

**Abstract** Many years ago, butch/femme lesbian relationships were an accepted way of identifying and organizing lesbian love and lust. The new and noisy women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 70s denounced these relationships and identities as reactionary and sexist. Since then rebellious lesbians have reclaimed their history and reinstated butch and femme personas as valid and sexy possibilities. But this reclamation and celebration has obscured problems and contradictions in both butch/femme relationships and in individual butches and femmes. In a tentative exploration of my own history as a 'sort of' femme and of my disastrous butch/femme relationships, my own disappointments and contradictions are exposed. Unsettlingly, these include stubborn heterosexual romantic baggage.

**Keywords** butch/femme, feminist history, identity, romance

Sue O'Sullivan

*Freelance Writer and Editor*

## I Don't Want You Anymore: Butch/Femme Disappointments

I may be here under false pretences. I've been masquerading as a part-time femme for all these years of lesbian life. An admission: I took on femme because I fell into swooning love with butch lesbians and later realized that's what femmes tend to do. I took it on because everyone told me that's what I was. I took it on for its rebellious stance – in relation to feminism and the rest of the world. I took it on because I loved dressing up and wearing hats. I took it on because it made some sense. But it never made complete sense and I never took it very seriously.

### Looking for clues

I cannot see a little femme-to-be in the 1940s and early 1950s in chicken farming Connecticut, USA; nor a shy baby butch. I do remember a tomboy childhood in the company of a whole group of similar girls. We were derisive of excessive girliness and all wore jeans and boys' sneakers to

school. Our mothers supported us. I suppose this was relatively unusual at the time. But some of our mothers often wore slacks. Nancy's mother even wore men's Levis. They were outdoors girls themselves, although soundly heterosexual.

I took on some of the trappings of conventional femininity in junior high and high school – wearing skirts and 'ship and shore' blouses, curling my hair each night, but it was never the whole caboodle. I also continued to have blue jeans and slacks in my wardrobe and as time went by to cultivate a vaguely bohemian look which was not part of mainstream femininity at the time. I wasn't wildly feminine. I didn't notice if boys were wildly masculine or not. I didn't go goo goo over football players.

Mine was a youthful, unarticulated refusal of the conventional femininity of the era, at the same time that I was focussed on a fantasy of idealized and romanticized heterosexual sexuality.

All along, I located my sexuality completely in daydreams of heterosexual encounters. From approximately the age of nine I imagined sexual pleasure. I thought something amazing would happen when I had sex with a man, although exactly what was still a mystery. I fantasized about this in purely romantic gendered terms. These visions hinted at orgasms to come. I didn't know the word or the reality even though I felt breathless with stirrings. My daydreams were fuelled by historical romances. I devoured *Gone With the Wind* when I was ten. I didn't give a toss about the clothes the heroines wore – I lived for the moment they were swept up by the powerful lover, the desiring man.

Years later, in the late 1960s, in London with my family, I was part of the beginnings of the UK women's liberation movement. Stereotyped femininity and masculinity were under attack. What a relief! Yuk to aggressive jocks and creepy rugby players. Goodbye to pathetic eyelash flutterers and passive doormats.

## Tracing butch/femme

I'd never heard of butch/femme when I got involved in the women's liberation movement. When lesbianism first entered my line of vision it was almost totally within the context of that movement, confident in its condemnation of 'sex roles' of any sort. The lesbianism I came in contact with distanced itself from any old forms of Sapphic role playing. An older generation may not have known better. But to ape heterosexual relationships now could only be wilfully reactionary.

These condemnations swept from view a major part of the history of lesbianism in many countries and cultures. They casually dismissed the lives of older lesbians, especially working-class and black lesbians. They excluded women who were interested in women's liberation and who were

also either butch or femme. They pressured some lesbians to drop a butch/femme way of loving and living in order to 'fit in' with the new movement. But they also enabled some lesbians to shed older pressures to conform to a butch/femme stereotype which they found stultifying and rigid.

Since that time, lesbianism has increasingly moved into the limelight, such that there is more than one way of thinking through the expression of same-sex desire. As a result, ways of thinking about butch/femme have proliferated both in popular lesbian culture and in lesbian and queer studies. In the backlash against the perceived rules and regulations of lesbian feminism, butch/femme was reclaimed from the closet it had been banished to and instead proclaimed legitimate, exciting and transgressive. Those who had denounced, were now in their turn condemned. Femme and butch lesbians were not anything to do with heterosexual femininity or masculinity. The swagger was a delightful and sexy parody of masculinity, transformed into something entirely different by the butch. So too, the femme's appropriation of heels, flounces, and fluttering eyelashes. Femmes were not passive, they made things happen.

