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## Lesbians, Masculinities, and Privilege: The Privileging of Gender and the Gendering of Sexuality

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# Lesbians, Masculinities, and Privilege: The Privileging of Gender and the Gendering of Sexuality

*Though LGBTQ individuals, experiences, and communities have been increasingly recognized as valuable subjects of research, the existing body of research on and about this population is still significantly lacking. In a field so young and full of controversy, it is vital that research be done that gives voice and agency to LGBTQ individuals, their experiences and lifestyles. This paper will introduce readers to the concept of “female masculinity” and, specifically, the complicated relationships many lesbian identities have with different configurations of masculinity. I will introduce the concepts of “butch” lesbian identities and “femme” lesbian identities as well as their relation to one another. I will dispel stereotypes about butch/femme identities and behaviors, and explore some of the diversity of lesbian identities and gender performance in which gay women have participated within the community. Using existing research and scholarship on the subject of lesbian masculinity, this paper expands the academic discussion on the ways that gender identity is performed in lesbian spaces. I will explore and explain the current theoretical and empirical research related to the subject of lesbian masculinity, summarize contributions to this scholarly dialogue, and incorporate my own vision for the future of queer studies.*

## Introduction

Academic and scientific fields of study have historically devalued and ignored the experiences of women as a whole. This is especially true for women who belong to marginalized categories of identity, such as women of color, impoverished women, and gender and sexual minorities. This lack of representation has resulted in a deficit of knowledge on the experiences, opportunities, and lifestyles of people in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) communities and a scholarly need for research and discussion that will help to validate LGBTQ identities and experiences. This particular paper summarizes research on the experiences of lesbian women, their relationships with masculinity, and the ways that their relationships with masculinity affect their personal relationships and the lesbian community more broadly. I determine whether lesbians who exude “masculinity” through style of dress or behavior may gain access to the kind of privilege that is typically reserved for men who achieve a version of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) or the culturally idealized configuration

of masculinity. I also examine the ways that lesbian masculinities disrupt commonly accepted understandings of gender as well as how this impacts lesbian relationships. These alternative masculinities not only dismantle the biologically reductionist notion that masculinity must be reserved for male-bodied persons, but the variety of masculinities among lesbians also refutes the heteronormative assumption of the necessity of gendered roles within romantic relationships.

Scholars have often argued that butch identities and lesbian masculinities are merely reflections of heterosexual gender relations or that they reproduce heteronormative gendered scripts. I argue, however, that the kinds of gendered behavior and relationships among and between lesbians are unique to the lesbian community. Rather than simply reproducing straight relationships and identities, masculinity within the lesbian community demonstrates one way in which gendered behavior is challenged rather than merely reproduced. While masculine lesbians may participate in a form of heteronormative gender presentation, there is different meaning attached to their gender presentation inherent in the context of their identity

as queer. Lesbian masculinities are explicitly at odds with and challenge the very notion that masculinity is inherently male-bodied or biological in nature. Thus, merely through their existence, lesbian masculinities disrupt and trouble theories of gender in so far as they provide an inherent challenge to biologically deterministic theories of gender. While gender and sexuality are usually thought of as being rooted in particular bodies, masculine women's ability to separate masculinity from biological maleness demonstrates the instability of the commonly accepted conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality.

Current scholarship demonstrates an attitude by many feminist and gender scholars that masculinity in women's (and specifically lesbians') bodies is actually something quite different than the masculinity performed by men. Examining female masculinity as it is experienced by women who date women is an opportunity to consider the ways that sex, gender, gender expression, and sexuality come together to create individual identities within the context of competing societal understandings of gendered behavior, sexuality, and the interactions that support and challenge these belief systems.

Our society continues to support and perpetuate an attitude that men and women have different roles and that they must experience masculinity and femininity as both entirely separate and entirely opposite. Scholars who study gender have demonstrated a number of ways in which this societal understanding of a true or natural gender dichotomy is not only flawed, but even nonexistent (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 1998; Rubin, 1975/2011). The disruption of this dichotomy implicit in butch lesbian performances of self forces scholars of gender and sexuality to consider what masculinity and femininity mean in a new light, how they are enacted, who can participate, and the consequences of participation for different groups of people.

This paper will first acknowledge the language used to discuss gender identity and presentation among lesbians, defining terminology that scholars have used previously and that I use within this paper to describe and explain the appropriation of gender. I will then describe my own background and qualifications for writing on this subject by informing the reader of my history and identity and explaining my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. After this introductory section of the

paper, I will present the scholarly work that has informed this research and the conclusions I draw from it by comparing and contrasting theories and perspectives that various scholars have developed. From here, the paper will analyze the aforementioned scholarship and describe the reasoning behind my conclusions.

