

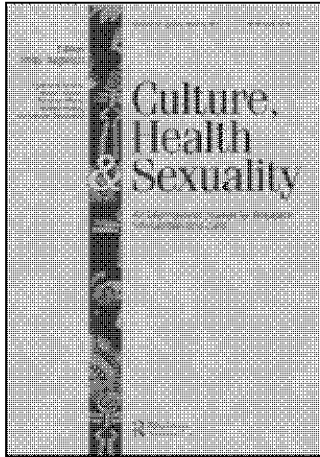
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### **Black lesbian gender and sexual culture: celebration and resistance**

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## **Black lesbian gender and sexual culture: celebration and resistance**

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Lesbian gender expression is a persistent theme in research and writing about lesbian culture. Yet little empirical research has examined the ways lesbian gender functions within the sexual culture of lesbian communities, particularly among lesbians of colour. This study was aimed at documenting and assessing the functions of lesbian gender among African American lesbians. Particular attention was paid to identifying core characteristics of sexual discourses, such as evidence of dominant and resistant sexual scripts and contradictions between messages about sex. This study took the form of a rapid ethnography of an African American lesbian community in the USA using focus groups, individual community leader interviews and participant observations at a weekly open mic event. Findings document how lesbian gender roles translated into distinct sexual roles and expectations that appear to both parallel and radically reject heterosexual norms for sex. The deep roots of the social pressure to date within these roles were also evident within observations at the open microphone events. While data highlighted the central role that lesbian gender roles play in this community, analyses also revealed a strong resistance to the dominance of this sexual cultural system.

### **Résumé**

L'expression du genre lesbien est un thème récurrent dans la recherche et les publications sur la culture lesbienne. Pourtant peu de recherches empiriques ont examiné les modes de fonctionnement du genre lesbien dans la culture sexuelle des communautés lesbiennes, en particulier celle des lesbiennes de couleur. Cette étude visait à documenter et à évaluer les fonctions du genre lesbien parmi les lesbiennes africaines-américaines. Elle s'est particulièrement intéressée à l'identification des caractéristiques principales des discours sexuels, telles que l'évidence de scripts sexuels résistants et dominants, et les contradictions entre les différents messages sur le sexe. Ces travaux ont été menés à la manière d'une ethnographie rapide d'une communauté lesbienne africaine-américaine aux USA, grâce à l'utilisation de méthodes telles que des groupes cibles, des entretiens individuels avec des leaders communautaires et des observations participantes lors de micros ouverts hebdomadaires. Les résultats apportent des informations sur la manière selon laquelle les rôles de genre lesbiens peuvent se traduire en attentes et en rôles sexuels distincts qui semblent à la fois avoir des similitudes avec les normes hétérosexuelles de la sexualité et les rejeter radicalement. Les racines profondes de la pression sociale dans ces rôles, à ce jour, sont ressorties comme des évidences lors des observations à micro ouvert. Alors que les données ont mis en avant le rôle central joué par le rôle de genre lesbien dans cette communauté, les analyses ont également révélé une forte résistance de la dominance de ce système culturel sexuel.

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**Resumen**

La expresión de género lesbiano es un tema persistente en los estudios y escritos sobre la cultura lesbiana. Sin embargo, en pocos estudios empíricos se han analizado las funciones del género lesbiano en la cultura sexual de las comunidades lesbianas, especialmente entre las lesbianas de raza negra. El objetivo de este estudio fue documentar y valorar las funciones del género lesbiano entre la comunidad lesbiana afroamericana. En este estudio prestamos especial atención a identificar las características centrales de los discursos en materia sexual, tales como la evidencia de guiones sexuales de carácter dominante y resistente, y las contradicciones entre los mensajes que hablan de la sexualidad. La estrategia para recabar información en este estudio fue la de una etnografía rápida de una comunidad lesbiana afroamericana de los Estados Unidos mediante grupos de discusión, entrevistas a líderes de la comunidad y observaciones de las participantes durante una sesión semanal con micrófono abierto. Los resultados ponen de relieve de qué modo se traducen los roles del género lesbiano en los diferentes roles y expectativas sexuales que parecen ser paralelas a las normas heterosexuales de la sexualidad y al mismo tiempo rechazarlas radicalmente. Las raíces profundas de la presión social existente hasta ahora en estos roles también fueron patentes al analizar las participaciones en las sesiones de micrófono abierto. Si bien los datos pusieron de relieve el papel central de los roles del género lesbiano en esta comunidad, en los análisis también observamos una fuerte resistencia al dominio de este sistema cultural y sexual.

