

# Fairy Butch and the Labia Menorah: a queer example of ludic parody, play, and performance art

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"Queer Nationals are torn between affirming a new identity - 'I am queer' - and rejecting restrictive identities - 'I reject your categories', between rejecting assimilation - 'I don't need your approval, just get out of my face' - and wanting to be recognized by mainstream society - 'we queers are gonna get in your face'" (Smyth, quoted in Case, 1996: 165).

## Introduction

Within the contradictions, ambivalences and multi-vocality of what has come to be called 'queer', I address here only a single voice, the voice of San Francisco's Jewish lesbians and leatherdykes (i.e., those who identify with or participate in S/M [sado-masochist] play). Many of these women were raised in observant families, but are unable to reconcile a heritage of Jewish patriarchal male exclusivism with their own desire to participate ritually in a manner acceptable to them. They choose instead a recasting of religious and cultural symbols: characterization into caricature, customary dress into burlesque, prayer into challenge, sacred into satire. In this way, they turn the very roles, rituals and ritual objects which have been denied them, or which they have found unpalatable, into something they can call distinctively their own.

The women use humor and irony as their weapons, and heavily lace their attack on mainstream Jewish values with playful, but powerfully effective, outrage. The performance art they concoct, however delicious, cannot mask the immutable after-taste of bit-

terness. The performative is the place where we can seek integration. It is restorative not just for the liminal but also for those who appear to be caught permanently between the cracks of codified social behavior. Outsiders may use jest to deflect the barbs of mainstream society, yet those barbs continue to find their target. Trauma begets humor and performativity before it begets violent retribution (Fanon 1963: 57-58). Playfulness allows those so engaged to vent and share their frustration when they cannot yet change the conditions of their oppression.

At the same time as the women in our current example engage in parody, travesty and burlesque of Jewish ritual and symbols, they are unwittingly participating in a longstanding Jewish enterprise. Satire and language play are ancient Near Eastern pastimes for which Hebrew is well suited. The difference, for example, between Jewish magic and mysticism is rooted in grammatical ambiguity and gender play (e.g., Kaplan 1981, 1993, Zussman 1993). While punning and word play are quite ancient, parody (which keeps the form but changes the content), travesty (which keeps the content but changes the form), and burles-

que (which keeps neither form nor content, but maintains a general resemblance) emerged in the twelfth century, the golden age of Jewish literature (Davidson 1907). Much of that parody revolved around male ambivalence and hostility toward women. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish parodies and travesties began combining political ideology with gender themes and liturgy, affirming the possibility for a just and moral world in which the inequities, inhumanities and suffering inflicted by man would be erased.

What follows, then, could be called a twentieth century Jewish lesbian feminist dream - a balancing of the misogynistic scoreboard - at the same time as it represents serious nativistic immediacy. From this perspective, what we are exploring here is neither fluke, freak show, nor laughing matter. Jewish parody has addressed questions of women's agency and societal inequities from its inception. More than this, parody and travesty performed by women, while not documented in the manuscripts collected by Davidson, must have an equally long and prolific history in the kitchens and courtyards of Jewish homes.

Frantz Fanon noted the seditious quality of the humor of sequestered and revolutionary Algerian women during the struggle for independence:

"The humor which is a rigorous appraisal of events is unperceived by the occupier. And the courage that the Algerian woman manifests in the struggle is not an unexpected creation or the result of a mutation. It is the insurrectional phase of that same humor" (Fanon 1967: 66-67).

The play, hidden away in female space - whether in the North African courtyard or North American club - cannot stop misogyny nor hate crimes against women, gays, Jews, or any other marginalized population. Nor does revolution necessarily change the conditions of women. Nevertheless, what is achieved is a demarcation of the battle lines, articu-

lation of one's separate identity, and the promotion of solidarity.

The emergence of the women's movement, the gay community, queer culture, and even post-queer culture entail complex revolutionary acts that share certain features with other nativistic movements. Primary among these are a sense of shared oppression, marginalization, discrimination, physical danger, inability or undesirability of assimilation, and a search for symbols of identity from the past as well as the creation of new symbols, interpretations, and meanings.

In the performances which follow, it is not the mainstream conservative, predominantly Christian American society which is lampooned, but rather the women's own minority religion. The performers help redefine the collective consciousness of their audience in ways which may eventuate more radical acts and class action in the larger society. Thus, while the performers are able to use humor and playfulness to express their alienation, they politicize their audience.

