Lavender, Lipstick, Labryses and Leather: Lesbian Fashion and the Politics of Exclusion

by

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Submitted to the Women's Studies Program, Department of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Humanities at the MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

May 1994

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Acknowledgments

I can not thank everyone who made this work possible; the people and organizations below come immediately to mind. I must thank the women who gave generously of their time to participate in my interviews. Without them, this work would have been literally impossible, and their warmth, humor and insight made my work much more enjoyable. Equally essential were my advisors, Ann Russo and Yukiko Hanawa, who’s patience, encouragement, and questions were invaluable. Beth Haskell of the Lesbian Herstory Archives came in on a weekend, the only time I could be there; the archives remain an invaluable resource. The Austin Kelley Fund paid for my trip to the Archives, and Ginger Hanson and her family let me stay with them while in New York. The AMITA Oral History Project let me to use their tape recorder and transcriber. Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program funded a lot of my work doing interviews. Sandy Martin helped me find women to interview, listened to me philosophize and complain, offered much needed encouragement, and didn’t yell at me for being consistently half an hour late to work because “I just had to finish this draft!” Mary Loeffelholz gave advice and encouragement in the early stages of the project. Finally, my mother, Cathy Spatz Widom, and my friends, Ginger Hanson, Eon Harry, Tom Wilhelm, (and anyone else I happened to talk to over the last year or so) listened to endless complaints about my workload.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Socially determined we may be, yet we consistently search for crevices in culture that open to us moments of freedom. Precisely because fashion is at one level a game (although it is not just a game), it can be played for pleasure."¹

"To say that I 'play' at being one [a lesbian] is not to say I am not one 'really'; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed."²

"Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak."³

Many lesbians and bisexual women have played with fashion in constructing identities, communities and political strategies. Part of this process has been assigning meaning to particular styles, and this involves some form of exclusion. Identities themselves are in some sense based on exclusion; a category cannot include everyone or everything, or it would make no sense as a category. In order to assert a meaningful identity, there must be some qualities or traits which are not included. What has looking like a lesbian meant, and what have various lesbian styles excluded, when, and for what purpose? Although the experience of being excluded has been painful for many people, the exclusionary practices I will document in this paper have not

necessarily been wrong or reprehensible; they enabled strategies for fighting sexism
and homophobia in the larger society. Below I will elaborate how my own experi-
ences of identity and community have shaped my questions, goals, and definitions
in thinking about lesbian fashion, and outline some of the important points for this
paper.

One of my most important realizations in doing this project was that I came out
in the 1990s. My community has centered around queer-identified MIT students,
young, middle/upper class (although with a range of class backgrounds), mostly
white, mostly christian, and very much inclusive of bisexual women. Further, because
of the demographics of MIT students, I have known more gay men, than lesbians.
Since coming out, I have spent a lot of time clothes shopping with my friend Tom.
Tom and his roommate Eon, both bi/queer identified men, gave me advice while
shopping for my first neck tie. Tom was also with me when I first cut my hair short
after coming out. In some ways, my exclusion of men from this study is contrary to
my own experience of queer fashion, and to the experiences of some of the women
I interviewed. I have excluded gay men from this study primarily because of my
interest in what lesbians and bisexual women have said and done to bring meaning
to particular styles.

An important part of my shopping trips with Tom has been identifying other
queers. In this context, I use queer to mean either same sex couples showing affection,
or more often individuals, who wore enough gay/lesbian/bi signifiers, and used enough
of the relevant posturing to set off our “gaydar.” Signifiers include: doc marten shoes,
leather jackets, short hair, buttons with political slogans or a pink triangle, or labrys
jewelry. Tom and I use these symbols, although there are any number of queer-
identified people who do not wear those things, and any number of straights who do.
But we never actually walk up and ask any of the people we recognize if they identify
themselves as queer; it is irrelevant, as we do not expect to see them again. Eye

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4JS remembers learning about fashion from drag queens when she was first coming out. In talking
about their influence on her fashion sense, she showed me a picture from the seventies, of herself
in a pair of overalls onto which she had sewn sequins. LH remembers adopting “gay leather man”
style when she first came out in the early eighties.
contact and a smile is as far as it goes. However, this ritual of identifying other queers is important as an experience of community. I move in a fairly small circle of friends, yet identify with a larger group of people in Cambridge and Boston, who I really only see at lesbian/gay/bisexual pride marches once each year, or occasionally at bars or other events. Recognizing others who might identify with this larger group serves as material confirmation that the group exists, and that my circle of friends participates in a larger subculture. Further, through learning to identify other queers, I learned what it meant to look queer, and what I had to look like in order to participate in this community.

The ways that I learned to change my appearance included acquiring a black leather jacket and many t-shirts, but probably the most important step in my efforts to look queer, to participate in this ritual of identification, was cutting off my hair. When I came out I had shoulder length hair. As looking queer became more and more important to me, I decided to cut my hair very short. Immediately after the hair dresser finished cutting my hair, I thought, “Fabulous, I look like a lesbian now! Other lesbians should recognize me on the street now, because I identify women who look like this as queer.”

This version of community may be one only experienced by MIT students too busy or lazy to seriously explore off campus, and cannot even be generalized to queer undergraduates at MIT. Regardless, this experience of community has significantly influenced my thinking about the importance of lesbian fashion. In part because of it, within at least my circle of friends in an environment relatively safe in terms of homophobia, looking queer is privileged. In writing notes for this chapter, I wrote, “place myself squarely within queer activism, and with really valuing recognizing other lesbians on the street as evidence of a community out there even if I am not


6Here, in using queer, I refer to a specific politics which embraces sexual marginality and inclusion of not just lesbians and gay men, but bisexuals, sex workers, etc in political movement for sexual liberation. For more on this see Chapter 5.
feeling like a real participant in it because I am stuck on this campus with no women.” Part of my initial questions about lesbian fashion then, were about the relationships among fashion, identity and community. Do other lesbians and bisexual women today experience this emphasis on recognizing other women on the street? Have lesbians in different points in history used this type of strategy for constructing communities?

Also essential to this work has been my experience of butch-fem. I have come out in a time and circumstance where a particular version of butch-fem is almost trendy. My first girlfriend identified as butch, and we fought about this a great deal, because I did not want to be labelled fem; to me at the time and to some of the women I interviewed, fems were passive, bought into societal expectations for women, and passed as straight. Given how important looking queer was to me, being a fem was unthinkable. Since that time, I have rethought my definition of fem, and come to identify as fem, because of my attraction to butch women, and my joy in wearing lipstick and “accessories.” As opposed to the average MIT student who wears jeans and t-shirts most of the time, I wear earrings and scarves and lipstick with my jeans and shirts. Arlene Istar has written,

Discerning what is fem and what is butch is very difficult, since most of us who use these terms use them to define who we feel we are, and do not mold our behavior to fit existing stereotypic roles. I call myself fem because it describes who I feel I am, once I figured out it wasn’t a bad word. It does not mean that I love to cook, or that I never wear pants, or that I can’t paint a house or seduce a woman. It does mean that I love the feel of femininity, that I experience my essential self, sexually and socially, as female.

While I do not think of myself as having an “essential self,” I agree that the meanings of butch and fem are contested and unstable. Although the words butch and fem have

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7See Arlene Stein, “All dressed up, but no place to go? Style wars and the New Lesbianism” Out/Look Winter 1989, 1(4).


9I have tried to be recognizable to other queers, in a context where butchness is key for queer women’s identification and mainstream women’s fashion has become more and more like men’s. I also want to incorporate fem expression into my clothing. This is not a conflict I have resolved, and I doubt that other lesbians read this confusion in my clothing.

been in use for quite some time, the meanings associated with them have changed. For me, butch is the lesbian appropriation of masculine attire and/or mannerisms, and fem, the lesbian appropriation of feminine attire and/or mannerisms. I also associate particular sexual dynamics with butch-fem. However, my definitions of butch and fem are not necessarily the same as anyone else's. Definitions of masculinity and femininity, particularly with respect to fashion, have changed dramatically over time. While I may see a lesbian appropriation of masculinity and femininity in cover pictures of *The Ladder*, (see page 29) most of the women in the Daughters of Bilitis (D.O.B.) in the late 1950s and early 1960s would not have interpreted these covers as indicative of butch-fem which they associated with working class lesbian bars. Although I may view feminist androgynous fashion as a butch style, a lesbian-feminist in the 1970s would have been at least as likely to simply describe her clothing as practical or indicative of strength. I will use the terms butch and fem throughout this paper, clarifying their meanings in each context.

The above generalizations about lesbian-feminists and the members of DOB bring me to the question of just who I am talking about here. What do I mean by lesbian or bisexual? In defining lesbian and bisexual for the purpose of selecting women to interview, I relied on self-identification, acknowledging that individual definitions were probably inconsistent. However, I do not claim to speak for all (or even most) women who have identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual in the United States since World War II. Even while using self-identification might seem to include everyone who would consider their experience relevant to this project, the terms themselves can be exclusionary. Further, in practice, I did not randomly select from

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12I did look for diversity in terms of age, race, class and body size, because I felt that these differences might have important effects on women's experiences of using fashion in constructing identities. For example, working class and poor women, and very large women have access to a smaller range of commercially available clothing. Women who came out at different periods of time might well have different experiences of the meanings associated with clothing. Also word choice varied; actual self-identifications of the women I interviewed included lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, dyke, and queer. One problem in relying on self-identification is that some women participate in lesbian subculture, but do not choose an identity in any of these terms, even while recognizing that others may label them this way. I was unsure of how to define lesbian or bisexual to include these women.
everyone who identifies as lesbian or bisexual. In some ways, self-identification seems overbroad (what of the woman who feels no sexual desire for other women, and yet defines herself as a lesbian because of political beliefs?), even while my use of self-identification may mask exclusionary choices in my definitions. First, this study is restricted to those women whose writings were published, and/or available at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, or were interviewed by myself or other researchers. Also, almost all of my sources are from New York state, Massachusetts, or California. These sites are no more relevant than any others, they are simply the places about which I found the most information.

