

Patriarchy, Power, and Female Masculinity

Athena Nguyen, BSc/BA(Hons)

Monash University

ABSTRACT. This article examines the place of “butch” within the women’s movement. The political potentials of butch in both her refusal of patriarchal constructs of femininity and her transmutation of masculinity will be explored. It will be argued that the butch lesbian threatens male power by severing the naturalized connection between masculinity and male bodies, by causing masculinity to appear “queer,” and by usurping men’s roles. However, for “butch” to truly have feminist potential, it also needs to be accompanied by a feminist awareness and a rejection of aspects of masculinity that are oppressive to women. Hence, “butch feminist” need not be an oxymoron, but a strategy for challenging male domination and power.

KEYWORDS. Butch, butch-femme, feminism, female masculinity, lesbian, queer, gender performativity

In struggles over the political implications of butch, lesbian feminists have often accused butch women of wanting to be “like men” and of attempting to access patriarchal privilege and power. The development of queer theory, on the other hand, has challenged these critiques by pointing to the subversive potentials of female masculinity and reclaiming it as a

Athena Nguyen is a Bachelor of Arts (Hons)/Bachelor of Science graduate from Monash University. She has also been a summer research scholar at the Australian National University and a guest lecturer for the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University.

Address correspondence to: Athena Nguyen 207/504 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3000 (E-mail: athena_ngu@yahoo.com).

Journal of Homosexuality, Vol. 55(4) 2008

Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com>

© 2008 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1080/00918360802498625

point of disruption to hegemonic gender and sexuality. Far from being a thing of the past, the identity or accusations of being “butch” (both positive and negative) continue to be a reality for many lesbian women. Unlike their predecessors in the butch-femme culture of the 1940s and 1950s, however, the negotiation of their gender and sexual identity now exists within a social context influenced by developments in feminist politics and queer theory. This article explores the performance and politics of butch by bringing a new body of theory on female masculinity to an old debate over the political consequences of women “being like men.” In exploring the identity of “butch,” my intention is not to attribute some imaginary stability, clear boundary, or homogeneity to the category of butch. Nor is it to imply that butch is a voluntaristic performance of gender or the expression of some essential lesbian core. Rather, I have chosen the term “butch” because of its widespread use in the lesbian community, its historical significance (e.g., Kraus, 1996), its recognition as specifically lesbian (e.g. Halberstam, 1998; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004; Rifkin, 2002), and the heavy undifferentiated load it often carries (Rubin, 1992) by encompassing many different expressions of lesbian female masculinity, such as “boi-grrls,” “baby butch,” “soft butch,” “stone butch,” “drag butch,” “diesel dykes,” “bull dykes,” “daddies,” and so on. For those with a proud butch identity, the word “butch” also comes with a sense of territoriality as described by Lori Rifkin (2002):

First, a woman must consistently present herself as butch rather than attempting to draw butch identity on and off like an article of clothing. Second, a “real” butch never presents herself as traditionally feminine in order to appeal to the male gaze. . . Third, butches present their butchness only for other women. (p. 160)

In this article, I will attempt to discover whether it is possible to put the “butch” into feminism or to see the feminism within butch. I ask: What effect does the gender expression of “butch” have upon the presentation and use of the female body? What is the relationship between butch, the patriarchy and power—is butch an attempt to access male power or does it threaten male power? What are the political potentials of butch for challenging male domination and the subordination of women?

The 1980s and 1990s saw a slow but sure re-emergence of “butch-femme” culture within the lesbian community (Faderman, 1992) as well as renewed objections from lesbian feminists (e.g., Penelope, 1993). While taking inspiration from the strength seen to be exhibited by their

butch-femme predecessors in the 1940s and 1950s, the current butch-femme culture differentiates itself by being adamant that their roles stem from choice rather than survival, play rather than essentialism, and subversive desire rather than mimicking heterosexuality. A vibrant butch-femme culture now exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Affirmations of butch-femme identity can be found in literature such as *The Persistent Desire* (Nestle, 1992) and *Back to Basics* (Szymanski, 2004); spoken word performances such as “Femme Fever” at the Midsumma carnival, which describes itself as a space “to enter the stories, dreams, fantasies and nightmares of femmes” (Midsumma, 2005); and on Web sites such as butch-femme.com (2008) and Butch-Femme network (2008).

The increasing visibility of butch-femme and the rise of queer politics, however, has also brought a reassertion of lesbian feminist politics in the face of what appears to be a depoliticisation of lesbian existence (e.g., Bell & Klein, 1996; Harne & Miller, 1996). Lesbian feminism considered the butch-femme culture of the 1940s and 1950s to be a particularly oppressive era of lesbian herstory in which survival necessitated the mimicking of heterosexual gender roles. Hence, the renewed interest in butch-femme today has been seen as the “lesbian manifestation of the contemporary right-wing backlash” (Penelope, 1993, p. 18) and as a “dangerous development for lesbians” (Jefferys, 1989, p. 160). Femmes have come under attack for upholding patriarchal practices of femininity and for “voluntarily” oppressing themselves. Neither feminism nor queer have been able to adequately account for the position of “femme,” and hence femme in many ways “marks the limitations of our theoretical tools (Carter & Noble, 1996, p. 27). On the other hand, butch women have come under attack for their adoption of masculinity and their perceived alignment with men. Butch women have been accused of being complicit in maintaining the oppression of women through their masculine-like behavior.