**Keywords:** Black; lesbian; gender; sexual culture; USA

**Introduction**

It is clear ... that rather than a lesbian community *per se*, there exists now a whole lesbian society comprised of different lesbian communities. (Rothblum and Sablove 2005, xvi)

The notion that there are several forms of lesbian communities in the USA, distinguished by the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic class and regional diversity, has been reflected in multiple studies of communities of same-gender loving women<sup>1</sup> (Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993; Morris 2005; Rabin and Slater 2005). While there are few studies that have attempted to examine cultural systems within lesbian communities, empirical research (see, e.g., Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993) and published personal narratives (see, e.g., Hampton 1981; Nestle 1984) on the ways lesbian community life has been organized reveal lesbian gender expression as a persistent and core feature of lesbian sexual culture.

Sexual culture is a group's worldview regarding normative sexual behaviour and sexuality (Herdt 1997). In an effort to examine sexual culture as a dynamic construct, I used sexual discourse theory as delineated by Schifter and Madrigal (2001) who studied sexual health risks among Costa Rican youth. Sexual discourse theory holds that one way to understand a group's sexual culture is to examine the ways people speak about sex and sexuality, as well as the messages they report hearing from various institutions (e.g. family, school, religion). Within this framework, a researcher approaches the study of sexual culture as a dynamic construct by purposively examining both dominant and less dominant discourses regarding sex and through the expectation that cultures do not remain the same across time (Schifter and Madrigal 2001).

Within lesbian sexual culture, gendered sexual discourses have illuminated the myriad ways that lesbian women have used and *expected* one another to identify

with labels along masculine and feminine continua; terms like 'femme' and 'butch' are among the labels that lesbians have used to describe where they fall along these continua. Gayle Rubin (1992) describes butch and femme as 'ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women' (467). Contrasting these forms of lesbian gender, Taylor and Rupp argue that one of the most significant forms of US second-wave feminist ritual that have characterized contemporary lesbian culture is the androgynous or 'neither masculine nor feminine' mode of self-presentation. These ways of dressing and behaving have been presented as an oppositional stance against the mainstream dominant view of appropriate feminine expression. However, women of colour and working class women have also asserted that these androgynous modes of expression are a cultural artifact of White middle class lesbians, not necessarily all lesbians (Burch 1998; Crawley 2001; Taylor and Rupp 1993).

### *Black lesbian gender expression*

Historians have noted gender non-conforming modes of expression as core features of sexual life among Black same-gender loving women in the USA since the 1920s (Garber 1989; Walker 2001). African American blues and jazz singers during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Ma Rainey in her song 'Prove it On Me', asserted that they did not hang around 'no men' and that they 'talk to the gals just like any old man' while wearing suits and ties (Davis 1998). Black women who partnered with women and adopted masculine gender-scripted dress and behaviours have used the term butch (Lorde 1983), but also used racially specific terms such as 'stud' (Hampton 1981). More recently, terms like 'aggressive' (Peddle 2005) and 'dominant' have also been used by Black same-gender loving women and girls who identify as masculine in appearance, behaviour, erotic expression and/or relationship role (Wilson and Rowell 2003). The term 'femme' continues to be used in Black same-gender loving communities to denote women who identify as feminine in appearance, behaviour, erotic expression and/or relationship roles (Chisholm and Stark 2006). Black lesbians' personal narratives illustrate the ways that dress and hair styles have been important markers of Black lesbian gender roles (see, e.g., Blackman and Perry 1990; Lorde 1983; Smith 1992) and contemporary representations of style differ dramatically depending on age, geography and interests, ranging from hip-hop to sportswear to business attire.

There is relatively little empirical research on lesbian gender expression. The few researchers who study lesbian gender have focused on varying topics, from butch and femme identity development processes (Hiestand and Levitt 2005; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003) to biological factors associated with lesbian gender identification (Brown et al. 2002; Singh et al. 1999). Among them, even fewer have focused on the role lesbian gender plays in organizing sexual or romantic life (see Crawley 2001; Pitman 2000 for examples of exceptions). In a small qualitative study of lesbian body image issues, Pitman (2000) found that for her Black participant, butch identity and Black identity were central to her body image. However, the ways in which butch or masculine identities played a role in Black lesbian culture was not further examined, as it was not the central focus of the study.

Most studies on lesbian gender expression focus solely or primarily on White lesbians. The social sciences have devoted little attention to documenting and examining the role of lesbian gender in the sexual cultures of African American

lesbians, possibly reflecting what Hammond (2002) describes as the absence of black queer women's experiences from dominant sexual discourses and the silencing of black female subjectivity. One exception is an in-depth qualitative study of a community of Black lesbians in New York City (Moore 2006) that identified three categorizations of gender among Black lesbians, including femme, transgressive and gender blender. Transgressive referred to more masculine identified women, including masculine-identified women who did not like the terms butch and stud, whereas gender-blender referred to the mixing of explicitly feminine and masculine characteristics. Moore's study was an important step in the direction of documenting an often ignored segment of US culture, Black lesbians. The current study is aimed at adding to this body of research by specifically examining dimensions of Black lesbian sexual cultures. Additionally, this study aims to expand the use of sexual discourse theory to a multiple minority group. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate the complex relationships Black lesbians have to sexual messages that are generated within primarily Black lesbian spaces, as well as those from the multiple oppressed communities in which they may participate (e.g. women, African American, lesbian) or through the dominant mainstream (i.e. patriarchal, European American, heterosexual) US society.

