

More than Surface Tension: Femmes in Families

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SUMMARY. This article raises questions about the lack of scholarly focus on butch/femme couples and their absence in studies of lesbian couples and family-building. In an era of lesbian marriage and lesbian parenting, femme and butch coupling and family-building remain unspoken topics within family studies, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)-specific research. Moving beyond a focus on eroticism within the femme/butch couple, questions about how gender expression impacts other relationships dynamics, including the maintenance of long-term relationships, power and intimacy, domestic chores and child-rearing, are raised. The femme role in “homemaking,” that is, building and maintaining families, especially needs further exploration.

KEYWORDS. Butch/femme couples, lesbian relationships, butch, femme, gender, lesbian, research, lesbian families, lesbian couples, LGBT research

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If memory serves, it was 1980 or 1981. I was a young dyke living in the San Francisco Bay Area coming out in the glorious era of lesbian-feminism. I went out with friends to see a new slide show that had recently been put together by The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project called She Even Chewed Tobacco: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women. Our movement was younger then and images of ourselves were hard to find. It was a fun and raucous event and the mostly lesbian audience hooted in joy at the butch dykes dressed in suits and ties and smoking cigars—not that many of us young dykes wore suits and ties or smoked cigars, but we could certainly appreciate that women "like us" had.

I found myself staring at the old photos, mesmerized by these handsome butches, but I was also aware—acutely aware—of the women standing next to them. One photo stands out in my memory all these years later, of a group of couples, butches in tuxes and their femme partners dressed to the nines for a night of dancing. The femmes looked like any other image of women from the 1940s, women who looked strangely like my mother did in pictures from the same era—in her early 20s—same hairdo, tight low cut dress, wide smile with bright lipstick. Yet, these women in the picture were clearly lesbian, obviously partnered with those handsome butches; they were, I suspected, nothing like my mother at all.

I shyly raised my 21-year-old hand. "What do we know about the other women?" I remember asking. "Their, uh, partners," I said, knowing that although the word butch was a strong, Amazonian, lesbian-friendly term, the word femme would not be so easily accepted. I knew it would bring undo attention to my long hippie skirt, dangling earrings, and extremely long hair that had already put my lesbian reputation into question. My question fell flat in the room, the presenters had little to say, someone shrugged, and we moved on to the next picture.

Decades later, I still find myself contemplating that question: "What do we know about the other women?" I am still surprised at the silence regarding femme identity in the alphabet soup of the now lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)-queer community, and how that is mirrored in Gender Studies departments.

Themes of gender and sexuality abound, and are the focus of research in diverse fields from critical theory to child development, from family therapy to transgender medicine. Femme and butch identities are a theme in lesbian humor as well as erotica. Nonetheless, femme and butch coupling and family-building remain absent from discussions within family studies, including LGBT-specific research.

Feminists have examined gender bias in mental health and diagnosis (Ballou and Brown, 2002), and family therapists have raised critical questions about the role of gender in heterosexual partnerships (McGoldrick, Anderson, and Walsh, 1991). Lesbian and gay coupling has become a scholarly pursuit in family lifecycle development (Laird and Green, 1996; Savin-Williams and Cohen, 1996), and, in recent years, lesbian and (to a lesser extent) gay parenting has become an important site of research (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, and Banks, 2005; Golombok et. al., 2003; Patterson, 2001; Patterson and Chan, 1996). Gender has been the focus of sociological analysis, psychoanalytic exegesis, and textual deconstruction (Butler, 1990; Dimen and Goldner, 2002).

