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If I were editing/adding to the essay today I would talk about feeling two-Spirited vs  
being "butch". I'd tell you how my experience and expression of gender has shifted post  
cancer/menopause/and turning 50. I feel this is an essay that maybe wants to be a book  
that I can't yet wrap my mind around because I am still Living/discovering/becoming it's  
language. For now/I just want to share with you what I so far can express about the  
Journey...because I know on some level/we've been down this Road together...

*a wo'mn called sir*

written by

**sharon bridgforth**

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people often assume me to be a Black man and i am  
but mostly i'm a Black butch lesbian  
which to me is about gender identity/in combination with  
energy sensibility style and Spirit.

for me to claim myself butch was a process  
in fact the first time someone called me butch/i was deeply insulted.  
for years i'd been called tomboy mannish a stud and sir/none of which was a bother  
however  
butches/in my mind  
were white women who wanted to be men  
and i ain't white  
i've never wanted to be a man and  
i am not interested in engaging with women who want a woman to be a man.  
so to be called butch to me/was like being called an oreo.  
i decided to work through my initial response to the word because people kept using it as  
a label to refer to me. during the process of working to understand why people  
saw me/called me butch  
a lot of things surfaced like  
i remembered being ten years old looking at the sears & roebuck's catalogue over and  
over daydreaming about the outfits i wanted-all those great color coordinated boys' shorts  
and tees that would be mine one day/when i had money.  
i realized that as an adult i dreamt about stylish men's clothes i wanted to buy. and  
it became clear that  
in my mind  
my body was a man's body.  
not because i wanted to be a man  
certainly not because i lacked woman curves

but/because i didn't see my body as woman.  
and i couldn't imagine women's clothes ever accurately expressing how i felt/inside  
which has caused many a fashion crisis over the years.  
my Black gurl hips and thighs don't look right in men's pants/my big woman titties don't  
really work in men's shirts and even if i considered women's clothes something to dream  
about-they always felt too small too short and too confining. too womanish.  
the Gregory Hines que suave/Coloured man sleek city gq look that was my inside self  
was too phat for my wallet.

thinking about my butchness i realized that  
women have rarely spoken to me in public bathrooms/in fact  
they often rush out when they see me come in  
while nervously trying to direct me to the men's bathroom  
or openly curse my existence with cutting eyes and curt body language.  
but once/in dallas texas while i washed my hands in a bathroom at the mall  
an attendant/an older very old school mannish looking Black woman  
walked in/stood next to me/stared at me in the mirror  
and in a quiet voice said  
*"light skinned as you are  
and with that good hair/looking like you do  
you can have any woman you wants.  
can get them to give you money and things too if you know how."*  
she then gave the counter a quick wipe  
turned and walked away.  
friendly advise i suppose/from one stud to another.  
fortunately for me  
i grew up surrounded by femme power/and in that environment  
grew into my butchness/from the inside out.  
although i have had to look at ways that i've internalized sexism growing up  
my butchness/my personal power has never been based on my ability to manipulate or  
physically overpower and control women.

i have always been surrounded by femmes/was raised by one my mother  
single/migrated from the south to los angeles  
she and all her friends were fierce femmes come to the big city to make a new life.  
i adored these women/and they loved me-encouraged me to grow fully into myself  
relieved i believe  
that i was more interested in sneakers shorts and playing ball/than finding the path to  
womanhood as they understood it.  
although men were not intricately woven into my daily life/they were around.  
i watched them use their physical power/the privilege of their maleness  
in effort to control my mother and her friends.  
i saw that the femmes out thought these men/played them for whatever points they  
wanted/while visioning building and maintaining their own lives  
and the lives of their children.  
all while working/giving into/and sometimes being dominated by male ego and pride.

i saw myself more like those butch men than the femmes that raised me/though  
i did not like the way the men underestimated talked down to and mistreated the femmes.  
i understand now that the very conservative south they had all fled from/was present  
somehow within the confines of the female-male games they played.  
these men had very little power outside of the homes they lived in and visited  
and that jim crow had preceded them west/imposing continued separate but not equal  
housing education and employment opportunities.  
living in this kind of reality  
for the sake of survival  
things got buried  
unnamed  
unspoken  
forgotten  
masked/forced  
tossed out  
boiled over/burned.  
and often  
simply evaporated.