Three interwoven strands, like those of the braided Friday night Sabbath challah, appear in the pages that follow. They are the history of Jewish parody, the experience of queer performativity, and the nativistic response inherent under conditions of domination.

## **The club and the show**

What we are looking at is a number of performance art pieces that were staged at a predominantly lesbian club in San Francisco on a dark December night close to the turn of the millenium. The club is located in an alleyway, across from what was at the time a dungeon popular with the leatherdyke community. The neighboring dungeon has been renowned for its private women's S/M, or 'leather', parties (see Zussman 1998). Despite the recent relocation of the dungeon to another part of town, the club continues to receive a stream of fetish-attired women and dungeon partygoers.

Thus, the club itself, while not always oriented toward a lesbian crowd, nor strictly oriented toward an S/M clientele, certainly is identified with, and frequented by women of both orientations - leather and non-leather.

The club, or bar, as a locus of gay socialization and activism is well documented (see e.g. Kennedy and Davis 1993: 29). Today, even in San Francisco, public places exclusively delineated for lesbian and bisexual women can be counted on one hand. Thus, this particular club, the arena of the ludic presented here, is understood by the gay community to be a rare locale - one of very few public spaces in which lesbian identity can be negotiated, maintained and continually reconfigured. It is a place where questions of struggle and resistance can at the very least be voiced. This dark, little nightclub serves as the locus of a particular nativistic radicalism.

The club is subterranean. One walks down a turning staircase, pays a negotiable fee at the entrance, and is admitted into a dark, channel-like bar leading to a more open circular space. The physical structure of the club conveys a distinctly vaginal or womb-like impression. By the time one has wound her way through the crowded, tightly packed passage to the stage area, the ambience of women's space has been delimited. The club is one of the few places in the city for women to openly express a wide range of sexual behaviors with each other without the leering eyes of men.

The show, which has been attracting crowds for years, is entitled 'In Bed with Fairy Butch'. It is put on the second and fourth Friday night of each month, exclusively for women. 'Fairy Butch' is a large butch dyke in drag; she has short-slicked back dark hair and wears a tuxedo. At some point in the show, she reappears in female drag and performs her own burlesque striptease. In addition, there are femme and butch strippers who strip, dance, or display their physical attributes between the comedy acts. Given the intimacy of the community, the boundaries between audience and performers are not rigidly delineated.

The particular 'In Bed with Fairy Butch' performances which follow were unusual in that they focused on Jewish themes: the Sabbath and Chanukah. It is implicit in observant homes that the proper thing for a 'nice Jewish girl' to be doing on a Friday night is to be at home - not frequenting a subterranean leather-dyke bar across from a women's S/M dungeon. The mere act of being present at the club constitutes a form of rebelliousness. Ironically, at the same time, it keeps women bounded within female space in accordance with the strictest of Jewish orthodoxy's homosocial convention.

The performances that follow, shift from ritual correctness to something appalling from the point of view of orthodoxy. For the audience, however, there is exclusion to participation in religious ritual; something personal, accessible, sensual, and at the same time, forbidden. Is this desecration or consecration? The answer appears to be both.

Religious parody exudes rage, and outrage - transforms it into something one can laugh about and yet make one's point effectively. Hostility pervades these pieces - but are they, as I suggest, political action? The history of parody suggests so. What is more, as will be seen, the symbols and ritual objects these women 'defile' are changing as I write precisely as a result of actions such as these.

### **First piece: Hasidim at prayer**

"[T]he Sages have commanded that a man should not teach his daughter Torah, because most women do not have the intention of truly learning and they turn the teachings of the Torah into nonsense, in accordance with their limited understanding" (Shulhan Arukh, quoted in R. Biale 1984: 37).

Two women, dressed as male Hasidim, come out of the audience onto stage. They begin to put on their *tallit*, or prayer shawl, silently intoning the appropriate prayer with ritual correctness, and davenning - praying, while genu-

flecting lightly - in the manner designated by Hasidism as appropriate for men.

The putting on of the tallit is an act that is prescribed only for men, as are the wearing of *payyot* (uncut locks of hair in front of the ears), and *tzitziyyot* (fringes worn which represent male adherence to biblical commandments and moral propriety), which the women have also donned. As they put on their tallitot, the davenning becomes more pronounced; the women appear entranced.

