

The Role of Butch/Femme Relationships in Transgender Activism: A Codependent Mutualism

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"If I wanted a man, I'd be with a real one."

"I'm not with a fake man; I'm with a real butch."

Throughout decades of queer feminist consciousness, butch lesbianism has been the subject of much heated debate and breaking points among progressive women. This troubling tension and hostility has resulted in the relocation of butch-femme romantic partnerships to transgender spaces; a distinct mutualism has developed between the butch-femme dynamic and the transgender community. This symbiosis redefines both the transgender and butch-femme experience to promote better understanding between groups of marginalized people and more opportunities for solidarity and activism.

The Butch Identity in Transgender Space

Butch lesbians play a substantial role in transgender communities and this involvement has led to the formation of a channel between transgender and lesbian spheres of discourse and activism. Over time, the butch identity has negotiated a new delineation on the gender spectrum and now embodies a new breed of masculinity for those who can comprehend its delicate balance between survival and self-expression.

The butch gender identity has declared independence from the implications of biological maleness, both in behavior and self-perception. As feminist scholar Gayle Rubin suggests, "the coexistence of masculine traits with a female anatomy is a fundamental characteristic of 'butch' and is a highly charged, eroticized, and consequential lesbian signal (Rubin 470)."

By assuming a butch lesbian is a woman pretending to be a man, we feed into society's gender norms that dictate all gay men to be effeminate queens and heterosexual women to be quiet-rinse dishwashers. Rather than embody the social implications attached with a masculine-presenting physicality, butches hug the line between femininity and masculinity and challenge the very existence of this binary. As a

femme lesbian once verbalized, "[butches] destroy the whole notion of two genders with [their] alchemy, blending the best characteristics of both into a smoking hot potion uniquely [their] own (Feinberg 98)."

The presence of the butch lesbian is also appropriate in transgender space because as masculine-presenting queer women, butches enter transgender space pre-equipped with the knowledge of heteronormative and sexist oppression and offer an incredible degree of sensitivity and insight.

Implications of the Transitioning Butch Lesbian

Ever since the advent of second-wave feminism, butch lesbians have been transitioning to FTMs (female-to-male transgender) in increasing numbers, a factor that explains and necessitates their growing role in the transgender community. "FTMs comprise only a fraction of the transsexual population, but their numbers are growing and awareness of their presence is increasing (Rubin 473)." As a recent article in *The New York Times* also suggests, "while still a rarity, young women who become men in college, also known as transmen or transmales, have grown in number over the last 10 years." According to research at the Stonewall Center at University of Mass., Amherst, transsexuals who wished to transition historically did so in middle age, but today the majority of physical gender reassignments occur in adolescence or early adulthood. The National Center for Transgender Equality estimates that "between a quarter of a percent and 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender — up to three million Americans (Quart)." Additionally, "many FTMs live as butches before adopting transsexual or male identities, [and] boundaries between the categories of butch and transsexual are permeable (Rubin 473)."

In a sense, this is a sign of times that have shifted to allow more acceptance of transgender individuals, in the same way that sexual minorities have gained visibility and assimilated into parts of mainstream culture. Stone butches, masculine women who engage in sexual acts only to give pleasure to their partners, often transition into men; most then become feminist men with extraordinary insight from female socialization and experience in a patriarchal world. This

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trend is also paradoxical—as butch lesbians have become increasingly ostracized by lesbian feminist rhetoric for their masculine presentation, they have increasingly transitioned into male bodies and identifications. Their departure from the lesbian mainstream is often not a willing exit, but one that grants them clemency from the social persecution associated with gender transgression. As one butch-turned-FTM individual chronicles, “they drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked...they said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women’s hearts they broke. We were not hard to send away, we went quietly (Feinberg 11).”

Indeed, academics attribute these increasing transitions to the drastic rejection of masculine-presenting women by lesbian communities ever since the ‘70s. Despite coexistence under the “queer umbrella,” lesbian feminists have been historically intolerant of transsexuals, treating MTFs as “menacing intruders” and FTMs as “treasonous deserters.” Feminists also perpetuated derisive stereotypes of gender-variant individuals as “unhealthy, deluded, self-hating, enslaved to patriarchal gender roles, antifeminist, antiwoman, and self-mutilating (Rubin 474).” Due to this vehement disapproval inflicted by their own communities, butches have found the necessity to leave and find their own space, taking with them their femme life partners. Second-wave feminism especially spurned butch and femme women, accusing them of conforming to socially-prescribed gender roles leftover from a chauvinistic era. The lesbian community has been known to succumb to bigotry, exclusion, and renunciation when confronted with perceived threats to the queer-women-centered lesbian infrastructure. In 1991, The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival was fiercely controversial at the national lesbian conference, which banned all but “womyn-born-womyn” from the events. Second-wave lesbian feminism has not been compassionate to masculine women, justifying discriminatory policies “so blatantly on recycled biological determinism (Rubin 475).”