naming myself/butch gave me a lens to look through/a way to speak on  
explore and understand my experiences and feelings.  
i don't believe that i have to model my behavior after men. i believe that if men had the  
freedom to be fearlessly who they are/if this world didn't punish the feminine  
more men/and more butches would live inside their sensitivity  
speaking from the heart/deeply feeling/willing and able to communicate quickly clearly  
powerfully truthful there would be more Peace.  
but that is not the world we live in.

once  
an older femme woman/a seer came up to me  
said  
*"gurl*  
*you was a man last life.*  
*but you was soooo bad to the wy'mns*  
*that they sent you back a wo'mn this time yourself.*  
*and you begged and pleaded/cause you didn't want to be no wo'mn*  
*but they said you had to be taught*  
*so here you are*  
*and thats why you got so much man energy*  
*uhmmhum*  
*yes.*  
*so now i'm telling you*  
*you better be nice to the wy'mns.*  
*are you nice to the wy'mns! do you have a wo'mn!*  
*well*  
*you better be nice.*

*else you gonna come back a wo'mn again/next time."*

yes ma'am.

i am trying.

i am trying to be nice to the wy'mns.

and i am trying to be nice to me/the wo'mn the man the butch.

as a butch/i have often felt like i'm an easily identifiable lesbian-target for closeted and curious women looking to play. this used to upset me/until i admitted that i was choosing to be with these kinds of women-unavailable women/women who could not or would not love me completely and openly.

as a result

my heart was never not broken/so

i was always loving from a place of resentment.

deep down

i didn't think that i would ever find someone that would be with me

stay/and truly love me.

furthermore i realized that i carried shame everywhere i went

because there was a way that i felt humiliated every day almost every place i went.

from public bathrooms to public stores/where people assuming me a young Black man

targeted their hate and mistrust of young Black men towards me/following me with

distrust and fear. marking me a thief a thug/not human. and some

people assuming me a gay man or a mannish lesbian targeted their heterosexism towards

me. and some people seeing me working class decided me not worthy of the time of day.

and i remembered that as i grew older

from a tomboy to a wo'mn/called sir

fear and embarrassment changed my mother's ability to love me unconditionally.

i realized that i have carried the weight of my mother's disapproval/silently

unknowingly for a long as i can remember

i have responded to her disappointment and shame.

it has been the whisper of doubt/the murmur of guilt

the worrying reason/part of why

i've never looked in the mirrors

i haven't lived in my own body completely

i have embodied butch-phobia.

i realized that i wanted my mother's approval.

i had been waiting

to hear

*you look good today*

*congratulations/you did great today daughter i'm so proud of you.*

words that i will probably never hear

from my mother.

today i say

SO WHAT!

i love my mother and i know she loves me.

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i can't continue to blame her or anyone else for the resentment that i embody and put out  
in the world/in relationships. once i stopped blaming the women in my life for all my  
problems/once i decided to commit to learning to love myself  
slowly i began to Heal/to honor my own  
heart  
scars and all  
and to live/from the inside out  
in my  
butchness.

today  
butch fits me like a box/a label too small to express all of who i am.  
today i say i am two-Spirited.  
*but thats a whole nutha story/yeah...*

New Dramatists member, Sharon Bridgforth is a two time Alpert Award Nominee and recipient of the 2008 Alpert/Hedgebrook Residency Prize. She received a National Performance Network, Creation Fund Award for *delta dandi*, commissioned by Women & Their Work in partnership with the National Performance Network. Bridgforth is the author of the Lambda Literary Award winning, *the bull-jean stories* and *love conjure/blues*, a performance/novel. Both books are published by RedBone Press. She is an affiliate of The Austin Project, sponsored by The John L. Warfield Center For African and African American Studies, University of Texas at Austin (CAAAS). Bridgforth's *Finding Voice Facilitation Manuel* will be published in, *The Austin Project Archive: Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic*, edited by Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Director, CAAAS, Associate Professor, Department of Theater and Dance U.T. Austin; Dr. Lisa L. Moore, Associate Professor, English and Women's and Gender Studies, U.T. Austin; and Bridgforth (Spring, 2010 by University of Texas Press). Bridgforth is Fall 2009 Artist In-Residence in Performance Studies at Northwestern University. For more go to: [sharonbridgforth.com](http://sharonbridgforth.com).

Check Bridgforth out on Afterellen.com in an article written by **Cheryl Coward**  
<http://www.cherylcoward.com/content> June 10, 2008:  
<http://www.afterellen.com/people/2008/6/sharonbridgforth>.