

Butch-Fem Relationships

Sexual Courage in the 1950's

Joan Nestle

For many years now I have been trying to figure out how to explain the special nature of butch-fem relationships to Lesbian-feminists who consider butch-fem a reproduction of heterosexual models. My own roots lie deep in the earth of this Lesbian custom, and what follows is one Lesbian's understanding of her own experience.

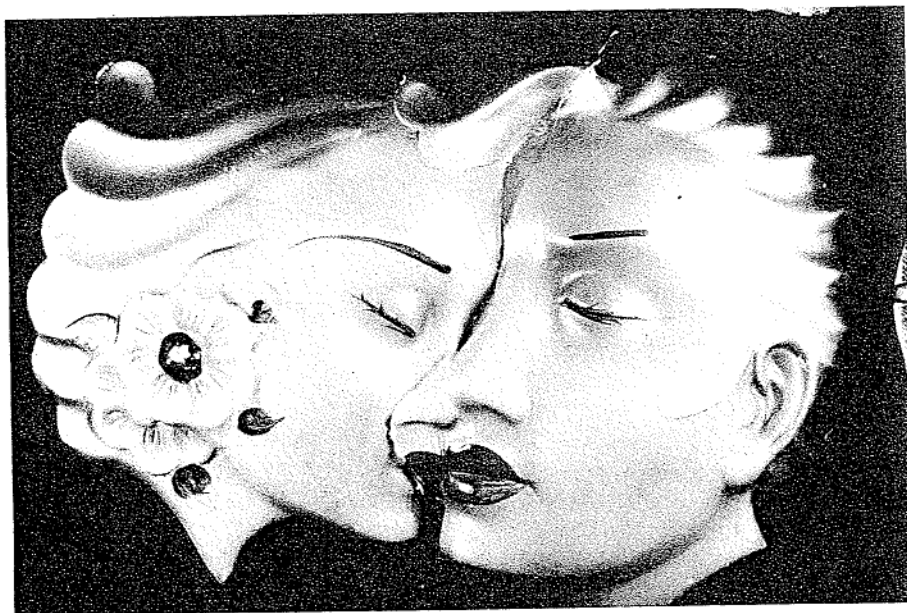
In the late 1950's I walked the streets looking so butch that straight teenagers called me a bull-dyke; however, when I went to the Sea Colony (a working-class Lesbian bar in Greenwich Village, New York) looking for my friends and sometimes for a lover, I was a fem, a woman who loved and wanted to nurture the butch strength in other women. I am now 40 years old; although I have been a Lesbian for over 20 years and I embrace feminism as a world view, I can spot a butch 50 feet away and still feel the thrill of her power. Contrary to belief, this power is not bought at the expense of the fem's identity. Butch-fem relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply Lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, loving, courage, and autonomy. None of the butch women I was with, and this included a passing woman,¹ ever presented themselves to me as men; they did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility. Part of this responsibility was sexual expertise. In the 1950's this courage to feel comfortable with arousing another woman became a political act.

Butch-fem was an erotic partnership, serving both as a conspicuous flag of rebellion and as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality. It was not an accident that butch-fem couples suffered the most street abuse and provoked more assimilated or closeted Lesbians to plead with them not to be so obvious. An excerpt from

a letter by Lorraine Hansberry, published in *The Ladder*² in 1957, shows the political implications of the butch-fem statement; it is a plea for discretion because, I think, of the erotic clarity of the butch-fem visual image.

*Someday I expect the "discreet" Lesbian will not turn her head on the streets at the sight of the "butch" strolling hand in hand with her friend in their trousers and definitive haircuts. But for the moment it still disturbs. It creates an impossible area for discussion with one's most enlightened (to use a hopeful term) heterosexual friends.*³

does) because they made Lesbians culturally visible—a terrifying act for the 1950's. Hansberry's language—the words "discreet" and "definitive"—is the key, for it speaks of what some wanted to keep hidden: that is, the clearly sexual implications of the two women together. *The Ladder* advocated "a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society," and it was this policy Hansberry was praising. This desire for passing combined with the radical work of survival that *The Ladder* was accomplishing was a paradox created by the America of the 1950's. *The Ladder* was bringing to the sur-



Lesbian wall plaque (c. 1930)

A critic of this essay has suggested that what was really the problem here was that "many other Lesbians at that time felt that the adoption of culturally defined roles by the butch-fem was not a true picture of the majority of Lesbians; they found these socialized roles a limiting reality and therefore did not wish to have the butch-fem viewpoint applied or expressed as their own."⁴ My sense of the time says this was not the reason. The butch-fem couple embarrassed other Lesbians (and still

face years of pain, opening a door on an intensely private experience, giving a voice to an "obscene" population in a decade of McCarthy witch hunts. To survive meant to take a public stance of societal cleanliness, but in the pages of the journal itself all dimensions of Lesbian life were explored, including butch-fem relationships. *The Ladder* brought off a unique balancing act for the 1950's. It gave nourishment to a secret and subversive life while it flew a flag of assimilation.

