

## BOOK REVIEWS

Special Book Review Section: Reviewing *Mother Camp* (Fifty Years Late)

Newton, Esther. 1972. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## Introduction: Classic. Mother. Camp.

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Why review a book—why have an introduction to *seven* reviews of a book—that was published almost fifty years ago? While Esther Newton's ethnography *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* is nowadays almost reflexively called a "classic," that term should raise questions in light of the latest debates about the place of classics and canons in anthropology, the meanings of "ethnography," and renewed attention to the corrosive consequences of elite, masculinist intellectual networks. Unlike most "classics," *Mother Camp* has lived in anthropology's margins; it was never reviewed in an anthropology journal. Its subsequent fame was, rather, established among different disciplinary kin networks even as its theoretical frame was overtaken by transformations in anthropological interests and styles. However, while there are good, *festschrift*-y reasons for this special book review section, our goal is neither simply to retrospectively celebrate Newton nor to correct a historical wrong. Collectively, the reviews gathered here argue that there are solid reasons to spend time on *Mother Camp* as anthropologists in 2018: first, for what it can offer to contemporary disciplinary debates and, second, for understanding the political moment some of us appear to be surprised to be in. The unexpected genre of *book review* for this task is appropriately performative and campy.

First, though, we should consider its status as "classic" and can do so through the kin figure in its title. When I began planning dissertation fieldwork in 1992, I was pointed to *Mother Camp* as essential reading. Indeed, twenty years after its publication, Newton's monograph was not only essential but still stood almost alone as an anthropological analysis of what subsequently became the flourishing social, political, and intellectual field nominated by "transgender." By historical accident, *Mother Camp* is a documentary snapshot of a particular moment, a cusp of gay, lesbian—and, nowadays, we would say transgender, bisexual, queer—history in the US,

just before large-scale social, political, and economic transformations produced highly refined classificatory systems of gendered and sexual identities. Arguably, its starring role in Judith Butler's field-making book *Gender Trouble* (1990) to support the now almost doxic point that "gender is performative" led to—employing Newton's analytic—its move from "back" to "front" stage. Indeed, *Mother Camp*'s contributions, if measured by citation, were recognized primarily after Butler's felicitous use of it to elaborate a fundamental point that Newton had expertly drawn in the pages of her monograph. Like the "famous relative" that David Schneider (Newton's advisor) analyzed in his own classic *American Kinship* (1968), part of *Mother Camp*'s classic status in anthropology may thus be assigned to fame achieved elsewhere. This might be a reason for a patriarchal and patrilineal anthropology (itself back in the news with recent disclosures of self-replicating masculinist and elite intellectual networks at the journal *HAU*) to re-acknowledge some kin connection along the feminist-maternal line. As Belbel notes, echoing Bonilla's (2017) contribution to a recent discussion of "classics" (prior to the above revelations), there is a deep politics to which authors are cited for what kinds of contributions; to be a "classic" is not automatically to be taken seriously in your own terms.

But *Mother Camp* does much more than serve as a queer and prodigal (if repatriated) outsider "first" by offering ethnographic support for feminist philosophical arguments. As an anthropological text, it dramatically demonstrates, in 131 concise pages, the strengths of anthropological analysis and storytelling that emerged precisely from the conditions of its pioneering firstness. That firstness is not only in its subject matter but also in its field sites, its approach, and its voice. First among firsts, as Rubin points out, is its remarkable repurposing of then-contemporary sociological and anthropological theory to its own ends. It is a demonstration of how a critical and talented anthropological eye can not only identify and make sense of a social field but *also* subject misaligned intellectual arguments, political contexts, and disciplinary commitments themselves to anthropological analysis. Second, *Mother Camp* moves expertly between the

analysis of symbolic orders—of gender, space, Americanness—and descriptions of the responses to and through those orders by drag performers, radically foregrounding such orders as *productive of* queens' abjection rather than trying to account for their psychological dissonance or developmental failure. Third, it makes "America" itself an object of anthropological investigation, a question rather than a presumed context. Fourth, it transforms thick, rich ethnographic descriptions of drag shows and the day-to-day brutality of queer street life into a theorization of what drag does as a social phenomenon, thus revealing the logics of camp not as generalizable but as ontologically emergent from particular conditions. Fifth, it demonstrates how cultural capital and visual economies of gender and sexuality articulate with broader political economies of consumption, labor, and capital impacting queer and trans (they would have said gay) communities in 1960s America. Moreover, it adopts a multisited methodology and takes as its subject a dispersed cultural phenomenon rather than an *ethnos*—a community, a village, or a kinship or exchange network—at least twenty years before these approaches became central within the discipline. The understandable absence of Newton's explicitly reflexive butch lesbian voice, as Ochoa notes, is nonetheless countered, in Rubin's and Engebretsen's reviews, by a lip-synching scientific authority and a simultaneous nod to the audience with a wry insider's knowledge—camp indeed.

Given these claims, we might consider *Mother Camp* in new light in relation to contemporary arguments about what is at stake in mobilizing "ethnography." Tim Ingold (2014, 388), decrying the loose uses of "ethnography," writes that "participant observation is absolutely not an undercover technique for gathering intelligence on people, on the pretext of learning from them. It is rather a fulfilment . . . of what we owe to the world for our development and formation." Regardless of the scientific voice she deploys in drag, Newton faithfully meets this "ontological commitment," taking her reader deep into an understanding of world and world making where the options of American life are intensely restricted. We learn from Newton how to learn about a world as anthropologists.

