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TITLE: Always Endangered, Never Extinct: Exploring contemporary butch lesbian identity in the UK

ABSTRACT

This article presents empirical data from survey research into lesbian and queer masculinities in the United Kingdom, conducted in 2017, which garnered over two hundred responses. Four dominant themes emerged from the data gathered. These themes addressed: distinctions and relationships between the sexed body and gender identity; the contradictions of identifying with masculinities while critiquing hegemonic masculinity; a sense of anxiety or loss around a perceived decline of lesbian community and identities within it, particularly the identity of butch lesbian; and also the great variety of trans identities and how they are defined and distinct. There were many considered responses under all the above themes on the changing meaning of the butch lesbian signifier, from forty self-identified butch lesbians as well as from those identifying with other terms, and this topic is the focus of this article.

I will explore the meaning and resonance of the butch lesbian identity in the UK context, and the sometimes rocky relationship to the explosion of newer terms describing sex and gender identities, such as masculine of centre (MOC), non-binary (NB), gender non-conforming (GNC) or transmasculine. While there was some unease that newer terms might or may have already eclipsed the category of butch, alongside a common assertion that the category of butch is considered old fashioned, 'butch' was still a term that valiantly persisted and held sentimental and political value. Many participants were keen that this identity be included and distinguished in the contemporary rainbow of possibilities for sexuality and gender identities in the UK.

KEY WORDS

Masculinity; Lesbian; Butch; Trans; Identity

Always Endangered, Never Extinct: Exploring butch lesbian identity in the UK

INTRODUCTION

Historically, much of the research on lesbian masculinities and butch gender identity, in the West at least, has come from the US, and much of it emerged during the queer zeitgeist in the 1990s, with little since (Halberstam, 1998b; Munt, 1998; Burana et al, 1994; Nestle, 1992). This now classic literature explores the herstory of femme-butch identities and relationships, mainly from the late 1930s and mainly situated in North America (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). The literature also illuminates some of the tensions that have exercised such communities in more recent history from the 1970s through to the 1990s; and perhaps in some cases, up to the present day. Tensions such as 'butch flight' for example (Brownworth, 2011), which is the community concern that young butch lesbians may increasingly choose to leave the lesbian identity behind and transition to live as trans men instead (Fox, 2019; Bergman, 2006). This theme perhaps speaks to more contemporary tensions here in the UK between some modern trans rights activism and some feminist, lesbian feminist or lesbian separatist activism, as I shall discuss in more detail later in this article (Hines, 2017).

This latter tension is what has become known, in the UK and also in the US, as the TERF Wars (Enke, 2018), where "TERF" stands for 'trans-exclusionary radical feminist' and distinguishes from Radical Feminists who are trans-inclusive. It is a widely used term, especially on social media, and is arguably misleading as it is often used to reference anti-trans standpoints or transphobia from any individual, regardless of whether their politics are feminist at all, let alone Radical Feminist (Williams, 2016; Morris, 2015).

Another tension that emerges from the classic North American and British literature of the 1990s is around the so-called 'lesbian sex wars' (Healey, 1996) and the suspicion of sexist stereotypes lurking in femme-butcht relationships and sexual practices (Jeffreys, 2018); critiques which came from within lesbian communities and outside. This was a tension investigated in my research, and I will return to this topic later in this article.

There has seemingly been less scholarship on femme-butcht identities and communities or lesbian gender identities more recently, post-1990s, with a UK focus. This is surprising, given the current fast changing climate and contemporary tensions, as introduced above; and this is partly what motivated my sense of urgency in researching this field.

Butcht and masculine lesbian or queer communities are by no means limited to the UK or US context, indeed, the butcht is arguably a global phenomenon (Brodell, 2018). Lesbian/queer masculine identities and expressions are known and expressed through a wide variety of terminology, such as onabe, boys or tomboi in Japan (Summerhawk et al, 1998; Blackwood & Johnson, 2012). There are masculine presenting lesbians currently finding a home for identity expression in Cuba's burgeoning Drag King scene for example (Santana, 2018).

There are zhongxing or T's in Taiwan (Hu, 2019) and stud, AG or aggressive amongst Black communities in the US (Cole, 2011; Lane-Steel, 2011; Wilson, 2009; Moore, 2006). All these and many more communities are being researched by scholars local and external and are obviously worthy of further research and comparison with the UK setting. However, such a comparison or more international undertaking was outside the scope of this relatively small and unfunded research project. Nevertheless, I assert that this particular piece of qualitative research is a constructive insight into under-researched communities and lives in the contemporary UK, but is only a beginning.

RATIONALE: WHY DO THIS RESEARCH NOW?

Investigating these communities is timely given the so-called gender-wars/TERF Wars mentioned earlier. The research is also relevant given the supposedly generational shifts which are occurring across the UK in relation to fixed or fluid conceptualisations of sex, sexuality and gender identities. Recent surveys and commentary from here in the UK suggest that younger generations have an increasingly more fluid conceptualisation of their sexed, sexual and gender identities and are less likely to identify rigidly as either straight or gay, or as either women or men. Surveying of just over one thousand (N=1006) 13-26 year olds in the UK and also the US by anti-bullying group 'Ditch The Label' in 2017 found that more than half (57%) did not identify themselves under the category 'straight' and 76% stated that labels for sexuality are no longer important (2017).