It was not the rejection by our own that taught the most powerful lesson about sex, gender, and class that butch-fem represented, but the anger we provoked on the streets. Since at times fems dressed similarly to their butch lovers, the aping of heterosexual roles was not visually apparent, yet the sight of us was enraging. My understanding of why we angered straight spectators so is not that they saw us modeling ourselves after them, but just the opposite—that we were a symbol of women's erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them. The physical attacks were a direct attempt to break into this self-sufficient, erotic partnership. The most frequently shouted taunt was: "Which one of you is the man?" This was not a reflection of our Lesbian experience as much as it was a testimony to the lack of erotic categories in straight culture. In the 1950's, when we walked in the Village holding hands, we knew we were courting violence, but we also knew the political implications of how we were courting each other and we chose not to sacrifice our need to heterosexual anger.⁵

The irony of social change has made a radical, sexual, political statement of the 1950's appear today as a reactionary, non-feminist experience. This is one reason why I feel I must write about the old times—not to romanticize butch-fem relationships but to salvage a period of Lesbian culture that I know to be important, a time that has been too easily dismissed as the decade of self-hatred. Two summers ago in Kansas at the Women's Studies Association Conference, a slide show was presented to the Lesbian caucus in which a series of myths about Lesbians was entertainingly debunked. The show was to be used in straight sex-education classrooms and for community organizations. One of the slides was a comic representation of the "myth" of butch-fem relationships, with the voice-over being something like: "In the past Lesbians copied heterosexual styles, calling themselves 'butch' and 'fem' but they no longer do so." I waited until the end to make my statement, but I sat there feeling that we were so anxious to clean up our lives for heterosexual acceptance that we were ready to force our own people into a denial of some deep parts of our lives. I knew what a butch or fem woman would feel seeing this slide show, and I realized that the price for social or superficial feminist accept-

ance was too high. If we deny the subject of butch-fem relationships, we deny the women who lived them and still do.

Because of the complexity and authenticity of the butch-fem experience, I think we must take another look at the term "role-playing," used primarily to summarize this way of loving. I do not think the term serves a purpose either as a label for or as a description of the experience. As a fem, I did what was natural for me, what felt right. I did not learn a part; I perfected a way of loving. The artificial labels stood waiting for us as we discovered our sexualities. We labeled ourselves as part of our cultural ritual, and the language reflected our time in history, but the words stood for complex sexual and emotional exchanges. Women who were new to the life and entered bars have reported that they were asked: "Well, what are you— butch or fem?" Many fled rather than



answer the question. The real question behind this was: "Are you sexual?" and when one moved beyond the opening gambits, a whole range of sexuality was possible. Butch and fem covered a wide variety of erotic responses. We joked about being a butch fem or a femmy butch or feeling kiki (going both ways). We joked about reversal of expectations: "Get a butch home and she turns over on her back." We had a code language for a courageous erotic world for which many paid dearly. It is hard to re-create for the 1980's what Lesbian sexual play and display meant in the 1950's, but I think it is essential

for Lesbian-feminists to understand without shame this part of their erotic heritage. I also think the erotic for us, as colonized people, is part of our social struggle to survive and change the world.

A year ago some friends of mine were talking about their experiences in trying to explain butch-fem relationships to a women's studies class. Both had been gay since the 1950's and were active in the early gay liberation struggles. "I tried to explain the complex nature of butch sexuality, its balances of strength and delicacy," Madeline said. "The commitment to please each other was totally different from that in heterosexual relationships in which the woman existed to please the man." As she spoke, I realized that not only was there the erotic statement made by the two women together but there was and still is a butch sexuality and a fem sexuality, not a woman-acting-like-a-man or a woman-acting-like-a-woman sexuality but a developed, Lesbian, specific sexuality that has a historical setting and a cultural function. For instance, as a fem I enjoyed strong, fierce lovemaking; deep, strong givings and takings; erotic play challenges; calculated teasings to call forth the butch-fem encounter. But the essential pleasure was that we were two women, not masqueraders. When a woman said, "Give it to me, baby!" as I strained to take more of her hand inside me, I never heard the voice of a man or of socially conditioned roles. I heard the call of a woman world-traveler, a brave woman, whose hands challenged every denial laid on a woman's life.