Radical and lesbian feminism has had a hostile relationship with masculinity and this hostility has not been entirely unjustified. (Perspectives differ as to the relationship between radical feminism and lesbian feminism; a common view is that lesbian feminists are radical feminists whose lesbianism is part of their political resistance, while radical feminists may or may not be lesbians; see Douglas, 1990, for an elaboration.) While the development of more nuanced understandings of women’s oppression have made some lesbian feminist analyses appear simplistic or outdated, value remains in arguments that have been put forward regarding the

oppressive effects of masculinity upon women. Masculinity has been regarded as a sign, a reward and an instrument of men's power (Gardiner, 2002), and as central to the maintenance of patriarchy and women's subordination. While radical and lesbian feminists may differ in their understandings of the relationship between masculinity and men's biology (Douglas, 1990), all agree that characteristics that have been socially constructed as masculine, such as aggression, competitiveness, arrogance, and dominance, are "undesirable and highly destructive to humanity" (p. 43). Ti-Grace Atkinson (1974) in *Amazon Odyssey* argues that it is "male behaviour that [is] the enemy" and that it is "necessary . . . for the Oppressed to cure themselves (destroy the female role), to throw off the Oppressor, and to help the Oppressor to cure himself (to destroy the male role)" (p. 62). Masculine behavior, masculine roles, and masculine beings are seen as antithetical to and the problem of the movement toward women's liberation (Gardiner, 2002).

It is within this analytical framework that lesbian feminism's objection to female masculinity or "butch" arises. Butch women in their state of being "pseudo-men" through behaving like men, dressing like men, and treating other women like men are regarded as "an even more insidious threat to the lesbian feminist community [because they are seen as] the enemy within" (Love, 2000, p. 106). Butches have been accused of bringing undesirable masculine behavior into a community that is meant to be a haven from the patriarchy, masculinity, and men. In interactions with other women, particularly with "femmes," butches are seen as colluding with the patriarchy through treating women as men do, such as by objectifying women, by wanting to be the physically stronger or dominant partner, or by pursuing women as sexual "conquests." Jeffrey (1989, p. 169) even has gone to the extent of calling (stone)butch a form of "internalized lesbophobia" in which stone butch is considered to be a rejection or denial of oneself as female and, hence, one's attraction to other women as lesbian.

While lesbian feminism does raise valid concerns in regard to not reproducing those traits associated with masculinity involved in the maintenance of women's subordinate position, this simplistic analysis of butch overlooks its complexities and political potentials. The rise of queer theory and the release of publications such as Halberstam's (1998) *Female Masculinity* have re-oriented the debate on butch to bring into consideration the ways in which it may threaten or destabilize hegemonic gender and sexuality. These new perspectives on female masculinity will be used to reconsider the performance and politics of butch and the relationship of butch to patriarchal society and male power.

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

The movement against biological determinism and biologically based hierarchical relations between men and women has produced a discourse of social constructivism. Gender has been demonstrated as not being biological expressions of the male and female sex but rather as products of a particular social, cultural, and historical moment in time. Implicit in many of these arguments based on the sex/gender distinction has been the assumption of an underlying “natural” body on which gender sits as an artificial cultural overlay. Recent academic literature, however, has started to dispute the existence of this underlying natural body (“sex”). Not only gender but sex as well has been argued to be constructed through discursive and cultural means, thus rendering problematic the possibility of accessing a culturally unmediated body (Butler, 1990/1999). The assumed inert materiality of nature has also been questioned. Rather than cultural construction being that which animates nature, cultural constructions have been argued to be ways of desperately attempting to contain, organize, and make sense of a flux and fluid nature that spawns uncontrollable variation and difference (Grosz, 2004).

These positions move beyond the sense of voluntarism contained within some strands of social constructivism that imply gender is a cultural artifice that may be taken on and off at will. Butler (1997), for example, argues that gender performativity is compelled and impelled within a set of cultural constraints and that it “is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self” (p. 17). Although “drag” has often been cited as the most salient example of gender performativity, Butler warns that this is misguided as gender performativity is not reducible to the gender performance of drag. While drag king performances may mock or parody the performance of masculinity (e.g., Noble, 2002), they do not have the same investment in masculinity as butch lesbians (Maltz, 1998). For this reason, it is the masculine performativity of butch rather than of drag that Maltz considers to be more threatening to heteronormative gender/sex. The butch lesbian can be understood to “perform” masculinity in both senses of the word—that is, theatrically, in terms of an act, a spectacle or a presentation that is witnessed by others; and functionally, in terms of how a thing operates, works, or runs.

