounded in role playing. This culture could not imagine people without roles. Matty, in fact, defines ki-ki as "double role playing," and looks at it with much more sympathy today than she did formerly.

"Yeah, they called them neither-nor, ki-ki. You find that now too, double role playing, that's all it is actually. . . . See, it isn't that they don't want to make a choice, it's that they're leaving themselves open to the occasion of whomever might come in that they could play either role. It isn't that they don't know what they are. . . . They don't want to pin any one thing on themselves for fear if they pin 'feminine' on themselves if they become attracted to a feminine girl, well that girl won't bother, you know. And I think that's the way it should be, you should be able to play either role. . . . 'Course I didn't know too many people back then that didn't play a role, there weren't that many when I came out. . . . But looking back now, if I knew then everything I know now that's the way I would have been when I came out."

The negative reactions in the 1950s to those who were ki-ki stem from the fact that such people disrupted the butch-fem social order. Those who maintained their roles felt that their own identities and reputations were threatened. Sandy remembers how she used to hate it if someone she was with became butch in another relationship. She didn't want others to think that she was fem. "I knew women who didn't know their role. I was with some when they were fems. When they came out butch, I didn't want anyone to get the idea that I rolled over." She explains that butches experienced this kind of role-changing as a personal betrayal. "You showed someone you cared. You let your defenses down, and then they switch roles and you feel betrayed."

Some fem narrators were also deeply upset by those who changed.

"They swung like monkeys from one thing to another. . . . It was like one time, well I'm butch this week or this month and maybe I'll be fem the next month. . . . [They] totally disgusted me. . . . I feel that people should know . . . what they want. You've got to know where you're at. Like you're either butch or you're fem, you can't change a thing from one month to the next." (Bell)

A fem was not worried about her reputation, but rather that the person she was with would go back and forth in the relationship and not make the fems pleasure a priority. Bell continues:

"I think most of your fems felt like I did and a lot of the butches, of course, they thought it was fun to fuck around and play around and change around. . . . Not a lot of them but some of them that I knew. But I didn't think that was too funny. . . . I didn't go to bed with them, but there was a friend of mine who had been with one of these particular people and she had thought that the party was quite fem in bed and other times very butch. It's confusing

and very hard to understand something like this. That's like someone having a split personality or something. I like someone who knows what they are and who stays that way. That fluctuating, whatever, I don't care for it."

The community's increased interest in setting standards for butch-fem eroticism in the late 1950s was partially related to the growing cohesion of the community and to the discussion of sexuality as part of lesbian culture. Butch-fem sexuality could not have been policed without a community to enforce norms through discussion and action. The social pressure for clearly defined roles also grew from the increasingly defiant stance of the community which was rooted in expressions of the butch role. This exaggerated the difference between butch and fem and demanded high performances from butches in defending their own and their fems' right to exist. The tough butch who could take care of business became idealized. Untouchability expressed difference from the fem, control over one's life, and ambivalence about one's female body, all characteristics of the butch persona. The strong concern for role-appropriate eroticism developed in creative tension with the culture's validation of female sexuality and emphasis on learning about and exploring new sexual practices. The butch was not only competent as a fighter, but also as a lover. In reaction to the dominant ideas about women needing men for sexual satisfaction, these butches projected themselves as better in bed than any man. Sandy explains what it meant to be an untouchable butch: "I didn't want to be a man, but I wanted to be treated like one, put it that way . . . right? I wanted to satisfy them and I wanted to make love." Ironically, the rigidification of roles and the openness about sexuality interacted to create an erotic system predicated above all on the sexual satisfaction of women.

LEARNING ABOUT SEX IN THE 1950s

Coming to sexual subjectivity was a different process for lesbians in the 1950s than the 1940s. For one thing, more resources about heterosexual sex were available to inform or misinform women about their sexuality.²⁹ More importantly, there was a different attitude within the lesbian community toward sexuality. Narrators for the 1930s and 1940s had described their sexual expression as "natural." Those narrators who came out in the 1950s approached sexuality as something they had to learn, making use of all the resources available. Although we might be tempted to say that acquiring sexual information and experience was easier due to a more supportive social context, such a statement does not capture the struggles of individuals to feel sexually knowledgeable.

The greater discussion of sexuality in society itself exposed lesbians to images of and ideas about sexual activities, albeit heterosexual ones. Many narrators

transformed these to fit their own desires. Sandy remembers looking at her father's girlie magazines, and imagining herself with the models.

" 'Cause then it was psss, psss, you know, whisper that shit. Read the books under the bed and things like that. . . . Sexual books, . . . pictures of nude women, I loved that. Oh God, I was crazy about 'em. . . . [I got them from] my father. Get them out of his room and go in my room. And he'd steal my comic books, wasn't that funny. He'd take my comic books and I'd take his girl books. . . . No, [it was] not real heavy stuff. I didn't know that much about it anyhow, so I wouldn't have known if it was heavy or not. I was really dumb when it came to stuff like that, 'cause I was never interested in it. You know, I never thought about relationships, like man and woman relationships. I'd look at the girls, pictures of women; put myself with them."

