

Queer Time, Affective Binds: An Erotohistoriography of Butch/Femme

by

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## Table Of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	2
<i>Introduction</i> .....	4
<i>Chapter 1: Querying Time: Rethinking History</i> .....	12
<i>Chapter 2: Past in the Present: Feeling Identifications Across Time</i> .....	36
<i>Chapter 3: Politics of Butch/Femme: Refiguring Sameness and Difference</i> .....	67
<i>Epilogue: It Gets Better</i> .....	88
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	93

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1950s Butch/Femme Lesbians: My present has gained meaning through your touch.

“What is the story I will not tell? The story I do not tell is the only one that is a lie. It is the story of the life I do not lead, without complication, mystery, courage, or the transfiguration of the flesh. Yes, somewhere inside me there is a child always eleven years old, a girlchild who holds the world responsible for all the things that terrify and call to me. But inside me too is the teenager who armed herself and fought back, the dyke who did what she had to, the woman who learned to love without giving in to fear. The stories other people would tell about my life, my mother’s life, my sisters’, uncles’, cousins’, and lost girlfriends’—those are the stories that could destroy me, erase me, mock and deny me. I tell my stories louder all the time: mean and ugly stories; funny, almost bitter stories; passionate, desperate stories—all of them have to be told in order not to tell the one the world wants, the story of us broken, the story of us never laughing out loud, never learning to enjoy sex, never being able to love or trust love again, the story in which all that survives is the flesh. That is not my story. I tell all the others so as not to have to tell that one” – Dorothy Allison

## Introduction

I remember as a young child sitting cross-legged on the prickly oriental rug in my grandmother's living room with a musty-smelling photo album in my lap. The textured black pages were filled with photographs of family I had never known, with white inscriptions inked underneath. The black and white photographs captured unexceptional people's everyday lives. I felt a connection with them, though even then, I recognized the distance between their noticeably average lives and my own. I didn't know them and I would never know them, except through the inscriptions penned by my long deceased relative, and the content of my grandmother's associated memories. I always held a secret desire to somehow mark their lives like they had marked mine. This feeling of connection with the past remained an undercurrent in my life until it surfaced in my junior year of college when I first came across 1950s butch/femme<sup>1</sup> lesbians. My initial relationship with these women was one of respect. I was deeply fascinated by their lives and their ability to survive a time of such violence and blatant heterosexism. From the very beginning I felt their backward pull; it only intensified with time.

For a long time I was confused about why I felt so intimately connected to 1950s butch/femme lesbians. I identified with them even though our lives and historical context seemed so different, especially different because I didn't identify as either butch or femme. My lesbian present felt very removed from their lesbian past. Intrigued by these feelings of connection, and believing that my present was informed by their past, I embarked on writing a thesis constructing a history of lesbianism. As I

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling of femme varies (sometimes it is spelled "fem"). I will adopt the spelling of the author I am referencing.

read more material, I found myself becoming increasingly invested in the representation of butch/femme lesbians. My relationship had evolved from one of respect to one of intense identification and love. I had no words or concepts to explain this connection and I didn't think any existed. It was this identification with the past, once finally vocalized, that completely queered my straight thesis.

My initial thesis proposal indicated my desire to construct a history of American lesbianism from the 1930s to the present. After conversing with several professors and research librarians I came to understand that this was too large of a topic. I narrowed my scope to a survey of lesbianism from the 1950s-1970s. I planned to examine the lesbian community's shifting perception of eroticized gender difference as it manifested itself through butch/femme. I researched this topic for almost three months before I had a life-changing and certainly thesis-changing conversation with my thesis advisor, Margot Weiss. In one of our weekly meetings she asked me a question, which I was unprepared to answer: "Why do you care about this topic?" I struggled to come up with an explanation for my interest in the eroticization of gender difference. Perhaps this was because I wasn't actually all that interested in it. I was unable to find words to express my interest and investment in butch/femme history. None of the things I had to say felt academic or intellectual enough. I was reluctant to share my thoughts because I didn't think my reasons for caring about this material were good enough, smart enough, or thesis-worthy. I hesitated to answer for quite a while until I couldn't bear the awkward silence of my advisor waiting for me to answer. For ten minutes I rambled to her about my affective connection with butch/femme lesbians: how I felt invested in their lives and how their

lives were represented, even though I didn't know them; how I had come to love them, and how I wanted to be one of them. I was worried I sounded crazy; I explained that I didn't know why I felt this way, or what it all meant. As I spoke I noticed that I kept using the word "feeling," which struck me as odd as I had always thought of academia as devoid of feeling. In fact, I felt that my investment in the project wasn't intellectual enough *because* it was so connected to my feelings. The anxious person that I am, I was worried that Margot Weiss would be thoroughly unimpressed with my stake in the project and regret taking me on as an advisee.

She let me talk without commenting, until she stopped me and recommended a book for me to read. I was supposed to read the introduction and if I liked it, continue on to the first chapter. The book was Heather Love's (2007) *Feeling Backward*. I checked it out of the library and read. It talked all about backwardness, the problematic desire to rescue people from the past, ways of connecting with the past, identification with people of the past, the need for negative affect in histories, the importance of shame, and the persistence of the past in the present. I remember reading the first chapter and being shocked at how well it addressed my questions about connecting with the past. This book ended up completely changing the topic of my thesis, transformed my hatred (or fear) of queer theory into love, and gave me the tools to tackle questions that had haunted me for years about my relationship with the past. This thesis is a result of that intervention.

## Butch/Femme Archive

What is butch/femme? Butch/femme has sometimes been represented as a lesbian aesthetic: butches are masculinized, short-haired lesbians dressed in boots, a pair of jeans, and a T-shirt, while femmes are feminized lesbians with long hair, heels, a skirt, and a low-cut top. Yet butch/femme is far more than a simple style of dress. Instead, the dynamics of lesbian gender known as butch/femme have been a topic of constant debate within queer and lesbian circles, yet these discussions have not yielded any sort of consensus. It has been described: as an “imitation of heterosexuality”(Faderman 1991, 217), as a “key structure for organizing against heterosexual dominance” (Davis and Kennedy 1993, 6), as “complex erotic and social statements ... filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy” (Nestle 1992, 138), as a “heterosexual cop-out” (Cordova 1992, 283), and as a “deeply felt expression of individual identity and a personal code guiding appearance and sexual behavior... a system for organizing social relationships delineating which members of the community could have relationships with whom...[and] working-class lesbians’ only means of expressing resistance to the heterosexual world in this prepolitical era of gay and lesbian history” (Davis and Kennedy 1992, 62). As is clear in this compilation, most definitions of butch/femme assert either its similarity or difference to heterosexuality.

Researching butch/femme has necessitated the construction of an expansive archive<sup>2</sup> containing an eclectic range of sources. This archive has served as a

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<sup>2</sup> My understanding of the archive itself has been particularly influenced by “The Brandon Archive” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*; “In the Archive of Lesbian Feelings” in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*; *Archive Fever*:

“resource, a productive narrative, a set of representations, a history, a memorial, and a time capsule” (Halberstam 2005, 23). My archive includes queer theories of affect and temporality; novels, ethnographies, essays, social commentary (including blog posts, YouTube videos, and a rap) on butch/femme; traditional histories; and feminist theory. This thesis is centrally concerned with the use of queer affect and queer temporality in rethinking representations of butch/femme. I have been particularly influenced by Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, Elizabeth Freeman’s essays on temporal drag and erotohistoriography (Freeman 2000, 2005), Valerie Traub’s (2007) essay “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography” in which she introduces cycles of salience, Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, and Carolyn Dinshaw’s (1999) *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. I bring this queer theoretical material to bear on a variety of ethnographic, historical, and essayistic representations of butch/femme life: Amber Hollibaugh’s (2000) *My Dangerous Desires: a queer girl dreaming her way home*, Joan Nestle’s (1987) *Restricted Country* as well as (1992) *The Persistent Desire*, Leslie Feinberg’s (1993) *Stone Butch Blues* and Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy’s extensive ethnography of a 1950s butch/fem community, (1993) *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. By using a wide range of materials, I hope my archive serves as a home for what Foucault refers to as “subjugated knowledges”: “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the

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*A Freudian Impression* by Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault’s “The Life of Infamous Men” in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris, 1979.

required level of cognition or scientificity” (1980, 82). These are knowledges, like my own initial interest, that are not considered official, scientific, historical, or academic enough. I am deeply invested in incorporating these knowledges into my archive, and I believe the interplay of queer theory and an eclectic archive can disrupt the limited ways we have come to understand butch/femme history, representation, affect, and politics.

This thesis explores the temporal and affective structures that undergird our understanding of butch/femme history, affect, and politics. I examine butch/femme’s relationship to sameness and difference, as well as backwardness and progress, in order to develop a reading of queer temporality<sup>3</sup>: a notion of time that resists linearity and heteronormative reproduction and can fold into or across itself, challenging directional dichotomies. As a temporal structure it seeks connection across time through shared positionality<sup>4</sup>. My first chapter juxtaposes two dominant models of history—continuist and alterist—in order to highlight the temporality of our constructions of sameness and difference. I use these models to analyze the relationship between 1950s and 1980s iterations of butch/femme. I argue that these models make different claims and rest on divergent temporal assumptions. The continuist model assumes a “no time” temporal model. It positions time as static and unchanging, failing to take historical context into account. It contends that all time is the same. The critique of this is the alterist model, which adopts a linear reproductive

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<sup>3</sup> For more on queer temporality see: Christopher Nealon (2001) *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*; Elizabeth Freeman (2010) *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*; Carla Freccero (2006) *Queer/Early/Modern*; Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Mendon (2005) “Queering History”; (2007) “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion”; and Elizabeth Freeman (2007) “Introduction.”

<sup>4</sup> For more see *Getting Medieval*

model of time and focuses on difference across time. I contend these models are unable to fully explain the complex relationship between similarity *and* difference that marks butch/femme. I instead propose examining butch/femme through Valerie Traub's cycles of salience, a historical model based in what I call queer temporality. Traub's model complicates the relationship between sameness and difference by putting historical periods in conversation with one another, rather than isolating or collapsing them.

My second chapter continues this development of queer temporality by turning to the affective politics of butch/femme representation. I examine the ways in which affect – positive and negative, pride and shame – can be used to forge connections across time. While positive affect and positive representations are often the sites of identification and coalition, I examine the potentiality of negative affect and representation with and alongside the positive. This chapter, then, explores the potential of queer temporality to allow us to “touch” and “feel” across time.

My third chapter turns queer temporality toward the question of the sexual and gendered politics of butch/femme. I examine the two dominant understandings of butch/femme politics – the lesbian feminist and the pro-sex or queer feminist – in terms of how they construct sameness and difference. On the one hand, the lesbian feminist approach critiques butch/femme's eroticization of gender difference because it indicates a similarity to heterosexuality; in this model, butch/femme is an imitation of heterosexuality, reproducing all of its worst characteristics. On the other hand, pro-sex feminists deny butch/femme's similarity to heterosexuality by asserting its many differences. In this reading, butch/femme is progressive and forward-looking; it

reiterates rather than repeats heterosexuality. Drawing on Elizabeth Freeman's analysis of the temporality of Judith Butler's understanding of queer performativity, I focus on the temporal assumptions that undergird sameness as politically backward and difference as politically progressive.

Throughout, my thesis tracks the queer time of butch/femme, engaging new ways of conceptualizing the place of history, affect, and politics in our understandings of lesbian communities in the past, in the present, and in the past-that-resides-in-the-present. Thinking about time queerly allows us to more fully experience the pull of the past and expand our conceptions of community.

## Chapter 1

### Querying Time: Rethinking History

Those who associated themselves with the 1980s and 1990s tended to make careful distinctions between the ‘new’ butch/femme of their day and ‘classic,’ ‘old-fashioned,’ or ‘traditional’ butch/femme from years gone by.

★ Kath Weston, *Gender in Real Time: Power and Transience in a Visual Age*

“Butch-femme is back,” exclaimed Yvette Schneider, founder of the Butch-Femme Society (Morgan 1993, 40). Schneider is referring to what many have called the “resurgence” of butch/femme in the 1980s and 1990s. This resurgence has troubled lesbian history, for it prompts a series of difficult questions: What is the relationship between the “original” 1950s-60s butch/femme communities and these newer 1980s-90s communities? Should butch/femme history be written as one continuous story or as a narrative with two or more distinct parts? Is 1980s butch/femme essentially the same or radically different from 1950s butch/femme? And how do we account for the obvious sartorial similarities between historically disparate butch/femme lesbians?

Consider the following scene:

Whenever I went to a bar or a party and saw a butch-femme couple—*oy gevalt!* I was mesmerized, thrilled, and delighted: femmes with shimmering red lipstick and nails to match; femmes who nurtured and protected their butches, sometimes with a simple glance or touch; butches in faded jeans, button-down, tailored men’s shirts, loafers, and close-cropped coifs; butches who dipped their femmes on the dance floor. My knees quivered and my thighs were wet (Erlichman 1995, 239).

From this description, it is impossible to determine if the narrator is describing butch/femme life in the 1950s or in the 1980s. Our understanding of femmes as more traditionally feminine and butches as more masculine is upheld across historical periods. Indeed, many 1980s butch/femme lesbians (such as the one below)

acknowledge the similarities between themselves and earlier butch/femme lesbians.

This similarity and shared positionality can serve as a site of identification and connection:

I'm a femme because of the femmes before me,  
the skirted femmes in secretarial jobs  
enduring the men's crude words and touches  
to support butches too proud to go out in drag.  
The femmes who took their lovers' arms proudly in the street  
when they could have passed unnoticed,  
knowing it might mean insult—or death (Wempen 1995, 208).

For other butches and femmes, even though these relationships may “look the same,” they are marked by fundamental differences between generations: they are not at all the same (Morgan, 43).

These kinds of questions are not new to historians, who have struggled with how to think about sexual categories and identities across time and to negotiate the complex relationships between sameness and difference. As Valerie Traub argues, the two dominant historical models are continuist and alterist (2007, 124), which offer two different ways of analyzing history and time. The continuist model<sup>5</sup> stresses similarity whereas the alterist model positions history as a narrative of difference. The continuist model exists outside of time. It understands time as static and unchanging, paying no attention to historical context. This model of “not time” shows how the present and past make up one continuous line without any separations or breaks of difference. The critique of this is the alterist model, which depends on a linear or straight model of time, where historical time is a straight line with a definite

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the continuist model see: John D'Emilio (1983) *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*; Judith M. Bennett (1997) “Confronting Continuity”; David M. Halperin (2002) *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*; and Leila J. Rupp (1980) “‘Imagine My Surprise’: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective”.

beginning, middle, and end. Straight time dichotomizes past and present, forward and backward. The alterist model employs the linear model of time to demonstrate the clear dichotomy of past and present, utilizing this dichotomy to construct a narrative of change, and often progress. In contemporary history, the alterist model is more widely adopted and the continuist model is often cast as outdated and passé because it displaces difference, ignores historical context and endorses an understanding of time as static (Rohy 2006, 67). The continuist model is thought to be backward, primitive, and inaccurate, because of its understanding of time as unbroken and constant, while the alterist model is linked with modernity and progress.

This chapter queers historical readings of the recurrence of butch/femme, analyzing the relationship between 1950s and 1980s butch/femme through continuist and alterist models of history. I apply these two models to two scenes depicting 1950s and 1980s butch/femme in order to unfold the complex ways straight time undergirds sameness and difference. And in order to unsettle this dichotomy, I turn to queer temporality to think about the relationship between 1950s and 1980s butch/femme differently. I employ Valerie Traub's model "cycles of salience" to show that a "cyclical" understanding of time allows us to show the places past and present connect, deviate from the strict dichotomization of sameness and difference, and expand our possibilities for affective connection through shared positionality (which as Dinshaw contends (39) often takes the form of shared *marginality*).