This section explores the sexed and gendered body that comes into being through the performativity of “butch.” Rather than simply masculine gender on a female body, butch is a unique constitution of gender

itself, a “second order” gender category (Jalas, 2005, p. 52) or a form of “lesbian gender” (Rubin, 1992, p. 466) which references and renounces the system of heterogender and heterosexual (Rifkin, 2002). Butch has been asserted as being an “independent gender—a gender that is often unrecognized, discredited and disregarded, which forces [it] to be viewed through the lens of masculinity” (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004, p. 612) despite hegemonic masculinity being an inadequate measure of butch. Sedgwick (1995) has suggested that understanding female masculinity requires movement from a two-dimensional to an n -dimensional conceptualization of gender and sex in which masculinity and femininity are no longer oppositional but orthogonal and independently variable. Halberstam (1998) has also suggested that instead of measuring “butchness” against masculinity and femininity, degrees of hardness, softness, permeability (the level of emotionality and openness that the butch’s partner is able to elicit from her), and touchability (the extent that the butch will allow her partner to touch her during sex) might be more useful. Butch gender is also endlessly varied through factors such as class, race, religion, culture, education, and profession, as well as personal interests, personality, style, lifestyle, politics, social circles, and pastimes. In addition, butch is also not an indication of erotic preferences. Although the perception of butch lesbians is that they prefer “femmes” due to the historical linkage of the two terms, butch lesbians may prefer other butch women or women who are neither butch nor femme. Similarly, being butch is also not synonymous with being the active partner in pursuing sexual relations or in the bedroom. Butch lesbians may prefer to be “tops,” “bottoms,” or to “switch” (Jalas, 2005). Although there is no simple and easy definition of butch, much like masculinity, it is nonetheless still easily recognized (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1). Hence, throughout any discussion of butch its multiple and shifting variations need to be kept in mind.

THROWING LIKE A BUTCH

While the relationship between patriarchal constructions of femininity and women’s oppression has been explored extensively, the functioning of female masculinity within a patriarchal context has received less attention. In Iris Marion Young’s (1990) well-known work, *Throwing Like A Girl*, she explores how a “feminine” mode of inhabiting and utilizing the body is produced by, and continues to perpetuate, women’s subordination. She argues that women experience their bodies as both subject and

object or, drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, as both immanence and transcendence and that this produces an internally conflicted sense of comportment, motility and spatiality. For example, feminine motility is executed with an inhibited intentionality in which there is a simultaneous striving for a goal while refraining from a full bodily commitment to achieving the goal. Similarly, feminine spatiality is experienced as both a constituting spatial subject who is the origin of spatial relations, as well as positioned in space as an object. Hence, Young argues that women within a patriarchal society “are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified” (p. 153). The production of compliant, feminine bodies is also taken up by Sandra Lee Bartky (1997). Drawing on the work of Foucault, she argues that the erosion of older forms of domination have given way to the modernization of patriarchal power and the rise of disciplinary technologies which produce docile feminine bodies. The disciplinary practices involved in the production of the feminine subject through self-movement and self-presentation maintain women’s subordination through creating compliant, docile, objectified female bodies. The “micro-physics” of power and the operation of power on the processes and products of the body makes sites such as bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality as discussed by Young, or self-movement and self-presentation as discussed by Bartky, legitimate points of struggle and subversion.

To speak of butch presentation, comportment, motility, and spatiality is not to imply one standard manifestation of butch or to make claims of universality. While remaining aware of variations in degrees and styles of butch, from the “stone butch” who speaks of hardness and untouchability to the “boi-grrl” who reproduces a David Beckhamesque metrosexual masculinity, the enactment of butch transforms, transmutes, activates, and engages with the body and the experience of bodily existence in particular ways. Butch as a means of rendering the body intelligible as sexed and gendered involves the mobilization of masculinity in a dynamic tension with femininity and the female body. In terms of self-presentation, butch eschews to varying degrees the disciplinary practices which Bartky (1997) describes as producing the docile feminine body. This is not to situate butch women outside of disciplinary patriarchal power, as such a position does not exist. Instead, it is to suggest that in alternatively gendering and sexing the female body as masculine, the body is disciplined differently. For example, instead of wearing push-up bras and standing with the shoulders back and the chest out (Bartky, 1997), butch women may wear minimizer bras, sports bras, or even “strap” themselves and

adopt a slouched or hunched posture. "Wearing them well" in the world of butch refers to how unnoticeable rather than perky one's breasts may be. The desirable shape into which butch women aim to sculpt their bodies through physical exercise also differs. The pursuit of femininity focuses on producing slender bodies and lean muscles, hence the recent popularity of exercises such as pilates and yoga, which promise such results. However, among butch women, the physical strength and competence that is signalled through a well-built, muscular body is found to be aesthetically pleasing (Crowder, 1998). In particular, upper body strength is displayed with pride and is often enhanced through wearing singlets or Bonds t-shirts. And where the ideal of femininity requires flawless, unmarked skin, in butch culture scratches, bruises, cuts, grazes, stitches, and scars are signs of toughness and experience and are often accompanied by stories that exaggerate how little or how much pain was involved.

Therefore, butch self-presentation does not simply consist of women wearing men's clothing but involves the production of difference at the level of the material body itself, whether that be in muscle tissue, skin texture, or pain reception. The "natural" body that exists prior to the cultural construction of gender is not accessible as it is precisely *through* gender that the body comes into being. As Butler (1990/1999) argues, "gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex. . . gender must also be designated the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (p. 11). Hence, to conceive of butch women as simply being women who have adopted masculine characteristics is too simplistic because it not only presumes a default feminine/female body that has been perverted in various ways through the attempted adoption of masculine traits, but it also fails to recognize how masculinity is the *means* through which the butch body becomes gendered and comes into being.

