

# A Fat, Vulgar, Angry, Slut

by Betty Rose Dudley

I usually tell people that I am a fat, white, working-class bitch who comes from a small town in the slightly southern, mostly midwestern state of Missouri. Even though today I live in California, with a salary at least three times more than anybody in my family ever dreamed of legally obtaining, I have been fat, white, and working class for as long as I can remember. I was an obedient child, so the bitch part of my identity is an adult acquisition. I knew that I was a dyke long before I knew there was a word to describe what I was feeling. I am an angry woman, a very angry woman. I am angry at the world, but I am also angry at the dyke community that I have been a part of for the last 20-plus years. Most of all I am angry at myself for the ways I have compromised who I am in order to belong.

My mother was an uptight, incest-surviving sexual prude who, because of the socioeconomic class she was born in to, was also a slut. She was a waitress with large breasts, who wore red lipstick and fingernail polish when she dressed up to party, go to church, or deal with the P.T.A. She hated the word “piss,” although “shit” seemed somehow OK for adults to say, but “fuck” was way beyond acceptable as a word anywhere. She didn’t use “vulgar” language, but my mother knew that she would never be a lady. A lower-class woman can never be a lady, she can only act like one, in the same way a middle-class woman is never really a slut, she only acts like one. What my mother wanted was respect. In the class war, my mother knew deeply which side she was on, and it was not the winning side. My mother, too, was a very angry woman.

I like feminine women, but I have never been one. I say that I am butch, but not married to the concept. Butch is something that I am, not something that I do. I watch dykes “do” butch and femme, with lots of discussion of how to do it properly. For the most part it amuses me and I enjoy the show. What I don’t enjoy is watching middle-class girls “do” butch and femme as “stud” and “slut.” These are working-class roles that middle-class dykes bring into the sexual arena because it gives them the freedom to explore their sexuality in a way that would not be there if they stayed in their own class-bound roles. They strut their stuff on the dance floor or in the bedroom as if they were born to it. They are “bad” girls, girls that want to shock their parents and the world. Yet when they’re not on the dance floor or in the bedroom, they expect to be treated like ladies and gentlemen. They expect a privilege that no slut or stud that I grew up with ever envisioned. They expect the respect that my mother only dreamed of.

I came out in the seventies, when the white, middle-class women’s movement decided, by consensus, that we were all the same and trashed butch and femme women. I didn’t come out where there were bar dykes (women who never have used the word “dyke”). I don’t remember the butch and femme of the fifties; I’ve only read about it. From what I’ve read, it seems to me that it was more of a lifestyle and less of the party style that it seems to be today. Times have changed.

The butch role was far too violent and masculine, and the femme role too passive and feminine to be either politically or

personally correct—sexist assumptions about what many thought of as sexist roles. I came out with middle-class white women who were trying to throw off the shackles of their own class and race-bound roles and who made a collective decision that all other women, regardless of class and race, should do and be the same. They discarded their gender-bound roles. Some of them even gave up their money. Yet they managed to retain an assumption of the privilege to decide that the rest of the world should be like them. In this, they were no different from ladies who have, throughout history, started or influenced the reform movements that came before them. This time, though, they weren’t trying to free the slaves, save sinners, clean up alcoholics or educate and emancipate the poor. They were fighting for themselves and they called it a revolution, a feminist revolution, a nonviolent and overall (considering) rather polite and politely vicious revolution.

Other than the one tomboy butch dyke I’d gone to school with, political lesbians were the only lesbians I’d ever known. I wanted to belong, so I jumped on the bandwagon. I learned the rhetoric, I sang the songs, and I betrayed myself daily in order to be there. I refocused and redirected my anger. I became educated and assimilated and I learned how to get along. I loved women in a pure and political way and drifted benignly in the currents of this placid sisterhood that was going to make us all strong and beautiful and the same. But I was only a sister, and never a lover. I was sure, though, that it must be me. Hey, other fat dykes had lovers. Other working-class women had lovers. I didn’t know any fat, working-class dykes.

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I was trashed in the seventies on a college campus in the Midwest by a group of white, middle-class, and—at the time—straight feminists. I was trashed by straight women who went around campus spraying dyke symbols on stop signs, playing *Lavender Jane Loves Women* on their record players, and discussing vibrators and where to buy them, while lounging in the middle of the women’s center on campus. I was trashed because one of these women thought that I had called her a dyke. The irony of it all was that I didn’t, but she was. I know, because I ran into her 10 years later at The Brick Hut in Oakland, hanging out with her ex-lover and a group of dykes from Olivia Records. This woman, who had given me nightmares of self-doubt and self-loathing for years, didn’t even remember me.

She didn't remember me. Maybe I should have described myself to her. I was the fat sexual deviant, the one who volunteered to answer the phones at the women's center. I was the one who asked the straight women who painted dyke symbols everywhere what it meant to be a lesbian, where do you buy *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, and how do you choose this vibrator they were always talking about. I was the one who picked up the doctoral candidates survey, left at the center for women to take, and read out loud the title, "Are You Multi-Orgasmic?". I was the one she thought was asking her the question. I was the one who remarked on how powerful her political alliance with another woman could be—a boardroom, not a bedroom, alliance. I was the one who, by then, could not say anything that in her mind was not going to be interpreted as sexual. I was the fat, working-class dyke who had not yet learned to be a bitch. I got an education while I was in college.