### **Terminology**

The following words and phrases will be used throughout the text and are important to understanding the topic as well as the argument made by this paper. Though this brief section is not able to truly capture the complications of these words and their history and meaning, within the context of this research, operationally defining this terminology will help to make complex concepts easier for readers to grasp. The definitions provided are simplified summaries of vast concepts that will gain meaning and dimension within the context of my writing, therefore, readers should expect to gain only a rudimentary understanding of the fundamental principles of these terms and concepts from this section alone. This list is in no way an exhaustive list of all language or jargon used in gender or queer studies, but rather, an introduction to concepts that will be

addressed within the body of this paper. I have selected these particular terms for explanation because I believe them to be of significant importance for comprehension of the arguments made within the paper. This section helps to clarify these concepts so that readers can appreciate the ways in which I will be drawing connections between a diverse body of existing scholarship.

**Gender:** The term “gender” refers to the identity attached to characteristics that culture delineates as masculine or feminine in behavior and presentation. Gender encompasses the character traits and behaviors that a given society often associates with a social and legal status as “man” or “woman.” Although gender as masculine and feminine are personified through unique behaviors that are not tied to or linked to sex statuses (such as male and female), gender as a behavior lacks physicality and only gains meaning as it is placed on or performed by bodies.

**Sex:** The term “sex” is often mistaken for a synonym for “gender.” In this paper and more broadly, sex refers to categories of male, female, or intersex based on biological factors including chromosomes, hormonal profiles, and the presence of specific internal and external sex organs.

**Gender Performance:** Gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1993) explains gender as a performance that is accomplished by all individuals to demonstrate and express their own sense of identity. Butler (1990, 1993) understands gender performance to refer to a continuous repetition of actions and patterns of behavior that accumulate to form what we understand as “gender.” Rather than being an inherent element of an individual’s being, gender is an identity constructed and performed in such a manner that those around them as well as the actor themselves believe the performance to be their true identity. Butler also draws an essential distinction between the “performance” and “performativity” of gender. Calling gender a performance refers to the ways that we actively create gender categories and meanings. To refer to gender as performative is to claim that the performance itself provides the impression that there is a gendered subject behind that performance—the idea that we have a true gendered, core self. Butler (1990) suggests that this belief is itself a product of gender performance, and to that extent, she calls gender “performative” and believes gender to be real only to the extent that it is performed.

**Butch:** This term is difficult to summarize and highly flexible. Use of this term is incredibly dependent on context and personal preferences. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using “butch” to describe lesbian women who self-identify as “butch” or who others identify as “butch.” Butch is a masculine lesbian identity that is often cast as the opposite of the more feminine lesbian identity, commonly referred to as “femme.” This lesbian vernacular term is used to describe women who are generally more comfortable identifying with masculine traits and gender performances including style. Butch women are masculine presenting, often wearing men’s clothing, cologne, sporting short haircuts, and sometimes further minimizing markers of femininity such as flattening their breasts or intentionally lowering their voices. Butch lesbians distance themselves from femininity typically by avoiding makeup and jewelry associated with femininity and participating in behaviors and rhetoric often reserved for heterosexual men. Butch women often participate in bodily motion, positioning, and other behaviors more often culturally linked to masculinity (possibly including sitting positions, posture, and stride) (Halberstam, 1998).

**Femme:** Like the term “butch,” femme is difficult to describe with only one definition, as it is understood and experienced differently by many individuals. In the context of this paper, “femme” will be understood as a particular configuration of lesbian identity. “Femme” here is used to describe women who identify themselves or who others identify as *feminine* lesbians, often portrayed as the opposite of *butch* lesbians. Femme lesbians’ gender expression is characterized as feminine, often meaning that they appear to most people to approximate (or even exaggerate) heterosexual feminine norms. They typically have long hair, dress in clothing marketed to women, and wear makeup and jewelry. Femme lesbians happen to embrace and enjoy socially sanctioned versions of feminine appearance and behavior and celebrate this enjoyment in their performance of gender (Eves, 2004).

**Masculinity/Masculinities:** The terms “masculine” and “masculinity” or “masculinities” will be used to refer to traits and behaviors stereotypically considered to be ascribed to men or most commonly participated in by men. Though it is fairly uncommon to encounter the term “masculinities” outside of feminist and queer

scholarship, it is vital that I use it within this paper to acknowledge the true abundance of possible forms that masculinity can (and does) take. Different people experience masculinity differently, and these different masculinities may look vastly different on each one of them (Connell, 1995).

**Femininity/Femininities:** For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to use the terms “feminine” and “femininity” or “femininities” to refer to the traits and behaviors that are stereotypically considered for or enacted by women. As with the term “masculinity/masculinities,” the pluralization of femininity – femininities – is used to acknowledge the multiplicity of forms that a feminine identity may take. One can be feminine in a number of ways, and what constitutes femininity may vary depending on culture and identity and look very different on different individuals (Schippers, 2007).

