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## Reading and Remembering Butch-Femme Worlds

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the practice of building a syllabus that centers butch-femme literatures as a pedagogy of gathering and recuperation. Prompted by the loss of an early syllabus on lesbian histories, I examine the genre of the syllabus and contend that “butch-femme” is not the same as “queer” or “LGBTQ.” Through reflective and autobiographical writing on memory, place, queerness, and social media, the essay traces an ephemeral archiving revealing the stakes for naming and remembering butch-femme lesbian “worlds.” The essay highlights a sample student project and offers a syllabus as a teaching resource.

*Keywords:* butch-femme, lesbian histories, U.S. woman of color feminisms, queer pedagogy

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This paper is a weaving of two distant yet connected experiences with butch-femme lesbian literatures. Reflecting on the process of creating a butch-femme class, I begin with a memory of a rare lesbian studies course and the lost syllabus I am searching for now. My experience as a student and my experience as a teacher are linked through this special archive that needs to be named or it will be lost. Writing from the perspective of a teacher, I focus on the genre of the syllabus and the coalitional politics of women of color that shape my pedagogy. This essay also highlights the student work that came out of the butch-femme worlds class and contributes a syllabus for a future archive.<sup>1</sup> An insight that emerges is the gathering of new butch-femme literatures that works against forgetting resistant butch-femme worlds.

### **On Coming Out**

Introductions. That perpetual work of coming out to students every class, every year is something I grow weary of and often resist. I'm not comfortable simply announcing it on the first day, yet my queerness is not always legible at first glance. Usually the picture comes into focus when I'm in the company of my butch partner where I am often read as femme or when I drop a "she" or "partner" into a personal anecdote later on in the semester. My femmeness is not always legible along with being a Chicana in academia but certainly in the way that "femmeness" tends to be misread and invisibilized. I always "come out" to the students in my class but usually not on the first day.

I recently taught a class that was part of a sequence on Queer Literatures in the English Department at UCLA. As I prepared to write my syllabus, I drew from my background many times teaching the course "Ethnic American Writers" and my own experience as an undergraduate student taking a rarely offered course on lesbian studies. Focusing on lesbian literatures, I created a class called "butch-femme worlds" which I conceive of as different from and at a significant distance from how "LGBTQ" or "queer" are understood. As a particular kind of relation "butch-femme" is not easily translatable to umbrella terms like "LGBTQIA" or "queer." I wondered if in this era of fluid gender expressions and highly visible queer and trans representations in popular culture there is any place for centering butch-femme stories in a syllabus.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the students of Queer Literatures and Cultures, Spring 2019, at UCLA who contributed their zines to pass on to the next Butch-Femme Worlds.

As part of my introduction of the course to this group of students, I reflected on my own college experience taking a lesbian studies class. I worried a little about my story sounding anything remotely like “when I was young,” but I hoped that these students would be interested in thinking across queer generations. What would be different about this introduction is that this time I felt I had something relatable to discuss about queerness—on the very first day.

I was an undergraduate student at California State University Long Beach in 1993 and had the cosmic luck to take a course in Women's Studies from Sharon Sievers called "The Lesbian." At the time it was listed as “W/ST 356” and I remember that we had the option as students to have it listed generically on our transcripts, the discreet brown paper package version of the class. I chose to have “The Lesbian” permanently emblazoned on my official transcript. I was a music and French major, but I took several classes in women’s studies along with many friends, all the cool out queer students on campus. I teach in a gender and women's studies department now and reflecting on the process of how and why one builds a queer syllabus, especially one focused on butch-femme narratives, reminds me of how important this class was and what a difference it made to my experience as a student to take classes in women’s studies. I remember the feminist bookstore Pearls Booksellers on Redondo Avenue that also provided intellectual inspiration and respite when I was a student. Learning through other students that this bookstore was owned by Sievers’s partner, Edie Odelle, was almost as important as seeing the works of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa featured in the glass window cases, stacks of feminist poetry on the display tables, and books and magazines with provocative covers on tidy shelves along the walls. My friend Verónica Reyes worked there when she was a creative writing student and if Pearls were open now her own stunning collection of poetry, *Chopper! Chopper! Poetry from Bordered Lives* (2013) would be on display. I think about this and imagine how another first-generation Chicana lesbian student from East Los Angeles like we both were would feel holding such a book in her hands, knowing through the breath of those words that such mujer-centered worlds are real.

Such places of lesbian feminist respite are rare now and most have long closed. You can trace these shifts rather scientifically now with an objective distance of 20 years or more, a simple strategic business pattern that affected women’s bookstores and small independent booksellers nationwide. But I remember the start of that in Los Angeles, when Borders Books opened in 1995 directly across the street from Sisterhood Books in Westwood which closed

soon after in 1999. Now the specter of Amazon haunts every fledgling endeavor to dare to sell books and create a community of readers through the love of stories, poems, and like-minded company while making rent. Remembering those bookstores as a student is like travelling to a forgotten world. These are some of the meaningful events that shape the way I teach. I remember these feminist bookstores, these material lesbian histories, because I do not want to forget and I cannot allow them to be forgotten in my classroom or on my syllabus.

Over the years and one move too many after leaving Long Beach, I lost the bulky bubble gum pink 3-inch 3-ring binder that held all my course readings, papers, and the syllabus Dr. Sievers created for us. At the time I believed the class I took was the first time it was offered but in fact the course was born in the middle of the 1980s when programs like Gender and Women's Studies were under threat at CSULB and across the country. Known for such courses like "Women and Their Bodies" that demonstrated activities like vaginal self-examination, practices that remind students that the body is a political site, are now part of the well documented controversial history of that department. These radical feminist pedagogies drew accusations that women's studies and feminism encouraged lesbianism. I didn't know of Sievers's important role in establishing and defending women's studies at Long Beach. The hard work had been done by the time I was a student, and I simply got to sign up for this mysterious class called "The Lesbian." I remember reading Lillian Faderman's (1991) *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* and the stunning *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg (1993). Mostly we read articles hand selected by our professor, a course design practice I follow now, too. The class is still listed in the university catalog as "Lesbian Histories and Culture." I can imagine many kinds of introductions and first days in that class. I would love to see that lost syllabus again.