The first scene is from *Stone Butch Blues* and details the main character Jess' first time at a gay bar:

What I saw there released tears I'd held back for years: strong, burly women, wearing ties and suit coats. Their hair was slicked back in perfect DA's.<sup>6</sup> They were the handsomest women I'd ever seen. Some of them were wrapped in slow motion dances with women in tight dresses and high heels who touched them tenderly. Just watching made me ache with need (Feinberg 1993, 27-28).

The second scene describes Kath Weston's experience at Prom Nite, a dance held in 1985 at the Women's Building in San Francisco. She recalls:

On one side of the floor a woman in a pin-striped shirt and red tie leaned against the stage, hair slicked back, with just a few strands falling-carelessly? artfully?- over her forehead. In her arms was a woman in a sleeveless gold top that glittered under the lights, her outfit accented with lipstick, fishnets, and costume jewelry (1993, 3-4).

The women in both scenes identify as butch/femme and look eerily similar despite the temporal gap of 30 years. Feinberg's account of Jess's first time in a gay bar describes daily butch/femme life in the 1950s, whereas Weston's description reflects the performance of butch/femme at a community dance in the 1980s. In what follows, I analyze the relationship between the two scenes to queer our understanding of the resurgence of butch/femme and recurring erotic formations in general.

### **Continuist Model: "Not Time"**

When one of my close friends told me she identified strongly as a femme why was I instantly flooded with images of 1950s femmes hanging on the arms of their butches? Was this a fair leap to make? Did her identification as a femme in 2011 signal a connection with femmes of the 1950s? Did simply saying, "I identify as a femme" mean that she identified as a femme in the same way that lesbians in the 1950s or 1980s identified as femmes? The continuist model of history interprets sameness as identification through shared identity. In his critique of continuist

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<sup>6</sup> DA, also known as "Duck's Ass" refers to a popular butch hair style

history, John D'Emilio explains the model as it applies to gay and lesbian history: "Gay men and lesbians always were and always will be. We are everywhere; not just now, but throughout history, in all societies and all periods" (1993, 468). In this model, gay and lesbian are transhistorical identities, identities that maintain the same meaning and significance over time. Continuist models of history emphasize the "similarity between past and present concepts of sexual understanding" (Traub, 124). They typically ignore historical context and "the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves" have changed over time (Weeks 1977, 2). As such, the adoption of transhistorical identities often collapses erotic formations of one temporal period into those of another. If, through the continuist model of history, we take butch/femme to be transhistorical identities, then 1950s and 1980s butch/femme are interchangeable; they carry the same social meaning. As many critics have noted, the model encourages us to disregard political, temporal, social, economic, and historical differences.

In spite of or perhaps because of these problems, the gay liberation movement found the use of transhistorical identities particularly useful as they asserted the constant historical presence of gays and lesbians (D'Emilio, 468). In effect, the movement used the temporal longevity of the identities gay and lesbian to assert gay and lesbian normalcy or, at least, permanence. Others, such as Blanche Wiesen Cook, a lesbian historian writing at the end of the 1970s, found the model useful to find and identify gays and lesbians in the past, in the service of reclaiming a continuous gay and lesbian history. As she writes, "even if they did renounce all physical contact we

can still argue that they were lesbians: they chose and loved each other. Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians” (1979, 738). Cook’s definition of a lesbian is applicable to women across vast temporal and spatial expanses. Her definition, in true continuist form, ignores potentially significant historical and social meanings, claiming for lesbianism women who do not consider themselves lesbians, and even heterosexual women. Cook’s continuist orientation signals her belief that there have and always will be lesbians, and that the category is unchanging. It also suggests that we can work backward from our present, identifying the occupants of our current categories with little regard for their social or historical contexts.

If we apply the continuist model to the two butch/femme scenes, we look solely at the scenes, removing them from their historical context. If we take butch/femme to be a transhistorical erotic formation then we assume that 1950s butch/femme carries the same significance and social meaning as 1980s butch/femme. There is no divide between the past and the present, instead we are reproducing an erotic formation that has been produced before, and will be produced again in the future. The continuist approach emphasizes the connection between the butch/femme lesbians in the first and second scene, a connection based on a shared – the same – identity. The continuist model is defined by sameness, perhaps at the expense of productive difference.

Viewing these two scenes through the continuist lens, one identifies striking similarities. The butches in Feinberg’s scene have their hair “slicked back” just as the

butch in Weston's scene has her hair "slicked back." The femmes look similar in their traditionally feminine clothing and their shared physical positioning, wrapped in their butches' arms. Butch and femme are the same in these two scenes – butch/femme is a transhistorical identity: when something looks like butch/femme, it is butch/femme. Appearances are enough to signal sameness.

### **Alterist Model: Linear Time**

The alterist model of history challenges the continuist model by asserting there are no transhistorical identities or categories. While the continuist model claims the stability of identities like gay and lesbian, John D'Emilio contests the myth of the "eternal homosexual" when he writes, "gay men and lesbians have *not* always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era"<sup>7</sup> (468). This analysis is informed through the alterist model, which highlights the prevalence of historical difference as a result of varying historical contexts. Jeffrey Weeks points to the importance of historical context in understanding homosexuality: "It is itself a product of history, a cultural artifact designed to express a particular concept" (3). For Weeks, homosexuality cannot be considered outside of history, but instead is directly shaped by history. This is not to say that homosexual practices have not existed across time; rather, alterists point out that as a word and category, "homosexual" does not have "an unvarying meaning,

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<sup>7</sup> D'Emilio further asserts the importance of historical context when he claims that homosexuality was not possible before the development of capitalism because of the heightened importance of the nuclear family. He contends it was "only when *individuals* began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex" (470). He links this shift with the "historical development of capitalism—more specifically, its free labor system"(468).

beyond time and history” (Weeks, 3). Similarly, D’Emilio does not deny the historical presence of homosexual relations, but rather argues that “homosexual” as an *identity* did not come about until the development of industrial capitalism (and wage labor).<sup>8</sup> His association of the birth of homosexuality as an identity with the development of capitalism follows the most famous alterist, Michel Foucault: “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (1990, 43). These arguments all locate the development of identity within specific historical eras, pointing to the temporal instability of identity categories.

As the alterist model discounts the historical validity of transhistorical identities, it contends that 1950s butch/femme and 1980s butch/femme are essentially different. The alterist model casts history as a narrative of difference in which the past and present are held apart. In contrast with the continuist model, the alterist model “warns against the hasty assumption of commonalities between present and past same-sex desires and refuses as ‘ahistorical’ or ‘anachronistic’ readings that would project modern concepts back in time” (Rohy, 63). As such, historians embracing the alterist model would find Blanche Wiesen Cook’s universal model of lesbianism problematic, to say the least. The alterist critic reading these butch/femme scenes might, for example, ask after the differing historical contexts – Buffalo, NY in the 1960s and San Francisco, CA in the 1980s – and their accompanying gendered norms, economic relations, racial attitudes, and cultural geographies. A larger social context, then, is necessary to situate these two scenes, along with a grasp of the likely very different experiential meanings of being butch or femme in a gay bar in the 60s

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<sup>8</sup> Rupp also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between behavior and identity.

or at a lesbian prom in the 80s. For the alterist, in other words, appearances are not enough.

If we accept the alterist model, how do we understand the relationship between these two scenes? While the two scenes do look very much alike, their differing historical context must also be taken into account. In the 1950s:

Butch-fem roles were a deeply felt expression of individual identity and a personal code guiding appearance and sexual behavior; they were a system for organizing social relationships delineating which members of the community could have relationships with whom; furthermore, they were working-class lesbians' only means of expressing resistance to the heterosexual world in this prepolitical era of gay and lesbian history (Kennedy and Davis 1992, 62).

Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy contend that butch/fem did more than reflect one's sartorial choices, but organized whole communities. "Butch-femme roles, at least in their prefeminist incarnation, linked sexuality, appearance, and, frequently economic position in a highly ritualized way. Dress was a reflection of sexual style, a signal to potential sexual and nonsexual partners, a clue to one's sensibility on a range of related issues, and a pretty good indicator of whether you worked as a secretary or an elevator operator" (Stein 1992, 434). As both Davis and Kennedy and Arlene Stein show, 1950s butch/femme signified more than just gender presentation. One's identification as either butch or femme, through their sartorial choices, was indicative of one's sexual erotic preference, socioeconomic status, and beliefs. One had to identify as either butch or fem to be part of the community and one's identification determined whom one was allowed to date (Davis and Kennedy 1993, 152). Butches always dated fems and fems always dated butches. One narrator 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” (Davis and Kennedy, 165-166).

The resurgence of butch/femme in the 1980s takes place at a very different time. Perhaps, as Sally Munt argues, 1980s butches and femmes have “colonized” “a primarily working-class identification” appropriating a “butch/femme aesthetic ironically,” in contrast to the assumed authenticity of 1950s butches and femmes.<sup>9</sup> She writes, “an ambivalence to butch/femme often replays the assumption that those bar dykes in the 1950s and 1960s *were* too thick to know what they were doing, and really did want to be straight” (4). Munt’s analysis helps us to understand how 1980s-90s butch/femme lesbians thought about their identities. While from the outside they might look very much like their 1950s counterparts, their thoughts about their identities signal an “informed” distancing, an ironic play.

To be sure, the butch/femme lesbians Jess sees during her first time at a gay bar are situated in a different historical and political moment than the butch/femme lesbians Weston comes across. While lesbians in the 1950s cite the importance of butch/femme identities to their lives, many of the lesbians Weston comes across emphasize its playful and elective nature. One of the lesbians at the Prom, Rachel, doesn’t identify as either butch or femme, but admits that most of her friends label her a femme. Weston writes, “like many lesbians who claimed that the categories butch and femme had little to do with their self-perception, however, Rachel was prepared to accept the classification others attributed to her, ‘if I have to choose’” (3). Rachel tells Weston a bit later, “You guys remind me to act butch, okay?” “An hour or so

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<sup>9</sup> Munt acknowledges that Jewelle Gomez first asked most of these questions.

later, Rachel found me in the crowd and confided, ‘It’s amazing what dressing butch will do for you. I already asked three women to dance! And I’m saying the most incredible things.’ What sort of things? ‘Well, you know... flirting. And here I was worried I’d be a wallflower!’” (4). Reflecting on the evening Weston concludes:

Prom Nite, for instance, combined many elements customarily mentioned in attempts to distinguish the post-modern era from its modernist predecessor: nostalgia, a fragmentation that isolates artifacts (earrings, boots, hair) and presses them into the service of parody or pastiche; and overriding emphasis on fashion and style; and the distanced approach to gender epitomized by Rachel’s sense of playing a part (7).

In this analysis, the aesthetic similarities between the two scenes lose significance. Although the scenes describe butch/femme erotic pairings in much the same way, these similarities are, in the alterist reading, insignificant when compared to their very different historical contexts.

### **Temporality, Progress, and Difference: Linear Time**

Although the alterist model takes into account these crucial contextual differences, it relies on a linear understanding of time. While this model resists projecting modern identities backward, it simultaneously troubles projecting older models forward. Backward and forward projections serve the same problem: they both use temporally distinct identities to classify and give meaning to products of a different historical moment. In this way, the alterist model relies on the distinction between past and present. It prevents drawing comparisons or forming connections across time.

The alterist dichotomization of past and present frequently casts the past as pre-modern, backward, and bad, whereas the present and future are associated with

progress and modernity (Love, 3&28). The privileging of the modern over the premodern undergirds queer narratives of progress. Heather Love writes, “social negativity clings...to those who lived before the common era of gay liberation- the abject multitude against whose experience we define our own liberation” (10). The alterist model of history defines more recent experience against the experiences of those who came before us- specifically those who lived before Stonewall. This way of understanding and contextualizing present experience frequently takes the shape of a “queer narrative of progress” (27). Queer narratives of progress dichotomize the past and present by claiming progress as an assumed result of difference. As David Halperin writes, alterist “gay history...was a scholarly thought-experiment in which the self, by turning to the past, could come to recognize its own alterity to itself in the present and, ultimately, its undefined possibilities in the future. Such an emancipatory vision of the purpose of history was continuous with the liberatory promise of the lesbian and gay movement as a whole and with its queer trajectory” (2002, 15). Gay and lesbian history’s discovery of progress fit in nicely with the sentiments of the gay liberation movement and gave hope for the future. As Heather Love writes, “Although many queer critics take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history, we are in practice deeply committed to the notion of progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a better life for queer people” (3). She contends that historians are invested in a narrative of progress because they signal a brighter future for queers, a future free from homophobia and heterosexism. The construction of queer history is deeply informed by the desire for a better life and the comfort in determining that the present is less painful than the past.

Alterist narratives of difference and progress allow us to separate from the abject figures of our past: butch/femme today is nothing like the oppressive butch/femme of the past. At the same time, continuist narratives can also partake in a narrative of progress, this time by casting certain figures as unchanging, as backward. Joan Nestle notes: “many of today’s feminists see us as ahistorical, as if we are stuck in time and never change, as if we are that bad fifties thing” (1992, 265).<sup>10</sup> Disfavored erotic formations are rejected through their backward, premodern designation. As Judith Halberstam writes, “the masculine woman became a paradoxical figure within lesbian communities; she was representative of those communities as the ‘butch’, but she was also ultimately rejected as an anachronistic reminder of the rejected discourse of inversion. Indeed, to this day, many contemporary lesbian communities signal their modernity by denying the stereotype of the mannish lesbian” (1998, 96). In both alterist and continuist models, then, we (in the present) can distance ourselves from these figures, denying our similarity and pointing to our lack of shared identity, with Stonewall (1969) marking the distinction between past and present (Love, 28). Queers are able to dissociate from backward, pathetic, or despised figures of the past through constructing their identity in opposition to these figures. It is through rejecting identification with “backward” figures that others solidify their modernity.

Contemporary historians often utilize alterist logic when discussing the resurgence of butch/femme in the 1980s. The 1980s are deemed different and more evolved than 1950s butch/femme. For example, Lillian Faderman writes, “for many of the women who identify as butch or femme today, the concept has little actual

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<sup>10</sup> “The femme tapes” are the transcription of a conversation that took place between Madeline Davis, Amber Hollibaugh, and Joan Nestle in 1982. It is not a full transcription as the conversation lasted five hours.

connection with the lived experience of those labels in the 1950s. Butch/femme relationships are perhaps more complex now than they were in the earlier era, reflecting the complexity of sexual relationships in the parent culture as well” (1992, 591). Faderman negates the possibility of a shared similarity between the two lived experiences by referencing the cultural advancements since the 1950s. Using the alterist model and paying attention to historical context, Faderman attributes this difference to the fact that 1950s and 1980s butch/femme are products of two very different historical moments. In her eyes, these different moments are also hierarchical; the 1980s are marked by a more complex sexual climate, while the sexual climate in the 1950s was more rigid and simple. Others echo this analysis:

Today’s embracing of roles, though, is not a throwback to the 1950s. For many women, adopting a role is more a matter of play than of necessity; roles are more ambiguous and less naturalized. Many dykes still identify more strongly with one role than the other, but now there is a greater possibility of choice. Eighties butch-femme—if it can accurately be termed such—is a self-conscious aesthetic that plays with style and power, rather than an embracing of one’s ‘true’ nature against the constraints of straight society. Gone is the tightly constructed relationship between personal style, erotic preference, and economic position—the hallmark of roles during the prefeminist era (Stein 1992, 434-435).

This understanding of the resurgence of butch/femme repeatedly denies connection with and similarity to 1950s butch/femme. In fact, it goes so far as to question whether 1980s butch/femme should even be so-labeled. Butch/femme in the 1950s is cast as necessary, essentialist, limiting, and highly structured. In contrast, 1980s butch/femme is lauded as playful, a conscious choice, and informed. This comparison emphasizes the superiority of 1980s butch/femme over 1950s, a superiority that rests on an implicit narrative of progress.