The incongruity of Sandy's statement that she was "dumb" about male-female relationships, and the fact that she knew enough to take her father's girlie magazines and enjoy them, reflects the ambiguous position of lesbian sexuality in 1950s society. The society moved toward increased openness about sexuality, even toward valuing sexual expression for its own sake, but at the same time it was ambivalent about women's sexuality and continued to outlaw homosexuality.³⁰ Many lesbians had to fight deep feelings of shame about being sexual. Vic, while reminiscing about how great her first sexual experience was, also recalls her embarrassment. "I was ashamed, you know, 'cause it wasn't the right thing to do." She attributes these feelings of shame at least partially to her family, remembering graphically the way her father humiliated her on his visits after he had her put in jail.

"My father had me put in jail as a runaway, I was eighteen years old now, remember that. And I was told that, you have to live according to how your parents want you to live until you're twenty-one years old. . . . I was in jail for thirty days for doing this, and my father used to come and greet me every day and say, 'If that's how you want to be,' he used to say to me, 'I'll kick your teeth out and make your job easier for you.' I never had any idea what he was even referring to because I had never done anything like that to a woman, so I didn't know what he was talking about. Like I know now. But see, I guess that's what he worried that I was coming from. Which I wasn't aware of it. So I stayed in jail for thirty days and when I left out, that's when my friend and I went to Florida."

For butches, the actual coming to sexual subjectivity was a slow process, which they describe as moving from "bumbling" to excellence. The community was central in this process. In contrast to those of the 1940s, few butch narrators of the 1950s had their first full sexual experience before they had some contact with the public lesbian community, suggesting that women needed explicit social support to become competent leaders in lovemaking. Growing lesbian pride and the community's general willingness to reach out and educate newcomers meant

that the community participated in sex education. The sources of instruction were varied.

As in the Winters crowd of the 1940s, the fem was an important teacher for butches. Bert, who had come out in the Army in the early 1950s, remembers a fem who tried to teach her, and although the attempt was unsuccessful, it made her curious to learn more.

"The only thing I knew about—it took me a long time to come out as far as the overt sexuality—was necking and petting and I didn't know anything else. In fact I'll tell you a humorous story. It's very embarrassing but it's very funny. This one woman was after my body so to speak, so we went downtown and we got a hotel. And I guess I must have been pretty good at necking and petting, but I didn't know what you did beyond that. And she kept pushing my head and pushing my head, and I didn't know what the hell she was pushing my head for, and she got up and got her clothes on and got mad and left. So finally one day, [a few weeks later] there was ironically from California a woman, her name was Joan, we were in the shower and I told her what happened and asked her, 'What do you do?' and so she explained it all to me, . . . the many various positions. But I found out since I grew older she didn't know them all, I've learned a few since."

The woman who explained it to Bert had been gay before entering the Army and had a lot of experience.

Some fems were much more straightforward in their teaching. Sandy fumbled around for quite a while until she received explicit instructions from a fem partner. She had been strongly attracted to girls in high school but never knew what to do.

"And I had crushes there [Girl's Vocational High] on about thirty girls, all without their knowledge of course. This was definitely a no-no, this was a horrible, horrible thing, like a leper. And so when I graduated from high school I decided I was going to join the service. I thought, well I heard so much that things like that go on there, maybe I could find something there. I really didn't know what to do or what you're supposed to do, all I knew was I wanted women. And so I went up to the Catskills to say goodbye to my childhood friend. And we kissed goodbye. Now, at seventeen you pretty well know what you're doing. That was all, there was never anything sexual. I don't know, just never was. I wanted it but you didn't know what the hell to do. You were filled with passion but you just didn't know how to go about this thing."

In the Marines she was too frightened to have relations with women, but when she left, she ran off with a Marine's wife. It took them a while to make love. "And then it happened. And all I can say is not because anyone told us, we didn't read books, we just went to bed and did whatever we felt we liked and enjoyed and I had sex." But later in her story she clarifies that this still wasn't complete in regard to sex. "Well it was but it wasn't. It wasn't all the way, it wasn't a complete

affair. It was just the fumbling." She needed more education. She didn't want to ask other butches, however, because she felt it would contradict her tough image to appear ignorant about sex. "I didn't [talk much] anyhow. Because you were trying to have a good image of yourself, like you're tough, and you knew what the score was, what was what. . . . You couldn't talk about something you didn't know, and you didn't want to ask. So you just well, I got to peek or I got to find something."

Indirect learning—watching others and guessing what they did—cultivated mystery and excitement, if not knowledge, as captured by this narrator's humorous memories of her fantasies about the rubber gloves she saw when she went to a lesbian's home. After returning from the service, the first time she went to a gay bar, she met a woman she knew from the armed services who invited her to come over.

"This was really funny. . . . We were talking about whatever, probably work, and her dresser drawer was open. Now this is how your mind can . . . I didn't know anything. There was a pair of rubber gloves there, in her drawer. Now I didn't know what they were for. . . . And I said, 'Oh my God, wonder what they use that for?' . . . And then I really thought, what am I getting into? What do they use those rubber gloves for? [I didn't ask.] I didn't want them to know I didn't know. Wouldn't I have been stupid if I had asked, 'What do you use those for?' . . . [and she had answered], 'Oh I had a rash on my hands,' probably what it was!!!"

We asked her if she ever found out whether the rubber gloves were for something sexual or not. "No, I never found out. All I know is I don't need them!"

Finally, Sandy was with a fem who helped her out by giving specific instruction.

"Well, I'd just been out a short time. And then I went with this girl that had been out for a while. She wasn't a new one. . . . So I guess I really frustrated the hell out of her, and she says, 'Sandy you start out but you just'—and she took a piece of paper and drew me a picture. She says, 'Now you get this spot right here.' . . . I felt like a jerk. I was embarrassed, because she had to tell me that, 'cause here I was trying to—you know how you like to look pretty great in people's eyes. Jesus, then you fuck up."

