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RISKING EVERYTHING FOR THAT TOUCH:
BUTCH-FEMME LESBIAN CULTURE IN NEW YORK CITY FROM
WORLD WAR II TO WOMEN'S LIBERATION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Risking Everything for That Touch examines lesbian culture in New York City from the end of World War II in 1945 to the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Analyzing gendered subjectivities, erotics, self-fashioning, cultural rituals, and the production and distribution of sexual knowledge, it demonstrates the pervasiveness of butch-femme – a gendered style of lesbianism that encompasses dress and appearance, behaviors and mannerisms, courtship, relationships, and sex. But it also expands and complicates prevailing notions of this prominent erotic dyad. Rather than the uniformity implied by historical depictions of stark visual contrast and firm sexual standards, this dissertation explores the ways that varied groups of lesbians interpreted butch-femme identities and roles, demonstrating that they showed remarkable creativity and ingenuity in negotiating a hostile dominant culture while remaining fiercely committed to queer sexual and gendered explorations. Women played with queer legibility according to personal preference and the level of risk they encountered, and explored their sexuality both within and beyond the gendered

framework of their culture. Moreover, lesbians maintained a complicated connection to postwar norms, displaying a sexual fortitude that flouted dominant ideologies of womanhood while remaining entangled with normative ideologies of gender and romance. Drawing on sources rooted in the voices and experiences of postwar femmes and butches, such as oral histories and memoirs, I take an ethnographic approach to this historical moment, recreating the sights, sounds, and emotions of postwar lesbian life. This dissertation offers a window into their world, their culture, their understandings of themselves, and the meanings that they created under difficult circumstances. In the process, it demonstrates the flexibility and ingenuity of that powerful and enduring style of queer erotics – butch-femme.

Dedication

*For my grandparents,
who I wish had lived to call me Doctor*

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INTRODUCTION

“Risking Everything for That Touch”¹: Butch-Femme Lesbian Culture in New York City from World War II to Women’s Liberation

“Back then, everything was femme and butch,” Miriam Wolfson declared during our first interview – my first interview ever. It was 2010, and I had just begun researching mid-century lesbians. I was ecstatic that this 87-year-old butch had agreed to talk with me and nervously attached my newly purchased lapel microphone to her collar, set up my tape recorder, and sat beside her with my pen poised to document her story. Miriam did not disappoint. She was feisty and forthcoming, and confirmed much of what I already knew about postwar lesbian culture – the bars, the carousing, the sleeping around, and of course, the butches and femmes. She explained that in those days lesbian relationships were “exactly like boys and girls.” “Manly” butches wore suits, paid the tab, and guided sexual encounters, while femmes embraced feminine glamour and eagerly succumbed to butches’ erotic proficiency.²

Miriam’s description of butch-femme would come as no surprise to anyone who has read the “basics” – Joan Nestle’s powerful 1981 article, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s” (and her many other essays on the subject), and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis’s groundbreaking 1993 book, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. Like Miriam’s testimony, these texts emphasize gendered visibility and precise sexual roles as fundamental aspects of butch-femme, aspects that to these scholars harness and reveal its radical, defiant power. For Nestle, herself a “fifties femme,” butch-femme was a highly

¹ Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 March 2011.

² Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 1 July 2010.

visible “self-sufficient erotic partnership,” “a conspicuous flag of rebellion” that offered a public image of women’s sexual autonomy and butch sexual expertise.³ Kennedy and Davis built on this argument, contending that butches and femmes not only created a public lesbian presence in a hostile world, but also that the erotic system they devised subverted patriarchal models of sexuality in its distribution of pleasure and power. This culture of feminist sexual resistance resided in the fact that the “active or ‘masculine’ partner was associated with the giving of sexual pleasure, a service usually assumed to be ‘feminine’ [and] conversely, the fem, although the more passive partner, demanded and received sexual pleasure.”⁴

With these arguments in mind, I listened as Miriam described her experiences as a New York City butch at mid-century. But while she initially appeared to substantiate common perceptions of butch-femme cultural norms, there were inconsistencies that gave me pause. She described herself as a shy but aggressive butch, always masculine in mind and appearance, always the sexual initiator, and always attracted to gorgeous, feminine women. However, she had an ongoing affair in the early-1950s with May Brown, another butch in her community – and not just any butch, “the butch of the century.” And even though Miriam saw her as “the butchest,” May responded to her sexual advances in a style typical of femmes – which was to “lay back and fan.”⁵ Moreover, to my surprise, a photograph of Miriam and May revealed two women in skirts with feminine hairdos and hints of lipstick (Figure 1). This was Miriam and the “butch of the century”? These unexpected details unsettled my understanding of postwar lesbianism. The ways they

³ Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” in *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 92–4.

⁴ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 192. This is the only historical monograph focused specifically on butch-femme culture to date. Also, many lesbians of this era used the spelling “fem” instead of “femme.”

⁵ Wolfson, interview with author.



**Figure 1: Miriam Wolfson and May Brown, “The Butch of the Century,” circa 1951
Courtesy of Miriam Wolfson’s Personal Photography Collection**

challenged existing scholarly tropes of butch-femme visibility and adherence to sexual roles have shaped the primary arguments of this dissertation.

Risking Everything for That Touch examines lesbian culture in New York City from the end of World War II in 1945 to the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁶ Analyzing gendered subjectivities, erotics,

⁶ This periodization reflects common historical understandings of World War II as a watershed moment in the history of sexuality and LGBT history in particular, as military participation, factory work, and urban migration for the war effort created new opportunities for queer communities to develop. Despite transformations in American society and culture during the 1960s, my research suggests that lesbian life did not significantly change with these radical movements. Rather, it was not until the end of the decade that feminist challenges to prevailing notions of gender and sexuality began to alter conceptualizations of lesbianism and influence butch-femme culture. For World War II’s impact on queer community formation, see Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983);

self-fashioning, cultural rituals, and the production and distribution of sexual knowledge, it demonstrates the pervasiveness of butch-femme – a gendered style of lesbianism that encompasses dress and appearance, behaviors and mannerisms, courtship, relationships, and sex. But I also expand and complicate prevailing notions of this prominent erotic dyad. Rather than the uniformity implied by depictions of stark visual contrast and firm sexual standards, I reveal the ways that varied groups of lesbians interpreted butch-femme identities and roles, arguing that they showed remarkable creativity and ingenuity in negotiating a hostile dominant culture while remaining fiercely committed to queer sexual and gendered explorations. Women played with queer legibility according to personal preference and the level of risk they encountered, and explored their sexuality both within and beyond the gendered framework of their culture. Such resourcefulness ensured diversity in butch-femme expression across class, race, age, neighborhood and social circle, but also allowed for intriguing similarities and interactions across groups. Moreover, lesbians maintained a complicated connection to postwar norms, displaying a sexual fortitude that flouted dominant ideologies of womanhood while remaining entangled with normative ideologies of gender and romance.

These arguments offer important interventions into histories of postwar lesbian life and butch-femme culture in particular. With roots in fiery feminist debates about sexuality from the 1980s, most scholarship about butch-femme takes an ideological approach to its gendered relationality, some dismissing it as heterosexist and misogynistic and others claiming it as a powerful expression of women's sexual autonomy.⁷ For

Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.

⁷ Now known as the “sex wars,” these debates originally focused on pornography but came to encompass much larger issues concerning sexuality, with butch-femme as one of the most volatile. Many feminist and lesbian scholars writing in the 1980s and 1990s were in the thick of these “wars,” and their views often come across clearly in their work. For

example, while Nestle, Kennedy, and Davis argue for butch-femme's radical potential, scholar Lillian Faderman views these identities as simply imitations of working-class gender roles in a harshly conformist and patriarchal subculture.⁸ Firmly situated in postwar American history, my work disrupts the dichotomy of butch-femme as either heteronormative or subversive, revealing lesbians' innovative ways of navigating existing norms while creating distinctive queer cultural forms.

In this way, my work engages not only lesbian and queer history, but also larger historiographies of postwar women, gender, and sexuality. This was a complicated time to be a woman, as war, peace, and another war provoked rapid cultural shifts that disrupted and reframed gender and sexual norms, leaving "the woman problem" a topic of much debate in American society. Most histories addressing these issues grapple with what feminist author Betty Friedan later called "the feminine mystique" – a widespread ideology of domesticity that defined marriage, motherhood, and housewifery as postwar women's ultimate source of fulfillment and prestige, much to their detriment.⁹ Elaine Tyler May investigates Friedan's claims in the context of national politics, arguing that

more on the sex wars, see Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984); Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Alex Ellis Warner, "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': Feminism, Sex and the Problem of SM, 1969-1993" (Unpublished dissertation, Rutgers University, 2011).

⁸ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, chap. 7. Faderman made this point within the context of a far-reaching history of twentieth-century lesbian life; it was not her main focus. Nevertheless, since her book was widely hailed as an important contribution to lesbian history and taught in many history and women's studies classes, critics objected to her depiction of femmes and butches as passive receptors who lacked agency. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 13.

⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963). For a recent investigation of *The Feminine Mystique's* impact, see Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). For more about Friedan herself, see Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

cold war anxieties had a drastic effect on gender, sexuality, and the family, leading to a cultural insistence that women embrace a life “contained” within familial roles.¹⁰

Others challenge this view, demonstrating not only that women received conflicting messages about their position and options in American society, but also that they took paths beyond and outside the domestic realm. Joanne Meyerowitz explicitly contests the dominance of a “feminine mystique,” arguing that magazines and other popular media expressed ambivalence about women’s ties to the home and applauded their achievements in the workplace and political arena.¹¹ In addition, the articles in Meyerowitz’s edited collection, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America*, contradict the stereotypical image of the suburban housewife with the white picket fence, emphasizing women’s racial and class diversity, activism, paid labor, and cultural and sexual rebellion.¹² Most notable for this study is Donna Penn’s essay, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America.” Penn does not reject May’s idea of containment, but engages it to argue that lesbians and prostitutes were linked as icons of female sexual degeneracy in order to police the boundaries of normative heterosexuality.¹³

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Alluding to a cold war foreign policy strategy aimed at “containing” communism to those nations where it was already adopted, May uses “containment” to refer to the ideological push for women to channel their sexual energy into marriage and motherhood, condemning all other erotic expression (including lesbianism) as threatening to the nation.

¹¹ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1455–1482.

¹² Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s groundbreaking *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* also depicted the postwar period as ripe with contradictions, showing that, alongside the pressure to marry and panics about the “sexual psychopath,” figures as disparate as Alfred Kinsey and Hugh Hefner told the world that sexual activity was normal and healthy. John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Also see Estelle B. Freedman, “‘Uncontrolled Desires’: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 83–106; John D’Emilio, “The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America,” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 226–240.

¹³ Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” in *Not June Cleaver*, 358–381.

This dissertation speaks to both sides of this historiographical debate, investigating how lesbians and their culture fit into mainstream postwar values and institutions as well as how they deviated from them. Lesbian subjects are certainly examples of nonconformists challenging the heteronormative domestic order, not only because they harbored desires defined as deviant, but also because those desires led them to behaviors considered unfeminine: braving dangerous city streets, facing hostile police officers and angry straight men, participating in urban nightlife, enjoying sexual adventures well beyond their youth, and choosing paths of financial independence. However, my work, like Penn's, does not seek to contradict the idea of a "feminine mystique." Rather, in line with Lauren Jae Gutterman's recent scholarship on lesbian wives, I explore the ways that femmes and butches grappled with the heteronormative expectations of their time.¹⁴ In addition, I apply insights about postwar fashion and courtship to butch-femme styles and modes of interaction, demonstrating how lesbians adapted these standards for their own queer purposes.¹⁵

Moreover, as has become integral to gender histories, this dissertation takes an intersectional approach by analyzing interlocking forces of race, ethnicity, class, gender and age in the development of lesbian identity and culture. Most scholars depict butch-

¹⁴ Lauren Jae Gutterman, "'The House on the Borderland': Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1950–1979," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1–22. In this way, I join scholars who have revealed the ways that postwar women themselves participated in the conversation, debating sexual ideologies and standards in the pages of periodicals, negotiating rules imposed on college campuses, and challenging normative expectations with erotic experimentation and rebellion. See, Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 9–35; Leisa D. Meyer, "'Strange Love': Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture during the 1950s," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 625–657; Beth L. Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Wini Breines, "The 'Other' Fifties: Beats and Bad Girls," in *Not June Cleaver*, 382–408; Rachel Devlin, "Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Problem of Sexual Authority in America, 1945–1965," in *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 83–106.

¹⁵ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984); Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830–1980* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Louise Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress in the United States* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 2007); Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth B. Wilson, eds., *Body Dressing* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001).

femme as a primarily working-class phenomenon centered in bars, in contrast to middle-class homophile lesbians who sought social acceptance and respectability, and later, middle-class lesbian-feminists whose critique of butch-femme was often interpreted as class-based and elitist.¹⁶ Further, as Rochella Thorpe has argued, due to legal and de facto racial segregation at mid-century, the emphasis on bar culture works to produce a distinctly white portrait of lesbian history.¹⁷ Finally, historians have rarely turned their attention to differences in the experiences of butches and femmes, or to femme subjects apart from their connection to butches. Arguments about lesbian visibility and gender subversion focus on the butch, leaving the femme's queerness and rebellion unexamined and overshadowed.¹⁸ Consequently, "postwar butch-femme culture" is often reduced to an image of white working-class butches.

This study complicates such an image by incorporating African Americans, Latinas, working-class and middle-class white women, and femme as well as butch subjects into the story, not merely as tokens but as crucial voices informing the analysis. Their experiences and perspectives demonstrate the ways that race (including whiteness),

¹⁶ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, chap. 7; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), chap. 4; Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 277; Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 215; Elizabeth Smith, "Butches, Femmes, and Feminists: The Politics of Lesbian Sexuality," *NWSA Journal* 3, no. 1 (1989): 398-421; Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Rochella Thorpe, "'A House Where Queers Go': African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40-61. Along with Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis, and Anne (Finn) Enke, Thorpe demonstrates that African American lesbians more often socialized in house parties than bars. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Kennedy and Davis limited their subjects to women who still identified and lived as lesbians. This decision led them to interview over twenty butches and only eight femmes, thus offering a skewed portrayal of butch-femme culture. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 18. However, autobiographical and theoretical literature has not shied away from femmes, and these texts have been significant additions to my source base. For example, Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003); Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Sally Munt, ed., *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (London: Cassell, 1998); Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, eds., *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

class and gender shaped lesbians' social and sexual geographies, opportunities, decisions, and the production of queer identity and culture. Age also functions as a significant category of analysis, as women in different stages of life had different priorities and strategies for navigating structures like work, school, family, and community. However, my attention to race and ethnicity takes on particular importance due to the limited attention granted to African Americans and Latinas in both lesbian history and the history of sexuality more broadly.

A central feature in African American women's history has been the need to grapple with white supremacist ideologies that have historically imbued black sexuality with deviant excess. Addressing this issue, scholars have exposed the prevalence and utility of rape within racist regimes and shown how black women challenged harmful stereotypes by asserting their respectability and sexual morality.¹⁹ However, as Evelyn M. Hammonds argues, these scholars have inadvertently perpetuated sexual silences as "the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized... while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed." In particular, Hammonds laments the lack of attention to lesbian sexualities, viewing this topic as "a site that disrupts silence and imagines a positive affirming sexuality."²⁰

Mignon R. Moore and Mattie Udora Richardson agree, suggesting that the absence of historical literature on queerness is due to a fear of validating racist ideas of African

¹⁹ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912–920; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Paisley Jane Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 212–220; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 328–349; Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

²⁰ Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 99, 102.

American sexuality and gender roles as pathological.²¹ While this is not entirely true – a small but rich body of literature explores questions of sexuality and gender transgressions in relation to black women blues singers in the 1920s and 1930s, and there have been several studies addressing black lesbian communities at mid-century²² – this study’s inclusion of black women and deep racial analysis of butch-femme speaks to Hammonds’ appeal to engage more with sexual pleasure and agency, not just oppression.²³

In addition, despite Yolanda Chávez Leyva’s call to “put Latina lesbian history at the center,” historians have been slow to do so.²⁴ Celebrated works by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa as well as several notable anthologies offer access to queer Latinas’ voices through poetry, prose, theory, interviews, memoirs and critical essays.²⁵ However, as Lorena García and Lourdes Torres note in a recent article, “While such works provide

²¹ Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 80–1; Mattie Udora Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 63–76.

²² Hazel V. Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 238–249; Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: NAL Books, 1989); James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Ethel Sawyer, “A Study of a Public Lesbian Community” (Master’s thesis, Washington University, 1965); Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go”; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, chap. 2. For examples from disciplines outside history addressing black queer sexualities, see Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Catherine E. McKinley and L. Joyce DeLaney, eds., *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* (New York: Doubleday, 1995); E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

²³ Kennedy and Davis did not ignore black women or racial issues in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, analyzing black lesbians’ propensity toward house parties over bars in the contexts of segregation and African American community tradition. However, their discussion of parties serves to buttress their argument that different types of socializing enabled similar types of community development and resistance. Although useful, conflating the effects of house parties and bars as sites of community building can work to universalize black and white lesbians’ experiences. This issue is not rectified in their examination of butch-femme identities and sexualities.

²⁴ Yolanda Chávez Leyva, “Breaking the Silence: Putting Latina Lesbian History at the Center,” in *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni A. H. McNaron (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 145–52.

²⁵ Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Lourdes Torres and Inmaculada Pertusa, eds., *Tortilleras: Hispanic and U. S. Latina Lesbian Expression* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Carla Mari Trujillo, ed., *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1991); Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *The Sexuality of Latinas* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1989); Juanita Ramos, ed., *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

important insight into the sexual lives of Latinas, we are still in need of empirical research that uncovers [...] the ways in which institutions and structures impact Latinas' sexual subjectivities."²⁶ Thus far, Katie Gilmartin presents the best historical analysis of Latina lesbian identity, employing a methodological "layering process" to consider one woman's understanding of butch-femme in light of the distinct gender and sexual norms of her Chicana background and her European-American lesbian community in the 1950s.²⁷ I join her in incorporating a thorough analysis of Latina lesbian culture and subjectivity in this study.

Thus, in examining race, ethnicity, class, gender and age, this dissertation elucidates how white, African American, and Latina butches *and* femmes forged overlapping yet distinct groups in New York City and provides a deeper understanding of the diversity and tensions within queer communities in the postwar era. Indeed, despite some scholars' critique of the tendency toward "metronormativity" in queer scholarship, centering my story in New York City has allowed me to access this complex history.²⁸ The city's size, diversity, and status as a queer destination make it an ideal site in which to explore autonomous as well as intersecting lesbian networks.²⁹ Moreover, because my work expands understandings of butch-femme by revealing a wide variety of interpretations of identities and cultural rituals, it is possible to include subjects and communities that have been overlooked.

²⁶ Lourdes Torres and Lorena García, "New Directions in Latina Sexualities Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): viii. While this special issue on "Latina Sexualities" included an array of significant articles, none were from a historical perspective.

²⁷ Katie Gilmartin, "'The Culture of Lesbianism': Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Life of a Chicana Lesbian," in *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Connections*, ed. Toni P. Lester (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 160–179.

²⁸ Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time And Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), chap. 2. For an excellent study of rural queer life that speaks to this critique, see John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁹ Even so, this is the first large-scale history of New York City's lesbian culture to date.

Within the field of history of sexuality, accounts of oppression and struggle often take center stage, mostly through queer histories that emphasize trajectories of activism and rebellion. Challenging the widespread belief that the gay liberation and feminist movements of the 1970s initiated an era of gay pride and openness, putting an end to the shameful isolated closet of yesteryear, scholars argue that there were opportunities for self-respect, community and resistance much earlier in the twentieth century. George Chauncey famously recreates the gay male world of New York City's Lower East Side from 1890 to 1940, showing that not only was there a public and visible gay subculture integrated into urban life, but also that it enabled gay men to gain self-esteem, confidence, and joy in their sexuality long before gay liberation.³⁰ John D'Emilio, Marc Stein, and Marcia Gallo explore the homophile movement, America's first homosexual civil rights crusade in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that the gay activism that exploded after Stonewall was built upon two decades of political work.³¹ In this vein, one of Kennedy and Davis's major claims about butch-femme is that it was a culture of resistance that constitutes a "pre-political" stage of the gay and lesbian liberation movement.³² In her study of queer San Francisco before 1965, Nan Alamilla Boyd joins Kennedy and Davis in emphasizing the political contributions of butch-femme bar-goers. Arguing that lesbians who claimed social space in bars created opportunities for activist

³⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994).

³¹ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006).

³² Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 6, 390.

sensibilities to develop, distinct from those of their homophile counterparts, Boyd pushes their influence from “pre-political” to political in their own right.³³

These pivotal histories are invaluable, yet their attention to political legacies can obscure subjects’ lived experience during a time in which searching for love, sex and community, grappling with the shame and thrill of queer difference, and struggling to survive were often more constitutive of their lives than any (pre-)political agenda. Rather than searching for a prelude to what came next, this dissertation takes an ethnographic approach to this historical moment, recreating the sights, sounds, and emotions of postwar lesbian life. In addition, a focus on resistance can neglect the desire motivating queer subjects. More than political consciousness, it was desire – a powerful pull toward community, bodily comfort, sexual fulfillment, and love – that compelled lesbians to create subcultures rife with eroticized rituals and gendered identities that continue to resonate today. By analyzing my subjects according to the categories and themes they created, I connect with the immediacy of queer experience and capture the essence of this era on its own terms.

However, since the 1990s, most feminist and queer scholars have shied away from “the evidence of experience,” to cite Joan Scott’s turn of phrase.³⁴ Her influential 1991 article critiqued a methodological tendency in social history to “appeal to experience as uncontested evidence,” arguing that doing so fails to interrogate the ideological systems that constructed those experiences.³⁵ Influenced by Michel Foucault’s work on discourse, knowledge and power, Scott joined other poststructuralist

³³ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*.

³⁴ For an overview of feminist historians’ influence on poststructuralist thought and the linguistic turn, in the late-1970s and 1980s, see Kathleen Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 370–1.

³⁵ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 777.

scholars in calling for further contextualization of and theoretical engagement with social classifications and disciplinary structures.³⁶ Similarly, queer theorists challenged historians to move beyond studies demarcated by identity categories (i.e. “gay” and “lesbian”) and to interrogate the larger ideologies and institutions that produce and give meaning to concepts like “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” “normal,” and “abnormal.”³⁷ Instead of recovering gay experience, they argue that the goal of history should be to analyze the processes by which heteronormativity and deviance are constructed – discursive practices that shape subjectivity and sexual meanings.³⁸

For example, Judith Butler’s widely embraced theory of performativity argues that the supposed consistency between categories of sex, gender, and sexuality (i.e. the coherence among feminine gender and heterosexual desire in female bodies) is due to controlled repetition mandated by disciplinary regimes. Therefore, gender is believed to be an authentic state of being, a natural part of the self, rather than discursively constructed and regulated. Linking the subconscious performance of gender with the production of heterosexuality and the normal, Butler describes a “heterosexual matrix” which defines femininity and masculinity through heterosexual desire, explaining that “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and

³⁶ Also see Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–1075. This intellectual move was not uncontested among feminist scholars, as Canning shows in “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn.” For a critique of Scott’s work in relation to gay and lesbian history, see Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 186–7.

³⁷ Indeed, queer theorists challenged the utility of identity categories altogether, arguing not only that they are not complex enough “to capture the nuances of lived sexuality,” but also that they restrict sexual expression by creating new norms that become compulsory. Sharon Marcus, “Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 204.

³⁸ Alice Echols, “Queer Like Us?,” in *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 140.

organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”³⁹

Discourse analysis, performativity, and queer theory have been hugely influential for scholars of gender and sexuality, as they “shifted from studying women to studying gender as a set of relations, and [...] from tracing historically stable identities based on object choice to defining queerness in relation to sexual norms.”⁴⁰ Jennifer Terry, for example, reveals the ways that scientific and medical communities in the twentieth-century United States used discussions and studies of homosexuality to produce standards of acceptable behavior and attitudes about gender and sexuality. In this way, her work demonstrates how conceptions of deviance have been used to define the normal.⁴¹

However, while historicizing these kinds of institutional structures is undeniably significant, the focus on discursive constructions has in some ways obscured the queer subject. A recent current in queer, gender, and especially transgender studies has expressed a yearning for work that re-centers not only lived experience and queer people themselves, but also prioritizes the value of experiential and body-based knowledge.⁴²

Jay Prosser, for instance, challenges the privileging of discourse over experience with respect to transgender subjects. Critiquing the way that some queer theorists revere trans people as gender-crossers who exemplify the concept of performativity and

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 37–8, 136. Butler also specifically addresses butch-femme lesbianism, challenging the idea that it is an imitation of heterosexuality to argue that the “imitative effect of gay identities” are actually “running commentaries” that expose heterosexuality as “an incessant and *panicked* imitation of it’s own naturalized idealization.” Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 314.

⁴⁰ Marcus, “Queer Theory for Everyone,” 195.

⁴¹ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴² For the significance of body-based knowledge in shaping experience and subjectivity, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003); Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

denaturalize gender, Prosser argues that this perspective obfuscates trans people's lived experience and relationships to their bodies, particularly the feeling of an "inner" or "true" gender identity that many transfolks embrace.⁴³ Likewise, Susan Stryker argues that scholarship must validate and analyze "the embodied experience of the speaking subject."⁴⁴ While I do not discount the value of examining discursive production, my work follows the insights of scholars like Prosser and Stryker by placing my subjects and their embodied experiences firmly at the center of inquiry. My goal is to explore and expose femme and butch lives at this moment in history, to offer a window into their world, their culture, their understandings of themselves, and the meanings that *they* created under difficult circumstances. It is through their words, memories, and texts that this history comes alive.

I have compiled an extensive and diverse trove of research for this dissertation, rooted in the voices and experiences of postwar femmes and butches. As mentioned previously, I conducted oral history interviews with lesbians from this era, cultivating relationships with a diverse group of subjects by promoting my project in queer periodicals, websites, organizations, and community centers.⁴⁵ Edited collections of oral histories, transcripts and recordings of other scholars' interviews, and documentary films have also been invaluable sources.⁴⁶ In addition, the 1990s saw a proliferation of

⁴³ Jay Prosser, "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3 (1995): 483–514; Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Prosser specifically critiques the work of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam.

⁴⁴ Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

⁴⁵ See the appendix for biographical information for my participants.

⁴⁶ For example, Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998); Marcy Adelman, *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986); Arden Eversmeyer and Margaret Purcell, eds., *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* (Houston, TX: Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, 2009); Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Penny Coleman, *Village Elders* (University of Illinois Press, 2000); Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall* (Before Stonewall Inc., 1984); Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea: A Very*

memoirs and anthologies that mixed personal experience and theory to address butch-femme identity and culture. I analyze these texts – works like Joan Nestle’s *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, Esther Newton’s *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, and Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker’s *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls* – as both primary and secondary sources.⁴⁷ As well as examining postwar journalism, sociological studies, and other documentary evidence, I have conducted research in numerous archival holdings related to New York City’s queer communities.⁴⁸ The materials discovered there – letters, diaries and photographs, feminist organizational records, periodicals, unpublished manuscripts, and social science surveys – contribute additional voices and perspectives to this history.

Although interviews, memoirs and similar sources are rooted in individual memories and interpretations, as with any historical evidence I analyze them in context and read for silences, omissions, and biases. I also read them against other less personalized sources and decipher patterns to reach conclusions and produce arguments. Taken together these sources reveal lesbians’ diverse and innovative approaches to butch-femme as they traversed the postwar urban landscape.

Rather than producing a linear narrative, this dissertation takes a thematic approach, with chapters organized around sexual geographies, courtship rituals and

Long Engagement (Bless Bless Productions, 2009); Yvonne/Maua Flowers, interviews with Martin Duberman, Martin B. Duberman Papers, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York, NY.

⁴⁷ Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992); Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, eds., *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Other examples include Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due, eds., *Dagger: On Butch Women*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994); Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982); Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003); Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Sally Munt, ed., *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (London: Cassell, 1998).

⁴⁸ These include the Sophia Smith Collection (Smith College, MA), Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Harvard University, MA), New York Public Library (NY), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (NY), Lesbian Herstory Archives (NY), and the American Folklife Center (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

sexual interactions, fashion and visibility, and subjectivity and self-knowledge. Chapter 1 outlines butch-femme's assorted manifestations, arguing for its ubiquity as a gendered organizational system within postwar lesbian culture. Butch-femme provided structure for relationships, subjectivity, appearance, and social customs, but a diversity of interpretations ensured that many women were able to find a comfortable place within these identities and roles. Moreover, I argue that butch-femme identification took priority over strict same-sex sexuality in postwar lesbian communities, thereby challenging the existence of a strict homo-hetero binary and establishing the significance of butch-femme as an erotic cultural system. Analyzing sources within and beyond New York City, this chapter demonstrates that the insights of this dissertation apply outside this single case study and thus illuminate the dominant culture of postwar lesbians in the United States.

Chapter 2 maps the sexual geographies that diverse groups of lesbians created in New York City. Drawing details from oral histories and autobiographical writing, documentary films, postwar periodicals and sociological studies, this chapter follows femmes and butches through the famous Greenwich Village bar scene as well as less charted urban sites like the New York City Women's House of Detention, the hallways of Bay Ridge High School in Brooklyn, beaches in Queens, softball fields in the Bronx, and city streets and private homes throughout the boroughs. By engaging literature on geographies and sexualities, I demonstrate the resourceful ways that butches and femmes utilized the spaces at their disposal for queer purposes, and argue that lesbians desired not only other women but also community itself, pushing them to carve out places of their own in the urban landscape.

Chapter 3 considers the ways that lesbians engaged dominant cultural tropes to structure queer relationships, courtship, and sex. Gendered eroticism permeated the culture they built, and women entering lesbian spaces were immediately schooled in butch-femme modes of interaction, their form depending on the ways that different communities construed them. Women expressed gendered styles of flirtation through stance, gaze, dancing, and even how one held or lit a cigarette, adapting highly stylized heteronormative courtship rituals to their world of queer romance. Yet they also displayed a flexibility that suggests that individual character and personal preference often overrode strict cultural conformity. Moreover, lesbians took diverse approaches to butch-femme sexuality, demonstrating remarkable creativity in both constructing and bending the gendered rules in their determination to explore and act on their desires. In doing so, they exhibited courage and agency that defied cultural standards of what a postwar woman – or lesbian – should be. These women were fiercely committed to honoring their craving for that touch while maintaining a complicated relationship with normative gender roles.

Analyzing photographs and testimony alongside theories of dress and gender performance, Chapter 4 explores women's decisions about self-fashioning and queer legibility within a homophobic and hostile environment. While butch-femme is most often depicted in images of stark gendered contrast, photographs from several of my interviewees defy the standard impression of butchness as unquestionably masculine and visibly queer. They suggest that, understanding the risks associated with gender nonconformity, some butches favored more discreet looks that enabled them to feel connected with their queerness without alerting the public. By manipulating certain styles

of normative women's attire, like wearing structured skirt suits or donning a feminine hairstyle but refusing to wear makeup, or relying on clandestine codes like the ubiquitous butch pinkie ring, they demonstrate a range of interpretations of butchness in their everyday lives that did not necessarily rely on the men's styling that made lesbians visible in popular culture and the larger society. Conversely, some femmes dressed in styles perceived as queer to the outside world, such as slacks or even men's pants, but were clearly identified as femmes within lesbian circles. By complicating the high-contrast image of butch-femme and revealing ambiguities in its visual markers, this chapter challenges arguments that root butch-femme's radical potential in its visibility and illuminates the diverse strategies that butches and femmes employed to both convey and conceal their queerness.

Chapter 5 examines lesbian subjectivity, particularly butches and femmes' understandings of their queerness as an innate manifestation of their deepest selves. Analyzing oral histories and varied forms of life-writing, the chapter explores the ways that this narrative gave meaning to their experiences and the distinct emotional power it had for femmes and butches. Their belief in inborn, embodied queerness was a source of both shame and validation, distress and comfort, as lesbians confronted and interpreted their queer difference throughout their lives. This complex emotional response was integral to lesbians' sense of self and the culture they created. In addition, while I do not project transgender identity onto postwar butches, I chronicle a period of significant overlap among butch and trans experience, as transsexuality was just beginning to enter American public discourse and was not a viable option for the vast majority of people. Examining this intersection, I employ transgender theory and narrative to analyze the

gendered bodily discomfort that some butches experienced and historicize the category of female-to-male (FTM) transgender in twentieth-century America.

The dissertation ends with an epilogue considering the fate of butch-femme lesbianism in the 1970s. Butch-femme is believed to have largely disappeared in the 1970s, suppressed by lesbian-feminists who condemned “roles” they viewed as heterosexist and misogynistic in favor of androgyny and egalitarian sex standards. However, preliminary research reveals that while many lesbians involved in feminist activism learned that butch-femme had no place among liberated women, they did not necessarily abandon it. Instead, gendered dynamics became more secretive, subtle, and often unacknowledged. Since, as this dissertation reveals, butch-femme style and sexuality was manifested in a variety of ways in the postwar period, it is not surprising that it took on new forms in the 1970s. Moreover, arguments for butch-femme’s departure remain focused largely on educated, white, middle-class movement women, while research suggests that lesbians of color, poor and working-class women, rural women and those not involved in feminism maintained butch-femme identities and cultural forms.

These chapters illuminate an era of lesbian history in all its complexity: the fear of danger, the uncertainty of difference, the thrill of rebellion, the joy of belonging, the ache of desire, the vulnerability of love. Inventively navigating postwar norms, butches and femmes created a culture rooted in the complementarity of gendered eroticism but committed to sexual exploration and fulfillment. This commitment established butch-femme as a flexible system, widely interpreted and adapted to fit individual preferences

and communal needs. After all, to be queer in this time and place was “risking everything for that touch,” and lesbians fought to ensure that the rewards were well worth the risks.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Nestle, interview with author.

CHAPTER 1

Queer Complementarity: Butch-Femme as Postwar Lesbian Culture

Although this dissertation focuses on New York City, the tenets of butch-femme defined lesbian culture *throughout* the United States between World War II and the emergence of the gay liberation and feminist movements. Numerous scholars and abundant sources show the persistence of butch-femme rituals, rules and styles in spaces where lesbians congregated during this period.¹ This material illuminates the ways in which butch-femme permeated lesbian communities to provide structure for interpersonal relationships, subjectivity, appearance, and social customs. In other words, butch-femme was the primary organizing principle in lesbian culture.²

One of the goals of this project is both to acknowledge the importance of butch-femme and to complicate our understandings of it. While butch-femme has primarily been associated with working-class bar-going lesbians who displayed starkly contrasting gendered roles, behaviors, mannerisms, appearances, and strategies of resistance, the following chapters will demonstrate the many ways that this style of lesbianism was interpreted. These interpretations often varied by race, class, age, neighborhood, and social circle. However, I also reference butch-femme diversity to argue for its ubiquity as a gendered organizational system. Wherever postwar American women built a culture

¹ There is evidence of gendered relationships between women dating at least back to the early nineteenth century in the United States and Europe, but self-consciously defined butches and femmes did not emerge until the 1920s or 1930s (the exact date remains unknown). Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (1992): 467–497; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), chap. 2; Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 557–575; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 59.

² While postwar lesbians did use the terms "butch" and "femme," I do not believe that they explicitly characterized their cultural practices as "butch-femme." However, I (along with other scholars and contemporary lesbians) use the idiom "butch-femme" in this dissertation to refer to the diverse yet widespread gendered conceptualization of lesbian relationships and subjectivity during this period.

rooted specifically in lesbian desire, butch-femme – in its assorted manifestations – reigned. Even though some women found butch-femme personally or romantically limiting, déclassé, too visible, or too frankly sexual, all lesbians had to reckon with it if they wanted a place in queer culture. Moreover, I argue that butch-femme identification took priority over strict same-sex sexuality in lesbian communities, thereby challenging the existence of a strict homo-hetero binary at this time and demonstrating the significance of butch-femme as an erotic cultural system.

As Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis illuminate in their groundbreaking book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, butch-femme functioned as “both a powerful personal code of behavior and as an organizing principle for community life.”³ Gendered distinctions gave a clear form and language to lesbian desire, and determined the parameters of social and romantic interactions. Lesbians’ roles in the community, fashion choices, mannerisms, conduct, and sexuality were all understood and organized in gendered ways that influenced their relationships and subjectivity. The complementarity within the butch-femme dyad was meant to encourage harmonious romantic pairings. It also delineated the boundaries of acceptable partnerships, as two butches could be friends but not lovers, and likewise for two femmes.⁴

Women did not always follow these rules and some found them limiting (as discussed below), but most embraced this sort of synergy within a relationship. For Gloria Rivera, raised in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Bronx, butch-femme made perfect sense. It accurately prescribed which women she would best relate to as friends

³ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 152.

⁴ Ibid.

and which she would potentially be compatible with as lovers. Butch-femme's success was in each partner playing her part and contributing to the couple in her particular way. She did not know any gay women who did not conceptualize their relationships or identities like this.⁵

Indeed, lesbians were often mystified in the absence of butch-femme. Some femmes tried experimenting with other femmes, but found that "two girls don't make it."⁶ Friends might consider such attempts "silly as far as the rest of us were concerned... What would two girls do together?"⁷ And, even more simply put, if two butches are dancing, who leads?⁸ Many found the move away from butch-femme and toward lesbian androgyny in the 1970s "terribly confusing":

The longest relationships were the butch-femme ones. They were the ones that lasted twenty, thirty years. Everybody knew what she had to do. Now we say, "I'm not butch or femme; I'm just me." Well, who the hell is me? And what do I do? And how am I to behave? At least in role-playing, you knew the rules.⁹

Many lesbians who came of age in the postwar world assert that butch-femme worked well for their relationships and that things were much easier when lesbians were able to tell "who was who." After butch-femme became politically incorrect, they saw "mass confusion" in the lesbian community.¹⁰ As these perspectives demonstrate, butch-femme offered a common structure through which women could create meaning in their

⁵ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011.

⁶ Marcy Adelman, *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 27.

⁷ Merril Mushroom, phone interview with author, 12 April 2011.

⁸ Adelman, *Long Time Passing*, 147.

⁹ Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (San Francisco: New Glide Publications, 1978), 64. Feminist critics of butch-femme often referred to it as "role-playing" to convey their belief that it was simply an oppressive imitation of heterosexuality.

¹⁰ Ira Jeffries, handwritten notes, Folder "Articles – Drafts," Box 2, "Writing – Play scripts, unfinished, synopses, contracts," Ira L. Jeffries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter SCRBC).

relationships in the postwar era. As scholar Marie Cartier puts it, it “functioned to give a sense of order and cohesion to an otherwise outlaw and despised community.”¹¹

What often gets lost, however, in this debate between advocates and detractors of butch-femme is the many forms this erotic cultural system took within different lesbian communities. For some, butch-femme was clearly modeled on normative gender ideologies, “exactly like boys and girls.”¹² Of course, this could be problematic in an era when “girls” were expected to be submissive, dependent, and doting on men.¹³ A major feminist critique of butch-femme in later decades was directed at this sort of heterosexism and misogyny between women.¹⁴ And indeed, elements of misogyny do make an appearance in histories of butch-femme communities. Many lesbians note that butch was by far the more sought-after, respected, and powerful role, and instances of femmes getting bullied, controlled, and belittled did occur. But women also frequently interpreted gendered relationships in terms of complementary care, rooted in codes of chivalry. Many butches made it their business to treat femmes with the courtesy that men were expected to extend to women by opening their doors, lighting their cigarettes, paying for their drinks or meals, and offering protection if necessary. As one butch expressed it, “If you’re feminine, I will treat you with a delicate hand,” and her femme partners never complained.¹⁵

Yet some lesbians objected to such explicit chivalry in their adaptations of butch-femme. Robbie Marino, an Italian-American butch from Brooklyn, for example, recalls

¹¹ Marie Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of ‘Theeology’ in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women’s Bar Culture and Community” (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 140.

¹² Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 20 July 2010.

¹³ Although historians have demystified the postwar period as an era of strict adherence to traditional gender roles, ideologies of feminine passivity and masculine power remained strong despite challenges to them.

¹⁴ For an example of this critique see Sheila Jeffreys, “Butch and Femme: Now and Then,” in *Not A Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840-1985* (London: The Women’s Press Limited, 1989), 158–187. This perspective has been forcefully challenged in scholarship and autobiographical writing about postwar butch-femme.

¹⁵ Rivera, interview with author.

several incidents in which other butches rebuked her for not lighting her girlfriend's cigarette or offering her chair to a femme. They claimed that these acts proved she was not truly butch. While chivalrous gestures were central to many interpretations of butchness, Robbie found these attitudes too close to heterosexual conventions for her liking. For Robbie, butch-femme was much more about two women with complementary "auras" rather than socially imposed expectations about who lights whose cigarette.¹⁶

Appearance and personal style also played a significant role in many lesbians' understandings of butch-femme.¹⁷ Some femmes emphasized highly feminized glamour and some butches reveled in men's suits and ties, often enjoying the stark visual contrast between them. For butches especially, donning men's clothing and cutting one's hair short could be a profound expression of selfhood. But sometimes femmes and butches wore similar styles that revealed little differentiation to the casual observer. Thus some older lesbians assert that even if a butch and femme were wearing the same outfit, they wore them in different ways that reflected their gendered identity or role in the community. Earrings, a bit of makeup, or a more form-fitting sweater could be enough to distinguish a femme from a butch, at least within the lesbian community.

Still others defined butch-femme primarily in relation to sexuality. One's sexual role, a desire for certain sexual positioning, or the type of woman one was attracted to all influenced the ways that lesbians claimed butch and femme identities. Many women root their butchness in the desire to be the sexual aggressor or their unwillingness to be touched during sex. Conversely, some femmes cite a craving to be "fucked" by a butch woman as central to their identity. For instance, scholar, activist, and postwar lesbian

¹⁶ Robbie Marino, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 December 2010.

¹⁷ This is also true of scholarship about butch-femme. I disrupt these prevailing images with an analysis of lesbian fashion and visibility in Chapter 4.

Joan Nestle's femmeness was far more invested in her sexual dynamic with butches than with feminine appearance. A self-proclaimed "butchie-femme," she often felt frustrated "trying to attract these very butch women with the knowledge that if I could just get them home in bed I would show them." Without an overtly feminine look, Joan's fierce desire for butches is what cemented her femme identity, and sexual performance was the way that she proved herself. This tactic apparently worked; they always came back.¹⁸

Some lesbians also argue that being femme or butch was not merely a preference but a perceptible truth, a powerful manifestation of intrinsic selfhood. Although butch-femme translated into particular fashion choices and roles in their communities and relationships, these were also identities that many women understood as fundamental components of their deepest selves. According to Deb Edel, "There was a manner, there was a style, there was a feeling that I had inside myself until I heard the word 'butch.' And then it was an act of coming home."¹⁹ As this sentiment illustrates, many butches and femmes claim that the postwar lesbian community simply offered a name and a place for the desire and gendered qualities they already felt within themselves.