### **The Syllabus Genre**

What is a syllabus, formally speaking? In its most general sense a syllabus is an organization of knowledge, an outline of a course of study. "Butch-Femme Worlds" is an evocative title for a "queer" syllabus. But in practice it's easy for even the most creatively conceived class to become overdetermined by the conventions of the genre. A syllabus includes expectations and consequences even when such disciplinary language is against your teaching philosophy because it is part of the genre. More than ever now, the established form of the syllabus requires language about measurable outcomes that can take you far from your original pedagogical goals. Even calling it a contract now sounds overly transactional in the increasingly

corporatized university. The syllabus is a genre particular to academia that I struggle with every semester to keep the original spark of inspiration alive. I want to resist some of its conventions because I want to make my syllabus full of butch-femme and femme-butch persistence and resistance to do something else.

The genre of the syllabus has recently found a wider audience beyond academia. There is a trend on mainstream media to publish reading lists as an intervention to urgent topical issues. At moments of national crisis you will see these impromptu syllabi as reading lists on anti-racism, on underrepresented Latinx authors, banned books, and #MeToo circulated on social media. The syllabus has also become a form that gives validation to important cultural events such as Candice Benbow's (2016) immensely popular #LemonadeSyllabus based on Beyoncé's acclaimed genre shattering video album. The author's blog describes its public impact:

With contributions from over 70 Black women, Candice released the syllabus as a free downloadable resource of over 250 works centered around the lives of Black women. Within the first week, it was downloaded over 40,000 times and has reached over 600,000 downloads. National and international libraries created "Lemonade Stands" to highlight the books from the Syllabus that were available.<sup>2</sup>

These kinds of uses of the syllabus occupy a new inside–outside space, partly in academia, partly in popular culture, mediated by the flash fire speed of cyberspace. Whether it is used to offer a quick reading list to get yourself (or your friends) woke or as an innovation on the traditional course of study, there are discernable ideas about what a syllabus is and what it can do outside of the classroom. The emergence of these popular syllabi seems to express new kinds of public investments towards creating better worlds. If the genre of the syllabus is perceived as something that can offer solutions to systemic problems, the stakes are high. Ultimately, a syllabus is inherently limited and that is good. Even a great syllabus can only do so much on its own. Yet a syllabus can be in good company and in that way begin to work differently with more possibilities to do something else than its conventions dictate.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://candicebenbow.com/>

For example, in the important black feminist anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, the editors reserve the last section for syllabi reflecting interdisciplinary and literary approaches in the field of black women's studies (Hull et al., 1982). Organized under the title, "Doing the Work," it was there that I read Barbara Christian's syllabus for the course, "Major Afro-American Writers: Alice Walker Seminar." Reading her syllabus along with those of other black women scholars was profoundly moving. More than a syllabus repository, I see a coalitional practice of women of color enacted within the form of the anthology, much like the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* had done a year earlier (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). Against the individualistic, competitive culture of academia, here was a gathering of black woman centered knowledge generously offered to the reader—then and now. In the company of others the academic genre of the syllabus becomes critical work, both articulating and archiving its intellectual and political project. In whose company was the 1993 "The Lesbian" syllabus?

The anthologizing practices of women of color in *But Some of Us Are Brave* and *Bridge* are simultaneously intellectual, pedagogical, and activist in scope. Reading their introductions, I extend these politics in the making of my syllabus. Their introductions reflect the urgency of the work and the expansiveness of their vision that do something else with the form of the anthology. In "The Politics of Black Women's Studies" Hull and Smith state, "The publication of this book fulfills a long term need for a reference text and pedagogical tool" and note that the section devoted to course syllabi was "perhaps the most valuable part of the book for many readers (Hull & Smith, 1982, pp. xxiii-xxxi)."<sup>3</sup> This is a practical matter on one level, noting how scholars have had to rely on "informal networks and the lucky acquisition of a syllabus here or there," but these are also the lived conditions that inform the politics of gathering knowledge in the form of the anthology (p. xxiii). In the introduction to *Bridge*, Moraga & Anzaldúa (1981) state, "We envision this book being used as a required text in most women's studies courses" and "by every ethnic studies teacher in the country" (p. xxvi). It's safe to say that this goal has largely been met; however, they also envisioned a home for *Bridge*, "in libraries, bookstores, conferences, and union meetings in every major city and hole-in-the-wall in this country" (p.

<sup>3</sup> The introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave* is co-written by Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith.

xxvi). In other words, the editors of *Bridge* had an academic and general public audience in mind for this “revolutionary tool” (p. xxvi). These are examples of the ways women of color innovate and push the boundaries of established forms.<sup>4</sup> These anthologies model a way to do something else—because they must. At the same time that they establish intellectual fields, these coalitional works reject those structures and practices that exclude women of color in the first place. The editors of *But Some of Us Are Brave* state:

Originally, we had thought to make this book, not “Black Women’s Studies” but “Third World Women’s Studies.” It became apparent almost immediately that we were not equipped to do so. We hope that this one volume on Black women helps to create a climate where succeeding works on American Indian, Asian American, and Latina women can more swiftly come into being. (Hull & Smith, 1982, p. xxxi)

Furthermore, for Black women, curriculum could not be about exceptional Black women—or a conservative “contributions” approach—but rather it must be clear, courageous work that “saves Black women’s lives (Hull & Smith, 1982, p. xxv).”<sup>5</sup> For *Bridge*, the writings cut through genres and their stated and coalitional politics exceed the boundaries of atomized departments and discrete genres. These coalitional projects both share a practice of gathering of the knowledge necessary to their respective and interrelated projects and a commitment to “facilitate the necessary sharing” (Hull & Smith, 1982, p. xxviii).

