Project Title:  (Re)Conceptualizing the Normative: A Glimpse into the Radical Potential and Ultimate Failure of Queer Politics

Name: Anna Marie Storti  Faculty Mentor: Dr. Anita Jain

The CPP Undergraduate Research Office now has the ability to publish scholar’s reports online. Please indicate below whether or not you give permission.

Assurance Statements: Please answer all questions.

Does this project involve use of human subjects? (please check one) Yes x No □

If yes:  Protocol Number #12-152  Date of approval November 6, 2012

Does this project use nonhuman vertebrates? (please check one) Yes □ No x

If yes:  Protocol Number _____________  Date of approval _____________

Does this project use radioisotope materials? (please check one) Yes □ No x

If yes:  Protocol Number _____________  Date of approval _____________

Does this project use infectious agents, recombinant DNA, or other biohazardous materials? (please check one) Yes □ No x

If yes:  Protocol Number _____________  Date of approval _____________

Signature of McNair Scholar: __________________________  Date: ______________

I give permission to have this report published online.  Yes □ No □

I approve this final report.

Signature of Faculty Mentor: __________________________  Date: ______________

I give permission to have this report published online.  Yes □ No □
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Project title</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>Major objective(s)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Background research with analysis and summary of literature review</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Methods (Experimental procedure/design)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>Consent Form</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Re)Conceptualizing the Normative:

A Glimpse into the Radical Potential and Ultimate Failure of Queer Politics

Anna Marie Storti

McNair Scholar

Cohort 14
B. Abstract

Much of the literature surrounding the experiences of queer women\(^1\) revolves around the nonconforming characteristics of their lives, such as their sexuality, choice in partners, masculine gender presentation, or connection with a gay/queer community. A small amount of scholarly material details the conforming attributes these women possess, especially those of women of color. Perhaps one of the most conforming attributes a queer woman can embody is a feminine appearance. Feminine women directly fall in line with what is expected and socially acceptable. In doing so, they walk society’s streets with an assumed heterosexuality. Because there are few studies that revolve completely around the experiences of queer feminine women, especially in their involvement with queer social justice pursuits, a collective case study dedicated to their experiences will ultimately enhance the discussion revolving queer politics and queerness in general. I will detail how femininity is articulated within a queer woman’s experience by interviewing a total of 10 queer feminine women. By studying this marginalized community, I will increase the awareness and understanding of femininity in relation to queer experience, queer politics, and queer theory.

C. Major Objectives

My goal is to detail how femininity is articulated in the life of a queer woman. I want to understand the discrimination feminine queer women face in their pursuit of queer social justice efforts as well as their unique search for social affirmation. By focusing on the personal relationship queer women have with femininity, this project will highlight a conforming characteristic prevalent within a nonconforming sexuality. I choose to focus on the idea that “…if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin” (Cohen 438). While on the one hand queer feminine women who can pass for straight may confer a quasi-privilege within heterosexual spaces, my study explores how queer women's outward expression of femininity may in fact be marginalized within queer spaces. If queer politics centers on non-normative gender performance, then what does this mean for gender conforming queers?

D. Background research with analysis and summary of literature review

Within the disciplines of Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology the lives of queer women have been researched in depth. Including issues of visibility, media representation, masculine identity, and gender performance, research revolving around queer women tends to focus on the population’s more non-conforming and deviant attributes. As a result, there is a significant lack of research that details the more conforming aspects of queer women. Perhaps the most conforming aspect a queer woman can possess is a feminine appearance. With a feminine appearance, a queer woman automatically gets tagged as straight and is shielded from any assumptions of homosexuality. Past research has delved into the lives of feminine-appearing

---

\(^1\) In this paper I will use the term queer to reference sexualities that are not heterosexual or gender binary. Considering that this paper focuses on women, queer will denote female-bodied women who are lesbian, bisexual, fluid, or any other non-heterosexual label.
queer women and the findings were staggering. The following summary of my literature review will shed light on the topics that have dominated the field of queer women, and in particular feminine-appearing queer women. Topics such as Feminine Visibility, Queer Femininity, Queer Beauty and Attraction, Racialized Queer Femininity, and Passing and Marginalized Discrimination will be discussed.

For decades, mainstream society was reluctant to showcase lesbian individuals or lesbian culture in any medium; however, the 1990s saw the emergence of the lesbian in multiple media forms. Ann M. Ciasullo illustrates this phenomenon of increased lesbian visibility within the media in her piece Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s. As more and more lesbians began to surface in films, television shows, and magazines, this specific increase of lesbian identity was criticized as somewhat of a fad rather than a move toward equal representation. Ciasullo claims that this increase of lesbian visibility was catered strictly to feminine, otherwise known as femme lesbians whose heterosexual appearance allowed for a more acceptable and unthreatening notion of a ‘lesbian’. Simultaneously, Ciasullo discusses that with the increase of predominately white and middle-upper class femme lesbians comes a lack of representation of masculine lesbian women, otherwise known as butch lesbians. What results is a binary: an avoidance of butch lesbian representation within mainstream media, but an understanding that in society, an acceptable lesbian embodies more masculine features. Femme invisibility leads to an ability to enter heterosexual spaces and break down prejudices, which ironically serves as a form of queer visibility. Femme women identifying as ‘queer’ invalidate the common idea of what queer women look like. “… the femme not only casts doubt on the normative heterosexuality of feminine female bodies, but she also casts doubt on the abnormality of the queer” (Galewski 295).