The ways that women defined butch-femme were influenced by racial, ethnic and class background. As a gendered system, cultural conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity informed butch-femme experience.²⁰ For example, scholar Katie Gilmartin describes a young Chicana woman's confusion when faced with a European-American lesbian community. Different cultural notions of gender and sexual roles made it very

¹⁸ Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 March 2011.

¹⁹ Deb Edel, "Butch-Femme Panel" (panel discussion at the Sex and the State History Conference, Toronto, July 1985), Butch-fem subject file #02830, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter LHA).

²⁰ Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

difficult for her to fit in with this group as either a butch or a femme. Their gendered expectations were simply too divergent from her own.²¹

Thus, within the expanse of postwar lesbian culture an array of factors influenced the ways that butch-femme was interpreted. Normative gender ideologies, social and sexual roles, personal style, gendered subjectivity, race, ethnic and class background, or any combination of these contributed to countless adaptations of the dynamic. This diversity is reflected in a substantial body of terminology (in addition to *butch* and *femme*) that referred to gendered ways of being queer. Especially masculine butches were sometimes known as *dykes*.²² Often accompanied by a prefix (i.e. *bull-dyke/bull-dyker*, *diesel dyke*, *stompin' diesel dyke*), this term carried classed connotations within lesbian communities, denoting butches perceived as lower class, rough, or crude, frequently in contrast to middle-class or upwardly mobile butches.²³ *Dyke* used on its own generally indicated white people – indeed, that is how Gloria Rivera used it. In fact, she did not even know that whites used the word *butch* because to her that word was reserved for Latinas and African Americans.²⁴ Latinas also used *marimacha* to indicate butches, and sometimes *maricóna*.²⁵ Among African Americans, *butch* was often used interchangeably

²¹ Katie Gilmartin, “‘The Culture of Lesbianism’: Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Life of a Chicana Lesbian,” in *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Connections*, ed. Toni P. Lester (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 160–179. I explore the ways that racial, ethnic, and class differences influenced lesbians’ identities and particular adaptation of butch-femme culture in New York City in later chapters.

²² The usage of *dyke* or *dike* to refer to masculine lesbians dates back to the 1920s and had gained more widespread cultural currency by the 1940s. J.R. Roberts, “In America They Call Us Dykes: Notes on the Etymology and Usage of ‘Dyke,’” *Sinister Wisdom* 9 (1979): 3–11.

²³ Ibid.; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 7, 68; Katie Gilmartin, “‘We Weren’t Bar People’: Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1996): 34; Bruce Rodgers, *Gay Talk (Formerly Entitled The Queens’ Vernacular): A (Sometimes Outrageous) Dictionary of Gay Slang*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paragon Books, 1979), 70; Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Talking About Sex: Cheryl Gonzales and Rikki Streicher Tell Their Stories,” in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 107–8; Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2010; Wolfson, interview with author.

²⁴ Rivera, interview with author.

²⁵ Ibid.; Rodgers, *Gay Talk*, 70; Jessica Lopez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 18 January 2011; Carmen Vázquez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 10 August 2011. According to Elvia Arriola, *marimacha* is slang for masculine lesbian, combining *Maria*, a common woman's name in Mexico and Latin America, with *macho*, a term that

with *stud* or *stud broad*, as well as *bull-dagger*, *boon-dagger*, and sometimes, *sweet men*.²⁶ There were *strict butches* (those who maintained their butchness at all time), *drag butches* (those who dressed and often passed as men in various aspects of their lives), *stone butches* (those who did not like to be touched during sex), *courtly butches* (those who were protective and caring) and even *femme-looking butches* (those whose appearance was perceived as feminine).²⁷ As this array of terminology indicates, butchness was not only implicitly interpreted in a variety of ways, it was also consciously defined in a variety of ways.

Lesbians also used different words to refer to femmes, but they were decidedly less specific.²⁸ They were sometimes called *fish* among black women and *fluff* among whites,²⁹ but femmes were more often simply designated *women*, *girls*, *my lady*, or *so-and-so's girlfriend* or *wife*.³⁰ While butch classifications delineated different approaches to queer masculinity – classifications that distinguished butches from women and girls – femmes' queerness could be obscured through this generic and normalizing terminology. As the typically more visibly transgressive lesbian, perhaps butches were more actively

describes hypermasculine behavior. Elvia R. Arriola, "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies: The Construction of Homosexuality Before the 1969 Stonewall Riots," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 5 (1996 1995): 3. Carmen Vázquez explains that *maricón/a* was Puerto Rican slang that roughly translates to *queer*. It could be used in a derogatory way but also to signify someone a bit eccentric. Carmen has fond memories of her mother lovingly referring to her as *maricóncita*, or *little queer*. Carmen Vázquez, "The Christian Millennium Approaches," 2000, "Presentations" Folder, Acc #: 08S-03, Box 1, Carmen Vázquez Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC).

²⁶ Ira L. Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor," *NYQ*, February 23, 1992; Roberts, "In America They Call Us Dykes: Notes on the Etymology and Usage of 'Dyke'"; Sdiane A. Bogus, "The Myth and Tradition of the Black Bulldagger," in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 29–36; Ethel Sawyer, "A Study of a Public Lesbian Community" (Master's thesis, Washington University, 1965); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 30, 278; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 7; Jeanne Gray, "Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 2 of 3)," *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, 31 May 1980, MP3.

²⁷ Merril Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1983, 38; Nestle, interview with author.

²⁸ In addition, many women from this period use the spelling *fem*.

²⁹ Sawyer, "A Study of a Public Lesbian Community"; Roberts, "In America They Call Us Dykes." Both words carried misogynistic implications. I have not found any Spanish terms that specify femmes.

³⁰ Vázquez, interview with author; Lopez, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author.

and vocally defined, and afforded a clearer sense of both gendered selfhood and queer status in their communities.³¹ In fact, speaking to this possibility, the word *femme* itself was sometimes used among lesbians simply to signify feminine women, regardless of their sexual orientation.³² This linguistic generality expresses femmes' ambiguous and somewhat dubious standing in their communities – they were a necessary and desired half of the primary lesbian dyad, but also considered slightly less queer than their butch counterparts and prone to reverting to heterosexuality at any time.³³ Alongside the various factors that influenced women's interpretations of butch-femme, this assorted terminology further indicates the myriad ways that this gendered system worked to provide structure to lesbian culture as its members negotiated, in Avra Michelson's words, the "understanding of what it means for women to love women."³⁴

Lesbians all over the United States built communities in which butch-femme was the dominant cultural practice, a practice most visible in bars. Indeed, in her meticulous and far-reaching oral history research into gay women's bars in the twentieth century, Marie Cartier found that women overwhelmingly referred to bars as "the only place" they could find a community of lesbians.³⁵ This was not the case, however, for New York City and other large urban areas, and an emphasis on bars runs the risk of highlighting a

³¹ The term *lesbian* itself was infused with this queerness; indeed, it was linked with homosexual pathology and was predominately an insult in its popular usage. Consequently, *lesbian* was generally reserved only for butches, while *gay*, on the other hand, was applied equally to butches and femmes and was far more favorable and internal to the culture. This was potentially also the case with the Spanish translation, *lesbiana*. Rivera, interview with author. For *lesbian's* derogatory usage, see Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 32; Audre Lorde, "Tar Beach," *Conditions*, 1979, 34; Lisa E. Davis, "The Butch as Drag Artist: Greenwich Village in the Roaring Forties," in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 48; Marino, interview with author. For *gay's* usage see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 7; Kovac, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author. It seems that the Spanish slang *pata* also applied to both femmes and butches, although not in a positive, interior way. Lopez, interview with author.

³² Ferrara, interview with author; Carroll, interview with author.

³³ For more on femmes' suspect reputation, see Robert J. Corber, "Cold War Femme: Lesbian Visibility in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All about Eve*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 6–7.

³⁴ Avra Michelson, "Some Thoughts Towards Developing a Theory of Roles," 1978, Unpublished papers, LHA.

³⁵ Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion."

largely white history. Still, bars were undeniably a dominant nexus of lesbian cultural development. Few portrayals of butch-femme exist that do not mention the significance of bars, and vice-versa. There is evidence of butch-femme bars in most major American cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Miami, New Orleans, Denver, Houston, St. Louis, and, of course, New York City.³⁶ As they traveled the country presenting their research on Buffalo, New York, Kennedy and Davis found lesbians across the nation who related to their depiction of butch-femme bar communities. The authors believe that their history most clearly reflects the experience of lesbians in “thriving, middle-sized U.S. industrial cities with large working-class populations.”³⁷ And memoirs and studies on Detroit, Michigan, Columbus, Ohio, and Lynn and Lowell, Massachusetts, suggest this was the case.³⁸

Still, butch-femme lesbianism predominated outside of bars in some areas and for some groups. While there were African American lesbians who socialized in bars, legal and de facto racial segregation fostered a culture rooted in elaborate house parties in

³⁶ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 172; Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998), 47–8, 187–9; James T. Sears, “Growing Up as a Jewish Lesbian in South Florida: Queer Teen Life in the Fifties,” in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 173–186; Elly Bulkin, “An Old Dyke’s Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden,” in *The Persistent Desire*; Gilmartin, “We Weren’t Bar People”; Sawyer, “A Study of a Public Lesbian Community”; Bob Skiba, “Pansies, Perverts, Pegged Pants: A Glimpse of Gay Life in New England in the ‘50s,” *Gay & Lesbian Community Guide to New England*, 1982, History, The Fifties 1 subject file #06111, LHA.

³⁷ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 24, 10.

³⁸ Roey Thorpe, “The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965,” in *Creating a Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 165–181; Joan Nestle, ed., “From the Diary of Marge McDonald (1931-1986),” in *The Persistent Desire*, 124–128; Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 106; Janet Kahn and Patricia Gozempa, “In and Around the Lighthouse: Working Class Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History: Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, ed. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan Reverby (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 90–108. In Lowell, Massachusetts a butch-femme bar community formed around a band comprised of all local lesbians called the Moody Garden Gang. Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 106; Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 6 January 2009.

private homes, also organized around butch-femme codes of conduct.³⁹ Other women were initially introduced to both the concept of lesbianism and butch-femme in the military or in prison.⁴⁰ And research in New York City makes clear that butch-femme could also be learned and honed on the streets, at beaches and in local high schools.

The widespread practice of butch-femme throughout the United States was disseminated not only through personal interactions but also via lesbian-themed pulp novels that gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴¹ These lurid paperbacks were intended for heterosexual male audiences, and publishers' guidelines demanded unhappy endings – suicide, institutionalization, or at the very least a return to straight life. However, some pulp authors, particularly those who were lesbians themselves, found ways to challenge gay women's deviant image despite publishers' restrictions, creating a cultural space for more positive representations and discussions.⁴² Lesbian readers who devoured these books learned to recognize the ones with compassionate subtexts and less sadistic storylines, showing “their loyal appreciation for authors who expressed carefully coded support for the kind of lives they led.”⁴³ Pulp hold tremendous significance for

³⁹ Rochella Thorpe, “‘A House Where Queers Go’: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40–61; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. I explore New York City's African American house party circuit as well as black lesbians' experiences in gay bars in Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ Gilmartin, “‘The Culture of Lesbianism’: Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Life of a Chicana Lesbian”; Adelman, *Long Time Passing*, 146; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Regina G. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Sara Harris, *Hellhole: The Shocking Story of the Inmates and Life in the New York City House of Detention for Women* (New York: Tower, 1967).

⁴¹ Of the many scandalous subjects permeating 1950s paperbacks (i.e. teen drug abuse, “white slavery,” murder mysteries, etc.), these tales of lesbian lust were one of the most successful. Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 147.

⁴² Yvonne Keller, “Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Pro-Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965,” in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–25; Martin Meeker, “A Queer and Contested Medium: The Emergence of Representational Politics in the ‘Golden Age’ of Lesbian Paperbacks, 1955-1963,” *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 5–6.

⁴³ Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 58 (quote); Nealon, *Foundlings*, 149–50; Joan Nestle, “‘Desire So Big It Had To Be Brave’: Ann Bannon's Lesbian Novels,” January 1983, Box 1, Joan Nestle Special Collection, LHA.

lesbians of this era, as they were often the only means of gaining knowledge about lesbianism and alleviating feelings of isolation to those without support.⁴⁴ They provided both “solace and erotic transport,” and for women who had never heard language describing same-sex attraction, “suddenly, you had a name, and identity, and a community of unknown sisters.”⁴⁵ When Katherine Forrest came across her first lesbian paperback in Detroit in 1957 at age eighteen, she says, “It opened the door to my soul and told me who I was.”⁴⁶

Only available for purchase in sleazy bookshops, bus stations, newsstands, and grocery stores, buying a lesbian paperback was a frightening and risky act. With their sexy cover images of scantily clad women, just selecting one and walking up to the counter to pay could feel like a declaration of deviance. Many women planned in advance where they would hide their pulps once they got home – under their mattress, behind the refrigerator, in their sock drawer – so that no one would find them.⁴⁷ These experiences with pulps could tax women emotionally, as they cycled through feelings of need and fear while seeking them; joy, excitement and potentially depression while reading them; and occasionally shame and anxiety once they were through, as demonstrated by those who panicked and burned their paperback collections.⁴⁸ Even so, many lesbians found that “[their] need was greater than [their] shame,”⁴⁹ and sought out these books for access to gay life. And the life they discovered was often distinctly butch-femme.

⁴⁴ To honor this importance, the Lesbian Herstory Archives refers to its vast collection of pulps as “survival literature.”

⁴⁵ Ann Bannon, “A Salute to Ann Aldrich,” in *We Walk Alone*, by Ann Aldrich (New York: First Feminist Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Katherine Forrest quoted in Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 188.

⁴⁷ Nestle, “Desire So Big It Had To Be Brave”; Nealon, *Foundlings*, 148; Ann Bannon, “Forward,” in *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969* (New York: Viking Studio, 1999), 12–3.

⁴⁸ Nealon, *Foundlings*, 149. For an example of a young lesbian who burned her pulps in an attempt to forget her queer desires, see Debbie Bender and Linnea Due, “Coming Up Butch,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 101.

⁴⁹ Nestle, “Desire So Big It Had To Be Brave.”

One of the most popular pulp authors among lesbians was Ann Bannon. A Philadelphia wife and mother, Bannon took “authorial pilgrimages to Greenwich Village” to study the people and places that would inform her writing.⁵⁰ She says,

In my visits to Greenwich Village, I had already learned to recognize the butch/femme dichotomy so influential at the time, and I wanted to write a book about a big, handsome, exasperating, reckless, bright, funny, irresistible butch. She would do what I could not. She would be what I could not. I already knew her in the theater of my mind, and I even knew her name: Beebo Brinker.⁵¹

Bannon went on to write *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, an enormously successful six-volume series published between 1957 and 1962 that illuminated Greenwich Village’s lesbian world.⁵² Central to her depiction of lesbian experience was butch-femme; indeed, as Bannon asserts about the primary couple in her books, “Laura was feminine in the traditional way. Her defenses, her fear of emotional entanglement, quickly melted under the laser of Beebo’s sexual focus. And on her side, Beebo was intrigued with Laura’s beguiling femaleness. I knew of no other way to write about them.”⁵³ Joan Nestle, a femme carousing Greenwich Village bars at the time Bannon was writing, felt that her books depicted “a world I could recognize and sex that I could respond to.” Unlike *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall’s classic 1928 lesbian novel, which was too upper class and European for Joan, Bannon’s books felt accurate and familiar. She says, “I never stood a chance with Stephen, but Beebo – well, maybe.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ann Bannon, *I Am a Woman* (1959; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), vii.

⁵¹ Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out* (1957; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), xi.

⁵² *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* was originally published by Gold Medal Books, but the books have since been reprinted by Naiad and Cleis, both feminist presses.

⁵³ Bannon, *I Am a Woman*, vii. Similarly, Marijane Meaker (under the pseudonym Vin Packer) highlighted a butch-femme couple in her first lesbian-themed novel, *Spring Fire* (1952). Meaker received so many letters from lesbians begging for more that she went on to develop “her lesbian literary mouthpiece,” Ann Aldrich, and publish both fiction and nonfiction about lesbian life. Stryker, *Queer Pulp*, 57. For more on Meaker, see her recent memoir, *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950’s: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Nestle, “Desire So Big It Had To Be Brave.” Nestle is referring to Stephen Gordon, Hall’s female protagonist who is presented as the quintessential “masculine invert.” *Well of Loneliness* depicts a gendered lesbian dyad, as well, as Stephen falls in love with the traditionally feminine Mary, emblematic of sexology’s “feminine invert,” the innocent and passive object of deviant seduction. Indeed, Stephen Gordon (and the mannish lesbian or invert more generally) is

The women who found these novels not only discovered that they were not alone in harboring same-sex desires, but also that to be a lesbian meant to be butch or femme. Judith Schwarz, who came of age in San Francisco in the early 1960s, learned these three words – *femme*, *butch*, and *lesbian* – alongside each other upon consuming a lesbian paperback, and had her first orgasm while reading before ever having sex with a woman. She found that the books “mirrored [her] deepest sexual fantasies and desires” and reading them helped to establish the kind of woman she was attracted to; namely, she says, “I couldn’t wait to meet my first butch.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Linnea Due, also from the Bay Area in the 1960s, stole pulp novels from her corner grocery store and took her cue from Beebo in cultivating her own butchness. It did not always work out the way she planned, however, as she learned that simply asking a woman to dance did not guarantee that she could go home with her.⁵⁶ In this way, lesbians across the country modeled their behavior and identities to some degree on the characters in the books they read. And because one of the most popular authors – Bannon – based her work on observations of Greenwich Village, widespread knowledge about lesbianism was rooted in the Village’s butch-femme cultural norms.

By influencing far-reaching adaptations of butch-femme, pulp novels shaped what Kath Weston has termed the “gay imaginary,” that is, the ways in which queer people began to consider the meaning of being gay and the possibility of a community of others

often claimed as a butch forebear, while feminine inverts like Mary are viewed as precursors to femmes. Although banned in England after an illustrious obscenity trial, *Well of Loneliness* was reprinted in the U.S. in 1951 and became a best seller, continuing to sell over one hundred thousand copies a year throughout the 1960s. Most lesbians from the postwar period read and shared it, some finding it more relatable and enjoyable than others. Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian”; Vicinus, “They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong,” 480; Clare Hemmings, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Theorizing Femme Narrative,” *Sexualities* 2, no. 4 (1999): 451–464; Corber, “Cold War Femme”; Stryker, *Queer Pulp*, 52.

⁵⁵ Judith Schwarz, “The Joy of Lesbian Trash,” *American Book Review* 6, no. 5–6 (October 1984): 11–3, Judith Schwarz Biography File, LHA.

⁵⁶ Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 98, 102.

like themselves. These conceptualizations moved people to form attachments to imagined populations and particular places – Greenwich Village’s butch-femme communities, for example – and these attachments affected the ways that they interpreted their own queerness.⁵⁷ Thus, the act of reading lesbian paperbacks both created New York City as a gay homeland in readers’ imaginations and encouraged them to constitute their own queer identities in relation to its culture. This does not mean, of course, that butch-femme cultures across the United States were identical to New York’s – indeed, the Village harbored its own diversity, as the next chapter will show – but it does suggest that the lesbian world that authors like Bannon described informed and therefore linked remote manifestations of butch-femme identities and culture.

Perhaps partly because of pulps’ depictions of lesbian life, butch-femme is overwhelmingly represented as a working-class phenomenon in queer histories. Middle-class women are believed to have avoided bars (the spaces most closely linked to butch-femme) due to the threat of police raids and public recognition. As professional women, they feared exposure would ruin their careers and reputations.⁵⁸ In her analysis of one such white middle-class lesbian’s experience, Katie Gilmartin discusses “P.J.’s” discomfort yet preoccupation with “bar people,” the working-class butches and femmes she encountered at a gay bar in Denver. P.J. actively distinguished herself from “bar

⁵⁷ Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 253–277. Martin Meeker makes a similar argument, asserting that new communication networks, including pulps, disseminated knowledge about homosexuality that not only informed queer community and identity development in people’s collective imagination, but also contributed to the migration that made sites like Greenwich Village a gay mecca. Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For more on how lesbians constructed identity and community through reading, see Monica Bachmann, “‘Someone Like Debby’: (De)Constructing a Lesbian Community of Readers,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 3 (2000): 377–388.

⁵⁸ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 20; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 43. This opinion about middle-class lesbians is applied more to white women than women of color. Marie Cartier’s argues that butch-femme was the dominant cultural institution among African American and Latina lesbians, across class. See Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 27.

people” in classed terms, disapproving of their rowdiness, perceived promiscuity, and queer visibility. She asserted that, conversely, she and her small group of friends valued stable relationships and utmost discretion. Gilmartin argues that P.J.’s stance on “bar people” influenced her own middle-class lesbian identity, as she strongly conceptualized it in terms of the kind of lesbian she was *not*. As middle-class women constructed their identities in relation to “bar people,” Gilmartin demonstrates both the interdependency of identity categories and “the centrality of bars to midcentury lesbian identities, middle-class as well as working-class.”⁵⁹ In addition to bars’ significance in lesbian subjectivity, butch-femme infused lesbian public culture, setting the standard by which most postwar lesbians defined themselves.

Many other lesbians embraced the same ideas as P.J. Middle-class women were often uncomfortable socializing in public queer spaces and preferred smaller groups of friends, time with their lovers, or were simply loners. Like P.J., their close-knit circles of friends consisted of middle-class women who were so discreet they did not even acknowledge their lesbianism or relationships to each other, even though that is what brought them together.⁶⁰ Most of these women thus lived largely outside any form of lesbian community and generally had little concept of butch-femme.⁶¹ But certainly women like P.J. who came in contact with or became part of lesbian communities were forced to reckon with butch-femme, even if they ultimately rejected it. Interestingly, P.J.’s aversion to “bar people” was not an aversion to butch-femme itself; it was the visibility and overt sexuality that offended her class sensibilities. Indeed, she was comfortable with “less extreme, less obvious manifestations” of butch-femme, and

⁵⁹ Gilmartin, “We Weren’t Bar People,” 41.

⁶⁰ Adelman, *Long Time Passing*, 116–7.

⁶¹ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 184.

although her group did not instill gendered distinctions with powerful social meanings, they seemed to find gendered conceptualizations of relationships and individuals perfectly acceptable. According to another middle-class woman who disapproved of “bar people,” “In those days, we called everybody boys and girls.”⁶²

However, there were also white middle-class lesbians who both identified with butch-femme and spent their social lives in bars, perhaps especially in New York City where the multitude of options in Greenwich Village accommodated many different sorts. Edie Windsor and Thea Spyer, partners from 1964 until Thea’s death in 2008, were part of a lesbian circle that was decidedly middle- and upper-middle-class. Both highly educated, Edie worked for an elite group at IBM while Thea, raised in a wealthy family, earned her doctorate in clinical psychology and became a therapist. During their partnership, they lived in Manhattan, purchased a home in the Hamptons, and were regulars in the butch-femme bars in the Village, where they mingled with other middle-class lesbians who loved an exciting night out.⁶³ While the middle-class version of butch-femme may not have been as obvious or visible as the working-class model, these women also understood their relationships and identities in gendered terms. As women like Edie and Thea demonstrate, wherever lesbians developed a distinct culture in postwar America, butch-femme formed the dominant tradition and organizing principle.

⁶² Gilmartin, “We Weren’t Bar People,” 35–6. Esther Newton also discusses upper- and middle-class lesbians in Cherry Grove, a resort town on Fire Island outside of New York City, who identified with butch-femme in the postwar period. However, they were careful to distinguish themselves from working-class butches and femmes and their social scene. Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 215. Also see Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 181.

⁶³ Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (Bless Bless Productions, 2009). After Thea Spyer’s death in 2008, Edie Windsor was forced to pay over \$360,000 in federal estate taxes because the federal government did not recognize their marriage, which was legal both in Ontario, Canada and their home state of New York. Edie successfully challenged the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the United States Supreme Court, causing the repeal of DOMA in June 2013.

Queer scholarship's claims for butch-femme as a working-class dynamic is highlighted by contrasting it with the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a lesbian civil rights organization that emerged as part of the homophile movement in the 1950s.⁶⁴ Some of the most prominent gay historians position these two groups against each other to exemplify class and cultural differences among lesbians, with DOB widely regarded as middle-class in membership, assimilationist in its political strategies, and decidedly anti-butch-femme.⁶⁵ As historian Marcia Gallo notes, with the "goal of social acceptability as the route to integration," DOB strove to prove lesbians' normalcy and respectability to the public in order to combat the dominant perception of lesbians as drunks, criminals, and mentally ill sinners.⁶⁶ Leaders attempted this by setting an example of middle-class values and decorum, instituting a normative feminine dress code, and distancing themselves from those most visible queers, masculine bar butches.⁶⁷

Yet Gallo and other scholars have also begun to complicate this alleged divide by exploring the overlap among DOB members and bar lesbians. For example, in her history of the Daughters of Bilitis, Gallo explains that while DOB sought to provide social outlets beyond bars, members and leaders did not abandon going to bars altogether.⁶⁸ Nan Alamilla Boyd concurs, arguing that despite class and gendered tensions, DOB leaders

⁶⁴ For a thorough history of DOB, see Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006).

⁶⁵ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*; Meeker, *Contacts Desired*; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Also see Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then."

⁶⁶ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 73. Gallo argues that this strategy was not only to prove to the public that lesbians were an oppressed minority, unjustly persecuted by society's ignorance, but also to provide another image to lesbians themselves. DOB leaders believed that affirmative – and they argued, more accurate – images of lesbians would challenge pathologized, criminalized, sinful representations in popular culture and allow lesbians to think of themselves more positively.

⁶⁷ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 106–7, 113; Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 4, 7, 11, 24, 49, 53; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 215.

⁶⁸ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 64–5. Gallo also disrupts the image of DOB as solely middle-class, citing the diversity of various chapters in which members were middle- and working-class, multiracial, different age groups, etc. (pg. 59). However, challenging DOB's middle-class and anti-butch-femme image is not a priority in this study.

depended on bars as centers of queer community and developed a relationship of “antagonistic cooperation” with bar lesbians.⁶⁹ However, in these histories butch-femme is still relegated to working-class “bar people” while the “respectable” middle-class or aspiring members of DOB supposedly avoided this practice, whether they frequented bars or not.

On the contrary, new research suggests that despite DOB’s official condemnation of visible queerness, members and leaders were much more flexible privately and *did* incorporate butch-femme into their relationships and their conceptualizations of lesbianism.⁷⁰ DOB founders and partners for over fifty years, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin were a butch-femme couple, although their identities may not have manifested in ways that were particularly legible to those outside queer communities.⁷¹ Likewise, Julie Lee and Jinny Thomas, who were active members and seemingly affluent, identified with butch-femme, as well.⁷² Regarding DOB’s feminine dress code, Phyllis Lyon explained in an interview that this policy was in response to male homophile activists who opposed lesbians wearing men’s clothing, presumably in public demonstrations. She says, “So we passed a little resolution or something... That made them happy. Nobody changed what they were wearing... And nobody was ever thrown out or censored or even spoken to about it that I know about.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 164–5. Kelly Anderson puts forth a similar argument in “Out in the Fifties: The Daughters of Bilitis and the Politics of Identity” (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 1994), 23.

⁷⁰ Emily Catherine Holod, “Politics of Accommodation, Practices of Integration: The Daughters of Bilitis and Their Organizing around Differences of Race, Class, and Sexuality” (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2003); Anderson, “Out in the Fifties,” 23–5.

⁷¹ In the film *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon*, Martin and Lyon explicitly confirm their butch and femme identities, and a friend remembers Lyon as “big and burly as all get-out, just really dykie.” Joan E. Biren, *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon* (Frameline Distribution, 2003). Also see Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 60. In addition, when I suggested in an interview with white middle-class bar butch Miriam Wolfson that DOB disapproved of butch-femme, she expressed confusion, remembering that she immediately assumed Phyllis and Del were a butch-femme couple when she met them. Wolfson, interview with author.

⁷² Tracy Lark Hatton interview with Julie Lee and Jinny Thomas (April 23, 1985), Julie Lee Biography File, LHA.

⁷³ Lyon quoted in Holod, “Politics of Accommodation, Practices of Integration,” 39.

Moreover, butch-femme was a continual topic of discussion among DOB members, both in person and within its monthly publication, *The Ladder*. *The Ladder* often depicted distinctly butch-femme couples on its covers – twelve of them between 1956 and 1964 – and featured editorials, poetry, and fiction that engaged butch-femme themes.⁷⁴ Joan Nestle, one of the most outspoken critics of butch-femme culture, was not a DOB member but found *The Ladder* personally significant. It was here that she found “the first stories I read about my kind of loving, which was butch-femme loving.”⁷⁵ In addition, butch-femme was a frequent topic during “Gab ‘n Javas,” DOB’s discussion meetings, and couples could be seen abiding by gendered codes at DOB dances.⁷⁶ As this evidence demonstrates, butch-femme’s significance as a postwar cultural institution cannot be overstated, even among those lesbians who purportedly disavowed it.

This does not mean, however, that all lesbians felt intimately connected to femme and butch identities. There were many who felt stifled by the need to choose one or the other and commit to the accompanying social and sexual role. The immediate question “Are you butch or femme?” upon entering a lesbian space could be extremely off-putting for a woman who did not particularly relate to either. She could feel confused about how to respond, pressured into selecting a role, uncomfortable when it did not feel “right,” and left wondering why she did not fit in with other lesbians.⁷⁷ Many women who felt this way simply did not find a place in queer culture.

⁷⁴ Anderson, “Out in the Fifties,” 24; Holod, “Politics of Accommodation, Practices of Integration,” 35–7.

⁷⁵ Interview with Joan Nestle (March 15, 2002), “No Secret Anymore,” New York Interviews, Box 47, Joan E. Biren Papers, SSC. In addition, the Lesbian Herstory Archives holds thousands of letters with references to butch-femme lives which lesbians from all over the country wrote to DOB. Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 199.

⁷⁶ Anderson, “Out in the Fifties,” 35–6.

⁷⁷ Transcript of Consciousness Raising Group One session, “Butch-Femme” (Oct. 1971), Box 33, Folder 564, Noel Phyllis Birkby Papers, SSC.

For those who remained but refused to choose either butch or femme, whose gender expression defied binary categorization, and/or who switched roles depending on their partner, there was a name: *ki-ki*. Among some groups of African American lesbians these types were also called *sooners*.⁷⁸ *Ki-ki* and *sooner* were more derogatory descriptors than identities, as those more comfortable with butch-femme often mocked the decision not to definitively claim a role as an indication that ki-kis did not truly know themselves or what kind of partner they wanted. For example, a group of lesbians in Boston who met regularly to play charades would divide into teams based on butch and femme identification. When one couple who was not butch-femme-identified simply flipped a coin to determine which team each would join, the others thought they were “the craziest people.”⁷⁹ Femmes and butches were sometimes suspicious of ki-kis, doubting that this kind of uncertainty could really exist. Butch-femme’s conceptual power was so strong that many believed that ki-kis and sooners were “really” one or the other.⁸⁰ According to butch Robbie Marino, switching between butch and femme was “nonsense. Somebody is always something.”⁸¹ Moreover, the need for a term specifying lesbians who did *not* adhere to butch-femme demonstrates its overarching significance as a cultural paradigm.

Women perceived as ki-kis were accepted in butch-femme communities to varying degrees. When Carolyn Kovac, who hailed from a white working-class New Jersey family, told women that she was “neither” in her favorite Greenwich Village bar,

⁷⁸ Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor,” 44; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 30; Diane Wilson, “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 2 of 3),” *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, accessed May 17, 2013, <http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/items/show/59>. Since African American, Latina, and white lesbians all used *ki-ki*, this is the term I primarily use in this dissertation.

⁷⁹ Skiba, “Pansies, Perverts, Pegged Pants: A Glimpse of Gay Life in New England in the ‘50s.”
⁸⁰ Mushroom, interview with author; Vázquez, interview with author.

⁸¹ Marino, interview with author.

the Sea Colony, she felt that they quickly regarded her as not a “real” lesbian, “like, you know, you don’t have papers.” She was aware that others found her confusing – she was feminine in appearance but not attracted to the butches who approached her – and attributes her lack of romantic success to her unwillingness to conform to the bar’s gendered rules. At the same time, however, Carolyn was a regular at the Sea Colony. She felt comfortable spending most of her free time there, had a group of friends, and did find women to date, even though apparently not as many as she would have liked.⁸² Similarly, although Audre Lorde and her girlfriend were considered ki-kis within their circle of African American butch and femme friends, they were still accepted by this crowd, invited to their parties, and, because they were younger, looked after and protected.⁸³ Being ki-ki was taboo, but not necessarily an offense that would instigate violence or outright rejection. Some women did not mind this label despite its pejorative connotations, and claimed it as their lesbian identity.⁸⁴ One strongly butch-identified woman even somewhat envied ki-kis; by switching sexual roles they were able to have “the best of all possible worlds.”⁸⁵

Even though butch-femme could make some women feel excluded or forced into a particular role, many groups did not rigidly enforce cultural rules. Relationships and individuals were known to occasionally shift and experiment, even if more often behind closed doors than in public, and different communities interpreted gendered roles in ways that enabled flexibility. But whatever form it took, butch-femme served an important purpose. The choice to congregate in queer spaces came with substantial risk: “You had

⁸² Carolyn Kovac, interview with author, New York, NY, 7 December 2010.

⁸³ Lorde, “Tar Beach,” 34.

⁸⁴ Irene Read, phone interview with author, 31 May 2011.

⁸⁵ Mushroom, interview with author. Also see Mushroom, “Confessions of a Butch Dyke,” 40.

to prove [yourself]; you had to have some credential. You had to look recognizable in some way to be trusted, because people's whole lives were up for the taking..."⁸⁶ Butch-femme aesthetics and codes of conduct were signals to convey insider status and security to other lesbians. And in return, observing the tenets of butch-femme offered women the access to lesbian spaces and communities that they craved.⁸⁷ For many, the rewards were well worth it.

Butch-femme identification was so significant in postwar lesbian communities that it often took priority over strict same-sex sexuality. While ki-kis maintained a dubious status for refusing or switching roles, women with varied sexual and romantic associations with men were readily accepted in lesbian culture, as long as they were butch- or femme-identified. Sex workers in particular were a standard feature of many lesbian communities. As women traversing urban nightlife without male escorts, prostitutes and lesbians have historically shared territory, including certain gay bars, and many lesbians supported themselves through sex work.⁸⁸ Some were "on the game" to feed their own and their partners' drug habits.⁸⁹ Bars that allowed heterosexual men inside often provided clientele for "working women," but bars also functioned as sites of refuge for queer prostitutes – places to take a break between tricks to grab a drink, visit with friends, or give their girlfriends a quick kiss before heading back out into the night.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Nestle, interview with author.

⁸⁷ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 152; Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 329; Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 96.

⁸⁸ They were also conceptually linked as sexually degenerate women in medical, sociological, political, and popular culture. See Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 83–91; Joan Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood," in *A Restricted Country*, 154–175; Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 358–381.

⁸⁹ Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 335; Nestle, interview with author.

⁹⁰ Kovac, interview with author; Nestle, interview with author. "Hustling" straight men into buying one's drinks was also common as a way to save money and benefit from male presence. Many lesbians deliberately sought men out, knowing that stroking their egos and listening to their woes would result in a night of free drinks. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 96–7.

While it was more common for femmes to be prostitutes, butches also made their living through sex work. In fact, butches' queer masculinity could increase their desirability, as straight men sought out the opportunity for sex with a "real" lesbian.⁹¹ Sometimes butches and femmes worked together, performing shows called "circuses" for johns.⁹² Butches also occasionally worked as pimps managing femme prostitutes, but this was more controversial among lesbians than simply accepting financial support from a femme girlfriend's sex work.⁹³

Being a prostitute generally did not compromise women's standing within lesbian culture.⁹⁴ Their communities recognized that they were "really lesbian" (versus bisexual) and their sexual activity with men was understood as a job.⁹⁵ More important in claiming "real" lesbianism in this context, however, was butch- or femme-identification. The cultural imperative to comply with this gendered structure was such that ki-kis who rejected or confused butch-femme were more suspect than clearly categorized women who regularly slept with men.

Although it is perhaps easy to understand sex work as acceptable within the confines of lesbianism for pragmatic purposes, other examples that blur the boundaries between homo- and heterosexuality demonstrate how malleable these categories were during this period. People were known to drift in and out of gay life, and marriage or relationships with men did not necessarily preclude lesbian identification or community membership. Women's options and decisions were influenced by economic vulnerability

⁹¹ Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," 114; Mushroom, interview with author.

⁹² Harris, *Hellhole*, 217, 240; Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," 114.

⁹³ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 101–2; Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 334; Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," 114; Nestle, interview with author.

⁹⁴ This, of course, depended on a particular community's class sensibilities, as well as gendered codes. Kennedy and Davis found that butch prostitutes in Buffalo were more discreet and judged, which does not seem to be the case in New Orleans and Miami. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 101–2; Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," 114; Mushroom, interview with author.

⁹⁵ Marino, interview with author.

and social expectations as well as pressure from family and/or internalized homophobia, and many straddled both gay and straight worlds when negotiating these issues. It was not uncommon for women to date or sexually experiment with men while participating in gay culture or relationships, sometimes in an attempt to leave the danger and censure of gay life. Those who succeeded in “going straight” and married men sometimes left heartbroken partners behind. While some lesbians felt betrayed by the decision to leave gay life, most understood the impulse to make their lives easier.⁹⁶

Of course, many women married men before realizing their lesbian desire or in an effort to evade it. Itching to move out of her parents’ house and gain some independence, Pauline Ferrara of Queens got married at age seventeen. Moreover, she explains, “I ran away from being called lesbian. To prove everybody wrong I got married at a young age.” Even though she liked her husband as a person and had a son with him, it quickly became clear that the marriage was not working. Pauline abhorred sex and continually fell in love with women, which she knew made her husband miserable. After four years, they parted ways and Pauline found her place as a butch in a lesbian community in Queens and Long Island. Reflecting on the difficulty of this decision, she says, “It was a choice, and I know it was a big choice. I had a kid, I had a marriage, I had a husband. It was a big choice. It wasn't an easy decision to change my whole life around... and I'm not sorry. Not to this day. I'll never be sorry. I'm me. I'm finally me.”⁹⁷ Like Pauline, many lesbians struggled to reconcile heteronormative expectations with personal

⁹⁶ Merrill Mushroom, “Bar Dykes: A One-Act Play in Pantomime and Dialogue,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession, n.d.; Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1955), 134–7; Marino, interview with author; Pauline Ferrara, interview with author, Queens, NY, 16 December 2010.

⁹⁷ Ferrara, interview with author.

dissatisfaction and same-sex desire, and like Pauline, once they made their choice few ever looked back.

However, there were others who remained married and still participated in lesbian life. Some went to gay bars to seek out lovers whenever their husbands were out of town, while others were “regulars” in the bar scene, negotiating their husbands’ work or sleep schedules.⁹⁸ If this duplicity was discovered, it could quickly turn violent, as husbands were sometimes seen barging into gay bars to drag their wives back home.⁹⁹ There were those who maintained relationships with women alongside their marriages. Some lesbians married gay men to avoid suspicion and both partners simply continued with their queer lifestyles, but most married heterosexual men and kept discreet about their affairs with women.¹⁰⁰ Miriam Wolfson, a white middle-class butch bar-goer in New York City, dated a handful of married women over the years, some relationships progressing more smoothly than others. One girlfriend had a wealthy husband who traveled to Europe for months at a time, leaving her and Miriam free to take summer vacations to Fire Island. Another was generally only available during the day while her husband was at work. Miriam would visit during her lunch-hour, have sex, eat, and then go back to her office. This woman had also previously dated a friend of Miriam’s, suggesting that this lunchtime routine may have been an ongoing strategy to combine lesbianism and

⁹⁸ Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1958), x; Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 173; Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982), 178–9; Wolfson, interview with author.

⁹⁹ Harris, *Hellhole*, 223–4.

¹⁰⁰ Mushroom, interview with author. Lauren Jae Gutterman explores the issue of married lesbians, arguing that many wives created space for lesbian desire within their marriages in the postwar era. Lauren Jae Gutterman, “‘The House on the Borderland’: Lesbian Desire, Marriage, and the Household, 1950–1979,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1–22.

heterosexual marriage. This tactic did not last, however, as the husband eventually caught her and Miriam in the act. They divorced soon after.¹⁰¹

Straight women were also known to frequent gay bars. They might come on dates with their boyfriends or with straight female friends to gawk at the queers. Sometimes they acted as “teases,” flirting with lesbians to get an ego boost but then refusing their advances.¹⁰² But some also came seeking affairs with women. As Pauline Ferrara explained, there was no risk of pregnancy, “so if you just wanted to have sex, yeah, you’ll show up at the gay bar and latch onto a butch and take her home for a one-night stand. It’s happened many times.”¹⁰³ Conversely, there were some butches who actively pursued straight women. When an African American butch called W.D. became dissatisfied with the Village bar scene, she decided to try to meet women in straight bars while passing as a man. This plan was very successful. W.D. would flirt, buy a woman drinks, “and by the time I was finished with her, she was willing to leave the bar with me and it didn’t matter anymore when she found out that I was a woman.” Unabashedly, she says, “That was my quest, to conquer straight women, and I had a good time doin’ it.” After about six months, W.D. eventually grew tired of close calls dodging husbands (she began hanging her pants on the bedpost in case she had to leave in a hurry) and went back to dating lesbians.¹⁰⁴

Lesbians’ reactions to these sorts of movements across homo- and heterosexuality present an interesting paradox. While there was a term for the contemporary notion of bisexuality – “AC/DC,” like a current that switches on and off¹⁰⁵ – most lesbians

¹⁰¹ Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁰² Sears, “Growing Up as a Jewish Lesbian in South Florida: Queer Teen Life in the Fifties,” 180–1.

¹⁰³ Ferrara, interview with author.