Still, going back to *Mother Camp* in 2018 can be disconcerting. You have to read with a camp eye: the wryness, compassion, and outrage lie between the lines. It is still a product of 1972. As McGlotten and Engebretsen both

discuss, teaching *Mother Camp* to savvy twenty-first-century undergraduates requires work. These students have a far richer vocabulary of identity—indeed, a solid critique of "identity" itself—courtesy of the decades of feminist and queer scholarship and activism to which Newton herself is central. Moreover, as Chaudhry points out, *Mother Camp's* whiteness is evident in its clumsy treatment of race and racialization; the era of intersectionality is still far off.

But *Mother Camp* and the queens who stride through its pages can still school us in 2018. The buffeting shocks of the 2016 election still resound—*how could that happen?* The blatant misogyny, racism, transphobia, xenophobia, and the undermining of progress narratives that surprised so many of us white cis-liberals, however, would not have shocked *Mother Camp's* queens. As Manalansan and Chaudhry both point out, the book's descriptions of violence, homo/transphobia, and precarity have been consistently and deadeningly familiar to *Mother Camp's* queer heirs—particularly urban trans youth of color—over the intervening decades. At the same time, *Mother Camp's* descriptions of precarity, insecurity, and exploited labor—queasily uniting current concerns in both academia and among the white working class that elected Trump—demonstrate that the comforts of post-World War II capitalism were never evenly distributed.

The following reviews attempt to bridge the gap between 1972 and 2018 by drawing on the experiences and readings of six anthropologists at different career stages, as well as on the insights of the translator of the book into Spanish. The goal is to provide coordinates, at this late, long-delayed stage, for reading *Mother Camp* again—or for the first time—as the class(ic) act it is.

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## Esther Newton Made Me a Gay Anthropologist

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I discovered anthropology and that I was a lesbian almost at the same time, in the 1970–1971 academic year. By 1973, I began seriously pondering possible dissertation topics, and although I planned to focus on lesbians, it was not clear how one could go about such research. In the winter of 1973, Ray Kelly’s fabulous class on New Guinea introduced me to multitudinous modes of semen exchange among men, but while there was much evidence of male same-sex activity in parts of the Pacific, there was no indication of any female equivalents in the region. When I tried to formulate a project with a contemporary population closer to home, my coursework contained no models for urban research in North America.

Then I started preparing for prelims, one of the few occasions in an academic career where one can read like mad. I pretty much moved into the library, reading everything remotely relevant to the anthropology of homosexuality or gender variability. In this orgy of literature consumption, I discovered three texts that gave me a roadmap to do queer anthropology (in the old sense, the anthropology of queers). The first was David Sonenschein’s (1966) *Anthropological Quarterly* article, “Homosexuality as a Subject of Anthropological Investigation.” Sonenschein made a coherent case for the anthropological study of contemporary gay populations, opening the possibility of studying queers who were visible, socially organized, and culturally distinct. Gagnon and Simon’s (1967) edited collection, *Sexual Deviance*, included the few existing ethnographic studies of such populations, mostly by sociologists; these contained invaluable descriptive inventories of gay institutions and customs. The third was Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp* (1972).

In addition to the community studies they anthologized, Bill Simon and John Gagnon were wresting authority over homosexuality from psychiatry. They drew on the prevailing sociology of deviance, such as the work of Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, to articulate nonpsychiatric conceptual frameworks and social science approaches to the subject. Given the scarcity of relevant anthropological sources, Newton was directed toward these literatures by her advisor at Chicago, David Schneider.

Newton made brilliant use of these sources in *Mother Camp*, the first book-length ethnographic study of a gay community. It was not merely the first. It was great. Although focused on professional drag queens, it provides a detailed account of gay life in the United States in the 1960s, prior to Stonewall and gay liberation. It included astute observations of prevailing racial and class dynamics, including a dazzling

discussion of the economics of gay life in the mid-twentieth century. There was a particular appreciation of the role of architecture and space, with detailed descriptions and even layouts of sites, as well as discussions of their specific effects on behavior and experience. The book is one of the earliest articulations of the notion of gender as “performed,” extending the analysis of how “persons classified as ‘men’ would have to create artificially the image of a ‘woman,’” to the observation that “of course, ‘women’ create the image ‘artificially’ too” (5). It was, as Newton noted, a thoroughly traditional approach applied to what was then a thoroughly outlandish subject.

*Mother Camp* provided me with a conceptual apparatus, a field methodology, and a viable ethnographic approach for how to do the anthropology of contemporary queers. I followed her example into my own field project on what she had called “the leather queens,” about whom she insightfully noted that “within the homosexual community, butch becomes an element of style on a distinctively homosexual scale. Leather clothing, for example, is described as butch even though ‘leather queens’ do not look like straight men” (33). Moreover, Newton provided a role model for me as an anthropologist. She was a butch lesbian who wrote about the effeminate drag queens; I could be a butch lesbian researching those butch leather queens. I owe her much more than I understood at the time when I fell into her slipstream.

I also had no idea how fortuitous it was that *Mother Camp* was in the library when I was furiously reading for prelims. A couple of years earlier, I would have found the sociologists but would have missed Newton’s specifically anthropological deployment of the sociological theoretical frameworks, the example of her skilled ethnography, and her early treatment of gender as socially constructed. Anthropology’s critique of “race” had already introduced “social constructionist” perspectives that could be applied to gender, and later to sexuality (see Meyerowitz 2010), but Newton was among the first to do so.