However, there is a lack of scholarly research or clinical examination of butch and femme gender identities within lesbian couples and families. Lesbian identity is multifaceted, and lesbians have complex relationships to their gender and gender expression. Gender is a compelling and influential organizer of all human relationships, and masculine and feminine gender roles inhabit, motivate, and inspire many aspects of lesbian love. Butch and femme identities, for all their familiarity within lesbian communities, are under-explored and rarely analyzed as a significant factor in the development of intimacy, commitment, parental and domestic roles, and child rearing in lesbian butch/femme identified couples.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: BUTCH/FEMME RELATIONSHIPS AND LESBIAN-FEMINIST CULTURE

Western culture has long linked lesbian sexuality with cross-gender behavior. Nineteenth-century sexological studies of “inversion” linked what we would now call homosexuality and transgenderism (Hekma, 1994; Trumbach, 1994; Vicinus, 1993). Simply put, lesbians were assumed to be females who dressed like men, acted like men, probably wanted to be men, and were attracted to women, or more to the point, were *therefore* attracted to women. Because lesbians were assumed to be more man-like than woman-like, their desire would “naturally” be heterosexual, that is, attracted to their opposite. Lesbian women with same-sex desire who were not masculine in their dress or manner were invisible; women who appeared to be just like other women, regardless of their sexual interests, were simply not considered lesbians. Lesbianism that did not involve cross-gender behavior was unimaginable, but gender inversion that was not lesbian was equally impossible (Cromwell, 1999), leaving femme lesbians to be a cultural impossibility.

Despite limited anthropological and historical research, gender role expression in lesbian relationships has been discovered in diverse cultural contexts (Blackwood, 1999; Faderman, 1992; Murray and Roscoe, 1998; Nestle, 1992; Smith, 2002; Vicinus, 1993). Butch and femme identities have an especially long history within lesbian cultures in the United States and Europe, particularly within urban working-class communities and communities of color in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1992). Fictional accounts that reflect their own histories and experiences, reveal butch/femme culture as a vibrant part of American culture in the twentieth century (Feinberg, 1993; Lynch, 1986). Indeed, perhaps butch/femme culture was so ubiquitous throughout lesbian communities that it may have been the only way to actively engage in a lesbian culture at that time. However, the history of butch/femme communities has more thoroughly documented the butch narrative (see Nestle, 1992; Smith, 2002), once more obscuring femme identity and meaning.

The rise of lesbian-feminist politics in the 1970s effectively drove butch-femme identities, communities, and expression underground, silencing, and therefore historically distorting, discussions of gender expression in lesbian relationships. Lesbian-feminism challenged cultural assumptions about gender, sexism, and patriarchal power, and raised important issues regarding women's oppression and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1973). However, the *either* masculine *or* feminine role expression of butch/femme dyads became fodder for the early lesbian-feminist critique, which charged butch/femme couples with mimicking heterosexual patriarchal roles (Harris and Crocker, 1997). Feminist theory asserted that the oppression of women was maintained by the social construction of traditional male/female roles (Jeffreys, 1989). Masculinity, in early feminist theory, became a synonym for patriarchal domination.

At the same time, in a twist of logic, lesbians celebrated sisterhood by taking pride in doing traditionally male tasks and asserting and co-opting manners, stance, and behaviors that conveyed male privilege and power. Traditional female clothing was rejected and a watered-down masculine dress code was embraced—wearing male attire was experienced as liberating. In this paradox, lesbian-feminists celebrated much of what was masculine—although this was referred to as androgynous—and aspired to be “like” men, all the while despising male power.

Lesbian-feminist culture and theory, despite its elevation of the mystical concept of “woman,” also denigrated what had been traditionally perceived as feminine. The misogyny of the wider culture, which had been played out in various ways within butch/femme bar culture, continued, unabated

and unexamined, into feminist politics. Women who enjoyed feminine attire, who expressed their sexuality and identity through use of makeup, nail polish, and wearing high heels, were seen as un-liberated dupes of male oppression. Admitting one was attracted to a feminine woman was as intolerable as wanting to express oneself in a feminine manner. Gender expression itself became seen as a tool of the patriarchy.

Lesbians were critiqued for engaging in role-playing because feminist belief insisted that “all role-playing replicates the very (hetero)sexual structure from which lesbians are supposedly free” (Goodloe, 1999: 2, paragraph 1). It was never explicit what a life outside of “role-playing” might look like, and the dress code of lesbian-feminist culture was itself critiqued by the generation that followed for enforcing an androgynous look (Faderman, 1992).

