

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

BY ANNA STORTI

## Introduction

To date, queer politics has less transformed hegemonic sex and gender identities and has more so reinforced binaries through its tendency to classify everything into either “normative” or “queer.” 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.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its desire to eliminate the tendency to characterize identity into concrete boxes, queer socio-political praxis creates a division between the queer and the non-queer, a split that ruptures the very essence of queerness. As critical theorist 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.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, one’s identity is authenticated through the juxtaposition of what is deemed as queer and what is deemed as normative.

Queer feminine women are located at a unique intersection of sexuality and gender, one that is both queer and normative. This particular junction allows for an opportunity to probe queer politics’ need to categorize, a need present even within a space that wishes to remove any

<sup>1</sup> Susan Archer Mann, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Queer, and Transgender Theories” in *Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 233-35.

<sup>2</sup> Nikki Sullivan, “Queer: A Question of Being or A Question of Doing?” in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 45.

affiliation with identity politics or tendency to position them within a hierarchy. In detailing the means by which femininity is articulated in the lives of queer women, the discrimination feminine (read gender-normative) these women face in their pursuit of establishing communities can be highlighted, including the struggles they face in their unique search for social affirmation. 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 such 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."<sup>3</sup> While on the one hand the display of femininity by queer feminine women may confer a quasi-privilege within heterosexual spaces, my study explores how the outward expression of femininity by these women 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?

As queer spaces center on the recognition and visibility, invisibility results for gender-normative queers who do not necessarily fit into accepted queer styles. 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."<sup>4</sup> Identity hopes to convene a unique army united on a particular set of components. However, in the process, identity excludes those who may in fact identify similarly with the group, but are shunned because of their inability to measure up to the identity's external prerequisites. Their identity seems to be reliant on an outward expression of queerness, whether through physical appearance or

<sup>3</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 64, no. 2 (May 1997) 3(4): 438.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall. "Who needs 'identity'?" in *Identity: A Reader*. (New York: Sage Publications Inc., 2000), 16.

demonstration. This expression allows for the assembly of a legion, one that invites constituents so long as they fit in with the non-normative queerness deemed 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 such politics to flourish if it goes against its flexible nature to center on a constructed and normative queer identity. Female femininity constructs an assumed heterosexuality that then perpetuates notions of normality. When queerness gets added to the mix, queer feminine women do not simply challenge what is considered normal, but exist as subjects negotiating issues of authenticity at the crossroads of queer and identity politics.

### **Femme<sup>5</sup>**

During the months of January to March 2013, I conducted 10 semi-constructed interviews. 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 first contacted femme women<sup>6</sup> over the age of 18 at college LGBT/Pride Centers in Southern California. From there, I relied on a snowball method in order to gather the rest of the interviewees. The femmes 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 as Black; Michelle, Lara, and Britney as Latina and Multiracial; and Gwen, Kristina, and

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, I condense the term “femme” to serve as a marker for queer feminine women.

<sup>6</sup> This project focuses on female-bodied women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, fluid, or queer. 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.

Adrian as White. Jade, Kate, Rebecca, and Lara are lower class; Michelle, Britney, Kristina and Jasmine middle class; and Gwen and Adrian upper-middle class. Every woman is a U.S. citizen, with the exception of Kate who is a citizen of the Philippines. Michelle, Britney, Lara, and Jasmine identify as queer; Jade, Kristina, and Kate as lesbian; and Gwen, Rebecca, and Adrian as bisexual. While my study looks specifically at queer feminine women, not all women identify with the “femme” label. 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.

What these interviews revealed was that “femme” refers to an assemblage of elements not limited to femininity and queerness. “Femme” exists not to mimic normative femininity, but to serve as a blank canvas for queering femininity. More specifically, these femmes bring to light the pressure to “butch it up,” the identity of the hard femme, and the phenomenon of passing.

### **Butch It Up - Queernormativity**

Femmes often encounter a need to prove their queerness. While femmes receive the spotlight in mainstream media, such as in the television series “The L Word,” society casts butch lesbians as the ‘real lesbians.’<sup>7</sup> Despite the media exposure granted to feminine queer women, femmes juggle the invisibility rooted in their normative gender performances. When asked if they ever felt a certain pressure to embody a more masculine appearance in order to be

<sup>7</sup> Ann M. Ciasullo. “Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 602, accessed July 27, 2012. *JSTOR*.

taken as a legitimate queer woman, each woman responded with a resounding “yes.” Lara, Kristina, Gwen and Britney respectively revealed this:

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 it’s 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.

It’s 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 not very 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 regarding their own difficulty in establishing community, finding partners, and existing comfortably as femmes. Treated as outsiders, they encounter rejection from their own communities because they do not meet the expectations of a queer woman. What results is the pressure to butch it up. Lara, Kristina, Gwen and Britney, for instance, felt their femininity hindered their comfort in queer spaces as they opted to buy sneakers, get an undercut or short haircut, have piercings, wear unconventional clothing, or generally dress more visibly queer in order to embody a more authentic queerness. With the pressure to butch it up comes an accentuation of the queer/non-queer binary.

