

# Butch, Femme, and the Woman-Identified Woman

## *Ménage-à-trois of the '90s?*

by *Connie Carter and Jean Noble*

*Les auteures examinent la signification historique des termes «Butch» et «Femme» et le symbolisme complexe de ces désignations depuis les années 90.*

*The "I's" of these numerous discourses were now one entity, one identity, and spoke as that, empowered by a form of (white) nationalism, or so the story goes, that came to be known as the "lesbian nation."*

Ménage-à-trois? The woman-identified woman messing around with both butch and femme? Indeed, such an encounter might seem unimaginable. And yet for those of us who came out during lesbian/feminism and who are also thriving pleasurably through the current butch/femme moment, its more than imaginable. Once more, what's even more curious than the ménage-à-trois itself are the ways these seemingly opposable identity-formation narratives mirror each other.

Jean: My first coming out reads something like this: It begins with a story about reading and occurs in the mid-1970s, in an otherwise unremarkable, although primarily white and middle-class high school in southern Ontario, where I, a white working-class teenager, read my first "lesbian" book, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's book *Lesbian/Woman*. I had searched the school library for books that might help me come to terms with, or find a name for that elusive difference that seemed so obvious but escaped definition. What I might call this difference continued to escape me, until I found the Martin and Lyon text. I don't remember how I found the book, but I am quite certain I did not find it in my high school library. Published in 1972, two years after the appearance of the Radicalesbians' wonderful manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman," and ten years before Adrienne Rich's enormously influential "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Lesbian/Woman* was marketed as "the most complete and revealing book ever written about women who love other women" (front cover), and gave me just about everything I had been searching for. *Lesbian/Woman*, and other texts like *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (Abbott and Love) marked the birth of a kind of collective subjectivity, the core truth of who "we" were wrestled back from psychoanalytic, medical, heterosexual feminist, and gay liberatory discourses so that, suppos-

edly, any lesbian could speak itself using the "I" as it was now represented. The "I's" of these numerous discourses were now one entity, one identity, and spoke as that, empowered by a form of (white) nationalism, or so the story goes, that came to be known as the "lesbian nation." I found that identity and took it to heart. Those of us who will cop to identifying under the sign "woman-identified woman" will remember those as heady, albeit embarrassingly naive, days.

Connie: I, on the other hand, am a 35 year old white, working-class lesbian-femme, from British Columbia. I have called myself a dyke or a lesbian since August of 1979. I "came out" as a dyke in a very particular political and cultural milieu—one shaped by whiteness, literacy, lesbian feminism, and other strands of radical political analysis. In the lesbian community of which I was a part, it was fashionable, even necessary to mark oneself as lesbian by dressing in an androgynous manner and adhering to a particular set of political analyses, now loosely called lesbian feminism. In the field of what I would call lesbian literature and political analysis, it has become almost cliché as of late to construct that period as rigid, politically correct, anti-sex, anti-butch/femme in contrast to the more "enlightened," exciting and fun 1990s. While this period was indeed prescriptive in terms of its approach to lesbian identity, it was also productive of a particular lesbian subject position that haunts, informs, and shapes many of us who came out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, only to later call ourselves femme and butch. In 1990, I picked up a copy of Joanne Loulan's book, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny and Other Rhythms* on the advice of self-identified butch friend. As a feminist, I was stunned to find myself identifying intimately with the femmes in Loulan's text, and in particular, with the ways these femmes described their attractions for butches. In a manner similar to my "original" coming out, I leafed back through the pages of my own biography and turned out the moments that I thought revealed my identity as a femme. I did not have the quintessential dyke childhood of tree-climbing and roughhousing with boys. I liked dresses and dolls and playing house, albeit with other girls. Suddenly the narratives of femme in Loulan's text opened a subject position for me to be both feminine and lesbian simultaneously.