Recent research in UK schools points to an "*expanding gender vocabulary*", made up of twenty-three different terms for gender identity and a sense of vanguardism within young people, compared to a perceived previous backwardness amongst older generations (Renold et al, 2018). What do these apparent societal shifts mean then for the identity of lesbian (the same could also be asked for gay male identities of course)? These are and have been by definition usually understood as fairly fixed categories and are often linked to an assumption of biological sex, with 'lesbian' historically considered to refer to the same-sex sexual preferences of females (Faderman, 1991; Radicalesbians, 1970).

In 1998 Jack Halberstam presciently asked: "*As gender-queer practices and forms continue to emerge, presumably the definitions of gay, lesbian, transexual and transgender will not remain static, and we will produce new terms to delineate what the current terms cannot*" (1998:307). Twenty years later these terms are indeed far from static, but are perhaps still in

formation and flux rather than being fixed and agreed. New terms have been created, including for female masculinity and lesbian gender identities. This is a landscape informed by a much broader (though not always well informed) public awareness of the lives of trans men, trans women and transgender individuals, and by a younger generation increasingly rejecting sex, sexuality or gender labels of any sort; what I call a post-trans landscape. I shall explore in this article why in this context some people still choose to adopt the label of butch lesbian in the UK today, and what it means to them.

I will use the terms trans and transgender as umbrella terms in this article, as this is how they are commonly used. However, these are very broad categories which can sometimes be misleading and unclear as they contain such a huge diversity of identities and expressions. Such expressions could also be referred to under another umbrella term, that of 'queer' (Duggan, 1992). This describes all LGBTQI+ identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex) - that is, identities that are not sex/gender/sexuality normative. By that I mean identities which do not follow the presumed and policed prescriptions (Rich, 1980) of male/masculine/heterosexual or female/feminine/heterosexual; referred to by Ingraham as "heterogenders" (1996) or as "gender normals" by Schilt (2009). The umbrella term 'trans' usually includes transgender or genderqueer individuals, and also includes those who have transitioned, to varying degrees, legally, socially or medically to live their lives as trans men or trans women. For clarity, in this article I shall distinguish between trans men and trans women, and transgender or trans individuals.

SITUATING THE RESEARCHER: STANDPOINT AND REFLEXIVITY

This research holds personal significance for me as I have identified variously over the years as or with the butch lesbian identity, since first picking up a copy of Leslie Feinberg's 1993

classic - *Stone Butch Blues* as a teenager. It is a label I have returned to over the years, alongside periods of identifying as trans, and overall is a category I have experienced as fairly fluid, comfortable and diverse. Alongside my own personal investment in the communities explored in my research and my insider status within them (Edwards, 2002; Kanuha, 2000), there is also a sense of urgency due to increasingly binary tensions within the ongoing gender-wars (Hines, 2017; Rossiter, 2016). These tensions impact on all LGBTQI+ communities including those which I see as 'my own' to some extent, the butch, MOC, transmasculine and transgender communities; and they impact on me.

As a masculine identified person I have been since childhood regularly read as male (although I am female bodied) in the brief, quotidian exchanges of public life and am now also sometimes assumed to be a trans man. I therefore find myself between several different 'camps' on a regular basis. I have been involved in feminist activism and women-only spaces for decades and I have sometimes experienced prejudice and suspicion towards butch lesbians within those contexts. I have been policed in those spaces due to my gender presentation and questioned when entering women's political conferences for example, and especially women's toilets (Riggle, 2018; Bender-Baird, 2016). I have been active for an equal amount of time in LGBTQI+ human rights activism and community building. I invested many years in queer communities, alongside trans and transgender friends and colleagues. I therefore do not have an easy relationship with and nor can I ever pick one side in the gender-wars. In public readings I also have the experience of being treated as belonging in any one of these groups - a feminist, a lesbian, a trans man, or a young male, sometimes all in the same day. These regular, impactful, and deeply personal life experiences further my

interest in the variety of identities that the butch label can comfortably, or not so comfortably contain.

METHODS: SURVEYING THE BORDERS

In this article I will use data from survey research I conducted in the UK in 2017 into lesbian and queer masculinities. The survey invited responses from those aged over eighteen, resident in the UK, who identified with lesbian or queer masculinity. Within that broad umbrella, further examples of identity categories were presented as follows: butch; stud; masculine of centre; queer; gender non-conforming; non-binary; transgender; masculine; androgynous and transmasculine (the full survey schedule is available from the author upon request) as well as the options: depends on day/mood and: will write my own response.

The survey was conducted using the surveying software Qualtrics on a secure University account in the Summer of 2017, opening on the 23rd June and closing on the 14th August. The survey received ethical clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, University of (redacted). To contextualise the survey I designed an accompanying Wordpress site which hosted participant information and an informed consent form. The site also contained photographs to engage prospective participants and break up the text. Photos of self-identified butch, queer, GNC and NB individuals were used with permission from the US based photographer Meg Allen's new book, *Butch* (2017), and client shots from the UK based Butch Clothing Company.

