

FOREWORD

The Butch Anthropologist Out in the Field

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In this century of speed and simultaneity, it is rare that scholarly work can stand the test of time. Works written yesterday can look dated by the time they appear in print, and many of the feminist and lesbian texts from the 1970s simply do not translate in the present. But, as *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay* shows, Newton's older work remains relevant for a new generation of queer scholars and her newer work continues to build on her own legacy but also responds carefully and methodically to new concerns and research agendas.

Newton has clearly been one of the most important figures in gay, lesbian, and transgender studies over the past two decades, and her work on drag, camp, gender performances, and lesbian masculinities, which dates back to 1972, has been foundational and fundamental to the development of an interdisciplinary project of tracking and identifying lesbian genders. Some fifteen years after the publication of her essay on Radclyffe Hall's "mythic mannish lesbian," Newton's formulations of inversion and the butch have still not been eclipsed. More than twenty-five years after the publication of her study *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), Newton's insights about drag and camp, role playing and gender impersonation still constitute some of the most important considerations of gender variance available. Indeed, contemporary queer theory, especially queer theory under the influence of Judith Butler's work, has come to circulate endlessly around problems of drag and performance, the very problems, in fact, raised initially by *Mother Camp*.

Judith Butler carefully and significantly relates her debt to *Mother Camp* in an essay titled "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," when she provides her readers with an uncharacteristic moment of personal confession: "As a young person," she tells us, "I suffered for a long time from being told that what I 'am' is a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real" (1991:20). Butler foregrounds her confession by saying that it "thematize[s] the impossibility of confession" and she follows up on the confession by add-

ing that she found a defense against the accusation of inauthenticity through her reading of Newton's book: "I remember quite distinctly when I first read in Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* that drag is not an imitation or a copy of some true and prior gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed" (21). This moment of what we might call "reluctant butch disclosure" suggests the ways in which the personal and the theoretical come together in all projects about queer belonging, queer dislocation, and queer identity. Most queer theorists, whether they deploy a personal voice or not, pick their way to theoretical understandings through their own histories of unbelonging. We embrace our personal memories of dislocation and dysphoria through theoretical rewritings of moments of shame and embarrassment.

As I was working on my book *Female Masculinity*, I found my scholarly preoccupations criss-crossing time and again with Newton's "butch career." An interest in *The Well of Loneliness* led me to her essay on Radclyffe Hall; struggling to make the pleasures of the stone butch viable, I found my way to her essay on "sexual vocabularies"; and more recently, working on contemporary drag king scenes, I returned, of course, to *Mother Camp* and she shared with me her "Dick Tracy" essay. My work at every instance has been informed by Newton's, my understanding of butch embodiment has been shaped by hers, the sense of the viability and importance of a butch project has been handed down from Newton's work to mine. Many times as I was at work on this topic, I reflected on my own butch history and I felt the way it echoed the fragments of personal history that I found in Newton's. When Newton became a reader for *Female Masculinity* during its production, I felt that we struck up a most productive mentoring relation. Newton has been a generous, meticulous, and precise interlocutor—where I am sloppy, she is accurate; where I am rash and grandiose, she is methodical and tempered; where my project faltered, she gave it equilibrium. I have looked, I realize, to Newton, both in my work and in my life, for a model of how to be in the world.

But Newton's work has done much more than simply enable other butch scholars like me to find theoretical meaning in their memories of rejection; she also injects her own work with these moments of laconic butch self-revelation. Indeed, Newton has a particularly subtle and deft touch when it comes to personal voice revelations. In the appendix to *Mother Camp*, she offers us this gem of a story: While working with some female impersonators in Kansas City, Newton comments: "I considered my own role to include a great deal of participation . . . I not only listened and questioned, I also answered questions and argued. I helped out with shows whenever I could, pulling curtains, running messages for the performers, and bringing

in drinks and french fries from the restaurant across the street” (1972:134). Here Newton quietly introduces her role as participant-observer to the drag queen scenes she studies, but she also draws a strict line between being helpful backstage and participating onstage: “When the performers half-jokingly suggested that I should stand in for an absent stripper, however, I drew the line.” But, Newton continues, she was finally granted the kind of acceptance she sought in this backstage life when a drag queen responded to a visiting impersonator who had asked what Newton was doing there: “He replied casually, ‘Oh she’s my husband’” (134–35 n.3).

