

“I WILL ROCK SOME GLITTER LIKE YOU’VE NEVER SEEN”: BURLESQUE, FEMME
ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE FEMME MOVEMENT

By

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To the femmes

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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By

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This dissertation details the rise of what participants called a “femme movement” in queer communities: it is an account of the political work accomplished by femmes (feminine bisexual, lesbian, and queer women) wherein they encourage Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [GLBTQ] people to shift their negative ideologies about femininity. The author spent about one and a half years (and over one hundred and forty hours) conducting ethnographic observations of femme activist organizations and queer burlesque performances; she also conducted thirty-one in-depth interviews with activists and performers associated with these groups. Each type of organization is part of the femme movement: femme organizations are dedicated to creating femme solidarity (amongst members) and femme visibility (so that GLBTQ people may recognize the possibility of queer femininity); queer burlesque troupes use hyper-feminine erotic performances to critique the mainstream rigidity of gender and sexuality expectations, proving that femmes are a vital and sustaining part of queer communities.

The author argues that the rise of a collective femme identity and the political work done around that identity are constitutive of a uniquely queer New Social Movement. It is a movement that is not neatly feminist or queer, but is inspired by both communities’ histories,

ideologies, and cultures. Thus, she eventually argues that the femme movement may help scholars think of GLBTQ activism in terms of activist “waves,” as feminist scholars have conceptualized gender-based activisms. The femme movement is a current within the present-day GLBTQ activist wave, which exists inside an ocean of intermingling gender and sexual politics.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Femininity – and women who present in a feminine manner – have been highly controversial in lesbian communities. Stein (1993) argues that this controversy has existed for at least two reasons. First, because many feminine lesbians do not cue queerness in the same ways that many masculine lesbians do, they have the choice to remain silent about their sexual orientation in situations where they may receive sanctions for it. Feminine lesbians, because of their ability to “pass” as heterosexual, can receive moments of heterosexual privilege where more masculine lesbians cannot. Second, their desire is suspect as less authentically lesbian. Taylor and Rupp (1993) explain that lesbian feminist intervention into lesbian communities has sutured philosophies of feminism to the idea of what it means to be a lesbian and that the lesbian feminist position on gender disregards femininity as frivolous and oppressive.

Yet, feminine women have held a historical place in lesbian communities (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Throughout the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s one of the predominant expected genders for lesbians was “femme,” a subcultural community term which refers to bisexual and lesbian feminine women (Nestle, 1992a; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Although the controversy over femininity amongst lesbians has been waging since the onset of second wave feminism to the current time, feminine women – or femmes – have maintained a presence in lesbian communities. Although empirical investigations of bisexual and lesbian feminine women are sparse, biographical writings of women who identify as femme describe problems of alienation, invisibility, and vilification because of their feminine presentations [see Nestle, 1992b; Newman, 1995; Rose & Camilleri, 2002].

This project offers an investigation of the ways in which femme alienation, invisibility, and vilification are being redressed in the form of a new social movement. The femme

movement, as my participants called it, is a New Social Movement; it is made up of small, unaffiliated organizations who promote cultural change within their own subcultural communities. This is a project about femininity, queer feminine identification, the group construction of a collective femme identity, and the possible utility of (femme) queer politics.

In part, this is a project about gender, femininity, and identity. The research presented is situated within a trajectory of gender scholarship in sociology which has pointed to the importance of distinguishing between sexed bodies and gender expression (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Lorber, 1994) and to the ways in which race, nation, class, and sexuality complicate gender expectations (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). This research is also being conducted in response to several calls for particular kinds of queer scholarship: Stein and Plummer's (1994) call for empirical work on how sexuality manifests itself in cultural practices; Nardi's (2002) call for explicit discussions of sex and sexuality; and Valocchi's (2005) call for attention to the non-normative alignments of sex-gender-sexuality (Valocchi, 2005).

More specifically, this project is about organizations who strategize around the issue of feminine identity and expression specifically in queer communities, who want to make space for themselves in the queer community (not the national community), and who want to shake things up while they organize for change. It is dedicated to understanding how femme has shifted from a feminine *label* within lesbian communities to a consciously articulated queer *identity* and how femme identified people have mobilized to challenge femme stigma. That is, it is of great import that the femme movement is located within a context of "queer" deconstructionist¹ politics (Gamson, 1995) rather than more mainstream politics.

¹ I use the term "deconstructionist" as Gamson (1995) does; that is, as a sociologist. Queer theorists in the field of literary and cultural studies may have a different understanding of this term.

The word “queer” is sometimes used as a catchall term for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender [GLBT] community *and* it is sometimes used to describe a blurring of gender and sexuality categories. When I employ the word “queer” to connote the blurring of sex/gender/sexuality boundaries, I mean to say that I see “queer” as quite different from “gay” or “lesbian” and that I see queer politics as quite different from gay and lesbian politics. As Gamson (1995) states, “Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a ‘sexual minority’ and a ‘gay community,’ indeed of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and even ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (390).

Because a queer political philosophy rejects the privileges of sexual normalcy, its political maneuvers do not include lobbying the state for inclusion in its institutions (Berlant & Freeman, 1992). The consequence is that queer politics fails to look like traditional politics at all; the consequence is that if we want to understand what queer politics looks like today, we have to redefine what constitutes politics. The femme movement allows us to do just that: it allows us to look at atypical movement organizing in order to think about the motivations, goals, and achievements of a kind of queer politics.

The femme movement can be conceived of as a multi-faceted attempt to challenge feminine stigma in queer communities. There are femme organizations, and various kinds of femme performance art like burlesque, spoken word, and erotica; there are national femme conferences and documentaries being made about queer femme identity. For the purposes of this project, I focused on two types of femme mobilizing: femme organizations, groups who promote femme solidarity and visibility in queer community; and queer femme burlesque troupes, groups who create erotic performance art with hyper-feminine gender performances. This work highlights these two kinds of femme politics because they each embody an important genre of this

kind of queer politics: one of them is committed to building solidarity amongst femme identified people and visibility for femmes in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [GLBTQ] communities through measures like discussion groups, marches, and other visibility outings; the other uses art to challenge the rigidity of gender and sexuality and celebrate the unique contributions of femmes in GLBTQ communities.

To understand the process of the femme movement, this research project began with the following four important and interconnected research questions:

1. Because being queer and feminine has been thought to be mutually exclusive for women, how do individuals who identify as both manage this intersection of their sexualities and gender expressions?
2. How is femininity understood and presented in a queer context?
3. How do two types of queer feminine organizations – femme organizations and queer burlesque troupes – provide a space in which individuals understand queer feminine gender expressions in the context of other group members?
4. What are the purposes of organizing around this particular kind of queer gender identity and how are their goals accomplished?

To answer these questions, I employed a mixed-method qualitative data collection of participant observation and in-depth interviews: I collected over 140 hours of observations of queer burlesque troupe performances and femme organization events in my “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus, 1995) in the cities of Atlanta, GA, Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR [please see Appendix A, Table 1 for a list of organizations and troupes by city]; I also conducted 31 semi-structured, in-depth “active” interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with members of all the organizations and troupes I observed [please see Appendix D for a list of participants, their organization/troupe affiliation, and their demographic information].

Guided by a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2000; 2006), my analyses examined the central research questions listed above, with sensitizing concepts about

the social construction of gender and sexuality performance, and the social movement parameters of queer cultural politics.

This research is an intervention into the usual feminist conceptualization of femininity as problematic, to the academic attention paid to theorizing masculinity (Schippers, 2007), and into the usual academic conception of normative sex-gender-sexuality alignments (Valocchi, 2005). The research provides useful empirical examples on the experiences of queer feminine women, but also offers a more general knowledge on the production of gender expressions, on the ideological meanings of femininity, and on how social change occurs within communities.

The Research is Political, The Personal is Political, and the Research is Personal²

While this research is about the construction of femme collective identity and femme political work, it is also – very deeply – about me. This is an intensely personal research project because I am queer, because I identify as femme, and because I have firsthand experiences with what my participants called femme invisibility, femme alienation, and femme stigma in queer communities.

I came out as a lesbian when I was fourteen – an identity that would shift over the next thirteen years to dyke then to lesbian feminist then to femme dyke then to queer femme – but I did not identify as femme until I was twenty years old. I remember being nineteen and announcing to my partner that I hated femmes, but that I didn't hate Leslie Ma (the lone femme member of the dyke punk band, Tribe 8) because she seemed like she was “actually queer” (and not straight) and that she seemed “really tough.” The now silly part of this declaration was that I was feminine, but not femme identified; queers always thought that I was straight, and not tough,

² Parts of this section were published as an essay: Ryan, Maura. (2009). “The femme movement: Why we're here, why we're (so damn and beautifully) queer, and why you're going to get used to it.” In Burke, Jennifer Clare (ed.) *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume 2*. Michigan: Homofactus Press. pgs.60-63

and maybe would say that they too “hated” me because they perceived me to be less dedicated to the queer community and feminist politics than they were.

Eventually, through trying to read every piece of queer written word I could get my hands on, I stumbled upon the book *Stone Butch Blues*, and to borrow an articulation from Betty, a participant who also started to identify as femme after reading this book, I felt like I had “walked through the front door of where I was supposed to live.” I read essays and books by femmes: Joan Nestle, Lesléa Newman, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Amber Hollibaugh, and Jewelle Gomez – femmes from an earlier generation, femmes who I will always be thankful for, femmes who have helped preserve my soul, my sense of self, and my dignity when other queer people have been hurtful.

Like other femmes, queer spaces offer me a range of emotions and experiences: love, warmth, safety, isolation, open hostility, and even violence. Like when I was twenty – I saw the Butchies (an alternative band comprised of butch-identified dykes) play and a group of masculine dykes mocked my presentation by talking about pretty nails and long hair; later in the night I was standing on the outskirts of a mosh pit and one of them punched me in the face and shoved me – all I heard when she did it were the words “straight” and “get out.” Before those things happened it was a night that made me feel relieve from a hostile homophobic world – I lived in a small college town in Florida, but I was around dykes! In the same night I felt warmth and safety and open hostility and violence, all from other dykes.

Other queer people have always made me aware of how they feel about femininity. Telling queer people my dissertation topic has increased the number of awkward conversations I have about femme and have made me even more aware of the heartbreaking philosophies queer people have on the topic. Here are just a few:

“There’s nothing worse than a femme girl who’s basically a straight girl in disguise – one of those girls who wants to settle down, be wifey, be a lazy ass bottom, and then pretend that she gets some kind of queer credit for wearing red lipstick. When it comes down to it – hell! I think I just described all femmes” [A queer stranger’s response to hearing about my dissertation topic].

“That’s [a] great [topic]! Can you figure out a way to get rid of them for good?” [A queer stranger’s reaction to hearing that I’m researching femmes in queer communities].

“There are basically tough femmes and housewife femmes and tough femmes don’t take shit. Which one are you? Well you look like a housewife femme so I don’t know” [A friend of mine musing cavalierly about my passing privilege and which femmes he believes “take shit”].

“Could you tell me why femmes are always such selfish bitches?” [A genderqueer identified former friend of mine].

“Femmes are always selling out lesbians” [A genderqueer identified friend of mine who sometimes dates femmes].

I know that this tends to happen with dissertations. A friend of mine in grad school had a dissertation about white class privileged women hiring domestic workers. Suddenly everyone – including white feminist academics at her job interviews – was confessing to her their torrid tales of hiring a “cleaning lady.” Everyone has an opinion. Or possibly everyone needs to confess and to do this they make themselves see researchers as stand-ins for priests. They can discuss anything with us – the fact that they don’t want to pay their employees a living wage to clean their homes or they can look a femme in the eye and tell her that feminine passing girls are sell outs. Everyone has an opinion. Add queer people with their tendency to be opinionated, their tendency to be vocal about their opinions, and their seemingly collective fear/disdain/hatred/suspicion of femininity and you’ll hear a lot of stuff that will make a femme mad. Mad. Hurt. Maybe hurt is a better way to describe it. It is the feeling that I have been punched in my stomach and had the air knocked out of my lungs or that my gut fell out of my body and onto the floor and I can only look on and not breathe and not say a word because the

people I love most - who I still believe exist with me in an unwritten and non-verbalized contract to make me feel safe and loved and whole - refuse to see me.

As the above quotes suggest, queer folks have taken to talking to me about femininity like I am not femme. They believe that I have become a researcher of feminine queers – a vessel soaking up opinions about them to guide my work. I realize that this is a resourceful tactic they use. It is not to benefit my work or to engage in a philosophical discussion. Apparently, and painfully for me, I believe that people want to say these things to femmes. They're itching for the opportunity. They're angry because some of us pass or because some of us bottom too passively or because some of us are high maintenance. They want to hold us accountable for these things. Some small part of me believes that they say these things to see the speck of hurt in our eyes.

Femmes are well trained at cleaning up our reactions to these sentiments. We hear these things so much that the deep pools of hurt that we feel have only a momentary reflection in our eyes. A blink. A narrowing of the pupils. A flash of deep hurt. I sometimes wonder if they watch themselves reflected in my eyes and feel okay about what they just said to me. Sometimes I fight back, explain in a hurried and begging fashion that what they're saying is not so. More often – especially now that I'm a researcher – I nod along. The only residue of my actual feeling – the it, punched in the stomach, air supply cut off feeling – is the way that I imagine my eyes turn into narrow slits as I nod.

This dissertation reflects that those moments of individual deep hurt have collected into a flood of femme resistance. Finding out that groups of femmes have been brave enough to challenge the femme hating in queer communities has saved my life.

I approach the study of this flood of femme resistance as an ethnographer, but also as a femme. The project that follows details my situated understanding of femme political work during my immersion in political femme communities.

A Note on What is To Come

This dissertation presents the development of femme collectivity in queer communities. That is, analysis begins with some participant insights about their orientation toward femininity, moves into discussing the construction of a femme identity, and then details the political work around that identity.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of sociological and interdisciplinary literature of gender, femininity, queer femininity, and identity politics. In Chapter 3, I provide a discussion of my theoretical sensitivity by offering an overview of New Social Movement theory, cultural politics, and queer politics. These two chapters are meant to convey that this is research which reflects on and contributes to knowledge about three major social phenomena: gender, sexuality, and social movements. In Chapter 4, I detail my research design, data collection, profile of participants, and analysis.

Chapter 5 begins analysis of my research by introducing the reader to how participants understand the concept of femininity and their own orientation toward gender identity and expression. It relies on Schippers (2007) idea of pariah femininities to understand how a situated queer feminine identity might mean different experiences than mainstream feminine expectations. This chapter also engages the concept of race and class differences amongst the queer feminine women I interviewed. Chapter 6 describes the group construction of a femme identity: it offers background on participant descriptions of feminine stigma in queer communities and the responsive construction of a politicized femme identity.

Chapter 7 analyzes the meaning of femme organizations and demonstrates how they achieve their purported goals of creating solidarity and visibility for femme identified queer women. Chapter 8 offers the rise of burlesque in queer communities as an example of how femme political work can happen more subtly through the medium of art. While Chapter 7 describes the obvious political work of femme organizations who verbalize a demand for femme inclusion in queer communities, Chapter 8 describes the ways in which femmes use art to suggest that femmes are a unique and vital part of queer communities.

Chapter 9 offers a discussion of the meaning of the rise of a collective and politicized femme identity, femme political activity, and its location inside and outside both feminist and queer political work. Using the femme movement as a uniquely queer (and feminist inspired) version of a New Social Movement, I suggest here that scholars may think of GLBTQ activist work similarly to the way feminist scholars have talked of “waves” of activism; I suggest that we may think of the femme movement as a current within the present-day GLBTQ activist wave and that we may think of the modern GLBTQ activist wave as being inside an ocean of gender and sexuality politics.

Finally, Chapter 10 provides an epilogue of the state of the organizations and troupes I observed and interviewed. It is here that I reflect on the successes I believe they have achieved in their short existence.

What is to come is the detailed account of the emergence of femme political work, a uniquely queer and feminist inspired New Social Movement. Femme political work is based in the redress of feminine stigma in queer communities. As such, it frames the problems with and solutions for feminine stigma in feminist and queer political logics. Specifically, the political histories of both feminist and GLBTQ communities have formed a unique set of frames for

femme political work: lesbian feminism's focus on personal transformation and subcultural politics; the feminist sex wars, which established a "sex radical" political common sense; third wave feminism's de-stigmatization of femininity; the mainstream gay and lesbian commitment to visibility; Queer Nation's commitment to radical, in-your-face politics; and transgender activists' commitment to recognizing variant gender identities and expressions. These political histories have created a femme political common sense: femmes are demanding recognition and inclusion in queer communities based on the logic that personal transformation (like the way we think of gender identity) can be political, that subcultural change can change the culture, that visibility is vital to a healthy self concept, and that politics can and should be irreverent, fanciful, fun, and sex-positive; they rationalize their demand for inclusion by promoting the idea that femme identity is radical because of its rejection of natural gender, and its celebration of femininity despite patriarchy's misogynistic dismissal of it. Femmes put a queer political logic into (a new kind of) practice: everyone should be granted the freedom to choose the gender/sexual practices, expressions, and identities that feel right for them.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW: FEMININITY, QUEER FEMININITY, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

As this project details the rise of a femme movement, built on redressing the marginality of femmes in queer communities, this literature review offers an overview of sociological and interdisciplinary scholarship on gender and femininity, queer femininity, and identity politics.

Femininity

For many social thinkers, questions surrounding gender have been of prime import because, as an organizing feature of social life, it is one of the mechanisms that direct our life chances (Connell 1987; Acker 1992; Risman 2004; Yancey Martin 2004). This is a topic that deserves a social (rather than biological) focus because, as many sociologists contend, gender is socially constructed (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Lorber & Farell 1991; Kimmel 2004; Lorber, 2005). Although some scholars focus on how the social construction of gender is rooted in ideology (Lorber & Farell, 1991; Lorber, 1993; 1994), many choose to focus our attention on the ways in which gender is maintained through practice (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Messner 2000; McNay 2004; Ridgeway & Correll 2004). So, it is not just that processes of gender are enacted upon us, but that we enter into these complex processes through the relations of everyday life.

Kessler and McKenna (1978) are considered pioneers in establishing this now common sociological understanding of gender, the hallmark of their work being that they used an ethnomethodological approach to understand the specific workings of gender in our social world. Ethnomethodology, credited to Garfinkel (1967), is an orientation that places the emphasis on the everyday; it is concerned with how people make sense of the world around them, how they take part in the world using this knowledge, and how they produce the world by their actions. Imagining gender within an ethnomethodological framework meant that Kessler and McKenna

(1978) claimed gender, rather than being a consequence of biological functions, is produced through interactions with others. Within this theory, one of the key functions of gender relations is the process of *gender attribution*, a method by which people are categorized as male or female.

Similarly, West and Zimmerman (1987) followed in the tradition of ethnomedological approaches to explain everyday gender productions. In their famous contribution to this literature, they described that in *doing gender* we are performing our gender for an audience who holds us *accountable* for the “correct” gender presentation for our sex category. Through their articulation of accountability they illuminated the differences and linkages between sex (our bodies), sex category (being taken to be in the category of male or female), and gender (the expression of masculinity or femininity that leads people to place us in a sex category). Because we pattern our own gendered behavior in order to avoid sanction for inappropriate gender characterization, we may say that gender is the result of complicated prescriptions, proscriptions, and performances that produce a desired effect (West & Zimmerman 1987; West & Fenstermaker 1995). There have been many uses of this framework that have since expanded the notion of doing gender to a more complicated understanding that doing gender is race and class specific (Hall 1993; West & Fenstermaker 1995; 2002; Trautner, 2005).

Since Connell’s (1987) landmark work on hegemonic masculinity, sociologists have had the theoretical tools to discuss masculinity as being multiple – that is, differently experienced for men who are organized differentially along hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation – and to conceive of how masculinity practices are necessarily connected to a gender hegemony that ensures male privilege. Hegemonically masculine men experience ultimate access to society’s resources precisely because their masculinity is situated against the purported inferior masculinities of men of color, working class men, and gay men and against the

constructed inferior gender practice of femininity. So, while some privileged men are situated against some marginalized men, all men are always situated against femininity. All men benefit from the patriarchal dividend in some fashion (Connell, 1995). For this reason – that women can never occupy a power position that is equal to the hegemonically masculine man – Connell suggests that there is no theoretical basis to discuss a “hegemonic femininity.” Instead, we might talk of “emphasized femininities,” a femininity that is defined by compliance to men’s desires under patriarchy (Connell, 1987).

Connell (1995) defines masculinity as “...simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture” (71). Expounding on this definition, Schippers (2007) says that we may take several meanings of masculinity from his definition: it is a location that individuals can move into through practice; it is a set of practices and characteristics understood to be “masculine”; when these practices are embodied by men (or women, but especially by men) they have widespread effects. Although the practice of masculinity seems to be individual, gender cannot be individualized; they are enacted collectively by groups, communities, and societies (Schippers, 2007).

As Schippers (2007) notes, there have been many sociological uses of hegemonic masculinity, attempts to theorize female masculinity, and attempts to theorize multiple femininities, but femininity is still under-theorized. In much the same way that femininity is always “othered” to the superior attention awarded to masculinity, she believes that femininity has been “displaced in work on masculinity” (86). What she offers, and what she contends has heretofore been lacking in social theory, is a conceptualization of a hegemonic femininity and multiple, hierarchical femininities whose construction and practice are central to a male

dominant gender order. To that end, Schippers (2007) offers a definition of hegemonic femininity: it “consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationships to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (94). Involved in this definition is the recognition that some femininities are constructed as superior to other femininities and that this “ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities [serves] the interests of the gender order and male domination” (94).

Women who resist patriarchy – who do not serve the gender order or male domination – create wholly different feminine identities than complicit, passive feminine expectations. Although Schippers (2007) may be one of the first scholars to take a theoretical interest in “hegemonic femininity,” other feminist sociologists have investigated the idea of subversive femininity. For instance, Leblanc (2001) studied women in punk subcultures. She found that although punk culture is coded as masculine almost all of her participants identified as feminine, but that their femininity included tough fashion, foul language, and unladylike behavior. They amended conventional ideas of femininity to form their own: “most girls negotiated between femininity and punk, creating alternatives by creating aspects of both in creating specifically ‘punk girl identities’” (150)¹. Also, Wilkins (2004) studied women in goth subcultures, finding that the ethics of social nonconformity in their subculture aided her participants’ ability to experiment with taboo gender behavior. Her participants rejected a passive feminine sexuality in favor of being active pursuers of sexual encounters and participating in non-monogamous relationships. In both cases, the researchers illustrate that women can resist patriarchy while

¹ Although LeBlanc (2001) focused on women in a male-dominated punk subculture, it is important to note that many punk subcultures have shifted their understandings of gender and sexuality due to the feminist and queer political work of bands such as Tribe 8.

maintaining feminine self concepts. One of the leading ways to resist compliance with patriarchy is through sexual nonconformity [this is further discussed in the following section on queer femininity].

An earlier model than Schippers' (2007) for discussing multiple femininities came from Pyke and Johnson (2003) who claimed that we may discuss a white and middle-class hegemonic femininity that is constructed in superior opposition to the femininities of women of color. Not only do Pyke and Johnson (2003) critique Connell (1987) for arguing that hegemonic femininity is not possible, they also take issue with the concept of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) because it privileges gender practices while ignoring macro race and class power structures which similarly produce behavior. They interviewed 100 second generation Korean and Vietnamese women about how they negotiate their ethnic immigrant cultural norms and Eurocentric mainstream norms of gender. In their study, respondents reported consciously acting differently in different cultural settings. In ethnic settings, they felt pressure to act in accordance with docile and domestic expectations of femininity, which they did not see as reflective of their true personalities. In mainstream settings, they felt encouraged to comply with caricatured portraits of Asian femininity or to distance themselves from stigmatized images of Asian femininity. Their study provides evidence that bicultural women may produce different gender performances based on the specific expectations associated with their gender *and* their race. Referring to Pyke and Johnson's (2003) claim, Schippers (2007) maintains that the inequality between white women and Asian women is based in the racial hegemony of white supremacy and that their superior/inferior positions within the racial hierarchy do not translate to maintaining a patriarchal gender hegemony. She says:

I suggest that we move away from defining variation in gendered practice across different races, classes and settings as different masculinities and femininities, and instead

understand this variation as hegemonic masculinity and femininity refracted through race and class difference (98).

Scholars who suggest that femininities are stratified based on race and class hierarchies would not disagree with Schippers' point that the reigning hierarchy that places white women at the top and women of color on the bottom is a race hierarchy. However, they would argue that the race hierarchy intersects with the gender order, which encourages or limits certain women's opportunities to express, embody, or project femininity.

One of the key problems in modern feminist thought has been the failure of white middle class feminists to take race seriously. Collins (2000; 2006) has been at the forefront of suggesting that feminist thought must take an intersectional approach – one that theorizes about gender, race, class, and sexuality simultaneously – to understand any one of these oppressions. Said differently, to fully understand gender oppression, scholars must understand how race, class, and sexuality oppression influence (and are influenced by) the gender order. Although feminist thought has made some strides in its inclusion of racial talk, as Schippers does when she admits that a white supremacist racial order exists, what it still fails to do is understand that gender has a raced hierarchy associated with its functioning and that race hierarchies are gendered (Collins, 2006). Further, using Schippers' own language of "hegemonic" femininities and "pariah" femininities, which she says is not maintained through race or class stratification, we might argue that women of color have been associated with a kind of "pariah" femininity, a femininity which is feared because of its risk of contaminating a pure hegemonic femininity. For example, African American women have been stereotypically associated with several mythical archetypes: the mammy, the jezebel, the welfare queen (Collins, 2000), which all serve to reproduce a gendered racial order (which produces differential oppression for women in a racial

hierarchy) and a raced gender order (which produces differential oppression for people of color in a gender hierarchy).