According to Sandy, the lesson helped, and she explains that, "I went on to greater and better things."

By the late 1950s many butches received their instruction from other butches, particularly if they were young and just entering the community. Since there was no longer a taboo on bringing people out, it was not uncommon for someone to have her first affair with a butch and learn from the experience that she wanted to be butch herself. This happened for both Black and white narrators. Piri remembers how she didn't like the role she assumed in her first serious affair with

an older butch. The experience confirmed what she had already known about herself from playing around on the streets.

"The first time I had ever had an affair with anybody it was with Jacki Jordan. . . . I was really fascinated by her 'cause she had all these women, and I couldn't figure this out. . . . I didn't know what this was about. I had been messing around with girls my age. But like Jacki Jordan's an older person. She's got all these broads and they go out and they make money and they come home and give it to her. . . . We wind up getting into it and I'm laying on my back, on the bottom and I say, 'Woman, this ain't about nothing. . . . I don't like this, uh uh, no.'" So I reversed it, which I was doing all the time, but at thirteen you don't know what you're doing. But with Jacki Jordan, I was really just fascinated by her and then when I got involved with her, I knew it wasn't the way I wanted it to go. Then we just became buddies."

Vic describes a similar learning experience:

"The first sexual affair I had was with a bus driver, 'cause she let me use her car. I'm trying to think of how I could say it to you, 'cause I don't know now if you would call it a sexual affair. She used to drive the bus and she let me take her car while she was working. And I'd have to pick her up after work, and then I'd have to sit with her and we'd hug and kiss. But there was, gee how can I say it to you without feeling like a jerk. She was very butch, she was a very butch woman, masculine. She just used to tell me how nice my body was. There was never any clothes off at the time or anything like that. She was always fondling me but I could never touch her. Now how long, with me, can a relationship like that last? Car or no car, I can walk easier. That didn't work too well. [But the experience] was real to me, that was very real. You have to remember at that age you know, probably when that happened I was sixteen years old, and had never had any relationships with a man. That had to be very close to my first sexual encounter. . . . Who the hell, why would somebody want to be touching my boobs or my box, they got to be assholes. Then I realized well, maybe I could do it to other people and that's when I started doing it."

Knowing what she wanted to do and doing it were two different things. It was at least a year before Vic actively began to touch a woman, even though she had had relationships:

"Well that's when I was going to . . . school. This girl that I was going with, we went in her car one time and I don't think that either one of us wanted the other one to know that they were attracted to each other. So whoever happened to be driving at the time, we were always drinking, and the other one would pass out conveniently on the other one's lap or breast or something, and then just kind of do all kinds of weird shit while you're passed out. You know how you might move your hand. . . . Neither one of us probably ever was passed out; we didn't have the balls enough to do anything straight. And

then, I don't know how to tell you Madeline. . . . I had never been with a naked woman till I came to Buffalo and was working at the lab. It was all like really stupid bullshit you know. . . . Yeah, but you got to sit here and say to somebody, 'Geez you mean to tell me you were eighteen or nineteen years old before you were ever with a naked woman?' and I guess that's what I have to say if I'm going to be honest with you."

The use of alcohol to deny responsibility for one's sexual interest is mentioned by other narrators, and is another indication of how difficult it was for women to become sexually active lesbians. After living with this partner, Vic finally touched her.

"We got an apartment together, possibly because we used to like to pass out on each other's boobs or box or whatever, I don't know. And then—I don't know, I just remember the first time I ever touched her and it was with my hand and she bled. And I don't know if she had her period or if she was a virgin, but for some reason I can't think of [her] being a virgin at the age of nineteen, so she must have had her period. But anyway, that [the touching] was like wow, the greatest thing in the world to me."

The 1950s also saw the advent of another completely new practice—experienced butches teaching novice butches about sex through discussion and support. This became more common at the end of the decade, particularly when the two parties socialized in the same group at the bars. The instructions were quite full and detailed. Sandy remembers that younger women frequently approached her with questions about sex: "There must be an X on my back. They just pick me out. . . ." She recalls when Ronni was first coming out and "had to know every single detail. She drove me crazy. Jesus Christ, y'know, just get down there and do it. Y'get so aggravated." Ronni, in turn, remembers the instruction vividly, and indicates that her older buddy was a very good teacher:

"And I finally talked to a butch buddy of mine. . . . She was a real tough one. I asked her, 'What do you do when you make love to a woman?' And we sat up for hours and hours at a time. . . . 'I feel sexually aroused by this woman, but if I take her to bed, what am I gonna do?' And she says, 'Well, what do you feel like doing?' And I says, 'Well, the only thing I can think of doing is . . . all I want to do is touch her, but what is the full thing of it . . . you know?' So when [she] told me I says, 'Really?' Well there was this one thing in there, uh . . . I don't know if you want me to state it. Maybe I can . . . well, . . . I'll put it in terms that you can understand. Amongst other things, the oral gratification. Well, that kind of floored me because I never expected something like that, and I thought, well, who knows, I might like it."

She later describes her first sexual experience. She had been chasing this woman, but was so scared that Sandy had to keep encouraging her. One day Sandy offered the use of her house, and finally shoved Ronni into the bedroom.