Differentiating between lesbian and bisexual without using self-identification is also difficult. There are lesbians who are currently, and have always been, solely attracted to women. But, there are also self-identified lesbians who are attracted to and/or pursue sex with men, and self-identified bisexual women who do not. Initially, I planned to ignore bisexual identified women. However, ignoring tension over bisexual and lesbian identities ("the lesbian-bi split") distorts notions of at least contemporary, young, queer-identified lesbian identity. My inclusion of bisexual women is partly based in the identity politics and bi inclusion of my immediate community. For this paper, I use lesbian to mean women who self-consciously sexually relate to other women in a way which is not accepted in the dominant culture. More specifically, I am talking about women who have participated in the groups discussed below. I have considered bisexual women as they relate to lesbians, share experiences of community and politics; I use the term lesbian to include some bisexual identified women, and will clarify where and why I may discuss the two separately.

I have constructed four social/historical groups of lesbians in order to consider four strategies in thinking about fashion: women who attended urban lesbian bars in the 1940s, '50s and '60s; members of Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) during the late 1950s and early 1960s; lesbian-feminists of the 1970s and early 1980s; and young queer women of the late 1980s and 1990s. I use these categories because each of these groups defined themselves in part as different from preceding groups. Members of

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13For more on whom I interviewed, see Appendix A.
DOB disparaged bar butches, feminists felt early homophile activists and bar lesbians were outdated, and many young queers today feel similarly about "seventies-lesbian-feminists." Within each of these groupings of individuals there has certainly been disagreement, but significant trends exist. Also important are strategies which these groups have in common.

Judith Butler has written about the performative construction of sexual and gender identities. Briefly (and perhaps reductively) put, Butler's performance theory suggests that identities, indeed subjects, are constructed through the repetition of meaningful acts of language and self-presentation, and that regulatory structures governing sexual and gender identities might be subverted in part by parody making this performance explicit. While I find Butler's analysis useful, I am left with the question of how the symbols in a performance become meaningful. Many have written about the difficulty of representing fems as lesbian. Also, some large women have noticed that they are rarely identified as lesbian or bisexual because fat people are considered asexual, while an Asian-American lesbian I interviewed (LTU) felt she was rarely perceived as a lesbian because she is first read as Asian and female. Bisexual women whom I interviewed felt that queers and straights alike identified them as bisexual only when their clothing displayed linguistic text to that effect, although they might otherwise be identified as straight or lesbian. Judith Butler's recognition of a cultural context in which we are constructed through certain rituals of representation is helpful. However, she does not explain the specifics of how those rituals gain meaning, nor which ideas or identities they can most readily represent. To use the notion of performed identities, we must consider the processes by which meanings are associated with particular styles.

16 JS and LS, see also Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser, eds. Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression, San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1983.
To this end, one might consider the capitalist context in which lesbians and bisexual women have gotten dressed. One reason why fashion is not reliable for signifying identities or political stances is the rate at which styles are coopted. Danae Clarke writes:

> Because style is a cultural construction, it is easily appropriated, reconstructed and divested of its original political or subcultural signification. Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the fashion world.\(^{17}\)

Rather than focusing on mainstream fashion's incorporation of lesbian fashion, the following chapters show conflict among lesbians about fashion and the meanings associated with particular styles. There seems to have been an effort, among the lesbians I look at, to invest styles with meaning in part by contrasting their present community and its styles with lesbians or other communities or groups. I call this exclusionary practice.

I came to question the evolution of meanings of particular styles from considering the importance of conflict among lesbians about the relationships among fashion, subculture, identity and politics. This paper documents extensive writing and discussion among lesbians about fashion; I doubt that anything which is discussed to this extent could be unimportant. But why have these issues been so important to the lesbians in this study? What is at stake in these discussions? Part of the answer may lie in the public and private domains of both fashion and sexuality, in the idea that with fashion, some women can make lesbian identity public, and in the process of making one version public, hide or delegitimate other versions of lesbian identity. Fashion spans the public/private dichotomy in our culture; getting dressed is a very private action, while appearing in public without clothing or in clothing usually worn by the opposite sex has been generally unacceptable, and in some cases illegal.\(^{19}\) Similarly,


\(^{18}\)These comments raise the question of what I mean by fashion or style. I use fashion to mean all forms of visual self-adornment, including clothing, makeup, jewelry, buttons, pins, stickers, hairstyles, shoes, etc. I will focus on discourse on lesbian fashion, what lesbians and bisexual women considered appropriate clothing, as opposed to the specifics of what they wore.

\(^{19}\)See Chapter 2 for a brief discussion of laws against cross-dressing.
sexual behavior is considered private while legislation regulating sexuality makes it public. The question becomes: who gets to make which version of lesbian identity public? In this process, what is excluded from the public image; and what purpose does this exclusion serve?

This paper documents some of the meanings of fashions within specific lesbian subcultures, and the ways in which exclusionary practices enabled these meanings. Lesbians in urban bars of the fifties had few resources with which to fight homophobia and sexism in an organized way. However, they succeeded in building a subculture, teaching each other how to dress and what it meant to be butch or fem in a violently homophobic society. However, butch and femme identities were in part constructed through distrust or derision of kiki’s, those who did not consistently identify as butch or fem. DOB didn’t want a subculture, but pursued specific political aims through assimilation; this strategy involved trying to reform bar butches, to make them look more “respectable.” Lesbian-feminists used fashion to fight existing compulsory gender roles, and celebrate women’s strength, even while defining strength. Feminist re-definition of gender roles depended on excluding fem lesbians, or femininity. Now, it seems that young queers are at once prizing a queer subculture and defining ourselves in opposition to “seventies-lesbian-feminist puritanism.” Exclusionary practices, using opposition to a particular group or style in the midst of identification with that group, have been an important part of the process of assigning meaning to clothing within lesbian subcultures and political practice.
Chapter 2

Butch-Fem: Fashion and Subculture in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s

The end of World War II found many more young lesbians and gay men in larger urban areas,¹ and employment in factories during World War II made pants somewhat more acceptable clothing for women.² However, there were no lesbian institutions, in the sense of organizations or annual events, other than the bars. In 1947, in Los Angeles, Lisa Ben produced nine issues of *Vice Versa*, the first lesbian newsletter in this country, but larger, longer lived, homophile organizations did not begin until the fifties: the Mattachine Society in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in 1955. In bars in urban areas across the country there emerged a subculture which many have argued made future political organizing possible.³ In the midst of rampant police harassment and with few resources available, lesbians used fashion in building

an erotic language and subculture.

Before going any further, a disclaimer is in order. That most of my sources describe California or New York state is problematic. Nothing makes these sites more relevant to a discussion of lesbian fashion during this period: these are simply the sites for which I could find the most information. More importantly, my analysis rests on the memories of women who participated in bar subcultures and other researchers’ analyses and excerpting of these memories, as opposed to records from these periods. The earliest interviews I use were conducted in the early 1970s, with at least the interviewer participating in lesbian-feminism. Some of these interviews were conducted in the mid to late eighties, in the context of reclaiming butch-fem in the midst of feminism and sexuality debates, often referred to as the sex wars. Narrators told their stories with a consciousness of contemporary debates about lesbian fashion, butch-fem and politics. Women who experienced butch-fem in the bars of the forties, fifties, and/or sixties may romanticize these experiences in response to feminist disapproval for butch-fem. Alternatively, they may agree with a feminist analysis of butch-fem as imitative of heterosexuality and be more critical of these identities. Also each researcher brought her own background and politics to the interview and to the excerpting process. These complications are crucial to any analysis of these texts.

Although butch and fem were common terms in gay bars through the forties, fifties, and sixties, the meanings associated with these terms changed over time. Most generally, butch and fem meant masculine and feminine appearance, and active and responsive roles in sex respectively. However, at least definitions of butch (I found less information about fem fashion and sexual roles.), both sexually and in terms of clothing, became more specific over time. Lisa Ben remembers about the “If Club” in Los Angeles during the 1940s:

I started dancing with one or the other of them who would come over and ask me. I never asked them. They asked me because I was obviously


4Neither the meanings of butch and fem, nor the circumstances in which the bars operated, were static over these years.
feminine. I had my hair long and I wore jewelry. I didn’t look like a gay gal. I didn’t have the close-cropped hair and the tailored look that was so prevalent in those days. I didn’t do any of that jazz because I just didn’t feel like it. And I was darned if I was going to do it just because everybody else did. I’m a girl and I’ve always been a girl. The only difference is I like girls.  

This quote raises questions for me about the relationship between “gay gal” identity and masculine clothing. Did all of the gay gals - butch and fem - look one way, while Lisa Ben was just totally out of place? Were there more butches than fems at the “If Club”? Were fems not considered “gay gals”? Early in the twentieth century American and European sexologists created “gender inversion,” a neurosis where women both desired other women sexually, and exhibited masculine personality traits and style. Esther Newton has argued that some lesbians embraced the model of lesbians as invert or women seduced by invert, because it allowed them to articulate sexual desire, and to distinguish their relationships from asexual romantic friendships.  

In the 1950s, definitions of lesbianism shifted towards sexual object choice (whether one preferred men or women or both) from gender expression. However, this shift has never been absolute. In part because physical contact was discouraged by bar owners, lesbian bars were marked not so much by the interactions of the clientele as by their clothing.  

Lesbians were expected to be able to differentiate butch from fem on sight, and to provide enough clues in their clothing for others to do the same. However, some sources indicate that differences between butch and fem clothing were quite subtle, 

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while others point to more obvious differences. Whether a shirt was starched or soft, whether pants zipped on the side or the front, and whether a women wore argyle socks and/or men’s underwear were important indicators for some lesbians, although they may not have been as meaningful to straight people. Joan Nestle writes, “Since at times fems dressed similarly to their butch lovers, the aping of heterosexual roles was not always visually apparent, yet the sight of us was enraging.” In some instances fems and butches may have dressed alike, but there is as much evidence that there were significant differences in butch and fem dress. Sandy Kern’s memory of being bashed in a park in New York city also indicates more of a clear delineation. She mentions that this occurred “many years” after 1945, but there is no exact date.

I was dressed the way I dressed for many, many years. It was sort of a uniform, I guess. I had sneakers on, dungarees – in those days we used to role them up – and a sweatshirt tucked into my pants. That’s the way I was dressed. My hair was short, as it is now [1984]. I had no make-up on. But she [narrator’s girlfriend] was dressed as a woman; she wore a dress, a summer dress. She had long hair which she braided and wore around her head…. She wasn’t obvious by a long shot, but the two of us together – they knew right away that we were lesbians.