Jean: But I did have a masculine demeanor and anyone reading queer books in the 1990s will be familiar with yet another hugely influential book: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. The stories are dramatically different, but the process and impact are the same. Feinberg, along with Joan Nestle and Minnie Bruce Pratt reread pre-feminist lesbian cultures and erotic signifying systems, wrestling

butch/femme out of the clutches of the supposedly grumpy, drab, and androgynous woman-identified woman. Thus, my most recent coming out reads, and rereads, like this: Who am I kidding. All through that whole period of lesbian feminism, I was never happy. I am butch as the day

*The theory of lesbian-feminism promised alternatives to patriarchal culture. Differences of all sorts, including sexual practices and desires, were thought to be produced by patriarchal social relations.*

is long. I always have been butch and a lover of femmes. There was just never room before. And not only am I butch, sometimes, I feel more like a boy than anything. His name is bobby. He's always been with me.

This article represents mere snippets of our respective projects, and will explore both feminism and queer theory's rather problematic relation to femme identity. We suggest, through our interrogation of some of the primary texts and tropes of both feminism and queer theory, that the conditions of possibility for femme remain largely unmarked, and indeed, unthinkable.

### **The woman-identified woman**

Lesbian-feminist critiques of butch and femme cultural and erotic practices circulated throughout the discourses of the period that marked our coming out. Advanced by writers such as Abbott and Love and Lyon and Martin, butch and femme lesbians were described as old-fashioned and backwards. Part of the project of that period was to establish as Whisman suggests, "lesbianism as the quintessential feminism" (52). The theory of lesbian feminism promised alternatives to patriarchal culture. Differences of all sorts, including sexual practices and desires, and differences of race and class were thought to be produced by patriarchal social relations, more specifically, by men's oppression of women.

Lesbian feminists argued that women's oppression is maintained by the social construction of dichotomous gender categories. Gender categories such as femininity and masculinity and their concomitant roles and identities are assumed to be the organizing principle of heteropatriarchy. Relations between men and women are characterized by dominance and submission in which men, for their own benefit, subordinate and oppress

women. Femininity as a social construct requires that women be passive in all aspects of life. Butch and femme style is, thus, "assumed to involve two women locked in a drama that reworks classic heterosexual dominant/submissive behaviour" (Blackman and Perry 71). What emerges from both the lesbian-feminist critiques of the 1970s and 1980s, is the identity trope of the woman-identified woman. This particular lesbian subject position entails that one must disavow all desires for anything masculine, and identify as a woman who desires emotional and sexual relations with other women.

### **The re-emergence of butch and femme in the 1980s**

In the early 1980s, a renewed interest in butch and femme practices emerged in many North American lesbian communities. Led in part, by the work of writers such as Joan Nestle, this re-emergence was one in a string of resistances to the lesbian-feminist politics of the 1970s. Feminist writers such as Amber Hollibaugh, Cherrie Moraga, and Gayle Rubin have re-worked femme and butch culture practices in such a way that they emerge as authentic forms of gendered lesbian experience. These writers herald the re-emergence of butch and femme identities as the return of sexuality in lesbian relationships and the reassertion of the need for difference between women in order to create erotic desire and avoid lesbian "bed-death." As Rubin has suggested, butch and femme cultural and erotic practices are lesbian genders and they are but two of the many ways to combine sexual desire in woman-to-woman relationships.

The result of work by Nestle *et al.* was a butch/femme growth spurt marked by texts like: *Dagger* and *The Femme Mystique*. Such texts mark the limits of the sex/gender system as feminism reimagined it. Lesbian feminism told us sex does not equal gender, that sex is biology and gender the cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity, erroneously mapped onto biology. Now, Rubin, Butler, and Sedgwick tell us that if the sex/gender system really does function as such, then, indeed, boys can as often be be girls as boys, some girls, boys.

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 1990, 6)

By the assumption of masculine signs, women who are butch present a challenge to the "naturalness" of the

relationship between sex and gender and, in the process, destabilize the dichotomous categories of sex (Butler 1990, 122). The identification of butch as masculine does not constitute "a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 123). Butler demonstrates that the object of lesbian femme desire is often a female body played off against a masculine persona. "As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls ..." (1990, 123). Butler also notes that the categories of butch and femme do not fully resonate with heterosexuality. Butch women may present so-called mas-

*While butch and the entire continuum of female masculinity needs to be interrogated as a queer performance of gender, it's femme which productively marks the limitations of our theoretical tools.*

culine characteristics, but at the erotic moment can reverse the typical heterosexual male role and become providers of sexual pleasure to femme women. For Butler, "that providingness turns to a self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient art of feminine self-abnegation" (1990, 124).