"So our first encounter was at Sandy's house. 'Cause I didn't have anywhere to stay with her. Finally Sandy says, 'Ronni, tonight's the night,' and I says, 'What do you mean?' and she says, 'Darlene wants to go home with you.' And I says, 'Oh, I'm not ready tonight—forget it—I changed my mind.' . . . I was still living at home with my mother. . . . So I went home to Sandy's apartment and Sandy was sitting around the kitchen drinking coffee with Darlene and myself. And I was getting very nervous because I knew Darlene really made up her mind that she was going to go to bed with me. 'Well,' I says, 'Sandy, I can't go through with it. I just can't. I'm too scared.' She says, 'You chicken. Get in there, you've been after me all this time, and you've been after her all this time. Now you're not going to leave here until you go in there.' So finally Darlene says, 'Well, good night.' She goes in the bedroom I says, 'Sandy, what am I gonna do?' I says, 'I'm leaving.' So she says, 'Ronni, you're gonna go in there.' So, I didn't expect my first encounter to be like this, but I finally got up to get something and Sandy started shoving me into the bedroom and I says, 'All right, all right, I'll go.' So Darlene says, 'Ronni, come on in here.' So I says, 'Yeah, just a second and I will.' And Sandy's shoving me. So Sandy gave me a good shove and I go sailing right through the bedroom door, and there's Darlene. Well, I expected first of all when you go to bed with a girl you kiss her, and you make love, and you both have your clothes on, and you let happen what comes naturally—which usually it does. There she was laying stark naked on the bed. Right on her back. Well, by that . . . I just, I was floored. I didn't expect that. But I got all my courage up, and I went right over to her. And I just flung myself on top of her, and I started kissing her—and that's something I wanted to do really bad. And everything happened naturally."

Once she got over her initial fear, Ronni performed well. She remembers that her partner, who was a prostitute and also had quite a bit of experience with women, thought she was quite good.

"She says, 'And you are a god damned liar, telling me that you've never been with a woman before.' I says, 'I haven't.' And she says, 'You're lying'. And I says, 'I'm not lying. If you want to believe I'm lying, go ahead.' We had an affair which lasted two and a half years and it was a very sexually active one. It was the most sexually active affair I ever had in my life, except for when Barbara came along, which happened over twenty years later. I had a dry run there for a while."

This new lesbian culture, which openly instructed butches about sex, did not completely replace the dominant society's conceptions about the privacy of sex, and the connections between sex and love, particularly for women. Some lesbians were still shy about sexual matters and could not bring themselves to ask openly for instruction. The other side of lesbian culture's willingness to instruct about sexuality was its monitoring and pushing of those who were hesitant to learn. Toni remembers that she was not fully sexual in her first affair and that the more

experienced butches teased her about whether in fact she was a lesbian. She could not take the step toward a fully sexual relationship until she met someone with whom she was totally in love.

"I didn't feel confident about myself as a lesbian, because, well, I didn't actually have sex with somebody until a few years had gone by. I had a girlfriend, oh, for about a year and a half, and I guess she used to flirt with a lot of people, and one of the people she flirted with was Iris. And one night, I guess whatever was going on between her and Iris I don't know, but me and this woman Arlene, we had never really had sex, I just couldn't get myself to really do anything sexually. And one night we were out drinking, I was with Arlene and Iris was there too, and we all ended up in the parking lot across from the Carousel. And Iris said to me, 'You're no more gay than that lamppost over there is gay.' And it kind of took me back, because I'd always respected her judgment and I knew she was gay and she knew I was gay. Well, the thing was that my track record, sexually, didn't prove I was gay 'cause I really hadn't had sex. I had like fooled around and necked and petted and stuff like that, but I knew inside me I was gay. So I couldn't buy that but it made me feel bad, that I hadn't proven myself, sexually, to be a lesbian. And it wasn't until I met someone that I fell very much in love with that then my fears dissolved. I didn't even remember my fears any more. But I needed that emotional feeling of being in love with someone, to carry you past the fear that I had."

Fems' memories of sex education, and the language they use to discuss it, are strikingly different from those of butches. Since, in the butch-fem erotic system, fems were the partners to be pleased, they did not feel the same degree of pressure and responsibility to be active and competent sexually. The butch's guidance and instruction of the less-experienced fem was generally satisfactory, though not always. Some fems, who went on to find sexual satisfaction, complain about the ignorance of their early lovers. Whitney took a particularly long time to feel comfortable expressing herself sexually, and her story makes an instructive contrast with those of the butches. She is aware of her own growth and movement toward becoming a good lover but does not express the journey as a quest. Rather the changes happened to her, catalyzed by her partners. Also, part of her growth entailed discoveries about her own body, something that is never mentioned by butches.

Her first sexual affair was with a man when she was sixteen, but she considers herself still physically and sexually undeveloped at the time. Soon afterward, she had several affairs with women, some of which she initiated. She remembers all of her early partners as sexually ignorant and her relationships as sexually unsatisfying.

"Well Liz, one of the things when I was a fem, when I was twenty, twenty-one or so, women were not lovers, but then maybe most people of twenty are not lovers. But they sometimes would be very aggressive with their hands. . . .

I had a hangup for many years about using my hands. I wouldn't do it. And poor Sonny, I said to her, 'Don't ever touch me with your hands.' Because I had a bad experience with butchie women and their hands, . . . just vaginal. They were just aggressive and they . . . didn't read anything, and they mustn't even have been hardly in touch with their own bodies. . . . I don't know how they had orgasms. So I just chose alternate things for myself to do. There are many themes and variations in making love."