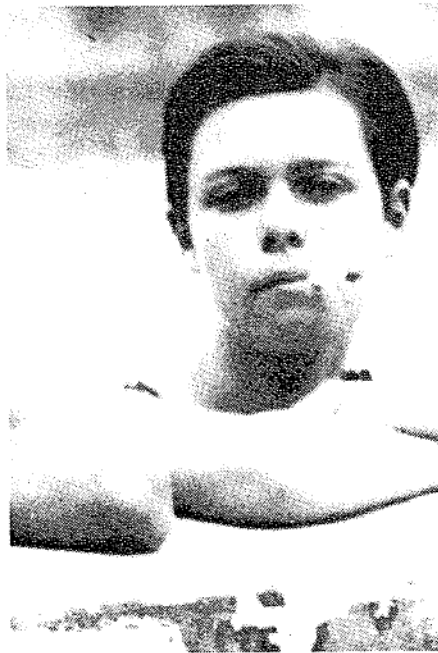
For me, the erotic essence of the butch-fem relationship was the external difference of women's textures and the bond of knowledgeable caring. I loved my lover for how she stood as well as for what she did. Dress was a part of it—the erotic signal of her hair at the nape of her neck, touching the shirt collar; how she held a cigarette; the symbolic pinky ring flashing as she waved her hand. I know this sounds superficial, but all these gestures were a style of self-presentation that made erotic competence a political statement in the 1950's. A deep partnership could be formed with as many shared tasks as there are now and with an encouragement of the style which made the woman I loved feel most comfortable. In bed the erotic implications of the total relationship only became clearer. My hands and lips did what felt comfortable for me to do. I did not

limit my sexual responses because I was a fem. I went down on my lovers to catch them in my mouth and to celebrate their strength, their caring for me. Deeper than the sexual positioning was the overwhelming love I felt for their courage, the bravery of their erotic independence.

As a way of ignoring what butch-fem meant and means, feminism is often viewed as the validating starting point of healthy Lesbian culture. I believe, however, that many Lesbians, pre-Stonewall, were feminists, but the primary way this feminism, this autonomy of sexual and social identities, was expressed was precisely in the form of sexual adventuring that now appears so oppressive. If butch-fem represented an erotically autonomous world, it also symbolized many other forms of independence. Most of the women I knew in the Sea Colony were working women who either had never married or who had left their husbands and were thus solely responsible for their own economic survival. Family connections had been severed or the families were poorer than the women themselves. These were women who knew they were going to work for the rest of their Lesbian days to support themselves and the home they chose to create. They were hairdressers, taxi drivers, telephone operators, who were also butch-fem women. Their feminism was not an articulated theory; it was a lived set of options based on erotic choices.

We Lesbians from the 1950's made a mistake in the early 1970's: we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture. The slogan "Lesbianism is the practice and feminism is the theory" was a good rallying cry, but it cheated our herstory. The early writings need to be reexamined to see why so many of us dedicated ourselves to understanding the homophobia of straight feminists rather than to understanding the life-realities of Lesbian women "who were not feminists" (an empty phrase which comes too easily to the lips). Why did we expect and need Lesbians of later generations and differing backgrounds to call their struggle by our name? I am afraid of the answer, because I shared both worlds and know how respectable feminism made me feel — how less dirty, less ugly, less butch and fem. But the pain and anger at hearing so much of my past judged unacceptable have begun to surface. I believe that Lesbians are a

people, that we live as all people do, affected by the economic and social forces of our times. As a people, we have always struggled to preserve our people's ways, the culture of women loving women. In some sense, Lesbians have always opposed the patriarchy; in the past, perhaps most when they looked most like men. This essay is not a full-grown analysis, but it is an attempt to shake up our prevailing judgments. We disowned our near past too quickly, and since it was a quiet past (the women in the Sea Colony did not write books), it would be easy not to hear it. Many women have said to me, "I could never have come out when you did." But I am a Lesbian of the 1950's, and that world created me. I sit bemused at Lesbian conferences, wondering at the academic course listings, and I know I would have been totally intimidated by the respectability of some parts of our current Lesbian world. When Monique Wittig said at



the Modern Language Association Conference three years ago, "I am not a woman, I am a Lesbian," there was a sharp gasp from the audience. But the statement made sense to me. Of course I am a woman, but I belong to another geography as well and the two worlds are complicated and unique.

The more I think of the implications of the butch-fem world, the more I understand some of my discomfort with the customs of the late 1970's. Once, when the Lesbian Herstory Archives presented its slide show of pre-1970 Lesbian images, I asked the women how many would feel comfort-

able using the word "Lesbian" alone without the adjunct "feminism." I was curious about the power of the hyphenated word when so few women have an understanding of the Lesbian 1950's. Several of the women could not accept the word "Lesbian" alone, and yet it stood for women who did stand alone. I suggest that the word "Lesbian-feminist" is a butch-fem relationship (as it has been judged, not as it was), with "Lesbian" bearing the emotional weight the butch does in modern judgment and "feminist" becoming the emotional equivalent of the stereotyped fem, the image that can stand the light of day. Lesbianism was theory in a different historical setting; we sat in bars and talked about our lives; we held hands in the streets and talked about the challenge of knowing what we were not permitted to do and how to go beyond that; we took on police harassment and became families for each other. Many of us were active in political-change struggles, fed by the energy of our hidden butch-fem Lesbian life, which even our most liberal left friends could not tolerate. Articulated feminism added another layer of analysis and understanding, a profound one, one that felt so good and made such wonderful allies that for me it was a gateway to another world—until I realized that I was saying "radical-feminist" when I could not say "Lesbian."