In her contribution to *But Some of Us Are Brave*, “Black Women’s Health: Notes for a Course,” Beverly Smith also sees the possibilities in the form of a future syllabus to properly address Black women’s needs, marked by a glaring absence in the research she gathered:

The greatest shortcoming in the following materials is the frequent absence of awareness that Black women’s health is affected by sexism, racism, and class position. I see the following, though it is in the form of a syllabus, as an initial attempt at gathering the concepts which would be necessary for such an analysis. (Smith, 1982, p. 105)

Smith is calling for an *intersectional* analysis and her careful notes offer ways to make the academic genre of the syllabus work towards an important intervention in the lives of Black women.

<sup>4</sup> The histories of independent feminist presses are important to note here too.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul C. Gorski’s (2009) typologies in his study of the philosophies that underlie the “official” multicultural curriculum in Multicultural Teacher Education (MTE).



Teaching in Los Angeles I expect to see first generation, queer, trans, undocumented students of color in my classes and I have them in mind when designing a syllabus. As I began sorting my ever-growing list of potential queer texts, I realized what I wanted my syllabus to do: Even though this was not a race and gender studies class, I wanted it to have a rigorous and nuanced discussion of race and gender. Even though this was a literature class, I wanted it to be a lesbian literature class. I wanted all the literature to be by working class authors of color. Focusing on butch-femme literatures ensured that. Knowing this made the task of narrowing down the texts more clear. I focus on butch-femme literatures so that these stories, lives, desires, and struggles are not forgotten. On a personal level, I want students to know that this lesbian literature exists, that it is beautiful and important. On another level, I want my butch-femme syllabus to embody its woman of color feminist politics as I see modeled in woman of color anthologies. I want my syllabus to be an introduction to lesbian literatures with a radical edge, coalitional more than comparative, that names the linked processes of race, class, and gender on the first week. To center these texts, concepts, and perspectives on my syllabus resists reinforcing the canon and its ordering logics and also resists the survey model that I began with when I thought of the class as part two of “Queer Literatures.” My first draft had a few units dedicated to butch-femme representations but when I decided on the title: “Butch-Femme Worlds,” now I could get to work.

### **Butch-Femme is Not the Same as Queer**

Naming the course “Butch-Femme Worlds” historicizes working class and women of color lesbian literatures in ways that terms like “queer” and “LGBTQ” do not allow these contexts to be seen. In that sense, butch-femme is not the same as queer nor always legible under LGBTQ. These terms have been widely debated and part of the problem with “queer” is aptly captured by Siobhan Somerville’s (2007) entry for *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*:

“Queer” causes confusion, perhaps because two of its current meanings seem to be at odds. In both popular and academic usage in the United States, “queer” is sometimes used interchangeably with the terms “gay” and “lesbian” and occasionally “transgender” and “bisexual.” In this sense of the word, “queer” is understood as an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are “not straight.” (p. 187)

Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa warns of the way that queer is used as “a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities, and classes are shoved under” (Anzaldúa,

1998, p. 264). We can see in this pointed statement the “race trouble” E. Patrick Johnson speaks of in proposing “quare studies” to accommodate “racialized sexual knowledge” as part of a bigger project on Black queer studies and why the emergence of a “queer of color critique” is necessary (Johnson, 2001, p. 1).<sup>6</sup> That “queer” needs these negotiations and interventions by people of color points to the hegemonic status of queer theory in the academy.<sup>7</sup> More than a convenient or innocuous umbrella term, the homogenizing effect of “queer” actively works to erase gender and race. Theoretically speaking this might be desirable but in practice, in the case of butch-femme histories, there is a need to be specific in order to see lesbians through the queer umbrella.<sup>8</sup> For instance, writing about the decision to use “gay” in the title to the anthology *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*, editors Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez refer to the way that “queer” elides gender difference and therefore “gay” becomes a more representative term for their anthology (Hames-García & Martínez, 2007). Problematically, Anzaldúa (1998) claims that the word “lesbian” “doesn’t name anything in my homeland” (p. 263); however, Carla Trujillo’s (1991) *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* makes “Chicana lesbian” part of *my* intellectual homeland. This naming matters because “lesbian” simply does not retain the same level of status, visibility, or acceptance, however fraught, that “gay” does for men. These discussions are part of what inform how I teach about non-normative gender. We will likely never get to a consensus on the possibilities and limits of these terms that name parts of our plural selves, but that’s not really what needs to be resolved here.

What needs to be understood is how to recognize identity in a way that matters for the survival of marginalized communities. When Anzaldúa (1998) states, with prickly reluctance, “If I have to pick an identity label in the *English language* [emphasis added] ... I pick ‘dyke’ or ‘queer,’” she does so for “different reasons than those of the dominant culture” (pp. 263–264). She is working out the difference María Lugones painstakingly elaborates in her rejection of categorial logics—in the reductive uses of race, gender, queer—for a critical and historicized understanding of identities which arise “at the point of resistance” (Lugones, 2011, p. 52). Forced into an impossible corner, Anzaldúa (1998) acts and makes something with more

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing Judith Butler’s notion of “gender trouble.”

<sup>7</sup> Other meanings and contexts for “queer” precede its established use in academia.

<sup>8</sup> Theoretically speaking, Monique Wittig has provocatively argued that lesbians are not “women.”

resistant possibilities out of these terms: “My labeling of myself is so that the Chicana and lesbian and all the other persons in me don’t get erased, omitted, or killed ... Naming myself is a survival tactic” (p. 264). *Can a syllabus really do all of this?*

In the academic setting of an English department where literature by authors of color continue to be marginalized and minoritized, I cannot easily assume that a course called “Queer Literature” means “queer of color” or that “queer of color” means butch-femme lesbians. The history of English departments as arbiters of canonical knowledge, the force of categories and genres, the conventions of the survey style syllabus, all work together so that queer literatures and histories by people of color are hard to see at first glance no matter how much we have done to destabilize its hegemonic meaning. For these reasons, reading white lesbian literature alongside lesbian of color literature lets me see “butch-femme worlds.” But this is not to make new canons or genres. My correction to avoid a bourgeois queer hegemonic syllabus is to bring class to the front. To read butch-femme literatures is to read white working class and woman of color working class immigrant narratives. Moreover, the literature itself demands the confrontation of these intersections, tensions, and difficult coalitions.