**Female Masculinity:** Female masculinity refers to instances in which individuals who identify as female participate in dress, behavior, or conversation that society attributes to and proscribes to men. The leading scholar on female masculinity, J. Jack Halberstam (1998), introduces the idea that female masculinity is masculinity

without men, or masculinity experienced and performed by female-bodied persons. Halberstam (1998) explains that “in alternative models of gender variation, female masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity,” but rather “the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 29) The analysis of female masculinity contains the potential for new understandings of gender and gendered behavior, as female masculinity challenges the assumption that conventional models of gender conformity demand.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity:**

Sociologist Raewyn Connell (1987) first theorized masculinities as plural in an attempt to make sense of variation among (as well as between) women and men alike. She perceived that there were different configurations of gender practice that exist in a hierarchy and as an important social dynamic through which gender inequality is reproduced (Connell, 1995). To make sense of this hierarchy, Connell (1987) refers to the most culturally idealized form of masculinity as “hegemonic masculinity,” a configuration that exerts power over and dominates all other configurations

of gender practice. This configuration is constantly shifting, but often is associated with specific characteristics that position someone as an authority who is capable of violence (Connell, 1987, 1995).

### **Heteronormativity:**

Heteronormativity describes the manner in which it is assumed that a person is heterosexual by default and the way in which society is organized to accommodate and reward heterosexual identities. To be heteronormative is related to the idea that heterosexuality is the only acceptable or natural form of sexuality, while in fact there are many different sexual orientations and complex romantic identities among multiple configurations of sexual identity.

### **About the Author**

It is important for me to acknowledge that I do not approach this subject free of bias. My research and this paper are undeniably and heavily influenced by my own opinions and life experiences. For these reasons, I feel that it is important for the readers of this paper to understand a little bit about its author. I am a feminine, white, middle class, 24-year-old woman who has been dating women since the ninth grade. I grew up in a charming town in the



Finger Lakes region of New York State, was one of approximately three “out” lesbians in my large high school, and have spent my college career learning about gender and sexuality to provide women like myself with a voice to contribute to the academic conversation about our identities and communities. For these reasons, I am personally and deeply invested in this topic and my standpoint has value for the future of queer studies.

The unique perspective from which I write this piece certainly has an important impact on the arguments made in this paper. My position as a lesbian and a feminist inform my existing knowledge on the subject matter and influence my choice in topic. While I am a lesbian, I do not identify as “butch” and I am sure that other lesbians would not identify me as such. I would describe myself, and most likely, other lesbians would classify me as “femme” based on my appearance, dress, and behavior. Though I may not be a butch lesbian, my writing and research on this subject are influenced by my relationships, both romantic and platonic, with masculine women and my own experiences navigating what I am referring to as “female masculinity.”

Though the details of my dating history and my friendships may not

seem relevant to you the reader or to the research on female masculinity, it is through my experiences with other lesbian women that I have come to realize my fascination with masculinity and develop the perspective on the subject that I now have. Kristin G. Esterberg’s (1996) chapter, “A Certain Swagger When I Walk: Performing Lesbian Identity,” discusses the manner in which research on lesbians has often failed to include actual empirical accounts of lesbian women’s experiences and identities. Thus, not only has the existing body of research “failed to reflect the very real and complicated ways in which lesbians and gay men think and talk about their lives” (Esterberg, 1996, p. 260), but it has failed to validate the very identities and experiences of the subjects. As I have developed my sense of self, my identity as a lesbian and a feminist, and my participation in the LGBTQ community over the years, I have made interesting observations and been able to consider female masculinity from within the community. This means that while I did not engage in participant observation for this research, it is entirely appropriate to claim that I have been an “observing participant” for roughly half of my life. Through the way that I have experienced my own

identity as lesbian, and as an insider of the community, I am able to write from a place of experience and involvement within my subject matter. My education in Women and Gender Studies has provided me the research, language, and the theoretical framework within which I now understand, question, and discuss these observations and explore the existing research and theory on the concepts within this paper. Through this paper, I hope not only to describe the complexities of lesbian masculinities, but to provide voice and agency to the members of my community who have been spoken over by those who research their lives.

### **Butch: A Brief History**

Before examining the literature on the complexities of masculinity and lesbian identity, it is essential to consider the history of the lesbian community in the United States of America, how these identities came to be understood and recognized, and how they may or may not have changed over time. Though the history of LGBTQ identities stretches back far beyond the scope of this paper, this section of the paper will consider the development of lesbian women's identities from the 1930s until the 1970s. These particular decades are

important to the development and understanding of this essay because it was during this period of time that modern understandings of homosexuality began to emerge and when the beginnings of contemporary lesbian subcultures began to develop (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993).

In their examination of an oral history of the working class lesbian community, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993) introduce a brief history of the formation of lesbian identity during the early 1900s. Beginning in the late 1930s and extending until the rise of the gay liberation and the feminist movements of the 1970s, Kennedy and Davis (1993) discuss the transformation of lesbian identities, communities, and sexualities, specifically those that were developing in Buffalo, New York. In its infancy in the 1930s and early 1940s, when women began to move out of the private realm of the home for employment and social purposes during the second World War, the lesbian community emerged out of the surge in women's autonomy and their new opportunities to meet one another. By the time the war was over, communities had formed around these women's "explicit sexual interest in other women," and these communities

continued to develop over the following decades (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 10). With the development of community came the maturation of lesbian identities and expression of self.

