

# RENDER ME, GENDER ME,



Lesbians Talk Sex, Class, Color, Nation, Studmuffins . . .

kath weston

# Render Me, Gender Me

---

Lesbians Talk Sex, Class, Color, Nation, Studmuffins . . .

Kath Weston

C O L U M B I A U N I V E R S I T Y P R E S S

N E W Y O R K



Columbia University Press  
*Publishers Since 1893*  
New York Chichester, West Sussex  
Copyright © 1996 Kath Weston

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weston, Kath, 1958–

Render, me, gender me : lesbians talk sex, class, color, nation,  
studmuffins ..., / Kath Weston.

p. cm. — (Between men—between women)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-231-09642-9

1. Lesbians—United States—Identity. 2. Lesbians—United States—  
Psychology. 3. Lesbians—United States—Attitudes. 4. Sex role—  
United States. 5. Gender identity—United States. 6. Stereotype (Psychology)—  
United States. I. Title. II. Series.

HQ75.6.U5W47 1996

305.48'9664—dc20

96-14888



Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books  
are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

*Designed by Linda Secondari*  
Printed in the United States of America  
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Render Me, Gender Me

---

BETWEEN MEN ~ BETWEEN WOMEN

*Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Lillian Faderman and Larry Gross, Editors

BETWEEN MEN ~ BETWEEN WOMEN

*Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Lillian Faderman and Larry Gross, Editors

*Advisory Board of Editors*

Claudia Card

Terry Castle

John D'Emilio

Esther Newton

Anne Peplau

Eugene Rice

Kendall Thomas

Jeffrey Weeks

Between Men ~ Between Women is a forum for current lesbian and gay scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. The series includes both books that rest within specific traditional disciplines and are substantially about gay men, bisexuals, or lesbians and books that are interdisciplinary in ways that reveal new insights into gay, bisexual, or lesbian experience, transform traditional disciplinary methods in consequence of the perspectives that experience provides, or begin to establish lesbian and gay studies as a freestanding inquiry. Established to contribute to an increased understanding of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, the series also aims to provide through that understanding a wider comprehension of culture in general.

**for geeta, with love**

## Acknowledgments

---

To the women in these pages, who took a chance on a cultural anthropologist. To Janaki Bakhle and Suzanne Vaughan, for keeping me this side of meltdown and calling me back into my name. To Young-Ae Park, for walking into the desert to find whatever it was we found. To the Bad Girls—Celia Alvarez, Tressa Berman, and Gloria Cuádriz—for reminding me that exiles (like activists) are made, and not by job markets either. To Julie Erfani, for returning me to writing class/race/nation when living them was hard enough. To my writing buddy, Tim Diamond, for having the old-fashioned audacity to insist upon a better world. To my cousin, B. C. Cliver, whose narrow escape from studmuffindom had to show up in a book title somewhere.

To Nico Colson-Jones, who convinced me I was wrong about a lot of things but right about dreams. To Julie Cordell, who laid out for me in death the power of the word. To Carla Schick, who helped set up the second round of interviews and whose work with the Women's Writers Union fed poetry to my prose. To Kristin Koptiuch and Kara Tableman, for those magnificent dinners. To Steve Kossak, for the little room with a view that ushered me through chapter 8. To Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg, for the story. To Lisa Márquez, amid the storm clouds at Acoma, for inspiring me more than she knows. To Susan

Cahn, Ed Cohen, and Wendy Patterson, for the calm. To Cheri Thomas, for understanding the difference between being in contact and being in touch. To Esther Newton, for Graceland and showing me a few of the ropes. To Sheila Friedeman, for pointing out the obvious when it wasn't.

To my great-aunt and godmother, Irene Heidenway, for always being by my side. Oh, right, and for the gift of irreverence. To my baby sisters, Lynda Foster and Jeanne Lisse, who swear to this day they taught me everything I know. To my mom, Darlene Weingand, and my dad, Wayne Weston, who never let me fall for the line that working people don't read books.