In the context of 2018, with queer studies so academically institutionalized, it is difficult to grasp how isolated Newton’s work was, and the fearless courage of her unapologetic, straightforward insistence that gay populations were worthy of serious ethnographic exploration and analytic attention. Homosexuality was still classified as a mental disorder when *Mother Camp* was published. Monographs on gay communities were not only nonexistent; they were hardly a path to academic careers. Newton paid a price for her bravery. But with her characteristic boldness, she did it, and did it brilliantly.

The fact that this book was not reviewed at the time is symptomatic of how marginal this kind of work actually was. The fact that it has since had such an impact is symptomatic of how much the world, and the field of anthropology, has

changed. The fact that, in 2018, the trans population is such a primary target of the reactionary right is an index of how much the world described in *Mother Camp* haunts us still.

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## Mighty Realness, *Mother Camp*

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When I first read *Mother Camp*, I was struck by the noncelebratory ending of her book. Right before the appendix on research methods, Newton provides a lengthy excerpt from an interview with an older performer. Her informant says:

If you have messed up your life by being feminine . . . and if you're too feminine on the street, then the only thing you can do is go up and down the street camping, or saying "I don't care" when in reality, you really do care. And it's not a beautiful life at all. There's nothing really pretty about it . . . it's like Outward Bound. You're going to ride this ship the rest of . . . eternity. Just back and forth, back and forth. Uh . . . I think this is the saddest I've talk to you about it, but it isn't a nice way of life, simply because it isn't an acceptable way of life.

Most people read this informant's statement as a kind of pessimistic or almost pathetic surrender that has no relevance to what is happening in the transgender and queer worlds today. Writing before the days of RuPaul and *Drag Race*, Newton bravely sketched the seemingly dark and forlorn summation of life as a "female impersonator" whose realness was always in question, or at least held at bay by the spectacle of staged performance. *Mother Camp* dealt with white Midwestern female impersonators in the 1960s, and these informants have been facilely apprehended by contemporary readers as figures of gender "bending" anachronism and historical curiosities, at worst, or as proto-trans subjects, at best. In my critical rereading of *Mother Camp*, I consider her informants as participating in an unintended yet productive dialogue with contemporary trans subjects in terms of gritty life experiences, suffering, and failure. At the heart of this fraught dialogue is a reconsideration of the idea of realness.

"Realness" is a drag vernacular idiom that was and in some ways still is prevalent among queer Latino and African American members of the ball community. This word underscores the tensions and contradictions inherent in the idea of drag as a survival strategy of minoritarian queers of color who have to contend with hegemonic normative gender-binary expectations, fabulousness, and the gritty and

dismal conditions of working-class life. For the female impersonators who serve as informants in Newton's book, and for contemporary ball members and trans subjects, "realness" is implicated in the intricate and messy links between gender, class, race, and geography in everyday life. I am not positing any facile equivalence or commensurability between these groups of subjects. Rather, I am trying to appreciate how, despite the seemingly mercurial semantics of "realness," it contains a persistent and enduring strain of suffering that affectively punctuates if not undergirds queer lives in various times and places.

"Realness" is a fraught category for many contemporary trans subjects because it speaks to the problematic idea that cisgender (the gender one is born into) is more "real" (and therefore more valid and valued) than transgender. Today, this word is no longer just about a kind of performative verisimilitude to normative gender expectations but rather involves a more complex set of embodied experiences. Transgender activist Janet Mock (2014) considers her life story in terms of "redefining realness," which is also the title of her memoir. While realness has indeed shifted in terms of its semantic vernacular meanings, it is still embroiled in contentious debates, specifically in its value in understanding the politics of transgender embodiment. In her memoir, Mock talks about the suffering that she has endured and continues to endure. While her words come in part from a position of newly found strength and political empowerment in what has been touted as the "transgender revolution," they also intersect with her own reality of being a person of color in a violently racist and revanchist America. Maybe times have not really changed. Maybe the *Mother Camp* informant's words are not quite anachronisms. How can we then situate *Mother Camp* in the America after 2016?

I propose juxtaposing Mock's life story with Newton's informants. My intention is not to position Mock as a contemporary redemptive endpoint to the journeys of Newton's female impersonators of the 1960s and 1970s. This is not a facile gender-evolution story but rather a more itinerant, messy narrative. While I do not have the time to properly map a detailed intersectional narrative, I take seriously how, despite the significant major time,

space, and genre differences, both works illustrate how issues of the real and the fake (fake news?) still continue to this day.

In her preface, Newton asserts that her understanding of the *Mother Camp* world of female impersonators in the late twentieth century has stood the test of time. I initially thought that Newton's statement was just one scholar's bravado, but reading Mock and Newton together made me realize otherwise. These two works (one is a memoir and the other is an ethnography) are not antipodal genres but rather interconnected fabrications of vibrant suffering voices that animate and affectively articulate wars worth fighting and that champion lives worth living amid the violent realities of an increasingly transphobic and racist neoliberal state. Confronting these realities in these works—in the spirit of Sylvester's disco anthem "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" (1978)—has enabled me to "feel" or properly get attuned to

the fleshy relevance and nuanced poetics of Newton's ethnographic sensibility and to the seemingly melancholic words of her final informant, as well as to better understand the continuing struggle of transgender subjects today. Despite its volatile nature, realness is not about the past and present, nor is it about the 1960s or about present-day Trumpian chaos. Realness is neither a slice of time nor a state of being. It is aspirational, or to use José Esteban Muñoz (2009) words, a horizon. The revolution is not over.