¹⁰⁴ W.D. interview with Lenn Keller, 29 August 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 178; Marino, interview with author.

seemed to disavow this concept. Rather than positing attraction to both men and women, they often claim a fixed sexual orientation and root traversal across sexual boundaries in circumstance. For example, Miriam Wolfson considered her married girlfriends “gay always” without emphasizing the obvious inconsistency, perhaps implicitly acknowledging the prevalence and pressure toward marriage.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, while some lesbians may have supported others’ decisions to leave gay life, they might have simultaneously believed that this attempt would fail because the woman in question was “really” gay.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, Pauline Ferrara viewed “straight” women in gay bars as lasciviously seeking sexual release without the risk of pregnancy, no matter if it was with a woman. Interestingly, though, when asked if she had ever slept with a straight woman, Pauline replied, “If I went home [with someone], to me they were gay, but they could have been straight.”¹⁰⁸ Likewise, the straight women whom W.D. pursued in neighborhood bars were still “hot to trot” when they got home and realized that she was actually female.¹⁰⁹

This evidence suggests that lesbians accepted a considerable amount of sexual fluidity alongside the opinion that women were either “really” gay or straight. Thus, within butch-femme culture, and perhaps within the larger American culture as well, the line between homosexual and heterosexual was more blurred in the postwar era than is commonly believed. As these examples demonstrate, by privileging gendered dynamics, postwar lesbian identity was conceptualized beyond exclusive homosexuality as well as

¹⁰⁶ Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁰⁷ Mushroom, “Bar Dykes: A One-Act Play in Pantomime and Dialogue.”

¹⁰⁸ Ferrara, interview with author.

¹⁰⁹ W.D. interview with Lenn Keller.

outside the realm of strict same-sex object choice.¹¹⁰ This history thus defies stark binary understandings and categorizations of sexuality and lesbianism. Rather, the most significant and enduring binary among postwar lesbians was butch-femme.

Women who sought queer community in the postwar period undoubtedly encountered butch-femme. As the primary organizing principle of lesbian culture, butch-femme communicated a sense of belonging and security to gay women during a time when queerness was condemned as sick, sinful, and criminal. Across class, race, and the expanse of the United States, diverse interpretations of gendered codes provided the structure for lesbians' relationships, communities, and identities. Further, adherence to butch-femme customs took precedence over strict same-sex sexuality in defining lesbian identity during this era. Although the subsequent chapters of this dissertation focus on New York City, the implications of this case study stretch beyond northeast urban centers and document the dominant culture of postwar lesbians.

¹¹⁰ Between 1880 and 1930, medical understandings of homosexuality underwent a shift from the theory of gender inversion, in which attraction to members of the same sex was merely a side effect of the overall inversion of the gender role, to that of same-sex sexual object choice as the defining quality of homosexuality. That is, sexuality would now be determined based on the sex of one's desired partner, not their own gendered presentation, feeling, or role – at least in theory. In reality, though, this distinction was slow to take hold, as medical and psychological professionals and lay people, including queers, continued to link gender and sexuality to characterize homosexual types and pairings throughout the twentieth century, especially with respect to lesbians. George Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female 'Deviance,'" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 87–117; Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 68; Donna Penn, "The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America," in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106–124.

CHAPTER 2

“A Place for Us”: Forging Lesbian Sexual Geographies in New York City

If you stood in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village in the 1950s, you could walk a few blocks in almost any direction and come upon a lesbian bar. You might end up on Third Street in the shadows under the Sixth Avenue Elevated train, looking for an unmarked door that an unknowing person could easily miss. When you stepped inside, you would be hit by a wall of smoke and the smell of beer, and watch as all eyes turned toward you. If you were a newcomer, nervously adjusting the tie you snuck out of your brother's closet, the looks might be wary, lingering, waiting to see what you do next. If you were a seasoned bar-goer, you would say hello to the bouncer and stride in to join your friends at a table in the back, or if a good song was playing on the jukebox, hit the dance floor. Either way, you would breathe a sigh of relief just to be there.

This cramped, smoke-filled bar in Greenwich Village is a typical image when conjuring lesbian life in post-World War II America. By this era, the Village had a reputation for harboring queers and had become a well-known hub of lesbian socializing, both in reality and in the public imagination. As wartime military participation and factory work created homosocial spaces that allowed for the enactment of same-sex desire, many women relocated or remained in urban centers after the war, producing lesbian subcultures that were larger and more defined than ever before.¹ Due to the Village's queer image, publicized by word of mouth, journalistic exposés, pulp novels,

¹ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 120–1, 126, 159; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 155–70.

and “pseudo-social-scientific studies of homosexuality,”² New York in particular became known as a gay mecca, and lesbians from all over flocked there in search of love, sex, and a community of women like themselves.

As historians have noted, city life and urban space offered queer people the autonomy, independence, and anonymity to explore their sexual desires and create subcultures, identities, and resistance.³ However, while scholars like Nan Alamilla Boyd, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, and Anne (Finn) Enke have discussed postwar lesbian communities in places from San Francisco to Buffalo, New York and the Twin Cities of Minnesota, there is a dearth of historical work addressing New York City, one of the most famous centers of queer life and culture.⁴ This omission is significant not only because the Greenwich Village scene is so iconic, but also because the city’s size and diversity reveal a rich sexual world with an array of urban spaces beyond the Village. Varying by race, class, age, and neighborhood, diverse groups of lesbians created and utilized these sites for their own social and sexual purposes, establishing distinct yet overlapping networks, practices and rituals.⁵ In addition to the Village bar scene, this

² Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 109.

³ John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100–113; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); Phil Hubbard, *Cities and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii–xiv.

⁴ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵ Historians Rochella Thorpe, Anne (Finn) Enke, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, and Katie Gilmartin have shown that lesbian socializing in Detroit, Buffalo, and Colorado was most often segregated along race and class lines. However, my research reveals overlap in New York City’s queer spaces, and thus an opportunity to examine the racial and class dynamics at play. Rochella Thorpe, “‘A House Where Queers Go’: African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40–61; Roey Thorpe, “The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965,” in *Creating a Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 165–181; Enke, *Finding the Movement*; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Katie Gilmartin, “‘We Weren’t Bar People’: Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1996): 1–51.

chapter explores alternate sexual geographies, including the New York City Women's House of Detention, Harlem's queer nightlife, the beach in Queens, women's softball teams, public street cultures in the Bronx and Spanish Harlem, Bay Ridge High School in Brooklyn, and women's homes throughout the boroughs. By carving out and pursuing these spaces, lesbians fulfilled not only their desire for other women, but also a profound desire for queer solidarity and community.

The postwar period is widely characterized as an era of oppression for lesbians and other sexual minorities. Fears of communism inspired a crackdown not only on political subversion, but also on gender and sexual nonconformity. The media and popular psychology portrayed homosexuals as deviant, psychologically maladjusted, and dangerous. Getting caught engaging in same-sex sexual activity could lead to forced psychological treatment and institutionalization. Colleges and universities created questionnaires to detect "abnormal" desires and expelled students suspected of homosexuality. While gay people were routinely purged from federal and military positions, the FBI also worked with local police forces to create vice squads that regularly busted gay bars and offered free rein on public harassment. But despite the national obsession with suppressing sexual and gender "deviants," these forms of oppression also reinforced a collective consciousness that enabled queer communities to bond and thrive during this era.⁶ By establishing gay worlds within a hostile and homophobic culture, lesbians were able to relieve the tensions of living in a society that denigrated them, feel more at ease with their deviant desires, find friends and lovers, and

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 82–3; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 130–2, 140–6; John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 226–240; Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 3; Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 180–7; David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, 1st ed (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 15–6.

construct subcultures that felt like home. However, the spaces they established were fraught with ambiguity and offered an uneasy combination of erotic excitement, joy, peril, and oppression to the women who relied on them. They functioned as both safe and forbidden sites, where women chose to brave the myth and reality of danger to experience a sheltered lesbian world.

Despite its reputation for sophisticated cosmopolitanism, postwar New York City appeared abandoned, bereft, incomplete. Industry began its “decades long exodus” in search of lower taxes and more space, leaving deserted factories behind; urban renewal projects left rubble in their wake; and the city’s elevated trains were torn down, their seedy underbellies emerging into the light. Many areas looked “either half-built or half-decayed.” High-intensity streetlights were not installed until the late-1960s, so city streets were dim and shadowy after dark.⁷ The night itself was male territory, offering “particular masculine forms of spatial privilege” that limited women’s access to and comfort in city spaces amid the threat and actuality of sexual harassment and violence. In search of lovers and community, lesbians navigated this urban landscape, often by themselves, and challenged the cultural anxiety and disdain for lone women in metropolitan nightlife.⁸

Greenwich Village’s legendary reputation called to lesbians from all over the United States. Many women uprooted their small-town lives and resettled in the big city, hoping to find the “sordid” underworld they had read about in lesbian-themed pulp novels sold in drugstores and sleazy bookstands across the nation. Although these books depicted a world of depravity and discontent intended as titillating cautionary tales, pulps

⁷ Mark Caldwell, *New York Night: The Mystique and Its History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 300–1, 308–9 (quotes); Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 101.

⁸ Hubbard, *Cities and Sexualities*, 132–5.

promoted the Village as a gay space and served as guides to lesbian life there.⁹ For New Yorkers, it was common knowledge that queers congregated in the Village, and women could simply hail a taxi and ask the driver to take them to a gay bar.¹⁰ Many also learned about the scene through friends, acquaintances, and even men they dated or married. For example, Pauline Ferrara, a white working-class woman from Queens, drove past a Village hotspot looking for lesbians because her husband mentioned that they hung out there. Assuming the butches standing outside were men, she disappointedly drove back home thinking that her husband did not know what he was talking about. Later, after coming out as butch herself, Pauline frequented that very bar and laughed at her former naiveté.¹¹

Women and girls traveled to the Village from the outer boroughs, Westchester, New Jersey, and even as far as Philadelphia and Boston to get their weekly or nightly fix of lesbian camaraderie.¹² In fact, they did whatever they could to spend time in these spaces, going to great lengths including lying to their parents, sneaking out, using fake IDs, and going to work hung-over after popping a few chlorophyll tablets to mask the smell of booze.¹³ In the late 1940s, one young butch rode into New York City on the bus

⁹ Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 3; Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 187–8; Kelly Hankin, *Girls In The Back Room: Looking At The Lesbian Bar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 14.

¹⁰ Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1958), viii; Marie Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of ‘Theeology’ in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women’s Bar Culture and Community” (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 485–6.

¹¹ Pauline Ferrara, interview with author, Queens, NY, 16 December 2010.

¹² Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (Bless Bless Productions, 2009); Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall* (Before Stonewall Inc., 1984); Martin Duberman interview with Maua Flowers (June 12, 1991), Audio tape #02877, Martin B. Duberman Papers, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York, NY (hereafter NYPL). There were not many lesbian bars in Philadelphia, which might explain why they chose to spend time in New York (Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 55).

¹³ Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 195; Letter from Amber Amazon to Joan Nestle (Nov. 16, 1991), Joan Nestle Special Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter LHA); Jessica Lopez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 18 January 2011; Irene Read, phone interview with author, 31 May 2011; Carolyn Kovac, interview with author, New York, NY, 7 December 2010; Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 1 July 2010.



Figure 2: Greenwich Village Lesbian Bars, circa 1950s, map created by Alix Genter¹⁴

each weekend carrying men's clothes she had swiped from her brother's closet in her purse. After changing in an alley, she left her skirt and blouse in a bus station locker, slicked her girl's pageboy into a butch D.A., and went to the bar.¹⁵

The visible lesbian presence in the Village amazed many new arrivals. Upon her first visit to this celebrated space, one woman remarked, "When I went there, there were lesbians in the streets in droves. Women that looked like men... Women with their hair slicked back... the femmes with the beehive."¹⁶ Washington Square Park was a site of sexual activity, with lesbians (and gay men) cruising each other at designated spot called

¹⁴ Adapted from a Google map of present-day New York City.

¹⁵ Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998), 134–5. D.A. refers to "duck's ass," a popular hairstyle that butches adopted from the 1950s "greaser" image. The hair was slicked back into a point at the nape of the neck that resembled a duck's tail.

¹⁶ Schiller and Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall*.

the “meat rack” before sneaking off together.¹⁷ Others chose to pick up women a few blocks away at another well known cruising area on 6th Street and 8th Avenue known as the “Campy Corner.”¹⁸ The sheer abundance of bars in the Village made women feel like they were in their own world. Individual gay bars were always closing and opening or switching hands, but the bar scene itself was a more permanent institution.¹⁹ While they had their favorites, women spent time in a variety of sites, often running around the Village from bar to bar in the course of a single night. It could be exhausting if you were looking for someone in particular.²⁰ Many lesbians and gay men also gathered at a diner called Pam Pam’s after the bars closed. According to Carolyn Kovac, a white woman who worked as a prostitute after running away from her New Jersey home at age seventeen, it was “an absolute scene. Every gay person [...] wound up there at some point. It was like a bar that served coffee.”²¹ At Pam Pam’s, under harsh fluorescent lights that stung the eyes after a dark bar, women met new and old friends and enjoyed impromptu drag queen performances over breakfast.²²

The bars, however, were dark, smoky and usually packed wall to wall with women and occasionally gay men.²³ Most had a bar in the front and a back room with a jukebox for dancing and “necking.” The entrance often opened into the front bar space, so patrons and management could see people as they arrived. The visible doorway and

¹⁷ Sara Harris, *Hellhole: The Shocking Story of the Inmates and Life in the New York City House of Detention for Women* (New York: Tower, 1967), 222; Lopez, interview with author; Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 March 2011.

¹⁸ Letter from Lee Lynch to Joan Nestle, November 11, 1981, Box 1, Joan Nestle Special Collection.

¹⁹ Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 127.

²⁰ Muska and Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea*; Anonymous letters circa 1955, Box 7, Folder 72, Noel Phyllis Birkby Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC).

²¹ Kovac, interview with author.

²² Joan Nestle, “The Femme Question,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 139; Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Madeline Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 257; Nestle, interview with author.

²³ Although lesbians and gay men did share Village bar space on occasion, more often they socialized in separate bars. This was the case with many cities during this period. John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives & Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998), 177; Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1955), 55, 141.

backroom dancing functioned as “spatial defenses,” precautions taken to protect bar-goers against sudden visits from unfriendly guests or police.²⁴ But other dangers lurked. Drinking was mandatory – you could get “86ed” for not buying enough alcohol – and many lesbians during this period became alcoholics.²⁵ Violence often erupted after someone had too much to drink. Bars were sexualized places where most women were uncoupled, practicing the art of seduction while on the prowl for their next fling.²⁶ The implicit code of conduct was to avoid infringing upon others’ relationships or flirtations, and those who did not abide by this rule could find themselves in a fistfight.²⁷ But despite their dinginess and sense of danger, bars also offered a comfort and familiarity that encouraged women to return night after night. It was thrilling to walk into a bar and see two women dancing together. It was thrilling to be able to relax and feel at ease in your own skin. According to Robbie Marino, a white working-class butch from Brooklyn, “That’s all we had... It was the only place we had to be, to feel safe in a sense. Not that we were safe, but we felt that we could be ourselves. Couldn’t do it on the street, couldn’t do it at home. You could do it there.”²⁸

While exhilarating, finding the bars could also be frightening. On her first visit, Robbie actually peeked through the door and circled the block several times before she worked up the courage to enter.²⁹ For many lesbians, it was the first time they had ever been in a room with other gay women, proof that they really existed beyond the

²⁴ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 126–7; Judy Lederer, “A Letter,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 95–6; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 134–5. I have borrowed the term “spatial defenses” from Boyd.

²⁵ Kovac, interview with author; Rosalie Regal interview transcript, 14 August 1999, Box 45, Joan E. Biren Papers, SSC; Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love*, 82–4.

²⁶ In fact, most women avoided the bar scene while they were in relationships and returned once they were single again. Read, interview with author; Kovac, interview with author; Robbie Marino, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 December 2010.

²⁷ Ferrara, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author.

²⁸ Marino, interview with author.

²⁹ Ibid.

sensationalized stories they had read. Going to a gay bar could feel like a concrete way of admitting that this is what you are and where you belong, a daunting prospect to confront in a culture that claims you are sick, sinful, and criminal. And the bar scene itself did not really disrupt this perception. It *was* seedy and part of a criminal underworld. The State Liquor Authority prohibited bars from becoming “disorderly,” and although homosexuals were not explicitly named in the law, police exercised broad discretion to interpret their presence as “disorderly” and “lewd and dissolute,” putting any bar that served them in danger of having its license revoked. Because queers constituted an illegal but lucrative market, the Mafia managed New York City’s gay bars and paid off police who threatened to raid or report them, a system that became known as “gayola.”³⁰ Every Friday – “Brown Bag Friday” – cops would stop by the bars to fill paper bags with wads of cash to distribute to their colleagues in the notorious and corrupt Sixth Precinct. These payoffs could total up to \$2000 a week per bar, but pushing watered-down drinks on their abundant gay clientele made up for it.³¹

Scholars have generally categorized Mafia bar management as a wholly oppressive aspect of postwar gay life, despite the fact that it fostered queer community development and bonding under a tyrannical regime.³² However, Mafiosos and lesbian patrons sustained a more complex relationship than a simple dichotomy of oppressors vs. oppressed. Stories of employees imposing humiliating regulations on patrons, such as

³⁰ Elvia R. Arriola, “Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies: The Construction of Homosexuality before the 1969 Stonewall Riots,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 5 (1995): 33–77; Steven A. Rosen, “Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 12 (1981 1980): 159–190; Christopher Agee, “Gayola: Police Professionalization and the Politics of San Francisco’s Gay Bars, 1950-1968,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2006): 462–489.

³¹ Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 114, 181–5; Carter, *Stonewall*, 17–8, 33, 47–8.

³² D’Emilio, “The Homosexual Menace,” 237; Duberman, *Stonewall*; Carter, *Stonewall*. Jeffrey Escoffier characterizes the regulation and economic exchange among the Mafia, police, and queer patrons as a major component of the “Closet Economy” – a system that subjected queer people to the “economic domination of outsiders.” Jeffrey Escoffier, “The Political Economy of the Closet: Toward and Economic History of Gay and Lesbian Life before Stonewall,” in *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 66.

preventing more than one woman from using the bathroom at once while doling out an allotted amount of toilet paper, and shining a flashlight on couples dancing too close together, certainly suggest that these bars were exploitative spaces.³³ But many lesbians, while not happy about the supervision, understood these rules more as safety measures than displays of contempt. As Joan Nestle, a white working-class femme, explains, “I was aware that we were criminals. That was clear. And we were being protected by other criminals.”³⁴ They all knew that, even with payoffs, certain behavior was necessary to keep the vice squad at bay, and by taking certain precautions, like inhibiting sex in the bathroom and preventing the cops from seeing women dance together, the mob gave them a better chance of avoiding harassment and arrest. While protecting their business was their top priority and managers did not want to risk being shut down, they also needed to keep their clientele happy given the number of competing bars in the Village.³⁵

Some women experienced positive interactions with Mafia management. Managers, bouncers, and bartenders sometimes developed friendly, accommodating relationships with their regular patrons, allowing women to run up their tabs until they got paid and relaying messages to friends if a group had moved on to another bar. According to Miriam Wolfson, a middle-class white butch from the Bronx, they were just nice Italian guys who would walk you home if you got too drunk. If they really took a liking to you, they might even step in to warn you if they thought the object of your affection seemed like trouble, or rig your electrical box to ensure that you never had to pay another bill. Some lesbians were grateful for Mafia protection in such a hostile

³³ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 26–8; Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion” 550; Kovac, interview with author.

³⁴ Nestle, interview with author.

³⁵ Ibid; Kovac, interview with author.

climate, and relied on them to keep straight men out and warn them when the cops were coming. They understood that they would not have these bars without the mob, and felt that “they kept us safe, we were their girls.”³⁶

However, not all lesbians were considered “their girls,” and many who sought refuge and kinship in Village bars did not find it. Bars were sites of the racial tension and injustice that permeated postwar culture, and the Village scene consisted primarily of white women due to both discriminatory management practices and the overt or passive racism of white patrons. While there was an African American and Latina presence in bars, women of color knew that they were in white spaces and were always in a small minority. Gloria Rivera, a Puerto Rican working-class butch, believed that “they owned the Village, we did not” – a common perspective that prevented many women of color from feeling comfortable in bars and often encouraged them to create or find social spaces elsewhere.³⁷ Despite having a white lover and a close-knit group of white friends, Audre Lorde was always on the lookout for other black women in the bar scene. But even when she found them during her nightly headcount, the connection between them was strained:

[We] knew each other’s names, but we seldom looked into each other’s Black eyes, lest we see our own aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness... We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lay in our fewness, our rarity.³⁸

³⁶ Merrill Mushroom, phone interview with author, 12 April 2011 (quote); Wolfson, interview with author; Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2012; Nestle, interview with author; Muska and Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement*; Kate Clinton, “The Class of Edie Windsor,” *Washington Blade - America’s Leading Gay News Source*, July 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2013/07/25/opinion-kate-clinton-the-class-of-edie-windsor/>.

³⁷ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011.

³⁸ Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982), 226, 177.

Lesbians of color who did frequent the Village scene were sometimes turned away at the door, the bouncer claiming that it was too crowded that night, and certain bars would require them to show additional forms of ID. In Yvonne Flowers's experience, "As a black person, you never knew whether you were going to get in or not."³⁹ When they did gain admission, women of color were often ignored or treated as exotic oddities, and the de facto segregation inside could feel like "being in a room with people that were from Mars."⁴⁰ Moreover, once inside, black women resented handing their hard-earned money over to white people who clearly did not welcome their presence.⁴¹

Some white lesbians were comfortable socializing with women of color and believed that even during this period of racial unrest, there was no discrimination or prejudice in the bars. They felt that the burden of gay oppression muted racial difference and race was not an obstacle to developing community.⁴² This perceived solidarity not only worked to prevent racial awareness among whites, but also created a space in which race and racism were dismissed as nonexistent, and therefore inconsequential and unmentionable, issues.⁴³ For example, when Audre Lorde "had the bad taste" to bring up the fact of her blackness in the company of whites, she felt that she "had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me... I was acutely conscious... that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs."⁴⁴ By masking white supremacy in white lesbians'

³⁹ Duberman interview with Maua Flowers (June 12, 1991), Audio tape #02876, Martin B. Duberman Papers.

⁴⁰ Tracy Lark Hatton interview with Jean Oliver (April 24, 1985), LHA.

⁴¹ Jeanne Gray, "Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 1 of 3)," *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, 31 May 1980, MP3.

⁴² Ferrara, interview with author; Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 203–4.

⁴³ Thorpe, "A House Where Queers Go," 49–50.

⁴⁴ Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 180–1.

collective consciousness, even those who felt strongly about racial equality could be blind to the ways in which racism shaped the lives of their friends in the queer spaces they shared. When Yvonne Flowers faced incidents of harassment or bigotry in the bars, she knew that a white woman might comment that it was unfortunate or unfair that such a thing happened, but that she would not stand up to defend her.⁴⁵ Still, the Village scene was so iconic and well known that many lesbians of color endured this treatment and went there anyway.⁴⁶

Finding comfort and queer community in the Village could also be limited for white lesbians. Women with an aversion to the seediness of the atmosphere, the ubiquitous drinking, the butch-femme roles that organized the culture, and the frankly sexual nature of the pick-up scene often chose to socialize elsewhere, although some continued in the bar scene out of a perceived lack of options.⁴⁷ In addition, whiteness did not override class divisions, and bars were often segregated along perceived class lines, creating a sense of territoriality among the “regulars” that was hard to breach.⁴⁸ The Sea Colony, a bar near Abingdon Square, was home to many working-class lesbians, some of whom struggled financially, battled drug and alcohol addictions, were prone to violence,

⁴⁵ Schiller and Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall*.

⁴⁶ This is especially true for those who were not aware of the alternatives for lesbians of color that existed in Harlem and elsewhere. Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 548–50; Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 186–7.

⁴⁷ Sally Duplaix interview transcript, 14 August 1999, Box 45, Joan E. Biren Papers; LeClair Bissell’s oral history, Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, SSC; Notes from Radicalesbians’ consciousness-raising group, ca. 1970, Ellen Shumsky Papers, SSC. A bar called the Hay Loft on Long Island was a popular alternative for white women who were put off by the rough and illicit nature of Village bars. The Hay Loft’s somewhat secluded location prevented police from dropping by too often and straight neighbors from complaining or disrupting their fun. Ferrara, interview with author; Read, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Due to women’s precarious economic status in this era compounded by my subjects’ lesbianism, it is difficult to work within a traditional framework of class hierarchy. Arguing that butch-femme lesbians were strictly working-class, Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis, and Martin Meeker use ideological differences among lesbians to complicate this image. Employing terms like “upwardly mobile” and “striving,” they distinguish between two different sets of lesbians within the working-class, but maintain that middle-class lesbians did not go to bars. However, in New York, I have found a number of professional, or middle-class, women who frequented the bar scene, as well as both “upwardly mobile” and poor working-class women. The three groups seem to have rarely mixed, but were aware of each other and shared the Village. Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 277; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 134–5, 141–3.

and spent time in jail. The bar had a “sexually-charged atmosphere,” its danger enhancing the erotic excitement.⁴⁹ For Joan Nestle, although she sometimes went out “with dread of what could happen that night,” she craved the Sea Colony – “a place so touched by collective desire... where you were risking everything for that touch.”⁵⁰ In addition, while regulars at the Sea Colony acknowledged that it attracted a rough crowd, they felt that they were a valued and supported part of it. Carolyn Kovac, who worked as a prostitute in the early-1960s, became friendly with other prostitutes and strippers, watched out for each other, and made sure to stay safe.⁵¹

But for other women, bars like the Sea Colony were to be avoided. They did not want to mingle with prostitutes, viewed the butches who frequented these sites as macho types who were always looking for a fight, and found the whole scene to be riddled with drug addicts, violence, and hostility. They preferred bars like the Laurel’s or Provincetown Landing – “friendlier” places for more “refined” or “intellectual” people like them. The back room at Provincetown Landing had a fireplace and comfortable chairs in addition to the dance floor. Without prostitutes, there were fewer heterosexual men lurking, and sometimes men were not allowed in at all.⁵² Women who patronized these bars seemed to embrace a classed notion of lesbian respectability, looking down on members of the tougher scene. And, conversely, from the perspective of regulars at the Sea Colony, bars like Provincetown Landing were “snooty.”⁵³

These attitudes toward class could cause difficulty, particularly for younger lesbians whose lives were in transition. Both Joan Nestle and Debbie Bender fiercely

⁴⁹ Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union: New & Selected Writings*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 118.

⁵⁰ Nestle, interview with author.

⁵¹ Kovac, interview with author.

⁵² Marino, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author; Anonymous letters circa 1955, Box 7, Folder 72, Noel Phyllis Birkby Papers, SSC.

⁵³ Kovac, interview with author.

guarded their outside lives from their bar friends, worried that the fact that they went to college would displace them from the rough, working-class crowd at the Sea Colony.⁵⁴ As scholar Roey Thorpe argues about Detroit, class-based views also influenced women's sense of safety in the bars. While middle-class white lesbians sought physical safety, opportunities for discretion, and a group with financial stability, respectable professions and similar values, working-class women found security in having their own turf. Rather than distance from hustlers, prostitutes and violence, they wanted a space where they could be themselves and find support among friends who were willing to stand up for one another, aggressively if necessary.⁵⁵

Whether "rough" or "refined," the police were a consistent presence in gay bars and around the Village, habitually dropping by to get their payoffs and occasionally to conduct raids. While lesbianism was not explicitly illegal, police interpreted certain laws broadly enough to intimidate and arrest women caught engaging in sexual activity or transgressing gender norms.⁵⁶ Two women dancing together in a bar or holding hands could be charged with "sexual misconduct" or "lewd and lascivious acts," while "disorderly conduct" and "vagrancy" were generously employed catchall categories.⁵⁷ Sumptuary and masquerade laws prohibited impersonating the opposite sex and wearing disguises, respectively, and lesbians were very aware that they could be arrested for

⁵⁴ Debbie Bender and Linnea Due, "Coming Up Butch," in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 111; Nestle, interview with author. Audre Lorde also talks about being a "closet student" amid the hostile divide between Village bar-goers and the "college crowd" in *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 177.

⁵⁵ Thorpe, "The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965," 178-9.

⁵⁶ However, gay men in New York were generally subjected to more police brutality, harassment, and entrapment than lesbians. Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence*, 181, 318; Aldrich, *We Walk Alone*, 121-4; Duberman, *Stonewall*; Carter, *Stonewall*; Rosen, "Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980," 159.

⁵⁷ Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 50; Maxine Wolfe, "Invisible Women in Invisible Places: Lesbians, Lesbian Bars, and the Social Production of People/Environment Relationships," *Arch. & Comport. / Arch. & Behav.* 8, no. 2 (1992): 147; Rosen, "Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980," 163-4.

wearing less than three items of women's clothing.⁵⁸ One butch sewed lace onto her socks to ensure that combined with her bra and women's underwear she fulfilled the requisite female attire.⁵⁹

Bar management usually knew when the cops were going to stop by to get their payoffs and flashed the lights in the back room to warn their patrons. This signal indicated it was time for same-sex couples to stop dancing and underage kids to hide in the bathroom or sneak out the back door. Although they generally did not arrest people, cops often made a show out of counting their money and looking around the room, purely for intimidation.⁶⁰ Sometimes they checked women's IDs looking for past traffic violations or other excuses to penalize them, or forced them to file outside and be counted to verify that the bar did not exceed legal capacity under fire or health and safety codes, a practice that, while legal, was selectively enforced to harass homosexuals.⁶¹ For some women, the police presence was terrifying and generated an "undercurrent of fear" throughout the bar experience,⁶² while others took it in stride as a simple fact of gay life. If they were of legal age to be in a bar, they simply sat quietly and waited for the cops to leave.⁶³ Irene Read viewed these little visits as "just a game they were playing," one that did not stop her or other lesbians from returning to the bars each night or weekend.⁶⁴

Raids, however, raised the danger of the bar scene significantly. Stories of raids move beyond intimidation into a horrifying realm of police violence, humiliation, and

⁵⁸ Carter, *Stonewall*, 15–6; Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 64–5, 73; Arriola, "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies," 62.

⁵⁹ Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 64, 116.

⁶⁰ Nestle, interview with author.

⁶¹ Arriola, "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies," 65–7.

⁶² Kovac, interview with author.

⁶³ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 27; Lopez, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author; Nestle, interview with author.

⁶⁴ Read, interview with author.

cruelty, with lesbians being assaulted, arrested, and their names published in local newspapers.⁶⁵ Yet, while second-hand accounts of brutal raids circulated widely among lesbians during this era, few seemed to have faced them directly. Instead, the consistent *threat* of raids colored their experience in Village bars, taking on an almost mythical presence as something they had heard about and been warned against but luckily never suffered themselves.⁶⁶ In addition to word-of-mouth cautioning within the community, lesbian pulp novels often included accounts of raids, planting the idea in lesbians' collective imagination.⁶⁷ Likewise, widespread warnings about the "three-piece" clothing rule and plainclothes cops infiltrating the bar scene to entrap women created an atmosphere of vigilance and, to an extent, paranoia. With the understanding that "to be queer meant to travel in policed territories," a tradition of "survival lore" and rumor permeated postwar lesbian networks, enabling protective strategies against police hostility and a collective consciousness of oppression.⁶⁸ At the same time, for many this sense of criminality infused their identities as lesbians, and they regarded the law with both fear and insolence. According to white working-class femme Rosalie Regal, "We were outlaws. And we were rebellious. And it was wonderful... it was thrilling to be on the edge of society and to be defiant."⁶⁹

When lesbians were arrested, it was more likely to be for an unspecific misdemeanor charge of disorderly conduct or violating the "three-piece" clothing law in

⁶⁵ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Milford, CT: Firebrand Books, 1993).

⁶⁶ Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 454, 553–4; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 136; Suzanne interview transcript, Butch-fem subject file #02850, LHA; Nestle, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author; Carmen Vázquez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 10 August 2011. Merrill Mushroom, who had relocated from Miami, actually felt much safer and freer in New York. In Florida, physical and sexual assault came standard with police regulation, while in the Village she felt, "They're just busting the establishment; they're not busting *us*... It was really a tremendous sense of freedom." Mushroom, interview with author.

⁶⁷ For example, Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker* (1962; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001).

⁶⁸ Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 117.

⁶⁹ Rosalie Regal interview transcript, 14 August 1999, Box 45, Joan E. Biren Papers, SSC.

the streets outside the bar than in a raid. In addition, many working-class lesbians worked as prostitutes and maintained a strong presence in certain gay bars, like the Sea Colony. This overlapping space in a “shared outlaw culture,” coupled with a conceptual link between lesbians and prostitutes as sexually degenerate women meant that even those who were not prostitutes were in danger of being picked up for working the streets.⁷⁰ Events like New York City elections and the 1964 World’s Fair were likely to lead to more instances of entrapment, street sweeps, raids, and arrests.⁷¹ If arrested for minor charges on the street, lesbians were loaded into a paddy wagon and taken to the New York City House of Detention for Women. Once inside, the desk sergeant asked, “Guilty or not guilty?” and, although there was rarely a specific charge, pleading guilty and leaving after paying the five dollar fine was preferable to being locked in a cell and held until a judge could see them. Women taken in during occasional raids endured more severe treatment, such as being strip-searched, harassed, and held for a day or two under appalling conditions until they could be seen in court.⁷²

The New York City House of Detention for Women, or House of D, as most lesbians called it, was an imposing, twelve-story brick building on Sixth Avenue, right in the middle of the Village. Joan Nestle walked past it every weekend on her way to the Sea Colony, a witness to the “pleas of lovers, butch women shouting up to the narrow-slitted windows, to hands waving handkerchiefs, to bodiless voices of love and

⁷⁰ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 83–99 (quote); Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 358–381; Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 155.

⁷¹ Rosen, “Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980,” 167. The largest raid on a lesbian bar in New York City, in which 46 women were arrested, was in 1964 during preparations for the World’s Fair. Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 108; “Description of a Raid on a Lesbian Bar...” LHA Newsletter #12, June 1991, pg. 5, Box 107, Martin B. Duberman Papers.

⁷² Duberman, *Stonewall*, 110, 117; Carter, *Stonewall*, 36–7, 41–2, 47; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 132–3.

despair...”⁷³ The House of D became a sort of tourist attraction, the street scene encouraging anyone to peep into the lives of incarcerated women. There was always a crowd outside, as family members and lovers gathered to fill inmates in on the latest news, let them catch a glimpse of their babies, or tell them they loved them. Those walking by could observe these “unrepentant shouts of need,” as well as shrieks of profanity and obscene hand gestures. Unlucky pedestrians out for a stroll or shopping at the fresh fruit stands across the street could find themselves hit with garbage or debris flung from above. Almost immediately after the prison opened, neighborhood residents began complaining about the noise and undesirable visitors. And for lesbians on their way to their safe havens, the prison was at once “a defiant pocket of female resistance” and a cruel reminder of their illicit, policed existence.⁷⁴

The House of D was notorious for its “snakepit conditions.”⁷⁵ It was filthy, overcrowded, and had an impressive infestation of roaches and rats. Inmates, disproportionately poor African Americans and Latinas, received substandard food, clothing, and hygienic supplies, and many claimed that they had been raped or molested during medical exams.⁷⁶ Sexual violence between inmates was also prevalent, and lesbianism, both coerced and consensual, dominated the social organization inside.

Homosexuality indicated a measure of belonging, without which prisoners had difficulty

⁷³ Joan Nestle, “Women’s House of D, 1931-1974: A City’s Shame, A Community’s Icon,” *OutHistory.org*, 2008, http://outhistory.org/wiki/Nestle:_Blog_on_History:_Women%27s_House_of_D,_1931-1974. Inside the House of D, these “street visits” were prohibited but habitual. Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 60.

⁷⁴ Ibid. (quotes); Harris, *Hellhole*, 38–41; Marijane Meaker, *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950’s: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 65; Merril Mushroom, “Houssa D”, n.d., unpublished paper in author’s possession; Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 206; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 17–8, 60.

⁷⁵ Harris, *Hellhole*, 10.

⁷⁶ Harris, *Hellhole*; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 136–7; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 18–9, 23–4, 41, 48–9, 61, 64; Mushroom, interview with author.

protecting themselves from violence and sexual assault.⁷⁷ But despite the disturbing pervasiveness of sexual coercion and intimidation, not all relationships in the House of D were rooted in sadism or self-preservation. Within the prison walls, inmates produced their own lesbian space rooted in butch-femme relationships, converting their cells, the dining hall, and recreational spaces into sites of friendship, community, sex, and even romance.

Women conveyed their desire and affection for each other in myriad ways in the culture they created inside the House of D. They wrote each other “kites,” notes folded into tight triangles that were easy to conceal, planning ways to meet and expressing sexual longing and love for one another.⁷⁸ Eating meals and playing ping-pong, card games, Scrabble, and volleyball were opportunities to flirt, and escaping to the roof for some fresh air or authorized exercise offered the prospect of a semi-private sexual encounter. During occasional movie screenings, provided that the projector was not broken, inmates paired off to hold hands or kiss in plain view of the guards.⁷⁹ And every evening, women could be heard calling “Goodnight!” to one another throughout the dark prison for a long while after lights-out.⁸⁰

While same-sex relationships were visible and generally accepted as beyond staff control, sex between inmates was officially prohibited in most prisons and was policed and punished to varying degrees depending on the facility.⁸¹ As one woman learned when she was unable to flee the scene because her hair was caught on her lover’s bedsprings,

⁷⁷ Harris, *Hellhole*; Florrie Fisher, *The Lonely Trip Back: As Told to Jean Davis and Todd Persons* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

⁷⁸ Regina G. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 136; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 61; Harris, *Hellhole*, 237–8.

⁷⁹ Harris, *Hellhole*, 34, 238; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 51–2.

⁸⁰ Davis, *Angela Davis*, 49–50.

⁸¹ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*, 115–6. To explain this disconnect, Kunzel argues on pg. 101 that unlike male same-sex sexuality, prison lesbianism was often trivialized as harmless crushes that were more emotional than sexual, and therefore considered less dangerous.

the repercussions for being discovered at the House of D were not too severe. The offender was briefly locked in her cell, had a “D” for “degenerate” stamped in her file, and was most likely out pursuing her next tryst before long.⁸² According to Florrie Fisher, who was in and out of the House of D throughout the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, there were ample opportunities to engage in sexual activity. Since cell doors were opened several inches if the temperature exceeded ninety-five degrees, inmates would ask friends who worked near the thermostat to hold a lit match beneath it to move the dial. Once the cell doors opened and someone agreed to “play chickie” and watch for guards, small women like Florrie could squeeze through the small gap and release other inmates so they could meet their lovers in shower stalls or under beds.⁸³ In other instances, inmates worked together to facilitate sexual encounters by distracting prison staff so a couple could steal away for a rendezvous, a feat that required planning and cooperation.⁸⁴

As historian Regina Kunzel has shown, inmates often established extensive surrogate family networks that provided protection, affection and companionship to members. Within this kinship system, butch-femme couples fulfilled roles as husbands, wives, grandparents, children, aunts, uncles, etc. and took their social and affectional responsibilities very seriously.⁸⁵ Couples and families were expected to protect and provide for their own by securing optimal job assignments to supply the family with extra food, clothes, drugs, and luxury items like candy and cigarettes from the canteen.⁸⁶ In a context of fierce competition, these familial relationships also regulated acceptable sexual

⁸² Fisher, *The Lonely Trip Back*, 142.

⁸³ Ibid., 141–2.

⁸⁴ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*, 119.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 118–19.

⁸⁶ Harris, *Hellhole*, 232–3; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 53–4.

partners via rules about gendered butch-femme coupling and incest taboos among fictive kin.⁸⁷

By instituting family networks and community, the culture that women created in prison worked as a support system to counteract the dehumanizing effects of incarceration. Inmates came together to commemorate rites of passage like wedding ceremonies and birthdays.⁸⁸ To celebrate a birthday, for example, kitchen workers might swipe some extra food to make hors d'oeuvres and those with money could buy chocolate bars and cookies from the canteen to share for dessert. Women might play a makeshift game of limbo under a broom or toilet brush, some would sing and clap their hands in rhythm, while others fashioned costumes out of spare bed sheets and performed titillating dances which left some women “flushed and panting” and “would have sent a man into a frenzy, if there had been any men around.”⁸⁹ As was implicit in the family system, these kinds of celebrations combined sexuality and emotional support to offer incarcerated women access to affection, erotic longing and community despite the hellish conditions inside the House of D. Sexual and familial relationships enabled inmates “to feel necessary to someone, [and] have someone who is necessary to you.”⁹⁰ Instances of friendship, cooperation, romantic gestures and sex show that despite the potential for violence and coercion, women managed to create a lesbian subculture in an oppressive space.

Because the House of D held both sentenced prisoners and those only in for a night or two awaiting trial, lesbians who were arrested on the street for misdemeanor

⁸⁷ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*, 119–20.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 121; Davis, *Angela Davis*, 55.

⁸⁹ Fisher, *The Lonely Trip Back*, 9–10.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 140.

charges often returned to the bars the following weekend with stories of what it was like in jail.⁹¹ Whether or not charges were officially filed, arrests could have significant consequences. In addition to the humiliation and inconvenience, arrest records could expose women's lesbianism and impede their opportunities for employment, credit, insurance, etc.⁹² But with the “subversive sense of humor that undercuts hardship,” women referred to the prison as the “Country Club”; but beneath this ironic indifference was the fact that lesbians could not escape their criminalized existence, even in their places of refuge. To women in the bar scene, “The prison was a presence in our lives – a warning, a beacon, a reminder and a moment of community.”⁹³

Despite the danger and pervasive evidence of their outlaw status, lesbians who made the bars the center of their social and sexual lives found excitement, relief, and delight in their experiences there. As one woman described it, there was “such a feeling of belonging to something, you know? Everyone felt such a kinship... there was an awful lot of warmth and good spirit.”⁹⁴ At the same time, though, finding home in an urban underworld confirmed these women’s sense of self as deviant and criminal. They understood that they were a criminalized population and for some, it was precisely the danger of participating in something illicit that appealed to them. This was the case for Carolyn Kovac, who began driving into the city from New Jersey at age seventeen to frequent the bars:

I was attracted to the lifestyle... It was kind of like... a secret club. And it was forbidden and it was out of the norm and so it was very exciting... [It was] a very exciting time. A time to do what they write books about. To live like the

⁹¹ Nestle, “Women’s House of D, 1931-1974”; Harris, *Hellhole*, 40.

⁹² Rosen, “Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980,” 164–5.

⁹³ Nestle, “Women’s House of D, 1931-1974.”

⁹⁴ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 454.

adventure. To do what you only see in the movies. To be a part of the something that was forbidden.⁹⁵

Negotiating police aggression, Mafia regulation, and public hostility in an overwhelmingly queer environment colored lesbians' experience in the Village with an ambiguous mix of freedom and oppression. For many, the familiar understanding of how it felt to savor a gay space while looking over your shoulder was a point of connection that transformed a group of disparate women into a community.