The phenomenon of increased sex reassignments further necessitates the presence of butch-femme dynamics within the transgender community. A woman respected and loved as a butch lesbian may suddenly become despised when she embarks on a journey to change her physical sex. This trend also has multi-faceted implications - the shift in identity seems to not only confirm lesbian feminism’s accusation that masculine-presenting women secretly want to be men

in a quest to possess male privilege, but also invariably forces their lesbian partners to reevaluate their own sexualities and roles in the lesbian community.

Implications of the Genderqueer Butch

In relation to the gender spectrum, butches may also identify as genderqueer, thus propelling themselves and their partners to the newest frontier of the transgender movement. The genderqueer identity self-defines as anything from a bi-gendered (existing as both genders simultaneously) to a genderless identity (one who exists outside the constructs of gender itself), and is united in the rejection of a traditional gender binary. The genderqueer movement embodies the concept of gender fluidity, explores the transience of identity, and is thus an appropriate branch of transgender rights. Butch alignment with genderqueer represents new solidarity in transgender activism and demonstrates the inaccuracy of assuming that someone with a masculine presentation must be trying to emulate biological men. Butch lesbians debunk the gender binary with their mere existence; they embody masculine gender presentations without possessing male privilege or participating in the dominant patriarchy.

Butch lesbians are increasingly identifying as genderqueer, although the current lack of a cohesive movement interferes with demographic projections. Many individuals who identify as “trans” today seek not simply to “change their sex but to create an identity outside or between established genders — they may refuse to use any gender pronouns or take a gender-neutral name but never modify their bodies chemically or surgically (Quart).” The trans-community welcomes these individuals, though they self-identify as bi-gendered, gender nonconforming or genderqueer rather than gender-variant or FTM.

Part of their aversion to using labels is generational — “[some queer women] see themselves as genderqueer rather than gay. For them, sexual orientation is fluid. Like some of their peers, [they] want to be — and sometimes imagine they already are — part of the first generation to transcend gender (Quart).” In an interview, butch-to-FTM Rey remarked, “my identity is fluid; it may evolve and fluctuate...my preference is not to use gender pronouns (Quart).”

The implications that result from the genderqueer butch woman include the creation of novel identities of their partners to accommodate the radical and subversive

notion of genderqueer. For one, the self-identification of a butch as genderqueer fuels the need for words like pansexual, omnisexual (as referenced by the NYT article “When Girls Will be Boys), polysexual, or multisexual that affirm the existence of more than two genders and guide hir femme partner into a complementary sexual identity. “The partners of FTMS do not necessarily become bisexual or heterosexual because a lover decides on a sex change, although some do eventually renegotiate their own identities (Rubin 476).” In existing outside the sphere of gender and debunking the binary system, genderqueer butches also inherently challenge the gender expectations of the transgender individual. Along these lines, the existence of genderqueer also redefines the transgender experience. No longer strictly about the journey from one side of the spectrum to another, transgender identity will never be quite the same, and neither should our perceptions of its domain.

Salubrious Mutualism of Butch-Femme and Transgender Spheres

The commensalism between butch-femme partnership and transgender identity has been a mutually necessary and adaptive alliance of the queer movement. This is especially accurate in the context of butch lesbian survival and evasion from physical and social harm.

In recent decades of lesbian feminism, butch/femmerelationshipshavebeendemonizedasperpetuating mainstream heteronormativity and catering to society’s prescription of gender performance. Butch women especially have been condemned in lesbian communities for looking like “men” and changing their identity to gain male privilege, and have been consistently painted as traitors and malevolent males infiltrating women’s space. This rejection by mainstream society as well as post-progressive lesbian feminism created the need to secure butch/femme-affirming space and places where butch identity is embraced and not shunned; they found both in the transgender community. As Feinberg’s butch protagonist recalls in the memory of hir femme lover’s face when ze was arrested, “in her eyes I had seen the pain of being overpowered and helpless - the way I felt almost everyday of my life...We really were in this life together. We might not have the words, but we both knew exactly what we were choking on (Feinberg 137).”