Lillian Faderman (1991) explores the details of these years and their rich historical significance to the development of lesbian gender identities, discussing the difficulties that faced a community of women who previously had neither identity nor community. Indeed, in a way, homosexuality did not exist before this time, and was certainly not a characteristic belonging to individuals. It was at this point in history that homosexuality moved from a medical diagnosis of behavior (or what would have been classified at this time as symptoms) to a social and sexual form of identity. This was the emergence of the dichotomy that we continue to see today between groups who identify as “hetero” or “homo,” “straight” or “gay.” Faderman (1991) describes this shift in social definition, explaining that for the first time, lesbians “not only loved homosexually; they were homosexuals” (p.156). Kennedy and Davis (1993) also call attention to the significance of this change, describing how behaviors and desires previously considered pathological due to their

difference gradually became indicators by which women organized themselves into communities with other women who “experienced themselves as different” and recognized that “this difference was a core part of their identity” (p. 8). This shift in the understanding of homosexuality created a whole new category of identity, one in which same sex attraction was not an ailment of the mind, but a thing that a person could actually *be* instead of *have*.

Though this newly formed classification of identity gave lesbian women a term with which to describe themselves, their behavior, and desires, it did not protect them from the stigmatization of their communities and they were still considered deviant and perverted by overarching American culture at the time. This discrimination, along with the newly emerging sense of community that stemmed from a common identity category, resulted in the formation of lesbian subcultures united not only against the “common enemy of homophobia,” but in the challenge of conceptualizing themselves and their identities from scratch (Faderman, 1991, p. 160). With essentially no history against which to define themselves or to use as guiding principles in the formation of their new community, lesbians were both free to

imagine whatever they wished as well as limited to what they were able to conceptualize based on the world they knew (Faderman, 1991).

Faderman's (1991) explanation of how "butch" and "femme" emerged from this period of plasticity follows a somewhat essentialist theory of gender. Her explanation for this categorization of lesbian women reasons that, without any other models on which to base their identities, lesbians were forced to rely on heteronormative ideas of gender roles by default in the formation of their subculture groups (Faderman, 1991). Because heterosexual relationships and male and female gender identities were the only examples that lesbian women had ever observed, they were limited in that "a functioning couple for them meant dichotomous individuals, if not male and female, then butch and femme" (Faderman, 1991, p.167). The world, at this time, was divided strictly into masculine and feminine, and even within the context of a homosexual lesbian community, there were no other options.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) also note the prominence and crucial significance of butch-femme roles during the development of lesbian communities in the 1940s and 50s. The authors

acknowledge that these roles were, in a number of ways, derivative of the common heterosexual gender model. They discuss the manner in which butch and femme identities, behaviors, and symbols were "embedded in the dominant society," specifically, the heteronormative and patriarchal society (Kennedy & Davis, 1991, p. 11). They explain:

During this period, manipulation of the basic ingredient of patriarchy – the hierarchical distinction between male and female – continued to be an effective way for the working-class lesbian community to give public expression to its affirmation of women's autonomy and women's romantic and sexual interest in women. (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 6)

While Kennedy and Davis (1993) appear to agree with many of Faderman's (1991) theories about the origination of butch and femme identities, the authors challenge Faderman's implication that the lesbian women at this time were passive participants in the creation of their own history and identities. Rather than writing of women as "active forces in history" (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 13), Faderman (1991) discusses the

creation of lesbian subcultures as if it were an inevitable happening outside of the women's control. Kennedy and Davis (1993) contest the assumption that a heterosexual model was utilized out of convenience and recreated the conventional patterns of dominance seen within heterosexual romances, explaining that butch women's masculinity actually "usurp[ed] male privilege in appearance and sexuality" and their relationships with other lesbians "outraged society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control" (p. 6). In this context, the butch-femme relationships and roles are not merely an imitation of the surrounding straight and sexist society. While the roles of butch and femme individuals may have been derived of the surrounding heterosexual world, they helped to shape an authentically and specifically lesbian lifestyle and community (Kennedy & Davis, 1993).

Even within this analysis of the history and development of what are currently understood as butch and femme identities, it is clear that scholars are divided on the origins and meanings of lesbian behaviors and relationship models. The arguments made by other scholars demonstrate the different understandings of what it means to be

butch, the consequences of butchness, and how butch-femme relationships reflect upon heterosexual ones. It is the consideration of this notion – that butch and femme lesbian identities simply rely on the preexisting heteronormative model of gender and relationship roles – that many gender scholars disagree upon and that this paper will examine in greater depth.