### **Current study**

The current study on lesbian gender roles within African American lesbian communities is part of a larger study, the 'Black Lesbians' Ideas about Sex and Sexuality' (BLISS) study. The BLISS study was designed to document the defining features of African American lesbian sexual culture in Chicago, including the beliefs, values and perspectives about sex and sexuality. Using sexual discourse theory as a framework for studying sexual culture (Schifter and Madrigal 2001), the BLISS data were analyzed for the current study to address the following research questions: (1) what function, if any, does lesbian gender play in Black lesbian sexual life?; (2) how is lesbian gender constructed and understood?; and (3) what are the range of perspectives regarding lesbian gender in Black lesbian communities?

### **Methods**

#### ***Setting***

The manifestations of racism and heterosexism in Chicago and their impacts on the lives of African American lesbians and gays are well known by sexual minorities of colour in the USA. Chicago is highly residentially segregated, in part because of its history of entrenched racist housing policies (Massey and Denton 1998). Paralleling the racism of the larger White community, racism within the gay communities in Chicago that are predominantly White has marginalized many African American lesbians and gays. African American lesbians and gays in Chicago cannot easily access support for their sexuality and a community based on their sexual identity. Additionally, heterosexism within African American communities isolates many African American lesbians and gays from support and resources as racial minorities. No predominantly Black lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) neighbourhood in Chicago exists.

However, several Black LGBT organizations and groups exist, suggesting a continued resistance against multiple oppressions and an effort to create empowering, affirmative and culturally-specific spaces and institutions for LGBT people of colour. Yet most of the organizational resources for Black gay people in Chicago are

through health institutions, which tend to focus mostly on HIV services for gay and bisexual men, leaving a dearth of places for Black gay people that are not focused on issues of disease, especially for women. Only one of the city's organizations that solely focused on Black lesbians and bisexual women has its own physical space separate from other organizations, Affinity Community Services, which is a 13-year-old advocacy and service organization for Black lesbian and bisexual women. Prior to beginning this study, I had worked with several gay organizations that included Black gay and bisexual men as part of a university-based HIV-prevention team. I was also involved with Affinity Community Services, first as a youth programme chair and then later as a Board of Directors member.

### *Participants and procedures*

I employed a rapid ethnographic assessment methodology (Kluwin, Morris, and Clifford 2004), including three data collection methods: focus groups, individual interviews and participant observations. Each method offered a unique lens through which to examine African American lesbian sexual culture. The study involved focus groups ( $n=9$ , 26 participants) with African American lesbians (see Table 1 for demographics); individual interviews ( $n=5$ ) with community leaders;<sup>2</sup> and, participant observations ( $n=10$  across 4 months) at a weekly open mic night for African American lesbians. Focus group participants were recruited through snowball sampling techniques. I conducted the focus groups using a protocol that was composed of five domains: attitudes toward black lesbian community; defining sexuality; defining sex; butch and femme; and the influence of various communities (African American, lesbian and women) on their views about sex. The open mic events were important because they provided an opportunity to see how sex and sexuality was talked about outside of the research-directed setting. I listened to the open mic performances and noted characteristics of the audience, how and when performers talked about sex, what kinds of people were referred to in sexual poetry (e.g. perceived lesbian identity labels, sexual identities or race), the reactions of the audience and the topics of other non-sexual poetry. The individual interviews with community leaders served as an opportunity to validate and expand upon the findings from the focus groups and observations.

### *Sampling issues*

I sought to recruit a diverse group of participants for the focus group and individual interviews. However, I was unable to enroll more than two women who had never been to college. The findings therefore primarily represent the perspectives of women who have attended some college or technical school and those that have graduated college with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Additionally, I used convenience sampling and recruited through established LGBT institutions and media, such as agency listservs and community newspapers. Therefore, the respondents represent a population of lesbian-identified women that are relatively well connected to gay and lesbian communities. Though this sampling was useful for the primary aim of the study, which was to document lesbian community beliefs and norms, the absence of the perspectives of African American lesbians who were no longer or had never been connected to the community may limit the representation of other subgroups within the community. Finally, because the primary goal was to document sexual discourses

Table 1. Focus group participants.

