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Author

Haller, Martinique

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Martinique Haller
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Queer Femme Representation: Disrupting 'Woman'

Minnie Bruce Pratt describes what femme means to her when she says “For me, femme is a place of resistance to [that] degradation, a place to divest femininity of limiting stereotypes, and a place to assert the power and dignity of femaleness” (Pratt 197). Femme has often been charged with reinforcing outdated and un-feminist stereotypes of women, especially when femme is paired with butch. A femme/butch pairing has been accused of imitating heterosexuality, or at best, heteronormativity. These ways of understanding femme are predicated on the idea of the femme as the butch’s other half, but femme exists on its own. Pratt, like many self-identified femmes, finds a queer femme identity to be empowering: “a place of resistance.” How, then does a woman who is performing femininity do this? To brush aside a queer femme as imitative of straight women, as ‘passing’ in order to access heterosexual privilege at the expense of a butch counterpart is overly simplistic. Furthermore, if we continue to locate the subversion of femininity on butch dykes or masculine lesbians, we reify the old category of ‘woman’ while holding up ‘woman’ as weak and a natural, fixed category. This occurs when we look at visibly butch lesbians and call their femininity subversive because it is not concerned with stereotypically feminine ways of being like submissiveness or weakness thus relegating traits like these to the category of woman. This way of thinking reproduces the patriarchal discourse that exists in the dominant culture within queer communities. It is problematic in that it leads to the devaluing of queer femmes as a result of reading feminine appearance without a critical eye through the lens of misogyny.

So, what then, is femme? Robbin VanNewkirk explains her decision to identify as femme: “I refer to myself as a femme because my history of sexuality and experience as a woman and a feminist in both the straight and queer community parallels other femmes’ experiences of dissatisfaction, frustration, invisibility and even anger” (VanNewkirk 76). I like VanNewkirk’s articulation because it does not rely on two-dimensional understandings of femininity or require the trappings of ‘high-femme’ that many people associate with the self-identity of femme such as stilettos, long nails, and a state of perpetual commitment to hair and make-up, for example. Instead it is an identity that results in a state of invisibility within both the queer and straight communities, but not a state which has the purpose of invisibility, which would include an intentional attempt at ‘passing’ as straight. This resulting invisibility, as I will explain later, is what allows for the destabilizing of the ‘woman’ and ‘queer’ categories. Rebecca Ann Rugg explains the distinction between intentionally passing as straight and choosing an identity that happens to be read as straight in her article “How Does She Look?” when she writes: “[T]he problem for the femme dyke who is not assimilationist is not only distinguishing herself from straight women, but from those femmes who consider straight-acting a compliment” (Rugg180). Thus, being ‘femme’ is not about looking straight or passing as straight. Instead it is about divesting femininity of those negative stereotypes and reclaiming or reworking ‘feminine’ as powerful. When we make this distinction clear, performing femme becomes as intentional a choice as performing butch because it is motivated by personal preference rather than a desire to pass because, as Albrecht-Samarasinha says “As a femme, you have made decisions about how you will appear as a gendered person” (Albrecht-Samarasinha 215).

What, then does 'femme' *do*? How does a femme identity become a "site of resistance" if it looks so much like 'straight'? Cheshire Calhoun pulls from Judith Butler and Monique Wittig and addresses this point well:

Heterosexual society assumes that masculinity is naturally united to the male body and desire for women. Similarly, it assumes that femininity is naturally united to the female body and desire for men. Butler argues, however, that gender identity is not natural but the result of continuous gender performances. One can be a man, for example, only by continuously performing masculinity and desire for women through a male body...The butch lesbian gives an outlawed performance. She performs masculinity and desire for women through a female body (Calhoun 340).

Calhoun does not address that a femme lesbian also gives an outlawed performance; it is her desire that is outlawed, rather than her gender performance. She performs femininity and desire for women through a female body. Her gender is read as 'natural' because of her feminine performance. Her desire, however, in order for her to be a 'natural' woman should be located on a masculine body, or even better, on a biologically male body. When it is not, the categories of woman and man become destabilized and not-natural based on outlawed gender performances and outlawed desire.

Calhoun believes that a lesbian sexuality or identity disrupts the category of 'woman' because a lesbian does not ascribe to what traditionally defines a 'woman,' that is, a female biological sex (which is easy to distinguish and unambiguous), a sexual desire for men, and a feminine gender performance. That lesbians desire women, which is a desire that should be located on a male body, bars them from the stable 'woman' category. Calhoun writes: "Neither anatomy nor desire nor gender can link her securely to the category 'woman'...She shares with

members of the category ‘man’ a sexual desire for and love of women” (Calhoun 340).