One begins to hear klezmer (Eastern European Jewish music) in the background. The women put on the tallit in a moving, beautiful manner. The audience is silent with expectation - watching, knowing, waiting ... Slowly, ever so slowly, the women begin to rid themselves of their male attire, including *shtreimel*, *payyot*, *tzitziyyot*, long black garb. They strip themselves of the outer garments of maleness until, in their nakedness they are revealed as women. Their only garb now is the sacred prayer shawl.

The Torah teaches that one should be enfolded by the tallit; thereby one is enveloped in holiness. The *kohanim*, or priests, are allowed to cover their heads with the tallit, while other men need only cover their shoulders. In prayer, one presses one's eyes to the fringes of the tallit, then kisses the prayer shawl three times in the course of prayer - but tallit and tzitzit are never to touch bare skin directly, for the flesh is too 'close' to carnality. The tzitzit are amuletic for a man, ostensibly protecting him from his own sensuality, susceptibility, and desire. Engulfed in the tallit, one is transformed into a vehicle of communication with the divine. Prayer reaches its intended destination.

The women do precisely this, with a sole exception: but for the tallit, and a g-string, they are entirely nude. It is precisely their flesh that is in contact with whatever divine may or may not exist. The music begins to change. The audience is quiet as the women's genuflecting begins to grow into a kind of grind. The tallitot are now between the women's legs rather than

over their heads and shoulders. They pump and grind erotically, then energetically, into a rhythmic frenzy. I think as I watch, that if men's covenant with God is through circumcision of their foreskin, these women create their covenant through their dance of sexual union, mediated by the ancient, sacred cloth which symbolizes the joining of man and God - as well as the joining of man and woman, for it is supposed to be worn by man at his wedding.

The striptease turns into the erotic dancing of two women sexually engaged together. At the peak of their dance, they turn away from their audience, bend over, low, and display bright, glittery Jewish decals on their naked rear ends - gaudy stars of David, Chanukah dreidles, and menorahs. The female audience howls and hoots appreciatively. Some reach out for a feel, as the music reaches its climax.

The first piece attacks the lack of female access to venues of prayer and ritual objects associated with male prerogative. These sacred symbols - pants, *payyot*, *kipah*, *shtreimel*, tallit and tzitzit - become profane when donned by women, particularly these women in the course of their performance. Is this something new? Not at all. Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote 'Yentl the Yeshiva Boy' about a girl from the shtetl in 1903 whose desire to study Torah drove her to cross-dressing and infiltrating the *yeshiva*, the male bastion of Jewish learning. In 1983, Barbara Streisand turned the story into a Hollywood movie with a contemporary feminist point.

In our current example, cross-dressing is not a strong enough statement, for these women pray with their bodies as the rebbes dictate. Davenning performed by Hasidic men consists of swaying back and forth in a manner that induces a trance-like state. Men sway from the hips and are indeed supposed to embody and feel their prayer. Ironically, the ecstasy of Hasidic prayer itself has met with accusations by detractors in a vein similar to the outrage generated by the women we are watching perform. The Hasidim were themselves considered a threat to rabbinic power. The eighteenth



century accusations were of Hasidic travesty: "The Hasidim commit the sin of involuntary ejaculation at all times during their prayer, for they deliberately give themselves erections during prayer according to the commandment of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem [the founder of Hasidism], who said to them that just as one who engages in intercourse with an impotent organ cannot give birth, so one should be potent at the time of prayer and, in prayer, it is necessary to unite [sexually] with the Shekhinah [the female emanation of God]. It is therefore necessary to move back and forth [davenning] as in the act of intercourse" (David of Makof, quoted in D. Biale 1992: 121).

Eroticism is implied, if not prescribed in davenning; the women simply move their bodies with greater variation than do men at prayer in the synagogue. Thus, the women, swaying their nakedness into their prayer shawls as if they were lovers, are indeed davenning, and davenning correctly. They too are entranced inside acts of ritual devotion. The audience is now mesmerized by their movements. The parody constitutes a rite of reversal: male into female, morning into nighttime, spoken prayer into dance, clothed into unclothed. At the same time, strictly speaking, the dancers are performing their embodied prayer correctly. At the end of the frenzy, they kiss their tallitot and exit backstage.

The tallit is essentially a survival of the cloak or veil worn by both men and women in the ancient Near East and contemporary Middle East from which Jewish culture emanated. It has been ritualized and usurped by men for their exclusive communing with the divine. Its form and shape are virtually the same as the wool and linen veils still worn and politicized by the women of North Africa, as described by Fanon.