Galewski mentions in her footnotes that her study primarily revolved around European or American queer women a theme prevalent within much of the studies I read. In doing so, Galewski failed to question how race plays a part in the experience of feminine invisibility. Without delving into the differences between races and ethnicities, Galewski’s study lacks a comprehensive and all-embracing experience of femmes’ involvement with political action.

“Lesbian standards of beauty are both influenced by, and negotiated against, not only mainstream female beauty standards, but perhaps more interestingly, lesbian regimes of beauty” (Schorb 255). Jodi R. Schorb and Tania N. Hammidi specify how the lesbian community considers beauty in their piece Sho-Lo Showdown: The Do’s and Don’ts of Lesbian Chic. By focusing on lesbians in San Francisco and Sacramento, their study articulates the influences of lesbian appearance and attraction by spotlighting on lesbian hairstyles, which birth the culturally alternative yet still overwhelmingly masculine and feminine driven lesbian regime of beauty.

“Femmes repeatedly battle invisibility from both within and outside of the community, and dykes who wear their hair long often express frustration at being ‘not taken seriously’… perceived as heterosexual, bisexual, questioning, or just coming out” (Schorb 258). This study highlights a key difference between lesbians and straight women that revolves around beauty standards and norms. Unlike straight women who have the ability to thrive in our heterosexual society, lesbians have the hardship of having to not only attract the same sex, but also create a queer community, which includes a need to be recognized by other lesbians. Due to this need to create and sustain queer communities, lesbians have come to recognize one another by referring to each other’s clothing or hairstyle. This common form of recognition not only allows lesbians to distinguish each other, but often times creates invisibility for those more feminine looking lesbians who do not necessarily fit into accepted lesbian styles. In relation to what lesbians define beauty as, hair and style are the two most common forms of seeking out community;
“…we find the endurance of the sho-lo a valuable lesson about the relation of style to community and the relation of beauty to community sustainability” (Schorb 257).

Feminine appearing queer women of color uniquely experience life on the margins of their identities. By examining the ways Asian and Black women experience the intersection of their race, sexuality, and feminine appearance, this section will demonstrate the ways different races, ethnicities, and cultures regard feminine appearance.

In an attempt to find the parallels between the construction of gender and race as they affect Asian queer women, JeeYeun Lee discusses how Asian women are viewed as hyperfeminine, exotic, passive, and objects of white heterosexual male desire in her piece *Why Suzie Wong is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Roles*. She further mentions how the dominant image of a lesbian is white and butch, a concept also addressed in Ciasullo’s *Making Her (In)Visible*. This dominant social perception mixed with Asian cultures’ hyperfemininity makes it seemingly impossible to view an Asian feminine woman as anything but heterosexual because she is both a person of color and feminine appearing. Lee’s discussion about what effects gender identities is important in realizing the scope of gender identity in relation to sexual identity. Incorporating Asian women into the conversation of femininity and queer women provides the perspective of a widely accepted feminized race.

Mignon Moore’s *Invisible Families* describes the intersection of race, class, and sexuality and how this intersection connects to black lesbian familial relations. By conducting interviews and surveys from black lesbians primarily residing in New York, Moore demonstrates the conflicting gender stereotypes placed upon this marginalized group. In the chapter *Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities*, Moore attempts to explain the reasons behind and meanings of gender presentation within New York black lesbians.

In her attempt to understand the reasons behind gender presentation within Black lesbians, Moore highlights the influence of attraction and desire instead of lesbian politics. In doing so, Galewski would argue that Moore is neglecting to study a group of Black lesbians that is truly inclusive. Galewski emphasizes the influence politics, whether lesbian or queer, has on some women’s gender presentation. Black New York lesbians were found to construct their relationships and their gender in ways that illustrated their social and cultural identities. It is because of this intricate association of gender, sexuality, race, class, and education level that the lesbians studied by Moore initiate great time and effort to present themselves in a certain way.

It seems clear that there is a distinction between the experiences of queer femininity within women of color and women of European descent. Even more so, the experiences of femininity within Asian women and African American women show how differing cultural norms influence the notions revolving femininity. The effect this perception has on the women is still in question. However, it is the daily effect of these notions that has yet to be mentioned. While Asian women’s extreme femininity is resulted in hypersexualization, Black women utilize femininity as a form of strength and independence. However, Galewski would seek more information regarding the impact a queer woman of color’s femininity has on her ability to pursue queer politics. However, a major critique within this theme is the lack of conversation dedicated to multiracial or multietnic women.