She did not have her first orgasm until she was twenty-three and that was with an older, more experienced butch. It was an important event, which she marked by sending a note to one of the sexually ignorant butches she had been seeing. "It must have been about in June, I sent Gayle a note, and you can quote me. It said, 'Dear Gayle something happened to me last night that never happened before. Love Whitney.' So she sent back a card and the card said, 'Now you have something to crow about.'" The sex in this new relationship was hot and heavy for a while. "We had a really close, close, work-up-a-sweat, physical relationship." This was true despite the fact that Whitney continued not liking to be stimulated by her partner's hands.

"And another thing I want to bring up about that too, Liz, was I told you I was a slow developer. Well when my nipples would be touched . . . it made me uncomfortable. . . . It was my body developing and I didn't know what it was. And so I'd say, 'Don't touch my breasts.' So poor Sonny . . . and when I think of it now I think, oh my word. If she slept with me now, I'm totally different. She would say, 'This isn't Whitney, who is this?'"

After a few years, the sex dropped off to nothing, which Whitney attributes to difference in age. In time, she started having affairs, one of which was critical in changing how she felt about her body and what she liked sexually.

"Then when I was about twenty-nine I met a woman at a party, she thought I was nice and I thought she was nice. Some of my friends had told me that she had been quite heavy and she had lost a lot of weight, and I was really thinking she was kind of special. And she was interested in me and I was interested in her and we were both involved with someone else. So she told me that she masturbated, now I didn't know how to masturbate. So one night I was at her house and she was in bed with her lover and I was in their guest room, and I started thinking about her . . . and I masturbated. 'Hey I know I'm super great,' it's like your first orgasm, it's really brand new, it's super. Now if I hadn't had a relationship with someone else outside of the relationship with Sonny, I wouldn't have become as good a lover as I am today. Because I became in touch with my own body and I can be in touch with other people's bodies."

Some fems had extensive experiences with men before having relationships with women. This heterosexual experience, when combined with interest in a woman,

did not automatically create sexually active fems. It often took time. Arlette pursued a young and attractive, though inexperienced, butch and it took them two years to make love. Her humorous memories of the early stages of this affair convey how dependent a fem, who is just beginning to explore lesbian sex, no matter how experienced she is in heterosexual sex, can be on the sexual confidence of the butch.

"And the first person was Calley. She was young. I was driving around . . . and I saw her standing on Sycamore and Pratt. My girlfriend and I . . . were driving around Buffalo. . . . I had an Oldsmobile then. And I said, 'You know, that girl looks like one of those funny kind of girls.' She said, 'Yup'. She was really good-looking, short cut nice hair, light skin, she was cute. . . . We rode around the block to look at her again and she said, 'Hey, can I have a ride?' . . . We said, 'Yeah.' I was just bold enough. I said, 'Oh, if my nerve is up we going to find out about this.' And it's strange. She followed me everywhere I went, she went to my house and spent the night. But she would always get way on the other side of the bed and then I said, 'Well, hell, this isn't any fun.' . . . She never did anything. That went on for about two years. I ended up going back to Syracuse. She followed me to Syracuse. And I came back here again to Buffalo. I checked in to the Vendome Hotel. I'll never forget it, she walked in the bathroom while I was taking a bath. She was sitting on the side of the tub just talking. I thought, I don't understand this woman, I know she's weird, she's different. . . . She's not even trying to approach me. And funny thing about it though, when I stood up in the tub she looked at my body and fell in the water. Clothes and all. And it was a good year and a half before we had anything to do with each other. And we just kept messing around till one day she really got to me and that was it. Had somethin' on you and I was ruined." From that day forward it was, ooh wow, 'cause I was going with a fella then."

After this relationship, Arlette became an active part of lesbian life, and affairs no longer took so long to begin. In fact she went on to instruct many young studs.

An experienced lover did not invariably make the transition to lesbian sexual activity easy. Annie's first encounter did nothing for her even though it was with a sexually experienced butch. Just like some butches, she needed to care deeply for someone in a warm, sustained relationship to feel the specialness of lesbianism.

"That was a come-and-go thing. I was only with her that one night. . . . I couldn't see where the attraction was and anything. . . . Because, to really be honest I thought, well a man does the same thing. But it's more than just that. It's the softness, and where you don't feel like you got that iron hand over you or something. Where with a marriage, truly I feel as though it's like a job. I do. . . . A woman, I don't know, to me I think maybe it was . . . became exciting, different and new, curiosity."

Although in general fems tend to express their learning about sex more in terms of growth and self-knowledge than in performance, for those who attempted to take the more active role of making love to their partners orally, performance pressures did emerge. Even then, however, it is viewed as a specific part of pleasing a partner rather than generally upgrading one's sexual competence. Annie remembers feeling very ignorant the first time she made love orally.

"Very stupid. . . . It's your first time around, you know. And you don't really know what it's all about. But I think you pick up this new fac[tor], oral sex. . . . It comes naturally too I think. . . . First you're shy or whatever . . . and the second time you're a pro. . . . I don't know. It's hard to remember how you felt afterwards, that's rather hard. . . . I just asked was it satis[factory]? Did I do all right or anything. And it's getting to know the body."

All of our fem narrators learned about lesbian sex from someone who already had some contact, even if marginal, with the public lesbian community. Sandy, however, suggests that this is atypical, and that it was common for fems to have their first affairs with women in their neighborhoods.