Some fem narrators in Madeline Davis’s and Elizabeth Kennedy’s work claim to have worn pants or zoot suits. Joan Nestle, writing about her experience in the late 1950s, distinguishes between straight people’s reading of her as a “bulldyke” and other lesbians’ reading of her as fem.

In the late 1950s I walked the streets looking so butch that straight teenagers called me a bulldyke; however, when I went to the Sea Colony, a working-class Lesbian bar in Greenwich Village, looking for my friends and sometimes for a lover, I was a fem, a woman who loved and wanted to nurture the butch strength in other women.

Here it appears that looking butch was synonymous with looking like a lesbian

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(bulldyke). Davis and Kennedy describe the experience of one fem who was mistaken as butch, not by straight men in the street, but by other lesbians.

Although unquestionably fem, Bell did not appear traditionally feminine. “I’ve had many people, though, that have taken me to be a butch because I do not like dressing really feminine, and I feel that I do have some butch ways that have led people to believe that I just might be a butch. I’m not real feminine acting.” Feminine appearance and mannerisms were less important to her identity than sexual interests and her need to be dependent on someone “strong.”

Audre Lorde recalled the value of certain clothing which could be worn by both butch and fem: “Garments with zippers were highly prized among the gay-girls, because these could be worn by butch or fem alike on certain occasions, without causing any adverse or troublesome comments.” I suspect that there was a wider range of acceptable styles for fems than for butches, particularly as mainstream women’s fashion became more androgynous in the sixties.

Part of the change in the meanings given to butch and fem was in terms of sexuality; active and responsive sexual roles were more strictly differentiated as time went on. Whereas in the late forties and early fifties, the butch role of sexual initiator had been more loosely defined in terms of penetration, towards the late fifties and early sixties, there emerged the designation “stone butch.” A stone butch did not let her fem penetrate her, but even more so did not let her lover even touch her. Butches, and later particularly stone butches, commanded respect in the bars as a symbol of strength in being able to defend the community. However, for a butch to be “flipped” by her fem, (to have let her fem make love to her, or later to touch her) was an embarrassment.

As sexual definitions of butch became more narrow, acceptable dress codes for butches also narrowed.

Stormy, a regular at Bingo’s in the mid-1950s, remembers white butches on the weekend wearing sports jackets, western shirts, or tuxedo shirts with

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ties. When they went out during the week, they dressed more casually in shirts and chinos. Penny loafers were common, and they were often worn with argyle socks. But tough butches also wore cowboy boots and low-cut men’s dress boots. Despite the requirement of men’s clothes, white butches in the early and mid-1950s had quite a bit of leeway in how they constructed their image.

For the younger tough white butches in the late 1950s the dress code was more restrictive. The image is captured by Ronni’s description of herself, “I played a very dominant, possessive, butch, truck-driver role at that time. I wore a crew-cut and shirts. I used to have my pants tapered at the bottom. I’d have my cuffs taken in. I’d go have my hair cut at the barber.” Chinos had gone out of style and blue jeans were in, so that during the week, butches wore T-shirts and jeans, a uniform popularized by the movies of James Dean and Marlon Brando.\textsuperscript{16}

The following memories of the late fifties and early sixties indicate the value placed on butches wearing masculine clothing all of the time, even if it meant losing their jobs.

“I wasn’t in the gay scene, so it didn’t matter if someone saw me, ’cause they didn’t know me anyhow. And after I started going around – found the gay bars, the gay people – I just went the way I felt like going, and that was... my butch way. And then after you meet different girls, well, you couldn’t meet them after work. You’d have to go home and change, and then if you were working and went out for lunch you wouldn’t want anyone from the gay crowd that thought you were wow, saying something, to see you prancing around in a little skirt, why that would just blow the whole shot. So that ended the job.”\textsuperscript{17}

“Now a majority of these [homeless] kids wouldn’t take jobs where they would be in danger of being fired because of being gay.... I remember one girl in particular, a very bright girl. The only job she could get was running an elevator because she wouldn’t wear a dress. That was OK because we encouraged these kids to be themselves, to stop trying to hide it.”\textsuperscript{18}

In this case, it seems that not wanting to wear a dress and not “trying to hide it” are used almost synonymously. Again I am left with questions about whether both


\textsuperscript{17} p.175, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community, New York: Routledge, 1993.

butches and fems wore pants, or whether fems were simply left out of these discussions of lesbians?

Although some butches felt that butch style was more important than their jobs, others disagreed. Some butches saw wearing a skirt and make-up to work as protection. Sandy Kern remembers "Well, I had to go to work and I had to compromise. I always wore skirts to work, and I never had any trouble when I wore skirts and lipstick. That was a sort of shield." Despite the fact that their gay friends would expect them to dress butch most or all of the time, there was some flexibility, particularly for work or when spending time with one's family.

Mainstream fashion's definitions of masculine and feminine have changed over time, while men's clothing and women's clothing are imbued with significations of age, class and culture. Butches adopted very specific masculine styles. Butches in the 1940s "did not simply wear masculine clothes, but rather developed a definite style for dressing up. A distinctive part of their attire was the heavily starched shirts which contrasted with their softer everyday blouses." Also, different bars with varying clientele had different styles: "Those [butches] in Bingo's modeled themselves on the Italian men of the West side neighborhoods, while those in the Carousel had a more collegiate look."

Joan Nestle has written about the erotic language which butch and fem styles enabled:

I have always been struck by the ahistorical quality of this yearning for a public lesbian sexual self, since lesbian life in America from at least the thirties through the sixties was organized around a highly developed sense of sexual ceremony and dialogue. Indeed, because of the surrounding oppression, ritual and code were often all we had to make public erotic

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connections. Dress, stance, gesture, even jewelry and hairstyles had to carry the weight of sexual communications. The pinky ring flashing in a subway car, the DA haircut combed more severely in front of a mirror always made me catch my breath, symbolizing as they did a butch woman announcing her erotic competence.  

I have not found other sources which describe this type of public erotic conversation so explicitly. However, changing meanings of both clothing and sexual expression seem to indicate an emerging language for sexual desire. In order to construct these meanings, it seems that lesbians in the bars had to universalize the importance of butch and fem, thus excluding those who did not want to identify as one or the other.

In addition to enabling an erotic language, the strictness in dress codes helped in dealing with homophobic police officers. Because of the specificity of butch and fem dress codes, recognizing outsiders was not difficult. Since undercover police officers sometimes went to bars in order to entrap and arrest bar clientele, the ability to differentiate between members of the community and outsiders was important. Of course, this was problematic for genuine newcomers to the community. Alternatively, butches who defended themselves physically against the police sometimes used feminine clothes, stature and mannerisms to get themselves out of trouble. One white narrator recalls:

I didn't have any [court clothes]. I borrowed them.... That was one, great advantage of being gay, was you beat the court. I beat 'em every charge.... Beat all of my cases.... [They were for] assault. One was on a police officer.... He could identify me, but they didn't believe I did it to him. They didn't believe I could do it. He was in there, his head was all wrapped up, he had a concussion, broken nose, eyes, and, about a six footer. And there I am, looking as pathetic as I could. And I remember the judge, he says, "You did that? ... Why you couldn't weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet," he said to me. I says, "98." He says, "I don't believe you did this, no I have to throw this out."  

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However, this defense would probably not have worked as well for a larger woman or a woman of color.

Some police harassment was legitimized by laws against cross-dressing. These laws were used against all butches, but African Americans were harassed more than whites.\(^{27}\) Audre Lorde wrote that black lesbians who were brave enough to be out in the fifties had to present a tougher than tough image so no one would mess with them. However, they were careful of the laws against crossdressing: “Most of the women we knew were always careful to have on a bra, underpants, and some other feminine article. No sense playing with fire.”\(^ {28}\) The specific laws seem to have varied by region, and over time; however, the general stipulation was that everyone had to wear two or three garments “appropriate to her sex” at all times. Lisa Davis writes:

> In the fifties, you could still get busted by the vice-squad for being a transvestite (“masquerading” as a man) unless you wore three pieces of women’s clothing. So you can imagine the rigors of life for a butch who worked in drag in the forties. And the *did* wear men’s underwear.\(^ {29}\)

With few resources to fight police harassment, lesbians in gay bars in the forties, fifties and sixties used fashion both to protect themselves and to develop a dynamic erotic language. The question of feeling forced into a role (ie butch or fem) seems to me, at once a cliched lesbian-feminist comment in discussions of butch-fem, and an essential intellectual question. Examining what was excluded from this lesbian sub-culture in order to establish an erotic language is important. Asking these questions does not negate the importance of the accomplishments of women who participated in this bar culture, but adds to our understanding of the ways in which we can invest symbols with meaning.

Chapter 3

Daughters of Bilitis

The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) was the first expressly political lesbian organization in the United States, and it existed as a national organization from 1955 to 1972.\(^1\) DOB's monthly newsletter, \textit{The Ladder}, circulated around the country and was read by many lesbians and bisexual women.\(^2\) The initial statement of purpose of DOB, published in each issue of \textit{The Ladder} and in place until 1967, read as follows:

\textbf{Purpose of the Daughters of Bilitis}, a women's organization for the purpose of promoting the integration of the homosexual into society by:

1. Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications – this to be accomplished by...

1 Although DOB started in San Francisco in 1955, there were soon chapters in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Rhode Island, and New Jersey. In 1972 DOB agreed to dissolve as a national organization and allow the chapters more autonomy; \textit{The Ladder} had split from the organization a few years before. The Boston chapter of DOB is still active.

2 There were bisexual women in DOB; \textit{The Ladder} featured debates on the validity of bisexual identity. One writer exclaimed, "Those girls are the death of every lesbian!" (\textit{The Ladder} 4(11) August 1960.). Later Miriam Gardner from Texas wrote in: "I found myself saying 'yes, yes, yes' on every page – particularly to the one remark she [Valerie Taylor] made about bisexuals who 'conceal their natures because they get hell from both sides.' Indeed yes. Since writing the two 'Borderland' articles, the few people who know my identity have been encouraging me with all their hearts, bless them, to come out of hiding and live freely as a homosexual - quite missing the point of the entire article, that for people of this particular sort, exclusive homosexual orientation is just as impossible as the life of the good homey hausfrau! Or else they quite miss the point and assume that I am perpetually gripped by an insane desire to plunge into orgies of the type described in the various works of the shady press, more notable for quantity and diversity of participants than for any qualities of emotion or tender companionship." (p23, \textit{The Ladder} 5(5), Feb 1961.)
dress acceptable to society.
2. Education of the public at large through acceptance first of the individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices...
3. Participation in research projects...
4. Investigation of the penal code...  