There seems to be a significant lack of discussion focusing on the way feminine-appearing queer women interact with queer politics. Throughout these pieces of literature it can be understood that “the archetypal figure of the lesbian” outwardly appears as masculine and this archetype remains sound regardless of the increase of feminine lesbians in the media. While visibility seems to be a dominant ticket to equality, the feminine queer woman still finds herself lost in limbo between her passing privilege and her marginalized discrimination. Does this
unique intersection of femininity, race, sexuality, and gender result in an overall societal downplay of female sexuality and gender expression? While it is significant to present oneself in a way to allow fellow queer women to notice one’s queerness, it is perhaps more important to note each women’s need to establish community. In a society that is heavily influenced by heterosexual standards, lesbians find a great amount of comfort when they notice that they are not alone. There are evident boundaries one must remain within when identifying as queer. In order to convince others of the validity of their sexuality, queer women are pressured to fit into a socially acceptable box of gender expression. This box must also be relative to issues of race because queer feminine women of color undergo a more unique experience with femininity. With race and sexuality a part of the picture, a feminine woman of color will most likely not be acknowledged as a lesbian firstly because she is of color, and secondly because she is not butch. A legitimate queer woman should possess masculine or androgynous physical markers. If they agree to this appearance, queer women’s sexuality will be met with society’s acceptance and recognition. However, in the case that queer women forgo the typical and archetypal figure and instead choose to perform in an outwardly feminine manner they will be met with doubt, skepticism, and disbelief.

E. Methods

While my project stemmed from my own life, I acknowledge my experiences as a queer, cisgendered-feminine, light skinned mixed-race, middle-class, able-bodied, womyn as an attempt to check my social locations in order to consciously stray away from subjectively impacting my findings and analysis. I conducted ten semi-constructed interviews during the months of January to March 2013. For each interview I went in with a list of IRB-approved questions, but encouraged the flow of conversation to take precedence. The average time of these interviews was one hour. I sought out feminine appearing queer women over the age of 18. In order to determine whether the women were both queer and feminine I relied on their discretion and honesty about their sexuality, and my judgment about their outward appearance.

Demographics

I first contacted a few out queer women at Cal Poly Pomona’s Pride Center. From there I relied on a snowball method in order to gather the rest of the interviewees. The ten women I interviewed ranged from the ages of 20 to 27 and were all either current college students or recent college graduates. Aiming to embody a diverse sample, I sought out a racially and economically varied group of women who have all been renamed. Jade and Kate identify as Asian; Rebecca and Jasmine identify as Black; Michelle, Lara, and Britney identify as Latina and Multiracial; and Gwen, Kristina, and Adrian identify as White. Jade, Kate, Rebecca, and Lara are lower class; Michelle, Britney, Kristina and Jasmine are middle class; and Gwen and Adrian are upper-middle class. Every woman is a U.S. citizen, besides Kate who is the lone Philippine citizen. Michelle, Britney, Lara, and Jasmine identify as queer; Jade, Kristina, and Kate identify as lesbian; and Gwen, Rebecca, and Adrian identify as bisexual. While my study looks at queer feminine women, not all women identify with the term femme. Michelle, Britney, Rebecca, Jade, and Adrian identify as femme; Lara identifies as genderqueer; and Gwen, Kristina, Kate, and Jasmine believe they are feminine, but do not affiliate themselves with the femme label. For convenience, I will sometimes use femme to denote the feminine women in my project.
Procedures
The main procedure utilized will be 10 interviews. Attached is the Consent Form.

To commence the data collection, I found, selected, and set up interview meetings with each member of the sample. From there I utilized and relied on a snowball method in order to gather the rest of the potential subjects. Because of this, my approaching feminine women did not create any risk for the women. I instantly identified myself as a McNair Scholar who is researching within the queer community in order to prevent the assumption that I may be coming off as potential person of interest. I ensured that respondents understood the scope of my project and the requirements of participating in the study. All prospective subjects were given a copy of the consent form. Please see attached consent form sheet.

Semi-Structured Interviews
I conducted individual interviews with the 10 women in my sample. I allowed the interviewee to choose the location as their comfort and privacy is most important. I voice-recorded the interview with my MacBook computer as well as took notes while they were answering the questions.

Questions
What has your experience been in terms of having a gay/queer community?
What does femme mean to you and do you identify as femme?
Why, or why not?
What kinds of people are attracted to you based on your gender presentation?
How has your experience been in terms of finding partners?
Does the general public view you as a more feminine woman?
What have been the implications of this view within heterosexual spaces?
What about in more queer spaces?
Is there a particular reason you dress the way you do?
Has anyone ever accused your sexuality as being “just a phase”?
Has anyone ever said you do not look like a lesbian?
Are people often surprised when you disclose your sexuality?
Why, or why not?
Has your family or culture ever felt that you were not LGBTQ because you look feminine?

Follow-Up Questions
Describe your coming out process?
Is your sexual identity a political identity? Or do you associate it with feminism?
Do you have to “come out” often?
How do you identify? (race, gender, sexuality, class, age, etc)
Does your race have an implication on your sexuality?
Did you ever feel pressured to embody a more masculine, or nonconforming gender presentation in order to be recognized as queer?

F. Final Paper
On May 4, 2013 I traveled to the University of California, Berkeley to attend the 6th Annual Queer and Asian Conference. The premise for this conference was *Navigating Spaces, Living Intentionally*. I had the privilege of leading a workshop in which I used this project as a basis of conversation. My workshop, *(Re)Imagining the Feminine: A Discussion on Queer Asian Femininities and Their Potential for Radical Change*, aspired to probe issues relating to Asian familial culture and Asian hyperfeminization in order to discover how these influence the experiences of queer APIs in our modern society. Discussing issues of passing, queerness, and femininity, this workshop was conceived as an open dialogue encouraging attendees to not simply share their thoughts on queer Asian femininity, but more importantly discuss ways in which we can all work to dismantle the binaries we live in.