A well-known repertoire of classic lesbian literary works point to these communities and the inter-racial, class, and erotic dynamics that echo the classic ethnographic studies, essays, and dialogues published at nearly the same time: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) by Audre Lorde; *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992) by Joan Nestle; *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg; *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (1991) by Lillian Faderman; *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1993) by Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis. The shared ten-year timeframe for these new literary representations and ethnographic writings about butch-femme communities helps highlight the ways that fiction often works to recover histories that are not officially documented or are marginalized within canonical literatures and genres. It is also important not to make research work to authorize what is told in literature and instead I want to reconsider the capaciousness of literature for representing butch-femme lived experiences, including their aesthetics and formal innovations.

My first selections were the classic memoirs *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg and *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* by Audre Lorde which, in part, document butch-femme spaces in 1950s New York, the surrounding attitudes towards class and race, and the violent policing

of gender. These are indispensable generative works in white working class and black lesbian literature that speak well to each other and to our current moment. But the inspiration for building the course around the butch-femme theme came from reading new Chicana butch and femme characters in the poems of Verónica Reyes (2013). It's not every day that I get to teach Chicana lesbian writers and reading her vibrant debut collection of poems that remember familiar times, places, and sounds set in East Los Angeles, the city I grew up in, made it exciting and urgent. I had also seen the short film *¿Tienes Hambre?* by Margo Rivera-Weiss (2005) at a queer woman of color film festival some years earlier and I never forgot it—but it was not made available in time to show in my class. Nonetheless, I could not pass up the opportunity to pair new literary voices and films with the classic texts. Designing the course this way helped to disrupt the idea that butch-femme is somehow “old school” and problematizes the sense of linear progress in the area of sexuality and gender sometimes assumed by the visible flourishing of new queer and trans subjectivities in popular culture. Of course, I needed to trouble the stability assumed in “The Lesbian” too and make room for my own experiences to count, something I remember in hearing the bilinguality of Reyes's poetry.

I came out among a group of young women of color at CSULB. But it wasn't until I went to a Latina lesbiana support meeting at The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU) with a friend, another Chicana, that I met Latina lesbians who were not students. We travelled from Long Beach to East Los Angeles to attend Lesbianas Unidas meetings and participate in Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU) events. Many activities and events were held in community centers around the city including the Women's Center for Alcoholism, cafés like Café Tropical, and small *jotería* owned businesses during closed hours. Eventually I attended a camping retreat and it was there under the stars and around the fire that I realized that there were lesbians who spoke Spanish. Moreover, Spanish was their primary language. This had not been my experience in college and I felt somewhat out of place at times. I felt the same way at working class lesbiana butch-femme nightclubs. The lesbianas I met in these spaces were not only Mexicanas but Guatemaltecas, Salvadoreñas, Peruanas, Argentinas. If ever there was a Chicana lesbiana awakening, that experience of hearing Spanish spoken, listening, organizing, flirting and dancing to music among lesbianas was it for me! Until then, my sense of being queer and being Mexican were two different worlds that rarely met. Hearing Spanish spoken so easily between women, with intimate inflections of understanding, friendship, and desire was what

gave butch and femme lasting meaning for me. Here I'm thinking with Juana Maria Rodríguez's idea of "queer latinidad" embodied through language in words like "entendidas" that are hard to translate without its intimate, queer, outlaw inflections (Rodríguez, 2003). There are limits and complexities in sharing a language, Spanish is not an equalizing tool, demarcations of class, colonial legacies, citizenship, and degrees of assimilation all play out in the field of language. Somehow, I felt more queer—and more femme—in Spanish. In those spaces we fight to exist in, our hometowns, hangouts, families of our own making, even as subjects of literature, recognizing butch and femme worlds pushes back against the forces of marginalization, erasure, and violence. As Elizabeth Kennedy states in the preface to *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, we must remember these butch-femme communities as "communities of resistance" (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. xiii).

Indeed, the terms "butch" and "femme" are quite alive and widely used now, whether creatively paired or kept in the singular. As Stacy Macías (2020) notes, the meanings and popular use of the terms have been expanded, in particular the uses of "femme." This new visibility is reflected in our consumer culture and practices. It's both jarring and fascinating to see a t-shirt for sale at Banana Republic with the word FEMME printed on it. These terms with rich lesbian histories and meanings have new queer and trans articulations, and at the same time they are used to make heteronormative claims. These layered processes are worth paying attention to. There is an important literary and cultural history to which we have a responsibility to keep alive by naming it "butch-femme" and troubling how we read queer and LGBTQ.

Perhaps I could have called this class "Butch-Femme Literatures and Cultures" as the syllabus includes film, art, and sound. I wanted to evoke another perspective, another pedagogy. I wanted to use language and grammar that resisted categories and hierarchies that we are habituated to think in. I include the hyphen in "Butch-Femme" to link the phrase in a relation of complementarity. I call it "worlds" because I wanted room to interpret "Literature" very broadly. I borrow the term "worlds" and the phrase "worlds of sense" from María Lugones (2003) "against the grain of atomic, homogenous, and monistic understanding of the social in any of its dimensions" and to suggest the possibility for "meaning and communication to be both less coded and less determined" (pp. 25–26). Without foreclosing the suggestive possibilities for thinking with Lugones's "worlds," I find this is a helpful partial description:

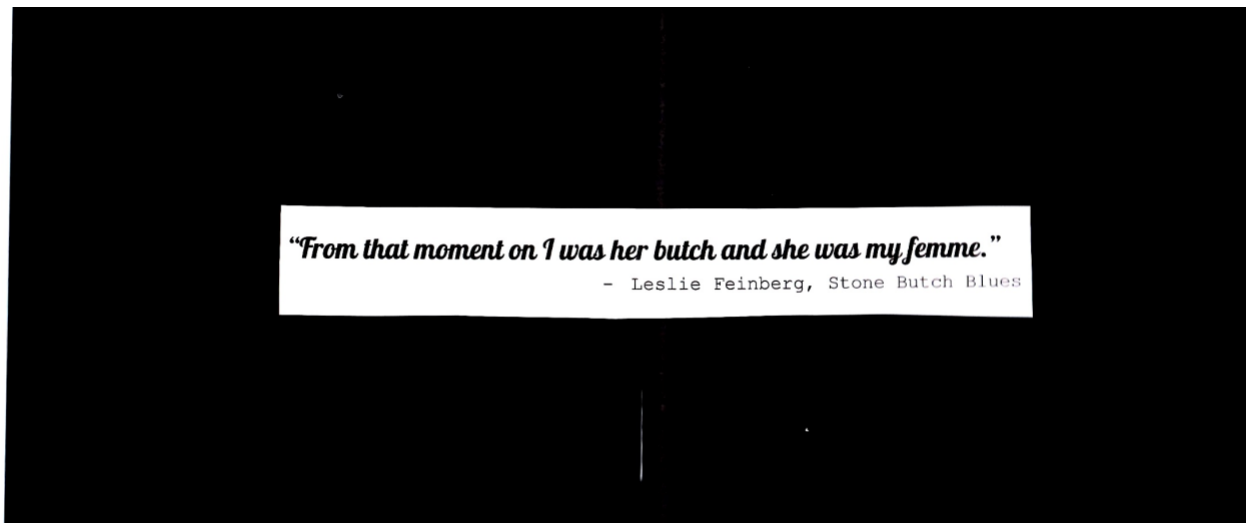
For something to be a “world” in my sense, it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this “world” met in some other “world” and now have in this “world” in imagination. (Lugones, 2003, p. 87)

By naming the class “Butch-Femme Worlds,” lesbian communities need not be thought of as “subcultures,” and our approach to texts and people may invite the “sensory” and the body into how we study bodies of knowledge and bodies of literature.

### Sample Project: A Butch-Femme Zine

#### Figure 1

*Student Work 1*



*Note.* The quote by Leslie Feinberg from *Stone Butch Blues* is typed in a cursive font and spread over two pages of the zine, made in cardstock, a place of prominence and importance.

The goal of the class was “an” introduction to LGBTQ literature. I chose to make this class about lesbian literatures because it’s a body of work I care about: how it’s represented, how it’s read and misread. Having also seen the introduction of new butch-femme characters in film long after the film *Bound* (1996) in the film *Pariah* (2011) by Dee Rees which features a young black “stud” as its protagonist, I felt a twinned sense of responsibility to these works and the young queer and trans students of color I imagined would select to be in the class. I did not need to see the prior iterations of “Queer Literatures and Cultures after 1970” to know that a

class on butch-femme lit would be rare. I knew that and so did the students. On the first day of class, after reviewing the list of books and films, a student who identifies as femme told me that she had taken another queer lit course and that she never read any lesbian literature, let alone butch-femme stories (see Figure 1).

All “queer” meanings gathered in the course of the class need to be kept alive at the same time without competition for the final word. As someone who grew up politically, musically, and queerly in the 1980s, I don’t expect students to identify as butch, femme, or lesbian—or even Chicana. However, we must think and teach historically with these words; we cannot erase them from our lexicon or too much will be lost, forgotten. I created this special topic so that students, whomever they might be, might see themselves in the readings and perhaps imagine their queer forbears speaking to them across time and place, generations, and complex differences (see Figure 2). Working toward these goals, I created assignments that emphasized exploring concepts rather than defining them so that all students regardless of their background in race, gender, and theories of sexuality could draw from their own experiences, discover their own questions and come up with their own insights into our topic. The Raymond Williams-style “keyword” essays and the student group co-led discussions support and reinforce these goals (Williams, 1976). Together they interrupt tidy dictionary logics of meaning, the linearity of chronological time, and orient learning against mastery in favor of playfulness and exploration. A key group activity was close reading which students practiced extensively—and even held a hearty sustained debate over the butch-femme symbolism held in a cup of coffee: black or with sugar and cream.<sup>9</sup> There is no “test” that makes sense for me to give as the work of the class is done. Ultimately, I wanted students to imagine themselves as part of this literary lineage. I wanted them to write their own stories.

The zine project is the culmination of the class. The guidelines are framed by Lugones’s (2000) healthy suspicion of any meaning that is too pinned down and an open appreciation of “linguistically improper” words. Mimi Nguyen’s (2012) theorization of zines as an important archival site comprised of “materials and absences” offer critical questions for the students to examine in the shared process of making zines:

<sup>9</sup> Referring to the wildly flirtatious femme seduction scene between Violet and Corky in the film *Bound* (1996).

I like dictionaries. I am also suspicious of them. I am politically discriminate, critical, active, as I 'look up' words. I am particularly attracted to dictionaries of the linguistically improper. (Lugones, 2000, p. 246)

The archive is not just a place for study, but must be itself an object of it. What is in the archive, and how did it get there? What are the criteria for assembling, organizing and presenting materials? Who selects and collects, shapes and donates their stories to an archive? What is not there? How do these materials and absences produce knowledges, including norms and teleologies?" (Nguyen, 2012)

The pedagogy and politics of the zine project are encapsulated in these epigraphs. The simplest description of the project is to create a publication with an accompanying image discussing any aspect of "butch-femme" students choose including new uses not yet captured by dictionaries or official texts. For further definition I offered the following (see Appendix):

A zine, short for magazine or fanzine, is typically a DIY publication made on a very low budget (often "free"), copied in black and white, stapled, focused on a single topic, with hand made, drawn, or found illustrations and graphics, circulated in small batches.

Zines are "unofficial" sites of knowledge and labor and often provide important stories and counter-discourses missing in "official" archival sites. Zines are meant to be easily accessible and readable and passed on by hand.