The reason that Schippers is reluctant to include race as one of the qualities that informs occupying a hegemonic or subjugated feminine position within the gender order is that she has constructed a theory that is attentive to the ways in which behavior complies or resists the gender order: hegemonic femininity complies; pariah and alternative femininities resist. In her reasoning, a woman of color cannot occupy a non-hegemonic femininity simply because of her race because her behavior could still comply with patriarchy. It is true that anyone can comply or resist patriarchy through their behavior. However, they are always complying with or resisting a white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Just as women in queer communities experience different cultural norms for feminine expression, race, ethnic, and class norms influence how people experience and identify with femininity.

Certainly, sociologists of gender have come to understand that all gender expectations – expectations of male masculinity and female femininity – are rigid, unyielding, and often oppressive. However, femininity is especially marked by its association with inferiority. For this reason, canonical feminist writings that discuss gender identity try to make sense of women’s oppression; femininity is rarely discussed in feminist discourse without its link to oppression.² For example, in her description of “the sex/gender system” Gayle Rubin (1975) explains that women’s subordination is a consequence of the social organization of sex and gender. Her foundational claim is that society transforms sex into gendered activity, but further argues that society mandates that its citizens take on characteristics that will serve the interests of

² Exceptions to this can be found in cultural feminist descriptions of the superiority of feminine ways of interacting [see Gilligan, 1993], but these orientations tend to be essentialist in that they assume women to have a core femininity; social constructionist feminists tend to see femininity as only oppressive.

society. In short, society *forces* individuals to understand themselves as gendered people. Similarly, in “One is Not Born a Woman” Monique Wittig (1981) detailed the ways in which women have been convinced of the myth that the category of “woman” exists. She claims that uncovering this myth is the first hurdle that must be overcome in order for women, as a social class and not a biological group, to attain freedom. The title and premise of her essay was borrowed from an earlier idea articulated by Simone de Beauvoir’s (1952), who noted that:

One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between, male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (249).

In searching for an explanation of women’s subordination, feminist scholars have argued that gender categories, expectations, and characteristics are part of a socially produced myth that ensures women’s unequal status in society. For the subordination of women to succeed, society has had to ensure that female people are convinced of their belonging in the category “woman” and that this category describes a distinct group of people with unique (and undesirable) characteristics.

Unsurprisingly, during the second wave era of U.S. feminism, mainstream political solutions to gender inequality called for the end of gender differentiation (Echols, 1989; Rosen, 2000; also see Atkinson, 1974 for an example). Even when a sexless society was not the political goal in mind, much of feminist discourse has explored the damaging consequences of feminine mandates [see Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Weitz, 1998 for examples]. Although it may be true that ideals of feminine beauty and expectations for feminine mental and emotional performance have detrimental effects for women, this has too often meant that feminists condemn femininity (and people who are feminine). Ti Grace Atkinson, a notable second wave

feminist, compared women's identification with femininity to Stockholm Syndrome, a psychological condition in which captives are loyal to their captors (Serano, 2007).

Serano (2007) has recently taken this condemnation to task, arguing that any successful feminist paradigm should question the misogynistic tendency to devalue femininity. Part of her claim rests on creating new definitions of sexism, arguing that a singular definition is ineffective. First, she argues that there is a cultural focus on *oppositional sexism*, where men and women are understood as mutually exclusive categories that do not overlap in their abilities or characteristics. Second, to maintain the male-centeredness in gender hierarchy, there exists *traditional sexism*. Traditional sexism is an ideological basis of understanding maleness and masculinity as superior to femaleness and femininity. This particular kind of sexism, working in concert with oppositional sexism, ensures that those who are masculine will have power over feminine people. Both of these kinds of sexism contribute to misogyny, the degradation of all things feminine in favor of all things masculine. Feminists, she argues, have been inattentive to the ways in which traditional sexism degrades femininity alongside femaleness. Mainstream feminists have internalized the idea that femininity is frivolous, stupid, and inferior even when they argue that female people should not be typified by these stereotypes. Said differently, in order to challenge the legal ramifications of oppositional sexism, mainstream feminists have joined forces with traditional sexists in their negative views of femininity (Serano, 2007).

As a sociologist, I contend that gender is a micro and meso level practice that is constituted by (and constitutes) the larger social practice of gender inequality; as a feminist I also contend that dominant expectations of femininity have been used to naturalize sex distinction, rationalize heterosexuality, and inflict hurt on women. However, this research is situated much in the same way that other feminist sociologists have dealt with femininity. Just as LeBlanc

(2001), Wilkins (2004), and Schippers (2007), have been interested in the possible ways that women can be feminine and still resist patriarchy, this work details another kind of simultaneous identification with and resistance to feminine expectations for women.

Queer Femininity and Femmes

If hegemonic masculinity is defined by the characteristics of sexual desire for a feminine object, physical strength, and authority, then what is hegemonically feminine must be defined as its opposite: a feminine object to be desired, physical weakness, and passivity. Referring to what Butler (1990) calls a “heterosexual matrix,” where gender is constructed as a binary of two distinct classes of people who are necessarily attracted to one another *because* of their mutual exclusivity, Schippers argues that the binary opposition of masculine and feminine characteristics resides in the gender order’s tendency to view men and women as perfect heterosexual pairs. In opposition to the reigning hegemonic femininity, Schippers suggests that we may conceive of “pariah femininities,” or femininities that are “deemed not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity” (95). These “pariah” femininities include: women who have sexual desire for other women; women who are promiscuous, “frigid,” or sexually unavailable; and women who are aggressive. As such, they “constitute a refusal to embody *the relationship between masculinity and femininity* demanded by gender hegemony” (95). The possession of just one of these characteristics means that an individual becomes a kind of person, delineated by her subversive behavior; she becomes a lesbian, a slut or a cocktease, a shrew or a bitch.

Schippers’ conception of hegemonic and pariah femininities is important because it suggests a more complicated analysis of multiple femininities *and* because she focuses on behavior it suggests that one’s gender status is more influenced by what a person does than ascribed characteristics like race [an idea I deal with in Chapter 5]. Most importantly, her ideas

suggest that some feminine *behaviors* can resist compliance with patriarchy. Her focus on women's sexual behavior being linked with feminine compliance or resistance to patriarchy resonates with some feminist and queer scholarship which suggests that heterosexuality and gender categories are co-constructed. Taking these ideas into account, I suggest that a key organizing principle of femininity is compliance or non-compliance with heterosexuality.

In his introduction to 1993's *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner developed the term "heteronormativity" as a way to illustrate the highly routine mechanisms employed to render heterosexuality natural and all other sexualities alternative or unnatural; unveiling heterosexuality as unnatural social practice asserts the "necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world" (xxi). Arguing that the height of heterosexual privilege is its ability to cast itself as the very definition of human society, he says, "Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (xxi). However, he notes that other scholars have also developed ways of articulating the social nature of heterosexuality when he refers to Wittig's (1992) idea that the social contract is heterosexuality; she says, "To live in society is to live in heterosexuality" (40).

Feminist scholars have been interested in the sociality of heterosexuality since the 1970's (Warner, 1993; Ingraham, 2002; Jackson, 2005); their work was pivotal in exposing heterosexuality as both a normative ideology and an oppressive social practice (Ingraham, 2002). As Ingraham (2002) points out, perhaps most notable amongst these scholars are Adrienne Rich's (1980) description of heterosexuality as a taken-for-granted, compulsory institution that ensures male dominance and Monique Wittig's (1992) argument that heterosexuality is a political regime which necessitates sex categories. From a feminist assessment of

heterosexuality, it is a highly regulated and ritualized social practice *and* it is responsible for gender categorization and gender inequality (Butler, 1990; Ingraham, 2002; 2005). This sentiment is present in Ingraham's (2002) argument that heterosexuality is more than a natural impulse or a socialized attraction; she states, "Rules on everything from who pays for the date or the wedding rehearsal dinner to who leads while dancing, drives the car, cooks dinner or initiates sex, all serve to regulate sexual practice" (74). Similarly, it is present in Jackson's (2005) reiteration that the coercive power of institutionalized heterosexuality has gendered effects when she states that heterosexuality "entails who washes the sheets as well as what goes on between them" (18). Ingraham (1996) argues that the connection between gender and heterosexuality is so significant as to warrant the term "heterogender." She explains:

Gender, or what I would call 'heterogender,' is the asymmetrical stratification of the sexes in relation to the historically varying institutions of patriarchal heterosexuality. Reframing gender as heterogender foregrounds the relation between heterosexuality and gender. Heterogender confronts the equation of heterosexuality with the natural and of gender with the cultural, and suggests that both are socially constructed, open to other configurations (not only opposites and binary), and open to change (169).

Heterosexuality and gender hierarchy are mutually constitutive of each other in that the basis of heterosexuality relies on two socially constructed and mutually exclusive sex categories to make sense of itself and that, in turn, sex differentiation (and the gender inequality that follows) relies on heterosexuality as a rationale for its own natural existence (Butler, 1990; Ingraham, 1996; 2002; 2005; Jackson, 2005).

Rejecting heterosexuality is not the only way to resist patriarchy, but it is a unique way that marks women as non-compliant with the gender order. Femmes have long argued that their femininity is not compliant; because it is a femininity outside of the heterosexual matrix, femme femininity is "radical" and "critical." Harris and Crocker (1997) say this in the introduction to their book, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*:

Femmes – like other groups of women – were not always welcomed into a mainstream feminist movement that had as its primary constituency middle-class white women. For femmes in particular, feminism’s failure was its pejorative understanding of femme as equivalent to patriarchally imposed femininity, rather than alternatively a positive understanding of femme as a critical approach to femininity. In its (mis)recognition of femme, feminism denied femme its radical and critical nature (3).

Many queer women – transgender women, femme identified people, and femme allies now reject the kind of feminism that uniformly disregards femininity by arguing that choosing feminine presentations is not incongruent with a feminist orientation [see Rose & Camilleri, 2002].

It is not only mainstream feminism that has misunderstood femme femininity as compliant rather than subversive; lesbian communities have been dismissive of femmes as well. Modern (lesbian) understandings of appropriate lesbian gender are infused with a second wave feminist intervention that directed the current ideology of lesbian gender toward an aesthetic of androgyny (Case, 1999). Before this intervention – throughout the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s – the predominant lesbian gender dynamic was that of butch and femme. According to the often cited anthropological work of Kennedy and Davis (1994) on the mid-twentieth century butch/femme bars of Buffalo, New York, butch/femme dynamics were so prevalent that there was little room to articulate any other gender identity. Butches and femmes, ostracized from the gender and sexuality norms of their day, found family-like community with another. They also created unique community norms regarding relationships, sex, masculinity, and femininity. The prevalence of butch/femme gender began to change in the 1970’s when a lesbian feminist political sentiment emerged, seeking to redefine the parameters of appropriate lesbian behavior by criticizing the already existent lesbian culture of butch/femme (Nestle, 1992a; Kennedy & Davis, 1994; Case, 1999; Rubin, 2003). College-educated feminists, who were largely removed from the working class lesbian bar subculture, would enter butch/femme bars and attempt to educate them about the oppressive nature of their gender dynamics (Nestle, 1992a); butches and

femmes in lesbian organizations were purged or encouraged to change their gender presentations (Case, 1999). Butch/femme couples were accused of unwittingly aping heterosexual roles (Nestle, 1992a). Butches were painted to be uncivilized brutes who attempted to garner power by dominating their feminine partners; femmes were assumed to be fallen heterosexual women who forced their partners to be masculine as substitutes for men (Case, 1999). Consequently, it became politically and socially difficult to assert a butch or femme identity for decades following this gender intervention (Nestle, 1992a).

When lesbian feminists of the 1970's were constructing a definition of what it meant to be a lesbian, much of it relied on feminist identification and androgynous gender expression (Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Although there has always been some cultural difficulty in understanding the possible same-sex desires of feminine women, lesbian feminism solidified the relationship between an androgynous/masculine gender expression, feminist identification, and lesbian authenticity. Maltry and Tucker (2002) commented:

A feminist perspective align the signifiers of femininity (dishes, make-up, shaving, long hair, fashion) with both weakness and stupidity. Simultaneously, feminine signifiers are not merely cast off, but instead are replaced by boots, unshaven legs, and toughness. Within this construct, femininity cannot be seen as powerful because it is not androgyny that has become the ideal, but masculinity. As femininity and masculinity are configured within feminism, female-appropriated masculinity can at least be seen as active resistance to one's imposed feminine gender. Femininity, however, cannot be seen as resistant in any capacity (94).

They explain a conflation of not just masculinity with lesbian authenticity, but femininity with weakness and compliance.

In the 1990's, what some refer to as a "butch/femme renaissance" emerged (Roof, 1998) with publications like *The Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader* (Nestle, 1992b), *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993), and *The Femme Mystique* (Newman, 1995), that allowed lesbians to redress the issue of gender in lesbian communities. According to some of these works, during

this time it became fashionable for lesbians to play with masculinity and femininity in their gender presentations and it became more acceptable to identify as butch or femme. However, both scholarship and the popular press paid far more attention to the butch/femme dyad and female masculinity than it has to femme femininity (Maltry & Tucker, 2002).

Although today some suggest that lesbian gender norms are now more inclusive of a broader range of gender presentations (Stein, 1993), many femme writers suggest that masculinity is still privileged in relation to femininity in lesbian communities [see Rose & Camilleri, 2002]. According to this perspective, when masculinity is the measure of authentic lesbianism, femmes' sexual orientations are suspect and they become alienated from queer communities (André & Chang, 2006). Maltry and Tucker (2002) suggest that the privileging of masculinity in understandings of dyke identities is so extensive as to warrant the term "butch privilege" (90). They argue, "Granting authenticity solely to masculinized dyke identity invalidates the identities of those who deviate from such a model and ultimately renders the existence of some invisible" (90). The characterization of femme femininity as unfeminist and uncritical and the idea that only masculine women are truly queer, are precisely the issues taken up by the organizations and troupes I studied.

Identity Politics

Social constructionists are interested in identity as a construct which reflects the "conceptual structure of the surrounding social world" (Rust, 1992: 366). That is, identities are inherently social. Further, although acquiring an identity is already a social-psychological endeavor, the articulation of identities has enhanced social and political consequences. Rust (1992) argues that the sociality of identities is especially true for disadvantaged or stigmatized groups, or what Bernstein (2005) calls "status identities," and what Calhoun (1994) calls "challenged identities." People in oppressed race, gender, and sexual minority groups create

identities that are attached to feelings of solidarity *and* the assumption that members of the group share common experiences, interests, and values; this can lead to politicization through a social movement that seeks to redress the inferior status of the group.

Melucci (1989) first introduced the concept of collective identity as a way to understand the link between structural motivation for a movement and individual action. That is, collective identity, or how people come to understand themselves as linked to a movement, helps provide insight as to why people act (Melucci, 1995). Part of the goals of a movement must be for people to see themselves as a unified group with specific goals; they must begin to see themselves and their personal outcomes as connected to the outcomes of the movement (Melucci, 1995; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In short, social movement scholars have come to understand that the identity of movement actors is always present in the processes of movements.

However, some movements exist *because* of the identity of movement participants. As Bernstein (2005) notes, these movements are unique in that the challenged identity of participants create “part of the basis for grievances” (48). Movements that center on these identity concerns are what Marxists have disparagingly referred to as “identity politics,” dismissing them because of their individual rather than structural, economic concerns (Bernstein, 2005); they are also what New Social Movement theorists have called “identity-oriented paradigms,” paying attention to the importance of seeking cultural and ideological change in American social movements since the 1960’s [see Touraine, 1981].

Identity politics have been both lauded and criticized. Critics argue that organizing around identity can lead to further marginalization by ignoring the complexities of group differences (Ryan, 2001), that groups built around a certain identity cannot agree on anything besides being united against a common enemy (Bernstein, 2005), and that identities are often

based on essentialist understandings of the world (Ryan, 2001; Bernstein, 2005). However, proponents argue that it is politically transformative to associate with people who confront the same life circumstances; oppressed people involved in identity politics may organize for changing their status, but organizing around the identity may also help their feelings of self worth (Ryan, 2001). Further, people who criticize identity politics for its essentialism have not considered that proclamations of essentialism may be made as a strategic maneuver rather than an actual position of the activists (Bernstein, 2005).

Identity politics have always been a major part of the women's movement in that women have had to see themselves as a class of people in order to be politicized around the issue of gender inequality. It has also been uniquely contentious in the women's movement because identities are multiple: race and sexual orientation identities have proven to be a divisive issue, especially for (white) (heterosexual) women who believe that the identity of woman should be primary (Ryan, 2001). However, Ryan (1997) claims that reports of identity politics being detrimental to the women's movement are too simplistic because there is much evidence of multi-racial feminist organizing.

Increasingly the mainstream gay and lesbian movement is relying on a quasi-ethnic form of identity politics (Armstrong, 2002). Conversely, queer politics [discussed further in the next section] is philosophically opposed to identity politics; instead they seek to "destabilize" socially constructed identity categories.

What I have offered here is an overview of gender, femininity, and identity politics so that we may begin to think about how identity politics may work when the cohesive identity being constructed revolves around queer femininity. While the gender and social movement literature discussed here certainly provides sensitizing concepts for the ways I analyzed my data,

the next chapter more specifically details theoretical concepts on modern movements. The confluence of New Social Movement paradigms, cultural politics, and queer politics help explain the dimensions of the femme movement.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY: NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, CULTURAL POLITICS, AND QUEER POLITICS

This project is broadly informed by a tradition of feminist sociology and queer sociology. That is, feminist social theory focuses on women's lives, experiences, and subordination; its goal is to uncover the ways in which women's experiences have been overlooked in traditional scholarship and to make women's lives better (Alway, 1995). Distinct from the practice of using gender as a variable and from the misunderstood concept that feminist theory *only* reflects the social movement of feminists, feminist theory seeks to make gender a theoretical focal point in our sociological dissection of the social world (Stacey & Thorne, 1985). This project is informed by a feminist worldview in that the central research questions center on gender and because I am attuned to questions of equality.

Also, queer sociology is described by Stein and Plummer (1994) as an incorporation of queer theory and sociology that accomplishes the following: (1) It questions the role of culture more seriously than sociologists currently do; (2) It brings sociology's key concerns – inequality, modernity, and institutional analysis – to queer theory, providing a clearer analysis of sexuality; (3) Because sociologists must understand how identities are constituted in cultural practice of everyday life, sociology offers queer theory a focus on how people actually construct their lives; (4) Finally, because queer theory can teach sociologists how important it is to study the center alongside the margins, a “more queer sociology” (183) is also critical of normative sexuality. Generally, a queer sociology utilizes the insights of queer theory (its rejection of naturally occurring sex, gender, sexuality and its radical posturing) while retaining sociology's unique focus on institutions and sociality of interaction (Green, 2002).

Specifically, this project is guided by new theoretical insights in social movements that have helped me contextualize the femme movement. Here, I provide an overview of the

conceptual paradigms on New Social Movements, cultural politics, and queer politics that inform my analysis.

New Social Movements

Before the advent of New Social Movement theorizing, there were two dominant waves of social movement thought. Prior the 1960's, American social movement scholars fell under a tradition known as Collective Behaviorists who often problematized social movements as irrational [see McAdam, 1994 for a critique of this genre]. With the myriad of 1960's movements challenging social inequality, movement actors could no longer argue that activists were irrational, ushering in a new wave of Political Process and Resource Mobilization theorizing. The dominance of Political Process/Resource Mobilization perspective in U.S. social movement scholarship privileged the political, organizational, and network/structural aspects of social movements while giving the more cultural or ideological dimensions of social movements significantly less attention (McAdam, 1994). Proponents of Resource Mobilization, in particular, seem unable to understand that movements cannot be reduced to their movement organizations (Rucht, 1989). Their rejection of the cultural aspects of social movements is the result of the rejection of the classical Collective Behaviorist paradigm, which emphasized the role of shared beliefs and identities but whose perspective was based on assumptions of irrationality and pathology of movement actors (McAdam, 1994).

Although Collective Behaviorists tended to focus on individuals and ignore the larger goals of movement activity, Resource Mobilization perspectives introduced an overemphasis on organizations and became inattentive to individual perspectives (Gusfield, 1994). To make this point, Melucci (1989) calls Collective Behaviorist theories "actors without action" and Resource Mobilization theories "actions without actors" (17-20). In many ways, the New Social

Movement (NSM) perspective is a reinvestigation of the importance of ideas and ideology that was present in Collective Behaviorist perspectives (Gusfield, 1994).

Much of the work on social movements tends to take one approach and distinguish itself against the other, trying to decipher which is best, creating schisms like “structure vs. culture” as explanatory models for the emergence and sustainability of movements (Bevington & Dixon, 2005). According to McAdam (1994) movement analysts should have two goals: to account for the structural factors that have strengthened movement opportunities; to analyze the processes by which meaning is attributed to the significance of movement participation. In short, although shifting opportunities in political process and availability of resources is important, cultural shifts are also important (McAdam, 1982).

In contrast to an integrative approach that deals with political structures *and* culture, the NSM perspective is most usually associated with a concentrated concern with ideas, ideology, symbols, and identity. The NSM perspective is more of an approach than a theory; it is not a set of general propositions that have been empirically tested, rather it is an attempt to identify common characteristics in contemporary movements (Johnston, et al., 1994). What is more, it is a perspective that gained prominence as a critique of both Collective Behaviorist’s and Resource Mobilization’s assumptions, but it is also a perspective that describes a particular kind of modern social movement (Melucci, 1980; Johnston, et al., 1994; Pichardo, 1997).

The NSM perspective became popular because new social movements emerged that could not be explained by existent American traditions in social movement scholarship.¹ This refers to a broad range of protest movements: the student movement, the women’s movement, gay rights movements, animal rights movements, minority nationalism, alternative medicine,

¹ The use of NSM theory in American social movement scholarship was born from European traditions [see Tarrow, 1988].

environmental movements, the new peace movement, citizen initiatives, and the list could go on (Rucht, 1989; Johnston, et al., 1994). Importantly, the term new social movements does not describe all current social movements. Instead, it describes modern movements with a particular character and structure; they are loose, heterogeneous, decentralized movements (Rucht, 1989).

Also, new social movements differ from earlier forms of collective action in the following ways: (1) they do not bear a clear relation to structural roles of the participants. The social location of the participants is often based in “diffuse” social statuses that do not have structural explanations (e.g. organizing around peace or the environment); (2) they exhibit pluralistic beliefs and solutions, in contrast to the unifying elements of collective action found in Marxist movements; (3) they tend to focus on formerly weak dimensions of identity; (4) the movements tend to blur the relationship between the individual and the collective; (5) they sometimes focus on personal and intimate aspects of personal life (e.g. the women’s movement focused on women’s sexual practices); (6) they use radical mobilization tactics of disruption; (7) they tend to be segmented, diffuse, and decentralized (Johnston, et al., 1994).

Also, unlike the linear movements that present a goal and a direct means toward a projected end, new social movements tend to be “fluid movements,” in that they imply changes in how values and realities are conceived; they occur outside or in addition to organized and direct action (Gusfield, 1994). For example, the women’s movement occurs in more than just one organizational context: although it includes organizations like the National Organization for Women, it also occurs in the everyday interactions between men and women (Gusfield, 1994). For this reason, it is more difficult to assess successes and failures in new social movements (Gusfield, 1994).

New social movements are described as a product of postindustrial capitalism and therefore uniquely different from working class movements of the industrial age (Pichardo, 1997). According to Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield (1994), the focus on identity in new social movements is related to characteristics of a postmodern society: material affluence, access to information, confusion over abundant cultural opportunities, and system inadequacy in providing norms for identification.

According to Pichardo (1997) the NSM paradigm is a recent addition to social theory that stresses both the macro-historical and micro-historical elements of social movements. At the macro level the NSM paradigm concentrates on the relationship between the rise of contemporary social movements and the larger economic structure, and on the role of culture in such movements. At the micro level the paradigm is concerned with how issues of identity and personal behavior are discussed in social movements.

However, as he also suggests, scholars should be hesitant to assume that new social movements represent any new or unique turn in social movement activity. Instead the New Social Movement perspective should be taken for what it is: the latest addition to social theory on social movements, this time offering a previously ignored emphasis on identity, culture, and the role of the civic sphere (Pichardo, 1997).

With its focus on identity and culture, the femme movement is an obvious example of this kind of movement. It is useful to understand the femme movement within the context of the New Social Movements paradigm because it helps explain the wider cultural phenomena that have helped the emergence of this kind of movement. That is, a subcultural movement that is concerned with identity and a cultural shift in consciousness about femininity could only exist in a society that has allowed new kinds of movements to emerge.

Cultural Politics

The dominant view of social movement scholars has been that in Western democracies, social movement activity is directed toward the state and the state's institutions (Van Dyke, et al., 2004). However, Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor (2004) argue that public protests are also meant to shift public opinion, identities, individual behaviors, and cultural practices. Although all movements direct some attention to the state, they claim that movements like the civil rights movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the women's movement direct a considerable amount of energy toward non-state entities like public opinion or ideology.

In fact, many of the movements that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's were more concerned with culture and identity than with challenging institutions (Bernstein, 2005). This form of organizing politicized aspects of everyday life previously thought to be apolitical such as sexuality, interpersonal relationships, lifestyle choices, and culture itself (Van Dyke et al., 2004; Bernstein, 2005). Cultural politics are often centered on questions of identity and thus hold the position that the expression and affirmation of identities can be a basic motivation for political work.