### **Lesbian Identities, Heteronormativity, and the Transgression of Gender Norms**

While the idea of women and girls participating in, expressing, and experiencing masculinity or masculinities is not entirely new, it is still an emergent area of scholarly literature without easily identifiable boundaries. Scholarship and theory on the subject is relatively scarce, but what is available is a fascinating collection of work discussing essentially what femininity and masculinity really mean and how lesbian identities and relationships interact with these meanings. There has been controversy over butch identities and lesbian masculinity since women began to openly express and label these qualities. Radical and lesbian feminisms have had an unfriendly relationship with masculinity as a whole that is often

directed specifically at masculine lesbians (Tong, 2014). The argument seems to be mostly over whether women's participation in masculinity is promoting heteronormative and heteropatriarchal gender roles and imitating heterosexuality common to heteropatriarchy or challenging these concepts. There have been compelling arguments written for both conclusions over the past few decades and this portion of the paper will explore and analyze the main points and arguments of the existing texts. Feminist scholar Rosemarie Tong (2014) summarizes decades of compelling arguments that divide radical cultural (female centered) and radical libertarian (androgyny centered) feminists' theoretical frameworks to qualify ways these thinkers and writers consider the social and political dimension of lesbian gender and sexual identity. I use this existing literature to examine the complicated question of if or how butch lesbians might have access to privilege via their masculinity.

Possibly the most influential author on the subject of female masculinity is J. Jack Halberstam, professor, author, and gender scholar, whose book *Female Masculinity* (1998) has had an enormous influence on this paper as well as countless other works by gender

scholars in all fields. Halberstam's (1998) work is possibly the most in-depth analysis of the subject of female masculinity that exists to date. In his scholarship, Halberstam (1998) argues that rather than masculinity being a quality inherently belonging to the male sex, it is really a group of character traits and behaviors that may exist within and upon bodies of all sorts. Not only does he describe the ability of women to participate in and enact masculinity, but he also analyzes the assortment of virtually infinite gender expression possibilities among masculine women. Halberstam (1998) reaches for new understandings of masculine identities and breaks down queer scholarship on the subjects of masculinity, homosexuality and their relationships with one another.

Judith Butler (1990) is also among the leading gender scholars who writes about the ways that gender manifests upon bodies and is performed by the individuals who reside within those bodies. Butler's (1990, 1993) theories of gender performance and performativity challenge the commonly accepted notion that gender is something that is inherent in the human body and experience and argue instead that one's learned performance of femininity or masculinity is an act or

performance, one that is compulsory due to heteronormative and heterosexist society. Based on this philosophy, in which gender is an entity independent of biological sex, “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body and a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990, p.10). Butler’s (1990, 1993) theories are of extreme importance to arguments made about gender because of their radical rejection of conventional notions that sex and gender are inextricably linked to one another and are fixed within the body. This understanding disconnects masculinity from biological maleness and femininity from biological femaleness, permitting the existence of marginal identities such as butch lesbians whose gender identity contradict essentialist gender theories.

Another author who has attempted to tackle this topic in a piece titled “Patriarchy, Power, and Female Masculinity” (2008) for the *Journal of Homosexuality* is Athena Nguyen. Nguyen (2008) explains that butch women have been abhorred for bringing an undesirable masculinity into what some lesbian women consider to be a community that is meant to be a

kind of sanctuary from men and the power of masculinity. In their contact with other women, especially femme women, butch lesbians are seen as “colluding with the patriarchy through treating women as men do, such as by objectifying women, by wanting to be the physically stronger or dominant partner, or by pursuing women as sexual ‘conquests’” (Nguyen, 2008, p. 668). This description captures part of one feminist argument against butch identities and female masculinity. She continues to explain that female masculinity is particularly frowned upon by such theorists when performed by a butch lesbian because lesbian feminists tend to observe and analyze her actions as participation in patriarchal masculinity adopted with an intention to enjoy male privilege and power through participation in practices that subordinate other women (Nguyen, 2008).

Nguyen (2008) is not alone in her analysis of feminism’s critique of butch identities. This idea of lesbians coveting masculine traits and behaviors in order to somehow fake their way into a privileged space at the disadvantage of other women is a popular theory for feminist scholars who opt for similar argument. Further explanation of the aversion to female masculinity can be

seen in work by Carrie Paechter (2006) and Evelyn Blackwood (2012). Paechter's (2006) piece, entitled "Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities: Power, Identities, and Gender" explores the idea of butchness allowing access to male privilege, describing the manner in which women can claim power by distancing themselves from stereotypical configurations of femininity. She writes that by rejecting classic forms of the feminine, butch women and tomboys reject what she refers to as the disempowerment that comes along with a feminine identity (Paechter, 2006). Paechter (2006) claims that masculinity performed by female-bodied individuals and the "adoption of a form of hegemonic masculinity" leads to a "claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy" (p. 257). By this logic, in distancing themselves from a form of gender identity that they observe to be underprivileged, these women knowingly employ a strategy through which they may gain access to privilege that they would otherwise be denied.