Focus group	Education level	Age	Years in Chicago
FG1	Some college	35	17
	Some college	40	16
	College graduate	44	14
		<i>M</i> =39.67	<i>M</i> =15.67
FG2	College graduate	40	40
	Some college	20	20
	Some college	37	37
		<i>M</i> =32.33	<i>M</i> =32.33
FG3	College graduate	50	50
	College graduate	30	30
		<i>M</i> =40	<i>M</i> =40
FG4	College graduate	40	2
	College graduate	53	25
		<i>M</i> =46.5	<i>M</i> =13.5
FG5	Some college	34	5
	Some college	38	17
	Some college	35	35
		<i>M</i> =35.67	<i>M</i> =19
FG6	Some college	20	20
	High school graduate	22	22
	Some college	19	19
	High school graduate	20	20
		<i>M</i> =20.25	<i>M</i> =20.25
FG7	College graduate	41	41
	College graduate	30	30
	College graduate	25	25
		<i>M</i> =32	<i>M</i> =32
FG8	Some college	65	65
	Some college	46	10
	Some college	39	20
		<i>M</i> =50	<i>M</i> =31.67
FG9	Some college	40	40
	Some college	44	2
	Some college	32	32
		<i>M</i> =38.66	<i>M</i> =24.66

Note: All participants identified as African American and as lesbian.

more broadly and the prominence of the lesbian gender theme in this study was emergent, I had not anticipated the need to purposively sample participants that represent various lesbian gender categories. As such, the sample is composed primarily of lesbians who reported that they did not currently have a strong or salient lesbian gender identity and the findings should be contextualized by the sample composition.

### **Analyses**

I followed a coding process endorsed by many qualitative researchers (Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub 1996; Wolcott 1994) and used NVivo Software to organize the data. In short, the analyses followed a five-step process that began with identifying initial themes of the interview transcripts and observation notes. Then, I unitized the data into smaller units (i.e. coding) and examined patterns among codes across data sources. Following these steps, I negotiated the coding structure with a second coder to increase code consistency and interpretation validity. I conducted these first four steps for the focus groups and observations prior to conducting the community leader interviews, which were used primarily as a way to help further negotiate my interpretation of the coding structure and identify themes that may have been missed in the focus groups and observations. Finally, the fifth step in the analysis process was identifying final themes and uses for theory.

### **Results and discussion**

#### **Overview**

Using the analytic process above, I identified several aspects of the beliefs and practices regarding lesbian gender roles within African American lesbian sexual culture in Chicago. The results section is divided into three main parts that represent the dimensions of lesbian gender discussed by participants. First, I present how specific lesbian gender labels were constructed to create a stud-femme gender role dichotomy that functioned to organize sexual life. Then I discuss current debates among Black lesbians in this community about the prominence of the roles and labels, including evidence of resistance to the polarized dichotomy of these roles. Finally, I discuss my interpretations of how lesbian gender was given meaning in sexual situations to produce a radical interpretation of gender sex roles. Quotes from focus group participants and community leaders and observation notes are included as evidence of key themes and relevant literature is included to illustrate connections to contemporary theory and research on lesbian gender expression. Pseudonyms are used for focus group participants and community leader interviewees.

One of the main questions of the focus group protocol was, 'Are roles or labels like butch or femme or aggressive or passive important in sex and sexuality? How so or why not?' This question was eventually rephrased to include the term stud as another term for butch since this was the term most often used by participants to describe masculine gender identities, reflecting ethnic differences in masculine identity terminology in the city. Every focus group chose to devote significant time and energy to answering this question. Participants consistently highlighted lesbian gender roles as a key organizing construct of African American lesbian sexual life. Four participants claimed these labels for themselves. Several other participants supported women's adoption of these roles. The ways in which participants spoke about stud and femme categories indicated that these ways of constructing lesbian gender were part of an overarching sexual cultural norm of which all were aware. Within every focus group, participants conveyed a sense that the expectation to adopt a label and to operate within the category was a strong message throughout the Black lesbian community. Hence, expectations to be a femme or stud appeared to be a sexual cultural script for this Black lesbian community. Participants indicated

that this cultural script was communicated in several contexts, including romantic relationships and community settings.

In addition to lovers, participants reported being encouraged strongly to take on these labels by friends or acquaintances. In response to my question about who was trying to ascribe these labels, one participant, Pat, who was in FG3 said, ‘... I’ve been asked the most questions by Black lesbians. Not that they try to ascribe a label to me, but truly try to figure out where I fit and where I belong from other Black lesbians’. Community leaders who were interviewed testified to the strong presence of these labels and expectations within African American lesbian communities. Some focus group participants also suggested that although they do not use labels such as stud, butch or femme to describe themselves, they nonetheless yield to expectations around choosing a role within relationships in order to find dates or to satisfy a current partner.