The survey was mainly distributed using social media and was directed on Twitter and Facebook to national LGBTQI+ news sites and organisations in the UK such as Stonewall, the national LGBT human rights group in the UK and *Diva*, a national lesbian/bi magazine. I also

approached personal contacts at both these organisations and asked these contacts to publicise the survey as much as possible. I specifically targeted LGBTQI+ cultural social events and groups, such as drag king clubs, queer film clubs, Black and Asian queer club nights, suit tailoring companies for butch women and older lesbian groups through a mixture of email and social media contact. I designed the survey with open-ended questions and open text box options (McInroy, 2016; Punch, 2005; Seale and Filmer, 1999). Before making the survey live I piloted it with colleagues in my own University who have experience in survey design, from the disciplines of Psychology and Sociology. Their feedback improved the flow, readability and order of the survey questions.

The survey was arranged into four sections: 1.About you – Identity. 2.Sexuality and gender identity – Your personal biography. 3.Changing labels and identities – Your views and experiences. 4.New terms for gender and sexual identities – Your views and experiences. I designed the topics and the questions within them based on my review of the literature on femme/butch identities past and present, psychological research on lesbian sexuality and lesbian gender identity and broader academic research on the current gender-wars. In the design of the survey I also took into account popular discourses from mainstream and social media that address the gender-wars and lesbian community tensions (Ditum, 2018). I sought to provide space for participants to relay their own experiences of these tensions. As the research was unfunded and without discrete time allocation I was unable to engage with lesbian and queer communities at the survey design stage, for example in focus groups, but this is an aspiration for future research.

In total there were 247 responses to the survey. Not all respondents completed every question in the survey; there were 175 complete surveys, a response rate of 70.85%.

Surveys were completed anonymously and thus pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

The majority of respondents were aged 35 – 50 years old. The majority identified as White English (N=85). Nine respondents ticked 'Mixed/Dual Heritage'. Sixty two respondents chose to write their own ethnic identity. The demographics of the participants give rise to two weaknesses of this research. The sample is made up of overwhelmingly White respondents and the respondents are mainly middle-aged. The latter point raises a particular weakness in representation, that being the lack of younger individuals, given that research suggests these are precisely the groups taking a more fluid approach to sex/gender and sexuality identities. Aspirations for future research, based on this initial survey, include more targeted recruitment and in-depth interviewing.

As most of my research experience has been in qualitative semi-structured interviewing, I decided to approach the completed surveys similarly to interview transcripts. There are of course many available ways to analyse such qualitative data, usually the aim is for data reduction, which is one of the four stages of the research process listed by Miles and Huberman (1994) in their framework for qualitative analysis. The process of coding condenses the data and draws meaning from it. This process is described by Punch (1998) as: "putting tags, names or labels against pieces of the data" (1998:204). The target is to recognise patterns, regularities or themes that arise across the transcripts (Berg, 2007). To do this I utilised thematic analysis: "to classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories" (Ritchie et al, 2003:220). I consulted the famous, five-phase practical guide from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Through close readings and re-readings of the completed survey responses, I initially identified eight themes, which reflected the variety and complexity of the data. These were as follows:

1. Differing definitions of butch
2. Differing definitions of lesbian
3. Term butch being outdated
4. Defining masculinities, including female masculinity
5. What does it mean to identify as a woman
6. Possible links between trans identities and butch identities
7. New terms and labels for sex and gender, including critiques of these
8. Possible links between gender and sexuality

After further analysis I was able to reduce and group these themes under four overarching key themes:

1. Distinctions and relationships between the sexed body and gender identity
2. The contradictions of identifying with masculinities while critiquing hegemonic masculinity
3. A sense of anxiety or loss around a perceived decline of lesbian community and identities within it, particularly the identity of butch lesbian
4. The great variety of trans identities and how they are defined and distinct

It is the third theme that will be the focus of this article, considering the meaning of the butch lesbian identity in the UK context today and its relationship to newer terms for female masculinity and gender identity. Before moving on to present the findings under this theme I shall ground this research within a selection of the key literature on butch, lesbian and queer communities applicable to the UK context.

LITERATURE REVIEW: REVIEWING UNDEFINED DEFINITIONS

At this juncture it is important to note that while this article concerns butch lesbians there is hardly a unified definition of what the term 'butch' means in the UK today, or has meant historically, let alone what it might mean in the future; if the category persists at all (Halberstam, 2015). Many texts on the subject, mainly from the US, perhaps purposely refrain from providing a definitive definition. Indeed, as Rubin has pointed out: "*Attempting to define terms such as butch and femme is one of the surest ways to incite volatile discussion among lesbians*" (1992:466). Scanning the available Western literature finds more references to almost spiritual invocations of inner essence than any relationship to sexuality, lesbian or otherwise. Indeed, it is often commented that the butch identity would realise itself and express itself regardless of whether the individual was in a relationship, sexually involved or celibate (Inness, 1998).

There seems to be an understandable and admirable reticence to limit or narrow the huge variety of expressions and self-definitions in individuals whose relationship to and presentation of gender is somewhere on the masculine spectrum. Identities which are also, of course, intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) – that is, raced (Cole, 2011; Wilson, 2009; Moore, 2006), classed (Crawley, 2001; Case, 1989; Nestle, 1981), aged and inhabiting a body of varying shape, size and which is subject to strain, environment, illness and disability.