DOB formed as an alternative to lesbian bars. They described the bars as "risky and rough;" there were often fights, and one risked arrest in attending gay bars. Initially, the founders of DOB conceived of a social organization for women. However, they quickly began work publishing *The Ladder* and organizing more explicitly political events, such as forums with the police and clergy. They also sponsored studies of their membership intended to prove that lesbians were well adjusted, productive members of society. Although initially unaware of the existence of (primarily male) homophile organizations such as One, Inc. and the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis soon allied themselves with the homophile movement. In the midst of McCarthyism, DOB and the other homophile organizations worked to remove some of the stigma from homosexuality, and to become accepted as normal by society; DOB's pursuit of a "mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society" was an expressly political strategy. In 1950s America, building a distinct subculture did not seem to be an appropriate strategy for reaching the goal of acceptance.

The members of DOB did not approve of the masculine and working class attire of butches in the bars. Barbara Stephens wrote a series of short stories about a martian who came to earth and eventually decided that although he loved his beautiful wings, if he was to fit into human society, he had to hide them. Martos, the martian, shared his experiences with the friendly lesbians he met on earth, who learned from his strategies. Because they recognized the value some lesbians placed on butch style, these stories were relatively mild compared to some of the ongoing commentary found

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3 *The Ladder*, 1(1), October 1956. In the January 1967 issue of *The Ladder*, among other changes, the phrase “advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society” was replaced by a clause about providing a forum for the exchange of ideas among lesbians.


in the “Readers Respond” column. Numerous readers wrote in to decry butches’ “shameful” state of attire, associating it with ignorance and anti-social status. One “anonymous sister” wrote “I can’t fathom why any woman would want to be called ‘butch’.”6 Whereas in the bars butches were admired as defenders as well as signifiers7 of the community, among many members of DOB, the label butch was an insult. In the second issue of The Ladder, Del Martin wrote in her “President’s Message”:

I must go back to her [a DOB member’s] letter in which she states ‘...but the kids in fly-front pants and with the butch haircuts and mannish manner are the worst publicity we can get.’

Very true. Our organization has already touched on that matter and has converted a few to remembering that they are women first and a butch or fem secondly, so their attire should be that which society will accept.8

Later in the same letter she quotes one of DOB’s “changlings:” “I find that because now I am wearing women’s slacks and letting my hair grow long, I am getting a wider variety of friends and I have neighbors instead of people next door. I no longer have the feeling that everyone is watching me.”9

The quote from the “changling” above acknowledges her experience of different treatment from society at large with a change of clothing. New friends and feeling less like everyone is watching her were probably important benefits of her change in style. Similarly Billie Talmij remembers that DOB “had gab ’n javas... on how to make a butch into a dolly – something weird like that. It was about how to accommodate to a given situation.”10 Accommodating to a particular situation is different from considering the causes of homophobia, or the ways in which one might be speaking for all lesbians (e.g. giving lesbians bad publicity) in adopting a particular style of dress. Some members of DOB located the cause of homophobia in butch fashion itself. One woman wrote:

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6 pp.23–24, The Ladder, 4(8), May 1960.
Do we take pride in our sisters who have lost their self respect and who are constantly the subject of ridicule and who have established themselves as the emblem of our ‘ism’? I think not. I hope not! I pray not! Is this the woman we are asking society to accept? Do we accept her? Our objective is clear — in order to eliminate the prejudice against the lesbian, we must first eliminate the cause. In order to help society understand the lesbian, the lesbian must understand herself.

Altogether too much emphasis is placed on our ostracism by society. Have we not ostracized ourselves by refusing to conform to certain standards that would, in part, open the door we are pounding upon so weekly? *Basically all we need to do is act and dress as befits our sex.*

Similarly, at the end of an article on police and alcohol regulation agents raiding gay bars in San Francisco, Del Martin wrote, “The homosexual must learn that defiance in the face of a prejudiced society does not serve his ends, but rather it tends to justify and intensify the prejudice he would seek to eliminate.”

To whom was this prejudice justified? Did defiance justify prejudice to the general public or to Del Martin? This statement seems different from a simple cautionary remark, to the effect of “The police tend to be more violent towards women wearing fly fronts, so you might not want to take that risk,” or a story of different treatment based on different clothing. Martin discussed more general concepts of prejudice, rather than specific instances of maltreatment, implying that by defying the police, perhaps by dressing in “men’s” clothing, some lesbians brought oppression onto themselves.

In addition to questions about butch style causing homophobia, writers in *The Ladder* associated butch clothing with ignorance. Amidst debates about lesbian pulp novels, N.R. from California, exclaims:

> It is obvious that Miss Aldrich’s main objection is the picture of the lesbian we are showing the world – the irresponsible, argyled, slacked, short-haired female carpenter who is too ignorant to realize that she, too must live in this society; that she, too, is obligated to hold down a job to support herself; that she has a certain responsibility to her fellow lesbians and to society, as well as herself....

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13Ann Aldrich wrote pulp novels. In debates about these novels in *The Ladder* writers often preferred Ann Aldrich to Ann Bannon who wrote about “Beebo Brinker” a butch character who attended in urban lesbian bars.
In short, if we homosexuals want to feel integrated into society, we in turn must offer something useful and desirable to accept.  

What is considered useful or desirable in this context? NR wrote that “we,” presumably lesbians, were presenting an unacceptable (ignorant, irresponsible, gender-inappropriate) image to the world. She assumes that lesbians have responsibilities to other lesbians, and to society at large, but she does not clarify what these responsibilities entail. NR’s conflation of fashion, occupation, and social qualities make understanding these responsibilities somewhat difficult. However, her use of the monolithic “we” implies that the primary responsibility to other lesbians lies in assuming that one represents all lesbians when representing oneself. In other words, lesbians who dress in ways which are unacceptable to society at large, give all lesbians a bad name. Despite some calls to arms in The Ladder, the individual members of DOB were generally scared to reveal their identities, as were many of the women who went to lesbian bars. However, DOB members used clothing to blend in, so there was no way for them to change the “image” of lesbians without identifying themselves as lesbians with words (either holding a sign, or verbally telling everyone they met).

In the early sixties, the homophile movement did sponsor rallies to protest government discrimination against lesbians and gay men. At these protests, men wore pants, shirts and ties, and women wore skirts and heels. Martha Shelley remembers “I thought it was ridiculous to have to go there in a skirt. But I did it anyway, because it was something that might possibly have an effect. I remember walking around in my little white blouse and skirt and tourists standing there eating their ice cream cones and watching us like the zoo had opened.” That even with conventional clothing activists still felt like animals in a zoo, points to homophobia independent of dress. While butch women might have been the objects of ridicule without carrying a sign with linguistic text identifying them as lesbian, as long as “the public” knew that the protesters were gay or lesbian, the respectability of their dress did not make them socially acceptable. However, staring without physical violence is better than the

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police brutality which lesbians in men’s clothing often experienced.

In contrast to the publicity of a protest, Helen Sanders happily reported in The Ladder about the first DOB convention, “Probably the casual on-looker would not have known just what sort of convention this was. We don’t mind.”16 Women were asked to wear skirts to DOB conventions. Billie Tallmij remembers this requirement as a practical matter of protection from the police.

We had our first DOB national convention, which we had right here in San Francisco in 1960, one woman called us from the Los Angeles area. She had been a subscriber to The Ladder and a DOB member for several years, although we had never met her. She asked, “Do we have to wear skirts?” She hadn’t been in a skirt in seventeen years. And we said “Yes, you do have to wear a skirt.” So, she went out and she bought one skirt. She had several different men’s shirts to go with it. I didn’t care about the men’s shirts; nobody else did either. But she had to wear a skirt, for her own safety. There was a law on the books that you could be arrested for impersonating a male, which included wearing fly-front jeans! We knew there would be police at our first convention and that they would scan every one of us. We wanted to protect people who came.17

DOB members’ opinions on the political utility of butch clothes varied within a certain range. Z.N. from San Leandro, California wrote “Any minority group wishing to be accepted must conform to the majority group where first impressions are concerned.”18 She then explained that she liked wearing pants, but wanted to get to know people before shocking them. Also, aside from questions about which clothing was politically appropriate or practical, there were issues of accessibility. S.K. from North Las Vegas, wrote that given that she was six feet tall, women’s clothing in her size was extremely expensive.19 She claimed to not flaunt her homosexuality, but stated that “It’s not what you are wearing that counts, it is how you conduct yourself that matters.” SK amended DOB’s general ideology of fitting in, with the reality of limited options in clothing for large women. The Ladder featured an ar-

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article, "Transvestism in Women" by Gene Damon and Lee Stuart, which discussed women passing as men throughout history and concluded that because women's and men's clothes were becoming more alike, and women had more job opportunities, there would be less need to pass as men. However, Damon and Stuart assumed that a woman would only cross dress if there were some economic reason to do it, or if feminine clothing were too uncomfortable, or were unavailable. This disregards the subcultural significance of cross-dressing for participants in the subculture in the bars. Kay Lahusen remembers, "As I quickly learned, the purpose of DOB was to get gay people to jack themselves up. If you were a lesbian, you were to put on a skirt and join the human race." It seems that, in general, the strategy of the members of DOB was to accept gendered conventions in fashion, and appease straight society by meeting the fashion expectations for women.