However, since this was New York, the Village was not the only option. Harlem had a thriving nightlife that incorporated lesbian socializing. African American women sometimes spent time in neighborhood bars that did not explicitly cater to gay clientele, often feeling more comfortable in a largely heterosexual space within their black communities than in the white-dominated Village.⁹⁶ Many straight bars also had a back room with its own side entrance that was reserved for lesbians to drink and dance. Larger nightclubs, like the famous Tubby's Table Top on 125th Street, and underground after-hours clubs were another option for those who sought commercialized leisure.⁹⁷ Like the white teenagers who snuck into Village bars with fake IDs, fifteen-year-old Latina Gloria Rivera slipped past the bouncer at an underground club in Harlem just so she could see that gay environment with her own eyes. It was not long before she got caught and thrown out, but watching the Latina and African American women dance thrilled her, offering a glimpse of her future.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Kovac, interview with author.

⁹⁶ This was also the case in Washington D.C. Brett Beemyn, "A Queer Capital: Race, Class, Gender, and the Changing Social Landscape of Washington's Gay Communities, 1940-1955," in *Creating a Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187-8, 200-3.

⁹⁷ Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor"; Martin Duberman interview with Maua Flowers (June 12, 1991), Audio tape #02875 & #02876, Martin B. Duberman Papers. For information on the roots of these underground clubs in gay speakeasies in Harlem in the 1920s, see Kevin Mumford, "Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (September 1996): 395-414.

⁹⁸ Rivera, interview with author.

Women of color also created their own lesbian spaces, holding lavish dances in legendary neighborhood venues like Harlem's Rockland Palace (also home to annual gay men's drag balls) and the Hunts Point Palace in the South Bronx. Lesbians traveled from all over New York City and even New Jersey for these exciting occasions. For dances, women dressed to the nines, with butches in elegant tuxedos and femmes in flowing ball gowns.⁹⁹ Some of these events were exclusive to lesbians, but others mixed with gay men and even opened their doors to the larger African American and Latino communities around them.¹⁰⁰ These dances, bars, and clubs offered lesbians of color the opportunity to socialize with people who looked like them and shared their culture, as opposed to the whiteness and exclusion of the Village scene. In these sites, where they were the majority, black and Latina women were better able to let loose and feel more at ease.

Even so, black lesbians – like whites and Latinas – had varied experiences with their families and communities, ranging from rejection to tolerance to loving support. However, African Americans' particular history of racist persecution created a cultural context that regarded queerness with a complex mixture of homophobia and acceptance. On the one hand, because white supremacist ideology has historically burdened black sexuality with deviant excess, African Americans often challenged these harmful stereotypes by asserting their respectability and sexual morality. Within this tradition, lesbians and gay men might be considered "traitors to the race." On the other hand, because African Americans were often restricted to certain neighborhoods and economic sectors, black communities could feel small and close-knit, even in a city like New York.

⁹⁹ Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor"; Tracy Lark Hatton interview with Jean Oliver; Rivera, interview with author. For information on Harlem dances and drag balls in the 1920s, see Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: NAL Books, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Elly Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," in *The Persistent Desire*, 121.

Black identity and the shared experience of living under a racist regime worked to mute the potential for conflict around issues like sexual orientation.¹⁰¹ As Ira Jeffries describes,

Back in Harlem, the neighbors may have whispered a lot about us, but we were not ostracized or treated like pariahs by the community at large. I'm not saying that we didn't have to be mindful of the harassment, slurs, and insults hurled at us on occasion (we all did), but I never experienced any real violence.¹⁰²

Moreover, homophobia often had classed connotations, and once someone realized that being gay did not hinder their loved one's commitment to education, career, and conducting themselves in a "respectable" way, their disapproval sometimes diminished.¹⁰³

Regardless of a particular family or local community's response, African American bars and clubs lacked the Mafia protection so prevalent in the Village, and were often more vulnerable to police harassment and raids.¹⁰⁴ In part because of these dangers, the most important and prevalent means of establishing black lesbian communities and networks was the house party circuit.¹⁰⁵ Of course, white women also had parties in people's homes, but these parties were rooted in larger African American community tradition.¹⁰⁶ "Rent parties" or "pay parties" were a custom in Harlem since at least the 1920s. The hosts provided liquor, food, and good dance music, charged

¹⁰¹ Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 107–11; Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 101; Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Black, Lesbian, and Gay: Speaking the Unspeakable," in *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Random House, 2003), 154–5.

¹⁰² Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor."

¹⁰³ Martin Duberman interview with Maua Flowers (December 25, 1990), Audio tape #02874, Martin B. Duberman Papers.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor."

¹⁰⁵ This was also true for Detroit, Buffalo, and Washington D.C. See Thorpe, "A House Where Queers Go"; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 29–37; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*; Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 190.

¹⁰⁶ For white women, house parties were sites of celebration more than cultural tradition. Since they were more likely to find solace and community in bars, the friendship networks they created there extended to birthday and anniversary parties and annual New Year's Eve and Halloween festivities, but their primary form of socializing remained in weekly or nightly visits to their favorite bar.

admission at the door and could often make enough money to pay their rent in a month when they were short.¹⁰⁷ Women like Mary Archer and Alice Whitehead, described as “the backbone of Harlem’s lesbian community for many, many years,” built on this tradition and threw many of the parties that became institutionalized as a facet of New York’s African American lesbian life.¹⁰⁸ You might pay fifty cents for admission, check your coat for twenty-five, fifty cents per drink, and a dollar for a full meal of mouth-watering fried chicken, roast beef, salads, greens, and more. While not all parties were pay parties, a similar atmosphere of delicious food, loud music, hot drunken dancing, and the smells of “plastic couch covers and liquor and hair oil and women’s bodies” pervaded these spaces, promising a vibrant and exciting night out.¹⁰⁹

The house party tradition expanded beyond its Harlem roots to homes in other areas of Manhattan as well as the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn, creating lesbian networks that sometimes overlapped.¹¹⁰ For example, when partners Mabel Hampton and Lillian Foster moved to the Bronx in the 1940s, they discovered that their new neighbors hailed from Harlem as well. It was through subtle conversations about Harlem parties that the women determined that their neighbors were also gay. Moreover, they learned that they hosted parties for lesbians based on the same model that they had all left behind, thereby offering Mabel and Lillian a familiar social scene and cultural tradition among

¹⁰⁷ Garber, “A Spectacle in Color,” 321–3.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor.”

¹⁰⁹ Audre Lorde, “Tar Beach,” *Conditions*, 1979, 35–6 (quote), Periodical Collection, LHA; Bulkin, “An Old Dyke’s Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden,” 121. According to Lorde, parties thrown by white lesbians were much more subdued, quiet, and dull compared to these fun and lively affairs. White women served wine but not hard liquor, played music but not for dancing, offered bland food and never had enough of it, and in the absence of laughter and loud conversation, the “sound of moderation [was as] thick and heavy as smoke in the air” (*Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 217–8).

¹¹⁰ Chloe Cooney puts forth this idea in “‘Prove It On Me’: Migration, Urbanization and the Making of an Autonomous, Black Lesbian Culture,” n.d., Unpublished Manuscripts, LHA.

new friends in a new neighborhood.¹¹¹ Similarly, Yvonne Flowers began throwing huge pay parties when she needed “to make a few bucks” after moving from Harlem to the Lower East Side, and saw the same pattern develop when a friend of hers moved to Brooklyn. After that, she was introduced to “a whole Brooklyn scene.”¹¹² In this way, the house party tradition was, as Chloe Cooney argues, “mobile and not bound to a specific location, but instead moved with the women who made up the culture.”¹¹³

An alternative to Village bars and Harlem nightlife, house parties facilitated a different kind of socializing for lesbians of color. As black lesbians confronted the challenges of “triple jeopardy” – battling racism, misogyny, and homophobia – they created queer communities that were exceptionally close. They felt a camaraderie and sense of duty to one another that combined friendship and family.¹¹⁴ If homophobic parents rejected their children, others in the queer community incorporated them into their “gay family.” Some lesbian couples not only welcomed abandoned teens into their homes, providing clothes, food, and a warm bed, but also paid for their education. According to butch Jeanne Gray, “This was a black, bulldaggin’ community tradition.”¹¹⁵ Private parties were opportunities for these tight-knit familial groups to form.

Moreover, as Anne (Finn) Enke argues about Detroit’s similar tradition, these parties not only helped construct vast African American lesbian networks, they also functioned as “alternate marketplaces” to “redistribute resources and affirm community among a population with restricted earning power.”¹¹⁶ Additionally, they were simply

¹¹¹ “The Mabel Hampton Tapes,” (1976-1988), 163-4, Box 1, Mabel Hampton Special Collection, LHA.

¹¹² Duberman interview with Maua Flowers (June 12, 1991), Audio tape #02876 & #02877, Martin B. Duberman Papers.

¹¹³ Cooney, ““Prove It On Me,”” 31.

¹¹⁴ Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor.”

¹¹⁵ Gray, “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community.”

¹¹⁶ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 35.

more personal and private, as women entertained in their own homes and invited only their friends. There were no straight men lurking or gawking, no bouncers hassling them, and no white people snubbing or treating them like exotic curiosities. Parties also enabled a more sexualized environment, as there was far less of a chance of a police raid, and women did not have to worry about being caught dancing together or kissing. For many lesbians of color, socializing in a friend's home with familiar company trumped the bar scene every time, as women produced lively sites of community and culture.

But lesbians did not only congregate under the cover of night. They also pushed beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of traditional nightlife and made queerness visible during daytime hours and in public, communal areas. One of the most popular outings for lesbians (as well as gay men) across racial and, to an extent class, lines was Riis Park, a beach in Rockaway, Queens that was known for its gay visitors.¹¹⁷ People packed their cars full of friends, coolers and snacks, or took the long subway ride out to the end of Flatbush Avenue before switching to the bus that would take them to the coast. For those on public transit, it was great fun watching the subway car gradually fill up with other queers, knowing you were all going to the same exciting destination.¹¹⁸

Although it was a public beach, summer weekends at Riis Park boasted quite a rowdy scene, with drag queens camping it up and butches lifting trashcans above their heads in competitions of strength. Surrounded by other gay people, women felt it was a safe place to be “just as wild as you want to be with your lover,” and walked on the beach hand in hand or used the cover of beach blankets and crashing waves to take advantage of

¹¹⁷ Cherry Grove, Fire Island was another favorite beach getaway for lesbians and gay men during this period. While a more working-class presence developed by the 1960s, Cherry Grove had traditionally been a haven for middle- and upper class lesbian “ladies” who reveled in the privacy afforded by the island’s isolation, as opposed to the more public nature of beaches like Riis Park. Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

¹¹⁸ Nestle, interview with author; Mushroom, interview with author.

the easy access afforded by swimsuits. Some even brought pup tents and camped out overnight, roasting marshmallows over a fire and going for a cool, refreshing swim at sunrise.¹¹⁹

However, as with other queer spaces, Riis Park offered a blend of haven and harassment. Despite the abundance of lesbians and gay men on the subway and bus rides, they were joined by other New Yorkers headed to the beach, and often endured stares or crude and insulting remarks. Once they arrived, voyeuristic tourists gaped at them from the boardwalk, and children could be seen riding by on bicycles with binoculars or peeking over the low wall that bordered the beach, pointing and laughing. There was also a police presence, as cops kept their eyes peeled waiting for someone (usually a gay man) to violate the local ordinance that banned “suggestive” swimsuits, or patrolled the restroom changing areas hoping to catch and arrest people having sex. But just like in the Village, lesbians devised coping strategies to avoid trouble, such as standing in paper bags when they were fooling around in the changing rooms to disguise lovers’ two sets of feet. They loved going to Riis Park, and persisted in their public displays of queerness despite efforts to repress them.¹²⁰

Playing softball was another visible daytime activity that allowed lesbians to congregate. In the postwar era (and beyond), women’s organized sports challenged heterosexual and gender norms and became spaces in which lesbians developed camaraderie and collectivity. Much like the single-sex environments of wartime factories and military bases, sports offered the opportunity to reject the confines of traditional

¹¹⁹ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 35; Tracy Lark Hatton interview with Jean Oliver (quote); Ferrara, interview with author; Nestle, interview with author; Marino, interview with author.

¹²⁰ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 35; Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 37; Nestle, interview with author; Duberman, *Stonewall*, 84; Rosen, “Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980,” 165.

heterosexual femininity and explore same-sex desire. While some players and league managers made efforts to combat the stigma of queerness that accompanied female athleticism, it was common knowledge that you could go to “any small-town softball field and just wait. Sooner or later they would all come.”¹²¹

In New York, women’s softball teams like the Monterey’s, the New York Aces, and the Amerks competed in tournaments for trophies, and drew lesbians in as players and spectators. After games and practices, they would party at players’ homes or at the bars that participated as sponsors. The citywide league included teams from throughout the five boroughs and Long Island. Teams out of Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn consisted mostly of black and Latina women, while those based in Queens and Long Island were generally white.¹²² According to Gloria Rivera, a Puerto Rican player from the Bronx, the whole league was gay. Even if that was an exaggeration, softball was Gloria’s primary queer social outlet and the friends she met there became like family. Her team manager, an African American woman, mentored her and other young butches, teaching them how to “dress right,” “talk right,” “act right,” and “walk with pride.” She even visited Gloria’s mother to assure her that being gay did not preclude being a good person and living a happy life, and in doing so significantly enhanced their mother-daughter relationship.¹²³

Gloria’s team also rented out a hall and hosted annual dances for the players and their guests. These dances were known to be gay, and very popular. Like the dances at the Rockland Palace, guests were expected to come in appropriate attire – no jeans or

¹²¹ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7–8; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, Ch. 3; Schiller and Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall* (quote).

¹²² Bulkin, “An Old Dyke’s Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden,” 121; Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor”; Duberman, *Stonewall*, 90; Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 189.

¹²³ Rivera, interview with author.

sneakers were allowed. And like other lesbian dances, the dress code respected the butch-femme styling that dominated in lesbian communities, encouraging butches to don elegant men's suits alongside their femme dates in glamorous dresses.¹²⁴ Fostering queer solidarity through sport and socializing, softball became a space for young lesbians of color to construct gendered and sexual identities that they claimed with pride.

However, while Gloria's team and others consisting primarily of women of color offered an opportunity to form a queer "softball family" with a vibrant social life, the white teams were more discreet. When Pauline Ferrara tried out for a team on Long Island, she was dismayed and outraged to find that she was rejected because she appeared too masculine. Although her femme girlfriend played with no problems, the coaches feared that Pauline would arouse suspicions of lesbianism and expose the rest of them. Pauline still went to games to watch her girlfriend, but she never knew who was gay in the group of more guarded and inconspicuous women, and considered the bars a better bet for finding queer friends.¹²⁵

Despite their visibility and relative safety in public areas like softball fields and the beach at Riis Park, New York City streets were uncertain spaces for lesbians to navigate. Police harassment was typical in public areas, especially for those who noticeably transgressed normative femininity. Cops frequently stopped pedestrians they perceived as queer solely to frisk, insult, or intimidate them.¹²⁶ Also, because the Village was so well known for its queerness, straight people often "came down to bust heads,"

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ferrara, interview with author.

¹²⁶ Rosen, "Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980," 165; Arriola, "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies," 36-7.

and many lesbians felt more secure in a bar than out on the street.¹²⁷ However, in certain areas, young women carved out lesbian spaces within the public street culture of their communities. Neighborhoods in the Bronx and Harlem had lively street scenes filled with children playing, activists and sidewalk preachers lecturing, and people settled in folding chairs or on milk crates talking or listening to the radio.¹²⁸ Also in the crowd were teenage lesbians who made no secret of their queer sexuality.

Jessica Lopez grew up peeking out the windows of her family's Bronx apartment in order to stare at the teenage *marimachas*, or Latina butches, gathered outside.¹²⁹ While they fell under the larger rubric of bad "street" kids, they were also publicly acknowledged to be lesbians, inciting neighborhood gossip and warnings about their sexual and gender deviance. These warnings reinforced the prevalent image of the sexual psychopath that permeated postwar culture.¹³⁰ Jessica's mother and their neighbors cautioned her that these girls were dangerous; although they were female, they acted like men and were not to be trusted. They would disguise themselves as normal young women in order to befriend naïve girls like her, and then seduce and even rape them. However, it was through this talk that Jessica first learned about lesbianism and began to identify with it. She says, "The more they talked about it like it was something bad, the more I wanted to know about it." Despite the warnings, she became infatuated with these older girls,

¹²⁷ Ferrara, interview with author. As mentioned previously, white women were most likely to experience feelings of security inside bars.

¹²⁸ David F. García, "Contesting That Damned Mambo: Arsenio Rodríguez and the People of El Barrio and the Bronx in the 1950s," in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, ed. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 187–198; Herb Boyd, ed., *The Harlem Reader: A Celebration of New York's Most Famous Neighborhood, from the Renaissance Years to the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003); Lorde, "Tar Beach."

¹²⁹ According to Elvia Arriola, *marimacha* is Mexican slang for lesbian, combining *Maria*, a common woman's name in Mexico and Latin America, with *macho*, a term that describes hypermasculine behavior. "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies," 33.

¹³⁰ Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960," *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 83–106; D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace."

wishing they *would* seduce her, and often defended them and challenged her mother's threatening stories.¹³¹

If these teenage lesbians fostered the production of queer knowledge by offering Jessica a framework for understanding her same-sex desires, they also transformed a typical street scene of people hanging out on their stoops into a social and sexual site of lesbian identity, community, and cultural development. They created a visible lesbian presence, flirting with women and girls who walked by, and loudly sharing scandalous stories of their sexual encounters. As well as being visible, the *marimachas* passed around a copy of *Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall's 1928 classic lesbian-themed novel.¹³² Like many young gay women of this era, reading and discussing the book probably enabled them to see images of themselves in print and put a name to what they were feeling. When Jessica saw the girls outside reading *Well of Loneliness*, she went and found it at her local library and had the same experience.¹³³

Further downtown in Spanish Harlem, or "El Barrio," Gloria Rivera also initially learned about lesbianism from the Puerto Rican "old-timers" in her neighborhood who sat outside and gossiped about the *marimachas* they saw on the street. Similar to the teens in the Bronx, Gloria infused her local gang with lesbian activity. She and her best friend were the leaders of the Latin Ladies gang and, in addition to representing and defending their turf, created an initiation ritual that required the new girls to kiss them.¹³⁴ Perhaps because they were too young to gain access to bars or nightclubs, and living with their

¹³¹ Lopez, interview with author.

¹³² Although banned in England after an illustrious obscenity trial, *The Well of Loneliness* was reprinted in the U.S. in 1951 and became a best seller, continuing to sell over one hundred thousand copies a year throughout the 1960s. Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 52.

¹³³ Lopez, interview with author.

¹³⁴ Rivera, interview with author.

parents was not conducive to throwing parties, these teenagers converted the conventional public street culture of their neighborhoods into subversive, sexualized spaces. Despite the negative images that young women like Jessica and Gloria received, their Latino neighborhoods became sites of lesbian knowledge and community.

But when Jessica's family moved from the Bronx to Brooklyn in the early-1960s, they left that world behind. In their new predominately Italian neighborhood, not only were they the only people of color and treated like outcasts, Jessica had also lost the lesbian presence on which she had come to rely. But while her sister was struggling as one of the only "Spanish-Black" students at John Jay High School in Park Slope, Jessica forged her mother's signature on the public school selection form, determined to go to an all-girls high school. On her first day, as she and her mother rode the subway to 59th Street in Brooklyn, Jessica's excitement grew as she saw more and more lesbians fill up the subway car with each stop. Finally, they reached their common destination: Bay Ridge High.¹³⁵

According to Jessica, the lesbians at Bay Ridge High "really ruled that school." Like the *marimachas* who hung out on the corner in the Bronx and Spanish Harlem, these white teens were known to be rebellious; they smoked, drank, and cut class. Likewise, their recognizable style and cocky sexuality projected an image of queerness that was widely legible among students. While straight girls gossiped about them and teased one another by asking if someone had gotten the "lezzie germ," the lesbians at Bay Ridge High appropriated this intended insult, taunting straight girls and sticking them in their rear ends with pins, asking, "Have you been stuck [by the lezzie germ] today?" Even less subtly, they marched down the hallways chanting, "We are the lezzies!" and assembled in

¹³⁵ Lopez, interview with author.

front of the school to sing their parody of the school song, “Gay Ridge High,” at the top of their lungs. When they played hooky, they gathered at a nearby restaurant called Joey’s where they could smoke, flirt, dance to the jukebox, and sneak into the bathroom to make out, sniff cleaning fluid, or both. Jessica happily joined this group, dropping her former straight friends and proudly declaring, “I guess I do have the lezzie germ, ‘cause I’m a lesbian.”¹³⁶

Alongside the teenage *marimachas*, the Bay Ridge High School crowd demonstrates how different groups of young lesbians subverted normative ideologies and asserted queer visibility. Perhaps it was the perceived invincibility of youth and the risky coolness of rebellion that allowed them to shed their inhibitions and celebrate their nonconformity to a hostile culture. However, it is unclear to what extent their lesbianism was obvious in the world beyond Bay Ridge High, if the “old timers” sitting outside in their predominately white Brooklyn neighborhoods recognized their queerness and warned young girls to avoid them. It is quite possible that they altered their behavior and self-expression once they returned home, and it was the school itself – a single-sex, youth-oriented environment away from their parents – that provided the space to articulate a lesbian identity and create a community. Either way, these girls converted Bay Ridge High School into a site of lesbian activity with its own internal queer culture.

Throughout New York City, lesbians constructed physical and cultural spaces fueled by a powerful longing to find women like themselves. As a criminalized and policed population, they were often segregated into particular sites, but also played with

¹³⁶ Ibid. Interestingly, although the vast majority of the students at Bay Ridge High School were white, Jessica felt that their common lesbianism overrode their racial and cultural differences, much like the white women in the Village bar scene. Moreover, due to her network of friends from school, she felt very comfortable at Village bars, where they spent their Friday nights together. Although her new friends exoticized her accent and dark complexion, she enjoyed that they found her sexy and loved being a part of their group.

the spatial ambiguity that organized their social and sexual lives and reveled in a self-imposed, coveted segregation that allowed them to feel comfortable and enjoy their deviant desires. Discovering queer community and sharing their feelings of difference could be as exciting and emotionally significant as the sexual relationships that women sought in those spaces. Many would affirm that “[it] was one of the most thrilling moments of my life when I could actually tell another gay person, connect with another gay person.”¹³⁷ Walking into a bar or party and seeing women dancing together, watching the subway car gradually fill up with lesbians on your way to school or the beach, meeting your first gay friend or lover – women yearned for these experiences with a determination that rivaled and sometimes mingled with their fear of danger and censure. This erotic excitement permeated the spaces they created, producing identities and cultural rituals informed by that profound desire.

¹³⁷ Carroll, interview with author.

CHAPTER 3

Ritual and Flexibility: Romance, Sex, and Gendered Erotics

You are sitting by yourself at the bar in the club you hang out at, legs wide, leaning on your elbow, holding your cigarette deep in the crotch of your fingers. There can be no doubt about the fact that you are a butch. You notice a woman you've never seen before sitting at a table, and you are attracted to her. She has short hair and is wearing a little makeup, but she isn't obviously femmy-looking. You are not sure if she's butch or fem – a critical issue – so you call over the bartender. You say, “Don't be obvious, but see that woman over there? Do you know who she is?”

If the bartender responds, “Yeah,” you ask, “Is she butch or fem?” If the woman is a fem, you may proceed with the rituals. If the issue remains uncertain, proceed as though she were a fem. If she is a butch, forget it unless you are still attracted to her. In that case, consult with the bartender as to her opinion on whether you should try “flipping” her.

-Merril Mushroom, “How to Engage in Courting Rituals
1950s Butch-Style in the Bar”

As this passage from Merrill Mushroom's essay indicates, postwar lesbian culture was rife with methodical approaches to flirtation, courtship, desire, and sex. Mushroom goes on to enumerate the seven “rituals” of butch courting – “cruising,” “the buying of the drink,” “the playing of the jukebox,” “the approach,” “the lighting of the cigarette,” “the asking to dance,” and “the dancing” – offering explicit direction and advice, and inviting the reader to either skip ahead or give up if they receive certain signals from the woman they are pursuing. If all goes accordingly, the rituals will culminate in that “most blatant form of foreplay,” dancing, where with heads bent close and bodies touching, the two women will determine if they have the sexual chemistry both hoped to find when they left home earlier that night.¹

Mushroom emphasizes the formulaic rituals and gendered rules that permeated postwar lesbian culture, but she also reveals an ambiguity and potential for flexibility not

¹ Merrill Mushroom, “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950s Butch-Style in the Bar,” in *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: Viking, 1994), 213–217.

often attributed to butch-femme interactions. As a butch, Mushroom is seeking a femme, but is attracted to a woman whose role she cannot identify on sight. If she turns out to also be butch, Mushroom may attempt to “flip” her – that is, see if she is willing to take the femme social and sexual role in this particular relationship, thus upholding the butch-femme dynamic.² Although butch-femme was the expected romantic pairing, as Mushroom acknowledges, attractions sometimes defied this standard. With the goal of exploring and acting on their queer desires, lesbians found ways to fulfill them within, and sometimes despite, the gendered paradigm that organized their culture. In doing so, they displayed a sexual fortitude and self-knowledge that flouted ideological constructions of postwar womanhood, while maintaining a complicated connection to normative ideologies of gender.

This chapter explores the gendered eroticism that infused lesbian culture, considering the ways that women used dominant cultural tropes to structure queer relationships. Women entering lesbian spaces were immediately schooled in butch-femme modes of interaction, their form depending on the ways that different communities construed them. Gendered approaches to flirtation, courtship, and sexual positioning emphasized an essential complementarity that organized desire and defined femme and butch roles. Lesbians adhered to these guidelines to varying degrees, demonstrating a flexibility that suggests that individual character and personal preference often overrode strict cultural conformity. Moreover, in the world they created, postwar lesbians engaged and affirmed their queer desires within a larger context of homophobia and female sexual repression.

² “Flipping” a butch or a butch that “flips femme” quite literally refers to sexual positioning, as a butch would flip onto her back to take on the receptive sexual role.

After World War II, marriage and motherhood increasingly defined conceptions of American womanhood.³ Still reeling from war and cowering under the threat of the bomb, Americans sought relief in heterosexual fulfillment and nuclear families, as marriage and fertility rates rose and the age at which couples wed and bore children fell. By the late-1940s, more than half of U.S. women were married by age twenty-one, and this trend continued throughout the 1950s.⁴ Encouraged to root their identities in their familial roles, women were assured they would find a “whole world of satisfaction” in their decision to marry and mother.⁵ These tenets were the “center around which women built their futures. To not share this expectation cast doubts on one’s identity as a woman.”⁶

Despite what historian Beth Bailey has termed “the normalization of sex,” female sexuality became “contained” within marriage.⁷ Sexual experimentation – “petting,” “necking” and the like – were accepted components of youth culture, but while girls were expected to respond to male attention, they were also cast as the gatekeepers responsible for limiting premarital sexual activity to non-penetrative sex if they wanted to maintain a good reputation. Moreover, teenage monogamy replaced the prewar custom of competition-based dating, as “going steady” was embraced as a sort of practice-

³ This is not to say that this domesticated ideology was inevitable or uncontested. The postwar period brought much confusion and social tension regarding women’s roles after their brief brush with the freedoms of the wartime economy, and their identities were very much in flux. However, few Americans managed to avoid the powerful message that women should embrace domesticity. For several rich examples of how postwar women defied dominant cultural standards, see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁴ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 287–8; Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 25.

⁵ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 27.

⁶ Trisha Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 9.

⁷ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 80–1.

marriage.⁸ Once they entered adulthood, women could safely channel their sexuality into their families, satisfying their husbands' sexual needs and fulfilling their own through motherhood. At the same time, all non-marital sexuality was condemned as irresponsible, immature, and deviant.⁹

Of course, these conceptions of womanhood represent ideologies rooted in white middle-class values, not actual behavior. As Alfred Kinsey's path-breaking 1953 study of female sexuality showed, there was a wide discrepancy between ideology and practice, even among white middle-class participants.¹⁰ Even so, as part of the rise of a more nationally oriented culture, standards of womanhood and rules about sexuality were disseminated widely in ways that structured individual experience. These ideologies informed policy, school curricula, and how people judged one another. They were the norms against which many American women evaluated themselves.¹¹

Despite the general emphasis on marriage and motherhood among all groups in American society, communities of color developed distinctive standards and practices within the context of the larger white-dominated culture. Latinas were more likely to learn about gendered roles within their own familial and cultural frameworks than from white society. As scholars such as Tomás Almaguer have noted, Latin American conceptualizations of gender are rooted in the cultural myth of contact – masculine conquistadors exerting dominance over passive, feminine natives. In this view, men's

⁸ Ibid., 26–9, 87–94; Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 38–40; Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 302–7; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 1st Perennial Library ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 261–2.

⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 82, 141.

¹⁰ Ibid., 101. Kinsey's published study was actually limited to white women, much to the disappointment of African Americans who had hoped that his work would help dispel stereotypes about black women's sexuality. Leisa D. Meyer, "'Strange Love': Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture During the 1950s," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 630–2.

¹¹ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 6–8, 12.

ongoing symbolic conquest of women defines the larger gender system, setting up a paradigm of male control and female obedience, deference, and subservience.¹²

Stemming from this conquest allegory, postwar Latinas (like their white counterparts) learned that marriage, motherhood, and channeling sexuality into the family were essential to proper womanhood. In this context, lesbians and women who enjoyed sex or pursued it outside of marriage existed in the same threatening, deviant category.¹³

In addition, African American women have long struggled against their exclusion from white middle-class womanhood, most notably through a politics of respectability that minimized sexuality in order to combat racist conceptions of black hypersexuality and immorality.¹⁴ However, ideologies of respectable black womanhood did not necessarily mirror those from the white middle-class. As Leisa Meyer has shown, while mid-century black print culture emphasized the primacy of heterosexual marriage and a gendered hierarchy, it also included “moments of possibility” and “alternative visions of African American women’s sexual subjectivity” that strayed outside the boundaries of white middle-class norms.¹⁵ Moreover, as Ekua Omosupe argues, the reality of black women’s lives fosters independence, self-sufficiency, and self-preservation in order to survive, and these qualities were incorporated into black girls’ socialization.¹⁶ Likewise, Mignon Moore asserts that African Americans have historically constructed distinct

¹² Tomás Almaguer, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior,” ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993): 255–73.

¹³ Karla E. Rosales, “Papis, Dykes, Daddies: A Study of Chicana and Latina Self-Identified Butch Lesbians” (M.A. thesis, San Francisco State University, 2001), 92–3; Juanita Ramos, ed., *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xxvi; Katie Gilmartin, “‘The Culture of Lesbianism’: Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Life of a Chicana Lesbian,” in *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Connections*, ed. Toni P. Lester (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 172–4.

¹⁴ For an overview of this literature, see Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 97–8.

¹⁵ Meyer, “Strange Love,” 626–7, 645–7.

¹⁶ Ekua Omosupe, “Black/Lesbian/Bulldagger,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (1991): 103.

gender ideologies from whites, associating black femininity with power, independence and leadership, rather than delicacy and submissiveness.¹⁷ Consequently, black and white womanhood can look very different.

Despite racial and ethnic distinctions in the ways that Americans understood gender norms, nearly all groups perceived lesbians as irresponsibly rejecting their rightful roles as wives and mothers. In this way, lesbians became un-feminine by definition, “labeled deviant to the degree that they symbolized, represented and actualized lives that defied strict gender distinctions during a period of profound anxiety regarding gender roles and the postwar restoration and maintenance of ‘normal’ family life.”¹⁸ These women were viewed as intent on seizing their “perverse” desires despite social and legal sanctions. And in a way, they were. As femme Joan Nestle asserts, “We knew what we wanted, and that was no mean feat for young women of the 1950s.”¹⁹

At the same time, however, lesbians adopted butch-femme; a gendered system of erotics that looked enough like heterosexuality to be condemned as patriarchal and misogynistic by a younger generation of feminist lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁰ Although many activists and scholars have fiercely refuted this critique, arguing that butch-femme was not merely an oppressive heterosexual model but a feminist manipulation and subversion of the postwar gender hierarchy,²¹ when describing the way

¹⁷ Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 72–3.

¹⁸ Donna Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America,” in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 116.

¹⁹ Joan Nestle, “The Femme Question,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 139.

²⁰ For example, Sheila Jeffreys, “Butch and Femme: Now and Then,” in *Not A Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840-1985* (London: The Women’s Press Limited, 1989), 158–187.

²¹ See Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” in *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 92–102; Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

their culture was structured during the postwar period, lesbians often do rely on heteronormative tropes and traditional understandings of gender. In the simplest terms, they explain that butches were masculine, femmes were feminine, and their relationships were “exactly like boys and girls.”²² Their connection to heterosexual norms was more complicated than that, not least because the lesbian world was marked by the same racial, ethnic and class diversity as the larger society. But most postwar lesbians did embrace a sense of gendered complementarity that strongly resonated with dominant cultural ideologies.

As Avra Michelson argues, butch-femme was an interpretation of the prevailing way that people in postwar society understood their emotional lives and sexual needs; that is, via a sense of gendered balance. Rooted in the patriarchal kinship system of the modern Western world, the family cemented gendered opposition as the basis of emotional and sexual interaction. Thus, lesbians along with heterosexuals learned to view gender as the “critical institution in shaping our emotional lives and determining who we are and who we find fulfilling,” with masculinity and femininity as the “parameters of our social options.” This “opposites attract” ethos translated into butch-femme; “the uniquely lesbian form of this phenomenon, as expressions of emotional opposition among women.”²³

Although postwar lesbians did not explicitly articulate this theory, their understandings of butch-femme demonstrate its relevance. As white working-class femme Barbara Carroll describes, “We’re attracted to people who have something that

²² Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 20 July 2010.

²³ Avra Michelson, “Some Thoughts Towards Developing a Theory of Roles,” 1978, Unpublished papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter LHA).

we need.”²⁴ Even couples that did not express their identities in discernibly gendered ways emphasize an essential complementarity, explaining, “Their aura was different. How they behaved was different. Their assertiveness was a different style... so that the two things meshed.”²⁵ However, although normative heterosexual relationships were models in some ways, butch-femme also enabled lesbians to see gender as a spectrum that transgressed biological sex, as a range of human traits and mannerisms that are contained within gendered categories. For example, although Puerto Rican butch Gloria Rivera firmly located her masculinity in her female body, she recognized that “in a heterosexual’s mind we’re playing the male part.”²⁶ Acknowledging that this continuum gets funneled into a binary based on sex, many lesbians claimed butch and femme identities and took part in the gendered rituals that organized their culture.

These rituals were immediately apparent upon entering lesbian spaces, especially in Greenwich Village bars, New York’s most prominent queer “pick-up” scene. Butches and femmes were known to “cruise” each other – that is, look at a woman they found attractive, make eye contact, smile and see if she returned the attention – but as the “masculine” partner butches were deemed responsible for initiating flirtation. If a butch was too shy to approach a femme directly, she might send her a drink after consulting the bartender. The femme’s reaction would determine the butch’s next steps. If she smiled, the butch should feel confident enough to go introduce herself; if she frowned or looked bored, the butch might want to move on to someone else.²⁷ Other butches were comfortable walking right up to a femme and striking up a conversation or asking her to

²⁴ Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2010.

²⁵ Robbie Marino, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 December 2010.

²⁶ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011.

²⁷ Mushroom, “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950 Butch-Style in the Bar,” 214.

dance. One particularly bold Puerto Rican butch bought a drink for a younger white femme at their favorite working-class bar, the Sea Colony, and whispered in her ear, “You will be mine.” Leaving the young femme both aroused and a bit intimidated, she then headed back out into the night to resume her work as a taxi driver.²⁸ Lighting a femme’s cigarette was another way that butches initiated contact. In fact, white working-class butch Debbie Bender began smoking as a teenager specifically so she could light women’s cigarettes in Village bars.²⁹ Likewise, working-class Latina femme Jessica Lopez took up cigarettes to give butches an excuse to approach her. Despite choking and coughing due to her asthma, she thought her plan worked well and felt “like the hottest thing around.”³⁰

As Jessica’s tactic demonstrates, femmes were not simply passive receptors of assertive butches. They developed ways to solicit attention, chose whether or not to accept a butch’s advances, and often dictated the next steps in a flirtation by their responses.³¹ Some butches waited for a signal that a femme was interested – a sidelong glance or an enticing smile – before approaching her, effectively letting her make the first move. Miriam Wolfson, a shy middle-class butch, says, “I never took one step toward anybody unless they took two or three or four steps toward me.”³² Moreover, femmes enjoyed being pursued, and integrated this position into their lesbian identities.³³

One way that women just learning about lesbian life determined whether they were butch or femme was by considering their “type.” If someone was not sure of her

²⁸ Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 March 2011.

²⁹ Debbie Bender and Linnea Due, “Coming Up Butch,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 99.

³⁰ Jessica Lopez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 18 January 2011.

³¹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 238–9; Mushroom, “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950 Butch-Style in the Bar.”

³² Wolfson, interview with author.

³³ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 237.

role, her friends might ask, “Well, who are you into?” If she pointed at a butch, she became a femme, and vice versa.³⁴ Merrill Mushroom started out her lesbian career this way. Because she was initially attracted to a butch woman, she presented herself as a femme in order to pursue that desire. This brief relationship worked well, as Merrill’s butch “had no problem being fem in bed; and she could lie on her back for days,” thus allowing Merrill the sexual control that she craved. Soon after, she “decided to settle down as a butch, especially because I had a hot crush on Sallie Lee.”³⁵ Her attraction to this femme encouraged her to take on a public butch identity (which she maintains to this day). Coupled with her dominant sexual positioning and masculine appearance, butchness suited her well.

This was not always the case, however. When these three elements – attraction, sexual role, and appearance – did not correspond, women sometimes had trouble with butch-femme dynamics. Despite her feminine look, Carolyn Kovac was never considered a femme because she was not attracted to butches. Wearing dresses and heels, rejecting butch advances and pursuing other feminine women cemented Carolyn’s position as a ki-ki in her working-class bar community.³⁶ Similarly, those who did not take on a sexually assertive role but whose appearance was perceived as butch confounded lesbian expectations. This was extremely painful for one woman who “felt like a femme but looked like a butch.” Her look attracted femmes’ attention in Village bars, but when she tried “playing the game” as a butch, she did not enjoy sex and feared she might be

³⁴ Janet Kahn and Patricia Gozemba, “In and Around the Lighthouse: Working Class Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History: Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, ed. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan Reverby (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 96–7.

³⁵ Merrill Mushroom, “Bar Dyke Sketches: 1959,” *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1982, 19, History - The Fifties 2 - subject file #06110, LHA.

³⁶ Kovac, interview with author.

“frigid.” She began to dread the moment when a femme who expected a butch lover would realize that she was really a “girl” in bed.³⁷ Unable to reconcile her image and sexuality to butch-femme standards, she “gave up all hope that anybody would ever love me.”³⁸ While some women experienced butch-femme as alienating in this way, others were able to successfully negotiate community standards. For example, in some cases if a woman’s image and sexual role did not coincide, the sexual role took precedence as the indicator of butch or femme status.³⁹ According to one butch, no matter what someone looks like or how she behaves in a bar, “you never can be really sure until you have them.”⁴⁰

Women entering lesbian communities learned butch-femme modes of interaction in different ways. Some absorbed this knowledge through observation. When teenager Gloria Rivera snuck into a gay after-hours club in Harlem, she delighted in watching the older Latina and African American women dance together. Through this experience, she says, “I grew up knowing a femme and a butch, and I decided that I am the butch.”⁴¹ Likewise, the first time African American butch W.D. visited a gay bar in the Village, she sat by herself, sipped her drink, and surveyed the scene around her. Fascinated with the butches’ mannerisms and the way that they picked up femmes, W.D. felt she had gained a “really good education around how women treat each other” by the time she left.⁴²

³⁷ As Joan Nestle has argued, legible butchness conveyed sexual expertise, so it is not surprising that a femme would be disappointed when the woman she believed was a butch did not deliver on this promise once they got in bed. Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” 92–3.

³⁸ Notes from Radicalesbians’ consciousness-raising group, ca. 1970, Ellen Shumsky Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC).

³⁹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 192.

⁴⁰ Merrill Mushroom, “Bar Dykes: A One-Act Play in Pantomime and Dialogue,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession, n.d.

⁴¹ Rivera, interview with author.

⁴² W.D. interview with Lenn Keller, 29 August 2004.

Others learned through instruction. It was not uncommon for butches to mentor one another, those who were older or more experienced imparting their knowledge upon newcomers.⁴³ Some femmes took it upon themselves to also guide “baby butches” entering “the life.” After fifteen-year-old Carmen Vázquez realized that she was attracted to other girls, she fell in with a group of older Puerto Rican femmes who “stewarded” her into “a world of butch-femme delight.”⁴⁴ In spite of the trouble they would face if caught with a minor, these adult femmes tutored Carmen in the style of butchness they sought in their partners. Emphasizing what would please the femmes in their Latina community, they taught her to approach women politely, not in a vulgar or macho way, to lead when they danced, and to always wear a clean pressed shirt.⁴⁵ In this way, they took an active role in Carmen’s butch development. Moreover, although there is scant evidence of systems of mentorship among femmes,⁴⁶ Carmen’s close-knit group of friends suggests that this impression may not be accurate. They show that there were femmes who formed friendship networks, supported one another, and shared their experiences – or at least, shared their opinions about what makes a good butch.

Although stylized gendered rituals were the standard in both heterosexual and lesbian culture, the rules were not always strictly enforced. Just as there were differences by race and class, lesbians also allowed a certain degree of flexibility in how and whether these rituals were performed. Some perceived the femme role as simply “sitting against

⁴³ Judith Halberstam, “Between Butches,” in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1998), 62.

⁴⁴ Carmen Vázquez, “Voice and Visibility: Looking Up at the Stars,” 08S-03 Box 1, “Conference” folder, Carmen Vázquez Papers, SSC.

⁴⁵ Carmen Vázquez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 10 August 2011.