These definitions link the practical aspect of making the zine and the critical aspect of the politics of the zine. We have a workshop day of high spirits, 80s tunes by request, and shared supplies including sharpies, non-toxic glue sticks, hole-punches, and crafters scissors (see Figure 3). I brought a few sample copies from my collection to share, so did another student, and we watched a great "how to" video from the Barnard Zine Library for a more practical example. I'm happy to see that several students decided to collaborate and make their zines together. The activity is friendly enough but the stakes are higher as they are now the authors of these butch-femme narratives and some insecurities were felt and expressed differently. One student asked me if she could turn in her zine to me in private, feeling that she was not yet



ready to be out to the class. On the final day when students would share and discuss the process of making their zines, she changed her mind and joined in quietly but fully present. I think many students felt the affirming effect of the friendly space they had built with each other.

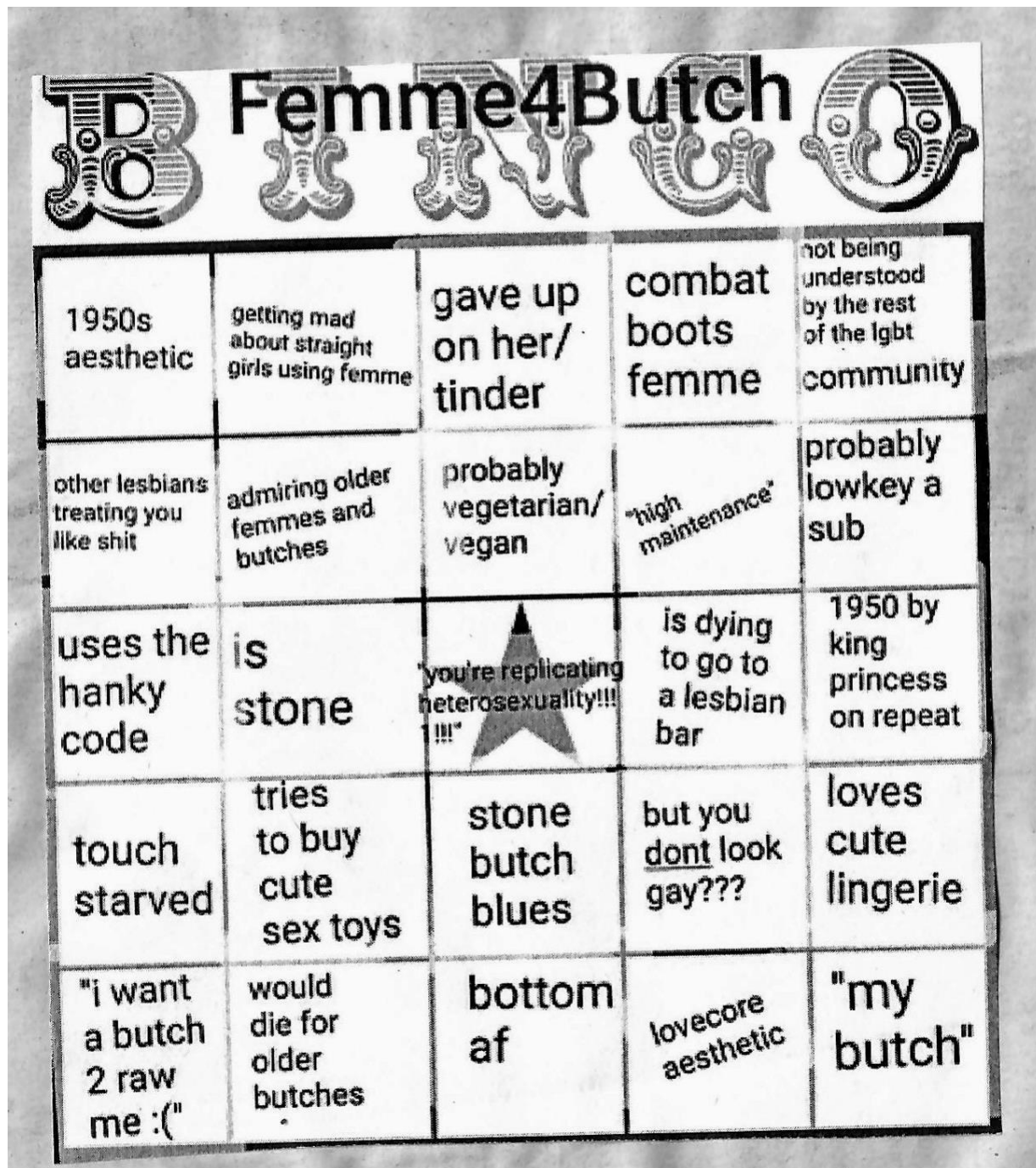
## Figure 2

### Student Work 2



Note. A poetic reflection on Zami facing a portrait of Audre Lorde illustrated in vibrant watercolors and ink.

**Figure 3**  
Student Work 3



Note. Close up of a found bingo game card collage remixed as “Femme4Butch,” juxtaposed on a newsprint background.

## **Lost and Found, Some Things Do Come Back**

*Social Media Post, January 18, 2019*

My LA peeps, anyone got a copy of *Stone Butch Blues* I can borrow? My copy is in an unmarked box somewhere in storage. There's a free PDF online (courtesy of the author) but bound books are more friendly to my eyes. Thanks!

I should have kept a journal. Instead I left traces of this process on my social media over several months which has helped me immensely in remembering this journey. I did not know this course called "butch-femme worlds" would happen: It was a fortuitous set of circumstances and people that set it in motion. I was to be back in Los Angeles for a few months. It was a perfect temporary gig. In my mind's peripheral vision, I'd always had a copy of *Stone Butch Blues* in my home library, the same edition by Firebrand Books I had when I was in college. Most of my boxes of books were in storage now and I could not find my copy. Moreover, I could not be sure that I had actually stored it. All the certainty I had about that particular book and other lost queer things was undone. I kept my worries at bay with the knowledge that there is a free PDF version available made by Feinberg herself. Part of the greater problem is that the book, like many other lost lesbian works, was out of print. I sent a plea hoping someone in L.A. might still have a copy that I could borrow. I had also sent messages to old college friends about "The Lesbian" syllabus as well as the department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at CSULB. No luck. All was lost it seemed.