The objections of the women in DOB to butches were different from those of lesbian feminists in later years, in that they centered on looking acceptable to straight society rather than on relative gendering in lesbian relationships. In particular, objecting that butch-fem couples were imitating heterosexuals would have made less sense in a group which valued fitting in with heterosexuals. Further, it is possible that women in DOB practiced a different form of butch-fem (using my definition from the Introduction) than the women in the bars. I do not have information on the sexual practices of those in DOB; however there is some evidence that at least among some couples in DOB one partner generally wore more masculine clothing while the other wore more feminine styles. Several covers of The Ladder show pairs of women with masculine and feminine signifiers respectively or women who look butch (see figure 3). My interpretation of the pictures above may demonstrate that I am reading a relative gendering of two people despite their intentions. However other scholars have confirmed that butch-fem dynamics existed in middle class lesbian subculture, and DOB was mostly middle class. Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy write, "Although

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22 The average income and educational level of DOB members were well above the average for white women. ("DOB Questionnaire Reveals Some Facts About Lesbians," pp.4-26, The Ladder,
Figure 3-1: Covers from The Ladder representing a butch-fem couple and a butch, respectively. (Left: April, 1959, Right: November, 1960.)
butch-fem culture existed in all subcommunities the butch role was less ‘obvious’ or ‘flamboyant’ in the more upwardly mobile crowd.”23 Also Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, two of the founders of DOB, write of their own experiences:

The only model we knew, a pattern that also seemed to hold true for those few lesbians we had met, was that of mom-and-dad or heterosexual marriage. So Del assumed the role of ‘butch’ (she was working at the time) and Phyllis, being completely brainwashed in society’s role of woman anyway, decided she must be the ‘fem’.24

Clearly, had Phyllis been “completely brainwashed in society’s role of woman,” she would have been married to a man. Whether this demonstrates anti-fem sentiment of earlier DOB subculture or the upcoming lesbian-feminism is unclear, as this book was published in 1972.

While DOB emphasized visually fitting in to straight white middle-class society’s norms, they also prioritized openness about one’s lesbian identity, or overcoming fear of coming out. K.L. from Pennsylvania wrote a “Readers Respond” letter25 emphasizing the importance of coming out. D.S. wrote about a raid on a gay bar in Chicago in which 52 people were arrested and abused by the police: “Though I do not wish to go into details of their fifteen-hour detention period, I will say that the conditions of the lockup itself, as well as their treatment, violated more than a few Illinois laws.”26 Her letter is an impassioned call to hire lawyers and fight this illegal treatment, and she recognizes that in order to do this, lesbians must overcome fear of coming out to a lawyer: “He [a lawyer] can not stage a legal battle when almost every gay person seems to be too scared of getting a public black eye to fight for the legal rights that constitute his personal liberty.”27

There was conflict about DOB’s stated strategy recorded in the pages of The Ladder. One reader wrote in valuing gay subculture, and discouraging conformity:

September, 1959.)
25 The Ladder, April 1963.
I can’t understand those homosexuals who want to blend into the landscape. I mean those who live in suburbia, move in its milieus, and strongly desire to remain a part of it. As if there were any basic comfort in the alien climate of opinion there.

I know of several homosexual couples who are wearing out their lives looking as bland and tasteless as their suburban neighbors, consorting with those who must always be only acquaintances, and attending the church that rejects their kind.... Aren’t they confusing middle-class morality with morality? Split-level homes with high-level living? Conformity with commendability? They must or they wouldn’t continue the chameleon act.28

B.G. of Kansas City writes a “Reader Response,”29 about a conversation with a Black woman friend of hers who said that she didn’t think that being accepted was an appropriate goal of any civil rights movement, but that activists should fight for equal rights. The woman writing the letter thought this was a good idea for lesbians too. However these ideas seem to have been the exception to the rule.

Although the ideology of dressing in a manner acceptable to straight society was somewhat controversial, it was a popular view for much of the DOB membership. The Daughters of Bilitis, along with other homophile organizations, worked to make lesbians and gay men more acceptable to a violently homophobic society. Part of their strategy to reach this goal necessarily involved reframing the general image of “the lesbian.” This strategy resulted in exclusion of butch styles.

Chapter 4

Seventies-Lesbian-Feminism

After the Stonewall Riots in June of 1969, many lesbian/gay liberation organizations emerged, particularly on college campuses. The second wave of American feminism had begun, on the heels of civil rights and Black nationalist movements, and movements against the Vietnam war. By the early seventies there was a thriving youth counterculture. Young lesbian-feminists drew upon these movements in building an ongoing movement and established lesbian subculture. In the process, they differentiated themselves from “old gays” — activists from the homophile movement and butches and fems from the bars. Prevailing lesbian-feminist ideology rejected butch-fem identity and roles, and feminine styles in particular. Joan Nestle has written about the exclusion of fem lesbians from lesbian feminism.

In the Straight world, butches bear the brunt of the physical and verbal abuse for their difference, in the lesbian-feminist world, fems have had to endure a deeper attack on their sense of self-worth. Leather and denim, flannels and vests — butch women could easily adapt these prevailing signs of feminist gender resistance into superficial passports to acceptance, but the fem woman, in her lace and silk, high heels and lipstick, had no place to hide.1

Stating that many women who now and/or then identified themselves as fem felt hurt by exclusion from lesbian-feminism seems a dramatic understatement. I find

ignoring that pain unconscionable. Having said that, I want to consider what lesbian- 
feminism's exclusion of fems meant at the time, and what purposes it served. I do 
not think that there are essential human beings who are born fem. Fem identity, like 
any other, is constructed. Because lesbian-feminists were rejecting styles associated 
with women, one might regard this exclusion of femininity as indicative of misogyny. 
More likely feminists were trying to redefine femininity and femaleness, and hoped 
to reject all "outside" constructions of femininity and start from scratch. Similarly, 
some have characterized lesbian-feminists as antisex, while lesbian-feminists aimed to 
redefine lesbian sexuality in opposition to the mainstream focus on genital contact 
and orgasm. In both cases, redefinition required exclusion.

Many lesbian-feminists saw feminine clothing as less practical and less comfortable 
than men's clothes, a drain on time and energy, accepting of compulsory gender roles 
and thus indicative of women's subordinate status. In many feminist groups, wearing 
pants was expected and if someone decided to wear a skirt, they were expected to have 
an excuse and/or an apology such as work, or visiting with family (JS). BM recalls: 
"[There was] a general sense of looking down at people who wore skirts, or dismissing 
it as something you have to do to make a living, but there was no appreciation or 
acknowledgment that someone might choose to do that."

JoAnn Loulan and Lyndall MacCowan have written that the word fem almost 
vanished from the lesbian-feminist vocabulary, while butch remained. ED remembers 
of her work at a rape crisis center, which was "swarming with dykes":

There was some remnants [of butch-fem], but there weren't a whole lot 
of fems around. At that point, the lesbians were - even if they had long 
hair, they were wearing work boots and flannel shirts - much more on the 
butch side. You know there were baby butches, those were the softer ones, 
and the littler ones, but very few fems.... there was a lot more emphasis 
on butchness.

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2p.129-130, Wendy Chapkis, Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance, Boston: 
South End Press, 1986.

3JoAnn Loulan, The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny and Other Rythms, Min-
neapolis: Spinsters Ink, 1990., and Lyndall MacCowan, "Re-collecting History, Renaming Lives: 
Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties" in Joan Nestle, ed. The Persistent Desire: 

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The differentiation between baby butches and butches here is interesting in that it does not connote an age difference. Baby butches could have been more feminine - "softer" and "littler" - but they were not called fem.

However, there seems to have been conflict between wanting choice for women, and politically disapproving of fem clothing. While arguing vehemently for visibility through short hair, and identifying privileges associated with long hair (job opportunities for example), Liza Cowan wrote “Every woman should have the choice of how to wear her hair. I would hate to hear of a Lesbian who was put down or ridiculed by her Lesbian peers for wearing her hair in any manner she chose. But... hair is political. The choice is a personal one, but it always has political implications.”

It seems that more often than not, political implications won out over personal choice. Lillian Faderman writes of lesbian feminist politically correct fashion:

There were rules for everything, even acceptable dress. Makeup, skirts, high heels, or any other vestiges of the ‘female slave mentality’ would arouse suspicion in the community and were shunned. The uniform was usually jeans and natural fiber shirts. Expensive clothing suggested conspicuous consumption and was inappropriate in a community where downward mobility was ‘p.c.’ ‘Fancy threads’ meant thrift shop elegance: vests, ties, fedoras or berets, pinstripes and baggy flannels. Although butch-and-fem were ‘p.i.’ in the lesbian-feminist community everyone looked butch.

But the goal was to appear strong and self-sufficient, rather than masculine: no matriarchy could function if its inhabitants had to run or fight in high heels and tight skirts.

Lillian Faderman implies that the value of clothing was based on its utility – how well suited it would be to running or fighting. Because high heels and tight skirts were not practical in this sense, lesbian-feminists shunned them. However, practicality could not have been the only concern. Any number of different styles could be practical, while there seems to have been a particular look which was popular. Almost all of the women I interviewed emphasized that they dressed for comfort, but comfort meant very different things for each of them. While some women have said that...

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pants are more comfortable, LK stated, "I usually wear a dress or a skirt, usually this length [mid-calf or ankle length]. Always going for comfort.... comfort is key. I like things loose." Perhaps because it served to mask the exclusionary practices of lesbian-feminism, practicality was named the most important concern with respect to clothing. Nancy Williamson reasoned:

In consistently deviating from the Hollywood-Madison Avenue-Playboy norm, we have indeed affected a studied ugliness. Many of us have cut our hair, and chosen to wear loosefitting pants, shirts with high necks, sturdy shoes rather than tight short skirts and dresses and flimsy, fall-apart shoes for several reasons. It is more comfortable; it causes less attention on the street; it is less abasing; it is less expensive, less time-consuming.⁶

“Attention on the streets” meant sexist harassment (catcalls etc.) or more extreme violence. The goals of avoiding violence and fighting consumerism, and the idea of practicality allowed a rationalization of this preference for masculine/androgynous (what I would call “butch”) clothing stripped of it’s association with “role-playing” and fems. On wearing men’s clothing, Liza Cowan argued: “We know that men, the patriarchal rulers, take what is best for themselves, at least materially, including clothes. So, to dress in ‘men’s’ clothes is not to imitate men (who wants to be a man!) but to wear what is least oppressive.”⁷ BM speaks of values about fashion in a lesbian support group:

Some people were on their way to church or back from church, and so they’d be wearing dresses or skirts, but that wasn’t very common.... Because of the age range, some of the women were much older, they would talk about what it used to be like, and they would describe a largely, just classic from the books butch-fem kind of thing.... They also did a lot of talking about, well because it was a black group, about what we would do or not do to our hair, and some talk about make-up. There was a lot of pressure not to change your hair, not to process your hair, and to not wear make-up. It was made very clear that you could be, I would say, emotionally beaten up, if you did those things.

