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Feminine trouble: The removal of femininity from feminist/lesbian/queer esthetics, imagery, and conceptualization

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SYNOPSIS

This article utilizes the femme figure to examine the ways in which feminist, lesbian, and queer paradigms encourage and at times even pressure women to reject femininity in order to be included in these domains, and to expose the femme's potential in turn to put pressure on the boundaries of gender and sexual categories. While lesbian–feminist politics of the 1970s as well as radical feminist theories of the 1980 drove many femmes to convert to androgyny, other influential lesbian and queer representations and discursive models similarly led to a privileging of butchness and female masculinity and corresponding stigmatization and indeed exclusion of femininity and femmeness. The article argues that the denial of the femme is grounded in a reproduction of the dichotomy between feminism and femininity and the coupling of lesbianism with masculinity, both of which are based on misogynistic premises, and suggests a reconceptualization of the femme as a position which challenges not only the heteronormative sex–gender–sexuality continuum, but also some of the feminist, lesbian and queer trends aspiring to subvert it.

Femme esthetics and lesbian feminism

> Thus femmes became the victims of a double dismissal: In the past they did not appear culturally different enough from heterosexual women to be seen as breaking gender taboos, and today they do not appear feminist enough, even in their historical context, to merit attention or respect for being ground-breaking women.
>
> [(Nestle, 1992a: 140)]

> Because of the fem(me)'s proud display of fem(me)ininity, lesbian–feminists perceived her as a woman who did not understand her full potential as a capable and strong individual. The signifiers that she had once found powerful tools of attraction and identification became defined by lesbian–feminism as 'tools of the patriarchy.'
>
> [(Maltry & Tucker, 2002: 93)]

The message conveyed to femmes throughout the 1970s was that they had to change their style and appearance in order to be accepted as a part of the lesbian–feminist movement. The movement's members were expected to adopt a homogenous uniform, consisting of work cloths, strong shoes, and a backpack — a guise that might easily have been characterized as masculine but instead was theoretically formulated as gender neutral or androgynous.[1] The lesbian–feminist call to uphold a correlation between political obligation and gender appearance included the decree "to abdicate the femininity within" (Sheiner, 1997: 132), which entailed relinquishing skirts, heels, make-up, and feminine corporal gestures — all of which were read exclusively as a submission to the patriarchal control over the female body. The refusal to acknowledge femmeness as an intelligible and legitimate form of lesbianism forced femmes into an impossible choice between femininity and feminism, and

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between betraying the movement's values and betraying their own chosen gender position: "If I wear these clothes because I am afraid of the judgment of my own people, then I am a different kind of traitor, this time to my own femme sense of personal style, since this style represents what I have chosen to do with my womanness" (Nestle, 1992a: 142).

The repeated contesting of the validity of femmeness as a form of lesbianism condemned femmes to a split identity that conditioned lesbian recognition on the denial of the femme self — the self that manifested their own particular variation on lesbian gender.[2] As Millersdaughter (1997) attests, "I have defended myself as absolutely lesbian […]. And it has always found me rejecting the name, femme, as shorthand for feminine, for straight girl" (120). The dubious status of the femme has also led many to abandon their femmeness reluctantly when they first came out and reclaim it at a later stage, when they were able "to dress more girly" because they were "more comfortable and established" in their identities (Slone & Mitchell, 2002: 109). Many femmes attest that only once they actively fashioned the required "feminist uniform", a less feminine and more androgynous outer appearance, were they viewed as reliable and authentic lesbians (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Nestle, 1992a; Sheiner, 1997; Soares, 1995), while any refusal to renounce femininity was invariably interpreted as a sign of false consciousness and estrangement from the feminist project: "What I'm angry at is feminism, specifically lesbian–feminism […]. I am angry because its message has been plain these past two decades: as a lesbian who is a femme, I'm not considered worthy of liberation" (MacCowan, 1992: 302). The demand to renounce "the femininity within" essentially disclaimed femmeness as a chosen gender by reconfiguring femininity in terms of an inner essence and, in doing so, preserving the heteronormative construction of the sex–gender–sexuality mechanism that both dictates a necessary accordance between gender and sexuality and predicates social acceptance on the adjustment to gender norms. This is one clear sense in which, as Sheiner (1997) argues, the feminism of the 1970s, which began as "a rebellion and a way out of oppression" became itself "a new form of oppression" (137).