The first half of the workshop went smoothly as issues of family and the development of *femme* came up. I was surprised however, at how the discussion quickly veered towards a cisgendered and more gynocentric focus. Recognizing this I asked the group to do what our keynote, Andy Marra, encouraged us all to do: take risks. I wanted more folks to speak out. The Socratic Circle seemed to comfort a group of queer feminine API women, as they were the ones speaking out the most. In retrospect, I speculate why this came to be considering that I, as a facilitator, identified with those identities. Recalling that out of the 55 attendees only 10 or so actively participated, I wonder if folks felt uncomfortable speaking on such topics within a large group, chose to absorb rather than share, or regrettably, felt disregarded. Then a conference coordinator fervently spoke out against the direction the workshop was going after an attendee made a comment about dressing up her male dog in both boy and girl clothes. Digesting this comment as an effort to view gender beyond humanistic boundaries, I admit to not thinking anything of it. This thus fueled my shock when a group of conference coordinators approached me after the workshop ended and wanted to debrief about what had “occurred”. I looked at them
with raised eyebrows while my mind raced to pinpoint what they were referring to. We sat down where I was then informed that the comment about dressing up a dog triggered a trans* attendee to feel equated to an animal. Stunned and remorseful, I was less spoken to and more scolded at due to my apparent inability to properly facilitate. It was as though I was being disciplined for “not having the privilege to be educated about trans* issues”. Despite my aggravation post-debriefing over such assumptions heaved, I knew that I had to hold myself accountable, yet I walked away feeling attacked, but mindful that those feelings were selfish.

As I walked down Bancroft Way towards Downtown Berkeley’s BART station I asked myself these questions: Was I enacting cisgendered or white passing privilege? Is passing really a privilege? Despite my queer and Asian identities, did I overstep boundaries by facilitating this discussion as a light skinned Filipina/Italian? Why do I now feel like an inauthentic queer API?

With Foucault acting as my therapist, I reflect on how this experience exemplifies the danger of identity politics. To be present in a true queer conference would mean walking into a space that completely rids of the need to discipline those based on a strict queer regimen. While queer politics seeks to construct a space of resistance, queer theory aims to critique normativity, believes that gender and sexual identities are artificial and unstable, and speculates that sexual norms constitute a distinct hierarchy (Mann 233-35). Queer theory seeks to create a space where identity flexibility is not just accepted but embraced. In spite of its desire to eliminate the tendency to characterize identity into concrete boxes, queer theory creates a divide between the queer and the non-queer, a split that ruptures the very essence of queerness. As Nikki Sullivan reminds us, “The term queer can be used to reinforce, rather than deconstruct, the ways in which identity and difference are constructed in terms of binary oppositions, of us and them - oppositions which are never neutral, but are always hierarchal. The queer subject of this kind of discourse reaffirms his or her identity in opposition to the supposedly normative other” (Sullivan
Focusing on queer feminine women’s experiences within queer spaces, I will demonstrate how even within a politics that intrinsically shies away from identity distinctions, queer politics upholds a political inclination to stratify those not adhering to a suitable queer performance.

**Theoretical Framework**

To date queer politics has less transformed hegemonic sex and gender identities, but more reinforced the binaries through its tendency to classify everything into either ‘heterosexual’ or ‘queer’. Similar to Cathy Cohen’s racial critique in her piece *Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?*, I choose to focus on the idea that “…if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin” (Cohen 438). Feminine queer women are located at a unique intersection of sex and gender, one that is both normative and queer. This particular junction allows for an opportunity to probe queer theory’s need to categorize, a need present even within a politics that wishes to remove any affiliation with identity politics or tendency to differentiate others based on sex and gender. I aim to detail how femininity is articulated in the life of a queer woman in such a way that will highlight the discrimination feminine (read normative) queer women face in their pursuit of establishing queer communities as well as their unique search for social affirmation. While on the one hand queer feminine women who can pass for straight may confer a quasi-privilege within heterosexual spaces, my study explores how queer women’s outward expression of femininity may in fact be marginalized within queer spaces. If queer politics centers on non-normative gender performance, then what does this mean for gender conforming queers?

**Queer Dynamics: Research Findings**
In my quest to bare queer theory’s radical and embracing potential I bring to light the pressure to butch it up, the identity of the hard femme, and the phenomenon of passing.

**Butch It Up – Queernormativity**

“Lesbian standards of beauty are both influenced by, and negotiated against, not only mainstream female beauty standards, but perhaps more interestingly, lesbian regimes of beauty.”

– Jodi Schorb and Tania Hammidi

*Sho-Lo Showdown: The Do’s and Don’ts of Lesbian Chic*

Queer communities centered on the recognition of other queer folks create invisibility for gender-conforming queers who do not necessarily fit into accepted queer styles. In relation to what queers define beauty as, hair and style are the two most common forms of seeking out community. Stuart Hall informs us that, “…identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (Hall 16). Identity hopes to convene a unique army contingent on a set of components. However, in the process, identity excludes those who may in fact identify similarly with the army, but are shunned because of their inability to measure up to the identity’s external prerequisites. Queer identity seems to be reliant on an outward expression of queerness whether through physical appearance or demonstration. This expression allows for the assembly of a queer legion, one that invites constituents so long as they fit in with the non-normative queerness reckoned acceptable. With a visibly queer expression serving as the centralized condition for queer spaces to exist, a certain queernormativity erupts. It then seems impossible for queer politics to flourish if it goes against its flexible nature to then center on a constructed and normative queer identity.