Butch as a way of gendering and sexing the body effects not only self-presentation but also one's comportment, motility and relation to the surrounding space. Diane Griffin Crowder (1998) in *Lesbians and the (Re/De)Construction of the Female Body* explores the ways in which the (non-femme) lesbian has recreated the female body. Crowder takes up Monique Wittig's (1981/1993) assertion that women are culturally produced rather than born and that it is the relation between women and men within a heterosexual two-gender system that produces gender difference. In their refusal of heterosexuality, Wittig argues that lesbians are, therefore, not women. Taking up Wittig's (p. 105) point that lesbians are "not-woman" and "not-man," Crowder asserts that "if the conventionally

feminine or even female body is unliveable and the masculine body unthinkable, then lesbians must recreate the body. . .to transcend the categories of “masculine” and “feminine” (p. 57). In comparison to the constricted and restricted body of the feminine woman described by Young (1990), the butch lesbian is often more physically relaxed, careless and comfortable in her comportment and motility. Crowder notes that the butch lesbian occupies and uses the space around her with greater ease and sense of ownership, such as sitting with her legs apart, walking with longer strides, or making more elaborate arm gestures. This use of space by butch lesbians is often interpreted as being unladylike, masculine, or even aggressive (Crowder, 1998). In addition, butch lesbians may also use their voices differently, such as talking in a lower pitch, a louder volume or a more assertive tone rather than using a “girly” or high-pitched voice (Crowder, 1998). Butch lesbians may also feel less obligated to hold facial expressions that signal compliance, “niceness” and deference such as through smiling or averting their eyes (Bartky, 1997). In these ways, butches refuse “women’s typical body language, a language of relative tension and constriction [that] is understood to be a language of subordination” (p. 102).

What are the consequences of alternatively gendering the female body within the patriarchal context in which it exists? One threat that the butch body may present to the status quo is in her rejection of femininity. By refusing to partake in the disciplinary practices of femininity that crafts the docile female body, butch women also refuse to partake in practices that maintain women’s subordination. For example, butch women who do not shave refuse the infantilization of women’s bodies that occurs through the removal of all body hair. Butch women who shudder at the thought of heels refuse the physical handicap and pain of such footwear. By refusing markers of “sexy femininity” such as red, glossy lipstick that mimics sexually aroused female genitalia and clothing culturally loaded with sexual connotations, such as miniskirts and fishnet stockings, butch women may distance themselves from sexual objectification. In terms of appealing to the male gaze the butch body is, therefore, not a “useful” or “consumable” body (Ciasullo, 2001, pp. 600–604). The butch woman offends patriarchal sensibilities by being “ugly” (602).

To read the challenge of the butch body only in terms of refusing femininity, however, is too simplistic. As discussed in the next section, it is in the transformation of masculinity rather than the rejection of femininity in which the subversive potential of butch lies. Furthermore, the refusal of feminine gender is not done in the spirit of radical feminism in which a

“rediscovery” of women’s natural bodies under layers of patriarchal conditioning is believed to set women free (e.g., Wolf, 1990). Instead, butch is an alternative gendering of the female body through an appropriation of masculinity. Although Bartky (1997) denies that masculinity is the direction in which to go, calling instead for a “radical and as yet unimagined transformation of the female body” (p. 106), her reference to masculinity as merely femininity’s “opposite” overlooks the multiplicity of meanings and manifestations which masculinity’s reinscription on the female body can mobilize and the ways in which its redeployment by women can threaten patriarchal power.

LET’S TAKE IT OUTSIDE: FEMALE MASCULINITY VERSUS MALE MASCULINITY

While butch self-presentation and movement may appear to be masculine, it is not just a replication of masculinity. Butch gender continues to be a lived reality within a female body (Maltz, 1998) and the masculinity of butch needs to be constantly negotiated with the disciplinary forces which seek to produce the body as feminine. This prevents the expression of masculinity by butch lesbians from simply being “assimilated into the framework of patriarchal construction of men” (Wiegman, 2002, p. 51) as the adoption of masculinity by the butch is not done with the same ease and comfort of men, nor does it enjoy the same naturalized connection to her sex. Being butch does not consist of an assumed access to masculinity; rather, it is a defiant claim of masculinity. Butch is often performed defensively, encompassing both the defensiveness that women within a sexually violent patriarchal society may feel, as well as the defensiveness of being lesbian within a violently heteronormative society. Therefore, butch is not an unaltered imitation of masculinity, where imitation is the highest form of flattery, but rather butch masculinity sits in an uncomfortable and antagonistic relation to hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, challenges the privilege of masculinity as being accorded to men. The following example of the Butch and the Boxers will begin to demonstrate the ways in which female masculinity can threaten the patriarchal status quo.

