

Viewing 1950's Butch Femme

Sexual Practice As Possibly Religious Practice / Practicing Religion

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the sexual practice of butches and femmes, particularly from bar culture during the 1950's in North America, as a source for a possible theology of corporeality. Based on over twenty in-depth interviews with butches and femmes from that historical and contemporary period, plus written memoirs and fictionalized accounts, as well as the author's own participant-observer status in this culture, the study focuses on the subjective experience of participants, allowing their own stories to develop. The ways in which butch-femme culture of the 1950's fixed the gaze of the participant in the sexual act on a sacrality of experience is contrasted to the absence of this discourse in the heterosexual communities of that time. The role of memory and nostalgia is brought into consideration

methodologically.

This paper presented at the following conferences:

National American Academy of Religion Conference, Denver, CO, 2001

Queer Visions in the Americas Conference, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, May 2002

Minority Mentor Program Conference, "How Then Shall We Live?" Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, April, 2002

Postgraduate Research Weekend Conference to celebrate the inauguration of Professor Lisa Isherwood at St John and St Mark's, Plymouth, England, May 2002

**Viewing 1950's Butch Femme Sexual Practice
As Possibly Religious Practice/ Practicing Religion**

Introduction:

"..I praise those hands, with scars she's proud of,

on gender fuck forearms.

...They steady my pulse,

settle down, settle down, curve on my cheek

in the dark like a prayer.

..Her hands say yield and make it sound safe.

They enter me like something holy.

It takes time to interpret the tongue of her hands,

the whispering of 'come here',

or the bunch and knot of 'back off',

as they churn cement, hoist bricks,

sludge mortar into cracks,

knife off the excess,

until she's built Jericho

and I have no trumpet...

...I am in the sweet, inquisitive poultice

of her hands,

proudly helpless, wanted, given.

She makes loaves and fishes of me.

It is my intent in this paper to look at the sexual practice of butches and femmes particularly from the 1950's bar culture period (which actually encompasses a period of roughly 30 years from the late 30's to the late 60's), ethnographically at first, and in the second section of the paper to interpret those findings theologically. I have been invested in this period of history and the project of extracting from this period a possible theology of corporeality for at least the past four years. In the current study, I gather and examine verbal testimony and written accounts, including fictional accounts, using the methodology of thick description as a way to uncover primarily where the participants posit their practices, particularly their sexual practice. It has been my intent in this study to let the participants tell their own story - whatever that story is.

I admit that I am a participant observer in this culture, and my experience is one of religiosity within the sexual practice. I do see this lens operating in such a way as to fix the gaze of the participant in the sexual act on a sacrality that I do not see necessarily in the gaze of the heterosexual in the sexual act - particularly in the historical period that I am researching. And this was not a lens that I personally felt was operating when I was a participant observer as a heterosexual woman in my early 20's. Except for certain exceptions, such as Tantric Buddhism that I have discussed in other studies, heterosexual sexual practice has not lent itself necessarily to descriptions of sacrality for both partners within a corporeal practice.

Research Question #1: Is butch-femme sexuality a site of possible sacred practice?

Research Question #2: How did the context of the 1950s contribute to the birth of butch-femme culture and its possible sacrality?

Research Question #3: Is butch-femme sexual practice unique in its praxis?

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the Research Questions above, I have conducted over twenty in-depth interviews with various butches and femmes from the 50's bar culture period and with contemporary practitioners. I will report their impressions of their sexual practice and ensuing life styles in this paper. While conducting the interviews, I was aware that in contemporary butch femme culture and gender studies we are privileged to look back at the repression of the 50's, and also that participant observers from the 50's may look back at their experience with a lens that refrains, rather than re-frames. This is particularly true when the participant does not want to see what she no longer wishes to see - such as the extreme police violence towards transgendered individuals during the 50's bar culture period. Therefore, I will interpret these interviews with an eye to the fact that that nostalgia can and does happen.