"There's a lot that are having affairs with maybe their next-door neighbor or something, that have never been downtown. That have never been out. You know, and then when they do come out they know just about where it's at. Then there's the ones that just come out, and that's the one's that will be asking, that have never been with anyone. . . . I'd say the majority though, have had some sort of an affair before they come out. . . . I'd say seventy-five to eighty per cent, have had an affair. . . . That was just finding their space on the shelf, that's all."

Since many fems at this time had active lives as heterosexuals before—and also after—associating with lesbians, it would make sense that they might have their first affairs with neighbors, and that this experience would lead them to go downtown looking for other lesbians.

Our finding that lesbians talked and educated one another about sexuality during the 1950s has not been verified for other communities. In fact, some material exists to contradict our research. Phyllis Lyon, a very reliable source for lesbian history as co-founder with Del Martin of Daughters of Bilitis, states in her introduction to *Sapphisty* that her group of friends associated with Daughters of Bilitis never talked about sex.³² Indeed, the topic of sexuality never came up in all the peer counseling that she and Del Martin did before 1968. She thinks this is because the topic was taboo, not because people didn't need help. To her mind 1968 is a turning point because of the founding in San Francisco of the National Sex Forum. The difference between Lyon's experience and that of Buffalo lesbians suggests that discussions about sex were predominantly a bar and butch-fem phenomenon. Those who left this community to form the DOB might not be

familiar with the place of sexuality in bar culture, or might not have been open to considering bar culture's positive points along with the negative.

THE PURSUIT OF SEXUAL PLEASURE IN THE 1950s

As implied in the stories about sex education, this community valued sexual fulfillment, although that meant something different for butch and for fem. Lesbians created an environment in which sexual satisfaction was an acceptable and expected part of women's lives and in which sexual competence was encouraged. The assumed high quality of lesbian sex was expressed in a popular community myth: "But like they say, once you've been with a woman you'll always go back to a woman" (Annie).

The butch-fem erotic placed most of the pressure on the butch for attaining the competence that would lead to sexual satisfaction. Sexual performance was basic to the butch role. Sometimes when we would ask a fem narrator if a person she had just mentioned was butch, she would respond: "Yes, she was an excellent lover" (Bell). Butches also remark on the sexual expertise of their friends. Several butch narrators refer to Sandy as "the varsity." Sandy always set high standards for herself. "Sex is very important. I really try to be a perfectionist at it." Sexual competence did not consist of technique to the exclusion of feelings. Only one narrator did quite a bit of reading about sexuality. Typically, butches talk about experience as their main teacher, "on the job training experience" (Sandy), and the way their own feelings and their fems' responses served as their guidelines. "Wherever I felt this urge of excitement, I got right to it" (Sandy).

Butches did not discuss with one another particular fems' qualities as sexual partners. For old-time butches there was a protective attitude toward their fems. In addition, the performance ethic was so high for butches that, should fems not be enjoying themselves in bed, they assumed it reflected on their own performance. They felt a strong responsibility for their partner's pleasure. Vic attempts to clarify:

"You said there's sex and there's O.K. sex, I've never had that. All the women I've ever been with I could never say she was really great and this one was terrible. Women are good in bed, all women are, given the chance to be. . . . They're women. To me, first of all I enjoy being with them, you don't have to be, as you say, knock-out, drag-out sex. . . . They're good, if they're having sex with me they're good. How can a woman have bad sex? What do you do to have bad sex? . . . What's the difference between bad sex, good sex and medium sex? I don't know either. I want to know this myself, 'cause maybe I'm doing something wrong. 'Cause I'm the lovee not the lover or however you want to say it, and that can't be bad for me. . . . I could never, God, that's the highest insult you could give me when you say to me, 'dead lay.' I would never say that. . . . Now there's a difference between saying a woman is a bad

lover and saying that I didn't get satisfied. I've been with a lot of women that I haven't been satisfied with, but I would still never say that they were bad in bed because of it."

The successful development of a sexual culture predicated on the butch's pleasing the fem can be measured by the rare occurrence of rape in this community. The butch's aggressiveness did not mean coercion, violence, or pain for her partners in the sexual realm. Butches' pride in their ability to fight straight men and to respond aggressively and violently if necessary, affected domestic life (as will be discussed in the following chapters on relationships) but not sexual relations. In fact, the more aggressive butches, the leaders in the community, were also those who were the most expert lovers. They wanted their women and felt it was their performance that was essential for success. The culture did not eroticize violence.

Two narrators report having been raped by women, but neither instance occurred within the context of community life. Whitney, who was not living in Buffalo at the time, brought another woman out and agreed to live with her. They did not participate regularly in the Buffalo lesbian community or any other. When Whitney was no longer interested in sex with her partner, she could not stop this woman's advances.

"So I never had orgasms, right? And Grace was raping me regularly. . . . It was true. The thing is, these old people were in their house that we lived [in]. I couldn't make a hell of a lot of noise because we were gay. I couldn't . . . [yell] 'Get out of here' or slamming doors or I couldn't go through all those things, so I was like beating on her. . . . It was terrible. She had to be about a hundred and fifty pounds, and I was about ninety-five, a hundred. . . . There was no way I could physically avoid that. And she would just get into her cups and say, 'Great, a little Whitney tonight.'"

Whitney was not made cynical by this horrendous experience, and does not see it as typical lesbian behavior, rather, claiming like others, that it was extremely rare.