On the other hand, the transgender identity has been reconstructed by butch-femme experiences and instances of intimate as well as politically-charged coalitions. In turn, butches and femmes seek transgender space for safe haven – resulting in the comfortable mesh of two overlapping and subversive worlds. The masculine-presenting woman has found compassion and empathy within transgender space where previously ze had only the support and guidance of hir life partner and the elusive, underground butch subculture.

These examples of the mutualism between the butch-femme partnership and the transgender movement establish the benefit and necessity of this coalition. As one femme lesbian described, “Butches are a kind of female we never knew existed! They represent a woven dichotomy of the vast intimacy in a lesbian relationship while offering masculinity, tough exteriors and confidence (Faderman 173).” The butch lesbian embodies an amalgam of tough exteriors and vulnerable interiors that is only revealed for hir partner - the rough exterior that hides a tender, warm, loving human being; ze is a curious blend of contradictions: male/female, strong/tender, playful/serious, soft/hard, confident/humble, protective/in need of protection. These instances refute the common misconception that butch/femme relationships exist in mimicry of heterosexual gender roles, and question this premise to reveal the gender and sexual-identity assumptions that are made with this assertion. As Jan Brown writes about the butch-to-FTM transition, “we become male, but under our own terms, our own rules. We define the maleness. We invent the men we become (419).”

Butch lesbians possess exceptional awareness of heteronormative and sexist oppression that result from experiencing female socialization for entire lifetimes before making the decision to physically transgress gender. From this profound and often painful understanding, butches are predisposed to offer astounding amounts of respect to their partners as fellow women and members of a marginalized sexual population that makes them inherently stand apart from men. As one high femme remarked in Lillian Faderman’s chronicle of American lesbian literature, “[butches/FTMs] can see right into you and know what you want without you having to scream at the top of your lungs to get the point across to them (Faderman 65).”

Additionally, butch lesbians also represent a source of strength, resilience, and inspiration simply

for surviving in a world that subjects them to constant harassment, humiliation, cold stares, and rejection – and still fighting for space to exist. Butch masculinity embodies the sheer courage it takes to stay true to oneself where that appearance can warrant arrest, rape, physical assault, healthcare denial and negligence, state and legislative abuse and neglect, and job termination. As a femme lesbian character expresses in Feinberg’s novel,

“You walk a difficult path with powerful dignity. Mistreated and misunderstood by many, you refuse to be anything other than authentically yourselves. Exuding capability and a bold mesmerizing masculinity, you charge the air with that special aura that only butches and stone butches have, the one that makes femmes twitch as they sense you across a room. Without you many femmes might never come into the knowledge of their own selves, might never know how special they are as well (Feinberg 89).”

The transgender movement cannot help but admire the transcendental way that butches and FTMs have experienced so much by living in a world where they brave prejudice for transgressing gender norms, but draw strength from the pain and become unafraid to be truly themselves.

Redefining the Transgender Experience

The presence of butch/femme partnerships has vastly redefined the parameters of transgender identity from social discourse to sexual practice. The overlap between butch and FTM identity has also aided the transport of femme presence into transgender communities, reinforcing the mutual codependence between gender nonconformity and the butch-femme dynamic. The most universal instances involve femme support for her partner’s unique experience and needs within the umbrella term of transgender. Femmes provide intimate/sexual validation of butch partner’s gender identity, sexual orientation, and often also their sexual practices. In the case of the stone butch, hir femme partner’s sexual function even revolves around the femme’s ability to “melt the stone” and coax the desires nestled deep within butch masculinity to surface. This example of the femme’s validation of stone butch sexuality reinforces the intimate and multi-faceted support femmes provide at every step of the journey and put them in the rare position to provide objective commentary and transcripts of the

transgender butch experience. Femme partners have become the main active support figures apart from other transgender individuals in the community, since in most cases butch or FTM lesbians face familial condemnation and a degree of social rejection after coming out. Femmes are capable of offering insightful and important perspectives from understanding and interacting with their partners in ways the outside world never experiences – from the horrors of being denied proper medical attention in an ER at 4 a.m. to the thrill of injecting the first syringe of testosterone into her partner’s buttocks. The femme partners of FTM/genderqueer butch lesbians are instrumental in documenting the experiences of transgender individuals, and this ties in with the struggle to gain queer and transgender visibility. As Quart documents, “I’ve saved 20 voice mails of your voice changing over the last four months.” He looked at her adoringly as they ate French fries in sync: Melissa was not only his girlfriend but also the historian of his identity (Quart).”