To the activists of the National Writers Union, especially Sarah Bewley and Elaine Perry, for getting me in that writerly way. To my agent, Charlotte Sheedy, for her steady encouragement and no-nonsense advice. To Lori Jervis and Marcie, for help with the interview transcription. To Lisa Kammerlocher, for dropping reference after reference into campus mail. To Deborah Bright, for the "tour" of the slide archives that led me to the work of Gaye Chan.

To the National Science Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, for funding the research that led to this book. To the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota and the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa, for shelter and support. To the Spring 1995 *Queer Theory* class and the Faculty/Staff Discussion Group on Lesbian and Gay Studies at Wellesley College, for some lively feedback on the "Chameleon" and "Guessing Games" chapters. To the faculty and students at Princeton who attended my presentation "Writing High Theory for Its Discontents" and commented on the "Copycat" chapter. To Arizona State University West, for granting the leave that allowed me to edit the interviews. To the women of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, for doing what they do best.

A book that wends its way through so many differences and identities owes a lot to the people who take the time to critique it. To John Comaroff, Renato Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako, for reminding me to ask when difference makes a difference. To the late David Schneider, for a metacritique that will outlive many manuscripts. To the friends and colleagues who willingly subjected themselves to earlier drafts, including Lawrence Cohen, Judith Halberstam, Yasumi Kuriya, Ellen Lewin, Radhika Mohanram, Geeta Patel, and Judi Weston. My missteps are my own, but there would be many more if it weren't for these folks.

In a tribute to the butch at heart, Geeta Patel got me out of the muck more than once when my wheels were spinning. My thanks to her for showing me more about nuance in a day than I'd learn on my own in a lifetime. Who would have thought all those signs for utopia weren't leading to a way out?



**Render Me, Gender Me**

---

*Although many of the people interviewed for this book were willing to have their names appear in print, I have followed the anthropological convention of using pseudonyms throughout.*

BETWEEN MEN ~ BETWEEN WOMEN

*Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Lillian Faderman and Larry Gross, Editors

*Advisory Board of Editors*

Claudia Card

Terry Castle

John D'Emilio

Esther Newton

Anne Peplau

Eugene Rice

Kendall Thomas

Jeffrey Weeks

Between Men ~ Between Women is a forum for current lesbian and gay scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. The series includes both books that rest within specific traditional disciplines and are substantially about gay men, bisexuals, or lesbians and books that are interdisciplinary in ways that reveal new insights into gay, bisexual, or lesbian experience, transform traditional disciplinary methods in consequence of the perspectives that experience provides, or begin to establish lesbian and gay studies as a freestanding inquiry. Established to contribute to an increased understanding of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, the series also aims to provide through that understanding a wider comprehension of culture in general.

# Contents

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

XIII

<b>First Takes</b>	1
<b>1. Guessing Games</b>	7
Marta Rosales: "God, If I Ever Meet One of Them!"	8
Sid Stein: "I've Seen Some Pretty Curvaceous Butches"	11
Louise Romero: "They All Say I'm Femme, So I Go as Femme"	14
Carolyn Fisher: "In Five Minutes, I May Want to Wear a Dress"	16
Guessing Games: Double Takes	19
<b>2. Metro Retro</b>	26
Julia Benoit: "Now She Has Long Nails and Nail Polish"	27
Melissa Simpson: "No Self-Respecting Butch Would Have Worn Lingerie in 1972"	29
Raye Porter: "Honey, You Can Do That Yourself"	34
Metro Retro: Double Takes	38