The Butch and the Boxers

In her introduction to *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam (1998) explores the “bathroom problem” which she says is a “a standard feature

of the butch narrative” (p. 22). The use of public bathrooms poses a problem for many butch lesbians as the segregation of genders produces a heightened sense of gender regulation in these spaces. The presence of a woman who is not immediately recognizable as female arouses tension, paranoia, and even fear as she violates the “cardinal rule[s] of gender”: Women must be feminine, men must be masculine, and one’s gender/sex must be recognizable at a glance (p. 23). Inness (1998) also describes how public toilets have become a “war zone” for her. Her entrance “strikes fear into many women’s hearts, as they glance pointedly from the sign on the door to us. The women at the sink glare at us as if we have committed some unspeakable crime. Not uncommonly, a braver woman will walk up and tap one of us on the shoulder and say, “This is the *ladies’* room”” (p. 233). The inspection and judgement of feminine women works to police and punish masculine women for disturbing a space that has been reserved for the enjoyment of enhanced femininity, a space where women can go to gossip, reapply lipstick, or buy tampons from the dispenser (Halberstam, 1998).

A different set of tensions arise when observing a butch lesbian entering the men’s section of a clothing store. Take, for example, a shopping trip for boxer shorts in a family-oriented department store in Melbourne, Australia. While a butch lesbian may or may not feel uncomfortable in both the women’s and the men’s section, her presence in the men’s section arouses particular anxieties around masculinity, sexuality, and space. Suffice to say that when a butch finds herself in the men’s underwear section, both the butch *and* the men wish that the other wasn’t there. The butch enters the men’s underwear section already defensive and the men become defensive upon her arrival. The men, socialized in their masculine privilege that accords them the right of the gaze, make no qualms about visually scrutinizing the butch’s self-presentation, her actions, and her accompanying femme. Their silent disapproval signifies that in all the ways that she has refused gender conformity, she is “wrong.” She is resented for the space she takes away from them and for the amount of space that she takes up, as she is not a “little slip of a girl” who has been properly socialized into occupying the minimum amount of space through her ladylike comportment.

The butch also elicits in the surrounding men a sense of possessive ownership over masculinity. Masculinity is supposed to be their birthright, after all. Masculinity is constitutive of *their* identity, their self-understanding, and their relationship to the world and their place in it, not hers. In reaching for the same pair of boxer shorts, both the butch and the

man struggle over who has the right to this cultural signifier of male gender. In her display of masculinity on a woman's body, she demonstrates that masculinity is not the exclusive domain of men and reveals that the naturalized connection between masculinity and men's bodies to be up for renegotiation. Her sexuality is also likely to be assumed as lesbian, as the mannish woman has been the most recognized figure of the lesbian in Western premodern (Creed, 1995) and modern (Ciasullo, 2001) cultural imagery. As a lesbian, she brings the additional threat of not only wearing men's clothes but also usurping other roles that reaffirm men of their masculinity, such as changing a flat tire or being a stud in the bedroom. The slogans emblazoned on the boxer shorts, such as "The Great Groper" and "Tiger in the Bedroom," are supposed to be (half) comical references to *his* virility and sexual prowess not to *her* abilities to please the ladies. The surrounding men become defensive and annoyed, not knowing how to get rid of this impingement on their world. In protecting their territory of masculinity, the butch lesbian is "the one person on earth that men hate and fear the most" (as cited in Crowder, 1998, p. 97 [anonymous source]).

One of the political potentials of butch lies in her severing the link between masculinity and men. By constituting her gender identity through "the deployment and manipulation of masculine codes of gender" (Rubin, 1992, p. 467), the butch lesbian is a threat to the male establishment. Sedgwick (1995) argues that "it is important to drive a wedge in, early and often and if possible conclusively, between the two topics, masculinity and men, whose relation to one another it is so difficult not to presume." (p. 12). If masculinity is indeed a sign and an instrument of men's power (Gardiner, 2002), then the butch lesbian demonstrates that the connection between masculinity and male biology is not natural or inevitable and that men's power—flaunted through a dominant and virile masculinity—is, therefore, an artifice.

The butch lesbian not only denaturalizes the connection between masculinity and men but she also denaturalizes masculinity itself—she makes masculinity appear "queer." The resignification of masculinity on the female body forces it to transmute and, with a sense of travesty, spawn new meanings and manifestations (Rubin, 1992). Butch identity involves both the pain and pleasure of being neither male nor female properly. To be "butch isn't simply to flunk basic gender training; it's to scoff at the whole curriculum" (Solomon, 1993, p. 38). Female masculinity constitutes one of queer's favorite methods of assault on the hegemonic system of gender—that of "gender fucking" or "fucking gender," which involves a "full-frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of

gender- and sex-roles” (Whittle, 1995, p. 202). Female masculinity fucks with gender and in so doing, contorts heterogender in such ways that it fails to register as stable, set, or certain.