Assuming that butch/femme couples are replicating heterosexual roles assumes butches wield a male power they may not have access to; it also assumes that femmes are subservient to their butches, the way heterosexual women were traditionally expected to be. Newton (1984) suggests that butch/femme dynamics deconstruct hetero-patriarchal roles, challenging them rather than imitating them. From this alternative perspective, butches could be viewed as brave, visible lesbians who are/were rejecting the limits of what has been possible for women. Butch/femme relationships and desire can be viewed, not as feeble replications of patriarchy, but as women acting from their own agency and desire (Case, 1988–1989). As Rubin (1992: 177) has said, “Butch and femme were brilliantly adapted for building a minority sexual culture out of the tools, materials, and debris of a dominant sexual system”.

A lesbian-feminist critique of butch/femme culture was necessary to open up a middle ground for ways to express being female that were not limited by traditional masculine or feminine expressions. It allowed for androgynous dress and social freedoms that mirrored the greater feminist movement’s liberation of women. Expressions of lesbianism that are not particularly gendered reveal that butch/femme desire and sexuality may actually be a minority experience within the wider experience of lesbian sexuality.

QUEER CONSCIOUSNESS AND GENDER EXPLORATION

Pair bonding and the development of intimate relationships have been grounded in assumptions about human sexual and gender identities.

Western civilization describes sex and gender as dichotomous. Males and females are considered opposites, and gender identity is assumed to flow from biological sex. Considered immutable and unchanging, masculine and feminine expression is expected to follow the biological assumptions about sex and gender identity (i.e., biological females are socialized and culturally ascribed as women who are comfortable expressing feminine behavior). Sexual orientation is assumed to “naturally” flow from this paradigm, creating a hetero-normative model where opposites (i.e., males *or* females, men *or* women, masculine *or* feminine) literally attract, like the poles of a magnet.

This model virtually disappears from the human family large groups of people who do not fit into this bipolar diagram, including those who are intersex and transsexual. Postmodern and social construction theory, influenced by feminism, initiated a deconstruction of the definitions and boundaries of sex and gender, the meaning of masculinity and femininity, and the assumptions of hetero-normativity. Contemporary understandings of human sexuality have decoupled masculinity and femininity (i.e., gender roles) from exclusively male and female sexed bodies. Additionally, the distinctions between sexual orientation and gender identity, so confusing for the sexologists of the nineteenth century, have become increasingly developed, producing identity constructs for same-sex desire between people with similar gender identities and expressions. In the early years of the twenty-first century, new narratives of sex and gender identities are emerging, that reveal new possibilities for intimate relationships beyond the old binary system (Boyd, 2007; Kane-Demaio and Bullough, 2005; Nestle, Wilchins and Howell, 2002).

The very concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality highlight the perceived differences in male and female bodies; homosexual relationships are often referred to as “same-sex,” signifying the importance of biology, and in particular the identical-sexed genitalia of the partners. Currah (2001: 182) states that the term sexual orientation “remains intelligible only if sex and gender remain relatively stable categories,” and butch/femme coupling confounds the simple stability of sex/gender categories. Lesbian couples who identify as butch/femme are (generally) in a same-sex relationship (i.e., they have both been assigned as females), and yet are not a same gender relationship (one partner has a more masculine gender expression and the other a feminine gender expression).

Lesbian-feminist theory presumed that “...the seemingly unequal power dynamic of butch/femme relationships [were] a mirror of heterosexual oppression” (Gusnoski, 2000, paragraph 2). Feminist theory, with

the goal of liberating women, conflated masculine and feminine gender expression with women's oppression, assuming that if people could somehow become gender-free then the power dialectic would be effectively dismantled. This assumes that lesbian relationships that are not constructed within the dialectic of gender opposites could somehow avoid power struggles. Power is, of course, multi-sited, and like race and age oppression, one cannot simply eradicate the constructs in which our lives are embedded—as if gender could simply be eliminated from women's lives.

Butch and femme can only be considered role-playing if all gender expression is role-playing. Butler (1990: 33) has taught that, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result." Both butch and femme have the subversive potential to bring attention to the masquerade of all gender roles. Gender has surely played an enormous role in maintaining subjugation in the lives of both women and men, and the task of postmodernism and queer theory has been to examine the limits of not just gender itself, but the ways the concept of gender is defined, constrained, mandated, and reified within the cultural discourse. And also the ways it can be reclaimed and resignified.