It has been suggested that an attack on culture may be especially useful in gender based movements because of the tendency for gender inequality to permeate everyday practices (Gusfield, 1994). As such, the movement itself can permeate everyday practices. For instance, Robin Morgan said this about the women's movement:

This is not a movement one 'joins.' There are no rigid structures or membership cards. The Women's Liberation Movement exists where three or four friends or neighbors decide to meet regularly over coffee and talk about their personal lives. It also exists in the cells of women's jails, on the welfare lines, in the supermarket, the factory, the convent, the farm, the maternity ward, the street corner, the old ladies' home, the kitchen, the steno pool, the bed. It exists in your mind and in the political and personal insights that you can contribute to change and shape and help its growth (Morgan, 1970 quoted in Dicker, 2008: 20).

Divergent from traditional Marxist class politics that tend to rebel in structured, conventional protests, gender movements can exist in personal transformation or small-scale consciousness raising amongst friends. Changing even some minds can change the culture, and changing the culture can help alleviate inequalities.

Movements based on sexuality concerns also challenge culture. For instance, alongside lobbying government agencies and pharmaceutical companies to be more proactive in ending the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS] crisis, AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) also devised strategies to challenge cultural homophobia because of the link between homophobia and institutional inaction around AIDS (DeLuca, 1999; Edwards, 2000). Further, there are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender [GLBT] cultural practices that can be described as political even if they do not tend to look like traditional protests. For instance, Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson (2004) have argued that the performances of drag queens can be broadly understood as a form of social protest. Although their performances have long been understood as apolitical camp or as sexist attacks on women [for a description of misunderstanding drag queens, see Newton, 1979], they suggest that drag queen productions are better understood as a protest against the cultural prescription for heterosexuality and hetero-normative gender expressions.

Increasingly, social movement scholars have recognized the importance of culture in social movement activity alongside more mainstream agitation for change. Because the femme movement is subcultural, because it does not ask for change from dominant members of society, and because it does ask for social, cultural, emotional and intellectual changes from other queers (rather than institutional or organizational changes), cultural politics helps explain the logic of femme political work.

Queer Politics

According to Gamson (1995), the successes of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement have been achieved because they have built a public collective identity. In creating a claim to a shared, fixed identity they have developed an ethnic/essentialist politics; they have even established gay festivals, neighborhoods, and a flag. He says, “Underlying that ethnicity is typically the notion that what gays and lesbians share – the anchor of minority status and minority rights claims – is the same fixed, natural essence, a self with same-sex desires” (391). Yet, this logic is opposed by the philosophy of queer politics. These deconstructionists, who believe clearly defined collective categories to be obstacles to progressive change, believe gender and sexuality categories to be historical and social products rather than naturally occurring phenomena. Gamson (1995) explains that queer deconstructionists believe the following:

It is socially-produced binaries (gay/straight, man/woman) that are the basis of oppression; fluid, unstable experiences of self become fixed primarily in the service of self control. Disrupting those categories, refusing rather than embracing ethnic minority status, is the key to liberation (391).

The difference between mainstream gay and lesbian politics and queer deconstructivist politics may be simplified to a difference in political philosophy: the former adheres to fixing a collective identity in their argument of their minority status; the latter seeks to achieve gender and sexual liberation by challenging the historical rigidity of those categories.

However, the philosophy of queer politics directs its political maneuvers. That is, because queer politics envisions itself as a radical challenge to the state, it does not lobby for inclusion in its institutions; queer politics is more based in achieving cultural changes than institutional reforms (Warner, 2000). It is not only the targets of activism that differ between queer and mainstream gay and lesbian politics; the way activism unfolds is wholly different. For

example, AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power [ACT UP] and Queer Nation, queer political organizations active in the late 1980's and early 1990's, were both known for their direct action street protests, their flamboyance, and their cultural antics, such as performing street theatre or staging die-ins to make their points (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; Bérubé & Escoffier 1991; Berlant & Freeman 1992; DeLuca, 1999; Edwards, 2000).

According to queer activist/writer Mattilda/Matt Bernstein Sycamore (2004) in the introduction to *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, "...assimilation robs queer identity of anything meaningful, relevant, or challenging – and calls this progress" (3) and goes on to say, "As the gay mainstream prioritizes the attainment of straight privilege over all else, what gets left behind is any critique of the dominant culture, whatsoever" (3). While the early 90's politics of ACT UP and Queer Nation may have given way to a gay mainstream political agenda that prioritizes marriage, adoption, and military service (Warner, 2000; Bernstein Sycamore, 2004), queer critiques are still waging as a subcultural form of politics. In a fascinating parallel to the femme movement, queer politics is often located within the queer community: queer people agitating for change from people within the GLBT community. For example, Fed Up Queers [FUQ], a direct action group that lasted from 1998 to 1999, organized demonstrations to prove that the increasingly normalization of gay identity was at the expense of larger freedoms (Flynn & Smith, 2004). Similarly, the organization Gay Shame, established in 1998, protests Gay Pride events in order to critique the corporatization of gay culture (Bernstein Sycamore, 2004).

I note that "queer politics" is part of my theoretical orientation because I see femme cultural activism through a lens of queer politics. That is, because of the ways that the femmes I

interviewed discussed gender, femininity, and sexual orientation, their political mode is best described as “queer.”

It is important that this new attention paid to femme gender identities has an antecedent of a queer politic that diverged from essentialist understandings of gender and sexual orientation categories. Partially in response to the AIDS epidemic which called for new kinds of radical activism and partially as a consequence of the intellectual stronghold of queer theory, GLBT people reclaimed the word “queer” in the late 1980’s/early 1990’s. During this time, members of GLBT communities began referring to themselves as “queer” as a way to characterize the new dimensions of their communities (increasingly there were members who could not be described easily as lesbian or gay) and to mark their “politic of provocation” (Epstein, 1994:153) in which they challenged heterosexual societal norms (Duggan, 1992; Stein, 1993; Epstein, 1994). The word queer is associated with a particular kind of deconstructionist politic; it is weary of labels, celebrates gender and sexual fluidity, and it does not hold reformist political intentions (Duggan, 1992; Epstein, 1994).

It makes sense that if GLBT communities have provided a “queer” avenue through which one may more thoroughly investigate taken-for-granted assumptions of what it means to be a lesbian, or a woman, or a feminist, or an activist, that they may also re-investigate what it means to be masculine or feminine. In many ways, femmes are “queering” what it means to be a femme, as well as what it means to be feminine.

CHAPTER 4 METHOD AND DATA

This project is an ethnographic and interview based project that investigates individual queer feminine identities and the ways in which they are publicly performed in queer communities through burlesque performance and femme organizational events. I conducted extensive observation of two queer burlesque troupes in Seattle, Washington [WA] (with minor observation of troupes in Portland, Oregon [OR] and Atlanta, Georgia [GA] and extensive observation of one femme organization in Atlanta (with minor observation of organizations in Portland and Seattle) [please see Appendix A, Table 1 for a list of troupes and organizations by city].

This project is constructivist in the ways that I approached collecting the data and in the ways that I analyzed them. My ethnographic approach (interpretivist ethnography) (Denzin, 2003), interview approach (active interviewing) (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), and analysis approach (constructivist grounded theory) (Charmaz, 2000; 2006) are connected by a methodological orientation that views the researcher as someone who produces meaning rather than someone who uncovers knowledge.

Broadly, this is a project on a unique form of political expression and organizing within the confines of the queer community: “the femme movement.” As such, it is both about the personal dimensions of feminine identity and the group dimensions of the political work around it.

For the purposes of this project, femininity is important as a self concept. That is, it is being investigated as a self conscious identity on the parts of my participants. Any self proclaimed definitive articulation of femininity would be flawed by its blindness to gender’s most constant truth: femininity is in constant flux, being interpreted and mutated by the doers and readers of feminine practice (as discussed in Chapter 2). However, I offer here a more

concrete definition of how I am conceiving of femininity in this research design. The definition that follows is one that is formed by observations in femme communities and my sociological understanding of gender. That is, what follows is my definition of femininity, based on a sociological interpretation of how I perceive my participants' views of femininity.

First, femininity is that which culture associates with being womanly, and as such, is often associated with female bodies. It may seem that I am denying the socially constructed basis of femininity. On the contrary, I am suggesting that the socially constituted binary of male and female sexes has produced the idea that femininity is naturally associated with female bodies. Although it is not the case that female bodies are naturally feminine, it is the case that people culturally identify some bodies as more feminine than other bodies.

Second, and in slight contradiction to my first point, femininity exists in external and stylistic markers of extravagance that are intended to convey messages about the doer's internal sense of her or himself. Feminine style markers – such as bright colors, high heels, makeup – are not understood as neutral. They are worn with the intention of producing a feminine effect; without them female bodies might be interpreted as quite androgynous.

Third, alongside visual cues of femininity, I understand femininity to reside in the emotional and mental characteristics that this culture has designated as “not masculine.” Although a patriarchal gender order would define these oppositional gender traits as inferior because they are not masculine, an alternative consciousness might value them. For instance, we might say that emotionality is preferable to stoicism; we might conceive of “weakness” as preferable to violence.

Finally, I concur with Connell (1987) and Schippers (2007) that femininity is always and already constituted by (and re-constituting) power relations and that these power relations are

discursively produced through practice; even when I discuss femininity as an identity, I conceive of feminine identity as a kind of gender practice.

This project focuses on bisexual, lesbian, and queer women who navigate feminine meanings in queer communities. Throughout, I attempt to distinguish between “lesbian communities” and “queer communities” by using the appropriate language for each. However, I understand that “queer communities” is a vague term. When I use the term queer to talk about my participants’ communities, I mean the meeting places, ideologies, and culture of a group of people who are not heterosexual and who hold a political philosophy that diverges from lesbian communities. In many ways, it could be said that my participants reside in queer women’s communities. Actually, one could argue that queer women’s communities are a generationally specific modern incarnation of lesbian communities. However, the increasing prevalence of transgender men and genderqueer people in these communities make this an inadequate term. By and large, the queer community my participants reside in is made up of non-transgender bisexual/lesbian/queer women, transgender men [female-to-male transsexuals], and genderqueer people [people who refuse a binary gender identity]. Non-transgender bisexual/gay/queer men tend to build distinct communities, as do transgender women. Although the femme movement has attempted to include non-transgender men and transgender women who may identify as femme, the historical location of femme within lesbian communities has made this a perfunctory and unsuccessful action.

At the level of examining organizations, investigating femininity becomes something of a different endeavor. Alongside questions of personal feminine development, this project seeks to understand why and how feminine people in queer communities organize around femininity. Organizing around femininity is happening in countless ways; there is a rising popularity in

femme organizations, burlesque troupes, spoken word performance art, and national and regional femme conferences. This project investigates just two of these cultural phenomena: femme organizations and queer femme burlesque, both due to their prevalence in GLBTQ communities and their unique contribution to femme politics.

As discussed in the literature review, many femme identified women experience a tenuous relationship with the queer community because of the stigma that surrounds femininity. In response to this marginalization, some communities have developed femme organizations in order to offer solidarity to femme people and to create femme visibility in queer communities. Although I can imagine that femmes may have held discussion groups or gotten together with femme friends on a regular basis for the same reasons that femme organizations mobilize around femme identity, there is no record of femme organizing prior to the modern uprising of this form of organizing. Femme Mafia believes itself to be the first organization of its kind; my research concurs with this assessment.

Burlesque is a vaudevillian inspired strip-tease that utilizes extravagant costumes, dramatic makeup, and humorous skits to entertain audiences through a merging of erotic display and wit. According to Baldwin (2004), “The Golden Age of Burlesque” was during the 1920’s and 1930’s, a time when every major U.S. city offered burlesque venues. By the 1960’s burlesque almost met its demise with the rise of modern strip clubs. In the 1990’s, however, burlesque was revived by counter-culture performance artists (in New York City and Seattle) and is now generally referred to as “neo-burlesque.”¹ When burlesque reemerged in the 1990’s, the media in New York City referred to it as both “creative stripping” and “female-to-female drag”

¹ I pursued Seattle as a research cite for burlesque observations because it is well known for its queer-centered burlesque performance. While New York certainly has much counter-culture performance art and perhaps individual queer performers, the Northwest is well established as a place where queer burlesque emerged.

(Baldwin, 2004:27). Since the 1990's burlesque has grown in popularity; it enjoys continued success in counter-culture performances and has seen some growth in mainstream recognition of it (Wilson, 2008). Not all neo-burlesque is queer burlesque; this project focuses on queer burlesque, which I define as all queer identified burlesquers performing for queer audiences.

Feminist Research, Feminist Methodologies

The second wave of the U.S. women's movement helped create an atmosphere of academic feminism in which feminist-oriented academics began to challenge the mainstream assumptions of their disciplines (DeVault, 1996; Messer-Davidow, 2002). Feminist social science methods exist because of the women's movement, feminist theory in academia, and the emergence of a research focus which provides a political investment in women's lives (Reinharz, 1992; DeVault, 1996). Feminist social scientists challenge the epistemological (the "assumptions about *how to know* the social and apprehend its meaning") and methodological (the "study of *actual techniques* and practices used in the research process") foundations of classical social science techniques (Fonow & Cook, 1991: 1). That being so, the epistemological and methodological standpoint of feminist social science research speaks back to the knowledge production project of the social sciences.

Feminist social scientists exist within a larger movement of academics who seek to challenge the assumptions of positivism, the belief in an objective and value-free science (Smith, 1987; Wolf, 1996; DeVault, 1996; 1999). According to scholars who challenge it, positivism's purported objectivity is merely a *subjective* endeavor, masked as a project to objectively portray reality; the subjectivity of the researcher is seamlessly masked when their perspective matches dominant beliefs (Wolf, 1996). This mask of objectivity is the method by which exploitation and domination occurs through the production of knowledge (Smith, 1987; Wolf, 1996).

Feminist social scientists' epistemological challenge to positivism is essential because it is the first step in unraveling the patriarchal exclusion of women from the production of knowledge. Most notably, Dorothy Smith (1987) has described a process of the "relations of ruling" or a "ruling apparatus," in which "power, organization, direction, and regulation [are] pervasively structured" (3) through a complex intermingling of routinized practices, including government, law, business, discourses in texts, and educational institutions. According to Smith (1987), mainstream sociology has created a portrait of society based on the standpoint of the ruling and is produced by men who do the ruling. To understand society from a mainstream sociological perspective is not to take on an objective knowledge of society; it is to take on the view of the ruling.

The mainstream sociological investment in objectivity is composed of a deep male bias cloaked in the rhetoric of objectivity and universality. Women have been excluded from the relations of ruling; because of this, they have also been excluded from an integral part of the relations of ruling: the formation of an intellectual and cultural world centered on men, more formally called, the production of knowledge (Smith, 1987). The control of discourse, over the production and dissemination of knowledge, ensures the reification of the status quo (Smith, 1987; Collins, 1990). In her sociological contribution of describing *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1990), has argued that elite white men have been the exclusive purveyors of knowledge and that the control over what counts as "knowledge" has the potential to further marginalize already marginalized groups.

Although women can practice positivist inquiry, it does not behoove a feminist project to do so because mainstream sociology only accepts work as objective if it validates their pre-existing masculinist assumptions.

The philosophy of feminist social science methods rests on a rejection of positivism and focuses on knowledge production (and the effects of knowledge production) because feminist research is a political enterprise. Critically engaged with the project of *excavation*, placing women's experiences at the center of social science research, feminist social science methods diverge from classical approaches to data collection because feminist researchers have a political goal to help better women's lives in their production of knowledge (DeVault, 1999).

As I stated earlier, feminist social scientists are not the only group of academics who challenge the assumptions of positivism. Rosenau (1992) points out that where positivists stress the importance of objectivity and reason in their deductive and inductive observation and analysis of patterns, postmodernists deny the possibility of objectivity, representation, regularity, or logic in their deconstructive analysis of narratives, texts, and emotions. The epistemological standpoint of most feminist social scientists is most paralleled with what Rosenau (1992) calls "affirmative postmodernists," who are balanced between what she calls "the modern approach" of positivists and the "skeptical postmodernists." The "affirmative postmodernists," or what we might think of as feminist social science approaches to research, promote conducting research in the following ways: they seek to reduce the author's authority; they question the "value-free" nature of their discipline; empowerment (of participants, researchers, and readers) is important; they do not seek to generalize to explain reality, but to offer a slice of interpretation of multiple realities; relativism is stressed over objectivity; truth is seen as fluid and unfixed; and the researcher may employ reason and logic, but only with a deconstructivist caution.

Challenging the baseline assumptions of positivism's objectivity and supposed non-political intentions is the foundation of feminist social science epistemology. However, a feminist social science epistemology must also challenge classical approaches to research that

are rooted in positivism. For instance, feminist social scientists redefine ideas of authority, subject/object distinction, the standpoint of the researcher, and the insider/outsider position of the researcher.

In de-legitimizing the notion that one can become an “authority” based on the non-political, objective social science investigation of the social world, feminist social scientists promote multiple versions of reality and multiple “authorities” on those realities (Smith, 1987; DeVault, 1999). Importantly, feminist social scientists ideally view their participants as authoritative knowers of the research project they help produce (Reinharz, 1992). Related to this redefinition of the participant as an authority, feminist social scientists have also challenged the traditional distinction between the subject (the researcher) and the object (the person who is objectified as a thing to be researched) (Westkott, 1990) by philosophically viewing the researched party as a *participant* rather than a “subject” of investigation (Reinharz, 1992).

Generally, a great deal of theorizing has questioned the traditionally taken-for-granted nature of the researcher’s relationship to her/his participants, research project, and the theory produced by her/him. This has produced a methodological position: standpoint theory. Within Smith’s (1987) description of the relations of ruling she also argued that because women are excluded from the “ideologically structured mode of action” of knowledge production women’s “way of knowing the world” is not represented in scientific inquiry (17). From this point of view, a solution to the problem of men’s standpoint in reproducing the relations of ruling through knowledge production is for women to create knowledge from their unique standpoint (Smith, 1987).

Standpoint theory is both an explanatory theory (based on describing the relationship between the production of power and the practices of power) and a theory of method (a guide on

how to produce future feminist research) (Harding, 2004). Most notably, standpoint theory is heralded as a method of empowering oppressed groups because it values their social locations, their experiences, and their “oppositional consciousnesses” (Collins, 1986; Harding, 2004; Sandoval, 2004).

Importantly, standpoint theory, or the promotion of situated knowledges, in feminist social science philosophy is married to the debate on the importance and use of insider/outsider position of the researcher (Naples, 2003). While mainstream social science methods may note the importance of insider or outsider position of the researcher in relation to the group she/he is studying, feminist social scientists are attentive to the exploitive potential of the researcher’s positionality (Reinharz, 1992; Naples, 2003). They note that there are both positive consequences that can come of being an insider (the preexisting knowledge of the group, the ability to gain entrance to the group) and to being an outsider (having a learning lens may encourage participants to teach the researcher more); and that there are possible negative consequences related to each position: an insider may more easily exploit the trust of their participants, an outsider may exoticize participants’ experiences (Reinharz, 1992; Naples, 2003).

According to Naples (2003), in describing an “outsider within” the academy positionality, Collins (2000) suggests that communities of similarly located people (e.g. African American women) can create a partial explanation of the matrix of domination through their distinctive group standpoint. Conversely, she says that Smith (1987) encourages an individual dialogue between the inquirer and participants about their daily life actions and how they are structured (Naples, 2003). In both cases, “...such dialogue is to decenter dominant discourse, and to continually displace and rework it to determine how power organizes social life and what

forms of resistance are generated from social locations outside the matrix of domination of relations of ruling” (Naples, 2003: 53).

The methods of feminist social scientists are married to feminist epistemological standpoints. However, unlike the epistemological foundation for conducting feminist research which is based on a commitment to challenge gender inequality and to highlight women’s voices in the research project, there are various methods for conducting feminist social research. Importantly, there is no one feminist method, but many ways to conduct feminist inquiry (DeVault, 1996; 1999). Common feminist methods include interviews, ethnographies, case studies, content analyses, and discourse analyses (Reinharz, 1992). Although feminist social scientists tend to favor qualitative methods, because of the actual use of women’s voices in the research process, quantitative methods may also be used with feminist intentions (Reinharz, 1992). A method can said to be feminist if it: (1) attempts to shift the focus from men’s concerns to women’s experiences (Reinharz, 1992; DeVault, 1996); (2) follows a scientific process that minimizes harm and exploitation of research participants (DeVault, 1996); (3) conceptualizes women’s behavior as an expression of social contexts (Reinharz, 1992); (4) develops knowledge that is useful to women and leads to social change that will better women’s lives (DeVault, 1996). It is not the method itself that can be described as feminist, but the rigorous, self-reflexive *practice* of the method that is feminist (Reinharz, 1992). This project utilized feminist ethnography and feminist interviewing ideas in the collection of data.

The qualitative method of ethnography, as an alternative to mainstream positivist methods, is pre-formulated to be amenably produced by feminist social scientists. This is not to say that all ethnographies are feminist. If all ethnographies were feminist we would not see male biases in cultural anthropology (which bases much of its findings from ethnography inquiry) and

pioneering women who contributed to the field of ethnography would not be ignored in academic scholarship on the method (Reinharz, 1992). However, the method has empowering potential when it is “ethnography in the hands of feminists” (Reinharz, 1992: 49). This has come to mean, as Reinharz (1992) states, “research carried out by feminists who focus on gender issues in female-homogenous traditional or nontraditional settings, and in heterogeneous traditional and nontraditional settings” (55) and goes on to say, “the researchers are women, the field sites are sometimes women’s settings, and the key informants are typically women” (55).

Importantly, Stacey (1996) has suggested that a feminist ethnography may not be possible because ethnography’s tendency to require some form of deception is at odds with feminist goals of being truthful with participants. Although Reinharz (1992) notes Stacey’s (1996) concerns, she maintains that a mindfully feminist ethnography is possible. I also contend that feminist ethnography is possible – if the researcher has feminist goals, is self reflexive about the process, and is truthful with participants about the ends of the research project – and that this project is in line with these requirements.

The political concern behind encouraging my participants’ narratives is similar to perspectives in feminist interviewing techniques. Feminist interviewing methods mirror interpretivist interview practices (like active interviewing) in that they both tend to suggest the importance of interviewee-led discussion in interviews [see Reinharz, 1992]. However, feminist social scientists maintain the importance of this practice because of an ethical and political concern with women’s lives and gender oppression (Reinharz, 1992). As such, feminist researchers also suggest practical ethical considerations in researcher interactions with participants. For instance, feminist researchers suggest that researcher self-disclosure in which

the researcher tells the participant intimate details of her life alongside the intimate details shared by her participant may be “good feminist practice” (Reinharz, 1992: 32).

Because of the political dedication in feminist research, there is an assumption that interviews are more than just places where strangers are asked about their experiences by strangers; there is an assumption in feminist research that a friendship-like rapport can (and should) develop between researcher and participant (Reinharz, 1992). Further, as DeVault (1987) claims, interviews between women can have a “consciousness raising-like” quality to them. My qualitative interview tools for talking to femmes incorporate feminist researcher’s goals of empowering participants and developing a rapport with them. In fact, I believe that just as some feminist scholars have suggested an easier rapport between women (Reinharz, 1992), a possible queer interview method might rely on the similarity of social location between researcher and participant when both members are queer (and in this case, queer and femme identified).

However, as some critics of these feminist research method claims point out, assuming a universal connection between women is dangerous because of the potential it has to erase race, nation, and class disparities between women (Patai, 1994). Certainly, in that I attempted to create an empowering feminist interview method which sought to establish rapport between the researcher and the researched, I was cautious to not assume a universal and unmediated queer connection between all queer femme participants and myself.

I believe that these interview methodologies have allowed me to construct an interview setting that encouraged the empowered participation of my participants, whose subjectivities have been traditionally ignored or exploited in academic inquiry. Further, the policing functions of heterosexism and homophobia silence my participants’ narratives in many other institutional

(in work, family, health care) and social (in interactions with strangers) settings, making the interview space's encouragement of their narratives unique.

Research Design

The main cities that host sites for ethnographic observation are Seattle, WA (for burlesque observations) and Atlanta, GA (for femme organization observations). As urban areas, they are both diverse settings. Yet, they are diverse (and even urban) in different ways. According to the 2000 census, the population of Seattle is 563,374 and Atlanta's is 350,000. In Seattle, almost half of the population over 25 holds a bachelor's degree or higher and in Atlanta this is true of only 37% of the population. The two cities' economic and racial statistics vary as well. Seattle's median household income is \$45,736 compared to Atlanta's \$30,576. Eleven percent of Seattle's population lives in poverty as does an outstanding 27% of Atlanta's population. In Seattle, people report their racial identities in the following ways: 70% white, 13% Asian; 8% black or African American, 2.5% other, 1% American Indian, 0.5% Native Alaskan or Pacific Islander, and Latinos/Hispanics of all races make up 5.3% of the population². Five percent of Seattle's population identify themselves as multiracial. In Atlanta, people report as following: 33% white, 65% black or African American, 2% Asian, less than 0.5% American Indian; less than 0.5% Native Alaskan or Pacific Islander; and Latinos/Hispanics of all races make up 2% of the population. Only 1% of Atlanta's population identified themselves as multiracial in the 2000 census. Also, 17% of Seattle's population was foreign born whereas only 4% of Atlanta's population described themselves this way.

Portland, Oregon is also a host city for minor observations. I began with the cities of Seattle (because of its well-known queer burlesque troupes) and Atlanta (because of its well-

² It is pertinent to remember that this is the government's racial categorization and that Latinos, specifically, are becoming increasingly difficult to categorize because of the narrow racial categories available for them.

known femme organization). After learning of a burlesque troupe and femme organization in Portland, I spent time in that city while I lived in Seattle. Portland tends to mirror Seattle's demographics. [please see Appendix A, Table 2 for the three cities' demographic information in table format].