Fem/me-butch identities are widely seen to have gained visibility in 1950s predominantly White, working-class, American bar-culture when lesbians faced severe discrimination without any legal protections, leading to economic marginalisation for many – arguably especially so for those who did not present as feminine and who were readable instantly as lesbian (Feinberg, 1996; Faderman, 1991). Historians, scholars and activists also note however that fem-butch or fem-stud identities within Black LGBTQ communities in the West have a longer history, and were, and perhaps are still, more consistently visible and accepted; with modern terminologies including stud, and also dom/dominant and aggressive for example (Manfredi, 2017; Wilson, 2009; Moore, 2006).

Just as there are different ways to be masculine (Messerschmidt, 2018), there are different ways for butches to do masculinity also, and various recognised identities and sub-categories illustrate this diversity, or possibly more accurately, this spectrum (or hierarchy perhaps) from soft butch to stone butch, as psychologists studying these communities, Levitt and Heistand observed (2004).

Even in her introduction to what should surely be seen as a sacred text of femme/butch, Joan Nestle (1992) does not define butch either, making references to erotic energies just as much as short hair and starched collars. In their *Persistence*, Coyote and Sharman (2011) similarly do not define butch, stating in their introduction that when they went looking for definitions all they could find were stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in terms of appearance, attitude and roles. Therefore, these were rejected in favour of acknowledging the variety of butch and femme expression and embodiment.

Similarly, in their introduction to *Dagger: On Butch Women*, the Editors, Burana, Due and Roxxie (1994) underline that what unites butches is their diversity, pointing out that in the

lesbian community, as in any community, there is huge variety. They state that: "*For butches, being butch is about being yourself; for society, being butch is about slapping convention in the face*" (Burana, Roxie & Due, 1994:10). Indeed, butch is often associated with rebellion against inscribed and expected sex, gender and sexuality norms (Inness, 1998). Butch is frequently presented as a rebellion against sexist society more broadly and as a symbolic or real threat to men and masculinity: "*Adopting and often transforming traits traditionally associated with men, butches threaten masculinity more than they imitate it; they colonise it*" (Solomon, 1993:37).

In her research with self-identified butches and femmes in the UK in the late 1990s, Eves describes butch as a lesbian gender identity and notes that there is: "*a relative lack of language for lesbian genders*" (2004:483); but she does go on to define butch as a term for gender preferences that reside on a spectrum of masculinity. It is perhaps unsurprising that this is the most common understanding of the term, though scholars may be, and are wary of narrowing it down. Such descriptions often fall back onto current culturally recognisable masculine signifiers. Such as, men's fashion or short hair (Crawley, 2008; Kanner, 2002; Esterberg, 1996; Inness & Lloyd, 1995); male-dominated careers, hobbies or sports, such as construction, motorbiking or weight training... "*dykes with such objects or attributes as motorcycles, cummerbunds, wingtips, money, pronounced biceps*" (Solomon, 1993:37); and, sometimes, attitudes or behaviours constructed as the preserve or pastime of masculinity, such as being chivalrous, competitive and having "*pride in toughness... 'out-machoing' men*" (Crowder, 1998:55), being "*assertive and dominant*" (Rosario et al, 2009:35).

POST-TRANS LANDSCAPE?

As I have asserted earlier, it could be argued that the current backdrop for my discussion here is one marked by a growing awareness of the fluidity and flexibility rather than fixity of sex, sexuality and gender, what could perhaps be referred to as a post-trans landscape. This is certainly not a landscape where trans liberation has been won and where thus trans rights movements are no longer needed, far from it, but it is one in which trans identities are considered to have gone through what could be called a watershed moment (Burns, 2018). Such lives are considered to be more visible and more represented than they have been before in popular culture, with Laverne Cox's appearance on the cover of *Time* in May 2014 for example being heralded as a 'trans tipping point', followed soon after by Caitlyn Jenner's feature and cover in *Vanity Fair* in July 2015. These are of course the most famous examples of trans lives, and it cannot be and has not been ignored that those enjoying most visibility are those with arguably particularly privileged lives and who embody gendered body ideals, in this case of femininity (Rossiter, 2016). Nevertheless, such visibility still speaks to the apparent broader societal shift in understandings and classifications of sex, gender and sexuality categories. This impacts on older categories like 'butch', which in turn may be perceived as outdated or backward in contrast to the newness of modern terms (Renold et al, 2017).

Within this shifting landscape there are also some fierce battles over the territories of terminologies and classifications. These modern border wars are not just in theory, but in practice also and here in the UK have come to popular attention via responses and mobilisations to the UK Government's review, in 2018, of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Trans activist, many LGBTQI+ and allies groups around the country organised to campaign in favour of reforms to this Act, particularly the proposal for self-identification, which would

remove the need for medical authorisation before a Gender Recognition Certificate and amended sex marker could be issued. Meanwhile, several gender-critical or gender-abolitionist feminist, lesbian separatist and lesbian feminist groups took the opportunity to begin far-reaching lobbying and activism against such changes, and in some cases against the entire current system for the legal recognition and protection of trans men and trans women (Jeffreys, 2018; Hines, 2017). This is now at the stage of what Watson calls an: *"ideological war"* (Watson, 2016:246). All of this, added to the longer history of internal anxieties in the lesbian community around butch flight (Hale, 1998; Prosser, 1995) presents a challenging environment in which to research the meanings, expansion and borders of identity categories like 'butch' (Beemyn & Eliason, 2016). However, I would suggest that this backdrop only adds to the urgency of such research and I shall now turn to the voices of those who participated in my survey, to explore the resonance and meaning of the butch lesbian signifier and identity in the UK today.

