

BOOTS OF LEATHER

Chorus

For she walks in boots of leather  
And in slippers made of gold;  
She will be a child forever  
And forever, she'll be old.  
She's the heroine of legends;  
She's the eagle and the dove.  
She's the daughter of the moon;  
She's my sister and my love.

She was born in winter's fury,  
with the wind about her ears.  
She was raised on strife and sadness,  
and the city-dweller's fears.  
She was nursed on wine and bloodshed  
and she cut her teeth on steel;  
and she wept alone in darkness  
for the pain she was to feel.

Chorus

Many nights can fill a cavern;  
many days can dry the seas;  
many years will dull the longing  
and erode the memories.  
Ever more the granite forests  
make a place for her to dwell.  
And the streets of sleepy dreaming  
Make a story she can tell.

Chorus

—Madeline Davis c. 1974

*Boots of Leather,  
Slippers of Gold*

THE HISTORY OF A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Niagara Frontier. This began a new era in Buffalo lesbian history. Hereafter, lesbians and gays had alternatives for public socializing and political activities.

The juxtaposition of the three Buffalo subcommunities reveals the political ferment in working-class lesbian life during the 1950s. In the context of a developing understanding of lesbians as a distinct group, each subcommunity developed its own strategy of resistance, and therefore brought a different prepolitical consciousness to the era of gay liberation politics. Together they provided the basis for a powerful movement. The rough and tough bar butches—Black and white—with their male appearance and manners, were brazen rebels against injustice, defying society to accept lesbians for the “queers” they were. They, and the fems who associated with them, projected a vision of a single community that could take care of itself. Those of the more upwardly mobile white group believed that they could bring about the acceptance they were entitled to by living “normal” lives, and carrying on an individual dialogue with the world. Black lesbians effectively protected their own institutions through both diplomacy and physical confrontation. Black and white lesbians together created a pattern of interracial socializing that has perhaps not been matched by gay liberation, and certainly not improved upon.

Because Buffalo was a working-class city, the rough and tough lesbians—Black and white—were a strong force and their contribution was most apparent. Of the women who, alongside men, founded the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier, and brought gay liberation to Buffalo, the largest constituency were rough and tough lesbians.<sup>42</sup> The steady harassment of the bars by the police and the State Liquor Authority, plus the developing activist politics of gays in other cities, combined with bar culture and consciousness to create a gay and lesbian political organization.<sup>43</sup>

This perspective suggests that both the homophile movement and gay liberation had their roots in the working-class culture of bars and house parties. The kernel of the idea that lesbians were a distinct kind of people that deserved a better life, when combined with the expanding opportunities for women’s white-collar work, provided the conditions for the development of the homophile movement. Similarly, the rebellious element of gay liberation was rooted in the bar community’s own prepolitical forms of resistance. To understand this fully requires a multifaceted exploration of butch-fem roles, which were the central institution of resistance and are the subject of the next two chapters. Here it is sufficient to suggest that the confrontational and defiant spirit of gay liberation did not derive solely from external forces like the student and Black power movements. Toni, on reading a version of this chapter, comments: “Finally, the truth is spoken. The strength of gay liberation did not originate in the classrooms of middle-class students. Its strength came from those who were tired of being kicked around. The ones who took the chances and the bruises. The ones who had been out there getting their bodies and psyches battered.”

## “WE’RE GOING TO BE LEGENDS, JUST LIKE COLUMBUS IS”: THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE AND THE LESBIAN FIGHT FOR PUBLIC SPACE

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“I don’t think that now they differentiate as much. . . . Then it was very cut and dried. It was a butch or a lesbian. And the girlfriend, the ladies. . . . And they dressed differently, they acted differently.”

—Joanna

“In particular, I remember a woman who was Black, or she might have been Black and Spanish, but she was brown skinned, and had short curly hair, and in those days we put grease on our hair when we had it cut short and she had like grease on her hair and it was close cropped and real curly. She was kind of short. She was leaning up against the juke box, and she was swinging a key chain; and she had on men’s spade shoes, black leather dress shoes, and maybe like a suit, or a vest, and a pair of trousers and a trench coat. She frightened me ‘cause she looked so tough to me, but she intrigued me too.”

—Toni

Butch-fem women made Lesbians visible in a terrifyingly clear way in a historical period when there was no Movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence, and they often provoked rage and censure both from their own community and straight society. Now it is time to stop judging and to begin asking questions, to begin listening.

—Joan Nestle, “Butch-Fem Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s”

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Although narrators differ on the importance of roles, or the ease with which they followed their prescriptions, they all agree that butch-fem roles predominated in the public lesbian community of the past.<sup>1</sup> They also agree that in today’s world, roles take a different form, and are not immediately apparent, if, in fact, they exist at all. As they look around the bars these days, old-timers are likely to quip, “You can’t tell the players without a program,” or, “Look at those two. When they go home they’ll toss a coin to see who will be on top!”

Our research reveals that the salience and tenacity of butch-fem roles in the pre-1970s public lesbian community derives from their functioning as both a powerful personal code of behavior and as an organizing principle for community life. As the former, they dictated the way individuals presented themselves in daily life, particularly in regard to image—appearance and mannerisms—and sexuality. Butches affected a masculine style while fems appeared characteristically feminine. Butch and fem also complemented one another in an erotic system in which the butch was expected to be the doer and the giver; and the fem's receptive passion was the butch's fulfillment. Appearance and sexual expression were the primary indicators of butch-fem roles.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes narrators would also refer to personality—being more or less domineering—but not consistently.

Butch-fem roles, however, entailed much more than a personal code of ethics. They were also a powerful social force. They were the organizing principle for this community's relations with the outside world. The presence of the butch with her distinctive dress and mannerism, or of the butch-fem couple—two women in a clearly gendered relationship—announced lesbians to one another and to the public. Butch-fem roles established the parameters for love relationships and friendships within the community. Two butches could be friends, but never lovers; the same was true for two fems. The importance of visibility and erotic difference for the organization of the community explains in part why appearance and sexual expression were key elements in the butch and fem guidelines for personal behavior.

Roles as the basic organizing principle for the community and roles as a code of personal behavior were inseparable throughout this period. Whether or not someone wanted to follow the code of personal behavior, the community's relations with the straight world and its methods for developing love relationships depended on roles, and therefore, to be an active member of the community a person had to adhere to the rules to some degree.<sup>3</sup> As a result no matter what a particular lesbian personally thought or felt about the butch-fem code, whether assuming a role identity felt like a natural expression of her being or something imposed, she needed to adopt a role. They were a social imperative. Only then could she participate comfortably in the community and receive its benefits. For lesbians coming out in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s this is a very difficult concept to grasp, because we can imagine roles only as a code of personal behavior. As a result, we make the mistake of considering the social pressure for roles as simply arbitrary, negative pressure. But in the 1940s and the 1950s, the social pressure came from the way roles functioned in building community. If they required individuals to compromise their identity they offered the reward of participation in a community which effectively resisted the oppression of gays and lesbians.

Butch-fem roles have been the subject of significant controversy in the feminist and lesbian feminist movement. Coming from a theoretical framework that associates masculinity and males with evil—violence, rape, exploitation, and destruction—some feminists have scorned butch-fem communities for their imitation of

the patriarchal system of gender.<sup>4</sup> Others, recognizing the entrenched nature of gender in twentieth-century Western industrial culture, have explored the ways that lesbians have appropriated gender roles as a tool of resistance. As early as the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir, in her chapter on lesbians in *The Second Sex*, recognized the power to be gained by lesbians adopting masculine characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Joan Nestle makes this argument historically specific, articulating how the butch-fem couple in the 1950s boldly expressed the sexual interest of women in women at a time when such love was outlawed and there was no political movement for protection.<sup>6</sup> Our research has been influenced by and in turn supports this tradition, revealing the complexity of gendered resistance for lesbians during the 1940s and 1950s.

Butch-fem culture unquestionably drew on elements of the patriarchal gender system; but it also transformed them. On the simplest level, butches were masculine, not male, and fems were attracted to masculine women, not men. Butch-fem roles, therefore, expressed women claiming their difference, their right to love other women at a time when few, if any, other such opportunities existed. The masculine appearance of butches distinguished them and their fems as different, thereby serving as a badge of identifiability among lesbians themselves and to the general public. The possibility of recognizing one another was essential for the building of a distinct culture and identity.

Butch-fem roles crystallized the varied possibilities for resistance and stimulated people to carry them out. The extraordinary resistance that was documented in the past three chapters was highly gendered. It was accomplished by butches and fems.<sup>7</sup> The core group that built the lesbian bar community of the 1940s were the severely masculine yet gentle butches who were willing to be identified as different, as "homos." The Black and white tough lesbians continued this tradition in the 1950s, pushing to be identified as lesbians, or "queers," twenty-four hours a day. They not only endured the hostility of the straight world but they defended themselves with physical force if necessary. The fem contribution was radically different, though no less important. Fems' public resistance centered around support for their butches, being seen with them on the streets or in restaurants, or bringing them to family dinners. They also validated their butches' existence by acknowledging and respecting butch identity.

To begin the process of illuminating the place of the butch-fem dyad in prefeminist lesbian communities, this chapter explores the butch-fem image as a code of personal behavior and as a social imperative and the connections between the two. (The erotic dimension of the butch-fem image, with its attendant aura of excitement, is not explored fully until the next chapter.)<sup>8</sup> The concept of the butch-fem image is somewhat misleading because it suggests that we are focusing strictly on the visual, when we are in fact considering personal inclination, social rules, community pressure, and politics. It is our experience that all language for talking about butches and fems is inadequate. For instance, the concept of butch-fem roles reduces butch-fem behavior to role playing and does not take into account

the depth and complexity of butch and fem as an organizing principle which pervades all aspects of working-class lesbian culture. We, therefore, use the concept of the butch-fem image as a way of entering this complex culture, rather than as a way of simplifying it. We document the elements of dress and mannerisms that composed the butch-fem image during the 1940s and 1950s, and explore the social meaning of this image. In the interest of creating a comprehensive view of the development of twentieth-century lesbian consciousness, we consider the relationship between the prepolitical forms of resistance expressed through the butch-fem image and the rise of gay liberation.

### THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE OF THE 1940s

Narrators who entered the bars in the 1940s all have vivid memories of the striking appearance of butch lesbians. When asked how she could tell that Ralph Martin's was a gay bar on her first visit, Reggie replies: "You could tell by their dress, you could tell the boys when they walked—the butches were very butchy, very, ties, shirts." Joanna conveys a similar impression when reminiscing about her first night at Ralph Martin's.

"At that particular time there were many more lesbians who came out and didn't worry about having their hair curled, or long; or their ears pierced. Those kinds of things to look a little [feminine], because they really didn't care. . . . But at that time almost every lesbian was dressed in men's attire."

Not all butches of the time cultivated this exaggerated masculine appearance, but it was certainly the style of the core group of bar patrons.

White butches remember devoting a great deal of care—not to mention time and money—to their dress when preparing to step out on a Saturday night in the 1940s. In this culture, it was not just fems who paid attention to their looks. Butches wanted their image to be admired by others in the community and wanted to appear handsomely attractive to fems. They 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. Leslie remembers, "They would starch them until they would break. If there was a wrinkle in them, they would put them back in the water." They wore big cuff-links in their shirts and jackets over them. In the 1930s jackets were an optional part of dressing up, since not all butches could afford them. By 1942 when they had more money, due to the economic recovery from the end of the Depression and the onset of the war, jackets were regularly worn for an evening out.