Rubin's productive distinction between sex and gender, in recent years has become like 50 per cent of Canadian marriages; they have parted ways and often times with animosity. Notwithstanding Butler's recent polemical appeal for marriage counselling, sexuality, now rethought as distinct from gender, constitutes a new field of inquiry different from feminism, more the domain of queer theory. But despite commonly held beliefs, the birth of queer theory is the spawn of second-wave feminism.

Axiom 2: The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. (Sedgwick 27)

Paradoxically, and again despite commonly held beliefs, neither feminism nor queer theory can fully account for femme. One recent text, *The Femme Mystique*, a very interesting collection of writings about femme, foregrounds the complicated and often painful collisions between the 1970s woman-identified woman and 1990s femme. *The Femme Mystique* escorts the willing reader through the myriad of ways that femme means. We see just about everything that might possibly fall within that category, and then some. But most importantly, what is repeated throughout many of these pieces is the one thing that femme does not mean: straight. Raphaella Vaisseau's "I Am Not a Straight Girl" reiterates that imperative in her narrative.

I am not a straight girl; I am a femme. There's a huge difference, even though it may not be obvious to the untrained heart or eye.... I didn't have the experience of looking outwardly different from my straight girlfriends, my mother, or the women I saw on TV or in the movies. (30-31)

Many of the other pieces in the text underscore the differences between being able to read/recognize femme and reading straight, suggesting that what is at stake in those differences are intelligibility vis-a-vis reading practices—how we read femme—not necessarily how femme is categorically defined by an ontological essence.

But let's pause over the title for a moment. In her introduction, Newman attempts to contextual her choice of title by suggesting that every femme has her own mystique. "Find yours," she concludes, "and never let anyone take it away" (13). She is, of course, referring to the painful ways that lesbian feminism disavowed butch-femme in general, but femme in particular. Anyone over 30 remembers all too well the nastiness and righteousness of those sentiments. Many of the pieces gathered under this title reiterate the pain and confusion of that moment for dykes who identified as femme. It seems that for many, femme is structured by a painful split between femme and lesbian identities.