The deep roots of the social pressure to date within these roles were also evident within my observations at the open mics. Most women that appeared to be coupled off, as evidenced by them kissing or cuddling with each other, were a clear butch and femme couple. Using the language suggested by Moore (2006), only one couple was a ‘gender-blender’ couple. They were a younger couple, maybe in their early twenties, and were each dressed in both feminine and masculine clothing. I did not observe any couple that was composed of two women who were traditionally feminine and observed only one couple in which both were dressed and acted in traditionally masculine ways. An inherent aspect of sexual discourse and cultural scripts are the potential disconnects between expected norms and individual transgressions against those norms (Parker 1991; Schifter and Madrigal 2001). This one masculine-masculine couple appeared to be participating in this type of transgression. Recognizing the discrepancy between their coupling and the cultural sexual scripts expectations, I asked that couple that night whether they had experienced negative reactions to their being a couple in which both women appeared masculine identified. They explained that they had received harsh reactions and lack of understanding from other African American lesbians. However, they felt that they were no longer into labels and loved each other. They had been together for over eight years and people knew them as an established couple so left them alone.

### ***Constructing the dichotomous stud-femme label system***

With regard to non-sexual roles within romantic relationships, the extreme stud and femme labels carried expectations around partner choices. In particular, femmes are supposed to date studs and vice versa. Focus group participants and my participant observations suggest that there is little tolerance for femmes or studs dating one another. Once choosing a partner of the other lesbian gender, participants mentioned a few relationship roles that each person was expected to fill. Participants within several groups talked about being with a stud or femme partner who was disappointed that they would not follow the ‘rules’ of lesbian gendering. For example, Dalia indicated that she was expected to act more ‘mannish’ in her gestures when she was with a femme partner (FG3). Another participant, who was partnered with someone who identified as a hard stud, in turn expected her partner not to cry in order to live up to the masculine image (FG4, Cynthia). Similarly, participants who were with partners that were studs were expected to act in certain ways to be considered good femmes, such as in the case of Bré who reported that she

was expected to sleep on the inside of the bed in order to be protected (FG7). The expectations and tendencies to date within a stud-femme dyad participants reported were very similar to those reported in Moore's (2006) study of New York Black lesbians, suggesting Black lesbian cultural script that spans the boundaries of one city.

Specific to sexual practice, participants within groups and individual community leader interviews, as well as my participant observations, provided a rich description of how these labels translated to the sexual lives of Black lesbians in the community. The data indicated unique expectations and norms around sexual expression for feminine and masculine identified lesbians.

### *Masculine expression*

Lesbians who expressed a highly masculinised gender were labelled 'hard studs' and hard studs had relatively strict guidelines for sexual practice. For example, participants talked about the, 'hard studs that will come out and say, "I don't want my woman to touch me. I want to be the total pleaser"' (FG2, Leslie). Contrasting femmes and hard studs, another participant claims:

... because studs mostly in traditional situations, they're usually the one who initiates, they're usually the one, who, if you have oral sex, they usually the one who would initiate having oral sex on that particular person, when they want, on a femme. I know a lot of studs. They don't like to be touched to a certain point, you know, you can touch them in certain places, but you know, you can't really touch them like on, on their, you know, vagina or so things that may make them feel feminine. (FG5. Jay)

These participants' descriptions of the hard stud with which they were familiar is similar to the stone butch described in the fictional autobiography of Feinberg's (1993) 'Stone Butch Blues' and discussed in Halberstam's (1998) critique of the tendency to pathologize the stone butch in her book *Female Masculinity*. As such, it is possible that the language of hard stud is an ethnic-specific term that denotes a lesbian gender category identified in other ethnic communities. While a few participants who identified themselves as either aggressive, tomboy or dominant volunteered that they usually or rarely allowed partners to penetrate them, it is important to note that focus group participants were not asked to describe their own sexual lives. Hence, data from this study cannot confirm or disconfirm the extent to which these 'hard' or 'stone' sexual scripts resonated with the sexual practice of the women in the study.

Illustrating how hard stud sexual scripts were understood by many Black lesbians in the community, two primary reasons were provided by participants for why hard studs would demand that they not be touched during sex. One explanation was that hard studs were not comfortable with the parts of their bodies that defined them as female, mainly their breasts and vaginas. As such, a successful performance of the 'male' role during sex required that the hard stud's female body parts not be touched. Another reason concerned the meaning of being touched and seduced. That is, participants talked about the importance of maintaining the appearance of dominance in the sexual act for hard studs and how being touched sexually or being the 'bottom' took away that sense of dominance and control. The vulnerability of being sexually aroused and pleased threatened the image of the dominant sexual partner. The contrast between these two explanations is significant. The first explanation, *rejecting femaleness*, is similar to the comments made by some transgender people regarding discomfort with their biological body parts that

dictate mainstream society's current gendering system. However, the second explanation, *maintaining dominance*, is not about denying one's femaleness as expressed through the body but instead about accepting a view that being sexually pleased and aroused by another makes a person vulnerable. Being vulnerable does not fit with the hegemonic masculine image and, hence, does not fit with the image of a true stud.