Pratt says that what "looks like power and domination from the outside . . . that's not what it is from the inside . . . everything looks different from the inside" (1995: 99). Indeed, a movement that began with the concept "the personal is political," had politically analyzed the meaning of gender in lesbian relationships without listening carefully to personal, subjective narratives of the very people for whom these ideas were a vivid reality. As Epstein (2002: 43) says, "Butch/femme roles take place in the context of and are enabled by the hegemonic categories of heterosexuality, but their significance is the internally dissonant and complex way they refigure these categories."

One of the greatest shortcomings of the lesbian-feminist critique of butch/femme dynamics was downplaying the importance of eroticism in the building of intimate relationships. Nestle has said that butch and femme are "complex erotic and social statements, not phony heterosexual replicas" (1992: 138). Butch and femme are, at their root, gendered erotic identities. Butches, assigned and identified as females, experience their sexuality as mediated through masculinity. Femmes, by reclaiming a social scorned femininity, broadcast their sexuality—a lesbian-specific sexuality—by publicizing their attraction to masculine females. Pratt (1995: 117–118) comments on this sexual dance:

You are a woman who has been accused of betraying womanhood. In my groans of pleasure. . . perhaps some would say I have betrayed womanhood with you, that we are traitors to our sex. Your refusing to allow the gestures of what is called masculinity to be preempted by men. Me refusing to relinquish the ecstasies of surrender to women who can only call it subservience. Traitors to our sex, or spies and explorers across the boundaries of what is man, what is woman?

Butch/femme sexuality is “motivated by desire, with romantic and sexual relations constructed around the sexual tensions created by gender difference” (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005: 40). Surely butch/femme couples in previous generations were motivated by the same sexual desires, but placing these identities and desires into a larger postmodern political movement that includes feminist, queer, and trans understandings of sex and gender, allows for the building of communities and families outside of small subcultural context of butch/femme bar culture (Lev 2006). It is within this milieu that butch/femme relationships, desire, intimacy, and family-building must be re-examined.

LESBIAN GENDER

In the late 1980s, I was living in a small city in up-state New York. I was a young social worker, far from the rhythms of San Francisco and big city culture, and also far from the bucolic enclaves of rural (mostly) separatist dyke communities where I had spent my early 20s. It was a warm Saturday night, and I could feel the sexual heat of mid-summer bearing down on me. Although not a drinker or a dancer, I went out to a local “women’s dance,” hoping for some company, or maybe more. I found myself standing on the side-lines, feeling more out of place than I had since my last high school dance. I looked around at the room of androgynous lesbians—sweet women, laughing and enjoying themselves, comfortable in their bodies and the celebration of sexuality that dancing with your own can bring—and with the suddenness of an electric shock, I realized there was not one woman in the room who I could imagine dating. My community, a home in my heart, left me sexually cold, aloof. I walked home alone, wondering—after nearly two decades of living as an out lesbian—if I was actually still a lesbian.

Although I had always known myself to be femme, for the first time I understood how salient this butch/femme business really is for me, and how

pertinent it is to my desire. The word "lesbian," although not incorrect, did not go far enough in describing my sexual orientation, my sexual preference, and my identity.

Laird says that butch and femme are "metaphors of lesbian language and culture" (1999: 61), and even those who do not identify with the terminology, or feel it describes their identity, are familiar with the constructs. Even lesbians who deny any personal identification with butch/femme identities are culturally fluent in the language and recognizing the gendered signifiers in themselves and one another (Loulan, 1990; Levitt and Horne, 2002).

Butch/femme sexuality is, of course, only one specific erotic dance between lesbians. There are many of other ways to explore and experience sexuality between those born female, including (but not limited to) femme/femme sexuality, butch/butch sexuality, and many various forms of androgyny. Gender is not a salient aspect of lesbian intimacy for all women who are sexual with women. It also is worth mentioning that terms like butch and femme are used outside of the lesbian community, and will have a different resonance within gay male culture, or even straight culture; these words will certainly have different meanings in other countries, cultures, and subcultures, across age, race, and class lines. Some females are masculine, or tomboys, but not lesbians (Boyd, 2007; Devor, 1989) some lesbians are feminine, "straight-acting," but not femme-identified, most notable those labeled lipstick lesbians (Maltry and Tucker, 2002).

