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Thesis Proposal: Archiving Butch Lesbian Past/Present/Future

In lesbian communities, gender and sexuality are thoroughly intertwined in the understanding of identity, community, and collective oppression. Within this minority, butch lesbians, through their combined masculine embodiment and lesbian sexuality, have their own rich history, culture, and communal experiences that have continually shaped their identity since the formal development of lesbian bar culture starting in the early twentieth century. Butch identity is deeply tied to femme lesbian identity in a unique dynamic that centers love and kinship between women and woman-aligned folks and the defiance of prescribed gender roles. In the contemporary moment, cisgender heterosexual populations and some groups within the LGBT community view butch identity as an antiquated, dying breed, which can be seen in social media discourse, queer and feminist theorists, as well as in the continued negative representation in media¹. Efforts have been made by butch lesbian artists and groups, such as the photographer Meg Allen through her photography series BUTCH and the publication *Butch is Not a Dirty Word*, to combat misconceptions about butch identity and showcase the diversity, strength, and development in butch communities today.

Continuing this legacy, my project will focus on capturing a snap shot of butch lesbian subjects to show a selection of the variety that butch identity offers, combat negative stereotyping to demonstrate the identity's development, and provide comfort and inspiration for butch lesbians and other LGBT folks, without claiming to generalize the entirety of the community. I will achieve this through a digital and print anthology book as well as a functional and updatable digital archive (Weebly website, [Quire](#) publication, etc.) that features portrait photography and art of butch subjects, interviews, questionnaire responses, and personal writings from myself and some of the subjects featured. The book will involve the creation of a particular order structure for the content, which involves intentional curation of the content. Within this subject I would like to specifically focus on concepts of childhood and memory, current thoughts on identity/community/relationships, and projections/hopes for personal and collective futures,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/31/butch-lesbians-paying-price-bending-gender>

but blended together in a predominantly non-linear manner. The primary intended audience of these objects is first and foremost the butch lesbians, but they can also serve as a resource for other folks to learn and celebrate the nuances of butch diversity and identity. As a butch lesbian, I have personal stake in this project, and I have learned from my involvement in the community that a representational and collaborative project like this is still so important for butch lesbians of all ages to see themselves and their own diversity in a society that continues to treat them as lesser and systematically impact their lives.

This project will have both web and print based components: a physical book, a digital PDF eBook version, an accompanying and updatable digital archive that includes digital photography, and digital art (photo manipulation, mixed media, etc.). From a larger lesbian and greater LGBT history, I will be drawing upon histories of lesbian portrait photography, collage culture, anthologies, and zine-making in my format and execution. I have a strong interest in the book as an archive and also believe that books, both print and digital, harbor a particular power and permanency that I believe matches the content of my project. In support of my technical and artistic approach, I have taken Intermediate/Advance Digital Art, Digital & Analog Printmaking, B/W Darkroom Photo, and several classes abroad that focus in graphic design (Graphic Design 1&2 that focused on the design and production of a book, Concepts of Editing that focused on narrative in design, and Information Environments that focused on new ways of interpretation information through art and design in different formats). Through internships I have gained exposure to data management and digital publishing software and framework that has kindled my interest in archives, (digital) preservation, and ideas around accessibility and the distribution of information. I will be using InDesign for the production of my book, Photoshop and Illustrator for editing photos and creating other art elements, and either Weebly or Quire as a platform for the additional archival component, all of which I have experience with and access to. I will be using film and digital photography and scanners to capture subjects and objects to be used for the more artistic aspects of the project.

The core of my research, conceptually and content wise, centers around books, articles, journals, exhibition catalogues, videos and film, archives, and websites dealing with the subject of butch lesbians, the lesbian community, lesbian and LGBT art, lesbian history, archival studies, and gay/lesbian/queer theory. A selection of those sources include *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, *Dagger: On Butch Women* edited by Lily Burana, *Straight to Hell: 10 Years of Dyke*

Action Machine, articles from the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, the documentary *Gender Trouble: The Butches*, along with videos and articles circulated through the web through websites/sources such as Them, Intomore, and Pink News. I have access to most if not every tool I need but will likely be applying for additional funding through the Motley to help with printing and film costs. To find subjects to photograph, interview (in-person or through video call), and complete questionnaires, I will be using my own personal network, the Scripps and 5C network, and several lesbian and butch lesbian-specific or inclusive Facebook groups that I have membership in. In addition to photographing subjects myself in the southern California region, I will also be asking folks who I cannot photograph to provide their own self-selected photos of themselves (or other photos of relevance or importance), with their full consent, for use in photo manipulations, collages, and other artistic pieces that would be featured in the book.

I ultimately view this thesis project as a culmination of my Media Studies major, as well as my Art and Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies minors, through my theoretical contemplation of the role of archives and digital (cultural) preservation through particular mediums (ie. the book and digital archive) in relationship to minority groups and its implications within and in resistance to dominant systems, the artistic components, the overall subject matter, and additional theoretical considerations. Guiding my research and production are the following:

How do butch lesbians conceive of their identity and its connection to lesbian history today? How do butch-identifying folks perceive the future trajectory of their identity and community? How can archiving and digital preservation ethically serve and be useful to marginalized communities who face historical erasure? How can archiving be used as a tool of resistance?