“Women who talk about butch and femme all the time frequently perceive women who identify as butch or femme as dinosaurs,” Tracy Morgan relates (42). Identities that are denigrated and disparaged for being too backward are relegated to the irretrievable past. Past and present are dichotomized to prevent connection between backward formations and their more current counterparts. And at times this marked distinction between past and present is used to make the past appear backwards, old-fashioned, or nonmodern. Faderman continues, “for most lesbians [today] the roles are not the life-or-death identity they often were in the 1950s, but rather an enjoyable erotic statement and an escape from the boring ‘vanilla sex’ that they associated with lesbian-feminism” (593). This contrast between the past and the present is used to make the present more appealing through a queer narrative of progress: “Look how far we’ve come!”

The continuist model sees only similarity, while the alterist sees only difference. Given the emphasis on historical change and progress in contemporary gay and lesbian history however, both models can reinscribe a progress narrative, where butch/femme in the 1950s and 1960s is confined to the past.

Linear time is also labeled straight time because of its intimate connection with heterosexual temporality. For example, José Muñoz writes that straight time “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” (2009, 22 see also Boellstorff 2007). Linear time rests on a dichotomized view of past and present, preventing constructive interactions between the two. It offers either

history as sameness or history as difference. If we accept the continuist model, then historical categories remain the same over (not) time. If we accept the alterist model, then historical categories are marked by difference through their separation into past and present, modern and premodern. But how do we account for scenes that appear to be both similar and different? And how can we escape the narrative of historical progress that binds us to our “ever better” present?

### **Cycles of Saliency: Queer Time**

As Valerie Traub notes, “There exist certain recurrent explanatory meta-logics that accord to the history of lesbianism over a vast temporal expanse a sense of consistency and, at times, uncanny familiarity”(126). Butch/femme is one of these recurrent explanatory meta-logics. It recurs often and does evoke a sense of “uncanny familiarity.” In this section, I challenge the notion of linear time as the only kind of time in order to explore queer temporal formations that resist progress narratives and dichotomies such as past/present, modern/premodern, and sameness/difference. As José Muñoz argues, “queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time...Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (25). Queer time rejects linearity and progress, and challenges notions of backwardness as bad. It opens up different possibilities for thinking about time and connections across time that are not structured by the dichotomization of similarity and difference. A queer history must be open to the idea of meaningful connections across time as well as the unexplainable identifications with queers of the past. I argue it can do so through cycles of saliency.

Instead of the alterist or continuist model of history, cycles of salience tracks the “forms of intelligibility whose meanings recur, intermittently and with a difference across time” (126). It is able to incorporate alterist and continuist theories by moving away from a linear model of time, instead paying close attention to time’s cyclical and interconnected nature. Traub’s cycles of salience focuses nether on sameness nor difference, backwardness nor progress, but instead on questions: “Why do certain figures and tropes of eroticism (and gender) become culturally salient at certain moments, becoming saturated with meaning, and then fade from view? ... Why do specific figures, separated by vast temporal expanses, appear to adumbrate, echo, or reference one another?” (130). Traub’s hermeneutic tool allows for the consideration and comprehension of the similarities between 1950s and 1980s butch/femme, while simultaneously acknowledging difference in meaning. This model allows us to refrain from choosing an alterist or continuist understanding of history, but lets us take fragments from both. As she writes, “to do the history of sexuality is not to turn a blind eye to perennial features of the erotic system in the name of historical alterity. But neither is it to too quickly assume homology when not every facet repeats”(132).

It is important to note that Valerie Traub is not referring to transhistorical categories. She contends:

It is less that there exist transhistorical categories that comprise and subsume historical variation than that certain perennial logics and definitions remain useful, across time, for conceptualizing the meaning of female bodies and bonds. Emerging at certain moments, silently disappearing from view, and then re-emerging as particularly relevant (or explosively volatile), these recurrent explanatory logics seems to underlie the organization, and reorganization, of women’s erotic life (126).

These recurring meta-logics allow us to expand the ways in which 1950s butch/femme and 1980s butch/femme relate to one another without constructing a strict binary of similarity or difference. While these two scenes take place in two very different historical moments, they look oddly similar. Traub attributes these periods of similarity to “moments of social crisis which have their source in anxieties peripheral to eroticism, such as reactions to feminism and changing gender roles, reservations about redefinitions of the family, nationalist or racist fears of contamination, concerns about morality and social discipline, and violent upheavals in the political order” (132). Traub is thus partially attributing cycles of salience to external factors such as political climate or ideology. She is not proposing the existence of transhistorical categories of sexual identity, but instead looks to similar or shared cultural context for explanation.

Traub’s understanding of history allows one to incorporate both similarity and difference by complicating and multiplying the number and types of relationships possible between these two scenes. To explore these potentials, I employ Traub’s cycles of salience to analyze two new scenes. The first depicts a black house party in the 1950s, as described by Audre Lorde in her (1982) biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The second scene is taken from the anthology (1995) *Femme Mystique* and provides a more recent reproduction of butch/femme. Using this new model we will explore the relationship between sameness and difference. Lorde writes:

Here and there throughout the room the flash of brightly colored below-the-knee full skirts over low-necked tight bodices could be seen, along with tight sheath dresses and the shine of high thin heels... Femmes wore their hair in tightly curled pageboy bobs, or

piled high on their heads in sculptured bunches of curls, or in feather cuts framing their faces... Butches wore their hair cut shorter, in a D.A. shaped to a point in the back, or a short pageboy, or sometimes in a tightly curled poodle that predated the natural afro (242).

The more recent account details butch/femme interactions in what we can assume is the 1980s. One femme describes an erotic fantasy:

*Fantasy:* A pool hall full of men. My butch and I walk in the door. Sudden silence as all eyes turn on us. I'm in high heels, sheer stockings, a tight thigh-high skirt, a low-cut blouse, and gold hoop earrings: my slut outfit. She's in Dr. Martens and skintight jeans, a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, sharp new flattop haircut (Frost 1995, 304).

Like the previous two scenes, these scenes reflect similar gender polarity: the masculinity of butches and the femininity of femmes. But instead of trying to determine whether they are exactly the same or completely different, following Traub we might think of them as both. Femme and butch appear as “forms of intelligibility whose meanings recur, intermittently and with a difference, across time” (126): the femmes in both scenes wear high heels, low-cut tops, and skirts, whereas the butches have short hair and are distinctly masculine. While I'm pretty sure 1950s butches didn't wear Dr. Martens, the other sartorial choices of the 1980s butch were similar to 1950s dress. Traub's analytic allows us to see both the similarity and difference of the two scenes. Butch/femme in the 1980s is not a mere reproduction of 1950s butch/femme, but neither is it a wholly separate identity. Instead, Traub encourages us to look for the potential of shared positionalities – a shared social context of homophobia and heterosexism that I explore in Chapters 2 and 3. Cycles of salience allow us to see historical, social, and psychic possibilities for connection *and* differentiation.

While the two scenes do look very much alike, and possess some sort of recurrent intelligibility, they repeat differently across time. In this way, the model enables a crossing of sameness and difference that resists the progress narratives of straight time.

### **Queer Temporality and Progress**

Queers are intimately linked with backwardness and regression. As Heather Love argues, “whether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow recall the past” (6). Many queers are invested in a queer narrative of progress as a way out of such identifications with backwardness. If queers can claim our place in modernity, we will no longer be considered backward, or less than. It is partially because of this desire to be recognized as modern that queer historical narratives often claim progress, a formulation that relies upon strict dichotomies of past and present while disavowing transhistorical similarities. While much of gay and lesbian history has been written in this style, it is rarely successful in achieving its aims, in part because queers will never fully fit into straight time.

While many queers are resistant to backwardness, backwardness is an important aspect of queer culture. Love writes, “Not only do many queers... feel backward, but backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture... Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting

and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects” (7). Feeling backward is a “disposition toward the past- embracing loss, risking abjection” (30). It involves looking to the past without expectations, without a transformative agenda, without the trope of progress, and with the willingness to explore connections across temporal expanses. Backwardness is not automatically negative, even though it is frequently placed in opposition to progress. Instead, it is full of possibility and meaning, offering a path of resistance to progress and the rushed time of heteronormativity.

Backwardness encourages us to linger, hesitate, dwell, and explore connections with those who have come before us.

Re-conceiving historical time through cycles of salience allows us to resist an empty celebration of history-as-progress. And importantly, it makes use of the backward pull of queer identification to focus our attention on the shared or similar social contexts that produce our erotic lives. This act of feeling backward can sometimes be painful and difficult because we will come in direct contact with the dark moments we have tried to forget. However, our identification and feelings of familiarity towards queers of the past make resisting the call backward difficult. We “find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with these figures: the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present” (Love, 8-9). The past is full of dark feelings and negative affect that does not fit in nicely with our modern era of gay pride and assimilation into heteronormative culture. We resist identification with figures in the past partially because we feel uncomfortable admitting we too feel shame, pain, and humiliation on a regular basis. Identifying with these figures means rejecting the queer narrative of progress that gives hope of a

brighter future. While this might be difficult, denying our similarity to our queer brothers, sisters, and others of the past, we are fooling ourselves into believing that our present situation is free of queer phobia and societal injustice.

Looking and feeling backward opens up the possibilities for community formation, affective ties, and identification. Queer time consists of multi-layered, intertwined, connective histories as opposed to one linear history. As Carolyn Dinshaw argues, drawing on Walter Benjamin's description of history as a constellation "revises any positivistic relation of past events to each other and to the present: its starry lights are emitted at different times even as they are perceived at once, together" (17-18). This image demonstrates the separateness of time and space of each history, yet also their ability to connect. It is an event's dual status as connected and separate that allows for what Dinshaw refers to as a "queer historical impulse": an "impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now"<sup>11</sup> (1). Like Traub, Dinshaw does not claim continuity between the cultural phenomena she seeks to connect, but instead claims shared positionality. It is this shared status that allows us to make connections across time and create communities through cross-temporal identification. As she writes, "a historical past can and does provide material for queer subject and community formation now. That term, 'community'...does not in itself imply unity or homogeneity" (22). Dinshaw challenges us to be open to connecting with the past; to serve community formation in the present and future, rather than resist its pull.

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<sup>11</sup> Indicating shared positionality and marginality

Writing history is a way to reanimate dead bodies, past communities, social lives; it is also a way to connect to those lives across time. As Dinshaw writes, “the historian manages thus, by writing, to ‘touch’ bodies across time” (47). Drawing on Michael Camille, Dinshaw notes “history writing must attempt a ‘commun[ion]’ with particular past entities ... blurring the line between the past and the present, emphasizing not the chasm that separates the living from the dead but the shared space where the gazes of both can meet” (36). This touch across time is a form of communion; the corporeality of the subject being touched is just as important as the corporeality of the reaching subject. Understanding history writing as a communion focuses not on the space between bodies, lives, and temporalities, but instead on the “shared space” where the two can come together. It is this shared space that blurs boundaries, causing one to question the discreteness of past and present; the past is not behind us, but beside us (Muñoz, 25). Layering histories on top of one another allows for them to resonate, touch, and inform one another. Thinking of time and history as layered or stratified as opposed to linear makes possible these kinds of connections. Perhaps this is why I can only understand my queer present through connecting with butches and femmes of the 1950s. Our gazes have met, and I cannot look away. Once you look back, it’s hard to stop.

The notion of queer community is significantly altered when we look to form connections not just across lines of race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, location, political beliefs, religion, ability, but also across time. The larger our community is, the greater its potential. Dinshaw writes, “If we want to imagine, as does Bhabha, that the oppressed subject gains agency by means of identifications

with others who elude resemblance, let us imagine the widest possible usable field of others with whom to make such partial connections” (21). Certainly, opening up the usable field of others to include temporally distant figures dramatically expands the community of the oppressed. We are able to connect with these figures not because of our continuity, but instead because of our shared queer positionality. “Queers can make new relations, new identification, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality” (39). We connect through our backwardness, marginality, and similar difference.

Instead of resisting identification with the past and backwardness, queer history should seek out such connections and eerie resemblances. Rejecting a linear understanding of time and a triumphalist history, we should examine the possibilities that come from an expanded queer community that traverses time. It is through teasing apart our intertwined histories that we gain a better understanding of our position, and insight into the future.

## Chapter 2

### Past in the Present: Feeling Identification Across Time

“Deep Lez” has arrived to explicitly reclaim the politics of regression and of what I have called the prehistorical. Deep Lez, a catchphrase *cum* artistic vision *cum* political movement, works temporal drag toward a different kind of time—not the time of childhood but geologic time, the time of feminism and other dinosaurs, of fossilized icons and sedimented layers of meaning.

★ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

Ordinary affects highlight the question of the intimate impacts of force in circulation. They’re not exactly “personal” but they sure can pull the subject into places it didn’t exactly “intend” to go.

★ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*

What does it mean to be out of place, or existing at the wrong time? Kate Thomas speaks to this in her reflection on starting graduate school in the early 90s, right around the time that queer studies solidified as an academic field. She states:

I began graduate school twelve years ago. It was a queer time all right. *Tendencies*, *Bodies That Matter*, and *Fear of a Queer Planet* had all been published the previous year. My copies of those books bear two dates: on the copyright page, the printed publication date of 1993, and on another, my handwritten name and the date 1994. Did I turn up at the party a little late, or awkwardly early? (2007, 615)

Thomas’ feeling of being temporally out of place is conveyed through her half-joking, half-serious question, “Did I turn up at the party a little late, or awkwardly early?” Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman discusses the temporal drag of certain bodies in her essay “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations.” She starts by writing about an incident in which she remarks in class, “I wear this T-shirt that says ‘Big Fag’ sometimes, because lesbians give potlucks and dykes fix cars. I’ve never done well at either, so ‘Big Fag’ seems more appropriate” (727). One of her student comes to see her “in Birkenstocks, wool socks, jeans, and a women’s music T-shirt” to tell Freeman that “she felt dismissed and marginalized by my comment, that lesbians-

who-give-potlucks described her exactly, and that I had clearly fashioned a more interesting identity with her own as a foil” (727). Freeman, who, in the past, felt excluded from the categories lesbian and dyke herself unintentionally reproduces this exclusion at her student’s expense. This exclusion comes partially from the temporal “other-ness” of her student. Freeman notes that her student looked temporally out of place, like she was arriving late to a historical era now passed. While Freeman thought she was simply relaying her own feelings of inadequacy, she later realized she was in fact “telling a story about anachronism, with ‘lesbian’ as the sign of times gone by and her [student’s] body as an implicit teaching text” (727). Freeman cites the “temporal incongruity” of her student’s body and sartorial presentation as a type of temporal crossing: “It was a crossing of time, less in the mode of postmodern pastiche than in the mode of stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceeded her own temporal moment” (728).

I begin with these two stories because they illuminate the way affect and queer temporality intersect. These feelings of lateness, backwardness, and/or temporal “other-ness” encourage us to rethink the temporality of recurring erotic formations such as butch/femme. This chapter explores the affective politics of representations of butch/femme through temporal drag and cross-historical affective and physical connections that engender identification and community. Affect is central to discussions about which representations are acceptable, which are detrimental, and why we feel invested in certain representations over others. Here, affect is taken to be a form of relation that, in combination with shared positionality and emotionality, allows for connection across time and space. It is through *affect* that butches and

femmes in the past become sites of identification and community in the present – across time. This is in part because affect is more than just a compilation of emotions or feelings. Like the verb “to affect,” affect is active; it signals an acting on of bodies. Affect *does* something: it moves us. It tells the story, shapes the story, and is the story all at once.