For FTM or genderqueer butches who may be attracted to women on the feminine-presenting end of the spectrum, femme lesbians also represent a rare population of potential friends and romantic partners. The loneliness that accompanies the transgender butch experience is well documented, and femme partners also offer unique and compassionate perspectives about the process of physical transition that are invaluable to the progression of the movement. As Feinberg chronicles through hir protagonist, “I don’t know what the fuck I am. I just don’t want to be different anymore. There’s no place to hide. I just want everything to stop hurting so much (Feinberg 159).” Physical, financial, and practical support aside, femme partners of transitioning FTMs offered the solace of friendship and emotional validation at each stressful change and turn of events. As *Stone Butch Blues*’ butch-turned-FTM protagonist said, “as the world beat the stuffing out of us, [our femmes] tried in every way to protect and nurture our tenderness (Feinberg 46).”

Bisexual femmes in particular, as opposed to lesbian separatists who denounce all trace of “maleness” or even the appearance of it on a full-pledged member of the lesbian community, understandably exhibit more tolerance for the male-identification of their partner, although this is certainly not exclusively the case. As the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues* remarked, “[my femme] held me inside her warmth... without words I

told her everything she felt... without saying anything she let me know she understood (Feinberg 70)."

"Later that night I woke up and found myself alone in bed. You were drinking at the kitchen table, head in your hands. You were crying. I took you firmly in my arms and held you, and you struggled and hit my chest because the enemy wasn't there to fight. Moments later, you recalled the bruises on my chest and cried even harder, sobbing, "it's my fault, I couldn't stop them. In that one moment I knew you really did understand how I felt in life. Choking on anger, feeling so powerless, unable to protect myself or those I loved most, yet fighting back again and again, unwilling to give up (Feinberg 10)."

In both these instances, the unity in misery and frustration demonstrates the role of the femme lesbian in transfiguring the transgender butch experience.

In response to the nurture and emotional support of femme partners, butch women in turn validate the femme identity in queer women circles (especially second-wave feminism) and combat discrimination against femme lesbians for their traditionally feminine-presenting physicality and allegedly buying into the system of gender roles. In explaining the comfort that butch and femme lesbians are able to find in each other's company, one femme lesbian expressed, "We just fit, you know? She kissed me again. 'You're the only women in the world who hurt almost the same way I do, you know? You're the tenderest lovers in the world (Feinberg 108)." The well-documented ostracism that masculine-presenting women have endured from lesbian feminist communities is not exclusive to those with crew cuts and BVDs; femme lesbians also brave the harsh criticisms from lesbian subculture that condemn them for being "stereotypical" women. In Lillian Faderman's collection of lesbian herstories from twentieth-century America, one femme lesbian expressed gratitude towards her butch partner for "how you make me feel welcome and at home in the queer community, instead of being condescended to by others for 'looking straight' (Faderman 134)."

Butches and femmes also face common oppression together from society, and in their love are building intimate and politically important coalitions for both the transgender as well as the lesbian movement. Butch and femme relationships were "brilliantly adapted for building a minority-sexual culture out of the tools, materials, and debris of a dominant sexual system (Rubin 477)."

In the momentous and socially transgressive journey from butch lesbian to FTM male and everywhere in between, the transgender butch experience has claimed its rightful space within the transgender identity, hand in hand with the priceless contributions of its femme partner's experiences. In this fortuitous setup, butch-femme dynamics have invariably diversified the FTM identity and provided much-needed commensalism between two marginalized and condemned groups of gender outlaws. With the recent influx of butch and genderqueer lesbians and their femme and pansexual/omnisexual/polysexual partners into the transgender community, both parties have been undeniably regenerated and remodeled into greater self and reciprocal understanding and better empowered to stand in solidarity against the common foe of the sexist, heteronormative patriarchy. With the intimacy of butch-femme love and trust transposed onto the political coalition between butch-femme partnerships and the transgender experience, this new departure from post-modern lesbian feminism offers a refreshing reminder of the unity of the oppressed and the universal human capacity for endurance as well as compassion.

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