FINDINGS: WHAT AND WHO IS BUTCH IN THE UK TODAY

In total there were two hundred and forty seven survey responses from all over the UK, including rural and urban settings. All respondents ticked one of the options given for gender identity. One hundred and eighty four respondents went on to elaborate definitions of their gender in the open text box provided. Perhaps fittingly for sex, gender and sexuality radicals the most common response ticked for gender identity was to write their own definition, this was used by forty-nine respondents and eighteen stated that their identity varied depending on the day or their mood. Other popular categories chosen were queer, ticked by twenty-eight respondents and eighteen chose GNC, seventeen NB, sixteen androgynous, ten MOC, eight masculine, five transgender, four transmasculine, and one

stud. Some respondents chose multiple identifiers and they then went on to explain further in open text. No participants identified as trans women. Thirty respondents ticked the butch response and a further ten went on to define as butch in the open text response - such as 'faggy butch' or 'soft butch'; many of these butch respondents are platformed in this article.

As mentioned earlier, this article focuses on the third theme that arose from my survey data: a sense of anxiety or loss around a perceived decline of lesbian community and identities within it, particularly the identity of butch lesbian. My findings suggest that within this broader theme: 1. 'butch' is widely considered outdated; 2. it describes a masculine presentation; 3. that this should not always be conflated with the masculinity of men and thus could be considered a female masculinity or lesbian masculinity; 4. that there are overlaps with and distinctions from new terms; 5. that there exists a stubborn hangover from the 'sex-wars' resulting in continuing suspicions that butch identities are synonymous with sexism; and finally, 6. that despite such popular negativity the identity of butch is powerful and affirming for many. I will now go on to present these findings in the order above.

1. BUTCH TODAY: OLD SCHOOL, UNCOOL?

It was frequently noted by respondents to my survey that the label of butch today is less used than in the past, as they experienced it. There was also a sense that the label of butch was seen as old fashioned, what respondents like Roddy called "old school". Roddy did not give her age, a queer gay woman, White British, she stated:

"To me it seems a more old school term. Butch is used as a joke in my experience" (Roddy).

Young respondents recounted similar, Lombard for example, White British, aged in her late twenties, identified as a GNC female woman and a butch lesbian or dyke. Lombard felt that compared to newer terms such as MOC or transmasculine the label of butch:

"is treated as the embarrassing archaic older cousin of most of the new terms"... "it is rarer to meet women/lesbians my age and younger using butch specifically as a descriptor" (Lombard).

Storm, an NB genderqueer trans person aged in their late forties and identifying as White English, felt that not only the butch identity itself but femme-butch relationships or pairings in general were now out of date and 'uncool':

"I feel that the Butch/Femme identity is old fashioned and a bit 'uncool', it makes me think of people in bow ties and cummerbunds and badly fitting suits" (Storm).

When respondents gave their definitions of butch many of these signposted masculine clothing, such as the statement from Storm above, and often used some classic or stereotypical examples of masculine sartorial styles.

2. BUTCH = MASCULINE?

Clothing, body shape and hairstyle were mentioned frequently in definitions of butch, including by those who used the label of butch for themselves. Joss, White British, aged in their late thirties identified as butch and as a gay woman, they specified haircut and clothing:

"My personal view is this speaks only to appearance and not other characteristics. I guess, short hair, masculine clothing and the way we hold our bodies" (Joss).

Idgie self-defined as 'an old fashioned butch dyke', aged in their late forties Idgie identified as White English and as a lesbian:

"For me, butch means a lesbian who is more stereotypically masculine than feminine. It has connotations of those lesbians who came before us, who dressed in suits and presented as male" (Idgie).

Julia was not a butch lesbian, she was aged 18 – 25 years old, White British and defined herself as a gay woman, queer and as feminine with masculine tendencies. Julia saw butch as:

"masculine dressing lesbian with short hair, older, generally larger women who have quite a presence. Like the woman version of a bear. Tattoos. Wears leather jackets and hard looking clothing" (Julia).

Pointing out variances in masculinity and masculine styles, Raymondo, a queer gay woman in their early thirties who identified as White English, emphasised that butch can be a spectrum of masculine styles, just as there are a variety of masculine styles for men and expressed by men:

"Butch equals masculine of centre presentation, ranging from tough kinds of appearance through to quite effete dapper looks" (Raymondo).

This reliance on often-stereotypical examples of masculine clothing and hairstyles did not go unquestioned. Many respondents took time to reflect on the usefulness or otherwise of the term 'masculinity' itself and the stereotypical associations that go with it which are obviously raced and classed. Several respondents, like Joss, also made it clear that although they identified with some elements of masculinity, simply around clothing or hairstyle for

example, this did not mean that they identified with some other elements classically attached to masculinity, namely negative behaviours and attitudes that might be colloquially described as 'toxic masculinity' (Hemmings, 2017).