As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth argue:

At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters or; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities” (2010, 2)

In butch/femme representation, positive affect – pride – signals the belonging of a body, whereas shame identifies a body out place, and perhaps out of time.

Butch/femme history is affective as it is a story of the “body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters” and a “*non-belonging*, through all of those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities.” As such, shame and pride are intimately intertwined in the writing of butch/femme history, as in the living of queer lives.

Affect not only traces relations between bodies, but is also “*a form of relation*” (Gregg and Seigworth, 13), a distinct way of interacting and making connections. These relations can be made across time; affect allows for queers in the present to find connection with queers in the past through shared emotionality and positionality.

As Sara Ahmed argues:

Emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very ‘flesh’ of time. They show us the time it takes to move, or to move on, is a time that exceeds the time of an individual life. Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others. It takes time to know what we can do with emotion (2004, 202).

This description of emotion figures it as something that both tells a lot about time and is constitutive of time. Emotions resist the assumed linearity of time and do not abide by bodily rules: the physical body may disintegrate into dust, but the emotional body transcends natural decay. This transcendence writes the past into the present and future and therefore opens up different possibilities for connection across time. It is through the residual existence of emotions that queers today are able to commune with queers of the past.

In butch/femme history, the differentiation of good and bad feelings rests on a linear notion of time in which bad feelings take on a backward cast, while good feelings are imagined to move people forward. As Ahmed states, “The very distinction between good and bad feelings...presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that ‘stops’ the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up and getting out” (2010, 50). Ahmed lays out the relationship between affect and temporality by showing that, as long as time is understood as linear, bad feelings are somehow stuck in the past, while good feelings are orientated toward the future. Affect is not just social; it is profoundly temporal.

For lesbian historians, then, the project of representing butch/femme communities positively or negatively is tied – socially and politically – to the temporality of affect. Bad feelings come to be seen as a drag, both affectively and temporally; they evoke memories of a violent past.<sup>12</sup> Negative representations of the past are often deemed too depressing to be of any use to politics. Love asserts, “Texts that insist on social negativity underline the gap between the aspiration and the actual. At odds with the wishful thinking that characterizes political criticism, they are held accountable for the realities that they represent and often end up being branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use” (4). Backwardness is problematized because of its association with negative affect and the supposed damage it does to the progress of queers. Further, it is seen as a repetition of the past as opposed to the creation of a new future. We are resistant to backwardness because “the relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair, and loss but also by the shame of identification” (Love, 32).

In contrast, good feelings become the ticket to a positive and homophobia-free future. Good feelings are linked temporally to the post-Stonewall era, an era marked predominantly by a forced narrative of pride and progress. To be orientated toward pride is to have the “proper alignment” toward the future. Ahmed links pleasure with

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<sup>12</sup> As trans activist and rapper Katastrophe (Rocco Kayiatos) writes in his song “Bad Bad Feelings”:

Ignore the past so I could blast fast forward and blend with the other sheep in the herd instead of being too absurd to be heard or understood I always tried to just be good and do as I should and keep the rest to myself and now that’s why I need too much help and there’s nothing out there except anger and depression and so much second guessin’ too much stressin’ smoking cessin’ now I’m hard pressin’ all these bad bad feelings

Katastrophe’s rap about his “bad, bad feelings” and his desire to “blast fast forward and blend with other sheep in the herd” highlights the desire to resist negative affect, especially by relegating it to the past. His rap, while written almost 60 years after 1950s butch/femme, demonstrates how feelings inform and help construct representations of the past in ways relevant to butch/femme history.

proper alignment: “When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way” (37). The post-Stonewall era has been marked by an affirmative turn in which negative affect has been reappropriated and transformed into positive affect to support a progressive political agenda.

From the very beginning of the gay liberation movement shame and pride have been tightly intertwined and gained meaning from one another. As Sally Munt argues, the modern coming out discourse has “celebrated a rubric of pride. Outside, in this context, meant claiming a place in society. Inside carried the connotations of the closet, as a prison of shame. The lesbian inside/outside structure is characterized by this *affect*—the binary opposition of shame/pride. Pride is dependent on shame; pride is predicated on the—sometimes conscious—denial of its own ostracized corollary, shame” (4). Munt demonstrates the importance of affect to the Lesbian and Gay movement, linking inside/outside to shame/pride. Gay pride, privileged as *the* gay politic, is dependent on the rejection of shame, but, at the same time, pride gains its definition and significance through its relationship with shame (Halperin and Traub, 4).

The dependent and hierarchical relationship of shame and pride helps us understand the representations of butch/femme bar culture. As Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy remark about their book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, “The phrase “Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold” captures the duality that lies at the core of lesbian communities of the past- the toughness required to endure and struggle against severe and often visible homophobia, and the light and joy gained from the quest for the perfect love and the faith that a safe and respected place in the world

was possible” (14). Shame, negativity, pain and stigma work with and against pride, positivity, please and belonging: the history of butch/fem is marked by great pleasure, sex and desire, friendships, freedom of gender expression, violence, shame, pain, and jealousy. According to Judith Halberstam, this duality is well represented by *Stone Butch Blues*, “Feinberg makes her readers aware over and over that the butch life is not simply heroism, motorbikes, suits, jeans and femme companionship (or as Jess remembers it, ‘butch friends, drag queen confidantes, femme lovers’); it is also defeat, poverty, violence, loneliness, and the blues” (1998, 61). This dynamic relationship between pride and shame in representations of butch/femme can help us rethink the politics of affective temporality – resisting positive as politically progressive and negative as politically backward. In what follows, I develop the concepts of “temporal drag” and “feeling backward” to explore the politics of cross-temporal affective ties.

Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, Eve Sedgwick, and Elizabeth Freeman’s theorizations of queer affect and queer time, I analyze representations of butch/femme and the links between affect, temporality and community building. If, as I argued in Chapter 1, we might understand history as queer (and as such without a definitive past and present) with the ability to form connections across time through shared positionality, this chapter explores the politics of representations of “past” or “prior” communities in terms of affective involvement. I track various authors’ affective investments in butch/femme representations, developing Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” and Love’s analysis of “feeling backward.” These constructs examine the continuation of the past in the present by challenging notions of linear

temporality and sameness and difference. Further, they help us to understand why we feel any relationship with the past and people we have never known. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick's work on the links between feeling and touching, I read these representations as a means of feeling and touching *across time*. In this way, I consider how cross-historical affective and physical connections are formed and resisted through affective identification. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the political utility of both positive and negative affect and how feelings often serve as a site of identification around which butch/femme lesbians can rally.

### **The Problem of Representation: Politics**

How does one write a history of butch/femme that can be mobilized for political purposes while staying true to the affective realities of the past? Early work in gay and lesbian history problematized the dominance of negative representations of lesbianism. Blanche Wiesen Cook, a lesbian historian writing in the late 1970s at the advent of gay and lesbian studies laments:

Denied access to an accurate historical record, we knew only that our foresisters wore neckties, and committed suicide all over the last pages of the novel. With little to read and practically nothing to wear, we occupied an alien and threatening environment. The cost to women of that historical violence can be measured in the examples of women who, without knowledge or support, named sinful and sick, were in fact driven to suicide, or were deprived of energy and happiness (720)

Cook and other feminist historians problematized the normative historical record and its lack of positive representations of lesbianism, as well as the paucity of representation in general. They pointed to the inaccurate nature of history and how the biased historical record did and continued to do great violence to lesbians who,

without positive models of lesbianism were “driven to suicide, or were deprived of energy and happiness.” Their continuist histories were the result of this historical lacuna.

The problem of representation continues as butch/femme lesbians and other critics grapple with how to portray butch/femme lives. Joan Nestle writes, “because I am on the defensive many times in raising these issues, it is tempting to gloss over the difficulties that did exist in the past and do now. Being a femme was never a simple experience, not in the old lesbian bars of the 1950s and not now“(1992, 143). Nestle acknowledges how difficult it can be to write the history of a community that one has a particular stake or investment in. She admits that her identification with butch/femme culture frequently leads her to want to write a more positive history of butch/femme by not including the pain and other negative feelings experienced by butches and femmes of the past and present. Sue-Ellen Case expresses a similar problem of representation that she had when she wrote her first play about butch/femme bar life. Case relates that one of the lesbians who went to the play “looked me up later to ask why, in my humorous and alluring depiction of the bars, I had not detailed the alcoholism and drug abuse, which had so challenged her life<sup>13</sup> and which she attributed to the fact that lesbians could only gather in bars... I, too, when writing out into the straight culture, want to idealize the bars for political purposes. Make them jealous” (1998, 39). Both Case and Nestle desire to turn

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<sup>13</sup> Through eliding this aspect of bar life Case eliminates a potential site of shared positionality and marginality. She denies this lesbian the opportunity to connect with other lesbians through negative affect. Case emphasizes only the positive in service of a greater political project (to prove to heterosexual culture that butch/femme lesbians aren’t half bad), thereby denying other lesbians the opportunity to rally around shared feelings of shame and pain.

negative representations into positive ones for political purposes. This “turning” has come to be known as the “affirmative turn” (Love, 3-4).

The affirmative turn has been linked with a revisionist history that discredited negative representations or negative feelings because they were viewed as a threat to the legitimacy of gays and lesbians (Love, 3). Further, the affirmative turn is hard to resist as butch/femme lesbians have been bombarded with negative representations of their lives and sexuality. One butch recalls purchasing lesbian pulp fiction at her local drugstore: “I could tell just by the titles which books were meant to be about me... I was in my early teens going to the counter with all the shame and fear that the man I’d have to pay would know what I was reading about, and by that, know what I was—something bad, a subject for pornography” (Allegra 1992, 241).

Representations like these as well as the “psycho-socio-anthropological scientific bullshit studies on gay women written by Ph.Ds” contributed to feelings of self-loathing, internalized homophobia, and other negative affect (241). It is in reaction to these negative representations that queer critics and historians have struggled to affirmatively turn negative representations of butch/femme. Heather Love discusses how queer critics and historians find negative representations of the past difficult to deal with as they make it more challenging to construct an overwhelmingly positive queer history. She writes, “In attempting to construct a positive genealogy of gay identity, queer critics and historians have often found themselves at a loss about what to do with the sad old queens and long-suffering dykes who haunt the historical record” (32). These representations are negative, backward, and hard to turn.

While these critics look for a way to turn, to affirm, historical representations of lesbian life, other critics seek a way to dismiss positive representations as misrepresentative of butch/femme life. Lillian Faderman writes, “Nestle romanticized 1950s butches and femmes, depicting their own expression of nonconventional sexuality in an antisexual era as a rebellion of a colonized people. The appeal of that heroic image has been tremendous among many lesbians who not only want to honor that aspect of history, as Nestle did, but to live it, though filtered through their own time” (1992, 586). Faderman argues that these accounts give unwarranted agency to 1950s butch/femme lesbians; a group of people that Faderman believes lacked any sort of agency. She attributes this to Nestle’s desire to “honor that aspect of history.” In her anti-butch/femme version of continuist history Sheila Jeffreys, an opponent of butch/femme finds this desire problematic as it lends itself to the creation of biased historical representations. She remarks, “Some lesbian historians who are chronicling lesbian roleplaying in history treat roleplayers with unqualified admiration” (1993, 159). She believes Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* epitomizes this problem. She states:

It is a problem that at present some lesbians seem unable to break free from a hero-worship of butches based upon a masochistic sexual attraction which makes historical investigation a difficult task. Complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable but it would be helpful if writers would state their bias. Davis and Kennedy pretend to innocence about what they will find out about roleplaying whilst referring copiously to the writings of Nestle, Moraga and Hollibaugh in their notes” (187).

Jeffreys is angered by Davis and Kennedy’s supposed claim of innocence, while in fact (according to Jeffreys) their work was heavily influenced by the work of decidedly pro-butch/femme writers. Jeffreys is particularly concerned with the fact

that the “version of the past we are being given by promoters of butch and femme today is misleading” and that it is informing the way that roleplaying takes place in the present. She sees “the reclamation of roleplaying as a dangerous political development for lesbians.”

Here, although Faderman and Jeffreys take the opposite position vis-à-vis butch/femme roles from Nestle or Case, it is a *political commitment* that guides both of their concerns. In other words, butch/femme must be represented positively (for Nestle or Case) in order to solidify lesbian identity politics whereas (for Faderman and Jeffreys) butch/femme must be represented negatively – also to solidify lesbian politics. In both cases, the politics of representation here turn on affect – positive or negative, pride or shame – and affect’s relationship to political goals of the present.

### **Affective Representations: Identity and Community**

The butch/femme archive is full of negative representations that focus on the hopelessness, pain, and shame experienced daily by butch/femme lesbians. These representations are written by both supporters and opponents of butch/femme, and often center around the dismalness of bar life, the violence that stemmed from a homophobic society, and the lack of agency granted to sexual deviants. Faderman writes, “Since the bars alone provided a home for them, they had to risk whatever was necessary for the sake of being there. They tolerated the smallest crumbs and the shabbiest turf in their desperation for a ‘place.’ And even that was periodically taken away, whenever the majority community wanted to make a show of its high moral standards” (1991, 167). Faderman’s representation of butch/femme life casts it as a

shameful life in which lesbians took what they could get and were not afforded any respect. She describes the bars as dangerous, shabby, heterosexist, and homophobic. However, they were the only place that butch/femme lesbians could congregate so they were forced to risk it all for the chance at some sort of community. Audre Lorde expresses a similar sentiment in her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. She writes, “The society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it, and which allowed the Bagatelle to survive as long as it did, selling watered-down drinks at inflated prices to lonely dykes who had no other social outlet or community gathering place” (220). These two representations of the butch/femme bar scene of the 1950s emphasize despair and depression, shading these two writers’ representations with the density of affect.

This hopelessness is also a core component of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*. In this scene, a prostitute offers Jess some insight into the pain and suffering that results from spending a lot of time in the bars: “Angie rested her hand on my arm. ‘I’m gonna give you a piece of advice—you don’t have to take it. Get yourself a factory job so you don’t end up spending your whole life in the bars. Life in the Tenderloin’s like lickin’ a razor blade, you know what I mean? I’m not saying the plants are heaven, or anything, but maybe you can get into a plant with the other butches, pay your bills, settle down with a girl” (69). These representations of butch/femme life pay special attention to the role the bars played in community formation, but they emphasize the negative aspects of butch/femme bar life – a space of violence, despair, and oppression. These depictions emphasize the lack of choices

available to butch/femme lesbians and how they frequently had to make the best of a bad situation.

The *pièce de résistance* of negative representations of butch/femme lesbianism is without a doubt Radclyffe Hall's (1928) novel *The Well of Loneliness*. It is one of the most commonly read lesbian novels, and has been critiqued because of its incredibly depressing representation of lesbian life (as well as its supposed dependence on the sexological inversion model of lesbianism). As Lisa Walker writes, *The Well* has been referred to as “the lesbian novel” and “is inseparable from its reputation as *the most depressing* lesbian novel ever written”(2001, 22). Stephen Gordon, the main character serves as “The most famous literary example of a butch's masculine image” (Inness and Lloyd 1995, 6).

*The Well of Loneliness* is the lesbian novel against which all other representations of butch/femme are constructed. It has also been considered a foundational text in transgender representation (Love, 117) It is a difficult piece in the archive of butch/femme representation as it is horribly depressing (in defiance of the gay and lesbian movement's affirmative allegiance...in the family of butch/femme representation it has become the crotchety great-uncle that no one knows or wants to know how to deal with), it demonstrates a butch lesbian's explicit desire to be male—horribly anti-feminist! —and represents tragic romantic failure (Love, 114). Most lesbians have read or heard about *The Well* and as such it at least peripherally undergirds new representations of lesbianism.

Stephen Gordon cannot be said to be a happy lesbian. All textual analysis indicates that she is uncomfortable with her body and is troubled by her lesbianism.