This study was designed to examine sexual discourses – essentially, how Black lesbians discussed sex and what cultural level sexual scripts were recognized in the community. While examining conflicts between cultural level norms and individual behaviour was not the aim of the current study, some participants noted that there is some evidence of transgressions. Participants in two focus groups (FG1 and FG9) discussed studs they knew who had recently had vaginal sex with men and had children, behaviours that did not fit into the masculine lesbian gender identity role. It is quite likely that many studs and many ultra-femmes engaged in sexual behaviour that transgressed expected community norms (beyond the mainstream norms they already transgress through sexual orientation and gender presentation), as was found in a study of the level of congruence between butch global presentation and actual self-presentation in sexual settings within a predominantly White sample (Rosenzweig and Lebow 1992).

### *Feminine expression*

Within the masculine/feminine dichotomy that was discussed by participants, there were also the pillow princesses and ultra femmes at the other end of the lesbian gender spectrum. Similar to the hard stud category, these extreme femme labels have clear sexual behaviour roles. In this study 'Ultra femme' was a label given to women who expressed themselves in high-fashion feminine ways, usually including heels, make-up and contouring or revealing clothing. Relevant to the current study, 'pillow princess' was a special label for the ultra femme that alluded to the sexual context. In particular, this label described a lesbian who prefers to be the receiver of sexual pleasure and acts, such as having oral sex performed on her. She is not expected or likely to perform any sexual acts on her partner. In a sexual encounter, the expectation is that ultra femmes are the ones that will be vaginally penetrated with sex toys or fingers. While not all participants spoke to the relationship between sexual penetration and femme identities, one group agreed that a requirement to being labelled femme was that an individual liked penetration (FG1). It is notable that outside of acknowledging that this role may be a little selfish, no pathology related to body image or gender identity was ascribed to the role of pillow princess. In general, it was the role of hard stud that engendered the most resistance, as will be described in the next section.

### *Debate within the community about lesbian gender*

As Burch (1998) has noted, some activists and theorists argue that the adoption of femme and stud roles and labels is an attempt to replicate the gendered sexual norms in which lesbians were raised in the mainstream heterosexual society. Several community leaders and focus group participants thought similarly. For example, in FG7, Wanda talked about the differences between White and Black lesbians that she saw:

They are, and not just Whites, but [also] other non-African American lesbians see it as we are just two women that love each other. Whereas Blacks say we are two women that love each other, however we do have roles. You know, and we are trying to in a sense maybe ascribe to a heterosexual way of life, or way of operating, in our relationship. (FG7)

Similarly, one of the community leaders whose work focused on sexuality and spirituality, Vicki, discussed her own experiences with previously claiming a butch identity. She indicated that letting go of this identity represented seeing it for what it was, a replication of heterosexuality. Kendra, another community leader who works in lesbian and gay health arenas, also reported that she felt that femme and butch labels appear to mimic traditional gender roles. However, she cautioned against the assumption that mimicking traditional gender roles automatically made lesbian gender label expression 'artificial'. That is, many African American lesbians genuinely feel masculine or feminine and are truly attracted to 'opposite' lesbian gendered women. Nonetheless, these same women who identify as butch or femme are sometimes frustrated with the strict rules regarding these labels and identities.

In contrast, one focus group participant, Gail, who identified as femme and as a member of the 'butch-femme community', also conveyed to the group that there was a renaissance in the butch-femme movement that included reconfiguring butch and femme to mean more than a replication of heterosexual gender roles. She felt that contemporary butch-femme communities were more egalitarian than they had been when she was younger, where femmes were no longer placed in a subservient or domestic role. Some scholars have argued that femme and stud labels do not attempt to replicate heterosexist norms, but serve as mechanisms for de-gendering gendered lines by claiming masculinity in women's bodies. The butch lesbian in particular functioned as 'images to contradict the prevailing image of female sexuality as passive or even nonexistent' (Burch 1998, 361). However, this argument suggests that lesbians who adopt lesbian gender labels do so as a political statement. While a masculine identity may operate as a radical rejection of traditional female expectations, no data from this study suggest that the adoption of lesbian gender labels among African American lesbians was intended to be a purposeful and political affront to mainstream gender expectations.

Despite the large role that lesbian gender played in organizing Black lesbian sexual life, every focus group discussion revealed individuals' (within the group or people known by group participants) conscious and purposeful rejection of femme and stud labels/roles. There were several strategies used to reject the femme and stud categories within African American lesbian communities: refusing to label oneself; feeling bothered by labels; feeling hopeful that the cultural scripts will change; and avoiding hanging out with people who like labels. Focus group participants reported that they refused to label themselves in terms of femme or stud. As Sheri from FG4 said in response to a comment from another group participant:

I agree with that. ... don't identify in any of those butch/femme things. It is a mystery to me ... I don't disapprove of it, it just isn't who I am ... the role thing, it makes me a little nervous, but I realize that it's out there. That other folks are, that's who they are. And I understand the politics around those roles. But I don't choose it for myself. (FG4)