*One day later...*

*Social Media Post: January 19, 2019*

My new copy of *Stone Butch Blues* arrived today via special hand delivery. I had to document this epic experience! Thank you so much for this wonderful gift, Luis!

## Figure 4

### Social Media Post



Note. The author with Luis Alfaro in Hollywood, CA.

Some things do come back, at least in part. I now have a new copy of *Stone Butch Blues*, gifted to me by Luis Alfaro, a generous gesture I like to think he made out of friendship to both Leslie and I—and to a commitment to our shared queer worlds (see Figure 4). His copy included a bookmark from the bookstore A Different Light, an ephemeral artifact documenting so much in its absence. I think of Margo Rivera-Weiss’s (2005) beautiful and sexy butch-femme film *¿Tienes Hambre?* that was almost lost—which they posted on YouTube not too long ago—but our loss of Margo and their work in future queer women of color film is felt too now.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Margo Rivera-Weiss (2005) made several films through the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (<https://qwocmap.org>) based in San Francisco, CA.

I don't believe the syllabus to "The Lesbian" is truly lost. Some of the memories have been awakened by this process and are held now in the space of these pages. Having created an ephemeral space archiving the gathering of memory, stories, and artifacts on social media does not replace the practice of a teaching journal, but it does some work to help document and recover some of what has been gained along the way to this class. Moreover, it gives form to a recurring theme of loss I mediate in the writing and re-making of my own lesbian syllabus. The many unexpected returns remind me of the stakes for reading and remembering butch-femme worlds.



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## Appendix

### Syllabus: Reading Butch-Femme Worlds

#### Description

This course is an introduction to butch-femme representations in LGBTQ literatures after 1970. We begin with the Stonewall Rebellions to frame the political and historical contexts for reading “queer” and “queer of color” in U.S. writings and film. Major topics include race, class, gender, sexual identities and politics, and theories of oppressing-resisting. In particular, we will examine butch-femme constructions across several texts. We will read a repertoire of classic and contemporary narratives including such forms as the novel, autobiography, memoir, short stories, and poetry, and we will screen both narrative and documentary films. Select theoretical readings, critical concepts, and frameworks will complement our analysis and original interpretations. We will give plenty of time to practice close reading of texts, film, and visual art. Primarily, this course is dedicated to examining diverse butch-femme representations and creative innovations in the vast repertoire of LGBTQ literature and film.

#### Books

Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Crossing Press, 1982.  
 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*. (20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition) Alyson Books, 2003.  
 Sharon Bridgforth, *The bull-jean stories*. Redbone Press, 1998.  
 Verónica Reyes, *Chopper! Chopper! Poetry from Bordered Lives*. Arktoi Books, 2013.  
 Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Penguin Books, 1995.  
 Myriam Gurba, *Dahlia Season: stories & a novella*. Manic D. Press, 2007.

#### Films

Lana & Lily Wachowski (Directors), *Bound*, 1996.  
 Dees Rees (Director), *Pariah*, 2011.  
 Harry Dodge & Silas Howard. (Directors), *By Hook or by Crook*, 2001.  
 Margo Rivera-Weiss (Director), (2005) *¿Tienes Hambre?*, 2005.

### Reading Schedule

#### Introductions

Overview & Introductions

Cheryl Clarke, “Of Althea and Flaxie” & images in *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1982.

#### What’s In A Name

Raymond Williams, “Introduction,” “Culture,” and other selections in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1976.

Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

#### Class, Gender, Race

Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

Stacy I. Macías, “Latina and Chicana Butch/Femme in Literature and Culture,” in L. G. Mendoza (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latina and Latino Literature*, 2020.

Jeanne Cordova, “Butches, Lies, and Feminism” in J. Nestle (Ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. Alyson Publications, 1992.



## Representing Butch-Femme

Film: *Bound*

B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema" in *Sight & Sound*, 1992. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/new-queer-cinema-b-ruby-rich>

Amber Hollibaugh & Cherríe Moraga, "What we're rollin' around in bed with: Sexual silences: A conversation toward ending them" in *The Persistent Desire*.

Madeline Davis, Amber Hollibaugh, & Joan Nestle, "The femme tapes" in *The Persistent Desire*.

## Butch-Femme Poetics

Sharon Bridgforth, *The bull-jean stories*

Sharon Bridgforth, "A Wo'mn Called Sir" in R. Labonte & L. Schimel (Eds.), *First Person Queer: Who We Are (So Far)*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007.

## Butch Protagonists and East L.A.

Verónica Reyes, *Chopper! Chopper! Poetry from Bordered Lives*

Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame A Wild Tongue" in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute, 1987.

Leticia D. Galindo, "Caló and Taboo Language Use Among Chicanas, A Description of Linguistic Appropriation and Innovation" in L. Galindo & M. D. Gonzales (Eds.), *Speaking Chicana: Voice, Power, and Identity*. University of Arizona Press, 1999.

María Lugones, "Wicked Caló: A Matter of the Authority of Improper Words" in S. L. Hoagland & M. Frye (Eds.), *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*. Penn State Press, 2000.

Macarena Gómez-Barris, "The Plush View: Makeshift Sexualities and Laura Aguilar's Forbidden Archives" in C. O. Chavoya, D. E. Frantz, & M. Gómez-Barris (Eds.), *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* Prestel, 2017.

## Queer of Color Coming of Age

Film: *Pariah*

Dees Rees, select interviews (online)

## Femme Genealogies and Solidarities

Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*

Dorothy Allison, "A Woman Like an Ocean" in *The Women Who Hate Me*. Firebrand Books, 1983.

Maya Chinchilla, "Femme on Purpose" in *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética*. Korima Press, 2014

## New Queer Narratives

Myriam Gurba, *The Dahlia Season*

Juana María Rodríguez, "Gesture and Utterance: Fragments from a Butch-Femme Archive" in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

## Femme-Butch Futures in Post-queer Times

Film: *By Hook or By Crook*

B. Ruby Rich, "New Trans Cinema" in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Zine workshop

## Zine Presentations & Party!

### More Recommended Readings

Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Penguin, 1993.