Seattle, Portland, and Atlanta are examples of imagined urban meccas for GLBT people who may be searching for a queer-friendly living environment (D'Emilio, 1993; 1998; Weston, 1995). They are urban areas that are known for their queer communities, but provide different opportunities for survival based on differences in state laws, differences in economic structures, and differences in politics of race relations. All of these things provide a basic context for how the queer people in my study construct their lives, their feminine identities, and their organizations.

An Ethnographic and Interview Project

This project relies on both ethnographic and interview data in order to understand the individual identities, public personas, and organizational efforts of queer feminine women. Because I am dealing with the topics of identity, performance, and social change, I employed a mixed method approach that allowed me to investigate different aspects of feminine gender expression. For example, ethnographic observations were useful in my pursuit to understand queer feminine gender performance; interviews were needed in order to understand how troupe/organization members thought about their gender performances and how they articulated their gender identities.

Also, part of my ethnography included analysis of texts produced by these organizations which allowed me to think about the institutional discourses of femininity that are being locally produced within these groups. Utilizing the method of ethnography allowed me to conduct a project that, as Stein and Plummer (1994) call for, is attentive to "developing an understanding of

how sexuality, along with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and generation, is articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices” (184). Increasingly, it has become a tradition for feminist scholars to employ the method of open-ended interviews in combination with ethnographic work (Reinharz, 1992) in order to uncover personal voices of participants in combination with observing their practices; this project follows that tradition. The traditional sociological method of interview provided an opportunity for my participants to tell me about their identities and how they viewed their organizational practices; the method of ethnography provided me with an opportunity to document the ways I saw their gender/sexuality practices unfolding in public forums. In short, through interview my participants could tell me about their identities and through ethnography I could watch their identities in practice.

The Ethnography

My ethnography was conducted in the sites of Atlanta, Portland, and Seattle; I committed to an emerging tradition of multi-sited ethnography. Focusing an ethnographic project in multiple sites may seem contrary to ethnography’s project of intimate emergence in specific locales, but it can provide a useful alternative approach to field work. As Marcus (1995) says, “Ethnography is predicated upon attention to the everyday intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups” (99); he goes on to say that traditional ethnographers in favor of single-site observations may find that the “move from committed localism to represent a system much better apprehended by abstract models and aggregate statistics seems antithetical to [ethnography’s] very nature and thus beyond its limits” (99). However, multi-sited ethnography illuminates the very project of ethnography: to paint a picture of the system by studying the localized representations of it. Every ethnography is a representation of the system and should therefore be studied in multiple incarnations of the system (Marcus, 1995).

Although multi-sited ethnography attempts to provide multiple examples of how macro structures affect micro experiences, its goal is not a generalizable or “holistic representation” of reality (Marcus, 1995). Its rejection of the traditional ethnographic claim that one can understand the global from just one local site, and its suggestion that one can learn aspects about the system through multiple examples of it, illustrates its divergence from a positivist-oriented methodology (Marcus, 1995). My attention to multiple sites and the kind of ethnography I conducted placed me within a constructivist orientation of ethnographic work, in contrast to earlier models of ethnography. Early models for conducting ethnography provided a set of systematic tools for researchers to document reality; it was believed that researchers could turn culture into a series of written words (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Denzin, 2003). Building on early models of ethnography, but questioning their positivistic understanding of reality, constructivist ethnographers exist within an interpretivist epistemology (Denzin, 2003).

This project’s ethnographic accounts are situated within the framework of an interpretivist ethnography, where “context replaces text, verbs replace nouns, structures become process,” (Denzin, 2003:16) and where the ethnographer, “values intimacy and involvement as forms of understanding” (Denzin, 2003:16). Although traditional ethnographers intimately involve themselves in the communities they study, they tend to see themselves as objective observers of reality; interpretivist ethnography builds on the traditional tactic of community emersion by utilizing their involvement as a source of data. Similar to feminist methodology [see Reinharz, 1992], interpretivist ethnographers question the possibility of objectivity and purport that their interpretation of observations is only one version of reality. Intereptivist ethnography most accurately describes the kind of observations I conducted because of my feminist objection to positivist assumptions and because of my situated identity within the

communities I am studying. As a queer person, as a femme identified person, and as someone who is knowledgeable about queer communities, I entered into observation sites with a pre-formulated knowledge of the situation which allowed me a unique ease in interacting with members of the community; this also directed me toward a unique interpretation of what I watched.

The ethnography consisted of observations of four queer burlesque troupes (of which members were interviewed) and three femme organizations (of which members were interviewed).

Although the frequency of queer neo-burlesque troupes is not documented in the academic literature, even cursory internet research will find that at least one queer burlesque troupe is now likely to exist in most urban areas; it seems to be a rule that if a city is known for having a significant queer population, it will also have a queer burlesque troupe. During my burlesque observations, I participated as an audience member. At most events there was a cost associated with entrance to the event, which I paid in order to enter. In those cases the funds collected at the door were donated to benefit the queer community in some way. (Examples of this included queer youth programs, gay pride festival events, or a documentary made by queer film makers). I would arrive when doors at the venue opened (usually about an hour and a half before the performance began) and stay for the music and dancing that conventionally follow burlesque events. Staying after the burlesque allowed me to understand the full atmosphere of the evenings and provided an opportunity to have informal conversations with the burlesque performers who mingle with the audience during this time.

The frequency of femme organizations is not as great as queer burlesque troupes, but the number of this kind of organization seems to be increasing. For observations of femme

organizations my participant role is more difficult to concretely decipher. I have made my presence as a researcher known to members at events where I observe, but I have participated in the events much the same way other members have. These events included “salon” discussions about femme identity with the Femme Affinity Group, dyke marches and pride marches with the Femme Affinity Group and the Glitter Revolutionaries, dinners, dancing, sleepovers, and even a trip to the zoo with the Femme Mafia.

As discussed in the beginning of this section, I chose the Northwestern locations of Seattle, WA and Portland, OR and the Southeastern location of Atlanta, GA because of their exemplary burlesque troupes and femme organizations and because of their differences in population. What I also found is that the most well-known burlesque troupes (discussed later) were located in the Northwest, with femme organizations being (seemingly) less important in these regions. Similarly, the most well-known femme organization (discussed later) was located in Atlanta, where queer burlesque is present, but (seemingly) less important than the presence of the femme organization. Accordingly, I allocated the most hours of burlesque performance observations in the Northwest (Seattle specifically) and the most hours of femme organization observations in Atlanta. My observations of femme organizations in the Northwest are minimal as are my observations of queer burlesque in the Southeast. In total, I conducted extensive observations with the burlesque troupes The Queen Bees³ and The Von Foxies (both in Seattle, WA) and with the femme organization, Femme Mafia (Atlanta, GA); I conducted minimal observations with the burlesque troupes The Rose City Sirens (Portland, OR) and The Moxie Cabaret (Atlanta, GA) and with the femme organizations, The Glitter Revolutionaries (Seattle, WA), and Femme

³ In the tradition of social movement scholars who use the actual names of their social movement organizations, I use the actual names of these burlesque troupes and femme social organizations as a way to demarcate them in my research as movement organizations. All interviewees were given pseudonyms.

Affinity Group (Portland, OR). All of the burlesque troupes and femme organizations are younger than five years old.

The heart of the queer burlesque performances I observed are located in Seattle, WA with The Queen Bees and The Von Foxies. I centered my burlesque studies in Seattle because it is one of the two cities where neo-burlesque emerged (Baldwin, 2004) and because The Queen Bees are the most renowned queer burlesque troupe in the U.S.; I say this because of their notoriety amongst queer people (list serves, web sites, and people outside of Seattle speak of them) and because there is a documentary about them. The Von Foxies are also recognizable outside of Seattle because they won “best troupe” in last year’s Miss Exotic World pageant, the national competition of burlesque dancers. I spent two months (May and June of 2007) living in Seattle, attending burlesque events, and meeting with burlesque performers and former performers. I spent nearly 50 hours in the field during this time and recorded ethnographic notes of my observations.

Minor observations were conducted with queer burlesque troupes that are located in the same cities as femme organizations, The Rose City Sirens (located in Portland, OR) and The Moxie Cabaret (located in Atlanta, GA). I spent about 15 hours in the field observing their performances. For these two troupes, I mostly relied on interview data to provide information about their organizations, but I was able to witness some of their troupe performances as examples of their work.

The heart of my femme organization observations is located in Atlanta, GA with Femme Mafia, an international organization that dedicates itself to femme visibility using a myriad of methods. Founded in January 2005, it was the first Femme Mafia chapter; the organization now has chapters in Milwaukee, WI, Springfield, MO, Chicago, IL and two international chapters

(one in Sweden and one in Germany); the leader of the Atlanta chapter, referred to as The Donna, is the figurehead of all the Femme Mafia chapters. The emergence of five other chapters in three short years speaks to the significance of Femme Mafia, Atlanta.

Femme Mafia, Atlanta has over 150 members and about 20-30 active participants who are present at every gathering. Beginning in September 2007 and ending in May 2008, I have observed every meeting and event associated with Femme Mafia during that time. They meet for dinner and an after dinner event every second Saturday of the month and sometimes offer additional Femme Mafia events at the end of the month. Their events are creative: in September 2007 their after dinner event was a gender performance show at a local lesbian bar; in October 2007 their second Saturday event brought them to the Atlanta Zoo and then brunch; and the additional event in October was lube wrestling hosted by a gay men's leather bar. I have spent over 75 hours in the field with this organization.

Femme Affinity Group, or as they refer to themselves, FAG, is a similar group in Portland, OR that has yet to receive the national recognition that Femme Mafia has during its existence. They offer a monthly discussion group to facilitate femme solidarity and consciousness raising, events sponsored by the organization (like a night of queer art performances), and they have written two zines (short magazines). Like with the burlesque troupes the Rose City Sirens and the Moxie Cabaret, I did not conduct extensive observations with this group. When I was living in Seattle I traveled to meet with them twice. The first time I sat in on their monthly discussion group and the second time I marched with them in their portion of the Dyke/Trans march in Portland. I have spent six hours in the field with this organization. Although I relied on interviews with members of this organization for a bulk of my data on them, witnessing one of

their monthly discussion groups and one of their pride events allowed me to observe examples of how they interact with one another and how they are received by queer community members.

Also, while living in Seattle I learned about a contingent of the 2007 Queerfest parade who called themselves “The Glitter Revolutionaries.” Femme identified people and people who considered themselves “allies” to femmes were invited to march with them as they chanted about femme visibility and threw glitter into the crowd lining the street; they organized a similar march for Seattle’s gay pride parade in June 2008. The people who organize this march speak of wanting to create an organization by the same name, but thus far they have not been able to sustain themselves as a femme organization.

Although the Von Foxies (Seattle, WA) and the Rose City Sirens (Portland, OR) are enjoying the height of their popularity, a majority of organizations have either disbanded or experienced a serious decline in popularity. The Queen Bees (Seattle, WA) and Femme Affinity Group (Portland, OR) have disbanded although some members of the latter hope to restart the organization. Moxie Cabaret (Atlanta, GA) offers spontaneous shows after long hiatuses. The Femme Mafia (Atlanta, GA) saw a dramatic drop in membership, a lull in event attendance, and public discord over the way the organization is run: they attempted to reorganize in the spring of 2008 with what they jokingly called “Femme Mafia version 2.0” but it was largely unsuccessful; the organization now has a new board, but membership has not increased. The Glitter Revolutionaries (Seattle, WA) has never been able to maintain steady collectivity; they are able to come together for the pride parade march, but otherwise are maintained as a loosely affiliated group of friends. The longevity of these organizations may seem problematic for my contention that a femme movement is occurring. On the contrary, I believe that the fluctuation of these organizations/troupes and even the total disbandment of some of them, may be seen as evidence

of the kind of politic they embody: a uniquely queer version of a New Social Movement. In this sense, they provide a way to think about the special contributions of these kinds of movements.

In total, I have spent about one and a half years and about 140 hours observing burlesque performances and femme organizational events.

The Interviews

Alongside ethnographic observation of burlesque troupes and femme organizations, this project is also based on individual interviews with members of each type of femme group. Each troupe/organization holds the following number of members: The Queen Bees (a rotating cast of around 20); The Von Foxies (3); The Rose City Sirens (3); Moxie Cabaret (a rotating cast of about 20); Femme Mafia (over 150, 20-30 core members); FAG (about 50, 15-20 core members); The Glitter Revolutionaries (7-10). In total, I conducted 31 interviews. I did the following number of interviews with each: The Queen Bees (7); The Von Foxies (1); The Rose City Sirens (3); Moxie Cabaret (6); Femme Mafia (8); FAG (4); The Glitter Revolutionaries (4). Although Seattle's and Portland's femme organizations and burlesque troupes had distinct membership, several members of the Moxie Cabaret are affiliated with the Femme Mafia. Two of the interviews I conducted with the Moxie Cabaret also account for two of the Femme Mafia interviews. Interestingly, the two femmes interviewed who were currently part of the Moxie Cabaret were far less involved with the Femme Mafia than they used to be. It seemed to me through my observations in all cities that the femmes in femme organizations and the burlesquers did not overlap in social circles or friendships. They were distinct organizations; probably because they do very different kinds of political work.

I did not attempt to only interview founders or leaders of organizations. Instead, my strategy was to interview the general populace of the organizations in order to get a broad

understanding of its existence. In some circumstances (The Queen Bees, The Rose City Sirens, Moxie Cabaret, The Glitter Revolutionaries) I did interview the leaders and founders, but it was not my intention. I would let everyone in the organization know I was doing interviews and ask if they would be interested in talking to me about the organization; the people who notified me first were the people who were interviewed. In all cases, they were people I knew to be deeply involved with the organizations/troupes from my ethnographic time spent with them. I targeted several unrepresented groups making sure that I interviewed women of color, a male person who was previously femme identified and involved with the Femme Affinity Group, a male “boylesque” dancer who performs with femme burlesquers in Atlanta, and a “female gentleman” identified person (Cynthia) who runs the Moxie Cabaret. All of the interviewees except the last three described (Randall, Charles, and Cynthia) are feminine non-trans queer women. Nearly all of the women interviewed, with the exception of five burlesque performers, identified as femme. All of these five burlesque performers reported to “sometimes” or “most of the time” or “sort of” identify as femme. It makes sense that all of the people who “sometimes” identified as femme were involved in the sect of the femme movement that pays attention to feminine performance with their burlesque, rather than femme identity, as with femme organizations. The reader can look to Appendix D for a list of which participants identify as femme; the reader may assume that quoted interviewees are femme identified unless otherwise noted.

All interviews were conducted by me in face-to-face interviews. Interviews took place in a variety of settings. Settings included participants’ homes, coffee shops, restaurants, and even a public laundry facility where I helped the interviewee wash and fold her laundry. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes.

Interviews followed an “active interview” approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), allowing individuals to co-construct the interview and to initiate their own topics. Based on my initial ethnographic observations and my previous knowledge of the literature, I created a demographic survey and a semi-structured in-depth interview guide that encouraged an active interview discussion, focusing on their individual identity negotiations with being queer feminine people and on their participation in their respective organizations [please see Appendix B for the demographic survey and Appendix C for the interview guide].

All interviewees were administered informed consent that is consistent with University procedures and approved by the University’s internal review board. I explained the research project, how the interview would be conducted, and how their interview data would be used by me; I also requested permission to tape-record the interview [please see Appendix D for a copy of the informed consent]. Pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewee. Because some of the troupes/organizations have very few members, I was careful not to note defining characteristics about them in order to maintain confidentiality. Following each interview I wrote memos of potential themes that came out of our talk. The digital records of the interviews were later transcribed verbatim by me personally.

Profile of Interview Participants

Interview participants were very representative of the demographic dimensions of femme organizations and burlesque troupes I observed. In terms of age, sexual orientation, race, class, education, and occupation what is described here could easily be understood as the dimensions of femme organizing, as I have witnessed it. There are no systematic profiles of these groups’ memberships.

The femme movement, and my interview sample, is composed of fairly young people. This is unsurprising, as the movement is located within radical queer communities, which is often associated with youth. The oldest person I interviewed was 44, the youngest was 20; the average age of participants was 30 and the median age was 29.

In terms of sexual orientation, a majority of participants identify themselves as queer. 14 participants, or 45%, responded simply that they are “queer” to the demographic question on sexual orientation; another 14 participants, 45% more of them, identified as some combination of queer and another sexual orientation word such as Katie who said that she is “Queer/Dyke/Bi.” Two participants identified as gay and one identified as bisexual; these participants were somewhat older than the bulk of participants in their 20’s and early 30’s.

A majority of interviewees identified themselves as white: 25 of the 31 people interviewed, or 81%, were white. Three people, or about 10%, described themselves as Black or African American. Two people, 6% , were biracial: One of them was Black and white; One of them was Native American and white. One participant, or 3%, described her race as Latina.

The femme movement may also be characterized by class-privileged and highly educated members; my data also reflects this. Four participants, or 13%, were upper-middle class. 14 participants, or 45%, were middle class; Five participants, or 16%, described themselves as lower-middle class. Six people, or 19%, self identified as working class and two people, or 6%, identified as “poor” or “broke.” In terms of education, all participants had more than a high school education and more participants held a master’s degree than just had some college. Five participants, or 17%, had some college. 19 people, or 61%, had a bachelor’s degree. Six people, or 19%, had a master’s degree and one person, or 3%, had a PhD.

A majority of occupations tended to be located in the nonprofit sector or in office and managerial work. Three people, or 10%, were fulltime students at the time of the interview and two of them, or 6%, were unemployed. One person, or 3%, was a legal sex worker. Six of them, or 19%, were in service or retail work. Ten participants, or 33%, were in nonprofit work, paid political organizing, or social work and nine participants, or 29%, were office workers, managers, or researchers. [For a list of this demographic information and participant pseudonyms, please see the Table of Interview Participant Demographics, Appendix D].

Analysis

Grounded theory, developed in the 1960's by Glaser and Strauss, advocates for an inductive approach to codifying qualitative data in a practical and scientific way; their advancement of qualitative methodology has been seen by many as a means to make qualitative inquiry a more positivist process (Dey, 2004; Charmaz, 2006). Although it is positivist in its assertion of a scientific process, the paradigm of grounded theory breaks with that tradition of conducting research by insisting that researchers do not define a hypothesis about their research and that they use a constant comparative method that allows theory to emerge from the data; instead of moving from theory to data for proof of existing theories, one is instructed to move from data to an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Interpretive grounded theory, closely associated with Charmaz (2000; 2005; 2006), questions the classic grounded theory assumption that there is a reality that can emerge from the data collected. Instead, an interpretive (or constructivist) grounded theory provides tools for qualitative analysis that acknowledges the researcher's role in the process of creating theory (Charmaz, 2005). According to this perspective, researchers grapple with questions of meaning; we assume that we are investigating how realities are constituted rather than assuming that we are uncovering one external reality (Charmaz, 2000). In this way, the coding process is a process

of meaning-making. The codes that emerged were a unique result of the interplay between me, as a researcher, and the data I have collected.

In total, my data includes one and a half years and about 140 hours of observation and 31 in-depth interviews. I studied people involved in femme organizing and femme burlesque troupes about their self identification with femininity, their experiences being feminine people, how their experiences had shaped their ideas about femininity, and their organizing around femininity.

The chapter that follows this begins data analysis: we begin with how participants talk of femininity itself and their self-described impulse to express in a feminine manner. Their emotional connection to femininity and their desire to enact feminine expression are precursors to a politicized femme identity, which itself is a precursor to femme social movement activity. As you read the next four analysis chapters, it is pertinent to remember that the political work being done by femmes is part of a trajectory of feminist and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [GLBTQ] political concerns. Their debates about gender expression, queer collective identity, and the queer and feminist ethics of sexual representation are informed by feminist and queer histories of activism prior to femme cultural interventions.

CHAPTER 5
WHAT IS A FEMININE SELF?: QUEER “PARIAH FEMININITIES” AND THE
RACE/CLASS DIMENSIONS OF THE FEMININE OTHER

In the following chapter I describe how my participants see femininity: as something that is both a social expectation for them and a deeply felt impulse; as something that is socially constructed (and therefore not real) and something that benefits their self concepts when they perform it (and therefore *feels* very real). This chapter also reflects on the ways in which their social location as queer women and their race and class positionality affects their femininity. Because they are involved in a social movement, they are people with a highly politicized concept of femininity. That is, their concepts of femininity help elucidate the political meanings of femininity and gender expression in queer communities – integral conversations in feminist and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [GLBTQ] politics.

Describing A Feminine Self

Although participants had spent a great deal of time thinking about femininity – because they organize around the concept – defining exactly why they want to be feminine and what exactly femininity is proved to be a difficult task. For example, when I asked Annabelle what femininity is she responded:

Um...I don't know. The first thing that came to my mind was the opposite of masculinity because to me they counter each other like a dichotomy...like if one didn't exist then the other wouldn't exist. I don't know. I know it when I see it, but I don't know how to describe it.

Like the now famous description of pornography or Judith Halberstam's description of masculinity (1998), Annabelle cannot describe femininity, but knows it when she sees it. We know when we see certain phenomena because they are otherwise indescribable. In addition, we may need to see femininity because it is often such a visual production. Emma told me that she was very feminine. When I asked her to describe what that meant to me she replied:

Well, I wear makeup everyday, generally speaking. I wear dresses as much as humanly possible...I wear high heels and skirts and things that show my boobs off. Jewelry. Lots of Jewelry. Mmm... yes. Oh and my hair. My hair is a big part of it too. It's long and beautiful and I love it.

Although one may be able to list numerous mental or emotional characteristics that tend to be associated with femininity, Emma's description of herself as "feminine" rested on typical style markers of femininity: dresses, high heels, skirts, jewelry. While these items are literally put on her body, she also describes choosing attire that will "show [her] boobs off," intimating that she also uses her body to produce a feminine aesthetic. Interestingly, she also described having hair that is "long and beautiful" as something that is a "big part" of her femininity, a characteristic that is a mainstream expectation for women and one that she cannot take off. Other interviewees also discussed their hair's relationship to their femininity. Katie explained her feelings about her long curly hair this way:

Frankly, I get really jealous about [queer femmes with short hair]. Like, I've had my hair short and it did not feel good to me and really hot femmes that can pull off the queer short hair. I get really really jealous about that. How much I hate myself for having really long curly hair, getting to curl it and make it all pretty or my nails...loving the feeling of having long nails and knowing how queer it is to have short fingernails. <laughs>

And Michelle reflected on her feelings about growing her hair longer:

[My friend and I have] been talking about that recently because both of us are growing out our hair because we want to. The difficult thing about that is on days when femininity doesn't feel good, we don't have options. It's funny that it can come down to something as silly as hair, but it does. It really does...I find that very frustrating because my femininity is not something I wear everyday and not something I want to wear everyday. I want to wake up in the morning and see how I feel and wear whatever expression feels good. It's very difficult to find a way to express all those different things with the same getup. I'm struggling with that right now.

Although Katie says that having short hair "did not feel good," she also "hates herself" for having long hair. Tellingly, she parallels her shame for wanting long hair with her shame for "loving the feeling of long nails" because for practical sexual purposes, short fingernails are more expected for queer women. Similarly, Michelle is conflicted about growing her hair long

because it curtails her ability to express masculinity on days where that may be preferred to feminine expression. Weitz (2002) has suggested that women's hair styles announce their social location in society, their status, and their political orientations. For both Katie and Michelle, their tumultuous relationships with their long hair are imbued with social meanings that contradict a self that can be fluidly feminine and queer: they at once feel a sense that their femininity is recognized by having long hair and that their queerness is less recognized by the same attribute.

Nearly all of my participants told stories of disidentifying with some aspects of femininity that they find negative. Danielle said simply, "the part [of femininity] I definitely reject is the submissiveness part." Similarly, Ruth explained her rejection of "behavioral" femininity:

Behaviorally I'm not very feminine. I'm very outspoken. I tend to be very direct in my language. And I feel like, I think that's why it was really hard for me to come to femme identity because my form of femininity is not so much typical. In my everyday interactions with people, in the way I address people, I feel like I tend to be more masculine in my behavior, but more feminine in my presentation.

Although many participants rejected aspects of mainstream femininity that they associated with submissiveness or weakness, many of them also embraced qualities that might be considered conventionally feminine by critiquing the idea that those qualities are necessarily submissive. Ruth also explained:

One time I was talking about being in the follow position in dancing. I like to use that [as a] metaphor [for femininity] because a lot of people see that as a position of weakness. But the thing about partner dancing...in swing, or two-step waltz, salsa, that kind of thing, the thing about partner dancing, as a follow, you have to trust the lead. Yeah, you have to do what the lead tells you to do, but the follow is in the ultimate position of power because you choose to go with the lead and if you don't go with the lead, the lead doesn't go anywhere. I feel like that's the power of femininity. It's about acceptance and openness and there's something that happens in that partnering. Every time I could dance with somebody different and it's a very different experience. And if I don't feel comfortable and I don't trust that person it's going to be terrible.

Ruth's comments parallel her thoughts about femininity to concepts of masculinity: just as it is inaccurate to assume that a "follow position," or a feminine position, is inferior it is also inaccurate to assume that someone who is leading, or taking on masculine characteristics, is more powerful.