Having rejected feminine clothing, these lesbians embraced a somewhat modified butch-style, while idealizing “woman-identification.” Feminists were left with a contradiction. What could they make of this new style? Was it butch? Androgynous? Simply natural? Esther Newton summarized:

Because the proposition that lesbianism is an intensified form of female bonding has become a belief, thinking, acting or looking like a man contradicts lesbian feminism’s first principle: the lesbian is a ‘woman-identified-woman.’ What to do, then, with that figure referred to in various times and circumstances, as the ‘mannish lesbian,’ the ‘true invert,’ the ‘bulldagger,’ or the ‘butch’? ... She is an embarrassment indeed to a political movement that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness.

Identifying goals of practicality and the appearance of strength served to solve this contradiction. In a society where men were constructed as strong and (white) women as weak or frail, adopting men’s clothing was a way of embracing strength.

The feminist emphasis on comfort and practicality served to mask communal pressure, and personal choices – ways in which lesbian-feminist style was just as constructed as any other style. Deborah Goleman Wolf, in an ethnography of a lesbian community in the early seventies, wrote of the feminist modification of butchness:

Among lesbians, the extreme forms of male dress that ‘old gay’ butches had adopted became modified as feminist thought influenced the lesbian community. As one lesbian pointed out in a 1971 interview about lesbian dress: ‘We’re breaking down the old butch-fem roles which mimic heterosexual society. We’re getting through all those layers and becoming real.’

This reference to “becoming real,” to stripping away layers (of pretense? socialization?) implies a truth or essence which exists “underneath” or prior to the roles of old gay women. It seems that butch-fem was acknowledged to be constructed, or at least not reflective of this underlying essence, while blue jeans and flannel shirts reflected some essential strong woman-ness.

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Fashions do not happen by accident. Clothes have a function and meaning. I don’t want to wear bluejeans and suits for the rest of my life; in fact I’m already tired of them, but our revolution is still young. I am confident that there will begin to evolve a true Dyke fashion, just as Dyke music and theater is already beginning to appear.\(^{10}\)

Lesbian-feminists were redefining what being a woman meant, moving away from stereotypes of (white) women as weak, frivolous or sexual objects for men and building a community based in opposition to those stereotypes. While refuting misogynist stereotypes was useful, lesbian-feminists accomplished this by rejecting any symbols which might be associated with those stereotypes.

Despite what some now recognize as harsh exclusion of lesbian fems from lesbian feminism,\(^{11}\) for some people in this community, it did feel like a period without rules. One woman I interviewed (JS) said she had never thought about the ways in which lesbian-feminism excluded fems, until fems she knew started to tell her about it in the early eighties. Another woman remembers joining the gay liberation movement, and participating in a broader youth counter culture:

> It was very easy for me in the late 1960s, when the gay liberation movement came along, to run around in a tie-dyed tank top and a pair of cut off jeans and say the hell with it, and thumb my nose at the world. Gay liberation just blew away the last restraints. I felt like I didn’t have to fit in anymore – at least I didn’t have to pretend to fit in. There was a whole movement that was supporting my not fitting in.\(^{12}\)

In addition to redefining femininity, an important contribution of lesbian-feminism has been an emphasis on visibility as a political strategy. While ongoing activism introduced more methods for visibility than fashion/image alone, the rise of immediate, day-to-day visibility as an articulated political strategy was important.

We [at the National Gay Task Force, in 1974] also did lots of community organizing, always emphasizing visibility because this was – and is – at


the core of our oppression. There’s no question about it: If everybody who’s gay was visible, we would probably eliminate 70% of the oppression. Everybody already knows gay people. They just don’t know that we’re gay.\textsuperscript{13}

What did it mean to be visible? In terms of fashion, lesbian visibility depends on the articulation of what it means to look like a lesbian. In order to invest certain clothing with lesbian signification, most of the lesbians participating in a particular subculture had to wear the clothes. Perhaps, because feminine women were/are rarely recognized as lesbians in light of the legacy of the sexologists, and mainstream fashion was moving towards androgyny, adopting masculine clothes served the imperative for visibility. However, I suspect that if lesbian-feminists had wanted to make fems recognizable as lesbians, they could have.

The idea of everyday visibility, and the emphasis on opposition to mainstream definitions of femaleness, in particular the ways in which lesbian feminists attempted to use anti-fashion fashion or “studied ugliness,”\textsuperscript{14} were complicated. As Elizabeth Wilson has written: “Even the determinedly unfashionable wear clothes that manifestly represent a reaction against what is in fashion. To be unfashionable is not to escape the whole discourse, or to get outside the parameters. Indeed, the most dowdy clothes may at any moment suddenly get taken up and become, perversely all the rage.”\textsuperscript{15} For example, “In pioneering thrift-shop styles and retro-chic, feminism was innovative rather than anti-fashion. The hacking jacket worn with a flower skirt (1977), the trilby hat (1979) and the old-fashioned handmade sweaters were fashions that feminism initiated and the mainstream copied.”\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to industry cooptation, downward mobility was an important aspect of anti-fashion fashion. There was a big influx of college students into the gay liberation movement after the Stonewall riots in 1969. The position of these activists within


the academy allowed them some freedoms with clothing that other women did not have. Kay Lahusen, who had been active in the homophile movement, notes that she did not fit in with members of the Gay Liberation Front in New York City, because in part, she could not afford the clothing they were wearing: “We were easy to pick out of the crowd because we didn’t have on the right radical rags. We didn’t have enough money to buy what these leftists with no jobs somehow had the money for.”

Downward mobility involves giving up money which could be put to progressive use. One woman I interviewed had some important comments on politics and the fashion industry:

You have to buy clothes, so some of it has to do with, like where do you buy your clothes? Do you buy designer clothes or do you buy them on sale at Filene’s? Or do you buy, do you think it’s weird to spend $130 on a silk blouse or do you think it is okay? Is it okay to spend $600 on a leather jacket or does that make your skin crawl? You know, there’s designer clothes for women of every size now... And the lines change. They’ve changed for me over time, and they’re different for every woman, but certain kinds of excessive materialism in clothing or home furnishings. I mean there is the opposite of that, that is just as big a trap which is downward mobility, which is really obnoxious. So I think it’s a line. Like, why would a lesbian wear a fur coat? There’s like a billion ways to keep warm that don’t involve wearing a fur coat. (JS)

Another woman I interviewed dressed fem, but bought most of her clothing at vintage clothing shops and Goodwill. She recalls, “I went to a women’s dance one time at the Baptist Church in Cambridge, and a woman came up to me and called me a classist bitch... and I couldn’t tell you what I was wearing that inspired that much reaction.” (JL) This exemplifies another instance of clothing being unreliable for expressing specific messages. In this case feminine was read as classist, without much clarity about the specific class message of the clothing.

Deborah Goleman Wolf suggests that the lesbian-feminist style was worn more generally by all feminists. From her field notes, from a November 1972 DOB meeting, she quotes “They did not look different from nonlesbian feminists in their age range.

All wore pants, some wore boots, many had long hair, many wore earrings, and some even had on eye makeup."18 Donna Karan, a mainstream clothing designer, has commented "The 70s were all about putting women in men's clothes."19 Lillian Faderman asserts that lesbians since the 1980s have been much less recognizable than our counterparts of the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

Some of them [lesbians coming out in the 80s] reintroduced makeup and sexy clothes into the most visible part of the lesbian community. They were far less distinguishable from heterosexual women than their 1970s counterparts had been.... the most visible lesbian community changed its character so that in the '80s it was made up in good part of women who were far less separated from the mainstream in their appearance and outlook than had been the butches and fems of the 1950s and '60s and the lesbian-feminists of the 1970s.20

I have not been able to determine the relationship between lesbian-feminist fashion, mainstream fashion, and straight feminists' styles from the late 1960s to the early eighties. The above quotations indicate some of the conflicting ideas I have encountered.

I have argued that escaping fashion is not really possible, nor is defending a particular fashion solely on the basis of its practicality. Lesbian-feminism's exclusion of fem styles served to bring lesbian signification to styles somewhat derived from a larger youth counter-culture. This exclusion at least in part enabled the emerging politics of visibility, and a distancing of "new" lesbian-feminists from "old-gay" activists.

Chapter 5

Rules Among the Ruleless

"In 1970, the Radicalesbians declared, 'A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.' Today, we've lightened up."¹

"There were times when there were rules. I mean, we could be in a rule time, I just don't know what the rule is." (BM)

Naming this chapter has not been easy. Almost everyone that I interviewed, and many articles I have read,² mention a rejection of the strict dress codes of lesbian-feminism. The date of this change has ranged from the election of Ronald Reagan 1980, (JS) to the founding of ActUp³ in 1987. I was tempted to name this chapter "Fashion Since the Sex Wars," or simply "And now...." Some contemporary queer⁴ women have defined ourselves in opposition to a supposed puritanism of seventies-lesbian-feminism. Lisa Duggan has written: "...the lesbian sense of style is in a state of transition, from 1970s political puritanism, to a 1980s butch-fem revival with a

³AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, founded in New York, eventually a national organization which spawned the group Queer Nation. LH
⁴I use queer in this context in the sense of a politics which embraces sexual marginality, and an identity inclusive of most people who's sexual practices and/or desires are “deviant.” Young queer women might be a better designation, but the sides of the “style wars” (discussed in Arlene Stein’s article) are not clearly differentiated by age.
One important outcome of the sex wars of the early eighties was the stereotype of the "anti-sex" puritanical politically correct lesbian-feminist. In concluding, I will consider what this redefinition of seventies feminism produces, and propose a new direction for the "style wars."