My butch-fem days have gifted me with sensitivities I can never disown. They make me wonder why there is such a consuming interest in the butch-fem lives of upper-class women, usually more removed literary figures, while real-life, working butch and fem women are seen as imitative and culturally backward. Vita Sackville-West, Jane Heap, Missy, Gertrude Stein, and Radclyff Hall are all figures who shine with audacious self-presentation, and yet the reality of passing women, usually a working-class Lesbian's method of survival, has provoked very little academic Lesbian-feminist interest. Grassroots Lesbian history research projects are changing this. The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Men's History Research Project has created a slide show entitled "Lesbian Masquerade," which discusses passing women in San Francisco at the turn of the century. The Buffalo Lesbian Oral History Project (Madeline Davis, Avra Michelson, and Liz Kennedy) is focusing on the lives of pre-1970 working-class Lesbians. The Lesbian Herstory

Archives has a slide show in progress called "Lesbian Images Pre-1970." There are other groups in Boston, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York attempting to be more inclusive of the varieties of the Lesbian experience.

Because I quickly got the message in my first Lesbian-feminist CR group that such topics as butch-fem relationships and the use of dildos were lower class, I was forced to understand that sexual style is a complicated mixture of class, history, and personal integrity. My butch-fem sensibility also incorporates the wisdom of freaks. When we broke gender lines in the 1950's, we fell off the biologically charted maps. One day many years ago, as I was walking through Central Park, a group of cheerful straight people walked past me and said, "What shall we feed it?" The "it" has never left my consciousness. A butch woman in her fifties reminisced the other day about when she was stoned in Washington Square Park for wearing men's clothes. These searing experiences of marginality because of sexual style are crucial lessons.

Butch-fem women made Lesbians visible in a terrifyingly clear way in a historical period when there was no

movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence, and they provoked rage and censure both from their own community and straight society. Now it is time to stop judging and to begin asking questions and to begin listening. Listening not only to words which may be the wrong ones for the 1980's, but also to gestures, sadnesses in the eyes, gleams of victories, movements of hands, stories told with self-dismissal yet stubbornness. There is a silence among us, the voices of the 1950's, and this silence will continue until all of us are ready to listen. If we do, we may begin to understand how our Lesbian people survived and created an erotic heritage.

It has taken me 40 years to write this. The following women helped make it possible: Frances Taylor, Naomi Holoch, Eleanor Batchelder, Paula Grant, and Judith Schwarz, as well as the *Heresies* issue 12 collective; Paula Webster, who has said "do it" for years; and most deeply, Deborah Edel, my butchy Lesbian-feminist lover, who never thought I was a freak.

1. The word "passing" is used here for Lesbians who look like men to the straight world. They wear men's clothes and work at men's jobs (e.g., driving taxis or clerking in stock rooms). Language, however, is inadequate here. Neither "passing" nor "transvestism" adequately explains the experience of the passing woman. Only she can. In other places I use "passing" to mean disguising a deep identity for societal acceptance.

"Passing" in all its meanings is a central issue in Lesbian culture and deserves its own analysis. Michelle Cliff's *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Persephone Press) is a beginning.

2. *The Ladder*, published from 1956 to 1972 and edited by Gene Damon (Barbara Grier), was the most sustaining Lesbian cultural creation of this period. As a street fem living an unacceptable social life, I desperately searched the lower-East-side newspaper stands for this small slim journal with a Lesbian on its cover. A complete set is now available at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

3. *The Ladder*, No. 1 (May 1957), p. 28.

4. Letter from Sandy De Sando (August 1980).

5. An article in *Journal of Homosexuality* (Summer 1980), "Sexual Preference or Personal Styles? Why Lesbians Are Disliked" by Mary Riege Laner and Roy H. Laner, documented the anger and rejection of 511 straight college students toward Lesbians who were clearly defined as butch-fem. These results led the Laners to celebrate the withering away of butch-fem styles and to advocate androgyny as the safest road to heterosexual acceptance—a new plea for passing. This is the liberal voice turned conservative, the frightened voice of the 1980's that warns Blacks not to be too Black, Jews not to be too Jewish, and Lesbians not to be too Lesbian. To me, this is the basis for a truly destructive kind of role-playing—a self-denial of natural style so the oppressor will not get angry.

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Deb and Joan. Photo by Morgan Gwenwald, 1980.