Similarly, a participant in another focus group responded to this issue by saying:

And I'm like, okay, I'm a girl, you know what I'm saying? I'm, we're both women, and it doesn't matter, you know, I don't care what kind of femme I am ... So I, I still have a problem with it ... but ... this is the way I guess our community just, you know,

identifies each ... the studs over here, the femmes over there. So I use labels like in my everyday vocabulary, whatever, but when it comes to me personally in a relationship ... I don't look for, like I said, I like the studs, whatever, but I would rather have a female that knows that she's a woman first. I like the masculine type, but I would rather she knows she's a woman first and not come at me all the time like stud this, and stud that, and stud this. In my personal life, that irritates the hell out of me. I'm sorry to say it like that, but it does. It irritates me. And I would just rather, in my personal relationship don't use those labels like that, because we're both females. (FG6, Tracey)

As illustrated by these quotes, some participants refused the labels for themselves and also expressed being bothered or irritated with the community trend to adopt labels. However, they also conveyed acceptance or tolerance for those that chose the labels. Further, the comments made by Tracey in FG6 indicate that the choice to refuse labels for oneself is not incongruent with having an attraction to women who possess the characteristics those labels define.

In contrast, other focus group participants expressed rejection or avoidance of femme and stud identified women. As discussed above, Gail was a participant who had previously avoided Black gay spaces because she had experienced butch-femme culture as oppressive, but then later came to adopt a femme identity. In contrast, the two other participants in her same group expressed strong negative judgments of the lesbian gender labels, particularly those expressed by stud or butch women. In particular, Anna evaluated masculine identified women in this way by making racial identity confusion analogous to masculine expression (e.g. scratching your crotch) among women:

... if I walked around saying, 'I'm White, so please address me as such' I think I'd have a mental problem. If I walk around as a woman ... and I'm scratching something I don't have, I also see that as a slight mental deficiency. (FG8)

Stacey then reported that she would like to see lesbians view themselves differently:

Because I've seen it, seen it all, heard it all, been through a lot of goody stuff, I mean, geez, I used to have a ball, girl. I miss some of that but, ah, I, I've always prayed that gay women would just be as wholesome and caring as possible and not get caught up in all this heavy butch, heavy femme, heavy stud, Dyke, all this shit. Just be who you are. I think you'll be a hell of a lot happier. (FG8, Stacey)

Several poets at the open mics spoke about struggling against expectations to label oneself in terms of lesbian gender. For example, one poet who enrolled into the study so that I could quote her poem speaks of wanting to drop these labels as she professes her attraction to a straight girl:

... the first time I laid eyes on you  
my heart and soul despised of you  
wondering why I couldn't dine with you  
spend a little time with you  
share a piece of mine with you  
but that was on a Sunday  
one day I took time to clear my mind of each and every thought of you  
the fucked up labels that I brought to you ...  
like STUD and FEMME,  
DYKE and SHEM.  
Just being me was a crime you see  
cause I'm a FEMME living  
STUD LOVING  
thought you was my woman till you said you was my husband????  
Damn! our lifestyle is complex

that's what leaves the straight ones vexed  
 thinking we all play roles and can't be role models ... (V-love)

Another poet who was interviewed as a community leader, Warrior, also expressed frustration and anger at being forced into the label of stud and femme. As soon as I asked her to respond to my preliminary findings suggesting that lesbian gender roles were consistently discussed as a unique feature of African American lesbian sexual culture, she commented that she wanted to resist the evidence that the phenomenon of butch and femme belongs to 'us' (i.e. Black lesbians).

*Between the extremes*

Despite a consistent description of femme and stud at the extremes of lesbian gender expression, participants also discussed several labels that fell between the ultra femme-hard stud ends of the continuum, such as 'soft stud' and 'aggressive femme'. Labels like these represented lesbians that blended both masculine and feminine ways in their public expression and/or sexual behaviours, but with a purposeful leaning toward more masculine or feminine identity. The use of these terms appears contrary to the reports that there were dominant expectations of highly masculine or highly feminine modes of expression. Yet, the sets of sexual discourses that comprise a group's sexual culture are inherently contradictory and often disjointed from one another (Schifter and Madrigal 2001). There was a collective acknowledgment that dominant sexual discourses in Black lesbian communities emphasized an expectation for choosing identities representing opposite sides of a single feminine-masculine continuum. Yet, this expectation did not prevent the existence of informal, less dominant sexual scripts that created room for blending characteristics along both masculine and feminine continua.

One of the community leader interviewees, Kendra, suggested that the mere presence of these alternative labels was evidence of a loosening of the hold that the traditional conceptualization of lesbian gender had on African American lesbians in Chicago. She asserted that the creation of new labels is one form of resistance to the strict dichotomy of stud and femme that arose out of the 'old school' African American lesbian sexual culture and provides more freedom for people to act in various ways and date different types of people. In this way, the development and adoption of more labels, and thus more roles and conceptualizations, could represent a quasi-organized movement towards changing the current gendered sexual discourse among Black lesbians.