One butch was raped by her mother's lesbian friends when she was a young teenager. She had expressed interest in women and for whatever reason, they decided to "initiate" her, behavior that she does not understand or forgive to this day. In the interactions of mature women, such behavior was unknown. The aggressive aspect of the butch was tempered by the desire to be an excellent lover. Perhaps the community institution of fems talking about butch sexual behavior served as a check on the substitution of violence for sex.

This woman-centered, sex-positive culture was open to a variety of styles of lovemaking. Guided by feelings, butches developed their own styles and fems their particular preferences for sexual expression.

"In fact I was really surprised, because as you're younger and you're seeing someone close to you, or if you have the opportunity to know someone that's

a lesbian—it's all in the curiosity. 'What do they do together? Oh my God, there's only one thing they can do together.' And that doesn't hold true. If they just happen to enjoy the female body, and they find their intimacy and that by dyking, and some others by oral. Or fooling around in your own little private way, whatever. But not everybody goes orally. . . . They do different things." (Annie)

Although oral sex had become quite common, dyking (tribadism) was still popular. Annie remembers with great affection some women who were exclusively dykers.

"I know of a butch that wouldn't think of having oral sex, would not think of it. Really. And I was involved with her, and strictly what you call a dyker. . . . She's my age, your age. . . . Same era but to have oral sex, no. She was strictly dyking, strictly. . . . What is dyking? It's when a butch and a fem, the fem plays the woman part and the butch plays the male part, and the male lays on the female just like a man would do to a woman, except for there's no intercourse. There's a very intimate feeling that goes on. It's like getting pressed together. . . . It does the same thing as the man would do except for you don't feel the penis inside of you. . . . Oh it's very beautiful. . . . Oh yeah, it's very intimate. It's more so than just having oral sex. . . . Oh yeah, I think you get much closer for a relationship and everything."

For the best moments, she thought it took a special partner plus working together. "Well it's the person that you're involved with number one, you just can't do it with anybody. And I don't know, it's a thing you work on, you build and you put your act together. . . . It is the full body. . . . Some don't even know how to do it. Theirs is strictly oral." Despite this fem's preference for good dyking, she did not experience it in all her relationships. The butch's style generally predominated. "I don't know. If it was there it was there; if it wasn't it wasn't. It's something that you have to, both parties, it has to come from both, not just one or whatever. And like I say, it's something that not everyone can do."

Within the framework of tribadism and oral sex, lesbians regularly tried new things, looking to expand pleasure. Sandy explains: "Might have discussed [sex with your partner] if you happened to fall upon some new discovery that really sends you somewhere. Say, 'Oh, you like that,' and here you just fell into that maybe by accident. And then you'd find out that that was what someone liked." But the culture also had definite limits. Sex toys and elaborate sex scenes were not a priority. Most narrators think that sadomasochistic sex was not practiced, or if it was, was kept very quiet, so others wouldn't know about it.

In the heterosexual world of this period, the penis was so central that sex could not be imagined without it. As a consequence, lesbians were stereotyped as unable to function sexually without using the dildo.³³ But since butches were masculine not male, lesbian sexual culture was built on altogether different premises. Butch-

fem couples achieved sexual fulfillment through fully exploring the woman's body, and the dildo, if used at all, was a sex toy for enhancing pleasure. Butches did not ostracize those who used the dildo, but most thought it was unnecessary. When penetration was wanted, they used their hands. Their confidence in their own hands and their ability to please did not dispose them to think that a dildo would improve lovemaking.³⁴ Vic remembers her embarrassment when a friend, who had been a passing woman, excitedly showed her a newly acquired dildo.

"[I never wanted to] dash out and buy a dildo or twenty years ago when they used to make them out of argyle socks.³⁵ Maybe you think I'm shitting you but I'm not. . . . Jamestown Gerry has a dildo that is totally unbelievable, unless you were married to a elephant. She called me in the bathroom at the Crescendo one time,³⁶ this was when she first got it. She says, 'You got to see this Vic you got to see it.' I didn't know what she was talking about. So she says, 'Come on, come on,' so we walk in the bathroom. Jesus, she whipped this thing out on [me]. . . . I'm supposed to be butch and my face felt like a neon sign. I could feel the embarrassment. How do you admire a dildo? No seriously, what do you say? 'Hey, wow, that's neat.' . . . She says, 'Look at it now, it's got veins, it's got everything, a woman can't tell.' 'Oh wow, oh wow. Maybe I ought to trade my hand in and get two.' I didn't know what the hell to say. Well what would you do if somebody did that to you? Well I tried to be cool about it, 'Heeeyyy. I want sequins on mine, that glows in the dark.' I know you think I'm shittin' you but I'm not. You got to meet her and then you'll just nod and you'll know where I'm comin from. 'Cause she's a trip. But nice, she's nice people."

Her attitude is not so much one of condemnation, but of incredulity. Fem narrators did not mention a desire for the use of a dildo, but we imagine that, just like some butches, some fems found it pleasurable and reacted positively to its use.³⁷

Our discussion of lesbian sexual pleasure has been unavoidably flawed, because it treats sexuality in isolation, not sufficiently emphasizing the connections between sex and love. At this point it is necessary to indicate that, despite its open and supportive attitude toward sexual expression, lesbian culture did not completely separate the feelings of sex from the emotions of love. The discourse of sexual experience indicates it was about physical pleasure, beauty, intimacy, closeness, and caring. As can be seen from the quotations throughout this chapter, these words came up repeatedly in the discussions of sex. Lesbians of the 1950s had little trouble in explicitly discussing sex, but they did not value the physical as entirely distinct from the emotional. For most narrators, sex and love were intertwined as the basis for affairs and relationships, a subject that will be explored fully in the next chapter.