This is not to imply, however, that butch works outside of or has somehow managed to escape the dominant gender system. For butch to have subversive potential, it is not required to occupy an impossible position that is free of normative gender or sexuality. Instead, butch can be seen as a repetition of normative gender which has somehow gone wrong. As a system whose provisional success depends on the appearance of seamless repetitions of heterogender, the existence of butch demonstrates that there is a flaw in this regulatory system (Butler, 1997). The anxiousness with which heterogender is continually and obsessively repeated reveals the fear that one day it will be discovered to actually lack the original that it is claiming to approximate. This lack of an original means that the authority of heterogender has no foundation and, instead, needs to be secured through an accumulation of repetitions (Butler, 1997); it also means that its norms are neither natural nor inevitable, thus, making it vulnerable to the possibility of resignification at each repetition. Hence, the “disruptive potential of queer female masculinity” lies in the way it persistently and insidiously haunts heterogender, suggestively presenting itself as an alternative manifestation of masculinity and the female body (Maltz, 1998, p. 274). The threat of butch lies not in its proliferation of genders but also in its exposure of “the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals” (Butler, 1997, p. 22). This is not to suggest, however, that repetitions of gender are voluntary acts that can be recrafted at each repetition. Rather, the inefficiency of the regulatory regime of gender means that it is not fully determining and that freedom, agency and possibility can be found in the gaps that exist within these regulatory norms (Butler, 1997).

The political potential of butch also lies in the connection of butch gender to lesbian sexuality. The butch body is a body that cannot be “de-lesbianized” (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 602). Melinda Kanner (2002) writes that “irrespective of the imagination of the observer the butch lesbian has stood out as the clear, visually declarative statement of attraction to other women” (p. 28). The butch body signals a woman’s unavailability to men, her attraction to women, her as *being* attractive to other women and her displacement or replacement of men in sexual encounters. Through being butch she “advertises. . .her ability to subsume the role that men assume is theirs” (Inness, 1998, p. 235) and in so doing, she does not simply imitate masculinity; she colonizes it (Solomon, 1993).

In discussions of the ways in which butch lesbians may “colonize” the territories traditionally occupied by men, the slippage between the phallus as a signifier of male power and virility, the penis as its denied yet recurrent signified, and the lesbian strap-on/dildo has become all too easy to make (Jagodzinski, 2003). Such slippages can produce questionable connotations and undesirable conclusions, such as that lesbians and lesbian sex is ultimately lacking and requires an imitation of the penis which can never be as good as the “real thing”. But if such conclusions are indeed conclusive, then why do butch lesbians present such a threat to the male heterosexual establishment that they must be subject to sometimes violent social sanctioning and punishment? Perhaps it is because such slippages remind the patriarchy of the fraudulent nature of the phallus. Judith Butler (1993) has argued that the phallus is fundamentally transferable. Disputing theorists who have suggested that lesbian sexuality exists outside of the phallogocentric economy, Butler asserts that although lesbian sexuality may not be primarily structured around the phallus, lesbian interactions have the potential to subversively displace the phallus. The phallus does not and cannot exist separately to the occasions of its symbolization and hence, “the lesbian phallus offers the occasion (or set of occasions) for the phallus to signify differently, and in so signifying, to resignify, unwittingly, its own masculinity and heterosexist privilege” (p. 90). By removing the phallus from masculine heterosexuality and recirculating and resignifying it within the context of lesbian relations it “deploys the phallus to break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates” (p. 88).

For the phallus to maintain its power, it needs to remain veiled as, according to Lacan, its exposure would also be a revelation of its lack (Jagodzinski, 2003). As such, the lesbian phallus might be the ultimate phallus, for it exists only in an endlessly deferred chain of signification (Rosenberg, 2003). The lesbian phallus *can* not be the dildo/strap-on in ways that the male phallus can never *not* be the penis, and the removal of the lesbian strap-on does not produce the same sense of de-phallicization as the removal of the penis. The lesbian phallus does not experience the threat of being severed as it is already severed and is instead located elsewhere, but exactly where cannot be determined. Thus, the lesbian phallus is “radically unbegotten” and “the more we want to see it, the more the lesbian phallus becomes a joke at the expense of the visual field all together”; the existence of the lesbian phallus cannot be denied, however, as precisely in trying and failing to see the lesbian phallus, its presence can be felt (Rosenberg, 2003). As such, “the lesbian-dick *is* the phallus as floating signifier that has no ground on which to rest. It neither returns to

the male-body, originates from it, nor refers to it. Lesbian-dicks are the ultimate simulacra. They occupy the ontological status of the model, appropriate the privilege, and refuse to acknowledge an origin outside their own self-reflexivity” (Hart, 1996, p. 58, original emphasis). Perhaps, then, the threat of the lesbian phallus is not that the lesbian phallus might be real, but rather that the masculine phallus is a little too real.

If we are to return then to lesbian feminist critiques of butch and butch-femme as being oppressive replications of masculinity and heterosexuality, respectively, such arguments start to become harder to sustain. In *Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic*, Case (1989) argues that butch-femme couples are not victims of the dominant heterosexist culture whose oppressive models of sexual relations they have transposed onto their own relationships. They “are not split subjects, suffering from the torments of dominant ideology. They. . .do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference or metaphysical values, but constantly seduce the sign system through flirtation and inconsistency” (p. 283). Rather than restrictive roles, butch-femme can instead be seen as an erotic script (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004) in which neither partner is saddled with the baggage of essentialism, natural order, or biology. Butch-femme represents a form of “playing” rather than “being” (Faderman, 1992), they exist in the realm of signs rather than ontologies, imagery rather than reality, appearances rather than truth (Case, 1989). Signs of heterosexuality become perverted as the butch-femme couple reproduce them in ways that are all *wrong*, and then revel in the pleasure of their misproduction. Butch-femme plays off the regulatory norms of heterosexuality, producing a space that is simultaneously political and erotic in which “heterosexuality is recoded, transformed, duped and parodied” (Harris, 2002, p. 75). In butch-femme, the hegemonic system of heterosexuality becomes unable to contain and control the reproduction and resignification of its own norms. Butch-femme reveals heterosexuality to be a tale to which there is no copyright, rather than a natural relation between the sexes which has existed since caveman times. Hence, Love (2000) suggests that we should ask “not what heterosexuality has done to butch/femme, but what butch/femme can do to heterosexuality.” (p. 112).