This anecdote provides a lovely insight into Newton’s investment in the world of female impersonators. It illustrates precisely the way she refuses to distance herself from the “stigma” of the drag queens and how she understands her own gender identity as a role; furthermore, Newton carefully marks the boundaries of her role in this personal confession and distances herself from normative femininity. The queens, after all, are teasing Newton about her own performances by including her in their backstage banter and pulling her into the business of running a show. Her disjuncture from the role of stripper and her obvious pleasure at being called the drag queen’s “husband” mark Newton’s butchness in clear terms and make obvious her own gendered investments in this theatrical world of camp and drag impersonation.

Although some may feel that the entire project of lesbian history has been an excavation of the butch and her habits, her troubles, her lifestyles, her lovers, it is also clear that we have only just begun the long task of unraveling the meaning of female masculinity and its relation to queerness. However, reading through Newton’s theoretical preoccupations over the past twenty years, as this rich volume allows, gives us some idea about how long it takes to properly formulate and produce butch history. In 1972, for example, Newton provided an interesting footnote to *Mother Camp*. She wrote: “There are also women who perform as men: male impersonators (‘drag butches’). They are a recognized part of the profession but there are very few of them. I saw only one male impersonator perform during field work, but heard of several others. The relative scarcity of male impersonation presents important theoretical problems” (5). In an essay that appeared in print twenty-six years later called “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen” (1996a), Newton finally returns to these important theoretical problems and begins to navigate the complicated terrain of butch camp and drag king theater. Newton’s own publishing history, this particular lag between recognizing herself as the drag queen’s husband, noting the absence of a comparable world of male impersonators, and then finally picking up the threads of a butch camp project,

shows the break in continuity between gay history and lesbian history, and shows, simply, how long it takes to construct the complicated archaeology of gender-deviant lives. We have to confront medical opinion and mainstream doctrines of pathology and only then can we identify the vibrant vernaculars and inventive subcultures of queer lives. Butch history, far from being a completed project, has so far only filled in the barest details of the lives of a few extraordinary women.

While butch history, then, remains an ongoing and vital project, Esther Newton, perhaps more than any other scholar of her generation, has shown us how to think through the complex relations among erotic behavior, community formation, gender variance, and embodiment. Newton has always taken risks, big risks, in her work: she was an ethnographer of sexual subcultures in America at a time when anthropology still focused on so-called exotic cultures, and she was a chronicler of gender variance at a time when lesbian history still searched the past for “romantic friendships” between women. Newton was “queer” before the word had been reclaimed and dusted off for a new generation, and she identified her butchness at the very moment that lesbian feminism designated butch-femme as an outlaw, outmoded, outlandish category. The misleading perspective of hindsight, perhaps, prevents us from fully recognizing the boldness of Newton’s research decisions on the one hand, and the costliness of them on the other. She asked questions that others did not think of asking (“Did the doctors invent or merely describe the mannish lesbian?”) and she pursued projects that other researchers avoided because they feared it might cost them their jobs. Hindsight has also rendered certain Newtonian paradigms inevitable when in fact they are the consequence of enormous intellectual labor. For example, though while now, in the 1990s, we seem to have unhinged butch-femme from the anxious formulation of “role playing,” in 1984 a defense of the “mythic mannish lesbian” in terms of the power of her masculinity would have seemed counterintuitive. Again, a decade before a transgender movement, before a butch-femme revival, before current theories of performativity, Newton dared to suggest that Radclyffe Hall’s “equation of lesbianism with masculinity needs not condemnation, but expansion.”

Newton’s work remains vital and central to the fields in which it participates. One of Newton’s very best essays, for instance, is a gorgeous piece on “the erotic equation in fieldwork.” Published originally in 1996 and included here as one of the real jewels in Newton’s collected work, this essay, titled “My Best Informant’s Dress,” places Newton at the forefront of new queer and feminist anthropology; it also provides a great example of the combination of humor, vulnerability, and lucidity that makes Newton’s work con-

sistently compelling, relevant and, in the end, necessary. In “My Best Informant’s Dress,” Newton comments on the self-reflexive turn in anthropology and produces her own self-reflexive meditation on the motivations of the anthropologist and the potentially erotic relationship between researcher and informant. Newton remarks that in graduate school she had been taught that erotic interest between fieldworker and informant did not exist; moreover, when the topic of erotic interaction did finally enter into discourse, Newton notes, it was all too often accompanied by confessions in the form of conquest narratives by straight male anthropologists or narratives about missed sexual opportunities by straight female anthropologists. Newton, characteristically, cuts to the chase and asserts, “My fieldwork has been fraught with sexual dangers and attractions that were much more like leitmotifs than light distractions” (1996b:220). Newton qualifies this statement by saying, “I was not looking for sexual adventure in the field” but she confirms that as a gay anthropologist studying gay research subjects, “my key informants and sponsors have usually been more to me than just an expedient way of getting information and something different than ‘just’ friends” (221).

