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QUEER FEMININE AFFINITIES

Edited by Alexa Athelstan, Vikki Chalklin,
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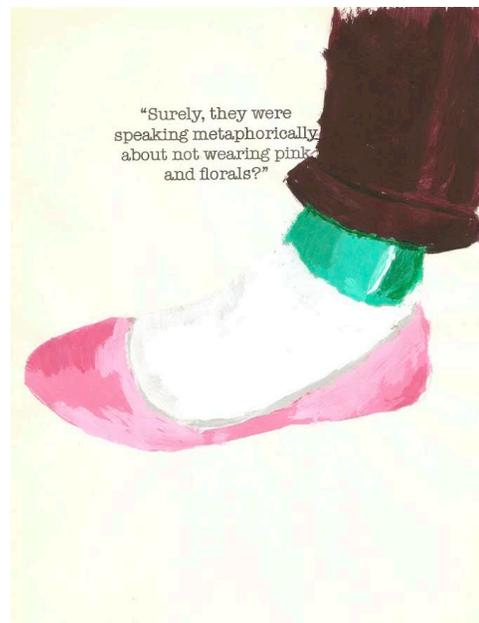
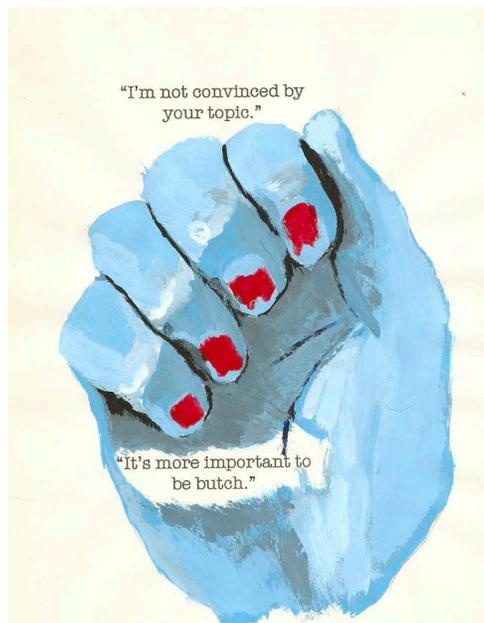
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Low Femme

Andi Schwartz

In this paper, I explore the connection between affect and femme gender presentation. Femme interventions in queer theory have created a high femme standard which conceptualizes femme as performative and brazen. This impressive legacy has caused anxiety for some femme scholars. Using these femme scholars' critiques of high femme gender theory and autobiographical experiences, I offer low femme as an alternative femme form that emerges when negative affects interrupt a high femme aesthetic. This essay contemplates low femme as an aesthetic and emotional form alongside Low Femme, five mixed-media images.



Introduction: Femme Failures

What happens when affect disrupts the performance of gender? This essay accompanies a series of mixed media pieces titled *Low Femme* that offers a new femme aesthetic based on the collision of high femme aesthetics and anxiety. *Low Femme* explores the effects that feelings like depression and anxiety have on the body, and the impact this has on gender presentation, particularly femme gender presentation. Ann Cvetkovich (2012) asserts that negative affects



like depression can be spurred by social and political phenomena. Cvetkovich's work operates as part of a collective project dubbed Public Feelings that touts campy slogans like: "Depressed? It might be political!" (Cvetkovich 2012, 2). She points to the gay and lesbian political turn to homonormativity and "queer neoliberalisms" as a source of this depression: "the queer activism of the 1990s has had its own share of political disappointments, as radical potential has mutated into assimilationist agenda and left some of us wondering how domestic partner benefits and marriage equality became the movement's rallying cry" (Cvetkovich 2012, 6). Jose Esteban Muñoz (2006), too, views depression as political. Muñoz understands depression not as universal, but as socially and historically specific (2006, 675); he states there are particularities to "feeling brown" and feeling down (2006). He writes: "Depression is not brown, but there are modalities of depression that seem quite brown" (Muñoz 2006, 680). Here, Muñoz is referring to the "shattered" ego that is a result of attentiveness to the social—a vital aspect of brown politics (2006, 680). Keeping in mind the specificity of negative affects and their link to the political and social, *Low Femme* considers the anxiety produced by the nagging pressure to achieve or adhere to a high standard of femme style—both physical and emotional—that is commonly found in femme theory.

Femme is a queer feminine identity that stems from working-class lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s in North America (Nestle 1992). Femme has often been paired with the butch, a masculine-presenting lesbian. During the 1940s and 1950s, the masculine/feminine aesthetics of butch-femme style kept lesbians safe—invisible to the undiscerning, straight eye. Joan Nestle (1992) writes about femmes holding their lesbian communities together in these tough times with their sexuality and emotional labour. She writes: "Femmes poured out more love and wetness on our bar stools and in our homes than women were supposed to have" (Nestle 1992, 138-139). Femmes are routinely sexualized and objectified, and disproportionately expected to perform emotional labour, but these are also highly prized femme skills. However, interpersonal relations are often a source of anxiety for me, which I explore in the fourth image of the *Low Femme* series. The image is Bach's Rescue Remedy Spray (used for stress relief) with the text "I heard femmes are supposed to be receptive, but even hugs scare me."

As butch/femme culture evolved, femme was further theorized as a queer and political gender and sexual identity (Nestle 1992; Hollibaugh 2000; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002). However, when queer theory was introduced to the academy in the late 1990s, its emphasis on subversion and deconstruction seemed to privilege butch, trans-masculine, androgynous, and drag expressions over the seemingly more normative femme expression. This insidious queer narrative holds fast in academia, but also holds sway in queer communities. The fear of not being queer enough is a real one for femmes. The third image in the *Low Femme* series reflects my own anxiety about being queer enough. The image shows chipped red nail polish on a femme's fingernails with the text, "I'm not convinced by your topic. It's more important to be butch." This was another student's response to my interest in researching femme identities, revealed in the obligatory round of introductions during my first week of graduate school. I froze—at once a failed queer and a failed academic.

Queer theory and femme theory reveal that femme identity is always already a series of failures and rejections. Femme, in its queerness and excess, fails to be normatively feminine. Femme, in its femininity, fails to be normatively queer. Much of femme theory is about embracing these failures, and actively rejecting the aspects of normative femininity that seek to regulate marginalized subjects and bodies. Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh (1996) write, "The feminine white woman is offered 'respect' only in relation to those excluded from the



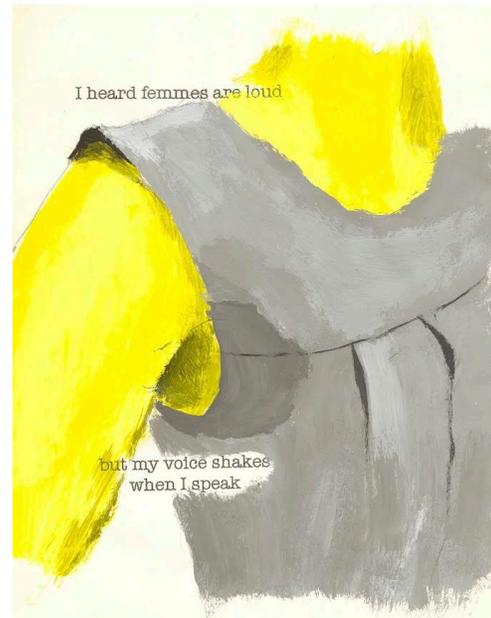
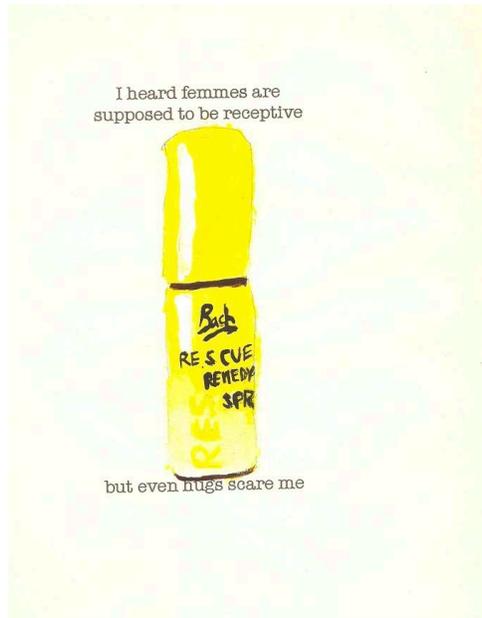
sacred domestic and its ‘protections’—the slave, the mammy, the whore, the jezebel, the wage slave, the servant, the hussy, the dyke, the welfare queen. ‘Femininity’ here is the price paid for a paltry and debasing power” (157). Femme has been an alternative mode of embodying femininity while refusing to cash in the paltry prize of normativity. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (formerly Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha) writes:

Femme is queer. Drop a femme into a straight bridal shower and she’ll stand out as much as a drag queen would. Femme in the working-class, often colored, contexts I have experienced it in is brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious. It goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass feminine propriety. Femme women, like MTFs, construct their girl-ness and construct it the way it works for us. At our strongest, we are the opposite of feminine heterosexual women who are oppressed by their gender and held to impossible media standards designed to foster hatred of one’s body. (1997, 142)

Femme, in many ways, is feminine failure repackaged and reclaimed as a defiant triumph. This has been femme theorists’ response to the treatment of the femme in queer theory: adopting the language of queer theory to argue that femme is a queer, performative, ironic, subversive, and radical identity (Duggan and McHugh 1996; Harris and Crocker 1997; Hollibaugh 2000; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002). The result is a canon of femme theory that centres on a “high femme” aesthetic: a put-on, exaggerated, and performative—even drag—version of femininity that is simultaneously tough, brash, and brazen. Embedded in this aesthetic is another femme expectation that makes me nervous: the second image in the *Low Femme* series is a femme’s sweat-stained dress paired with the text, “I heard femmes are loud but my voice shakes when I speak.”

Low Femme started with a question: if there is such a thing as high femme, then what is low femme? My answer is informed by personal experiences of falling short, of failing to meet the expectations of femme identity performance as described in the femme theory (both high and low) that I have loved, that has offered me a sense of belonging and community. Heather Love’s work on queer histories provides a framework for understanding the strong attachment to the fore-femmes found within femme theory. She says queers look to the past because “contemporary queer subjects are also isolated, lonely subjects looking for other lonely people, just like them” (Love 2007, 36). Experiencing “backward” or negative affects, like loneliness or isolation, drives us to seek a community and a history by tracing the lineage of our identities that are, in part, characterized by similar affective experiences. Muñoz also argues that the “depressive positionality” offers the potential to know others with whom we share an affective or emotional valence (2006, 682). Love encourages us to see these connections “not as consoling but as shattering” (2007, 45). Indeed, it is shattering to try and to fail at performing an identity that leads to a community that could chase away isolation and loneliness. Love (2007) writes of contemporary queer subjects attempting to “save” the queers of the past through historical projects (51), but turning to queer histories is a way in which we also try to save ourselves; we seek to save ourselves from loneliness, isolation, and sadness by finding ourselves in the images, stories, and identities of the queers of the past. This is certainly what I have done with “femme.” Finding “femme” meant finding myself, it meant seeing myself, and it meant understanding myself. More than that, it meant finding a language and community. In other words, it meant finding a context in which it made sense that I existed. And now to feel as though I am falling short of femme, as though I am failing to be femme, well, this is “botching it” (Love 2007, 51) in a different sense.

Using autobiographical experiences to inform the *Low Femme* project follows Cvetkovich's exploration of personal narrative and memoir in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) and *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). Although Cvetkovich (2012) acknowledges the critiques of using memoir, especially in academia, she asserts memoir's usefulness as a methodology and uses personal narrative as a way to reroute around writer's block and explore new ways of thinking (16, 17, 75, 82). Memoir has been particularly useful for femme theory, as femmes' life writing is central to this literature and has served as a corrective to the queer narratives that privilege butch and masculine identities (Brightwell 2017). Analyzing trauma in the context of butch-femme sexualities, Cvetkovich says: "Writing about these emotional and sexual intimacies becomes a way of forging a public sphere that can accommodate them" (2003, 82). Similarly, I hope that writing about the intimacies of femme failures forges a place in femme theory that can accommodate them. I hope my public acknowledgement and exploration of femme failures broadens the scope of femme identities and that it introduces a new dialogue or a new direction in which to take femme theory. Aestheticizing the often private and personal feeling of failure is an attempt to undo shame associated with failure, to generate a public dialogue about femme failures, and to reroute my way to/through/around femme. I see this project as a way to generate different versions of femme and foster communities that can hold the history of femme, while also being less afraid to botch it.





High Theory/Low Theory, High Femme/...Low Femme?

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam introduces the concept of low theory, a theory that gives credence to “the in-between spaces” (2), a “theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples that refuse to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory” (16, emphasis in original). Halberstam’s low theory offers something of a reprieve to my high femme anxiety. The first image in the *Low Femme* series is a femme’s face wearing sloppy, crooked eyeliner accompanied by the text: “Resist mastery.” Bolstered by Halberstam’s directive, I try my shaky hand at femme performance and, predictably, I botch it.

In *Low Femme*, I use the concept of “low theory” coupled with an affective “low,” or sense of anxiety, depression, or otherwise negative feelings. I call these feelings “low” because of the low energy and low function that they seem to instill in the body and the psyche. Queer theorists frequently characterize depression as a “low.” Muñoz describes depression as feeling “down” (2006). Cvetkovich writes: “everyday life produces feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a *low level*, and hence barely discernible from just the way things are, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or for worse, as depression” (14, emphasis mine). Further, she says: “panic brings you down fast” (Cvetkovich 2012, 63); and anxiety leaves one “unable to get up” (Cvetkovich 2012, 44). Cvetkovich’s also articulates anxiety and depression as “ordinary” feelings (2012, 12), which makes them even more apt terrains on which to play with low theory, as articulated by Halberstam.

My use of the term “low” also comes out of femme scholars’ critiques of femme identity theory and their personal anxieties about meeting the standards of femme gender performativity imposed by said theories. Particularly apt is Robbin VanNewkirk’s (2006) apparent dread of the term “high femme,” which I repeat here:

I resist the label of femme sometimes... This is particularly true when people start talking about *high femme*; versus what? Thankfully, you don’t hear people talk too much about *low femmes*, but it still leaves me wondering if I can truly manage this identity... Can I still be subversive if my actions are not always a manipulative and tactical strategy for resistance? What if the subversive potential of femme identity becomes an expectation that I cannot always fulfill? (76-77, emphasis in original)

Lisa Walker (2012) also quotes VanNewkirk’s passage and adds: “it echoes the anxiety of women such as [Jess] Wells and [Amber] Hollibaugh, who find that their age makes them question how they can continue to fulfill the subversive potential of femme in the same fashion they effected as younger women” (807). Walker uses her own experience of ageing as a jumping-off point to question the emphasis on femme drag and femme performativity in the construction of femme identity in femme theory. She writes: “the playground of consumer culture was becoming a minefield: shimmery eye shadows emphasized fine lines; matte red lipstick suddenly looked too brash; vintage clothes looked suspiciously like I might have bought them new” (2012, 796). Like me, Walker (2012) suspects she might be failing as a femme, and will continue to do so if the standards remain the same: “If, as I fear, I am aging out of my own somewhat muted version of alternative femininity, I am probably closer than ever to flunking femme science and embodying a ‘repulsive’ gender style” (798). Here, Walker is responding to Duggan and McHugh’s take on normative femininity: “an historically dated and utterly repulsive gender style” (1996, 156). Duggan and McHugh mock the sincerity of “delicate, morally superior feminine white women” (1996, 157) and question “the dignity and wisdom of



anyone who would wear pink without irony, or a floral print without murderous or seditious designs” (1996, 157). Walker further questions her ability to measure up to these femme standards: “Surely, they were speaking metaphorically about not wearing pink and florals? Or maybe I am a failed femme” (2012, 797). The codes of what purportedly constitute femme identity and performance seem to be setting a high standard, so high, in fact, that it causes femmes to experience fear and dread, and to question their own femme identity and the construction of femme identity itself. Anxiety over femme failure seems to be increasingly common which, in keeping with Love’s theory that queers seek “other lonely people, just like them,” is somewhat comforting. In *Low Femme*, I draw on Walker’s sense of failure as well as my own. The final image in the series is a femme in flat shoes with Walker’s quote “Surely, they were speaking metaphorically about not wearing pink and florals?”

In *Low Femme*, I juxtapose visual representations of physical experiences of a nervous, anxious body with textual representations of mental and emotional ruminations on anxieties and insecurities related to fulfilling a femme identity. The result is a collection of five images that wryly suggests a new femme aesthetic: low femme. Riffing off Halberstam’s low theory, and Walker’s and VanNewkirk’s anxieties around looking *femme enough*, low femme emerges as a sweatier, sloppier, quieter, and shakier version of her high femme big sister in flat shoes. Along with lipstick, low femme touts Rescue Remedy. Her nervous hands can never produce unchipped nails, or manage those stubborn greys. She can hardly muster a hug, never mind making it to the book launch, the poetry reading, the queer slow dance... Low femme is low in energy but high in anxiety. The series *Low Femme* further embodies low theory through the use of a rough, unrefined painting style and “bargain brand” materials. Through my art (and femme) practice, I push myself to “resist mastery”—to botch it—and embrace the result. I hope that using failure and low theory to frame my theory and inform my practice will make this artwork recognizable and relatable to a usually unaddressed femme audience: low femmes.

I say, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that although *Low Femme* is a series of mixed media images, it could also be considered an ongoing performance piece. As I have previously stated, I drew on my own feelings of femme failure to inform this project, but I also used my own body to create the images. I photographed various parts of my body that represent the physical effects of negative affects like anxiety that I experience. I photographed these physical effects as they naturally occurred on my body to highlight the everyday, ordinariness of negative feelings, as articulated by Cvetkovich (2012, 12). The effects I chose to photograph—sweat, crooked eyeliner, and chipped nail polish—can be particularly devastating to a femme image, as they suggest a failure of femininity. Other images, like flat shoes and Rescue Remedy, though they may not be considered physical effects of negative affects, also signify failures in femininity and femme identity, which is purportedly sexy, bold, and loud. I then used these photographs as references to paint the images on paper printed with text. The printed text represents anxious thoughts or insecurities that may either cause the physical effects described above or be a result of experiencing them. The combination of text and image represents the connection between affect and bodily experiences, which is also suggested by Cvetkovich (2012): “To describe anxiety as a psychological state or as subject to mental persuasion doesn’t capture it. In my experience, it was a feeling deeply embedded in different parts of my body. Like physical pain, it kept me fixated on the immediate present, unable to think about other things” (35). *Low Femme* pays attention to the ways negative affects are mental and emotional, but physical as well. The Cvetkovich passage above and the *Low Femme* images also indicate that depression and anxiety can act as a roadblock for a variety of pursuits, including those related to gender performance.



Even though these images were created using my own experiences and body, and thus reflect a white experience, I resist the concept of “flesh tones” in my art practice by painting with colours not often associated with skin to create the images of femme bodies. Though this is not sufficient to decentre whiteness in this project (as whiteness is signalled by more than skin colour), it is my way of acknowledging that femme is not only a white experience or identity; these experiences and identities can be (and are) claimed by any body. In fact, femme literature presents ample critique of the normative feminine ideal that is defined as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Queering femininity is the overt project of femme theory, and often this is done in more ways than one. Most femme literature is written from a queer perspective, but heterosexuality is not the only aspect of normative femininity challenged by femme theorists: the writing of Nestle (1987), Hollibaugh (2000), and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2015) emphasizes how their working-class positionality shapes their femme sexuality, style and politics, while Piepzna-Samarasinha also foregrounds racialization and disability in her femme figurations (2015). The ongoing contributions of femmes of colour, femmes with disabilities, working-class femmes, trans, and genderqueer femmes to femme theory (high and low) demonstrates that “femme” takes many intersectional forms.

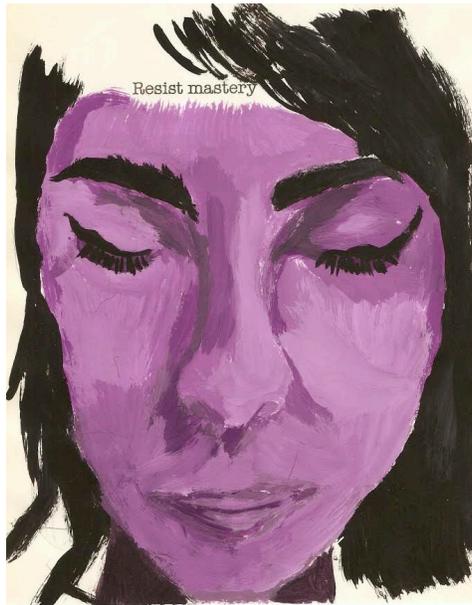
Failure as an Art, Depression as Creative

Halberstam (2011) encourages us to view failure not as a defeat but rather a source of potential: “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). Halberstam does not intend for failure to be construed as favourable; the optimism they see in failure is not one “that relies on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists upon the bright side at all costs; rather this is a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other” (5). Similarly, Cvetkovich (2012) insists that depression should not be twisted into a positive experience, but sees it as an opportunity for creation and alternative thinking. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, she writes:

It might instead be important to let depression linger, to explore the feelings of remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived. But through an engagement with depression, this book also finds its way to forms of hope, creativity, and even spirituality that are intimately connected with experiences of despair, hopelessness, and being stuck. (Cvetkovich 2012, 14)

Muñoz, too, sees potential in a political understanding of depression. He writes: “This political recognition contains a reparative impulse that I want to describe as enabling and liberatory, in the same way that an attentiveness to those things mute within us, brought into language and given syntax, can potentially lead to an insistence on change and political transformation” (2006, 687). According to these theorists, in negativity, depression, and failure lies hope, life, and potential. These theories provide a framework for understanding low femme as a new way of relating to femme identity through failure. Instead of being defeated by these failures, we can use them to challenge femme identity to open up, to see if new understandings of femme can be forged through failure. In forging new identities, the potential for the formation of new communities emerges, too.

Taking cues from Halberstam (2011) to “resist mastery” (11) and Love (2007) to “botch it” (51), *Low Femme* seeks to embrace failure as a method and to reject shame associated with failure. Halberstam says failure can offer rewards: “Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (2011, 3). Though Halberstam is writing here in the context of heteronormative and neoliberal logics, we can understand this in the context of gender identities and queer histories, too; low femme can be understood as a rebellion against femme standards codified in femme theory. This is part of the creativity that Cvetkovich (2012) describes as encompassing “different ways of being able to move: to solve problems, have ideas, be joyful about the present, make things. Conceived of in this way, [creativity] is embedded in everyday life, not something that belongs only to artists or to transcendent forms of experience” (21). In this sense, *Low Femme* is a creative endeavour that finds new ways of relating to low and high femme theory and new ways of being femme.



Conclusion

Low Femme is a mixed media art project that combines Halberstam’s low theory, personal narrative, Walker’s and VanNewkirk’s critiques of high femme aesthetics, and the lived experiences of negative affects. *Low Femme* acknowledges the importance of femme histories to contemporary femme identities, but also the anxiety left behind by the standards these impressive legacies have instilled. These anxieties—as well as negative affects that arise from other sources—have physical effects on the body that can interrupt the performance of the particular version of femme outlined in femme theory. To counteract the high femme standard, *Low Femme* plays on low theory and emotional lows to suggest ways of embracing failure to navigate our way around norms and ideologies that we cannot live up to or compete with. *Low*



Femme finds that embracing failure can be a fruitful way to develop new identities—and, potentially, new communities—while reevaluating the ways we relate to negative affects. Cvetkovich, Halberstam, Muñoz, and the *Low Femme* project demonstrate that failure, depression, and anxiety need not necessarily be fixed or avoided or be considered unproductive, but should rather be considered alternative routes that undercut standards of success and happiness we never agreed to.

Using personal experiences of anxiety and femme failure, I take up these issues in *Low Femme*, trying, also, to see the humour in it all. Bumbling my way through femme performativity can be crushing: the frazzled hair that will not coif, the sweat stains that ruin dresses, the liquid lines that remain shaky no matter how many fresh starts are made. But sometimes seeing how pitifully you fail can lead to useful challenges and productive critiques of the ideologies you didn't realize were crushing you. Halberstam, Muñoz, and Cvetkovich provide the framework that allows *Low Femme* to provoke critiques of femininity and femme identity by allowing the space to engage with experiences of anxiety, depression and femme failure.

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The Exclusionary Effects of Queer Anti-Normativity on Feminine-Identified Queers

Laura Brightwell

How is “queer” normative? How does queer anti-normativity participate in its own form of hegemony and exclusion? This article argues that a queer aesthetics of radicalism is levied against and between community members in order to gain cultural capital. The emphasis on non-binary critiques in queer theory can reify binary thinking and hierarchical logic through the ways in which queer femininities—especially transfemininities—are received in queer spaces. The article draws from various bodies of queer and feminist theory and integrates the author’s experiences in queer spaces to outline and then critique the ways in which queer anti-normativity participates in transmisogyny and femmephobia.

