

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

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).

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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. And 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 brilliant 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 “with 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. And 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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