⁴⁶ Halberstam, “Between Butches,” 62. In their study of butch-femme culture in Buffalo, NY, Kennedy and Davis found that instead of the camaraderie that butches enjoyed among themselves, femmes were more likely to experience competition. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, “The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950s,” in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, ed. Laura Harris and Liz Crocker (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

the wall waiting for somebody to come over,”⁴⁷ but there were many femmes who defied this notion and actively pursued butches. Rosalie Regal, a working-class Jewish femme, was not the type to sit back and wait to be approached when she saw a butch that she liked. As she remembers fondly, “[I] picked up my first baby butch at the bar [and] took her home with me.” This young butch quickly fell in love with her, but Rosalie had already moved on to someone else. Spotting a handsome butch sitting on the couch at a party, Rosalie immediately approached her and proclaimed, “I want you... Come dance with me,” and, later, “I’m taking you home.” This act of femme assertiveness led to “the most passionate love affair” and a five-year relationship.⁴⁸

There were also those butches who lacked the confidence to simply walk up to a woman and express their attraction as ritual dictated. Miriam Wolfson always had to work up her nerve before she approached a woman, ideally receiving a signal that someone was interested in her beforehand. Her friend Charlotte, who was “a big butch, much butchier than me,” also took a different tack, asking Miriam to speak on her behalf to women she found attractive before going over herself.⁴⁹ Nervous or timid butches were not uncommon. According to one femme, “You know how it is with butches. Half the time they’re so shy they stand at the bar all night talking to other butches and you got to practically throw yourself at them to get them to dance with you.”⁵⁰ As with Rosalie Regal’s aggressiveness, deviating from prescribed butch-femme formulas did not necessarily cause rejection or loss of credibility within New York City’s lesbian

⁴⁷ Kovac, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Rosalie Regal interview transcript, 14 August 1999, Box 45, Joan E. Biren Papers, SSC.

⁴⁹ Wolfson, interview with author.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, untitled story, n.d., Fem subject file, LHA.

communities. It was understood that character varied among individuals, and many women adapted their form of butchness or femmeness to suit their personalities.

Alongside the recognition of some flexibility in roles, most lesbians were committed to the gendered complementarity of butch-femme and believed that this was the structure that relationships should take. Romance or sexual encounters between two butches ranged from being merely puzzling to extremely taboo, and femme-femme relationships were just considered silly.⁵¹ While it was acceptable in Pauline Ferrara's white community for two butches or two femmes to dance together as long as they did so as friends, if two butches actually became romantically involved Pauline assumed that one of them was really ki-ki – that is, had switched to the femme role in this particular relationship. It was simply unfathomable to her that two butches could form a functional couple.⁵² In Gloria Rivera's circle of black and Latina women, even two butches dancing together would indicate that "somebody doesn't know who they are... somebody's confused." Gloria maintains, "I guess I'll die being like that, 'cause you won't find me dancing with a butch."⁵³ Likewise, Ira Jeffries was humiliated at a Harlem house party when she accidentally asked another stud to dance, confusing her for a femme because she was wearing makeup.⁵⁴

But despite cultural taboos against such behavior, many lesbians did pursue their attraction to "forbidden" partners. Sexual freedom was important to them; exploring and honoring their "deviant" desires is what led them to lesbian life in the first place. For

⁵¹ Merrill Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1983, 40; Bender and Due, "Coming Up Butch," 105; Rusty Brown, "Always Me," in *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians*, ed. Marcy Adelman (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 147. In some groups, proscriptions against butch-but and femme-femme couples operated as a lesbian incest taboo, always defining some women as off-limits and thus shrinking competition and increasing the potential for friendships and solidarity. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 298–9, 417. Kennedy and Davis attribute this idea to John D'Emilio.

⁵² Ferrara, interview with author.

⁵³ Rivera, interview with author.

⁵⁴ Ira L. Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor," *NYQ*, February 23, 1992, 43, Periodical Collection, LHA.

example, in Miriam Wolfson's white middle-class community it was almost unheard of for two butches to go together. She recalls one butch-butcht couple being the subject of much gossip and agreed that this duo was incomprehensible and odd. However, Miriam, who was always butch-identified, had an ongoing affair in the early-1950s with her friend May Brown whom she describes as "the butch of the century." May was a good bit older, her popularity and reputation in the Village preceding her, and Miriam was attracted and made a move. Although May was "the butchest," she responded favorably to Miriam's advances and even submitted to her sexually. Miriam describes this relationship as an aberration, a mere blip in a lifetime of femme partners while trying to work out her "daddy issues" by sleeping with a masculine woman. Interestingly, this experience did not compromise her butch identity or May's, or even disrupt her continuing belief in the strangeness of deviating from butch-femme's logic. Miriam simply situates this relationship in the context of her desires at the time, shrugging off the cultural rules that might have prevented it.⁵⁵ Her experience with May demonstrates the ways that lesbians chose to explore their sexuality both within and beyond the dictates of butch-femme.

Moreover, the category of *ki-ki* demonstrates both the dominance of butch-femme as an organizational system and its potential for flexibility. Some women deemed *ki-kis* or *sooners* (a term sometimes used in African American communities) did not subscribe to butch-femme categories at all, but many participated in it by shifting their role based on their current love interest. Although they did not feel particularly wedded to a femme or butch identity or sexual style, *ki-kis* often formed relationships with avowed butches

⁵⁵ Wolfson, interview with author. Some lesbians think that butch-butcht relationships or sexual interest was more common than generally believed. "Butch-Femme Panel" (panel discussion at the Sex and the State History Conference, Toronto, July 1985), butch-fem subject file #02830, LHA.

and femmes in which community standards of gendered complementarity still applied.⁵⁶

Thus, ki-kis were able to negotiate their attraction to different lesbian types while upholding butch-femme norms.⁵⁷

The possibility of fluidity notwithstanding, this was a gendered “world of ritual display,” and lesbians incorporated a certain amount of performance into their flirtation.⁵⁸

Recalling a gay club in Harlem, African American butch Ira Jeffries remembers “feeding the jukebox and watching everyone perform... that’s right perform, because that’s what we were, performers! Trying to outdo each other, out-dress, out-laugh, out-drink, and out-love each other.”⁵⁹ Femmes and butches put a great deal of care into their

appearances, and enjoyed the attention they received by putting themselves on display.

As one African American femme describes her early years: “I would come prancing into the club in my high heels... and all those butches would be vying for my attention, calling my name, ordering me drinks, crowding around me, touching my a—, uh, my personal anatomy, you know what I mean.”⁶⁰ Since gendered behaviors structured lesbian interactions, a bit of posturing was often necessary to both attract other women and express one’s own desire.

Merril Mushroom’s “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950s Butch-Style in the Bar” is an exercise in the performative aspects of butch-femme courtship, particularly her description of ritual three: “the playing of the jukebox.” The purpose of visiting the jukebox, of course, is to choose a song to pique a femme’s interest in dancing, but it is

⁵⁶ This did not mean that ki-kis were equal parts butch and femme or capable of coupling successfully with anyone; their relationships depended on sexual chemistry like any other.

⁵⁷ This approach to relationships seems to have been more communally acceptable than those ki-kis who defied butch-femme altogether.

⁵⁸ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 26.

⁵⁹ Ira Jeffries, Folder “Clotel (A Love Story) – Original Notes,” Box 1, “Biography, Writing – Play scripts,” Ira L. Jeffries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter SCRBC).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

also to give the femme an opportunity to observe the butch in all her glory. Mushroom instructs her reader, “Be sure to pass her table on the way to the jukebox, no matter how devious a route you may have to fabricate.” Upon reaching the jukebox, she should pose in “as butch a position as possible.” To be sure she achieves the desired effect, she should “experiment at home with jukebox poses, and get a friend to tell you what angle you look best in against the light.” Despite this calculated effort, the butch should look “extra casual” when painstakingly deliberating her song choice. By the end of this elaborate process, the butch should know whether the femme is keen to dance with her.⁶¹

Although Mushroom’s descriptions of these rituals are obviously exaggerated, wryly revealing her delight in hyperbole, they also reflect the structure of postwar courtship etiquette. To reaffirm traditional gender roles after the unrest of war, masculinity and femininity defined one another through sharp contrasts and highly stylized romantic rituals, which were incorporated into butch-femme codes of conduct. Many butches enjoyed these performances of chivalry for their femme dates. According to Pauline Ferrara,

[It] brought out the best in me... [I] wanted to take care of my partner, do things for her, loved shopping for her. Get special gifts to see her eyes light up, you know, be romantic, bring home flowers to her. Sometimes make a dinner. [J]ust show her everything humanly possible... It's what makes me feel good inside. It makes me feel ten feet tall and I'm only five-foot-four.⁶²

Butches like Pauline delighted in opening doors, lighting cigarettes, pulling out chairs, leading on the dance floor, and walking curbside to prevent unwanted splashing or debris from the road just as men did for women. Likewise, butches were expected to pay for their dates and if a femme picked up the tab it was considered “dutch.” While femmes

⁶¹ Mushroom, “How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950s Butch-Style in the Bar,” 214–5.

⁶² Ferrara, interview with author.

welcomed being “wined and dined,” this could be an impediment for butches who could not afford to treat.⁶³ Within this gendered arrangement, a heterosexual woman who violated these customs was criticized for effectively usurping her potential date’s masculinity, though straight men and women also went “dutch” periodically.⁶⁴ Still, by adapting this system of courtship for their own queer purposes, butches subverted dominant cultural scripts and challenged men’s monopoly on masculine styles of romantic interaction.

Lesbians both manipulated and participated in mainstream romantic culture in other ways, as well, disrupting “the production of compulsory, coupled heterosexuality” of the mid-century United States.⁶⁵ In the process, they infused popular leisure spaces with queerness. Young femmes and butches got to know each other after school over sodas and hot dogs, took walks around their neighborhood inconspicuously holding hands inside their pockets, and visited local areas where teenagers were known to “neck.” Without access to bars (or fake IDs), they went to the movies, took pictures in the photo booths in Times Square, rode the ferris wheel at Coney Island, or simply traversed the city together on the bus or subway.⁶⁶ As with other teenagers, automobiles not only enabled greater mobility but also a level of privacy and intimacy that young lesbians welcomed.⁶⁷

⁶³ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 98, 110–3; Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998), 151; Jerre Kalbas, interview with author, New York, NY, 11 January 2011; Pauline Ferrara, interview with author, Queens, NY, 16 December 2010; Merrill Mushroom, phone interview with author, 12 April 2011; Vázquez, interview with author; Rivera, interview with author; Virginia Jones, “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 1 of 3),” *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, 31 May 1980, MP3.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 58–9.

⁶⁵ Phil Hubbard, *Cities and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 138.

⁶⁶ Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 4–5; Ramos, *Compañeras*, 20; Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 99; W.D. interview with Lenn Keller; Vázquez, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author; Ira Jeffries, “Sugar’s Blues: A Memoir,” Folder “Personal – Memoir,” Box 1, “Biography, Writing – Play scripts,” Ira L. Jeffries Papers.

⁶⁷ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 294; Ferrara, interview with author.

Lesbians also hid in plain sight, recognizing that strolling arm in arm or otherwise expressing affection were considered normative aspects of female friendship. White working-class butch Jerre Kalbas had the brilliant idea to take her girlfriends to Grand Central Station on dates. Since they were both women, Jerre knew that even a passionate embrace would be inconspicuous amid the hustle and bustle of a busy train platform full of people saying their goodbyes.⁶⁸ Although men have historically been afforded greater mobility and access to public space, intimacy between them has been far less normalized than it has been for women. Thus, lesbians' femaleness may have limited their opportunities in many public and professional arenas, but it also created certain allowances for public expressions of intimacy, provided that their queerness not was legible.

For those couples that could not avoid detection due to a butch's masculine look, there were other options. Many butches chose to pass as men when out on dates. It was well known that being perceived as a heterosexual couple was simply safer than attempting to find a tolerant locale, as horror stories of straight men attacking recognizable butches circulated widely in lesbian communities.⁶⁹ In addition, while women in pants were generally turned away from straight dining establishments, there were restaurants known to cater to lesbians and gay men. Places in Greenwich Village like the Fedora and Aldo's were not exclusively gay restaurants but welcomed women wearing slacks, and lesbians felt comfortable there. As one woman remembers, "You could hold hands, sit close, and enjoy being treated like any other couple."⁷⁰ However,

⁶⁸ Penny Coleman, *Village Elders* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 70–1.

⁶⁹ Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke"; Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg, *Before Stonewall* (Before Stonewall Inc., 1984); Ferrara, interview with author.

⁷⁰ Marijane Meaker, *Higsmith: A Romance of the 1950's: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 12–3.

these downtown spaces were not immune to the larger racial injustices of postwar culture, and it is likely that patrons' whiteness contributed to their hospitable experiences. Indeed, in order to inconspicuously avoid negative attention, African American butch Jeanne Gray knew to always present a normative feminine demeanor when venturing below 96th Street, and preferred to socialize in her uptown neighborhood with other people of color.⁷¹

Like straight couples, lesbians exchanged gifts to convey their affection and commitment. Postwar courtship protocol dictated that young men give their girlfriends a visible token, such as a class ring or an ID bracelet, to publicly announce their relationship, and many lesbians took this to heart.⁷² While some couples maintained the dominant culture's gendered distinction and only the femme partner received a token, others chose mutual gift giving. Couples exchanged rings, bracelets, or pins engraved with their initials, the date they met or moved in together, or the title of their chosen song.⁷³ To commemorate being "each other's special person," white middle-class partners Jo and Cynthia visited a jeweler and bought the other a ring of her choosing. Wearing their rings, Jo felt "sort of like we were married."⁷⁴ In the absence of legal marriage between women, these tokens were potent symbols of love and devotion, even if the relationship did not last forever.

However, while same-sex marriage might seem to be a more contemporary occurrence, lesbians did have wedding ceremonies during the postwar era.⁷⁵ These were

⁷¹ Jeanne Gray, "Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 3 of 3)," *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, 31 May 1980, MP3.

⁷² Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 50.

⁷³ Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1958), 4–5.

⁷⁴ Jo Hiner, phone interview with author, 8 April 2011.

⁷⁵ This is not to say that same-sex marriage or even life-long monogamous relationships were important goals in postwar lesbian communities, as they would later become in LGBT rights movements.



Figure 3: Joint Wedding, mid-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

usually more private affairs, limited to friends from the queer community and held in someone's home or a gay bar or club. Sometimes gay clergy would even preside over these ceremonies. Femme brides wore white gowns and lace veils, while their butch partners donned suits or tuxedos, sometimes also in white. Lesbian bridesmaids dressed either in dresses or suits, depending on their identity.⁷⁶ At one 1956 wedding, half of the attendants were butches in tuxedos and half were drag queens in pink taffeta dresses.⁷⁷ Wedding ceremonies were particularly elaborate in the Women's House of Detention, where butch-femme couples comprised extensive networks of fictive kin that were central to inmates' social organization.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Jeffries, "Sugar's Blues: A Memoir"; The Mabel Hampton Tapes, Mabel Hampton Special Collection, LHA; Ferrara, interview with author.

⁷⁷ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 41.

⁷⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 55.



Figure 4: Wedding thank-you note, 1968
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

Some butch-femme relationships – whether commemorated with a ceremony, a ring, or simply a verbal declaration – lasted decades. African American working-class partners Mabel Hampton and Lillian Foster were together from the time they met in 1932 until Lillian's death in 1978.⁷⁹ Likewise, white working-class butch Blackie and her wife Helen had their wedding ceremony in 1956 and were married until Helen passed away in the 1980s.⁸⁰ White middle-class partners Edie Windsor and Thea Syper began their lives together in 1965 and remained “engaged” until they legally wed in Toronto in 2009.⁸¹ Other relationships, however, were more short-lived. As Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis have argued (and my research corroborates), most mid-century lesbians maintained a pattern of serial monogamy throughout their lives. This “alternate system of emotional bonding” differed from heterosexual standards that based romantic success on

⁷⁹ Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*, 43–4.

⁸⁰ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 41.

⁸¹ Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (Bless Bless Productions, 2009).

lifelong relationships with established familial roles. Embracing both serious and casual romantic opportunities, the significance of lesbian relationships was not dependent on the length of time a couple was together, but rather on the “quality of feeling – its depth, its intensity.” Moreover, serial monogamy prioritized love, romance and pleasure, as women “recognized different intensities and qualities of romantic love and accepted the probability that many more than one important love relationship might exist in a lifetime.” In this context, the ultimate goal of dating and courtship was not necessarily lifelong commitment as in heterosexual society (although lesbians were always looking for their next great love), but sexual and romantic exploration.⁸²

Sexuality was completely integrated into butch-femme’s culture of romance. Desire and erotic excitement permeated the spaces in which lesbians congregated, from bars and parties to public street corners and the beach at Riis Park. While urban nightlife was primarily “a marriage market” for heterosexual women, their participation ending as soon as they tied the knot, lesbians had different priorities for a night out.⁸³ Gay bars were primarily “pick-up places” full of single women “cruising” each other.⁸⁴ Small “postage-stamp dance floors” and cramped tables or booths facilitated close talking and intimate dancing, while bathroom stalls afforded some privacy for couples wanting to take their sexual escapade a bit farther.⁸⁵ In some bars, a femme going to the bathroom

⁸² Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 232–5, 245, 275–6, 280. In explicating this relationship structure, Kennedy and Davis explicitly challenge critiques of homosexuals as promiscuous and fickle, asserting instead that serial monogamy created a “tradition of support for personal strength and independence” among lesbians and reinforced the significance of queer community. Their argument places lesbians within their own cultural context rather than within heterosexual norms that would define multiple romantic and sexual relationships as undesirable.

⁸³ Hubbard, *Cities and Sexualities*, 137–8.

⁸⁴ Bar attendance generally decreased among women in relationships and increased if they became single again. Thus, lesbians maintained ongoing participation in urban nightlife and therefore had very different social lives from their straight peers.

⁸⁵ Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982), 180 (quote); Mushroom, interview with author; Kovac, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author.

alone was a signal for a butch to follow her and make a move.⁸⁶ Depending on the bar, management rarely interfered with patrons' behavior on the dance floor unless the police were rumored to stop by for a pay-off, but some bars did implement preventative measures to eliminate sex in the bathroom. Women who frequented the popular working-class bar the Sea Colony had to wait in line to use the restroom one at a time, and were even given an allotted amount of toilet paper.⁸⁷

While women cruised each other, sent over drinks, and leaned in close to light a cigarette, it was on the dance floor that sexual interest and even compatibility was really communicated. As in heterosexual culture, dancing "encouraged sensuality rather than sociability" and was a favorite activity in lesbian spaces.⁸⁸ Jukeboxes in bars offered old standards by Johnny Mathis, Frank Sinatra, Edith Piaf, and Gene Pitney, love songs that fostered closeness and romance. Women did ballroom dances, like the lindy hop, fox trot, cha-cha, and mambo, as well as the "fish" – an intimate, sensual style in which partners clung together and moved their bodies in rhythm. Some dances were cozier and slower than others, but they all required bodily contact and gave lesbians the opportunity to judge their partner's sexual receptivity, as well as convey their own. A fox trot or two-step often turned into a slow fish as women began feeling more erotic, and expressing this sort of sensuality indicated that a woman was interested in sex, a date, or both.⁸⁹ Sometimes the fish actually became sex, as younger kids with no place else to go or

⁸⁶ Marie Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of 'Theeology' in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women's Bar Culture and Community" (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 328.

⁸⁷ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 26–8; Mushroom, interview with author; Kovac, interview with author. While Joan Nestle has characterized this experience as emblematic of the queer oppression of her time, others viewed it as an irritating but understandable way for bars to maintain their businesses.

⁸⁸ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 292.

⁸⁹ Mushroom, "How to Engage in Courting Rituals 1950s Butch-Style in the Bar"; Merril Mushroom, "Bar Dykes: A One-Act Play in Pantomime and Dialogue," unpublished manuscript in author's possession, n.d.; Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 220; Wolfson, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author; Marino, interview with author.

women simply overcome with desire danced so intimately and purposefully that they had an orgasm right there on the dance floor.⁹⁰ One butch who went out to the bars with a sock stuffed in the crotch of her pants routinely had orgasms throughout the night this way.⁹¹

As this type of activity indicates, casual sex was commonplace in lesbian life. Unlike in straight society where non-marital sex could ruin a woman's reputation, sexual experimentation was the foundation of lesbian culture. Unconcerned about marriage and saving oneself for "the one," lesbians delighted in casual relationships as well as those that were more serious.⁹² When Merrill Mushroom was a young butch, she "ran around with a whole lot of women, a whole lot," enjoying the opportunity to "practice technique without being hampered by emotional involvement."⁹³ Likewise, Robbie Marino remembers of her early gay days, "At that time it was so new. It was like being in a candy shop and never having lollipops, [and] suddenly you get all the lollipops."⁹⁴ One-night stands were so predictable that Carole Damoci-Reed, who traveled to the Village each weekend from New Jersey, never bothered to make arrangements for lodging beforehand. She says, "There was always a girl I ended up staying with – I wasn't worried."⁹⁵

Those who lived alone or with gay roommates had the easiest time with one-night stands, as they could simply bring a woman back to their place. Others, particularly lesbians who lived with their parents, had several options. They could try sneaking a woman into their parents' home, as Irene Read sometimes did. This was risky, however, as Irene's mother walked in on them the next morning, leaving all three humiliated and

⁹⁰ Nestle, interview with author.

⁹¹ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 38.

⁹² Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 245.

⁹³ Mushroom, interview with author.

⁹⁴ Marino, interview with author.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion," 207–8.

her overnight guest hiding under the covers.⁹⁶ Miriam Wolfson knew to only bring girls home with her when her parents were out of town. She enjoyed these opportunities to have sex in her own bed, but thought twice about taking this chance when a woman once moaned so loudly that she feared her neighbors would hear through the open windows.⁹⁷

Another option, if they could afford it, was renting a hotel room, but the cheapest ones were usually dingy enough to inspire them to look elsewhere. Some lucky women learned about a buzzer on 14th Street marked “Amazons Ltd.” with a lady upstairs willing to rent rooms to lesbians by the night, or even by the hour.⁹⁸ Other couples took their sexual activity not only onto bar dance floors and bathrooms, but also cars, church pews, and public restrooms in parks or subway stations. One trick in restrooms was for one person to stand inside a paper bag to disguise that there were two people in one stall.⁹⁹ Some lesbians were so full of desire that they had sex quietly and secretly while sharing a bed with other friends, roommates, and even current lovers.¹⁰⁰ As these examples demonstrate, lesbians employed creative solutions when sexual territory was limited, strikingly determined to act on their desires despite the risks associated with both queer criminality and defying postwar ideologies of proper womanhood.

As lesbians experimented with sex, they learned more and more about butch-femme erotic dynamics and cultural standards. The dominant conception of this exchange was, as Latina butch Carmen Vázquez explains, “[That] the butch will initiate and the butch will be on top. And nobody ever complained about that.”¹⁰¹ Traditionally, butches were expected to take an assertive role and guide the sexual activity, while femmes

⁹⁶ Irene Read, phone interview with author, 31 May 2011.

⁹⁷ Wolfson, interview with author.

⁹⁸ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 111.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 110; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 249.

¹⁰⁰ Ferrara, interview with author; Jeffries, “Sugar’s Blues: A Memoir.”

¹⁰¹ Vázquez, interview with author.

enjoyed receptive sexual positioning as the focus of the butch's erotic attention – what Wolfson and her white middle-class group called to “lay back and fan.” Elaborating on this idiom, Miriam says, “Femmes usually didn’t do anything aggressive. They just laid back and fanned and you did anything you wanted to do to them sexually.”¹⁰² However, as public as lesbian sexuality could be, most intimate moments between women were private and butch-femme erotics manifested in a variety of ways behind closed doors. As femme Joan Nestle asserts, “When one moved beyond the opening gambits, a whole range of sexuality was possible.”¹⁰³ Thus it is important to explore both the more standardized tropes of butch-femme sexuality as well as the range of possibilities that resulted from lesbian flexibility and creativity.

Many lesbians describe butch-femme sexuality as essentially an exchange of power.¹⁰⁴ Language is important here, as many scholars have contested the use of the terms “active” and “passive” to describe butch and femme sexual positioning, respectively, most often challenging the conceptualization of femme sexuality as submissive, weak, and dominated by the butch. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, “So impoverished is the language of sexual power, especially the loss of sexual power, that it can only be translated into an active/passive dichotomy, where passivity is always stigmatized.” She suggests that using “receptivity” instead of “passivity” can mitigate the negative connotations associated with femme sexuality.¹⁰⁵ Words like “responsive” and

¹⁰² Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁰³ Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” 96.

¹⁰⁴ For examples, see Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism, A Conversation toward Ending Them,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 243–253; Esther Newton, “The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary (with Shirley Walton, 1984),” in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 167–175; JoAnn Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny, and Other Rhythms*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Co., 1990).

¹⁰⁵ Ann Cvetkovich, “Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities,” in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 125–6, 132.

“reactive” can have the same effect.¹⁰⁶ Butch Robbie Marino, who once slept with a femme so undemonstrative that Robbie thought she had fallen asleep, explains that as the receptive partner, a woman’s “*response* has to be assertive... That’s a style of assertiveness. It looks like passivity but it’s not.”¹⁰⁷

Femme scholar Amber Hollibaugh agrees that while “it’s hard to talk about things like giving up power without it sounding passive,” femme sexuality is about *actively* relinquishing control to a butch partner in order to fulfill both of their desires. She says, “I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting... 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.”¹⁰⁸ Likewise, JoAnn Loulan explains, “I can sexually abandon myself to a butch lesbian. I can acknowledge a willingness to give myself up, to allow for a strength different from mine.”¹⁰⁹ Some femmes challenge the stigmatization of sexual passivity altogether, and claim it as a perfectly valid erotic preference that both they and their butch partners enjoy.¹¹⁰

However, many femmes do not consider sexual receptivity as a means of surrendering control, but instead experience “being fucked” as a powerful way to demand pleasure and assert their own desire.¹¹¹ Claiming “active receptivity,” they emphasize “responsiveness as a physical *activity*,” arguing that engaging with their lover and communicating “their active and eager desire to be fucked” constitutes its own form of

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 379.

¹⁰⁷ Marino, interview with author, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” 246.

¹⁰⁹ Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 124.

¹¹⁰ Victoria Goodwin Baker, “Untitled,” butch-fem subject file #02860, LHA; Heather Findlay, “Fishes in A Pond: An Interview with Jewelle Gomez,” in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, 145–159.

¹¹¹ Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, “An Introduction to Sustaining Femme Gender,” in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, 4.

labor and authority over the sexual encounter.¹¹² Although Joan Nestle loved to simply “lie back and enjoy being enjoyable,”¹¹³ she also contends, “I’ve never felt as powerful in my life... as when I was on my back. And taking in.”¹¹⁴

Others counter the inadequacy of the active/passive dichotomy with ideas of “assertive” and “accepting” energy, conjuring a complimentary yin-yang balance.¹¹⁵ As one femme explains, “My sexual energy connects up to a butch’s sexual energy to make a circle.”¹¹⁶ This opposition worked to “define the erotic ‘other’... help[ing] create an attraction through a sense of difference within the context of two women’s bodies.”¹¹⁷ Lesbians were enticed by women who were *not* exactly like themselves – women “whose hardness complimented [their] softness,” for example.¹¹⁸ Thus, butch-femme’s “two polar positions... fed each other symbiotically in a persistent cycle of desire.”¹¹⁹

Within this context, femme pleasure was paramount. It was central to both partners’ gratification and the ultimate goal of a sexual encounter.¹²⁰ Butches often express that their own arousal and pleasure was dependent on their partner’s. They found the confidence and control with which femmes entrusted them to be incredibly stimulating, frequently more so than physical sensation.¹²¹ No matter where a partner touched or kissed her, Carmen Vázquez felt it was “almost like a foreplay. And then

¹¹² Cvetkovich, “Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities,” 138–41 (emphasis in original).

¹¹³ Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Madeline Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 266.

¹¹⁴ Nestle, interview with author.

¹¹⁵ Goodwin Baker, “Untitled”; Jewelle Gomez, “Femme Erotic Independence,” in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, 105; Findlay, “Fishes in A Pond: An Interview with Jewelle Gomez.”

¹¹⁶ Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 124.

¹¹⁷ Moore, *Invisible Families*, 90.

¹¹⁸ Jones, “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community” (quote); Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 103, 126.

¹¹⁹ Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 72.

¹²⁰ In this way, according to Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, butch-femme sexuality “both imitates and transforms heterosexual patterns,” as the “‘masculine’ partner was associated with the giving of sexual pleasure, a service usually assumed to be ‘feminine.’ Conversely, the fem... demanded and received sexual pleasure...” Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 191–2.

¹²¹ Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” 246–7.

we're gonna do the thing that I really want to do.”¹²² Women's responses, reactions, gasps and moans incited not only a profound desire in butches, but also, as the poetic Cherrie Moraga describes, a sense of restorative power “strong enough to heal the deepest wound.”¹²³ This power could strongly inform butch identity. As one woman explains, “I am butch because I express desire for a woman in terms of how I can make her feel... I want to see *her* face change... I want to hear the pleasure I bring to *her* mouth. I need – and it's with no small amount of need – to be my lover's best lover.”¹²⁴

As this quote indicates, sexual expertise was extremely important to butches. Making a woman feel good, bringing her to orgasm, and leaving her satisfied were significant sources of butch pride. Some considered non-orgasmic femmes a welcome challenge – one that they often overcame.¹²⁵ While they sometimes mentored each other in sexual performance, butches more often gained their expertise through femme instruction.¹²⁶ After all, these were the women with whom they shared their erotic experiences, and a good amount of learning was done on the job, so to speak. Femmes showed or explained to butches what they liked to do in bed and how to do it, whether it was oral sex, manual penetration or stimulation, or using a dildo, sometimes even drawing pictures to illustrate their instructions.¹²⁷ And since femme pleasure reigned supreme, their coaching helped guide the sexual exchange. Butch Miriam Wolfson

¹²² Vázquez, interview with author.

¹²³ Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We're Rollin Around in Bed With,” 246–7.

¹²⁴ Sue Hyde, “A Celebration of Butch-Femme Identities in the Lesbian Community” (panel discussion at the New York Lesbian and Gay Community Service Center, New York, December 1990), butch-fem subject file #02860, LHA (emphasis in original).

¹²⁵ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 166.

¹²⁶ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 216; Kahn and Gozembka, “In and Around the Lighthouse: Working Class Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” 104; Natasha Kraus, “Desire Work, Performativity, and the Structuring of a Community: Butch/Fem Relations of the 1940s and 1950s,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 1 (1996): 38. While Leslie Feinberg emphasizes butch sexual mentorship in the autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*, I did not find this to be the case in my research on New York City's lesbian communities. *Stone Butch Blues* (Milford, CT: Firebrand Books, 1993).

¹²⁷ Madeline Davis, “Butch-Femme Panel.”

altered her technique depending on what the woman wanted, and this strategy paid off. She confirms, “They say I was a very good lover.”¹²⁸

While some women considered oral sex the point at which lesbians crossed the line from petting to sex (according to butch Jerre Kalbas, “the real part”), others reveled in manual stimulation.¹²⁹ Joan Nestle loved being penetrated by butches; wrapping her legs around them with their hand inside her “was just my giving of my whole body to her.”¹³⁰ Another young femme brought a dildo in a pink satin purse with her to the bars each Saturday night to ensure that her partner understood exactly what she wanted.¹³¹ Far from being passive receptors, femmes actively participated in orchestrating their sexual interactions, determined to express their desires and be satisfied. As Amber Hollibaugh asserts, “I want to come and I want certain things to happen. I am real defined about how I want to be fucked. I have never known a butch who was equally defined...”¹³² This could put butches in a precarious situation. Despite being labeled the “active” partner in lovemaking, there is “a special vulnerability in trying to please another sexually,” especially when the person a butch was trying to please was very clear about her expectations.¹³³ Moreover, a butch’s reputation as a good lover depended on femmes spreading word of their satisfaction, giving femmes a significant amount of sexual power.¹³⁴

Although femme pleasure dominated in sexual exchanges, it was not to the exclusion of butch fulfillment. Many butches report spontaneously reaching orgasm

¹²⁸ Wolfson, interview with author.

¹²⁹ Kalbas, interview with author.

¹³⁰ Nestle, interview with author.

¹³¹ Nestle, “The Femme Question,” 139. However, many women report not having access to dildos in the postwar period, but experimenting with them later, and/or simply not feeling the need to use them.

¹³² Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 263.

¹³³ Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 100.

¹³⁴ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 209.

while making love to their partners, their pleasure “triggered primarily through psychological/emotional networks, not through physical sensations.”¹³⁵ Some also engaged in tribadism, what some lesbians called “dyking”— the practice of rubbing bodies together to create pleasurable friction. Others simply enjoyed sex without climaxing, reveling in the sensuality and eroticism of making love to a woman. Butches generally did not demand or expect their orgasms in the same way that femmes did, as they were not as central to the sexual activity or considered fundamental for the encounter to be deemed successful.¹³⁶

This sexual dynamic has its roots in the archetype of the stone butch – untouchable, impenetrable, and detached from her female body. As scholar Jack Halberstam notes, “The stone butch has the dubious distinction of being possibly the only sexual identity defined almost solely in terms of what practices she does *not* engage in,” strangely indicating the “nonperformative aspects” of sexuality.¹³⁷ Stone butches did not let their partners touch them sexually and often left their underwear and t-shirts on during sex to conceal their female bodies. According to Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, butch untouchability was a way that lesbians maintained the distinction between butch and femme, the major organizational structure of their culture. If both partners’ bodies were exposed, similarities might be revealed that would undermine butch-femme difference.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Kraus, “Desire Work, Performativity, and the Structuring of a Community,” 38 (quote); Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 205; Rivera, interview with author; Nestle, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author; Mushroom, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author.

¹³⁶ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 263; Cvetkovich, “Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities,” 135.

¹³⁷ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 123. See Halberstam’s Ch. 4 for a forceful critique of the way “stone butchness has been understood as a dysfunctional rejection of womanhood by a self-hating subject who cannot bear her embodiment.”

¹³⁸ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 208.

Some butches' desire to disconnect from their bodies also had to do with masculine gender identity, as this quote illustrates: "She doesn't want to feel her femaleness because she thinks of you as the 'real' woman and if she makes love to *you*, she doesn't have to feel her own body as the object of desire. She can be a kind of 'bodiless lover.'"¹³⁹ In addition, cultural constructions of gendered sexuality might influence lesbians' aversion to specific sexual acts and/or positioning. For example, the sexualized mythology of European colonization creates a gendered hierarchy of domination in Latina cultures, distinguishing between the (masculine/active) *chingón* and the (feminine/passive) *chingada* – literally, the fucker and the one who is fucked. So laden with demeaning connotations of subjugation, some Latina butches became a *chingón* to resist feeling like a *chingada*.¹⁴⁰

Butch untouchability became the standard in some postwar lesbian communities. In Buffalo, New Orleans, and Miami, for example, *butch* and *stone butch* were practically synonymous, and one's reputation and prestige in the community depended on maintaining untouchable status. If a butch "rolled over" or "flipped femme" (meaning, allowed their partners to touch them) and others found out, it was a humiliating experience that might destabilize her public standing and future relationships.¹⁴¹ One

¹³⁹ Hollibaugh and Moraga, "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With," 248.

¹⁴⁰ Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 125–6. For more on Moraga's theorization of Latina butch sexuality, see Ann Cvetkovich, "Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butchness as Emotional Style," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, 162; Katie Gilmartin, "'The Culture of Lesbianism': Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in the Life of a Chicana Lesbian," in *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Connections*, ed. Toni P. Lester (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 173; Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior," ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993): 267–9.

¹⁴¹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 209; Elly Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," in *The Persistent Desire*, 116; Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," 42; Mushroom, interview with author.

butch from Miami was so disgraced in this way that she did not let another woman touch her for fifteen years.¹⁴²

However, while some butches in New York City displayed aspects of stone sexuality, it did not have the same cultural imperative as it did in other places.¹⁴³ Merrill Mushroom felt far less pressure to remain untouchable once she moved from Miami to New York, and began to enjoy mutual lovemaking without the fear that it would compromise her butch standing.¹⁴⁴ Many butches had no qualms about accepting touch from their partners, sometimes surprising femmes by “laying back and fanning” once they got in bed.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, unlike in smaller cities where stone butchness was policed partly through public discussion, lesbians in New York City did not often speak about sex in communal spaces with their friends. These conversations were more likely to take place in an intimate setting between lovers.¹⁴⁶ When one woman did open up about her partner’s untouchability while out at the Hay Loft, a favorite Long Island bar, she learned that most of her friends had relationships which were more mutual, and quickly went off to find a partner that she could touch.¹⁴⁷

Butches who felt uncomfortable being touched or exposing their bodies during sex more often root this inclination in personal preference or self-esteem issues than community compulsion. For example, Miriam Wolfson felt so uneasy with nudity that she decided against joining the military during World War II because of the physical

¹⁴² Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe, eds., *The Original Coming Out Stories* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1989), 52; Mushroom, interview with author.

¹⁴³ Also, butches may not have been as strict as they led on in these other cities. Some admit to being touched in the context of long-term relationships at femmes’ insistence, versus during a one-night stand. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 204–5; Bulkin, “An Old Dyke’s Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden,” 117.

¹⁴⁴ Mushroom, interview with author.

¹⁴⁵ Marino, interview with author; Kovac, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁴⁶ Wolfson, interview with author; Rivera, interview with author; Kalbas, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author.

¹⁴⁷ Read, interview with author.

examination. During sex, she either kept her pajamas on or made sure the room was dark enough to prevent her lovers from seeing her, and it took a lot of time and trust for her to feel comfortable enough to let a partner touch her. She says, “I never considered myself stone, really. I just knew that I was shy and I didn't want anyone to just see my body.”¹⁴⁸ Others, like Gloria Rivera and Sandy Kern, got tremendous pleasure out of making love to femmes, but simply did not want them to return the favor. For Gloria, that touch was “like pouring cold water over me,” while Sandy “felt like [a femme] was trying to take away [her] butchness” if she reached for her.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps their discomfort had more to do with erotic preference – the desire for control over the sexual exchange – than with cultural rules about butch sexuality.¹⁵⁰

Some butches with stone tendencies gradually relaxed their restrictions on touching in the context of long-term relationships. Femmes were satisfied being the center of attention, but some longed to make love to their partners once in awhile, and pushed for more access to their bodies. In her first relationship, Latina femme Jessica Lopez was glad that she “got touched good” but felt frustrated with “one-way sex.” She says, “I came to the realization as a lesbian I didn’t know how to make love to a woman, so that's kind of ridiculous,” and refused to accept butch untouchability with her future lovers.¹⁵¹ Femmes knew that it could take a lot of time and patience to “melt the stone.” White working-class butch Jerre Kalbas initially felt that it was difficult to accept “the female making love back to me” and quickly put a stop to her lovers’ efforts to touch her.

¹⁴⁸ Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁴⁹ Rivera, interview with author; Coleman, *Village Elders*, 40.

¹⁵⁰ In discussing this aspect of sexual preference, Esther Newton suggests using the terms “top” and “bottom” as opposed to the inaccurate “active” and “passive,” explaining that as a butch top she wants to “start, orchestrate and complete the sexual event,” and arguing that we “need to describe interactions, not physical activities.” Newton, “The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary (with Shirley Walton, 1984),” 169–71.

¹⁵¹ Lopez, interview with author.

Over time and with specific partners, however, she became more comfortable with reciprocal sex, although she remained more open to manual stimulation than oral – a sexual act which strongly challenged her conceptualization of butchness.¹⁵²

Femmes also devised creative sexual strategies that respected and incorporated their partners' masculine identities. Instead of touching a butch as they themselves enjoyed being touched, they might avoid direct genital contact and encourage tribadism to bring them to orgasm.¹⁵³ One femme remembers learning how to use her hipbone this way when making love to butches.¹⁵⁴ Butch bodies could have different sexual responses than femmes' and some preferred women to caress their backs or necks to their breasts or vaginas. Experimenting with anal play and even penetration might not feel as threatening as vaginal stimulation to a butch.¹⁵⁵ In addition, femmes sometimes engaged in "male fantasies" with their butches. This involved "giving service rather than taking control" and regarding a butch's body as if it were a man's (or *not* a woman's) – treating her clitoris as if it were a penis, "as something capable of entry," or her hand and fingers as an extension of her body, "as having sexual abilities beyond those of a hand."¹⁵⁶ If performing oral sex on a butch, femmes might avoid vaginal penetration and "almost treat the clitoris like the end of a penis... lick[ing] it with an up-and-down motion rather than a circular one."¹⁵⁷ Besides being pleasurable, exploring this kind of play and seeing femmes enjoying their bodies could help butches to reconcile their masculine identities

¹⁵² Kalbas, interview with author. In our interview, Jerre laughingly pointed out the irony of linking butchness with discomfort receiving oral sex, since butches are supposed to be "manly" and men love it.

¹⁵³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 124.

¹⁵⁴ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, "The Femme Tapes," 265.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 262; Madeline Davis, "Roles and Sex: Notes on Doing It - One Fem's Point of View," 1981, Unpublished papers, LHA.

¹⁵⁶ Davis, "Roles and Sex."

¹⁵⁷ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, "The Femme Tapes," 262.

with their femaleness.¹⁵⁸ In this way, some butches with stone tendencies were “touchable and sexually receptive, but not in the same way that their femmes were, in other words, not as objects of desire, not as ‘women.’”¹⁵⁹ And femmes displayed an impressive level of sexual creativity to understand and satisfy their butch lovers’ erotic and emotional needs.

The butch-femme sexual dynamic had distinct but overlapping significance for femmes and butches. It enabled both of them to accept their femaleness, their womanhood, and their bodies in different ways. As mentioned previously, a femme’s delight in a butch’s body could help resolve the disconnect she might feel as a masculine woman. After years of discomfort and awkwardness in her body, Esther Newton explains that only by seeing herself through her lovers’ eyes could she begin to feel attractive and desirable. Their lust and love allows her body to make sense.¹⁶⁰ Further, the ability to please a femme could mollify feelings of inadequacy or deviancy that could accompany queer difference. As Sue Hyde expresses:

I need to know from her that the failure I experienced at adolescence, that moment of horror when I realized I could never be a man and in this culture I would never quite be a woman either, can be transformed and transcended through her profound pleasure and my pleasure in hers.¹⁶¹

Conversely, a butch’s delight in a femme’s body empowered women to accept the things about themselves that deviated from postwar constructions of beauty and appropriate womanhood. Madeline Davis knew that the men she dated enjoyed sex with her, but their reactions to her never quelled her insecurities about her body and looks. She

¹⁵⁸ Lily Burana, “Conversation with a Gentleman Butch: An Interview with Jeanne Cordova,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, 116.

¹⁵⁹ Robin Maltz, “Real Butch: The Performance/Performativity of Male Impersonation, Drag Kings, Passing as Male, and Stone Butch Realness,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 3 (1998): 275.

¹⁶⁰ Esther Newton, “My Butch Career: A Memoir (1996),” in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 208.