There have been many attempts to define and explain the terms butch (Bergman, 2006; Burana, Roxxie and Due, 1994) and femme (Harris and Crocker, 1997; Newman, 1995, Levitt and Horne, 2003), and all fall prey to stereotypes about clothing, mannerisms, and cultural signifiers. Gender identity and expression, although certainly performative and culturally embedded, also evokes a core sense of self, an experience of actualization (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). Wearing male clothing for butches may be rife with cultural meaning, although it may appear to be simply an outward choice of appearance and a "facile presentation of our surfaces" (Borich, 2000: 122, 129); however, more than simple aesthetics urges butches and femmes to wear the clothes they do. It seems that when making "choices" about clothing "more than surfaces is at stake" (ibid.), and that freely made choices are sometimes "choices we are compelled to make." (ibid.).

Female masculinities (Halberstam, 1998) represent a broad spectrum of expression, behavior and identity. Butch is "a category of lesbian gender ... for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities" (Rubin, 1992: 167). The butch role has been a

reclaiming of masculinity, and at the same time an important symbol of rebellion against male power, sexism, and patriarchy; it has represented a lesbian archetype of women's power, and is therefore a profoundly feminist position.

In recent years, many formerly butch-identified females have claimed a male identity, emerged as female-to-male transsexuals (transmen). Creating "border wars" of identity (Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1998), masculinity in female bodies has become a contested area of embodiment and political alliance. The transgender liberation movement has created a larger space for those born female to explore the meaning of their masculinity and actualization as men. For some crossing over the binary from female to male has resolved the dysphoria of living as a masculine female. However, for others, transitioning can not resolve that dilemma, and can even increase the sense of displacement (Bergman, 2006; Feinberg, 2006); living outside of the binaries of male and female can sometimes leave one homeless. Butch is used here as an inclusive term, including many who also identify as transgender (Lev, 1998), but stops at the place where masculinity is experienced as male. Unlike transsexuals who defy social expectations about gender *identity*, butches experience a cross-gender *role*, that is, they are women who are masculine, not men with female bodies.

Femme identity has been harder to define and classify, precisely because it does not obviously defy societal expectations for what a woman should be. Femme identity is not straight and it is not exclusive to female-born bodies. It is not a passive identity, nor is it necessarily a sexualized or objectified identity, despite the misogynistic stereotypes. Femme is a conscious appropriation of what is traditionally thought of as feminine (although the word feminine itself is often rejected by femmes). Femmes identified that "the label evoked a strong, positive image of feminine sexuality" (Levitt, Gerrish, Hiestand, 2003: 103). Femme lesbian identity represents a comfort with having a female-sexed body and celebrates the pleasure inherent in feminine gendered sexuality. Femme (within the butch/femme dance) celebrates the masculinity of butch lesbians, and in that act heals some of the disembodiment butches can experience.

Femmes have a socially normative biology, gender identity, and gender role, but challenge the social conventions by actively choosing females as sexual partners. By "orienting their sexuality toward a butch woman instead of a man, the femme women made lesbian desire public" (Levitt, Gerrish, Hiestand, 2003: 99); this was historically an enormously radical act, and remains one today. Within the butch/femme dyad, femmes are often perceived as more passionate, more powerful and in charge—traits one

might assume to be masculine. Despite their public invisibility as lesbians, femmes are often out and outspoken within the lesbian community, commanding positions of leadership and power. Femme can be strong, willful, empowered, and embodied.

Nonetheless, femmes have been denigrated within the lesbian community (Harris and Crocker, 1997) and even their authenticity as lesbians has been continually questioned. The femme can become “reduced to unrecognized status” (Gusnoski, 2000, paragraph 11), and this invisibility strips her “not only of her identity, but of any understanding of her identity as subversive” (Maltry and Tucker, 2002: 94). It is this subversive element of femme identity that needs further explication, particularly in examining how butch/femme couples form long-term, stable relationships and families.