Contemporary ideas of not living in a "rule period" the queer politics of inclusion, butch-fem revival after the sex wars all depend on the exclusion of the "puritanical lesbian-feminist." S/M, butch-fem, pornography and bisexuality exploded as issues during the sex wars in the early eighties. Some lesbians criticized 1970s feminism in terms of its de-sexualization of lesbianism, exemplified by the essays "The Woman-Identified Woman" by the Radicalesbians, and "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" by Adrienne Rich. Lesbian and bisexual women into S/M drew on gay male S/M culture and used leather fashion to represent their sexual identity and desire. Some lesbians felt that S/M and butch-fem perpetuated oppressive heterosexual, sexist, racist and/or anti-Semitic structures. One woman I interviewed recalled:

A lot of the fashion I adopted is what I consider a gay leather man type thing, which a lot of dykes ended up adopting five years later, which was interesting. But when I was in college, the way I dressed, the punk way, was not at all what the lesbians looked like.... I made some attempts to go to women's caucus type meetings, and I went to some, but I never really hit it off with the lesbian community.... I didn't know if it was my style or my politics or what, but I just never clicked with them. I felt very judged. It was in the time of being anti-pornography, and being real anti-S/M and I think, even though I wasn't into it [S/M] then, I think that was what the look was connected with then, and I felt a lot of judgement around that... having people say specific things like, "You shouldn't dress like that because it's buying into the heterosexist or patriarchal thing" or "It promotes violence against women." And I didn't feel I was doing that. (LH)

This story demonstrates an important difference between the supposed lesbian-feminist assumption that there is an inherent meaning in particular clothes, and LH's declaration that that was not what she was "doing." The emphasis on individual agency

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in assigning meaning to particular clothing is representative of contemporary "rulelessness." Another woman I interviewed commented:

An awful lot of the way lesbian and bisexual women dress I think is determined by wanting to feel like they're in control of their body and their environment, and there are different ways of doing that. I mean some women do it by doing totally femmy, and other women do it in a totally different way, but the point is to be able to have the choice and the control, and to be able to control the message that you're giving out. (CC)

The sex wars also sparked a butch-fem revival. Butch-fem now is certainly not the same as in the bars thirty or more years ago. Arlene Stein writes, "Eighties butch-femme - if it accurately can be termed as such - is a self-conscious aesthetic that plays with style and power, rather than an embrace of one's true nature against the constraints of straight society." In contrast to women in the bars before Stonewall, it seems that many contemporary queer women are ambivalent about butch and fem as identities. There is some sense that butch and fem are fun to play around with, but one shouldn't be too "stuck" in roles. Women move between butch and fem identities: "I refuse to present myself all the time as either a leather butch or a leather fem. I care a lot about being able to look good in either role - although I am usually more comfortable wearing butch clothing. But I like knowing I have a choice." LK seems to want to be respectful of butch-fem sexuality, yet feels uncomfortable with being identified as fem:

That doesn't even really come into consciousness for me butch-fem, usually, I mean I took women's studies courses. I minored in Women's Studies. I studied it, and I understand, the 1950s wonderful, and yeah "she's really butch" has come out of my mouth I admit, or, "I'm a total fem" stuff like that, but never really, it doesn't organize my world very much. And, I was in P-town last week... and this woman... was hanging out and talking to us, and she said something about "Well, I'm just going to go shave my legs and then I'm going to come to the beach." And then she looked at me and she said "Or, maybe I'll just let them grow like yours." And I said "It's low maintenance." Whatever. And she said "You're a

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fem right? Are you a fem?” And I said “What?!? What are you talking about?!? Am I a fem? ... What, if you need to organize your world that way, fine, yeah I guess so, but not really.” I mean, I don’t feel like a fem. No, I mean I feel kind of tough sometimes. I mean I grew up in Brooklyn, I got a lot of that shit in me. You know, fem to me is - I don’t even know what it is to me, I guess I just don’t identify with it very much, but I’m not butch. And, I guess do I consider myself sort of feminine the way I look - absolutely, without a doubt. But, I don’t feel that way about myself, not really. (LK)

Given the masculinization of female clothes through the seventies and eighties, some feel that femininity can be read more easily as a masquerade. Elizabeth Wilson writes “In this context, femininity is more obviously a ‘masquerade’ then ever; Madonna sleaze (denim skirt with lace frills, heavy ‘fifties’ lipstick in deepest crimson) creates a different appearance from the Marilyn Monroe image of the 1950s; more camp, a parody, a pastiche.” Similarly, fem style is more explicitly drag, or at least tries to be more explicitly drag. But this is complicated. As Wendy Chapkis wrote, “Taking control of the kind of body image to be presented to the world can be empowering – though it then seems a bit feeble to choose the shape that is currently most fashionable.” There is also the question of who can, or wants to live up to beauty standards in terms of blonde hair and blue eyes, or a thin body. Most of the women I interviewed when asked to define “fem” said that elems were passive, or not challenging gender codes; elsewhere I have read that by wearing men’s cologne with a skirt, makeup and heels women have perfected gender-fuck and subverted oppressive structures of gender. These issues can be reduced to choice: I like to dress this way, why shouldn’t I?

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Part of the butch-fem revival has been a romanticization of the working class. In “S/M Aesthetic” published anonymously in Out/Look magazine, a woman described her sense of style:

...boots, a knife, 501s, t-shirts, a leather jacket and a studded belt... I also like punk haircuts and neon hair coloring.... My appearance tells people that I am a sexual outlaw and an urban gender terrorist.... It says that I prefer rude girls and honest tarts, diesel dykes and leather fags to the camelhair suitcoat set. It is a class message as well as a message about my membership in a sexual minority.13

But what is the class message here? Levi’s 501’s are not cheap jeans, and leather is certainly not cheap either. Is the class message about being a member of the working class? Or, is it a message about rejecting middle class origin?

A lot of people, particularly middle class people, look at punk and think it is a working class thing. But actually there are few working class punk rockers. Only children of the middle class can afford to look ragged. It is a class statement, but not in the way people tend to assume. Punks are rejecting their class position, but you have to be there before you can reject it.14

The emphasis on the class message in looking a certain way, however, obscures the very concrete ways in which the garment industry oppresses its workers. If we were thinking of identifying with the women who make our clothes what would we wear?15

This is a more difficult class message to imagine representing through fashion. As Joolz implies above, romanticizing working class fashion is very much a middle class privilege, which does not, as far as I can see, do anything to oppose class oppression. Rather, it commodifies working class oppression, as a rejection of the narrow minded

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15 Cynthia Enloe has written, “The processes by which clothes are designed and marketed are integral to the maintenance of notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and the structures of male dominance and privilege. Women’s fashion often has incurred the wrath of feminists for a design that is impractical, confining and a part of the trivialization of women. But we have paid less attention to the oppressive processes by which clothes are made and how our own consumerism makes us unwitting participants in those processes.” p.118, Cynthia Enloe, “We Are What We Wear – The Dilemma of the Feminist Consumer” in Wendy Chapkis and Cynthia Enloe, eds. Of Common Cloth: Women in the Global Textile Industry, Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 1983.
(puritanical?) middle class culture. Within this logic, lesbians and bisexual women of the middle class do not have to consider our privilege, because we have supposedly thrown it away even while we exercise it.

Another important issue of queer politics has been the inclusion of bisexuals in “lesbian and gay” movement. Again as opposed to lesbian-feminists who required specific sexual practices, including no sex with men, young queers are supposedly more “open minded.” Of course, young queers have not made major efforts to include asexual people or necrophiliacs. In addition, there have been bisexual identified people in “lesbian and gay” organizations for years. Only in more recent years have bisexuals organized their own groups, and fought more extensively for explicit inclusion in “lesbian and gay” organizations. I wondered if there had been any attempt to establish a bisexual “look.” One bi woman identified a problem with attempting to establish a bi “look” for women. While lesbians could draw on stereotypes of lesbians as masculine, there is no workable visual stereotype of bisexuals:

I was immediately reminded of a workshop I observed when I was first getting involved in bi activism. I went and I observed Kathy Cummings and Robyn Ochs doing a Bi101 at Wesleyan [University]. And they asked this room full of people to describe what a lesbian looked like, what a bisexual looked like, and what a heterosexual (all women) looked like. And the lesbian you know, she didn’t shave her legs, and she didn’t shave her underarms, and she owned a cat, and she rode a motorcycle, and she had sandals on and she wore blue-jeans.... and the lesbian had really short hair.... Then the heterosexual woman had a skirt or a dress, shaved her legs, shaved her underarms, had long hair, wore lipstick, wore eyeshadow, wore nailpolish, wore heels.... Now the bisexual woman, one leg was shaved and one wasn’t; one underarm was shaved and one wasn’t; half of her was dressed in a pair of pants and half was in a skirt; one eye had eye shadow and one didn’t; one ear, I think both ears were pierced... She might or might not own a cat.... But I had that mental image of this schism, and... one half of the body was one way and one half of the body... was a very different way.

Although they valued verbally coming out as bisexual, many of the bi-women I interviewed felt that visibility was important in terms of allying themselves with lesbian,
or broader queer communities, rather than attempting to look bisexual specifically:

I think visibility as a political statement is important. The more people recognize that there are queer people all around them, that have been part of their lives all along, things will start changing. Personally, because I am bisexual and in the queer community, I'm very aware of the feelings some gay people have about bisexuals taking the easy way out and riding the coat tails, and you know, being queer when it's convenient and straight when it's not. So I feel like my visibility as a queer person refutes that myth, because I'm not taking the easy way out even though I'm [currently] involved with a man. I am not using that as a cover or safety. (ED)

"Listen, my answers may be different than yours, but don't run from the question." 18

Above all, queer women ought to make politics and experiences of fashion and exclusion explicit. Lesbians have been debating fashion for years, and have invested different styles with meaning through comparisons with other lesbians. Each of the lesbian groups I have discussed – butch and fem women in the bars before Stonewall, members of DOB in the late fifties and early sixties, lesbian-feminists of the seventies, and contemporary young queers – participate in exclusionary practices in constructing fashion mores for political movements and communities. I cannot assume that looking a particular way has a measurable political impact. Further, although practices of exclusion can be very painful for those who feel excluded, I suspect that there could be no meaningful lesbian politics without some exclusion. I am deeply ambivalent about this. The idea of accepting the exclusion of anyone who can justify their behavior as an identity seems unacceptable, on the other hand, a great deal has been gained through the use of exclusionary practices. Conclusive definitions of lesbianism may reinforce existing regulatory structures, but rallying politically around a cause or identity the meaning of which no one understands seems ludicrous. Ultimately,

I think that the debates must continue. For me, a more interesting question than choosing a correct style or view on fashion, is questioning who or what cause is served by the particular exclusions which definitions of correct and incorrect fashion rely upon.
Appendix A

Interviews

I interviewed nine lesbians and eight bisexual women.\(^1\) Thirteen women were white, three African-American, and one Chinese-American; there was some range of class background, but all of them had at least some college education. The women I interviewed are not a random sample of Boston’s lesbian population. Using electronic mail and friendship networks heavily slanted the selection of women interviewed in terms of class. Because few people have access to electronic mail, and most of my friends and acquaintances are associated with universities, my interviewees are, generally, middle class women. I asked about their experiences with fashion, politics and community, touching on issues including butch-femme, passing, buying clothing, fat oppression, racism, and coming out. I found women to interview through a number of strategies. I posted flyers about my study in the Cambridge Women’s Center, in New Words Bookstore, and in Glad Day Bookstore. I also advertised over lesbian, gay and bisexual electronic mail lists, and in *Sojourner*. I contacted a number of lesbian, gay and bisexual groups in the Boston area, including an Older lesbian group, Association of Massachusetts Asian Lesbians and Gay Men, and others. Finally, I relied on friends of friends for interview subjects. The following is the outline which I used in interviewing women for this project. My interviews were fairly informal,

\(^1\)Tapes of 14 of the interviews will be available at the Lesbian Herstory Archives by 1995. The women who agreed to contributing tapes of their interviews were ED, JL, WS, LH, EA, AD, BM, LS, SU, YM, CC, JS, BS, and LTU.
and rarely strictly followed this outline, but it gives some idea of the structure of the interviews, and the issues covered.