Jazza, White English, aged in their late thirties who identified as queer, emphasised the difference/s of/in female masculinity:

"I don't believe in masculinity. I believe in masculinities and each would have its own definition. E.g. toxic masculinity differs widely to my perception of female masculinity, which differs to my perception of faggy camp masculinity, which differs to butch masculinity etc" (Jazza).

Other respondents echoed this, advocating that butch is a particular kind of identity and expression and should not be linked to men or masculinity.

3. BUTCH = FEMALE MASCULINITY?

Respondents frequently asserted that the term 'masculinity' itself was inappropriate in many ways to describe the masculinity of butch identified individuals. Although references to masculine stereotypes were given it was often emphasised that butches possess or display a particular type of masculinity all of their own; that while various, could or should perhaps be defined specifically as 'female masculinity' or as 'lesbian masculinity'. This view was put forward by those butches who identified strongly with womanhood and with their identity as lesbian. For these women being butch was just one way of being a woman and/or a lesbian. Leslie, White English, aged in her late forties, identified as butch and as a lesbian. She saw being butch as an expression of womanhood:

"My 'butchness' is one way of describing what type of woman I am" (Leslie).

Cleo also asserted her womanhood and was definite that being butch was not the same as being a trans man or identifying with men and maleness in any way. Cleo was aged in her early fifties and identified as Black British, a gay woman and androgynous, she titled herself as a femme-loving butch and said she was proud to be female, strong and butch:

"I like the fact that I am a woman, I am not trying to be trans or masculine. I think it's important to recognise that being butch is about being a certain type of woman, not a woman who is trying to be a man or more masculine" (Cleo).

Similarly Minnie, aged in their early forties, who identified as White Jewish was proud to be butch, MOC, queer and a lesbian. Defining their own version of masculinity, Minnie explained:

"I have always identified as masculine but not with dominant masculinities. It's appearance, way of relating to the world, sense of body." (Minnie).

For many of those who carefully described what makes the butch identity special and unique, this label - butch - was considered to have a complex relationship to some of the newer terms on offer today, such as MOC, NB, GNC or transmasculine for example.

4. BUTCH ON NEW TERMS?

Some respondents were committed to clarifying clear differences between the label of butch and newer terms for female masculinity, or lesbian gender identity. Others felt that butch might have some common ground with these newer terms or that these could be just new words for the huge variety of butch expressions and identities. Trans identities like transgender or transmasculine were variously seen to be either: A. accurate terms to describe some butch individuals now but particularly in the past, even if they (the butch

individuals) did not know/acknowledge it themselves; or, B.as lesbophobic erasure of butch womanhood, female masculinity and/or lesbian identity. These two opposing approaches hinged on whether respondents saw butch as either: a specifically female identity or type of womanhood; or, whether they saw it as a type of inner maleness and/or masculinity.

Some of the newer terms in usage today were considered to be directly linked to womanhood and/or femaleness; at least they were terms not thought to hide or erase any possible link to women or female people. This was highlighted by Radclyffe, a butch lesbian in her late forties who identified as White European:

"For me butch and masculine of centre are very similar and do not imply that you don't identify with the term woman (which the other terms do imply)." (Radclyffe).

Often seen to be sex-neutral, these newer terms could be applied to and used by an individual of any sex. Some therefore considered these terms not to be appropriate for butch individuals where butch was seen as a particular type of womanhood, femaleness and/or lesbianism.

Some respondents voiced that the plethora of trans identities such as transgender, transmasculine or trans could have the unintended effect of overwriting butch identities because there might be an ever more common assumption that butch individuals are transgender or trans men. This was explained by Lucy, White European, aged in their late fifties, identifying as butch and queer:

"I think what they have in common [newer terms] is that people often mistake a butch for one of these other identities- one particular trend I have witnessed is that people assume you are some where en-route to transitioning (FTM)" (Lucy).

Some respondents had even had the experience of being assumed to be trans men or asked if they were transitioning to live as trans men, such was the case with Bobby, aged 18-25 years old who identified as a butch lesbian:

"Many people assume I am trans rather than a masculine woman" (Bobby).

Many reasons were put forward for why the newer terms in circulation might be proving so popular or being taken up more widely. Two reasons were singled out by respondents to explain this. Even if the respondents did not agree personally with this reasoning, they identified it as influential. The two reasons identified were: A. the newer terms were seen as more inclusive and flexible; and, B. the butch identity had become associated with too many often negative stereotypes, including assumptions about inherent sexism and sexist behaviours or roles in femme-butch relationships.

5. BUTCH = SEXIST?

Several respondents mentioned that the butch identity and femme-butch relationships were sometimes assumed to be heterosexual role-playing and thus sexist. Shelley recounted such standpoints. Shelley identified as Mixed/Dual Heritage, aged in her early thirties, a cis gay woman and lesbian:

"The term butch, even in the lesbian community, has been seen to have negative connotations. It is as if butch lesbians were seen to be mimicking men"... "I have seen butch identifying women being mocked on MANY occasions on the gay scene over the years. 'I want a woman, not some woman who looks like a bloke. If I wanted a bloke I'd go for one', is a direct quote that I have heard many times on the lesbian scene. Butch/femme are often ridiculed for mimicking heterosexuality too" (Shelley).