¹⁶¹ Hyde, “A Celebration of Butch-Femme Identities in the Lesbian Community.”

felt entirely different when she slept with a butch: “Here was a woman who, when she touched me, trembled, and god – the world opened up.”¹⁶² Butches’ unrestrained joy in “big-hipped, wide-assed women’s bodies” enabled femmes to appreciate their womanness.¹⁶³ Joan Nestle had always been fiercely independent and self-sufficient, but butches gave her something she could not give herself – the power to feel beautiful. Gratefully, she says, “That’s something that I’ll spend a lifetime... saying thank you for.”¹⁶⁴ In addition, butches’ great pleasure in satisfying their lovers could work to assuage the ambiguity that some femmes felt toward being sexual and expressing desire as women in postwar America. Simply put, “It is a shocking thing to be unequivocally wanted for your femaleness in this culture. That’s why femmes love their butches so much.”¹⁶⁵

As this chapter demonstrates, femme and butch lesbians prioritized their sexuality at a time when women’s priorities were expected to fit within the boundaries of marriage and motherhood. Eroticism permeated the culture they built, as they both subverted and employed dominant cultural paradigms of gendered romance to construct queer relationships. Lesbians took diverse approaches to butch-femme sexuality, demonstrating remarkable creativity in both constructing and bending the gendered rules in their determination to explore and act on their desires. In doing so, they displayed courage and agency that defied cultural standards of what a postwar woman should be, fiercely committed to honoring their craving for that touch.

¹⁶² Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 262.

¹⁶³ Nestle, “The Femme Question,” 142.

¹⁶⁴ Nestle, “Butch-Femme Panel.”

¹⁶⁵ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 267.

CHAPTER 4
Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Styling, (In)Visibility, and the Accuracy of Visual Cues



Figure 5: Sunny and Doris, 1956
 Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Butch-femme lesbianism is often characterized by visual cues. This image of Sunny and Doris is typical: a femme looking glamorous in a dress, makeup and heels, and a dapper butch sporting a man's suit and tie and a slick D.A. haircut with a pompadour and one casual curl in front. The butch's masculine appearance and the sharp gendered contrast between them make their queerness highly visible, a standard feature in images of postwar butch-femme in both the public and scholarly imagination. Indeed, lesbian visibility at midcentury was almost entirely dependent on gender transgressions in the form of "mannishness," demarcating butches as the public face of lesbianism – a role that scholars like Joan Nestle, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, and Donna Penn

argue had powerful political implications. Butches not only challenged normative conceptions of gender and claimed lesbian social space, they also defiantly announced their queerness through their looks, thereby expressing women's sexual autonomy and acting as vehicles for introducing others to gay life. Alongside them, femmes, while generally undetectable on their own, proclaimed their own lesbianism and contributed to these modes of visual resistance.¹

In these analyses, femmes are incorporated into lesbian rebellion by association with butches – their willingness to stand beside them and be read as queer, and to provide love and support for their partners who took the brunt of homophobic abuse because of their gender expression. Butch visibility remains the foundation of butch-femme resistance, and legible butch masculinity remains an idealized icon of subversive lesbian power. But what if butches in postwar America were not as visible as commonly believed?

Consider Miriam Wolfson and May Brown, for example (Figure 6), both butches in New York City in the 1950s. Miriam sees herself as a shy but aggressive butch who has always felt masculine, and according to her, her friend May Brown was “the butch of the century.”² Photographs like the one below demonstrate the visual disconnect between what one might expect butchness to look like and what it *did* look like for some

¹ Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” in *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 92–102; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Donna Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America,” in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106–124. For a discussion of “swish,” or gay male effeminacy, as a signifier for homosexual men in postwar America, see Craig M. Loftin, “Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945–1965,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 577–596.

² Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 1 July 2010.



**Figure 6: Miriam Wolfson and May Brown, “The Butch of the Century,” circa 1951
Courtesy of Miriam Wolfson’s Personal Photography Collection**

women during this era. While the classic suit-and-tie and jeans-and-t-shirt looks were certainly employed, New York City’s butches also conveyed their identities through alternate means that included clandestine codes and plays on women’s fashions. In doing so, they offered a range of ways of interpreting butchness in their everyday lives that did not rely on the men’s clothing and styling that made lesbians visible in larger American culture. If butches were not brazenly flaunting their queerness, what happens to arguments that root butch-femme’s radical potential in mannish visibility?

This chapter explores the interesting irony of masculine style as a signifier for lesbianism during the postwar era. Queer legibility could enable entrance into lesbian communities and attract one’s next lover as well as provoke hostility, violence, and

arrest. Thus, appearance carried tremendous significance, and butches and femmes employed diverse strategies to both convey and conceal their queerness. By destabilizing gendered visual cues, this chapter complicates prevailing images of butch-femme appearance and resistance and demonstrates how women negotiated their looks as they developed lesbian subjectivity and culture in a hostile environment.

By the postwar period, the “mannish lesbian” was already a distinct cultural type disseminated for decades by sexology and scandal.³ After the war, popular and “expert” literature became increasingly obsessed with lesbians’ gender deviance as anxieties mounted about women’s wartime emancipation and perceived masculinization. Journalists, doctors, and popular writers further cemented the conceptual link between lesbians and masculinity, defining their pathology, threat, and queerness in terms of gender transgressions.⁴ In this way, the dominant symbol of postwar lesbianism resided in legible butch bodies.

New York’s long-standing reputation for harboring queers was due in large part to visible displays of gender nonconformity in the city. Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s boasted floor shows and theater reviews featuring “bulldykin’ women” – blues singers like Gladys Bentley and Ma Rainey who performed in tuxedos and alluded to “mannish women” and “sissy men” in their lyrics.⁵ In the 1940s, drag shows in Greenwich Village

³ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–3; Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 557–575; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 115–6, 123–4.

⁴ Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America.”

⁵ Hazel V. Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 238–249; Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: NAL Books, 1989); James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 155–6.

featured white butch “crooners” in tuxes and tails who made their female fans swoon.⁶ Starting in 1945, the annual Fun Makers Ball in Harlem offered a public display of drag queen glamour, drawing thousands of spectators to see men in “splendiferous gowns of sequins, feathers, taffeta and organdy trailing behind them...”⁷ Those who picked up a copy of the best-selling journalistic exposé *New York: Confidential!* learned that Greenwich Village was home to “variants [who] are so mixed up the habitués don’t know whether to use the boys’ room or the other one.” Firmly locating queerness in gender deviance, New Yorkers knew how to spot a homosexual. All they had to do was look for “the long-haired men and the short-haired women.”⁸

Within the context of postwar fashion, the mannish lesbian should have been easily discernable. Attire was strictly gendered and aesthetic standards of femininity and masculinity were clearly defined.⁹ Although World War II had ushered in the acceptance of pants for women, this was usually relegated to casual, daytime attire, typically reserved for time at home, or at play for kids and teens. It was not until the late 1960s that slacks began to lose their controversial status in restaurants, schools, and professional workplaces, and even then the transition was slow outside large urban areas.¹⁰ And while certain masculine styles were incorporated into women’s fashion – such as angular, tailored suit jackets for the career woman worn with button-down oxford shirts, also

⁶ Lisa E. Davis, “The Butch as Drag Artiste: Greenwich Village in the Roaring Forties,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 45–6.

⁷ Ira L. Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor,” *NYQ*, February 23, 1992, Periodical Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (quote; hereafter LHA); Brett Beemyn, “A Queer Capital: Race, Class, Gender, and the Changing Social Landscape of Washington’s Gay Communities, 1940-1955,” in *Creating a Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 192–3. While favorable press coverage of the Fun Makers Ball suggests that drag queens may have been “generally accepted as a part of the cultural landscape within urban African America,” Leisa Meyer points out that female gender inversion was considered to be a far more dangerous threat. Leisa D. Meyer, “‘Strange Love’: Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture During the 1950s,” *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 643–7.

⁸ Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *New York: Confidential!* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1948), 72, 74.

⁹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 178–9.

¹⁰ Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Louise Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress in the United States* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 2007), Ch. 5–7.

known as “man-tailored” – there were still cultural taboos against blatant appropriation of men’s apparel. If a woman chose to wear “mannish” styles, her femininity should still be clearly legible.¹¹ Further, simple design elements, such as the placement of buttons or a zipper, distinguished male from female attire. Wearing “fly-front” pants or a shirt that buttoned on the “wrong” side was enough for a woman to be labeled a cross-dresser.¹²

Butches certainly did flout these gendered restrictions and style themselves in ways that alerted the public to their queerness. Yet they were well aware of the risks that went along with this decision, and many thus employed alternate, less visible strategies for moving through the world while remaining connected to their butch identities. Scholars have generally associated more discreet forms of butchness with middle-class and upwardly mobile or aspiring women, generally white professionals with much to lose if exposed.¹³ However, across class and race many women felt the need to conform to conceptions of normative femininity in certain arenas of their lives in order to go unnoticed. Whether it was at work, school, or family and religious gatherings, butches in New York City found ways to *use* women’s clothing and styling to be inconspicuous while expressing their butch identities to those in the know.

Postwar women’s styles encompassed two distinct silhouettes: full skirts with a snug waistline, like the stereotypical 1950s poodle skirt, and narrower “pencil slim” skirts, like the ones that Miriam Wolfson and May Brown chose (Figure 6).¹⁴ Although equally socially acceptable, when dressing for work or school, butches of this era favored

¹¹ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 33–4, 42.

¹² Marie Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of ‘Theeology’ in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women’s Bar Culture and Community” (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 146; Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 49–50.

¹³ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 115, 133, 137; Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 206.

¹⁴ Farrell-Beck and Parsons, *Twentieth Century Dress in the United States*, 148.

skirts of the slimmer variety for a more tailored and less feminine look. Understanding that women wearing slacks was simply not appropriate in certain circumstances, they made a clear distinction between skirts and dresses, preferring to wear skirts since they could be paired with a more unisex style of top, like man-tailored collared shirts. If forced to concede to certain aspects of feminine style, the attitude seemed to be, “Well, at least I wasn’t wearing a dress.”

Some women and girls who were more comfortable after changing into jeans or slacks once they got home nonetheless adopted skirts as their daytime butch uniform. For example, Puerto Rican butch Gloria Rivera, who was “not the type to keep a dress on,” asked her mother to make her wrap-around skirts in different colors. Paired with a man-tailored shirt, Gloria could safely attend her junior high school in the Bronx in the early-1960s, expressing her butchness without attracting much attention. She actually loved this look, including the skirt. For her, wrap-around skirts did not fall into the same category as dresses and other kinds of “pretty stuff” that clashed with her butch persona. Moreover, since Gloria knew other girls at school who were like her and wore wrap-around skirts, she viewed this style as “the tell sign of who’s who.”¹⁵

Similarly, among Bay Ridge High School’s mostly white working-class population, young butches developed a signature style that allowed them to stay within the school’s gendered guidelines. There, instead of wrap-arounds, they wore long, pleated skirts with their man-tailored shirts, sometimes with a vest or coat on top. While other students, both femme lesbians and straight girls, chose dresses or shorter skirts with knee-high socks, these butch-identified teenagers used the girls’ fashions at their disposal to create a look that both expressed their different relationships to gender and remained

¹⁵ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011.

normative enough to fly under the radar.¹⁶ As at Gloria Rivera's school, young butches established trends that became internal emblems of queerness and enabled covert lesbian bonding.

Older women in the working world also found ways of interpreting their butchness while dressing feminine enough to be appropriate for their jobs. Structured clothes remained popular for women from the 1940s through the early 1960s, and many butches found crisp, tailored women's suits with slim skirts to be acceptable alternatives to the slacks they preferred in their free time. Miriam Wolfson, who worked as a bookkeeper, proudly explained that, although she never wore dresses after her mother



Figure 7: Miriam Wolfson and Butch the Dog, mid-1950s
Courtesy of Miriam Wolfson's Personal Photography Collection

¹⁶ Jessica Lopez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 18 January 2011.

stopped forcing her to do so as a child, she often wore suits (Figure 7). Suits with sharp, structured lines created a tailored, smart look that was both appealing and suitable for her white-collar career.¹⁷ Likewise, Ira Jeffries, a working-class African American butch from Harlem, was ecstatic to buy a women's suit when she got her first summer job. Her mother had previously prevented her from wearing the structured clothing that she preferred, but when given the opportunity to buy her own she went straight for "man-tailored" attire. Linking this fashion decision with her butchness, she recalls, "I was never very feminine, I loved wearing man-tailored clothing because it was the way in which I chose to express myself, and my women loved it!"¹⁸ Like their younger counterparts, Miriam and Ira utilized normative women's fashions to embody their butch identities without visually identifying themselves as lesbians to the world at large.

Other women chose to express feelings of butchness by avoiding certain aspects of feminine attire. They might concede to donning skirts but refuse to wear makeup, or fill their pockets with their everyday necessities instead of using a purse.¹⁹ Jerre Kalbas, a white working-class butch from the South Bronx, felt that she had to be discreet for work and so wore lipstick and "pinchy earrings," but preferred to carry her cigarettes and wallet in a paper bag or manila envelope.²⁰ Many also relied on covert symbols to express their queerness to those in the know, such as wearing a handkerchief a certain way or the ubiquitous butch pinky ring.²¹

¹⁷ Wolfson, interview with author.

¹⁸ Ira Jeffries, "Sugar's Blues: A Memoir, Part I," Folder "Personal – Memoir," Box 1, "Biography, Writing – Play scripts," Ira L. Jeffries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter SCRBC).

¹⁹ Wolfson, interview with author; Robbie Marino, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 December 2010; Marijane Meaker, *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950's: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 9.

²⁰ Jerre Kalbas, interview with author, New York, NY, 11 January 2011.

²¹ Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998), 146; Daniel Rivers, "Queer Family Stories: Learning from Oral Histories with Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers from the Pre-Stonewall Era," in *Bodies of*



Figure 8: Pauline Ferrara (on the right in both photos) with butch friends, early-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

Of course, conforming to feminine fashion standards could be uncomfortable and even painful and destructive for some butches. Carmen Vázquez, a working-class Puerto Rican woman from Harlem, felt “humiliated and trapped” for years by her Catholic school uniform, which she considered “girl drag.” In her late-teens, after her girlfriend wanted them both to attempt to be straight, Carmen tried dating boys and dressing in a more womanly way, but found underwire bras too uncomfortable, this emblem of femininity literally cutting into her skin.²² Similarly, Pauline Ferrara (Figure 8), a white working-class butch who hailed from Queens, could not wait to get home from school everyday so she could change into jeans and a sweatshirt. Although she “played the game” and dressed in women’s clothing when she felt she had to throughout her life, she

Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60; Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” 97.

²² Carmen Vázquez, “Voice and Visibility: Looking Up at the Stars,” 08S-03 Box 1, “Conference” folder, Carmen Vázquez Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC); Carmen Vázquez, interview with author, Brooklyn NY, 10 August 2011.

always felt that her “body didn’t fit,” and that she ended up looking like a guy in drag.²³

Another young butch became a teenage alcoholic under the strain of trying to appear normal, and did not quit drinking until she later came out as butch and began to dress as such.²⁴

However, other butches report less severe reactions to their experiences with feminine attire, and simply took it in stride as a fact of gay life. Although they did prefer to change into jeans or slacks in their free time, many butch-identified women understood the gendered expectations of their time and did not necessarily mind wearing skirts,



makeup, and even stockings and heels to work.

According to one woman, “playing straight at [her] job” didn’t really bother her, “because that was what you did” in those days.²⁵ Even Merrill Mushroom (Figure 9), who sometimes bound her breasts and passed as a man, was content to wear dresses and skirts to her job as a teacher because, simply put, “It was work. It was my job.”²⁶

Figure 9: Merrill Mushroom, “How the Butch Does It”
Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Then again, these butches’ attitudes toward feminine appearance may have become more indifferent in retrospect. While they say they did not mind dressing feminine for work and other aspects of their lives, they also did so out of a keen sense of

²³ Pauline Ferrara, interviews with author, 16 December 2010 & 16 February 2011.

²⁴ Debbie Bender and Linnea Due, “Coming Up Butch,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 101.

²⁵ Marino, interview with author.

²⁶ Merrill Mushroom, interview with author, 12 April 2011.

self-preservation. As any gender nonconformist in the postwar period knew, wearing clothing that did not correspond with your sex could easily become grounds for harassment, violence, and arrest. When Sandy Kern (Figure 10) met her lover one night in Prospect Park in Brooklyn wearing her standard butch uniform of dungarees, a sweatshirt and sneakers, a group of young men “pounced” on them, screaming and taunting them for being lesbians. One ripped the pages out of a book Sandy was carrying and followed her onto the bus. Luckily, he got off at a nearby stop and left her alone, but she was terrified and felt like “a hunted animal.” Her lover was “dressed as a woman... [not] obvious by a long shot,” and Sandy knew that her butch appearance is what gave them away.²⁷ Those who wore their butchness legibly ran the risk not only of being



Figure 10: Sandy Kern, 1950s
Courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives

denied service in restaurants, chased out of public restrooms, and avoided in the elevators of their own apartment buildings, but also of being stabbed for walking too close to a

²⁷ Joan Nestle, ed., “Sandy Kern,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 56–8.

baby carriage or pulled out of their cars and beaten at stoplights.²⁸ Living with this fear and knowing the risks all too well, it is no wonder that many butches chose to remain undetectable.

Since queerness was linked with visible gender transgressions in the public imagination, police disproportionately targeted masculine-appearing lesbians.²⁹ When Pauline Ferrara (Figure 8) was helping a friend push her broken-down car out of a Brooklyn parking lot, a group of cops surrounded them with their guns drawn, shoving them against a wall and aggressively frisking them. They were eventually let go, but standing there with a gun to her head, Pauline “thought for sure we were gonna be shot,” knowing that their only offense was their visible butchness.³⁰ Although Greenwich Village could feel like a safe place with its abundance of gay bars and Mafia protection, there was also a constant police presence that could shift from merely an annoyance to a violent and frightening incident at any moment. With no possibility for legal recourse, cops were known to sexually harass butches right on the street, claiming they were checking for drugs or the requisite three articles of women’s clothing. It did not matter if there were onlookers; having witnesses to a lesbian’s humiliation was part of the fun.³¹

The danger was often magnified for butches of color. Black and Latina lesbians were typically excluded from the protections that the mob offered white women in the Village, and people of color were disproportionately targeted by police harassment and violence regardless of their gender expression. Moreover, not only was black masculinity

²⁸ Joan Nestle, “Homophobia and Private Courage,” *Prejudice and Pride: The NYC Lesbian & Gay Community, WWII-Present, Photography Exhibit and Essays*, June 1988, History- All Decades- 20th Century subject file #06040, LHA; Ferrara, interview with author; Kalbas, interview with author.

²⁹ Elvia R. Arriola, “Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies: The Construction of Homosexuality before the 1969 Stonewall Riots,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 5 (1995-1996): 37.

³⁰ Pauline Ferrara, interview by Thomas Weber, 9 April 2009, Storycorps.

³¹ Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1955), 123; Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 192.

particularly associated with aggression and criminality to white America, racist ideology had historically imbued black women with deviant hypersexuality.³² Thus, masculine gender presentation both provided a racialized excuse for police to pursue black butches, and could cause alienation from segments of the African American community dedicated to distancing themselves from stereotypes of sexual deviance. In addition, some black men, due to their economic and political disenfranchisement, felt emasculated by butches who they perceived as threatening to one of their remaining masculine prerogatives: sexual prowess. While all people of color were subject to white racism and police harassment, hostility from within the African American community could be particularly painful for black butches.³³

With such brutal consequences for legible butchness, the decision to wear feminine attire can be considered a form of passing. There were certainly butches who passed as men in their daily lives in order to avoid violence and hostility as well as to gain work as cab drivers, mechanics, construction workers, and other jobs reserved for men.³⁴ But many more found it easier, preferable, or simply more promising to pass as straight women. Comparing her experience to gay men's, Gloria Rivera believes it was better for lesbians because women were able to wear things like wrap-around skirts and man-tailored shirts to express their butch identities, while remaining fairly concealed. On the other hand, "Guys couldn't wear feminine nothing, because it was a straight world."³⁵ Moreover, social norms dictated that two women could live together, stroll arm in arm

³² For more on these racialized sexual and gender ideologies, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 328–349.

³³ Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 83–7.

³⁴ It may also be possible to read transgender history there. This topic is taken up more fully in Chapter 5 in a discussion of butch subjectivity.

³⁵ Rivera, interview with author.

and be affectionate in public without arousing suspicion – provided that they did not fit the stereotype of queer masculinity.³⁶ While scholars Elizabeth Kennedy and Katie Gilmartin have argued that middle-class lesbians – as opposed to butches and femmes – employed discretion as a strategy to live without stigma in homophobic environments, many butches’ decisions about appearance demonstrate that they, too, took this approach.³⁷ By manipulating women’s fashions and interpreting their butchness broadly, they were able to navigate the straight world and sometimes avoid the harassment and persecution that other gender nonconformists faced. Queer visibility can be powerful, but the choice to remain less- or in-visible and evade violence and oppression is also a compelling strategy for survival and resistance.

This is not to say that these butches never let their hair down, so to speak.³⁸ There was often a dramatic difference in their appearance with the shift from day to night, work to play, and straight to gay spaces, as butches made calculated decisions about when and where it was safe to look queer. Those who wore skirts and lipstick during the day frequently changed into men’s slacks, ties or ascots, and suit jackets once the sun went down and they headed off to a party or their favorite bar. Gloria Rivera, who relished her wrap-around skirts for school, went “the whole nine yards” for dances with the girls from her softball league, sporting men’s pants, man-tailored shirts, jackets, and long thin ties,

³⁶ Donna Penn, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 365.

³⁷ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “‘But We Would Never Talk about It’: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928-1933,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 15–39; Katie Gilmartin, “‘We Weren’t Bar People’: Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1996): 1–51. In addition, Kennedy and Gilmartin argue that discretion was not only a tactic to avoid consequences of homophobia, but also rooted in middle-class sensibilities of privacy regarding sexuality in general.

³⁸ In a 1941 glossary of homosexual slang, *to let one’s hair down* is defined as: “To drop all restraint in displaying one’s homosexuality, or to admit to being a homosexual... to drop all pretense or finally to tell the truth...” Gershon Legman, “The Language of Homosexuality,” in *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*, by Dr. George Henry (New York and London: Hoeber, 1941), 1149–1179, quoted in Jonathan Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

making sure that everything was “color-matching.”³⁹ Carole Damoci-Reed, a white working-class butch who drove from her New Jersey home into Greenwich Village each Friday night, remembers, “I would put on a tie that I kept hanging over the rearview



Figure 11: Butches out on the town, early-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

mirror on my car and I would not come back until Monday!”⁴⁰ Other butches traveling into the city kept lockers at the bus station so they could change into their jackets and ties on their way to the bars.⁴¹ And the girls who attended Bay Ridge High and sported long, pleated skirts at school got all “butched out” in suits and ties for the bars on Friday nights, “dressed like men from head to toe.”⁴²

Since it was popular for women to have short hairstyles during this period, many butches were able to transform their looks simply by slicking their hair back into a D.A.,

³⁹ Rivera, interview with author.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 168.

⁴¹ Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 100; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 134–5.

⁴² Lopez, interview with author.



Figure 12: D.A. Hairstyles
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

the preferred butch style.⁴³ One teenager used stale beer from a hip flask to hastily “plaster [her] pageboy girl hair into a decent D.A.” before she went to the bar.⁴⁴ Others didn’t bother. Miriam Wolfson, for example, was complimented all her life on her gorgeous, reddish-gold hair and kept it long, deciding that her hair was the one thing about her that was not going to be butch.⁴⁵

As in Miriam’s case, some women who heightened their butch appearance for lesbian spaces still did not necessarily read as queer on sight. Lesbians made classed distinctions between butch looks that were more “tailored” and “professional” and those that were “severe.” Middle-class women often chose the former, embodying the Katharine Hepburn-look in wide-legged slacks instead of the men’s chinos or blue jeans that “severe” (and generally working-class) butches preferred. Wearing an ascot or scarf secured with a pin rather than a man’s tie was another way to differentiate the

⁴³ D.A. refers to “duck’s ass,” a popular hairstyle that butches adopted from the 1950s “greaser” image. The hair was slicked back into a point at the nape of the neck that resembled a duck’s tail.

⁴⁴ Judy Lederer, “A Letter,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 95–6.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, interview with author.

“professional” set.⁴⁶ These kinds of looks could project a butch image within lesbian spaces, but not be conspicuous enough to alert the public or the police.

Indeed, women were very aware that if their attire appeared too masculine they were in danger of being stopped by police and even arrested for violating what became known in lesbian vernacular as the “three-piece clothing law.” Sumptuary and masquerade laws – which prohibited impersonating the opposite sex and wearing disguises, respectively – were loosely interpreted to target gender-bending homosexuals. They mandated that every woman, lesbians included, wear at least three articles of women’s clothing.⁴⁷ Although Carmen Vázquez was “so ready to wear a tie” at age fifteen when she was introduced to gay life in underground Puerto Rican clubs, the group of older femmes who brought her forbid it, fearing the law and its consequences for their younger friend.⁴⁸ But butches found various ways to cope with this rule, endlessly discussing the gendered qualities of their outfits to be sure they were covered if the vice squad arrived.⁴⁹ “Fly-front” pants were a dead giveaway of men’s attire, and if they heard that the cops were coming butches might hurriedly turn their pants around so that the zipper was in the back, as was the custom for women’s slacks. Then they would be safe if the officers shone their flashlights on their crotches, as they sometimes did.⁵⁰ Often butches simply wore women’s socks, underwear and a bra for their requisite three articles

⁴⁶ Wolfson, interview with author; Marino, interview with author; Jo Hiner, phone interview with author, 8 April 2011. For more on how some middle-class lesbians actively distinguished themselves from butch “bar people,” see Gilmartin, “We Weren’t Bar People.”

⁴⁷ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, 1st ed (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 15–6; Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 64–5, 73; Arriola, “Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies,” 62.

⁴⁸ Vázquez, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 104; Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 553.

⁵⁰ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 49–50.

of clothing. One butch sewed lace onto her socks to ensure that if she was questioned she could immediately prove that at least her ankles were not cross-dressed.⁵¹

Still, the temporal and spatial boundaries that butches drew around their visibility, appearing straight at work or school and then trading their skirts for slacks for a night out in queer company, did not guarantee their safety. Traveling to and from known lesbian spaces could be the most dangerous part of the evening, as this is when women most often embodied the stereotype that heterosexuals learned about in pulp novels, “expert” opinion, and publications like *Life* magazine, sensationalized media that disseminated images of lesbians dressed as men.⁵² Moreover, queerness was not only detectable through legible butchness, but also through geographic markers.⁵³ Greenwich Village in particular stood out as a gay location in New Yorkers’ minds, and it was not uncommon for straight people to go there specifically to bully and attack lesbians. Women going from one bar to another, taking a stroll through Washington Square Park, or walking home at the end of the night were met with taunts of “lezzie,” “queer” or “dyke,” and threats to see “if the ‘lezzie’ can take it like a man.” Gangs of adolescents known as “chain boys” would rattle bicycle chains to intimidate women, and sometimes throw them at passersby.⁵⁴ If an incident turned violent, no one was going to come to their aid;

⁵¹ Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union: New & Selected Writings*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 64, 116.

⁵² For example, J. Mills, “Lesbians Try to Peddle Each Other,” *Life*, December 3, 1965; Frank Caprio, *Variations in Sexual Behavior* (New York: Citadel, 1955); Jess Stearn, *The Grapevine* (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Sara Harris, *Hellhole: The Shocking Story of the Inmates and Life in the New York City House of Detention for Women* (New York: Tower, 1967); Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker* (1962; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001); Vin Packer, *Spring Fire* (1952; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004); Lait and Mortimer, *New York: Confidential!*.

⁵³ Kelly Hankin, *Girls In The Back Room: Looking At The Lesbian Bar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 10.

⁵⁴ Nestle, “Sandy Kern,” 58; Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1958), 29; Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 130; Nestle, “Homophobia and Private Courage.”

lesbians had to protect themselves. Knowing this, many made sure to always carry a switchblade just in case.⁵⁵



**Figure 13: Pauline Ferrara (bottom left) and friends at Riis Park
Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection**

The beach at Riis Park in Queens was also a well-known locale for queer New Yorkers. Despite instances of straight visitors gawking and police patrolling the boardwalk, lesbians thoroughly enjoyed turning this public beach into a gay space on hot summer days. However, their queerness was visible more through public displays of affection than butch masculinity. While some butches avoided women's swimsuits altogether in shorts and a t-shirt, others felt comfortable in simple two-piece suits, distinguishing them from skimpier, more feminine bikinis (Figure 13).⁵⁶ Rather than visible gender transgressions as the impetus for homophobic confrontations as in the

⁵⁵ Harris, *Hellhole*, 223.

⁵⁶ Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love*, 79; Ferrara, interview with author.

Village, at Riis Park, it was women plainly expressing same-sex desire that more often prompted an attack. When a straight family saw Joan Nestle and her girlfriend kissing one evening when the beach was mostly empty, the father approached them and said, “You girls better stop that or I am not responsible for what my sons will do,” pointing out two large teenagers lurking nearby. Despite the nearly vacant beach, Joan realized, “our public kiss had earned for us the right to be beaten.”⁵⁷ No amount of women’s clothing could obscure this blatant a demonstration of lesbian sexuality.

As much as butches adapted their looks to fit feminine fashion standards when they felt they had to, they often seized opportunities to express their butchness in visibly masculine ways despite the risks. Dress is an integral component of conveying personal and social identities, and for young butches embodying this part of themselves could feel more significant than meeting their first lover, even.⁵⁸ As Lee Lynch articulates:

You know what I used to want more than anything? To be a smooth butch in a black denim jacket and black jeans and a light blue button down shirt sitting at the bar in the Sea Colony, checking out the women that came in. That’s all. At seventeen or so I couldn’t even see beyond that to really asking someone in the back room to dance or going out with a woman.⁵⁹

Similarly, clandestinely experimenting with her father’s clothing, young Sandy Kern was so enamored with her own masculine image that just looking at herself in the mirror brought her to orgasm. She continued this practice into adulthood when she changed from her feminine work attire into men’s clothing for a night out, completing the look with a sock in the crotch of her pants. She says, “I’d have several orgasms before I left home, just seeing that nice big lump there, and more when I was dancing with the girls.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Nestle, “Homophobia and Private Courage.”

⁵⁸ Joanne Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth B. Wilson (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001), 47; Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 16–7.

⁵⁹ Letter from Lee Lynch to Joan Nestle, November 11, 1981, Box 1, Joan Nestle Special Collection, LHA.

⁶⁰ Penny Coleman, *Village Elders* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 37–8.



Figure 14: Carol primping, early-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

Performing their masculinity and perfecting their butch style was part of what made gay life so exciting. Both the preparation – sculpting a flawless D.A. with a pompadour top and one “casual” curl in front – and the public display – combing and primping in a bar or in front of the mirror that hung beside the door at Pam Pam’s diner, for example – were meaningful aspects of butch self-making.⁶¹

In the Women’s House of Detention, a queer space without temporal limits, butches or “stud broads” took their masculine appearances very seriously. Social codes revered tough, aggressive butchness, and they crafted their images with tremendous ingenuity. While it was difficult to “mac it” in the House of D – that is, fully dress in men’s clothing – butches made do with men’s undershirts, smuggled out by female inmates working in the sewing factory. More important, though, was having a masculine haircut, also a challenging task as the beauty parlor on site only offered feminine hairdos

⁶¹ Merrill Mushroom, “How the Butch Does It: 1959,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 133–7; Joan Nestle, “The Femme Question,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 139.

and inmates were prohibited from cutting their own hair. To achieve the D.A.'s and crew cuts they preferred, butches stole razors or broke light bulbs and used the jagged glass to style their hair. In 1965 alone, twelve inmates were disciplined for infractions involving stolen razors and broken light bulbs, purportedly for personal grooming.⁶² As this resourcefulness and determination demonstrates, butch styling held deep personal and social significance, heightened by a harsh, hierarchical environment. Inmates' status and safety often depended on it.

Despite the appeal of men's clothing and masculine haircuts, butches modeled their style not on men, but on other butches.⁶³ Through "a system of intergenerational butch mentoring,"⁶⁴ women learned how to dress and act to represent butchness within specific communities. Details such as types of belts and socks, the length of one's fingernails, or how to hold a cigarette or cross your legs were all determining factors. Older butches often acted as role models, helping younger ones figure out where and how to buy clothing or pointing out if their cufflinks were on backwards.⁶⁵ Those without mentors simply learned through observation. One woman spent her first night in a gay bar just watching. She did not know anyone, so she had a drink and studied the butches around her. Wearing jeans and sneakers, she felt out of place, but on her second visit she "walked in with confidence," this time sporting *pressed* jeans with a crease, a turtleneck

⁶² Harris, *Hellhole*, 234. For more on butch-femme styling and gender performance in prisons, see Regina G. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 122–6.

⁶³ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 183.

⁶⁴ Judith Halberstam, "Between Butches," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1998), 62.

⁶⁵ Bender and Due, "Coming Up Butch," 103–4; Mushroom, interview with author.

and a blazer. Absorbing the norms of butch attire enabled her to feel more comfortable in that bar, and in this outfit she was approached by an intrigued femme.⁶⁶

Butch appearance was not only personally significant, it also had important functions within lesbian communities. In addition to announcing lesbianism to the public, butch legibility was a primary means by which women found each other.⁶⁷ Simply following a masculine woman was one way that many lesbians discovered their first gay bar.⁶⁸ More subtle clues, such as a pinky ring or “severe” haircut, might prompt a lesbian in search of gay friends to introduce herself. When Merrill Mushroom moved to a new apartment and noticed that the woman across the hall had “short hair, [a] butchie swagger, short fingernails... Another girl living with her with long hair, femmie,” she immediately pretended that she needed to borrow a cup of sugar and knocked on her door. Their conversation led to a friendship and acquaintance with another gay couple living in the building.⁶⁹ In this case, it was not merely the presence of a butch but also of a femme partner that signaled to Merrill that her neighbors might be gay.

Visible butchness inspired a particular thrill for lesbians seeking community. Lee Lynch remembers the “paralyzing excitement” she would feel watching “a really smooth butch” walking down a Village street. To her, that woman “incorporated in her dress, walk, manner all the risk and fear and sense of adventure I was feeling as a 15 year old... baby-butch.”⁷⁰ Likewise, Carmen Vázquez was ecstatic the first time she saw butches in masculine attire in an underground Puerto Rican club. With a glimpse of her own future, she says, “I knew that they were women, dressed in a way that I wanted to dress... It was

⁶⁶ W.D., interview by Lenn Keller, 29 August 2004.

⁶⁷ Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America,” 107, 120.

⁶⁸ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 9.

⁶⁹ Mushroom, interview with author.

⁷⁰ Letter from Lee Lynch to Joan Nestle, June 23, 1981, Box 1, Joan Nestle Special Collection.

great, I loved it. I loved seeing women dressed like men.”⁷¹ And for femmes coming face to face with the kind of women they had only dreamed of, seeing their first butch could be magical. When white working-class femme Rosalie Regal entered her first gay bar, she “looked at those butches, and... thought, oh my God, I am home.”⁷²

Although many breathed a sigh of relief to be in places where it was okay for women to explore masculine fashions and styling, these spaces also imposed their own internal regulations on dress. Access to lesbian sites often depended on displays of queerness, achieved by exhibiting masculinity in some way.⁷³ As Joan Nestle explains, “You had to prove [yourself]; you had to have some credential. You had to look recognizable in some way to be trusted, because people’s whole lives were up for the taking in that bar.”⁷⁴ Given the risks associated with this criminalized population, to get past the bouncer in Mafia-run bars one had to either know someone or look the part. Even though these were butch-*femme* communities, butchness is often what initially got women in the door.

Joan Nestle, perhaps the most well known femme of this era, describes herself in her early bar days as a “butchie-femme,” someone who in slacks and with short, curly hair was recognizable as queer and accepted in lesbian spaces on sight.⁷⁵ Joan was inadvertently introduced to her favorite bar, the Sea Colony, after an older woman she met in the Village assumed that she was already a regular there based on her look.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Carmen Vázquez, interview by Amy Donovan, 13 November 1996, “Presentations” folder, 08S-03 Box 1, Carmen Vázquez Papers, SSC.

⁷² Rosalie Regal interview transcript, 14 August 1999, Box 45, Joan E. Biren Papers, SSC.

⁷³ It is common for subcultures to use cultural artifacts like dress to demarcate group boundaries and register belonging. Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 47–8.

⁷⁴ Nestle, interview with author.

⁷⁵ Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 92; Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 117; Angeline Acain and Susan Eisenberg, “Joan Nestle: Sixty and Sexy,” *Ripe: Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Midlife and Older*, April 2001, Box 44, Joan E. Biren Papers.

⁷⁶ Nestle, interview with author.

However, this does not necessarily mean that her style read as butch. There were many femmes who dressed in slacks and even men's pants when they went out at night and who may have looked queer to the outside world but were clearly identified as femmes within lesbian circles. Subtle differences, like the presence of jewelry or makeup, stance or walk, and the way one held a cigarette could clearly distinguish a femme from a butch. It was understood that even in the same sort of outfit, butches and femmes wore their clothing differently. For example, Joan paired her slacks with tight sweaters to accentuate her shape – something butches rarely chose to do.⁷⁷

Of course, there were also “high femmes” who reveled in feminine glamour. Special occasions, like dances at the Rockland Palace in Harlem, might warrant flowing ball gowns, while for a more casual night out at a party or bar femmes might choose a tight sheath dress or a bright full skirt over a low-cut bodice.⁷⁸ With their hair teased into a



Figure 15: Butchie-femme (middle), early-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

⁷⁷ Kelly Hankin, “Femme Icon: An Interview with Madeline D. Davis,” in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, ed. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker (New York: Routledge, 1997), 57; Nestle, *A Fragile Union*, 117; Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 92. In fact, Nestle says that having to defend butch-femme relationships and her own femmeness against feminist critiques during the 1980s and 1990s led her to become much more feminine than she was in her earlier life. Acain and Eisenberg, “Joan Nestle: Sixty and Sexy.”

⁷⁸ Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor,” 44; Audre Lorde, “Tar Beach,” *Conditions*, 1979, 35, Periodical Collection, LHA.

bouffant or beehive, nails polished, makeup just so, and jewelry sparkling, these femmes delighted in the erotic power of turning heads with their alluring, sexy looks.



**Figure 16: Lillian Foster,
1940s
Courtesy of the Lesbian
Herstory Archives**



**Figure 17: Frilly Femme
Courtesy of Pauline
Ferrara's Personal
Photography Collection**

However, with masculinity as the most potent symbol of postwar lesbianism, more normative forms of femininity could sometimes get lost in queer spaces. For example, when Edythe Eyde first went to a lesbian bar decked out in feminine clothing, a

butch woman she danced with thought she was just another straight girl looking to see how the other half lives.⁷⁹ This misrecognition was very painful for femmes. Although many butches expressed their desire for glamorous feminine partners, it could be difficult to tell the difference between femmes and straight women, and displaying butchiness was a strategy that some femmes employed to prove themselves. At Bay Ridge High School, femme Jessica Lopez was dying to get in with the lesbian crowd but was overlooked because the butches assumed she was straight. One day, she went to school in a man-tailored shirt with her hair tucked up into a hat. Butches approached her almost immediately, exclaiming, “We didn’t know you were gay!” She took her hat off and said, “Yes, but I’m not really a butch.” Looking her up and down, they replied, “You’re sure not!” and from then on she was a part of their group. Jessica knew that she needed to look like a butch to get their attention and assert her queerness, and once she did they accepted her as a femme and she dressed as such. In tight skirts and dresses with nylons, makeup and her long hair down, those butches could not get enough of her.⁸⁰



Figure 18: Femmes
Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara’s Personal Photography Collection

⁷⁹ Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 54.

⁸⁰ Lopez, interview with author.

Visibly transgressing normative femininity was necessary to prove one's queerness and served as a vehicle for introducing others to gay life, but it also subjected women to public and legal hostility. Although many lesbians believed that, regardless of what the outside world thought, it was obvious to them whether a woman was butch or femme, negotiating these complex and sometimes conflicting consequences of queer legibility could cause ambiguity around visual cues, even within gay spaces. In addition to defining the terms *butch*, *femme*, and *kiki* in the glossary that Merrill Mushroom lists in her article "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," she also includes *butchie-femme* and *femmie-butch*, those butches or femmes who look enough like the other to be mistaken for one (Figures 15 and 19).⁸¹ As the presence of these terms implies, despite the popular notion that butches and femmes were easily discernible by their contrasting gendered signals, this was not always the case.



Figure 19: Femmie-butch and unknown man, early-1960s
 Courtesy of Pauline Ferrara's Personal Photography Collection

⁸¹ Merrill Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1983, 39.

This is also evidenced by the recurring question among lesbians, “Are you butch or femme?” Many women report that the moment they walked into a gay bar they were invariably asked this question. Sometimes it came despite how “obvious” the person thought they were. After donning a man’s shirt and trousers and spending an hour sculpting her hair into the perfect D.A., Merrill Mushroom was still immediately asked if she was butch or femme when she entered a bar for the first time.⁸² This visual uncertainty could disrupt the gendered courtship rituals that organized lesbian communities since discerning if the object of one’s desire was butch or femme would determine the terms of their potential relationship. As a young stud, Ira Jeffries embarrassed herself at a party in Harlem when she mistook another butch for a femme and asked her to dance. The woman’s lipstick and powder had given Ira the wrong impression; at age sixteen, she did not yet realize that not all studs were “make-up free” like she was.⁸³

Ambiguity around butch-femme appearance could sometimes be resolved through mannerisms, stance and behavior. As Joan Nestle explains, “I think any of us from that time would be able to distinguish the butch from the femme by subtle differences in walk, how the shoulders were held, or how the heads bent during conversation.”⁸⁴ A couple who dressed similarly might express their roles in the relationship by asserting gendered affectations, the butch holding the door for her femme partner, lighting her cigarette, or offering her a seat at the bar while she stood.⁸⁵ After the butch lit her own cigarette, she would hold it in the “crotch” of her fingers – as opposed to near her fingertips – or

⁸² Merrill Mushroom, “Bar Dyke Sketches: 1959,” *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1982, 17, History - The Fifties 2 - subject file #06110, LHA.

⁸³ Jeffries, “Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor,” 43.

⁸⁴ Nestle, “The Femme Question,” 145.

⁸⁵ Merrill Mushroom, “Bar Dykes: A One-Act Play in Pantomime and Dialogue,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession, n.d.

between her thumb and forefingers. If she did take a seat, she would sit with her legs apart or crossed ankle-over-knee, never knee-over-knee as femmes did.⁸⁶ Lesbians further expounded these kinds of gendered behaviors through courtship, sex and relationships, sometimes their femme and butch identities entirely bound up in interpersonal and sexual interactions with no perceptible physical manifestations. In these cases, butch-femme becomes even farther removed from legible declarations of identity.

