



Butch-Femme

by Teresa Theophano

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A butch-femme couple participating in a group wedding ceremony in Taiwan.

The concept of butch and femme identities have long been hotly debated within the lesbian community, yet even achieving a consensus as to exactly what the terms "butch" and "femme" mean can be extraordinarily difficult. In recent years, these words have come to describe a wide spectrum of individuals and their relationships. It is easiest, then, to begin with an examination of butch-femme culture and meaning from a historical perspective.

Butch and femme emerged in the early twentieth century as a set of sexual and emotional identities among lesbians. To give a general but oversimplified idea of what butch-femme entails, one might say that butches exhibit traditionally "masculine" traits while femmes embody "feminine" ones. Although oral histories have demonstrated that butch-femme couples were seen in America as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, and that they were particularly conspicuous in the 1930s, it is the mid-century working-class and bar culture that most clearly illustrate the archetypal butch-femme dynamic.

Arguably, during the period of the 1940s through the early 1960s, butches and femmes were easiest to recognize and characterize: butches with their men's clothing, DA haircuts, and suave manners often found their more traditionally styled femme counterparts, wearing dresses, high heels, and makeup, in the gay bars.

A highly visible and accepted way of living within the lesbian community, butch-femme was in fact considered the norm among lesbians during the 1950s. Deviance from these identities was stigmatized; women who did not fall into either category were deemed "kiki" and often called "confused."

In addition, the unwritten rules of butch-femme dictated that butch-but and femme-femme relationships were strictly taboo. A butch, with her tough exterior and vaunted sexual expertise, was expected to couple with and please a femme. Femmes, sometimes misunderstood as being sexually and emotionally passive, often competed fiercely for the attention of a butch. The couples frequently settled down into committed, long-term relationships--a lesbian alternative to marriage--and fought hard simply to be themselves in an era of extreme sexual repression and bigotry.

But later twentieth-century identity politics, linked closely to the lesbian feminist movement beginning in the early 1970s, dismissed butch-femme culture as politically incorrect. Many lesbians of this era critiqued butch-femme as capitulation to oppressive patriarchal standards. Androgyny became the lesbian ideal. However, as writer and historian Lillian Faderman points out in her seminal lesbian history *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, "androgyny" usually meant that *everyone* looked butch!

Criticism of butch-femme was usually based on the claim that these identifications are an attempt to replicate heterosexuality by designating one member of a couple as male (the butch) and the other as female (the femme). Even today this argument is frequently aired. However, it is highly problematic because of its own underlying assumption of heteronormativity--that is, the tenet that heterosexuality is

normal, and that all other forms of sexuality are only weak imitations of it. Butch-femme need not be an imitation of *anything*; it is a unique way of living and loving.

While it is impossible to define strictly the essence of butchness, one may examine characteristics that many butches share. More than simply a mode of dressing or a preference in the bedroom, butch identity is often predicated upon a kind of androgynous, powerful energy.

Butches may cross-dress and crop their hair not because they want to be men, but because they are expressing a different way of being a woman, or simply of being gendered. Rather than attempting to replicate traditional masculinity and heterosexuality, butches present a challenge to both in their rejection of how the dominant culture has decided a woman should look and act.

Stone butches, as described extensively in Leslie Feinberg's 1992 novel *Stone Butch Blues*, do not permit themselves to be touched intimately. They instead derive pleasure from making love to their partners, who often identify as stone femmes. Some butches may also choose to use male first names and pronouns, because while they do not identify as men, neither do they consider themselves women. Yet often they still identify very strongly with the lesbian community.

Femmes are perhaps best described as lesbian, bisexual, and queer women whose manner and style falls along the lines of what is traditionally considered feminine. Whereas butches are sometimes accused of trying to be men, femmes are sometimes accused--by other lesbians--of donning accoutrements of traditional femininity to pass as straight in the mainstream world. Actually, however, femme lesbians subvert prescribed sexual and gender roles by co-opting conventional "womanly" traits to indicate their attraction to other women.

Joan Nestle, an author and activist who has written extensively on butch-femme, explored what it meant to be femme when this identification was wildly unpopular. In her 1992 anthology *The Persistent Desire*, Nestle examines in depth the femme experience, elaborating on the fact that "butches were known by their appearance, femmes by their choices."

As Nestle elucidates, butches and femmes appreciate and complement each other's physical and emotional differences--as well as their likenesses--in a way that no outsider could truly understand.

A resurgence of butch-femme identities and relationships in the late 1980s brought this dynamic back to the forefront of lesbian culture. The resurgence of butch-femme may be due in part to the fact that gender fluidity has become much more acceptable in recent decades. After all, butch and femme are related not only to sexual orientation, but also to gender expression.

In recent years, "pansexual" and "polysexual" have joined "bisexual" as terms that indicate women's attractions to more than one gender. Another indication of that fluidity is the fact that one cannot always tell simply by looking whether a lesbian identifies as butch or femme. Butches are not necessarily tops; femmes are not necessarily bottoms; and butches and femmes are no longer expected to date only each other.

However, in spite of butch-femme's renewed visibility, many women now argue that "butch" and "femme" are labels that oversimplify, generalize, or pigeonhole complex identities into false dichotomies. Femmes have been dismissed both within and outside of lesbian communities as being "too pretty to be 'real' lesbians." And a common refrain among lesbians and bisexuals who do not understand the appeal of butch women is "If I wanted to be with someone who looks like a man, I'd be with a man!"

But, as Carol Queen puts it in the groundbreaking anthology *Dagger: On Butch Women* (1994), "male" traits in females constitute something else altogether--"something our gender-impooverished language doesn't offer us words to describe."

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