Steph felt that femme-butch relationships do indeed ape heterosexual roles, she was in her late thirties and identified as a Jewish gender atypical gay woman:

"There's also something about the butch-femme dynamic that seems to emulate heterosexual relationships – one of the reasons I'm glad I'm gay is that I don't have to deal with that crap, so it always surprises me when I see people attempting to recreate it within their same sex relationships" (Steph).

Lombard explained that butch had in some circles become synonymous with toxic masculinity and this may be partly behind its lack of appeal:

"with 'butch' being tied to toxic notions of masculinity and dominant behaviour, its unsurprising that most younger women are choosing terms perceived as softer, and less confrontational, like transmasc or the suitably vague non-binary to describe themselves" (Lombard).

Although most respondents were aware of these views and the stubborn prevalence of such assumptions many were still proud of their butch identity and countered that it was misunderstood and unfairly represented. This was underlined by Josh, aged 18-25 years old, German British, identified as butch, MOC, GNC, transmasculine and as poly and queer:

"some feminists have too simplistically refuted it as adopting problematic masculine codes. Also assume it is part of a binary with femme which dictates a sexual exchange based on prescribed roles and inequalities. This is so not the case" (Josh).

6.WHY BE BUTCH TODAY?

Despite the misunderstandings, new terminologies, and some negative connotations many respondents defiantly drew attention to the benefits of being butch; and testified to the appeal and comfortable fit of this identity. This was expressed by Elizabeth, White English, a butch dyke in her early fifties:

"I am who I am. Coming out as a lesbian brought me into a community which celebrates butchness (we are an endangered species after all)" (Elizabeth).

Respondents also frequently defined their identity with pride. They coupled it with strength, independence, and defiance against societal expectations, as Judith explained:

"I love being a butch lesbian - to me it forcefully presents another and alternative view of woman"... "I can't tell you how much I love striding down the high street looking and feeling powerful, knowing that people have to reassess what they think a woman is" (Judith).

Having outlined some findings around the links or otherwise between butch and masculinity, the legacy of the lesbian sex wars and the impact of newer terms and possible modern border wars, I will now move on to discuss these findings in more depth.

DISCUSSION: ALWAYS ENDANGERED, NEVER EXTINCT?

As Halberstam (2015) continues to assert in their invaluable scholarship, while there have long been overstated rumours of the demise of the butch or panics over erasure in favour of more youthful terms, this label stays calm, stoic, and carries on. Participants in my survey were clearly not ignorant of the ascendancy of new terms for lesbian/queer individuals identifying as or with masculinities. They brought to light that this shift has added to a general assumption or background received wisdom that the butch identity is 'old school', meaning outdated and therefore 'uncool' in contrast to newer presumably cooler

terminologies. Scholars have also noted that this could be driven by a desire to create distance from the common homophobic and lesbophobic stereotypes created by mainstream society. Gaining this distance may require ejecting the archetypal mannish lesbian from the ranks: *"Is it our own community now that disallows the male-centric butch because she fits a stereotype that assimilationists want straight society to either forget or ignore?"* (Brownworth, 2011:143).

These almost universal images of lesbian expression, functioning of course to police the sexual identity of women and promote compulsory heterosexuality (Hesford, 2005) have attached to the moniker of lesbian in general but to the label of butch in particular. Holtz suggests that because of this lesbians who could have adopted the identity of butch are reluctant to do so for themselves: *"When a masculine woman claims she's not butch, what she may be saying is: I'm not that stereotype; I'm not fat; I'm not ugly; I don't have a blue-collar job; I don't hate men. I could point out that these attributes are nothing to be ashamed of"* (Holtz, 2011:116).

While observing prejudice towards the butch identity and an explosion of newer terms to describe lesbian gender or queer expressions of female masculinity, the butch identity remained used and understood. What it was understood to convey was a masculine presentation or style and respondents made reference to outward cultural codes that signified this masculinity, such as short hair, suits, and clothing from the men's department. However, survey respondents such as Jazza and Joss also reflected on their use of and reliance upon these predictable outward tropes of masculinity. They questioned the suitability of the term 'masculinity' at all, mirroring debates in the literature about whether a different category is needed altogether to clearly demarcate such expressions or

presentations from the masculinity of men and to bolster a separate identity for female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998b), or perhaps a lesbian masculinity. Evidently, there are those masculine and/or lesbian individuals, such as respondents Cleo and Leslie platformed earlier, who do not wish for anything about their identity to be seen through or understood in relation to the frames of maleness, men or stereotypical masculinity. As Esterberg also concluded: *"to present oneself as 'butch' or 'dykey' was an attempt to assert a distinctly lesbian presence that did not rely entirely on the language of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Although the specific gestures draw more from traditional notions of masculinity, they are not identical"* (Esterberg, 1996:276).

The dissatisfaction with masculinity as a useful or progressive reference point and the reflective critique of some negative practices linked to masculinity gives added weight to the offer of the newer terms like MOC, NB or GNC. Perhaps these are without the baggage of 'butch' and therefore safely separate from the racism, classism, sexism and homophobia of dominant masculinity. This was behind the inspirational project of B Cole of course who coined the term MOC: *"Masculine of centre recognises the cultural breadth and depth of identity for lesbian/queer womyn who tilt toward the masculine side of the gender scale, and the term includes a wide range of identities such as butch, stud, aggressive/AG, tom, macha, boi, dom etc"* (Cole, 2011:128).