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## Mother Camp in Drag

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The first time I saw *Mother Camp*, I recognized its drag immediately. This slim volume looks exactly like the ethnographies I was assigned in my introductory coursework as an undergraduate anthropology major in the late 1980s. Skinny books, all about the same height (23 to 26 mm), each promising to produce a certain kind of knowledge of an obscure local culture for its readers. The first of these I read was called *The Zinacantecos of Mexico* by Evon Z. Vogt published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1970. These were part of a series published from the 1960s forward (and sometimes still!) by a number of presses: "Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology." I remember finding it in the stacks in grad school and being struck that *Mother Camp* would fit right in next to all these slim volumes on the shelf.

The structuralist drag continues inside, with its symbolic opposition charts and detailed drawings of bar layouts, along with fantastic photos of the natives in their environment. Esther Newton's field-defining work begins as a humble contribution to the knowledge of human societies—in this case, part of a Prentice-Hall series, "Anthropology of Modern Societies," with clear aspirations of participating in the ethnological canon. I have no way to know how it might have been received by those who stumbled across it thinking it was a window into another non-Western society with strange customs, but I delight in imagining it.

I think of *Mother Camp* as an excellent example of autoethnography in the sense proposed by Mary Louise Pratt ([1992] 2008, 9):

[Autoethnography] refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.

Newton positions herself as the presenter of the knowledge of her community in terms that are intended to provide it legitimacy. In Pratt's formulation, Newton is "partly collaborating with and appropriating the idioms of the conqueror" (Pratt [1992] 2008, 9). This is autoethnography as intervention, not confessional—a strategic choice to appropriate whatever legitimacy anthropology afforded in the early 1970s for the purposes of documentation and legibility. In this move, Newton created space for generations after her to propose queer/trans topics, to have spectacle, gender, and sexuality taken seriously as areas of anthropological inquiry. *Mother Camp* makes the familiar male/female sex dichotomy strange, far ahead of its time.

Newton herself acknowledges there are gaps in how she represents the gay world of the Midwest in the late 1960s, particularly through the lens of race. Newton is operating in a segregated world. Black queens appear a couple of times, indicating more complexity to the system of segregation, but Newton leaves it at a few mentions, an acknowledgment that there "is said to be a distinct homosexual subcommunity in the Black ghetto" while insisting that "racial segregation among homosexuals is not enforced" ([1972] 1979, 27). No other racial categories besides Black and white appear to exist. I have found it difficult to teach in the climate of self-assured and empowered declarations of identity that characterizes undergraduate education now. Students react

to the now dated language of the book much as they react to the analytical distance of other ethnographic texts of the era. Their referents for trans existence and queer social life are too rich to fully appreciate the silence and pathologization in which Newton's informants eloquently elaborated their lives. Newton says it best in the preface to the Phoenix edition: "Those who would bring things up to date will find in *Mother Camp* a solid baseline for their own explorations" (xi).

I remember being struck by that sense of dissonance when I first encountered the cover of *Mother Camp*, the garish red of the makeup and nail polish against the grayscale of the photograph on which they are superimposed. The queen on the cover has chewed nails like my own—not at all like the perfectly manicured nails of the *transformistas* I would work with in Venezuela or the *translatinas* of San Francisco. That queen insisted on her dissonance, didn't seek to pass.

Newton, through her careful (butch) positioning, becomes the observer of spectacle—an analytic perspective I have also embraced. The care with which she described the queens and fairies in this ethnography, the seemingly mundane details of their lives, has provided us a rich archive of what some of queer life might have looked like at this time. The symbolic systems that devalue and stigmatize the queens along hierarchies later elaborated and articulated by Gayle Rubin are clearly described in *Mother Camp* if we read it for its documentation of these lives rather than for an analysis of gender inversion. Newton, in fact, is much more focused on the conditions of her informants' lives than on a

surface reading of producing femininity on a male-assigned body. She details the multitude of "types" she encounters within what she calls "the gay world." Her detailed readings of performances in chapter 4 are literally the textbook for spectacle and bar ethnography—I was pleased to find them again while preparing this review and am looking forward to teaching with this chapter in the future. I was particularly taken with the historical significance of a moment before queens lip-synched, when there was a distinction between "live acts" and "record acts" (44). Newton's powers of observation and description do justice to her informants and to the meaningful organization of their lives.

In this work, Newton has done far more than document the social world of some Midwestern queens. She has outlined the structure of misogyny inherent in the social differentiation of queens, documented the poverty and violence in which these queens were embedded, and highlighted the strategies used by her informants to make a place for themselves in the world. At the time of its publication, it was an incredibly courageous work of ethnography and one that made the field of queer anthropology possible.

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## In the Wake of Esther

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I began my tenure-track appointment at Purchase College in the fall of 2006, the semester after Esther Newton left. A few anthropologists in the know about the institution asked me whether I'd replaced her.

"Yeah, right."

I'd worked backward into Esther Newton's work: *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay* (2000), then *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993). Embarrassingly, I didn't read *Mother Camp* in its entirety until after I had started fieldwork for a book about artists/activists who use drag in their work. I read the book in a couple of sittings. I was impressed then and now by the clarity of the language and her claims. The book holds up, anticipating the claims by subsequent writers like Judith Butler and the pathbreaking *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* by Newton's Purchase colleagues Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978), which Paul Preciado (2013)

returned to at length in his *Testo Junkie*. "Appearance is an illusion," Newton ([1972] 1979, 103) already wrote in 1972, situating her project within these forty-plus-year genealogies. The book holds up as well in the ways it speaks to issues that still characterize debates about drag and queer culture more broadly, especially queer culture's appropriation by mass culture.