While it is my hope for women of this period that studies such as this will eventually allow us as a community to see how we have made "loaves and fishes" of *each other*, I did not want to lead the interviewers. Therefore, I tried to scrupulously avoid asking anything that spoke of religiousity or sacrality in the interviews. I have been primarily interested in looking at this material as it is, with a decided hope that the theological findings I did find, if any, would be authentic, not just for me, but for the women who I interviewed, and for my community at large. Moreover for the butches and femmes who had the courage to remain alive and proud in a culture that would have them dead, the last thing they will "buy" now is a false sense of themselves. In other words, I can not tell them that their lives have a sacred meaning, if they do not tell it to me themselves.

The "I" Story in the Study:

"...We are so much bittersweet and gold.

Sunset, fall, early morning, wake up

to you, to us, to me, honey. Glory. Hosannah.

I am. Take me. You.

We are. This is..."

As a participant observer in the contemporary culture about which I am writing in this study, it is necessary to briefly reveal how I came to butch-femme culture and my investment in it. Suffice to say that my mother was in a closeted butch-femme relationship in the 1950s, which she tried to hide from our family. It was in the 1970s that I came to consciousness as a lesbian feminist. The following example illustrates my and many lesbian feminists rejection of butch-femme. I remember being part of a group that encircled a butch femme couple in a Boston primarily working class bar and made their shame so acute they left the bar - the femme's heels clicking in the silent room, until the door closed behind the butch who of course opened the door for her. Did we realize at the time, that it was probably a woman like the butch woman, perhaps even that woman herself, who had fought to create the very space we were shaming her from entering? No. We did not have, nor did we particularly want, access to that

history. There was no room for masculinity within asserting the primacy of the female. Butch and femme were banned. We had no gender theoried language yet for the separating of biology and gender that would have "allowed" for butch femme sexual and relational practice.

It is my belief that there is inherent sacrality in the body, in corporeal identity. That we are our bodies first, and without our bodies whatever we are is conjecture. It has been my experience as a Catholic that sacrality tends to be posited outside the body. This has happened along side a rise in the past 2500 years of the rise and primacy of patriarchal culture and has resulted in the loss of, for particularly women, access to the right to name the sacred. This has infused within me, the desire to name the sacred within my self.

I found god in myself

& I loved her/ I loved her fiercely

I am nothing if not the body. This kind of sexuality is something I never had with men, never had with androgynous women, and have never had except inside of butch femme practice. It has been about for me opening very clearly to "god in myself." This study is an exploration of the roots of this type of practice in my mother's generation, and explores whether my phenomenological experience has common ground in other women's experience. However, it is important to examine the literature on butch-femme culture, the historical context of the 1950s and female sexuality.

Literature Review

Butch Femme as an erotic partnership

...I was a femme, a woman who loved and wanted to nurture the butch strength in other women. I am now forty years old (1981).

Although I have been a Lesbian for over twenty years and I embrace feminism as a world view, I can spot a butch thirty feet away and still feel the thrill of her power. Contrary to belief, this power is not bought at the expense of the femme's identity. Butch femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply Lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, loving, courage, and autonomy... In the 1950's this courage to feel comfortable with arousing another woman became a political act.

Joan Nestle, who created the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City in 1981, partly in response to the erasure of butch femme her-story, is the author of the above. It is a quote from her seminal essay, "Butch Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950's," and has been included in many anthologies, among them, *Que(e)rying Religion*, an anthology of queer religious theory. Nestle continues:

My understanding of why we angered straight spectators so is not that they saw us modeling ourselves after them, but just the opposite: we were a symbol of women's erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them. The physical attacks were a direct attempt to break into this self-sufficient erotic partnership. The most frequently shouted taunt was, "Which one of you is the man?" This was not a reflection of our Lesbian experience as much as it was a testimony to the *lack of erotic categories in straight culture*.(Italics mine.)

Butch-femme in the context of the 1950s

The most popular TV show of this period was *I Love Lucy*. Lucille Ball had to fight to have an inter-racial love relationship on screen, and she had to fight to be pregnant on screen. The relationship Lucy and Ricky had was stormy, tempestuous, and very much in love. And they slept in twin beds. This was the norm for "acceptable" public displays in 1950's married life - you slept in twin beds. The erotic categories were not present. Intimacy. Eroticism. Sex. There was no place for this in the 1950's. For two women to walk out of straight society solely because of a desire for choice in sexual practice - which is what marked butch-femme - was anathema.