This article argues that an aesthetics of radicalism is levied against and between queer community members in order to gain cultural capital. The emphasis on non-binary critiques in queer theory can reify binary thinking and hierarchical logic through the ways in which queer femininities—especially transfemininities—are received in queer spaces. The article draws from various bodies of queer and feminist theory and integrates the author’s experiences in queer spaces to outline and then critique the ways in which queer anti-normativity participates in transmisogyny and femmephobia. This paper specifically discusses forms of anti-feminine discrimination in what Julia Serano has called the “queer/trans” community (2007, 345). Serano characterizes this community as “a subgroup within the greater” LGBT community that is composed mainly of folks who are more likely to identify as queer and/or trans rather than “lesbian” or “gay” (2007, 345). Anti-feminine discrimination is a pervasive trend in many queer communities. For example, many authors note the gendered and racialized forms of sissyphobia that are specific to gay male communities (Bergling 2001, 113; Chamberland 2016, 110; Eguchi 2001, 37). The gendered, classed, and racialized components of anti-feminine discrimination are specific to each community and need to be analyzed as phenomena in their own right. This article will therefore focus specifically on femmephobia in the queer/trans community that is comprised mainly of members who are Designated Female At Birth (hereafter DFAB) and argues that this kind of femmephobia has a historical lineage that originates in the lesbian-feminist community.

Although experiences of femmephobia and transmisogyny in the DFAB queer community are much discussed in social media conversations, blogs, online magazines, and among community members, there is to-date little academic research that explores these various forms of anti-feminine discrimination. This paper will investigate how androgyny was equated with a lesbian-feminist aesthetic in the 1960s and 1970s, and looks to femme memoirs from that time to explore the exclusionary effects of this investment on feminine lesbians. I suggest that a similar aesthetics exists in specific queer communities today. I hope to ground the theoretical in lived experience and provide anecdotal evidence of various forms of femmephobia by recounting my own experiences and looking at accounts of femmephobia in



blogs. This article considers blogs a contemporary form of memoir and therefore traces not only a historical lineage of femmophobia, but also of femme life writing that recounts the psychological effects of this discrimination.

Femmophobia is a well-known phenomenon that is only recently gaining academic attention. It can be defined as the discrimination directed at someone who is perceived to express themselves in a feminine manner, and operates specifically in LGBTQ communities (Blair and Hoskin 2015, 232; Nicholson 70, 2014). Although femmophobia has in the past been understood to denote the discrimination experienced by feminine cis lesbians at the hands of other lesbians, the general understanding of the term is expanding to encompass prejudice or antagonism towards any queer person who is perceived to embody culturally feminine characteristics (Hoskin 2015, 232). At the same time, the definition of femme is also expanding. Previously understood to refer to cis lesbians who present themselves in a feminine manner, femme is now increasingly understood to denote anyone who situates their femininity in relation to their queerness and is an identity taken up by people of all genders. Additionally, many DFAB femmes articulate their femme-ness as a genderqueer or non-binary gender identity. Accordingly, this article understands femmophobia as a queer-specific form of anti-feminine discrimination that reaches across the LGBTQ spectrum.

I first came to know femmophobia through my own experiences of exclusion within queer communities. I have been actively involved in queer communities and social justice work across cities in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Each of these communities has their own aesthetics, which determine what is considered queer, and what is considered sexy. In London, butch and femme styles are commonplace, with dandy dress being the norm for those on the transmasculine spectrum, and a retro 1950s pin-up look the standard for femmes. In Montréal, I found androgynous looks were common for those DFAB, and strongly masculine or feminine looks were unusual. Berlin appreciates transmasculinities that conform to a punk aesthetic and can be very hostile to those who do not fit this dress code.

Despite the distinct linguistic, cultural, and geographical locations of each of these queer communities, there are clearly shared characteristics common to queer aesthetics. In particular, there is an emphasis on “androgynous” or “masculine” gender presentation within queer communities that are predominantly comprised of people who are DFAB. Many theorists have noted the predominance of an androgynous or masculine aesthetic in DFAB queer culture (Maltry and Tucker 2002, 90; Dahl 2016, 12). Several theorists locate the origin of this trend in lesbian-feminist culture (Maltry and Tucker 2002, 92; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003, 100), and a desire to reject feminine clothes and accessories, which were associated with “submission to patriarchal control over the female body” (Mishali 2014, 55). Lesbian feminists wanted to embrace androgyny as a way of escaping the patriarchal gender system (Stafford 2010, 88). Rejecting femininity in lesbian-feminist culture became a way of proclaiming one’s sexual and political identity, making androgyny a kind of queer uniform for those DFAB. At the same time, the equation of androgyny with lesbian feminism made femme identity illegible as a form of lesbian or queer identity (Mishali 2014, 55). The embrace of a lesbian-feminist androgynous aesthetic had the effect of ostracizing members of the community who did not conform to this dress code.

Authors, such as Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, provide us with first-hand accounts of femme experience in this era, and were often critical of the exclusionary dynamics of the lesbian-feminist movement. Their memoirs recount their experiences as working-class and racialized femmes within lesbian-feminist communities of the 1970s. In her collection of essays *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way*



Home, Amber Hollibaugh notes that femme was seen as a feminine “role” that was inimical to the freedom supposedly represented by androgyny (2000, 257). She recounts the damaging effects of femmephobia on the femme psyche: “Whatever you think is difficult about queer becomes a hundred times more provocative and full of menace when you struggle to understand a way of wanting and a way of being that you know is held in contempt, even by other queers, which balances your selfhood and your erotic identity on the edge of continual humiliation” (260). Hollibaugh describes herself as a “lesbian sex radical, ex-hooker, incest survivor, gypsy child, poor-white-trash, high femme dyke” (2000). In her memoir, she criticizes the failure of the lesbian-feminist movement to provide an intersectional framework that is inclusive of women from diverse racial and class backgrounds: “When we walk down the street, we are both female and lesbian. We are working-class white and working-class Chicana. We are all these things rolled into one, and there is no way to eliminate even one aspect of ourselves” (72). Here, Hollibaugh gestures towards the racial and class exclusions generated by lesbian-feminist political frameworks. She also criticizes the abjection of butch and femme erotic identities, and argues that the lesbian-feminist ideal of “mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex” is unattainable (72).

Pratt, who was a campaigner for LGBTQ and workers’ rights, recounts the misperception of butch/femme relationships within the lesbian-feminist movement in her memoir *S/he*. Pratt notes that her and her butch partner’s gender differences looked like “icons of pornography” and “narratives of inequality” to the lesbian-feminist community (1995, 133). According to a lesbian-feminist politics that relies on the notion of sameness and the lack of difference to construct a vision of egalitarian sexuality, butch/femme looks too reminiscent of the gender inequality that lesbian feminism is trying to critique. This perception directly contributes to their social ostracism from the academic lesbian community (133). Nestle, a working-class Jewish femme, is also explicitly critical of the association of sexuality with a particular kind of dress and gender presentation. In her collection of essays *A Restricted Country*, Nestle critiques the pressure to adopt an androgynous style she felt in lesbian-feminist communities (1987, 105). Like Hollibaugh, she notes these tendencies to declare one’s political affiliation via physical presentation, laconically describing them as “the dress styles that [...] symbolize feminist fashion” (112).

We see similar attitudes towards femininity in queer communities today, and similar conversations among femmes who criticize the equation of androgynous presentation with queer sexuality. In their 2008 study, Heidi Levitt and Sharon Horne note that androgyny is seen as “the feminist-endorsed gender expression” among self-identified queer women they interviewed in the U.S. Southeast (35). In a separate study conducted in the early 2000s, Heidi Levitt, Elizabeth Gerrish, and Katherine Hiestand report anecdotal evidence from femmes they interviewed who said that they had both felt pressured to adopt an androgynous aesthetic, and found it hard to be accepted in lesbian communities because they did not conform to this aesthetic (2003, 105). Participants cited instances in which femmes were “accused by other lesbians of not being political [...] or lesbian ‘enough,’” presumably owing to their feminine presentation (106). These femmes were concerned that the association of lesbianism with an androgynous aesthetic had the effect of marginalizing femmes from lesbian communities (106). These instances suggest that the existence of a dominant queer aesthetic has exclusionary effects on some members of the community. It also suggests that some femmes experience their femininity as a kind of queer failure (106). In addition to noting the prevalence of a politicized androgynous aesthetic in lesbian-feminist culture, Melanie Maltry and Kristin Tucker also observe the prevalence of a similar androgynous aesthetic in “young dyke culture” of the early



2000s (2002, 90). Reading femme narratives of coming out as lesbian, Maltry and Tucker observe that the emphasis on androgyny prevented femininity from being seen as a “powerful” or “resistant” gender presentation in U.S.-based queer communities at the time (94). Maltry and Tucker’s reading suggests that androgyny is valued in some queer communities because it is seen as resistant to a hegemonic femininity that is forcibly imposed on those who are DFAB in patriarchal culture.

We see a similar emphasis on resisting gender norms in queer theory. Several queer theorists identify an anti-normative position as a central posture to many queer theories. David Halperin states that the investment in the anti-normative is typical of queer theory, and argues that the act of taking an oppositional stance is central to queer politics. Halperin writes, “if [something is] queer, it’s politically oppositional” (2003, 341). For Halperin, queer “demarcates [...] a positionality vis à vis the normative” (1999, 62). Robyn Wiegman argues similarly that queer “prioritizes the nonidentical, unassimilable, and anti-institutional as the means to rethink not only politics and identity” but also “political subjectivity itself” (2012, 96). Taking an anti-normative position is for Wiegman a defining feature of queer political subjectivity. For Jack Halberstam, queer even becomes a synonym for non-normative practice. In the introduction to his popular book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam writes that for “the purpose of this book, ‘queer’ refers to nonnormative [sic] logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space” (2005, 6). Alexis Shotwell agrees with the aforementioned authors that the invocation of an anti-normative position is a characteristic of queer theory. She also suggests that anti-normativity in this context usually denotes a position in relation to cultural norms around gender and sexuality. She characterizes queer theory thus: “Open most any piece of writing about resistance to oppression based in sexuality and gender, and you are likely to find at least one reference to normativity in this model: the normative is what we resist, and to be queer and feminist is to resist norms” (2015, 991). For Shotwell, this act of resisting norms around gender and sexuality defines who “we,” as queer subjects, are. All of these theorists identify an anti-normative position as a central characteristic of queer theory. This anti-normative posture is generally understood to be positioned in relation to cultural norms of gender and sexuality. If the anti-normative does define queer subjectivity, as Shotwell suggests, we can start to see how an anti-feminine posture comes to be defined as queer and feminist in DFAB queer communities.

Julia Serano identifies a similar trend to queer theories of anti-normativity in the politics of queer communities that she calls “queer/trans” communities (2007, 345). In her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Serano invents the term “subversivism” to describe the trend of privileging gender identities and sexual expressions that are seen to be subversive in these communities (2007, 346). According to Serano, queer communities’ investment in subversivism means that we, as queers, tend to overvalue “gender identities and expressions” that we see as “inherently ‘subversive’ or ‘transgressive’” (346). Serano describes subversivism as “the practice of extolling certain gender and sexual expressions and identities simply because they are unconventional or nonconforming” (345). According to this logic, “these atypical genders and sexualities are ‘good’ because they ‘transgress’ or ‘subvert’ oppressive binary gender norms” (346). Serano observes that the consequence of this trend is that some gender expressions and sexualities are culturally coded as non-transgressive, perhaps even “inherently conservative”:

By glorifying identities and expressions that appear to subvert or blur gender binaries, subversivism automatically creates a reciprocal category of people whose gender and sexual



identities and expressions are by default inherently conservative, even “hegemonic,” because they are seen as reinforcing or naturalizing the binary gender system. Not surprisingly, this often-unspoken category of bad, conservative genders is predominantly made up of feminine women and masculine men who are attracted to the “opposite” sex. (347)

Serano shows us how the designation of some gender expressions as non-hegemonic operates in relation to unarticulated but deeply ingrained assumptions about what constitutes the hegemonic in terms of gender and sexuality. This tactic of privileging gender identities and expressions that are seen to be subversive depends on a general understanding that other gender identities and expressions are not subversive. Similar to the emphasis on anti-normativity in the work of Halberstam, Halperin, and Shotwell, an investment in the subversive requires the concomitant creation of the normative.

The emphasis on subversivism or anti-normativity in queer communities contributes to feelings of inadequacy among many queer-identified individuals. As we have already seen in the study conducted by Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand, the valorization of an androgynous aesthetic that was coded as politically subversive leads some femmes exposed to accusations of not being political or “lesbian enough” (2003, 106). These femmes felt marginalized from their communities, and even experienced their femininity as a kind of failure (106). Strikingly, similar feelings of inadequacy persist among many femmes and other queer-identified individuals today. These feelings of inadequacy are not specific to femmes, lesbian or otherwise, but are also experienced by other members of DFAB queer communities. By looking at contemporary queer blogs, we can observe the effects this investment in the subversive or anti-normative has on queer subjects who live in these queer communities. Blogging platforms like Tumblr, online forums such as Reddit and social media threads provide a rich source of knowledge about the conversations that are currently happening in queer culture. Similar to femme memoirs recounting the lesbian-feminist movement at the end of the twentieth century, these accounts offer access to voices of those who are not traditionally foregrounded in DFAB queer communities, and who often feel marginalized from those communities.

Caleb Luna is a prolific blogger, based in California, who writes the Tumblr blog “queerandpresentdanger.” Luna critiques queer identity through a queer-of-colour lens from their positionality as a working-class, “superfat, queer, light-skinned latinx, femme.” Luna argues that they are excluded from the queer norm of the white, thin, masculine-of-centre, DFAB body. In their blog post “Queerness is Dystopia,” Luna writes that “claiming queer” entails a replication of a “colonialist capitalist white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy, only to then invisibilize [sic]” that replication. Using a nationalized metaphor to interrogate queer identity politics, Luna asks, “When does queerness become yet another State [sic] to which we claim citizenship [...] and when will we realize the necessity to abolish this one too?” Luna draws attention to the fact that queer identity creates and polices its own borders, and argues that queerness is only a welcoming space for people who meet certain criteria. They state that queer spaces are often fraught with classism, racism, transmisogyny, and fatphobia. Luna continues, “It is easy to reject these spaces as not ‘actually’ queer when they do not live up to our ideas or expectations, but I am not willing to do that. Because they are queer. Because this is what queerness is.” Even though queer politics often aspire to be anti-discriminatory, they often end up reproducing the same kinds of prejudices that we see in patriarchal culture at large. Many people experience queer communities as exclusionary spaces owing to these spaces’ unacknowledged replication of patriarchal values.



We can trace these feelings of exclusion or inadequacy across other online platforms. Reddit is a popular website that hosts “subreddits” or discussion forums on numerous topics related to pop culture. Users can create their own subreddits, and there are many subreddits about queer identities and queer culture. One such forum is “Genderqueer Reddit,” a forum for those “who don’t fit the gender binary or are interested in questioning it”. Genderqueer is an increasingly common gender identity, especially among members of the DFAB community. Although each genderqueer individual may understand their identity differently, broadly speaking genderqueer denotes all those whose gender identity is outside of, not included within, or beyond the binary of female and male. Increasingly, many femmes understand their femme identity as genderqueer, arguing that their femininity is not correlated to their biological sex. One of the most common questions on Genderqueer Reddit is: “Am I genderqueer enough?” This question recurs in different formulations across the site. The popularity of this question suggests that, even among those who identify as having an anti- or non-normative gender identity, there is anxiety about having an aesthetics or politics that is radical enough.

Similar expressions of inadequacy or anxiety about queer identity can be found across other online platforms. CN Lester is a U.K.-based writer, musician, and trans activist who runs the blog “A Gentleman and a Scholar.” In July 2013, Lester hosted a public conversation about trans and genderqueer identities, posing a series of questions to invited guest hosts. Lester invited submissions of questions about trans and genderqueer or non-binary identities, which they then posted anonymously on a weekly basis and asked commenters and the guest hosts to answer. Called “Beyond the Binary,” the question series aimed to debunk myths about trans and gender non-conforming identities, and to provide a repository of knowledge about these identities. The guest hosts, each of whom identified as having a non-cisgender identity, answered questions, referencing other blog posts, and telling their own anecdotes. Readers also interacted with the blog via the comments section, sharing their own understanding of their trans and genderqueer identities, and expanding the perspectives offered on the blog. Questions included: “What makes a gender presentation more or less genderqueer?” “How would you define sex and gender from a genderqueer [...] perspective?” as well as a general call to discuss the intersections of femme and genderqueer identities (Lester “Beyond the Binary”).

During the discussion, Lester summarizes the stereotype of what genderqueer looks like. They describe genderqueer as mostly looking like “young, white, FAAB (female assigned at birth) [sic] androgynous types with edgy haircuts and skinny jeans” (“Beyond the Binary”). Lester nods towards the normativities present in queer communities, and in a genderqueer, anti-normative aesthetic. Another blogger called Hel agrees that the “investment in anti-normativity produces a “sense of (sub)cultural normativity, where masculine/genderfucked presentation (usually on female-assigned bodies) somehow [becomes] equivalent to and determinant of genderqueer identity” (“Beyond the Binary”). Both bloggers observe that genderqueer identities tend to be equated with white, thin, DFAB bodies, leaving genderqueer folk with other kinds of bodies out of the picture. The equation of genderqueer identities with one type of body has particularly disastrous effects for femmes who identify as genderqueer. All contributors to the blog post concur that femme is generally not seen as a genderqueer identity. As one submission reads, “I am genderqueer and have a femme presentation, which seems to be a distinct minority among genderqueer people. The “standard” (maybe stereotypical is a better word) genderqueer presentation is more androgynous or genderfuck” (“Beyond the Binary”). Here we see a femme queer claiming a genderqueer identity, while noting that they are excluded from the stereotype of what a genderqueer person generally looks like. Nat, another contributor, agrees, “I have observed a tendency in some circles to conflate androgynous



appearance with nonbinary [sic] identity or to imply that those who are androgynous [...] are 'more successfully' nonbinary than those who express their nonbinary gender in other ways" ("Beyond the Binary"). For our queer communities, a "successful" genderqueer identity involves inhabiting "androgynous," as opposed to feminine traits. Femmes who identify as genderqueer may feel that they embody, or are perceived to embody, a kind of failed genderqueer identity.

So far, I have looked at the ways in which rebellion against constrictive gender norms has created a DFAB queer culture that tends to reject femininity, especially insofar as it is expressed by those who are DFAB. However, this valorization of anti-normativity results in anti-feminine discrimination directed against trans women, as well as femmes and queers who are DFAB. In his blog "Trans Fusion," trans sociology professor Cary Gabriel Costello blogs about the deployment of the term "normative" within genderqueer communities. His blog is one of those linked in the discussion about genderqueer on "A Gentleman and a Scholar." Costello describes his experience of being at an academic conference that was mainly attended by genderqueer students who were DFAB. He observes that the students are using the term "transnormative" in a different sense to its original meaning. Transnormativity originally described the stereotypical, medicalized narratives told about trans people, that they were "born in the wrong body" and that they must proceed through gender confirmation surgery and/or hormone therapy in order to be "cured" of their gender dysphoria. However, Costello writes that these students "used 'transnormative' as a pejorative for any trans* [sic] person whom they read as 'reinforcing the gender binary.' In translation, what that meant was trans* men they saw as "passing," and almost all trans* women" ("The Transsexual Empire"). Transnormativity is equated here with anyone who is seen to be "reinforcing the gender binary" in their gender presentation. Someone who is Designated Male At Birth (DMAB) and feminine is seen to have a presentation that upholds the gender binary, whereas people who are DFAB and present in a masculine way are seen to subvert the gender binary. Costello continues to show the violent effects of this exclusion of trans women from the queer community by relating a personal anecdote:

There was also a woman from the local community attending who sat by herself, ignored by the people around her at all the panels we both attended, often with empty seats on either side of her. Her trans* [sic] status was visible in her wig and the hair on her hands. [...] It's always disheartening [...] to see people like her [...] come to a community event hoping for some recognition and support, only to face more social ostracism at the place they hoped to meet with understanding. (Costello 2012)

Trans women often experience social ostracism from the queer and trans community. Despite the fact that all trans people express non-normative gender expressions by virtue of their trans status, it is usually only trans men who are seen as anti-normative or queer. Similar to all femmes, it is trans women's femininity that is targeted for ridicule or seen as anti-feminist. However, unlike DFAB femmes, trans women also experience specific forms of discrimination. As Serano notes, trans women are singled out for ridicule far more often than trans men (2007, 14). Serano calls this specific form of discrimination transmisogyny (15). It is trans women's "expressions of femininity and [...] desire to be female" that are "sensationalized, sexualized and trivialized" and otherwise targeted by society at large (14). Trans women experience transmisogyny, in addition to transphobia (15). As Serano argues, "when women's or lesbian organizations and events open their doors to trans men but not trans women, that is not transphobia—it is trans misogyny [sic]" (15). In queer communities populated by people who



are DFAB, many believe femininity is inherently oppressive. To transition into femaleness and, for some trans women, femininity, is seen by many queer feminists as “buying into your own oppression.” The treatment of trans women in these communities lies in stark contrast to the treatment of trans men, who are often welcomed and seen as more radical.

Despite being dismissed as “normative” by the lesbian-feminist and contemporary DFAB queer communities at large, many femmes have and continue to understand their gender identity as anti-normative. In an interview with Amber Hollibaugh conducted in the 1990s, brown, disabled, non-binary femme Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha discusses her femme identity. Piepzna-Samarasinha theorizes “high femme” as a form of transgender identity: “Even though we do not cross from our assigned-at-birth gender—the way transgender is often thought of—we still chose to live a different gender. If a high femme goes to a baby shower and *struts* her stuff, she will be read as being as queer as a drag queen would” (Hollibaugh 2001, 249; italics in original). Piepzna-Samarasinha divorces her femininity from any correlation with her body and instead situates it in relation to her queerness. She reconceptualises her femme identity as queer by using the language of transgender identities. She also aligns her femmeness with that of drag queens, thereby implying that her femininity is exaggerated and artificial. Hollibaugh agrees with Piepzna-Samarasinha, adding “if you’re doing high femme, your femininity is profoundly made up” (250). In an earlier essay, Hollibaugh also states that she has been profoundly influenced by drag queens. She writes, “I never ever saw myself as a ‘natural’ woman. [...] I wasn’t femme because I felt like I was a ‘real’ woman” (147). Hollibaugh adds that this kind of femininity is “witty and brittle and bitchy and kick-ass” and emphatically not passive (148). Hollibaugh suggests that being femme has nothing to do with being a “real” woman. She articulates her gender identity as a kind of camp femininity that is a deliberate performance. This kind of outrageous, “unnatural” femininity is typical of a queer femme aesthetic. This understanding of femme as performative, exaggerated and divorced from femaleness or womanhood is very common today, among both DFAB and DMAB femmes. As Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh exemplify in their 2002 “A Femme(inist) Manifesto,” many femmes are “suspicious of any notion of the feminine that takes itself seriously” and question “the dignity and wisdom of anyone who would wear pink without irony” (157). For many femme writers and theorists, femme does have an anti-normative aesthetic. This aesthetic usually entails an exaggerated, camp version of femininity, which is loud, obnoxious and in-your-face.

This camp, femme aesthetics forms a counter-discourse that is committed to queer anti-normativity but that also looks different to the dominant queer aesthetic in dyke- and trans-oriented queer communities. However, this conceptualization of femme also has an “Other.” By vehemently asserting that their femininity is ironic, “unnatural” and divorced from any claim to authenticity, these femme authors implicitly distance themselves from any claim to femininity as an innate, authentic or earnest experience. These authors can only claim femininity when it is ironic; in a sense, queer identity and femininity are very much still at odds with one another.

In conclusion, there are many culturally, geographically, and historically distinct forms of femmephobia. However, despite these differences, the trend of devaluing femmes, trans women, and feminine gender expressions is consistent across lesbian, lesbian-feminist, and “queer/trans” communities. The emphasis on a supposedly feminist androgyny in lesbian-feminist communities excluded anyone with a feminine gender expression. This emphasis persists in contemporary queer communities, coded as anti-normativity. While there is no obvious direct correlation between queer theory and the ways queer identities are formulated, we do see the feminine being coded as the normative, and femmes experiencing instances of



feeling or being told they are not “queer enough” by other queers. A queer aesthetics of radicalism is levied against and between community members in order to uphold gendered conventions of queer (anti-)normativity. By using the language of camp and anti-normativity, femmes can gain access to queer identity. However, this access still produces an “Other” from which they have to distance themselves, and who implicitly remains outside the borders of acceptable queer femininity or acceptable queerness. These articulations of queer femmeness both challenge and can unwittingly reinforce sexism in queer community. Any femme who experiences their femininity as authentic or innate is performing the wrong kind of femmeness, and by extension is not performing an appropriately “queer” or “anti-normative” femme-ininity. Trans women also experience anti-feminine discrimination and feel unwelcome in the DFAB queer community. Unlike trans men, whose masculinity is seen as anti-normative, trans women are criticized by queer feminists for embracing femaleness and femininity. It is important to consider why transmasculinities are praised, while transfemininities are so often rejected as normative and “binary.” This mismatch between the reception of transmasculinities and transfemininities illustrates the prevalence of transmisogyny and reveals the misogynist logic that queer communities often replicate.