Jewish men in prayer cover their heads and wrap themselves in much the same way that women still do in Andalusian North Africa - evoking, perhaps, their common heritage of Moorish Spanish culture in the twelfth-four-

teenth centuries, from whence Jewish parody emerged. When men enfold themselves in the tallit and their heads are covered, at their crown is a band, embroidered in gold or silver, reminiscent of the diadems still to be found on the brides of the mountains of the Rif and the Atlas. One must ask, then, who, indeed, is a parody of whom? Does ritual emerge as much out of parody as parody out of ritual? Have Jewish men donned the veil and made it sacred, only then to forbid it to their women?

A grammatical point arises here. The women in the show use an archaic, Eastern European pronunciation of their Hebrew. Thus, they say 'tallis' instead of the contemporary standard Sephardi and Israeli form, 'tallit'. 'Tallis' can be heard in the language of Lubovitcher rebbes, Hasidim, East Coast Ashkenazim in synagogue, or Woody Allen movies. One should ask at this point, if it is indeed the women who have changed the prayer shawl ritual or if it was their fathers - and their fathers' fathers - who have done so. For the Ashkenazim refer to the tallit incorrectly as masculine (plural *tallisim*) while in fact the prayer shawl is feminine (plural *tallitot*). Further, they refer to the grammatically feminine *payyot*, and *tzitzit* in similar fashion - as *payyes* and *tzizis* - transforming the grammatically feminine into a masculinized travesty. In the realm of symbolic action, particularly with regard to Jewish prayer, language and the shifting of linguistic forms, is indeed a significant piece of the ritual transformation.

The grammatical aspect is more complex still, in that the relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew is itself gendered. Ashkenazim have treated Yiddish as the *moma loshen* or 'mother tongue' - the language of the domestic sphere, of women, and secularism. Hebrew, on the other hand, has been the prerogative of men and male learning, the sacred ancestral language of the Torah, the language of the synagogue. Naomi Seidman looks at this relationship at length (1997). Men who dwell overlong in the *moma loshen* appear to be feminized by it. Nevertheless, in twentieth cen-

tury America, Yiddishized Hebrew prayer remains the domain of men, just as the tallit - or Yiddishized *tallis* - remains, according to Orthodoxy, a firmly entrenched male privilege. Alternations of feminization and masculinization in word play mirror the layering of multiple meanings in the donning of genderized and re-genderized sacred garments.

The Jewish Renewal movement, Jewish feminists, lesbian and straight alike, have begun taking back the tallit. By the late 1990s one could purchase 'alternative' tallitot, including those in lavender or with rainbow stripes - colors associated with gay pride - instead of white with blue or black stripes at the ends. These alter the spirit, not just the cloth. Jewish women, in retrieving the tallit, may inadvertently end by finally legitimizing or reclaiming the veil.

## **Second piece: Sabbath candle-lighting prayer**

"Candle lighting can be seen as the paradigmatic Jewish women's ritual (...) Jewish sources (all written by men) specify that women are commanded to light candles on the Sabbath Eve because women must make amends for Eve's having "put out the light of the world" ..." (Sered 1992: 30-31).

The stage is dark, the music comes on. It is 'Sunrise, Sunset', the Sabbath prayer from the Jewish musical, *Fiddler on the roof*. A woman enters the stage, wearing what appears to be a conservative sheath. Her head and upper body are covered with a large shawl. Her face is in shadows. She sets the Sabbath candlesticks on the table, adjusts the candles, and takes out a box of matches. Her head is bowed, her eyes give the appearance of being closed, but it is hard to tell. She strikes a match and lights the candles, then waves her hands ritually over the illumination and covers her eyes with her hands as she intones the prayer. Her pronunciation is less Ashkenazi than mainstream

'American Hebrew school' Hebrew. She too does not change the prayer's genderized grammar, either in Hebrew or English: "Blessed art thou our Lord, King of the Universe ...", She performs the obligatory women's Friday night Sabbath candle-lighting ceremony with strict adherence to prescribed ritual. Many in the audience quietly intone the prayer with her; apart from that, there is a hush in the cavernous club.