During the war, pants became more acceptable in general for women, and

butches started wearing them when they went out on weekends. Previously they would wear boys' pants indoors but not outside. "You had to travel in a street car and you would run into flack from men. Women too would cause trouble, they might feel that you would follow them into the bathroom and attack them" (Leslie). Arden recalls that finding suitable pants took initiative. "You could get pants to wear for work but you got dressed up on a Saturday night. That was the night you went out," and dress pants for women were unavailable.<sup>9</sup> They had to have them custom tailored; despite their masculine appearance they did not wear men's dress pants. Joanna reminisces: "There was a place on Chippewa Street that used to make girls' [pants] without the fly in the front. The zipper was on the side. But they had to be tailor made. They didn't sell them in the stores, on racks, like now." Even Dee, who felt ambivalent about projecting an extremely masculine appearance, went to this shop. She loved her tailor-made slacks of fine material, which she kept until recently.

"During the war years, everybody wore pants. They were not known as pant suits as we have today, they were not as feminine as the pant suits are today. We even, at that point, we had heard about this place on Chippewa Street where they would tailor the slacks for girls. We went in there. As probably just a sentimental thing I still had them, I threw them away when I moved [three years ago]. But at that point I had had these tailor-made slacks and I was very proud of them."

Although Black lesbians did not regularly frequent the bars during the 1940s, their dress code for house parties was not radically different from that of whites. "If you want to know how I dressed, well I had on slacks. And some of the best kind. And my hair was cut short" (Debra).

To go with their pants, butches got "the most masculine-style shoes you could find, flat shoes, like oxfords" (Leslie). White butches usually went to Eastwoods, a Buffalo specialty store for sensible, sturdy shoes. Arden remembers making excuses for her masculine shoes. When she was young she would come home with shiny, laced up shoes with thick soles. Her family would say, "It's a wonder you can't get something with a strap." She would respond, "I can't walk in them."

Their short haircuts were also consciously created for their image. Arden recalls, "It was worn very extreme, not like today; it wasn't until later that they softened it." In her case it was cut short, up over the ears. She would often wear a hat. "In my own neighborhood, I might wear a knitted cap, but when I went downtown I might wear a masculine-like hat." Unlike items of clothing, haircuts could not easily be changed between work and socializing, so not all butches could wear such a severe cut. Leslie remembers that she and a butch friend adopted the "pineapple look." They had curls all over, and therefore, didn't look so butch at work. Since long hair was traditionally associated with femininity, the cutting of

hair was symbolic in the process of achieving an extremely butch appearance. "I was going through that stage, you know where well, I'm gonna cut my hair real short and do what I want to do. . . . Very mannish" (Reggie).

The fem dress code of the 1940s was not distinctive to the lesbian community, but rather copied that of fashionable women in the heterosexual world. Fem narrators like Charlie remember always having a keen interest in clothes and style. "I enjoy clothes, clothes make me happy. And it makes me happy to dress my friend too. . . . I always wore what I wanted to." When asked how she knew she was a fem, Charlie replies:

"Well because I wore makeup, I wanted to wear makeup and I liked clothes. I never went to butchy clothes or . . . like a librarian, they wear a certain kind of clothes, you know, they don't go in with a low cut dress. Probably because of the way I wanted to dress and then I just never felt any other way."

Pearl, also a fem, remembers her appearance:

"Well I would dress with high-heeled shoes and skirt or a dress. That's the way I usually dressed. . . . Once in a while I'd get real, I don't know if you'd call it brave or what, but I would put on . . . I don't know if you remember when the zoot suits were in style with the long jackets and the chains and the pants that had the real tight legs and you had to take your shoes off to put them on. . . . I had long hair but I wore it up. I hardly ever wore my hair down. It was usually up in a bun or french twist or just with a ribbon [in a ponytail]."

Although fems liked to dress up, some also were comfortable in casual clothes. Sometimes, they even wore pants. Joanna remembers how much she liked her first pair.

"At that time slacks weren't really that popular. . . . And to wear a pair of slacks was really kind of looked down on because they just weren't worn for everyday attire. That wasn't part of the wardrobe. That was part of somehow, say you were going riding, or you were roughing it. But if you went out you didn't wear them. My first pair of slacks I thought were the greatest I ever had in my whole life."

Even when they both wore pants, there was a definite difference in the appearance of a lady and her butch. Joanna mentions the distinguishing features of fem appearance while remembering a time when in the late 1940s she and her butch were harassed by some men after leaving a bar in Manhattan. "I was wearing pants too but I had, like I had a blouse on. I had makeup on. So evidently we did look a hell of a lot [like a gay couple], well my hair was [done-up]."

Butch narrators' memories of the 1940s emphasize the glamorous appearance of fems. "They would wear high heels and makeup and have their hair done in the highest fashion of the day" (Leslie). Or, "The girls used to be dressed in all

their finery, dresses, high heels" (Arden). Leslie, like most butches, remembers with affection and humor any difficulties fems had in achieving these high standards. "[She] dressed ultrafem, gloves up to here, and a hat with a veil, and high heels and Kolinskys [a fox-fur neckpiece], and would drink too much. The Kolinskys would fall on the floor." Leslie of course, would pick them up for her and the evening's fun would continue. Butches' appreciation of glamour was such that show girls who were flashily dressed and heavily made-up were easily accepted in the community.<sup>10</sup>

As visible as dress was in the presentation of a role-defined lesbian, it was not the sole determinant of image. Mannerisms were also cited by narrators in their definitions and descriptions. The significance of mannerisms is evident in the way old-timers attempt to identify roles in the current bar scene where there is no longer a role-defined dress code. D.J. explains:

"All their appearances are all the same. There's a very few that you can really say, 'Now that's a butch, whee, there's a fem.' You can't do it no more, 'cause they're all dressed on the same order. The dungarees, the T-shirts, long hair . . . unless . . . it's the way they pick up a drink . . . if you're really watching that hard. . . . Or the way they hold a cigarette. . . . Then you can distinguish. But as far as appearance, clothes-wise, no one can tell any more."

Butch and fem mannerisms were modeled on male-female behavior as portrayed in the Hollywood movies of the period. They included all the little details of presenting one's self—manner of walking, sitting, holding a drink, tone of voice. Most butches were expert mimics who had mastered the subtleties of masculine nonverbal communication. It is particularly noteworthy that during the 1940s, despite the extreme of masculine dress, but in keeping with the lack of physical violence in the community, these butches did not project an aggressive tough image. Narrators describe their image as "severe," never tough. Reggie goes as far as to describe her friends as gentle and kind, most likely an implicit contrast to the tough bar lesbians of the next decade. She found them willing to accept her for who she was, and most importantly, restrained in their use of physical violence:

"Your fems were very feminine, your butches were butchy but they were kind, you know. . . . They weren't the macho type and they didn't go out and want to fight right away. You know, 'You're talking to my girlfriend.' I never had to ask any of them. I asked their girls to dance. I never got a dirty look or 'Hey, out of due respect you're gonna ask me.'"

Since 1940s lesbians did not actively introduce people to gay life, they did not instruct people in how to dress or carry themselves. Newcomers picked up what they wanted. When asked if everyone was into roles in the old days, Leslie responds, "For at least ninety-five percent there was no mistaking." Then she wonders out loud, "If we did it to them, push people into roles?" She answers



herself, "No, they preferred it that way. We didn't do it." And Arden concurs. Reggie remembers the 1940s lesbian community as very tolerant. She felt fully accepted by the older butches, even though with her long hair, she didn't look as severe as they. However, just the existence of admired social groups created some social pressure to conform. Dee still remembers feeling ostracized from the core group of butches at Ralph Martin's because she and her fem went to the bar one time dressed in evening gowns, with their gay male escorts, after a company dance. Furthermore, gender polarity pervaded the whole culture and was therefore difficult to escape.

An important part of the 1940s butch and fem images was not only the way each appeared and acted separately, but also the striking contrast between the two. Every narrator at some point made a comment on the difference between butch and fem appearance: "Well see there was quite a distinction" (D.J.), or "The so-called butches were really masculine looking, dressed masculine, and the fems were the same way, dressed feminine" (Phil). Joanna remembers, "There was a hell of a difference. . . . [Ladies] looked like girls . . . with the makeup and earrings." The contrast within the butch-fem couple was part of the community's aesthetic sensibility. As narrators reminisce about events or friends of their past, their flashes of memory about a particular couple regularly capture the distinctive appearance of butch and fem: the lady with "the ultrafem look" and her butch wearing "a stiff shirt with a jacket that came down to her hips" (Leslie). The fashionably feminine and intriguingly masculine communicated excitement and pleasure to partners in a couple and to the entire community (see photos after p. 190).

### THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE IN THE 1950s

The basic elements of the 1940s image for butches and fems—the importance of dressing up, with butches wearing masculine clothes and fems appearing glamorous—continued into the 1950s, but the details of presentation changed (see photos after p. 190). Part of the change simply reflected trends in male and female dress styles in the dominant society. But part of the change reflected developments in the lesbian community and the social climate for both straight women and lesbians. White tough bar lesbians, Black tough lesbians, and the primarily white upwardly mobile lesbians projected different images.

White tough bar butches cultivated an extremely working-class masculine look. They generally wore more articles of male clothing than butches in the 1940s or in the more upwardly mobile crowd of the 1950s, but not more than the tough Black butches. Although they modeled themselves after the more experienced butches, they were often influenced by the style of some of the more popular musicians of the emerging rock and roll scene. Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and later in the decade the young Elvis Presley, with their slicked back hair, pouty lips

in a slight sneer and a smoldering look about the eyes, all became models. Many butches developed a style that was at once tough and erotically enticing; simultaneously careless and intense.

Since they went out to bars every night, not just on weekends, tough bar butches had to have appropriate clothes for both casual wear and for dressing up. Stormy, a regular at Bingo's in the mid-1950s, remembers white butches on the weekend wearing sports jackets, chino pants or sometimes men's dress pants, and men's shirts—button downs, western shirts, or tuxedo shirts with 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. Bert recalls her partiality to colors: "Even though I wore men's clothes I always wore colorful type clothes. I can remember in the summertime one time I had a lavender top, light yellow [pants]. Just regular men's clothes."

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.

On the weekends they still dressed up, but strictly in men's clothes. Toni remembers having to acquire the right clothes:

"I did not have the clothes at first. On Friday night I would meet [these older butches] dressed in men's shiny shoes, men's dress pants—they were pegged at that time—white shirts and thin belts. . . . I copied these butches. I bought my first pair of men's shoes, loafers, men's slacks, men's shirts and started dressing like the others."

Absent from this memory are sports jackets, which were no longer essential in the white community by the late 1950s. Instead, butches wore sweaters—cardigans and V-necks. Little Gerry suggests that the reason for this was "TV and the growing influence of the Perry Como look."

Greased back D.A.'s were the popular haircut of the white tough bar crowd.<sup>11</sup> Some had other men's-style hairdos including a few crew cuts, but narrators explain that those were mainly worn by people who did not have to go to regular jobs. As in the 1940s the act of cutting hair, whatever the style, was often a personally meaningful step in acquiring the butch image.<sup>12</sup> Vic remembers her haircut as central to achieving her identity: "I had my first butch haircut in the back room at Bingo's bar. My hair was about down to here. Rose her name was,

Shirley & how

buying men's clothes for herself, which just was not done then. It was very embarrassing, but I wanted the clothes bad enough to put up with it. It was humiliating always to me, very embarrassing. I felt awful about myself, 'cause I felt like I was being watched."

Toni adds that there were certain stores where other butches went in which it was easier to shop.