Yet this is complicated when the female individual is also a lesbian. Paechter (2006) discusses the manner in which butch women are both attracted to the feminine qualities that they see in

their partners and sort of internally opposed to femininity, although I would argue that this statement is presumptuous and in no way true for all butch women. She also goes on to explain that butch as a gender identity, just like men and masculinity, requires "the feminine as its Other" (p. 10), making butch not much of anything and certainly not "transgressive" without the stereotyped femininity with which to compare itself (Paechter, 2006). Similarly, Evelyn Blackwood (2012) explores the same issues in a slightly different manner, describing the idea that butch and femme lesbians may have trouble envisioning something outside of the realm of the strict gender dichotomy offered by the dominant culture. Hence, the dichotomy of butch and femme is so often situated as mirroring heteronormative ideals. Blackwood (2012) explains that while masculine women transgress gender norms, their participation in masculinity often serves to "reflect the dominant ideology in their presentation of masculinity" because of the kinds of "masculine" behaviors in which they may participate (p. 95). In this way, rather than *queering* the gender binary, as scholars often think of the kinds of gender expressions enacted by lesbian identified women, Paechter (2006) and



Blackwood (2012) suggest that the gender binary of masculine men and feminine women is reinforced despite being enacted by same-sexed bodies. Though each of these arguments appears to discredit any validation of female masculinity in lesbian bodies, both Paechter (2006) and Blackwood (2012) discuss and situate butchness as something quite different than the masculinity performed by men, a point that is extremely important to identify.

The work of Halberstam (1998) argues that rather than being some sort of imitation of machismo, lesbian masculinities are really manifestations of genuine merged gender identities. Halberstam (1998) writes of “gender outlaws” and “gender warriors” whose existence functions to dispel gender conformity and challenge the notion of compulsory gender. While feminism and queer scholarship have brought some awareness and a small sense of change to perspectives on gender, and some men and women are feeling increasingly empowered to experiment with the limits of masculinity and femininity, our culture still dictates that we script gender for male and female bodies in “remarkably consistent and restrictive ways” and cling to a strict dichotomy of gender in which only two opposing kinds exist (Halberstam, 1998,

p. 118). It is important to identify that female masculinity and lesbianism are not synonymous terms, but equally important to understand the strong force that masculinity has historically had within lesbian experiences and identities. In Halberstam’s (1998) words, “because masculinity has seemed to play an important and even crucial role in some lesbian self-definition, we have a word for lesbian masculinity: butch” (p. 120). Here, it is clear that rather than being the same masculinity that is experienced by male-bodied individual, being butch means to experience a unique masculinity or masculinities. Women design, enact, and name new kinds of masculinities unique to their female bodies, and while at times these new masculinities may be “produced as new renditions of male masculinities; sometimes they are produced as original forms of a growing sub-culture” (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 276-277). Like performances of drag, the emergent forms of masculinities that Halberstam (1998) documents are not exactly carbon copies of masculinities among males. Rather, they rework the form, meaning, and content in ways that are unique to female masculinity. Thus, like Butler’s (1990, 1993) discussion of drag as offering a potential site of transgression

rather than reproduction, female masculinities also offer an interesting site of potential transgression and transformation. Whether that potential is realized is both a theoretical and empirical question.

Lillian Faderman's (1991) *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* differentiates between male masculinities and butch masculinities within a specifically historical context. Following her aforementioned exploration of the notion that the butch/femme dichotomy is shaped with the male/female or masculine/feminine dichotomous mold, Faderman (1991) addresses the proposal by lesbian historians like Joan Nestle and Judy Grahn that, as Halberstam (1998) will come to conclude, butch lesbians are not in fact copying men but offering a new and different way of experiencing womanhood. The historians assert that butch and femme roles in the 1950s were not based on the social and sexual models that lesbians grew up observing, but rather "on natural drives (such as 'butch sexuality' and 'femme sexuality') and on lesbian-specific, lesbian-culturally developed behavior" (Faderman, 1991, p. 169). While butches and femmes were left with little choice but to use descriptive language

modeled on the way that heterosexual couples spoke to and of each other, and the resulting roles were often similar to roles expected from heterosexual men and women at the time, the dynamics of a butch-femme relationship were fundamentally different than the heteronormative model (Faderman, 1991). It was not that butch women desired to be men, Faderman (1991) declares:

It was rather that for many of them in an era of neat pigeonholes the apparent logic of the connection between sexual object choice and gender identification was overwhelming, and lacking the support of a history that contradicted that connection, they had no encouragement at that time to formulate new conceptions. (p.170)