Imperceptibly at first, the music shifts. It gets faster, more driving. The devout woman's full length shawl is flung into the audience, colored lights rise and she is revealed - not nude, but worse: bedecked in 'g-string' and pasties. Adding outrage, the pasties dangling from her nipples are silvery blue Stars of David, long-standing symbols of Jewish identity. Just as in the first performance piece, in which symbols of Jewish identity - payyes, shtreimel and tallit - are recontextualized to drive the point home, here too, the Star of David and matronly Sabbath shawl are perverted from sacred to whorishly profane. The crowd loves it.

The music soars. The Jewish pasties jingle audibly, emitting six-inch long glittery silver tassels - looking suspiciously similar to the sacred tzitzit forbidden to women - dangling from the center of each ensconced breast. Is this travesty or is it honor? Jewish identity, after all, is forged through matriliney, not patriliney. It is conveyed through a woman's body as she sustains and replenishes life through womb and breast alike. When a Jewish lesbian offers these to her lover, does she not offer up her identity as well? Could there be any greater gift than this? The crowd of women hoots and howls their approval.

The prayerful stripper's pasties continue to undulate as she does. She is a consummate striptease artist in a 'mainstream' club downtown that is frequented almost exclusively by men. Here her dance is for women only, as is her exuberant, erotic lap-dancing. She wriggles from their laps onto their tables, and eventually is writhing on the bar counter as well. The women shout encouragingly and applaud

loudly when her piece is finished. She disappears into the audience, chatting with friends, rather than disappearing backstage.

In this performance piece, the artist hits at the core of prescribed Jewish female behavior. Instead of highlighting what is forbidden to women, the stripper underscores the expected behavior. The audience has a nostalgic moment as 'mother' performs her ritual duty to her Lord, King of the Universe. But while the moment is sustained suspenseful, the audience knows that this is a role they cannot - or will not - live up to. The audience is filled with a preponderance of skinny young androgynous dykes with short spiky hair, wearing a swagger, a cigarette, white T-shirts, checked flannel, or old jeans, combat boots, booze, piercings. There are smatterings of nipple piercings poking through bra-less T-shirts, and plenty of tattoos. While not every woman in the club conforms to this butch persona, there is not a woman present who appears able to fill the comfortable shoes of the maternal candle-lighting figure onstage. Nevertheless, the audience responds with audible reverence: she is wistfully familiar.

At the same time, the performance piece hits the contradiction between the mother and the whore; the confined, shrouded domestic female body, and the celebration of rampant, explicit, disobedient sexuality. A heterosexual marriage is not something that anyone in this audience aspires to. The piece is a reminder: this is not you - this will never be you - unless it can be transformed into something palatable. For some, it brings to mind countless attempts to explain to their mothers what exactly they find abhorrent and why they cannot fulfill their mothers' dreams.

### Third piece: the Labia Menorah

"[T]he Chanukah lights represent the illumination of the intellect [and] the subjugation of the body to the service of the Creator, blessed be He (...) Darkness, according to our wise

men, represents this world, a world of material, bodily pleasures, and desires of the flesh, all of which cause a man to forget his Creator and forsake his Mitzvot" (Glazerson 1985: 139).

"My menorah consists only of failings so that everyone will see that they do not command perfection. Everyone has a failing, for whatever he considers beautiful is ugly in the eyes of others. In reality, however, I can make the menorah as it should be" (Reb Nakhman of Bratslev, *A tale of a Menorah*).

The menorah, or branched candelabra used to hold the candles lit in the celebration of Chanukah, is the oldest symbol of the Jewish People. In the Bible, it was to be found upon the Tabernacle which the Hebrews erected in the desert in their migration out of Egypt. Images of the menorah have been documented in Palestine and Syria beginning around the Middle Bronze Period. The earliest oil lamps were made of clay and stone, and only later of metal, from bronze to gold. They took the shape of deep bowls, each with a spout for the wick. It is said that upon Mount Sinai, God shows Moses a pattern of the Tabernacle and all of its accoutrements, including the seven-branched menorah. It is possible that the central shaft and six branches represented the six days of labor and seventh day of rest undertaken by the Divine at the time of Creation. The Chanukah menorah, or *chanukiyah*, is nine-branched - on the Tree of Life representing *yesod*, foundation, which in the Jewish mysticism is associated with sexuality and generativity. The menorah as vessel, holds the sacred oil, and is lit, metaphorically, by a shaft of the Divine light - 'or 'ain sof - eternal light, light without end - this is the Light that Kabbalistic cosmology claims is the original Creator of the Universe.