...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. For instance as a femme I enjoyed strong, fierce love making; deep strong givings and takings; erotic play challenges; calculated testings that called forth the butch femme encounter. When a woman said, "Give it to me,

baby" as I strained to take more of her hand inside me, I never heard the voice of a man or of socially conditioned roles. I heard the call of a woman world-traveler, a brave woman, whose hands challenged every denial laid on woman's life.

Nestle will go on in the essay to assert that this kind of erotic independence was feminism. Specifically since so many butches and femmes were working class, recently divorced, working mothers, or single working women, she asserts that they were the fore-runners of 1970's feminism - and were doing what feminists do - challenging gender expectations for women, including the period's erotic expectations for women. The difference between this period's feminists and 1970 feminists, as Nestle sees it, was the embracing of masculinity in women that the 1950's culture was able to hold, and that the 1970's culture had to reject.

Butch-femme and Female Sexuality

On May 29, 2000, the cover story for *Newsweek* magazine was "Searching for a Female Viagra: Is it a Mind or Body Problem? The Science of Women's Sexuality." Interestingly the article states that for women, "the relationship and the context of sexuality can be even more critical to satisfaction than the majesty that is orgasm..." However, throughout the article women bemoan their lack the orgasm. Almost thirty percent of American women have never orgasmed. The article which was the cover story for America's number one news magazine ends by grappling with the question of whether female orgasms serve a biological function:

The traditional answer, phrased by anthropologist Don Symons in 1979, is that female orgasm is a relic of Darwinian sloppiness, like male nipples: evolution had no good motive to cut one gender out of the fun.

Butch-femme sexuality, in contrast, valorizes femme desire and therefore female desire. This is one of the few places in contemporary or historical contexts where this happens. For example, Davis and Kennedy writing about butch-femme sexuality in the 1940s and 1950s say that, "..the butch's pleasure was defined solely in terms of pleasing her fem," and that this was not true for heterosexual relationships.

The authors go on to describe how for many butch women, there was no such thing as "bad sex." They allow "Vic," an "old time butch" to articulate this attitude of protection toward "their fems."

You said there's sex and there's OK sex. I've never had that.

All the women I've ever been with I could never say she was really great

and this one was terrible. Women are good in bed, all women are, given

the chance to be...They're women. To me, first of all I enjoy being with them,

you don't have to be, as you say, knock-out, drag-out sex...They're good, if they're having sex with me, they're good. How can a woman have bad sex? What do

you do to have bad sex? What's the difference between bad sex, good sex and

medium sex? I don't know either...I could never, God, that's the highest insult you

could give me when you say to me, "dead lay," I would never say that...

As Nestle said, women in this time period lived by a lived set of "erotic choices," and considering the lived set of "erotic" choices that many American women live by today, these choices that the butch femme community made, and continue to make, still seem to have perhaps something to teach the culture at large. Defining butch femme seems to be about the need to locate that community of women for whom the ability to make satisfying erotic choices is important, not just for the masculine identified partner in this gendered couple, but also and most challenging for traditional heterosexist dynamics, for the feminine identified partner. For as the narrator above, Vic, states, femme women in butch femme culture were seen for the most part from all butch narrators I interviewed or whose testimonies I read.. "good in bed, all women are, given the chance to be. They're women."

Locating the 50's Butch and Femme: Costume and Performative Gender

For me, the erotic essence of the butch-femme relationship

was the external difference of women's textures and the bond of

knowledgeable caring. I loved my lover for how she stood as well as

for what she did. Dress was a part of it: the erotic signal of her hair

at the nape of her neck, touching the shirt collar; how she held a cigarette;

the symbolic pinky ring flashing as she waved her hand. I know this sounds

superficial, but all these gestures were a style of self-presentation that made

erotic competence a political statement in the 1950's.