Also conveying the idea that one can be "empowered" by traditionally feminine traits, Betty said, "My femme [identity] really means to me that I am really empowered by things that are really traditional gender roles. I really enjoy caretaking; I would really like to be a mom." Importantly, traits like "following," "caretaking," or even being a mom are often seen as inferior characteristics in comparison to more masculine traits. In making the argument that they feel empowered by them, perhaps they are saying that they feel empowered articulating that they want those things; they feel empowered because they have shifted the cultural meaning of these acts to be positive attributes.

In their quest to redefine conventionally feminine traits as something that can be "empowering," as Betty notes, several respondents discussed how coming to a feminine identity in their adult lives has made them "find a lot more compassion for straight women," as Betty also told me. Specifically, several participants brought up early memories of their mothers' and grandmothers' femininity as a source of learning femininity. Patricia reflected:

Probably my mother [was a model of femininity]. My mother was really feminine and even when I was really young I wanted to be [feminine like her]. When I was like eight I wanted her to make me up; she would do my nails, give me little French manicures. Not because my mother was gender role-ing me but because I wanted it really badly and she was really feminine too so she kind of helped develop that in me. She was probably my biggest role model in terms of femininity.

In fact it is possible that Patricia's mother was "gender role-ing" her *and* that she "wanted it really badly." Importantly, though, Patricia reflects on her emulation of her mother's femininity with fondness, illustrating that this process was not painful for her and that, at least she feels, it

was something she wanted. In a slightly divergent tale, Katrina shares her own story of trying to emulate her mother's femininity:

My mom ... she is not at all gay and she is very [feminine] in her presentation of herself, extremely so, more than your average heterosexual woman. She puts a lot of time and energy into her hair, her makeup, her appearance, her accessories. That being my, I think defining female role model of what it looks like to be a woman, of course rubbed off on me. As a child, like not uncommon, I played dress up in my mother's clothes. There was this standard of beauty I was trying to attain. So not only is she very highly feminine in her expression of herself, but she is also very stereotypically beautiful. She's 5'8", weighs 118 pounds, has a full C cup, teeny tiny waist, no ass to speak of, she's like a walking Barbie doll, right? So as a young person, you know, this being my primary model for what a woman is supposed to look like, playing dress up, and then coming into myself as a young, like an adolescent and then a teenager, there was this sense of trying to accomplish something that was absolutely unattainable. I'm taller than her, I'm bigger than her, I don't have big breasts. I have a really large ass. It's like everything was upside down. <laughs> And yet I tried. I would say that I fantasized, I think the way a lot of teenagers do, I fantasized about getting breast implants, I fantasized about getting plastic surgery. These were all things that I felt really committed in my young mind, that I would alter my appearance to achieve this.

Unlike Patricia, Katrina's experiences with trying to emulate her mother's femininity were both pleasurable and painful. Similarly, Betty told a story of her "first femme role model," her grandmother. As Katrina did, Betty learned positive and negative "feminine" expectations from her grandmother:

My grandmother was straight, as far as I know. She has my femme role model, I think. She was my first femme role model, rather. My grandmother was very powerful and very manipulative. She never worked, she never drove, she never had a car. I sort of watched my grandmother navigate the world and arrange it, mostly, to her liking...I learned from her, I learned subconsciously how to be manipulative which is really dysfunctional, but I also learned a real concrete sense of power. Red lipstick, she always wore red lipstick, red lipstick is a power symbol...like the way you look at pictures of presidents or monuments ... if you talk about literal symbols of power, red lipstick is a symbol of power...As I age I'm learning how to move through the world and handle my business as a grown woman, thinking about how her femininity informed everything that she did.

These stories of bonding with feminine women from their families of origin are deeply complicated. They were learning ideal standards of physical beauty and ways that feminine people learn to navigate the world in subordinate positions. They were learning about power,

and in many ways, feeling powerless. Most significantly, they learned to experience joy at being “gender role-d”. They also suggest how deeply internalized their feminine identities are.

All of my participants who identified as “femme” [femme identity is discussed in depth in Chapter 6] described their femininity as a deeply internal impulse. Danielle said, “My [femme friend] would say, *if I go out to the mall in a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt and some converse on, people are still going to know I’m a femme*. Like you can’t this off of me.” Whatever the external markers of femininity may be, they can be taken off; Danielle insists that feminine identity cannot be taken off of her. Betty also reflected on her femme identity:

Well you know how you don’t really know something is happening or you’re experiencing something until you look back on it. I’ve always loved attention. I’ve always loved extravagance. I’ve always loved dressing up...my mother’s favorite story to tell my friends and my lovers is when she bought me my first pair of shoes, how I held my little feet up out of the buggy and my feet were going and my hands were going and I was so little. What was I? Probably like two, but I was so excited about having these shoes. As a kid, I always loved...my mom is a pastor so we always went to church. Being southern, that’s a huge part of my family culture. So, you know, I always loved getting dressed up for church. In that way, I always did ballet. I loved getting dressed up. I loved the makeup and you know, getting ready for my shows. So, I think in a gendered sort of way I was always sort of femme but never realized it.

Although Betty could not take on a self conscious “femme” identity until she was an adult, for her, part of her femme identity is based in a love of femininity that she claims she has always had. Later in our interview Betty shared with me that she identifies as “glitter core.” She said, “I identify as being glitter core. You know how people identify as being like ‘something core?’ Yeah. I’m totally glitter core.” Again, a socially constructed feminine marker, glitter, is something that is described by Betty as being a part of her “core” self. Similarly, Ruth told me that coming to identify with femininity was realizing that it “took over 30 years to figure out that this part of me is something that’s part of me.” Although she says that femininity is “not innate,” that it is “like figuring out you’re queer. You can choose to express it or not.” Both Betty and Ruth recognized that feminine identity is social, but they both seem to imply that their

orientation toward femininity is not something they were socialized into feeling. Katrina tells another story of always being oriented toward femininity:

No matter what social group I identified with, I always dragged it up. I tried to be kind of gothy or new wavey, but I would be dripping in all the crucifix jewelry, but overwhelmingly like all over my body. Then I tried to be kind of like the skater chick and doing the low slung baggy – skater/rave look – inevitably I would wear the low slung baggy shorts and the baggy shirt with tennis shoes that had rhinestones on them. You know? No matter what look I tried to do, I always fucked it up. It was always involving too much accessorizing, too much rhinestones, too much glitter, and so finally when I was in high school I sort of realized that I had my own look I was going for and I just embraced lame and sequences and all these things.

Part of Katrina’s story with fashion and adornment seems to be her internal inclination to “drag up” the attire of her current subculture and make it more feminine by adding jewelry, rhinestones, and glitter.

For cissexual¹ women, an orientation toward femininity is difficult to separate from the societal expectation that they should be feminine. All gender identities and expressions are composed of rewards and consequences for the identification or presentation. As Chapter 6 discusses, even socially non-conforming gender identities/expressions like female masculinity have subcultural rewards. Similarly, the feminine women I interviewed got rewarded for femininity in ways that exceeded social support for their feminine choices: femininity made them feel good. When I asked Emma what she got out of being feminine, she responded:

I feel pretty, I don’t know. What do I get out of it? It just makes me feel fabulous. I like the way I interact with people when I feel pretty. Not just when I look pretty, but when I feel pretty. It makes me more social. It makes me more comfortable.

If Emma were to take steps to be less feminine, it would have an effect on how she felt about herself; she would be less social and less comfortable. Importantly, it is necessary for Emma to *feel* pretty, not just *look* pretty for other people. Later in our conversation Emma expounded,

¹ The terms cissexual and cisgendered are ways of referring to people who are not transgender.

“What would I do without glitter? I would die. I would die. What would I do without dresses? I would die. I would be so unhappy I would die.” While Emma’s passionate commitment to glitter and dresses may sound like a toddler’s temper tantrum, it conveys how much she attaches her happiness to her ability to express femininity.

Similarly, Katie says of her femininity, “I don’t where it comes from, but I know that it’s...it feels very real.” Katie’s impulse to express femininely feels “very real” to her. It is so real that she is unable to articulate what causes it. She went on:

One of my biggest vices, if anything is going askew or anything is going wrong [in my life], just spending so much time in my closet because I get ready in my closet, spending time on my hair. I don’t know where it comes from, but I know that I feel better about myself and I feel more connected to the world when I get to do stuff like that. And it’s like, sometimes it’s on a superficial level and sometimes it’s like on a level of, everyone has their thing that makes them feel really good and if I want to curl my hair for three hours and I’m not hurting myself or anyone else then that’s what I’m going to do. I don’t know where it comes from. The reason that I think it’s more than being socialized that women should look and act this way is that a lot of it can be curling my hair for three hours and not leaving my house. There’s not outward approval. Of course, that is part of...gender identity and all of that, but a lot of it is how it feels so good to me and doesn’t have to be validated. I think we’re told to look feminine because we’ll be validated in this way. I think part of that has been true for me. Knowing what it’s like to walk in the world as high femme and all of that, part of that is not. It’s something else. I don’t know what it is.

Katie offers a complicated analysis of her apparent need to produce a feminine expression. She tells us multiple times that she “doesn’t know where it comes from,” insinuating that it is more complicated than “coming from” the usual suspects of either biology or social validation. She admits that women are socialized to want to feel pretty when she says, “that is part of...gender identity and all of that,” and that part of wanting to be feminine is being validated as feminine by other people, but she continues to assert that it “feels so good and doesn’t have to be validated.”

Crimson provided another example of how femininity makes her “feel good.”

This was her response when I asked her if femininity ever felt bad to her:

[Femininity] definitely feels good. I feel empowered all the time. I feel like, I don't know, as far as it being a task ... if it feels like a task, it's a fun task. It feels like a task when I'm getting ready to go someplace and I can't think of like how I'm going to present myself for this particular night, as far as getting dressed up for things and inventing my femme self. But it's like a challenge kind of task where it's exciting, you know. Even though I feel like I'm still femme in my baggiest sweat pants and my rattiest t-shirt, there's still something about getting dressed up to go someplace where it's just completely different. I feel like I walk different and I stand different and it's just this powerful, strong thing even if nobody is looking at me. I feel like they're supposed to be and they should be. It's a very strong thing.

Crimson separates external markers of femininity from her feminine identity by saying that she's still femme in her "baggiest sweat pants and rattiest t-shirt," but also suggests that she feels more feminine when she is highly adorned with feminine markers. As evidence that she feels "good" and "empowered" by femininity, Crimson claims that she does not need people to look at her, to validate her femininity. If they are not looking at her, they should be. She went on to explain the lasting effects of dressing up for a special evening:

Even the next day. I could be at work in jeans with grease on them, but it's like I know my potential and I know ... it's almost like this, like this superman thing where superman goes into the phone booth and comes out a superhero. I work in a diner. I'm a waitress. And I see all the time where guys come in and all my coworkers who are taller, or thinner, or lighter [skinned], or flirtier ... the guys come in and they get better tips [from the male customers] and they flirt back and forth and I almost have that superman feeling of like, oh, well, you're not reading me as femme right now (or maybe you are) but you just don't know the bombshell vampness that is me. There's still that feeling. There's that feeling of when I'm figuring out how my strength is going to be dressed up and presented at some event where there will be queer people ... the taller walk I get is there so when I'm feeling invisible as my queer self or my fat self, I still feel ... I know what's going on here. Since I've been cognizant of my queer identity and my femme identity, I feel stronger and more confident. Even though there's that invisibility for not being read as femme or for not looking like the standards for societal femininity, I definitely feel it all the time and it's empowering.

In contradiction to the idea that feminine presentations need to be validated by others, Crimson suggests that even the memory of a feminine presentation can change her feelings about herself.

Like Katie, Crimson describes rewards for her femininity coming from an internal place, not a

social validation. Further, Crimson's self validation for her femininity counteracts oppression she feels in dominant society for her unconventional feminine beauty.

These participants describe an idea that was reiterated to me time and again in interviews with queer feminine women: they perform femininity because it feels good to them, not because they are trying to fulfill a social mandate for female behavior. Notably, Foucault (1979) argues that one way power works is through "technologies of power," which influence our actions, give our actions meaning, and provide a way for us to think of our actions and our selves; these technologies of power encourage the internalization of social mandates so that we feel like we have freely chosen our behavior. Using this Foucauldian idea, Martin (2003) insists that gender exists outside of interactions and institutions; it also resides in the "deep, internalized parts of who we are" (57). She suggests that we also pay attention to internalized technologies of gender or "the aspects of the gender system that are in us, that become us" (56). Certainly part of the way that gender "become[s] us" is through our own interpretation of gender based on our social location. Said differently, femininity is contextual; it is situated, perhaps most significantly by one's sexual participation in the gender order – by compliance or resistance to heterosexuality. The next section deals with how participants describe their own de-naturalization of female femininity through their queer identities and their participation in queer communities.

Pariah Femininities: Queer and Feminine Others

Recall that Schippers (2007) described pariah femininities as femininities that are "deemed not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity" (95). Schippers offers four examples of pariah femininities; they are overwhelmingly women who reject feminine sexual scripts: women who have sexual desire for other women, women who are sexually unavailable to men, women who are considered

promiscuous, and women who are aggressive. These behaviors mark women as non-compliant with patriarchy.

Further, Ingraham's (1996) concept of heterogender suggests that the institution of heterosexuality relies on the exclusive performances of femininity and masculinity (and their sexual relationship with one another). We might say that hetero(feminine)gender connotes two achieved statuses (femininity and heterosexuality) and that they work together to carry out the mandates of institutionalized patriarchal heterosexuality. Thus, heterofemininity (and its converse, heteromascularity) are joined as one concept. A queer feminine expression that disarticulates heterosexuality from femininity thus renders both systems less effective in their ruling. As Michelle commented:

I think that everybody, almost everybody, has had some kind of interaction with a butch woman so it's not so new and frightening. And they can understand why someone would want to adopt masculine qualities. It might peeve them a little bit, but they get it. *You want to be like me, of course you do, why wouldn't you want to be like me? Why someone would take on feminine qualities, but exaggerate them to the point that [heterosexual men] are no longer attracted to them? They can't understand that. Why would you want to attract queers? Don't you want a real man? If you could just tone that down, you could probably get yourself a man.* I think that that's really scary to people.

Although Michelle acknowledges that butch women are disruptive of the gender order for their female performances of masculinity, she argues that feminine queer women disrupt it in a different way. If as Butler (1990), Ingraham (1996), Schippers (2007), and Michelle suggest, that heterosexuality is built on the mandate that men are masculine and women are feminine, there are multiple ways to disrupt this sexual gender order: women can present as masculine or queer women can present as feminine. Although the practice of women presenting as feminine is conventional, queer women presenting as feminine subverts the conventions of hetero(feminine)gender. She also suggests that the femininity of queer women is scary to heterosexual men because femmes are not trying to attract heterosexual men; when women use

femininity to attract queers it is necessarily a thought-about decision rather than an unexamined social script for femininity. Michelle continued:

People see [queer femininity] as very powerful and that makes them scared. They think, in my experience at least, people think, *so what's gonna happen if people stop doing things because I and the rest of society tells them to? What if they do it because they want to OR what if they DON'T do it because they don't want to? What's gonna happen to society?* That comes down to the binary. They get so overwhelmed and so afraid of what would happen if that gender binary were dismantled. *What do you mean you have a gender expression that doesn't require a binary? What do you mean that you have an orientation that doesn't require a binary? That's how I've understood the world so how can you come now and try to tear that apart?*

Michelle argues that queer feminine women challenge the gender binary because their femininity connotes choice: women are feminine in compliance with the gender order's concept of heterosexuality that male masculinity and female femininity are naturally occurring opposites that need one another; when queer women reject heterosexuality yet embrace femininity, they reject the practical uses of femininity. In Schippers' (2007) words, they reject the "relationship between masculinity and femininity" (95). In Michelle's words, "they have a gender expression that doesn't require a binary." In this way, choosing to do femininity "because they want to" underscores the idea that women can choose not to do femininity "if they don't want to."

In the following two sections, I will discuss how the sexual social location of being queer influences one's femininity. First, I offer descriptions of how participants described their individual desire to "queer" visual and interactional aspects of femininity because of their personal rejection of femininity. Second, I analyze the ways in which queer communities foster an environment of critical reflection on normative gender which encourages a consciously queer feminine identity.

Queer Selves Create Different Feminine Selves

As discussed in Chapter 2, heterosexuality and gender are understood as fused entities; because queer femininity rejects the status of heterosexuality, queerness informs the status of

one's femininity. Further, a rejection of the status of heterosexuality informs how one experiences femininity. This may be particularly true when feminine women have to negotiate everyday interactions with hetero(masculine)men who misread their presentations of femininity to be a hegemonic hetero(femininity). Michelle commented:

Any time [queer feminine women] have tried to express their femininity, which is what I guess they are naturally drawn to, they've gotten unwanted attention from men, often resulting in violence. Even if it's not resulting in violence, it's resulting in attention you're not looking for. You're not getting attention from other queers that you want; you're getting attention from straight men that you don't want. And I think there's so much frustration in that.

Similarly, during our conversation about how she started to become more feminine after coming to a femme identity, Edith told me:

As I started adopting more traditional feminine signifiers I got so much more attention walking into work. I mean, I think I have always sort of gotten a little more attention because of my hair. It catches people's eye. But as soon as I started wearing heels and especially if I was wearing red lipstick...I would definitely get comments like, *oh, girl, I like redheads*. Ok, you and every other guy on the planet. I'm so shocked by that. I have red hair, oh my god! Where have you been all my life?

Although Edith jokes about the ludicrousness of being catcalled on the street, her assessment of *when* it began happening more is important: when she began "adopting more traditional signifiers." She went on to talk about how this attention makes her feel:

...if you try to counter some of the attention you get with a [statement of], *I'm queer, fuck off*, there's this sort of perception of deception on our part, like we we're doing this thing to attract their attention. It's like the woman in a short skirt in a dark ally, you were asking for it because you were putting yourself out there in a way that makes you attractive to them. It's not ... it's just really not comfortable at all. It reminds me, I think of what happens when trans women [male to female transsexuals] get discovered as being trans when a guy has been attracted to her. It challenges his identity and that's when the violence happens. In a way you're at risk, I don't know if it's more risk or less risk, I try not to assign value to that, but you're at risk for a different reason.

Pariah femininities: femininities which resist the relationship between masculinity and femininity that makes heterosexuality and patriarchy possible. Edith places queer women, women in revealing clothing who are sexually unavailable and trans women in the same category: women

who are thought to “deceive” men by performing femininity without the intent of pleasing men. In turn, patriarchy doles out a punishment: violence. Heather, a trans woman I met at a Femme Affinity Group meeting in Portland, told a story during the salon session [a femme discussion group] about how she has stages of reaction when men sexually harass her: first she feels validation, then fear, then anger (after the fear has subsided). She explained that she has different fears than other women because, as she said, “when girls like me get raped they end up cut up in little pieces.” She went on to discuss how this affects the way she dresses when she goes out in public, “If they look under my skirt and I don’t happen to be situated in the right way that day, I could die. So I wear pants.” Reflecting on what her femininity means, she said, “I’m scared all the time. Femininity is dangerous” [author’s field notes]. Edith and Heather, as a non-trans woman and a trans woman, are situated differently in society’s gender order: certainly Heather faces much more danger for her femininity than does Edith. Importantly, though, they both recognize that their departure from hegemonic heterosexual femininity marks them as pariahs who must be contained through ritualized violence. Further, they both recognize that their femininity makes them visible targets for such violence. After all, Heather said, “femininity is dangerous” – in these cases, femininity has the potential to provoke attention and their refusal to comply with that attraction has the potential to lead to violence.

Katie also commented on how the expectation that femininity is used to attract heterosexual men makes her feel unsafe as a queer feminine woman:

...one of the things I struggle with probably more than anything else with my gender identity is really really really unwanted attention from men. It makes me so angry. I have a lot of anger around it and a lot of just awful feelings around it. So I know that a lot of this socialization of how women should look and act comes from heterosexuality of like, *this is how you’re going to get attention and validation from men*, and that is not in any way, shape, or form [what I want]. More than anything [I have] the thought of what can I do to lessen [attention from men] ... because a lot of that attention is unsafe.

Katie went on to say “If I could change that I would. I don’t know how.” If she believes that it is not simply being female which attracts so much attention, but her particular brand of femininity, then it might stand to reason that making herself less feminine might be one way to change her circumstances. However, as she noted during different points in the interview, expressing femininely “makes [her] happy.” When she says, “I don’t know how” to get less attention from men what she might mean is that larger societal norms would have to shift: being a feminine woman would not be confused with being heterosexual and (perhaps) femininity would not invite having one’s space occupied by masculine people.

Michelle, Edith, Katie, and Heather describe a link between heterosexual male attraction and violence: if a woman attracts a man and then refuses him, it could result in violence. More abstractly, by virtue of expressing a queer identity, queer women become subject to the violence of patriarchy without the protection of men. Said differently, being a particular kind of woman makes some women more vulnerable to violence. In an interview about sex workers, Chapkis (2006) said, “Women and sex are closely linked in our culture – women’s sexual status is still defining for many women: virgins, wives, and mothers have a protected status denied to sluts, dykes, and whores” (244).

Some queer feminine women I interviewed internalize this differential feminine status as something positive to project to the world. In short, they attempt to create a queer feminine style. Renee told me, “It is very important to me for people to see that I’m queer. And feminine. You know? This is what it looks like... Sometimes I think I try to make what is invisible, visible.” She and I went on to have this conversation about her style:

Maura: It’s an interesting style to pull off and I’ve wondered if you think about it, if you take steps to think, *this makes me queer, I’ll keep my hair like this because it makes people read me as queer?*

Renee: Yes, definitely.

Maura: So you consciously think about it?

Renee: Yes, definitely. I definitely consciously think about it. I'm not super high femme or anything like that so I just want to make sure that people see me as queer and femme.

Because she doesn't feel the need to express as "super high femme" and because it is important to her to be read as queer and as feminine, Renee consciously constructs a feminine style that people would have to read as queer through the style of her hair (a Mohawk), facial piercings and tattoos.

Montana also told me that she believed that femmes can create a performative queer feminine aesthetic.

I get tired of looking at queer notions of femme that are skinny, white, women that I think you could see just as easily on the pages of Cosmopolitan or Ladies Home Journal or whatever. I think that while certainly I'm not suggesting that's not a valid femme representation, but what does excite me is when I see femme representations either in person or in media of queer women who do have a queer aesthetic, who have something you're not going to see on the cover of those magazines whether it's, you know, how do they present with their body size? How do they present with their body ability? How do they present with their class? How do they present around their race, their tattoos, their body modifications, their sense of style in clothing?

Danielle agreed that style differences sometimes connote a queer femininity, "Pretty much the way that you can identify queer femmes from [other] girls is, you know, a lot of times there's more tattoos, or a little more edginess to them or a little bit more funky style or a little bit of ... you know!" However, this is not foolproof. Even if it is more common for queer women to have Mohawks, piercings, tattoos, or even "funky style," some heterosexual women also adopt this style.

Although no one could definitively say that someone is queer or heterosexual based on presence or absence of tattoos, Renee is suggesting that a kind of political stance (e.g. that women do not need to look a certain way to be considered feminine) influences her style choices. Danielle, a black femme, agreed:

In the black community, a lot of times, we can measure who's queer and who's not by natural hair. If you have natural hair, you're likely queer. If you perm your hair, you're likely straight because that comes with being feminist too though and being Afrocentric and everything. For me, it's easier for me to pick out femmes. I mostly hang in the black community and so, you know, I'm like, oh, ok, she's a femme, she's a femme, that might be just one of her straight girlfriends.

For Renee, trying to "make what is invisible, visible" through her projection of a queer looking femininity, it is another consciously produced resistance to heteropatriarchy. For Danielle, feminist and Afrocentric political ideas about ideal standards of beauty may influence how some queer women present themselves to the world.

Most other participants felt that while some queer feminine women do adopt an "edgy" style that may allow some people to read them as queer, they themselves felt that their femininity made most people read them as heterosexual. However, like Renee and Danielle, they felt that queer feminine women adopted a different feminine attitude which marked them as queer, like Patricia who said "I feel empowered because I'm a femme. I might be 10 times more outrageous [than the average woman] because I feel so empowered as a femme." Emma told me that this is how she deals with being read as heterosexual, "I'm also a very brash sort of brassy feminine person and that doesn't really match up with who a feminine straight woman is supposed to be. So I think that's actually one way that I deal with not being read as queer, is not being a good woman." When I asked her to give me examples of what it means to "not be a good woman," she told me, "Being loud, being obnoxious, not shutting up when people tell me to be quiet, speaking my mind about everything. I really actively try to break all the stereotypes around femininity and what it means to be feminine." Patricia agreed with her:

[When you're a femme], I think you're sort of loud. You get attention. Straight women might get attention, really feminine straight women might get attention, but it's like we said earlier...your attitude. Because you sort of have that aggressive attitude. I don't mean aggressive, but it's out there. Your presentation is out there and that leads to visibility and that's a choice, to take on that attitude and go out there and show it off, for sure.