With such a description, the idea of a menorah draped with images of labia no longer should sound outrageous, for the shape of ancient Near Eastern earthen oil lamps is renowned - they resemble female genitalia, filled

with sacramental oil, and lit precisely where the clitoris should be. The deep cups of the lamp of the Tabernacle Menorah were ornamented in the shape of almond blossoms. A menorah of third century Tiberius alternated ornamentation of blossoms and pomegranates, and of course by then the Menorah had already long been established to take the form of a stylized tree - the Tree of Life, or perhaps the Tree of Knowledge - both associated with the first woman of Creation, at home in her primordial scented garden. The pomegranate is her symbol, filled with fruit like drops of ruby red blood, which speaks of nothing if not the essence of woman. The oils burned in those ancient menorot were deliciously scented. In these and other myriad ways, the menorah speaks of the creative powers associated with woman's fertility.

The Labia Menorah at the club performance was conceived and produced by a protégée of Fairy Butch, a young dominatrix-attired femme, dressed in a skimpy black leather corset and not much else. The Labia Menorah she had made herself consisted of an upright *chanukiyah*, in the classic branching tree formation. Each branch was draped with a life-sized rendition of female genitalia - each one different from the next. While these dykes do not appear to have a fear of penetration - given the preponderance of dildos, strap-ons, and for some, fisting - nevertheless, it may be significant that the candles were not inserted into the 'genitalia', but rather, were placed above each, in their usual slot on the menorah.

Unlike in the earlier performance pieces, the presentation was done without veiling or shrouding. The designer of the Labia Menorah stood on stage exposing both herself and her wares. She proudly lit the candles as she carefully sang the prayers in a little girl's cadence. She too used the archaic Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation still extant that reveals the flavor of Old World values and patriarchal shtetl existence. In both accent and affect, she was decidedly East Coast. Much of the audience spontaneously joined in the Hebrew prayers,

which they sang with great articulation and gusto. As before, no changes were made to the language of prayer, but rather only to the ritual practitioner and ritual objects themselves. Were one to have only heard the candle-lighting, it would have sounded as in any Jewish home. Visually, however, the effect was perfect travesty.

Fairy Butch made sure that an additional prayer was sung - the *shehechi'anu* - one offered only at the start of something new. It was not a prayer that would normally be sung on that particular night of Chanukah. But here it was, a prayerful reclamation of the feminine vessel - a far cry from the masculinized celebration of Maccabean militancy. This feminization, or refeminization, of Chanukah has a distinctly pagan odor to it: the holiday is recast excising the politico-mythologized military victory of Jews, and restoring emphasis on the return of light out of darkness.

While rebbes may dictate that darkness represents "this world, a world of material, bodily pleasures, and desires of the flesh" (Glazerson 1985: 139), light signifies the righteousness and goodness of the Oral Law, the Torah. At 'In Bed with Fairy Butch' the opposite is true: the light of the menorah illuminates the hidden sexual body of woman, sacralizes it with authentic, devotional prayer, and proclaims it to be good. Reb Nakhman of Bratslev's wisdom, quoted earlier, is revealed: the menorah is a projection of the values of the observer. For the women drawn to spend Friday night with Fairy Butch, the Labia Menorah is validating, not offensive, and it is oral sex, more than Oral Law that embodies the sacred. Perhaps it is for this transmutation of darkness into light that the *shehechi'anu*, the prayer for new beginnings, is invoked.

But did the black leather-corseted priestess speak a word of homily, textual validation, or archaeological evidence? Not a word. This is performance art; playtime on a Friday night. She bantered a bit with Fairy Butch, displayed her wares, wriggled seductively, flirted with members of the audience, took charge authori-



tatively, led her audience in prayer, and disappeared back into the dark recesses of the club, only to reemerge much later as a key figure in the fourth and final performance piece. By the end of the night, women in the club wanted a Labia Menorah of their own - although we are unlikely to see them appearing in mainstream synagogue gift shops any time soon. It is the measure of San Franciscan perversity, however, that posters of labia menorahs began to appear in upscale shops selling toys for sexual pleasure.

#### **Fourth piece: Yenta the matchmaker**

"There is no specific negative commandment prohibiting [lesbian practices] (...) Consequently, such women are not (...) prohibited to her husband because of it. It behooves the court, however, to administer the flogging prescribed for rebelliousness ..." (Maimonides, quoted in R. Biale 1984: 195).