The place of sexual expression in lesbian life was innovative for women during the 1940s and 1950s. The culture validated women's desire for sexual satisfaction,

providing opportunities for discussion and for experience.³⁸ In creating this culture, lesbians unquestionably built on the trend toward sexual liberalism in the larger society. But they also challenged heterosexual culture—particularly the repressive tone of the 1950s—in affirming lesbian sex, and by implication the sexual autonomy of women. Lesbian community was essential to creating a sex-positive culture, as it provided an environment for fostering alternative ideas and values. In the 1940s, positive attitudes about sex existed only in individuals and in small groups. But the consciousness and pride of the 1950s was strong enough to break down individual isolation and insure that sexual innovation was no longer the province of individual rebels. Lesbian community also provided a safe space for sexual experience. It contained no penalties—or very few—for sexual expression. In this context, lesbians' sexual subjectivity was nurtured.

The butch-fem erotic system was at the heart of the cultural ferment around women's sexuality. Lesbian culture drew on male-supremacist heterosexual models and successfully transformed them to create an erotic system that was gender defined but not governed by the penis. What emerges from our narrators' words is a range of sexual desires that shaped the framework of butch-fem sexuality, and in turn, was influenced by it. The definition of the butch's role to include both the aggressor and the giver of pleasure, and the defining of her sexual pleasure completely in terms of satisfying her fem, combined with the absence of penalties for sexual expression, created a culture in which women's sexual pleasure was central, but also defined this pleasure differently for butch and for fem. Butch-fem eroticism encapsulated a tension between the similarity among women and the differences between butch and fem.

In some sense, butch and fem each embodied complementary aspects of what feminists today would consider necessary for women's sexual autonomy. The butch represented woman's ability to initiate, act on, and realize sexual passion for another and to satisfy the other fully. The fem embodied woman's knowledge of and delight in her body and assertive concern for her own fulfillment. The butch-fem erotic system was organized around difference, but was flexible enough to let many lesbians develop sexual characteristics of both butch and fem, as long as roles weren't obliterated. Ironically, the ideology of the stone butch, which allowed the least flexibility, also pushed to the extreme women's potential for experiencing sexual passion and pleasure. The tough lesbians of the late 1950s, Black, Indian, or white, in a sense represented the beauty and illogic of this polarization among women. They did not foster similarity and mutuality between lovers, but they did establish a system for erotic satisfaction that was woman-centered and that distributed power evenly between partners.

This examination of lesbian sexuality during the 1940s and 1950s stands in contradiction to those feminist writings that posit women's lack of sexual subjectivity. Such theory maintains that women's sexuality has been completely colonized by a male-supremacist culture that defines women solely as the objects of male desire and enforces the system through violence.³⁹ The evidence is conclusive that

these lesbians, in the context of a strong community culture, successfully sought to shape their own sexuality. To view their sexuality as male-defined fails to do justice to their accomplishment against tremendous odds. They created an erotic system that was woman-centered, albeit gender-defined. Their experience suggests that new forms of sexual expression come not simply from correct ideas but also from the ongoing activity of women in community.

In the varied and active sex lives of public lesbian communities, we can find the roots of a "personal-political" feminism. Women's concern with the ultimate satisfaction of other women is part of a strong sense of female, and potentially feminist, agency and may be the wellspring for the confidence, the goals, and the needs that shaped the later gay and lesbian feminist movements. In developing an understanding of the bar community as a predecessor to the gay liberation movement, the analysis must include sexuality. These lesbians actively sought, expanded, and shaped their sexual experience, a radical undertaking for women in the 1940s and 1950s. Lesbian sexuality was a harbinger of the sexual mores to be demanded by the radical feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**"NOTHING IS FOREVER":
SERIAL MONOGAMY IN THE LESBIAN
COMMUNITY OF THE 1940s AND 1950s**

Love came along and saved me
saved me saved
me.

However, my life remains the same as before.
O What shall I do now that I have
what I've always been looking for.

—Judy Grahn, "Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love"

"I mean to me they come and they go. But I mean with me, you know, I've been with . . . like this girl right here [in that photo] we messed around with each other, off and on for over twenty years. . . . And then like the girl that died, we lived together for nine years. I've had some short relationships. There's another lady. I just seen her picture. I messed around with her about twelve years. So sometimes you get into a whirlwind thing, then you find out after, it's not meant to be and then, you got to let go. But gay people, it's really odd to see a long-lasting relationship, you know, till death do us part. You don't find too many of those."

—Piri

Like Piri, all narrators had a series of relationships during the 1940s and 1950s, and afterward. To our knowledge, no historical research exists on the pattern of lesbian relationships that predominated not only in Buffalo but also in most other public lesbian communities of the twentieth century.¹ We think this absence is due in part to the fact that popular opinion assumes such relationships to be failed attempts at permanent coupling and therefore considers them insignificant, unworthy of serious attention. Deeply embedded in twentieth-century culture is the idea that lifelong marriage is the highest form of intimate relationship, and that inability to achieve it reflects immaturity and indicates failure. This idea is hegemonic, in that it is hard to discuss, or even imagine, other kinds of relationships