---

With all of this at play, queer femmes often encounter a need to prove their queerness\(^3\). When asked if they ever felt a certain pressure to embody a more masculine appearance in order to be taken seriously as a queer woman, each woman responded with a resounding ‘yes’. Lara, Kristina, Gwen and Britney respectively reveal this (bolded are words depicting the pressure to butch it up; italicized are words and phrases associated with queer women styles):

“Ya definitely, I tried to butch it up. If I do dress more feminine I know that people will perceive me a certain way and maybe I guess its not taken as serious.”

“Yes! I’m always looking for sneakers that are more masculine. I’m also planning on getting an undercut haircut so I’m more easily identifiable to other lesbians.”

“Its pretty ridiculous how unfriendly the LGBT community is to outsiders. I think if I had short hair and a bunch of piercings, or really outlandish, crazy clothes they would talk to me and try to befriend me. But because I’m very, in their eyes, straight looking they are very not welcoming.”

“Going out to queer gatherings and being discriminated for looking too feminine does give me the impression that I have to dress more masculine in order to be acknowledged. I've done it in the past, but at the end of the day I feel disgusted with myself.”

These women speak on their own difficulty in establishing community, finding partners, and existing comfortably as queer feminine women. Treated as outsiders, they encounter rejection from their own simply because they don’t meet the expectation of a queer woman.

“Femmes repeatedly battle invisibility from both within and outside of the community, and dykes who wear their hair long often express frustration at being ‘not taken seriously’… perceived as heterosexual, bisexual, questioning, or just coming out” (Schorb 258); What results is the pressure to “butch it up”. Lara, Kristina, Gwen and Britney, for instance, felt that their femininity was hindering their comfort in queer spaces as they opted to buy sneakers, get an undercut or short haircut, have piercings, wear crazy clothes, or generally dress more masculine or visibly queer in order to embody a more authentic queerness. Such a practice contributes to a

\(^3\) Ibid.
system of binary gender and sexual identities, and so any sort of queer politics is forfeited. With the pressure to butch it up comes an accentuation of the queer/non-queer binary.

Lisa Duggan argues that the new homonormativity reinforces the danger of identity politics as she explains that lesbians and gays less resist dominant heteronormative institutions, but more defend them through their social and economic assimilating actions. In essence, they seek to join the popular kids’ patriarchal and capitalistic party unbeknownst as wallflowers. On the ideal other hand, queers involved in queer politics choose to forgo assimilation into dominant groups and instead form their own identity and stigma-free communities. This ideal falls short; I argue that where homonormativity is present in lesbian and gay politics, queernormativity takes its place in queer spaces further proving the danger of identity-focused politics. The failure of the queer movement is seen through its administration of the same political sedative present within the lesbian and gay movement. Queernormativity is the oxymoronic reality that queer politics conforms to a binary distinguishing queer folks between the good and the bad. In this sense, queer politics does not challenge dominant homonormative practices, but instead defends them through its failure to abandon a desired (queer) fixed identity. Without being truly inclusive of (queer) identity fluidity and (queer) non-normativity, queer politics serves a distinct queer mainstream, a mainstream that filters through the good and the bad and adopts an agenda catering to the authentic queers.

It is one large contradiction for queer politics to say that, for instance, a gender conforming queer is less queer than a gender non-conforming queer, simply because according to a mainstream queer mentality, to conform, whether through dress or its parallels, is to then relinquish one’s ability to be queer. Furthermore, it is one large contradiction to practice a

---

5 Ibid.
politics centralized on non-normativity, when in essence, the politics normalizes what it means to be queer. So it is worth asking if it is possible for queer politics to abstain from the politics’ mainstream queernormativity and seek to reach a broad audience, an audience that may or may not conform to normative gender expressions or sexual norms.

Communities will always have their conflicts. The challenge comes with disentangling such conflicts while staying true to the community’s core values. For queer politics to zone back in on its anti-identity hub, a dire progress report is in need. Queer politics must reevaluate its tendency to distinguish between the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, and the queer and the non-queer. This politics must fall back on its inclusive essence; If not, queer politics is scheduled for a rude awakening, one at risk of surrendering the coveted queer authenticity.

**Hard Femme – (Re)Imagining the Feminine**

“To be a feminist, you have to go gaga!”

– J. Jack Halberstam *Gaga Feminism*

Jack Halberstam gives rise to an emerging gaga feminism, “a gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and the true” (Halberstam 26). In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, Halberstam fascinatedly explores gaga feminism’s potential for intellectual emancipation by “shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions” (Halberstam 29). When laying out the ground rules of gaga feminism, Halberstam concludes on principle #5, which states that gaga feminism is “outrageous …it is for the freaks and geeks, the losers and failures, the kids who were left out at school, the adults who still don’t fit in” (Halberstam 28-9). It is an interesting assertion to suggest that in order to fit into this gaga feminism, one must go gaga. Feminism is articulated in a plethora of ways. In existence are feminists that choose to boldly strut society’s streets vividly resisting the
patriarchy just as there are feminists who unleash their resistance and societal critiques through a more quiet and composed force. While both completely bona fide, the latter feminist, for the most part, fails to coincide with what it means to be gaga, which is “impolite, abrupt, abrasive and bold” (Halberstam 29). While beautifully innovative, Halberstam’s conception positions feminists who do not necessarily “go gaga” in a location of denunciation.