Another core feature of sexual discourses, particularly those that are more formal (i.e. explicit) and dominant, is that they engender resistance (Schifter and Madrigal 2001). It was in the theme of lesbian gender that forms of resistance were most evident. As noted above, resistance strategies ranged from individual choices to not identify with femme or stud roles, to open rejection of other lesbians who chose those identities. Additionally, some Black lesbians discussed the adoption of labels that represented a blend of feminine and masculine traits which simultaneously embraced preferences for gendered ways of relating sexually and romantically and rejected strict rules for lesbian gender roles. Most of the resistance discussed centred on disagreements with the concepts of prescribed roles in romantic and sexual relationships. In cases where the frustration was directed specifically at those who identified with the labels, the discontent was with masculine women, not the femmes. This theme has been observed in other work documenting the experiences of Black

studs and aggressives (Moore 2006). This is notable because it indicates that resistance against femme-stud lesbian gender expression is not an unqualified rejection of all Black lesbians who express themselves in gendered ways. The Black lesbians in this study who disagreed with lesbian gender roles were not arguing for a movement toward the androgynous images that characterize many White lesbian communities (Taylor and Rupp 1993). Instead, the resistance is centred on the rejection of masculine women, studs, who dare to transgress the mainstream cultural expectations for proper female expression as well as a possible mainstream Black women's cultural expectations of women to operate somewhere between gender-blending and feminine expression.

### *A radical side to lesbian gender sex roles*

The butch/stud and femme phenomenon as discussed by study participants also represents a shift from traditional notions of masculine and feminine expressions of sexuality, even though these views were not labelled as forms of resistance by participants. Though many focus group participants, community leaders and poets at the open mics argued that studs and femme roles were replications of heterosexual male and female sexual relationships, the sexual scripts for hard studs and pillow princesses appear to turn the traditional conceptualization of fe/male sex roles on its head. Heterosexual men may be expected to be the sexual aggressors (as studs were described to be by participants), but they are typically not socialized to view sexual pleasure of *their female partner* as the primary outcome. For example, in her historical analysis of the invention of the vibrator, Maines (1999) identified three steps of sex within the dominant US cultural script for sexuality: (1) foreplay or preparation for penetration; (2) penile intercourse; and (3) male orgasm. This type of sex is regarded as the 'real thing' in popular US culture. In contrast to this dominant script, masculine identified stud women prioritized the feminine partner's orgasm. Similarly, whereas pillow princesses and other femmes appear to fall in line with heterosexual conceptualizations of sexual roles for women, where the woman's role is the passive and non-assertive partner, they represent radical departures in other respects. In particular, participants indicated that ultra femmes and pillow princesses fully expected that the sexual act ended with their sexual climax. This appears to be a re-conceptualization of the connection between femininity and sexual prowess, deeming the feminine partner as the primary physical beneficiary. In essence, the feminine partner can be viewed as *receptive*, rather than passive (Burch 1998).

### **Conclusion**

African American lesbians in this study conveyed a set of sexual beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that influenced what types of sex they had, who they dated and their behaviour within romantic relationships. This study highlighted that femme and stud roles were a dominant norm operating within this African American lesbian community, yet there were clearly informal and less dominant sexual discourses, which included an integration of masculine and feminine forms of representation. Participants expressed various reactions to dominant scripts regarding lesbian gender roles, including various forms of resistance.

While the intent of this study was more explicitly focused on sex than Moore's (2006) study of Black lesbians, many of the findings related to dating and community expectations around partner choices were similarly reported in the two studies. The similarities of these two studies' findings from different cities, as well as several of the personal narratives discussed earlier, suggest that there may be a persistent sexual cultural script shared among Black lesbians. These scripts may be rooted in an interpretation of African American traditions. The ways in which these similarities are a function of the interaction between race, gender, sexuality and urban living is not known and warrants further investigation. Additional research focusing on significant intracultural or intragroup differences will contribute greatly to theory that accurately represents the diversity of experiences and thinking among groups that have traditionally been silenced around sex and sexuality.

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### Notes

1. I use the term 'same-gender loving' women to refer to women who partner and have sex with women, some of whom may choose to not use terms like lesbian or bisexual. This is a term that has emerged within US African American gay and lesbian communities to represent the range of labels that may describe non-heterosexual peoples and to counter Eurocentric gay and lesbian terminology.
2. Community leaders were selected for their experience in working within Black lesbian communities or because of their work as sexual health educators in ethnically diverse lesbian communities. Due to confidentiality, they individual demographics are not provided, however they collectively comprise of group of community organizers, artists, religious leaders, public health directors and sex workshops facilitators.

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