"There were a couple of stores that some of the women would go into. I remember there was one store on Grant Street where [several butches] bought clothes, so that was like a little more comfortable. He was used to lesbians coming in there and buying pants; it wasn't like he'd look at you funny. There was one tailor that you could have your pants tailored at, if you got dress pants. [He] was used to the lesbians and he didn't, you know, make you feel embarrassed about yourself."

The fem image in the white tough bar crowd was not significantly different from that of the 1940s, except for the differences brought about by the inevitable changes in the fashion world. Fems, dressing according to the latest styles, adapted a more overtly sexy look, like the sweater-girl style popularized by Lana Turner, Jane Russell, and Marilyn Monroe. The invention of new fibers helped to create this image. Nylon and Dacron were used for sheer stockings, diaphanous materials for blouses and undergarments, and Orlon and Banlon for inexpensive, body-hugging sweaters.<sup>14</sup> One of the authors, Madeline, remembers being intimidated on one of her early forays into the bars in 1957, several years before she came out fem, by the sophisticated and sultry appearance of the fems.

Fems wore pants as well as skirts. Annie describes her costume of the late 1950s.

"When I first started coming around and hanging around in those bars I used to wear skirts, high heels. I used to wear my heels all the time. And then I started getting into the habit where we were wearing slacks and jerseys. Dungarees weren't really in for girls then. It was slacks. And then on occasion you'd wear a dress; you'd dress up."

A few fems in the late 1950s wore only pants. This defiance of the feminine dress code did not bring censure from other butches and fems, but it did get Bell in trouble with her probation officer.<sup>15</sup>

"I was a very rebellious person, I didn't like the officer because, she insisted that I wear skirts to report for probation. One time I went there and I had jeans on and she said, 'I thought I told you to wear a skirt here.' I said, 'Well I don't happen to own any skirts and I don't have the money to go out and buy any.' She said, 'Well borrow one then.' She made me go home. Somehow I had to go and borrow a skirt. I came back and I had a skirt on. And she was just so nasty. I said 'damn,' in my heart, I was just so aggravated and angry

about everything, I said, 'I think I'd rather just go and do the six months rather than have to come down here and report to this asshole.'"

Whether in pants or a skirt fems usually wore makeup and had their hair done in a feminine style.

As in the 1940s, butches still appreciated a fashionably dressed fem. They went out quite frequently with show girls, and with prostitutes whose work required at least a touch of glamour. Ronni recalls the thrill of seeing her first love: "She was behind the bar with this real strapless dress on. And she looked to me like Elizabeth Taylor."

The basic content and meaning of the butch-fem image in the tough Black lesbian crowd was similar to that of the tough white lesbians. Studs wore as many items of male clothes as white rough and tough butches, if not more. However, the butch-fem image was constructed in the idiom of Black culture and therefore had a distinctive flavor. Black studs remember modeling themselves on older lesbians whose mode of dress was severe yet stylish. When asked if she dressed like a man when she went out in the 1950s, Piri responds, "All the way, all the way. . . . I just started over the last I'll say one and a half, two years toning it down, wearing women's slacks, women's clothes. I mean I don't wear no dresses. . . . Hey, I got grandkids, and I can't go around lookin' like a man in front of them." Some studs wore all men's clothes, including underwear. Others modified them: "I never went into wearing any men's underclothes. I sleep in men's pajamas, men's bathrobe. But it's just like some of them wear jock shorts and T-shirts. I wear a silk T-shirt with sleeves, but not sleeveless. Lot of them into that too" (Lonnie). So important were men's clothes to a stud's identity that some wish to be buried in them. "And I have lots of friends say they want to be buried in men's clothes. . . . I have a friend say she want to be buried in a three piece suit" (Lonnie).

Studs had high standards for dressing up, and often cut an elegant image in three-piece suits. Lonnie recalls:

"I used to wear ladies clothes a lot, heels and stuff like that. After my grandmother died I went all the way. I started wearing three-piece suits, had my hair chopped off. And we went to—a friend of mine that's in gay life, it's a he and he always wears dresses. So we was at the Holiday Inn one night, and he had on a long gown, wig and all this, and I had on a three-piece blue suit; we blowed their minds. One woman say, 'That's the handsome man there; he don't even shave.' After my grandmother died. I got rid of my other clothes and just put them out for the garbage pickup."

Black lesbians adopted this more formal look even on week nights. Jodi does not recall them ever wearing casual clothes. Whenever they went out they wore starched white shirts with formal collars and dark dress pants. Their shoes were men's Florsheim dress shoes worn with dark nylon socks. They had their hair processed and wore it combed back at the sides and cut square at the back. Studs



put a great deal of money and energy into their clothes, buying the best. Piri remembers having clothes made in Toronto or shopping in the boys' departments at Seeburg's and Kresge's.<sup>16</sup>

The striking appearance of studs helped lesbians identify one another, as can be seen from Arlette's description of the first woman in man's clothes she saw in Buffalo:

"The first time I saw really gay women, mannish-looking women was here in Buffalo, New York. And I didn't know what they were. I really thought that they were men. . . . The first gay lady I saw here . . . to me she was fascinating. I kept looking at her, and I said, 'That's a good-looking guy, but it's a funny-looking guy. . . .' I could never tell if she was a man or a woman cause I never got close enough to her, but there was one strange thing, she would have on lipstick. I said, 'This woman's different.' She's got on men's clothes, her hair was very nice, cut short. She treated a lady like a gentleman would with a lady out, but I said, 'Is that a man or a woman?' So I made it a point to get close enough to hear her voice, 'cause I knew if I could hear her talking I could tell. Then I found out, this is a woman. And I said, 'Golly, got on men's clothes and everything, what kind of women are these?' Then I started seeing more women here dressed in stone men's attire. I said, 'Well, golly, these are funny women.' Then they kind of fascinated me. What could they possibly do? Everybody want to know what can you do. I got curious and I said, 'I'm going to find out.'"

In keeping with the formal style of their studs, Black fems wore skirts or dresses, rarely pants, and aimed to achieve the highest standards of feminine beauty (see photos after p. 190). Arlette, who even now is conscious of looking stylish, remembers that they modeled themselves after entertainers and movie stars. She loved the fashions in *Vogue*. "I was *Vogue* crazy." At that time she made the majority of her clothes so she could simply create whatever suited her fancy. Black fems also had their hair styled according to the latest fashion. This required having their hair straightened and then curled. Although Arlette recalls one stud who wore her hair "natural," she remembers that during the 1950s the majority of both studs and fems hated this look.

Mannerisms continued to be an important ingredient of the butch or stud image in the 1950s. When asked what distinguished a stud, Piri gives a typical reply: "Mannerisms . . . the way they was dressed . . . the way they talk, the way they acted." "Rough" and "tough" describes the comportment of the Black and white tough butches, adjectives that were never used for the 1940s-butch.<sup>17</sup> The style they projected was based on working-class men, who knew how to take care of themselves and did not back away from physical confrontation. D.J., who came out in the 1940s, but was at home with the tough bar crowd, identifies willingness to fight as a distinctive mark of the butch manner. "It used to be strictly the appearance of the person, the way you handled yourself. In other words you had

to knock about sixteen people around to let them know you were [butch]." Their often-elegant attire did not deter studs from cultivating this rough-and-ready style.

"Oh yeah, you have to be ready. To me, if you act all meek and humble you gettin' ready to be stepped on. I still have a tendency to be that way, 'cause to me that's the way I was brought up. If you weren't ready and rough you couldn't make it, not one bit. . . . A lot of people figured they could take advantage of [you]. . . . I've been put in a position where I was raped two or three times, 'cause I was gay. If you don't really just hang out there and you just sit back, and you don't struggle for it or fight for it then you might as well hang it up." (Piri)

The tough image prevailed not only in fighting, but in one's entire presentation of self. For instance, Toni recalls learning, "If you were in a bar, and someone called your name, you never turned around smiling. I remember Sandy objected to that kind of friendliness." For those who were hesitant to fight, the appearance of being unafraid and able to handle themselves was important. "Lots of us had to look real tough because underneath we weren't really secure about ourselves. We were scared" (Stormy). Even those who felt inadequately prepared, thought it necessary to look tough.

"Well, see there were fights, people would fight, and I was always afraid of actually fighting physically. But I never wanted anyone to know that I was afraid so I guess I put on a real tough front. And an interesting thing was about two months ago I was at a friend's house, and I've known this woman, she's a gay woman, since those days, and she was sort of teasing me about how tough I was in those days, and how everyone was afraid of me. And I thought she was kidding me, because the thing was, I believe her now, but I was so scared that all of that was motivated by fear. But I guess I put on a pretty good front. I only really got into two fights and those were fights that I wanted to get into myself. I never usually had to fight with people, I guess, I talked my way out of things. Either talking nice or talking to scare people" (Toni).

When she was in a rough situation, Toni would make sure she was near one of the leaders who had the ability to take care of business.

Since the 1950s lesbian community was willing to educate newcomers, the butch-fem image was easily attained. Older tough butches might speak directly to younger butches and fems about their appearance and behavior, and were not shy about influencing them. In addition, newcomers energetically modeled themselves after the old timers when entering the community. Among tough bar lesbians there was strong pressure for people to conform to the butch-fem roles, as Vic remembers:

"Well, you had to be [into roles]. If you weren't, people wouldn't associate with you. . . . You had to be one or the other or you just couldn't hang

around. There was no being versatile or saying, 'Well, I'm either one. I'm just homosexual or lesbian.' You know, they didn't even talk about that. It was basically a man-woman relationship. . . . You had to play your role."

All narrators agree that the butches and the fems of the more upwardly mobile circle looked different from those in the rough and tough bar crowd. Toni explains the difference this way. "Those [butches] in Bingo's modeled themselves on the Italian men of the West Side neighborhoods [of Buffalo] while those in the Carousel had a more collegiate look."<sup>18</sup> At another point she characterizes it as a more waspy, middle-class look. Others make the distinction by describing those in the Carousel as having a sporty look; still others characterized it as a more discreet look.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the women, who had frequented Ralph Martin's and Winters in the 1940s, continued the tradition of dressing up when they started patronizing the Carousel in the 1950s. The younger patrons, those who entered the bars for the first time in the 1950s, however, adopted a more sporty or collegiate look. Cheryl, an upwardly mobile butch, captures this image in her impression of butches on her first trip to the Carousel in 1960, "They all looked alike. They all dressed alike. Their slicked back D.A.'s, white belts, white bucks, chino pants, shirts with pockets on the side and button-down collars." Carousel butches also wore crew necks and pullovers, a definite mark of the collegiate style. If there was a pop musician of the period that might characterize this look it was Pat Boone. With his white buck shoes, button-down shirts with crew-neck or V-neck sweaters, his clean cut hair and open smile, he was the acme of the sporty boy next door, a more acceptable image for the socially conscious butches of the Carousel.

Although more sporty than that of the white or Black tough lesbians, the appearance of the upwardly mobile crowd was equally cultivated. Whitney remembers a friend of the late 1950s:

"[She] would have her old pants on, and she would have a pair of chinos that were pressed. She'd get out of the car, she'd stand at the side of the car, she'd pull on her chinos, and then she'd stand in the bar all night with that crease. She would not rest. She might rest her buttocks a little bit, but she didn't bend her legs."

Just as in the white and Black lesbian communities, time, energy, and self-consciousness went into creating the appropriate image for the butches of this more elite crowd.

The fems in this crowd adopted the same sporty or collegiate style as the butches so that the difference in the appearance between the two was less striking. Nevertheless, there was a difference. Although fems were not expected to be glamorous in the manner of movie stars or show girls, they were still expected to look feminine and pretty. Whitney recalls her early days in the Carousel in the late 1950s. "I would wear dresses; I would wear pants. I would wear like treader

pants and things. I think that was the style then and high heels." In further clarifying the difference between the appearance of butches and fems, she adds, "And another thing too in butches, butches weren't as apt to wear makeup. In fact they didn't wear makeup. . . . And another thing was, butches would have their hair cut in a kind of butchy style, where fems would have curls and bouffant type of things."