What I find shocking about the book is how it still stands alone within anthropology. In the preface to the 1979 Phoenix edition, Newton wrote that the task to bring drag up to date would fall to others and that she hoped that *Mother Camp* would serve as a solid basis for that future fieldwork. It does, but why hasn't that work yet been done?<sup>1</sup>

I'm sure there are anthropologists completing projects that will indeed expand the discipline's engagement with drag, though I don't expect it to be my own. My own project is nowhere near as comprehensive as Newton's, focusing instead on just more than a handful of collaborators. Then there is the fact that I will never be the anthropologist Newton was and continues to be.

Every year since 2015, I have taught a class called Drag Theory and Practice. The class moves through a theoretical trajectory that begins with Kessler and McKenna, Butler (of course), and Theresa de Lauretis. We spend a lot of time with Paul Preciado. I try to do justice to the complex histories of queer scholarship, emphasizing trans and queer-of-color perspectives (even if the outline I describe above seems to suggest otherwise!). Because Purchase is a very queer campus with a lively drag culture, the class attracts a lot of students. The dense theoretical materials, which many find alienating, are interwoven with the, for them, more-satisfying drag workshops—on gendered gestures, makeup, lip-syncing, and strutting. Many of these are facilitated by alumni of the class. We spend a lot of time watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

What would, what does, Esther Newton think about *RuPaul's Drag Race*? The program, much less its global success and importance, wasn't imaginable in the 1960s, to Newton or the queens from whom she learned. In this and other ways, the impersonators' dreams resonate with the figures at the heart of Jennie Livingston's (1991) *Paris Is Burning*, although Newton's book deals much less with race than does the film. Dorian Corey famously said of herself:

I always had hopes of being a big star. But as you get older, you aim a little lower. Everybody wants to make an impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think, you've made a mark on the world if you just get through it, and a few people remember your name. Then you've left a mark. You don't have to bend the whole world. I think it's better to just enjoy it. Pay your dues, and just enjoy it.

Now, there are queens who really are superstars.

In class, I pair our viewings with readings about queerness and capitalism, but our critical approach to the program is hard to maintain. Exclamations of “yasss, kween!” and “werk!” sound out. Fingers snap. Afterward, we have lively debates about language (and snapping): Who gets to yass and who doesn't? What are the linguistic histories of these terms? Consensus: probably black women and queer people of color, though none of us really know. The not knowing is a problem (“read a book,” I tell them shadily). Then, too, there are the ways the program depends on the same “cut-throat motives of gain and competition” (Newton [1972] 1979, 115) that shaped the lives of the queens in *Mother Camp*, who were struggling to find a foothold in a world in which they were seen, including by many of them, as fundamentally immoral, as “embod[ying] the stigma of homosexuality” (104). But more troubling is the idea that people can “own” cultural forms. My students of color push back. Then the white students get uncomfortable, so we talk about that, too. Then there are the debates about who gets to appear on the show. Most of these focus on trans inclusivity and whether Ru is really transphobic or just practical about maintaining his brand—opinions here have been split.

Collectively, we find it hard to deny the pleasures of this show, or the ways that, in spite of its contrived reality TV format and all of the affective exploitation the genre

depends on, we still find ourselves moved, not just by the competition and rooting for our favorite queens but also by the stories they tell about their lives. Whatever the problems with the show, it is undeniably the first mass cultural show to celebrate the lives of gender-nonconforming men and women.

My students have grown up with the success of the show, so they find the world Newton describes unfamiliar when I assign the final two chapters of *Mother Camp* late in the semester, especially the organizing oppositions she outlines between masculinity and femininity and how these are expressed in other dichotomies, between inside and outside, inner and outer, and back and front (the latter, one of her wry explanations about gay male sexual practices). They—at least my students at Purchase—inhabit such a diversity of gendered experiences that these oppositions are unfamiliar to them. This unfamiliarity is found most dramatically in their difficulty with understanding camp, the most important themes of which are “incongruity, theatricality, and humor” (106). It's the incongruity part they find disorienting. I try to explain this through some of the examples Newton lists. “Mae West, Bette Davis? Friends of Judy???” I show them videos, and they still don't get it; they already know that gender is performative and that our ideas about gender are fundamentally shaped by media. They like the camp queens featured in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but their appreciation of them isn't based on knowledge of the references those queens are citing but the theatricality and humor they convey as themselves.

I show them videos of Mae West and they laugh politely, of Bette Davis and they snap but only mutedly. Then I show them two videos that express my dismay at their lack of knowledge: *The Gay Age Gap* and *The Gay Age Gap 2* by the comedian and actor Brian Jordan Alvarez (2015a, 2015b). The first opens with the older half of an intergenerational couple describing how the nighttime lip-smacking of the younger reminded him of Gena Rowlands in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Alvarez doesn't know the reference, and so the older one, Sam Pancake, tries to explain who Gena Rowlands is and then continues through a cascading series of references Brian doesn't know about, which finally lead him to John Waters. “Who's John Waters?” Alvarez blithely asks. “Brian, you have to know these things!” Sam responds, incredulous. Brian waves this away: “It's just a generational gap. You don't know my stuff. Like Twitter, Instagram, the Web. Cars.” He gestures limply toward the lamp: “Lamp.” In part 2, Sam begins Brian's education by introducing him to gay cultural histories through *Paris Is Burning*. He sets it up by asking Brian whether he knows Madonna and her video “Vogue.” He does—“Madonna? Mmmhmm. She's really old.” They end up watching the film . . . on Brian's phone.