Calhoun’s understanding of the identity category ‘woman’ exposes the hegemonic discourse at work that shapes our understandings of this category, which looks more and more like one chosen identity among many others, rather than a designation which can unequivocally be foisted upon someone.

Similarly, we can begin to value both desire *and* body as ways to subvert traditional codes of gender. A queer femme appears to be an authentic woman because she performs femininity, but de-authenticates that ‘natural’ category by locating her desire on other women. There are further outlawed locations of this desire other than female-bodied yet masculine women (ie., ‘butch’) such as female-bodied and feminine women or on transmen, transwomen, androgynous people, multiple people at once etc. These possible combinations of gender performance and desire further complicate the category ‘queer’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘dyke’. The category of lesbian was historically understood to encompass both desire *and* a masculine gender performance which was the foundation for the ‘invert’ theory. The visible gender performance, however, is the only (however inaccurate) visible marker of a lesbian. This marker is the only method on hand to identify lesbians because desire is an unmarked category. If desire is what defines lesbians, and it cannot be visually detected, the category of lesbian is no longer a safe category; I agree with VanNewkirk when she says: “If I do not register on the gaydar then the technology is broken by its very rigidness and inability to register complexity” (VanNewkirk 81).

This logic might appear to advocate for queer assimilation into straight society, but that would only follow if feminine lesbians (for example) had an intentional desire to pass. What it does instead is destabilize those categories. If we can only identify dykes by identifying female

masculinity, and we continue to ascribe to the notion that this ‘gaydar technology’ works, we continue to reproduce the hegemonic discourse around gender and queerness, which is to say, that masculine desires feminine and that female masculinity is the only subversive female gender performance; thus decreeing that female femininity is not and cannot be a site of resistance and subversion, thereby committing to reifying a ‘natural’ woman category. VanNewkirk agrees when she writes: “Visible butch codes of identity are easily interpreted as gender performance if femininity or femme is taken for granted as the natural and standard behavior for the female body” (VanNewkirk 77). When we view femme as not-subversive we reify traditional codes of femininity. We continue to reinforce the patriarchal discourse of gender that tells that there is one way to be a woman and that is to be biologically female, stereotypically feminine, and romantically and sexually attracted to men. If we accept ‘butch’ as the only way to trouble femininity, we are, in fact, reinforcing the very modes of femininity that we attempt to disrupt.

If a woman chooses ‘femme’ intentionally, (rather than trying to ‘pass’) and people cannot tell that she is actually queer, she is read as a liar in the sense that people cannot use her body as the site of truth. In this way, she troubles gender in a similar way that transgendered people might; she appears to be a woman (which means straight) but is not ‘really’ a woman, or a real woman, because she is not actually straight; she has ‘lied’ by way of her gender presentation. Albrecht-Samarasinha says this nicely when she writes: “I look the right kind of a girl, and chose the wrong kind of... ‘guy’” (Albrecht-Samarasinha 215). Annabelle Willox discussing the film *Boys Don’t Cry* explains how this problem occurs: “This new queer orthodoxy...where transexuality might be seen as ‘not queer’ because it seems to promote the dominant ideology of sex and gender by focusing on the need to align psychical and physical body images, thereby reintroducing the importance of the body as the site of authenticity”

(Willox 410). Although Willox is discussing transgendered people, we can transfer the important point she makes to queer femmes. The connection being that a transman, who is attracted to women might be seen as reinforcing heterosexuality by seeming to normalize his sexual desire by de-gaying it by becoming a man. Similarly, a femme, who desires women, is normalizing her gender, even though her desire is queer. Thus, a queer femme has a 'natural' gender identity and an 'unnatural' desire, while a transman (that is attracted to women) has a 'natural' desire and an 'unnatural' gender identity. This is not the case though; in both examples gender and desire are being toyed with and neither the queer femme or the transman has 'successfully' normalized the categories of woman, man, or queer; in fact, they have troubled all three of these categories.

We can see that the femme dyke expands the category of woman in doing this precisely because of the confusion she creates. In being read as straight, but not actually being straight she has destabilized the category of straight women, while also destabilizing the category of queer women because she cannot easily be identified as either. In what ways is destabilizing these categories an act of resistance? In doing so, femme lesbians can threaten the security of heterosexuality. When the straight community can no longer predictably identify lesbians, heterosexuality as a fixed, default identity breaks down. Similarly, when the queer community cannot recognize femmes as queer, the fixed visible category 'queer' begins to break down within the queer community as well which, if the category is successfully destabilized could alleviate the problem of invisibility for queer femmes within their own communities. No one 'passes' anymore when we accept that we cannot mark desire, and queer femmes represent this inability to mark desire beautifully. The discourse around gender that equates feminine with straight is unequivocally troubled by a queer femme. As a result, gaydar technology breaks down and become ineffective.

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