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feral feminisms

Queer Feminine Affinities

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More Fats, More Femmes: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia and Femmephobia on Grindr

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“More Fats, More Femmes: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia and Femmephobia on Grindr” is a personal narrative about the liminalities of being a fat and femme queer on Grindr, the largest and most-widely used social networking application geared specifically towards queer men. The piece deconstructs the now-ubiquitous phenomenon in queer male communities, “no fats, no femmes,” and examines the complex intersections and interactions that exist between queerness, fatness, and femininity. The narrative radically explores the intricate double marginalities that fat and femme queers must navigate when their bodies and identities are simultaneously eroticized and discriminated against.

Dedication

This personal narrative is dedicated to all the queers who have had to learn to play by a different set of rules on Grindr.

This personal narrative began when I was about 20 years old. It was the first time I downloaded Grindr, the largest online queer social networking (read: fucking) application geared specifically towards queer men. When I started engaging with the application, I immediately remember feeling like I did not *belong*. My fat hairy body existed amongst a plethora of abs and rib cages and the makeup on my face marked my queer identity as feminine, which was contrary to the profile descriptions declaring “masculine guys ONLY.” It was the first time in my life that I started to understand my queer body as *fat* and my queer identity as *femme*. It was the first time I felt like my queerness was something that could be “wrong”—my fatness was deemed as gross and unattractive and my femininity was devalued and degraded. I learned quickly that my queer identities existed behind a ubiquitous phrase that is used on the application: “No fats, no femmes.”¹ In fact, this phrase has been popularized so much that for the low-price of \$28.50, you can celebrate pride this year with your own Marek + Richard tank top that spells out in big, bold letters that you are not interested in fats or femmes (for the record, do not buy this shirt). The notion of “no fats, no femmes” has left me constantly questioning what it means to “belong” on Grindr and what bodies are afforded a “sense of belonging” in that space.

Hegemonic narratives surrounding the queer male body have constructed a queer space on Grindr that celebrates and welcomes whiteness, masculinity, and muscularity. Queer bodies that do not conform to these rigid boundaries of identity (read: fats, femmes, and/or racialized queers) are relegated to the margins of this social networking application. These queer bodies are confronted with a double marginality—they are rejected from straight society for who they fuck and fall in love with and then rejected from the corporate queer community for their non-whiteness, fatness, and/or femininity. The complex Othering and deviancy of femininity, fatness, and/or non-whiteness on Grindr is continuing to construct an online queer



space where a particular form of queerness is celebrated—that is a queerness that is white, masculine, and muscular. It is this queerness that is welcomed and invited into queer spaces without adversity; it is this queerness that is used in queer media and advertising; it is this queerness that is accepted at Pride events; it is this queerness that is sought out on Grindr; and, most importantly, it is this queerness that is represented as being the “right kind of queer.”

It is important to understand that “queer” is not a homogenous identity and requires a critical deconstruction of the ways social hierarchies (e.g., race, class, gender expression, body type) come to structure seemingly unitary categories of sexuality. We must be critical of the ways that multiple diversities form between those groups who identify as “queer.” I posit that Grindr is a space of pervasive homonormativity—that is, the queer body in this space is constructed within raced, gendered, and classed norms (Brown, Browne and Lim 2007, 12). Further, as Jon Binnie (2007) notes:

Heteronormativity has been a powerful concept in challenging the way society is structured along the two gender model—norms that enshrine heterosexuality as normal and therefore [queer] people as Other and marginal. However, I am not so sure about its usefulness now. The notion of heteronormativity tends to lump all heterosexuals [and queers] together in the same box, and can mask or obscure the differences between and within sexual dissident identities and communities. (33)

The notion of a “singular queer community” ignores the important oppressions and discriminations that are occurring *within* and *between* queer communities. The notion of homonormativity (Ferguson 2005; Nero 2005; Binnie 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004; Duggan 2014) refers to the mainstreaming of queer politics and the increasing visibility and power of affluent white gay men accompanied by the marginalization and exclusion of queer bodies on the basis of race, class, gender identity and expression, body size, and (dis)ability (Binnie 2007, 34). These queer bodies become what Binnie and Bell (2004) refer to as the “queer unwanted” (1810).

Homonormative formations in queer spaces have marked the fat, femme and/or racialized queer body as “unwanted” and “undesired.” To embody the “right kind of Queerness” on Grindr is to be what Rinaldo Walcott (2007) refers to as the “archetypal queer”—white, muscular, middle-class, able-bodied and masculine (237). Fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies have been excised from the “we are a family” discourse of the contemporary gay and lesbian movement (239). I argue that fat, femme and/or racialized queers are scripted as impostures on Grindr.

As a fat and femme queer, my Grindr experiences have become the same fatphobic and femmephobic routine:

Random Grindr Guy One: “Hey bro, what’s up?”

Me: “Not much, I should be working on my thesis but I am about to binge watch Netflix.”

Random Grindr Guy One: “Cool. Are you masculine acting? #masc4masc”

Me: “Only on Fridays”

Random Grindr Guy One: “Huh?”

Me: “Never mind.”

Random Grindr Guy One: “So... I think u r cute... Do you have any more pics? Like a body pic?”

Me: *reluctantly sends body pic*



Random Grindr Guy One: “Oh, sorry I’m not really into big guys”

Me: “That’s fine, I’m not really into body-shaming and femmephobic assholes anyway! ☺”

Profile after profile on Grindr marks my fatness and femininity as Other. I have begun to learn that fatness, femininity, and queerness on Grindr are defined as mutually exclusive concepts. Interestingly, on Grindr, I am not even given the option to describe my body as fat. When prompted to select a “body type,” users can only choose to describe their bodies as toned, average, large, muscular, slim, or stocky. Fat users, such as myself, cannot even label themselves “fat.” Instead, Grindr provides a few ambiguous and relative terms, such as “large” and “stocky” that allude to fatness without actually naming a user’s body as “fat.” Grindr has successfully created an online queer space where one does not have the option to embody fatness, and thusly, fatness is scripted as exclusive to queerness. As Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy (2009) write in *Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers*, to deny fatness in queer communities is to ignore the existence of radical fat-positive queer identities and sexualities (149). Similarly, when user’s on Grindr are prompted to select their “community” identification (or to use Grindr’s problematic language, “tribe”), they do not have the option to select “femme” (see Appendix A). This process forces fat and/or femme queers to present online versions of themselves that do not match their real life queer subjectivities. It is important for me to note that my body is fat and my identity is femme. However, I am not given the option to embody these subjectivities on Grindr. When entering the application, I am unable to present my identities as fat or femme and I have to conform to constructions of queerness that do not truly represent my queer identities—that is, I am unable to be who *I am* as a human being. I am forced to grapple between identities such as a “stocky bear” or a “geek who is large” rather than being myself: A fat and femme queer.

As I write this narrative, I think about all the queers (myself included), who are afraid to embrace their beautiful, fabulous, and special femme identities, in fear of being an “inferior queer.” I think about all the queers who are told countless times by the corporate queer community that their bodies need to be fixed and corrected. Countless studies have confirmed that queer men are at a particular risk for developing patterns of body image disturbances and disordered eating (Siconolfi et al. 2005; Yelland and Tiggemann 2003; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Austin et al. 2004). Queer men are more likely than straight persons to have fasted, vomited, and taken laxatives or diet pills to control their weight within the last 30 days. Queer men are seven times more likely to report bingeing and twelve times more likely to report purging than straight men (National Eating Disorders Association 2012, 2).

As a fat and femme queer, I am left navigating Grindr as a complex paradoxical space. When my fat body and femme identity are not at the site of exclusion, they are at the site of hyperinclusion because of their “differences” from the image produced by corporate queer culture (read: white, masculine, and muscular). Fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies represent bodies that exist as sources of tension in corporate queer spaces because they represent that which could expect rejection but also fetishization (Winge 2012, 59). The “Otherness” of fat, femme, and/or racialized queer bodies becomes a form of *pleasure*—fatness, femininity, and/or nonwhiteness become what hooks (1992) refers to as “enjoyment” (21).

bell hooks (1992) argues that Otherness has become so successful “because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (21). For corporate (white) queer bodies, the “real fun” is to be had by bringing to the surface all their “nasty unconscious” longings and fantasies about sexual contact with the Other (21-2). The corporate (white) gay may contemplate: What is it like to fuck a fat person? What would it feel



like to be pounded by a “big black cock”? How tight is a sissy boy’s asshole? How would it feel to have my cock blown by a “submissive” Asian boy? For many corporate (white) queer bodies, fucking is a way to confront the Other—to leave behind their corporate (white) queer “innocence” and enter the world of “experience” (23). Fatness, femininity, and/or nonwhiteness become embodiments that are *fetishized* on Grindr—bodies that are sought after for consumption.

I recently had a “social networking” (as I previously explained, these quotations mean fucking) experience with someone on Grindr who I will refer to as Random Grindr Guy Two. As I reluctantly took my clothes off for him, assuming he would be uncomfortable with the fat on my body, quite the opposite happened. He grabbed the fat on my thighs and stomach and told me he “loved the way my skin jiggled for him.” The whole encounter was unnerving—he repeatedly called my “fat ass beautiful” while yanking, grabbing, and pinching the fat all over my body. When we were done having sex, he looked me in the eyes and told me he had a type. When I asked what he meant, he explained to me that “he loved fat sissies.” I realized then that Random Grindr Guy Two did not care about my personhood. I was simply a fat and femme queer whose ass would jiggle for him when he fucked it.

The femme queer body, despite its subordinate positioning by corporate queer culture, is also “admired” and fetishized for its imagined sexual submissiveness. Femme embodiments are hypersexualized and are often sought after for their presumed sexual availability. As Julia Serano argues, femininity is seen as something to be taken control of and positioned as powerless (2007 254). Femmes on Grindr are scripted as sexual objects and commodities, rather than fully formed human beings. Their embodiments are hypersexualized in our culture because they are viewed as “enabling” their own sexual objectification by virtue of the fact that they are willingly embracing femininity (253-60). Moreover, I also want to acknowledge that fat itself is often a form of sexual interest. Fatness is often admired and eroticized in a body, particularly in queer male bodies (Richardson 2010, 101). As Richardson (2010) notes, “[G]ay culture has always been more openly fetishistic [about fat] than its heterosexual counterpart. Gay men have always been keen to identify (unashamedly) in terms of their fetish for physical features” (102). The fat body in queer communities often represents a supreme, erotic indicator (102).

As noted by Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy (2009), fat queers are continually pursued by queer men who often label themselves “fat admirers” or “chubby chasers.” Within gay culture, the terms “chubby chaser” or “fat admirer” are utilized to describe queer men whose sole attractions are towards “chubs.” Chubby chasers tend to have slim-built bodies and are devoted to the admiration of fatness (Whitesel 2010, 5-6). Fatness is fetishized, desired, and “admired” because of its bodily difference in a culture that tends to only represent and celebrate a slim and muscular queer body. Chubby chasers and fat admirers are exclusively attracted to fatness and see fat queer men as an “object of desire” (Pyle and Loewy 2009, 147).

My experiences with Random Grindr Guy Two also made me realize that there are complex intersections between my fatness and femininity. As Whitesel (2010) notes, fatness in the queer male body has been negatively associated with effeminacy, an association that has not historically been made with the straight, male body (216). Thus, the fat queer body lives in historically-constituted and highly-gendered communities where the physicality of hegemonic masculinity remains under constant surveillance (216). The embodiment of fatness within the queer male body produces stereotypical feminized features, such as breasts, hips, and the diminishment of visible genitals, all of which threaten images of masculinity and the archetype



of the disciplined muscular body (216-7). Queer men adopt notions of a hegemonic masculine body to create a rigid border between themselves and the so-called “fats” and “femmes” (217).

This personal narrative has aimed to shift the dialogue away from the ways that heteronormative society is defining and oppressing queer persons and rather, begin deconstructing and troubling the ways that queer folks are discriminating and oppressing other queer folks *within* their own communities. This narrative is a reminder to continue challenging oppressive corporate (white) gay propaganda found on Grindr and work towards disrupting the notion that fatness is “abject” and “gross” and that femininity is “weak” and “lesser-than.” My narrative implores queer folks to radically reconsider the implications of their words on Grindr. I contend that words matter and words have important consequences. And to the queer folks who do not think so, you can stare at my glittery middle finger and kiss my big, fat, queer ass. This personal narrative concludes with a poem I wrote entitled *young queer kid*:

young queer kid,
remember how you always wanted to dance on the rings of Saturn.
and you would picture your legs transforming into this sexy see-through lace.
and you would imagine the way your feet would burn in the best way possible from all
of your carefree dance moves?
and you would smile.
a smile so radiant and infectious that it would be confused with the prettiest and
brightest purple lilacs that ever bloomed.
and then you stopped smiling.
and you stopped dancing on Saturn’s rings.
because that straight parent told you to act like the boy you were supposed to be.
and that straight friend was too embarrassed to be around you because your voice was
too high and too loud.
and the speed and the frequency at which you talked was too over-whelming.
and they marked you a sissy.
and questioned you.
turning your identity into an examination you had no way of ever studying for.
you failed them. and you thought you failed yourself.
because those straight institutions never told you that you could exist.
the hetero love that you learned was a prized display for the world.
it was 14 carat gold love.
and you were somehow wrong.
always changing the pronouns in your poems and pretending that your high school
love letters didn’t exist because of him.
invalidating the ways you loved as if they ever existed in your embodiment.
but don’t worry. they will tell you it gets better.
you will be welcomed into a community of love and acceptance.
but then you do worry.
because you learn it doesn’t get better.
it only gets worse. meaner.
because you will finally be at an age where you will have the vocabulary to name your
discriminations.
and this time.
it won’t be the straight system who tells you are wrong.



but rather your queer friend. your queer lover. your queer communities.
they will tell you that you are the worst kind of fag.
your femininity will be their joke.
your gapless thighs will make them vomit corporate rainbows.
you'll plant your identities into the earth.
equal parts soil. equal parts water. equal parts naivety.
you'll think that their love will nourish your roots. but no flowers will ever bloom.
they will always forgot to tend to your garden.
they will forgot about you.
and you must learn young queer kid.
that you can forget about them.
the same way they forgot about the femmes who were throwing bricks at stonewall,
while masc boys were fucking in parks moaning over the chants for revolutionary
freedom.
the same way they forgot to represent your body in any queer spaces making your
identity the new "in" that prefaces "visible."
the same way they forget to tell you that you are beautiful while young queer boys
starve themselves following an instructional manual that is written in a language they
can't read.
young queer kid. it is okay to bloom on your own.
to bloom as beautifully and dangerously as you have to for them to see you.
let your radical self-love be your resistance.
young queer kid. dance on the rings of Saturn until your feet are filled with big
beautiful blisters.
then bloom.
bloom into the biggest and prettiest flower you can be.
grow and grow and grow. until you have grown so tall that you can't see or hear the
people who told you that you are not valid.
young queer kid. you are valid.
you are special.
and you are loved.
if not by other people. then by you.

Notes

1. The popularized phrase "no fats, no femmes" that is used on Grindr is also often extended to include "no Asians" and "no Blacks." The analyses I offer throughout this personal narrative are limited by my own positionalities and lived knowledges—that is, fatness and femininity. I want to stress the importance of noting that I benefit every day from corporate white queer discourses and systems that privilege the colour of my skin, and that my fatness and femininity are experienced through and within whiteness. Thus, this piece is bound by my own white subjectivities and I therefore, cannot make claims or speak to the lived experiences and realities of racialized folks who engage with Grindr.



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Debility

t pomar

In many of the queer spaces I have inhabited for over a decade, I have observed and experienced how the toxic masculinity characteristic of heteropatriarchy has spun a web of femmephobic biases around anyone or anything perceived as feminine/effeminate/camp—portraying femmes as “less than.” For years, I have struggled with internalized femmephobia, often denying myself the pleasure(s) associated with femme/feminine-of-centre gender expression/presentation. I wrote the poem “Debility” as a way of healing from the self-inflicted wounds of femme denial and of reclaiming and celebrating my true self—centred on total visibility, making room for my overlapping identities (femmeness included).

Debility

For years I thought, a femme bottom—what is more common, what is more despised? Than a girl with her legs open. Wanting something. Just wanting. I didn’t come up with this idea on my own. The whole world told me it was true. The whole world told me that there is nothing more common and stupid than someone feminine of center with their legs open, wanting something more than a kick or a curse.

—Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2015, 214-215)

[F]emme accounts of receptivity avoid a redemptive reading of sex, insisting on the fear, pain, and difficulty that can block the way to and be conjured up by making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive. ... What’s required instead is a sex positivity that can embrace negativity, including trauma. Allowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a space for shame and perversion within public discourse rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable.

—Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 63)

there is a girl inside you
dressing her mouth
in night terrors
low-lying traumas hovering
like nerve gas in the air

an inconsolable sighing waist
in bouts of escape strategies
nimble fingers in deft beckoning
fondling the throes of thighs
in relentless exploration of detritus
mapping carmine alluvial fans



there is a girl inside you
listening close to spines
fallen prostrate in adoration
exposed on her bedroom floor
determined to live fleshed

hot-blooded surges of abiding desire
an invocation for something other
the queerness of crepuscular feelings
plentiful and undistorted by any body
as echoes of the moon's orbit annotate
the deep groans of supplicating knees

always degrees away from waning

Artist Statement

Misogyny, both crude and subtle, is deeply ingrained in our patriarchal, heterosexist, cisnormative, gender-essentialist Western cultures. As exemplified by the quotations chosen to preface the poem “Debility,” people of all genders and sexual orientations have been indoctrinated with prejudice against women, which results in dislike or even aversion towards anything perceived as being on the feminine end of the prescribed gender binary.

Our queer communities (even non-binary ones) are not always exempt from collective internalized misogyny and the resulting erasure of femme identities. Misogyny both informs and is informed by femmephobia: The denigration, fear, or even hatred of anyone or anything associated with femininity or perceived as being effeminate/camp (irrespective of their *actual* gender identity). Femmephobia is alive and well in our queer cultures, which are still largely dominated by the politics of toxic masculinity: By the constant policing of fashion, mannerisms, or behaviours for hints of femmeness/campness; relentless shaming based on said femme/camp signs; and even violence (most notably against transwomen—especially those of colour) as direct manifestations of femme/camp loathing.

In lesbian cultures, femmephobia shows itself in femme invisibility. There is a tendency in both the heteropatriarchal and the queer world to read lesbians whose gender presentation is on the feminine spectrum as “straight.”¹ As a result, many lesbians knowingly deny themselves their authentic identities while unknowingly internalizing femmephobia, all in the name of not “passing” as straight or not having your sexual orientation called into question by your very own community. Butching up to gain queer credibility to prove that we are not going along with the heteropatriarchal order and that we are ever as radical and feminist as the more masculine-of-centre or androgynous members of our community, takes a heavy toll on us and limits not only our gender expression but the exploration of our true sexual selves.

Confusing gender expression with sexual orientation can be commonplace both outside and within the LGBTQIA+ community, where a femme/feminine-of-centre person is only ever made visible by association with a butch/masculine-of-centre lover. The dynamics, in the bedroom and public spaces alike, of butch-femme relationships have been widely documented and could be considered a subdiscipline of queer studies.² However, femme-loving femmes are still met with disbelief and sometimes mockery (based on desexualizing



essentialisms rooted in sexism), even in many of today's most inclusive queer communities and spaces.

The virulent and oppressive dialectic of masculinity also struggles to recognize intersectionality and, as dominant discourse, it oftentimes succeeds at erasing the significance of issues pertaining to trauma(s), classism, ableism, racism, etc. to an individual's experience of selfhood, especially of issues pertaining to trauma(s), classism, ableism, racism, etc. It was amid coming to terms with my own internalized femmephobia and other types of self-hate that I conceived "Debility." Not wanting my identity to be policed, distorted, and potentially expunged by overriding narratives, my poem was an exercise on visibility on all fronts: An attempt to live up to my full gender-presentation and sexual potential. "Debility" helped me start my healing process through exploring and reclaiming my identity in my own right: As based on my queer, feminine-of-centre, NBPOC, femme-loving power bottom, migrant body-shrine to my true complicated self—who refuses to wear the invisibility cloak any longer.

Notes

1. The presumption of heterosexuality for feminine-of-centre folk within LGBTQIA+ communities has been extensively discussed by numerous queer femmes who have denounced the detrimental effects such an assumption has on one's identity. An important contribution to academic discussion around femme identity, (in)visibility, and discrimination and violence arising from femmephobia within queer spaces is Karen L. Blair and Rhea Ashley Hoskin's qualitative analysis of 146 femme-identified individuals' responses to questions pertaining to "coming out, experiences of femmephobia and the notion of essentialised femininity" (2014, 229). Additionally, the internet is awash with first-person narratives of the marginalization of femmes read as straight in the queer scene. One of such stories is Mary Emily O'Hara's candid account: "Femme Invisibility is the Dirty Little Secret of the Queer Community." In the heteropatriarchal order, equating femininity to straightness is a tale as old as time. This unyielding misinterpretation gives way to many a "but you don't look gay" moments. Consequently, instances of comic relief at the expense of such an essentialist notion can be found in popular culture, with a famous recent example being delivered as part of Kate McKinnon and Kumail Nanjiani's opening monologue at the 2016 Film Independent Spirit Awards: "...you have ended up with us: A gay woman and a Pakistani man. Or as Hollywood thinks of us: A straight woman and her IT guy."
2. Photographic evidence indicates that butch and femme identities and butch-femme cultures and relationships date back to at least the beginning of the 20th century. In today's queer world, "butch" and "femme" definitions have evolved to accommodate multiple gender expressions and identities. However, the analysis of butch-femme realities continues to be an integral part of queer studies, adding to an increasing canon of seminal and (for the most part) intersectional work which spans decades and genres and includes contributions by Ann Bannon (*The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*), Joan Nestle (*The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*), Leslie Feinberg (*Stone Butch Blues*), Ivan E. Coyote (*Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*), Amber L. Hollibaugh (*My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*), Jack Halberstam (*Female Masculinity*), Wendi Kali (*The Butch/Femme Photo Project*), and Cheryl Dunye (*The Watermelon Woman*)—to name but a few.



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feral feminisms

Queer Feminine Affinities

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Bi, Femme, and Beyond

Angela Martinez Dy

The pieces that follow are prosaic and poetic reflections on the author's experiences as a queer femme of colour, and address some of her most significant insights, joys, and heartaches therein. In "Bi, Femme, and Beyond" she explores her earliest memories of being queer, challenges around coming out in a traditional and religious family context, and the finding of queer POC community through art and activism. In "Mapache" she identifies and celebrates a distinct queer femme of colour lineage, historicising and honouring the legacy of those whose lives serve to decolonise and liberate sexuality and self-expression.

My desire to please began with my mother. Beautiful and glamorous, with her wavy auburn hair and long, tapered fingernails, always neatly dressed and made up, I inherited from her my understanding of what it means to be feminine: sexy and strong, simultaneously. She, in turn, inherited it from her mother, an elegant, well-built *mestiza* woman who bore twelve children and never left the house without lipstick and her trademark doe-eyed winged eyeliner. Her preferred style included matching her dress to her shoes and earrings, which she had customised with the same fabric. I often watched my grandmother at her dressing table, engaging in her morning and evening rituals. The women in my mother's lineage taught me that dressing with intention, making oneself up and caring for your body in a way that pleases you were powerful acts that had meaning, where beauty and strength coexisted. This is where the femme in me begins.

In my earliest sexual fantasies I am naked onstage, dancing for a crowd of ogling, appreciative men. Since my dad was never around, I wanted the attention of men. But men were not the objects of my attention. When I was eight, I saw a comic strip that had a cartoon drawing of a woman on a stage unzipping the back of her gown. I knew it was naughty and I found it inviting. I had a habit of cutting out comics that I liked, so my mom did not find it unusual when I went for the scissors and snipped a square out of the Sunday paper. She did, however, sternly question me when she found the drawing on the counter in the bathroom. I had left it there by accident after bringing it in with me to the shower, where I used the massaging showerhead to give myself my first orgasms.