In mannerisms as well as clothing the difference between the butch and fem images of the upwardly mobile crowd was definite but muted. The butches cultivated a masculine presence without the rough and rowdy mannerisms that prevailed among the white and Black tough lesbians. They looked down on such behavior as crude and aimed to be more refined and genteel. When asked why she didn't socialize with the tough crowd, Whitney responds that she disliked "their mannerisms, their manners. They were into a lot of the role stuff of being tough." As in all other aspects of their lives, the butch-fem image of the upwardly mobile crowd was more discreet than that of the tough lesbians. Neither the butch alone, nor the butch-fem couple were immediately and necessarily recognizable as lesbians. The butch-fem image typified and reproduced the class distinctions within the lesbian community and was central to shaping and expressing lesbian politics.<sup>20</sup>

### THE SOCIAL MEANING OF THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

As much as the code of personal behavior for dress and mannerisms was modeled on heterosexual society, it was not simply imitative. Butches of the 1940s and 1950s actively worked to create a unique image. Their goal was not to pass as men. Although many of them knew passing women or might even have passed as men for short periods in their lives, as part of the lesbian community they were recognized on the streets as women who looked 'different' and therefore challenged mainstream mores and made it possible for lesbians to find one another.

Passing women usually had a male identity, complete with false identification papers and were known as men at least at their work place. Leslie pithily contrasts herself with a passing woman of her acquaintance who wore a binder and looked like a man. "[Perhaps] this was the lesser of two evils, rather than be in the middle like us, not looking like men or women. . . . But we weren't trying to fool the public." In the 1950s women who passed were also known to the lesbian community, but they were not considered an integral part of its daily life. Butches chose to look simply—and dangerously—like butches or "queers." As Stormy put it, "We all knew we were women, let's face it." Vic remembers the terrible pressure of the butch role: "When I was young I was made so queer conscious that I don't ever want people to call me queer. So now wherever I go I'll either look like a

man or a woman, but I won't look like a queer. I don't want the label any longer. I had it all my life and I hate it."

From the perspective of the 1980s and 1990s it is difficult to separate being butch and passing as a man, but for members of this community, the difference was significant. Many narrators, like Vic, are resentful about this modern confusion. "People don't relate to me as a gay person, Madeline. Wow how can I even try to talk to somebody? Because people, gay women look at me and say, 'Oh she thinks she's a man.' Which I don't, but that's how they relate to me. So should I sit there and run it to 'em?"

Language usage concretized the difference between being butch and passing as a man. While passing women were referred to as "he" by everyone, including their partners, the community of the 1940s and 1950s only rarely used male pronouns to refer to butches.<sup>21</sup> Bell who went with a passing woman for several years remembers feeling uncomfortable with using the male pronoun: "Yes, she was, very masculine-looking and acting. . . . More times than many, I didn't like it at all. Because when we would go places she would want me to call her 'he.' [I would say,] 'But, you're not a man you're a woman. . . .'" Occasionally, in the Black lesbian community, an older stud might address a younger as "son," and might be addressed by others as "pops," but this was not institutionalized.

Although most butches had a nickname which was appropriate to their presentation of self, and served to camouflage their connection to family and jobs, these names were not exclusively male. In the 1940s, many women had nicknames that were related to particular personality characteristics or habits and were not gender-based. Leslie, who took inordinate pride in her stiffly starched shirts, was nicknamed "Arrow" by her friends. Arden, who always dressed in the immaculate taste of a corporation president, was called "the Executive." These nicknames were a sign of affection among close friends but they also provided a degree of anonymity for those who took risks by socializing in an open gay society.

In the 1950s, consistent with the fact that tough bar lesbians (Black and white) socialized primarily in house parties and bars rather than with a small group of intimate friends, such personal nicknames were rare. Most of these butches, despite their developed male image, took on unisex names, usually derived from their own names. Roberta and Barbara were shortened to Bobbi, or Margaret to Marty. Such names were advantageous because they could be used by friends in front of family without causing disruption in the daily routine. At one time, there were so many Gerrys in the community, they had to be distinguished by other attributes, such as Big Gerry, Little Gerry, Jamestown Gerry, Raincoat Gerry, Crazy Gerry, etc. A few took on unisex names that were completely unrelated to their own names. Ronni describes how she acquired her nickname on her first night out at a gay bar:

"When I was at one of these gay bars I heard a guy call another guy Ronni. Well, being guilty and feeling like I was, I didn't want anybody to know my name. I wanted to remain anonymous, so the first [person] that walks up to me and says 'What's your name?' I said, 'Ronni,' so that popped right out of

me and I just thought, well . . . that sounds all right to me. So I became Ronni that day, that evening, at the age of twenty-one, in the first gay bar I ever walked into."

Both the commonness of unisex nicknames and the space for individual variation, at least in the Black lesbian community, are seen in Arlette's story about a woman she met at a dance in New York who became a passion in her life.

"And I looked at her, I said, 'What's your name?' She said, 'Susan.' I laughed, Susan! She's so hard looking. Most of them have a kind of [name like] Jo, anything like that. It tickled me. Well she said, 'What did you think I was gonna say, my name was Gerry or Jo, or something?' Well, I started laughing because I knew [those names here in Buffalo.] It really tickled me. 'Well,' I say 'That would have been a little more appropriate.' But Susan really floored me. She was very pressed and extremely neat."

In the 1940s and 1950s being a butch or part of a butch-fem couple on the streets meant claiming the identity of difference, of being a "homo" or a "queer." "Homo" was the term commonly used to designate their difference by those who came out in the 1930s and 1940s while "queer" is the language of those who came out in the 1950s, particularly at the end of the decade. Although both had derogatory connotations, implied stigmatization, and were used somewhat ironically, the former is more clinical, and the latter more judgmental, reflecting the increased confrontation between society and the late 1950s butches.

Most narrators were fully aware of the social meaning of the butch-fem image: To announce, or in narrators' language, "to not deny," to the straight world that one is different, is a "homo," a "queer," a "gay," or a "lesbian," and through this to find community with others like oneself. "I would not deny it" is a phrase which appears somewhere in most butch narrators' life stories.

"I mean, I don't think I'm any different now than I was back then. . . . I don't go around advertising or trying to advertise what I am . . . to so-called straight society, but yet if I was approached and they asked are you a lesbian, I wouldn't deny it either. I wouldn't wear a sign saying I'm a lesbian, but on the other hand, if a person came up to me, which it has happened, and said, 'Are you gay?' I wouldn't deny it. I wouldn't say, 'Oh no. God no, not me,' I'd say, 'Yes I am.' Because I feel I have every right to live in this world as anybody else."  
(Matty)

Matty's distinction between "not denying" and "advertising" draws attention to the fine line separating defensive and offensive behavior. The old time butches did not see themselves as taking the offensive. In their minds they were minding their own business and were forced to defend their right to live differently. However,

it is the nature of the butch-fem image that what is seen as "not denying" by one person can be viewed as provocative flaunting behavior by another.

### LIVING THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE IN THE 1940s

During the 40s, when lesbians were discreet about separating work and family from social life, the butch appearance was particularly powerful. Those who achieved it took tremendous risks. Butch narrators vividly remember being identified as different when they went out.

"Fems didn't look like homos. When they were walking on the street they didn't get any harassment so gay life was not that difficult for them. The only time they had any trouble was when they would go to the bar on Saturday night. There might be some straights making comments there. And afterwards when you would go out to eat at a restaurant. That got so bad that I stopped doing it. It wasn't worth it to have to deal with all the men making comments and poking fun. The biggest problem is going out on the street, and who bothers a fem when she goes out alone. She doesn't have to face that kind of thing." (Leslie)

Both butches and fems agree that the former bore the primary burden of public exposure, and therefore had a special role in the community. However, butch-fem couples on the way to bars, in the bars, or going out to eat after the bars closed drew the same kind of negative reaction as butches alone, because the couple's presence made the meaning of lesbianism explicit. Leslie finds the butch-fem couple more challenging to men than today's unisex couple. "That is perhaps why there is not so much trouble today. If a man should go into a modern bar and look around he would not be so interested in the women there. Most of the women are in pants and look alike."

Given the repression of the times, there was significant disagreement among lesbians of the period about the wisdom of being "obvious." Those who felt comfortable with the butch-fem image were the women who were out in the bars every weekend and were the core builders of community. Those who disliked the degree of visibility demanded by the butch-fem image were not concerned with the formation of community and spent long periods away from a public social life. Their discontent helps to reveal the butch-fem image as a prepolitical form of resistance.

Reggie was fundamentally ambivalent about the butch image. She was attracted to it, because it expressed pride and ended hiding, but she felt the stigma caused too many problems in her life. Her identity was always butch, but from the beginning she presented a less severe image than the core group she first met at Ralph Martin's. Her reasons were complicated.

"I had family, you have your school, later on I had my job. And I don't feel you have to broadcast. And I have found the nicer women wouldn't want the real butch type either. Not because you're ashamed, but again they have, say special jobs in society, and we can't expect every straight one to recognize us or to like us and to accept us. Just like we can't accept their ways a lot either. That's the way I feel about it. But mainly I'd get the shit kicked out of me by my father, which I did."

When she was young her major concern about her appearance was to keep her identity hidden from her father. She was not able to do this, despite her caution, and she paid dearly for it, three years in a reformatory. But her view today is based on her total life experience, and is fairly typical of the community's understanding of the problems associated with "broadcasting" one's lesbianism. An obvious butch had trouble with all of society. She also would have less success with fems who did not want to be exposed by the butches they were with.

At one period in her life, Reggie was drawn to the obvious butch image and gave it a try, but she found it too limiting. She had taken a job at the One Eighty-One Club in New York City where butches were part of the show as waiters and were required to present an extreme image. She felt that image was "her," but:

"I just felt that as much as I wanted to be me, at the time I found that I was confined too much, to the Village. 'Cause I had tried to go up to see some gay girls I knew up in the Bronx, and my girlfriend and I almost got beat up on the train. Another time . . . [friends and I had] just got back from shopping and were carrying the bags and five guys went by with a car and started calling us names. Well, I made the mistake, which it was my fault, I made a sign and of course they went around the block. And they came back, jumped out of the car, and they formed a circle around me. And my friends walked on, they didn't call for the police or nothing. . . . No one on Sixth Avenue, it was in the midafternoon, did anything. . . . So I wound up two weeks in the hospital and I came out. I think between that and the Club, and then not being able to see friends—I mean good friends. They were straight, but I just couldn't bring them to town, understanding me and accepting me, I couldn't force that on them. So I let my hair grow again, not quite as long. I just felt free. I just felt that I'm not confined any more."<sup>22</sup>

The combination of harassment on the street, distance from straight friends, and problems at the Club led her to return to being less obvious. In her experience, the benefits she received from being obvious did not outweigh the limitations. This decision did not stop her from being an active lesbian. She still went to bars and dances in the Village and in Harlem and expanded her horizons, riding motorcycles with a straight male group and visiting her friends from the reformatory in Harlem. She says of herself at the time: "You had a lot of gall when you were younger, I guess." But she was relatively free of the public stigma of homosexuality. This stance toward the straight world seems relevant in shaping

future developments in her life. During the 1950s, she married and went on to live with her husband for twenty-three years and raise two children. Now she is again living as a lesbian. At no period in her life was she central to the building of a public lesbian community.