Costuming and location were very important for the butch femme couple. Nestle will state in her essay, that it was not so much that butch femme participants identified *as either butch or femme*, but by taking one or the other position they were identifying themselves to the bar community at large as women who were interested in sex, and were safely to be considered as such.

Women who were new to the life and entered bars have reported that they were asked: "Well, what are you - butch or femme?" Many fled, rather than answer the question. The real questions behind this discourse were, "Are you sexual?" and "Are you safe?"

Locating the 50s Butch-femme: Class

It is important to remember that locating the butch femme couple in their historical time period means to remember class. However, many of the studies about butch-femme individual lives have focused on lives of wealthy and famous women, such as Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf, and Vita Sackville West. Fifties butch-femme was primarily evidenced in public spaces because it was a working class representation and members of the working class for the most part didn't have private spaces. As a public representation at that time of outlawed sexual difference, butch identity had to be a strong masculine creation in order to compete with standard masculinity and win public space for the community.

All commentators on twentieth century lesbian life have noted the prominence of butch fem roles. Before the 1970's, their presence was unmistakable in all working class lesbian communities: the butch projected the masculine image for her particular time period, at least regarding dress and mannerisms - and the fem, the feminine image; and almost all members were exclusively one or the other... butch fem roles not only shaped the lesbian image but also lesbian desire, constituting the base for a deeply satisfying erotic system.

FINDINGS

Power and pleasure within the butch-femme dynamic

Research Question #1: Is butch-femme sexuality a site of possible sacred practice?

After about five or ten minutes I'm just in another place, and that place is you know.. with her. I'm not thinking of all the bullshit of my day anymore, that's for sure.. She can feel me I think let go and when that happens she

pulls me to her and starts...well..you know..whatever...just, you know...whatever...

I mean we are having sex at that point.

....Usually?...I don't know....uh...massaging my breasts, dripping oil down the front of my body, squeezing my nipples, because that drives me nuts, and

then she rubs my thighs inside, my stomach, you know, just touching me all over like we're together..and then I'm like ..I don't know..uh...hers...its so obvious what I want..

One thing's for sure, eventually she's going to fuck me and it will be so deep

I will almost I don't know forget my name or something..one thing for sure, she goes past everything about "I can't have this." She's right in the center of where I want to get to.

One thing I think about that scares me about it? I don't think I could get wherever that is without her. I really don't think so. I've been with other butch women.. and it was the same but different. I just went some place with all of them, some place I couldn't go on my own. I don't know if they could go there on their own, I can't. It would be almost be too scary, it's so..it's a free feeling that would be almost hard to have on your own.

The above is part of an extended interview with a femme who identifies with the historic period, but who is currently the femme part of a contemporary butch femme couple. Part of what I found in many of the interviews was a reluctance to go deeply into specifics of sexual practice because of the notion "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," and a reluctance to feel perhaps "therapized," around sexuality, if they discussed it in detail. What became clear, is not that sexual practice per se was important, but as the above interview suggests, what seems most important is an independence that allowed for a freedom to explore whatever the expression was and a willingness on the butch's part to find out what the femme "liked." This seems true for both femme and butch narrators who seemed to feel this willingness to find out what the "femme" liked would perhaps be missing in heterosexual relationships.

"Well, I think that..uh..the butch has the power, yeah..but, the femme, well, she has the control."

This quote is from the butch partner of this butch femme couple referred to in the above, in response to the dynamics of her sex life. Like the masculine part she embodies she had nothing else to say about sexual practice, and did not disagree with the rough outline "her femme" presented to me in her absence from the room, just shook her head and said the above. What this quote suggests to me, is exactly a collaboration of the Kennedy and Davis material - the butch has the power to execute the plan that is laid out by the fem's desire - in other words the fem is controlling the practice, but the butch puts it into practice. However in unpacking these quotes further, there are several places where the femme is clearly letting the butch "take over." It appears that the femme controls at least in this instance much of how the foreplay will occur, and the butch takes over after desire is firmly established.

This appears to correlate with a lack that is represented in the contemporary condition of heterosexuals as exemplified in the *Newsweek* article - a lack of attendance to what the woman wants, particularly in setting up the encounter, and paying attention to the dynamics of the relationship as exemplified in foreplay.