My first girl crushes trod a blurry line between wanting a woman, and wanting to be her. My favourite film was *Dirty Dancing*, because it starred not one but two of the first crushes I remember: Patrick Swayze as the strong but sensual dance instructor Johnny, and Cynthia Rhodes as the gorgeous and talented ex-Rockette, Penny, who turned heads and stopped hearts when she entered a room. I both admired and desired her. Since I spoke to no one of my feelings, there was no one who told me that my interest was wrong. My family assumed I watched it over and over because I liked the dancing.

I am a recent transplant to Britain, from a family with a long history of migration. My parents and grandparents were all born in the Philippines. My mother's side is Spanish-Filipino, strictly Catholic, and my dad's is Chinese. My parents moved to the Northwest corner of the



United States, to an unassuming city called Seattle, Washington before it became home to Starbucks, Microsoft, and grunge. I was raised in a small suburb just north of the city. I attended Catholic school and had little interaction with out, queer people as I was growing up—unless you count my butch Chinese aunt Jennifer, who my mom swears went gay after being rejected by the man in whom she was interested (I never really believed this).

Seattle grew up and became a yuppie-hippie paradise, attracting lefty people of all kinds. I grew up and became a poet. I was welcomed into the heart of a Filipino poetry collective where I learned about performing and grassroots organising. I surrounded myself with artists and, eventually, a radical queer brown adopted family. All outcasts or castaways in some form or another, we found each other through art, activism, and community. My good friend Katrina and I made music together, and our first song was about the process of self-love. Our second song was about being bi; we called it “Bi D Way.”

I had one relationship with a girl when I was eighteen. It lasted three months. She was slightly younger than me and I broke it off because she needed more than I could give her. From there I quickly went back to serial hetero-monogamy in practice, coupled with blatant lesbianism in the majority of my fantasy life, although there were some nights when I wanted nothing more than one of each at the same time. This is where I now live. I love my boyfriend and I am open with him about my attraction to women. A picture of Frida Kahlo sits like a saint on my altar. I read *Henry and June* by Anaïs Nin and bell hooks’ memoirs with an intensity that only another person who knows what it means to have loved men and women at once could feel. I dream of having a big, blended family: multiple loving adults in fulfilling relationships mutually parenting many wanted children. I do not think this dream is realistic, but I have not yet given up hope yet.

I have come out to my mother three times, each one more difficult than the last. Because I am femme and bisexual, dating men, she is able to pretend that this errant part of me has gone away. Or, as she said when I first told her at eighteen, that it was “just a phase.” We were in the café of her favourite department store. I had a steaming bowl of clam chowder. I remember gathering my courage and trusting that her love for me was unconditional, that she would accept me for who I was. I told her as directly as I could: “I have something to tell you. I think I’m bi.” She looked at me and took it in; the soup before me cooled. “It’s normal, honey,” she managed. “We have always had an appreciation for beautiful women in our family. It’s just a phase. You’ll get over it in time.” Words likely said more for her benefit than mine.

The second time was eight years later. We were together in the car, she in the driver’s seat, I on the passenger side. She was again glossing over my sexuality, discussing marriage or children or something to that effect. I took the opportunity to remind her, as coolly as I could, that I am not heterosexual. “I’m bi, Mom, remember? That hasn’t changed.” Enter the silent treatment. Either she did not know what to say or, more likely, did not want to say what she was thinking, as is her habit when angry. This is a habit I picked up from her, one which I am still working to break. Frustrated with my inability to speak openly, a memory unexpectedly rose into my consciousness: my aunt’s husband in the Philippines, molesting me during my holidays every other summer since I was thirteen. In a jagged breath it escaped: “I’ve had bad experiences with men, things you don’t know about.” I tell her what he did. To protect me, my memory suppressed this truth for years. I first blamed it on myself and pushed it from my mind, until the truth-seeking practice of poetry brought it to the surface. That it spilled from my lips in that moment, now as much as ever, surprised me, and shocked her. She was silent for a moment, taken aback—and then proceeded to attribute my queerness to the abuse. I do not remember the precise words she used because of how much it hurt to hear them. I protested



this incorrect association to no avail. She had made up her mind. She did not speak of these subjects to me again, but told three of her four sisters what I have told her—all of them, except the one who is married to him. The most religious of my aunts called me to say that she, too, was once sexually harassed, and ask me if there was anything I may have done to provoke it. I hung up on her and sobbed.

The third time was last year. I saw an ad online for the biannual femme conference in Baltimore, on the East Coast of the United States, and was excited. I arranged a trip to visit family in New Jersey around the conference. Just as I was gearing up to go, my mom pressured me to tell her what the nature of the conference was. I revealed as little as possible but she went online to confirm what I said. My answers, it seem, did not match up. I hate the closet and am tired of trying to hide, so I finally said: “It is a conference for queer people who identify as femme.” She found the website and forbade me from attending. To guarantee my compliance, she organized a family road trip to Canada for the same weekend. I was heartbroken. But I chose to reflect on the idea from Eastern philosophy, and Western psychotherapy, that you cannot control others’ emotions or actions—you can only control yourself and your responses. And so, for the sake of peace, I decided not to fight. I asked my boyfriend to help me make a video of me sharing my poem about being femme, which had been accepted for the conference. I posted it online and sent the link to the organizers. I dreamt it would go viral; it got about 500 views. When the day of the road trip came, I wore a t-shirt with my friend Katrina’s logo, and applied the thickest, blackest eyeliner I could.

I am tired of coming out to my mother; I am simply tired of coming out, period. But I love her; I do not resent her. I understand that she is a product of her history. Her old-world immigrant Catholic sensibilities will never be compatible with my queer sexuality. And because I am femme and bi and mostly date men she does not have to confront my sexuality in a way that the mother of a lesbian who is butch or trans or genderqueer might. Yet, I sometimes think: is it possible that I have never brought a woman home precisely *because* I am the dutiful, peace-loving second generation daughter of a strong-willed woman who lives in denial of my same-sex desire?

Freedom is a funny thing. I am free to do as I choose but I must acknowledge that my choices may have consequences I am not prepared to accept. If I love women romantically and openly, something between my mother and I will be forever lost—her words, not mine. Still, a lifetime of poetry has taught me the primacy of honesty, the human imperative to be truthful with oneself. To live in denial is one of the worst forms of self-inflicted violence there is. The truth of my story is this: I am fully femme and unashamedly bi, beyond the closet, and never going back.



Mapache

from the Nahuatl mapachitli (raccoon): the one who holds everything in its hands

I wear the word femme
on a glittery purple plaque
on a chain round my neck
like a sideshow a queering
of identity loud as a disco
to those who know
how to boogie.

femme speaks gender identity
as an act, a performance
circuistry and acrobatics as artificial
as the melt of pancake makeup
under hot stage lights
and if it's an act
not a biological fact
then any kind of body
can be femme.

since femininity was connected
with whiteness and class
women were frail, slim and
slight little things who always
needed looking after

while feminine men
are anathema
when machismo
is the norm.

a queer femme of colour
is far from this. we carry
our own burdens
and some of yours too
with our pedicured toes
eyelids full of glitter
the shards of every broken promise
we've ever heard.

we put on lipstick in the morning
smack our lips twice and smile at ourselves
in the mirror. sometimes
it's the only smile we'll see
all day. so we cherish our reflections
like we have learned to love



and you return to crafting
the exquisite feminist script
of your existence on the skin
of your body on the tips
of your fingers and the walls
of your airing-out closet.

we're so in touch with ourselves
you could call it
self-pleasure.

I wear mascara
but I don't wear a mask.
don a miniskirt while I do
some mental math
and show skin
while going in
on the right wing.

ask me anything
I'll choose if I answer

I assert agency
in the midst of structure
chipping away at the cornerstones
because I'm not afraid
of your questions.

the closet is full.
this is for all my gender warriors
who live outside of it, giving the weary
some room to rest.

we are not new at this.
our femme
is the lingering energy
of every grown woman
who's ever been called an old maid
because she stopped pinning
her hair up in the morning
when she saw her priorities
changing



bold
transgressive
and unexpected

by rejecting limitations
we grasp galaxies

and like the brightest graffiti
in the most dangerous places

you just can't tear your eyes away.

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Affecting White Woman

Katalin Halász

*This article explores the imagining of the destabilization of heteronormative power relations in the performance *I Love Black Men* (Halász 2011). The performance points to the potential of developing anti-racist white femininities through the white female body and its affective dimensions. This article explores how the racial category White Woman is made in a particular racializing stereotype that posits an elemental sexual attraction between white women and black men, and how this stereotype is subverted in the performance. It argues that *I Love Black Men* envisions a new public body for white woman, and for the potential of forming new, anti-racist relations.*

Introduction

This article considers the imagining of anti-racist white femininities in the performance *I Love Black Men*, which I developed in London in 2011 as part of a visual sociology research project. The research investigates the production of anti-racist white femininities through affect. The performance studio was staged to resemble a classroom; only the performer and I were present. I took the role of the instructor, remaining invisible throughout the video that records the performance. I developed the performance to address the invisibility of whiteness, the social construction of race through discourse, and the processes of racialization in representation, stereotyping, and cultural inscription. In my research, I employ the performance to challenge these models by insisting on the relevance of materiality and affective relationality in any theorization of the making of White Woman. In this article, I investigate the potential of developing anti-racist white femininities by directing attention to the affective dimensions of the white female body. I examine the imagining of the destabilization of heteronormative power relations in the performance, and its attempts to unsettle the grounds on which the racial category White Woman is made in a particular racializing stereotype that posits an elemental sexual attraction between white women and black men.

Before discussing the performance, I first briefly overview existing scholarship on the invisibility of whiteness. I then consider the stereotype as a representational practice and the trope of ideal white femininity. Finally, I suggest that through close attention to the affective dimensions of the white female body it is possible to recognize how “social discourses are enmeshed in lived experience” (Gunaratnam 2003, 7). Working through the performance, I show how affects surge to the surface of the body, reorientating its relations.

Invisibility of Whiteness

Current attention to whiteness is characterized by a critique of whiteness asserted as *invisible*, universal, and “the presumed norm” (Back and Solomos 2009, 607), as well as by an effort to fundamentally “*unmask and name*” whiteness (Knowles 2003, 175; original emphasis). A



central concern of “anxious whiteness,” as Sara Ahmed termed it (2004a, 2), is how to de-centre, challenge, dismantle, and escape white race privilege while avoiding inadvertently re-centering and reifying the term and the underlying logics of white supremacy, thereby constructing whiteness as an essential and homogenous white identity and culture (Frankenberg 1997; Nakayama and Martin 1999; Knowles 2003; Haggis 2004; Alexander and Knowles 2005; Back and Solomos 2009).

Whiteness is considered a pervasive and universal condition that is effectively unseen and unmarked. White privilege and racial dominance by whites are socially and culturally embedded to the extent that whiteness has been naturalized. Consequently, there is widespread stress in the literature on the need of seeing and marking hitherto invisible whiteness to deconstruct it. Black scholars have however long argued that whiteness has only been invisible for whites (Fanon, 1967; hooks 1992; Gilroy 1993, Ahmed 2004a). In contrast to racialized minorities, whites have a choice of attending to or ignoring their whiteness (McIntosh 1992; Gallagher 1994). Richard Dyer explains:

As long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. (1997, 1)

The unmarked, invisible position of whiteness is made through the marking—racializing—of others, on which its transparency depends. The transparency of whiteness must be continuously asserted for it to function as the norm, which in turn contributes to its invisibility. The contours of whiteness as a racialized position works like the colour white, an absence of colour and all colours in itself—it is invisible and escapes characterisation because it is everything and universal (Dyer 1997). Hence the pledge of studies of whiteness is that to learn to see whiteness as a colour rather than an absence of colour is crucial to the marking of whiteness (Ahmed 2004a).

Working against the invisibility of whiteness, *I Love Black Men* firmly secures a place for whiteness in the racial palette. Whiteness cannot escape racialization as a colourless universal norm; it is palpable. The specificities of identity constitution and normalizing tendencies at work are made tangible in this piece through the appropriation of the use of the colour white that gains its meaning in relation to and against the black. The performance whitens the white woman; her whiteness is simultaneously asserted and undone; she is inescapably coloured in the racial hierarchy. Paraphrasing the term “post-black” art¹ referring to art about the black experience that attempts to dispel the notion that race matters, I termed my performance *post-white* to point to the fact that white artists have never been charged with the burden of representation and the label of “white art,” with reconfiguring the construction of whiteness and the normality of it, or with the politics of looking at it. As an anti-racist project, the performance is working from inside the normative parameters of whiteness. Engaging with the question “but what are white people to do?” (Ahmed 2004a, 18), the performance imagines anti-racist white femininities “out of whiteness” (Ware and Back 2002): it envisions a refusal of the designated racial place of white womanhood and the privileges inherent in that relation. To avoid the pitfalls of returning to the white subject and re-centring white agency in any critical investigation of whiteness, and hence amounting to the “narcissism of a perpetual return” in the search for answers to the question she posed, Ahmed proposes a “double turn” (2004a, 19). This means a turn away from white subjects but in a way that retains a turn towards their role and responsibility in present and past histories of racism and thus an implication in what they

critique, but also (and here lies the double work of Ahmed's turn) towards others, and away from themselves. Following Ahmed and Les Back, for whom any critical examination of whiteness needs to start with "racism rather than whiteness" (Back 2010, 445, original emphasis), the performance works with a stereotype that continues to be the cause of much racial violence and suffering.² *I Love Black Men* is placed in histories of racism and anti-Black violence, and critically examines the construction of the trope of ideal white femininity through testing assumptions of racialized hyper-sexuality and sexual desire grounded in the fetishization of the black male body. It seeks to provide a direct way to speak out against objectification and categorization.

White Racial Stereotyping

I Love Black Men responds to racialized discourse and operates with stereotyping as a representational practice. It identifies the white female body as a site for exposing and challenging the heteronormative discourse that posits an elemental attraction of white women to black men. Importantly, the performance works with *white* racial stereotypes, with those stereotypes that have been formulated and practiced by white people with often fatal consequences.³ The alleged sexual attraction between white women and black men that grounds much of the relationships in the "trope-ical family," as explained by Ruth Frankenberg (1997), is essentially a white construct. While acknowledging that there is no one true meaning (Hall 2013), *I Love Black Men* employs stereotyping as a representational practice that fixes meaning. As Stuart Hall explains, in the "racialized regime of representation," *stereotyped* means "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics" (2013, 237). In the words of bell hooks:

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed. (1992, 170)

In the nature/culture binary, whites are placed at the superior position and have overcome nature through culture, whereas among blacks nature and culture are commensurate. In the history of racialization the status and position of inferior races became fixed and socio-cultural differences between populations were explained by behavioural practices and physical attributes of the body. The body became "the totemic object" and was effectively racialized in the attempt to explicate the social and the biological, nature, and culture (Green 1984, 31; quoted in Hall 2013, 233). Visible differences between bodies played a pivotal role in naturalizing racial difference and thus were at the centre of visual discourse and the production of racialized knowledge: "The representation of 'difference' through the body became the discursive site through which much of this 'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated" (Green 1984, 31; quoted in Hall 2013, 233). *I Love Black Men* seeks to demonstrate how racialized knowledge and visual differences based on raced and gendered bodies "pass into our very being and becoming so that they appear as if they are natural and inevitable bodily markers" (Blackman 2008, 62). It works with visual discourse on racial and gender differences, and with their visual markers that are culturally inscribed on the "flesh," but it does not stop



there. It explores how the performance of any identity is deeply embedded in a sense of self, and allows for the deeper, intersubjective, affective processes to coalesce with the image of stereotyped white femininity on the surface of the white female body. This conflict between the visual, external, culturally inscribed surface and the affective inner sense of the self is at the heart of the performance. Central to the piece is way cultural inscription is “embodied and enacted at the level of the individual, subjective experiences of bodily affectivity” (Blackman 2008, 71). The conflict between embodied subjectivity and the social articulation of difference is brought sharply into focus: by employing a direct and clean black and white aesthetic, and by using repetition as a conceptual and artistic strategy, the performance enacts the ways in which “cultural injunctions and subject positions might be literally written into the flesh of the body” (Blackman 2008, 72).

Tropes of Representation of Ideal White Femininity

The piece works with “tropes of representation” (Hall 2013, 219), the interweaving of femininity and masculinity with race and sexuality. In its recoding of white femininities in the process of always being made and remade, *I Love Black Men* enters the racialized regime of representation. In the construction of “femaleness and maleness divided by race,” Frankenberg composes a repertoire of images “in simple pairings,” —tropes repetitive across time and space to the point of banality were they not so “devastating in their effects” (1997, 11). She suggests that the tropes of the “simple quartet,” the members of the “unholy and unorthodox” family have been and are “coconstructed, always hierarchically so”: White Man, White Woman, Man of Colour, and Woman of Colour (Frankenberg 1997, 11). Frankenberg demonstrates the complementarities and contrasts that give meaning to White Woman:

White Woman is frail, vulnerable, delicate, sexually pure but at times easily led “astray.” White Man is strong, dominant, arbiter of truth, and self-designated protector of white womankind, defender of the nation/territory (and here defense of the nation and its honor often also entails defending White Woman’s racial chastity). Man of Color... is sexually rapacious, sometimes seductive, usually predatory, especially toward White Woman; it is he, in fact, from whom White Woman must be protected by White Man.... White Man as a savior would founder without White-Woman-who-must-be-saved. Similarly, without Man of Color as predator, White Man loses much of his sense of worth and purpose.... White Woman’s ambiguous and ambivalent status in this family of tropes is striking: she is, on the one hand, accorded privileges and status by this race/gender positioning, and on the other hand, confined by it. In any case she is advantaged only conditionally on her acceptance of the terms of the contract. This includes especially her sexual practices, for the trope-ical family is strictly heterosexual and monoracial in its coupling. (Frankenberg 1997, 12)

The discursive of trope white femininity as essentially racialized and sexualized has proven to be particularly persistent across centuries and different locations and contexts (see Ware 1992), and underlies a range of political and ideological positions that continue to directly affect everyday, intersubjective affective encounters up until the present. This trope is useful: as the relational nature of the categories of race, gender, and sexuality becomes clear, it establishes an ideological relationship between all members of the trope-ical family. In this trope, white femininity is an “ideal, but also the most passive and dependent of femininities” that was produced in the eighteenth century through textual and visual technologies (Skeggs 1997, 99).



As Beverley Skeggs argues, “by the end of the nineteenth century femininity had become established as a (middle-) classed sign, a sign of a particular form of womanhood” that was “always coded as respectable” (Skeggs 1997, 99). This is the “particular form” of white, middle-class, “strictly heterosexual” femininity (Frankenberg 1997, 12) that I investigate in the performance. According to Skeggs, middle-class women could prove their femininity, their adherence to “ideal of the lady,” and hence their respectability through appearance and conduct (1997, 99). She argues that “femininity requires the display of classed dispositions, of forms of conduct and behaviour,” the display of a “divine composure” (Cixous 1980; quoted in Skeggs 1997, 100), which include the components of femininity as silent, static, invisible and composed” (Cixous 1980; quoted in Skeggs 1997, 100). According to Skeggs, the performance of this respectable white femininity was “never a given” for working-class black or white women, whose bodies were coded as sexual and thus distanced from the ideal. In what follows, I explore the affective embodiment of this discourse and the bodily submission of this ideal white heterosexual femininity in *I Love Black Men* to argue that certain performances of respectable white femininities can reach far beyond appearance and conduct, and engender the refusal of identification with this ideal through a fuller engagement of the body than the display of constructions of certain gender norms would require.

Existing research on white women that has emphasized the historical constructs of racial representation examines the construction of respectable, white femininity through this racist discourse of the sexually pure, vulnerable white woman and the fantasy of the predatory black man as an analytical tool (Hall 1992; Ware 1992; Frankenberg 1993; McClintock 1995; Dyer 1997; Harris 2000). Catherine Hall and Vron Ware both look at white femininity as a historically constructed concept, and discuss the familial racist discourse that ties female sexuality and femininity to ideologies of race and class in its historical context (Hall, 1992; Ware 1992). Ware argues that different types of dominance and power were legitimated by this ideology of white womanhood that affects everyone, particularly in the politics of crime and public order. She provides examples of racial imagery based on the “powerlessness and physical frailty” of white women that has often been combined with fear of the threatening black presence (1992, 5). She recounts a visual and linguistic vocabulary based on the stereotypic constructions of black masculinity as the aggressive “savage / monster / beast / fiend” versus the nonviolent and “helpless” white woman as the foremost victim of “unruly black criminals,” and shows how this was used to evoke particular responses from the white public and influenced the wider social and political climate (Ware 1992, 7). Ware connects the activation of fear to these particular ideas and images of white female vulnerability, which could then be used to advance certain political agendas. Today’s far-right politics and populist ideologies similarly play on this image, particularly within the context of asylum and migration. Frankenberg’s research on white women includes real-life examples of white men who attempted to “save” these women from their black partners (1993, 81). The historically persistent image of the “threatening and attractive ... big black male” from whom white women need protection also featured in the interviews that Bridget Byrne conducted with white women in London (Byrne 2006, 86). Mica Nava argues that white women were indeed allured by the presence of black men in Great Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, driven by an “attraction of otherness” (2007, 91). I would argue that these conceptualizations are characterized by a neglect of the experiences and the role of the white female body in shaping this discourse. With my performance work, I intended to work towards discovering and disentangling the affective dimensions of inhabiting or rejecting this discursive environment. I aim to demonstrate that we can learn more about the construction of white femininities—which in turn can help to refute



the ideological power of whiteness—if we uncover the affective entanglements and responses that arise from racial discourses and imagery.

I Love Black Men seeks to subvert the trope of the ideal white femininity. Attempts to subvert this discourse have been found in existing research on white women. Frankenberg has observed that the lived experience of the discourse was continually exceeded and interrupted in the lived experiences of the women interviewed (1993). She argues that inhabiting a discursive environment is not an individual choice, and that subverting it therefore requires collective action. Ware, too, writes about those “scattered examples of women” who challenged the discourse and defied the role of the helpless white woman, but who, in doing so, were “inviting scandal and loneliness” and “remain eccentric individuals at best” (1992, 42). She nonetheless adds that “an equally fruitful and revealing discourse emerge” when women challenge the expectations the discourse put on them and manage to live independent lives (Ware 1992, 42).

Destabilizing Heteronormative Power Relations

Whiteness has been argued to be relational, “as a process, not a ‘thing,’ as plural rather than singular in nature” (Frankenberg 1997, 1), which allows performances of white femininities and their affective entanglements to be studied as continuing mediations and negotiations of historically specific relations in time and space, which in turn affords the imagining and remaking of these power relations with a strong feminist and anti-racist take. Hillary Harris argues that “antiracist whiteness must perform new relations with the subjectivities, the ideologies, and the material legacies of those historical relations” (2000, 184). This emphasis on creating new relations out of historical ones is also at the centre of *I Love Black Men*, which imagines the formation of anti-racist white femininities through the body of White Woman.

The performance works with this relational approach to racial difference and the affects “enhanced and produced through the relations between the self and other” (Blackman 2008, 133). Although only White Woman is to be seen, the defining presence of all family members is felt. White Woman remains to be apprehended through her relations, and through breaking with those tropic constructs and predictable performances of relations that have defined her historically and are performed and made to work into the present. These relations and performative tropes that give meaning to and embody the essence of White Woman—her respectable purity, her reproductive imperatives, and her innocent, unquestioned monoracial heterosexuality, which Richard Dryer describes as “the cradle of whiteness” (1997, 140)—can, however, also serve her as means to resist white supremacist normalization and the naturalization of racist and heterosexist assumptions.

The White Woman in *I Love Black Men* attempts to reject the contract and its terms. The performance employs queer feminist struggle as a tool and strategy to disclose and repel the codes, practices, and ideologies that ensure the racial and sexual conformity of white womanhood in the service of institutions of white supremacy, and in the constitution of respectable, pure white femininity—forever loyal to exclusive and monogamous unions with White Man. *I Love Black Men* insists on the notion that racial, gender, and sexual identifications are intertwined and are reproduced in a web of relations, always mutually constitutive and never inseparable. Focusing on the sexual aspect of all relations, *I Love Black Men* seeks to unsettle inflicted means through which we relate to the world. Through simultaneously making visible the politics of race and sexuality, the performance envisions building family outside of traditional “trope-ical” models based on the reproduction of

hegemonic white heterosexuality. *I Love Black Men* has a potential to engage in critiques of historical relations and in the refiguring of the set of ideologies, structures, and practices that are institutionalized across multiple identifications, and an imperative to draw into scrutiny race and gender formations.