The meaning of the butch image was and is so powerful that to this day, Reggie remains fundamentally ambivalent about it, attracted to the pride it represents, but uncomfortable with its confrontational aspect.

"But, you still cannot force the issue on people, you can't. Yes you want to be proud you're gay. . . . At one time I wanted to, but I couldn't. O.K., maybe I gave up too easy, I don't know, but I still knew you had to deal with society. I can't go to my boss and say, 'Hey, [I'm gay],' because it's male ego you're dealing with one. 'Hey, what do you mean? Get that pretty girl, what the hell has she got?' I've had that, I've seen it. Not only for this reason, but just people that are hardheaded, that don't want to know anything but what they live by. There's something wrong with them, they're crazy, they're queers."

Not all fems of this period would agree with Reggie that they preferred the less-obvious butches, but some certainly did. Charlie, for instance, preferred not to associate with women who were extremely masculine and felt, in fact, that her butch lovers would be more pleased with themselves if they looked less extreme and less obvious.

"I don't think I've ever gone out with anybody that's been very butchy, and if they are, I try to change them. . . . I think they're happier with themselves. . . . I think that they see the difference in how they look and they'd say, 'Gee, I look better this way.' That's how I feel. But I've never had a problem with anybody."

Charlie always had relationships with butches, preferring women who were more aggressive than herself, but she set clear limitations on the extent to which they could cultivate a masculine appearance.

Dee, whose role identity was not clearly defined in the sense that in some relationships she took the more masculine role and in others the more feminine, was also opposed to the obvious butch appearance. For long periods of time she did not go to the bars, particularly when her feminine lovers were hesitant about associating publicly with other gays. She was strongly against lesbians drawing attention to themselves.

"Well some of the ones that went to extremes I thought it was rather ridiculous. Again, I always found it repugnant to wear a sign on my forehead. 'Cause to me, we live in a straight society and we should have to conform. We can be gay when we're in our own crowd at a house party, when we're out in public we should sort of not flaunt gaiety. I never went for that idea. Maybe because Heloise drummed it into me so much at the beginning."

She did not like the hostility that "flaunting" elicited.

"I didn't think it was too good, because everybody that looked at them would sneer and scorn and be critical. . . . I at one point went with a gal who was very, very butch, she's never had a dress on in her life. Used to come to work in coveralls, and this was before this day and age, I'm talking '42, '45 with a lunch bucket. And at one point I was pretty enamored of her . . . and I know if we went into a restaurant or a tavern or anything I would sort of cringe the way people would look at us. 'Cause obviously she wasn't, so-called, norm, and was frowned upon."

Her memories of what it was like to be the more feminine partner demonstrate the way butch-fem mannerisms as well as appearance announced lesbianism. When asked what made her more feminine when she went with more masculine women, particularly since she claims to have still done some "masculine" things like repair machines, Dee responds, "And she would sort of carry me on a silver platter, so to speak. Like opening car doors, which I tried to get her out of, 'cause that's in the early 1950s or late 1940s, girls just didn't open car doors for other girls. It used to embarrass me. I said 'Don't do that.' There's a good deal of me that is conventional, even today."

Her objections to the obvious butch-fem image go beyond that of her personal discomfort. Dee did not and does not think it wise for lesbians to approach the straight world in this manner. When asked if there wasn't a positive side to butches asserting or claiming their difference, she replies, "Not necessarily, not if they're being scornful. They could make their way as a lesbian, without, shall I say, shocking the general public. I think there's other ways to attain that end of lesbianism. Such as some of, like GROW now, or Country Friends now, and you have different organizations."<sup>23</sup> She returns to the subject later, of her own accord, recognizing the way the butch-fem image expanded the presence of lesbians at the time, but affirming her position that it was not helpful for improving the situation of lesbians.

"I'm not meaning to ridicule those girls. As you said, they might have had a point in educating the public, but I feel sometimes they did more harm than good. . . . Like the criticism, the sneering glances at those that were separate from the norm. And even today I think you see some of that. I mean lesbianism isn't accepted yet."

Dee remembers that she not only objected to the extreme obviousness of butch roles, but also had questions about roles per se. She disagreed with women, lesbians, identifying completely with masculine or feminine characteristics. "Actually, basically I have never bought the fact of being butch or fem, because I think all of us have some masculine tendencies and all of us have some feminine tendencies, whether it's the boys or the girls, or the men and the women." She had the beginning of a feminist critique of polarized heterosexual gender roles. In



her own life she acted on this view, not always taking the butch role, and in her lasting relationships roles were not particularly important. She is the only narrator of the 1940s who raised these issues. For that group, the primary tension surrounding the butch-fem image was about the way it publicized or announced lesbianism, not the way it imitated heterosexuality, the concern of contemporary lesbians. On the whole 1940s lesbians were not critical of male and female roles; they just didn't want the power to rest solely with men.

These critiques by those who struggled with the butch-fem image vividly convey its impact. The core members of the bar community were the obvious butches and butch-fem couples who could endure stigma and scorn, while announcing the presence of "different" women, of "homos." Their visibility allowed them to build a social life that furthered the growth of a distinct lesbian culture and consciousness. The women who were uncomfortable with the obviousness of roles lived a significant portion of their lives as relatively isolated individuals or couples. They came to the community when they wanted it and needed it in their lives, and certainly appreciated its importance. But, without regularly risking identification as lesbians, they of necessity played a marginal role in community development.

### LIVING THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE IN THE 1950s

In the 1950s the butch-fem image continued to assert lesbianism in an extremely hostile world. Many of the 1940s lesbians mixed with the younger upwardly mobile crowd in the Carousel, who also socialized in bars on the weekend and maintained a firm distinction between social and work life. The pioneer spirit of breaking new ground for a public lesbian social life, however, was not continued by this group, but rather by the tough lesbians (Black and white). If anything, the lesbians of the "elite" 1950s crowd were a little more cautious than those of the 1940s. In most situations, these upwardly mobile 1950s butches wanted to underplay the butch image, and were less wedded to their butch attire than those of the 1940s. Joanna compares Leslie and Renée, her girlfriends from different decades.

"I think Leslie and Renée dressed differently too. Like Leslie dressed very butch, you know, slacks and suits, but Renée wore dresses for different occasions. She had to. . . . But it didn't bother her. She just took all that in her stride. And I thought that was great. . . . [not] that she was any more feminine. She wasn't. She just was from a different generation. . . . She did things differently. Didn't bother her to put on a dress. Leslie would never put on a dress, I don't think if they chloroformed her."

The "elite" crowd was careful about where they announced their lesbianism. Butch women were subject to criticism by other members of their group, sometimes

even by their own fems, if their dress and mannerisms exposed them to the heterosexual world. Whitney speaks of her butch of many years:

"She was a butchy looking woman. . . . I would be embarrassed. We would go downtown and I could be embarrassed when I would see people look at her, but I was also sort of. . . . defiant, maybe to stick out my chin. And I was hurt and I knew she was hurt by some of the women in the community who would, if they saw her with say one of their business associates or whatever, or if they had a business. . . . I was welcome to go there, but she was not."

This woman who was easily identifiable as butch had been central to the 1940s community. The 1950s elite crowd discouraged this degree of obviousness.

It was the tough butches and studs who continued the bold spirit of the butches of the 1940s. Throughout the 1950s, these butches were open about their appearance, aiming to diminish the division between their work and family lives and their lesbian lives. They forcefully defended their right to be different. This trend toward asserting one's lesbianism intensified so that the leaders of the late 1950s and early 1960s were still more "obvious" than their predecessors of the early 1950s.<sup>24</sup>

Tough butches and studs of the period shared a particular attitude toward their clothing that was notably different from that of butches of the 1940s or of the elite 1950s crowd. Butches and studs felt it was important to dress butch as much of the time as possible. This was in part an adaptation to the fact that they went out to bars during the week as well as on weekends. Beyond this, butches had a drive to express their difference, and rebel against the conventional standards of femininity. Before she entered the public community, Sandy had worked at an office job and was required to wear a skirt to work. She remembers, 'I hated it,' and explains how, once she found the bars, she would not do this any more.

"I wasn't in the gay scene, so it didn't matter if someone saw me, 'cause they didn't know me anyhow. And then 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 you couldn't leave the house. It was daylight and the neighbors would see you, so you couldn't go out until it was dark, and then sneak out. 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."

The desire of butches to be seen by their gay friends only when dressed in masculine attire was fostered and reinforced by the community culture. Vic also remembers community pressure as the major reason she quit her white-collar job:



"There were a lot of butches around, if you remember, that the woman took care of them. 'Cause they couldn't work or didn't want to because they looked so butch so the woman supported them. . . . When I worked at the lab, I was living really two lives. I had to go in as a, what would you say, a woman of record. . . . And I had a little makeup on, or whatever. Because I was dealing with people and you had to have a little curl in the front here to look halfway decent. So when I came out, when I came home I was a different person. That's why I resigned. Because I couldn't lead the two lives any more. I'd run into people that I'd see at the bars, and I took more ridicule for that. You had to wear a uniform and all that. I'd go in, I couldn't do it any longer. . . . I went to work every morning for seven years, while I'd have five people sleeping on the floor at my house . . . and I just said the hell with it."

Butches took other extreme measures to appear butch as much of the time as possible. Arlette remembers how studs who lived at home would change their clothes in the car. This allowed them to look the way they wanted when they were out without offending their parents:

*Full of fun from butches*  
 "Yeah, I knew girls would go out, and they would have to change clothes in cars. . . . [This one girl] didn't want her parents to see her in these men's type of clothes; so she would change clothes in the car; or in somebody's house. Then before we could take her back home, she'd have to change clothes again, to get back to the girls stuff, before she could go home."

Black and white tough lesbians had created a culture that valued asserting their difference through appearance. They looked down upon those who wouldn't take such risks, particularly the more upwardly mobile lesbians. By the late 1950s white lesbians had become competitive about butchness and set the standard that to be truly butch, the best butch, you had to look butch all the time.<sup>25</sup>

"The ones that were butch were butch. Now there might have been the butches that were still the sissies, they'd come and order a drink and hide in the bathroom all night, . . . afraid someone would see them. And they couldn't have short hair like us, they couldn't wear clothes—if they didn't want to I mean that's a different story, but most of them wanted to, but they were afraid to. Candy asses you know. And of course, the butches that were butches, like myself, the rest of us that were, we ruled them, because we didn't give a shit. But those candy asses took their girl, 'Shut up,' you know. They had no say so." (Sandy)

Not all tough bar lesbians achieved the ideal of looking butch all the time. Many still modified their appearance as required by work, family, and partners. The respected leaders of the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, did not alter their appearance on very many occasions. They were butch all the time and that was part of their charisma.

As the pressure to look butch all the time increased, the nonconformist character

of butches came to the fore, and led them to defy the rules which they had created. Most narrators of the 1950s remember with glee when the renowned butches would come into the bars dressed in feminine attire. Bert remembers going out all dressed up just to cause a stir:

"Talking about the butch and the fem era, I remember one time when I went with Barbara, to blow other people's minds, every once in a while on a Friday or Saturday night we'd dress up, in heels and the whole bit. . . . At first they were probably surprised and shocked, but after a while didn't seem to make any big deal about it. It probably underlying was a way of getting attention, to be noticed."

Iris remembers dressing up for diversion, but also as a way to assert her independence.