I want to quote here from several other interviews and then look at their significance in the ensuing sections.

... my whole program in terms of the art of love making was to give ecstasy to

my partner without expectation ..my ecstasy was expressed solely in her.I certainly got excited and occasionally would orgasm with tribadism..but don't get me wrong,

I certainly felt made love to..there seemed to be this unwritten code ..it wasn't

until I was with the lesbians of the late 60's , early 70's ...I'll never forget

the first time I was with a woman and she said "Roll over," and I said, "What?"

But, I never felt like I wasn't made love to in return with the women of the early

60's...I just was never physically touched..my breasts, cunt...I mean, come on,

the fact that we were making love at all is pretty fucking amazing to me..

I thought and still think..you can have a total orgasm with a kiss...

it's a total spiritual experience you know?

It's an honor to make love to a woman. From what I can tell men think it's a science experiment. A femme woman takes my hand and puts it on her breast,

between her legs..and I'm still, you know, taking notes and I'm trying this out

maybe on another woman sometime..you better believe that I was taking notes because I had this sense of reverence for it....

I was having a great time, I mean the first chance I got I spread my legs, but I was having a great time before that, too..I didn't feel any lack up until that point in the 70's when that woman said "Roll over," up until then women made love to me by being expansive..their love would happen and their love was what was going on in return...

Basically all I can say is it's not a matter of whose doing what to whom...I mean, if you think that, you just don't get it.

The above narrator confirms the Kennedy and Davis material that she did receive pleasure, satisfactory pleasure from the sexual practices of the early 60's which "denied" her genital stimulation. From either the historical time change which *allowed* femme genital contact with the butch, and/ or the feeling of "fitting in" that next historical time period which was about a seemingly more "equilateral" sexual practice in terms of equal genital contact, or from a simple previous unspoken desire to actually be physically genitally touched, she also enjoyed the woman who said, "Roll over." Basically what seems clear from this interview however, is that the relationship, and the relation for the women, the loving, and the connection and the real expressed sexuality between them, not "who was doing what to whom," was important. This is consistent with what again *Newsweek* says is most important to women in being able to be sexually relating, and what is often missing in their connections with men - a deep intimacy that cares about the nature of the relationship itself. Perhaps this is why the sexual connection works for this narrator, the clearly expressed love that she articulates she felt with the femmes of the period, even though she was not being touched genitally for many years (although she does admit to arriving at orgasm through tribadism as well).

Another interviewee also clearly supported the idea that what is embodied within butch femme sexual practice is a concern for the connection of the participants *past* the sexual connection, and that the sexual connection is dependent on the relational aspect of the connection:

..butch/femme is strong in the African American community as well...

it's how I walk though the world. Being butch is so much attitudinal for some..sometimes, but what I feel is that if you really are, then it just is.. I'm butch.

It's got nothing to do with anything else. I used to be stone cold butch.. now I

want to be loved up sometimes..but it's a matter of power, if I let someone do me, then I relinquish some of the power..but if you know..who you are..well no one can take that away from you...but, hey..her response (the femme's) is about making love back to me..making love to my heart...giving pleasure is pleasure to me..sexuality and spirituality and sacred is not separate to me..if your heart and your mind and your body are all one that's together..that is in itself a sacred act...if the heart's not in it, then what's in it?

Living within butch-femme culture and facilitating praxis

Research Question #2: How did the context of the 1950s contribute to the birth of butch-femme culture and its possible sacrality?

Nestle in her article, "Sexual Courage in the 1950's," - said that it takes courage to not only exist in the 50's and 60's, but also to have feelings, and it takes courage for masculine identified people to have deep feelings, like love. Falcon River, quoted earlier, is a self-identified butch lesbian from the mid sixties bar culture, who I interviewed extensively for purposes of this study. She mentioned the issue of having courage several times in her interview.

Femme women taught me a whole lot of things...how to pay exquisite attention to beauty, courage...Basically there was a whole lot of courage in butch and femme.