The performing naked white female body is the pivotal sight of the piece. The woman, almost identical to her naked body, could be perceived as an object of sexual desire. In making public her nakedness, *I Love Black Men* aims to render her body as visual subtext in the construction of sexual desire attached to the fetish of the black male. Her whiteness is made visible through her appropriation of the blackboard; her visible and invisible markings of her race, gender, and sexuality are at once skin-deep and hidden from sight. Her nakedness might suggest a woman taking pleasure in her own body, but as the performance evolves it becomes clear that it is taken away from her and turned into a sign of dis-possession; she is stripped of her own subjectivity. White Woman can be seen to be forced to patrol the definitional boundaries of the family, her race, and gendered heterosexuality that arguably draws her to Black Man. In this trope-ical construct, it is indispensable for White Man to establish and justify his power over Black Man, safeguarding vulnerable White Woman against a savage desire that she is argued to be unable to regulate. She seems unable to take control of her own subject position; she might be forever disciplined and controlled by White Man, who must be reaffirmed as the saviour of her, the family, and mankind:

The primal fantasy of the big, black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation, eugenic pollution and racial degeneration is acted out through white male rituals of racial aggression—the historical lynching of black men in the United States routinely involved the literal castration of the Other’s “strange fruit.” (Mercer 1994, 185)

The performance strives to destabilize heteronormative complementarity between White Woman and White Man, beyond a simple rendering of a good/bad binary between the two. Perhaps she has done something wrong or has not done something that she is expected, obliged to do. Like a schoolgirl, she must be disciplined by repeatedly writing-out lines of text, an act that itself reflects the repetitive nature of stereotyping practices and the performative process constitutive of identity. Repetition is the central act of the performance: “The reiterative power of discourse” (Butler 1993, 2) that produces regulated models of being, which subjects are responsible for re-enacting and maintaining, is the backbone of the piece. The notion that whiteness is performative—that one has to act-out discursive conventions in order to become it—is made painfully simple to comprehend. The repetitive writing is a visual articulation of the workings of disciplinary power and normative cultural ideas that render regulatory images of black and white bodies effective tools in processes of racialization.

“I LOVE BLACK MEN”

Text, sight, and sound lie at the core of the performance. White Woman’s image remains visible to the viewer, but her voice is not heard—only the sound of the chalk and the increasingly violent movement of her hand that makes the chalk shriek on the blackboard. The woman, a sight without a voice, is under constant surveillance by the authoritative instructor, an undefinable member of the trope-ical family, which establishes its power not only by making her write but also by freely observing her performance. Its authority increases as the woman



struggles under the burden of performing the act. In a setting designed to resemble a classroom, my performer, a naked white woman, holds a piece of white chalk and repeatedly writes a single sentence on a blackboard. Taking the role of the teacher, I instruct her to write the sentence “I LOVE BLACK MEN” on the blackboard. Written in the first person, this simple text makes her enact perceptions of her race, gender, and sexuality *inscribed* on her body—on the body of a white woman. Her whiteness and femininity—differences of race and gender—are reduced to the perception of visible differences of the white female body, the single most important means in producing beliefs and ideologies: “The Body, the most visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer a secure ground for those who seek the permanent, the feminine ‘nature’ and ‘essence,’ remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies” (Trinh 2010, 198). White women’s bodies were constructed through an association with bodily limits, defined through its degrees of deviation from the white male body in the scientific thinking throughout the nineteenth century, a period when “rather than *finding* evidence of racial difference, science was actually *constructing* or even inventing the very idea of race itself” (Ahmed 2002, 50; original emphasis). The body, “bodily difference[,] and bodily hierarchy” were the foundational ideas behind the invention of race (Ibid: 50). In this ordering of bodies, white women’s bodies were analogous to those of “lower races,” which according to Ahmed “allowed woman as a group to be racialized, and the ‘lower races’ as a group to be feminized” (Ibid: 51). Although the body of the white woman was considered less evolved than that of the white man, as a result of her membership of the “higher races” her bodily limits could—unlike the bestiality and sexuality of the bodies of black women—be transcended through the rules of “virtue,” “chastity,” and “modesty” that protected and also hemmed her in (Ahmed 2002, 53).

Affects of the White Female Body

In *I Love Black Men*, the body of the white woman is left bare, with no protection, and without the shield of respectability (Skeggs 1997). Her body is marked as a site of racialization. The production of the racial body is performed as an affective process through multiple histories of stereotyping practices. The performance attempts to reproduce the silencing and ignoring of the “dynamic nature of the body” (Shilling 1993, 104) inherent in social constructionism, whereby the body is passively written upon, but fails: affects surge to the surface; the white female body is trembling under the flow of affects. I would argue that there is a complex relationality at work between corporeal-affective and cultural inscription practices. The performance of white femininity has an affective charge, induced by—but involving more than—visual discourse and racial regimes of representation.

The way in which the performer embodies received ideas about “ideal” white womanhood indicates how stereotypes are perpetuated and how they affect us at the very core of our own personality. Through the naked woman’s repetitive writing on the blackboard, the sterile space of the staged classroom transforms first to a highly racialized and sexualized space, which then gradually blurs into a place where common-sense assumptions about the nature of identity and processes of identification are thrown into question. Stereotypes are made to come apart, and their assurances are gradually fading; fantasies of sexual desire and the myth of the sexualized black male that continue to haunt the collective imagination are re-viewed and unearthed. I contend, however, that there is more at play here than simply the intricate ways in which power shapes the body through discourse: the body of White Woman is not just a passive recipient of discourse or an “inert mass” (Shilling 1993, 80). The body is a process rather than a

substance; social and cultural practices and norms interact with the corporeal and physical in a dynamic relationality. The body of White Woman is neither a simple “inscriptive surface” (Grosz 1994, 23), nor pure biological matter: it is a fleshy materiality that is lived and experienced by subjects positioned within cultural norms, power structures, and restraints. Acknowledging the working of affects allows us to reckon with the interplay of political, social, cultural inscriptions, and constructs with the materiality of bodies, their felt orientations, and their lived relations to the world. I agree with Elizabeth Grosz that the external, visible experience of the white female body must be positioned in relation to the complex internal/external interconnection in order to avoid reducing it to its surface or to a blank page to be written upon. This “somatically felt body” (Blackman 2008, 30) is open to affect and to be affected, and is constantly changing as a result of this dynamic relationality of the inside and outside.

Furthermore, I would argue that the affects that surround White Woman are not arbitrary. Their nature and display is determined by the unfolding of the historical relations of the members of the trope-ical family, and by the power structures and systems of dominations of white patriarchy. The affective charge of heteronormative “ideal” white femininity does not belong to White Woman or to the performer performing White Woman: they belong instead to the public sphere constituted along the subjects appearing in the performance—White Woman, Black Man, and White Man. As Ahmed explains, emotions are profoundly intersubjective: emotion “is not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made” (2004b, 10). At the end of the performance, nonetheless, the affective charge of white femininity seems to become internalized by the performer, herself a white woman. A complex act of embodied affective positioning is taking place: the transformation from a performer tasked to perform an act into a woman with her own histories, feelings, ideas and subjectivity.

“I LOVE”

The performer struggles with the affective charge of white femininity: in the process of writing the text, “I LOVE BLACK MEN” becomes smudged and broken until it reads “I LOVE MEN,” or only “I LOVE.” This could be read as the performer’s intellectual and emotional struggle to comprehend the sentence and understand its implications, to the point when racial and sexual differences are exhausted, forcing us to ask what they actually entail. The only sound we hear at the end of the performance apart from the chalk on the board is the sigh of the performer. Maybe a sigh of exasperation, or an exhaustion of the process by which the discourse becomes internalized and thrown back again into the space. I would argue that through the sigh of affect the body takes back her place in the discourse—the body of the performer is not “a malleable entity that cannot speak back” (Blackman 2008, 16): its living texture and materiality has ripped off the body the inscriptive cover of discourse. A complex relationality between discourse and affect could be detected here: through the work of affects, the performance opens up the closure inherent in stereotyping, the last words of “I LOVE” written on the blackboard signaling a release from the fixing of boundaries and an invitation to include everything that previously did not belong.



Conclusion

I developed *I Love Black Men* in order to examine a particular discourse on race and gender. This racialized discourse has had far-reaching ramifications not just for sexualizing the relationship between white women and men of colour, but in terms of white women's positioning with respect to power, her relations to white men and peoples of colour, and her ability to engage in the most violent and dangerous forms of insubordination. My analysis of the performance is guided by the contention that our understanding of white femininities can be expanded by considering the racialized white female body and its affects. More specifically, this article has focused on addressing the tensions between sociocultural norms and heteronormative conceptions of white femininities, and what is felt and experienced affectively when racialized norms and ideas that ensue from this specific racist discourse are directly applied.

I Love Black Men seeks to gradually dismantle the trope of the “family,” to refuse the racial and sexual contract of white womanhood. The attachment of emotions and the embracing of love and desire of black males linked to ideal white femininity is pulled apart. The figure of the White Woman is hollowed out, her body a container made vacant but willing to be filled: the affect of whiteness seems to be left empty. The commitment to the continuing family project of heteronormative whiteness seems to have been broken, the reproduction of itself and its most pivotal trope, the White Man. *I Love Black Men* thus envisions both a new public body for white women and the potential of performing new, anti-racist relations.





Notes

1. The term *post-black* was coined by Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, in conversations with artist Glenn Ligon. Post-black generally denotes artists who refuse to be defined and apprehended through the identifier of “black artist” and static understandings of “black art” and “black culture” while entering into a dialogue about race and culture. As Golden explains, “saying a practice was post-black art was how Glenn would tell me that ‘this is an artist who has moved several steps beyond having to work out their relationship to a particular set of issues’” (Barson and Gorschluter 2010, 78).
2. The last reported lynching was in 1981 (Wikipedia 2018).
3. Lorraine Hansberry writes on black stereotypes of whites: “Is it not ‘known’ in the ghetto that white people, as an entity, are ‘dirty’ (especially white women—who never seem to do their own cleaning); inherently ‘cruel’ (the cold, fierce roots of Europe; who else could put all those people into ovens *scientifically*); ‘smart’ (you really have to hand it to the m.f.’s), and anything *but* cold and passionless (because look who has had to live with little else than their passions in the guise of love and hatred all these centuries)? And so on” (Quoted in hooks 1992, 170).



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Sex Work and Allyship: Reflections on Femme-, Bi- and Whorephobia in Queer Communities

Lindsay Blewett and Tuulia Law

Reflecting on the historical tensions that inform contemporary discord between sex worker and queer communities, and other failures of allyship, this commentary unpacks the sometimes palpable discomfort with sex work(ers). Problematizing the stigma and stratification amongst and between sex working and queer folks, we situate this discomfort at the intersection of femme-, bi-, and whorephobia. We emphasize the struggles, both discursive and historical, that both communities share in order to turn our fragile histories into a source of renewed allyship.

Sara Ahmed (2017) asserts that on the one hand, “feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we might first register through our own experiences” (21); on the other, the proximity of feminist (and, we would add, queer) politics to experiences of hurt can be “potentially shattering [and] leave us fragile” (22). Our political and community engagement is informed by our experiences as sex workers, as queers, as femmes, as people who have experienced stigma in the course of our everyday lives. The pain of stigma emanates from its pervasiveness, its relentlessness (Hannem and Bruckert 2012, 4)—a persistent lingering possibility, even from those with whom we associate most closely: our partners; families; communities, including feminist and queer. For example, one of Lindsay’s first relationships with a woman ended because that woman was uncomfortable with her continued interest in men. In addition to biphobia, Lindsay has also experienced numerous whorephobic comments while navigating the dating world (including a recent request for her STI test results in an introductory message on a dating site), and sometimes in academia as well (for example, a professor told Lindsay to start her research paper on the discursive silencing of sex workers from the premise that prostitution is violence against women, in effect discursively over-riding her experience). Having learned to embrace femininity after her colleagues at the strip club taught her to harness its power, Tuulia came to feel uncomfortable in queer spaces for being “too feminine” but stigmatized as a sex worker—through being fetishized as an object of desire, scrutiny or pity, and through verbal and emotional abuse—in feminist and straight contexts.

Recognizing that queer and LGBT-identifying activists and scholars have been important allies to the sex worker rights movement, this paper is not a list of grievances against queer communities. Instead, in this paper we extend Ahmed’s warning of fragility with Michel Foucault’s (1978) insistence that resistance (which is, in principle, key to the formation of queer and feminist communities) more often fractures unities instead of producing great ruptures in power relations (96). These fractures can be understood as effects of the simultaneity and interplay of power and resistance (96), in which “hierarch[ies] of credibility” (Becker 1963, 241) and “respectability” (Fellows and Razack 1998, 350) converge to create normative, and in turn exclusionary, ideas of radicality.



Through this lens we explore the points of fracture in the relationships between queer, feminist, and sex worker communities in order to articulate strategies to turn that fragility into a source of strength and renewed allyship. In doing so, we highlight how femme-, bi- and whorephobia intersect to shape perceptions of sex work and sex workers. In particular we examine the fractures amongst sex workers, cis, white gay men, lesbian feminists, trans and queer communities. Rather than claiming discomfort with femme sex workers is all-pervasive, the notion of fractures allows us to highlight weak points in allyship while acknowledging that, like any community, these groups are fractured unities (Kobayashi 2001, 62), in which tensions arise from the various identities, oppressions, and privileges their members occupy (Namaste 2005; Fellows and Razack 1998; Crenshaw 1989). Moreover, queer, LGBT, feminist, and sex worker communities often overlap (Chateauvert 2013; Pendleton 1997; Nestle 1998). Indeed, both of us have at various times been involved with, and considered ourselves part of, queer communities. After relating historical to contemporary tensions and exclusions amidst these groupings, we close with some suggestions for improved allyship between our communities, which we hope will contribute towards dismantling the intersecting stigmas—including whorephobia, which Gail Pheterson (1998) argues is not only about gender and sexual practices and identities but also deviantizes along intersecting axes (see Crenshaw 1989)¹ of race and class—to which we are all variously subject.

As both object to exclusionary sexual and gender norms, LGBTQ and sex worker rights movements have long had overlapping claims and members; however this relationship has not been without tension and discord. Perhaps the foremost example of allyship and discord can be found in the Stonewall Riots, in which sex workers' involvement has been downplayed or erased. Racialized trans sex workers played pivotal and prominent roles fighting back against police repression and violence in both the Stonewall Riot of 1969 and the earlier Compton Cafeteria Riot of 1966 (Chateauvert 2013, 9). However, the mainstream LGBT rights movement prefers to remember versions of those events that highlight the defiance of gays and lesbians without reference to the fact that these people were also sex workers (Chateauvert 2013). As Chateauvert explains, gay liberation groups were reluctant to support or accept sex workers and transgender people in the gay rights movement, noting that the movement's emphasis on "sexual respectability" is a form of whorephobia (2013, 10). For example, during the 1973 gay pride rally in Washington Square Park, Jean O'Leary of the Gay Activists Alliance publicly denounced drag queen Sylvia Rivera for "parodying" womanhood (Gan 2007, 133). Martin Duberman, who interviewed Rivera, noted of the Gay Activists Alliance that "[i]f someone was not shunning her darker skin or sniggering at her passionate, fractured English, they were deploring her rude anarchism as inimical to order or denouncing her sashaying ways as offensive to womanhood" (Duberman quoted in Gan 2007, 133).

This reluctance to centre trans women of colour can be seen in a recent film about the events of Stonewall, directed by Roland Emmerich. Emmerich was accused of whitewashing and erasing the voices of trans sex workers of colour, such as Miss Major and Sylvia Rivera, when he put a young, white, cis gay man at the centre of the riot while real-life historical figure, Marsha P. Johnson, appeared only on the periphery (Ginelle 2015, np). Namaste (2005) identifies yet other fractures, arguing transsexuals in particular are invisibilized by middle-class transgender activism, highlighting the Transgender Day of Remembrance as an instance in which victims' involvement in sex work, and in turn how whorephobia intersects with transphobia, gender and sexual norms, is not addressed.

This harmful and misguided focus on respectability is highlighted in Becki Ross' (2010, 208) analysis of how white, middle-class gay men in Vancouver's West End perpetuated the



stigmatization of street-based sex workers, openly demeaning them as “vulgar, lower-class, and deviant”, alongside other West End residents eager to expel sex workers in defense of their property values. Ross (2010, 208) connects this disavowal to the popularity of butch masculinity amongst gay men, which engendered a misogynist discomfort with the hyper-femininity embodied by female and trans sex workers. As a result, sex workers were forced to relocate to the notorious Downtown East Side (DTES) where they began to go “missing” in even greater numbers—from 1975 to 2001 more than 65 women disappeared, while another 20 went missing between 2002 and 2008 (Ferris 2015, 2). Statistics Canada (2016) reports that from 1991 to 2014, there have been 294 murders of sex workers across Canada and one in three murders remain unsolved. The exclusion of sex workers, racialized queers and trans people, and indeed radical politics altogether by middle-class, white gay men was highlighted by Black Lives Matter activists when they halted Toronto’s pride parade in 2016, arguing the contributions of these groups have been obscured by the contemporary centring of partying and the increasing space given to capitalist sponsors (Khan 2016).

While (some) gay men were physically and discursively excluding street-level sex workers, the rise of lesbian feminism began disavowing femmes and sex workers in a similar manner. Nestle (1998) laments the disruption of the historical “sisterhood” between lesbians and sex workers by lesbian feminism:

In the bars of the late fifties and early sixties where I learned my lesbian ways, whores were part of our world. We sat on barstools next to each other, we partied together, and we made love together [...] This shared territory broke apart, at least for me, when I entered the world of lesbian feminism. Whores, and women who looked like whores, became the enemy or, at best, misguided oppressed women who need our help. (248)

Lesbian and radical feminists argued that prostitution is “uniquely degrading” and a form of violence against women (Lopez-Jones 1987, 271). In equating prostitution to rape, some radical feminists (Raymond 1995; Farley 2005) disregard sex workers’ agency and diversity of experiences. For example, Raymond (1995) refers to prostitution as “rape that’s paid for” (np), while Farley (2009) famously compared indoor sex work to plantation slavery and referred to indoor workers as “house n****s” (np). These views of prostitution precipitated significant conflict at *Women’s Worlds*, a feminist conference we both attended in Ottawa in 2011, when feminists silenced sex workers and academics presenting at a session of the conference, and later loudly berated sex workers and allies silently protesting an exhibit equating the sex industry to violence, reducing one former sex worker to tears.

That some of our allies at *Women’s Worlds* were queer, however, speaks to the displacement of lesbian separatism with more nuanced and inclusive queer activism, and the accompanying proliferation of queer and trans theories of the body (for example, see Halberstam 2005; Stryker 1994; Stryker and Whittle 2006). However, there remains a modicum of discomfort with women *who look like whores* (i.e., who dress in a provocative, feminine manner). We see troubling similarities between (some) radical feminists’ assumptions that we are privileged, exceptional, and unable to grasp the depth of our own oppression—without asking us what we make of our own experiences—and distrust of femmes and bisexuals in queer communities. Julia Serano (2013) describes how the dominant framing of femininity as frivolous, artificial, and (politically, physically, or emotionally) weak circulates in mainstream and “radical” queer communities, shaping perceptions of femme-presenting women (both trans and cis). She highlights how, amongst both gay men and queer women,



masculinity is praised while femininity is looked at with suspicion (54). Kirsten McLean (2008, 67) notes a similar suspicion of bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community, in which the validity of bisexuality as an orientation and the trustworthiness of individuals who embrace it are often questioned.

These issues are compounded for femme queer women, who struggle with their presentation-of-self being read as heterosexual. Sinclair Sexsmith (2009) argues that femme in/visibility is a form of gender discrimination, writing “[w]hen someone refuses to recognize a femme as queer, that person is saying, straight women are feminine, dykes are not, therefore your gender presentation trumps anything that might come out of your mouth about how you identify or who you are” (para. 6). In our experience, sex workers are read by (some) members of queer communities as too gender-conforming and too straight, and perhaps not even as femmes but merely as conventionally feminine; our queerness as bisexuals, femmes, and, we contend, as sex workers is erased. Such assumptions force us to out ourselves over and over to justify our queerness.

To counter these exclusionary ascriptions, there needs to be a greater recognition that sex workers’ queerness might look different than the more “radical” or non-binary gender presentations and sexual practices that appear to be celebrated in the contemporary queer activist community. In fact, it could be argued that some sex workers (notably porn performers, escorts and cam girls) perform what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) terms dis-identification, a process by which marginalized people navigate mainstream culture, not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works, but by fashioning their own culture through the transformation of such works, such as the increasing visibility of what might be termed feminist porn (4). Asserting “there is nothing straight about sex work,” Eve Pendleton characterizes the exchange of sexual services for money as a queer act (1997, 76). Pendleton further argues that through their repeated performances of heterosexuality, sex workers develop critiques of, and distaste for, the institution of compulsory heterosexuality; they refuse to subserviently and politely tolerate male sexual advances outside of a work context. Unlike a sexual or gender orientation however, sex work is a job; as an instrumental, for-profit performance it does not reflect one’s “true” identity—it is temporary and unfixed. To this end, sex workers can be queer or (albeit not quite normatively) heterosexual: the work itself may or may not relate to our identities outside of work. The recognition of the performance aspect of our labour also contributes to a “queering” of sex work spaces because “it disrupts the taken-for-granted assumptions that heteronormative gender/sexual relations are naturally occurring, rather than something that is ‘put on,’ created, purchased, and consumed in the marketplace” (Read 2013, 476). Finally, one can recognize the ubiquitous normativity of heterosexuality and also still acknowledge, as Noah Zatz (1997) does, “the organization of communities of resistance within which the meanings of certain acts may be radically different from their significance in dominant discourse and that may act to subvert those dominant meanings” (297). In other words, what may seem heteronormative on the surface may, in fact, have very different meanings for sex workers.

The instrumentality of professionally performing gender and sexuality, especially when it mimics heteronormative relations (even as it simultaneously inverts them [Frank 2003]), brings us to another point of discomfort we have felt in queer activist spaces, in suggestions of complicity with capitalism. Here we would urge queer and feminist activists to revisit Marx, namely to recall that we are workers (whether as independents who directly solicit customers, or pseudo-employees of third party-owned establishments [see Bruckert & Law 2013]), and not capitalists—we do not profit from exploiting other labourers, but instead extract



money from customers through our own bodily labour. Sex workers do this by utilizing the particular conglomerations of gendered, classed, and racial presentations available to us in order to make our way in a capitalist society (Wolkowitz 2006; Bruckert 2002; Ross 2000). By explicitly requiring payment for emotional labour other women are expected to do for free, and which has traditionally been used to justify women's cheap labour, sex workers challenge "some of the structural conditions that narrow women's options in the first place" (Zatz 1997, 287). Thus Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald (2006) read sex work as a "resistant mode of female labour" (20).

It is understandable that queer people whose employability has been limited by their non-conforming gender presentation (and the importance of its consistency to their sense of self) may feel discomfited by our capitalizing on (relatively, and not always) apparently conformist gendered and sexual performances. However, this discomfort with our supposed capitalist accumulation ignores the fact that for many people living under capitalism, the only capital they have to bank on is that of body capital. Disabled people, street-involved people, racialized people etc., are often excluded from "mainstream" paid labour because of a lack of workplace accommodations, inaccessible work environments, racism, and discrimination (Withers 2012). Faced with these and other intersecting disadvantages including insecure housing, marginalized and/or LGBT people may turn to sex work (see Withers 2012).

Whether sex work informs or emanates from a deeper part of a person's desires or identity, or is just a temporary solution to the inescapable demands of capitalism (see Westcott, Baird, and Cooper 2006), sex workers understand stigma. We have felt it in the dangers and paranoia of criminalization and in disappointment, lack of understanding, or rejection from family; it has hurt us deeply. The moments of discomfort that arise when our femininity (in a personal or professional context) is read as un-political, or hegemonic, or as selling out, undermines solidarity amongst sexual and gender outcasts such as ourselves and other queers. To reduce this discomfort and the fractures and hierarchies it sustains, we offer some suggestions to improve allyship between queer and sex working communities:

1. Do not assume that our gender presentation(s) reflects our politics or our orientation(s), or is *not* political. We may wear lingerie and eyeshadow at work, or embrace a femme/inine aesthetic in other social contexts, but this does not mean we have not or do not experiment(ed) or embrace(d) other gendered presentations of self, or are familiar with or close to others who do. In return, sex workers should endeavour not to assume that queer activists are not sex workers (or that they are), or make assumptions about their politics.
2. Accept that we often discuss our experiences with cis men. They are overwhelmingly our clients; they may be our romantic or sexual partners; and as femme-presenting folks, we are often harassed by them. This, however, does not mean we are heterosexual or "un-radical." That said, talking about work can be exclusionary; to this end asking us to refrain from "shop talk" when in mixed company is more than reasonable. We could certainly better monitor our own behaviour in this regard.
3. Remember that, as workers, we are not capitalists reproducing the system—we are trying to make our way in it by taking control of our labour power through the overt use of our bodies. If you have a problem with sex work because of something to do with capitalism, consider that your problem may be with the commercialization of sexual



labour. Refrain from constructing/reproducing moral hierarchies of labour based on feelings—for example, sex work is oppressive because (some) sex workers hate their job, or empowering because (some) sex workers love it. Instead, think about sex workers like all other workers—struggling to balance the compulsion to work with their own agency and dignity.