In the sex wars of the 1980s lesbians lined up and embraced or denounced identities like butch/femme and sexual practices such as lesbian sadomasochism. There was little room for ambivalence or for an exploration of the contradictory aspects of various identities and practices. Since then, the popularity of a neo-butch/femme style has probably peaked and passed. Are younger dykes even interested any more? Nevertheless, at the end of the century it seems as good a time as ever to reassess and admit personally and politically that celebrations of many sorts often hide sadder realities.

## Contortions

My lesbian career probably got a kick start from the women's liberation movement. And yet I rejected any voluntarist notion that 'any woman can', as well as the sterner admonishments that every true libber 'should', become a dyke. I rejected lesbianism for myself until I found myself swept away with lesbian lust and yearnings. Who better than a butch lesbian to sweep me off my feet?

In the 1970s and while I was still a married, heterosexual mother of two, I taught health, sex education and exercise classes in Holloway Prison. My classes always had a fair number of lesbians in them. I blush to remember a private session I had with a young working-class butch who was confused by the things she had been hearing in my openly women's liberationist classes. Could I explain to her why women's liberation was critical of women like her who chose to wear men's trousers, shoes, and shirts,

and had conventionally feminine girlfriends. Earnestly, I set out to describe how women were treated unfairly by men just because they were women. If women 'aped' male behaviour in their relationships with other women it was wrong. I uneasily brushed aside a half-felt awareness of how attractive she was.

I am not telling this story only to reveal my own naivety. Even now I can recognize the problems. In prison, butches had girlfriends (often heterosexual outside) who did everything for them – got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed their cells, washed their clothes, catering as much as possible to their every need. After I became a lesbian and more consciously took up certain aspects of butch/femme myself, I would maintain that you simply couldn't conflate sexist butch behaviour (anywhere) with the heart of butch/femme. I was convinced that this heart was about emotional interactions, not roles. Even later, I admitted that emotions and 'roles' were often intertwined. I now believe it is important to explore some femmes' willingness to be bullied by a butch and some butches' willingness to bully, without risking a repeat banishment of butch/femme from the realms of acceptable behaviour.

Although I accepted the feminist textbook critique of butch/femme, my first woman lover was a young but very experienced butch I met while teaching in prison. I didn't even realize how attracted to her I was until she manipulated a meeting with me after her release. At the time I didn't see how I might be projecting remnants of heterosexual romanticism onto my fantasies of lesbianism. She pursued me with phone calls, flowers and passionate looks. I was an easy target. But this relationship also contained other signifiers of difference (and inequality): she was working class, I was middle class; she was young, I was in my mid 30s; she had been a prisoner, I was her teacher; she was a con artist, I was very gullible.

That first unequal and fated lesbian relationship in the 1970s was a disaster. But I never regretted it. It committed me to lesbianism and I was an enthusiast. I'm still an enthusiast but one much more tempered by the failure of subsequent relationships with butches. I'm more critical of my own place as a femme-of-sorts within relationships and I'm suspicious and cynical about much of the current wave of celebrations of lesbian masculinity.

Why is it problematic now, at this point in my life? Am I just too jaded from failed relationships full stop? Too scared to even contemplate another relationship when most of my past ones have had an obvious butch/femme component? Have I unfairly loaded many of my fears onto that part of the relationship? Or in the end is it just because I want to be adored by a woman, and I don't believe I'm adorable any more?

---

## Layers

And yet and yet . . . each time I fell for another butch, then each time I fell in love with the complicated woman underneath the visible butch persona. It was the butch woman's body I longed to fondle. All this as much as I wanted her to undo me. Her masculine posture was the first buzz, often subverted, sometimes unintentionally, by her contrary, unruly womaness. The ultimate attraction was the tension between these two.

The more I knew the butch I was romantically swept by, the more I loved her particular way of being a woman. In my experience this incorporated many other things besides being butch. But these other aspects would sometimes contradict my lover's own idealized presentation of herself. The more I knew the butch I loved, the more I saw her own contradictions, her fears, passivities, sillinesses, period pains, as well as the strengths of her self-presentation. I thought I understood her individuality. Then, sometimes, the more her self-presentation was swaggering (or lad-about-townish), confident, stereotypically lesbian butch on the street, the more it niggled.

Why? Because of its certainty when I knew there was uncertainty? Its confidence when I knew there was self-doubt and even fear? Other femmes have seen this as an aspect of butch courage. I wanted the multi-layeredness which made up the whole woman to be part of the identity and include butch. Poor old butch. My own emotional contradictions set up impossible scenarios. For me, butch/femme attractions were imbued with romance. But I was driven in everyday life to uncover and discover the aspects of a lover which challenged her butchness. I was attracted and repelled by the reality and romanticism of butch/femme.

