

# What One Femme Has Learned About Self- Identifying vs. Labelling Others

JESS CARFAGNINI

*L'auteure explore l'orientation butch/femme dans l'histoire du lesbianisme ainsi que sa propre orientation comme lesbienne et féministe.*

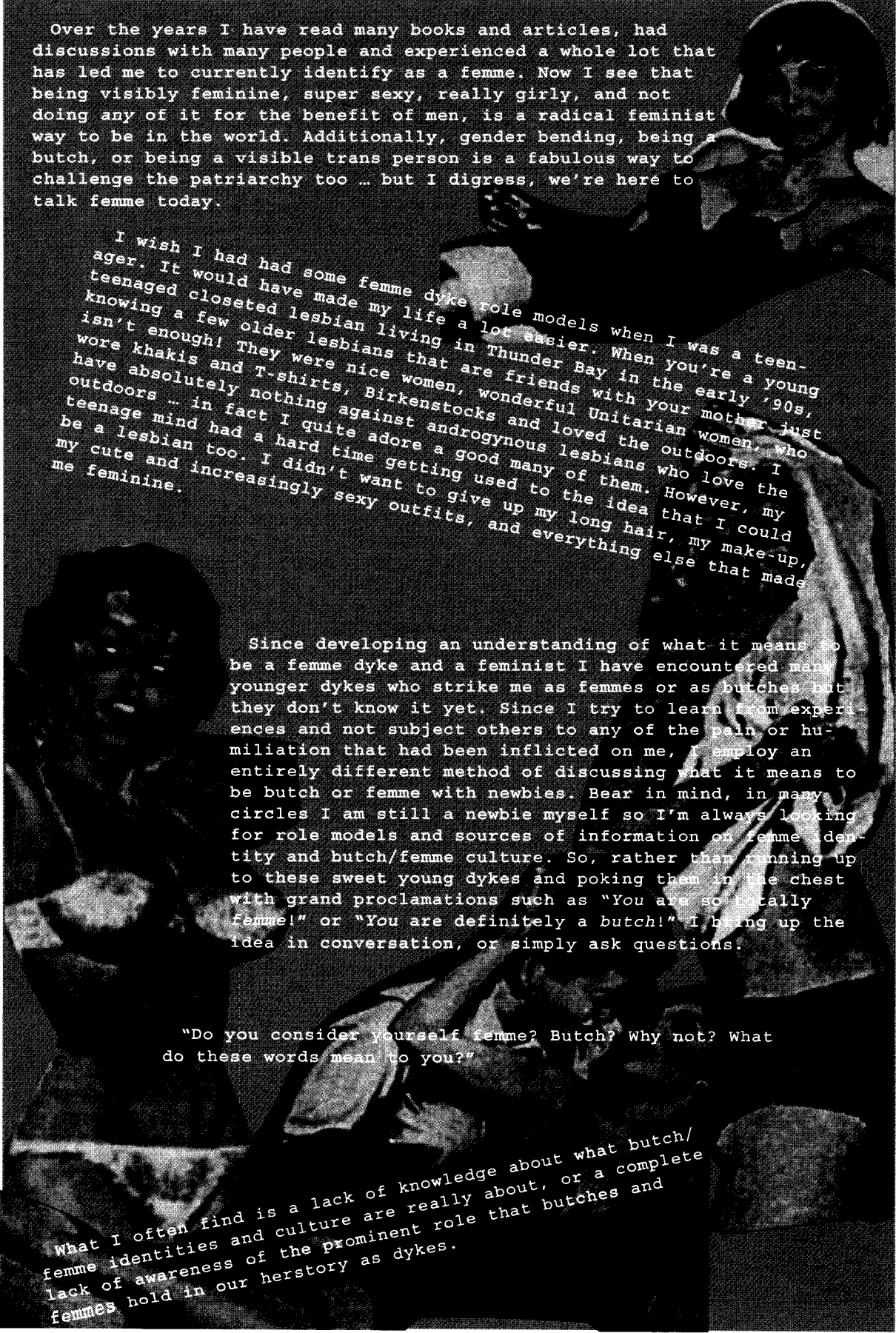
Once upon a time, when I was just coming out as a dyke I dated a butch who was very invested in her butch identity. That was one of the reasons I was attracted to her, not to mention that she seemed to practically worship me for a few months.

At the time I did not identify as a femme. Was I a femme anyway and just didn't know it yet? Yes, probably. That still didn't give anyone the right to label me without my permission! At the time, I was very invested in "looking like a dyke" and although we all know that there is not just one way to "look like a dyke" there are some stereotypes one might choose to emulate while trying to be as visibly queer as possible. Since this was early 1998 in Ottawa, I chose the big raver jeans, the baseball cap on backwards, the white tank top, and the requisite freedom rings/rainbow beads. Sweet. My new look worked, in combination with my volunteer work at the University of Ottawa Pride Centre, to make me into a suitably visible queer.