Maya Chinchilla, *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética*. Korima Press, 2014.

Sandra Cisneros, "Woman Hollering Creek" in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Vintage, 1992.

Jeanne Cordova, *When We Were Outlaws*. Spinsters, Ink, 2011.

Raquel Gutiérrez, *The Barber of East L.A.*, 2009. Manuscript held at the University of Texas Fine Arts Library. Link to 2008 performance at the Claremont Museum of Art:

<https://vimeo.com/35643903>

Emma Pérez, *Forgetting the Alamo*. University of Texas Press, 2009.

Tatiana de la Tierra, *For the Hard Ones/Para las duras: A Lesbian Phenomenology/Una fenomenología lesbiana*. A Midsummer Night's Press, 2018.

Kitty Tsui, *Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*. Spinsters, Ink, 1983.

Chea Villanueva, *Bulletproof Butches*. Masquerade Books, 1997.

### Activities, Assignments, Projects

Notes on the main assignments and activities and the complete zine prompt.

### Keyword Essays

These are a series of short (3-5 page) essays based on Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Keywords are drawn from the primary texts and some outside texts. By exploring 1-3 "keywords" across the readings students make an inquiry into a vocabulary and trace how meanings circulate in culture in explicit and implicit ways, in both written and in spoken practices. This approach invites students to contribute their own experiences and knowledges about their keywords. This quote captures the essence of the distinction between a "keyword" from a dictionary "definition" of terms:

This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical—subject to change as well as to continuity.

—Raymond Williams

While not thesis-driven, the student's perspective is reflected in the chosen keywords and how they cluster them. This open-ended approach helps create the conditions for students to be comfortable with multiplicity and ambiguity while thinking historically about the words and language we use every day.

Preparation:

Introduction to “Keywords” (assigned reading, lecture & discussion)

Select entries including “Culture” (in-class reading & discussion)

Background Resource: The Keywords Project, University of Pittsburgh

[https://keywords.pitt.edu/williams\\_keywords.html](https://keywords.pitt.edu/williams_keywords.html)

### **Group-Led Discussion Questions**

This activity gives significant time for students to co-lead discussion of a major text. Student groups should be formed very early as they will need to spend time outside of class to prepare questions. Students should feel free to explore any theme that interests them with no predetermined answers. Build in times to check in with the student groups ahead of their facilitation day. Students may post their questions and quotes/passages with page numbers to the course website before or after their presentation as a resource for the class. Review and practice different ways of posing discussion questions that are grounded in the text. Essentially, this is a great way to conduct research and gather a lot of perspectives over the course of the class. If they all write about the same topic, fine, they still have to write their own keyword essay. They are teaching their point of view.

Preparation:

Review the main books and films on the first day of class. Form book groups on the second day and reserve time for students to meet and exchange emails in class.

### **Close Reading and Analysis**

Needless to say, this class relies on close readings of both images and texts. This will need reinforcing throughout the course with several opportunities built in particularly when shifting genres. How do you read a poem, a passage, a scene, an image, a sound or a song? Pool together student knowledge, emphasize observation and details, read out loud, resist summary and quick interpretations. Practice!

Preparation:

Class activity: Read the poem “Of Althea and Flaxie” and one of the images from the book *Narratives*. They are both representations of butch-femme “worlds”—but how? Slowly move the discussion from observations to interpretations.

### **Final Project: A Butch-Femme Zine**

“I like dictionaries. I am also suspicious of them. I am politically discriminate, critical, active, as I ‘look up’ words. I am particularly attracted to dictionaries of the linguistically improper.”

– Maria Lugones, “Wicked Caló”

“The archive is not just a place for study, but must be itself an object of it. What is in the archive, and how did it get there? What are the criteria for assembling, organizing and presenting materials? Who selects and collects, shapes and donates their stories to an archive? What is not there? How do these materials and absences produce knowledges, including norms and teleologies?”

– Mimi Nguyen, “My Fales Library Donation Statement”

Taking a cue from María Lugones’s appreciation of “linguistically improper” dictionaries and the work of zinester-scholars such as Mimi Nguyen, your final project is to produce a zine on the topic of **butch-femme** or any iteration of this couplet. You may engage the readings and films we have explored this quarter if you wish and/or you may approach and recast your questions about butch-femme in new contexts. You can be compiler, chronicler, journalist, and writer-artist all in one. You do not need sophisticated skills, you just need the spark of an idea and some materials you are comfortable working with.

### **What is a zine?**

A zine, short for magazine or fanzine, is typically a DIY publication made on a very low budget (often “free”), copied in black and white, stapled, focused on a single topic, with hand made, drawn, or found illustrations and graphics, circulated in small batches. A quick Google search will lead you to many online archives and tutorials on how to make a zine. Zines are “unofficial” sites of knowledge and labor and often provide important stories and counter-discourses missing in “official” archival sites. Zines are meant to be easily accessible and readable and passed on by hand. Imagine a younger member of your family encountering your zine and the valuable information it contains. What do you want to tell them about “femme” or “butch”? How will you show them?

### **Ingredients in the mix:**

- Your definition of butch-femme; femme-but; butch; femme; etc.
- A creative-critical elaboration of your definition
- A name – if your zine were a punk band what would you call it?
- A short statement on the purpose of the zine. Who is it for? Why did you make it?
- Aesthetics – the art work/graphics or its “look” are important to consider. How do the written and visual components go together?
- If you cite authors, lyrics/music, or reproduce other people’s work in general, be sure to include a list of your sources somewhere so your readers can find them.

### **How many pages or word count?**

There is no max or minimum, you decide what is the “right” amount—when it’s “done.”

### **Alternative formats:**

A webzine, a podcast or audio zine, a video zine or game—keep in mind that these require more time and it helps to have experience in these formats already. You’re not sure what to make, pitch me an idea!

I highly encourage you to work collaboratively in small groups of 2-3. You can pool your knowledge and divvy up the work—research, writing, layout, artwork, printing and binding—there’s lots to do!