Queer studies critic Lisa Duggan argues that with the emergence of the “new homonormativity,” lesbians and gays do not so much resist dominant heteronormative institutions as defend them through their social and neoliberal economic assimilating actions.<sup>8</sup>

The homonormative reveals as a wallflower; while invited to the party, they seize the

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 50.

opportunity to reap the same social, economic, and political concessions exercised by the heteronormative. Still, many of those involved in radical queer politics choose to forgo assimilation into dominant groups and instead form their own identity and stigma-free communities. Such an anti-assimilationist ideal falls short. I argue that where homonormativity is present in lesbian and gay politics, queernormativity takes its place in queer politics further proving the danger of identity-focused politics. The failure of queer spaces is seen through its administration of the same political sedative<sup>9</sup> present within the lesbian and gay movement. Queernormativity is the oxymoronic reality that queer politics conforms to a binary distinguishing between good and bad queers. In this sense, these spaces do not challenge dominant homonormative practices, but instead defend them through its failure to abandon a desired fixed queer identity. Without being truly inclusive of fluidity and non-normativity, queer politics serves a distinct queer mainstream, one that filters through the good and the bad and adopts an agenda catering to the so-called authentic or legitimate queers. Michelle shares:

I think being in a (queer student organization) leadership position and being femme has been interesting because last year's coordinator, a butch, held the position and no one would complain at all about what she did and she is very radical. But when I became coordinator suddenly people began complaining that I was doing too much femme of color events. Too much of this, too little of that. With me, being a femme in a leadership position, I've been treated as like I don't know what I'm doing.

It is a paradox to practice a politics centralized on the critique of normativity, when in essence the politics normalizes what it means to be queer. In its drive to critique normativity, queer politics has not only, as Michael Warner would say, troubled normality,<sup>10</sup> but has established a new norm centered on a fixed queer subjectivity.

<sup>9</sup>Duggan. *Twilight*, 50.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

## Hard Femme - (Re)Imagining the Feminine

*"To be a feminist, you have to go gaga!"*

— J. Jack Halberstam Gaga Feminism<sup>11</sup>

In his latest book, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, transgender studies scholar Jack Halberstam calls for 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."<sup>12</sup> Halberstam compellingly explores gaga feminism's potential for intellectual emancipation by "shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions."<sup>13</sup> When laying out the ground rules of gaga feminism, he concludes with 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."<sup>14</sup> It is an interesting assertion to suggest that in order to conform to the ideals of gaga feminism, one must *go gaga*. One can articulate feminism in a plethora of ways, not limited to gender expression and unconventionality. Accordingly, many feminine acting feminists fail to coincide with what it means to be gaga, which is "impolite, abrupt, abrasive and bold."<sup>15</sup> While beautifully innovative, Halberstam's conception marginalizes feminists who do not necessarily "go gaga." 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,"<sup>16</sup> do the folks that perform normatively, conventionally, or femininely surrender any opportunity to be gaga feminists?

<sup>11</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga*, 28-9.

<sup>15</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga*, 133.

On a societal level, the femme body creates "... an interruption, a way of making queerness appear in a moment of ambiguity and incongruity".<sup>17</sup> 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.

Based off the tenets of queer theory, queer politics aims to critique the normative. However, the development of a new norm only arises where queers are validated and empowered so long as they resist normativity in precise ways. Many often expect queers to go gaga and look queer if they wish to be taken seriously. If anything other than audacious and brazen, they abandon and reject this accepted radical mentality. In doing so, queer politics contradicts its conviction of challenging norms by establishing a norm of its very own. What happens when queers are not "outrageous" enough to be taken seriously? Feminist credibility should neither determine nor depend on going gaga. For example, Jade pushes us to consider the femme's "radical possibility:"

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.

In search of the radical potential of queer politics, we can argue that the femme is in opposition to traditional 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. This politically radical femme takes grasp of fluid gender expression and queerness, grinds it up, and concocts the "hard femme." Below, Michelle reveals that while the femme may or may not be radical, the

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Galewski. "Playing Up Being a Woman': Femme Performance and the Potential for Ironic Representation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2008): 292, accessed July 27, 2012, JSTOR.

hard femme embraces a set of queered political views centralized on fluidity and transformation.

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.

Similar to other feminists, the hard femme believes in gender equality, demands a restructuring of oppressive societal institutions, and remains critical of gender norms. The difference, however, comes in that the hard femme views her femininity as a matrix, one that recombines and rearticulates masculinity with femininity in an effort to create something new. While gaga feminism is espoused in order to reflect a *gaga* nature, the hard femme serves to point to yet an additional form of feminism. The hard femme is rooted in a (re)imagining of the feminine, one where the conceptualization of femininity includes a multiplicity of practices that can be deployed to resist essentialist constructions of gender and sexuality.