<b>3. Baby Pictures</b>	45
Edith Motzko: "I Won't Grow Up. I Don't Want to Be a Man."	46
Yvonne Taylor: "You Can Never Take Naps Together Again"	50
Teresa Cruz: "Everybody Wanted to Get Close to Mercedes"	51
L. J. Ewing: "A Very Tomboy Thing"	55
Connie Robidoux: "You Emphasize the More Physical Aspects of Your Story"	57
Rose Ellis: "I Wonder Were They Like That All Their Lives"	58
Baby Pictures: Double Takes	60
<b>4. Copycat</b>	69
Cynthia Murray: "The Dads Always Drive the Boat"	71
Charlyne Harris: "You Act Like a White Girl"	73
Paula Nevins: "I Never Knew There Were Feminine Lesbians"	75
Jeanne Riley: "All These Women Were Throwing Themselves at Me"	77
Copycat: Double Takes	79
<b>5. Chameleon</b>	87
Lourdes Alcantara: "I Spit in His Face"	88
Elaine Scavone: "Half-Man Half-Woman"	91
Yoli Torres: "When I Say 'Sex,' I Don't Just Mean the Coming"	91
Rona Bren: "Little Did I Know She Was a Black Leather Motorcycle Queen"	94
Chameleon: Double Takes	96
<b>6. On and Off the Scale</b>	103
Rachel Tessler: "I Feel Most Femme When I'm Wearing No Clothes"	105
Helen Garcia: "Who I Think She Wants Me to Be"	107
Paulette Ducharme: "More Butch and More Femme Than Most"	109
Jerri Miller: "They're Feminine, But They're Not Femmes"	111
On and Off the Scale: Double Takes	116
<b>7. Me, Myself, and I</b>	125
Eriko Yoshikawa: "Shifting Gears All the Time"	127
Judith Mayer: "In the Days of the Big Orgasm"	131

Chris Parker: "The Power of Boots"	133	
Misha Ben Nun: "Good for Their Egos and Nothing for Me"	134	
Diane Kunin: "Downtown on Main Street"	136	
Me, Myself, and I: Double Takes	141	
<b>8. Power, Power . . .</b>	<b>148</b>	
Gina Pellegrini: "The Tourists' Eyeballs Were Hanging Out of Their Sockets"	150	
Jenny Chin: "A Carload of Teenagers Screaming at You"	154	
Deborah Gauss: "They Would Have to Publicly Denounce Me"	157	
Cheryl Arthur: "I Wanted to Say, "This Is Who I Am, You Fuckers'"	159	
Sarah Voss: "A Slap in the Face of Heterosexuality"	159	
Power, Power . . . : Double Takes	165	
<b>9. Who's Got the Power?</b>	<b>173</b>	
Richie Kaplan: "The Point of Invulnerability"	175	
Nicole Johnson: "All You Got to Do Is, You Take a Woman and You Kiss Her"	178	x
Roberta Osabe: "I Only Wanted to Do It Through Looks . . . I Didn't Want to Do All the Dishes"	184	xi
Toni Williams: "You Can't Always Be the Aggressor"	186	
Vicki Turner: "Just Because She's Butch Doesn't Mean She's My Master"	188	
Who's Got the Power? Double Takes	192	
<b>After Words</b>	<b>202</b>	
BACKGROUND MATERIAL ON THE WOMEN INTERVIEWED	205	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	209	

## First Takes

---

The last passengers raced across the lounge to catch the afternoon flight to New Orleans. Amidst a barrage of loudspeaker announcements, tourist posters, TV monitors, and airport food, I was filled with anticipation. Several weeks earlier a heterosexual colleague I hadn't seen in years had arranged this rendezvous to introduce me to her seventeen-month-old daughter. Over the phone my friend reported with pride that her child had mastered the cultural logic of gender at the annual anthropology meetings. Little Daria now divided strangers into two groups: women became "Mama" and men "Papa." My friend considered her daughter's recourse to kinship terms understandable, given the many ways that family relationships in the United States incorporate gender.

I soon glimpsed my visitors stepping off one of the moving sidewalks that crisscross the airport like conveyor belts in a transportation factory. Threading her way through a tangle of legs, bags, and briefcases, Daria rushed toward me with a toddler's wobbly self-assurance. "Papa!" she exclaimed as I lifted her into the air and she grabbed a fold of my leather jacket. Her mother looked abashed. "Well, maybe my daughter hasn't *quite* mastered gender," she said apologetically. "Don't worry," I replied with amusement. "Daria just has a few things to learn about the nuances of butch and femme."

In day-to-day life people move through the world acting as though they know exactly what they mean by feminine and masculine, boy and girl, mama and papa, butch and femme, stud and fluff. But like Daria, they use these terms to think their way through situations without necessarily thinking their way through the implications of separating the world into two discrete camps.