4. Welcome bi and femme folks in(to) your own community. Invite them out with your friends, introduce them to other queers you know. Ask us our pronouns. A smiling face is often enough to quell any fears we may have and to make us feel welcome. Accept when you make a mistake and apologize. Sex workers could also do better with accepting queer and otherwise non-normative orientations, identities, and relationships—even amongst (and in) ourselves.

In acknowledging our common and complementary experiences, concerns, and shortcomings, these strategies may heal the fractures we have enumerated in this paper. After all, the stigmas we face are two sides of the same coin: the slurs “whore” and “queer” both police gender and sexual norms (Namaste 1996; Pheterson 1998) that in turn foster misguided perceptions we have chosen deviant and immoral lifestyles. We highlight these tensions not to shame queer folks, but rather to encourage better coalitional politics, and as a reminder that heteronormative mimicry need not preclude allyship. Reflecting on these tensions benefits both of our communities by forcing us to recognize our assumptions; as Alison Kafer (2013) argues, “without such disagreement, and the way it compels us to reexamine our positions, we can too easily skim over our own exclusions and their effects” (150). Through this lens, we see our own exclusionary tendencies, whether it is being overly descriptive about our latest professional or personal encounters with men (Lindsay) or brushing off recreational erotic performers (e.g., burlesque dancers) as amateurs (Tuulia). Recognizing our discomforts opens us up to an allyship, which sees differences not through hierarchies of respectability or radicality that sustain the relations of power that enable our oppression, but as points of resistance that traverse social positions to make revolution possible (cf. Foucault 1978).

Notes

1. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” to remedy what she described as “dominant conceptions of discrimination [that] condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (140) and accommodate the experiences of Black women, which are “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (140).

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feral feminisms

Queer Feminine Affinities

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You're So Fucking Sexy and Other Poems

Lucy Aphramor

Found (fragment)

it is hard to remain faithful
to the firm earth
when the damp-petalled path
opens its throat
and the bluest of flames chooses
to spin spokes between two women
and / yet / but / so
we did it



You're So Fucking Sexy

I'm sat on the tube
thinking
You're so fucking sexy
I'm wetter than lube
already
So fucking sexy
I like that
my legs and chest
are gym-stiff
that I'm so hard
and fast
in fact, I'm pretty
blasted
So fucking sexy
flexibility's next
a firm effort
in that long stretch
untogether
pressing longing
pushing wanting
spinning it all ways
and any which
until I get me back
to you
get to flesh it out
with you
when,
again,
at last
I am
fucking Sexy



So to Speak

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open.
—Muriel Rukeyser

There is this body connected to the other and the letting go. Sharing what I know holds something of what's at stake in the decision to buy a young boy a pink bike with stabilisers on when he's not even yours. Of course it's all connected. How it was everybody's business that week 26 people were murdered at a school in America by a white man with a gun, which is a characteristic of 80% of killers in this sort of incident alongside 100% prevalence of Mr. BS—Male Belief System—as the Politics of Health Group alert us. If you want to be well, agitate for peace, speak, speak of shame as the vector of violence, of silence as the vector for shame. Do not show photos of headless fat people in the name of health or anything else. Let me not cast my lot with stereotypes. Or choke on my own fatuousness but roll up my body—race—class—age—hatred and erotophobia into a bolus and gob it up where it can shine a light and be gentle on myself, while I get to grips with its genesis and consequence which will be painful to witness and recurring like a fur ball. What I'm saying is that it would be a whole heap simpler to write and keep mum keep the real stuff of it hidden in poems of gardening anecdotes, which I dig, or deliciously salacious but ultimately disembodied erotic lyrics, but we know too much now how there are costs raised against all our choices, that silence prides itself with the price on our heads, our hearts, our lives, friendships, desires, destinies, mistakes the terrible way we can learn to live locked in and stitched up with it for years, pickling our bodies' thirst for knowledge in a mild acid bath of shame and fear and unbelonging—like I did. Everything I know about love I learnt the really hard way. I don't have my silences sorted yet nor am I familiar enough with my resiliences to be entirely comfortable performing them. Yet, here we are. Believe me, kiddo, this is a long shot. If it means anything anything at all for you to hear this then you know your story counts too. Don't you. It does so. The split-open world will need the word clitoris in it in a good way. I don't hesitate in writing only in the reading over when first imagining other than my lover's eyes censoriousness creeps up to lascivious and I'll cringe. Slut. Porn. Filth. As if them saying the words made me bad somehow. Now I know better to the letter from the way my tongue picks out the curves in the words flicks along their upright spines pours opulence along their reclaimed bellies belying everything that is untoward launching me launching me forward

The first time I read back labia it hit me pretty much like a shock tactic. Where it took me was to think that I know loads of powerful really good goddamn awful poems about rape and I don't mean to be gratuitous but it makes a point that I couldn't name, one with a pleased labia in it. That's graphic, telling everything of silence, I thought. The poet Nina Cassian in her book *Life Sentences* gives us '*the clitoris in my throat/ vibrating, sensitive, pulsating /exploding in the orgasm of Romania.*' A line that stayed with me all these years. Which means if we're serious about the word splitting the world open we've all got to start talking our bodies more seriously writing, signing, singing, dancing, painting, moving, entering, naming finding a way to say the words for it and also relate. And meanwhile I love you, I love you as you read this, distantly, knowing what gave me the gift of my body speech, babe, and lifted my lips to the page.



Playing Safe

But before we get down dirty and in case
you've never personally been there
or seen it acted or for real I thought
I'd better warn you of the facts:
the way I do a flashback is loud as
I can be, indecent with abandon,
wordless but for the obvious.
Nervous? I'll snap. Screw the
neighbours' sentiments it's bedlam.
I'll shake so bad you won't get almost close
when I need you, and you need you, to anchor me most
and you are faced with the utmost catastrophe
of love in the face of utter powerlessness
so you'll have to hold me steady by some
other route, find a way to let me know
this time it's not forever, that it's safe to say

*I'm coming back to the place
that we created where trust is what I make of it
and pain a pool that I will you to lead me to
so I can stand on its rim
and see myself reflected through its depths
where I turn my back on you and scare
myself with what I want to happen next
where cruelty is spent on violence
and fear, no longer petrified, has come to life*

You should know I can hear everything
even when I'm living memory
despite which as you try to reach me I'm likely to fight
like mad like hell for leather
like tooth and nail raw claw
like a terrified child
long gone far out of the body beside herself small
to rail against anything
against everything that threatens at all
to reconnect my head and flesh. I know,
sounds like a gas. You ready for that? Babe. Someone fucked up.



LUCY APHRAMOR // It is in performing poetry that the topics that interest me professionally in my work as a feminist radical dietitian—including embodiment, justice, trauma, and ways of knowing—find an integrated voice and take shape. For behind the widespread body hatred and disconnect that brings clients with eating troubles to seek out help, lies the scaffold of hierarchical, binary thinking that shores up stereotypes and reinforces the values of patriarchy where non-dominant ways of being are judged, blamed, stripped of power, and belittled. I started performing poetry over 15 years ago and my work now celebrates the power of authenticity and vulnerability in relationship with others, our histories, our bodies. Key to this is an insistence on a formidable physicality that transgressively breaks the silence around women's erotic experiences and desires, unapologetically putting a queer sex centre-stage.



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Cam Girl

Jax Sparxx

Being a webcam performer raises many interesting contradictions: between the culture of the mainstream sex industry, the fetish market, and the production of online identities; of performance and my own agency in presenting as not only Queer, but promoting a gender queer culture within these environs.

I'm a cam girl. My access to economic survival is via the online world of web-camming, one of the fastest growing and changing areas of the sex industry. My working persona is that of a Dyke Dominatrix. I train "Sissies" who want to be "forced" to be women and men who want to be told how I will fuck them with my strap-on. It's a world of homo sluts who want to be converted to being gay, submissives who want female supremacy and small penis humiliation, and guys who just want to be told what to do.

Being a webcam performer raises many interesting contradictions: between the culture of the mainstream sex industry, the fetish market, and the production of online identities; of performance and my own agency in presenting as not only Queer, but promoting a gender queer culture within these environs.

The sex industry has many facets. Often reduced to a single ideological entity by abolitionists, in reality it is a complex array of needs, markets, and conditions. The "straight" online fetish market in which I have most experience is often informed by highly produced stereotypes, genres into which people fit themselves rather than carve out new niches. This stands in curious juxtaposition with our online ability to present anonymously, and as other than we appear in real life (RL). I am a constant witness to others trying out new roles and identities in their sexual and gendered lives. Starting out in the sex industry, I chose to create a Lesbian persona, which has stuck as a brand, but has often operated differently from how I first imagined.

There are definitely peculiarities to being a queer femme sex worker, not least of these is my ability to pass, the dubious privilege of being recognised as a sexual object by men, and being treated as a woman.

Historically, I see myself aligned with familiar roles. The writing of Leslie Feinberg (1993) and Joan Nestle (1987), among others, give glimpses of a history of femme lesbians as sex workers, of the interplay between straight economies and queer survival. But to observe my life from only one viewpoint would be completely insufficient: class, gender, and sexuality, among other factors, all play a part in what is a complex picture.

Getting ready to cam, I try to motivate myself, hunting through the drawer where I keep my collection of black/lacy/transparent clothes. I choose see-through underwear, a garter belt, stockings, a push-up bra, super high stripper shoes, and a corset. Once upon a time, I used to wear this stuff to play parties as a parody of sexualised femininity; these days, I try to keep my work clothes and my play clothes separate. I'm not so sure about the irony anymore.

I sit in front of my cam using my image on screen as a mirror to apply my make-up. Lots of it, big eyes and a bright red lipsticked mouth. I adjust the camera angle and lighting



until I'm happy and then press "login." The program chimes and beeps as the encoder displays my bandwidth and frame rate. Finally, a message appears telling me I am logged in and warning me to watch out for viewers attempting to scam me in free view.

Online, there's a flood of visitors to my room: godoffuck, hunglikeahamster, clandestine antics, lickurbrains, pussylickinggood, Colonel Gadafi, leadballoon, gilfhunter, repoman, battybear, pindickwimp, monsieurcamembert, Stalion69, Stuntcock11, SingleWolf, bored_big_boy, Pitbull54-uk, Yer-Old-Da, loserdan, divinemortal, fat_cunt_in_thong, loves2fukdykes, donniedarko666, godseffingift, sticky conversation, humour me, nedzeppelin. Guys who spend all day in free view, the cheapskates and nuisance types, asking their uninspired and repetitive questions: "hi bb, how r u?," "hi bb where are you from," "hi bb can you stand up and give us a twirl?" The same questions over and over again, hour after hour.

I can do it: acting straight, when I need to make the rent, working extra shifts to make my weekly target and cash out. Putting on my innocent girly voice, smiling, stripping, showing pussy—not that there's anything wrong with that, my tits often pay the rent! At work I always feel like I am occupying some weird alter ego, plus the whole time I'm online I'm watching myself on cam—it's pure narcissism.

I spend a lot of time in between camming cruising other girls' profiles, checking out their pictures, and seeing what sort of stuff they do. Call it market research. Apart from professional admiration, I also have my favourites: "Mistress Golden Bullet," "Abusive Pin-Up," "Eternal Flame," and "Cash Princess." I can understand how guys get hooked on this stuff; if I had a few spare hundred dollars a week, I wouldn't mind hanging out and chatting with these girls for a while. Oh the money I might spend if I had it. The amount of porn I look at sometimes, I think I'm going to go blind.

Today I watched a man shove a cucumber up his own arse. Sex work is giving me a whole new perspective on heterosexuality. Basically all heterosexual men want is to be cross-dressed and fucked up the arse. I get plenty of "I'm straight but..." A lot of what I do is gender re-education 101, giving a bit of guidance to those poor myopically socialised fuckers.

I've often wondered if I lose business by not pretending to be straight, but the "Lesbian" title is a buffer I chose to put between myself and the sex industry. Experience has told me that most clients will go into paid private chat if they like your pictures; they are reading me at face value.

My shy long-distance boyfriend—we've been chatting to each other for about three years now—sometimes I don't see him for weeks at a time, but then he will pop up and I will exclaim, "Hey, where have you been? I missed you!" The first few times we chatted, he was very hesitant about exactly what he was into—it had to be something kinky. His tag line, "I adore older women," is a clue; at least I know I have the MILF factor down.

I try a few of the standard scenarios that most guys respond to: is it "enforced-bi?" He says: "Please Mistress can I ask you not to make me do anything involving other men? It's because of my religion." He knows I'm a lesbian; somehow, that doesn't make any difference. Our relationship is the flirtatiously sweet interaction of teenagers discovering the depth of their crushes on each other—that and the added violent canings, sexual humiliations, and cock milking.

One of my online clip-buying regulars is an African American guy in the States. He sends me custom clip requests for videos in which I act the part of his white female boss humiliating him for his obsession with my "beautiful big white ass." He especially loves for me to talk about how he is stroking his "huge black cock" and sends entire scripts for me to act out, to talk about how the other small dick white guys have been fired for not measuring up. It's a



minefield of racial, class, and sexual stereotypes, but where do I stand in this as the sex worker? What is work? What is sexual fetish? How does this play out in terms of real world relationships? What meaning does it have beyond a \$35 custom clip and a lot of graphic cock shot emails in my inbox? The answers are not easily found—by me anyway—and I've decided that a lot of this shit is not worth thinking about too much. I'm not sitting in a theory class; I need to pay the rent.

Maddie is my long term lesbian cam client. She loves to hear about how I will use her, introduce her to my world of sexual dominance, and take her beyond her physical and emotional limits. She wants to be my little girl plaything, a fuck dolly used and abused for my pleasure. I have no idea what gender or sexuality she claims off-cam. In my own queer world, I accept people's gender identities without question. It's a cultural imperative. One of the things we try to give each other is the chance to have a fostered and celebrated transition in a world that is far from friendly to those who are not gender conforming.

As a femme in the queer scene, I've seldom been afforded the same courtesy of having my gender identity accepted without question. Strangely, femme is often still seen as a default to femininity. As a gender queer femme, I am doubly invisible.

The queer world has its own complicated relationship with sex. As much as we reject the "all gay people ever think about is sex" label, much of contemporary queerness has been defined by its "sex-positive" attitude. The queer community is a place of sex clubs, sex parties, and heavily promoted polyamory. There can be a drive toward defining successful queerness in terms of the amount of sex and the number of partners and sexual adventures one has, to measure social standing via sexual prowess.

Being a sex worker in the queer scene can be weird. On the good side, once you are working, you realise just how many other queer sex workers there are. Then there's the other stuff, the whorephobia—casual remarks and assumptions that give away the thinly buried prejudice. And the fetishists—the whore fuckers who can't quite decide if they love or hate you, whether they want to live the fantasy or rescue you. As a projection of their desire you are "so fascinating," hot hot hot, like a new tattoo, even better because you are so edgy. Fucking you is like a badge of honour so everyone can see how cool they are.

Gender and sexuality are constantly shifting in the world of camming. The things I have most difficulty with are the same issues that baffle me in RL: When I am supposed to perform as the straight, cis gendered, stereotypically submissive, or at least sexually receptive, partner of a cis gendered man? I know how to do this, I've been well tutored in these roles growing up, but it's not who I am. I'm thrilled when my clients confess their homosexuality, their desire to be fucked, their secret longings to cross dress and be rented out as my whore.

I balked at first over the culture of "Sissification" in the sex industry: What did the expression of such desires mean in this context? I've met people who say they don't do "enforced-bi" or "enforced cross-dressing;" they only *encourage* their clients; the reasoning being that to do otherwise would be reinforcing ideas of homophobia or transphobia. Pathologising the desires of those who pay for sexual services is a common practice. There are a number of ideas missing from this analysis, the most important being the role that fantasy plays in many people's sexual and gender explorations, in our abilities to find self-expression, to try out identities in a safe space whether queer, straight, paid, or unpaid.

A client enters my private chat room and types, "Hello Sir." I reply, "Hello faggot slut." We run through our standard topics of conversation: the confession of their homosexuality, their love of cock, that they want to serve by sucking cock whenever master pleases, that they will be transformed into a female character, that their desire to please will be an integral part of



being owned. Our gender roles slip and slide easily, unquestioned. There is no need to make sense of our fantasy world in terms of how we are seen by outside society; we understand each other. This is probably the closest that my roles in RL and online come to each other. It's a place where I often feel close to being seen as myself.

On the screen, on the internet, typing in chat rooms, in precarious work, in queer bars or out on the street, my identity changes not only according to how I present myself, but also according to how I am perceived by others.

At home, my princess (a transgender boy) calls me Daddy. We understand each other's gender queerness. There is no need for roles to be solid; we believe in each other's bodies as they are, as we might wish them to be. Sometimes, our wishes change according to desire. My boy believes that Daddy has a big fat cock and a devil smile, and I believe that a princess lives beneath that burgeoning moustache, the new chest hair, and the forever butch strut. Our gender queer femme to gender queer transman relationship exceeds the confines of our passing roles. Understanding requires a step behind the scenes of the games people play, games that are very real. It's a task far more complex than what can be read at face value.

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feral feminisms

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from Unoriginal Danger

Dominique Salas

[A circle of women gather at a table to speak]

A circle of women gather at a table to speak
of other women and infidelity
and partners and are using the word EVIL
and the words BAD PERSON and then
the words WELL, NOT LIKE A REAL
BAD PERSON. And I still reflect
to wonder how I was A BAD PERSON. It was
all in the argument of my artistry. My period
of performance, that phase in which I was
into giggling, WHOA, who the fuck am I?
Sitting in the kitchen drunk, asking if people
would please give me their pizza crust because
I am lactose intolerant and who the fuck
didn't order the pizza I wanted with extra
sauce and no cheese? See, yes, that was me.
It still is, but consoling a boy that he was
nothing like his abusive father while then
fucking him in the bathroom and then lap dancing
on a Jacob-Something, that was not me. Technically it was, but it was not a healthy me. The
magazines with good-girl celebrities know when women are healthy good-girls. In some
dimension, it might have been that I could have done that. I never did, but I knew it was the
commitment that really mattered. The commitment to be
that girl at the party. You know, *that girl*?

You know? If you do, tell me, because I feel
like I should have something to say
aside from blinking slowly and eating chips
while at this table of every-woman. Every one
has a different image of *that girl*. Aside
from the fact that *that girl* is mostly only
that girl because of her possession of a clit or
the absence of one or because of how her skin presents
as butterscotch candy or some other
syrupey sweet for you to suck into disappearance in your mouth.



[At first, I wished that a man]

At first, I wished that a man
with a dick was writing about
me, instead of me. No one
walks into a museum to admire
the woman who statued herself,
glint of an open compact
in her hand. But, I am saccharine
hair-twirling in place of placid
grace, and women are mandatory-
resourceful. I can glance into the aureole
with a wink and chuck it at your feet.

Manmade unoriginal danger, I will see your
destruction, and raise you switch-blade sexy.

Do I really have to be switch-blade sexy? I assigned myself this duty as a child, rewatching *Interview with the Vampire* just to see Claudia in one scene. Her body frozen and neuter. She sees a woman, nude. If there were an argument deciding her beauty, this scene would be all the evidence. Claudia is enraged and tantrums out her anger. She wants her body to be whittled and lengthened: the collar bone jutting to catch the light, but designated plush on certain expanses of the body. Maybe of some use; maybe they are footholds for lazy lovers. I wanted that paradox of a body. As I got my period, I waited for my transformation. I turned seventeen, and finally rose to meet a B cup. I made the list of what this woman had, what I could not grow: the honeyed hair, pillows of white flesh and fat that cast shadows along the nakedness of her, and the height of her, just her stature meant Lady to me. So, naked, I stood in the restroom alone, tugged at my hair, the protrude of ribs where a chest should ascent. I had to stand on the toilet to get a full view of my body. If I could receive instructions to be a Lady, I would have been elated. I too could be that naked.

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“Performing Queer Femininity and Performing it all Wrong:” The Development of the Performance Persona Rosie Lugosi the Vampire Queen

Rosie Garland

This article presents how a profound engagement with my own alternative and non-normative femininity has a determining role in the creation and development of performance persona Rosie Lugosi the Vampire Queen: Mistress of Ceremonies, poet, and twisted cabaret chanteuse. I examine how Rosie Lugosi embodies the monstrous-feminine through challenges to the image of the lesbian vampire, exploring issues of performance and poetry as an integrative tool and path to personhood. Rosie Lugosi’s variant and outlaw voice articulates the mis/representation of women, the performance of fem(me)ninity and queerness, whilst exploring personal darkness, celebrating woman-as-abject, and reclaiming space as an outsider artist.

Rosie Lugosi is “The Girl You Never Loved But Always Looked For.” In and through her I perform the monstrous-feminine.

Succubus

She breathes on you; swear you don’t feel a thing
but the looking-glass is misting
damp with her condensation.

She writes: *she 4 me, 4 eva, I love U, true*
These are the ghosts she promises you.

Vinegar dreams that make you stand up
and suck your fingers.

She fills you with silk, sandpaper,
bites that tattoo your back and legs
with crescents of scarlet stars.

And she sings:

Baby baby, daddy shall have a new master
swinging your heart on the end of a ribbon.
Sleepy yet?

Thumbs your eyelids till they
sings in your ears until they
pins your butterflies until they



crouches on your ribs until they
Braids 7-year-itch bitterness
into the air that curls up from your tongue.

Writes: *she 4 me, 4 eva, I love U, true*
These are the ghosts she promises you.
She sings the blues—
purples you with a garden of rosy bruises.
She is teeth and tongue and
old enough to slip your window catches.
The girl you never loved

but always looked for.
She never comes when you call. You cannot warm her.
She writes: *she 4 me, 4 eva, I love U, true*
These are the ghosts she promises you.

She sings black and blue murder.
She is no accident that just keeps happening.
She's the breath you gasp out,
your half-empty bed,
the bottles rolling on the floor,
why you hate the weekends,
why it's just too hard to hold it all together
and why no other woman ever looks like her.
She 4 me, 4 eva, I love U, true
These are the ghosts she promised you. (Lugosi 2003, 23)

Rosie Lugosi is a Frankenstein creation, sewn together from worst nightmares and wildest dreams, and all the murky things we're not supposed to think about. She asks questions we are not supposed to ask.



Quintessential Outsider

I'll start with the question I get asked most often: *why did you choose the image of the vampire to express yourself?*

It's nothing to do with the limp *Twilight* universe, where vampires are de-sexed and de-queered (Meyer 2005); nor angst-ridden Anne Rice (1976) creations; nor even the passive Hammer Horrors (Sangster 1971), who got staked by Peter Cushing in the final reel (after everyone had got a good gawp at their cleavages). As a child I was afraid of the dark, and wanted something effective to help me deal with it. Something that knew the geography of darkness and revelled in it. I wanted fearless invisible friends, and chose vampires. Vampires were the most powerful creatures in the world. Nothing scared them.

The vampire is the quintessential queer outsider: it exists outside society, challenging and outraging social mores. It is an abject being that "[d]oes not respect borders, positions, rules and disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982, 4). It outrages the social order. Yet "normal" society is entranced, fascinated, obsessed. It wants to possess, but also to destroy.

This abjectness, this lack of respect for rules and borders, has traditionally been viewed negatively. Female vampires in particular have been viewed as "[a]n expression of women's position as outsiders, women's social and cultural alienation" (Jackson 1981, 71).

This misses an important point. I propose that the female vampire is an outsider through choice. She has not been thrown out of society: she defies it. She's a woman in rebellion



against the family and expectations of sexual passivity, not merely ejected. Rosie Lugosi is no leech on the patriarchal beast, which is drawn to her, yet tries to stake her. She gets her blood elsewhere. Therefore, she breaks the pattern of being hooked into patriarchy's push-me-pull-you relationship with powerful, sexually active women.

Vampires are contradictory. They embody yet challenge the breach between enforced and over-simplistic dualities (human and non-human, male and female, straight and queer). They exist within the contradiction of needing to "pass as human," so as to avoid getting staked every five minutes—a neat metaphor for the queer subject who, historically as well as currently, needed to "pass" as straight to avoid persecution. They invite questions about what we accept unquestioningly.

Vampires don't fit. Neither did nor do I. They don't strive for the heteronormative imperative of marriage plus children plus mortgage. They build alternative family groupings, creating new members of their community in a way that doesn't involve childbirth. They have families of choice, not families of origin. Oh, and they are sexy. I was attracted to their unconventional sexuality. As an isolated queer femme teenager it seemed radical to propose a form of sexual expression not focused entirely on male genitalia (it still does).

