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Butch Anarchy

Lee Shevek

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Butchness is not only the appropriation of traditional masculinity, but the *subversion* of it. The sacred weapon in the arsenal of patriarchy, the one they did and continue to do everything to keep us from taking, is not something we even bother to steal under the cover of nightfall. Instead, we swagger right through the front door, wryly appraise the shelf on which it sits, and take what of it suits us best. We wear it openly in the streets, keenly aware of the retribution such a theft will at any moment bring down upon us.

We take it so blatantly, so assuredly, not because we believe that masculinity belongs to patriarchy, but because we know that it does not. We know that gender expression and play and variety has existed throughout and beyond all of recorded time. We know who the original thieves are, who took masculinity and locked it away for only the privileged few to use and to weaponize. We know that this shares an origin story with all of private property. We know that the answer is not to concede the loss, but to liberate that which was stolen. That is what we butches do with masculinity.

Patriarchy, capitalism, centralized power, they are the original thieves, whose heists were such a phenomenal success that they went so far as to make many of us believe that we were *made*

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to be so impoverished, and, beyond that, that there is nothing in our power to change that. It is what we butches were taught from young ages, when our authenticity, our masculinity, first began to show its face. *That's not for you. Girls can't do that. Why do you want to be like a man? You are a woman, so you must be feminine.* Our truth, our birthright, stolen from us before we even understood what it meant to us, before we knew how precious it was. And then we were taught that the theft was not only normal... but that it never even really happened. Some of us developed our iron grips at a young age and never fully let go, some of us nodded along with pain in our hearts and tried to adapt for a while, some of us had masculinity printed so clearly on our faces or voices that no amount of policing could deny its truth. All of us, though, have scars from the attempted taking... and even more scars from the punishment that followed our refusal, then or later, to deny that we had a right to keep it.

Butchness, as we discover (sometimes with pain, sometimes with joy), is naturally subversive. There are butches who cling to other identities of power and privilege so tightly that they deny this subversive power, but it is there, and we all know it. We cannot walk into a room and not know it. While there are those who flinch away from the raw and vulnerable power such subversion lends us, there are many more who recognize that this is a necessary, and beautiful, aspect of being butch. We embrace it. It is the fuel to our fire. It is our righteous cause. It is butch anarchism. The subversion and overthrow of the entire order that would ever dare to limit who can and cannot be masculine. Who can and cannot be authentic. Who can and cannot eat. Who can and cannot be free. Who can and cannot live.

Butch anarchy is simply the refusal to accept the private ownership of anything, including identity and personal expression. It is a keen eye to the past, where we know there is a rich and endless history of those like us who struggled against the sovereignty of the powerful, and a focused eye on the future, where we see strong

possibilities for a better and liberated world. It is a somber recognition of the ways that patriarchy has privatized and weaponized masculinity, and a joyful knowledge that this is not the inherent nature of masculinity, only a sick and vapid distortion. It is a dedication to discovering personal authenticity, no matter how difficult the road. It is a commitment to taking masculinity and putting it to the work we know it's well-suited for, even if such a purpose has long been denied it: care, compassion, vulnerability, protection, mutual aid, liberation.

This is, I believe, the logical conclusion of butchness itself. Regardless of the unfortunate numbers of butches who choose not to travel to such a conclusion. If our enemy is the force that stole masculinity from us, who made us fight so hard to keep it or retrieve it, who beat us when it saw us wearing it, then our enemy is every institution that takes for itself the right to determine and restrict the conditions of our lives. Our enemy is every structure that works to rip away anyone's autonomy and personal agency in order to feed its own power. Our enemy is the State. Our enemy is capital. Our enemy is centralized power.

Recognition of such an enemy, then, makes us anarchists. Butch anarchists. And this is a beautiful thing to be. Here, we can fully resist the call to attempt to assimilate our identities into the rhythm of traditional, patriarchal, masculinity. We know that doing so would afford us no real safety, and, further, we know that even attempting to do so would be a capitulation to the very system that brutalizes us and so many others in the name of control and "normality." Here, we can look with clear eyes at who our real comrades are in the struggle, and what work needs our butch hands put to it. Here, we can see stretching before us endless possibilities for liberation, paths that are incredibly treacherous, but nevertheless do not demand any more surrender from us: only integrity, which — luckily — we have in spades.