However, I was not yet presenting myself as a femme, despite my childhood obsession with Madonna, my penchant for girly things, my inability to have my hair cut to a length that would not accommodate barrettes, and my pride and love of my own femininity. I didn't know about queering femininity and I had no brazen femme role models. All I understood at the time was that if I kept my hair long and wore dresses and forgot my rainbow gear at home, that dykes would ignore me and bio boys would hit on me. No good! The trappings of heterosexuality were exactly what I was trying to distance myself from.

So one morning I got dressed in my green combat pants, big leather belt and white tank top and slapped a baseball cap on my head. I said to my girlfriend, who was still lying in bed naked "I'm dressing butch today." She, in all her self-righteous butchiness laughed and said "Honey, you couldn't be butch if you tried! You are a femme no matter what!" I felt insulted. Why?

First of all, I felt mocked and belittled by the way she said it. Secondly, when you're trying to escape being publicly feminine, because your internalized homophobia still has you associating femininity with heterosexuality and your sweetie pie informs you that you're failing miserably and laughs at you ... well, that's a somewhat crushing experience.



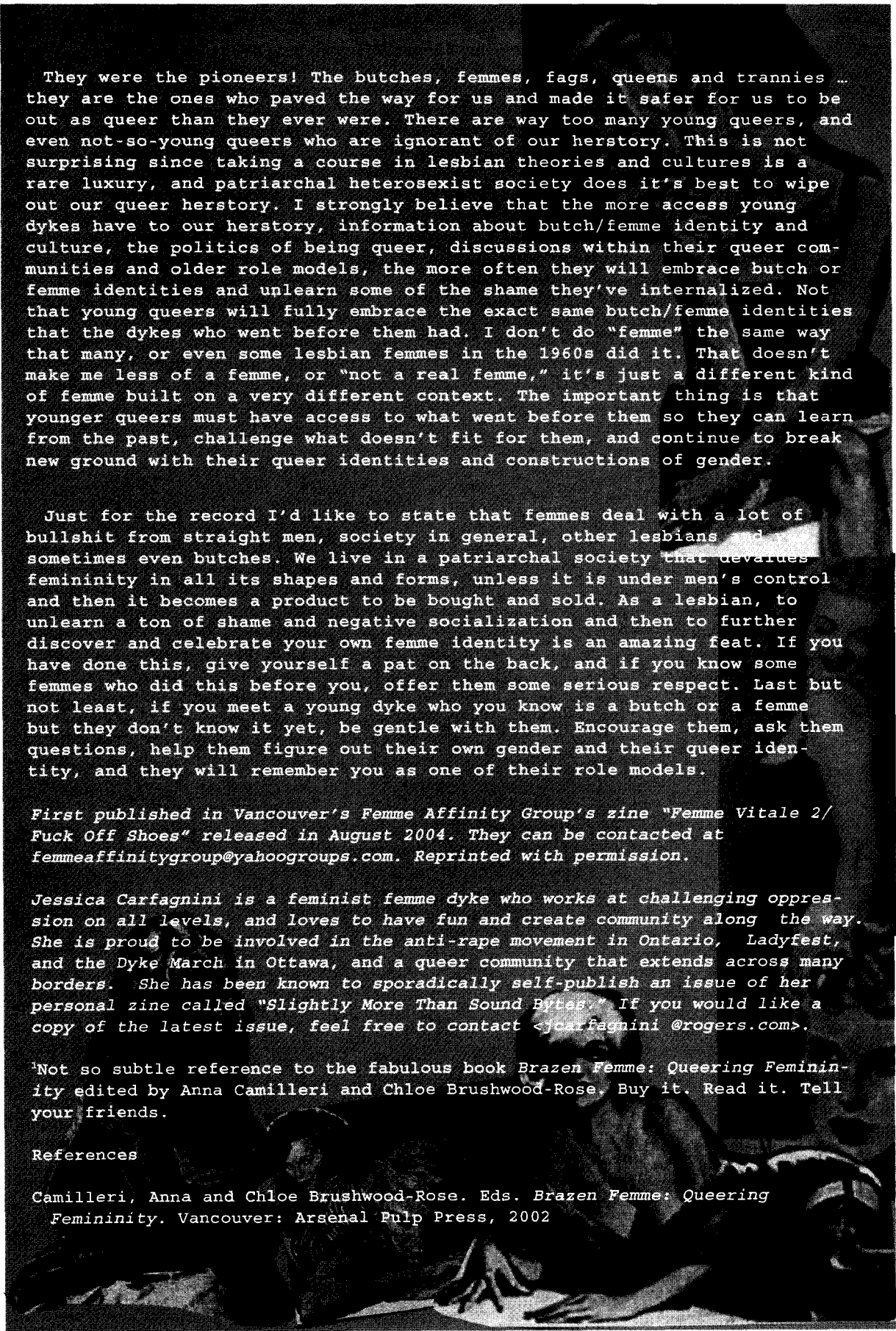
Over the years I have read many books and articles, had discussions with many people and experienced a whole lot that has led me to currently identify as a femme. Now I see that being visibly feminine, super sexy, really girly, and not doing any of it for the benefit of men, is a radical feminist way to be in the world. Additionally, gender bending, being a butch, or being a visible trans person is a fabulous way to challenge the patriarchy too ... but I digress, we're here to talk femme today.