While the analysis thus far has demonstrated that butch is not simply an imitation of masculinity and that butch-femme relations are not just re-enactments of heterosexuality, this has not answered all of the lesbian feminist critiques of butch-femme. Most arguments in defense of butch-femme tend to end here and fail to address one last element of the lesbian-feminist critique, that is, if a butch acts in such a way that if she

were a man her actions would be considered oppressive to women, are her actions still oppressive considering that she is a woman? Lesbian feminist accusations that butches are colluding with the patriarchy are not only based on their appearance as masculine but also on the ways that some butches treat other women. It is unfortunate that particular behaviors by some butches, such as going to strip clubs, watching pornography, telling sexist jokes, and pursuing women as sexual “conquests,” that are particularly objectionable to lesbian feminists have come to stand out as “typical” and have fuelled critiques of sexism and maintaining women’s sexual subordination. However, not all butches act in such ways and that not *only* butches behave in these ways, as women who are not butch and who are not lesbian also partake in these activities. However, when it is a butch lesbian who is behaving in this manner, lesbian feminists often read her behavior within the context the masculine gender markers she has appropriated to argue that she is attempting to enjoy male privilege and power through participating in the domination of other women.

Although the butch lesbian herself may present a threat to the patriarchal status quo, this does not preclude her from partaking in patriarchal structures and ideologies that are built upon women’s subordination. Butch women can, and some butch women do, participate in the sexual exploitation of other women. Despite her masculinity not being backed by patriarchal privilege, this does not alter the relationship of power between the consumer and “consumer object” when she participates as a consumer in the sex industry. This is not to imply in any way that the position of the butch lesbian and the heterosexual man are the same in such circumstances, as they certainly are not. Men do not experience the degradation of members of their own sex within these structures as butch lesbians do. It is merely to argue that these structures exist within a capitalist heteropatriarchy which sexually exploits women and that this does not change when it is another woman who is in the position of the consumer. (These arguments can and have been extended to all women who partake in the sexual exploitation of women as consumers, regardless of whether or not they are butch.) Furthermore, her position as a woman also does not prevent her from objectifying other women in everyday encounters with women outside of the sex industry, such as through making certain comments about women or viewing women through a sexually objectifying gaze. Even though butch lesbians may not be men, such behavior is still objectionable as it reinforces the notion of women as sex objects within a patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

If the goal of the feminist movement is to challenge patriarchal power, male domination and women's oppression, then this paper has attempted to demonstrate that butch identity and butch-femme relationships are not necessarily antithetical to this goal. Butch and butch-femme are not simply infestations of masculinity and heterosexuality in the lesbian community. Rather, they can be seen as subversive repetitions of heterogender and heterosexuality which denaturalize and destabilize dominant norms. The identity of butch can threaten the patriarchal status quo not only through her rejection of femininity but also through her severing the link between masculinity and men, her transmutation and "queering" of masculinity, her usurping of men's sexual roles, and the displacement of the phallus within lesbian sexuality. For butch to really threaten the heteropatriarchy, however, a feminist awareness is also needed. Not simply being butch, but being a butch feminist is required. When butch involves not only colonizing the well-guarded territory of hegemonic masculinity but also rejecting the aspects of male behavior that perpetuate women's objectification and oppression, then butch truly becomes a challenge to the patriarchal status quo. It is then that we will find the place for butch within the feminist movement and the feminist potential that lies within butch.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, T. (1974). *Amazon odyssey*. New York: Links Books.
- Bartky, S. L. (1997). Foucault, femininity and the modernization of patriarchal power. In D. T. Meyers (Ed.), *Feminist social thought: A reader* (pp. 93–111). New York & London: Routledge.
- Bell, D., & Klein, R. (1996). *Radically speaking: Feminism reclaimed*. North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press.
- Butch-Femme.com. (2008). *Butch-Femme.com*. Retrieved April 29, 2005, from <http://www.butch-femme.com>
- Butch-Femme Network. (2008). *Butch-femme network*. Retrieved April 29, 2005, from <http://www.butch-femme.net>
- Butler, J. (1990/1999). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997). Critically queer. In S. Phelan (Ed.), *Playing with fire: Queer politics, queer theories* (pp. 11–29). New York: Routledge.
- Carter, C., & Noble, J. (1996). Butch, femme, and the woman-identified-woman: ménage-a-trois of the 90s? *Canadian Woman Studies*, 16(2), 24–29.