Hence, while gaga feminism seeks to “…turn politics into performance and combine anarchist mistrust of structure with queer notions of bodily riot and antinormative disruption” (Halberstam 133), do the folks that perform normatively surrender any opportunity to be gaga feminists? What happens if someone agrees whole-heartedly in the struggle, but stands outside of the politics requirements? It appears that a seemingly normative queer is able to stand further away from the margins in mainstream society, but once they come home to their queer communities, they are exiled and othered. In regards to my study, a queer feminine woman presents a level of normativity that generates this very social dislocation. As I spoke with the women, I quickly discovered that it is impossible to concretely define femme because to be and to identify as femme is dependent on one’s own unique interpretation of a social construct. Femme can be understood as the intersection of one’s queerness and one’s femininity. With gender stereotypes at bat, femmes are thought to look just like straight women, and “that there is nothing ‘different’ about lesbians, except that they might hug one another more than straight women might” (Ciasullo 585). On a societal level the femme body creates “… an interruption, a way of making queerness appear in a moment of ambiguity and incongruity” (Galewski 292). Michelle exposes this:

“Based on my femininity I am easily accepted, easily digestible, because people can look at me and men for example, they can imagine that I’m straight, my mom can imagine that this [queer identity] is a phase.”
The femme body presents a role to society that acts as an anticipated expression of female gender. The femme is expected, and thus any possibility of queerness gets overlooked. In search of the radical potential of queer politics, we can argue that the femme is in opposition to dominant norms simply by looking normative but being queer. However, in order to attain radical change the femme needs to go beyond recognizing her queerness and femininity to then consciously view the intersection of her identities as political statements. “Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower”\textsuperscript{6}. This politically radical femme takes a grasp of femininity, masculinity, and queerness, grinds it up and concocts the \textit{hard femme}.

Angela Davis taught us that, “Radical simply means ‘Grasping things at the root’”\textsuperscript{7}. The hard femme is the femme’s radical sister. Aesthetically, but not categorically, she can be envisioned as a boot wearing, fist pumping, radical activist who adopts the term queer as a political statement and sexual identity. The hard femme consciously identifies as queer, while the femme is content with lesbian or bisexual and is more homonormative\textsuperscript{8} in her actions. The hard femme does not simply challenge gender, but negotiates the intersections of identity in a way that craves deconstruction and reconstruction. Fusing masculinity, femininity, and the gray area of gender, the hard femme embraces the empowerment that comes with femininity and thus does not equate femininity as a relinquishment of power or independence.

When speaking of the radical potential of queer politics, we must first acknowledge the need for queer politics to abandon any preferential treatment given to certain queers. While the hard femme identity may serve to empower, it is challenging to combat deeply rooted notions of femininity. These notions trickle into the queer community as Jasmine informs us:

\textsuperscript{8} “… a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 50).
“With me, being a femme in a [queer] leadership position I’ve been treated as like I don’t know what I’m doing.”

While there is an assumption that a feminine woman is straight, queer communities digest her femininity as an abandonment of power, just as society does. However, Michelle conveys:

“With my experience being femme in a butch/femme relationship I have been the strong force… I’m able to participate in that strength and that is what I think is so revolutionary and incredible about being femme … you are able to adopt all of these supposedly weak and trivial things like femininity, beauty, makeup and wanting to be beautiful … and really wanting to transform your life and community.”

Michelle’s actions are those of a hard femme. Her revolutionary ideas of femininity speak on the radical potential of queer politics and as Cohen stated, this is a space “…in opposition to dominant norms” (Cohen 438). While Jasmine and Michelle are marginalized within queer spaces, their ability to combat stereotypical ideas associated with femininity sheds light on the hard femme’s radical strength. But what happens when the hard femme is not “outrageous” enough to be taken seriously as a true queer warrior? Falling short of gaga’s excessive nature should not negate the hard femme’s feminist credibility.

“I do think being descriptively queer femme holds an inherent radical possibility because it retains an intrinsic tension that is resourceful for identifying how power operates, necessitating the personal/political connection. One must understand the systems at work in order to understand oneself. This is true for us all, but those who straddle seemingly contradictory identities or feel those tensions are especially motivated to understand and are therefore a resource for shifting conditions.”

– Jade

As Jade pushes us to consider the femme’s “radical possibility”, we are shown that politically conscious queer femmes teach, defy stereotypes, and ultimately reconstruct the notions of femininity, womynhood, and queerness; and so the hard femme is formed in an attempt to craft a distinction from the femme. However, distinguishing femme from hard femme seeks not to continually and problematically create binaries within queer spaces because the hard femme is not simply about an exclusive identity. My understanding of hard femme is an articulation of concepts that demands that women’s feminine behaviors need to be taken as
seriously as women’s masculine behaviors. To expand on this, queer’s more normative behaviors need to be taken as seriously as their more non-normative behaviors if queer politics ever hopes to reach the radical undertaking it proposes.