'In Bed with Fairy Butch' features a match-making finale at the end of each show. The final act on this night was no exception, save for the distinctively Jewish twist. Onstage came 'Yenta' - Yenta, the Matchmaker - emerging less out of an authentic shtetl, or Jewish village, from pre-World War II Eastern Europe, than out of American theater and film. A parody of parody. Fairy Butch's 'Yenta' was hobbled, hunched, scarf-covered, gray-haired, bespectacled, and dowdy. She moaned loudly, and spoke in a stereotypic thick Yiddish accent peppered with numerous 'oy's, and other Yiddishisms. She evoked the real-life voices of mothers and grandmothers extolling the virtues of matrimony. But matrimony with a difference: forbidden, illegal.

'Family', like matrimony, has come to be reconfigured in gay culture (see e.g. Curry 1995: 165-96). 'Out' in the world - i.e., publicly gay in mainstream society - one's safety is assured with the bond of community. 'Fam-

ily' is the queer community - which may or may not exist outside an idealized theoretical construct. These are gay 'brothers', lesbian 'sisters', and a 'family' full of the range of sexual and/or genderized minorities. This 'family' understands that the real-life Yentas of the world and one's 'real' kin relations have, more often than not, written them off. Jewish families may well be 'sitting *shivva*' for them, lighting a *yahrtzeit* memorial candle, and reciting the prayers for the dead. Matchmaking and creating 'family' may well be what 'Fairy Butch' is all about. Performers and audience crowd 'party' together, enjoying the spectacle they make - sisters bound together inside the shared womb of the club.

This last act is a favorite feature for 'In Bed with Fairy Butch' aficionados. Some lucky girl will have the chance to go home with some other lucky girl. And if that's not enough, she will likely receive a gaudy, sleek, glittery, glow-in-the-dark dildo thrown into the bargain.

'Yenta' was relentless. After selecting a 'marriageable' young butch from the audience ostensibly looking for a 'nice-Jewish-girl', she gathered up some suitable prospects from the audience to be tested by the blindfolded recipient of her good works. The selected contestant slouched comfortably on a chair center stage, blindfolded - a veritable James Dean of a dyke. She wore a T-shirt, baggy jeans with chains hanging down one side, and thick, black boots. Yenta worked the audience, and elicited from them that, yes, a 'nice-Jewish-girl' was precisely what every woman in the club wanted. After a series of 'test questions', the contestant picked her match: the nice-Jewish-leatherdyke who had presented her Labia Menorah to the crowd.

The long-legged diva in black leather strolled over to her newly-acquired butch mate, lifted her up out of her chair, into her arms, and sat down where her date moments before had been - and *mommied* her: She cuddled and cooed, and rocked the woman in her lap sweetly. The lanky butch curled into

her, happily. Jewish mother, nice-Jewish-girl, date, mate, slut and whore, dominatrix femme and potential lesbian lover were all rolled into one tightly-corseted, category-defying package. The audience roared, whistled, and stomped appreciatively, as the grinning couple stomped and wriggled off stage.

At that point, 'Fairy Butch' returned. "How many of you are Jewish out there?" she inquired. Half the hands in the club go up. "And how many of you out there are with a nice-Jewish-girl tonight?" Every hand goes down. The crowd is in shock, and for a moment Fairy Butch herself seems lost for words. Then the crowd is laughing long and hard in what appears to be a collective epiphany. Earlier, Yenta had ascertained from the crowd that every dyke in the club (at least, that night), Jewish or non-Jewish, was longing for that special 'Semitic sweetie', Yet every Jewish woman who had come with a date to the club that night had brought her own dyke version of the proverbial 'shikse goddess'. As if acting out of a strict rule of exogamy, one Jewish lesbian explained her own ethic to me sometime later: when it comes to dating Jewish women, she exclaimed, "I have my prohibitions!"

## Conclusions

"There are no limits [in ludic circles] - for in reality your purpose in coming together is to allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressivity, to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption (...) transform[ing] it into (...) violence and into his plan for freedom" (Fanon 1963: 57-58).

Fanon reminds us that in the long run we cannot dance, play or conjure away the inequities of the social order. Nativistic movements tend to make life tolerable under oppression, but in the end do not bring about structural change. In the meantime, participatory performance makes life not just tolerable, but wickedly fun.