I wish I had had some femme dyke role models when I was a teenager. It would have made my life a lot easier. When you're a young teenaged closeted lesbian living in Thunder Bay in the early '90s, knowing a few older lesbians that are friends with your mother just isn't enough! They were nice women, wonderful Unitarian women, who wore khakis and T-shirts, Birkenstocks and loved the outdoors. I have absolutely nothing against androgynous lesbians who love the outdoors ... in fact I quite adore a good many of them. However, my teenage mind had a hard time getting used to the idea that I could be a lesbian too. I didn't want to give up my long hair, my make-up, my cute and increasingly sexy outfits, and everything else that made me feminine.

Since developing an understanding of what it means to be a femme dyke and a feminist I have encountered many younger dykes who strike me as femmes or as butches but they don't know it yet. Since I try to learn from experiences and not subject others to any of the pain or humiliation that had been inflicted on me, I employ an entirely different method of discussing what it means to be butch or femme with newbies. Bear in mind, in many circles I am still a newbie myself so I'm always looking for role models and sources of information on femme identity and butch/femme culture. So, rather than running up to these sweet young dykes and poking them in the chest with grand proclamations such as "You are so totally femme!" or "You are definitely a butch!" I bring up the idea in conversation, or simply ask questions.

"Do you consider yourself femme? Butch? Why not? What do these words mean to you?"

What I often find is a lack of knowledge about what butch/femme identities and culture are really about, or a complete lack of awareness of the prominent role that butches and femmes hold in our herstory as dykes.



They were the pioneers! The butches, femmes, fags, queens and trannies ... they are the ones who paved the way for us and made it safer for us to be out as queer than they ever were. There are way too many young queers, and even not-so-young queers who are ignorant of our herstory. This is not surprising since taking a course in lesbian theories and cultures is a rare luxury, and patriarchal heterosexist society does it's best to wipe out our queer herstory. I strongly believe that the more access young dykes have to our herstory, information about butch/femme identity and culture, the politics of being queer, discussions within their queer communities and older role models, the more often they will embrace butch or femme identities and unlearn some of the shame they've internalized. Not that young queers will fully embrace the exact same butch/femme identities that the dykes who went before them had. I don't do "femme" the same way that many, or even some lesbian femmes in the 1960s did it. That doesn't make me less of a femme, or "not a real femme," it's just a different kind of femme built on a very different context. The important thing is that younger queers must have access to what went before them so they can learn from the past, challenge what doesn't fit for them, and continue to break new ground with their queer identities and constructions of gender.

Just for the record I'd like to state that femmes deal with a lot of bullshit from straight men, society in general, other lesbians and sometimes even butches. We live in a patriarchal society that devalues femininity in all its shapes and forms, unless it is under men's control and then it becomes a product to be bought and sold. As a lesbian, to unlearn a ton of shame and negative socialization and then to further discover and celebrate your own femme identity is an amazing feat. If you have done this, give yourself a pat on the back, and if you know some femmes who did this before you, offer them some serious respect. Last but not least, if you meet a young dyke who you know is a butch or a femme but they don't know it yet, be gentle with them. Encourage them, ask them questions, help them figure out their own gender and their queer identity, and they will remember you as one of their role models.

*First published in Vancouver's Femme Affinity Group's zine "Femme Vitale 2/ Fuck Off Shoes" released in August 2004. They can be contacted at [femmeaffinitygroup@yahoo.com](mailto:femmeaffinitygroup@yahoo.com). Reprinted with permission.*

*Jessica Carfagnini is a feminist femme dyke who works at challenging oppression on all levels, and loves to have fun and create community along the way. She is proud to be involved in the anti-rape movement in Ontario, Ladyfest, and the Dyke March in Ottawa, and a queer community that extends across many borders. She has been known to sporadically self-publish an issue of her personal zine called "Slightly More Than Sound Bytes." If you would like a copy of the latest issue, feel free to contact [<jcarfagnini@rogers.com>](mailto:jcarfagnini@rogers.com).*

<sup>1</sup>Not so subtle reference to the fabulous book *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* edited by Anna Camilleri and Chloe Brushwood-Rose. Buy it. Read it. Tell your friends.

#### References

Camilleri, Anna and Chloe Brushwood-Rose. Eds. *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002