And Danielle agreed:

[My femininity is] definitely different because I know that when I'm in a room of straight people I stand out a lot more than the other women, regardless if they're [considered] hotter than me [by societal standards]. I know that I have a presence that's very different. That's just a lot more... I think queer femmes are a lot more, *so what?* You know? I, you know, a lot of us are very independent women; we're like, you know, not...we don't care as much about what other people think and straight women...there's that sassyness about us that's like, you know, whatever. It's like, the *I don't need you* [attitude] and when I want what I want, I'll go get it. I think that's a lot more of a queer perspective, you know, that's separate from straight women

Like Renee's perspective that queer feminine women should visually express their queer difference, other participants felt that queer feminine women diverge from heterosexual feminine women in their attitudes. Just like some heterosexual women having tattoos and Mohawks, it is of course true that some heterosexual women are "loud," do not "shut up when people tell [them] to be quiet," have an "aggressive attitude," or have an "I don't need you [attitude]." Whether or not it is possible for heterosexual women to take on the attitude characteristics they describe, participants who felt this way believed that their attitude difference stemmed from their queerness. Crimson said, "I feel like femmes take a lot less shit than straight girls do ... like I don't know femmes who aren't like, this is a privilege, if you can't handle it, I'm going to move on." In some ways these participants are delineating a false line between heterosexual and queer women based on stereotypical ideas about (heterosexual) hegemonic femininity; in doing so they create a perspective that assumes all heterosexual women are a homogenous group. However, their description of their different femininities, whether those differences are visual or attitude-based, is not selected arbitrarily: they reason that these differences are based in the distinct goals of femininity for *most* heterosexual women and *most* queer women. They are not necessarily talking about individual heterosexual women, but the expectations of hegemonic heterosexual femininity. Irene explained:

I'm not the nurturing one in the relationship, you know what I mean? I'm not good with emotions, or anything like that. Relationships I look for are pretty evenly split in terms of those things. Like I don't seek out, you know, anything other than that. I think that ... partly because of who I am, but partly because I'm queer too...I'm not feminine in stereotypical ways. I do, I like to cook for people. I like certain things like [that]. I definitely think that queer femmes strike a balance with partners, people, and relationships. While I embrace a lot of things I do not believe, I do not feel that I want some things. I definitely want a strong balance, equality, that kind of thing.

Similarly, Blake told me that while heterosexual women and queer women may appear to have similar feminine presentations that maybe they do not share "the same goals or the same background." When I asked what those goals might be she said:

Well, they're probably not trying to attract the same folks. So a straight woman's goal is probably to find a guy so she can settle down and have kids and that ties into how she presents herself; [a queer woman] wouldn't necessarily ... maybe she just doesn't want to have kids, she's more confident, maybe not needing to settle down and start a family.

Again, there are heterosexual women who expect equitable relationships or whose primary goal is not to "settle down and have kids." However, what all of these participants are commenting on is the overarching ideal of heterosexual femininity: femininity is narrowly defined in its visual aesthetic; it is associated with submission and weakness because of its mandated compliance with hetero(masculinity); and the goals of hegemonic femininity are associated with reproduction and family life. In their description of alternative feminine selves because of their queerness, they are commenting on the ways in which queer communities offer alternative ways to structure one's life and to question normative gender productions.

Queer Communities Create Critical Perspective about Gender

Of course it is not an individual rejection of heterosexuality alone that influences an alternative queer femininity; it is a lived feminine expression within queer communities that offers alternative gender interactions (which, in turn, influence how queer feminine women think

about their femininity as personal, internal, performative,² and beneficial). This happens in multiple ways: queer communities create different experiences with gender which allow for a personal reflection about femininity; they offer relationships with people who have multiple and alternative gender identities. Also, as I'll end this section discussing, queer communities' expansive array of gender identities offers a safe place to explore feminine expressions.

Part of the reason that queer experiences with femininity differ from hegemonic femininity is that queer women's experiences with sexual difference in queer communities allow them to reevaluate the hegemonic mandates of femininity. Sabrina said:

I think that we process things differently. I think where a straight girl might just go along with those [mainstream femininity] cues, not even ask why the hell did I do that? Because we've dealt with a coming out process, I'm gay or [whatever], we're a little bit more in touch with the mechanisms inside our own head[s] that bring up the reasons why we do what we do.

Similarly, Crimson told me:

Queer women have to question a lot more because we're taught that we're supposed to be with men. If we go as far to think outside that then we also question other things that like aren't what we imagined for ourselves or how we feel happiest. I think it's just more common for us to be like, ok, well if I don't have to do it this way then ... something like dating who I've been told to date, then I don't have to be the quiet, coy, waiting to be chased, personality.

Making the same connection between heterosexuality and the mandate of female femininity that other participants have made, Sabrina and Crimson suggest that evaluating (and then rejecting) the assumption that they should be heterosexual has meant that they also evaluate the necessity of being feminine.

Also, the queer women I interviewed told me that they were more likely than heterosexual women to reflect on their femininity because they are surrounded by a community

² Throughout, I use the term "performative" to describe femme gender the way that my participants used the word: to describe a conscious performance of femininity. Importantly, academic queer theorists use the term differently [see Butler, 1990].

expectation that they should be masculine, that is reject femininity, because they are queer. Kelly said, “[There is] a tendency within the lesbian community to be less overtly feminine,” because, “At one point, I would say there was a very strong tendency to be outspokenly and deliberately androgynous. The idea that being too masculine or too feminine was wrong and that we shouldn’t buy into those gender roles.” Because of this community norm, Kelly said, “Straight women never encounter the circumstances of walking into a social gathering and have people judge them for whether or not they are too feminine.” The judgment that a woman could be “too feminine” to be authentically part of a lesbian community may influence some women to try to be more masculine. Katie told a common tale of shifting one’s presentation from feminine to masculine when she stopped identifying as heterosexual:

I think my entire life I have always been very stereotypically feminine, but as I started to question my sexuality and go through that whole phase I really associated being feminine with being straight and I didn’t understand how I could have all these other attractions and desires outside of that and so when I was a sophomore in college and began to come out as a lesbian, I cut off all my hair and didn’t wear a lot of makeup and went through this whole makeshift gender identity to try to make this other label of my sexuality fit because I didn’t know how the two could coexist.

Kelly and Katie are meeting a negotiation between gender accountability (wherein dominant culture insists that sex and gender align in the production of female femininity) and a queer subcultural expectation that they should reject female femininity. When Katie started associating femininity with “being straight,” she went through a “makeshift gender identity” in which she became more masculine to make her gender fit her non-heterosexual sexuality. The experience of rejecting the stereotypical femininity she had grown up with, living with a more masculine presentation, and then reevaluating both gender expressions when she decided to express more femininely means, to Katie, that she has a uniquely conscious feminine identity. Katie went on to say:

I think that identifying as femme is, I think what makes it queer is that it is a thought about gender expression in a way. I don't think it's a choice like when I shaved my head and stopped wearing makeup and how like uncomfortable and foreign that felt. Like, I don't think it's a choice that I'm comfortable in my body and in my expression, but I think that it's really a thought out process. I'm really well aware about the politics behind the clothes that I'm buying and I'm really conscious about how people are going to treat me and perceive me in the way that I present myself.

In her conscious feminine identity of femme, Katie offers a complicated analysis about choice in our gender identities and presentations. She made a choice to present as masculine when she shaved her head and stopped wearing makeup. Because it was a choice, and not something that she felt inclined to do, it felt “uncomfortable and foreign.” Although her femininity is not a conscious political choice, because it is what makes her feel more comfortable, it is a “thought out process.” It is queer because it is a “thought about gender expression.” Similarly, when I asked Charlotte what made her femininity queer, she told me, “it's queer because you choose it.” She went on:

It's so easy to go through life and do what society tells you. I grew up in the country and I was raised to grow up and have babies and like have a farm, which is something I still want to do, but have a farm, have babies, don't go to college, get your high school diploma and call it good. Get on your tractor and start going. It would have been really really easy to do that. It would have been easy to do that. There were plenty of people I could have had as a partner, plenty of land, and I had all the skill set. You know? And it would have been easy to do that, and to do what people told me. To take this gender and say, that's good enough for me, and I think people do that. But what's queer is when you defy that and you can defy that by consciously choosing what you want and I think that's radical.

Although she's a cissexual female feminine person, Charlotte conceives of her femininity as *not* doing what “society” tells her. She rejected the idea that she should have an unreflexive femininity, marry, have a farm, and have babies. Although she is feminine, something that we might say is something “people told [her]” to do, it is “radical” because she is “consciously choosing what [she] want[s].” Annabelle felt similarly:

I think that femmes are so different from straight women. I can kind of understand why some people might have that complaint about a straight woman [that they reinforce gender stereotypes about women by being feminine], although I would certainly not have that

complaint. But I think femmes are very different and they're very conscious about gender. They know what all their options are. It's like a conscious, for me at least, I feel like it's a conscious choice. A conscious expression. It's not like my parents told me to wear a dress and so I did. You know? It's not as simple as the way I perceive heterosexual women's femininity.

Kelly also said, "All this stuff is more complex for queer women than for straight women, in my opinion. In that sense, being feminine is more complicated." I think it would be rather easy to assume that these queer feminine women are making an argument for the radical nature of their own gender expression by scapegoating other feminine (heterosexual) women as less aware of their options and therefore, duped by patriarchy. Perhaps this is, in part, true [please see Chapter 6 for a further discussion of this]. After all, we are left with a portrait of heterosexual femininity that is an unconscious reproduction of what they have been told to do; it is simple and non-complex; they put on dresses because their parents told them to. However, in other ways, these participants are explaining their different experiences with femininity due to occupying a lower status in society's sexual hierarchy.

Discussing the queer femme controversy over whether or not heterosexual women can claim a femme identity [discussed further in Chapter 6], Katrina said:

Straight women *can* identify as femme. Straight women *don't*. Because they take their gender expression as an assumption, not as a performance. For example, I have known straight women [who] for all intents and purposes remind me of queer femmes, but they would never identify that way because it's not necessarily a choice to them, to look a certain way. I think it's very much a choice for me, and a very celebratory one. It's not that they *can't* identify as femme, it's that they ... (not they, I shouldn't say they broadly as in all straight women have no concept or are savvy of this kind of language, that would be a ludicrous assumption). Most straight women don't view [femininity] as a choice, they view it as an assumption. That sort of thing is exactly opposite of why I identify as femme.

Katrina clarifies the idea that heterosexual femininity is simplistic or apathetic: perhaps many heterosexual women enjoy femininity (as queer feminine participants say they do) and an empowered feminine identity has little to do with the gender someone finds herself attracted to.

For these reasons, heterosexual women can identify as femme, a conscious feminine identity. However, by and large, they do not because, as Katrina notes, “they take their gender expression as an assumption.” Although this may not be all heterosexual women, hegemonic hetero(gender) is based in being hetero(feminine) or hetero(masculine) *and* believing that these are natural categories (Bornstein, 1994). Someone may conceivably have a heterosexual sexual orientation and question the naturalness of sex, gender, and sexual orientation categories, but she would then be taking on a kind of “alternative,” or pariah, femininity herself; hegemonic femininity is constituted by unreflexive feminine behavior.

Also, while mainstream gays and lesbians have become increasingly invested in projecting a portrait of gay communities as normatively gendered (Bornstein, 1994; Duggan, 2002; Seidman, 2004), these participants suggest that queer communities have a history of cultivating a resistance to normative gender, which encourages people in queer communities to be highly reflexive about their gender identities and expressions. Katie mused, “I don’t know that straight women think about their gender identities a lot (or if they do what that means for them), but I think queer femmes [do].” Similarly, Ruth said, “... like a random straight person on the street doesn’t think a lot about gender identity and you talk to a random queer person on street, and they’ve spent a lot of time thinking about gender identity.” Also, Renee commented, “[Being queer] makes you very conscious. I think in terms of masculinity and femininity and what you see as masculine and feminine is more obvious because we’re consciously doing it.” When I asked her why queer women talk about consciously choosing femininity, and heterosexual women tend not to discuss gender that way, she said:

Probably because when you identify as something, like you’re in a minority group, like I said, you really have to ... you kind of have to ... kind of come outside and you see everything around you. For me, evaluating all these different things. For me, I guess, being aware of my own femininity and masculinity and seeing what exactly is feminine to

some folks and what is masculine to some folks. Gosh, for me performance, being able to display it – what I see as masculine and what I see as feminine.

She went on to say, “There are so many words when you’re queer. There are so many. There are so many subcultures within queer.” In part, what Renee is telling us is that queer people may discuss identifying with complex and nuanced gender identities because queer communities offer more gender identities than dominant culture allows. Danielle agreed:

I [had] never thought about [gender] as much [until] I’ve been out as queer. [I] never thought about it quite as much because it [wasn’t] always in your face. [Now it is]. You know, someone will say I’m only attracted to femmes, or I’m only attracted to that, and you start thinking about the words and what they mean and when they say that what their expectation is from that. Just being in the queer community, I feel like you’re constantly being forced to analyze a lot of parts of your identity because they’re always being questioned.

Abby, said, “I think there are straight women who just love femininity and aren’t doing it for men. Some are, some aren’t, but you know, the one difference is I’m queer so all the complexities of being queer versus being straight. Different worlds.” She went on to concur with Renee and Danielle:

With feminine [heterosexual] women, what I’ve noticed is there’s not that kind of awareness of being sex positive, of playing with gender from being attracted to FTM, genderqueer, to butch ... certainly not, some femmes are attracted to femme women too. There’s just not that awareness [for heterosexual women].

The multiple possibilities for gender (and attraction to those genders) in queer communities allows for a personal reflection of gender and sexual attraction that may not be afforded to people outside of queer culture.

Further, queer people constantly interact with people who have non-normative gender identities and expressions. More than the abstract possibility of multiple femininities and masculinities, queer people have the opportunity to reflect on gender and sexuality because people in their community offer real life examples of gender divergence. Katrina explained:

[Queer people] have to [evaluate gender]. It's part of our culture. I mean, if you are existing within queer culture and you are around people who are in same-sex couples, around people who are playing with notions of being genderqueer, possibly trans, possibly going through surgeries, everything you know about the dichotomy between male and female, between expressing as male – well, between biological sex, between gender, between sexual orientation, everything you know about those so called dichotomies gets blown up. If you're paying attention at all these things are getting called into question everyday within your lived experience. So, I mean, if there's any level of self awareness or critical thought in people who live around queers, you have no choice.

It is those real life examples which provide queer people with something the hegemonic gender order does not provide, and something that queer feminine women maintain makes their feminine identity different from heterosexual women's femininity: choice.

Michelle expounded on how queer communities and lesbian communities offer bisexual, lesbian, and queer women more choices than heterosexual women are offered:

In the queer community, particularly in the lesbian community, there's been this amazing and beautiful and great history of saying, you know what, all those things that you say I have to do because I was born a woman, I don't have to do them. And I think that's a really fantastic thing. I think for straight women, they don't, they haven't, women's lib only went so far. I think the culture still gives them so few options in terms of what parts, if any, sort of feminine coding or trappings that they want to go for. They may not want any of it, but they feel like they have to because of societal pressures. I think that for them they don't have any options of femininity.

Michelle points out the “amazing and beautiful” history in lesbian communities of rejecting mandates for being a woman in society; although feminism has offered some choices for heterosexual women, it “only went so far.” Queer women are offered the choice to totally reject femininity or to embody parts of feminine coding.

The gender choices offered in queer communities are multi-layered: it offers a reflection about gender identities and expressions, but it also offers a range of feminine expression.

Sabrina said, “I think that queer femininity takes on its own...there's this kind of like freedom to play with the boundaries of sexuality, gender, and social conformity.” This freedom means that people like Michelle can feel that they “learned the drag queen's version of femininity” while

others, like Crimson, can recognize that, “queers have a broader idea of what can be feminine.”

Michelle elaborated on the ways in which queer culture’s options in femininity encourages a hyper-femininity:

The difference is that queer femmes have options with femininity. They’re saying, you know what, I don’t have to wear lipstick, it’s a choice, so I’m going to wear bright pink lipstick with a glitter overlay just to let you know that I’m going this on my terms. I didn’t do this because my daddy told me I had to or because I’m trying to attract an army man. I’m doing this because I like the way it looks; I like that it stands out and it doesn’t look like everybody else.

Michelle, like many other participants, felt that because they have chosen femininity, they make extravagant and hyper-visible displays of femininity. These displays of femininity are often rejected in dominant heterosexual society. For the idea of femininity to be kept intact as natural, it cannot look so produced as “pink lipstick with a glitter overlay”; wearing this kind of makeup displays their rejection of “trying to attract an army man.”

Although queer communities reserve a certain stigma for feminine expression [discussed at length in Chapter 6], they also offer a safe reprieve from dominant culture’s hostile environment for feminine expression. Most importantly, participants explained that queer communities are “safer” places to express femininely. Emma, who said that she actively tries to challenge how people conceive of feminine women by “not being a good woman,” said that “when I’m in queer spaces I don’t have to do that so much...I can be more, I don’t know, stereotypically feminine.” Similarly, Irene told me that she enjoys being hyper-feminine and taking on a “drag” version of femininity, but “not in heterosexual settings as much because it’s not the same.” Michelle agreed, “it’s fun to put on glitter and bright pink makeup, and boas, and six inch heels and you can do that in the safety of your own community where you can’t really do that in other communities. It’s fun and safe.” Patricia explained further:

When I’m in the straight world like a lot of men make me feel really unsafe because they’re responding to that outrageous sexuality because I can’t turn it on and off because

it's that core part of me and so I get hit on a lot but they won't back down and I get scared. I don't want to go out alone at night. I don't feel that way in the queer community; I feel the opposite. I feel really strong. Even when butches hit on me inappropriately I'm like I can freakin top you because I'm a femme! It's like a totally different power exchange, in my mind. I might not be any safer in the queer community, but it feels safer. I really think a lot of femmes feel that way.

When Patricia expresses herself in heterosexual settings, men make her feel “unsafe,” whereas queer communities offer a “totally different power exchange.” For this reason, the safety offered by queer communities to express femininity, queer communities sometimes witness a more outrageous presentation of femininity. Katie also feels that, “part of [feminine display] is different in queer communities because I do feel that it is slightly safer in queer communities for femmes.” She explained:

I think [that with femininity in queer communities] there's a lot of in your face kind of thing and I think that part of that is trying to re-own part of what's been taken away. Like, I feel really objectified [in heterosexual settings] and I can't walk down the street because of how I'm being perceived and so when I walk into the dyke bar, I'm still going to wear my miniskirt and I'm going to show all the dykes that I know what I'm doing. And it's more of an ownership, like it's more of a kind of like, if you were going to objectify and marginalize this, when we're going to make a *we're here and in your face* kind of thing.

Katie later said, “Femininity has to be downplayed to be safe or taken seriously in the rest of the dominant world.” Because of this, she feels that her femininity has been “taken away” in dominant society. Although queer communities might be hostile to some expressions of femininity, they also provide “safe” places where queer feminine women can express a hyper-femininity and not feel as fearful of the consequences of their production as they might in heterosexual settings.

Race and Class Dimensions of the Feminine Other

Recall that the reason that Schippers (2007) is reluctant to include race as one of the qualities that informs occupying a hegemonic or subjugated feminine position within the gender order is that she has constructed a theory that is attentive to the ways in which behavior complies

or resists the gender order: hegemonic femininity complies; pariah and alternative femininities resist. She argues that women of color should not be understood to occupy a category of alternative femininity because of marginalized racial status; scholars should think about how *behavior* complies with or resists patriarchy. I both concur and disagree with her perspective. From my point of view, it is true that anyone can comply or resist patriarchy through their behavior. However, they are always complying with or resisting a white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Just as women in queer communities experience different cultural norms for feminine expression, race, ethnic, and class norms influence how people experience and identify with femininity.

Axes of Oppression: Femininity at an Intersection of Privilege and Oppression

These axes of oppression associated with a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy – racism, classism, heterosexism, and sexism – are played out on the bodies of individuals. This is perhaps easiest to see when people exist at an axis of oppression which encompasses several oppressions. Let us spend some time hearing from Crimson, a self described “queer femme,” a now twenty-one year old who has called herself queer since she was thirteen, a woman who described her class status on her interview survey as “Poor/Black/Fat/Nappy-haired.” When I asked Crimson why she described her class status as these four things, she told me that these things informed her status in society. She went on:

When I came out queer to my family, my mom, she wasn't disappointed exactly ... she just thought it was going to be a taxing thing, but one of the things she brought up was ... it's ok when white people are queer because everything's just ok for them. *You've already got things going against you, do you really want to add on to that?* I understand that with being queer, I'm also black, I'm also fat. Then there's one more thing with the hair thing. I don't see ... there aren't women on tv or in magazines who look like me. Women who are black and are depicted as pretty are light skinned or have straight hair, or a lot of times have blonde hair. That's just another thing I had to accept of being outside the norm. It's one of the things I had to accept about myself.

One of the ways that Crimson resists a white supremacist patriarchy is through wearing her hair natural – without a relaxer or a perm – which is “just another thing outside the norm.” Because the gender order is infused with racist codes for behavior, Crimson’s hair decisions mark her refusal to comply and would most probably mark her as a pariah – someone to be feared because of her refusal to comply.

Although some women of color may “comply” by making different hair decisions, white women do not even have this choice because their hair is assumed as a neutral default assumption for how hair should be and how women should look to be considered beautiful. White women do not have to comply or resist, in choosing the texture of their hair, because they are always implicated in a white supremacist gender order. Crimson said more about experiences with her hair:

It’s not even questioned that [women of color] wouldn’t have straight hair. I challenge people every time we talk about it. Why don’t we question why we would burn our scalps to look like somebody else? I think I was in high school when I stopped straightening my hair. Not only was I the fat kid and the openly queer kid, I was the kid with the big nappy hair. So it became another thing I had to make fit who I am and so I make it a point to address that as well, being the other, it’s just another thing that has to be dealt with, that I have to be conscious of. Sometimes people will make it an issue. Why don’t you put straightener in your hair? It’s not something I think about [anymore].

When she made the decision to stop straightening her hair, she became the girl with the “big nappy hair,” as well as being “the fat kid,” and the “openly queer kid” – it was an aspect of her identity that made her “the other.” All of these identities created a persona that was othered in her high school environment and no one who experienced one of these oppressions could understand the whole of experiencing all of them – being black, wearing natural hair, being fat, and being queer. She went on to describe how her queer politics influence her experiences with her hair:

I belong to this online forum that is for black women with natural hair and the whole idea is that from the time black women are small children, we’re taught that your hair needs to

be changed and I got my hair relaxed for the first time when I was five. That's usually the average age – five or six. So before I stopped and cut all my hair off I had no idea what my natural hair texture was like. So the forum is so everyone can exchange ideas because of none of us knew. When you stop and cut your hair off it's a big surprise and nobody knows what to do with it or what products to use so we have this forum. I get really excited about it all the time, but it's sad when the political aspect comes in and people don't understand. I feel like it's always the femmes that get it. Any black woman can wear her hair natural. For some women it is a fashion thing or it's what's cool right now or it's low maintenance or whatever. But when conversations about white supremacy or cultural assimilation or whatever comes up, it's the femmes that are like, yeah, that's why I do [it].

At a different point in our interview Crimson told me that she does not believe heterosexual women can be femmes so when she says that “it's always the femmes that get it,” she means that queer women of color are the ones who, she believes, understand the political nature of wearing natural hair. Although the forum to discuss natural hair is political in its very existence because it offers information on how to wear hair that white society has denigrated, Crimson believes that “any black woman can wear her hair natural” but that political beliefs about white supremacy and cultural assimilation are infused with a queer rejection of racist/patriarchal/heterosexist ideals for how women should look.

Again, the intersection of her multiple identities influences how she experiences one of them, the wearing of her hair. In discussing why she does not feel conflicted about wearing her hair natural she said, “I feel like it's just been so long that I've known that I'm not what society sees as beautiful that I don't even try to be that anymore.” She expounded on this issue:

My hair being the way it is it definitely is seen as another strike against me in the idea of what makes a pretty woman. With my dark skin color and my thighs, being openly queer, not straightening my hair is on that list of things that I have taken and made powerful. It does ... I have encountered people who don't think it's attractive or I've been in job interviews where people are like, *what are you going to do with it?* So I feel like it's just another one of those things that I want to take back, to claim its power and its beauty, as something that is ... that a lot of people won't recognize as attractive or positive, but that I want to make very femme and sassy.

Certainly women who have “dark skin,” “[large] thighs,” or queer attractions can behave in a way that complies with a racist, heterosexist gender order. It is Crimson's decision to “claim

[the] power and [the] beauty” of these things and to make them “very femme and sassy” which marks her resistance against patriarchy. Again, other women – white women whose hair texture is a default assumption or women with conventional body sizes and conventional sexual attractions – begin their journey toward compliance or resistance at a different starting place than Crimson. These women can still resist, but they are negotiating different choices. Although it is necessary to understand how women’s behavior influences their status in the gender order, it is also imperative to understand the ways in which women are organized differently – along hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality – pre-behavior.

Race, Privilege, and Femininity

Just as the queer women I interviewed believe that queer communities offered subcultural gender norms when compared to dominant (heterosexual) culture, the queer black women I interviewed believed that black communities have alternative gender relations when compared to dominant (white) culture. Johanna explained her experiences growing up African American in the south as growing up in a “matriarchal community” with a “glass ceiling”:

There’s that whole experience when you’re going to church that like women can be like ushers and head of the choir and all that good stuff, but they’ll never make church elder and it’s just a given. It’s not something somebody challenged and got smacked down for, it’s just a given. So, yeah, in that way. Femininity isn’t like revered and exalted, but I kind of feel like I still felt this sense of a matriarchal community with the cooking of big dinners and the way that big social activities were organized by women and men just sat on the periphery and men were shooed out of the kitchen and shooed out of the talks and all that good stuff, boy children especially. I kind of feel like I grew up in this matriarchal community, but it had a glass ceiling on it.

Although femininity may not be totally “revered and exalted” in communities she grew up in, there was still a sense that these communities could be described as “matriarchal.” Importantly, this discussion of a kind of matriarchal community was juxtaposed against how white women experience femininity: Johanna believes that white women do not experience matriarchal communities and that this affects how they develop femininities. She went on:

I kind of feel like with black folks, maybe all communities of color, that feminine, being feminine for women, is kind of the default setting. Sometimes it's more extreme – like I don't think I could do some of the things with my hair or the wearing of hats that my mother and grandmother do, you know, going to church. But I kind of just feel like it was the default setting. The way I grew up it might be more difficult to be butch.