I didn't think femeness was unproblematic either. I wanted to have it and not have it. I wanted to be a lesbian who was femme but not as the major organizer of my identity. Only as one of many elusive, changing, hard to pin down components of it. It never entered my head there was a butch/femme community I might belong to and anyway, I wasn't into 'communities'. I managed to avoid confronting just how much my early visions of heterosexuality informed my lesbian relationships. I was overly confident that lesbian feminism changed the names of the games.

Joan Nestle came to London in 1988 to publicize her book, *A Restricted Country*, which we were publishing at Sheba Feminist Press. Joan's visit stirred up a lot of discussion, particularly over the issue of butch/femme. On a day she was supposed to attend an informal meeting of lesbians who identified as femme, she woke up feeling ill. I was designated as her replacement. The group I met included women I was acquainted with who I had never thought of as femme. Going round the room, they told disturbing stories of denunciations by sister revolutionary lesbian feminists if they so

much as wore a skirt or grew their hair long. Almost more disturbingly, they described dismissive treatment from butch lesbians in their personal and social lives.

I wish Joan had been there. Appalled as I was, these were not experiences I shared. No one had ever denounced me (to my face) for wearing a dress – something I did infrequently in everyday life, but fairly often to parties, clubs or big occasions. No one I thought of as butch had ever (to my face) denigrated me, as a man might, because I was girly. Was I lucky? Was it because I was an older woman? Or had I been around in the women's movement for so long that it afforded me a bit of 'protection' from these behaviours? Did I exude another sort of confidence? Was I just a brash middle-class American who didn't even see a put down where it existed? I don't know.

I had to acknowledge something that day. Not about some lesbian feminists' continuing hatred of femmeness. That I knew all about. But about the unpleasant, anti-woman side of butch lesbians who were ostensibly informed by at least bits and pieces of lesbian feminism. This was the underbelly of butch/femme in its then current playful guise. A reclaiming celebration of femmes' (and butches') strengths and glories had obscured its all-too-painful negative aspects.

## The uses of butch/femme

As I entered lesbian life, propelled by desire and lust for a woman, I wonder if butch served as an othering which I needed in order to let desire run riot? Does butch/femme serve this purpose for other women starting out on their lesbian lives? Perhaps for some women it's a temporary phase. A way of initially ordering and identifying desires and fitting into a recognizable scenario? Is the romantic urge to be swept, rendered out of control, something which necessitates butch/femme? Am I now saying, fuck being swept? Is this being swept part of the romantic script of an older generation of women, including lesbians? But if I need to recognize the importance of difference in order to experience full-on desire, do I need butch to serve that purpose? What about the eroticizing of class, race, age, accents or size? And how do any categories of eroticized difference maintain their edge over the long term of a relationship? Over the years of growing older whether in a relationship or not?

Aside from joking, questions of butch/femme relationships and age are often avoided. In my case I have always had younger butch lovers. Very quickly we would both deny that I was a mother figure in the relationship. 'Yuk! You are *not* my mother'. 'Absolutely – you are *not* my daughter'. So much certainty. Hmmm. The disastrous end of my relationships always seemed to have an important element of disillusion and rebellion on the

part of my younger butch lover. But I think now that I had my own little poisoned wells of disillusion and disappointment which I hid even from myself sometimes. Nothing is simple once you start digging.

## Sick of suits

Whatever the complications, at this moment in my life butch/femme too often feels repetitive, compulsive and boringly predictable. I'm sick of suits. I'm sick of the idea of hanging on the arm of a butch in boots. I'm sick of the idea that butch lesbians automatically swagger in a sexy way. Too often I'm irritated by the current self-conscious display of lesbian masculinity. Too often it appears embarrassing, rather than fascinating. As if posturing in itself is somehow compelling. As if playing with gender is automatically sexually attractive when often it appears simply silly.

Don't worry, girls – I'm not confident about myself either. I think, oh my, I'm almost 60 – who'd want an old bag like me anyway? My gorgeous hats are largely unworn. I'm sick of femme fatale fashion. Occasionally I see the profile of lesbian masculinity and the old flutter starts. I look at it full face and I think, not 'Oh my, danger, yum', but 'Oh my, this doesn't work for me anymore'. I don't swoon at butch self-presentation anymore and I've lost the confidence of the fun and fullness of my own femme presentation. It no longer opens up my desire. But what opens up my desire? Have I lost my place in the plot? Am I out of the picture?