This sentiment was reiterated within the testimony of the lesbians interviewed in Faderman's (1991) research for her book. According to one butch woman, the strategy of modelling lesbian gender roles in the 1950s on traditional male-female roles was essential to the emerging lesbian community as lesbian women were "too busy trying to survive in a hostile world to have time to create new roles for

ourselves” (Faderman, 1991, p. 167). While these statements were made specifically about the kinds of lesbian gender roles that were emerging within lesbian subcultures in the 1950s, they help us to understand the way in which a dichotomy may have formed within the lesbian community due (in part) to heteronormativity but *not* simply through the imitation of heterosexuality. While the limitations of language and the lack of models on which to base their relationships left lesbian women divided into identities that seemed to look a whole lot like traditional relationships between men and women, in reality, the lesbian “genders” that emerged at this time were an expression of the articulation of “active and complex desire between women” (Halberstam, 1998, p.115). The signification of this desire manifested through butch and femme roles, and rather than reinforcing the gender roles created within the heteropatriarchy, this formation of tangible lesbian identities produced “new and fully functional masculinities, masculinities, moreover, that thrive on the disjuncture between femaleness and masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p.119). In this way, by using roles that may have originated from the most rudimentary notions of the heterosexual

world (dichotomy of identities, roles, masculinity, femininity), lesbians were (and are) still rejecting heterosexuality and relationship roles.

Adding to the explanation of the critiques on butch identities, Athena Nguyen (2008) describes the way that butchness represents the transformation of masculinity rather than the rejection of femininity. Nguyen (2008) argues that “butch” is really its very own sort of gender within the lesbian community – a configuration that is neither distinctly male nor distinctly female or even just masculinity displayed on a female body as some of the feminist critiques imply. As Nguyen (2008) states:

To conceive of butch women as simply being women who have adopted masculine characteristics is too simplistic;...[it]presumes a default feminine/female body that has been perverted in various ways through the attempted adoption of masculine traits... [and] fails to recognize how masculinity is the means through which the butch body becomes gendered and comes into being. (p.672)

The idea of “butch” as an identity does not exist without both a female sexed body and the ability of that body

to perform masculinity, making masculinity really the means by which a butch identity comes to be in the first place. Similar to Butler's (1990) suggestion that all gender is performative to the extent that it relies on and radically reinterprets the very bodies of those engaged in gender performance, butch identities are also performative. While we certainly feel that our unique identity is the source of our behavior and actions, Butler (1990) contends that our sense of independent agency and subjectivity is really a consequence of the enactment of a social understanding of what gender is and means. Within the lesbian community, as a population of female sexed bodies, there can be a difference in gender, somehow both reinforcing and destroying the strict gender binary to which our culture still clings. Nguyen's (2008) explanation seems complex, but further writing on this idea addresses this issue in greater depth.

Other scholars follow the same path, explaining initially what kinds of arguments exist against lesbian butch identities and then, explaining how these identities might actually be something different altogether. Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis' (1993) *Boots of Leather, Slippers of*

*Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* explores such butch identities. Kennedy and Davis' (1993) work demonstrates that butch and femme identities challenge and explore gender meanings rather than imitating heterosexual gender expectations. Butch women experience their gender identity as neither conventionally man nor woman. Rather than relying upon or imitating heterosexuality, butch masculinities and appearances are cultivated with the intent of publicizing their difference from heterosexuality and their explicit interest in other women. The visible expression of this gender difference is truly a resistance to the heterosexist, heteronormative world, signifying the ways that butch women transgress gender (Blackwood, 2012).

Kennedy and Davis's (1993) historical research also addresses the issue of whether or not butch-femme relationships and communities reproduce the kind of hierarchies among men that can be observed in the heterosexual community as well as divisions among women or whether they actually challenge men's claim to power. Their argument is that while butch women may not challenge gender polarity directly and are able to acquire male privilege to a certain extent, they are radical because their lives as women

living like men leaves them vulnerable to exposure. While the butch-femme dichotomy is certainly derived in part from heterosexual gender models and expectations, they are far more complex than a simple imitation and are a “specifically lesbian culture and lifestyle” (Blackwood, 2012, p. 97). This conclusion is supported by Nguyen’s (2008) work, in which she describes that:

Being butch does not consist of an assumed access to masculinity; rather, it is a defiant claim of masculinity. Butch is often performed defensively, encompassing both the defensiveness that women within a sexually violent patriarchal society may feel, as well as the defensiveness of being lesbian within a violently heteronormative society. Therefore, butch is not an unaltered imitation of masculinity, where imitation is the highest form of flattery, but rather butch masculinity sits in an uncomfortable and antagonistic relation to hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, challenges the privilege of masculinity as being accorded to men. (p. 674)

While many butch lesbians may refer to themselves as “one of the guys” through their masculinity and access to friendships with men that feminine women may be denied, their relationship with masculinity is much more complicated. Some butch women describe this complexity by explaining that while they cannot and do not wish to achieve the identity of a man, they “can be absorbed into their world a little bit more and be accepted” in ways that other women would not be (Wright, 2008, p. 107). The ability of these women to so authentically identify with qualities that have been culturally classified as strictly for men challenges our ideas about gender as a whole. Judith Butler (1990) argues that “gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscriptions of meaning on a pre-given sex... gender must also be designated the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (p. 11). This argument is demonstrated through the butch woman’s ability to gender her body as not man, but butch. While we associate traits like “a strong degree of independence, self-direction, and self-esteem” along with tough attitudes and a masculine physical appearance with higher measures of masculinity in an individual, is it possible that these traits

are independent of gender identity (Finlay & Scheltema, 1999)? And would it be so bad or strange if they were?