Politically conscious femmes challenge authenticity, defy stereotypes, and ultimately reconstruct notions of femininity, womanhood, and queerness; as a result, the hard femme emerges 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 entails more than just an exclusive identity. Furthermore, the hard femme is neither better, nor worse than other feminist representations. Instead, 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 queer's more non-normative behaviors if queer politics ever hopes to reach the radical undertaking it proposes.

Cathy Cohen asserts that this radical potential lies in resisting prevailing notions of normality.<sup>18</sup>

The manifestation of the gaga feminist and the hard femme alludes to the multitude of ways feminism and queerness can be expressed and articulated. These various embodiments contribute to an array of difference, one that if viewed non-hierarchically, serves as an opportunity for queer politics to productively refrain from attaching to any normalized expression of performance, whether feminist or queer.

### 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. Dubois *The Souls of Black Folk*<sup>19</sup>

Historically implied as a racial experience, “passing” is intrinsically queer as it disrupts the notion that identity is strict, set, and unchanging. While many think of it as a practice that renders visibility, safety, and comfort, passing instills a consciousness that uproots the supposed queerness of queer identity. People perceive femmes, in both straight and queer spaces, as feminine women, and such a perception yields an assumed normative heterosexuality. As such, femmes endure a queer double consciousness. This queered passing phenomenon draws attention to the space “...between being visible and being seen.”<sup>20</sup> While

<sup>18</sup> Cohen. *Punks*, 438.

<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Tribeca Books, 2013), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Schlossberg and Maria Carla Sanchez, “Introduction: Rites of Passing,” in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 5.

femmes are capable of passing as straight women, what happens when they and their normative gender embodiments step foot into queer communities?

I think I'm less accepted in the LGBT community, and I only say that because of my experiences of going to events at school. If a gay girl is wearing just jeans and a t-shirt, but if she's flamboyant and eccentric or talkative and very loud then of course she'll get noticed, but if you have a normal voice and are normal looking they see you as nothing special. They accept people who are more loud and crazy... For someone to view me as gay I would need to be more stereotypically gay, so short hair and piercings and stuff like that. Then, they would start to think, 'maybe she's gay.' -Gwen

While queer identity is not accompanied with a set of tangible attributes, the stereotypes associated with it ease one's navigation into queer space. Thus, if queers look or act queer, they are taken as legitimate. On the other hand, "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."<sup>21</sup> If queers fail to meet the understood standards of queer identity, then society questions their queerness. The eyes of others morph femmes into subjects that are seemingly straight within and out of queer space.

Queer politics has thrived on its employment of nonconforming leaders, and thus the power that arises by being noticeably queer is forfeited in the conforming body. "If 'visibility' is understood as the only legitimate form of political action, then the ability to 'pass' becomes problematic."<sup>22</sup> In queer politics, where visibly queer subjects are valued and respected, queers who can pass as straight are deprived of legitimacy. In acquiescence to these standards, the femme often attempts to dispose of her femininity by "butching it up" in order to achieve authenticity. Below, Gwen illustrates an evident reference of difference dividing queers between those who are acceptable and those who are not:

<sup>21</sup> Jodi R. Schorb and Tania N. Hammidi, "Sho-Lo Showdown: The Do's and Don'ts of Lesbian Chic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 19.2 (Autumn 2000): 258, accessed July 20, 2012. *JSTOR*.

<sup>22</sup> Galewski, *Playing*, 286.

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 alludes to the idea that gay-centered communities are both primarily comprised of visibly queer individuals and reject anyone that does not fit into this precise ideal. If one component of gay politics is based off of a marginalization of queerness, then one component of queer politics is based off of a marginalization of normativity. An examination of queer double consciousness demonstrates how queer spaces have redirected their focus of queerness onto a physical subjectivity, where passing subjects are located amid conflicting corporealities. The femme's negotiation between the psychological and social implications of her passing results in a consciousness that diverges between queer authenticity and feminine visibility. Femmes' abilities to morph in and out of queerness speak on this very fluidity. With the negotiation of and intersectionality between the queer, the woman, and the feminine, comes the multifaceted psychosis femmes endure in reconciling what is deemed normal and what is deemed queer.

### **Conclusion**

In a society that is at the twilight of equality,<sup>23</sup> is there any way to reach the dawn? What will this neo-world look like? Queers seek a revolution, one that no longer restricts or condenses the expression of queerness. A radical queer politics will allow for a workable discourse that challenges notions of normality and queerness. We must queer the queer constantly. I contend that the radical potential of such politics lies not in external emphasis, but in our need to evade conforming into corporeal subjects.

<sup>23</sup> Duggan, *Twilight*.