Recently I had an experience with a dear friend and ex-lover I don't often see. In a discussion about how to represent lesbians visually, we disagreed – I thought a photograph of a femme-looking woman standing alone was perfectly able to indicate lesbianism. She felt it was the only the photographs of the butch or masculine-looking woman on her own which stood out from heterosexuality and therefore designated lesbianism. On one level she is right. Perhaps I do not lend the visual as much power as she does. Perhaps I actually like a level of uncertainty. Perhaps I find the word 'perhaps' sexy and very lesbian.

If, *just if*, the butch is necessary for the femme's lesbianism to be seen and recognized, who is this recognition important to? Who is it signalling to? Is it heterosexuals? Dominant culture? Other lesbians? But other lesbians in their thousands, who are not particularly butch or femme in any obvious way, find each other, have exciting or boring sexual adventures, engage in the world, and even dress well.

And where does heterosexuality fit into the butch/femme agenda? Against heterosexuality, butch/femme is always being defined as progressive, transgressive, exciting and different from – too often implying that heterosexuality is something monolithic and unchanging, having no radical future or contested present. Defining butch/femme in an oppositional

relationship to heterosexuality has tended to obscure how many heterosexual women have struggled to subvert traditional femininity without necessarily throwing the baby out with the bath water. It has also set up blocks to exploring the underside of butch/femme, of acknowledging the oppressive aspects of femininity and masculinity which do persist in some butch/femme relationships.

## Butch friends, not lovers

I have a number of ongoing, significant friendships which include a butch/femme dynamic. I've never been at all self-reflexive about this until recently. In these friendships, femmeness and butchness is recognized – more or less, depending on how articulated the friend's butchness is. It seems that these butch/femme friendships work in a way which hasn't been possible to sustain with lovers. Why would that be? I guess it comes down to a difference between a butch/femme emotional dynamic in the relationships and more of a roleplay thing in butch/femme friendships.

I now feel rejecting of the emotional dynamic which seems to problematize the intimate playing out of butch/femme in my relationships. But what I've seen go so sour in my relationships I seem to manage in a friendship. Within my friendships, butch/femme is always part of much more and can be dropped like a lead balloon if inappropriate or not wanted by either person. It is not the organizing factor in the friendship and does not necessarily even have to be articulated – desire doesn't muddy things up. At the same time we validate each other's erotic and playful possibilities. We compliment the other, we joke about things that are amusingly butch or femme in the other. We gossip as a femme and butch about the lesbian world. We explore sticky areas such as our feelings of unease around the upsetting of butch/femme lesbian relations through the growing popularity of female-to-male transgenering. My romantic baggage has been left behind in these friendships.

## Ending optimisms

I don't think many of us who got involved in lesbian politics, culture and relationships in the Britain of the 1970s imagined that at the end of the century lesbian life would look like it does now. The ground has shifted so much. It now seems that in certain social groupings, age groups, political organizations, work places and in particular cultures and countries, there is just enough, *just about* enough, consciousness of the possibility of lesbianism, to make it *just about* possible to sexualize uncertainty and risk danger and/or rejection within a whole range of lesbians' looks and personas. Butch/femme then becomes one of many ways of finding each

other, organizing desire, framing presentations in the world. Why should it be privileged as anything more?

So here I am, struggling along. Not really on top of all the current sophistications in queer studies or any other studies. A femme but not a femme, if you see what I mean. And perhaps what I'm suggesting is that it's time to explore more openly the underbelly of the identities which were either rescued from the sex wars or excitedly developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Is it entirely naive to say that I'd like to fight for a lesbian politics which re-examined in a more sophisticated, nuanced, realistic, anti-voluntaristic way, a notion of creative confusion? Any woman might be? You can never tell? Assume nothing. *Perhaps*. This would necessarily be a politics which affected heterosexuality, as part of a process of confrontation and transformation. And out of which a language of erotic approach, of exploration, of long-term or temporary games, serious butch/femme or butch and anything else, or femme and anything else, among others, might flourish. As I imagine it, the sadnesses and weaknesses of both butch and femme could be admitted and explored in public and private in such a politics and neither would be caught in unmoving stereotypes. Such a politics and its results would, out of necessity and desire take on other major relations of difference (and exploitation) such as race and class. It would explore all these with reference to emotional and psychic forces. We might end up with more than 100 flowers of erotic possibilities blooming and maybe even have happier relationships.

### **Biographical Note**

Sue O'Sullivan has written extensively about the women's liberation movement and on sexuality and lesbian sexual politics. Currently she lives in London and edits the newsletter of the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS. *Address:* Flat 1 Savana, 72-74 Yoakley Road, London N16 0BG, UK. [email: [sosuk@dircon.co.uk](mailto:sosuk@dircon.co.uk)]