FEMME INVISIBILITY AND THE MAKING OF A HOME

*In 1943 Althea was a welder
 very dark
 very butch
 and very proud
 loved to cook, sew, and drive a car
 and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman
 who met her every day after work
 in a tight dress and high heel shoes
 light-skinned and high cheekbones
 who loved to shoot, fish, play poker
 and did not give a damn who knew her “man” was a woman.*

(Cheryl Clarke, 1992)

If we start from the acknowledged assumption that butch/femme relationships have historical presence and contemporary existence, and that lesbian intimacy is often formed within gendered parameters, we are left with some questions about the lack of visibility of butch/femme coupling within the research on lesbian relationships and family-building.

The clinical research on lesbian couples has continued to expand in the past thirty years, although it still remains a relatively small body of literature. The focus has primarily been on relationship satisfaction and intimacy, resilience of couple partnerships, the division of domestic chores, and more recently, a growing body of literature on parenting and

family-building (Chan, Brooks, Patterson and Raboy, 1998; Goldberg and Sayer, 2006; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1993; Mackey, 2000; Peplau, Veniegas and Campbell, 1996). The study of gender dynamics within same-sex relationships has overwhelmingly shown that lesbians have intimate relationships based on equality of roles and commitment to shared chores and parenting, and that traditional gender role dynamics do not operate in lesbian and gay relationships.

Although butch/femme couples are absent in scholarly documents, lesbian literature is seductive with stories of butch/femme sexuality, and it is undeniable that “femme-butch dyads offer . . . a highly charged sexual and gender specific way of caring for each other as lovers” (Harris, 2002: 75). But after the hot honeymoon, how do butch/femme couples make their way together as couples and partners and how to do they build gendered lesbian lives within the modern day lesbian culture?

Some butch/femme couples, according to emerging reports, enact family roles in sexualized and erotic ways (Harris, 2002; Maltz, 2002), meaning that roles of Mommy, Daddy, Son, and Daughter, are enacted—sexually and romantically—within the intimate narratives of the couple. For those that have lived outside of the confines of family life, this resignification may underscore the primal need for family, actualized through a re-creation of familial roles.

The focus, however, on butch/femme eroticism, as compelling as it may be, might obscure other equally subversive acts. I would like to suggest that one of the most subversive acts that femmes have accomplished is the establishment of a safe haven for their families in often hostile environments, through the creation of homes and through the process of homemaking. Gorman-Murray (2006) suggests that the development of a home plays a unique role in gay and lesbian partnerships, and that the sharing of domestic space helps to establish and consolidate same-sex partnerships.

Homemaking, which has traditionally exemplified the worst aspects of women’s oppression and forced domesticity, became a powerful site for reclaiming space, and creating environments where intimacy can develop and flourish. I suggest that femmes have played a unique role in the cultivating of their homes and the nurturing of families, a role that might appear to mirror the traditional role of heterosexual housewives on the outside, but to borrow from Pratt, it “looks different from the inside.” An alternative to bars and community spaces, having and maintaining a home creates a foundation in which long-term relationships can mature and move through time.

Homemaking is a private act that takes place outside of the public eye, and has therefore garnered little attention in mainstream society, which

has also served to protect butch/femme couples from too much public scrutiny. However, it also isolated couples and hid their home lives from historical and sociological inquiry. In a world that has been hostile toward masculine females and queers in general, femmes—the guardians of more traditionally feminine cultural artifacts—have fostered home environments for themselves and their butches where their identities and relationships could thrive. The act of making a home, a lesbian home, where female couples could build a life together as if they simply had the right, is a subversive act indeed.

In the contemporary world where gay and lesbians couples can build homes and have children, especially in large urban settings, we may fail to see how subversive it is to believe one has the right to exist as a family, and to become, in Borich's words "each other's plot of land" (2000: 118). The subversive act of cultivating a way of life in a hostile world has gone unnoticed precisely because things that belong to women's sphere and domesticity have mostly been deemed irrelevant and unimportant. Sadly, this is as true for lesbian-feminist theorists and gay historians as it was within mainstream culture. Women's domestic work—the work of cooking, cleaning, mending, and kissing "owies"—work that I suspect originated from and was sustained by the hands of femmes in femme/butch relationships, has mostly gone unnoticed or judged irrelevant or apolitical. Butch/femme couples have existed, creating homes in each other hearts, and becoming "each other's plot of land," yet remain hidden from the academic study of "lesbian couples."