An important point was made by respondents like Radclyffe and Judith, who felt that for better or worse butch was indeed associated with womanhood and lesbianism in a way that the other terms like GNC, transgender, NB or transmasculine were not, those terms being more sex and sexuality neutral. Therefore, an important finding here is that for those individuals who take pride in their womanhood and lesbianism, the sexing of the butch label

as female and its associations with lesbian communities was actually a plus rather than a negative.

Other respondents, such as Lucy and Bobby, were respectfully cautious of newer terms, for different reasons; giving fresh wings to fears of butch flight. In his introduction to *Butch Is A Noun*, Bergman takes great care to finally clarify some of the many definitions of butch, butch flight and he attacks the border wars directly, once and for all: "*Butches are not beginner FTMs¹, except that sometimes they are, but it's not a continuum except when it is*" (2006:16). Although a humorous addition to the field this very stance also appears in much of the available academic literature. It is a stance that respects self-definition absolutely and finally and recognises that the act of self-definition may be the only discernible difference between similar individuals or communities (Nataf, 1995; Rubin, 1992). As Hale asserted: "*self-identification as butch or ftm is the only characteristic that distinguishes some butches from some ftms*" (Hale, 1998:325).

Fears of butch flight led to participant's concerns that the term 'butch' may just fall out of usage altogether, being eclipsed by the plethora of trans identifications available in what Halberstam (2015) calls: "*an era of unprecedented visibility for transgender embodiment*", where the label of butch may, "*represent an obstinate fragment of an older paradigm*" (Halberstam, 2015). These same fears and concerns were explored by Bergman in 2006 illustrating the stability and presence of these panics as well as, in spite of these panics, the stability and presence of butches themselves: "*I hear from butches that they are saddened by what they think of as Butch Flight, that people who once might have lived as butches are*

¹ FTM refers to female-to-male and is lesser used today, with 'trans man' being the more common term.

now living as men, and it makes them sad. They're fearful that soon, masculine women like them will be a more or less extinct species" (Bergman, 2006:67).

Of course, another possible reason for the lack of appeal of the butch label is linked to the perception of butch as old-fashioned, and within that a perception and assumption of old-fashioned gender roles and particularly sexist attitudes towards more feminine or femme women. Participants Lombard and Josh reflected on this for example. Such reflections evidence the cloying hangover of the 1980s lesbian sex-wars in the UK, and internal conflicts, or what have been called feminist fractures (Mackay, 2015), within the US and UK Women's Liberation Movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Jeffreys, 2018; Rees, 2010). These fractures were often between feminists who emphasised lesbianism as a feminist political project beyond the personal and those who experienced lesbianism as a sexuality that was no purer or unpolluted by society than any other sexual practice. For those feminists who viewed gender as a system of sex rank and sought its destruction it followed that gender should be rid from personal life and relationships also, including sexual relationships (Beemyn & Eliason, 2016; Crawley, 2001).

Despite the spectre of such assumptions many survey respondents were able to reject these narratives and forged their own identities and relationships which they insisted were positive, self-fulfilling, self-actualising and critical of the toxicity of much available models of masculinity. Far from being internal agents of patriarchy these butch and queer individuals embraced being different to the expected norms at both ends of the current gender binary. Many such as Judith and Hilary spoke passionately of their reality as living proof of the false limits of gender dictates. As Queen argues, butch could therefore easily be seen as a

feminist identity because: "*Butch is a giant fuck you to compulsory femininity*" (Queen, 1994:15).

CONCLUSION

Even while being maligned or misrepresented the butch persists. For many this identity continues today to be a shorthand reference to particular expressions of masculinity by women, queers and lesbians. For some butches this has no relationship to men at all. Clothing or pursuits culturally coded as masculine are seen as open to all sexes and independent of bodily sex; thus being butch was considered as one manifestation of womanhood. Indeed, this was how several respondents understood their butch identity.

The butch flag was taken up in spite of suspicions of sexism and negative masculine roleplaying. It is interesting that the legacy of the sex-wars appears to continue to this day with such prevalence and was commented on not only by those in their fifties but by younger butches too, who would not have been born when the sex-wars played out in 1980s lesbian communities.

Another war is also proving stubborn and that is the issue of border wars between advocates for adopting identities that include trans identifiers and those that believe these dilute the womanhood and lesbianism of the butch title. This battle appears to be unresolved. For many participants in my research it was a source of consternation that the butch identity was linked to newer terms that indicate a transgender or trans identity. While the inclusivity of newer terms like GNC, transmasculine, or MOC might appeal to many - and are free of the assumptions of sexism and negative masculinity that seemingly continue to wed to butches - for some the unique selling point of the butch label is precisely its historic

links to lesbian and women's communities. This link was not something those participants wanted to sever or hide.

While the current context of the bitter TERF Wars is a challenging one to research nuances within lesbian and queer communities I conclude by suggesting that this should certainly not be a reason to avoid such research. If anything, the post-trans landscape, changing generational attitudes towards the fixity of labels for sexuality and gender and the indefatigability of sex-wars and border-wars makes for a more urgent climate in which to research minorities within minority communities, and what unites them.

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