Although femininity is a “default setting” for all women, Johanna seems to believe that “all communities of color” create more of an emphasis on women being feminine. Whether or not it would actually be more difficult for a white woman or a black woman to be butch, what is important is that Johanna relates her opportunities for gender expression to the racially specific community in which she was raised. In agreement with Johanna, Renee, a Black femme said, “I think [femme stigma] is definitely a black/white [difference] sometimes. Black femmes never had any issues with being femme, feminine at all.” Renee told me this at a moment when we were discussing how some white femmes had been treated badly in queer communities in Atlanta; she believes that white and black queer women have different experiences with queer femininity because they come from having different femininity experiences as white and black women.

In the way that all gender codes of behavior constrain or facilitate behavior, racialized codes of femininity may facilitate pariah femininity, or resistance against patriarchy. Danielle told me, “I think as black women we're already expected to be more outspoken and to stand up for ourselves and already, you know, not taking any bull shit while in a dress and heels. Yeah.” She continued to explain what this means for black queer women:

The thing is, I mean, black women are typically expected to be more aggressive and dominant so that's already a traditional part of our femininity whereas it's more traditional for white [women] to be more submissive so I think us falling into queer femininity is a lot easier in terms of having that edgy, spunky, sassy, diva quality about us, you know. It's a lot easier, I think.

Stereotypical ideas about black women – that they are “outspoken,” they “stand up for [them]selves,” “don't take any bullshit,” and are “more aggressive,” have historically been used

to rationalize their oppression (Collins, 2000). Not only does Danielle note these as positive qualities, she surmises that these qualities makes it “easier” for black women to “[fall] into queer femininity,” which is “edgy, spunky, sassy, and diva[like].” Importantly, Danielle concurs with Johanna and Renee that racialized experiences with femininity create unique experiences with feminine identification, but she suggests something more. These alternative feminine qualities she associates with black women of outspokenness, aggressiveness, and sassyness – qualities which resist patriarchy – are qualities that are associated with a pariah queer femininity. This is perhaps more evidence that black women are always outside of hegemonic femininity.

As previously noted, it is not just queer desire that promotes an alternative femininity, but the context and sociality of a queer community. Similarly, it is not just being black, but being a part of black communities (and queer communities) which provides these alternative meanings of femininity. For example, during a different point in our interview, Danielle explained how black communities “promote dressing up”:

Definitely, the black community promotes dressing up like far more so it gives you opportunities to present how you want to and how it’s more exaggerated, I guess, a lot more frequently. And then the whole ballroom scene [parties in Black communities that offer awards for hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine outfits] that I was mentioning earlier. It’s mostly people of color and they have competitions of performing femininity and whatnot and so you’ve got [to] strut down the catwalk and you know, the best this, the best that, whatever, a lot of the ballroom scene very much promotes hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity and like no room for the middle situations.

This subcultural expectation for displaying exaggerated gender may help encourage a hyper-femininity which facilitates femme identity for queer black women. She continued:

It’s so funny because I spend the vast majority of my time in black queer space so, you know, the only time...(I go and I obviously spend time in mixed spaces as well), but I’m trying to think like hmm...I think there’s actually more black femmes than white femmes in Atlanta, like a lot more. Come to think of it, just thinking about when you walk into a room, like me walking into a room in a party that I go to, plenty of femmes. Plenty!

Everywhere and they're lesbian femmes. When I go out to the clubs where there are fewer black people, I feel like there's not as many high femmes.

Perhaps because it is common for black subcultures, like queer ballroom cultures, to encourage exaggerated femininity and masculinity, there is more latitude for expressing an extravagant femininity. After all, Danielle says that there are “plenty” of femmes in queer black spaces and “not as many high femmes” in racially mixed environments.

Crimson seemed to have an optimistic idea about queer femmes understanding each other's oppression across lines of race and class difference. She said, “Because being queer, being ostracized and othered, you start to understand other people's oppression...I can talk about race and class with other femmes and femmes get it. Whereas like other women just don't seem to get it and it's disappointing.” However, it was rare in interviews I conducted for white women to have spent time analyzing how their race has affected them as feminine people. Very few white women were as conscious of their race and class privilege as Betty, who said:

My race and my class absolutely affect my femme. [In terms of social class] I think the most striking example is that I've had the luxury of learning about my femme. I've had time to think about it, I've had time to read about it, study about it, and you know, free to speak about it in this really articulate way. There have been times in my life when I've had two jobs, but that hasn't been often. I'm able to exist in the world in a way where I can arrange myself, and arrange my expression, in a way that feels great for me. The intersection [of class and race] is [also] present, you know, because there's nothing upsetting to anyone about me being white and femme. That's a huge amount of privilege. There's race privilege in that in society.

Although she does not specifically articulate how her race status has influenced her experiences with femininity, Betty is conscious of how her class position has affected her feminine identity: it has afforded her the luxury of articulating a specific kind of femme identity, which she largely encountered during her college education. She adds that because she is middle class and white, there is “nothing upsetting to anyone” about her being feminine. She implies that femininity associated with working class women and women of color is “upsetting” to the social order,

implicating white, middle-class women in maintaining racialized hegemonic femininity.

Providing a specific example of how white femininity can have racist effects, she added,

The aesthetic of southern white women is wholly dysfunctional. I really believe that women, southern white women, are socialized [to believe that] manipulation is our only tool. White southern women talk about their feelings all the time, how they feel about something, which is really, you know, can be quite racist in that it takes up so much space.

Just as Johanna, Renee, and Danielle recognized the ways in which their experiences in black communities created opportunity contexts for them to live femininely gendered lives, Betty is arguing that white women are socialized – not just as women – but as white women.

Importantly, she tells us that one of the ways white women are socialized – to be “manipulative” and to “talk about their feelings all the time” – can be “quite racist” because it “takes up so much space.” In short, she makes the argument that white feminine socialization has an effect and that effect can uphold a racist hierarchy.

Katie was also conscious about how her race and class privilege have influenced her feminine identity:

The most recent thing that’s come for me is makeup in that I love it and think that it is so much fun [but] also knowing that with makeup, clothes, all of that, there’s a ton of class stuff behind all of that – in the particular way that I express femininity. I don’t think there is in the way that everyone does it, but in the way that I do it there’s a lot of class stuff that goes behind it. There’s a lot of patriarchy deeming what...there’s a lot of race stuff that goes behind makeup [also]. A lot of that not being ok in how we’ve stereotypically defined what it means to be a woman, and choosing to identify with that, and there’s some privilege that goes along with that. And I think more than anything it’s just an underlying patriarchy deciding that this is how women should look in the world.

More than anything, Katie tells us, there is an “underlying patriarchy” which dictates “how women should look in the world.” These expectations for how women should look are infused with race and class bias. Not only does she realize that there is “class stuff” involved in the specific kind of femininity she expresses, but she also points out that she has “chosen to identify” with “stereotypically defined [notions of] what it means to be a woman.” Although her queer

identity marks her as having a pariah femininity, Katie takes accountability for the ways in which her race privilege and classed production of femininity associate her with a more hegemonic notion of femininity than the femininity productions of working class women and women of color.

Montana, a white, middle-class femme who is conscious that her race and class statuses have had some effect on her feminine identity, provided some explanation for why many white women are inept in analyzing their race privilege. When I asked her why she identifies as a “fat queer femme,” she told me:

That’s basically, for me, the crux of [my social justice work]... but that leaves so much out. It’s interesting because all three of those identities are marginalized identities, you know, and so, you know, I’m sure it would be much more accurate

to be like I’m a white, able-bodied, educated, American and English speaking queer fat femme so I want to admit the things I’m not saying when I do say that, but definitely that’s the ... that is the intersection of where I do my social justice work.

The “crux of [Montana’s] social justice work” centers on being fat, queer, and femme because these are aspects of her social location where she experiences oppression; because of that, they have become salient identities.

It makes sense that one’s most salient (and therefore most analyzed) identities would be those that are marginalized. For instance, Michelle, a white working class femme, spoke at length about how her class has influenced her feminine identity [discussed below], but when I said to her, “Do you feel like your race, being white, has influenced your femininity?” She answered, “I think it influences everything. I think more than race, I think class influences everything and yes, I think definitely my class background has informed my ideas about femininity.” Although Michelle went on to talk about how her race is “possibly” influential because her experiences as a white working class woman have been different than femmes she knows who are working class black women, her first response was that class is more influential

than race. Often there was an acknowledgment on the part of participants with race and class privilege that they receive social privilege in these arenas, but how this occurred was left unanalyzed. Emma, a white middle-class femme, was unable to analyze how her race and class affect her femininity even after she brought up the importance of race and class. This was our conversation:

Maura: Do you feel like femme looks a certain way? Are there style markers?

Emma: I think that's a regional thing probably. It has to do with class and race, for sure.

Maura: So tell me from your specific location. What has your race and class taught you about femininity?

Emma: I don't know. Those are things I don't think about very often so...

A similar conversation occurred with Edith. I asked Edith if she thought her race and class positions, as a white, middle class femme, had influenced her femininity; she agreed that it had.

When I asked her to tell me how they had influenced her, she said:

Yeah, I haven't really thought about [that] or put much energy into [thinking about it]. Part of that might be that Seattle is so fucking white that I don't feel like it's something I could think about or construct in any kind of appropriate way because I don't really have [many experiences with people of color]... it would just be so theoretical and based on so many assumptions that [it] just feels not ok to me.

These examples might be illustrative of a woman of color critique of white feminists: they have learned to acknowledge that race and class are influential hierarchies, but still fail to think about the ways in which they actually structure their lives (Moïse, 2006). Also, these narratives tell an important story of identity and how certain identities become salient in the way that we organize our daily thoughts and actions. In terms of queer femininity, it is evidential of why these queer feminine participants have spent so much time analyzing (and organizing around) their feminine identities: their queer identities challenge their feminine status and mark them as pariahs.

Significantly, working class participants, like Michelle, were well versed in describing the

intersection of queer, working class, and feminine identities; women of color participants, like Johanna, articulated the intersection of their queer, woman of color, feminine identities. The intersection of sexuality, class, race, and gender are always present in the social location of individuals, but they become more salient when the identity is oppressed or challenged – removed further from hegemonic ideals of femininity.

Femininity, Beauty, and Social Class

Class oppression influences one's feminine identity, just as race, ethnicity, and sexuality might. However, social class is unique in the way that it intersects with hegemonic femininity in the expected production of feminine beauty. Conventional feminine characteristics (both visual and mental) are situated within a hegemonic (white, middle-class, heterosexual, and complicit) femininity. Feminine women who diverge from this archetype are visible pariahs.

Just as Danielle suggested that norms of black femininity are parallel to norms of queer femininity because of their resistant qualities (being aggressive, standing up for one's self, et cetera), Michelle, a white working class femme, believed that working class femininities are similar to queer femininities. Talking about the difference between middle class femininity and working class femininity, respectively, she said, "That's the delicate, flower femininity and ours is the rough on the street femininity." Repeatedly during the interview she would call queer femininities "fierce" and "in your face," in arguable opposition to "delicate, flower femininity." These perspectives are articulating the departure from hegemonic femininity that women of color, working class women, and queer women make; their focus on the behavioral qualities associated with many women in these groups suggest, not just their subordinate status to hegemonic femininity, but their pariah resistance to it and patriarchy.

This intersection of class and femininity becomes all the more complicated when we talk about the specific identity of queer femmes because butch/femme, the antecedent of modern

femme identity, was based in a working class subculture of lesbian bar life (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Michelle spoke to this conflict:

For me, [femme is] about working class history, that's where butch/femme came from. I think that has a lot to do with the exaggerated stuff too. I think when you work on streets, people who work on the streets have exaggerated femininity or exaggerated masculinity to attract customers and a lot of people who started the butch femme phenomenon worked the streets. And, so, I come from a working class background where femininity is this really harsh thing. It's this really rough and raw thing and I think that's where femme started. I think it started from this very stone, very rough, beginning and I identify with that. I think [that's why] people automatically link the term fierce with the term femme.

For Michelle, part of the current “rough and raw” qualities of femme identity exists because of their historical basis in working class communities. For her, it is perhaps not queer femininities’ departure from heterosexuality that marks it as pariah, but its association with working class behavioral pariah femininity. Edith, a white middle class femme, has also noticed this fusion of working class origin and modern femme sensibilities. She told me:

There's a lot of class issues around femme community. I definitely feel like I would be out of place for class reasons so I would probably shy away from it [a lot of times]. Being in a more privileged position, I don't feel comfortable in queer space and I don't feel comfortable in femme space, like I have to apologize for the job I have.

Because of her middle class status, Edith feels “uncomfortable” in femme community.

Significantly, she discusses “queer space” and “femme space” as the same kind of community. In some ways this speaks to the ways in which queer culture rejects the materialism associated with American capitalism (unlike more mainstream gay and lesbian communities) and the ways in which femme community is still based in working class sensibilities; It also illustrates that femme organizing resides more in “queer” communities rather than “gay and lesbian” communities. Perhaps because of its working class origins, femme identity would not be comfortably situated within a mainstream gay and lesbian framework. Edith went on to say that this is especially true in the visual presentation of femme:

Edith: At the same time, I look at some of the things that other femmes do who are probably in a different class bracket than I am just because of what I do for a living and what they do for a living and I love the way they perform their femininity. The fact they go to a thrift store and find some awesome skirt. I love that style. I wish I had that style sensibility. I don't know that it would really work on me, but I think that's just as femme as anything else. I end up feeling a little shame about having a good job that makes a decent amount of money and being able to buy new clothes and end up a little embarrassed about it sometimes.

Maura: Because queer sensibility is a little more...?

Edith: Working class.

Maura: Like queer presentation especially?

Edith: Yes.

In part, Edith's narrative speaks to an unproductive middle class guilt for her privilege in that she "end[s] up a little embarrassed" about her class position; it is also illustrative of the ways that people in privileged positions can exoticize the positions of oppressed people in that she "wish[es] [she] had that style sensibility." Because of the symbiotic relationship between working class femininity and queer femme sensibilities, Michelle felt that middle class femmes "emulate working class origins of femme." Even when middle class femmes try to adopt the style Edith wishes could "work on [her]," Michelle believes that the middle class femininity they were raised with still comes to the surface. She said:

I'm thinking about middle class femmes I've met through femme mafia who definitely have a softer edge to their presentation of femme, even when they're femmed out to the hilt it's definitely softer. I'm thinking about femmes I identify with more and they have a rougher approach to femme and they're all working class.

The reason Michelle gives for identifying more with working class femmes is that they have a "rougher femininity" and middle class femmes have a "softer edge to their presentation." I asked Michelle, "When you say a rougher femininity, can you give examples or talk about that a little more. Is it an attitude, is it in presentation?" She answered: "It's in all of it. I definitely think that it starts from the attitude, but it's shown [in the presentation]." She went on:

When I was thinking just a minute ago about middle class femmes I know and working class femmes that I know, it's interesting...like if I take two different people in two different outfits. The middle class femme is wearing an outfit that costs 50 bucks or whatever, but it's very nice material and it would be very acceptable in mainstream culture. There might be something that's a little over the top, some accessory that's big and bold, but the fabric is nice and the overall presentation is very pleasing by mainstream standards. The working class femme I'm thinking about is often wearing fabrics that are associated with other subcultures. She might spend the same amount of money on that outfit, but it's something that would not be appreciated in proper community.

Importantly, clothing that marks class status is not necessarily based in how much one spends on an outfit, but with what feminine qualities the outfit is associated. She went on to give examples that working class femmes might wear that would not be appreciated in "proper community":

"leather, or nylon like pvc, or lace, something that would be seen as promiscuous or somehow sub, [inferior]." Working class femmes, in Michelle's mind, are more likely to present their femininity with style markers that are "somehow promiscuous or sub" because working class femininity is already associated with these sexualized markers of subordinated femininity.

Although queer femininity is also subordinate to a hegemonic ideal of femininity, the middle class status of queer feminine women positions them closer to that hegemonic ideal. She went on to make the conjecture:

There must be something there in middle class femme's femininity, that it's more tied to mainstream culture's ideas of femininity and because working class femmes are already marginalized because of their class background, I wonder if, for that reason, their approach to femininity is always going to have a subcultural marginalized look to it and feel to it.

Again, as Michelle pointed out, working class femmes are "already marginalized because of their class background" and so their queer femininity is even more subcultural than the queer femininity of middle class femmes, which is "more tied to mainstream culture's ideas of femininity." Although it is significant that a specific queer feminine identity, femme, has been infused with working class meanings, it is unarguable that the larger context of ideal hegemonic femininity is also infused with class hierarchy and access to displaying capital success.

If social class can be read on one's body (Adair, 2001) and social class and femininity intersect with one another, it is reasonable that expectations of hegemonic femininity are displayed through displaying one's class affiliation. Further, ideals of feminine beauty are associated with things that decorate the body, things that are purchased. An example from Femme Mafia in Atlanta is instructive. Although other femme organizations I spent time with seemed averse to consumerist displays of femininity – Femme Affinity Group in Portland especially articulated an anarchist and anti-capitalist position and projected a do-it-yourself (DIY) kind of fashion aesthetic – the Femme Mafia in Atlanta always struck me as particularly invested in extravagant expressions of femininity. This extensive quote from my observation notes of my first femme-only Saturday night Femme Mafia event:

When I got to the restaurant, Danielle and another mafia femme were just discussing their friend who received a pair of Versace sun glasses that were 360 dollars from her butch as an apology for an argument they'd had. Later, I found out that the Versace sunglasses belonged to the leader of the organization. They call her "the Donna," a feminized spoof of the mafia leader name, "the Don."

A few minutes later the Donna entered. She is tall (at least in her very high heels); she wore a black pencil skirt, black vinyl high heels, and a hot pink corset with embroidered flowers. She is slender, but curvy with long black curly hair, pulled into a teased ponytail with an impressive amount of height. She wears fake eyelashes, red eye makeup, and a lot of lipstick and lipgloss. She tells us that her corset was handmade for \$80, bragging about the deal she had gotten. She sits next to me and immediately shows Danielle and the other mafia femme a ring on her right hand. It's a big pink stone with encrusted diamonds around it. She says, *I just needed some diamonds on the ring so I put them on today.* They coo over it. She announces that the diamonds are actually cubic zirconium. Then shows them another ring, a pink ring with a raised gold crown around it. Also she tells us that earlier that day she went to a costume store, *you know, to buy something simple like spirit gum* another girl laughed and said *simple like spirit gum?* and she said, *yeah, how else do you keep pasties on?* When she was there, she bought a pair of \$50 fake eyelashes: they have sequins, jewels, and feathers on them. She said, *Did I mention I had a good day? I did.*

Later in the evening when the organization leader walked away from the table, Danielle and the other mafia femme told me that they have an annual masquerade ball in January to celebrate the organization. Last year, they told me, the organization leader wore a Marie Antoniette-type dress with a huge train and a big wig. They said in unison, *that's why*

she's our Donna. Danielle said I'm just not that fabulous. She paused and said, I can't afford to be that fabulous.

After the constant references to extravagance and how much things cost I jotted in my memos, “How would working class femmes feel in this environment?” Importantly, the Donna casually mentioned being raised “poor” and “working class” and “coming from nothing” several times during my time with Femme Mafia. Although I did not interview her, my guess is that the Donna would not currently identify as middle class. Interestingly, she told me that she left Florida, where she grew up, because major gay cities like Miami have lesbian communities where “it’s all about having the right sunglasses.” She has described her femininity to me as “gritty,” and that the femme she identifies with is “all about white trash debutant” and infused with a “southern working class” sensibility. I agree with her assessment. Using Michelle’s language, the Donna’s presentation is not considered appropriate in mainstream society: her clothing is often synthetic material, she is often mistaken for a drag queen because of her outlandish makeup, and she has large and visible tattoos; she is also bi-racial and often tells stories about how her race is difficult for people to assess, another departure from hegemonic feminine ideals. However, her constant reference to the cost of her feminine production is telling of the classed expectations associated with femininity as is the mafia femmes’ agreement that the cost, time, and effort she puts into her femininity rightfully makes her “their Donna.” She is “fabulous,” and, as Danielle notes, not everyone can “afford to be that fabulous.”

Katie, a white middle class femme who was raised upper middle class, noted how she negotiates her particular classed (and expensive to produce) version of femininity with her political ideas about capitalism:

[Negotiating class politics and beauty] has been a really big struggle for me and I’m not over it. Part of it has been giving myself permission to be ok with wanting to look [what I consider] pretty. Part of it is still that I am now supporting myself completely on my own, my mom will take me shopping twice a year. <laughs> So part of it is that there has been a

financial way for me to purchase the clothes that I want to, but it's also been an ethical getting myself in a mind frame....There's been all these places in my life where I've dedicated myself to social change and what that looks like. I've done a lot of traveling in my life. I've seen sweatshops and know how unjust they are and all of that. Even thinking about the politics of companies that produce the clothes that I buy and how they treat their workers and all of that. And I think that now more than any other time in my life, I'm knowing that and I'm trying to be very smart about that but I'm also stepping back and saying this is what I'm going to dedicate my life to studying and this is my volunteer hours and this is everything and I'm going to go shopping and try not to feel guilty about it and that still changes a lot.

Interestingly, as Edith pointed out, products that do not exploit workers tend to cost more than more commonplace items that are known for their poor production policies:

[Someone might feel like], Hey, I might not agree with Mabeline's products, but I work at a nonprofit and it's important to me to express femininity and I can't go to Sephora and buy the really fancy makeup or stuff that's socially conscious. Like making those tradeoffs between these politics and those politics and self expression and always fighting the good fight and how you give parts of yourself up to do that sometimes. It's not always worth it. There are sacrifices and they're not always on the side we would like them to be.

Edith explained, "Now that I'm not working at a nonprofit and I can be more intentional about where I spend my money, I do. Even when I had to buy my makeup at the drugstore, I was as good about it as I could be without having to eat crappy." Further, as Katie also stated, Edith explained how some feminine people decide to make a "tradeoff" wherein they participate in consumerist culture because it benefits how they feel about their gender expression:

Someone [on my friend's livejournal made a post that] said *I have a real problem with some of the ways that femme is expressed in some of the unexamined capitalist overtones.* They had [written] some things that really pissed me off. I was like, *what the hell makes you think it's unexamined? We were raised under the same queer culture that you were. We're all activists too.* Not all of us, but a lot of us are pretty hardcore activists and recycle and care about the environment and do the best we can to be good global citizens. So it bugs me when I hear people say, *oh well, being femme you're not examining these other things.* Well, I have, but being me and being true to myself is really important to me. And it bugs me when there's [this idea that] *oh, I can't believe you would shop at a drug store and [buy] mabeline, they do animal testing.* Yeah, that's really horrible, but at the same time for people who can't afford it, who am I to tell them, like, you have no right to your gender expression unless it lives up this set of ideals that may not be yours anyway. Even if they are, like it's none of my...it's not my place to take that away from them.

In some ways, this “right to [a] gender expression” and the negotiation of feminine ideals and capitalism that comes with it, is unique to feminine women. As Edith later stated, “I think there are definitely class issues with access to some of the external things that we do to signify our femininity.” In many ways, feminine women are scapegoated for being capitalist consumers in a way that masculine people are not because of the obvious products that go into producing a feminine presentation. Katie explained further:

I think that when you look at femininity and capitalism, it is really mind boggling to me because when I look through Cosmo magazine or something and I look through all these ads that are just really really not ok...[I look at] what they’re saying and [also] know that women are really smart and a lot of them are really smart consumers. It’s interesting that a lot of can be so in your face [but that] there’s still so much buying into it kind of thing that I haven’t really been able to figure out. Is it internalized stuff that’s happening or what? I do think...it would be interesting to see. It would be interesting to see how much women spend on appearance versus how much men spend; it wouldn’t surprise me if it’s drastically more [that men spend].

In this statement, Katie notes two important social phenomena: first, capitalism is targeted at women in a unique way. Even though women “are really smart,” and “really smart consumers,” there is some kind of “internalized stuff that’s happening” wherein women are encouraged to buy products in order to feel entitled to a genuine feminine identity. Her second point complicates her first: women are not solely to blame for consumer culture because it would be unsurprising if men spent more on their appearance than women. Although it has been famously noted by Wolf (1997) that an economic consequence of patriarchy is that women spend a large portion of their income on their appearance, Katie is noting that feminine products are more obvious. For instance, a seven dollar tube of lip gloss worn with a fifteen dollar pair of high heels might read as more engaged with capitalism than a masculine person’s appearance of no lipgloss and a 150 dollar pair of Doc Martin boots. Katie went on to explain that a discussion about the importance of purchased gender markers is especially critical when we are talking about queer people purchasing these items:

Absolutely [queer femmes talk about external gender markers as part of their femme identity]. And the fact that this is a queer community, which is very different for me than a gay community, and I feel like a queer community is not financially stable. There's a lot of people being majorly discriminated against, femmes included, in the job market. I would not consider the queer community as having a ton of wealth and all this disposable income so it is really interesting that there is this whole material thing to it. I think for queer folks and for trans folks. I think that when you look at all the money and the effort that goes on for gender markers, there's a lot going on for a community that doesn't have a lot of money.

Katie, like others, places femmes within a "queer community" rather than a "gay community" and suggests that queer people, because of their variant gender expressions, are discriminated against in the job market and do not have "a ton of wealth." Still, there is a "whole material thing to it," in the production of gender variant identities and expressions. This point underscores the ways in which capitalism intersects with the production of gendered selves in that we purchase products to feel authentically gendered.