**Passing – Queering Double Consciousness**

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—...; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

– W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk*

Passing is often thought as a practice that renders visibility, safety, and comfort. Passing allows for the ability to fit in with the majority and shy away from social marginalization. It can be said that passing is a favorable action because it coincides with groups and labels that are considered natural, normal, or socially acceptable (i.e. passing as white). Femmes, while queer in their existence, have the privilege to pass as straight in our heteronormative society where potential queer bashing may be avoided. This privilege does however evolve into discrimination within queer spaces as femmes are often met with contempt, confusion, or are believed to be just coming out (Ciasullo 585). Queer politics has thrived on its employment of nonconforming leaders and thus the power that arises by being noticeably queer is forfeited in the femme, normative, or cisgendered body. In queer politics, where visibly queer subjects are valued and respected, queers who can pass as straight are subjected not to a privilege, but to a marginalized discrimination. “If ‘visibility’ is understood as the only legitimate form of political action, then the ability to ‘pass’ becomes problematic” (Galewski 286).

Privilege tends to find existence in those who are unaware of that very privilege, for instance, those who possess white privilege or male privilege are usually oblivious of the benefits of those identities. Those who pass, on the other hand, are well aware of their passing
abilities. With such awareness yields not a privilege, but a consciousness. While passing may be rooted in a position of privilege, at what cost does this privilege serve? It is, then, constructive to recognize the experiences of queers who pass as a queer double consciousness.

W.E.B. Du Bois coined the notion of double consciousness in an attempt to explain the psychological challenge of reconciling African roots with European rearing. Historically, passing has played a crucial part in American race relations. Blacks in the post-Plessy era and Jews in the early twentieth century illustrate two major experiences where the ability to pass led not necessarily to a privilege of benefits and freedom, but to a never-ending awareness that they were neither Black/Jew nor white. Where passing resides, a societal retort secretes. As Daniel Itzkovitz shares in his piece Passing Like Me: Jewish Chameleonism and the Politics of Race, “The problem for many observers was not simply that Jews continually modified their mannerisms to suit their surroundings and thereby made themselves virtually indistinguishable from white Americans, but that even in so doing they maintained their mysterious difference, or what was called their ‘queer light’ (Itzkovitz 42). Passing is intrinsically queer as it disrupts the notion that identity is strict, set, and unchanging. Those who pass are well aware of their passing, and “…call attention to the performative and contingent nature of all seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ identities” (Schlossberg 2). Queers who can pass as straight may have the privilege to shape shift, but does this particular “privilege” truly grant rights and advantages enjoyed by the elite identities (i.e. white, straight, male)?

“The gay community is a very close community, which I can understand why because they were pushed out of normal society so they had to create their own community to feel safe and wanted and accepted, but then they went around and they shut everyone else out … The community as a whole is not accepting to people who are not like them. Even though I do belong, emotionally and mentally, I don’t feel like it.”

– Gwen

---

Gwen alludes to the idea that gay-centered communities reject anyone that does not fit a certain ideal. Because she does not fit it with a conventionally queer (yes, there is such a thing) appearance, she is shut out. I argue that this reveals the failure of queer politics. What gay and queer politics have done is create a space that separates the queers from the non-queers, basing this distinction on an acceptable queer appearance. For this reason, we can see that passing is not only a privilege, but also a queer double consciousness. The eyes of others morph queer femmes into subjects that are seemingly straight within and out of queer spaces. Queer femmes’ negotiation between the psychological and social implications of their passing results in a consciousness that is dependent on “the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Dubois 3). The very essence of passing elicits the fact that identities are fluid and unstable. Queer femmes’ abilities to morph in and out of queerness speak on this very fluidity. These passing abilities disrupt the widely held belief that identity is solid, and it is this disruption that invalidates the preconceived notions of identity; and so queer double consciousness is born. With the negotiation of and intersectionality between the queer, the womyn, and the feminine, comes the multifaceted experience queer femmes endure in reconciling their normativity and queerness.

In a society that is at the twilight of equality\textsuperscript{10}, is there any way to reach the dawn? What will this neo-world look like? Queer and radical folks seek a revolution, one that no longer restricts or condenses trans*, genderqueer, fluid and all non-normative identities. A true queer politics will allow for a workable discourse that acknowledges the ins and outs of each oppressive -ism as well as embrace those who are quote un-quote privileged, conventional, traditional, or normative. As Cohen believes, this revolution must tap in to “…its ability to create

a space in opposition to dominant norms” (Cohen 438). These revolutionaries must pinpoint the
dominant norms within queer politics, theorize and ultimately act with the intention of breaking
down all binary queer thought. We must queer the queer, constantly. As vital as it is to stand up
and demand rights, it is equally important to step back, forget our own passions and convictions
for just a second, and allow ourselves to open up to concepts other than our own. Activists need
to practice active listening as well actively challenging dominant and oppressive norms.
Considering that queer is fluid and ever changing, we must pay attention to these strides of
change and adjust accordingly. If queer, radical, anarchist, whatever-you-want-to-call-yourself
activists wish to reach a point of revolutionary change, we must constantly alter how we view
queerness and vulnerably open ourselves up to critique.