One of the most commonly quoted passages of *The Well* demonstrates Stephen's relationship with her body and her views of herself:

That night she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body that must worship yet never be worshipped in return by the creature of its adoration. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel; it was so white, so strong, and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs—Oh, poor and most desolate body! (186-187)

This quote has been taken as indicative of Stephen's self-hatred and her discomfort with her female body. Stephen's relationship with her body is representative of her greater hatred of her sexuality. Her desire to be male is often read as a desire to be part of the heterosexual world. If she were male, her desire for females would not be considered abnormal. Because Stephen is female, her desire for other females signals her deviant sexuality. Because of her shame and presumed self-hatred, revisionist historians and critics have been resistant to condoning and propagating the "melancholic image of the butch lesbian" that Stephen represents (Love, 114). Many critics are uncomfortable with the depressing tone of *The Well*. Halberstam states:

Indeed, in an essay written in 1982 about teaching *The Well of Loneliness*, Toni McNaron describes the discomfort which her class responds to the novel: 'No one had liked anything about the book. The nonlesbians objected to it as non- or even anti-feminist, while the lesbians hotly rejected it as heterosexual in its notions of relationships and negative in its presentation of lesbians.' The class is able to reconcile themselves to the novel eventually only by reading Stephen Gordon as quintessential outsider rather than as EveryLesbian, but still the reactions of hostility are somewhat typical for that readership (97).

*The Well* is frequently rejected on the basis of being "anti-feminist" or "heterosexual in its notions of relationships and negative in its presentation of lesbians." The

students in McNaron's class were only able to deal with Stephen Gordon by casting her as an outsider, thereby denying any relationship between her and the average lesbian. The students were deeply troubled by the negative representation of lesbian life and had to disidentify from Stephen and her bad feelings in order to get anything out of the book.

When confronted with negative representations of lesbian life like *The Well*, critics and historians often attempt to transform it into something more positive. Heather Love writes, "*The Well* poses the problem of negative representation in a way that is hard to avoid. In response to such dark representations, critics have tended to emphasize the positive, celebrating moments of courage and pleasure in the record of the queer past" (105). This is consistent with early work in gay and lesbian studies, which worked to affirmatively turn negative representations into positive ones. Love writes, "Early work in lesbian and gay studies was marked by the legacy of Stonewall and by the sudden turn of this moment of reverse discourse; the emergent field's powerful utopianism, affirmation of gay identity, and hope for the future resonated with the seemingly magical power of this new movement to transmute shame into pride, secrecy into visibility, social exclusion into outsider glamour" (28). This turn can be seen in the ways that *The Well* has been re-read by critics" in order to project a happier ending for long-suffering Stephen" (Love, 104).

Others, as Esther Newton writes, have had no choice but to reclaim Radclyffe Hall and her representation of lesbianism *without* transforming negative affect into positive affirmation (1984, 559). While many critics problematize *The Well* for its negative representation of lesbians, Newton offers another possibility. She casts

Stephen Gordon as a lesbian superhero who is simultaneously combating sexism and heterosexism through her gender presentation and erotic choices. “Making the despised mannish lesbian the hero of *The Well of Loneliness*... Stephen Gordon, is a double symbol, standing for the New Woman’s painful position between traditional political and social categories, and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert an identity” (568). Newton understands Stephen to be a proud symbol of lesbianism and sexual agency. She rethinks the stigma of lesbianism that so intimately affects Stephen’s life and reclaims it as a tool that can work to unify and mobilize contemporary lesbians. Newton writes, “The mannish lesbian, of whom Stephen Gordon is the most famous prototype, has symbolized the stigma of lesbianism and so continues to *move* a broad range of lesbians” (560, emphasis added). Newton argues for the political possibilities made available – and moving – through rallying under the banner of stigma. She resists the urge to turn stigma into positive affect, and, unlike many lesbian critics, she considers the political utility of negative affect. While queers can come together under the waving rainbow flag of gay pride, Newton contends we can also assemble through shared feelings of exclusion and shame. It is because these feelings remain in our present that we are able to connect with Stephen Gordon; Newton writes, “*The Well* has continuing meaning to lesbians because it confronts the stigma of lesbianism-as most lesbians have had to live it” (560).

Not only does this kind of reclaiming allow stigma and shame to form a cross-historical affective tie between lesbians, it also enables the formation of community. Amber Hollibaugh, who came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s,

emphasizes the pain and stigma of being in a butch/femme relationship in terms of isolation:

My first butch lover and I began to fear coming home after we found our cat murdered in front of our apartment, with a note pinned to the door saying we'd be next. We regularly fought with men who waited outside the bar for the most obvious bull daggers and their 'faggot girlfriends,' or we turned away and hated ourselves for giving in. We lived constantly with the rude looks and loud, bitterly spoken comments—in the restaurants where we ate, the stores where we bought our clothes and groceries. Insults could be flung at us as we walked along any street, at any time. Strolling together as a butch/femme couple, we were an erotic, magnetic, moving target for all the sexual fear, envy, and ignorance of this culture” (2000, 259-260)

Hollibaugh acknowledges that butch/femme life was not without suffering and was most certainly not without negative affect. She illustrates the fear that plagued her and her butch lover's daily life. They were frequently insulted, constantly under attack, and served as an “erotic, magnetic, moving target” for all of the homophobia, hatred, and violence society possessed. While Hollibaugh is proud to be femme and is a strong supporter of butch/femme, the most painful aspect is the marginalization or isolation she and her butch lover experience.

Judy Grahn, another butch/femme in the 1960s recalls an incident in which she was interrogated by policemen and effectually humiliated. She writes:

Sweat poured down my ribs as I obeyed. After they left, my friend and I sat with our heads lowered, too ashamed of our weakness to look around or even to look each other in the face. We had no internal defense from the self-loathing our helplessness inspired and no analysis that would help us perceive oppression as oppression and not as a personal taint of character. Only the queens with their raucous sly tongues helped us get over these kinds of incidents. They called the policemen 'Alice Blue Gowns,' insulting them behind their backs. 'Alice Blue Gown tried to sit on *my* nightstick but I said No. You dirty boy! I know you're menthrating!' one plump faggot in a cashmere sweater would begin and soon we would be laughing and feeling strong again” (Kennedy and Davis 1992, 76).

In the retelling of this scene Grahn conveys the pain, anxiety, shame and self-loathing that marked her and her friend's life. Yet through community forged with these brazen queens, she was able to start "laughing and feeling strong again." While butch/femme life was colored by pain and shame, negative affect was managed through the formation of strong interpersonal connections that brought happiness and joy – a community rather than pathological or individualized isolation.

Representations such as these enlist negative representations – negative affect – of butch/femme in the service of community building and solidarity. They also show that negative feelings are linked with pride and positive affect.

This linkage between negative and positive affect in the service of community can also be found in Leslie Feinberg's description of butch/femme bar life. While Feinberg's representation, as above, centralizes hopelessness, *Stone Butch Blues* also shows that negative and positive affect are intimately connected. While the bars were a place of violence and pain, they were also a place of joy. The bars provided Jess with a community, a way to understand herself, and a sense of pride and happiness.

Feinberg writes:

"Hey kid, what's up?" Meg called out as she wiped down the bar. Familiar faces softened as they welcomed me. I had become a regular at Abba's.

"Hey, Meg. Gimme a beer, will ya?"

"Sure, kid, coming right up."

I sat down next to Edwina. "Hey, Ed, can I buy you a beer?"

"Yeah," she laughed, "why would I say no?"

It was Friday night. I had money in my pocket and I was feeling fine.

"Hey, what about me?" Butch Jan laughed.

"And a beer for my elder, Meg."

"Hey, watch that elder shit," Jan said.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Judging from the length of the red-painted nails it had to be Peaches. "Hi, honey," she kissed me gently on the ear.

I sighed with pleasure. "And a drink for Peaches," I called out to Meg.

“Child, you’re in one damn good mood tonight,” Peaches said. “You get lucky with some girl or something?”

I blushed. She had hit a sore spot. “I just feel so damn good. I got a job and a motorcycle and friends”(51).

Representations like this one illustrate that the shame and violence of an outside world could be reworked within the context of a supportive bar community. This scene provides a vivid description of the pleasure and pride butch/femme lesbians experienced when they found the bar community. For butch lesbians like Jess, the bar scene—and the community it supported—served as a kind of family, and a space in which they could be themselves. Being part of a butch/femme community conferred a sense of belonging both to the community and also within a social structure; it was a way to deal with the loneliness and isolation Hollibaugh describes. As Davis and Kennedy write, it was in the bars that “lesbians gathered dignity and developed positive feelings about themselves. The friendships that formed in the bars and parties extended to socializing beyond them... and lasted a life time” (1993, 374).

Butch/femme communities supported their members by serving as a place to make friends, but also as a space in which butches and femmes could become comfortable with themselves – to solidify identities. These communities gave butch/femme lesbians self-confidence and dignity in a time in which they were constantly met with loathing and homophobia. In this way, negative representations serve as a site of identification both in the present and across history. As Heather Love contends, “although it is painful to recognize our continuity with figures like Stephen Gordon, it is through such shaming acts of identification that we can come to terms with the difficulty of queer history and with its continuing legacy in the present. Such a reckoning is necessary, for without it we cannot remember history’s failures,

or do justice to our own experience in the present” (127). Love locates the importance of negative representations such as *The Well of Loneliness* in their ability to help us understand the continuation of queer pain in the present as a process of identification, and such realizations that we are able to “do justice to our own experience in the present.”

The cross-historical link created by shame is a key source of identification and communality. As Newton reminds us, pride is not the only source of community. As David Halperin and Valerie Traub argue:

For the growing numbers of people who have come to feel alienated from gay pride and who have had increasing difficulty finding a place for themselves in its civic pageants, with their contingents of gay policemen, lesbian mothers, business leaders, corporate employees, religious devotees, athletes, and politicians, Gay Shame offers a refuge, a site of solidarity and belonging. It willingly embraces those queers whose identities or social markings make them feel out of place in gay pride’s official ceremonies: people with the ‘wrong’ bodies, sadomasochists, sex workers, drag queens, butch dykes, people of color, boy-lovers, bisexuals, immigrants, the poor, the disabled (2009, 9).

Halperin and Traub, like Love, note the importance of negative affect – shame, stigma –as “a refuge, a site of solidarity and belonging.” They recognize that Gay Shame “willingly embraces those queers whose identities or social markings make them feel out of place in gay pride’s official ceremonies.” For them, Gay Shame serves as a site of belonging and identification for those that are marked as out of place. Negative affect welcomes those bodies that positive affect rejects – both in the present of butch/femme bar community and across lesbian time. It is through our shared emotionality and positionality – our distinct yet related stigmatization through cycles of salience – that we are able to form affective connection with temporally disparate figures.

### **Temporal Drag, Feeling Backward: Trauma and Touching Through Time**

I first fell in love with 1950s butch/femme lesbians in mid-November 2010, shortly following a period in which I desperately wanted to be one of them. I have since given up on actually *being* a 1950s butch or femme, but I have not stopped identifying with them. Why was I in love with these women, and why did I identify so strongly with them – even though I did not identify as either butch or femme in my own time? As a 21-year-old queer woman, having never experienced butch/femme bar culture, or identified with butch or femme, what was the source of this connection? It was almost as though these women were reaching across vast temporal expanses to touch me, seeking connection.

How do we understand the pull of the past on the present? Sometimes it consists of feelings of temporal incongruity, other times it represents a continuation of the past in the present, or the inability to draw a clear distinction between the past and the present: traces of the 1950s strong butch or fierce femme reside within the 2010s gender queer. One way to think this is through Elizabeth Freeman's understanding of "temporal drag." Temporal drag draws attention to the sense of political backwardness by developing "all of the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present" (728). Temporal drag is useful in helping us to understand how we form relationships across time, and what these relationships might yield. For some, these relationships help the individual to better understand herself and her own life. For example, Heather Love discusses how her life is affectively connected to her idol Gayle Rubin's despite the 20 years

that stand between them. This connection yields both greater self-awareness as well as feeling out of time. Love writes:

She [Rubin] remembers reading “dirty lesbian novels” by “the Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien crowd” in the upstairs reading room at the Bibliothèque Nationale in the early 1970s for a thesis in lesbian literature; I read those same books in that same room in the summer of 1990, also for my senior thesis. Rubin also remembers how she came to rethink the politics of sex work and pornography in the late 1970s. I spent a lot of the early 1990s tracing the early history of the feminist sex wars... All that time, I thought I was just living my life, while I was in fact following in Rubin’s footsteps — and, as I later came to realize, she had also traced out the path ahead (2010, 1)

Love seems to be repeating Rubin’s choices and following in her footsteps, albeit at a distance. She is demonstrating a “stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceeded her own historical moment.” Without realizing it her body serves as a drag of the past on the present.

Like my own identification with butch/femme, the 1980s “resurgence” of butch/femme can be understood as a kind of temporal drag. As I described in Chapter 1, Kath Weston’s experience at Prom Nite in 1985 recalls images of 1950s butches dressed to the nines in their dapper men’s clothing. One 1950s butch recalls, “I wore a crew cut and shirts. I used to have my pants tapered at the bottom. I’d have my cuffs taken in, you know. I’d go have my hair cut at the barber”, and “On weekends they would still dress up but strictly in men’s clothes. Penny loafers and dress boots were common, often worn with argyle socks. White bar dykes wore their hair in greased-back DAs” (Kennedy and Davis 1992, 66). The 1950s butch exerts a backward pull on the 1980s butch. This is not to say that 1950s and 1980s butches are the same, but that their shared positionality makes identification possible. Those lesbians at Prom Nite have 1950s butches and femmes in mind when they are putting together their

outfits and interacting; earlier historical models of butch/femme actively work to inform contemporary models. This connection and similarity across time invokes a need for a different temporal model other than heteronormative linear time. Queer temporality and in particular Valerie Traub's cycles of salience serve as a useful model for helping us think about these uncanny similarities.

This understanding of cyclical time allows us to think about cross-temporal affective connections and their relationship to politics. Many butch/femme lesbians cite their affective relationship with 1950s butch/femme lesbians. Tracy Morgan recounts how 1980s feminists disparaged her butch lover's dress, convinced that it indicated a lack of commitment to feminism; her lover viewed her dress as a way of connecting to her butch predecessors. Morgan recalls, "I never thought of my lover's pressed white shirts and wing-tips as objects for discussion: they were just *her*. She was a dyke who saw herself very much connected to the lesbians of the past, and she was not about to turn her back on her history"(Morgan, 37). This sartorial connection is marked by both affect and politics: it entails a move away from linear temporality in order to risk connection with the past. As Heather Love argues, such "feeling backward" means "embracing loss, risking abjection" (2007, 30). Morgan's lover's investment in forging connections across time is manifested in her sartorial presentation, but feeling backward takes other shapes as well. Feeling backward references both being open to identifications with temporally distant figures on the basis of shared emotions and positionality, and being willing to explore and embrace negative feelings. It is through feeling backward that we can connect with figures such as Stephen Gordon, or the young dyke who tells us how she went to "the counter

with all the shame and fear that the man I'd have to pay would know what I was reading about, and by that, know what I was—something bad.” Feeling backward involves not just shaping our present through reading representations of the past, but instead shaping our present through making a conscious effort to *feel* the drag of the past.

The ability for affect to *move* us is linked to its ability to *touch* us. As Eve Sedgwick points out that both “touching” and “feeling” share “the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional” (2003, 17). Ben Highmore expands on this double-meaning in his essay “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics.” He writes,

In common English usage the words designating affective experience sit awkwardly on the borders of the material and the immaterial, the physical and the metaphysical: we are *moved* by sentiment; our *feelings* are hurt; I am *touched* by your presence. The interlacing of sensual, physical experience (here, the insistent reference to the haptic realm—touch, feel, move) with the passionate intensities of love, say, or bitterness, makes it hard to imagine untangling them, allotting them to discrete categories in terms of their physicality or their ideational existence” (Highmore 2010, 120)

As Highmore, Sedgwick, and other critics contend, touching and feeling are tightly intertwined as ways of perceiving the outside world. The emotional is linked to the corporeal, and *visa versa*; we are in Carolyn Dinshaw's moment of communion.