The conspicuous absence of discussion about butch/femme relational dynamics in scholarly research makes me wonder if butch/femme couples are simply not taking part in these studies, or if researchers are not asking the kinds of questions that would explore the way gender is experienced within lesbian dyads. Examining domestic chores and parenting styles, or even power dynamics and communication styles, may not accurately measure the way that gender operates within same-sex couples, and for butch/femme couples it may actually mask the way that gender roles are understood and interpreted within the relationship. If research about gender roles assumes a power differential attached to the gender expression, the "equality" within the lesbian couple may hide important aspects of how gender functions in the relationship that is neither traditional (i.e., based in hetero-normativity) nor hierarchal.

In one study on femme identity, Levitt, Gerrish, Hiestand, (2003) discovered that femmes felt housekeeping duties were not divided along gender lines, and that their romantic relationships were based in equality, mirroring

the general body of research on lesbian couples. Does this mean that gender is not a salient issue in the domestic lives of butch/femme couples? Are butch and femme only erotic identities, and once past the dating and seduction part of early relationships, gender is no longer important to the organization of their home lives? Or rather does it prove that equality and respect can exist in homes where couples express divergent gender expressions? Can it be that oppressive power-over dynamics are not simply woven into the fabric of gender role expression?

It has been suggested that it may be easier for femmes to find higher paid employment than butches, who may struggle with job discrimination because of their unconventional gender presentation (Faderman, 1992; Levitt, Gerrish, Hiestand, 2003). Does this make for more egalitarian relationships, because the femme is an equal partner in finances; how does being the “breadwinner” impact her identity as a femme? Can researchers find ways to explore how class, education, sexism, gender oppression, and finances function in lesbian couples without falling back on simplistic gendered explanations?

What is the role of gender expression, gender identity, and gender attributes in the daily lives of butch/femme couples? As more lesbian couples are choosing to have children, how do butch/femme couples negotiate decisions about pregnancy, breast-feeding, stay-at-home parenting, and childcare arrangements? How similar is this process to lesbians who do not identify as butch/femme? How can researchers study how gender functions within same-sex couples, and not assume it is “like” heterosexual couples or “like” other lesbian (and gay) couples, but respect that it has its own unique manifestation?

Butch/femme coupling confounds normative assumptions about gender, sex, and role expression. Just as the erotic dance between butches and femmes utilizes gendered images reminiscent of familiar heterosexual stereotypes (i.e., male and female clothing), yet is functionally a very unique lesbian sexual expression, so too is the domestic lives of butch/femme couples. If researchers assume that there are no gender dynamics happening because both females share household chores and parenting, they are perhaps not asking the right questions about gender and roles within butch/femme families.

Cheryl Clarke’s poem outlines how strongly butch/femme identified couples experience gender in complex ways that defy simple stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Althea (the butch) is a welder who wears suits and ties but also cooks and sews, and Flaxie (her femme partner, unnamed in the excerpt above), who wears high heel shoes and tight

dresses, loves to shoot and plays poker. They may be stepping out of societal assumptions about gendered behavior, but perhaps they are perfectly embodying how lesbian gender is enacted within butch/femme relationships? Clarke recognizes the masculine/feminine polarity of their lesbian pair-bonding, yet she also poignantly acknowledges that Althea and Flaxie defied both the gendered expectations of heterosexual coupling and the traditional assumptions of gender within butch/femme relationships.

Despite premature statements that femme/butch relationships are an extinct social form, same-sex, opposite-gender relationships have historical existence and contemporary continuity. Focus on the erotic lives of butches and femmes, though titillating, does not do justice to the complexity of long-term lesbian relationships built on gendered identities. Researchers of lesbian families need to develop ways to examine the unique issues of gender within lesbian couples.

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