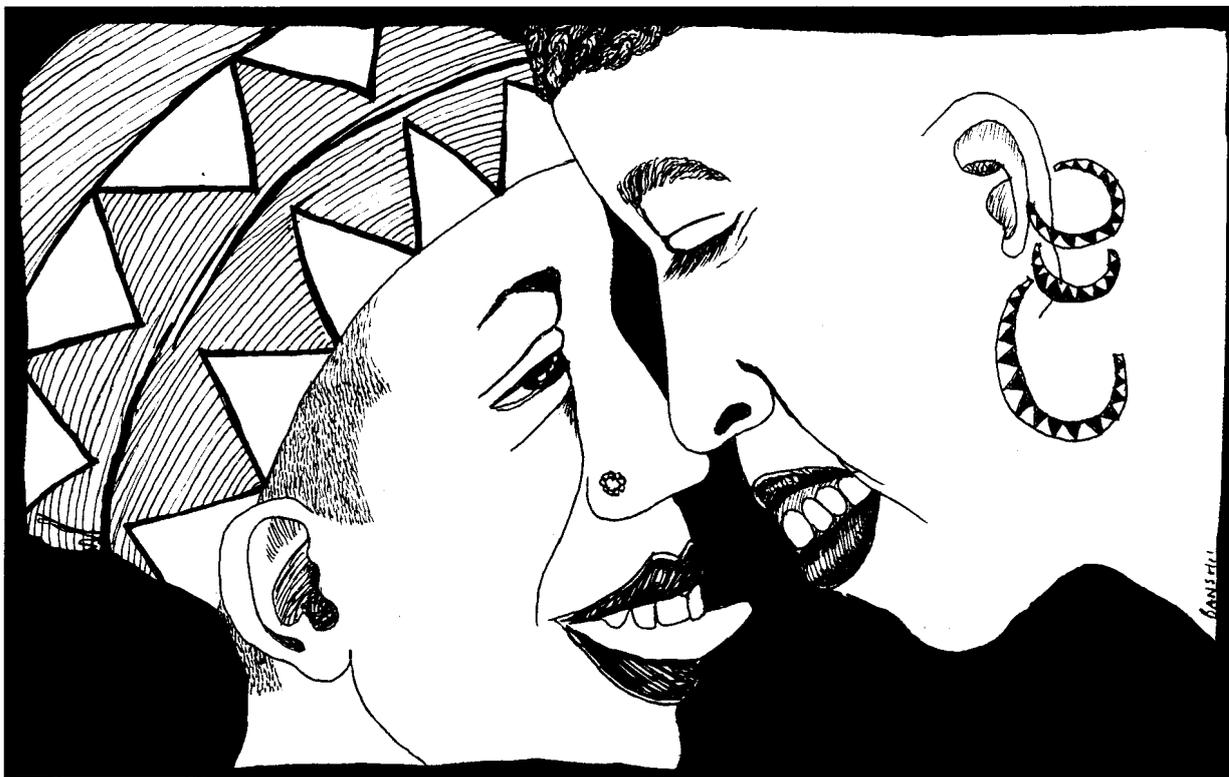
Given the prevalence of the notion of lesbian as cross-gender identification it often seems like the markers of "dyke" which signify transitivity, or butch. Thus, trying to construct self-presentations that read as both femme and dyke seem to work continually against each other. We suggest that while that rage is completely justified, it should, and we argue, has, given us pause to both reevaluate and reconceptualize a feminist project. The text wearies its reader with its long unself-reflective rants against feminism. Why does a book called *The Femme Mystique*, which so clearly alludes to Betty Friedan's problematical but highly influential book, *The Feminine Mystique*, work so hard to continually disavow its own historical context? Would a book like *The Femme Mystique*, which so clearly queers and parodies, yes, but also relies on, the narrative and consciousness-raising strategies of early feminism, even be possible without the last 25 years of feminism?

As an identity, femme foregrounds a different set of questions in this contemporary queer moment than it does/did for feminism. If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, homosexual identities in this century are conceptualized either by gender separatism (ie., the "woman-identified woman") or by gender transitivity (ie., the "nelly" boy and "butch" girl), then how can we account for femme subjectivity, which seemingly doesn't cross gender boundaries, and yet was also painfully marginalized by second-wave lesbian feminism? We suggest that we can't given many of the current conceptual tools. Thus, while butch and the entire continuum of female masculinity needs to be interrogated as a queer performance of

gender, it is femme which productively marks the limitations of our theoretical tools.

It may, in fact, be femmes that pose the most powerful challenge to the hegemony of heterosexuality. According to Sedgwick's orthogonal, chiasmic coding, the mannish or butch women can be explained in heterosexual terms. The early sexologists did just this with their theory of lesbianism as sexual inversion. In this view, women who desire other women display masculine traits and therefore are males trapped in female bodies (Newton 566). But the femme/feminine women's attractions for other women

Femmes on the other hand, were not solely objects of someone else's desires but were instead women who expected and received physical pleasure from butch women (14). The informants in Davis and Kennedy's study also indicated that butch/femme practices could often be fluid and flexible. Some insisted that all butches behaved according to the prescribed ideals, while others suggested that it was possible to receive sexual pleasure from femmes within the context of long-term relationships (16). Femmes did not always adhere to prescribed sexual roles; many butch commentators noted that their knowledge of sex



*Images from the Rainbow Side of the Dark by B.A.N.S.H.I.I.*

cannot be explained in the same way. The femme "remains the impossible space, in and out of gender, unaccountable" (Roof 250). Neither is her self-identity transitive in the way that butch identity has been formulated in queer theory and the popular imagination. But femmes whose desires and pleasures are constituted by the dissonance of which Butler speaks, bring into question the necessary hetero orientation of the feminine woman.