According to all of these arguments, some lesbians who are happy to be identified with masculine traits may, in fact, experience some benefits in certain situations compared to feminine women, but only within the context of their homosexuality. Their masculinity is not really an attempt to gain access to the kind of privilege held typically by white straight men, though it can give them the illusion of a similar privilege if they are around other marginalized individuals such as feminine lesbians or, really, other women in general. Rather than being the *motivation* for female masculinity, privilege is actually the *consequence* of female masculinity on some occasions. Though privilege may be associated with butch identities under certain circumstances, this is not the result of an intentional quest for access to privilege, but an inadvertent result of heteronormative culture and heteropatriarchy. By obtaining and performing masculinity for themselves, butch lesbians are not merely mimicking heteronormative gender roles, they are changing the meaning of those roles as well as the meaning of gender itself.

## Disrupting Dichotomy

This transformation of masculinity as it appears on the butch lesbian body is something that I have observed in my own life for many years, though it is difficult to describe outside of the realm of gender theory. In my past relationships with butch lesbians, I found myself often challenged by the idea that participation in a butch-femme relationship, or even friendship, placed me within a heteronormative relationship model that had been culturally prescribed to me. I felt for a while as though, rather than escaping from relationships in which an imbalance of power existed based on gender roles, I had simply replaced one gendered dichotomy and one imbalance of power with another. Without the education or experience to truly understand this thought, it lingered with me for many years, and I was left without the language to describe it or even the capacity to really define my unease.

As I began to take interest in feminist literature and theories of gender and sexuality, I found myself drawn to the topic of masculinity. I gained some perspective, relationship and social experience with other lesbians, and became gradually better versed in

gender theories and the Women and Gender Studies field as a whole. As I gained this perspective, I began to develop a new understanding of the true depth and complexity of that indescribable thing that I felt. It came from a place that may be experienced by all people who do not comfortably fit within this societies' gender rules, or possibly, from a unique femme lesbian context, but what I came to understand was that my problem was really with gender itself.

While some before me have felt this same unease in terms of lesbian masculinity, they have defined this feeling as a sense of loss of power, something that butch lesbians take from them through their appropriation of masculinity. While I felt similarly at one point, through my in depth study of masculinity and lesbians, I have come to understand that this is a false sense of blameworthiness placed upon butch lesbian identities who are truly disrupting the gender dichotomy and power imbalance of heteronormative gender and heteropatriarchy rather than upholding it.

### **Conclusion**

As lesbian communities and identities developed from the early twentieth century and to this day, the formation

and understanding of the butch identity has received a large amount of attention from feminists and scholars. The butch ability to queer gender – to acquire, embody, and utilize masculinity as a means through which to understand and express themselves as people as well as themselves as homosexual - has fueled decades of discussion on what it means to be masculine, feminine, man, woman, heterosexual, or homosexual. It is at these intersections that a butch identity can begin to be truly understood, considering not only her identity as a woman, but her construction through masculinity and her visible identity as a lesbian.

Feminists in the 1970s and some still to this day scorn the butch identity as a means by which some lesbian women attempt to participate in patriarchy as the patriarch rather than the oppressed (Tong, 2014). These accusations place butch identities as the feminine enemy, favoring femme lesbians as real women while displaying contempt for masculine lesbians who they believe appropriate masculinity in search of privilege. The flaw inherent in this argument, however, is the assumption that all masculinities are identical – that masculinity performed by a lesbian woman is a simple replica of

masculinity performed by heterosexual men.

The analysis of masculinity and lesbian identities within this paper has demonstrated the numerous flaws in the understanding of butch women as oppressor rather than oppressed, revealing the ways in which masculinity is more appropriately understood as the plural – masculinities, - which may be experienced differently by different people and different bodies. The notion that all masculinities play the same role in gender relations and are granted

access to the same privilege is presumptuous and ultimately incorrect. Rather than considering masculinity as a characteristic of people with male anatomy, masculinity and femininity alike should be reconfigured as to more appropriately encompass their flexibility and permeability. Butch lesbian masculinity, specifically, should be reimagined not as an attempt to take from men, but as the tool through which masculine lesbians produce their visibility, gender identity, and sexuality.

### Postscript

*What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime – what if someone began life as a boy but became a boygirl and then a boy/man? What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don't know what the hell is going on? ... What if you begin life as a queer mix of desires and impulses and then are trained to be heterosexual but might relapse into queerness once the training wears off?*

(Halberstam, 2013, p. 8)

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