The archetypal image of the vampire possesses great personal resonance. It links to my adolescent searching for a sense of self in a deeply conservative, rural home. Rosie Lugosi is "[n]ot an icon but an inroad" (Young 1988) into self-awareness and what it means to be a performer who is a queer femme. I am looked at, still. But now I possess knowledge. I am able to look back.

Drag, Dis-ease, and the Body Politic

Another frequent question is: *are you a man or a woman?*

I have no time for restrictive gender binaries. Rosie Lugosi blurs gender boundaries because, as I am told, *no real woman would ever act like you*. What is meant is that no authentic woman could be so loud, sexually assertive, wear such exaggerated makeup, make such exaggerated gestures, be so confident, so fearless, and thereby so terrifying. Rosie Lugosi is so extreme a representation of the feminine that she can't be a woman. She must be a man in drag. However, Rosie Lugosi is no domesticated Mrs. Doubtfire, whose drag neatly reinforces heteronormativity. She leaves it punch-drunk and reeling from lightning comebacks, honed on years of playground and workplace bullying.

Just as drag is about being an imposter, I use drag to "[i]nsist on the extension of legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal and unintelligible" (Butler 1990, xxv). In addition to perverting notions of what makes a woman a real woman, Rosie Lugosi's false and deceptive dress is analogous to the nature of vampires—they pass as human, but they too are impostors. Of course, this links to the stigma that queers bear, that they are not fully part of the human race. Like vampires, they too are marginal and therefore not to be trusted.

I am not a faux queen, a woman dressed as a woman, "[n]ot...celebrat[ing] drag as the expression of a true and model gender" (Butler 1990, xxiv). I am doing something far more disruptive. Rosie Lugosi is a perverse deployment of femininity. A caricature. Six foot tall in six-inch stilettos, wielding a riding crop, clad in latex catsuit, towering wig, fangs and hoisted cleavage, she transforms previous notions of what constitutes both gothic and queer performance. Just as Rosie Lugosi parodies songs, she parodies femininity, interrogating the theme of forbidden female fruit. I dress the part and portray Rosie Lugosi as the *Radical*



Lesbian Separatist Dominatrix Bitch Goddess Top Femme Vampire Queen. I am performing the "feminine" and performing it all wrong.

It's a fine line. Try to name voluptuous, overtly sexual comediennesses and you run out of steam pretty quickly. Mae West is one of the few examples that springs to mind. This reflects women's ongoing, deeply troubled relationship with their bodies. Female comics struggle with making their bodies sexual, in case it distracts (it will), or they are dismissed as eye-candy (they are). Rosie Lugosi is a spectacle, but not a passive spectacle to be consumed. She bites back. Cracking the whip, baring fangs, and flaunting flesh, I make my body part of the act. It is an extreme body that both personifies and encapsulates the whole ambivalence still felt about sexually active and confident women. Rosie Lugosi embodies the defiant and transgressive power of unconventional female sexuality—the predatory vampiric villainess who never gets staked.

Through Rosie Lugosi, I perform the tensions that women feel about how "real" women are represented in society and the media. Women are still under pressure to conform to a narrow range of acceptable presentations of woman. The "acceptables" often relate to invisibility. We are told being invisible will make us safe. However, my experience of living through the Yorkshire Ripper experience taught me this is not true (for an overview of the murder of 13 women in 1980s Yorkshire UK and the shamefully botched police investigation, see Louise Wattis 2017). The lie that only sex workers in short skirts are attacked persists. Anyone who has lived with domestic violence will tell you that no clothing or behaviour can make you "safe." So why bother? If neither clothing nor behaviour ensure safety, why waste creative energy trying? Rosie Lugosi is my response to that question. I have no desire to be assimilated into normative society, no desire to be abstinent. To paraphrase Peter Tatchell, "I don't want equality, I want liberation" (Tatchell 2009).

How Queer is Queer?

realesbian

But you don't *look* like a lesbian...

I am the double-take
The queerest of the queer,
so secure in my sexuality
That tonight I'll wear a dress
that hugs my waist and hips.

But you don't look like a *real* lesbian...

So you tell me what's real
while I shake out my hair
kick off my heels
peel off your shirt
and push you into the pillows.

But you don't look like a *normal* lesbian...

You're damn right; I'm not normal
I'm a subverter of society



and all its expectations.
So perverted, I love women
and that includes myself. (Lugosi 2000, 12)

Rosie Lugosi transgresses notions and perceptions of how femmes and lesbians perform and present "femme" and "lesbianism" to straight and queer communities. There is still a tension that flamboyance is politically suspect, that "dressing up" is letting the side down (an attitude that plagued eighties lesbian feminism). I am in agreement with Emma Goldman who said, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution" (The history of this misquotation is to be found in Goldman (1934, 56) and Shulman (1991)).

Dressing-up continues to be profoundly subversive. It plays with notions of what we can be and what we are told we can't be. Clothing is an instrument of power, and I appropriate it. Occupy it. Rosie Lugosi is a direct descendant of butch-femme bar culture of the 1950s and 60s, teamed with the political drive of the Suffragettes (whose lesbian history is, thankfully, being reclaimed), who fought for the right to look and dress as they saw fit, wearing red lipstick as an act of defiance (Marsh 2014, 35).

However, I wear no makeup when offstage: a challenge to restrictive notions of how femmes should present "real femme." It also draws a distinction between femme as an identity category (of non-normative sexuality), and the (drag) performance of the femme that exposes the cultural construction of femininity through parody.

Growing Old Disgracefully

Increasingly, I'm asked: *should you be doing this at your age?*

I'm growing older, and am doing it disgracefully. I have every intention of continuing to perform, and do not regard performance as an exclusively youthful experience. Why should we stop? Rosie Lugosi throws out that challenge. She physically embodies the monstrous-feminine through the outward trappings of the dominatrix-vampire-crone. She transgresses age boundaries by challenging notions of how women are supposed to act at a particular age, not to mention the diktat that women must keep young and beautiful. In my late fifties, I flaunt my age onstage. Rosie Lugosi is a *memento mori*. She stands in contrast to sanitised mainstream depictions of eternally-youthful female vampires, not to mention human females. Step close, I whisper. Approach this horror. Count the wrinkles, the cracked veins: these proudly displayed intimations of mortality.

There's an intake of breath, a knee-jerk recoil. *But you don't look that old* is the reflex response; hurriedly reassuring me that I need not worry. However, my age is a fact, not an option. Therefore, I look precisely the age that I am. Denial is always an indicator that one has struck the nail on the head. The injunction against displaying an ageing female body is potent—even amongst queers and feminists. There continues to be a horror of older sexually active women. Of crones. Of witches. Rosie Lugosi is a radical subversion of that perception. She will not hold her tongue. I use comedy to subvert notions of normative sexuality, gender-specific behaviours, and what constitutes appropriate female behaviour. Rather than polemic and preaching, I believe in the power of laughter to make people think.

I'm proud to call myself a feminist. Rosie Lugosi undermines the slander that feminists have no sense of humour, that political activism is boring or unfashionable. Rosie Lugosi tells jokes, and is a joke personified. She articulates the "[h]owl of laughter that would ridicule and



demolish any notion of the feminine that takes itself seriously" (Duggan & McHugh 2002). And, considering the current resurgence of the ultra-right, this is no time to hang up her fangs.

Conclusion

Performing Rosie Lugosi is about finding a variant voice and using it, loudly. Through her I give expression to the unexpressed underside of myself and experiences. The Rosie Lugosi material I write and perform is a mixture of humour and "dark materials." I am interested in outsiders; people who won't (or can't) squeeze into the one-size-fits-all templates they've been provided, and the friction that occurs when they try. I know that comes from always having been a cuckoo in the nest.

As Rosie Lugosi I utilise and reclaim the image of the predatory female. This is not about looking or acting "feminine" (the social construct of the disempowered and passive female). I'm reclaiming the power of being a show-off, that sign of ego and expression so much frowned upon in female children. Yes, I'm too big for my thigh-high PVC boots, and it's wonderful.

By utilising the classic image of the dominatrix as emcee and performer, I play with concepts of power: where and in whom it is situated, and how women use it. Rosie Lugosi cannot be dismissed as a tart in high heels and a wig. She is a challenge. She breaks down stereotypes of what queer femmes look like, sound like, can be, and can achieve. What it means to be different and proud. Rosie Lugosi embodies the power of a defiant and avenging angel. She says what she wants, wears what she wants, and does it for herself, not to please anyone.

In my novels *The Palace of Curiosities* (Garland 2012), *Vixen* (Garland 2014), and *The Night Brother* (Garland 2017), those marked by difference are not mute freaks robbed of agency, nor are they refracted through the eye of a normalising interviewer (Rice 1976). In the same vein, Rosie Lugosi speaks for herself, too. She challenges heteronormativity, not merely through performance but by the sheer force of her existence, which is both protean and Promethean. She proposes bright alternatives to a husband-and-marriage, nine-to-five existence, asserting that there is more than one book in the library, one song in the jukebox, more colours than beige.

Traditionally, vampires are supposed to be the living dead. The paradox is that as a suppressed, passive, unintegrated, underconfident voiceless individual I was never nearer death. As Rosie Lugosi the Lesbian Vampire Queen, one who has survived stalkers, cancer, and anything else the world has thrown at me, I have never been more alive.

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Playing Femme and Not Playing it Straight: Passing, Performance, and Queering Time and Place

Leanne Dawson

This article ties together femme history, theory, and culture to foreground a femme spectrum and an ever-expanding femme archive. The original reading of performers Bird la Bird and Rosie Lugosi considers the significance of visibility and the voice for the femme subject who may or may not “pass” as straight, while arguing that the femme can both problematise and mobilise queer theory, namely performativity and temporality, giving rise to a queer femme temporality that does not focus on traditional family structures and the future and can instead empower women and femininities across the spectrum.

Femme, taken from the French for “woman,” its pronunciation anglicised, has been used in the lesbian context since the 1940s, when it became a common term in working-class U.S. bar culture to describe feminine women who desired and partnered with other—usually masculine—women, known as butches (Kennedy and Davis 1993).¹ Meanwhile, the Black counterparts of the butch and femme were called stud and fish, respectively. The former, still in use today, conflates masculinity with sexual prowess while the latter reduces feminine women to their genitalia and the misogynistic idea that the vagina has an unpleasant odour. These butch-femme and stud-fish communities of the 1940s and 1950s considered butches and studs to be the true lesbians and suspected femmes may turn to heterosexuality at the first opportunity, reminiscent of the argument by sexologists and psychoanalysts that if women partnered with women their desire had to be masculine, thus establishing the notion that the relationship between sex, sexuality, and what would become known as “gender” was causal: homosexuals were called “inverts” and the masculine lesbian’s desire was heterosexualised, leaving the feminine lesbian, whose sex and gender are supposedly aligned, difficult to justify. In explaining the sexuality of the lesbian in terms of her (masculine) desire, appearance, and behaviour, the feminine lesbian was a puzzle that could not be solved, with sexologist Havelock Ellis arguing that she is not truly a lesbian, but a woman who is “not usually attractive to the average man” (1975, 87) and therefore engages in sexual and romantic relationships with women due to a lack of other opportunities.²

In order to fight against femmephobia, this article opens with an overview of femme history, theory, and culture to create a femme spectrum and a femme archive. I read the performances of Bird la Bird and Rosie Lugosi to argue that the femme can shatter binaries by being simultaneously queer, monstrous, and maternal. Indeed both performers increase the visibility of, and give a voice to, femme and queer feminine identities. This original reading, therefore, foregrounds the femme to both problematise and mobilise queer theory, namely performativity and temporality, for a queer femme temporality that does not focus on traditional family structures and the future (e.g., the “biological clock,” martyrdom and the daily routine, and women “losing their looks”) and can instead empower women and femininities across the spectrum.



Femme Pasts: Binaries, Policing, Erasure

Despite femmephobia existing both within and beyond gay communities, the proliferation of femme subjects, including in working-class nightlife establishments, continued beyond the U.S. context. In the United Kingdom, The Gateways nightclub opened in Chelsea, London in 1931 and from 1943, if not before, established itself as a meeting place for minority groups, who were frequently discriminated against elsewhere. This focus on nightclubs as queer spaces of low culture—unlike much lesbian history and representation, which has tended to focus on high culture, the wealthy, and elite—will return to the fore in my discussion of femme performers, Bird and Lugosi, throughout this article.³ The Gateways closed in 1985, but lives on in cultural references including *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich 1968) starring Beryl Reid as June “George” Buckridge and Susannah York as Alice “Childie” McNaught, a butch-femme pair. Like the aforementioned patronising arguments about femmes, Childie is presented as naïve in both name and character, for the filmic plot plays to the notion that femmes are unworldly heterosexuals.

Second-wave feminism was strongly influenced by the anti-essentialism of Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking 1949 text, *The Second Sex*, which Beauvoir wrote after seeing how Jews were othered during the atrocities of National Socialism and she went on to argue that woman, too, is subordinated to second place in the binary system, in which the first is considered a norm or positive, while the second position is regarded as lacking. A series of binaries traditionally tied to man-woman are masculine-feminine, active-passive, logic-emotion, and public-private, for men were expected to go out into the public sphere and work while women took care of domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare in the private realm of the home. We will see shortly how both Bird and Lugosi shatter these binaries with their public performances, which simultaneously queer the maternal. While we must acknowledge that second-wave feminism helped women gain rights, there were some problems with it. Femmes and butches were often considered outdated, uneducated, and an embarrassment to the androgynous, primarily middle-class and white, lesbians of the second-wave movement in Europe and North America, for lesbians were encouraged to replicate feminist dress codes with the goal of erasing strongly gendered styles from lesbian communities (Case 1993, 296).⁴ This gendered styling of the body was significant as the butch was considered a “failed woman” and the femme was “hyper-woman,” with her supposed excessive femininity (Munt 1998, 3). Ironically, to deny a woman’s right to femininity is as coercive as imposing it upon her, which is a complaint frequently levied against hetero-patriarchy due to the repeated reinforcement of a fictional link between femaleness and femininity. During the “(Feminist) Sex Wars,” which included the notorious Barnard College conference, “The Scholar and the Feminist” (24 April 1982), debates about the femme were reignited. The Sex Wars comprised two sides of feminists debating butch and femme, as well as topics such as pornography and sadomasochism. Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia, Carole Vance, Ann Snitow, Amber Hollibaugh, Dorothy Allison, and the femme co-creator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City, Joan Nestle, were in favour of freedom of gender and sexual expression while Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Robin Morgan, Sheila Jeffreys, and Julia Penelope argued that the above practices kept women in a subordinate position (Nestle 1998, 121).⁵ As the 1980s progressed, there was a cultural shift from proscriptive feminism and binaries to spectrums of identity, via the queer movement, for which the AIDS epidemic and lack of response to this by the Reagan administration in particular saw LGBTQ+ people unite in a way they had not done before and still have not done since. Queer was reclaimed from its use as a slur to act as an



umbrella term—free from the strict categorisation of medical discourse—for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans subjects.⁶ Such grassroots queer politics and culture outside of the academy contributed to queer theory within.

Judith Butler's text at the dawn of queer theory, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) challenges investment in gender binaries, crediting Beauvoir's insight in *The Second Sex* into what is now known as "gender" as a process, a becoming; summed up by the line "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1997, 249). Butler emphasises the body as a discursive surface, stating that it is not possible to derive the kind of sexuality someone practices from their appearance, and arguing that acts and bodily gestures simply give the impression of an internal core. She terms this gender "performativity" and goes on to distinguish it from the bounded act of staged performance (1993, 234). However, Butler sometimes looks through rather than at the femme and frequently confines the femme subject to the butch-femme binary.

To pass is to not be recognised as a member of a group to which the person in question belongs, and can apply to ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability status, etcetera or, frequently, an intersection of these. Notable historical examples of passing to escape persecution include light-skinned Black people being read as white in the racially-segregated United States and Jews passing as "Aryan" in Nazi Germany. The term passing has since been used in relation to sexuality and gender: gay men and lesbians who wish to keep their sexual orientation private or who dress and act in a way that is often erroneously considered to be heterosexual—like some femmes—and transgender people who are read as cisgender.⁷ By definition, while some people "pass," others "fail" (Bernstein Sycamore 2006, 2) and it is those who do not pass who are often most celebrated in queer theory. Indeed the passing femme is sometimes dismissed or ignored both in and outside of the academy, due to the preference for gender trouble: those considered more subversive, more *queer* because of their disruptive surface text, regardless of sexual acts or desire. Certain visual signifiers, most notably those linked to gender "crossing," are frequently read as signs of a queer sexuality, recalling homophobic and essentialist discourse from times gone by, and rendering invisible the cis femme whose queer sexuality is erased when she is read as straight. This brief overview demonstrates why cultural and theoretical interjections on femme subjects by femmes themselves are necessary.

In 1992, Joan Nestle, who had co-created and housed the Lesbian Herstory Archives to promote inclusivity, create visibility, and offer a space for all lesbian history, including silenced femmes, declared that "the decade of the fem" (1992, 3) was upon us, although she later admitted to her naivety in not predicting the focus, both in and outside the academy, on female masculinity. To rehabilitate the femme subject position, scholars and authors, particularly in the United States, have created a body of academic and anecdotal literature. Biddy Martin's *Femininity Played Straight* argues that femininity is used as a conservative position, against which others can be presented as radical, highlighting both feminism and the queer movement's sometimes negative attitudes towards the femininity of cisgender women (1996, 119), that is women whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.⁸ Passing should not be downplayed, however, for infiltration and camouflage, whether with or without intention, can both transform and unsettle in a covert way.⁹ Enforced visibility is oppressive, while emancipated visibility is necessary in social justice struggles. In her work on drag, Marjorie Garber claims the "hegemonic cultural imaginary's" desire to see and interpret otherness is to "guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question" (1992, 130).



Since the mid-2000s there has been a marked focus on temporality within queer theory, including J. Jack Halberstam's *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), which includes ideas that can be mobilised to empower the femme subject while underlining the femme's queerness. Halberstam argues that queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction (2005, 1), meaning they do not maintain the linearity and repetition of a normative life schedule, that is heteropatriarchy's fixation on the binary and futurity. For Halberstam, those with "queer" lifestyles, even if their gender and sexuality are heteronormative, include drug addicts and club kids who live life in "rapid bursts" (2005, 4). Of course recent lesbian and gay politics has devoted much attention to the normalisation of the gay subject through rather unqueer battles, such as for civil partnerships, the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and various forms of legally recognised parenthood, like adoption and birth certificate inclusion for same-sex parents. While the femme may sometimes be considered not queer enough if her surface text is read as heteronormative and allows her to "pass" as straight, the femme's desire is queer and there is room for non-normative politics and life schedules, departing from the focus on repetition and futurity, instead opening up a queer temporality.¹⁰

The Femme Spectrum: Queering Time and Place

Femme groups and gatherings—comprising those who do and do not pass—contribute to femme visibility while strengthening networks across traditional borders and boundaries: bodily, geographical, and temporal. *Femme 2006: Conversations and explorations*, held in San Francisco, was the first conference to exclusively explore femme identity.¹¹ Much like the freedom of the term queer, once reclaimed and appropriated by LGBTQ+ subjects, *Femme 2006* helped to demonstrate that femme identity has become a broad spectrum, including cis femmes, trans femmes, male femmes, those who partner with butches, with other femmes, with some or all identities in between, or with no one. Speakers and attendees helped to expand femme to anyone who wished to self-identify and claim the term.¹² This focus on a femme spectrum is positive for those who have called the femme identity apolitical or not queer enough. While cis femmes who pass as straight are often subject to misogyny and homophobia, such as sexual harassment and claims they have not found the right man, we cannot downplay the danger faced by trans and non-binary femmes:

gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of the transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. (Butler 1988, 527)¹³

Indeed the whole spectrum of femme identities are on the receiving end of toxic masculinity and other negative effects of heteropatriarchy.

Anthropologist Ulrika Dahl and photographer Del La Grace Volcano attended *Femme 2006* to both present and gather material for their book *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2008), which consists of photographs of femmes, European and North American, to whom Dahl either authors letters or poses questions, or who write their own short essay on femme identity. Like *Femme 2006*, and the three subsequent *Femme* conferences in the United States (Chicago; Oakland; Baltimore), their book demonstrates a trend for excess: hyperbolic



femininities and what I read as queer femme temporalities. For example, Mistress Morgana's home and dress appear to make her an ideal 1950s-style housewife, but she is a femme photographed in 2006, who instructs on BDSM, and lives only with chickens in her San Francisco abode (Dahl and Volcano 2008, 129). Also included is the "flicka" (girl), who is part of the Stockholm asexuality movement and, at age 24, is interested in "childish, naïve, crazy girly things," therefore pushing back against norms because she does not "identify as a grown-up" (Dahl and Volcano 2008, 164), and therefore helps us to re-read the aforementioned filmic Childie in a more positive way. The book is overflowing with other forms of dissonance relating to queerness, femme subjectivity, time, and place, including: fat femmes, one of the key strands throughout all U.S. Femme Conferences; trans femmes; "bearded ladies"; heavily-tattooed femmes, and so on, thus using the power of image to disrupt the way feminine women have been set up as heteronormative objects bound to a strict binary. The central femme subjects of this article, both Lugosi and *Femmes of Power* cover girl Bird actively invite the reader to look at them within the book, just as they do with the audience when onstage.

A non-academic focus on a spectrum of femininity, traditional and alternative, in clubs, pubs, and performance, is of note as many LGBTQ+ venues have become increasingly feminised in recent years and Sarah Schulman's keynote speech, "Writing Lesbian: The First Thirty Years," at the 2013 Brighton Lesbian Lives conference, claimed that this is tied to the depoliticisation and commercialisation of both lesbianism and queerness, although it must be stated that linking consumerism and apoliticism to femininity replicates negative second-wave discourse about femininity. Furthermore, women have often been patronisingly tied to consumerism and, for a significant period of time, were denied any role in politics.¹⁴ Rather, such depoliticisation is due, in part, to the fact that the last major LGBTQ+ political movement was queer, revolving around the AIDS crisis, while the main focus of LGBTQ+ politics in recent years is decidedly unqueer: the normalisation of gay lives via same-sex marriage, etcetera, therefore a heterosexual life schedule of marriage, parenthood, and a focus on the future, which stands in opposition to a queer temporality and introduces a binary of the normalised "good" gay subject and the queer LGBTQ+ subject.

Temporality and the maternal were queered when Bird appeared at the Baltimore edition of the Femme Conference in 2012, where she "held court" on gender, sexuality, and class in the United Kingdom. Her aesthetics underlined the significance of the intersection of these as her headscarf and rollers highlighted a stereotypically northern English, working-class femininity, although some audience members, primarily from the United States, may not have immediately understood these cultural references and nuances. The headscarf and roller look was considered to be one from years gone by, although it has experienced a—very public—resurgence in Liverpool, North West England in recent times, where it is common to see heteronormative, heterosexual women walking through the city centre in full make-up and rollers during the daytime on a Saturday, while shopping and preparing for the night out to follow and is closely linked to WAG culture.¹⁵ This very public outing of the hair in the midst of styling by Bird (who is now based in London) and Liverpoolians, stands in opposition to the privacy of such tools of femininity in the past, when women confined their rollers and preparation for appearing in public to the private sphere of the home. This appearance foregrounds the oft concealed labour in the process of creating a feminine aesthetic.

Bird, her name reappropriated from British English working-class sexist slang for a young woman or girlfriend, created a queer temporality in an already queer space through her hyperbolic northern English working-class femininity as her vintage hair and make-up would not have led to dissonance in the private sphere of an earlier time period and/or a different



geographical location. Her classically made-up, red-lipped face cites 1940s and 1950s style glamour, while her multiple tattoos, including a chest piece and heavily inked limbs, nod to the traditions of a working-class masculinity, rather than femininity, particularly due to the *site* of their placement on body parts that mean they are also in our *sight*. While aspects of her femininity may lead Bird to be misread as straight, the tattoos and embracing of what can be read as a wonderful feminine “excess” prevent her from being read as too straight-laced and conventionally heteronormative.