I end with this example not because I especially believe in unbridgeable generation gaps—the students do end up watching the film, after all—but because of the important ways queer histories must be passed down. *Mother Camp* is edging on fifty years old, but in spite of the differences

between the era it describes and today, when drag queens are superstars, we still have much to learn from it and from Newton's rigor, and bravery, in writing it.

#### NOTE

1. For ethnographically informed books from outside anthropology, see Bailey (2013), Torr and Bottoms (2010), and Halberstam and Volcano (1999).

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## Re-view: *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*

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When re-reading and teaching Esther Newton's iconic *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* vis-à-vis the wealth of ethnographies on sexual and gender diversity that has been published since, I keep being struck by how Newton's own voice and positionality so profoundly establish the text as a major critical work of ethnographic theorizing on gender diversity and heteropatriarchal normalcy. However, its enduring importance in this way is not entirely straightforward to all readers, something I have been dealing with most directly when teaching *Mother Camp* to students in anthropology and gender/sexuality studies in North America and Scandinavia. I have found that the text's principal emphasis on presenting a thorough, scientific analysis of female impersonators, undoubtedly in order to establish the topic as a worthy research project to pursue at the time, poses challenges for a new generation of students who are coming to sexual and gender diversity studies from a very different perspective than readers from earlier decades. Perhaps, I have speculated, one challenge for new readers is not the way "drag queens" are portrayed and discussed so much as an absence of an instant, unambiguous mode of identification—between author and those being studied (native-near positioning), as well as the absence of the now compulsory biographical sequences ("as I was sitting under the coconut tree . . ."). Of course, this is a suitable teaching moment on the importance of historical context. *Mother Camp*, alongside other seminal texts, such as Mary McIntosh's "The Homosexual Role" (1968), was

one of the earliest constructionist interventions that helped destabilize the medicalized perversion models and inspired a social-experience-based approach appreciative of actually existing human sexual and gender diversity.

In this brief re-view of *Mother Camp*, I therefore want to reflect on scientific authority and strategic positionality and consider whether the earlier era's textual strategies may teach us something today. My concern is this: the textual presence of the author as participant, as insider, as accepted member of the community in question, as the explicit reference point for observation and analysis, is a common writing tactic in much contemporary work dealing with sexual and gender minorities. This textual strategy is a principal authorial tool used to establish an ethical academic authority and demonstrate experience-near knowledge—in short, the all-around authenticity of their material. Reflexivity in ethnography has been crucial for developing collaborative strategies in knowledge production and an awareness of power dynamics. However, such critical reflexive strategies sometimes foreground the subjectivity of the ethnographer at the expense of those being researched. Now, a general absence of a subjective perspective characterizes Newton's authorial strategy in *Mother Camp*. However, rather than simply understanding this strategy as a simple lack of the mentioned textual and reflexive tactics, I would argue that *Mother Camp* in fact demonstrates a number of alternative, more subtle authorial presences—that is, if we consider the carefully placed and worded commentaries and the reflective perspectives foregrounded throughout the volume. The specific passages I have in mind include the preface(s), the interviews or conversational sequences referenced in text, the epic photograph titled "Skip Arnold with the author between shows," the incredibly detailed ethnographic

observations of “Two Shows” (chapter 4), and the appendix on “Field Methods.” This is incredibly rich ethnographic *stuff* that cleverly but subtly—and to my mind, more effectively—positions the author vis-à-vis her interlocutors and their lives portrayed. This feat is all the more impressive given the research environment for anthropological studies at the time; Newton concedes in the field methods appendix that she was “flying blind” at the time of her research because there was no comparative study of “the homosexual community” or “the drag world.” Indeed, *Mother Camp* is written as a classic anthropological text where ethnographic data and analysis are as much based around the anthropologist’s observations of events and social encounters and their manifold contexts as they are based on direct speech material (interviews, conversations, and so on). This enables, for example, extremely detailed and contextual ethnographic narratives of the two drag shows in chapter 4, Skip Arnold’s farewell party in Chicago and Lynne Carter’s show in New York City. They are exceptional shows, Newton tells us, not representative of drag shows in general, and yet the chapter, in its detailed contextualization of the shows, the locations, the performers, and the audiences, argues so convincingly for why the long-term participant-observation technique ought to remain at the center stage of contemporary queer anthropology.

But again, historical context is key. In the contemporary moment, academic research on minority cultures is targeted by bureaucratic neoliberal policies and growing populist sociopolitical sentiments that obstruct sufficient financial and academic support and time to conduct such research, except for at elite institutions that can afford to take occa-

sional chances on “risky” projects, students, and professors. Whereas the Association of Queer Anthropology in North America and the more recently established sibling organization, the European Network of Queer Anthropology, promote and support anthropological research on sexual and gender diversity, I’m concerned that the current research landscape makes monographs like *Mother Camp* almost impossible to develop anymore. Esther Newton has pointedly and repeatedly over the years critiqued universities’ institutionalized homophobia—specifically, how lesbians “who look it” and implicitly how other “deviants” (to use *Mother Camp*’s own terminology) are excluded from meaningful career paths and institutional support. Although the academic landscape has changed considerably since the 1960s, when Newton conducted her PhD training at the University of Chicago, today’s state of academic precariousness is certainly comparable. To be sure, certain aspects of *Mother Camp* are dated, and the text is challenging in some ways. Still, this phenomenal book, its author, and their legacies continue to inspire new and necessary reflections on ethnographic writing practices and the political ethics of commitment to queer anthropology.