Falcon told me of her apprenticeship or mentoring by an older butch, "Al." Al took her to her first bar. "She knew she was turning me loose, showing me the candy store, and she was very protective of me.... she was a tough cookie," says Falcon.

The first night..at the bar..we didn't get into the sex part. That took

a while (for her to tell me). Finally she told me to "*Take my time. Take it slow. And never ever leave your woman hanging*" That's a direct quote. "Never, ever leave your woman hanging." No matter how long it takes *or what it takes* - you made sure she gets what she needs."

She goes on to talk about courage and how going to the bar was that for her:

A sacred holy place... the only place where I walked in and I was

slapped on the back and hugged ..I knew I was home..I never had experienced

that real sense of coming home...then of course, the butch who greeted me, Al, pushed me away, because you know, it's a guy thing, but..what's home? Home is where I fit.

Home is where I stand. When I was 16, I walked into that bar, there were no rough edges...I was exactly where I was supposed to be, with the love looks of the

women..of the femme women to me, and the acceptance of the butches...

someone looking at you like that..with love acceptance....you bet, I risked

my life daily to go "home."

I would suggest that the working class nature of the community forced the creation of a strong public base for the preservation orally and instructionally of sexual practice and other community practices, such as costuming and what Butler would call performative gender elements.

Falcon will talk about, in this same interview that she was arrested in bar raids dozens of times, and raped most of those times. The first time she was arrested she was tied to a chair and raped by several cops, one of whom looked her in the face right before he raped her and said, "I've never done this before," and she said, "Well you are doing it now."

She spoke of how they repeatedly tried to make her cry and she would not cry and she would not look away, that she forced them to see her face, to see her as a person or as much of a person as she could make them see. When asked how she could risk this type of brutality, she simply smiled, and said "...the women. There was nothing keeping me away from that."

That kind of courage I would argue is very attractive in anyone, and was according to all the narrators I spoke with, very attractive to the culture as a whole.

Butch-femme As Religious Practice

Research Question #3: Is butch-femme sexual practice unique in its praxis?

Yes, because as noted earlier, it foregrounds female desire. In continuing with Falcon's story it is interesting to note that she has transformed her allegiance to butch femme into one of allegiance to the women's spirituality movement in particular, and does see the connection between spirituality and butch femme practice as obvious, at least in her life. She is on what she calls a "Guardian" path in Wicca, or goddess centered religion, and is part of a coven, or goddess circle, in which she acts as a guardian, or

one who guards the space for the women doing the magic in the center. She feels she is doing her own magic outside the circle, but still contained in the circle - that actually she contains the circle.

Butch women are deeply profoundly spiritual...sensitive women who have immense strength and psychic wisdom..all the skills we have are honed over the years to create safety for ourselves and our lovers..to hold the form of the lives we have chosen to lead..that's the core of the path of the Guardian.. it's a path of priestess and guardian...magical partners in ritual...we come together in our hearts...I consider the butch femme relation as that of the goddess and consort...although it has taken me twenty years to put language to that, language that made sense for me.

Other than this very specific connection to religious practice, most of the narrators that I talked with, and whose words I read in others volumes, spoke if at all, of a very general sense of connection, i.e., spirituality, or sacredness to the butch femme connection that I identify as "deep meaning," and therefore invested with what I believe perhaps has sacrality - perhaps. In any case it has "deep meaning."

Consider the following:

the most important thing we can do in discussing femme life and identity is to stop using the heterocentric dyad as a model for femm/butch relationships and stop buying into sexist stereotypes which attend such a model. We must dispel the idea that all a butch really wants is to be a man and a femme is the real woman..A butch is a lesbian woman who moves through the world in a way that is distinct from a man or a femme. A femme is a lesbian woman who moves through the world in a way that is distinct from a straight woman. Clinging to heterocentric polarity has made it very difficult for feminists. Those of us who don't want to explicate the same patriarchal models of relationships have worked hard to find the language to include our desire. Femme butch interactions are a way of being and a way of relating that grows out of our deepest sense of ourselves and our most intimate desire.