#### **That was then, this is now**

In an historical study of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, Davis and Kennedy found that butch and femme lesbian identities were not solely imitative of gender schemas in the larger culture, but rather, transformed these models into unique expressions of lesbian identity. Similar to stereotypical masculines roles, butches were responsible for taking the lead in sexual practices but in contrast to the stereotype, they derived their sexual satisfaction from providing pleasure to femme women.

and sexual responsiveness was taught to them by their femme partners, while some femmes did not accept the untouchability of their butch partners (19).

The re-emergence of butch and femme in the 1980s, has occurred in a context shaped by second-wave North American feminism(s). Today, it remains possible for lesbians to assume a butch or femme identity but these roles do not as easily translate into kitchen and bedroom responsibilities as they might of in the past (Faderman 587). Recent writings reflect the collision between butch and femme practices and feminism. Minnie Bruce Pratt's recent book *S/HE*, foregrounds the complex and contradictory pleasures of butch/femme erotic practices while it explores Pratt's own journey as she moves from a lesbian-feminist community to a profoundly moving butch-femme relationship with Leslie Feinberg. Speaking back to those who might suggest that femme sexuality is passive, Pratt says, "I'd asked what you wanted me to do when I had you in my hands, and you had said shyly almost unintelligibly, "Make me your butch" (99).

Many of those questions about that productive contradiction embodied in “female masculinity”—where “sex and desire are often as much at odds with one another as bodies are with pleasures”—are being articulated in exciting and rigorous ways (de Lauretis 251). What remains undertheorized, and to a certain degree, untheorizable given our theoretical toolbox, is *femme*. Biddy Martin argues as much in her “Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias”:

I am particularly interested, here, in a resistance to something called “the feminine,” played straight, and in a tendency to assume that when it is not camped up or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring. Too often, antideterminist accounts that challenge feminist norms depend on the visible difference represented by cross-gender identifications to represent the mobility and differentiation that “the feminine” or “the *femme*” supposedly cannot. (1994, 105)

While it may be the case that in this historical moment, the markers of lesbian and *femme* still work against each other, writers such as Nestle, Pratt, and Allison have begun to re-make the outlines of a powerful discourse of female/feminine sexuality. This discourse, haunted both by the insights of lesbian feminism and the sex wars of the 1980s, foregrounds the pleasures and dangers of sexuality for women in this historical moment. “I say that sex is the most physical risk I’ve ever taken, the *femme* equivalent of white water rafting” (Pratt 71). Throughout her text, Pratt offers the reader her sexuality, one not confined to emphasizing sexual danger “and the patriarchal heterosexual monopoly on sexuality” (Hennessy 105). But rather, one which continually addresses while it exceeds the culturally constructed limits of women’s sexuality and affirms sexual agency and non-normative forms of sexuality (Hennessy 105). Newton also anticipated both Pratt’s and Martin’s thinking by acknowledging that “Mary’s [the *femme* in *The Well of Loneliness*] real story has yet to be told” (Newton 575). Both Nestle and Pratt have carved out a space in which to speak, and be spoken by, *femme*. The narrator of *s/HE* foregrounds the complexities and enormous potential of such a dialogue.

As you take off your men’s clothes, I do not secretly want you to be a man ... [a]nd when I unknot your tie and unbutton your shirt, we lie down together naked, I say with a fearless caress that I love the man I am undressing, and I also know that a woman lies beside me ... [y]ou not looking like a proper woman, me not acting like a proper woman, we have wanted the body that is and, that is, both. (104, emphasis in original)

It is virtually impossible, short of disavowal of course, to not read the feminist *raison d’être* in Pratt’s performance of

*femme*: “you not looking like a proper woman, me not acting like a proper woman” [emphasis ours]. There is no orthogonal or chiasmic crossing, no either the woman-identified woman or butch: “we have wanted the body that is and, that is, both.” According to Foucault, four figures anchored the nineteenth century, and arguably twentieth century, epistemological preoccupation with sex as an object of expert knowledge: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse (inverted) adult. *Femme* is decidedly unthinkable here. Sedgwick reworks, but generally maintains, these figures in *Epistemology of the Closet*, deploying a rhetoric or trope of chiasmus, which is characterized by “inversion in second phrase of order followed in first” or, most simply “a crosswise arrangement” (OED). Thus,

... the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition ... the first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view). (1)

Sedgwick continues to schematize these major nodes of thought and knowledge, as well as the contradictions which constitute them.