"I used to have silver blonde hair and get dressed up. I used to run around with one of the gay boys and, on Saturday nights, just to get away from all the monotony of it all, we used to go to Cole's, Foster[s] Supper Club, the Stuyvesant, Victor Hugo's. We'd just go around and have a drink or two in each place, you know, for a change of atmosphere and that, and then we'd go down to the gay bars. . . . Right, but it was fun and I enjoyed it. Of course there was a lot of remarks, but I didn't care. I mean I just don't let people bother me because I just always felt, hey, they're not paying my bills and keeping me. When they do, then they can tell me how I live my life. . . . Yeah, I guess it was radical, but I enjoyed it. I really just never cared, I did whatever I wanted."

She remembers that in the late 1950s, some of the real "butchy butches," including herself, would plan to go out for an evening wearing slinky dresses, high heels, stockings, makeup, and jewelry. Iris still delights in recalling how they would present themselves at the bar for an evening of drinking, dancing—often with each other—and high hilarity.

"Every once in a great while, we'd all get dressed up in dresses and go down to the Carousel. Just for something different. And we'd sit around in our dresses and talk and laugh and get up and dance with each other. Some of the people would really be confused by this time, but we had a good time."

Marla remembers being shocked by the "turnaround" and enjoying it immensely.

"All the girls that were supposed to be big bad butches, right, turned out for some reason—was it one Thursday a month or once a week or something? They all would get dressed up, and I mean heels, dress, and everything else, and come down to the Carousel just for kicks. And you should see, some of those girls turned out to be some beautiful women really, when they got dressed up."

Sandy now remembers with incredulity dressing up for these occasions, because it was so contradictory to her identity: "I had [a dress], mine had the slits up the side. Looked like it was sort of leopard print. Trying to walk in high heels, you've got to be kidding!" Such masquerading, however, did not question the masculine identity of butches, but instead reinforced its "rightness." The fun and humor came from the attention caused by known butches taking on a feminine appearance. Other gay and lesbian patrons treated them as if they were in drag.

The importance of clothing and appearance in establishing social identity was not unique to lesbians. Assumptions about the correlation between dress and behavior pervaded 1950s culture.<sup>26</sup> A good deal of the objection to juvenile delinquency focused on appearance.<sup>27</sup> In 1955, the Buffalo Public School System developed the Dress Right program, which established strict standards for what young people could wear to school, based on the philosophy that the schools could change students' attitude toward authority by changing their presentation of self. By 1957, the program had achieved national attention, suggesting that the approach was perceived as relevant throughout the country. It was presented at national conferences of educators and discussed in the national media, on the *Good Morning America* show, in Chicago and New York newspapers, and in *Newsweek*.<sup>28</sup>

The increasingly masculine appearance of the tough butches and studs made their appearance fundamentally ambiguous. On the one hand, their clothes could serve as a cover, and allowed them in limited situations to pass as men. Alone on the streets, when butches did not have the protection of their group of friends, they sometimes exploited the possibility of looking like men on the surface, in order to draw less attention to themselves. Stormy reminisces about why some women would tape their chests to achieve a flat appearance: "It was easier to walk down the street if at first glance people thought you were a man." At another point in her interview, she states, "It was the local core butches who usually looked more butch. Sometimes it was a matter of what neighborhood you came from. You might feel safer if you went out dressed more like a guy so people wouldn't hassle you late at night."

On the other hand, their clothes also dramatically exposed them as "queer." Although butches cultivated a "male" cover, they did not rely on it, other than for moving through difficult situations. The ambiguous possibilities of looking male/looking queer were ever-present and appear in most butch narrators' memories: "Well I was always a tomboy, so I more or less just fit right in with them. You know, had the short hair, the D.A.'s. . . . We looked like little boys, like walking around with a sign on your back" (Iris).

Narrators emphasize that the 1950s dress code for women was very strict, so that aberrations were easily noticed:

"Well today the trend of clothes is unisex, what a guy can wear a girl can wear in mostly anything now. It's not as bad as it was then. Now today the kids run around in Levis and shirts and all this and nobody thinks anything of it. Back then they would have said, 'Ha, ha, queer.' Today nobody thinks

anything of it. You look out this window you see all these kids, and they got boys' pants' on, boys' Levis, and nobody thinks anything of it anymore. Back in those days, boy they fingered you right out." (Matty)

Toni, when trying to describe how different the 1950s were from today, emphasizes how much lesbians stood out because of their clothing:

"People looked at me a lot . . . either they weren't sure if I was male or female or I looked like a lesbian to them. And then there were dress codes. . . . And most women wore skirts and dresses, more female clothing. . . . And so maybe the fact that more women wore feminine clothing then, there weren't the hippies yet and there weren't the students with the long hair. People were more conservative then, and most people either looked like a man or a woman or male or female. And I looked either like a woman in men's clothes or they didn't know what the hell I was."

As in the 1940s, it was primarily the butch image that indicated difference. Even their fems, the women who chose them as lovers, were not always comfortable with the obviousness of these tough butches. Their insistence on appearing butch as much of the time as possible was a recurrent source of tension in relationships. Annie, who always went with women whose appearance was particularly masculine, felt that such obviousness made life harder. In her criticism of butch appearance she singles out the T-shirt as symbolizing the problem.

"Well, because all they had to do was write the name queer across their T-shirts. They didn't even have to do that you know. But it's just they were dressed in drag, so butchy looking and they weren't accepted then. In fact a lot of times I would tell Sandy, 'You walk behind me.' [Because] if I didn't want someone to know, you had to keep it more to yourself."

She adds that although she was never harassed on the streets when she was alone, "because I really didn't look queer," she was harassed when she was with her butch.

"Well not that I looked queer but the person I was with looked queer. And I mean they used to go and get the really D.A. haircuts that looked like a guy's. And Sandy and I, we have a very close attraction to one another. And it's a good thing that I didn't meet her when I was sixteen or that, and then take her home and say, 'Ma, would you like to meet my lover?'"

Arlette, who also preferred masculine women, nevertheless feels that they often went too far: "I never cared too much for that hard man's clothes. I don't like that to this day. I never have liked that, cause I don't think you have to dress that way; to me it's advertising. And you don't have to advertise to be gay." She later clarifies that it is not the men's clothes that bother her but the insistence on wearing them all the time, rather than when appropriate for gay affairs. She recalls how she used to try to convince her butch not to wear men's clothes when she went to a club in Manhattan where Arlette worked.

"But I always tried to get her then to put on something different if you want to come in those places. 'Cause to me you're asking for trouble. 'Cause a lot of people are really sick in the head, really think, oh here come one of those—some people really get violent and want to hurt you. 'Cause some people are really that messed up in their mind."

Public reaction to the butch and the butch-fem couple was usually hostile, and often violent. Being noticed on the streets and the harassment that followed dominates the memories of both Black and white narrators. Ronni gives a typical description:

"Oh, you were looked down upon socially. When I walked down the street, cars used to pull over and say, 'Hey faggot, hey lezzie.' They called you names with such maliciousness. And they hated to see you when you were with a girl. I was the one that was mostly picked on because I was identified. I was playing the male part in this relationship and most guys hated it. Women would look at me in kind of a confused looking [way], you know, straight women would look at me in kind of wonder."

Piri remembers how the police used to harass her for dressing like a man:

"I've had the police walk up to me and say, 'Get out of the car'. I'm drivin.' They say get out of the car, and I get out. And they say, 'What kind of shoes you got on? You got on men's shoes?' And I say, 'No, I got on women's shoes.' I got on some basket-weave women's shoes. And he say, 'Well you damn lucky.' 'Cause everything else I had on were men's—shirts, pants. At that time when they pick you up, if you didn't have two garments that belong to a woman you could go to jail . . . and the same thing with a man . . . They call it male impersonation or female impersonation and they'd take you downtown. It would really just be an inconvenience. . . . It would give them the opportunity to whack the shit out of you."

Many narrators mention the legal specification for proper dress, although some said it required three pieces of female clothing, not two. If such a law did in fact exist, it did not dramatically affect the appearance of butches, who were clever at getting around it while maintaining their masculine image.<sup>29</sup> The police used such regulations to harass Black lesbians more than whites, however.

Given the severe harassment, the butch role in these communities during the 1950s became identified with defending oneself and one's girl in the rough street bars and on the streets. Matty describes the connection between her appearance and her need to be an effective fighter. The cultivated masculine mannerisms were necessary on the street:

"When I first came out in the bars it was a horror story. You know they say that you play roles. Yeah, back then you did play roles, and I was a bit more masculine back then than I am now. That was only because you walk down the street and they knew you were gay and you'd be minding your business and there'd be two or three guys standing on a street corner, and they'd come

up to you and say, 'You want to be a man, let's see if you can fight like a man.' Now being a man was the last thing on my mind, but man, they'd take a poke at you and you had to learn to fight. Then . . . when you go out, you better wear clothes that you could really scramble in if you had to. And it got to be really bad, I actually had walked down the street with some friends not doing anything and had people spit at me, or spit at us, it was really bad."

Toni explains how there was no choice but to defend oneself:

"I think that's the only way we could act then. We just didn't have any ground except what we fought for. Especially like Iris and Sandy for instance, on the street people just stared at them. I would see people's reactions, I would see them to me if I was alone too, but I would see reactions when I was with my friends, and the only safe place was in a gay bar, or in your own, if you had your own apartment. Out on the street you were fair game."

If the world was dangerous for butches, it was equally so for the fems in their company, whom the butches felt they needed to protect. Some butches state that they did most of their fighting for their fems. Sandy describes how confrontational men could be.

"Well you had to be strong—roll with the punches. If some guy whacked you off, said, 'Hey babe,' you know.<sup>30</sup> Most of the time you got all your punches for the fem anyhow, you know. It was because they hated you. . . . 'How come this queer can have you and I can do this and that. . . .' You didn't hardly have time to say anything, but all she would have to say [is] 'No,' when he said, 'Let's go, I'll get you away from this.' He was so rejected by this 'no' that he would boom, go to you. You would naturally get up and fight the guy, at least I would. And we all did at that time, those that were out in their pants and T-shirts. And we'd knock them on their ass, and if one couldn't do it we'd all help. And that's how we kept our women. They cared for us, but you don't think for a minute they would have stayed with us too long or something if we stood there and just were silent. . . . Nine times out of ten she'd be with you to help you with your black eye and your split lip. Or you kicked his ass and she bought you dinner then. But you never failed, or you tried not to. . . . You were there, you were gay, you were queer and you were masculine."

The aggressive butch role was the most developed in the leaders of the late 1950s. They expressed their ability to defend themselves and their friends in the most macho terms. "It was strictly, you go in the bar and whoever was the baddest butch then that survived and if you didn't you got your face broke and that was it. So you had to be there" (Vic). Sandy emphasizes how she would do anything to prove herself:

"Yeah, I was trying to prove and show that I was tough, I could take it. . . . It really came down to . . . 'If you're gonna be here, then be what you are or I'll knock the shit out of you. You think you're tough, let's see how tough you

are, I'll show you how tough.' Well that's what you had to be. I would kill in those days, I would kill."

Piri describes her reputation as so bad that she didn't even recognize herself:

"I've had like confrontations with people and we wind up arguing and there might not even be a fight, and again it might be. I didn't have too many people bother me. Like at one time I had a reputation that's so bad, I used to go home and cry about it. It was like, 'Hey, that's Piri, don't fool around with her. She's got some prostitutes and what not, and she'll cut you up.' And I wasn't like that. And I used to hear it all the time. And I used to get really upset and cry about it a lot. I just sit around and say, 'Well, I know I'm not that rough, I'm not that tough; I'm just defending what I want to do, what I want to be.' Like I don't want nobody up in my face, like talking a lot of bunk to me. They nag. Then I get into it. Other than that, if you leave me alone, I don't bother nobody. I used to just sit and wonder, why is my name floating around like this. Piri this, Piri that. But like I said after a while you get used to it."