That sense of being part of a practice, or a religion if you will, that has a practice that has deep meaning within gender and is based therefore on *yin/yang* is perhaps easily seen in certain buddhist practices, as seen notably in Tantric Buddhism. There may be certain aspects of Indian Tantric Buddhist practice, such as valuing a menstruating woman (seen as embodying the goddess at her highest at this time), debunking frigidity in women, etc. that can be comparable to aspects of butch-femme culture and sexuality. However, due to constraints of space, that connection in developed elsewhere. Suffice it to say that similar to many religions such as Tantric Buddhism, butch-femme sexual praxis has rituals that help its practitioners access a higher power.

I belonged there (the lesbian bar) and that *faith* was constantly

tested.(Italics mine)

For many narrators, as with Falcon River in the above quote, practicing religion meant going to the place

that allowed faith *to be* practiced, in this case and in most cases the lesbian bar. It is central to understanding the butch femme dynamic that without a sense of space, and an actual physical space there was very little to no possibility of practicing the "religion."

There are many examples within poetry and fiction, however, both historical and contemporary that use religious language to create a "space", or a sense of what I would call here "practicing religion" when describing butch femme sexual practice, as in the opening poem by Cherry Smyth, "Loaves and Fishes."

For example, consider the following, from a women in prison story, by Sapphire:

I felt like lightning cutting through the sky. She pulled me up
beside her. I stuck my thigh between her legs and we rode till the cold
cement walls turned to the midnight sky and stars glowing like the eyes
of Isis. The hooves of our horse sped across the desert sand, rattlesnakes
took wings and flew by our side. The moon bent down and whispered,
"Call me Magdalena.."

we (then) fitted ourselves in a mean 69 and sucked each other
back to the beginning of time. I was a cave girl riding a dinosaur across
the steamy paleolithic terrain snatching trees with my teeth, shaking
down the moon with my tongue.

And this from Frankie Hucklebroich's autobiographical novel, *Crystal Diary*. She was a woman who passed as a man, and worked as a pimp to support herself. She says of that time, and of her desired sexual practice, that she did not always have the "courage" to fulfill:

What holds us, holds us tightly; some blood memory we could have fought or
fled or wept over. We could have fled the dangers of our choice. Instead,
we refuse the pretense of a double life, we are based on want as well as
circumstance, and we carve a third life - a needed selfhood that is, in its defiance,
still the kin to chaos... We still want . Love. ...I want a woman with truth on her

mind, a breath-breaking blow to the heart.

Conclusions

In summary what seems significant about butch femme sexual practice, specifically in how it was practiced in the 1950's is its allegiance to an erotic independence, and that it created a space for feminine identification of want and desire and fulfillment of want and desire as well as butch or masculine pleasure. It also created a space for all women, not just beautiful women to have sexual desire and fulfillment.

This is beautifully portrayed in Joan Nestle's short short story, "Hope."

I did not like the bigness of my ass, the weight of my body on my knees, and then just as I worked very hard to accept my lack of appeal, she said in a low firm voice, "You look so fuckable that way."

I froze, caught in that moment of self-hatred by the clarity of her desire.

I stopped all movement, awed once again by the possibilities of life.

..against all my fear she entered me. The fire blazed up and so did my hope as I finally left the burden behind me and rode her hand with all the grace love had ever given me.

That any woman can be a goddess, can be so "fuckable," even in the act of considering herself overweight is not a common theme in heterosexual narratives, but the butch creating for the femme the space where she can be the goddess is a familiar theme in butch femme narratives. This can be analogous to certain religious practices, like Tantric Buddhism, but has its own history in butch femme, which historically "trans" gendered relationships.

Finally, I want to speak to what part sacrality might play to butch femme. I believe that primarily it is that mystical "something" that many women say they want - relationality. It seems however, that as one respondent said "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." While many respondents spoke to the need for connection, and of finding that in butch femme, they did not offer a "how to." If there is any "how to" advice in the literature that I read and interviews I conducted it is the idea of instituting respect for the mystery of gendered relation.

It is in valuing the feminine, embodied in the femme, as a valuable mystery and respecting that, that perhaps butch femme varies most dramatically from traditional heterosexuality as it is usually practiced in patriarchy.

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ENDNOTES