Esther Newton, you made me a queer anthropologist. Thank you.

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## “Street Faeries Have Nothing to Lose”: Reading Logics of Difference in *Mother Camp*

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I was not surprised to see that the first collective homosexual revolt in history, the “battle of Stonewall” . . . was instigated by street faeries. Street faeries have nothing to lose.

— Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*

So Esther Newton ends the first chapter of her now classic ethnography *Mother Camp*. “Street faeries” are young, jobless, homosexual men whose lives are marked by “confrontation, prostitution, and drug ‘highs’” (8). They are the most marginalized subsection of the already “deviant” female impersonators, the people who bear the most obvious resemblance to, in the words of one of Newton’s interlocutors, “the transvestite thing we all fear” (52n3). Performers who

profit from and labor within the professionalized “stage” context elevate themselves compared with “street” queens and other representations of the “underclass of the gay world” (8). Put more directly, the “street faeries” (and their corollaries, including the “transvestite”) are distinguished from the stage queens by (white) middle-class norms of respectability and labor. At the end of a workday, stage performers take off their makeup, wigs, and dresses and go home to predominantly white homosexual lives. Street performers, on the other hand, are “never off stage” (8), often engaging in illicit economy labor for survival. Reading *Mother Camp* in 2018, it is clear how “street faeries have nothing to lose” reflects the racialized, classed, and gendered logics of difference that inform not only the 1960s context that Newton studied but also the present day. The “underclass of the gay world” today continues to be made up of bodies marked as foils to wealthy white gender-normative men: poor, black, or otherwise

racially marked gender-nonconforming people, particularly those who present as feminine.

While “transgender” cannot be easily mapped onto *Mother Camp*, the realities of violence and inequality that Newton attaches to “street faeries” and “transvestites” continue to affect black transgender women most prominently. Making such temporal connections requires the important caveat that Newton’s interlocutors—female impersonators and drag queens—are decidedly *not* “transvestites” and are predominantly white. Besides using 1960s-era racial markers, Newton rarely describes queens who are not white beyond mentioning their peripheral role in her interlocutors’ worlds. Black queens, in particular, remain in the shadows in a story of white impersonators: Lola adds an extra challenge to an otherwise all-white group’s attempts to secure sustainable housing (12), and Ronnie enters into a racist “dish” (hostile verbal exchange) with a white queen (80). Thus, while “street faeries” (assumed to be white) do not have much to lose, black queens remain marginal, except for when they disrupt or further marginalize the experiences of white street queens.

Today, though under different conditions and categories, similar forms of racialized and classed power pervade; the murder count against transgender women rises every year, and these rates are highest for poor black transgender women. In response to such realities, scholars and activists continue to circulate the language of “transmisogyny,” initially coined by activist-scholar Julia Serano (2007). “Transmisogyny” refers to the junction of transphobia and misogyny, specifically manifesting in how people on the transfeminine spectrum are most denigrated by media, psychiatric diagnoses and psychotherapeutic discourse, and violence. Serano’s work focuses specifically on how transfemininity—that is, femininity on bodies marked as “male” by scientific and societal standards—is deemed humorous, ridiculous, and/or deplorable. Examples of such derision are rampant in *Mother Camp*. Newton quotes a stage performer saying, “These little street faeries evidently can’t get enough attention . . . they have to have it by looking absolutely ridiculous” (1972, 17). Contempt toward the “ridiculous” street faeries reflects similar logics as Serano’s conception of transmisogyny. What this concept and Newton’s discussion of “street faeries” have in common, however, is not only an

attempt to recognize and analyze the precarity of (what we would now call) transfeminine subjects but also an assumption of whiteness.

Indeed, Serano’s work has received criticism for its elision of race and class. Elías C. Krell, for example, argues that this elision limits the potential for transmisogyny to capture the realities of transgender women of color, particularly black transgender women (Krell 2017, 232). Krell briefly gestures toward replacing “transmisogyny” with terms developed by black feminists (i.e., transmisogynior and racialized transmisogyny); we cannot, however, mobilize these replacement terms without engaging the deeper logics of difference they reflect. As these terms indicate, race, class, and gender (as Newton inadvertently demonstrates through her assumption of whiteness) are always already co-constitutive and must be recognized as such to fully comprehend the lived realities—and potential responses to the realities—of those most marginalized. Newton illustrates this most effectively in her analysis of “transy drag,” which her interlocutors avoid because it makes them appear “like an ordinary woman, and ordinary women are not beautiful” (1972, 51). Here, the notion of “ordinary” implies a normative whiteness and middle-class status; to say that “ordinary women are not beautiful” is not only misogynistic but also reflects queens’ fears of what it might mean to *want* to appear as an ordinary woman (“the transvestite thing”). Such a desire—especially if experienced by a poor black person—would push otherwise respectable female impersonators from “professional” to “freakish.” Thus, Newton’s discussion of “transy drag” reflects the work of the ethnography as a whole, setting an important historical precedent for understanding the logics that inform how and why “street faeries” and their present-day corollaries have “nothing to lose.”