The second is the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism—though by no means necessarily political separatism—within each gender. (2)

Arguing that these conceptual contradictions constitute an enduring, persistent deadlock which “has been the single most powerful feature of the important twentieth-century understandings of sexuality,” Sedgwick offers a rather bleak diagnosis.

I have no optimism at all about the availability of a standpoint of thought from which either question could be intelligibly, never mind efficaciously, adjudicated, given that the same yoking of contradictions has presided over all the thought on the subject, and all its violent and pregnant modern history, that has gone to form our own thought. (90)

We suggest that such a chiasmic episteme can only think that which it is overdetermined by: the woman-identified woman or masculine woman. But what about *femme*? She

requires an altogether different thinking—(dare we suggest femme marks? necessitates? an epistemic shift?)—one torsional, not chiasmic. Instead of an either/or crossing or swinging, we suggest a trope of torsion, a “twisting, esp. of one part of the body while the other is held fixed” (OED 1130), a rotating, queering, twisting of feminine subjectivity in, on, through, and around itself, nominally similar—feminine—but radically discontinuous—femme. Irreducible to neither gender separatism nor transitivity but queering both, torsion allows (both butch and) femme to be thought—(as “and, that is, both”)—but thought differently.

*Connie Carter is a student in the Master's program in Sociology at the University of Victoria. She is completing a study of lesbian femme identity construction processes and is planning to continue her work on gender and subjectivity among lesbians.*

*Jean Noble is a Ph.D. student in English at York University, and s/he continues to investigate the pleasures of female masculinity in the twentieth century.*

## References

- Abbott, Sidney and Barbara Love. *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism*. New York: Stein and Day, 1972.
- Allison, Dorothy. *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature*. New York: Firebrand Books, 1994.
- Blackman, Inge and Kathryn Perry. “Skirting the Issue: Lesbian Fashion of the 1990s.” *Feminist Review* 34 (Spring 1990): 67-78.
- Burana, Lily, Roxxie and Linnea Due. *Dagger: On Butch Women*. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Davis, Madeline and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy. “Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960.” *Feminist Studies* 12.1 (1986): 7-26.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Faderman, Lillian. “The Return of Butch and Femme: A Phenomenon in Lesbian Sexuality of the 1980s and 1990s.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2.4 (1993): 578-596.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. “Queer Theory, Left Politics.” *Rethinking Marxism* 7.3 (Fall 1994): 85-111.
- Hollibaugh, Amber and Cherrie Moraga. “What We’re Rollin’ Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism.” *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. Ed. Joan Nestle. New York: Alyson, 1992. 243-253.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. “Butch and Femme: Now and Then.” *Gossip* 5 (1987): 65-95
- Loulan, Joanne. *The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny and Other Rhythms*. San Francisco: Spinsters, 1990.
- Martin, Biddy. “Sexual Practice and Changing Lesbian Identities.” *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Philips. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1992. 93-119.
- Martin, Biddy. “Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias.” *Diacritics* 24.2-3 (Summer-Fall 1994): 104-21.
- Martin, Del and Phyllis Lyon. *Lesbian/Woman*. San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1972.
- Nestle, Joan, ed. *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. New York: Alyson, 1992.
- Nestle, Joan. *A Restricted Country*. New York: Firebrand, 1987.
- Newman, Lesléa, ed. *The Femme Mystique*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.
- Newton, Esther. “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman.” *Signs* 9.4 (1984): 557-575
- Pratt, Minnie Bruce. *S/HE*. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1995.
- Radicalesbians. “The Woman-Identified Woman.” *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*. Eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young. U.S.A.: Douglas, 1972. 172-77.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, and Scholarship*. Eds. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 139-68.
- Roof, Judith. *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory*. New York: Columbia University, 1991.
- Rubin, Gayle. “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries.” *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. Ed. Joan Nestle. New York: Alyson, 1992. 466-482.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Whisman, Vera. “Identity Crises: Who Is a Lesbian Anyway?” *Sisters, Sexperts and Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation*. Ed. Arlene Stein. New York: Plume Books, 1993. 47-60.