Annie concurs that these leaders were strong and effective fighters, a match for any man: "You went like into a straight bar, especially with the butches, and they had strength, they was no one to mess with. Some guy would start a fight with them, or call them, 'queer' or 'lezzie' or whatever, then . . . too bad for the guy. He'd better be strong."

As macho as the tough butch and stud leaders were as fighters, they were always aware that they were not men. Ironically, if they had been men they would not have had to be such expert fighters because they would not have been under attack. In tough situations, they thought strategically and used all their resources including their femaleness. In a confrontation with the police, if they thought it would help them, they would bring up that they were women. They regularly appeared in the court as women in order to play on the judges' prejudices about women's capabilities and receive a lenient judgment.

"I didn't have any [court clothes]. I borrowed them. . . . That was the 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.'" (Sandy)

In their interactions with men in the bars, butches did and did not want to be treated as men. Although they expected men to respect their physical prowess they did not want men to include them as part of their degrading conversations about women. Vic summarizes her philosophy on this subject:

"As butch as I am, I demand respect from men, straight men. You know, not to opening doors and giving me their bar stool. But there is a definite limit drawn to what they can say to me. Even though they talk to me as a butch or a man, however they relate to me, they will not talk to me the way they talk to their locker-room buddies or something, I don't want to hear that. Can't talk and sit around, 'Well how are you doing with your old lady?' and this and that. They would never talk to me like that. I wouldn't allow it for a minute . . . but I demand that little bit of respect. I am a woman, and you're gonna treat me like one regardless of how I am dressed. Don't treat me like I'm a butch queer, 'cause I won't allow it. Then you're gonna have to hit me or I'm gonna hit you. Because I get very physical along those lines with [guys]. I'll have to go down, you know, if its over my woman or over myself.<sup>31</sup> Or you, whoever I would be with, 'cause I can't allow that."

The pressure on butches and studs not to deny their difference and to defend themselves generated an extraordinarily complex and confusing relationship to maleness, which is vividly expressed in Sandy's statement quoted above: "You were there, you were gay, you were queer and you were masculine. Men hated it." These 1950s butches, particularly the leaders, were extremely masculine, and often thought of social dynamics in terms of male and female roles and relationships. At the same time, they were not men, they were "queer." Throughout their life stories they counterpose acquiring masculine characteristics with not being male. The prominence of masculinity in their vision of themselves and in their understanding of the world is perhaps responsible for the contemporary confusion between these butches and passing women, and the assumption that these women must have been trying to be men. But to recognize their masculinity and not their queerness distorts their culture and consciousness and negates their role in building lesbian community.

Judy Grahn helpfully and creatively handles the complexity of the butch role by positing that butches are magical, ceremonial figures who develop their personae by patterning themselves after other butches, rather than by imitating men. We do not agree with Grahn that the butch role has existed and had the same meaning throughout Western history. But her argument does aptly capture the way that twentieth-century butches as announcers, protectors, and inspirers of community transcend the mundane and take on mythical proportions. This view does not exclude or belittle the fem, but enhances her as butch and fem associate together in the same life.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE BUTCH-FEM IMAGE AS A PREPOLITICAL FORM OF RESISTANCE

The butch and butch-fem image, as projected in this community, contained three explicit elements of resistance. First, butches, and the butch-fem couple, by

"not denying" their interest in women, were at the core of lesbian resistance in the 1940s and 1950s. By claiming their difference butch and fem became visible to one another, establishing their own culture and therefore became a recognizable presence in a hostile world. Second, in the 1950s the butch, who was central to the community's increased boldness, had little inclination to accommodate the conventions of femininity, and pushed to diminish the time spent hiding in order to eliminate the division between public and private selves. Third, butches added a new element of resistance: the willingness to stand up for and defend with physical force their fems' and their own right to express sexual love for women.

This culture of resistance was based in and in turn generated a great deal of pride. Narrators are fully aware of how powerful their visibility was, challenging gay oppression and thereby creating a better world for lesbians today. Joanna, who was active in the community of the 1940s, sees the harassment endured in the past as freeing her from the responsibility to be active in gay liberation now:

"I didn't want to get involved that much [in the gay movement]. To me, it wasn't worth it because I figured, let some of the kids that are just coming out, they have to learn. We paved the way for them don't forget. We were the ones that took all the slurs and insults and everything, in bars and this kind of thing. And I thought, well, there's a lot of young kids coming out, with a heck of a lot more knowledge than I had when I was a kid. And had broader shoulders, you know, they could accept a lot more."

Butch narrators of the 1950s are particularly proud of their ability to assert and defend who they were. The theme of making history, of making the world a better place for lesbians by being out, being visible and being willing to fight is explicit throughout the life story of Matty who came out in the early 1950s.

"I'm not the type that will put a sign around my neck as I said earlier and parade around and say, 'Hey, my name's Matty and I'm gay.' But I won't deny it, and if I have to proclaim it in some way to make it easier for the gay people who are going to come along I'll gladly do it. Because my life's half gone, maybe more than half, who knows, and I think I've made it a lot easier, just as some other people that I could name, Vic, Sandy, Stormy, you yourself. In years to come I believe that we're going to be talked about and we're going to be legends, just like Columbus is. I'm serious."

The women she singles out, except for the interviewer, are the aggressive masculine butches of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although these women are not as eloquent about their roles in shaping a better world for lesbians, their stories reflect similar understandings of having made significant contributions to gay history. Vic recalls:

"Well Marty used to call me a crusader. 'Get off the street and stop crusading.' You don't know the time I've put in behind lesbians, defending and pushing and putting it in people's face, you don't know. You know how straight people

were about it, you'd get bopped. 'Cause I run it to them almost the same way that you're running it to me now. . . . I'm more of a crusader than you'll ever be, because I'm right there where it counts. . . . That's why my nose is crooked, 'cause I've never tried to hide what I am."

Sandy, however, conveys a lack of clarity about what she was doing at the time. On the one hand she says of the fights, "It started there. Rebellion right there." On the other hand, when asked explicitly about the goals of the rebellion, she doesn't recall having a vision of a better world for lesbians; she didn't believe such change was possible. "No, I just figured well this is the way it is and if I want to be this way just roll with the punches." Although she lacked a consistent social vision, she nevertheless had the dignity and conviction to stand up for who she was, which is the essence of tough lesbians' resistance in the 1950s.

Whether or not these butches and butch-fem couples consciously understood in the 1940s and 1950s that their appearance and actions would have the effect of making the world a better place for lesbians in the future is a moot question. The importance of these statements is not that they indicate the "true" consciousness of the past, but rather that they direct outsiders to the culture of resistance in these bar communities. For no matter how narrators chose to interpret their past actions, by any criteria, participants in these communities affirmed their right to be who they were against tremendous odds.

The developments in 1950s lesbian culture moved with accelerating force toward ending secrecy. In the context of severe repression, the forms of resistance became a dead end. By the late 1950s, the butches' constant confrontation with the straight world, and the unmitigated disapproval it generated, led to extreme stigmatization and, therefore, isolation. Narrators' sentiments of pride were commonly accompanied by equally powerful feelings of self-hate. This is especially true of the leaders of the late 1950s.<sup>33</sup> Vic remembers her embarrassment during a summer picnic in her backyard during the 1960s:

"Now Dana comes in, she's got tattoos runnin' up and down her arms, and size eighty-four boobs, and Jamestown Gerry and then my landlord comes out. Should I be embarrassed at my friends? I was. I say, 'Never again will that happen.' Y'know I've been embarrassed at myself, many times, but if I have to be embarrassed at the people that are around me . . . and I was. . . . And my landlord goin' . . . he's checkin' arms, he's checkin' tits, then he's lookin' at flies, he don't know what to make of the God damn [whole thing]. This is never gonna make it then."

The pain and degradation has stayed with her and is perhaps even heightened by the lack of appreciation for who she was and is in today's lesbian community. "Like people say to me, 'I could be a butch, I could do this. I could do that.' Anybody could be, y'know, for a weekend or a week. But go through life . . . dressing the way I dress, being with women who are [fem, and] men pick on you

*Quiba massed at myself*



because you are with them. This is a different story." At another point in her story she explains:

"Well, it's like I have to low-grade myself, don't have to but I do, because of what I am. . . . Well because it's been in my head. You have never had your face broke for being a queer, I have. For like twenty years of my life. And now, because you can go to a gay dance or something I'm supposed to say, 'Oh wow, now I can go there.' . . . But I can't even go there and do that cause I'm a butch and they don't want me either. Where do I go, I don't have where to go? I had to stay right where I'm at."

Sandy, whose leadership was undisputed in this period still carries great bitterness with her as the legacy of this struggle to build a lesbian life.

"You know it pisses you off, because like today, everything is so open and accepted and equal. Women, everyone goes to where they wear slacks, and I could just kick myself in the ass, because all the opportunities I had that I had to let go because of my way. That if I was able to dress the way I wanted and everything like that I, Christ, I'd have it made, really. Makes you sick. And you look at the young people today that are gay and they're financially well-off, they got tremendous jobs, something that we couldn't take advantage of, couldn't have it. It leaves you with a lot of bitterness too. I don't go around to the gay bars much any more. It's not jealousy, it's bitterness. And I see these young people, doesn't matter which way they go, whatever the mood suits them, got tremendous jobs, and you just look at them, you know, they're happy kids, no problems. You say 'God damn it, why couldn't I have that?' And you actually get bitter, you don't even want to know them. I don't anyway. 'Cause I don't want to hear about it, don't tell me about your success. Like we were talking about archives, you know where mine is, scratched on a shit-house wall, that's where it is. And all the dives in Buffalo that are still standing with my name. That's it, that's all I got to show."

The complex culture of resistance in the public lesbian communities of the 1950s and early 1960s provided a heritage from which gay liberation could draw. Although in its youth gay liberation did not have a sense of the past, and therefore did not consciously draw on what had existed before, its ideas were likely influenced by the bar communities. In turn the bar communities provided an environment conducive to igniting a mass movement. And in cities such as Buffalo, members of the bar community formed political organizations at about the same time as the Stonewall Rebellion that became active in the gay liberation movement. In fact visibility, standing up for one's rights, and ending the double life were core issues for both the tough lesbians and gay liberation, though they approached them differently.<sup>34</sup> The prepolitical tactics of the tough lesbians were immediate, spontaneous, and personal. They lacked gay liberation's long-term analysis of and strategy for ending the oppression of gays and lesbians in America and changing the world.

The similarities and differences between the politics of these overtly butch-fem

communities and that of gay liberation can be seen in the somewhat ambivalent relationship the Black and white tough lesbians had to the founding of the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier (M.S.N.F.) in which many of them participated. Many narrators felt that M.S.N.F. did not have much new to offer them because they had already achieved visibility and had asserted the right to be themselves. Matty joined M.S.N.F., at first thinking it was a good idea, and then withdrew. She remembers going to a picnic at Madeline's house and being offended by a member of Mattachine's comments about people who thought they were too good for Mattachine.

"It isn't that we think that we're too good, you have nothing to offer us.' And so she [a Mattachine member] said, 'What do you mean we have nothing to offer?' I said, 'Well, you tell me what you really want and what you're really fighting for, and if you're fighting for something that I don't already have I'll gladly pay another year's dues and get in.' She said, 'We're fighting to be able to work where you want to.' I said, 'I work where I want to.' She said, 'To be able to live where you want to without harassment.' I said, 'I live where I want to without harassment.' You know, 'To be able to have your neighbors know what you are and not have them,' . . . I said, 'My neighbors know what I am.'"