As this chapter demonstrates, notions of butch-femme in postwar New York City were not necessarily dependent on gendered appearance and visual cues. Knowing that female masculinity was the public face of lesbianism, women played with queer legibility, keenly aware that the way they looked could have significant consequences – both positive and negative. Despite arguments that root butch-femme’s radical potential in butch visibility, butch *in*visibility and ambiguities of butch-femme visual markers suggest that all lesbians were negotiating their appearance and its relationship to their identities while trying to survive under difficult circumstances. In addition, butchness and femmeness were interpreted in different ways, some more legible than others. Disrupting the idea that lesbian resistance was determined by public display enables us to consider butches and femmes on more equal footing; if both were navigating the boundaries of queer legibility, femmes were not merely riding the coattails of butch gender subversion. Moreover, the decision to be discreet and make one’s queerness less conspicuous may be more representative of this historical era when living a double life was commonplace, a time before gay liberationist politics established “coming out” as a strategy for personal and social change and created the “in” and “out” dichotomy of the closet. For many postwar lesbians, butch-femme transcended matters of appearance and personal styling.

⁸⁶ Mushoom, interview with author; Carolyn Kovac, interview with author, New York, NY, 7 December 2010.

Committed to deep-seated identities, what they wore did not change the queerness they felt within themselves.

CHAPTER 5

“As Natural As Breathing”: The Emotional Embodiment of Butch-Femme Subjectivity

When discussing her butch identity, Pauline Ferrara talks about a can of peas. She explains, “You put a label around a can of peas so you know there’s peas inside that can... My label is butch, so you know what’s going on inside of me.” But if you take away that label, there are still peas inside the can and she is still a butch.¹ Pauline’s simple allegory illuminates a poignant and complex belief among many postwar lesbians: that *butch* and *femme* were more than labels, more than descriptors, more than just the roles that organized their world. They were profound expressions of self, felt deeply and experienced as utterly, sometimes painfully, true. Rooting their queerness in body and psyche, femmes and butches assert that this is simply the way they *are*, that they could not be any other way.

There is a clear divide between this common trope and histories and theory that analyze queer subjectivity. In fact, much of the scholarship addressing queer identity evades this idea, careful to reject any vestige of essentialism. Recent studies generally deemphasize embodied experience in favor of discourse analysis, gender performativity, or the social, cultural, and political conditions that enable queer communities to form. While I am indebted to this body of work, lesbians’ interpretations of their own identities remain under-analyzed in this literature, thus neglecting a crucial aspect of the essence of queer experience.² It is significant that in their own narrations many women insist that

¹ Pauline Ferrara, interview with author, Queens, NY, 16 December 2010

² With respect to transgender subjects, Jay Prosser similarly challenges the privileging of discourse over experience. Drawing attention to the way that queer theory (specifically, the work of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam) reveres trans people as gender-crossers who exemplify the concept of performativity and denaturalize gender, Prosser argues that this perspective obscures trans people’s lived experience and relationships to their bodies, particularly the feeling of an “inner” or “true” gender identity that many transfolks embrace. Likewise, Susan Stryker argues that scholarship

butch-femme is “instinctual,” “natural,” and the “essence [of] what we are inside.”³ As scholars, we must incorporate this perspective into our analyses, not deny our subjects this powerful personal insight.

Without accusing historical subjects of “false-consciousness,” embracing biological determinism, or perpetuating a dichotomy of discourse vs. experience, this chapter examines postwar lesbians’ understandings of their queerness as embodied and innate, and considers what this line of thinking offered them.⁴ Why was naturalness so deeply implicated in many butches’ and femmes’ perceptions of themselves? How did this conceptualization give meaning to their experiences? And, significantly, what emotional role did it play in their lives? The belief in inborn, embodied queerness produced complex emotional responses that were integral to lesbians’ sense of self and their place in a world that defined them as deviant.

This dissertation has set the stage for analyzing the emotions of postwar lesbian subjectivity. Readers will remember the physical, legal, and personal dangers that befell lesbians caught in bar raids, kissing on the beach at Riis Park, or traversing city streets legibly expressing their queerness. Such activities challenged dominant discourses that “contained” proper womanhood and female sexuality within marriage and motherhood, institutions that formed a bulwark against communist threats. Avoiding this standard path

must validate transgender subjects’ experiential knowledge and subjective gender identities. Jay Prosser, “No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3 (1995): 483–514; Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³ Letter from Lee Lynch to Joan Nestle, January 3, 1981, Box 1, Joan Nestle Special Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter LHA).

⁴ In doing so, I engage phenomenology to analyze the significance of body-based knowledge in shaping experience and subjectivity. For more on body-based knowing, see Prosser, *Second Skins*; Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003); Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

and flouting normative femininity with self-sufficiency, sexual agency, and butch masculinity, lesbians were considered psychologically immature at best and threatening sexual predators at worst. Within this difficult context, they created queer communities and an exciting erotic culture, explored their sexuality and fell in love, and found comfort in their own skin. In these circumstances, postwar women's sense of their queerness as an internal truth they could not ignore or change produced a mix of emotions, ranging from shame and fear to relief, dignity, and joy.

Considering her butchness, scholar Esther Newton argues, "This masculinity, my masculinity, is not external; it permeates and animates me. Nor is it a masquerade. In my own home, when no one is present, I still sit with my legs carelessly flung apart."⁵

Situating her gendered sense of self in her body, Newton expresses her masculinity as something real, true. Grounding her analysis in an example as mundane and tangible as the subconscious positioning of her limbs, she describes masculinity as an essence that fills her body, the force that makes her who she is. Similarly, femme Joan Nestle asserts, "They can't ever scare us out of the way we love. They can't judge us out of the way we love. They can't ridicule us out of it because it is not a masquerade. It is in our breasts and our thighs."⁶ Addressing the difficulties of queer life, Nestle poetically portrays butch-femme as an embodied erotic truth, unchangeable despite the powerful threats of peril and condemnation.⁷

⁵ Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 199.

⁶ Joan Nestle, "A Celebration of Butch-Femme Identities in the Lesbian Community" (panel discussion at the New York Lesbian and Gay Community Service Center, New York, December 1990), butch-fem subject file #02860, LHA.

⁷ Newton and Nestle share a painful history of defending butch-femme from a deluge of lesbian-feminist reproach in the 1970s and 1980s. Their distinct challenges to the idea of butch-femme as a "masquerade" suggest that they are responding to younger lesbians' critique of their style of queerness as conformist, heteronormative "role-playing." However, this context does not detract from their opinions, widely shared by femmes and butches pressured to defend their existence not only to later feminist critics, but also to postwar powers of law, medicine, and social custom.

Both Newton and Nestle forcefully argue for queer embodiment, yet do so in ways that reveal larger differences between butch and femme perspectives. Reflecting their non-normative gendered positioning, butches were more likely to understand their queerness through physical and behavioral tendencies they perceived as masculine, as well as through same-sex desire. Femmes had a complicated relationship to womanhood and femininity also, but generally did not undergo the same kind of gendered discord that butches did. Consequently, they more often rooted their queerness in the visceral experience of desire alone. These differences in embodied understanding provoked distinct but related emotional responses for femmes and butches, including bodily shame, confusion, erotic fulfillment, and delight.

For instance, both butches and femmes point back to feelings and episodes from their childhoods as evidence of enduring, fundamental queerness. Butches tend to emphasize an early affinity for masculinity. Claiming tomboy status, stories of joining neighborhood boys in baseball and stickball games, tree climbing, and bike riding abound in butches' memories as early signals of their queer difference. Rejecting normative girl games, young Gloria Rivera used to "pop [dolls'] heads off and use them as baseballs" in her Puerto Rican Bronx neighborhood. "I just loved the chasing and the running and the climbing and getting dirty," she remembers. "I knew there was something up."⁸ Tomboyism was common among girls, many of whom did not grow up to be lesbians, their "masculine" yearnings for independence, physicality and adventure tolerated as long as they indicated a temporary adolescent rejection of adulthood, not femininity.⁹ Some femmes also had tomboy pasts, but were less likely to claim them as particularly

⁸ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011.

⁹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 5–6.

important for their lesbian adulthoods. Butches, on the other hand, often invest their preferences for sports and rough and tumble play with significant meaning. Declaring “my body ate masculinity and thrived on it,”¹⁰ they transform physical activities, competition, cowboy games, and books about horses from merely playful interests into verification of an embodied, lifelong truth.

For both butches and femmes, recognizing their attraction to other girls at a young age cemented many lesbians’ understandings of themselves as queer. Jerre Kalbas, a working-class Jewish butch from the South Bronx, insists, “I was gay around six years old” when remembering games of “doctor” or “mom and dad” that led to exploring her friends’ bodies.¹¹ Likewise, through playing “harem” with a friend, teaching her to masturbate, and spending “a lot of time between her legs” starting at age ten, femme Joan Nestle began to see herself as different from other girls.¹² Although sexual experimentation is a familiar childhood experience, this kind of play also caused Latina butch Carmen Vázquez to view “my sense of myself as different sexually” from age six onward.¹³ Lesbians employ these types of memories when narrating their personal journeys to demonstrate that their queerness has always been part of them.

Surrounded by heteronormative images of romance, young lesbians learned that people who craved and courted women were men. This message could encourage masculine identification among both butches and femmes as they became aware of their same-sex desire. Fitting themselves into the dominant view of coupled adulthood, many

¹⁰ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 199.

¹¹ Jerre Kalbas, interview with author, New York, NY, 11 January 2011.

¹² Angeline Acain and Susan Eisenberg, “Joan Nestle: Sixty and Sexy,” *Ripe: Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Midlife and Older*, April 2001, Box 44, Joan E. Biren Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC).

¹³ Carmen Vázquez, “Voice and Visibility: Looking Up at the Stars,” 08S-03 Box 1, “Conference” folder, Carmen Vázquez Papers, SSC.

baby butches believed that they would someday fall in love with women, marry them, and be their husbands.¹⁴ As they reached adolescence and these desires grew more poignant, some continued to view the “fierce impulse” toward other girls as male, as how they “imagined that men got turned on to women.”¹⁵ For butches, the urge to be the initiator, to touch and kiss and woo their female crushes, influenced their understanding of their erotic longing as gendered. At the same time, the physical experience of this desire – that “girls were who made my heart flip and my groin burn” – fixed their queerness firmly in their bodies.¹⁶ As one butch explained, “My hormones are the ones that told me to act on it.”¹⁷

Messages that defined desire for women as a masculine prerogative influenced young femmes, as well. Experiencing same-sex attraction without an accompanying affinity for boyishness could be confusing, as they felt a disconnect between relating to the female halves of cultural images of heterosexual couples – that is, understanding their desire to be the one to get kissed, not do the kissing – and knowing that a male counterpart was not quite what they wanted.¹⁸ Jessica Lopez, who at five-years-old informed her mother that she wanted to marry a woman someday, always reveled in her femininity and indeed grew up to be a glamorous femme. Yet, during games of “house” with a girlfriend in her neighborhood, she chose to take on the male role so she could be sure to incorporate kissing as part of the game. As Jessica learned about lesbianism, becoming infatuated with the *marimachas* (Latina butches) who maintained a visible

¹⁴ Debbie Bender and Linnea Due, “Coming Up Butch,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, ed. Lily Burana, Roxxie, and Linnea Due (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 96–7.

¹⁵ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 202.

¹⁶ Vázquez, “Voice and Visibility: Looking Up at the Stars.”

¹⁷ Rivera, interview with author.

¹⁸ Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Madeline Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 255; Jewelle Gomez, “Butch-Femme Panel” (panel discussion at the Sex and the State History Conference, Toronto, July 1985), butch-fem subject file #02830, LHA.

presence on her block, she changed the game. Now instead of being a man she would be a masculine lesbian so that she could seduce her friend. Despite feeling feminine and knowing that she was not really a *marimacha*, Jessica simply could not conceive of a way to fulfill her urge to experiment with other girls without assuming a masculine role.¹⁹ While butches' sense of gendered difference informed perceptions of their same-sex desire, femmes' desire informed – and often confused – perceptions of their gender.

Recognizing their queerness could be immensely frightening and painful for young lesbians, though living in New York City gave them more access to information, for better or worse, than those in less urban areas. If they had contact with media representations of queers, they learned that they were severely abnormal or deranged miscreants. Those that took the brave step of visiting the library to do a bit of research found books on homosexuality under lock, key, and a librarian's scornful eye.²⁰ While some embraced the information discovered as accurate depictions of masculine tendencies and same-sex desire, excited to be able to name what they already knew about themselves, others shrank from accounts of lesbians as psychologically maladjusted deviants.²¹ Growing up with little adult supervision and sexually experimenting with other girls throughout her youth, Joan Nestle had an understanding of “perverted desire” and its relationship to her own sexuality by the time she entered high school. Terrified by a part of her that “seemed so ugly,” she saw herself as a “freak,” as someone “damaged” and degenerate. When she entered the Village bar scene in her late-teens, Joan already

¹⁹ Jessica Lopez, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, 18 January 2011. Also, Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2010; Arden Eversmeyer and Margaret Purcell, eds., *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* (Houston, TX: Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, 2009), 229.

²⁰ Martin B Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 52.

²¹ Penny Coleman, *Village Elders* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 37.

believed herself a member of this depraved criminal underworld. She says, “I just felt this was where someone like me belonged.”²²

Joan’s femme perspective illustrates the significance of desire in defining queerness and the emotional turmoil that desire provoked. Butches had similar experiences, but also often endured gendered unease that substantially influenced their understandings of themselves. Whether for school, religious meetings, family gatherings, or simply when Dad got home from work, young butches were often required to conform to traditional standards of femininity, particularly in terms of their clothing. The dresses and other girly garb they were forced into frequently produced deep-seated feelings of discomfort.²³ It could be “mortifying” to wear skirts to school, and many could not wait to run home and change into jeans.²⁴ For these butches, it was not only the discrepancy between their unfeminine personalities and the girlish image they felt pressured to achieve that upset them; it was also their perception that their bodies simply did not – could not – fit that image.

For some, discomfort escalated to depression, alienation, and self-harm as their queer bodies felt increasingly out of their control. Expressing a common view among young butches, Debbie Bender explains, “I always wanted to be someone else, but I never felt I could... [I]t just never has seemed even remotely possible. I couldn’t change.”²⁵ Esther Newton felt the same way as she was growing up, horrified by her attraction to her female friends and the irrepressible masculinity she felt in her “traitorous

²² Joan Nestle, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 March 2011. Also, Zsa Zsa Gershick, *Gay Old Girls* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1998), 142–3; Merril Mushroom, phone interview with author, 12 April 2011.

²³ As explored in Chapter 4, there were also those butches who felt comfortable in girls’ and women’s clothing. Although most of them did prefer to wear jeans or slacks in their free time, many butch-identified women understood the gendered expectations of their time and did not necessarily mind wearing feminine attire in certain situations.

²⁴ Carmen Vázquez, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, SSC, 17 (quote); Ferrara, interview with author.

²⁵ Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 101.

body.” Although she “tried and failed to be ‘normal’” by wearing girly clothes and practicing the femininity that seemed to come so naturally to her peers in front of her mirror, she felt that “no clothing, no borrowed gesture ever performed the magic, made me right.” This charade for the sake of normalcy eventually gave way to rage, isolation, self-mutilation, and alcohol abuse.²⁶

Many butches continued in their attempts to mold their bodies according to guidelines of femininity. Sometimes their girlfriends coached them in ladylike mannerisms, correcting the tendency to walk “like a truck driver.”²⁷ But despite these efforts, they often felt that their bodies did not cooperate, their masculinity simply too much a part of them to suppress. Although Linnea Due was resolute about keeping the “terrible secret” of her same-sex desire hidden, she was expelled from her Girl Scout troupe due to her uncontrollable masculine comportment. Remembering the turmoil of that experience, she says,

My whole world turned upside down. Here I thought I was hiding successfully. What I didn’t understand is that my whole *person* was out there. I *was* masculine in that way they didn’t like, but it was so much a part of me I didn’t know I had to hide that, too.²⁸

Similarly, Jerre Kalbas recognizes in retrospect that she looked fairly “severe” as a young woman, but at the time she was surprised and ashamed when family members and strangers drew attention to her masculinity. Before she even knew the word, men on the street would jeer at her and yell “dyke.” She recalls a painful incident in which a subway worker followed her into the women’s restroom, mistaking her for a man. When she corrected him and said she was a woman, he made a disgusted face and turned his back

²⁶ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 94–5, 101–2, 200–2.

²⁷ Kalbas, interview with author; Miriam Wolfson, interview with author, New York, NY, 20 July 2010.

²⁸ Bender and Due, “Coming Up Butch,” 98, emphasis in original.

on her. Lamenting these experiences, Jerre says, “That’s how masculine I looked. I mean, it was terrible. It hurt so, not to be able to be like anybody else. I didn’t know what I was!”²⁹

As these painful anecdotes reveal, confronting shame was a foundational aspect of lesbian experience, closely connected with and sometimes magnified by the belief in innate, embodied queerness.³⁰ Interpreting their gendered difference and/or lust for other women as irrepressible parts of themselves, many lesbians felt helpless against the powerful pull of their bodies. While this shame did not necessarily disappear as they moved through their lives, the institutionalization of their kinds of “deviance” in butch-femme culture offered a place, a name, and an emotional reprieve from the harshness of queer life.

As Gayle Rubin has explained, the category *butch* “encompasses individuals with a broad range of investments in ‘masculinity.’”³¹ In postwar queer communities, this vernacular term included lesbians with varying degrees of masculine presentation, unease with their female bodies, and acceptance of women’s social options. It also incorporated both female and male identification, and behaviors and experiences that today might be interpreted as transgender. Across this breadth of possibilities, butch identity enabled masculine lesbians to make sense of the gendered differences they understood as embodied and inborn, and channel them into an honored communal role.

²⁹ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 69 (quote); Jerre Kalbas, The Real Rosie the Riveter Project, February 17, 2010, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University; Kalbas, interview with author.

³⁰ For more on “gay shame” and its role in the development of lesbian identity, see Jennifer Moon, “Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 357–368; Sally Munt, “Introduction,” in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1998), 4–7; Prosser, “No Place Like Home”. For an analysis of the effects of McCarthy-era homosexual panic on gay people’s self-esteem, see John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), chap. 3.

³¹ Gayle Rubin, “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 467.

Although one's interpretation of butchness varied depending on the particular community or individual, it offered the opportunity to explore different forms of masculine identification. Many butches adopted masculinized versions of their own names or, if it was not easily adaptable, simply acquired a more masculine or unisex nickname. For example, Pauline Ferrara's crowd knew her as Paul, while her friend Anne chose to go by DJ. Jerre Kalbas hated her given name, Emma, and so took on the more neutral Jerre.³² Some even pursued changing their names legally, perhaps because they felt a gendered disconnect from their appearance or did not identify with names that strongly connoted femininity. Sandy Kern, for example, changed her name from Shirley to the more androgynous Sandy in the 1950s so that she could maintain continuity when she tried to pass as a man in the world outside her butch-femme community.³³ Others did not bother altering their names, and found ways to be comfortable as Miriams, Trudys, and Carmens.³⁴ In some circles regardless of their names or how they looked, butches used male pronouns (i.e. "Jack and his girlfriend"), referred to each other as "guys," and were considered a femme's "boyfriend."³⁵ Moreover, some people made a distinction between butches and women, only attributing womanhood to femmes.³⁶

Claiming "gay names"³⁷ and making gendered decisions about language provided relief from the dissonance some butches felt as masculine women, but embracing butch appearance offered physical satisfaction and comfort that made them finally feel "right." Some explored this impulse in childhood, clandestinely experimenting with their father or

³² Ferrara, interview with author; Kalbas, interview with author.

³³ Fun fact: For her name-change, Sandy went to the "first black lesbian lawyer that ever was," the now famous feminist civil rights attorney and activist, Pauli Murray. Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 84. Interestingly, Murray's given name was Anna but she preferred Pauli for its androgyny.

³⁴ Nestle, interview with author; Wolfson, interview with author; Carmen Vázquez, interview with author, Brooklyn NY, 10 August 2011.

³⁵ Vázquez, interview with author.

³⁶ Carolyn Kovac, interview with author, New York, NY, 7 December 2010; Lopez, interview with author.

³⁷ Ferrara, interview with author.

brother's clothing.³⁸ In these instances, young butches knew they were breaking the gendered rules adamantly policed in postwar America, but persisted in their effort to remain true to what they perceived as natural. When they reached adulthood and were in charge of their own decisions about appearance, the choice to cut their hair short and dress in men's clothing felt like a homecoming, one that was celebrated upon entry into butch-femme culture.³⁹ After Pauline Ferrara divorced her husband, the marriage a failed attempt to challenge accusations of queerness, she embraced butch identity and style as a welcome validation of the gender discord she had always felt. Following years of seeing herself as a "misfit" whose body "didn't fit in the feminine role," Pauline sported a new D.A. haircut and "finally felt like I fit. I finally felt like I wasn't a freak. I finally felt comfortable that what I was feeling inside was finally being on the outside. And it just felt normal. It felt right."⁴⁰ For Pauline and many butches, establishing a connection between internal subjectivity and external self-expression was a significant step in finding comfort in their own skin.

Esther Newton also found reprieve from bodily unease through butch identity. She admits that mirrors made her "queasy," as her "masculine self-awareness... is startled, for example, by the breasts or hips I see in the naked mirror; other times because I look so different from how, as a woman, I know I'm supposed to look." But when Esther discovered the butch-femme bar scene in Greenwich Village as a teenager, her pain and confusion began to subside.⁴¹ Recognizing the significance of community, Jack Halberstam argues that butches "find solace in the revelations of other butches; it is as if

³⁸ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 37; Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire*, 353; Wolfson, interview with author.

³⁹ While my research suggests that butches found joy and comfort by embodying their masculinity, Jay Prosser argues that the cultural practice of concealing their female bodies demonstrates one way that shame was institutionalized in butch-femme culture. Prosser, "No Place Like Home," 494.

⁴⁰ Ferrara, interview with author.

⁴¹ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 197.

the shame of inappropriate gendering can be rendered more benign when it is shared across other bodies and other lives.”⁴² Esther’s testimony addresses this same idea: “Being butch was the first identity that had ever made sense out of my body’s situation, the first rendition of gender that ever rang true, the first look I could ever pull together... This gay gender, butch, makes my body recognizable.”⁴³ In this way, becoming part of lesbian communities and claiming butch identity helped resolve some of the bodily disorientation and shame of female masculinity.

But *butch* was flexible and also allowed for female identification, and there were many butches who felt comfortable with their womanhood. Robbie Marino, for example, always preferred slacks to skirts but did not experience the gendered angst that some butches felt in their bodies. Unbothered by the traditionally feminine attire required at her white-collar job, and later the glamour expected of a cabaret singer in Greenwich Village, Robbie distinguished herself from those “tie-wearing butches” whose relationships were “so man and woman,” emphasizing, “I wasn’t a man.” At the same time, she describes her butchness as “not a false thing where you say: okay, I’m going to identify as this. That’s not how it works. You feel it... It just is.” As the charmer and sexual initiator (characteristics she associated with masculinity and butch sexuality), Robbie did not prioritize appearance and social role in her interpretation of identity or disavow her femaleness. Even so, Robbie firmly defined her butchness as central to her being, asserting, “I was still a butch woman, you see? So it didn’t matter what I wore, it was who I *am*.”⁴⁴

⁴² Judith Halberstam, “Between Butches,” in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, 64.

⁴³ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 207, 197.

⁴⁴ Robbie Marino, interview with author, New York, NY, 22 December 2010.

Similarly, although Merrill Mushroom favored men's clothing and styling, it had more to do with her delight in constructing a butch image than embodied gendered turmoil. She savored the process of sculpting her hair into a flawless D.A. with one "casual" curl in front and passing as a man in the straight world, remembering, "I'd be all my illusion." However, she accepted the standards of dress for professional women, and had no qualms about presenting a normative feminine demeanor for her job as a teacher. Like Robbie, Merrill knew that her butchness did not depend on her attire; rather, she was a butch woman because it "felt like what [she] was supposed to be doing."⁴⁵

Other butches rejected womanhood and considered themselves male to varying degrees, claiming "male identity," "masculine identity," "male self-image," "man," or all of these.⁴⁶ There were also those who passed and/or lived as men in their daily lives, but were butches in queer communities and relationships.⁴⁷ However, using terminology like "male," "masculine," and "man" does not necessarily connote analytical specificity between anatomical sex and social gender, nor do decisions about passing definitively reveal male subjectivity. Rather, the interchangeability of the terms reflects postwar ideologies that linked sex, gender, and sexuality.⁴⁸ In this way, these butches provide a

⁴⁵ Mushroom, interview with author.

⁴⁶ Vázquez, "Voice and Visibility: Looking Up at the Stars"; Jean Elizabeth Wolfe Papers (MC 686), Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Jesse Josephson, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? My Life as a Butch," butch-fem subject file #02860, LHA; Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1958), 27.

⁴⁷ Merrill Mushroom classifies this type of butch as a "drag butch" in "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1983, 39, Merrill "Mushroom" Harris biography file, LHA. Others refer to such people as "passing women," as Joan Nestle did in her 1987 essay "Esther's Story." However, upon further reflection, Nestle acknowledges in a later piece, "On Rereading 'Esther's Story,'" that she simplified Esther's gendered sense of self in an attempt to validate her 1960s butch-femme community. She explains, "I knew that if I had written 'Esther wanted to be a man,' the story would have been dismissed and so would Esther and all I wanted for her in the new world of the 1980s. This balancing act led me to cast Esther's 'maleness' in a more womanly way." Elaborating on this point in an interview, she says "I had no right to claim her in any gendered history" when Esther did not offer one. Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 29; Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union: New & Selected Writings*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 111-2; Nestle, interview with author.

⁴⁸ According to Joanne Meyerowitz, discussions and debates about transsexuality starting in the 1950s, particularly surrounding the publicity of glamorous male-to-female (MTF) transsexual Christine Jorgensen, led to a slow and unsteady differentiation between these three analytical categories. However, they remained intertwined in much

means of considering lesbianism outside the realm of female identification⁴⁹ and demonstrate how the categories and experiences of *butch* and *transgender* might converge at this historical moment, an era when the “mannish lesbian” was a precise cultural type with a long history of interconnected sexual and gender deviance.

In order to properly contextualize and theorize the complexity of butch subjectivity, it is necessary to give a brief overview of this history. Individuals who became known as “passing women” in the nineteenth century lived as men and claimed male economic, political, and social privilege, such as earning men’s wages, voting, traveling alone, owning property, writing checks, and marrying women. Sensationalized news stories publicized the “discovery” and “deception” of those unlucky enough to be exposed, after which they were fined, incarcerated, or institutionalized.⁵⁰ Masculine privileges suggest clear motivation for passing, but it is possible that the desire to pursue sexual relationships with women also factored into the decision.⁵¹ Moreover, contrary to historian Jonathan Ned Katz’s assertion that these were not “imitation men, but [...] real women, women who refused to accept the traditional, socially assigned fate of their sex, women whose particular revolt took the form of passing as men,” it is also conceivable

medical and popular discourse throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and persist into the twenty-first. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2–4.

⁴⁹ This is in contrast to the 1970s when lesbians became defined as “woman-identified women” through lesbian-feminist identity work. Henry Rubin argues that this classification consolidated both lesbian and transgender identity and the number of female-to-male (FTM) men increased dramatically due to “the meager options for self-thematizing their gender in the new paradigm of lesbianism.” Rubin, *Self-Made Men*, 63–4, 89. Jack Halberstam similarly laments the decline of butchness, arguing, “the invention of transsexuality as a medical category has partially drained gender variance out of the category of homosexuality and located gender variance very specifically within the category of transsexuality” in “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 142–3.

⁵⁰ The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “‘She Even Chewed Tobacco’: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women In America,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 184–5.

⁵¹ Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.: A Documentary History* (New York: Meridian, 1976), 209; Avra Michelson, “Some Thoughts Towards Developing a Theory of Roles,” 1978, Unpublished papers, LHA.

that these individuals were acting on what they understood as embodied gendered feelings.⁵² That is, we might read transgender history here.⁵³

While “passing women” were making headlines in the late-nineteenth century, European sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis were busy defining and categorizing same-sex desire. Pathologized as a perverse inborn defect, the theory of gender inversion posited that attraction to members of the same sex was merely a side effect of an overall reversal of the gender role. In this model, “female inverts” were thought to act and feel like men, complete with the desire for women. By the early-twentieth century, the mannish lesbian had become a distinct cultural type that lesbians themselves sometimes embraced and American doctors and lawmakers worked to suppress.⁵⁴ And since the inversion model emphasized gender as the basis of sexual desire, “passing women” came to be conflated with “female inverts.”⁵⁵

By midcentury, medical understandings of same-sex sexuality had undergone a shift from gender inversion to that of sexual object choice as the defining quality of homosexuality.⁵⁶ That is, sexuality was now based on the sex of one’s desired partner, not their own gendered presentation, feeling, or role – at least in theory. In reality, though, this distinction was slow to take hold. Both medical and psychological

⁵² Katz, *Gay American History*, 209.

⁵³ As Gayle Rubin points out, both lesbians and transmen claim “passing women” as ancestors. Rubin, “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” 473–4. For more on the overlap in lesbian and transgender histories, see Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories,” in *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin B. Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 134–152. For an account that firmly (re)claims this history as transgender, see Jason Cromwell, “Passing Women and Female-Bodied Men: (Re)claiming FTM,” in *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (London; New York: Cassell, 1999), 34–61.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), chap. 2–3; Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 557–575.

⁵⁵ The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “She Even Chewed Tobacco,” 193.

⁵⁶ For a more complete explanation of this shift, see George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female ‘Deviance,’” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 87–117.

professionals and lay people, including queers, continued to consider gender and sexuality when characterizing homosexual types and pairings throughout the twentieth century, especially with respect to lesbians.⁵⁷ In fact, some scholars argue that postwar anxiety about lesbianism and sexual deviance was more closely linked to women's gender transgressions than their sexuality.⁵⁸

At the same time, the category *transsexual* was beginning to gain cultural legibility. Prior to the 1950s – when an explosion of media attention transformed Christine Jorgensen, a World War II veteran turned blonde bombshell, into the most famous transsexual of the mid-twentieth century – people who might later define themselves as transgender were subsumed within the status of invert, and then homosexual.⁵⁹ In the 1950s and '60s, after the uneven conceptual shift from gender inversion to same-sex object choice and Jorgensen's media blitz, some members of the psychological and medical communities began to distinguish between homosexuality and transsexuality. However, many did not and continued to regard individuals who identified with the tenets of transsexuality as homosexuals with internalized homophobia.⁶⁰ This was particularly true for those individuals who, had they been born later, might have identified as female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals. Jorgensen's story promoted transsexuality as a male-to-female (MTF) phenomenon, and many more MTFs than FTMs pursued medical treatment during this period.⁶¹ Perhaps they did not see transitioning as a realistic option, deterred by the cost of painful, unpredictable surgeries

⁵⁷ Ibid.; Terry, *An American Obsession*, 68; Donna Penn, "The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America," in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106–124.

⁵⁸ Challenging scholarship that points to the primacy of sexual object choice in defining lesbianism, Penn shows how postwar anxiety regarding gender roles, specifically women's emancipation and perceived masculinization, defined the sexual deviance of lesbianism through women's gender transgressions. Penn, "The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America."

⁵⁹ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 14–5; Rubin, *Self-Made Men*, 33.

⁶⁰ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 43, 82; Rubin, *Self-Made Men*, 53.

⁶¹ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 94, 148.

and condescending doctors. Perhaps they lacked the knowledge, financial resources or desire to change their bodies with hormones and/or surgery. Perhaps they simply found solace in lesbian communities as butches.

From passing women to invert to butch lesbians and the emergence of transmen, the overlap of lesbian and transgender history shows the popular and personal convergence of gender and sexuality. By the time butch-femme culture shaped the lesbian landscape in postwar America, categories of gender and sexual transgression were in flux, yet still tightly intertwined.⁶² Within this context of changing sexual knowledge, butch was an identity that people with different relationships to masculinity could embrace, including those who might later have considered themselves trans.

In addition, passing or living as men continued to provide economic and social benefits in the postwar period. Even though women's opportunities had expanded during World War II, they were still severely limited. The war opened new possibilities for wage labor, offering women well-paying jobs and the nation's respect. But while the proportion of women in the labor force continued to rise after the war's end, they were paid far less than men and the job market returned to routinely categorizing work based on sex, often excluding women from the most lucrative and prestigious positions as well as certain types of manual labor.⁶³ Many butches whose masculine presentation prevented them from holding jobs open to women relied on their femme partners to support them. Others chose to pass in occupations that were generally reserved for men, such as driving taxis,

⁶² Meanings of womanhood were also in flux during this period and influenced interpretations of butchness, although the most fervent and explicit challenges to the traditional gender system would not come until the women's liberation movement exploded onto the scene in the late-1960s.

⁶³ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Joanne Meyerowitz, "Rewriting Postwar Women's History, 1945-1960," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 383.

clerking in stockrooms, doing construction, or working in certain factories.⁶⁴ One butch decided to pass as a man in order to keep a job as a photographer when women were excluded from the position after the war, while another worked as a mechanic for years, passing despite having a higher, more feminine voice.⁶⁵ Men's jobs enabled butches not only to make more money and explore areas of interest beyond what was available to women, they also allowed them to dress and act in the ways they were most comfortable in their daily lives.

Butches also chose to pass to protect themselves. While the threat and reality of sexual violence limited women's sense of safety in city spaces, the risks were magnified for those who visibly transgressed gendered boundaries. Police officers frequently stopped pedestrians they perceived as queer solely to frisk, insult, or intimidate them, and straight people often showed up in known lesbian spaces to "bust heads."⁶⁶ Given this serious potential for danger, it was no wonder that many butches wanted to avoid unnecessary attention and pass as men. It was well known that doing so was simply safer.

Butches employed different strategies to pass as men in heteronormative society. As well as men's clothing and hairstyles, some bound their breasts or concealed them with a suit jacket. Shaving their cheeks and above the lip to encourage hair growth or even dusting their faces with dirt to resemble facial hair were other tactics butches might

⁶⁴ Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 29; Rusty Brown, "Always Me," in *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians*, ed. Marcy Adelman (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 148; Rivera, interview with author.

⁶⁵ Gershick, *Gay Old Girls*, 130; Rivera, interview with author.

⁶⁶ Steven A. Rosen, "Police Harassment of Homosexual Women and Men in New York City 1960-1980," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 12 (1981 1980): 165; Elvia R. Arriola, "Faeries, Marimachas, Queens, and Lezzies: The Construction of Homosexuality Before the 1969 Stonewall Riots," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 5 (1996 1995): 36-7; Ferrara, interview with author (quote). See Chapter 4 for a full discussion of the dangers of butch legibility.

try. For others, just the clothes and hair worked well enough to get by.⁶⁷ Not only did they pass at work and on the street, sometimes butches flirted and had sex with heterosexual women who never knew the difference.⁶⁸

Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's classic article "Toward a Theory of Gender" suggests a reason why passing may have been fairly uncomplicated for butches. According to their 1978 study analyzing the ways that people attributed gender based on visual cues (i.e. clothing, facial hair, and body shape), there was a strong tendency for participants to see the majority of cues as indicators of maleness, even the ones the investigators intended to be "female" and "neutral." Thus, Kessler and McKenna determined that Western societies "construct gender so that male characteristics are *seen* as more obvious... In the social construction of gender 'male' is the primary construction."⁶⁹ If this is true, perhaps butches did not have to try too hard to be viewed as men, especially in the postwar period when gender cues were generally distinct and unambiguous.

However, despite this theory, the decision to pass did not come with a guarantee. The possibility of being discovered kept many in short-term work, continually moving from job to job.⁷⁰ After being repeatedly found out and fired, one butch gave up and approached each new prospect with, "I'm a female... Am I hired or am I fired?"⁷¹ Another quit a factory job after passing as a teenage boy because it became too difficult

⁶⁷ Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," 39; Mushroom, interview with author; Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1955), 19; Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996*, 86; Kovac, interview with author; Ferrara, interview with author.

⁶⁸ Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love*, 27; Marie Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of 'Theology' in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women's Bar Culture and Community" (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 455; W.D., interview with Lenn Keller, 29 August 2004.

⁶⁹ Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, "Toward a Theory of Gender," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 176.

⁷⁰ Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love*, 27.

⁷¹ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 45.

to maintain the ongoing pretense of growing into a man.⁷² The inability to pass could be extremely painful for butches whose masculinity was central to their sense of self. Sandy Kern, for instance, loved her job as an elevator operator at a Fifth Avenue hotel, mostly because of the sharp, tailored uniform. She was confident that her coworkers and patrons believed she was a man, until one day her boss informed her that female employees had to wear a hair bow to distinguish themselves. Sandy refused, angry and humiliated, and never tried to pass at work again, lamenting that she was “always cursed with the look of femininity.” The skirts, heels, and stockings she wore to her longtime job as a secretary at New York University made her feel detached from herself. She says, “It made me lonely. I had to live at night.”⁷³

Of course, as Sandy’s pained frustration suggests, there is another possibility for why some butches chose to pass. Perhaps practical and social factors, like safety and women’s limited opportunities, were combined with discomfort in their female bodies and an affinity for activities and styles defined as masculine. Passing could have offered a measure of social and embodied comfort, the kind of “home” or “belonging” in the body that would later become a standard trope in transgender narratives.⁷⁴ It likely was one means by which some female-bodied people *lived* as men in the ways that were available to them.

As the concept of transsexuality emerged in the postwar period, some butches did identify with it and seek medical treatment. While media attention to Christine Jorgensen publicly gendered the issue as MTF, potential FTMs also informed themselves about their options. Some probably read Dr. Michael Dillon’s 1946 book, *Self: Ethics and*

⁷² Brown, “Always Me,” 148.

⁷³ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 38.

⁷⁴ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 59.

Endocrinology, which made a case for testosterone therapy for “masculine invert.”⁷⁵

There were butches who procured hormones, possibly through doctors but more likely through illegal means.⁷⁶ FTM surgical options were unpredictable, expensive, and difficult to obtain. Hysterectomies and mastectomies were feasible, but required conflict-ridden encounters to convince medical professionals to perform them, and phalloplasty procedures were undeveloped and unreliable.⁷⁷ Sandy Kern considered surgery in the early-1960s, but decided against it because the technology was too primitive.⁷⁸ Another butch called Blackie visited a doctor at age sixteen to inquire about a “sex change” and was told to go to Europe. Blackie never did, but continued to wish for the resources to transition.⁷⁹

With transitioning technologies so new and inaccessible, as well as the availability of butch gender identity and lesbian community support, the choice to pursue (or not pursue) treatment is not a clear indicator of transgender subjectivity. Although she knew all about Christine Jorgensen and even met her once at a gay bar, Pauline Ferrara simply did not see transitioning as a viable option when she was a young butch. Reflecting on the possibility now that more and more people are identifying as trans, she believes that if she were younger today she would transition. These feelings are connected both to her relationship to her gendered body and to the hardships she has experienced moving through the world as a masculine woman. She explains, “The butch-looking woman wants to see the masculine she feels looking back at her. She wants to be

⁷⁵ Rubin, *Self-Made Men*, 49–50. For more on Dr. Michael Dillon, his transition, and his work, see Pagan Kennedy, *The First Man-Made Man: The Story of Two Sex Changes, One Love Affair, and a Twentieth-Century Medical Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2007).

⁷⁶ Mushroom, interview with author; Kovac, interview with author.

⁷⁷ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 150–9.

⁷⁸ Coleman, *Village Elders*, 38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

able to grow a beard and not have the chest.” In addition, being a man would have enabled her to legally marry, extend medical benefits to her wife, and – although this part could not be helped either way – have children with her. However, Pauline’s butch identity seems to have fulfilled and contained her gendered discord. Despite lamenting what could have been, she declares, “I’ll never stop saying that I’m a self-identified butch, never... [W]hen I die, I’m going in my tux.”⁸⁰ With this understanding of lesbian identity, butchness could provide an outlet for transgender sentiment in the postwar era.⁸¹

Since female masculinity was the most culturally legible symbol of lesbianism, femmes maintained a complicated relationship to their queerness. In some ways, butches who felt same-sex desire with corresponding gendered dissonance had it easier; at least their deviance was recognizable. Femmes’ lack of masculinity was puzzling, often rendering them suspect and unintelligible to the medical establishment, the public, and butches in their communities. Sometimes they even felt this way about themselves. While their queer desire distanced them from normative womanhood, they were quite literally unable to embody quintessential lesbianism. This conundrum made femmes’ queer status somewhat dubious, this ambiguity shaping the distinct ways that they understood their queerness.

⁸⁰ Ferrara, interview with author; Pauline Ferrara, interview by Thomas Weber, 9 April 2009, New York, NY, StoryCorps. Pauline passed away in April 2013. Although she did not have a tux in the house, she was buried in the favorite white suit she wore to annual galas hosted by New York City’s Butch/Femme Society, of which Pauline was an honored and treasured member. According to a close friend, “She went out like the butch that she was!” Yvette Schneider, e-mail message to author, 11 December 2013.

⁸¹ In her analysis of a 1994 interview with four transmen, Nan Alamilla Boyd challenges the idea that lesbians cannot be men or that men cannot have lesbian histories. Arguing that their identities as men do not necessarily negate their “emotional affinities” with queer women or roots in lesbian communities, FTM experiences can “suggest a paradigm in which sexual identity has social meaning beyond or outside gender, so that men might, at times, be lesbians...” Boyd, “Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories,” 146. For the original interview driving Boyd’s analysis, see Deva, “FTM/Female-to-Male: An Interview with Mike, Eric, Billy, Sky, and Shadow,” in *Dagger: On Butch Women*, 154–167.

