

Book Review

My Butch Career: A Memoir

Sarah Chinn ^{1*}

Published: September 10, 2019

Book's Author: Esther Newton

Publication Date: 2018

Publisher: Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Price: \$29.95

Number of Pages: 274pp.

ISBN: 1478001291 (Paperback)

By the time Esther Newton was ten years old she had worked out who she was: “an anti-girl, a girl refusenik, caught between genders” (60). Growing up in a family both incapable of expressing emotion and suffused with rage and combativeness, the young Esther realised that she had another kind of identity, separate from that of her parents, although deeply informed by who they were. While her mother’s family was populated by “unconventional women, strong enough to follow their hearts and desires,” there was minimal room for Newton’s form of unconventionality, which combined a rejection of femininity and a full-hearted embrace of masculinity.

Many of the best moments in *My Butch Career* trace the prehistory of, ambivalence towards, and eventual embrace of her masculinity. But the book is more than a memoir. It works through a variety of other issues, including the structures of binarised gender itself, the misogyny that Newton faced in her academic career, and the meshes of gender and class politics in which she found herself caught for much of her life. The title itself speaks to these multiple trajectories. The word “career” can mean simply the professional path of a life from training to mastery. At the same time, as Newton points out, the idea of a career is inextricable from the professional classes, “bound up in class in gender” (2). Career means “education and training in business, politics, armed forces, law, or academia and like professions,” more than just a job but an identity that has long been the bailiwick of men of the owning classes.

But “career” can also be a verb, “to move swiftly and in an uncontrolled way in a specified direction.” Unlike the clearly-defined path of the professional career, this kind of career is unpredictable. It has sudden turns and stops, without a predefined destination. And Newton’s butch career followed both these paths simultaneously: on the one hand the procession from college to graduate school to entry-level academic job and on the other a stop-and-start journey towards her own definition of butchness and an untroubled embrace of her love of women. In addition, each of these meanings also informed and intruded upon each other. Newton’s sense of herself as having “a double gender consciousness,” shared with “drag queens and with transgender people who choose to end the discrepancy between the bodies’ sex and the gender they deem themselves to be,” leads her to write her dissertation on the drag culture of Chicago, which eventually became the classic work of queer ethnography *Mother Camp* (8). It also led to her being denied tenure and promotion, in large part because both her work and her embodiment were not deemed appropriate for the academic world.

Added to all of this is her sense of not measuring up to butch stereotypes, which are also grounded in class dynamics. Unlike the working-class bar dykes who shared her gender insubordination, Newton wasn’t tough: “Their rugged masculinity and tough talk made me seem wimpish. I couldn’t fight with my fists, a knife or even

¹ Hunter College, CUNY, USA

*Corresponding Author: sarah.chinn@hunter.cuny.edu

insults” (91). Whereas a cisgendered man could find a place for himself as a nonviolent academic, a masculine woman had a much tougher time of it in the 1960s and 1970s. Newton hardly came from a wealthy family, but she identifies with the professional classes and imagines herself ending up in a classroom, not a bar fight (in *Zami*, Audre Lorde talks about a similar tension, feeling that she has to construct firm lines between her lesbian, black, and academic lives).

At the same time, bar dykes taught her how to follow a different kind of career – the career lesbian. They were, she says, “the first to show me how to be butch, which means they showed me how to have a style” (92). But it was “exhausting” for Newton in her early twenties to keep up the double existence of butch dyke on the one hand and professional woman on the other, exhausting to maintain “the work of monitoring and camouflaging this other self – don’t hold your cigarette between your thumb and index finger, that’s too masculine” – and too working-class (98). Ultimately, Newton sees herself as faced with a choice and “I had already chosen higher education over the strongest passion in my life, my love for women, because the two seemed incompatible” (106).

Ironically, in a different era – perhaps the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or in our current moment – those two desires would have been able to coexist more comfortably. Newton’s spiritual foremothers, such as M. Carey Thomas, the longtime president of Bryn Mawr College, or Ruth Benedict, were able to combine their love for women with their academic pursuits. But in the hyper-heteronormative years of the Cold War, Newton faced steep barriers to living openly as a queer academic.

As for so many women of her generation, Newton’s life was turned around and upside down by the excitement and ferment of the feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While she had previously understood the reasons for her discomfort in the world as being caused by her queerness and resistance to femininity, feminism gave her a new vocabulary. Like many female academics of the post-war period, Newton was encouraged to see herself as an exception, unlike “regular” women in her desire to pursue an academic career and rejection of marriage and resignation to life in the suburbs. But feminism provided her with a notion of connection to other women: “My exceptionalism, I saw, was situated within the same gender matrix that constrained all other women” (13). The challenge, then, was to maintain her hard-won butchness while recognising and acting upon her connection to women quite unlike her.

While Newton gives the reader a detailed discussion of her formative years and her early battles with academic institutions, she rushes through more recent times. There’s a brief discussion of the founding of what was then the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (now CLAGS: The Center for LGBT Studies) and the struggles to find it a home. But I would have liked to have known in more detail how Newton dealt with her recognition by younger queer scholars as a pioneer in the field. In sharp contrast to the risks she ran early on in her career, Newton is now seen as a giant in the field of queer studies, from *Mother Camp* to her early work on “mannish lesbians,” for her involvement in the furore of the sex wars (chronicled in more detail by her sister-in-arms and former lover Amber Hollibaugh in her memoir *My Dangerous Desires*, a fascinating counterpoint to Newton’s book) to her now decades-long professional and personal partnership with performance artist Holly Hughes. Ironically for such a groundbreaking scholar, Newton doesn’t see herself as a revolutionary (although I’d surely argue that she is): “Revolutionary ideas do not sit easy on me, even though I am an outsider to the bottom of my angry gay heart” (157). I wonder if this sense of *outsidership* and ambivalence doesn’t adequately equip her to consider her own stature as a foremother (or perhaps fore-lesbian-aunt) to today’s queer and trans scholars, who stand on her shoulders.

Citation: Chinn, S. (2019). [Review of the book *My Butch Career: A Memoir*, by Esther Newton]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3(1-2), 18. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5924>

Copyright © 2019 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.