The confession that follows is a rich story about Newton’s erotic admiration for an old woman, Kay, who became her “best informant” for her book on Cherry Grove. In *Mother Camp*, we recall, Newton reveled in the moment that her drag queen informant dubbed her his “husband.” A similar moment occurs in “My Best Informant’s Dress” when Newton tries to solicit Kay’s help in setting up an interview with someone in the Grove. Newton asks Kay to tell the resistant interviewee that she is “a good guy.” Kay responds mischievously, “Oh I tell that to everybody” (225). There is a remarkable parallel between being named the drag queen husband and then being dubbed the older lesbian’s “good guy,” and in both instances we can see precisely how Newton forges a bond with her best informants that consists of much more than mere professional trust: these bonds are erotic in both instances and, in both cases, Newton positions herself and is recognized as a masculine suitor. In both relations, furthermore, the relationships are satisfyingly eccentric and cross many more boundaries than just the one that is supposed to distance the anthropologist from his or her object of study.

Newton cites from her field notes throughout “My Best Informant’s Dress”; they themselves make fascinating reading and suggest that one of Newton’s real skills is her ability to keep records and diaries; she literally makes her own archives. This skill, of course, is closely linked to the talent for sorting through the notes and journal entries later on and knowing what should be published, what may hold a general interest, and what is too idiosyncratic for public consumption. With surgical precision, Newton seems to extract just



With Kay in Cherry Grove, 1988. Photo by Diane Quero

the right episodes and quotes from what must amount to a mountain of research. She is also, one imagines, an enormously gifted interviewer, able to listen carefully and solicit information without prying, leading, or imposing. In 1996–1997 when I tried my hand at interviewing for a drag king ethnography, I discovered firsthand how profoundly difficult it is to encourage people to talk in a way that leads them to the topics of concern to you. After tripping and stumbling a few times and consistently soliciting one-line answers or else endless and pointless anecdotes from my informants, I went to Newton to try to discover the secret of the ethnographic interview. She gave me two pieces of advice: first, craft the question in terms of hows rather than whys (“How did you first start doing drag?” and not “Why did you first start doing drag?”), and second, *listen* to the response. Simple advice but truly effective. Newton is, ultimately, an active listener, and by listening closely she pays her informants the highest compliment possible; her attention lets them know that they are not simply useful but also desirable and admirable. For Newton, the best informants, in the end, are not simply those people who give her the most information; they are loved ones with whom she constructs worlds and creates knowledge. “If Kay had not existed,” writes Newton, “I would have had to invent her.” And in a way she did.

Newton does small things to insert herself into her ethnographic narratives; inevitably, for instance, she includes pictures of herself with her informants and these photo documents place her within rather than outside the frame of analysis. The more usual photograph of the ethnographer situates him or her to one side of the action, writing or watching. As James Clifford says of the picture of Stephen Tyler in India that serves as the cover art for *Writing Culture*, “In this image the ethnographer hovers at the edge of the frame—faceless, almost extraterrestrial, a hand that writes” (1986:1). Newton is no hand that writes and never faceless, but neither is she the traditional participant-observer who immerses herself in another culture in order to “learn” it and represent it. Newton is always of and in the cultures she studies. In the photograph of Newton in *Mother Camp*, she stands slightly behind her “best informant,” Skip Arnold, who is made up but not yet in drag. The caption reads: “Skip Arnold with the author between shows.” The photograph very effectively places Newton in relation to the drag cultures she documents. The young and masculine-looking woman has short hair and wears a bulky sweater; the face is handsome and serious; she looks down and away from the camera but inclines her head toward Skip, listening intently. Skip has obviously been caught mid-sentence by the photographer and his mouth is open in conversation. He has the heavy eye makeup of the drag queen and a lipsticked mouth; his gender indeterminacy actually emphasizes hers, espe-



Skip Arnold with the author between shows, 1965. Photo by Sherry Ortner

cially because as the caption tells us, he is between shows, not on stage and not off. Newton joins him precisely in this in between space: between genders, between shows, between subject and object, between the university and the drag club.