In butch/femme representations, affect is densely related to tactility and touch, and corporality – the body – is a central site of both positive and negative affect. For many butches and femmes it was through physical touch that they experienced emotional healing – identification and belonging; in other cases, it was through physical touch that they were shattered emotionally – isolated and stigmatized. Amber Hollibaugh discusses how, as a femme woman, butches served as a kind of

healing agent. “In their bodies, their complex genders, their eyes, the power of their hands and mouths, the wonder of their hands and their cocks, I could ride through and sink inside my history with all its humiliations, force, and beauty. I could find refuge. They could take me under. Through the sheer power of their desire for another woman they could take me home” (36). For Hollibaugh it is the physical act of having sex with a butch woman that gives her the opportunity to confront and tackle her history full of “humiliations, force, and beauty.” Understanding touching as affective allows us to reconsider how we can touch figures across time, how the butches and femmes of the past touch – and move – us here in the present. Touching across time can mean many things including identifying with figures across large temporal expanses, connecting emotionally with people of the past, creating communities across time. But always, touching people in the past yields an affective connection. It is by touching across time that we are able to experience both the touch of the past upon our present, and the physical and emotional sensations experienced by our foresters. For Dinshaw, touching and feeling constitute one another, her model of queer history and affective connection opens up space to explore the affective and political connections we feel across time, often in sites of trauma or pain.

As Ann Cvetkovich argues, it is through trauma that this doubleness of touch – “as both an emotional and physical category” – operates (68). For Cvetkovich, “trauma” and “touch” have both physical and emotional, both material and immaterial, connotations. “To be emotionally touched, like being traumatized, is to be affected in a way that *feels* physical even if it is also a psychic state... The imbrications of trauma and touch are a reminder of how modes of everyday sense

experience, and particularly the intimacies of tactile experience in which bodies and things rub up against one another, are connected to trauma as a somatic experience” (51). Cvetkovich’s analysis of trauma helps us rethink the hopeless and despair in representations of butch/femme, for if these moments mark sites of collective trauma, they also mark places where our emotional and our bodily experiences might touch across time.

As physical violence was a central feature of early butch/femme life, it serves as a key site of identification for touching and feeling – then and now. In these cases touching and feeling cannot be teased apart as is evident in one particularly gruesome scene of *Stone Butch Blues*:

“C’mon, Jesse,” a cop taunted me, “let’s have a pretty smile for the camera. You’re such a pretty girl. Isn’t she pretty guys?” They snapped my mug shot. One of the cops loosened my tie. As he ripped open my new dress shirt, the sky blue buttons bounced and rolled across the floor. He pulled up my T-shirt, exposing my breasts. My hands were cuffed behind my back. I was flat up against a wall. “I don’t think she likes you, Gary,” another cop said. “Maybe she’d like me better.” He crossed the room. My knees were wobbling. *Lt. Mulroney*, that’s what his badge read. He saw me looking at it and slapped me hard across the face. His hand clamped on my face like a vise. “Suck my cock,” he said quietly. There wasn’t a sound in the room. I didn’t move. No one said anything. I almost got the feeling it could stay that way, all action frozen, but it didn’t. Mulroney was fingering my crotch. “Suck my cock, bulldagger.” Someone hit the side of my knee with a nightstick. My knees buckled more from fear than pain. Mulroney grabbed me by the collar and dragged me several feet away to a steel toilet. There was a piece of unflushed shit floating in the water. “Either eat me or my shit, bulldagger. It’s up to you.” I was too frightened to think or move. I held my breath the first time he shoved my head in the toilet. The second time he held me under so long I sucked in water and felt the hard shape of shit against my tongue. When Mulroney pulled my head back out of the toilet I spewed vomit all over him. I gagged and retched over and over again. “Aw shit, fuck, get her out of here,” the cops yelled to each other as I lay heaving. “No,” Mulroney said, “handcuff her over there, on top of the desk.” They lifted me and threw me on my back across the desk and handcuffed my hands over my head. As one cop pulled off my trousers I tried to calm the spasms in my stomach so I wouldn’t choke to

death on my own vomit. “Aw, ain’t that cute, BVD’s<sup>14</sup>,” one cop called out to another. “Fuckin’ pervert.” I looked at the light on the ceiling, a large yellow bulb burning behind a metal mesh. The light reminded me of the endless stream of television westerns I saw after we moved up north. Whenever anyone was lost in the desert the only image shown was a glaring sun- all the beauty of the desert reduced to that one impression. Staring at that jail light bulb rescued me from watching my own degradation: I just went away. I found myself standing in a desert. The sky was streaked with color. Every shift of light cast a different hue across the wilderness: salmon, rose, lavender. The scent of sage was overpowering. Even before I saw the golden eagle gliding in the updraft above me, I heard it scream, as clearly as if it had come from my own throat. I longed to soar in flight with the eagle, but I felt rooted to earth. The mountains rose to meet me. I walked toward them, seeking sanctuary, but something held me back. “Fuck it,” Mulroney spat. “Turn her over, her cunt’s too fucking loose.” “Jeez Lieutenant, how come these fuckin’ bulldaggers don’t fuck men and they got such big cunts?” “Ask your wife,” Mulroney said. The other cops laughed. I panicked. I tried to return to the desert but I couldn’t find that floating opening between the dimensions I’d passed through before. An explosion of pain in my body catapulted me back. I was standing on the desert floor again, but this time the sands had cooled. The sky was overcast, threatening to storm. The air pressure was unbearable. It was hard to breathe. From a distance I heard the eagle scream again. The sky was growing as dark as the mountains. Wind blew through my hair. I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the desert sky. And then, finally, it released- the welcome relief of warm rain down my cheeks (62-63).

This scene effectively illustrates the relationship between touching and feeling through the physical and emotional violence Jess experiences. In this moment feeling is both deeply emotional and exceptionally physical. Jess is being called horrible names, verbally abused, and simultaneously being beaten, sexually abused, and essentially tortured. Everything Jess feels emotionally, she is also feeling viscerally, in her body.

And how do we in the present experience this scene? Do we resist identification with this violence, turning away from this scene out of our own shame? Or do we risk identification, connection? Scenes like this are troubling because in

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<sup>14</sup> BVD’s were a type of men’s underwear frequently worn by butches in the 1950s and 60s.

some way we feel the penetrating violence as if it were our body being defiled. Most of us have not been raped by police officers, but at the same time most of us have experienced state violence, marginalization, heteropatriarchy: the straight man who tries to convince us that one romp in bed with him will turn us straight, that his dick will be our salvation. Or straight men forcing themselves on our girlfriends because they think they can give them something we can't. At these moments, we metaphorically suck dick and eat shit. This affective identification through trauma enables us to feel backward, to allow ourselves to experience the drag of the past on our present. And through this pull we resist the easy politics of affirmation, the turn that would position us as far removed from the bad old days before Stonewall and Jess as our very distant past. But we are still being discriminated against. We are still called perverts, told by people we love that we are going to burn in hell, still asked, "You would never marry a *woman*... would you?" We still watch our parents cry when they realize that we won't be walking down the aisle in a white dress. We are still shunned by the people we love. We are still ashamed and it is in looking backward that we are able to see our pain and – by connecting to it through touch and feeling, affect and corporality – transform this shared trauma into a collective political project – rather than turning away.

### **Affective Sites of Identification**

It is the continued oppression of queer-identified people that permits cross-temporal identification. Affective connection and shared positionality allows for

identification and subsequent community formation. If we can rally effectively around positive feelings of joy, excitement and pride, we can perhaps rally even more effectively around shame, trauma, violence and stigmatization. These negative feelings stick with us, drag us backward; they evoke painful memories and visceral reactions. While we might initially resist negative representations of butch/femme life because we don't like the way they make us feel, their ability to make us feel so strongly demonstrates their capacity to link bodies across time and space. Reading accounts of homophobia and violence such as Amber Hollibaugh's story of her cat being murdered help us to realize how much we still have in common with our queer brothers and sisters of the past, creating sites of affective connection. Expanding these sites of identification allows us to open up the possibilities of shared positionality. I am not the same as a 1950s or a 1980s butch/femme lesbian (and they are not the same as each other), but we all share a kind of marginality, a queer status. It is this shared status that allows us to make connections across time and create temporally diverse communities.

This cross-temporal affective connection is difficult – even painful. Feeling backward reminds us of our violent past and troubling present, presenting a cycle of saliency structured not around progress – linear time – but rather around shared sites of trauma, a repetition of patriarchy and hatred. As Love argues, “texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present. We find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with these figures” (8-9). By distancing ourselves from the past we are attempting to secure our spot in the progressive queer present and future. We shun

history's others because they make us remember that we are like them, that our present shares something with their past.

The post-Stonewall era has been dominated by the trope of gay pride and reclamation of the past through an affirmative turn: a move to transform shame into pride, and pain into pleasure. This discursive move has depended on a commitment to looking forward and envisioning a powerfully positive queer future. Looking or feeling backward is then regressive; we might even fear “setting back the movement” if we linger at a site of trauma, rather than celebrate gay pride, progress and affirmation. Yet such lingering, a dragging backward, a touch across time – even, or especially through shame, trauma and despair – can “serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress. Most important, they teach us that we do not know what is good for politics” (Love, 27).

### Chapter 3

## Politics of Butch/Femme: Refiguring Sameness and Difference

Theresa smiled. “When a woman tells me, ‘If I wanted a man I’d be with a real one,’ I tell her, “I’m not with a fake man, I’m with a real butch.” I beamed with pride. “But,” Theresa added, “that doesn’t mean that butches can’t learn a thing or two from the women’s movement about how to respect femmes.”

★Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

This chapter explores the political implications of butch/femme. As many commentators have noted, butch/femme couples look the *same* as heterosexual couples, in terms of the eroticization of gender *difference*. This complex relationship of sameness and difference is, as I have discussed in terms of queer history (and time) and queer affect (and political progress) present throughout butch/femme discourse and representation. In terms of butch/femme’s politics, however, the crucial issue is similarity to or difference from heterosexuality. Developing my reading of queer history (and cycles of salience) and queer affect (and touching, feeling), this chapter explores the politics of *looking like* heterosexuality and its temporal implications.

There are two main approaches to the politics of butch/femme: the lesbian feminist and the pro-sex feminist. The lesbian feminist<sup>15</sup> position contends that butch/femme is antifeminist because of its imitation of heterosexuality. Jeanne Cordova, a butch coming to age in the 1960s, recalls:

The Lesbian-Feminists said it was wrong for femmes to wear makeup, patriarchal to indulge in monogamy, and ‘male-identified’ (a mortal sin) for butches to wear ties. In fact, the Lesbian-Feminists insisted there was no such thing as butch-femme. It was a ‘heterosexual cop-out.’... These frizzy-headed, unshaven interlopers decreed that ‘womyn’ who acted like men (butches) or like girls (femmes) were not even lesbians! Feminism’s only

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<sup>15</sup> Feminism in the 1960s-70s is alternately referred to as “Lesbian Feminism” and “Radical Feminism,” throughout this chapter I will adopt the first label unless quoting a passage that employs the other term.

analysis of ‘butch’ was as synonymous with ‘male’—which meant thoroughly politically incorrect” (1992, 283).

Cordova’s experience illustrates lesbian-feminism’s tendency to equate butch/femme with heterosexuality by denying lesbian space for eroticized gender difference. Gender *difference* indicated a *sameness* with heterosexuality. Butch/femme was therefore anti-lesbian because of its perceived reification of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Lesbian-feminism problematized difference while concurrently advocating for similarity, a position known as the “woman-identified-woman” (Radicalesbians, 1970).

In contrast, pro-sex feminists<sup>16</sup> denied butch/femme’s similarity to heterosexuality, rallying around its difference. Joan Nestle proclaims, “butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas” (1987, 100). Pro-sex feminists contest butch/femme’s perceived mimetic identification with heterosexuality by asserting its complexity and its lesbian specificity (Nestle, 104). However, while these two positions make opposing claims, they use the same logic.

This chapter illuminates the temporal assumptions that undergird both the lesbian and pro-sex feminist positions. Both positions fail to pay explicit attention to the progressive linear model of time that underlies claims of repetition versus reiteration, and therefore attribute political stances without an adequate queering of time. Elizabeth Freeman’s question, “What is the time of queer performativity?” (728) is, as we will see, invaluable to analyzing the politics of butch/femme. Turning Freeman’s question, I ask, “What happens to butch/femme politics if we queer time?”

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<sup>16</sup> For lack of a better term

### **Butch/Femme: Anti-Feminist and Anti-Lesbian**

Lesbian feminism's collapse of gender and sex meant that female masculinity was perceived as male-identification (Laporte 1971, 5). Butches were attacked for wanting to be men because of their masculine gender presentation. For lesbian feminists, butch masculinity represented a deep investment in heterosexual gender roles and an anti-lesbian, indeed, anti-feminist commitment to power and female oppression. As Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon write in 1972:

Strangely, it is those women who feel that they are 'born butch' who tend to ape all the least desirable characteristics of men. In this case one may well say to these butches, 'Up against the wall, male chauvinist pig!' For to consider oneself a heterosexual, to stress that male and female are opposites which presumably attract, is to accept the entire male-imposed doctrine that woman's place is indeed in the home serving the male (74).

Martin and Lyon distinguish between women who identify as butch out of necessity and those that believe it reflects an inner truth. Women in the latter category desire to be men, a desire that reflects their investment in dichotomous gender roles and heterosexuality's oppression of women. Through identifying as butch they are indicating that they no longer identify as women and because of this are not invested in the improved status of women. This makes them anti-feminist, and as they are not women-identified-women (because they do not identify as women and are not invested in women) they are anti-lesbian.

The lesbian feminist hostility toward butches is well represented in *Stone Butch Blues*. Jess recalls, "They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke. We were not hard to send away, we went quietly" (Feinberg, 11).

Feinberg beautifully contrasts the maleness assigned to butches by lesbian feminists

with their self-identification: “they said we were *male* chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was *women’s* hearts they broke” (italics mine). Lesbian feminist’s inability to distinguish between sex and gender frequently led to the “conflation of masculinity, maleness, butchness, and oppressive power” in “analyses of sex/gender oppression” (Roof 1998, 27).

Lesbian feminists located gender role differentiation as the primary site of heterosexism, sexism, and the solidification of the patriarchy. Dichotomized gender roles were perceived to be the foundation of heterosexuality and patriarchal domination. As Connie Carter and Jean Noble write:

Lesbian feminists argued that women's oppression is maintained by the social construction of dichotomous gender categories. Gender categories such as femininity and masculinity and their concomitant roles and identities are assumed to be the organizing principle of heteropatriarchy (1996, 25).

Because gender roles were thought to organize “heteropatriarchy” they were rejected. The Radicalesbians echo this sentiment; “Sex roles dehumanize women by defining us as a supportive/serving caste *in relation to* the master caste of men” (233). Sex roles contributed to the continued subjugation of women by placing women in a servile position to men. Thus, they should be eradicated. Lesbian feminists believed abolishing gender roles would disrupt the gender-role dependent dominance of the patriarchy. Judith Halberstam notes, “Lesbian feminists of this ilk believed that by casting off roles, women became free of patriarchal and capitalist constraints and could find their way to new and liberated and fully human forms of social and sexual interaction” (132). They thought that getting rid of gender roles would lead to the collapse of patriarchal domination, yielding new, liberated, and evolved relationalities.