These first takes involve more than “mis-takes.” People know that dichotomies such as “man versus woman” oversimplify the world. Many are careful to qualify their terms, and some set out to escape labels altogether. But they generally find themselves swept back into a confrontation with categories that do not even begin to convey what it means to be gendered “me.”

Halfway through the interviews for this book, I began to think that some of the most sophisticated theorists of gender in the United States were out walking city streets. Narrator after narrator pointed out ways in which women can be differently gendered from one another (and men from men). They drew attention to historical changes in the construction of gender that timeless categories such as “masculine” and “androgynous” cannot convey. They zeroed in on ambiguities that make one woman’s butch another’s femme. They insisted that an exclusive focus on gender obscures the very aspects of race, class, and nation that give gender shape.

*Render Me, Gender Me* is a book of personal narratives designed to complicate contemporary discussions of gender. It is also designed to be humorous, disturbing, fun, and thought-provoking, the sort of book that can be assigned in a graduate seminar or read aloud to a girlfriend before turning out the lights. In my commentaries on the interviews I spend more time generating questions and introducing complexities than seeking definitive answers or building models to explain it all. Woven into the text are theoretical clues that suggest some unaccustomed ways to approach the topics of gender and identity. Readers who like their theory “straight”—with fancy footnotes and analytic chasers—will have to wait until the publication of *Unsexed: Gender on the Edge of Identity*, a work in progress that will provide not so much a sequel as a companion volume to this one.

In the pages that follow, I am less interested in genders—Woman and Man—than I am in processes of *gendering*. Anything and anybody can be gendered in a variety of ways. Marketing departments sell everything from breakfast cereals (Special K, GI Joe) to hair coloring (Just for Men) to briefcases (“hard” and “soft”) by using gendered distinctions to differentiate products. When it comes to people, gendering can shift across the course of a lifetime: the rough-and-tumble country girl grows up to be a high-fashion model, the fifth-grade bookworm learns to operate backhoes and cranes, the unemployed autoworker remembers the bravado of younger years, the shy boy from the



back of the class becomes a sought-after date and dance floor sensation. Different social and historical contexts also open different gendered possibilities. A woman in shirt and pants would go unremarked in most suburban shopping malls in the United States today. Dress her in the same outfit and put her in a 1920s farm field, a 1930s sit-down strike, or a 1940s defense plant, and she would be making another sort of social statement.

To add to the complexity, gendered relations are filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Jokes abound about the “masculine” one who can’t handle a screwdriver and the “feminine” one who likes to call the shots in bed. Puzzled looks greet the what-shall-we-call-him one who looks like he could pack a mean punch but refuses to hit. And then there is the variation in what counts as feminine or masculine from time to time, group to group, place to place.

Power relations in the wider society guarantee that things are seldom simply gendered, but raced, classed, and sexualized as well. Occupations, fashions, sexual practices, styles, bodies, gestures, and chores are all coded with respect to social location. A person cannot don a generic suit of clothes in order to transport herself into some color-blind, class-free, neutral and neutered space. It makes a difference whether her shirt is woven of rough or smooth fabric; black, pink, or print; scoop-neck, banded collar, or button-down. A silk evening gown signifies differently than chinos or a polyester knit. What she wears and how she wears it will help mark her as church lady, homegirl, class tourist, elder, recent immigrant, fancydancer, passing woman, WASP on holiday, or a camp version of any one of these. Her access to material resources and placement in social hierarchies will influence whether she feels as though she controls the constellation of symbols that locate her or whether she feels assaulted by stereotypes.

The idea that people continuously negotiate gender can apply to anyone: heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, queers, even people who don’t use categories of sexual identity to order what they do in the world. So why make lesbians the focus of a book on gendered difference? Placing “same-sex” relationships at the center of an attempt to rethink gender makes the modes of gendering more obvious. There’s less temptation to believe that bodies tell you all you need to know about the meaning of words such as “masculinity” and “femininity.” Or that biology supplies the fixed template upon which culture works its variations. Or that gendered differences are always male-female differences.

I conducted the interviews for this book from 1985 to 1990 as part of an ethnographic field research project in the San Francisco Bay Area. All of the women in the otherwise diverse interview sample identified as lesbian or gay. Of the forty women whose interview excerpts appear here, approximately one-