In the photograph that accompanies “My Best Informant’s Dress,” Newton again stands behind her informant. Kay is in a wheelchair, centered in the photograph and smiling coyly at the camera. In this shot, however, Newton leans forward, now stares into the camera with a seductive and bold glare. In both this shot and the photograph with Skip Arnold, Newton appears as a face without a body and the body of the informant covers her own. These images suggest again the intimacy that Newton cultivates with her subjects, an intimacy that stops short of sexual involvement but goes far beyond the role of participant-observer. By appearing as a face without a female body, Newton presents herself not as androgynous or hidden but as resolutely butch, and she puts on display not her own body but the beautiful body of the drag queen or the magisterial body of the older lesbian. These photographs encourage the viewer to read the relationship between Newton and her informants as collaborative, erotic, and motivated. While Skip Arnold’s made-up face forces us to consider the remarkably bare and unfeminine face of his ethnographer, so too Kay’s femme grace allows us to read the butch’s courtliness.

Another photograph of Newton accompanies her essay on the infiltration

of a drag queen contest in Cherry Grove by a dyke (p. 165). This essay, “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen” is in many ways Newton’s attempt to survey the relation of camp and drag queen cultures to lesbian public cultures in the 1990s. There are obvious echoes in this essay of her earlier work in *Mother Camp* but it is the photograph of Newton that most clearly demonstrates the connection between the ethnography of drag queens from the 1970s and her history of Cherry Grove in the 1980s. As if to illustrate the changing conditions of visibility for gays and lesbians from 1972 to 1996, this photo reprises Newton’s earlier photo of herself and Skip Arnold. Here she is accompanied by drag queen Ann Miller and dressed in a smart and handsome white tuxedo. Newton wears shades and a rakish grin and looks directly at the drag queen on her arm. Once again the circuit of the gaze includes Newton looking at her informant while her informant boldly stares into the camera lens. But now Newton is not hidden behind her feminine partner nor is she in the background. Here she comes out into the full glare of visibility and accepts her active and explicit role as the drag queen’s husband.

Esther Newton’s work, I boldly assert here, has changed anthropology, feminist studies, and queer studies in remarkable ways. And her intervention into all three fields occurs as much at the level of methodology as it does in terms of subject matter. As I have tried to outline here, Newton’s methodological innovation has less to do with crafting new empirical tools than with a creative and inspired mode of listening and participating in the cultures she studies. Newton performs an anthropology of self that is neither narcissistic nor alienated. She explores cultures that reflect her own difficult rites of passage and that place her in relation to stigma and deviance but also in the way of contempt. Commenting on her facility with establishing a rapport with the drag queens in *Mother Camp*, Newton comments: “My status as a bookish female enabled me to present myself as a relatively asexual being, which was helpful. Although my own background is middle-class, alienated perspectives are congenial to me . . . however the respect and liking which I had for the performers may have been decisive. Impersonators, like members of other stigmatized groups, are extraordinarily sensitive to contempt (1972: 135).”*

“Alienated perspectives are congenial to me.” Despite the passive voice and the lack of a referent for her own alienated perspective, in moments like this,

* In personal communication with me, Newton commented: “I cringe reading my first sentence, which was a lie, or at least a partial lie. I presented myself to them (drag queens) as gay from day one (and also bookish), and the only reason I didn’t say so was fear of coming out within academia or anywhere in straightsville.”

Newton does much more than try to empathize with the impersonators; indeed, she links her fate and her psychology to theirs. By the last sentence we can include Newton in the category “impersonators” and understand that she shares with the performers a sensitivity to contempt. Once we locate Newton within her various ethnographic texts, we realize the courage of her projects new and old. Once we realize how carefully and delicately she has placed herself in the company of so-called deviants, impersonators, and mythic man-ish lesbians, we recognize the skill of the ethnographer who wants to be in the picture without engulfing it with her presence. Once we discern the personal narratives of desire and erotic admiration that infuse Newton’s relations to her subjects, we understand that the stories of drag queens have been the stories of butches and femmes all along. Margaret Mead may well have made Newton a gay anthropologist, but the drag queens and the femmes have made her queer, butch, and resolutely *out* in the field.