

butch anarchism



lee cicuta

This essay is written as both a development and a correction of my essay Butch Anarchy, written and published just over four years ago at time of writing. While that piece remains special to me, there are undeniably passages within it that disrupt transfeminine butches' ability to read themselves there. This is a foundational flaw in a work that postures at articulating a militant butch anarchism and a failure to my transfeminine butch sisters who are constantly—as they always have been—adding more gloriously audacious and radical dimensions to the identity that is our shared home and coalition. This essay is an attempt to address that failure and to generate a truer, keener butch anarchism.

A secondary note that, while this piece is an intentional effort to correct the exclusionary transmisogynistic theoretical flaws embedded in the first text, what follows is not an attempt to use language that every single

butch reader will identify with. As with Butch Anarchy, Butch Anarchism is a fairly personal reflection on butch gender through the filters of my own political analysis, personal identity, and lived experience. Many butches have a very complicated relationship to womanhood that is different from my own. Many butches are not women and do not see their identity in proximity to womanhood. This piece is reflective of how I, individually, have resolved my own complex relationship to womanhood: centered on diving into deeper intimacy with deviant womanhood and perhaps, if I'm lucky, having a hand in shaping it.

-

Butch masculinity is patriarchal masculinity's adversary: its challenge, a component of its inevitable overthrow, and a prefiguration of the future that will thrive on its decomposition. What patriarchy declares as

truth, butchness defies. It declares the masculinity of its hegemony to be the *only* masculinity: men's private property. Yet, like everything, it is inevitably, gloriously touchable by women's hands. It is looking out from women's faces. It is takeable by women; shapeable by women. In us it is a mark of deviance and a rejection of the regime of heterosexuality that has encoded patriarchal domination into every facet of social life.

Masculinity is a laden term embedded in a specific political context: that of capitalist-patriarchy and its historical machines of Western imperialism and white supremacy. Capitalist-patriarchy's grand narrative is that of a masculine hegemony and a clean, hierarchically gendering binary. This is what it seeks—with all its various social mechanisms and rituals, its politics of producing life and death—to reify. According to this narrative, masculinity is solely the mechanism by which men distinguish themselves amongst

themselves: that is, through contests that determine who can put the most space between themselves and the baseness of Woman. The rituals that constitute hegemonic masculinity work well to keep women removed from power and uncover the women who are arbitrarily and mistakenly assigned at birth into their ranks. These women—who by their very existence repudiate manhood and disprove the excellence of patriarchy's organizing system—are thrown along with patriarchy's other deviants into the multitudinous trash heap of gender variance that is as much a part of the patriarchal gendering system as Man and Woman are. Cast down from the upperworld and marked as UnWomen. Gender Failures. System Error Messages so numerous that patriarchy had to dig out a landfill just for us to be collected in. Categorized as the basest materials for extraction and unrestrained patriarchal violence. Masculinity, on those who end up

here, brands rather than defends. Lost is the sacred power of the sign. Corrupted, like all precious things, by the pernicious influence of UnWoman. Demonstrating that masculinity is not a uniform spell of protection and status or Men's private property, but a heavily contested territory.

In this contest, butches demonstrate that which men seek to reify as natural phenomena, god's mark of divine favor, or an expression of innate power is, in fact, a collection of social practices and signs that are given their meaning arbitrarily. These meanings are subject to change and can even be changed at women's behest, without men's input, and absent the standard consideration of patriarchal gaze. More: we corrupt the very core of masculinity's value to men as a reliable means of distinguishing oneself from women. We mark it out as just another path among many *to* women: to being *among* women and to *being* women. We demonstrate,

with every butch sign and gesture, that this is *desirable* to us. That the gender demotion we receive for expressing it is well worth the cost, is something we've even learned to render into a source of pleasure and joy. This is a total inversion of the value patriarchal society places on women and what masculinity is allegedly "meant" to do. This is blasphemy. It stinks of insurrection. It portends anarchism.

Butch anarchism is a butch-gendered militant antagonism against every system of hierarchy and social mechanism of coercive control. It makes an enemy of every State representative, boss, cop, and domestic abuser. It is an explicit conflict against the totality of authoritarianism—against Fathers as well as Kings and Presidents—and seeks to bring about a world in which the categories of Father and King and President will fail to cohere. It is a steadfast resolution to act as if such a world exists already: is brought to life

with every exhale, with every subtle movement of the tongue. This is why butch anarchists are stubbornly unimpressed by the spectacle of men's power—*especially* when it is formidable—and find clever ways to leverage this affect to disruptive ends. We engage in loud declarations of war and anonymous acts of sabotage in equal measure as the terrain of each skirmish demands. We hear a call to action in every conflict and dare ourselves to answer, answer, answer.

Butch anarchism is also a butch-gendered militant solidarity to the socially marginalized and a dedication to expand our collective agency. It sees a fellow insurgent in every survivor. It launches insurrection from the refuse pile. When a butch anarchist seeks understanding, we delve into the shifting wisdom of the underworld and, in our passage there, make intimate alliances with atrophy. A walking appeal to women's desire and a breathing rejection of men's, we have a long-

nourished habit of finding and cherishing that which patriarchal society declares valueless or, better yet, *corrupting*. We know that when corruptive forces are concentrated, they can have the power to dissolve away dense foundations. Butch anarchism calls on us to search them out and gather them close. Rupture the barriers that keep caustic substances separate and inert.

Butch anarchism does not seek to bring the brutal order of Man's World to Hades, nor to take that toxic upperworld in-hand, but instead to destroy the very roof of Hell. That is, to devour every foundation that men build on. To suck down each path, river, hilltop and valley until the new earth no longer resembles a glimmering marble but something like a smoking crater after the Meteor or, maybe one day, a little like a hummingbird's nest. That men may linger up there for a moment—scrambling in the open air, teeth gnashing, absurd—before crashing down into the dark

crater of the new planet will be a comedic pleasure to every butch anarchist. But more important to us will be that every fellow reject, every corrupting element, every Woman and UnWoman will feel the warmth of the sun again without ever having to lift a trembling hand. Not one will be called to spend herself climbing, climbing, climbing for the painful achievement of finding herself—emptied of all other efforts—on the same unforgiving edge she was once cast from. Butch anarchism accepts no new world that will not bring itself down into the refuse pile, disassembled and humble, to cry over every crucified palm.

Butchness is serious about everything and takes nothing very seriously; anarchism calls for the same approach. Butch anarchism is butchness's daily practice of regime defiance taken to its logical conclusions, made militant, and tied irrevocably to an anti-authoritarian posture against all systems of

domination. It is the theory and practice of living butchly and anarchistically at once and at all times: pain, pleasure, prefiguration. It is a declaration of the infinite ways women can be and become through postures of negation, rejection, cooptation, care, and irreverence. Butch anarchists blaspheme patriarchal masculinity. We craft butch masculinities that contest and best it by centering Women and UnWomen's desire and our *necessarily anarcha-feminist* liberation.