I conclude that the radical potential of queer politics lies not in an emphasis of external
queerness, but in our need to evade being disciplined into corporeal subjects. We, as a result,
must emphasize decolonizing our minds from binary queer thought all while straying away from
any unwanted need or pressure to queer our external performance. To judge one’s queerness,
radicalness, or dedication to a movement should have next to nothing to do with how they look,
but instead center and embrace alternative and queer forms of radical thought. If authentic
queerness were to lie within external performance, how much then can we rely on queer politics
to successfully penetrate oppressive authorities?

While escapable, the ultimate failures of queer politics, I believe, are positioned in the
perpetuation of exterior queerness and the abandonment of inclusiveness. At the heart of queer
politics beats an all-encompassing bloodline that embraces the non-normative, the normative,
and the critical eye. “Acknowledging the inevitable violence of identity politics and having no
stake in its own hegemony, queer is less an identity than a critique of identity. But it is in no
position to imagine itself outside that circuit of problems energised by identity politics”\textsuperscript{11}. The validity of queer as a term and as a politics has stretched beyond its fluid borders into the dangerous land of content. By queering our minds we can train ourselves to be look beyond the bare external, and seize the panoptic radical. With a queer mentality that understands, emphasizes and practices interconnectedness, comes a political execution that is able to forgo identity distinctions to then bond with non-queer, yet analogous, mentalities; and so rests the radical potential of queer politics.

G. References

Works Cited


Dear Potential Participant,

I will be conducting a research project as part of my involvement with Cal Poly Pomona’s McNair Scholar’s Program. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and further explain what your involvement will entail if you agree to participate.

This study will seek to capture the experience of lesbian, bisexual, or queer identified women who embody a feminine appearance. The purpose of this research project is to explain the doubt and skepticism that surrounds female and queer sexuality.

Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no compensation for participating in either parts of the research. The first half of the study will involve one 1-hour individual interview in which I will be the sole facilitator. The interview will take place in the months of January or February 2013 either in Cal Poly Pomona’s Violence Prevention and Women's Resource Center library, which is a secluded room within the center, or in one of Cal Poly Pomona’s University Library group study rooms. These locations are private and secluded areas. If you prefer, you may choose to have the interview in a public setting where it is customary for two people to be talking, such as outside the campus Starbucks or on an outside bench or table. You will decide the location, as your comfort is most important. During the interview you may decline to answer any of the questions at any time. You may also decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Simply inform me that you no longer wish to participate and the information already collected will immediately be disposed of. With your permission, I will take notes during the interview as well as having it be voice-recorded through my MacBook computer in order to help in my collection of the information. If you agree to be interviewed, but not voice-recorded I will ask for permission to only take notes while you answer any questions. If you absolutely refuse any kind of data collection I will then thank you for time and find someone else to interview. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations or pseudonyms will be used.

The second portion of the study will be a focus group in March 2013 including all interested interviewees. The focus group will span two hours and I ask that before you commit to the individual interview to also commit to participating in the focus group. The purpose of the focus group is to locate any similar experiences between the interviewees during their interview process and lived experiences as well as an opportunity for the participants to debrief. Concepts of femininity and queer sexuality will be discussed at length. The focus group will be held in a large group study room at Cal Poly Pomona's University Library. At the start of the focus group, I will spend 5 minutes telling all participants that the identity and names of everyone in the room should remain confidential. With the permission of all participants I will record the focus group with my MacBook computer while simultaneously taking notes. I will be the sole facilitator for the focus group. I ask that everything that is shared during the focus group remains confidential. Everything said during the focus group should not be repeated outside of the group.
By initialing this document here __________ you agree to keep all information said during the focus group private.

By participating in this study you will exceptionally help shape the knowledge revolving around women’s issues, queer issues, and issues of gender. By sharing your experiences you will bring awareness and understanding to female queer sexuality and femininity. Data collected during this study will be preserved in a password-protected computer file. My Faculty Mentor, Dr. Anita Jain, and myself will be the only people with access to the information. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study. However, because recollection of experiences may be an emotional risk I have listed Cal Poly Pomona’s counseling service you may contact if you feel it to be necessary. This service is free for all Cal Poly Pomona students and has resources for Cal Poly Pomona Faculty and Staff.

Counseling and Psychological Services
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
3801 W. Temple Ave.
Building 66, Room 116
Pomona, CA 91768

The following questions are examples of the type of questions I will ask during the interview:

What does femme mean to you and do you identify as femme?
Does the general public view you as a more feminine woman?
Are people often surprised when you disclose your sexuality?

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at (714) 293-9662 or by email at amstorti@csupomona.edu. Dr. Anita Jain will be my faculty mentor and you are free to contact her at (909) 869-3593 or by email at anjain@csupomona.edu. You will receive a copy of this form.

I hope that the results of my study will give voice to the understudied community of feminine queer women and ultimately enhance the body of knowledge surrounding their experiences.

Sincerely,
Anna Storti
McNair Scholar and Student Researcher, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

I have read and understand the details of this research project.

Participant Name (Please Print)_______________________

Participant Signature___________________

Date__________________

Please also check the box of which type/types of recording you are comfortable with.

☐ Voice Recording
☐ Note Taking
☐ No form of recording

I, Anna Storti, certify that I have explained the research to the potential participant