The music comes up, there is the end of show dildo give-away, and the dancing begins. The women playfully lunge lewd/lude penetrables at each other, massage each other, joke, and dance freely together, aware of the sanctity - and, in this case, rarity - of female-only space. In the American arena, women would do well to look to their Middle Eastern sisters for models of sexual separatism. Far from the American imagination of monolithic patriarchal oppression of the feminine, a large part of women around the globe relish their 'seclusion' from the world of men. It is when the men come home - from their equally gratifying time alone together - that levity dissipates and high spirits dissolve into the tensions inherent in mixed-gender territory. Homosocial space is conducive to the ludic.

Fanon speaks of the double bind of young Algerian women during the struggle for Algerian independence. They are caught between following the authority and customs of their father or furthering the revolution, at least until their fathers comprehend their revolution (Fanon 1967: 35-67). Afterward, the possibility of promoting their own cause may have dissipated, and the moment disappeared:

"Defending women's rights 'now' - this now being any historical moment - is always a betrayal of the people, the nation, the revolution, religion, national identity, cultural roots. (...) We are caught between two legitimacies: belonging to our people or identifying with other oppressed women" (Helie-Lucas 1999: 280-81).

Jewish lesbians in San Francisco are equally 'caught between two legitimacies' and more - the Jewish community, the gay community, and Christian/secular mainstream society. Jewish identity is problematic enough on its own, let alone in the context of Christian hegemony. The shifting levels of discourse parallel the multiplicity of layers donned and shed in the course of the two hour 'Fairy Butch' floor-show.

As women don the guise of a devout Hasid, dutiful mother, lusty stripper, dominatrix, and lap-dancer; as they shift from female to male to butch to femme, to androgynous other, and back again; as they shroud themselves and peel away the layers - as they play with the transmutation of self and community - there is the search for an authenticity which is both apparent and elusive.

The oscillation between revealing and concealing is as much about being 'out' as a lesbian as it is about exclusion or inclusion with respect to Jewish ritual. In both these regards, the women and their layered identities appear no more or less authentic for their raunchiness than for their solemnity, no more or less authentic for revealing their bodies than for concealing them, as they straddle the line between desecration and consecration. They alter ritual, liturgy, ritual objects and redefine the roles they will or will not play.

Echoing Helie-Lucas' frustration, Jewish women identify with the oppression of being Other, or layers of Otherness. But Jewish feminists come from a culture of disputation which relishes dialectical banter, confrontation, and challenge. From this point of view, Jewish lesbian parody, performance art, and protest are linked to an ancient form of discourse that can lead to social change (see Klepfisz 1997: 56).

Rabbinical discourse and Talmudic method are built upon a methodology of challenge and response. Jewish rituals demand that even small children learn to ask 'why'. And there is a place at the heart of Jewish culture for parody and travesty, satire and burlesque. There is a place even for homosocial intercourse. And as we have seen, lesbianism is not strictly forbidden - only women's 'rebelliousness'. There is also precedent for the feminization or re-feminization of ritual, and ritual objects, and even the divine (in the form of the Shekhinah, see Zussman 1993). What then, is so terribly rebellious?

Halakhah regulates in law only what is visible to men, not what they cannot see or know. Orthodoxy, however, is terribly nervous about

what women might be doing. It is here that these performance pieces overstep the boundary of challenge within the tradition and enter into a challenge of the tradition. There is no place for rampant bacchanalian sexuality and display of the body in Jewish life, nor is there a place for female-female sexual exclusivity.

'In Bed with Fairy Butch' performers and audiences collaborate in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaningful lesbianized symbolic forms. Their performativity requires vision not only of what was, but also of what can be. Their ritual travesties - from pasties to the labia menorah - continue to shift, for this is a community averse to codification. They challenge Jewish identity, sexual identity, gender roles, marriage and the family. Performance in ludic spaces allows for malleable alternatives.

In these four pieces, comprising little more than two hours, are the seeds of more than bawdy eroticism, desecration and laughter. These are acts that hearken, consciously and unconsciously, back to a time when the feminine spirit of the ancient Hebrews was more fully engaged, explicit, and accessible. In the hands of these strippers and comediennes, ancient symbolic meanings are resurrected and revitalized. Is it revolutionary? It is nativistic to the core, and we know that when nativistic movements do not go far enough, the choices are revolution or extinction. These women have no plans for extinction.

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