Lugosi’s gothic-style outfits ranged from latex catsuits to the velvet and lace of Victorian styling at all four U.S. Femme Conferences and at the first Italian Fem Conference and Great Fem Show at the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome (1 June 2013), which finally made femme conferences transatlantic.¹⁶ My attendance at most of the aforementioned conferences and numerous other social, academic, and cultural events, both as a scholar presenting research and as a self-identified femme who passes in multiple ways, means I could not help but notice how the crowd of delegates in the United States, whether performers, presenters, or audience members, repeatedly reached a level of playfulness, excess, and exaggerated artificiality in their appearance and behaviour that is rarely matched in femme spaces in the United Kingdom, and much of Europe, with Lugosi and Bird offering two notable exceptions.¹⁷

Such international femme gatherings have gone on to inspire local networks in the United Kingdom. The 2006 event in San Francisco cast a spotlight on the Atlanta Femme Mafia, a group which aims to fight stereotypes about and demand respect for the femme, and since then Mafia groups have sprung up throughout North America and Europe, including the United Kingdom. Although there has, thus far, been no U.K.-based conference focusing on femmes—something I intend to change in the future—the academic conference, Lesbian Lives, which used to take place annually at University College Dublin, Ireland, was hosted at the University of Brighton, England in 2013 and foregrounded femme subjectivity when both Lugosi and Bird performed and presented with shows entitled “Gory Gory Alleluia! Rosie Lugosi The Lesbian Vampire Queen in performance” and “Holding Court with Bird la Bird,” before Garland gave a talk on “Performing Queer Femininity and Performing it all Wrong.” It is this notion of performing (queer) femininity wrong that I now turn to, for Lugosi and Bird *may* pass as heterosexual—although they are far from the traditional image of heteronormative femininity tied to heterosexuality—but their styling, behaviour, and use of the voice create an “*other* otherness” of a queer femme time and place (Dawson 2015b).

Lugosi and Bird’s respective websites foreground their own voices. Lugosi’s captures all of her artistic output:

an eclectic writer and performer, ranging from singing in post-punk gothic band The March Violets, through touring with the Subversive Stitch exhibition in the 90s to her alter-ego Rosie Lugosi the Vampire Queen, cabaret chanteuse and mistress of ceremonies. (Rosie Garland, 2012)

While Bird’s multi-talent is delivered in the first person:

I started out as a gallery based artist in the 90s. I gave art up cos what I made was worthy and boring. It took me ten years to start my practice again when I hatched my alter-eggo—Bird la Bird. I favour the music hall tradition to gallery based performance art. I come from a queer femme perspective but my art isn’t just about being femme and it’s for everyone [...]. Bird la Bird is a Show-woman and Mama of Bird Club, a Queer Femme cabaret night



for 21st Century Marthas and Arthurs. Bird favours collaboration to create multimedia spectacles straddling stand-up comedy and performance art. (Bird la Bird, 2012)

Both artists collaborate with others and stand alone, rather than in a binary, which is significant considering how the femme was positioned alongside the butch, and because of femme now being considered a spectrum. Here, the “Mama of Bird Club” queers the maternal via her mother hen creation of supportive and mutually beneficial networks. Femme theorist Martin claims to be particularly interested in “the feminine, played straight” and the assumption “that when [femininity] is not camped or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring” (1996, 105), but Bird’s demonstration of the maternal, via a queer creation of family, can also help to destroy the notion that femininity—whether played straight or not—and the maternal are easy bedfellows, particularly with regard to straight temporality. This focus on queer family, a family without the direct blood lineage upon which heterosexuality so strictly focuses, recalls trans femme author and activist Kate Bornstein’s use of Auntie. Bornstein addresses herself as such with the intention of creating queer family and elders for all LGBTQ+ people, including those who have been rejected by their biological family. Because of recent changes to the law in many countries, same-sex families are becoming increasingly normalised, but queers like Bornstein and Bird create a much more inclusive community/friend-family structure.

Bird’s inspiration, a six foot two, winged circus performer named Fevvers from Angela Carter’s *Nights At The Circus* (1984), adds a touch of monstrosity to the maternal, much like Lugosi’s vampire, whose (sexualised) kiss/bite supposedly creates eternal life, unlike the mother who creates and births finite life. Their queer maternal is removed from traditional settings and favours the night over the daily routine of normative life schedules and straight temporality.¹⁸ Although Bird frequently foregrounds the female reproductive cell of the egg linguistically via puns (e.g., “alter-eggo”) she is not performing as the downtrodden martyr, who was traditionally expected to place the needs of her husband and children above her own, but as queer femme maternal. Lugosi’s vampire highlights that unlike the traditional mother, the vampire can give eternal life alone without the need for another person’s reproductive cells and who, also unlike the heteronormative, heterosexual mother, exists outside of straight time, due to immortality coupled with the queer time and space of the night, which lies in opposition to the heteronormative schedule revolving around highly regulated family life. Manchester-based Lugosi is well known on both the LGBTQ+ and the fetish scenes, with these two areas of “other” sexuality frequently intersecting, while Bird has been instrumental in creating and organising London club nights embracing queer femininity and alternative expressions of sexuality and gender. Both Bird and Lugosi often perform in club settings. The Birdclub, co-created with Maria Rosa Young, took place in a London working men’s club and foregrounded the historical link between the femme, working-class bar culture, and a supposedly unknowing femininity.¹⁹ Indeed the bind between these femme performances and the public, night-time setting point towards Halberstam’s club kids, living in rapid bursts long after others have gone to bed. That femmes can exist in a queer temporality is extraordinarily positive multi-fold as it is women who most suffer within straight temporality, not only as they become mothers/martyrs, but also with regard to the passing of time such as the “ticking” biological clock and the way women are considered to “lose” their looks while men are frequently described using terms such as “silver fox.”



The Femme Archive: From NYC to the World

Bird and Lugosi's femininities simultaneously fight against depoliticisation and invisibility, onstage and off. Their performances can blur the lines of the bounded act/staged theatrical performance and the boundless act/gender performativity that Butler highlights (1993, 234) as they can happen anywhere and are neither confined to the stage, nor demarcated like a theatrical play. They may be planned or spontaneous, live or pre-recorded. This points us, once more, to a queer time and place. Many of Bird and Lugosi's live performances are recorded and freely available online, including on the artists' websites and YouTube, which help to remove obstacles associated with artistic and cultural events (e.g., a ticket fee, inability to attend due to location or fear of appropriating a certain (possibly middle-class+) space), thus sharing their "cultural capital" to help create a "social capital" of networks and queer community/family, rather than prioritising the "economic capital" (Bourdieu 1986) of profit for themselves. Indeed Bird uses such media to further shatter binaries, for she engages with high culture and academic theory, but makes this accessible in spaces and places where it would not normally be expected. This online archive of the femme, therefore, continues a tradition of visibility, accessibility, and inclusivity that Nestle created in the founding of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. While the time period meant that access to Nestle's original archive was dependent upon being in a certain city (NYC) at a certain time, the ability to access information on the internet of today allows a connectivity of femmes across time and place.²⁰

Bird and Lugosi's videos, starring and created by femmes, offer a key interjection into femme representation, for the feminine "lesbian" is most frequently visually represented in pornography aimed at the heterosexual market: two women have sex in front of a male actor, for his and the viewer's pleasure, before he physically interrupts the scene to penetrate both actresses and simultaneously reinstate his power and hetero-patriarchal norms. Bird's agenda of highlighting femme visibility in film was emphasised via her work for London's 21st Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (since renamed BFI Flare), in 2007, for which she co-created a femme programme and performed at the screening of short film, *Fem* (Campbell X 2007), an audio-visual love note to femmes, in which she features. After the pornographic "femme," the second most frequent cultural representation of the femme is in the form of the vampire, a trend that has been seen in numerous movies including *The Hunger* (Scott 1983) and slightly less well-known films including *We Are the Night* (Gansel 2010), which explores lesbian separatist ideas promoted by Valerie Solanas and is just one of a very long line of lesbian vampire stories, such as *Vampyros Lesbos* (Franco 1971), a West German-Spanish horror film made in Turkey, and Belgian film, *Daughters of Darkness* (Kümel 1971), adapted from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871-1872).²¹ As with the aforementioned pornography, the vampire is often sexualised and the creature, just like the femme, may "pass" (the vampire as human and the femme as heterosexual). Vampire Queen Rosie Lugosi demonstrates a will to pass as neither, while nodding to both vampirism and cinema history, even from the trend of the screened lesbian vampire as her name nods to Bela Lugosi (Béla Ferenc Dezsó Blaskó), the Hungarian-American actor who portrayed the title figure in Tod Browning and Karl Freund's 1931 horror film, *Dracula*.

During second-wave feminism, film theorist Laura Mulvey argued that woman in mainstream narrative cinema is set up as a spectacle of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975). Indeed femininity, both on and off screen, may offer to-be-looked-at-ness, but choosing to be a spectacle and playing with the binary of passivity and activity is distinct from the imposition of femininity. Both Lugosi and Bird actively set themselves up as spectacles, although the audience



interactivity encompassed in their performance and that they conceive of and write their own material makes them both *auteur* and star of their shows, blurring the traditional male-female, subject-object binary. Furthermore, that these shows take place on stage is significant as the stage is a unique place, not only of the supposedly “bounded act” of performance, but because it is traditionally one of the few public spaces (recalling the public-private binary) in which women could both work and draw attention to themselves. Indeed, the stage often incorporates a *site* and a *sight* of gender crossing, such as women playing men’s or “trouser” roles (Garber 1992, 255) and vice versa, for example, men starring as the pantomime dame, who is often ridiculed because femininity is wrongly seen as weak (again, going back to the binary), and something in which those assigned male at birth should not want to indulge. This also points to the often horrific treatment of trans women and non-binary people incorporating aspects of femininity. The stage has been employed in film, too, in order to show a different kind of gender and sexuality, such as Marlene Dietrich’s infamous tuxedo and top-hat-wearing characters, the boisterous femme fatale Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (von Sternberg 1930a) and the gender-bending Amy, who shares a kiss with a woman during her cabaret performance in *Morocco* (von Sternberg 1930b).²² The stage is, therefore, a queer place that allows for various crossings and transgressions, although it must be noted that Bird and Lugosi’s performances are queerer than this as they are not simply acts bound to the stage.

Femme Mouths: Active, Monstrous, Powerful

Garland does not just command to be looked at, but also demonstrates a strong power over language during her shows, reinforced by her work offstage, such as her debut novel, *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013), as well as short stories and anthologised poems.²³ This manipulation of language is highlighted onstage using the vampire mouth, which kisses/bites to convert humans into vampires and, in the case of lesbian vampire tales, to queer—used here as a verb—heterosexuals. Lugosi is not only a femme, but a femme fatale and the vampire mouth is described as:

giving the lie to the easy separation of the masculine and the feminine. Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses [...] the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive. With its soft flesh barred by hard bone, its red crossed by white, this mouth compels opposites and contrasts into a frightening unity. (Craft 1984, 109)

Homing in further on the vampire mouth, especially that of the queer female vampire, it is significant to note that fangs, Lugosi’s artificial addition to her body, can penetrate and thus act as a lesbian phallus, made possible by fetishism. This is the process of substitution through which other body parts or things stand in for the phallus as the “original” signifier of lesbian desire and, as Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter*, “the displaceability of the phallus, its capacity to symbolise in relation to other body parts or other body-like things, opens the way for the lesbian phallus, an otherwise contradictory formulation” (1993, 84). The fetish of Lugosi’s lesbian phallus is further highlighted via her fetishwear costumes, while the prosthetic aspect of her fangs nods to her power over language, a prosthetic range of signs used to represent signifieds, both objects and abstract ideas. Garland writes and performs her own poetry, but also adapts the lyrics of familiar songs, such as Otis Redding’s 1965 Respect,



famously covered by Aretha Franklin in 1967, in which Lugosi changes the lyrics and r-e-s-p-e-c-t to v-a-m-p-i-r-e, thus combining pastiche, parody, collage, and quotation, aesthetic and linguistic, in her shows. The femme mouth is often considered a passive mouth, for the butch-femme communities outlined at the start of this article expected femmes to be sexually passive to their active butches, which has left a legacy of femmes often being considered “pillow princesses” who do not perform oral sex or penetrate. The active, piercing mouth of the vampire femme rubbishes this notion, compounded by the loud, public mouth of the stage performer, who orally expresses her power.

Bird employs such techniques, too, although frequently in a more politically overt manner and amplified thanks to her Liverpoolian accent. This is significant considering her inspiration is a non-human creature, a bird/woman, for subjectivity is dependent upon the linguistic anchor and ability to speak. While “Holding Court,” Bird claimed to “put the fun back into feminism and the camp back in to communism” and this blend of political activism and entertainment is routed through femininity, such as the creation of a Femme Pride Bird Float: “Femme Invisibility: So Last Year!” for London Pride in 2007, to foreground queer femininities at an event which started as a protest, but has transitioned into one of entertainment and commercialism. While Lugosi is inspired by vampirism and offers filmic intertextuality, Bird also draws on monstrosity to highlight femme visibility with her link to Fevvers, citing literature. Carter’s novel plays with a fairytale style to deliver a hazy concept of time, which, again, ties to a queer temporality, as well as a consideration of visibility and a comment on class. Like Lugosi and Bird, Fevvers exhibits herself and invites the gaze, with the repetition of “look at me!” (2012, 13).²⁴ Beauty and supposed monstrosity relate to the hetero-patriarchal idea of doing femininity right or wrong, of passing or failing, which is usually inverted in straight and queer venues, for female masculinity has often been permitted in gay and lesbian venues without question, while the femme had to justify and prove herself to gain entry. Indeed it is for this reason Bird created the Femme Police (2009) to subject non-femmes to the type of policing feminine women have often been the victim of at gay events, while mocking that age-old problem of not looking queer *enough* and the idea that sexuality can be read on the body. “Gay Shame... Goes Girly,” hosted at Brixton Academy as a creative rebellion against mainstream pride events and to offer satire on the commercialisation of the LGBTQ+ community, featured Bird, dressed as a highly-stylised police woman, “arresting” non-feminine attendees.²⁵

The femme body and politics combine in Bird’s show, *People’s Pussy*, which queers and mocks Conservative politics. The work was influenced by the Communist Manifesto and Busby Berkeley, as reflected in Comrade Birdski’s outfit: a red jacket with oversized gold epaulettes, simultaneously recalling military and majorette, bookended by a red headdress and red knee high socks. Birdski tears off a pair of white bloomers to appear (thanks to flesh-coloured hosiery) nude except for a communist red star covering her pubic area. Bird’s queer/ed, politicised genitalia reflects her monologue attacking the use of “cunt” as an insult. Her prime example is “fucking tory cunts,” to which she responds, “you can say tory cunt, but leave my cunt out of it because my cunt is a communist! [...] entry into my cunt is purely based on merit,” as she gestures towards her brain, “not credit,” linguistically foregrounding politics and class status, before ridiculing then Mayor of London Boris Johnson for getting stuck on a zip wire when celebrating Team Great Britain’s first gold medal in the 2012 Olympic Games. Bird declares that her cunt would have severed the line with her “razor-sharp vagina dentata,” recalling another life-giving hole that penetrates, just like Lugosi’s mouth. *People’s Pussy* closes with Birdski’s cunt playing *The Internationale*. Like the vampire, fictional, surreal, and part of culture rather



than any social or political reality, Marxist Bird hints at an *other* time and an *other* place with her queered femininity, sexuality, and politics, simultaneously destroying the notion that the femme is unknowing and apolitical. In the pared-down (by Bird's standards) performance at the Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF), of which I am Chair and to which I invited Bird in 2015 as part of my agenda of making both the femme and working-class subjects more visible and included in queer spaces, Birdski asked audience members to approach the stage and have a look at her "cunt." This recalls fellow femme performance artist Annie Sprinkle's "Public Cervix Announcement" (1992), during which she told audience members to come to the stage and examine her cervix, thus allowing Bird to create a link to other femme performance and contributing to the femme spectrum.²⁶ Furthermore, David Cameron was revealed to be pictured on Bird's cunt when audience members approached the stage, which returns us, once more, to a queer maternal and a queer temporality: the birthing of a Conservative prime minister, close in age to Bird, from a femme vagina at a queer public event.²⁷

Femme Presents: Futures and Pasts

So, a femme may incorporate a queerness in the presentation of femininity, queer desire in the feminine subject, a queer temporality rather than a normative life schedule, all of these, or none. The femme, a varied and ever-changing identity, even within a single subject, exceeds a stable definition, which is positive considering how medical discourse has repeatedly attempted to categorise, label, and define in order to exclude or "cure" those with a non-normative gender and/or sexuality. Femmes such as Lugosi and Bird play with the concept of passing to offer a blurring of performance and performativity; a femininity sometimes considered extreme, artificial, and monstrous, allowing their visibility and voices to politicise and prioritise the femme. They simultaneously create a femme maternal through queer incarnations of family, including the femme past (present, and future) of the archive, which also helps to queer time and place, showing that even when the femme appears to be "played straight," the subject is so much more. This series of snapshots from the femme spectrum aims to provide an overview of identities and networks, mapping some of the field, while leaving gaps and spaces in which other self-defined femmes may wish to insert themselves.²⁸ This spectrum ensures that there is an ever-growing space that can embrace a femininity that rejects and actively works against elements of cisheteropatriarchy.

Notes

1. The femme is somewhat of a site of linguistic absence in many languages, so the French term is borrowed. In contrast, there are numerous words for the butch across a broad range of languages and this linguistic inequality compounds femme invisibility. I use femme, which can be an adjective or a noun, over "lipstick lesbian" as the latter reduces femininity to a single signifier.
2. Here I employ the female pronoun, although the butch-femme binary has expanded to a spectrum of identities; indeed those who identify as femme include male femmes and genderqueer femmes. For more information on the sexologists and history, see Dawson (2018).



3. This “low” culture stands as a refreshing change to the “high culture” and representation of privileged lesbians in texts such as *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall 1928).
4. Such gendering was considered to be old fashioned and typical of the uneducated working-class and/or people of colour (Martin and Lyon 1972; Jeffreys 1993) and the most notable group rallying against this was the Daughters of Bilitis in the United States.
5. For further information, see Carole Vance (1984). This is not to say that the butch did not also suffer, but both the direction of this article and the word limit prevent an adequate analysis of the butch subject position.
6. See Michel Foucault (1978) for an in-depth look at how the homosexual was categorised and medicalised.
7. For an exploration of passing in relation to LGBTQ+ identities and “class,” see Dawson (2015b).
8. Lisa Walker considers the construction of identities through the trope of visibility, primarily in relation to race, arguing that privileging visibility has become a tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics, “in which participants often symbolise their demands for social justice by celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for discrimination” (1993, 868). Walker argues that theorists examine the performance of visible differences as the locus of political agency because of its potential to deconstruct foundational categories of identity such as race, gender, and desire, but goes on to problematise the privileging of visibility, because “subjects who can ‘pass’ exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity, they tend to be regarded as peripheral to the understanding of marginalization” (1993, 868).
9. For further discussion of the passing femme in relation to infiltration and camouflage, see Dawson (2012).
10. In this context I am using her and sometimes use she, but it is important to recognise that pronoun use depends upon the individual, with many femmes identifying as he or they, and others coining their own pronouns.
11. Keynotes were delivered by authors and activists, Jewelle Gomez, Hanne Blank, and Amber Hollibaugh, who had taken part in the Sex Wars debate at the aforementioned Barnard Conference.
12. The 2012 Femme Conference homepage claims it “seek(s) to explore, discuss, dissect, and support Queer Femme as a transgressive, gender-queer, stand-alone, and empowered identity and provide a space for organising and activism within Queer communities” (femme2012.com) and the lack of hierarchy is encouraged as the event is organised by a rotating collective of peers. There has since been three further Femme Conferences: Chicago in 2008, with keynotes Dorothy Allison, Julia Serrano, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Veronica Combs aka Vixen Noir; Oakland in 2010 featuring Kate Bornstein and Moki Macias and, most recently, Baltimore in 2012 with Nomy Lamm and UK-based filmmaker, Pratibha Parmar offering keynotes.



13. Black trans Femme artist, Travis Alabanza, for example, is helping to change and shape how femme is seen. The way that Alabanza is subject to transphobic abuse in public also unfortunately makes clear that not passing leads to a great deal of hate crime and danger.
14. Women have frequently been disparaged for buying clothes and cosmetics, despite pressure to be feminine, and have also traditionally undertaken food shopping as part of the domestic chores of the private sphere of the home. Despite this, the “pink pound,” that is gay spending power, is frequently tied to men as, whether straight or gay, the gender pay gap means they typically earn more than women. In relation to politics, women were dismissed as less intellectual than men in the second position of the logic-emotion binary and had to fight for the right to vote.
15. “Wives And Girlfriends” of footballers frequently foreground a highly-stylised working-class aesthetic and are often mocked because of this.
16. Although held in a theatre, the Italian event comprised academic papers during the day with theatre shows and art displays on an evening. It was not affiliated with the U.S. conferences.
17. My academic background is firmly in the Arts (French and German Studies) and my research analyses the representation of the femme in literature, theatre, archives, and—primarily—film, so while I am qualified to speak on the femme subject, I do not come from the perspective of an anthropologist, ethnographer, sociologist or suchlike, making these lay observations.
18. Lee Edelman’s monograph *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) was written prior to so many countries legalising same-sex marriage and variations of adoption, and uses the queer relationship to AIDS and (non-)reproduction to argue that this link to premature death and lack of procreation limits the homosexual future. Edelman discusses the “Child as the emblem of futurity’s value” (2004, 4) and heteronormativity’s focus on the investment in, and sacrifices for, this future, controversially claiming we should, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorised; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws, both with capital ls and small; fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (2004, 29).
19. As well as The Birdclub, Bird has been involved with alternative nights at Club Wotever and Duckie.
20. For more on the lesbian archive, including the repositories of the Lesbian Herstory Archive (NYC) and Spinnboden (Berlin) and lesbian film as archive, see Dawson (2018).
21. For more information about the lesbian vampire and the influence of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, see Dawson (2010) and for an overview of the lesbian vampire trend within queer European cinema in the United States and Europe, see Dawson (2015a).



22. The Weimar period delivered not only *The Blue Angel*, but also *Girls in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), in which the protagonist, a boarding school girl still in costume from a trouser role as the lead in Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos* (1787), waits until she is drunk before taking to the stage once again to declare her love for her female teacher.
23. Garland's poetry draws from fairy tales, religion, and goddesses, queering and recuperating iconic images of femininity.
24. Bird La Bird's performance art includes *Opus*, 2011; *People's Pussy*, 2011; *Cockney Venus - Femuseum*, 2011; *There's an Elephant in the Room*, 2009; *Rank*, 2009; *Holding Court - A period drama*, 2009; *Up Your Art with the Society for Cutting up Couples*, 2009; *You'll feel the Back of My Hand in a Minute*, 2009; and *High Femme Mass*, 2009, while she has created and performed group pieces including *The Daughter*, 2011 and *The Fabric of Butch Femme*, 2010.
25. Also performing as part of *Gay Shame Goes Girly* was American-born femme performance artist and scholar, Lois Weaver, co-creator of the WOW Café Theatre space for women, queers, and trans people in New York City's East Village and—with Peggy Shaw, narrator of Campbell X's aforementioned *Fem*, which Weaver starred in—Split Britches theatre company, which has focused on butch and femme performance, nodding to a network of queer femme art.
26. See Dawson and Treut (2014) for more on Annie Sprinkle's work.
27. Although I was lucky enough to see *People's Pussy* live at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow as part of SQIFF, the earlier version I refer to here is currently easily accessible for free on YouTube (see Bird 2012). Elements of this performance are included in my research-based documentary, *Femmes on Film*, about femme reality and representation, past and present. For more on this performance and SQIFF, see Dawson and Loist (2018).
28. Indeed femme is gaining ground: from the femme conferences in the United States to academic writings on femme identity and even events such as *Fabulous Femmes at Glasgow Women's Library*, which I hosted as part of the SQIFF, to create a space for femmes to speak about the significance of their identity. Femme is also moving beyond those with a queer sexuality. At the aforementioned Italian Fem conference, U.S. female to female drag queen, Fauxnique simultaneously declared her heterosexuality and her femme status, while here in the United Kingdom, I have worked as academic consultant to performance artist Jenny Wilson, another heterosexual, cis "female to female" drag queen, who is interested in what femme identity can do to queer her femininity, with the aim of proliferating the notion in her own art, thus continually expanding the femme spectrum. So, in times when many gay and bisexual subjects and their lifestyles are being normalised via the aforementioned laws and rights relating to family in several Western countries, now straight, cis women are claiming an identity traditionally tied to lesbianism: femme, and that is rather queer.



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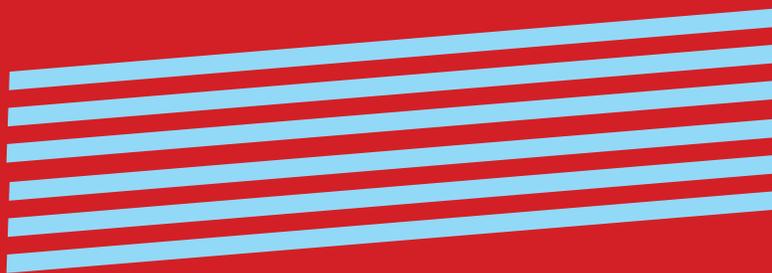
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feral feminisms

QUEER FEMININE AFFINITIES

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