Lesbian feminists judged butch/femme as anti-feminist because of its eroticization of gender difference. Butch/femme's eroticization of gender difference was equated with heterosexuality's intrinsic eroticization and affirmation of power difference through gender difference. As such, butch/femme's embrace of gender difference was, for lesbian feminists, an embrace of patriarchal power difference. Carter and Noble acknowledge the power difference in relationships that eroticize gender difference. They contend, "relations between men and women are characterized by dominance and submission in which men, for their own benefit, subordinate and oppress women" (25). While they specifically locate the power difference in heterosexual relationships, for most lesbian feminists this key difference applies to all relationships in which there is gender difference. Therefore, gender difference produces, relies upon and strengthens power difference.

Difference, for lesbian feminists, is not neutral. As Sheila Jeffreys writes:

The concept of difference is not benign. When sexists put down feminists with the slogan 'vive la difference' they are stating something profound about the way sexual desire is organised under male supremacy...The 'male-female polarity' is a polarity of dominance and submission. That is why difference in this context cannot be benign. Under male supremacy it is the subordination of women and male power that are eroticised. Sexual attraction is constructed around 'difference', i.e. dominance and submission. Those lesbians who are revalidating butch and femme are not discovering that they are innately butch or femme, they are engaging in an erotic communication based on sado-masochism, the eroticising of power difference" (179).

Jeffreys challenges the claim that butch/femme lesbians are expressing an inner truth by the adopting these roles, contending instead they are reproducing heterosexual power structures. Jeffreys links gender difference to power difference, and goes so far as to equate butch/femme with sado-masochism (since, in her logic, the eroticization of gender difference necessitates the eroticization of power difference). For Jeffreys,

all difference is power difference, or as she puts it, “dominance and submission.” Others share this equation of gender difference with power difference. The main character in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* comments on her displeasure about the dominance of butch/femme, especially as she doesn’t identify as either. For the main character Audre, butch/femme roles reflected all the strictures and oppression of heterosexual society.

For some of us, however, role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to “the life” in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression no matter where it came from. But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/submission, rejected what they called our “confused” lifestyle, and they were in the majority (221).

For women like Audre, butch/femme’s reproduction of heterosexual gender roles made it essentially heterosexuality through its *same* difference: the same as heterosexuality, based on eroticized power difference. The strict dichotomization of gender roles reinforced the eroticization of power difference and contributed to the continued oppression of women. While many women turned to lesbianism to escape the oppression of the heterosexual world, the proliferation of what they saw as heterosexual gender roles in the lesbian community allowed them no relief. All the sexism and oppression that supposedly stemmed from the hands of men was reproduced in butch/femme.

### **Politically Regressive: Temporally the Same and Backward**

Lesbian feminists viewed the politics of butch/femme to be regressive because it was imitative. As an imitation it was merely repeating the original—

heterosexuality. Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, writing in the early 1970s, remark “as the heterosexual culture has had a need for opposites, so gay women have felt they needed opposites. Their needs were a carbon copy of the heterosexuals” (1972, 94). Judith Halberstam notes, “Lesbian feminists took aim at butch-femme as a particularly insidious form of cultural imitation. Much of the lesbian feminist reaction to butch-femme took the form of disbelief, and women expressed bewilderment about what looked to them like slavish copying of heterosexual roles” (Halberstam, 122). Perceived to be an imitation of heterosexuality, lesbian feminism challenged butch/femme’s *lesbianness* because of its perceived investment in reproducing heterosexual gender roles. Further, lesbian feminists worried butch/femme was politically regressive; that it might set back the movement through its commitment to normative erotic formations structured around heterosexual gender difference. In an age of feminist hope for gendered equality and progress, butch/femme was a drag on the movement – it seemingly compulsively repeated and referenced of hegemonic heterosexuality (and with it patriarchy).

The temporality of this argument is not difficult to see: butch/femme is simultaneously figured as backward and the same. It is backward and the same because it consists of repetition without difference, constantly serving as a (poor) copy of the original, heterosexuality. Indeed, butch/femme has been charged with “replicating heterosexual patterns for want of a more original model or for lack of feminist consciousness” (Vance 1984, 16). As Freeman asserts, “repetitions with any backwards-looking force, on the other hand, are merely ‘citational,’ and can only thereby consolidate the authority of a fantasized original” (728). As butch/femme is a

repetition of heterosexuality, it consistently points to the original (heterosexuality), thereby strengthening heterosexuality's position as the original. Heterosexuality also gains strength through butch/femme's inability to perform heterosexuality as well as heterosexuality is able to perform itself (which, as Butler shows us, isn't very well at all). Carol Vance writes, butch/femme has been perceived by both lesbian culture and "the dominant, heterosexual culture... [as] a pitiful imitation by inferiors" (15-16). As a "pitiful imitation," and a referent, it reinforces the superiority of heterosexuality, and works to reinforce the notion of heterosexuality as the original. It is through this reinforcement that heterosexuality maintains its dominance. While butch/femme is critiqued for being backward because it constantly points back to heterosexuality, it is also critiqued for being the same as heterosexuality. Butch/femme exists at the same time and in the same time as heterosexuality. Both are located within heterosexuality's repetitive cycle.

Lesbian feminism after the 1970s continues the analysis of butch/femme as politically backward, although not the same. In the post-Stonewall era, the resurgence of butch/femme in the 1980s was seen as a "throw-back" not so much to heterosexuality, but to the 1950s models of butch/femme community. In this chain of referents (where butch/femme in later historical periods is understood to be referential to the original butch/femme, which is itself referential to heterosexuality), butch/femme is seen as repeating (seemingly without difference) an erotic formation of an earlier era. Kath Weston explains that, according to many lesbian feminists, butches and femmes were seen as "poor misguided wretches, carryovers from the 'old gay' days when lesbians were male- and heterosexual-identified because they didn't

know any better and lacked feminist models for constructing nonhierarchical relationships" (1993, 2). Lesbian feminists were able to explain why 1950s butch/femme lesbians identified as such-- because they lacked feminist consciousness and therefore didn't know any better than to imitate male/female relationships. On the other hand, lesbians who were aware of feminism's message and still identified as butch/femme were seen as "insecure, immature, and unevolved" (Halberstam, 131), and most likely "old-timers, gay bar habituées, or working-class women" (Martin and Lyon, 77). This applied to the post-Stonewall, post-1970s lesbian feminist butches and femmes – the butch/femme configuration of the 1980s and 1990s. If 1950s butches and femmes were backward because of their imitation of heterosexuality, 1980s butch/femme lesbians were backward because of their rejection of feminism: they could have (should have) known better. This backwardness, then, is explicitly political: the rejection of feminism, rather than the as-of-yet *unraised* feminist consciousness. And often, critics framed this analysis, as with Martin and Lyon, in terms of age, class, and level of education. Joan Nestle confirms the perceived relationship between backwardness and working-class identity. "Real-life, working butch and femme women are seen as imitative and culturally backward" (107).

Lesbian feminists rejected butch/femme because of its reproduction of heterogender roles and heterosexuality. Amber Hollibaugh remarks that the lesbian feminist movement, "viewed butch/femme desire and methods of social interaction as dangerous, odd, ridiculous, shameful, a ruinous erotic system which was considered antithetical to the goals and ambitions of that movement" (257). Butch/femme was critiqued particularly because of its similarities to heterosexuality and its

reinforcement of heterosexuality. Davis and Kennedy concur, “on the surface, lesbian feminists in the early 1970s dissociated themselves from butch-fem communities as a reaction to the gender-defined roles of that community. From their perspective, butch-fem roles reproduced the patriarchy and institutionalized hierarchy in women’s relationships” (11).

### **Butch/Femme: Radical and Transgressive**

While lesbian feminists claim butch/femme is anti-feminist because it imitates heterosexuality, pro-sex feminists contend that is inherently different from heterosexuality. For pro-sex feminists, butch/femme is a perception of sameness within the actuality of difference, and it is this dynamic that makes it radical and transgressive. In this argument, butch/femme’s eroticization of gender difference is not imitative of heterosexuality, but rather distinctly lesbian. Joan Nestle asserts, “not only was there the erotic statement made by the two women together, but there was and still is a butch sexuality and a femme sexuality, not a woman-acting-like-a-man or a woman-acting-like-a-woman sexuality, but a developed Lesbian-specific sexuality that has a historical setting and a cultural function” (Nestle, 104). Nestle points to the many differences between butch/femme and heterosexuality, the most important being that butch/femme takes place between two women. Regardless of whether butch/femme *looks* like heterosexuality, it isn’t because it is lesbian. What looks like male-identification is in fact a distinct butch sexuality and what looks like heterosexual-female-identification is actually a distinct femme sexuality. For Nestle

and other pro-sex feminists, butch/femme is not lesbianism-acting-like-heterosexuality, but lesbianism-being-lesbian.

This distinction relies on the social constructedness of gender and its difference from biological sex. Many butch/femme-identified lesbians assert how they consciously construct their gender—contrasting greatly with the lesbian feminist argument that butch/femme lesbians blindly imitate normative gender roles. Butch and femme are two very distinct and consciously constructed ways of being a woman. Judy Grahn expresses how her butch identity doesn't signal a deeper desire to be male, but is representative of the specific way she wants to be female: "our point was not to be men; our point was to be butch and get away with it. We always kept something back: a high-pitched voice, a slant of the head, or a limpness of hand gestures, something that was clearly labeled female. I believe our statement was 'Here is another way of being a woman,' not 'Here is a woman trying to be taken for a man'" (MacCowan 1992, 322). Grahn illustrates the intentionality of gender presentation. For her, being butch involved adopting certain male-signifiers, and rejecting others to construct a distinctly butch presentation; being butch didn't necessarily express a desire to be male, as lesbian feminists contended, but instead a new way of being female. Similarly, Amber Hollibaugh remarks about how carefully she put together her femme identity. She states:

You know that if you're doing high femme, your femininity is profoundly made up. Femmes make it happen in a way that is not at all natural-it is real, but it is not natural. As a femme, you have made decisions about how you will appear as a gendered person. And when you're doing it, you don't take a deep breath and say, "Ah, I'm finally me." Instead, you go, "Ha, I finally actually look like the way I think a girl who isn't a girl looks (249-250).

For these pro-sex feminists, butch and femme challenged and expanded the gender

options for women; Hollibaugh's femme identity isn't imitative of heterosexual femininity<sup>17</sup>, but most closely resembles a drag queen's femininity. For her, gender is not natural and it doesn't reflect an inner truth. She highlights the constructedness of high femme and contrasts it with the assumed naturalness of heterosexual gender.

For pro-sex feminists, butch/fem<sup>18</sup> eroticism is sex-positive and deeply empowering through the inversion of normative gender roles (Davis and Kennedy, 226). Yet of sexuality itself, there is much debate about the potential inversion of normative sexual roles. Butches are typically understood as the active partner; the femme is more passive. Femmes have challenged their supposed passivity, contending that they are active, but active in a receptive way.<sup>19</sup> Because the "masculine" partner is active while the "feminine" partner is passive, butch/femme has been compared to heterosexual erotic roles. Davis and Kennedy state, "Inherent to the butch-fem dyad was the presumption that the butch was the physically active partner and the leader in lovemaking... Insofar as the butch was the doer and the fem was the desired one, butch-fem roles did indeed parallel heterosexual male-female roles" (72). Yet Davis and Kennedy go on to argue that, "contrast to the dynamics of most heterosexual relationships, the butch's foremost objective was to give sexual pleasure to a fem; it was in satisfying her fem that the butch received fulfillment" (72). In this argument, the similarity (of gender and sexual role) turns into lesbian

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<sup>17</sup> This appears to be a relatively common analysis of the relationship between femme femininity and heterosexual femininity. "Straight women largely have come to represent a background of passive victims against which the femme can be convincingly reconfigured as subversive, feminist, and free" (Galewski 2005, 191).

<sup>18</sup> Davis and Kennedy use this spelling, so when referring to them I will also

<sup>19</sup> For a greater discussion of femme sexual agency see among others: *Restricted Country*, "What We're Rollin' around in Bed With" in *The Persistent Desire*, "The femme tapes" in *The Persistent Desire*, *The Persistent Desire*, *My Dangerous Desires*, *The Femme Mystique*, and *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*.

difference again, as butch/fem sex is not focused on the sexual gratification of the active partner.

Butch/femme sexuality, unlike heterosexuality, is centered on pleasuring the femme. Davis and Kennedy's many conversations with different narrators reveals just how prevalent this erotic formation was: "the active, or 'masculine,' partner was associated with the giving of sexual pleasure, a service usually assumed to be 'feminine.' In contrast, the fem, although the more reactive partner, demanded and received sexual pleasure and in this sense might be considered the more self-concerned or even more selfish partner" (1992, 73). Butch/fem eroticism inverted the heteronormative sexual gender roles by centralizing the fem's pleasure. If giving sexual pleasure is the role of the feminine partner in heterosexual relationships, the more masculine partner's giving of sexual pleasure indicated a gender role reversal.<sup>20</sup> For many, butch/femme eroticism allowed for an open and supportive community environment. Lyndall MacCowan speaks to the wonders of butch/femme eroticism:

It is butch women who made wanting sex okay, who never said I wanted it 'too much' or thought I got too wet. With so many other women I was either 'an ironing board' or 'a slut'; it was butch women who taught me about multiple orgasms and the incredible high of fisting, who made it okay to want to be made love to until I was too spent to move. It was butch women who made it right to give by responding rather than reciprocating, to make love by moving beneath them instead of using my tongue or hands. It was butch women who gave me permission to not be in control at all times, and butch women who didn't think it vain that I wanted to be pretty, who, indeed, made me feel beautiful (Cvetkovich, 57).

While butch/femme has been critiqued on the basis of its eroticization of gender difference and its strict gender roles limiting sexual experience, MacCowan finds butch/femme eroticism expands her sexual experiences. It is through butch/femme

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<sup>20</sup> This erotic formation based on the strict dichotomization of butch/femme roles was more prevalent in the 1950s and 60s than it was in the 1980s.

eroticism that she is able to satisfy all of her desires. It empowers her by affirming her distinct femme sexuality and more broadly by affirming her sexuality as a woman.

Pro-sex feminists have seen in butch/femme the resistance to and refusal of limited gender and sexual roles and an expansion of ways of being (lesbian) women. Indeed, Kennedy and Davis see butch/fem as a form of prepolitical resistance to heterosexuality at a time when women's roles and options were limited (1992, 62). Davis and Kennedy challenge the claim that butch/fem signaled a desire to reproduce traditional gender roles. Instead, they contend, "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" (1993, 153). Butch-fem was focused on producing difference from heterosexuality; this difference made them legible. Their legibility expressed their unwillingness to buy into heterosexuality, and announced their defiance of heterosexuality in favor of lesbianism.

The temporality of butch/femme politics for pro-sex feminists, then, turns on a repetition with a difference, a sameness that turns out to be different all along. At first glance it looks like a repetition, but upon closer inspection the truth becomes clear. Butch/femme's transgressive nature stems from it looking like something other than it is. This phenomenon is described in Sarah Waters' novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, when the main character goes to her first lesbian bar:

I looked at the group of figures at the billiard table. And then, after a moment or two, I studied them a little harder. I said to Florence, 'I thought you said it

was to be all toms<sup>21</sup> here? There are blokes over there.' 'Blokes? Are you sure?' She turned to where I pointed, and gazed with me at the billiard players. They were rather rowdy, and half of them were clad in trousers and waistcoats, and sported prison crops. But as Florence studied them, she laughed. 'Blokes?' she said again. 'Those are not blokes! Nancy, how could you think it?' I blinked, and looked again. I began to see... They were not men, but girls; they were girls—and they were rather like myself..." (2000, 416-417).<sup>22</sup>

From a distance Nancy mistakes the butch<sup>23</sup> women playing billiards for men; she initially misreads the scene because she reads it through the lens of heterosexuality in which masculinity signifies maleness and femininity signifies femaleness. Like Nancy's misperception, butch/femme can be misread at a distance because from far away it does look very much like heterosexuality. However, if we study the scene more closely, as Nancy does, we notice the dissonance between butch/femme's queerness and heterosexuality's rigidity. Butch/femme's power lies in its ability to defy expectations and initial assumptions. It gains its power by looking like heterosexuality, but being lesbian.