> In the 1970s and 1980s, the femme is also charged with the crime of passing, of trying to disassociate herself from the androgynous lesbian.
>
> [(Nestle, 1992a: 142)]

Sheiner indicates that despite the movement's initial intention to subvert gender norms, it ultimately perpetuated their restrictive structure by forcing not only femmes but also butches to contend with androgyny in order to fit in. The pressure to disavow the existence of gender roles among lesbians and uphold a sweeping correlation between the personal and the political resulted in an understanding of the waiver of femmeness as a political act. Since any admission of femmeness on the part of a lesbian was conflated with an internalization of sexist and heterosexist conventions and forecast her impending exclusion, Sheiner, like many other femmes, defines femmeness above all in terms of an anxiety: "The first thing that comes up for me as I analyze femme identity is fear, fear of promoting stereotypes, fear of being perceived as anti-feminist" (1997: 132). This response underscores the vulnerability of the femme position as well as the function of androgyny as a defense mechanism, suggesting that the formulation of lesbianism in opposition to femininity reflected a feminist panic with regard to femininity and its sexist utilization at the same time as a tool for women's oppression and a justification of it.

The movement's construction of a unified image of a lesbian–feminist who is genderless, independent, and assertive brought about an urgent coming out of the "femininity closet," a move which, in the rush to forsake any framework perceived as oppressive, failed to attend to the emotional, mental, and economic costs that women stood to pay for this concession. Even though the movement was established on the grounds of resisting women's gender oppression, its exclusion of the femme reproduced some of the same mechanisms by which women, and particularly feminine women, are oppressed by society at large, leaving femmes to sustain "much of the negative flack that women in general protested against in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement" (Gomez, 1998: 106; Ruby, 1993). The style and esthetics of a given community, while an inevitable and legitimate component of its unique identity, are never shaped in a cultural and political void and run the risk of confirming sexist and racist paradigms. Since the femininity of femmes confronted women with their own internalized oppression, the femme stigma reflected not simply misogyny but more specifically the prevalent stereotyping of "low class" women or prostitutes: "We knew that nothing, no one, was more despised than a femme. Femme was weak, they told us. Stupid. Old-fashioned. Self centered. Male identified. Tools of the patriarchy. Femmes were ashamed (or should be) of what we were…." (Donnelly, 1995: 34).

The characterization of femmes as indecisive, uneducated, cheap or tacky exposes the lesbian–feminist demand to diminish gender roles and avoid explicit sexuality as a demand for class assimilation, which aimed to reflect the values of white middle class women while overlooking the inescapable influence of class, race, and ethnicity on the formation of gender and sexuality.[3] Despite the movement's intention to offer a safe space for every lesbian, its exclusion of femmeness as an appropriate feminist/lesbian esthetics discloses its construction of a renewed obligatory scale that pronounces certain gender performances as proper and discredits others, thereby revealing the conditions by which feminist/lesbian visibility is made possible. The erasure of femmes, achieved either by coercing them to repress their femininity or by delegitimizing femme appearance, stemmed not only from the difficulty to distinguish femmes from heterosexual women but also from lesbian–feminists' own struggle with internalized misogyny. Thus, I suggest, just as the historical exclusion of the femme has stripped her "not only of her identity, but of any understanding of her identity as subversive" (Maltry & Tucker, 2002: 94), so her inclusion in the feminist history and the lesbian category could potentially do more than just promote a rehabilitation of the femme as an intelligible lesbian option: by positing femmeness as a product of a conscious negotiation with femininity and an active screening of gender characteristics and their adjustment to a particular lesbian sexuality, the inclusion of femmeness stands to uncover one possible form of resistance to gender universalization and an effective disruption of the purportedly necessary relation between gender and sexuality.