Jodi expresses similar feelings about how little Mattachine had to offer.

"In terms of how I've lived my life it [gay liberation] really did nothing actually, it's almost zip for me because I was never in the closet. And wherever I went I looked like this and every job I ever got I went like this, and I went to school like this. I got my present job looking like this. I go to work now looking like this, I mean there's some compromises I will not make, no matter what."

Gay liberation took the offensive, so that image was no longer the sole expression of lesbianism. Speech became paramount; visibility became more than the individual person's presentation of self. Gay liberation pursued publicity about gays on TV and in newspapers and organized demonstrations and marches. These new elements of visibility made some narrators uncomfortable. Even though they were used to being known for who they were, they were hesitant about broader publicity. They didn't feel the necessity of pushing beyond individual politics to TV appearances or marches. As a result, many narrators had mixed feelings about the tactics of M.S.N.F., as was the case of Matty who withdrew from the organization.

"The only thing I could see is every time I picked up the paper they were in trouble. At that time I don't know if they were all affiliated with the Mattachine, but they were all gung ho on the 'let's put on a sign I'm a lesbian and if you don't like it you can just,' you know, 'take it wherever you want to and march down the street.' To me that wasn't getting the right thing. It isn't that I wasn't interested in what they were trying to do because I was very interested in what they were trying to do."



A key element in the new forms of visibility was the explicit discussion of lesbianism with the heterosexual world, including the appropriation and transformation of derogatory words like "dyke" and "queer." Narrators of the 1950s asserted their lesbianism through appearance alone. Although they had words to describe their distinct identity, they did not usually talk about who they were to the heterosexual world, especially to the media. The topics of lesbianism and homosexuality, and the words themselves, did not become part of common conversations until gay liberation. "I get along with people and with neighbors. I don't hide what I am but I don't walk around with a sign on my back. Everybody knows that sign, if they don't know, it doesn't bother me one way or the other. My whole family knows and all our neighbors, mostly everyone knows" (Matty). Bert explains that hostility and oppression kept them from telling people. "I had never heard the terms [coming out, closets]. No, no. You didn't go around telling people that you preferred women instead of men, 'cause you were afraid of the oppression, how you'd become ostracized."

Narrators disagree about whether the expression "coming out" was used in Buffalo before gay liberation. However, those who remember using it indicate that its meaning was significantly different from today. Today it means telling others that you are lesbian or gay, then it meant having a first sexual relationship with a woman, or recognizing in oneself the desire for such a relationship. The narrators who are sure that they did not use "coming out" focus on the contemporary political meaning.<sup>35</sup> Several narrators agree with Bert's view, that although being seen by straights at the Carousel was like coming out, she never thought of it that way. "I guess it's sort of like coming out, in a way you're coming out to the people that came in [to the Carousel]. And we didn't even know about coming out. We didn't even know about closets in those days. That we felt more comfortable, you know, one more person knew you and accepted you." In her mind, coming out is about consciously and explicitly sharing one's lesbianism with the heterosexual world. It is a political process in which she did not engage until the 1970s.

"My real coming out probably in my life was [out West] after the civil-rights rally. I was going to . . . [a] community college, and I became aware that I had gotten caught up in a life of where I associated with nothing but gay people. So of course I was comfortable with my gayness. And in sociology class one day, we were broken up into groups to work on a project, and somehow one of the gay bars . . . came up, and the people were talking very freely. They didn't say 'queer' though, you don't hear people using that word so much any more. And I all of a sudden realized that I was a minority and that they didn't think I was gay. So that human-rights rally made me so angry that I went back to all my classes and said [I was]. And nobody even reacted. I was totally shocked."

Another key difference between the prepolitical forms of resistance and the politics of gay liberation was that gay liberation worked through organizations to accomplish social change. Although many narrators from the 1940s and 1950s

became members of Mattachine, none of the bar-culture leaders became political leaders. Gay liberation captured the imagination of those who entered the community in the late 1950s at a young age. Ten years later, they went on to give their best energy to gay politics.

"I was involved first in the gay movement in '71. I guess I started with the Mattachine Society here in Buffalo. Being involved in gay liberation gave me some positive feelings about being gay, working with other gay people, not being just confined to the bars. We were doing something; we were trying to make some changes in the world, some changes in our immediate environment. We were all working together. It gave us a sense of ourselves as having some power of togetherness. And it wasn't centered around alcohol and partying. And we did, we did bring about some small changes in our very immediate environment, because of the work that we did." (Toni)

In distinguishing the prepolitical forms of butch-fem culture from the politics of gay liberation, we do not mean to create an absolute division. In the 1950s bar culture there were many indications of different approaches to resistance, but the times did not allow them to coalesce into politics. Bert, for instance, who had decided she was going to relocate to Florida, was arrested during a raid on a bar in 1960, six months after her arrival. She wanted to fight the case but could not interest a lawyer: "And I remember getting out, and I went to a lawyer . . . my civil rights were imposed upon, and he said, 'Who do you think you're kidding?' He wouldn't even touch it. Which nowadays somebody would have."

During this same time period, the cultural push to be identified as lesbians—or at least different—all the time was so powerful that it generated a new form of identification among the tough bar lesbians: a star tattoo on the top of the wrist, which was usually covered by a watch. This was the first symbol of community identity that did not rely on butch-fem imagery. We can trace this phenomenon back to an evening of revelry in the late 1950's, when a few butches trooped over to "Dirty Dick's" tattoo parlor on Chippewa Street and had the tiny blue five-pointed star put on their wrists. Later, some of the fems of this group also got their stars. Bert thinks it was worn as a sign of defiance. Others claim they just got the idea one night and did it. The community views the tattoo as a definite mark of identification. Bert, who did not get the tattoo, experienced it as a dare: "And they tried to get me to do it but I wouldn't do it, and the main thing that I can think of that held me back was because of the job that I had at the time. There was the pressure, worried about them finding out why." She adds that one of her friends had told her: "The Buffalo police knew [that] the people that had the stars on their wrists were lesbians, and they had their names and so forth. That it was an identity type thing with the gay community, with the lesbian community."

The fact that the star tattoo was created by those who were firmly into roles,

in fact, by the group that was considered the butchy butches and their fems, suggests that the force to assert lesbian identity was strong enough to break through the existing traditions of boldness based in butch-fem roles. The stars presage the methods of identity created by gay liberation. In fact, the mark has become something of a tradition in local circles and has seen a revival since the 1970s.

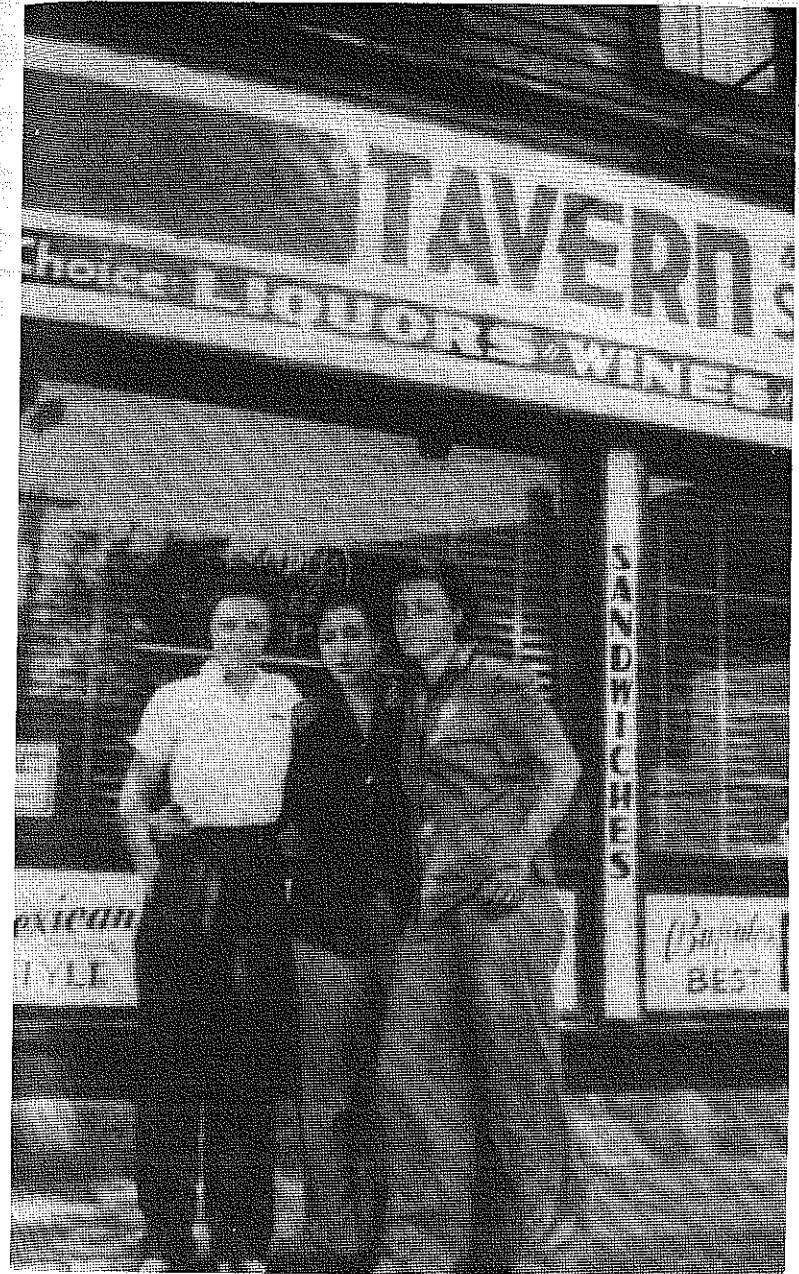
In contrast to the familiarity most narrators felt with the ideas of gay liberation, they thought that feminism offered something new and important. Some were particularly excited by it like Jodi who felt it opened up new ways for her to be in the world and realize her goals.

“Well it made me aware that I didn’t have to do or be some ways to live my life how I choose to live my life, as far as being a lesbian. . . . I mostly changed how I dressed. Some people still think I’m a boy, what can I say? And I changed some attitudes, but I’m still who I am mostly. But those changes were positive changes, and hopefully I’ll always be able to change. I’ll always be flexible so that good things, I’ll be able to incorporate in my life, and change so that I make many more of what I’d like to be.”

Ironically although lesbian feminists judged these traditional, role-defined butches and fems as an anathema to feminism, many butches, from years of claiming male privilege, and many butches and fems, from building their lives without men, were actively poised and ready to learn about feminism.

The butch-fem image both symbolized and advanced the assertion of lesbian distinctness during the 1940s and 1950s. Central to the major issues facing lesbian community—to be able to safely congregate with friends and find a romantic and sexual partner—it pervaded the entire culture. By definition this culture was never simply an imitation of heterosexuality, for butches did not completely adopt a male persona, and fems were aware that they were not with men. Rather, butch-fem culture indicated that lesbians existed, that women could live without men, that women might usurp the privileges of men, and also that women had sex with one another. In this sense, butch-fem roles were the primary prepolitical institution of resistance against oppression. This aspect of roles gave them their power and their ability to endure.

Members of the 1940s and 1950s butch-fem community struggled to determine the degree of “obviousness” appropriate and necessary for lesbian life, a debate that still continues in contemporary gay and lesbian politics. Is it better for lesbians to mute their difference and attempt to assimilate or should lesbians blatantly affirm their difference from heterosexuality? Because these butches and fems came down on the side of asserting difference, despite the consequences, they were instrumental in the development of a distinct lesbian consciousness and identity, one that profoundly influenced the development of gay liberation.



1. Friends at Eddie's, late 1930s