### **Politically Progressive: Temporally Forward**

Repetition with a difference is how Judith Butler frames the question of butch/femme in her work on queer performativity. This queer feminism, the development of the 1980s pro-sex feminist position, argues that butch/fem both "imitates and transforms heterosexuality" (Davis and Kennedy 1992, 72). It does so

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<sup>21</sup> Toms refers to lesbians

<sup>22</sup> While this book takes place in London, at the end of the nineteenth century, I recognize the applicability of this scene to a greater understanding of gender subversion. I by no means contend that butch/femme during this period mirrors butch/femme in later periods, but that gender subversion remains gender subversion over time.

<sup>23</sup> I use the word "butch" not to indicate a similarity between present definitions of butch and past definitions, but to signal a masculine presenting lesbian.

by reworking the gap between gender and the sexed body. As Gayle Rubin argues, “there are at least as many ways to be butch as there are ways for men to be masculine; actually, there are more ways to be butch, because when women appropriate masculine styles the element of travesty produces new significance and meaning” (1992, 469). Rubin cites the multiplicity of butch that stems from the juxtaposition of masculine gender presentation and a female body. Butches adopt and transmute traditional masculinity codes through their reiteration of normative masculinity. “Responding to the charge that butches and femmes replicate oppressive gender roles, butch-femme proponents pointed to the butch's power of gender subversion. Merely by walking down the street, it was said, the butch exposed the fiction of the sex-gender system. In this way, performativity figured the butch as an interruption in expected gender roles, living proof that female bodies are not always fated to be feminine (Galewski, 186). Galewski cites the dissonance resulting from the female performance of masculinity. Female masculinity challenges the naturalized (at least for lesbian feminists) link between sex and gender through demonstrating that one’s biological sex and gender are not necessarily interchangeable, but are distinct.

Butch/femme exposes the constructedness of gender and through doing so, creates new gendered possibilities. As Kath Weston contends, “Butch/femme represents a subversive practice... because it exposes gender as a social construct: something historically, collectively, and rather arbitrarily made rather than naturally and definitively given” (2002, 61). Accepting the social-constructedness of gender and differentiating it from biological sex allows for an expansion of gendered

possibilities. It reduces the authority of dominant gender models and offers space for new genders and gender relations. Butler writes, “*Man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *women* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (2008, 9). Or, “As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that ‘being a girl’ contextualizes and resignifies ‘masculinity’ in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible ‘female body.’ It is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire” (167). For Butler and these critics, the juxtaposition of masculine gender against a female body can expose the constructedness of heterosexual gender itself.

Further, this exposure illustrates that lesbian gender is not a copy of an original heterosexuality. Rather, as Butler argues, these juxtapositions expose heterosexuality as a copy. As she writes, heterosexuality maintains its dominance and presumed naturalcy through its constant repetition (1993, 313). As heterosexuality necessitates constant repetition in order to establish itself as natural it is in the moments between repetitions that it can be redeployed or transformed (315). It is this transformation that makes butch/femme performative as opposed to imitative. “In this sense, gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (314). Butler argues that gender is not something a subject is; rather, gendered performance produces a subject as its effect. The compulsory repetition of gender cites the ideal of heterosexuality (and the binary gender that structures

heterosexuality), while that ideal is constantly made and remade through these performances. For this reason, Butler argues, “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (Butler, 313). If heterosexual gender is an imitation, than butch/femme, rather than an imitation of an original, is, instead, an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy.

Butler urges us to “reconsider then the homophobic charge that queens and butches and femmes are imitations of the heterosexual real. Here ‘imitation’ carries the meaning of ‘derivative’ or ‘secondary,’ a copy of an original which is itself the ground of all copies, but which is itself a copy of nothing” (313). In this way, butch/femme can challenge and expose heterosexuality’s claims to naturalness, originality, and necessity. Butler writes, “when the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (2008, 185). To put it more bluntly, “Butch/femme roles certainly turned heterosexuality on its head and on its ear and on its ass” (Loulan and Sherry 1990, 51).

For Butler and the queer feminists who followed her theory of performativity, butch/femme does not work to consolidate heterosexuality as the original because there is no original. Instead butch/femme exposes the instability of heterosexuality by showing the gaps between sexed bodies and gendered performances, and the ways gender normativity requires constant, and constantly failing, citations. Butch/femme is reiteration – repetition with a difference. Yet, as Freeman argues, Butler’s model of

queer performativity couples difference with progress – both political and temporal. She writes that for Butler, “time is basically progressive, insofar as it depends upon repetitions with a difference—iterations that are transformative and future-oriented” (728). In order for something to be transformative it must reflect some sort of difference from its original (or illusory original): it reflects some sort of historical change. Freeman argues that this linear temporality, where difference moves us forward in time, is linked to a political argument: that which is transformative is also politically progressive, even radical. While Butler herself does not claim that butch/femme is necessarily subversive or politically transgressive, her understanding of performativity relies on a temporal model that connects political progress with social differentiation. It is to these questions of temporality that I turn next.

### **Temporality and Politics**

“What is the time of queer performativity?” (728) Freeman forces us to examine the temporal assumptions that undergird our understanding of butch/femme politics and queer politics in general. She argues that our understanding of politics relies on a linear, progressive model of time. Repetition without difference is figured as backward and regressive, while reiteration, repetition with difference is forward and progressive. Lesbian feminist, pro-sex feminist, and queer feminist arguments all base their political arguments on linear understandings of time.

For lesbian feminists, butch/femme is the same as heterosexuality and backward because it is an imitation of heterosexuality, repeating it without difference. Lesbian feminists contend heterosexuality is the original and butch/femme is a pitiful attempt at heterosexual mimicry – an attempt at sameness. Sameness, for lesbian

feminists, fails to be progressive because it too closely reproduces that which came before it, because of an absence of difference. This sameness also signals a temporal and political backwardness, bringing together temporality and politics. Progressive linear time also undergirds pro-sex feminists' understanding of butch/femme as radical and progressive. Progress is constituted by repetition with a difference. Difference, for pro-sex and queer feminists, is celebrated because it marks forwardness and change. This reiteration is politically progressive through its differentiation, again binding temporality to politics.

As Freeman argues, "the political result of these temporal formulations can be that whatever looks newer or more-radical-than-thou has more purchase over prior signs, and that whatever seems to generate continuity seems better left behind. But to reduce all embodied performances to the status of copies without originals is to ignore the interesting threat that the genuine *past*-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present" (728). Resisting *both* the lesbian feminist *and* the pro-sex or queer feminist understandings of sameness as backwardness and difference as change, Freeman suggests that repetition without difference can also be useful for politics. In this way, Freeman connects the continuist and the alterist modes of history through a reading of queer temporality, where sameness and difference, backwardness and change, might have a change in significance. Difference would not necessarily be suggestive of progressive politics, and sameness would not necessarily be linked with regressive politics. Employing Freeman's analysis, we reconfigure the political significance of sameness and difference. A queer model of time disrupts the association of sameness with regression and backwardness. Freeman suggests the

potential utility of citational reproductions. Progress does not always need to be our goal. Sometimes we can benefit more from looking back to the past than we can from focusing on the future and ignoring those that have preceded us. Looking backward allows us to form affective connections with queers in the past. Identification isn't limited to individuals with whom we share a multitude of similarities, but instead stems from shared positionality.

When I initially started this project I couldn't understand why I identified with 1950s butch/femme lesbians. We didn't identify in the same way or express our genders similarly. Now that I am familiar with queer temporality and affect I am able to see that it wasn't sameness that brought us together, but shared positionality. We both exist in the world as "others." Connecting with 1950s butch/femme lesbians through shared positionality allows me to see the recurrent – salient - themes in both of our presents. We both exist in a world marked by sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, limited options for gender expression, and other structural inequalities. Noticing these continuities doesn't automatically provide us with strategies for resistance or survival, but it does offer the knowledge that someone else has felt what you are presently feeling. You might be separated from them by the space of 50 years, but they also know how it feels to be harassed because of their gender presentation. Our shared suffering can serve as a life force when everything else in the world seems positioned against us. We have our connection to queers of the past. It's just a question of what we do with it

## **Epilogue: “It Gets Better”**

Early autumn of 2010 was marked by a dramatic increase in the number of gay teens committing suicide. This sparked Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” Project (IGBP). After he heard about the suicides Savage recalls thinking, “I wish I could’ve talked to that kid for five minutes before he killed himself...I’d tell him that however bad it was in high school or middle school...it gets better.”<sup>24</sup> Savage’s project has since enlisted the help of countless celebrities and other individuals, with over 10,000 videos produced thus far. The campaign centers around the logic that if you just wait, things will get better. The campaign’s website states: “While many of these teens couldn’t see a positive future for themselves, we can. The It Gets Better Project was created to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach – if they can just get through their teen years. The It Gets Better Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone — and it WILL get better.” Through its videos, the project attempts to show LGBT teens in distress that their experiences of marginalization and discrimination are normal, and that if they just hold on, they too will be able to experience a happy gay adulthood. This project promises queer youth a brighter future.

In the video he made with his partner Terry, Dan points to the bright future in store for gay teens once they graduate from high school. He locates much of the problem within the high school experience. His partner talks about how his life got instantly better the day he graduated from high school. Savage contends gay youth need to tough it out now to get access to a future full of happiness,

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<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>. All following references are to this webpage.

homonormativity<sup>25</sup>, and positivity. Savage states, “It gets better. However bad it is now, it gets better, and it can get great, and it can get awesome, your life can be amazing, but you have to tough this period of it out and you have to *live* your life so that you’re around for it to get amazing, and it can, and it will.”

Savage’s claims rest on a linear, reproductive model of time, what Halberstam refers to as “the time of reproduction.”<sup>26</sup> Halberstam describes how straight time “is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples.” Straight time also describes “the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future” (Halberstam 2005, 4-5). Savage emphasizes the benefits of growing up and locates hope in a glorious queer future. He also emphasizes the important place of positive affect in queer narratives. Happiness is the end goal, achieved after a long time of suffering. Savage focuses solely on the possibilities for connections created by sharing positive affect and feelings; he overlooks negative affect as a potential site of identification. The negative affect and painful experiences are something to endure in exchange for a happy future. Savage promises queer youth, “One day you will have friends who love and support you, you will find love, you will find a community, and that life gets better, and that the bigots don’t win.”

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<sup>25</sup> Lisa Duggan contends homonormativity “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002: 179). Dan Savage can be classified as homonormative, “Savage expresses his satisfaction over being in a long-term monogamous relationship, raising a son, and vacationing in Paris. He also states, “I didn’t think when I came out to my parents in the very early 1980s when AIDS was slamming the gay community that I would ever be a dad, that I would ever give my mom and dad another grandchild.”

<sup>26</sup> Reproductive time is also the subject of Lee Edelman’s (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

The IGBP is in the same vein as queer coming out culture, which also promises that life will get better once one comes out. It is *through* coming out that one realizes some inherent truth located deep within himself. Queers rally around coming out stories as a site of identification. Stephen Sprinkle, a professor at Brite Divinity School, compares the IGBP to the sharing of coming-out stories: “We’re able to look back on our stories and say, it really has gotten better.”<sup>27</sup> Both the IGBP and coming-out stories function as queer narratives of progress that emphasize positive affect over negative affect. Savage makes no remarks about the possible utility of queer adults exploring negative feelings as well, or connecting with queer (or bullied) youth through shared histories of trauma. Instead, he emphasizes the need for gay adults to provide gay youth with a positive narrative of the future

While the “It Gets Better” project has nothing but good intentions, it has been critiqued on many levels. One of the more common critiques has to do with its message of “toughing it out” in reaction to the prevalence of queer violence. This tactic does nothing to change the present situation and essentially tells LGBT youth to “sit tight” and deal with queer violence the best they can. They are offered salvation only at the time of high school graduation. Mary Gray, an anthropologist who works on queer rural youth, comments, “The problem with perseverance: it suggests that time, rather than social action, is the most effective weapon that protects us from anti-queer violence.”<sup>28</sup> In reaction to such claims, groups like “Make it Better” have been founded. While the IGBP accepts that high school years are universally horrible for queer youth and offers no tactics for changing this, the Make it Better project takes a

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/19/us/19video.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/19/us/19video.html?_r=1)

<sup>28</sup> (<http://queercountry.fromthesquare.org/>)

more proactive approach. “High school and middle school don’t have to be terrible! Schools should be safe for everyone. We can stop anti-LGBT bullying and LGBT youth suicides right now. Inspire others to take action by sharing what you are doing! Let current LGBT students know they don’t have to wait till they graduate to be happy. Youth have the power to change their schools and their lives now.”<sup>29</sup> The Make it Better project doesn’t promise that things will get better in the future; it advocates for students to work to make change now.

The IGBP has also been critiqued for being part of a larger trope of normative (white) gay narratives of progress.

Savage embodies the spirit of a coming-of-age success story. He is able-bodied, monied, confident, well-travelled, suitably partnered and betrays no trace of abjection or shame. His message translates to: Come out, move to the city, travel to Paris, adopt a kid, pay your taxes, demand representation. But how useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?<sup>30</sup>

Diana Cage echoes, “It’s beautiful and well-intended, and I’m thankful it exists. But seriously, we all know it gets better a lot sooner if you are white, cisgendered, and middle class. And for a lot of us it stays pretty hard.”<sup>31</sup> Her blog also includes a YouTube video made by an unknown queer woman of color<sup>32</sup> who challenges Dan Savage’s message. She states, “It doesn’t get better, but what does happens is you get stronger...”<sup>33</sup> Messages such as these assert that life won’t always be easy and that

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<sup>29</sup> [http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/?page\\_id=40](http://www.makeitbetterproject.org/?page_id=40)

<sup>30</sup> (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>)

<sup>31</sup> (<http://velvetparkmedia.com/blogs/it-doesnt-get-better-you-get-stronger>)

<sup>32</sup> She is known only by her YouTube name, LuzLoca21

<sup>33</sup> She also challenges the white neoliberal myth of progress and success: “Don’t give into this myth that it’s going to be fancy and amazing when you’re older and that everything’s going to be fine, just know that you got to get stronger and the stronger you get, the easier dealing with all this craziness will be, the stronger you get the more you hold on to your own life, the more you’ll love yourself, and you’ll be better able to be in relationships with other people, you’ll be better able to deal with the fact that you’re gay... you get stronger and you get more beautiful and you believe in yourself harder...”

sometimes you will have to put up with tremendous violence and queer-phobia. There is no guarantee that it gets better, but through recognizing our connection with suffering queers in the past, we are able to get stronger.

Both of these critiques of the “It Gets Better” Project focus our attention on the problems of straight time. By imagining time as linear and progressive, with things always getting better for queer people, linear time forecloses the possibilities for connecting through negative affect. Dan Savage stresses the importance of positive affect for identification. He claims it will give youth the hope to tough out the present so that they will be able to make it to a brighter future. But for some people, things won’t get better. The solution lies in getting stronger and having the courage to feel backward and connect queerly—and often negatively—across time. While abject historical figures might not offer us strategies for survival or positive feelings such as pride, they offer us connection through shared feelings of shame and pain—and in offering us connection, they let us know that we are not alone.

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don’t take your own life, it’s not worth it... please love yourself, please be strong...”

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