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## Mother Camp in Spanish

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Editor and translator

I decided to translate and publish *Mother Camp* by Esther Newton in Spanish for a number of reasons.

I have always felt attracted to feminist, lesbian, and queer writers who are pioneers in their field. Most of these writers never get translated into other languages. Publishing firms feel more comfortable picking and choosing this or that individual author as the “creator” of a new brand of theory. If that brand is successful enough, then it becomes a hit, and the person identified as the original author is then

elevated to the category of genius. For me, this is akin to the engineering of “fake news.” At any given period of time, there are always a number of debates unfolding in different political and intellectual fields, with the participation of all kinds of people and movements of all sorts, all of them trying to make sense of what may be going on at that particular moment. To select one single writer, to the exclusion of others, as the sole “creator” of a new trend or a new field in theory entails a gross misrepresentation of the actual richness and complexity of the whole process of knowledge production.

Besides this, if and when some relevant authors without previous star status eventually do get translated into other languages, it is often the case that only one of their texts is chosen, and in my view, this is also a kind of distortion, not unlike “fake news.” I believe it is unacceptable to disregard in this way the entire context of an author’s political, ethical, and intellectual preoccupations, which often develop through a whole life of work and cultural production. Unfortunately, this is quite common in the field of translations into Spanish, and it is the one of reasons why I decided to translate *Mother Camp* by Esther Newton (1972), Gayle Rubin’s “Studying Sexual Subcultures” (2011), and, recently, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003). All three of these authors are courageous intellectuals whose lives and work I admire enormously and whose work I intend to continue translating in the near future.

I greatly admire and identify with Esther Newton’s work, and I also felt personally very happy when I learned that her father had been a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the US section of the International Brigades that came to Spain to help the Republic in their fight against fascism in 1936.

Newton’s realization, upon watching a female impersonator show for the first time, that she was witnessing an instance of the cultural embodiment of gender resistance, much in the same way black music was a cultural embodiment of antiracist resistance, and the curiosity and urgency she felt, compelling her to transmute this personal experience into the subject of her PhD—all these things struck a chord with me, highlighting not only how important it was for her to blend work and life but also the risks she took within a conservative academic environment. For me, this is a magnificent example of how exciting intellectual and political work can be.

As it often happens, a good deal of our work as feminist and queer activists has to do with challenging the notion that gender issues are a separate and “secondary” contradiction vis-à-vis the primary social contradiction, class struggle. This is a deep-seated view among some male chauvinists on the left, who tend to dismiss homosexuals as superficial and frivolous individuals, intent only on maximizing hedonism and spending their time in places like bars. Works such as Nancy Achilles’s “The Development of the Homosexual Bar as an Institution” (1967), alongside Evelyn Hooker’s “The Homosexual Community” (1967) and Newton’s research on

camp and drag in *Mother Camp*, give us sorely needed tools to dismantle deeply entrenched prejudices of that sort.

This is a particularly relevant issue in the Spanish context, given that female impersonation in Spain has always been quite an impressive phenomenon, both in terms of quality and in numbers. But so far it remains underresearched, with very little written about it. Female impersonators of all sorts abound throughout recent Spanish cultural history. They can be found in some traditional Spanish music and performance genres such as *flamenco* and *copla*, as well as in cabaret and music-hall-style entertainment (locally known as *revista*). They can also be found among popular singers from the 1930s through the 1950s and beyond, among the 1960s pop generation (known as *ye-ye* singers), and well into the period in the late 1970s and 1980s that came to be known as the Spanish *movida*. Most of the works dealing with this phenomenon, however, do not go beyond descriptions of specific places and people, with no analysis of how gender and sexuality intersected with class and geographical origin in all these cultural manifestations. In this regard, *Mother Camp* provides an important tool that may not only throw light on drag and camp in Spain and the Spanish-speaking context but may also lend theoretical support to future research in the field.

Another factor I found relevant for Spanish readers was the precise geographical study Newton gives us on subcultures: the huge amount of female impersonators that come from the Midwest, the importance of places like Chicago and Kansas City, and the lack of female-impersonator shows in places like Boston. She describes the need to migrate to bigger places that allow discriminated minorities to create communities and spaces of identification to be culturally understood as the way to survive. So, as a matter of fact, the subculture they build takes many elements from their places of origin, and they flourish in the metropolis—places that are located in specific neighborhoods with the intention of building communities to find a sense of normalcy and protection.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, 8–9) points out in her introduction to *Touching Feeling* when she discusses *Mother Camp*:

Spatializing disciplines such as anthropology and geography do, though, have the advantage of permitting ecological or systems approaches to such issues as identity and performance. For instance, the anthropologist Esther Newton includes in *Mother Camp*, . . . the floor plans of two drag clubs . . . One of the strengths of her spatially precise analysis is an extra alertness to the multilateral interactions among people “beside” each other in a room . . . The effect underlines Newton’s continuous assumption that drag is less a single kind of act that a heterogeneous system, an ecological field whose intensive and defining relationality is internal as much as it is directed toward the norms it may challenge.

Finally, I would like to mention here Gayle Rubin’s (2011) comment that “*Mother Camp* is a deceptively straightforward book whose sophistication and subtlety becomes more remarkable with each reading.” Rubin also remarks that “*Mother Camp*’s contributions to the political economies

of sexualities have been largely ignored,” a claim that gives evidence to the contemporaneity of the book’s appeal.

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