1. Informed Consent Procedure

(a) The focus of this investigation is fashion, visibility, and identity among lesbian and bisexual women. I hope to place fashion in historical and political context, and examine issues involved in lesbian and bi-women’s use of fashion.

(b) Interviews have taken from one half hour to three hours. We can make additional appointments, to continue the interview if necessary.

(c) Important stuff:
   • Participation is voluntary.
   • Can decline any question.
   • Can stop at any time.
   • Can take a break at any time.
   • If we stop early I will destroy the tapes.
   • Confidentiality is assured.

(d) I will be writing down questions that I want to ask, so that I don’t have to interrupt you and I don’t forget.

(e) Do you have any questions?

(f) Do you want the final report? If so I need your address.

(g) Fill out consent forms/explain about contribution to the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

(h) At the end of the first interview, ask if she’d be willing to bring pictures for the second one. Also give posting for friends.

2. Background Information

(a) Racial, ethnic, and economic background.

(b) Age

(c) Why were you interested in participating in this study?

(d) Sexual identity

3. Today’s Outfit

(a) Tell me about what you’re wearing today.

(b) Is there anything significant about what you’re wearing today?
(c) Do you think you look like a LESBIAN \(^2\) today? Why or why not?
(d) Did you try to look like a LESBIAN?

4. Shopping Where do you get your clothing? Why?

5. Oral History

(a) Coming Out, Finding the Lesbians
   - When did you come out - I mean get involved in a LESBIAN community?
   - What did you think a LESBIAN looked like before or while you were coming out? Could you have identified a LESBIAN on the street? How did you know?
   - How did you find a community?
   - First LESBIAN events?

(b) Then what?
   - Has your clothing/style changed since you came out? How and why?
   - Different periods.
   - Were there any LESBIAN or feminist books that really struck you at the time?
   - Why do you think people in those communities dressed as they did? Did they talk about why they dressed the way they did?
   - Different types of lesbian styles?

(c) And Now
   - Tell me a little about the community you are in now.
   - What do you wear to LESBIAN events now?
   - How do you identify a lesbian on the street now? How has this changed?

6. People identifying you as Dyke

(a) How do you feel about other people identifying you as a LESBIAN? How has this changed over your life?

(b) Specific clothing. What about text or explicit symbols?

(c) Is looking like a LESBIAN important to you? Why and when? Do you see clothing as a political statement/strategy?

7. Passing
   Can you tell me about any experiences you have with passing as something you are not?

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\(^2\)Here, and throughout, I use this notation to indicate the term with which the subject identifies her sexuality. It could be lesbian, bisexual, etc.
8. Harassment
Can you remember experiences of harassment based on your appearance? What kind of harassment and what were you wearing? Do you notice that your clothing or self-presentation has anything to do with the type of harassment which you experience?

9. Butch and femme
(a) What do you think butch and femme are? Do you identify as butch or femme?
(b) Do you purposefully dress butch or femme? Why and when? If/when you dress femme or butch, do you think that people perceive you as a LESBIAN?
(c) Is there a difference between how a femme looks and how a straight woman looks?
(d) Do you dress in order to express sexuality more specifically than “lesbian”? How?

10. Closing Questions and Comments
(a) Anything else?
(b) Most important thing?
(c) Comments about the interview?
Appendix B

Comments from Interviewees

At the end of each interview I asked the respondent what she thought was the most important thing for me to say about lesbian and bisexual women's fashion. Here are some of the responses I received.

AD I guess, is there a myth that lesbians don't have a sense of fashion? I guess, that lesbians do have a sense of fashion would be pretty important to say, and that it's pretty diverse. I'd imagine it's really diverse. I just have a small, my own personal opinion of it.

BM The most important thing? Well, the fluidness of it, that it changes dramatically over time. Because there were times when there were rules. I mean, we could be in a rule time, I just don't know what the rule is. And that it's probably also regional... I think that gets lost a lot.

BS I couldn't tell you what the most important thing to convey is, I mean from my perspective like it's extremely politicized for me, and that's very important to me. But I feel like the whole identity of lesbian is extremely politicized, and has always been, and I have always maintained that rather than the biological, that it is a political and emotional mandate that I be a lesbian. So, that really shapes my experience with it. I can't say that's true for other women.... for me the political is huge in that whole thing. And it has to do with being oppositional, and liking being oppositional because, I so much hate what is out there, and so oppositional is a comfortable place to be. It can get tiresome being oppositional all the time, but certainly being oppositional fashion-wise is more pleasureable than being oppositional intellectually and politically to everything that exists. That is way more exhausting to me, and because of my interest in using fashion and using color, texture and shape, to make things anyway, I derive a lot of pleasure from working with those tools to be oppositional. But that's my thing, and lots of other people are going to have totally different things.
CC I think a lot of the issues around fashion are actually issues around control. Who's in control of the clothes and who's in control of the body that's in the clothes? I think that's why sometimes it's not as much what someone is wearing as the way they act within it. An awful lot of the way lesbian and bisexual women dress I think is determined by wanting to feel like they're in control of their body and their environment, and there are different ways of doing that. I mean some women do it by doing totally femmy, and other women do it in a totally different way, but the point is to be able to have the choice and the control, and to be able to control the message that you're giving out. I think what unites almost all of us is that we choose to be physically more in control than a lot of straight women do. I don't think they even realize that they're doing it. So, I think that is probably the key message. The key issue for us is about that, and that of course is reflected in the whole issue of becoming a lesbian or bisexual woman - saying that you are in control of your sexuality and that you are not going to choose to be sexual in a way that society has said women should be sexual, so it's just another manifestation of the same issue.

ED I'd say that fashion can be a weapon, it can be a prison, it can be a way of controlling people, keeping them in their place, and I think that's what has happened to a lot of sort of job defined fashion and a lot of the female fashion world. It can render a woman powerless in a lot of ways, and I don't think that's an accident.... I think what queer women have done with fashion is to take that same tool and to use it in a very positive way - use it as a liberation, a symbol of liberation, a celebration of sexuality, as a celebration of freedom, as a defiant tool.

JL Well, I think I'm really happy about the change, I mean I think it's really good. I think it makes it much easier for women who are coming out now... I think that there's a lot less emphasis on conformity which I found very hard to deal with. So, I'm really glad to see that. I think there is a little less seriousness and purpose, which I think is too bad. You know it's like there are lesbians who don't even identify as feminists, which I think is amazing.... When I came out you could not have possibly have gotten away with that.

LH I think for me the interesting thing is the way it [lesbian and bi-women's fashion] has changed over the years, the way it used to be the real strict butch/femme, and then the androgynous flannel look, now it's gone to the punkish look, and the way looks that used to be really sort of no-no at one time have now become popular, among younger women.... [And now] the young queer boys and girls have the same look which at one time never would have happened. I think that is largely because the gay and lesbian communities are doing more together. The Queer Nation stuff is more mixed, and I think the fashion reflected that. That's what has been interesting for me.

LK I guess it changes a lot. Like all fashion it changes a lot. I was actually painting at a friends house the other day, and I had a bandanna wrapped around my hair
and I took it off for a while, and I had it in my back pocket. And I started to laugh, and I said “Remember when... you knew a gay person because they had a bandanna sticking out [of] their back pocket?” and we talked about all the different colors meant something else, and that’s no longer the case, and just that things change so much. And I think that it’s also really cohort dependent, how old you are when you come out, and when you are needing and wanting to be identified as gay and wanting to identify, and how closely you need to and want to identify, and how you're coming out and what you're coming out to do and to be, and all that kind of shit. And I guess coming out as bi makes it harder and easier. Harder because you don’t feel like you belong really anywhere, and so if you choose to look really dykey... the draw will be to just associate that way, and identify that way, and if you choose to look really straight then you get that other kind of fleck that way.

LT As far as visibility, there are times that I’ll wear the t-shirt, to be out, to be seen.... I mean a lesbian t-shirt... the march on washington, there’s one that says we are everywhere, the unity [unity and a double women symbol]...

LTU Well fashion is costuming; you are not what you wear, and it can enhance what you are, but I don’t think that it can really say who you are.

WS About lesbian fashion, oh... I can’t believe I’m actually going to say this, but there is, it shows diversity, but I think that the increased awareness of fashion is an illustration of the increased nonpoliticalness of lesbians no-a-days. Now, listen to me, and the reason why I say this is because I know that where I am in terms of my job, where I am in terms of school, is not just racial, but sexual – the feminists who have paved that way for me to at least get in the doors of male dominated society. An unfortunately, there seems to be fewer of those to continue the struggle, and more of the ones who are like me growing up, and that is scary. So that’s what I think is happening. I think the equivalent is happening in Black America where you have now a lot of African American families who have made it, because of affirmative action, because of all these other programs, and people have paved the way, and so you have another generation coming in who just take it for granted, and don’t continue that struggle on it, that don’t have that drive, that anger, that rage to keep them moving, to keep them going. Now I’m turning into one of those people as I get older.
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