I'm still a feminist, still part of a women's/lesbians' movement that changed my life and in many ways changed my world. I'm still, like my mother before me, a fat slut, still part of a fat, working-class family. I am still angry. I am angry at women who abhor the way drag queens portray the worst and most stereotypical aspects of what it means to be female, yet do the same thing when they "do" slut. I am angry at women who abhor the racism that is apparent when Al Jolson puts on black face and falls down on one knee to sing "Mammy," yet do a classist equivalent when they "do" stud. I am angry when dykes buy into the notion that vulgar language and, by extension, vulgar people belong in the bedroom but never the boardroom. I am angry that my view of my body and my sexuality are so frequently and severely affected by other people's definition of what a fat slut is. I am angry at people who sexualize my life, the people and roles I grew up with, and then trash me for being perceived as sexual. I am angry at people who believe that sexual is vulgar unless it is naughty and "cute."

**I am a slut. A fat, lecherous, rude, crude, and very nice slut. If I no longer sound like the sisters I was raised with, I'll be damned before I continue to sound like the sisters I came out with.**

My straight sisters are fat bikers. They buy their leather on sale at Sears and they buy their motorcycles second hand. They do the South Dakota bike run when they can afford it. They are tough women, with men in their lives, but they are in no way butch. They are femme, but not necessarily feminine; they are sluts. They would be angry and offended if they were called sluts. They curse when they're angry but also yell at the men in their lives for the casual use of "bad" language. They are fat, and the word "fat" is part of their vocabulary of "bad" language. When they are quiet and complacent, not dressed for the road, they are often mistaken for ladies—until they open their mouths. They are not passive and they are not weak. They don't use educated words and they have Southern, "vulgar" hillbilly accents. I use educated words with less of an accent.

A college friend once went home with me for Christmas. After we got back to the dorms, she said, "Betty, you don't sound like your family." My sisters called me at work once. My co-worker took the call and later whispered to me, "Betty, your sisters sound like hicks." My co-worker, also up from the working class, is from New York but she, too, doesn't sound like it anymore. Yet we both, under duress, retain a flavor in our voices that tells you where we came from. We've both learned not to sound like sluts.

I have a dyke friend who is from poverty, and in spite of her college degree pretty much remains there. She likes middle-class dykes because they help her with money in ways that working-class dykes usually don't. She says, "I don't care if they do it because they feel guilty. I need the help, and all working-class people ever do is feel lucky and superior because they have jobs." My friend usually has middle- to upper-class lovers. Her last lover had lots of money.

My friend is an S/M dyke. Her lover keeps her in leather and lingerie and all sorts of slutty costumes and accoutrements. She once dressed up to go to a party; her mother was visiting at the time. She had on a pretty sleazy outfit for this party, and her lover grabbed her and said, "Ooh, baby, what's your Momma going to say when she sees you dressed like that?" My friend looked at her lover with a yeah-right expression and told her, "My mother is going to think 'How pretty! You look very nice.'" Her upper-middle-class lover did not believe her until they went into the living room and Momma said, "Ooh, how pretty. You look really nice dear!"

It makes me angry that the lover did not know that the mother would think that her daughter looked "nice." It makes me angry that you have to pay so damn much money to look really "cheap" in the dyke community. It makes me angry that most of the women who wear this look to party in think that it's only about clothes and are clueless to the fact that it is, and always has been, about people and class. I hate watching the gentrification of my roots taking place in a community that has given me an acceptance that my family of birth will never understand.

I left my fat-phobic, homophobic, family of origin to live in what I once thought was a "better," "more-accepting" community. I lusted after the more "genteel," nice, middle-class femmes and sought a quieter, more peaceful lifestyle than the one I'd been born to. I listened to the acoustic feminist folk music instead of the electric rock-and-roll I'd grown up loving. I have betrayed myself, and as a result I end up belonging nowhere.

I am a slut. A fat, lecherous, rude, crude, and very nice slut. If I no longer sound like the sisters I was raised with, I'll be damned before I continue to sound like the sisters I came out with. I am tacky and vulgar. I wallow in vulgarity, consume it with the hunger fat girls are famous for. I like cock rock; rock-and-roll chords resound in my head. If I think that the lyrics are misogynist then I change the words. I make words and music my own. I take back my power. If the vulgarity of my power bothers you, it is your problem; I no longer let you make it mine. I no longer give you the power to tell me who to be or how to behave. I behave like the fat, vulgar, angry slut that I am. If you want to act like me, or my sisters, in the sexual arena, go right ahead. Don't expect me, however, to abide by your limitations, your definitions, or to collude with you in shame over what you consider vulgar. I am a vulgar woman. I am a powerful female. ✨