- Case, S. (1989). Towards a butch-femme aesthetic. In L. Hart (Ed.), *Making a spectacle: Feminist essays on contemporary women's theatre* (pp. 282–299). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ciasullo, A. M. (2001). Making her (in)visible: Cultural representations of lesbianism and the lesbian body in the 1990s. *Feminist Studies*, 27(3), 577–760.
- Creed, B. (1995). Lesbian bodies: Tribades, tomboys and tarts. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (Eds.), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism* (pp. 86–103). New York: Routledge.
- Crowder, D. G. (1998). Lesbians and the (re/de)construction of the female body. In D. Atkins (Ed.), *Looking queer: Body image and identity in lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender communities* (pp. 47–68). New York: Haworth Press.
- Douglas, C. A. (1990). *Love and politics: Radical feminist and lesbian theories*. San Francisco: Ism Press.
- Faderman, L. (1992). The return of butch and femme: A phenomenon in lesbian sexuality of the 1980s and 1990s. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2(4), 578–596.
- Gardiner, J. K. (2002). Introduction. In J. K. Gardiner (Ed.), *Masculinity studies and feminist theory: New directions*, (pp. 1–29). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grosz, E. (2004). *In the nick of time: Politics, evolution and the untimely*. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harne, L., & Miller E. (1996). *All the rage*. London: The Women's Press.
- Harris, L. A. (2002). Femme/butch family romances: A queer dyke spin on compulsory-heterosexuality. In M. Gibson & D. T. Meem (Eds.), *Femme/butch: New considerations of the way we want to go* (pp. 75–84). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Hart, L. (1996). Doing it anyway: Lesbian sado-masochism and performance. In E. Diamond (Ed.), *Performance and cultural politics* (pp. 69–77). New York: Routledge.
- Inness, S. A. (1998). Flunking basic gender training: Butches and butch style today. In D. Atkins (Ed.), *Looking queer: Body image and identity in lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender communities* (pp. 233–237). New York: Haworth Press.
- Jagodzinski, J. (2003). Women's bodies of performative excess: Miming, feigning, refusing, and rejecting the phallus. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 8(1), 23–41.
- Jalas, K. (2005). Butch lesbians and desire. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16(1), 52–72.
- Jeffreys, S. (1989). Butch and femme: Now and then. In Lesbian History Group (Eds.), *Not a passing phase: Reclaiming lesbians in history 1840–1985*. London: The Women's Press.
- Kanner, M. (2002). Toward a semiotics of butch. *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 9(2), 27–29.
- Kraus, N. (1996). Desire work, performativity, and the structuring of a community: butch/fem relations of the 1940s and 1950s. *Frontiers*, 17(1), 30–56.
- Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, R. (2004). A quest for authenticity: Contemporary butch gender. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 50(9–10), 605–622.
- Love, H. (2000). A gentle angry people: The lesbian culture wars. *Transition*, 9(4), 98–113.
- Maltz, R. (1998). Real butch: The performance/performativity of male impersonation, drag kings, passing as male, and stone butch realness. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 7(3), 273–286.

- Midsumma (2005). *Femme Fever*. Retrieved April 30, 2005, from <http://www.midsumma.org.au/index.cfm?eventid=17>
- Nestle, J. (1992). *The persistent desire: A butch-femme reader*. Boston: Alyson Publications.
- Noble, J. B. (2002). Seeing double, thinking twice: The Toronto drag kings and (re-) articulations of masculinity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 34(3–4), 251–162.
- Penelope, J. (1993). Whose past are we reclaiming? *off our backs*, 23(8), 24–37.
- Rosenberg, J. (2003). Butler’s “lesbian phallus”: Or, what can deconstruction feel?. *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, 9(3), 393–414.
- Rifkin, L. (2002). The suit suits whom?: Lesbian gender, female masculinity and women-in-suits. In M. Gibson & D. T. Meem (Eds.), *Femme/butch: New considerations of the way we want to go* (pp. 157–174). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Rubin, G. (1992). Of catamites and kings: Reflections on butch, gender, and boundaries. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A butch-femme reader* (pp. 3–35). Boston: Alyson Publications.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1995). Gosh, Boy George, you must be awfully secure in your masculinity!. In M. Berger, B. Wallis, & S. Watson (Eds.), *Constructing masculinity* (pp. 45–60). New York: Routledge.
- Solomon, A. (1993). Not just a passing fancy: Notes on butch. *Theatre*, 24(2), 35–46.
- Szymanski, T. (Ed.). (2004). *Back to basics: A butch/femme anthology*. Tallahassee, FL: Bella Books.
- Whittle, S. (1995). Gender fucking or fucking gender?: Current cultural contributions to theories of gender blending. In R. Ekins & D. King (Ed.), *Blending genders: Social aspects of cross-dressing and sex-changing* (pp. 196–214). New York: Routledge.
- Wiegman, R. (2002). Unmaking: Men and masculinity in feminist theory. In J. K. Gardiner (Ed.), *Masculinity studies and feminist theory: New directions* (pp. 31–59). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wittig, M. (1981/1993). One is not born a woman. In H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (pp. 103–108). New York: Routledge.
- Wolf, N. (1990). *The beauty myth*. Toronto, ON: Random House.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.