Feminine lesbians confounded sexologists from the start. Working from the inversion model, gender “normalcy” and same-sex desire were irreconcilable within nineteenth-century understandings of queerness. These femme forebears who defied categorization were deemed passive recipients of masculine seduction, victims of the “mannish lesbian” who would surely renounce their unnatural relationships if able to secure the affections of a real man.⁸² By the postwar period, despite the shaky conceptual shift from inversion to same-sex object choice as the defining factor in homosexuality, femmes were still largely excluded from medical and psychological conceptualizations of lesbianism because of their normative gender expression. So-called experts continued to define “true homosexuality” on the basis of masculine embodiment, assessing factors like gait, stance, posture, smoking technique, and overall body structure. In this context, femmes remained the unfortunate – but curable – prey of aggressive butches instead of lesbians in their own right.⁸³

Despite a cold war obsession with invisible threats in which feminine lesbians inspired their own particular anxiety,⁸⁴ the gender inversion model persisted in popular media as well. It was key in mid-century African American periodicals, which identified queer women as “the girls with the swagger,” as well as publications like *Life* magazine and sensationalized journalistic exposés like *New York: Confidential!*⁸⁵ Novels like *The Well of Loneliness* and mass-marketed paperbacks with lesbian themes also helped to

⁸² Robert J. Corber, “Cold War Femme: Lesbian Visibility in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *All about Eve*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 6; Mary Louise Adams, “Disputed Desire: The ‘Feminine’ Women in Lesbian History” (Paper presented at the Eighth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Douglass College, June 1990), Fem subject file, LHA.

⁸³ Penn, “The Meanings of Lesbianism in Postwar America,” 115–7.

⁸⁴ Corber, “Cold War Femme”; Lauren Jae Gutterman, “Another Enemy Within: Lesbian Wives, or the Hidden Threat to the Nuclear Family in Post-War America,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 475–501.

⁸⁵ Leisa D. Meyer, “‘Strange Love’: Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture during the 1950s,” *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 625–657; Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *New York: Confidential!* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1948). For an example from *Life* magazine, see J. Mills, “Lesbians Try to Peddle Each Other,” *Life*, December 3, 1965.

perpetuate the stereotype of the gender inverted masculine lesbian and her confused feminine lover who came to her senses and went back to men by the book's end.⁸⁶ How did this public perception of gendered queerness influence femmes' understandings of themselves? Did they accept their dominant characterization as not "real" lesbians?

Like butches, femmes were attentive to the body in their self-interpretations, but instead of finding a sort of troubling validation of their queerness in embodied gender deviance, it was more often a feeling of misembodiment that troubled femmes. Lacking the masculinity that was supposed to accompany same-sex desire, some simultaneously doubted their queerness yet felt queerer than the butchest butches for failing to fit into a recognizable paradigm. Lesbian author Ann Bannon explored this uncertainty in her popular postwar pulp series, *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*.⁸⁷ While butch Beebo finds acceptance of her boyish body in a lesbian bar community, transforming her lifelong shame into pride, Bannon's femme character, Laura, struggles to reconcile her queer desire with her femininity. Scared and confused after giving in to a kiss from another woman, she considers the term "homosexual," finally "sob[bing] in an agony of self-accusation." Then, inspecting herself in the mirror, Laura thinks:

[N]othing seemed wrong. She had breasts and full hips like other girls. She wore lipstick and curled her hair. Her brow, the crook in her arms, the fit of her legs – everything was feminine... She thought that homosexual women were great strong creatures in slacks with brush cuts and deep voices... She looked back at herself... and she thought, 'I don't want to be a boy... I'm a *girl*. I *am* a girl... But if I'm a girl why do I love a girl? What's wrong with me?'⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian"; Adams, "Disputed Desire: The 'Feminine' Women in Lesbian History"; Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), chap. 8; Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), chap. 4.

⁸⁷ Bannon published the six books comprising *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* between 1957 and 1962. They were originally published in New York by Gold Medal Books and have since been reprinted by Naiad Press and Cleis Press.

⁸⁸ Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out* (1957; reprint, San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), 68–9, emphasis in original.

For Laura, the belief that she is naturally feminine, that she simply *is* a girl in body and style, confounds her understandings of lesbianism and exacerbates the feeling of being “wrong.”⁸⁹

Lesbians beyond the pages of fiction shared this experience of misembodied turmoil, as they not only compared themselves to dominant constructions of masculine lesbianism but also confronted the pressure to look butch within certain communities. One woman who eventually identified as femme tried hard to fit in with her masculine army buddies, this being the way to establish queerness among her peers. But she “was never too good at it,” believing, “I looked so weird. I’m just not shaped like a man... I looked like the missing link.”⁹⁰ Like Laura, she rooted her butch failure in the natural state of her body, demonstrating femmes’ particular kind of embodied shame. Moreover, this example highlights their ambiguous standing within lesbian communities. Despite the fact that femmes were a necessary and beloved half of a couple, many did believe that a true lesbian displayed at least some aspects of masculinity. Consequently, femmes were sometimes regarded as less committed to gay life and more likely to leave a woman for a man if the opportunity presented itself.⁹¹

For some femmes, understanding their lust for other women as an unavoidable and visceral truth was evidence that they too were queer. Their self-narration emphasizes desire as a powerful bodily force, surging forth from deep within as attraction to butches

⁸⁹ Elizabeth M. Matelski, “The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals, and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970” (Unpublished dissertation, Loyola University, 2011), 217–8.

⁹⁰ Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (San Francisco: New Glide Publications, 1978), 58–60.

⁹¹ This idea is reflected in postwar terminology that allowed for many different styles of queer masculinity (i.e. “drag butch,” “soft butch,” “courtly butch”) yet often simply conflated femmes with “women.” This tendency could normalize and conceal femmes’ queerness, affording butches a clearer sense of queer selfhood and status.

turned their “knees to water.”⁹² As a young femme, Joan Nestle felt there was something in her, an “appetite,” a “hunger” that needed sating, which pushed her to first explore her friends’ bodies and later to seek out butches in Greenwich Village bars.⁹³ Like the pangs of a fierce craving, “crushes... exploded in [her] guts” with an intensity she could not ignore.⁹⁴ Using language of corporeal sensation and need, of experiencing desire through a deep ache, weak knees, and a pounding heart, Joan echoes a common sentiment that offered queer belonging to femmes despite their uncertain status as lesbians.⁹⁵

Likewise, although some femmes did continue with heterosexual relationships during and beyond gay life,⁹⁶ many assert that their desire for women was profoundly different. Even if their experiences with men were enjoyable, they interpreted their sexual connection with butches as instinctual, primal, explaining, “[There was] something in them that something in me knew... We came together with some kind of basic... almost prehistoric foreknowledge of each other.”⁹⁷ Joan Nestle was always sexually curious and experimental, but the men she had been with could not hold a candle to her attraction to butches: “They could have huge penises, but I never felt them. A butch woman’s *finger* would send me over the wall!”⁹⁸ Some femmes insisted that sex with butches produced distinct tactile sensations, claiming, “There are textures I have never felt on my skin that they can create.”⁹⁹ By limiting these acute passionate reactions to butch-femme sexuality,

⁹² Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 256.

⁹³ Acain and Eisenberg, “Joan Nestle: Sixty and Sexy.”

⁹⁴ Joan Nestle, “The Femme Question,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 139.

⁹⁵ For another example, see Madeline Davis, “Forever Femme: A Soap Opera in Many Acts and an Agony of Analysis,” in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, ed. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker (New York: Routledge, 1997), 163.

⁹⁶ While this decision plays into the stereotype that feminine women could not really be queer, the fact is that many butches also maintained ties with men due to factors like economic vulnerability and social and familial pressure. For a full discussion of this topic, see Chapter 1.

⁹⁷ Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Panel.”

⁹⁸ Nestle, interview with author.

⁹⁹ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 267.

downplaying interactions with men, and again drawing on ideas of instinct and embodied response, these femmes imbued their queer desire with poignant meaning.

Though it fostered a feeling of queer belonging, femmes' belief in fundamental, irrepressible desire could also have adverse emotional consequences. At the same time that their normative gender presentation complicated their standing as lesbians, their desire distanced them from dominant ideologies of womanhood, due to its queerness as well as its powerful, unruly existence. Couched in "expert" opinion and rhetoric of national security, postwar discourse dictated that women concentrate on satisfying their husbands and contain their sexuality within the matrimonial bed.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, "shame prow[ed] around the sexually 'voracious' woman," those who defied this standard by harboring non-marital or seemingly excessive desire.¹⁰¹ For femmes with intense and markedly non-normative erotic longing, the belief that their sexuality was beyond their control could exacerbate and deepen feelings of perversion and deviance. It could also provoke a sense of detachment from other women, "good girls" who "play by the rules," who, as one femme distinguishes, "aren't interested in placing their desire at the forefront."¹⁰² Thus, even if they appeared feminine, femmes' sexuality complicated their relationship to womanhood, informing a distinctly queer gender identity.

In addition, lesbians were linked with prostitutes in the public imagination as exemplars of unbridled sexual degeneracy, "images of fallen womanhood" uncontained by marriage and motherhood.¹⁰³ As publicly sexual women, both were disreputable by

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 82, 141.

¹⁰¹ Munt, "Introduction," 5.

¹⁰² Joan Nestle and Barbara Cruikshank, "I'll Be the Girl: Generations of Fem," in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, 113.

¹⁰³ Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz

definition, positioned as “sisters of the sexual underworld” who clarified the boundaries between “normal” and “deviant” womanhood.¹⁰⁴ Understanding this conceptual connection, young Joan Nestle embraced Pat Ward, an upscale prostitute made famous by testifying against her millionaire pimp boyfriend, Mickey Jelke, in a highly publicized 1952 sex scandal. Explaining her obsession, Joan says, “I knew she was sexual and so was I,” alluding to the scarcity of feminine yet sexual role models in her world.¹⁰⁵ But having a role model did not necessarily offer Joan comfort; on the contrary, coupled with the knowledge of her queer desire, it confirmed a sense of her own perverted, shameful difference.

Despite the potential for emotional (as well as social and legal) repercussions, femmes were intent on exploring their “profound sexual need,”¹⁰⁶ their bodies pushing them to find the lovers they wanted. Infatuated by the butches on her block, Jessica Lopez recognized her queerness at a young age and, in spite of her mother’s warnings against the violent and manipulative delinquents looking to prey on innocent girls, never wavered in her lesbian identity. She not only vocally defended the *marimachas* to her mother and neighbors, but also incorporated the warnings into her sexual fantasies, thinking to herself, “Whatever, come seduce me... whatever this is, seduce me.”¹⁰⁷ In this way, Jessica welcomed her queer desire and subverted the negative trope of deviant masculine seduction and passive feminine victimization.

(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 359; Joan Nestle, “Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood,” in *A Restricted Country*, 158.

¹⁰⁴ Penn, “The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America,” 359–60. Indeed, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, lesbians and prostitutes did share territory in bars and these categories often overlapped when queer women supported themselves through sex work.

¹⁰⁵ Nestle, Hollibaugh, and Davis, “The Femme Tapes,” 255.

¹⁰⁶ Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism, A Conversation toward Ending Them,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 251.

¹⁰⁷ Lopez, interview with author.

Finding the courage to confront the dangers of gay life (many of which were far more brutal than neighborhood gossip) and embrace their desire could ease the pain of hardship. Experiencing a lover's touch brought femmes a sense of release and fulfillment that rivaled the shame of queer difference. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, despite "an often homophobic and variously deadening culture that threatens to destroy the self," femme selfhood "is precariously brought into being through sexual activity." In other words, sex "destroys the numbness created by an inability to express desire" and "compensates for the self-erasure and 'self-hatred' that are otherwise too pervasive" in femme experience.¹⁰⁸ In addition, butch erotic response – their immense pleasure in pleasing their lovers – could ease femmes' sexual shame. Speaking to this point, one femme explains, "It is butch women who made wanting sex okay, who never said I wanted it 'too much' or thought I got too wet."¹⁰⁹

Moreover, much like butch masculinity, femme desire was institutionalized in lesbian culture. Femmes were the focus of attention and affection in queer communities, the ones butches sought to woo, impress, and ultimately satisfy. In this culture rooted in and sustained by sexuality, femme pleasure reigned supreme as central to erotic activity and necessary for both partners' gratification.¹¹⁰ Being pursued and sexually fulfilled was a core component of femme identity and many embraced this position, expressing the urge to be "the woman that a woman always wanted."¹¹¹ In the same way that butches found solace from their sense of gendered discord in lesbian culture, femme identity and

¹⁰⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, "Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities," in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 140.

¹⁰⁹ Lyndall MacCowan, "Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives: Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties," in *The Persistent Desire*, 320. Although MacCowan is writing about the 1970s and 1980s, her ideas resonate with the postwar era.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 191–2.

¹¹¹ Hollibaugh and Moraga, "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With," 247; Gomez, "Butch-Femme Panel."

experiences helped to quell their sexualized shame. Women found a healing power in finally realizing their deviant desires and becoming part of queer groups. As one femme declared, “My passion had taken me home, and not all the hating voices of the McCarthy 1950s could keep me away from my community.”¹¹²

By institutionalizing female masculinity and same-sex desire with butch and femme roles, lesbians established cultural norms that encouraged some level of performance. Merrill Mushroom, for example, relished a certain theatricality in her butch presentation: “I could slick my hair back. I could wear sunglasses. I could tape my breasts down. I could swagger and be courtly and mannerly and gentlemanly and fuck around with a whole lot of women and not have to bother with anything but that.”¹¹³ She liked the illusion, the feeling of fooling the heterosexual public while she and her friends were in on the secret.¹¹⁴ But even if lesbians enjoyed and played with their images, butch scholar Esther Newton insists that, unlike gay male camp, postwar butch-femme culture was “utterly serious, always ‘for real,’ completely different in feeling and tone from the fabulous and bittersweet excesses of the camp drag queens.” Contrary to the idea that these types of performances exemplify gender’s social construction, she argues for the significance of innateness in these identities, claiming “Butch-femme... [is] not demolishing essentialism and the idea that there is an authentic (gay) self; rather, that is [its] foundation.”¹¹⁵ Similarly, while Merrill acknowledges her performance, she also had an intimate connection with her butchness. Aware of more contemporary theories of performativity and social construction, as well as the ways that her own identity has

¹¹² Nestle, “The Femme Question,” 139.

¹¹³ Mushroom, interview with author.

¹¹⁴ Mushroom, “Confessions of a Butch Dyke,” 41.

¹¹⁵ Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 65, 87.

evolved and shifted over time, she still cautiously believes that *butch* and *femme* represent “that core of insubstantial substance that I just have never found a way to be able to describe in language except that it is what it is.”¹¹⁶

Newton’s argument for an essential gay self is reflected not just in individual lesbians’ perspectives of themselves, but also in larger cultural understandings. Despite malleable and diverse approaches to butch-femme roles and ambiguity in visual markers, most lesbians still believed that being femme or butch was not so much a decision as it was a perceptible truth. For example, when questioned about how to tell a butch from a femme, Miriam Wolfson definitively states, “You didn’t have to pick. It was obvious.” And Robbie Marino echoes, “We just looked. We knew who was who.”¹¹⁷

This idea was also discernible in the pages of *The Ladder*, the periodical published by the lesbian homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s and 1960s. Satirical cartoons expressed the common opinion that true gendered selfhood resided in femme and butch bodies. Historian Elizabeth Matelski analyzes one such cartoon, in which a feminine outfit clearly cannot conceal a woman’s butchness (Figure 20):

Her form is stereotypically butch: her body is curveless and stout. Beneath her blouse, her breasts slightly sag as if without the support of a bra. Her legs are thick and little distinguishes her waist from her wide hips. Moreover, her short, cropped hair is slicked back on the sides. Her face is without makeup, her lips twisted in a grimace, one eyebrow arched, looking like a sneer. Her hands on her hips give her a very aggressive, challenging stance.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Mushroom, interview with author.

¹¹⁷ Wolfson, interview with author; Marino, interview with author.

¹¹⁸ Matelski, “The Color(s) of Perfection,” 222.



Figure 20: Comic by Domino,
The Ladder, February 1962



Figure 21: “Well, of course I’m butch.
What do I look like!” Comic by
Domino, *The Ladder*, April 1962

The caption accompanying this picture reads: “Oh, I always wear skirts and blouses in public so people won’t suspect that I’m gay.” The cartoonist is clearly encouraging readers to laugh at the delusion that a butch can hide who she is. Likewise, in another cartoon depicting a woman in butch attire, it is her obviously femme body that gives her away (Figure 21):

Her face and profile are angular and delicate. Her mouth is... lipsticked and her nose is dainty and upturned. Her hair is shortly shorn, but is clearly styled... Although she wears “men’s clothing,” her... collared short-sleeved men’s shirt hugs her impressive curves. Her waist is comically cinched, making her large balloon-shaped breasts even more exaggerated.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 223–4.

The caption – “Well, of course I’m butch. What do I look like!” – again sees humor in a lesbian trying to embody an identity that she plainly cannot.

As these images indicate, postwar lesbians were committed to the idea that butch and femme labels revealed core, internal truths about the women who claimed them.

Pauline Ferrara, who began this chapter with the simple “can-of-peas” logic, conveys a strikingly similar view of butch-femme embodiment, explaining,

You can take the clothes off a femme and you can put them in my outfit... but the femininity comes right through... so gorgeous, so feminine, and there’s no denying it. You can take their entire feminine outfit and put it on a butch and it will look like a guy in drag... They don’t walk like a femme... they don’t act like a femme. They’re just masculine, that’s the way they’re born... It’s just natural and you can tell right away.¹²⁰

As lesbians like Pauline navigated a hostile world, the conviction that they could not change or hide what they understood to be their authentic selves gave profound meaning to their experiences as queer people, as butches and femmes. This sense of innate subjectivity was a source of both shame and validation, distress and comfort, as they confronted and interpreted their queer difference throughout their lives. By institutionalizing the forms of “deviance” that lesbians found most troubling – butch masculinity and femme desire – butch-femme culture and community offered names, honored roles, belonging, and reprieve from the hardships of gay life. Thus, this emotional analysis of innate embodiment in lesbian subjectivity serves to elucidate and sharpen the personal significance of butch-femme identity and culture in postwar America.

¹²⁰ Ferrara, interview with author.

EPILOGUE

“Are Roles Really Dead?”¹: Butch-Femme in the Feminist 1970s

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women’s liberation movement established a new approach to lesbianism. While marked by desire, deviance, and gendered identities in the postwar period, lesbianism according to feminists was about being “woman-identified” – politically committing oneself to other women in every way, including sexually. It has become a common belief that lesbian-feminism repressed and supplanted butch-femme, not only because its radical activism disrupted dominant gender ideologies and instigated a sharp break from the past, but also because it actively tried to do so. Harshly condemning “role-playing” as heterosexist and misogynistic, radical feminists championed lesbianism as a strictly egalitarian, supremely political stance against the patriarchy. This notion has been cemented in queer collective memory, most powerfully by self-proclaimed butches and femmes who, during the “sex wars” of the 1980s, revealed their experiences under lesbian-feminist tyranny.²

But butch-femme did not disappear in the 1970s. Although many lesbians involved in feminist activism learned that butch-femme had no place among liberated women, they did not necessarily abandon it. Instead, gendered dynamics frequently became more secretive, subtle, and unacknowledged. There were also feminist lesbians who adamantly claimed and sustained butch and femme identities. Since, as this dissertation demonstrates, butch-femme style and sexuality was manifested in a variety of ways in the postwar period, it is not surprising that it took on new forms in the 1970s.

¹ Jeanne Córdova, “Are Roles Really Dead?,” *The Lesbian Tide* 9, no. 1 (August 1979): 4–6.

² Lillian Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme: A Phenomenon in Lesbian Sexuality of the 1980s and 1990s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 4 (1992): 578–596; Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 2.

Moreover, ideas about butch-femme's departure remain focused largely on educated, white, middle-class movement women, while lesbians of color, poor, working-class, and rural women, and those simply not involved in feminism often maintained butch-femme culture. Thus, although it is true that the 1970s marked the end of an era in some ways, butch-femme's enduring significance among lesbians shows the flexibility, persistence, and evolutionary potential of this erotic system.

As women's liberation swept the cultural landscape, it inspired countless women to challenge the status quo through consciousness-raising, organizing, theorizing, and experimenting with different lifestyles. For those who experienced their queerness as deviant and dangerous, the concept of lesbianism as a radical expression of feminist politics could offer a welcome sense of legitimacy and analytical insight. After years in communities of "people who were called freaks," becoming part of a movement – becoming a lesbian-*feminist* – enabled some femmes and butches to finally feel "respectable."³ As with many new feminists, it aroused feelings of hope and possibility, and made them proud to be women, perhaps for the first time.⁴ Some butches learned to reconcile their masculinity with their femaleness, as expanded ideas of what a woman could be and do allowed them to feel more comfortable being one.⁵ In this way, butch Jeanne Córdova says, "Feminism came to my rescue... [It] healed the core contradictions of my life."⁶

³ Joan Nestle, "Voices from Lesbian Herstory," in *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 105; Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," in *A Restricted Country*, 98.

⁴ Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 108; Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 214.

⁵ Elly Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 122.

⁶ Jeanne Córdova, "Butches, Lies, and Feminism," in *The Persistent Desire*, 281–2.

At the same time, however, Jeanne felt that the movement “tore apart [her] butch identity.”⁷ As part of a larger critique of the heteronormative gender system, lesbian-feminists rejected butch-femme styles and erotics as a “heterosexual cop-out,” mere “role-playing” that exaggerated traditional gender norms. As such, it was considered offensive and misogynistic, not to mention outdated. While butches were criticized as “male-identified,” femmes were labeled victims and traitors for acting like “girls.”⁸ Lesbianism was not about sexually objectifying other women, feminists explained; it was about actively combatting the patriarchy through female autonomy and self-affirmation.⁹

Feminists were not shy about sharing these opinions, and femmes and butches often found themselves in awkward and painful situations in lesbian-feminist spaces, if they were not banished outright. Leaders might pause before a meeting or consciousness-raising session to make sure that everyone there was “woman-identified” – that is, that there were no butches present – and refuse to begin until the offending members left.¹⁰ Those who remained learned that butch-femme was “low-class” and “low-consciousness.”¹¹ At dances and marches, butch-femme couples were openly belittled and taunted, as feminists called them deluded, treated them as an antiquated joke, and asked why they had even bothered to come.¹² To discourage butch-femme coupling, lesbian-feminists took up group dancing, and women who chose to dance in pairs were

⁷ Ibid., 283.

⁸ Ibid.; Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 80; Nestle, “Voices from Lesbian Herstory,” 112.

⁹ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 35–8.

¹⁰ Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 285.

¹¹ Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” 100; Esther Newton, “The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary (with Shirley Walton, 1984),” in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, 173–4.

¹² Amber Hollibaugh, “My Dangerous Desires: Falling in Love with Stone Butches, Passing Women and Girls (Who Are Guys) Who Catch My Eye,” in *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 259.

frequently made so uncomfortable that they left early.¹³ Those who picked up newspapers or popular lesbian-feminist texts, like Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, saw ads specifying "no butches need apply" and found butch-femme portrayed as a ridiculous, obsolete and harmful stereotype.¹⁴ The entry for butch-femme in *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* declared, "Pathetically, this behavior was generally a parody of the worst heterosexual coupling," as generations of lesbians were "brain-washed" into dysfunctional and psychologically damaging relationships.¹⁵

While many women happily abandoned butch-femme and embraced new standards of lesbianism, others "gritted [their] teeth and hid it," determined to remake themselves as "emotionally healthy radical lesbian activist[s]."¹⁶ The most recognizable way to do so was through androgynous style – a conscious and visible challenge to the patriarchal fetishization of women's appearance, the fashion industry, and American consumerism in general.¹⁷ As politically correct "dykes," lesbian-feminists cut their hair short, filled their closets with jeans, flannel shirts, and hiking boots, and tossed their makeup, jewelry, and high heels in the garbage.¹⁸ Ironically, the emphasis on

¹³ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 98; Marie Cartier, "Baby, You Are My Religion: The Emergence of 'Theeology' in Pre-Stonewall Butch-Femme/Gay Women's Bar Culture and Community" (Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2010), 296–7.

¹⁴ Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2010; Lyndall MacCowan, "Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives: Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties," in *The Persistent Desire*, 311.

¹⁵ Dr. Emily L. Sisley and Bertha Harris, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex: A Tender and Liberated Guide to the Pleasures and Problems of a Lesbian Lifestyle* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977), 60.

¹⁶ Allison, *Skin*, 22–4. On the other hand, some butches who felt that their way of life was disappearing under feminist attack opted out of lesbianism altogether and became men. As masculine people who loved women, they saw transitioning as a more viable option than attempting to fit into this new paradigm. Faderman, "The Return of Butch and Femme," 585; Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 63–89; Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Milford, CT: Firebrand Books, 1993).

¹⁷ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 79–82; Arlene Stein, "All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go? Style Wars and the New Lesbianism," in *The Persistent Desire*, 432.

¹⁸ As Anne (Finn) Enke points out, conflating femininity with objectification was a critique rooted in whiteness, as black women had a different, more empowering relationship to femininity and getting dressed up in the 1970s. Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 55.

comfortable, functional clothing, short hair, and few adornments often made the androgynous ideal indistinguishable from butch style, and it was now women who maintained their feminine looks who gave butch-femme couples away.¹⁹

For a femme who had previously reveled in making “a visual gift of herself” to butch lovers, the new androgynous criteria could feel confining and unnerving.²⁰ Women agonized over the pressure to cut their long hair, and, ashamed to be seen in their favorite high-heels, resolved to only wear them alone behind closed doors.²¹ Feminist femmes who did not give up their skirts, earrings, and lipstick were often labeled “female impersonators” and harassed out the door of radical bookstores and meetings, or became the subjects of constant gossip and criticism by women who disregarded their opinions on feminist matters.²² Butches fared better, since most already owned the requisite attire and felt comfortable wearing it, as long as they did not appear *too* masculine. For some, their clothing never did change – it was only others’ perceptions of their style that transformed their butchness into androgyny.²³ But butches also made sacrifices, sadly discarding their ties, suspenders, and suit jackets to align their looks with their feminist beliefs.²⁴ One woman, after learning that the chains on her boots were “male-identified,” almost cried as

¹⁹ Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 581; Sherrie A. Inness and Michele E. Lloyd, “G.I. Joes in Barbie Land: Recontextualizing Butch in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Culture,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 12; Joan Nestle, “Flamboyance and Fortitude: An Introduction,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 15.

²⁰ Nestle, “Voices from Lesbian Herstory,” 112 (quote); Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism, A Conversation toward Ending Them,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 252.

²¹ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 83–4; Letter from E.J. Graff to A.M., May 11, 1982, Fem subject file, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter LHA).

²² Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 284; MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 313–4; Jeanne Córdova, “Butch Femme in the Boardroom & the Bedroom,” *The Lesbian Tide* 9, no. 1 (August 1979): 4–5.

²³ Bulkin, “An Old Dyke’s Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden,” 122.

²⁴ Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 283; Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 84; Kelly Anderson, “Gender, Desire, and Feminism: A Conversation between Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez,” in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132.

she pried them off with pliers, wondering, “What did it mean to live as a butch without chains?”²⁵

Feminist dykes actively distinguished themselves from butch-femme communities – which they referred to as “old gay” – in other ways, as well. As part of a critique of both heterosexuality and queer gendered “roles,” lesbian-feminists condemned all power imbalances in sexual and romantic relationships as oppressive, setting a standard of equal partners and interchangeable sex acts. To avoid objectifying each other as women, truly “egalitarian sex” required lovers to initiate sex equally, participate equally, and orgasm equally. Good feminists were expected to refuse all penetration – that “superfluous ‘male trip’” – and focus exclusively on clitoral stimulation, ideally orally since tribadism had the potential to resemble the heterosexual missionary position.²⁶ In addition, although 1970s lesbianism has gained a reputation as being “heavy on the romance and light on the sex,” the principles of androgyny and egalitarian sexuality created the belief that all good lesbian-feminists could and should be sexually compatible and attracted to each other. Thus, there was a certain pressure to sleep with (and enjoy sex with) any other lesbian-feminist.²⁷

This kind of sex may have been fulfilling for some, but many lesbians who were used to butch-femme modes of interaction (or who would later discover them) found that it left much to be desired. As avowed feminists, they were ashamed and confused by their lack of sexual excitement, and felt like failures when an erotic encounter left them

²⁵ Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 284.

²⁶ Newton, “The Misunderstanding,” 168, 174 (quote); Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” 244–5; Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 582; JoAnn Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny, and Other Rhythms*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Spinsters Book Co., 1990), 68, 75; Jan Brown, “Sex, Lies, and Penetration: A Butch Finally Fesses Up,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 410–2.

²⁷ Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 582 (quote); Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 55; MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 312. Standards of non-monogamy also contributed to this pressure.

unsatisfied.²⁸ Butches who were proud of their sexual prowess quickly learned that to admit this in feminist circles was a vulgar error, like “eating raw steak in front of people.”²⁹ Because lust itself was considered “male” objectification, simply harboring desire for other women – what some might see as the cornerstone of lesbianism – was an affront worthy of confession and forgiveness. Femme Amber Hollibaugh, who had been hiding her true longing from her feminist community, finally broke down and cried during a consciousness-raising session. After guiltily admitting, “I can’t help it. I just... want her. I want to feel her,” the group comforted and absolved Amber in a display akin to exorcism, “exorcising this *crude* sexual need for women.”³⁰

This kind of desire was not only unacceptable; in some communities, it also marked the boundary between feminists and butches and femmes. Women just coming out in the 1970s learned that there were two types of lesbians: those who were “old gay” viewed their lesbianism in sexual terms, hung out in bars, and tended to be into “roles,” while “political lesbians,” “lesbian-feminists,” or “dykes” emphasized “the political meaning of love for women” that transcended the sexual.³¹ This could be confusing and shameful for women who came to their lesbianism through feminism but felt that powerful desire now attributed only to obsolete “old gays” and considered “bar-ish.”³² But although these distinctions were clearly defined in theory, in reality the lines between groups were more blurred.

²⁸ MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 312–3; Newton, “The Misunderstanding,” 167–8.

²⁹ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 101.

³⁰ Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” 250–1, emphasis in original.

³¹ MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 309 (quote); Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, chap. 1; Susan Krieger, *The Mirror Dance: Identity in a Women’s Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), chap. 11.

³² Krieger, *The Mirror Dance*, 134; MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 309–11.

Some women found it nearly impossible to reconcile their butch-femme identities and sexuality with their political community. Amber Hollibaugh, who cried while admitting to lusting after women, felt irrevocably torn as a working-class bar femme and a radical feminist revolutionary. Her high-femme femininity, intense longing for butches, and desire to be “possessed” by them sexually left her horrified and almost suicidal under the strain of feeling like an “alien to the politics of [her] own movement.” To cope with “ceaseless scrutiny and interrogation” and the knowledge that her “sisters” viewed women like her as “a perversion,” Amber hid her erotic femme life from her feminist community, running to bars after political meetings to “fuck like a rabbit with women who want me.” It was incredibly difficult for her to live in both worlds, to, in her words, be “in isolation as I faced all the accusations and silences made by those very people I trusted and valued inside my own gay political world, people I still needed in order to survive.” But she did not give up her bars or her butches. She did not give up being a “queer, high-femme, old-gay lesbian.”³³

While some women led discrete double lives, others had more success combining politics and butch-femme culture with varying degrees of separation, secrecy, and conflict. Like Amber, writer and activist Dorothy Allison kept her femme identity and attraction to butches hidden from the women in her collective, and snuck out at night to meet tough women in tough bars where she knew her feminist sisters would never find her.³⁴ But she did not always hide; she picked her battles, occasionally bringing butch lovers to lesbian-feminist events and pushing for their acceptance.³⁵ Jeanne Córdova was

³³ Hollibaugh, “My Dangerous Desires,” 253–62; Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With,” 250–1.

³⁴ Allison, *Skin*, 30.

³⁵ Anderson, “Gender, Desire, and Feminism: A Conversation between Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez,” 135.

a major organizer in Los Angeles and the founder of the prominent lesbian-feminist magazine *Lesbian Tide*, but maintained a butch identity and dated both “movement women” and bar femmes.³⁶ Recognizing a “growing cadre of closet butches,” she also started the Jaded Butch League to analyze feminist arguments against butchness and their place in the movement.³⁷

Although it is unclear to what extent Jeanne disclosed her butchness and femme lovers to her feminist community, there were political groups that accepted the presence of “old gays” in their midst. In fact, it was not uncommon for relationships to form across borders, and some members of “mixed” couples divided their time between butch-femme and feminist spaces without conflict.³⁸ Moreover, some femmes and butches simply refused to partition their lives, adamantly claiming their right to both feminism and butch-femme. Like most butches, Pauline Ferrara learned from her women’s liberation group, All the Queens Women, that she was brainwashed and politically incorrect. But Pauline was stubborn, vehemently defending her identity until her cohort was forced to accept it, and All the Queens Women became the center of her political and social life.³⁹ Further, a group of avowed femmes took matters into their own hands, founding the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, an organization that “defined lesbian-feminism in Southern California” in the mid-1970s. The RFTC embraced butches as well as femmes, coining the term “post-power femme” – “a feminist, femme-identified lesbian who was so secure in her power that she didn’t have to deny her femininity.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 269–71.

³⁷ Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 286.

³⁸ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 300; Krieger, *The Mirror Dance*, 128–30, 137.

³⁹ Pauline Ferrara, interview with author, Queens, NY, 16 December 2010.

⁴⁰ Córdova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism,” 286–7. For other examples of lesbian-feminist and butch-femme overlap, see Chea Villanueva, “In the Shadows of Love: The Letter,” in *The Femme Mystique*, ed. Lesléa Newman (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995), 57–59; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 38–48, 149, 168–72.

In addition, many believed that despite officially censuring butch-femme, lesbian-feminists often displayed gendered dynamics in their relationships, even if they did not acknowledge or identify them as such.⁴¹ For example, one woman interviewed in a 1979 issue of *Lesbian Tide* explained that she did not accept a femme label because she was not attracted to butches. Rather, her “type” was “androgynous-looking women, you know, flat chest, short hair, slim hipped, tall” – a description that could easily be applied to many butches. While another woman in the article declared that “roles are dead,” a member of the same activist community claimed that “role-playing” was alive and well among lesbian-feminists.⁴² And according to another feminist’s personal observation, “80 percent of all lesbians had behavior patterns that could be seen as butch or femme.”⁴³ One explanation for the seeming contradictions over “roles” points to the fact that lesbian-feminists viewed butch-femme in highly caricatured ways, making it difficult for any woman to actually fulfill the stereotypes. Thus, “one might get away with being ‘into roles’ as long as one doesn’t call them that.”⁴⁴

Moreover, many lesbians continued to eroticize traits associated with gender and seek the complementarity of difference, even if not explicitly.⁴⁵ Some femmes felt simultaneously belittled and desirable in their feminist circles, as androgynous women (whom they suspected were really butches) were “too into their politics to admit their attraction to [them].”⁴⁶ But contrary to standards of egalitarian sexuality, some lesbian-feminist couples did incorporate butch-femme erotic styles into their relationships, with

⁴¹ Ferrara, interview with author; Krieger, *The Mirror Dance*, 128; Córdova, “Butch Femme in the Boardroom & the Bedroom.”

⁴² Córdova, “Are Roles Really Dead?” 5–6.

⁴³ Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 583.

⁴⁴ MacCowan, “Re-Collecting History, Renaming Lives,” 315–6.

⁴⁵ Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 86–7.

⁴⁶ Villanueva, “In the Shadows of Love: The Letter,” 57 (quote); Loulan, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, 67.

one woman taking the lead in partnered dancing and initiating and orchestrating sex – sex which, it bears mentioning, was sometimes penetrative.⁴⁷ Femme Barbara Carroll says that even though butch-femme became an unacceptable practice in her feminist community, she continued to feel a gendered synergy with her partners, and dated women whom she considered butch in their approaches to sex and romance.⁴⁸ In this way, feminist lesbians created and participated in new versions of “old gay.”

Although the discussion above focuses on butch-femme’s fate in relation to lesbian-feminist dominance, there were plenty of women who did not get swept up in activism and maintained butch-femme culture during the 1970s in much the same way as they always had. Examples of social and sexual overlap between “political lesbians” and “old gay” butches and femmes reveal that these two types coexisted, that one did not replace the other. While lesbian-feminists created new social spaces, like bookstores, coffeehouses, and collectives, gay bars remained the principal meeting place for poor and working-class butches and femmes, particularly in non-urban areas.⁴⁹ It was in some of these “old dyke bars” in the Deep South that Dorothy Allison met her butch lovers, “women who were more [her] erotic charge” than the androgynous feminists she knew.⁵⁰ But even in major cities, like New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago, there were pockets of butch-femme that attracted women who were not involved in feminism. They were often centered within communities of color, where gendered identities never went out of style.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Sky Vanderlinde, “Loving Blue,” in *The Persistent Desire*, 230–3.

⁴⁸ Barbara Carroll, interview with author, New York, NY, 15 December 2010.

⁴⁹ Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 292; Newton, “The Misunderstanding,” 173.

⁵⁰ Anderson, “Gender, Desire, and Feminism: A Conversation between Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez,” 133.

⁵¹ Gloria Rivera, phone interview with author, 2 May 2011; Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 32, 124–6; Villanueva, “In the Shadows of Love: The Letter”; Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 582–3; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 37–45.

Many of these femmes and butches resented younger women swooping in and criticizing them as offensive and outdated. Who were they to tell them what being gay was really about? For lesbian-feminists, it was a political experiment, an adventure, not a way of life rooted in danger, deviance, and passion like it was for real queers. They even hijacked the word *dyke*!⁵² Furthermore, some older butches and femmes felt that they paved the way for the next generation. When younger women tried to tell her how to dress and act, Jeanne Gray responded, “This old grey-headed bulldagger made it possible that you could be out here and jump up and down and shout and say that you don’t want to be in role-playing.”⁵³ As this retort demonstrates, many lesbians were not willing to take “old gay” for an answer. For them, butch-femme remained current, relevant, subversive, and hot.

Thus, the 1970s did not mark the end of butch-femme. Lesbians created a complex and powerful erotic system, committed to gendered exploration and sexual fulfillment, and creative and flexible enough to withstand the struggles of postwar criminality and the challenges of 1970s feminism. In the generations since, styles of queerness have evolved and expanded, but signs of butch-femme’s lasting personal and cultural significance are everywhere, as lesbians continue to adapt and interpret gendered erotics within their identities and relationships. Like the accounts analyzed in this dissertation, these modern adaptations demonstrate that far from being rigid and

For more on butch-femme as the ongoing organizing principle in African American and Latina lesbian culture, see Cartier, “Baby, You Are My Religion,” 273; “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman,” *Herstories: A Digital Collection*, 31 May 1980, MP3; Karla E. Rosales, “Papis, Dykes, Daddies: A Study of Chicana and Latina Self-Identified Butch Lesbians” (M.A. thesis, San Francisco State University, 2001); Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

⁵² Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 100; Faderman, “The Return of Butch and Femme,” 585.

⁵³ Jeanne Gray, “Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman.” For an extensive critique of the way that feminism theorized and handled butch-femme, see Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With.”

confining, butch-femme is and was malleable and forgiving. The women whose stories are collected here attest to that.

APPENDIX

Biographical Information

Here are brief biographical sketches for many of the subjects whose experiences are analyzed in this dissertation. Some told me their stories directly, some through other scholars' research, documentary films, archival materials, and the pages of anthologies and memoirs. Several of these women preferred pseudonyms, which are interspersed throughout this list without distinction. I have included information pertinent to understanding the circumstances in their lives and in lesbian culture – their queer identity, date of birth, race/ethnicity, and class – to the best of my knowledge and as specifically as I am able.

Barbara Carroll

Femme, b. 1946, Jewish-American, lower-middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2010

Pauline Ferrara

Butch, b. 1939, Caucasian (French, Scotch and Italian ancestry), working-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2010

Interviewed by Thomas Weber, 2009, Storycorps

Yvonne/Maua Flowers

Butch, b. 1932, African American, class unknown

Interviewed by Martin Duberman, 1990, Martin B. Duberman Papers,

Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

Martin B Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993)

Jeanne Gray

Butch/Bulldagger, African American, age/class unknown

“Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community,” Brooklyn NY, organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman, *Herstories: A Digital Collection*. 31 May 1980. MP3.

Jo Hiner

Femme, b. 1926, Caucasian, upper-middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Ira Jeffries

Butch/Stud, b. 1932, African American, working-class

Ira L. Jeffries, "Strange Fruits at the Purple Manor," *NYQ*, February 23, 1992, Periodical Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY

Ira Jeffries, "My Mother's Daughter," in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 59–61

Ira L. Jeffries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library

Jerre Kalbas

Butch, b. 1918, Jewish-American (Russian ancestry), working-class/poor

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Interviewed by Anne de Mare, 2010, "The Real Rosie the Riveter Project," Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University

Penny Coleman, "Jerre," in *Village Elders* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 69–73

Sandy Kern

Butch, b. 1929, Jewish-American (Russian ancestry), working-class/poor

"Sandy Kern," in *The Persistent Desire*, 56–8

Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997)

Penny Coleman, "Sandy and Eileen," in *Village Elders* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 35–40

Carolyn Kovac

Gay/Ki-ki, b. 1942, Caucasian, working-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2010

Jessica Lopez

Femme, b. 1948, Puerto Rican/Cuban-American, working-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Audre Lorde

Gay/Ki-ki, b. 1934, African American (Caribbean/West Indian ancestry), working-class

Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982)

Audre Lorde, "Tar Beach," *Conditions*, 1979

Doris/Blue Lunden

Butch, b. 1936, Caucasian, working-class

Elly Bulkin, "An Old Dyke's Tale: An Interview with Doris Lunden," in *The Persistent Desire*, 110–123

Sky Vanderlinde, "Loving Blue," in *The Persistent Desire*, 226–233

Robbie Marino

Butch, b. late-1930s/early-1940s, Italian-American, middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2010

Merril Mushroom

Butch, b. 1941, Jewish-American, middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Merril Mushroom, "Bar Dyke Sketches: 1959," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1982

Merril Mushroom, "Confessions of a Butch Dyke," *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*, Fall 1983

James T. Sears, "Growing Up as a Jewish Lesbian in South Florida: Queer Teen Life in the Fifties," in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 173–186.

Joan Nestle

Femme, b. 1940, Jewish-American, working-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2009 and 2011

Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003)

Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union: New & Selected Writings*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998)

Esther Newton

Butch, b. 1940, Jewish-American, middle-class

Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000)

Irene Read

Gay/Ki-ki, b. 1944, Caucasian (Irish, English, Swedish ancestry), lower-middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Rosalie Regal

Femme, b. 1935, Jewish-American, working-class

Interviewed by Joan E. Biren, 1999, Joan E. Biren Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

Gloria Rivera

Butch, b. 1948, Puerto Rican-American, working-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Carmen Vázquez

Butch, b. 1949, Puerto Rican-American, working-class/poor

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2011

Interviewed by Kelly Anderson, 2005, "Voices of Feminism Oral History Project," Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

Carmen Vázquez Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

W.D.

Butch, b. early-1940s, African American, class unknown

Interviewed by Lenn Keller, 2004

Miriam Wolfson

Butch, b. 1922, Jewish-American, upper-middle-class

Interviewed by Alix Genter, 2010

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