These moments of femininity's intersection with beauty ideals, race hierarchies, class differences, and capitalism highlight the situated existence of femininity. Social location and personal experiences within multiple social hierarchies is perhaps the leading reason that Schippers' (2007) theory is useful, but must be amended. As she argues, it is crucial that we pay attention to the ways that femininity can be hegemonic and not just emphasized, underscoring the ways in which women who comply with patriarchy reap societal rewards; it is crucial that we understand femininities to be multiple and organized differentially in society's gender order. Further, Schippers offers a way to understand how *behavior* can comply with or resist the gender order. As I have spent some time discussing in this chapter, my participants' queer identities and participation in queer communities led them to want to produce a different kind of femininity, one that seeks to diverge from complicit, heterosexual hegemonic femininity. However, as I have also discussed, my queer participants were organized differently within the gender order, depending on their race and class statuses.

Still using Schippers' (2007) ideas, we might say that all women can comply with or resist patriarchy, that femininities are multiple and organized along stratification lines of hegemonic, subordinate, and pariah/alternative femininities. That is, I suggest that we think of the hegemonic category as one that implies access to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy – it is for women who occupy a privileged race, class, and sexual orientation category *and* who comply with patriarchy through their behavior. Women of color, working class women, and queer identified women, who occupy a subordinate femininity category, can resist patriarchy through their behavior, but they will never access hegemonic femininity. Finally, any woman – whether she occupies a hegemonic or subordinate femininity category – can occupy a pariah/alternative femininity category through her choices to resist the gender order with subversive behavior. Importantly, as this and the next chapter details, alternative femininities can feel authentic, deeply internalized, and empowering.

The femme movement, discussed throughout the rest of this work, stems from queer feminine women's deeply internalized impulse to be feminine, their situated feminine identities, and a growing consciousness that both mainstream and queer cultures disregard femininity as inferior to masculinity.

In the next chapter I discuss exactly how it is that participants moved from an orientation toward femininity to a deliberate femme identity. In many ways, femme identity can be thought of as a political tool which explains some queer women's experiences with femininity. That is, they frame their orientation toward femininity in politicized terms, using the narrative resources most readily available in their queer communities.

Gubrium and Holstein (2001) suggest that postmodern selves are produced by various and multiple institutional affiliations. "Institutional identities are locally salient images, models,

or templates for self-construction; they serve as resources for structuring selves” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001: 11). Inspired by an ethnomethodological approach to understanding the *ways* members of society “do” social interaction, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) are concerned with *how* members do social interaction. Part of that doing is through institutional understandings of self that then construct a self in situationally specific ways (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

Practically this means that in institutions (e.g. the organizational context of Alcoholics Anonymous), individuals use narratives available to them (narratives that are institutional, cultural, and social) in order to construct a recognizable person in interaction with other persons in their immediate situation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Broad (2002) has used Holstein and Gubrium’s (2000) idea of “postmodern selves” to articulate the idea that social movements provide a resource with which movement actors build recognizable selves to other movement participants and social actors outside the movement.

Similarly, femmes construct a group definition of femme identity that will be recognizable to other queer people: it relies on a queer political logic that personal gender choices are radical if they are freely chosen, that a “queer” orientation toward gender rejects the privileges of heterosexuality, and personal gender transformations can be a challenge to patriarchy.

CHAPTER 6
FROM FEMININE TO FEMME: THE GROUP CONSTRUCTION OF A QUEER FEMININE
IDENTITY

“[Femme] is a fucked up way of relating to femininity. It’s not a normal, not a straight, not a normative relationship to femininity.” [Emma]

“I [have] this whole thing about femme being other than what is considered, I guess, normal femininity. It’s like everything else is the norm, which I’m ok with. I’m ok with that being the norm and having this thing about me that is not as socially acceptable or not standard, I guess. For me, femme is femininity that is not the typical heterosexual submissive quiet woman that I was taught to be. It’s a kind of femininity that is overdone... it’s the kind of thing that, for me, femme is when you think it’s too much, it’s almost enough...[femme is] going too far.” [Crimson]

You can’t say the term identity without the term politics, it’s identity politics because [it’s] only in the political realm that you need to express a specific identity. Any time someone says, ‘this is my identity,’ they’re making a political statement. [Michelle]

As Emma and Crimson described above, femme identified individuals understand the unique queer feminine identity of “femme” as being differently defined, and in fact posed in opposition to, a conventional feminine identity; Also, as Michelle argued, exerting this particular identity is a political act. This chapter analyzes the ways in which participants understand queer communities as having stigmatized femininity, which has facilitated an agreed upon political definition of what it means to be a femme in queer communities, and the ways in which this politicized identity has created new feminine meanings in queer communities.

Most significantly, by detailing how participants understand femmephobia, its impact on their identity work, and the political meanings of being femme, this chapter tells the story of how the femme movement takes unaffiliated individuals who are queer and feel oriented toward femininity and creates a *collective femme identity*. According to Taylor (1989), collective identity is a shared group definition composed of the motivations of a movement’s members. It arises from a shared sense of injustice and builds solidarity. Essentially, the practice of creating a collective identity helps members make political sense of who they are and motivates them to

take action to redress injustices (Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1995; Taylor, 2000). On the consequences of collective identity, Taylor (2000) says:

By asserting a collective identity in public life, social movements produce a rich oppositional culture of rituals, music, art, knowledge, and other symbols and practices that voice new moral positions, often extended in personalized politics (223).

However, the creation of collective identity can have unintended consequences: the process relies on “drawing the circles that separate ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Taylor, 2000: 223) which can ignore the complex and fluctuating identities of its members.

What is more, organizing around the marginalized identity of movement actors may also serve to reinforce the validity of those socially constructed categories (Gamson, 1995; Taylor, 2000). Recall (from Chapter 3) that the mainstream gay and lesbian movement has created a collective identity that relies on the assumption of a fixed, same-sex attracted, sexual self, which is marginalized because of homophobia. Recall also that opposition to this claim has created a divergent path of queer deconstructionists who organize around challenging social categories of gender and sexuality.

Importantly, detailed in this chapter, the femme movement takes on a queer deconstructivist philosophy which rejects essentialized identity categories, but also attempts to build a collective femme identity. That is, by articulating that femme identity is chosen and not naturally occurring they maintain a queer rejection of natural gender and sexuality categories while also taking part in the identity politics that queer deconstructivists reject.

Intra-Community Definitions of Stigmatized Femininity

All feminine identities are social in that they are a reflection of a socially constructed gender order, social interactions, and the internalization of those learned gendered meanings. The social processes involved in femme identity are perhaps easier to see because femme is a uniquely defined subcultural feminine identity – dominant culture does not recognize this

identity and so femme identified people learn its meaning as adults. As is consistent with all identity politics, femmes are involved in a political process of redefining an inferior status (being feminine in queer communities) and redressing the consequential inequalities through movement activities. Significantly, though, the inferior status of femme and the re-articulation of a positive femme identity are both happening at a subcultural level; it is an intra-community discussion rather than a conventional dynamic wherein oppressed groups seek redress from a dominant power holder in society. This section describes how femmes understand the stigma associated with femininity in queer communities and the reluctance to identify with femme that follows.

Femme Stigma (or, the Political Term, “Femmephobia”)

All participants discussed learning that queer people value femininity less than masculinity before they came to femme identity. As the next subsection will elaborate, part of the reluctance to identify as femme – and the impetus for organizing around femme once one does identify as femme – rests on understanding that stigma is placed on feminine expression in queer communities. Montana told me this story about arranging to meet a queer identified college roommate in person after they had conversed over e-mail and the telephone:

She described herself in such a way that I still had no clue at all that she was femme. When she asked me what I look like I said, *well, I'm 5'5" but people think I'm a lot taller because I wear really big shoes.* And she was like, *you wear big shoes?* And at that moment I was like, *oh god, she's going to be another dyke who thinks I'm totally not because of how I look.* And I was like, *yeah.* And she was like, *do you wear glitter?* And I was like, ... *yeah.* And she was like <gasp> *Oh my god, me too, me too!!* And we had this total realization that we were both femmes, or feminine folks. She is actually who I started doing my femme performance and my femme activism with and for us that was such a telling moment that we were ashamed to tell each other about our identities before we met each other because we were worried the other one would reject us because we were femme.

Although they had previously discussed “her being a dyke, me being bisexual, about both smoking cigarettes, about being fat,” neither of them told the other that she was feminine for fear of rejection. Looking back on this experience Montana said, “This is very telling about where

things were in the community at the time, both around [the lack of] femme organizing awareness and kind of the glorification of masculinization that was really intense at that time.” Although she was young, living in Kentucky, and had never met a femme identified person, Montana had an intimate knowledge of what some people call femmephobia, a knowledge that led her to know that she may be rejected by other queer people for presenting femininely.

Charlotte analyzed her negative treatment in queer communities as being related to “femmephobia.” When I asked her what that meant to her she paused thoughtfully and told me:

It’s a repetition of heteronormative culture in some ways because people really are scared of femmes and scared of femme power ... Like a feminist group is scary to the culture at large. People are terrified of women or feminine people having power, that’s the core of femmephobia.

In this description the “core of femmephobia” is a fear of femininity. Annabelle, who repeatedly used the word femmephobia in our interview, agreed. When I asked her to define the concept she said, “Well, it’s similar to misogyny, but it’s specially aimed at queers. It’s specifically within the queer community. So it’s not just hating on women or hating on femininity.” Taking these definitions into account, we might say that femmephobia in queer communities is comprised of two powerful concepts. First, there is the subcultural belief that queer women should present as masculine and that masculine gender presentation is part of an authentic queer sexual orientation. Second, femmephobia describes the ways in which queer people comply with the general cultural belief that femininity is inferior to masculinity. This subsection will discuss participant experiences with each of these.

Queer communities may be the only spaces which provide safe havens for gender non-conformists. The assumption that not being heterosexual makes someone an un-masculine man or an un-feminine woman is related to dominant culture’s maintenance of heterosexuality because the concept stigmatized sexual minorities as being gender variant (Chauncey, 1994;

Katz, 1996). Still, queer people themselves have also celebrated gender non-conformity because it connotes resistance to heterosexuality (Queen, 1994). In many ways, the mainstream and queer cultural assumptions that bisexual, lesbian and queer women will reject femininity have helped to create a queer collective identity of gender nonconformity.

The assumption that all queer people will look visibly gender non-conforming renders cissexual female femmes “invisible” in being accurately read for their sexual orientation and their intended gender performances. As Cutie said in Femme Affinity Group’s zine, “I feel like our queer community privileges folks who present as more masculine. It is still, mistakenly, what many people identify as visibly or ‘more truly’ queer. Sometimes I will walk down the street and another queer will look right through me.” In our interview, Montana described how this happens to her:

Anyone who’s femme has experienced being in queer spaces and not being acknowledged as queer. Just the simple things. When I walk around the lake by myself and I run across people who I read as queer I may not get the knowing glance or the nod or whatever you want to call it. If I’m with somebody who is butch or masculine then we’re queered and I get that acknowledgment. I mean, we know that. We know that, but at the same time ... So I used to tell people, to fight invisibility, just assume that all folks are queer, all women are lesbians until you have reason to know otherwise. That was just to point out that you can’t look at people and know if they’re queer.

Irene also pointed out the trouble of femininity leading people to assume she is heterosexual:

I hate, I hate, I hate being assumed of as straight. I really don’t like that. I mean it’s not a huge deal. It used to [think of it as] a bigger deal, but I just don’t like it. I don’t know why it’s any different than any other assumption people would make about people or different than any other assumption I make about other people a hundred times a day too. But I just don’t like it. I don’t like getting hit on by guys; I don’t like people thinking that’s an option. I often wish that my sexuality was more obvious without me wearing like a rainbow flag which is going to make me look horrible like lambda earrings [a Greek letter associated with gays and lesbians] or something horrible.

Both Montana and Irene acknowledge the importance of signifying queer identity, but perhaps disagree with other queers that gender non-conformity should be what signifies it. Irene jokes that she should not have to wear “lambda earrings” to be read as queer and Montana, perhaps

more seriously, suggests that we should assume that no one is heterosexual until we learn otherwise. The experience of invisibility for femmes is not a necessary consequence of women presenting femininely; it is part of femmephobic ideology because it disallows female feminine expression and queer attraction to coincide. Charlotte said:

You actually don't gain legitimacy until you get a date. That's the drama. Once I have a partner then people can see [me]. It's a visibility thing. I walk down the street and people are like, *oh, she's queer* and that doesn't always happen when I walk down the street alone. It's femmephobia. It's invisibility.

Using a personal experience about dating a visibly genderqueer person, she elaborated, "I would walk down the street with Vic and people would be like, hey, *it's Vic's girlfriend*. I was never Charlotte, I was always Vic's girlfriend, but as soon as he was gone it was like I disappeared." So, it is not a natural state of affairs that feminine women do not have a queer aesthetic; these participants place the blame on other queer women for not seeing them as queer. This failure to see the complexity of queer presentations, possible in femininely presenting women, is part of femmephobia. Emma also commented, "Being a feminine person in Seattle means that I am ineligible for being part of the gay community, at least on the street." Montana commented on why this public invisibility is hurtful, "The reason I really resist invisibility is that I think it leads to oppression. We're afraid of that which is invisible. We pathologize that which is invisible. We exclude that which is invisible." Certainly Montana's sentiment was felt by other femme participants, who felt invisible in that they are not seen as queer *and* also excluded from queer communities.

These participants have focused on their invisibility "on the street," or the way that queer strangers read them in public. However, participants also raised concerns that the femmephobic idea that feminine women are not queer marks them as less authentic than other queers even when they announce their queerness. Irene described the "peer pressure" she felt in her group of

“dyke” friends to be more masculine when she first came out as a lesbian, “Everyone was very androgynous, there was no hair, no nails, or anything. I definitely remember thinking, am I lesbian if I don’t look like that? I didn’t feel adequate enough, I didn’t feel radical enough.”

Charlotte told a similar story about her group of friends when she was a young lesbian. Charlotte consciously became more masculine at the time, but a friend of hers, Alexa, remained feminine; Charlotte remembered how her circle of friends talked about her:

They talked about her all the time. She was treated as very suspect like *there’s no way Alexa could be a real queer. She’s only queer for Tammy, it’s only for Tammy. She’s gonna turn back.* And she hasn’t. She isn’t. Now finally she’s gained legitimacy, but it took a really long time.

More than the idea that being feminine makes someone “less radical” than masculine dykes, some people have had experiences with feeling that they were judged as less queer. So, more than being made invisible in public, participants felt invisible, or excluded, in their own communities. Emma said, “It definitely feels like there’s some larger queer scene in Seattle that I’m not part of and I feel that is largely due to being femme.”

Femme participants felt that queer communities keep them at a distance. Without my asking any questions about how they feel in public queer settings, several participants brought up not feeling comfortable in queer spaces, especially lesbian bars. Talking about the Wild Rose¹, a lesbian bar in Seattle, Katie said that she feels “un-dateable” and wonders if it is because she is femme. She said, “Dykes are like *why did the straight girl wander into our bar?*” Abby also said, “All feminine women, we all have stories about the Rose, being told *the bar you want to go to is down there ... whatever.* And I just remember feeling just completely not fitting in in queer communities here in Seattle.” Edith said, “[It] wouldn’t be ok to walk into the Rose down there

¹ The Wild Rose (Seattle), My Sister’s Room (Atlanta), and the E Room (Portland) are similar lesbian establishments. While their crowds see some heterogeneity in age, they are all lesbian bars with a primarily young clientele.

like this. I wouldn't dare do it, not without some sexy butch on my arm." And commented again later, "I wouldn't go to the Wild Rose dressed like this. I don't know that because I've done it and had a bad experience, I just know it wouldn't be a good idea." Ruth also felt this way:

Then there's the Wild Rose which I can't go into ... I feel like every time I walk in there people are looking at me like I'm lost and confused. My girlfriend will say, *they're not looking at you like that*. Well, they're not looking at *you* like that because you look like you fit in there, but I do feel like they look at me like that. She just won't see it or she can't see it. I don't know what it is. I just never feel very comfortable there.

These experiences were not limited to Seattle. Talking about My Sister's Room, the primary lesbian bar in Atlanta, Michelle said that masculine lesbians make comments to feminine women like, "*Did you get off at the wrong train stop?*" Renee, also talking about My Sister's Room, noticed a trend of how some femmes have been treated there. She said, "I would be pissed because my heels would be stuck in the floorboards. Oh my god! It was so annoying! It was kind of sportyish dykes. They all looked alike. T-shirts and shorts and flip flops. I guess they were just like, femme, what are you doing here?" Reflecting on the homogenous aesthetic of lesbians at the bar and unfriendly environment for people in high heels, Danielle said, "I get to My Sister's Room. People are looking like they just rolled out of bed. I come in there wearing a dress and some heels. My stilettos are falling through the cracks in the wooden floor. Oh God! I was like, *this place is not for femmes!*" Renee and Danielle offer humorous accounts of feeling like their bar was not designed to include people who dress the way they do. More generally, though, these Seattle and Atlanta accounts provide specific examples of a more pervasive problem of femme exclusion.

It is important that these moments of exclusion occur in lesbian bars, places in which much of the young queer community is located. People go to lesbian bars to find solace from oppressive heterosexual culture, to meet other queer people, to socialize and find community, and to find dates (Enke, 2003). That femme participants felt ostracized in lesbian bars illustrates

their more general exclusion and the idea that, as Katie said, they are “un-dateable” because of assumptions about their queer authenticity. Charlotte summed up why being ignored in bars is part of a more general femmephobia:

So not getting a date is a bigger femmephobic thing and part of why that is is we are not recognized. We are treated as suspect in our sexuality because our gender as femmes is not valued. It comes back down to misogyny. I think not getting a date is a really concrete example about how we’re being discriminated against, but also just shoved to the side, our opinions not being valued, our experiences shrugged off.

Paradoxically, though, several femme participants spoke to the ways in which femmes are sexualized in queer communities. Charlotte also said:

Strangely enough I’m seen more at the E Room [Portland’s most prominent lesbian bar], because there are more feminine lesbians there and because there are so many people. Not because [femmes are] united, but because they’re fuckable. And there’s a lot of us and it’s a place where butches or masculine people hang out so you can gain a small piece of visibility. It’s not a visibility that you want to keep for all time. It’s not something to write home about, but it’s there. Sometimes it makes you feel a little better.

Similarly, Edith said that it bothers her that she feels she cannot go into the Wild Rose by herself because masculine people in her life “benefit from [her] presentation of femme” when they are attracted to her. Because of that she said, “There’s this objectifying aspect to that too. It’s the same crap. The fact that it’s ok for you to be doing that if you’re doing it for my pleasure.” Katie told me, “What I have noticed is being in dyke bars, and these masculinely leaning expressing dykes grabbing my ass, is that the femme thing is still really fetishized.” Rose also said that femmes are expected to wear revealing clothing and to act hyper-sexual in lesbian bars because “femmes are exoticized” in queer communities.

The idea that femmes are valuable only because they are, as Charlotte said, “fuckable,” was reiterated by Stephen, a now femme identified trans man who used to identify as a butch lesbian. He wrote this in Femme Affinity Group’s zine about his early experiences in lesbian communities, “Femme very much existed in [the South Carolina] community [I grew up in] but

it was viewed as a necessary evil of sorts. To be gay was to be butch; to be butch was to date a femme and to be femme was suspect.” He went on, saying that femmes were “those weak girly things who didn’t know what it was really like to be GAY in the south. Those desirable objects to be caught and released like prize deer.” These femmes describe a situation in which queer communities keep femmes at an emotional distance, yet simultaneously sexualize them. This kind of treatment, sexualization and social marginalization, mirrors the way that dominant groups have treated subordinated people.

According to participants, femmes are treated this way because they are not read as authentically queer, but also because they are *feminine* people who are not read as authentically queer. That is, negative feminine stereotypes – created and maintained in dominant culture – are placed on femmes by non-femme queers. Sabrina said, “When I did transition [from butch to femme] there was some hostility. There was some, like, why *would you choose to go the role of the weaker side?*” Similarly, Patricia reflected, “When I started going out to the bars it was very much seen as weak like *Wow I can’t believe how straight you look, why are you coming out with us?*” In some ways, queer people have a unique response to femininity. Ruth suggested, “My feeling is like if you’re going to be queer you have to be strong and independent because the world is against you. Like, [queer people think] femininity does not fit into that model.”

However, participants were more likely to recognize the way in which these negative stereotypes are reflective of larger cultural patterns. Irene wondered, “Femmes are always in the background in almost any way you can imagine. I think that, to me, that’s something ... Is it because we’re women and women are undervalued? Like the women are kind of back in society, so that even happens in a queer community?” Katrina also noted that “[Queer women] devalue that which the broader culture identifies as feminine.” She went on, “When we look at

somebody and we look for cues as to who they are in our culture, when we [see] feminine cues – movements, clothing, hair, all that sort of stuff – it is automatically less than and it’s devalued.”

In this way, participants suggested that femmephobia is related to wider and more pervasive issues of misogyny, which devalues femininity because of its association with women. Randall suggested, “[Femme is not] seen as radical because masculinity is inherently more valued, because femininity is seen as fake and femininity is seen as all these things we don’t value. I really think [it’s] because of misogyny and sexism.” And Charlotte explained how she now thinks of femmephobia, “The words I have for that now is that that’s misogyny, straight up misogyny. I didn’t understand that that could happen within a, you know, a group that is outside of the majority. I didn’t understand that queer people could be misogynist.” In addition, Edith said:

There’s definitely a lot of the same bullshit sexism that translates over into queer spaces and into queer women’s spaces ... the way that masculinity seems to be valued in the lesbian community, that it is more ok to present as more androgynous or masculine or transgender or whatever and that is more desirable and to compete for that in a way. That’s the same bullshit stuff. Masculine identities and expressions take up more space and are seen as more valid in their queerness and how is that not the same bullshit dressed up in a different costume?

The subcultural community term “femmephobia” recognizes the unique ways that queer people devalue femininity and suggests that wider cultural understandings of femininity are problematic.

This “stigma” that participants talked about is differently engaged than Goffman’s (1965) perspective on stigma. Namely, although femme femininity might make them more acceptable than masculine women or effeminate men in mainstream culture, their sex-gender alignment is stigmatized subculturally. As detailed later (in Chapter 7), femmes demand visibility for their discredited feminine identity. This is a maneuver that also diverges from Goffman’s (1965) expectation that the stigmatized individual will go to great lengths to hide his/her stigma; importantly, this demand for visibility is similar to other Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender,

and Queer [GLBTQ] activism – it is a familiar political logic. Although I do not spend a great amount of time discussing Goffman’s (1965) ideas about stigma and its management, Chapter 9 makes use of his ideas on framing (1974) to talk about the collective action frames of the femme movement.

Understood in social movement terms, femmephobia is a mechanism by which a gendered queer collective identity is produced which assumes queer sexuality means a rejection of conventional looking gender expression – it is a form of boundary work. Also, it can be accomplished as a successful strategy of boundary work because it relies on misogynist stereotypes about femininity. The articulation of femme identity indicts both femmephobic queer women and dominant culture: it suggests that misogynistic dominant culture is informing femmephobia. As the next section will discuss, these femmephobic ideas, according to participants, prevent people from identifying as femme, at least for a time.

Previous Reluctance to Identity as Femme

Logically, participants spoke of their reluctance to identify as femme as connected to the stigma attached to femininity in queer communities. Johanna, a burlesque performer who still struggles with whether or not she identifies as femme, explained:

I have a lot of weird life experience around people’s definitions of femme and what that means. To me it seems like no one would ever really cop to it, but to be femme and queer means you like a certain kind of music, you dress a certain kind of way, that you have an obsession with youth culture and money and it seems really vapid. I know that’s horrible to say. That’s been my experience. Do I identify with that kind of femme? No. But when I sit down and I read and I talk to my other friends who are femme and we have the same experiences I’m like, ok, maybe I am femme and we’re femme in this really ... not a really different way, not a radically different way. It’s like we are, but it’s been given a bad name.

Johanna associates being femme and queer with predefined interests, a dress code, and a set of very negative stereotypes: an “obsession with youth culture and money,” and being “really vapid” – stereotypes that generally reflect dominant society’s negative view of femininity. In a

way, Johanna's internalization of negative ideas about femininity has led her to rationalize the poor treatment of femmes in queer communities, even herself. She went on to comment on "the experience [femmes have] where they go to the bar or whatever the lesbian hang out is, [and] they get disrespected because they're femme," saying, "Yeah, I've had that experience as well, but kind of understand where it's coming from, you know?" Significantly, she says that when she sets aside time and reads about femme or talks to other femmes, she thinks "ok, maybe I am femme," but that her femme identity diverges from stereotypical ideas about femmes.

Aside from an unacknowledged internalization of femme stigma, like Johanna's, participants who currently identify as femme told me that they had previously rejected the identity for more specific reasons: they were afraid of how other people would view them because they themselves disrespected femininity; it was a label that was put on them by other people; and it was an identity that was conceived of as too limiting or singularly defined to describe their lived experiences.

Participants associated their initial reluctance to be feminine with subcultural assumption that queer authenticity meant a rejection of femininity. Irene told me, "I definitely, probably around 19 or 20 tried to be more androgynous and tried to be more like friends who were lesbians, or more what lesbians looked like at the time." When I asked her why she made this decision she told me, "because I got a lot of shit, took a lot of flak for being femme so I tried [being more androgynous] for about a year and it just felt horrible!" Similarly, Michelle reflected on her early experiences, "like most people in the queer community, when I first came out at 19 the only way I understood coming out was butch and so I was very excited and proud to walk around with my burgundy crew cut and my chain wallet and boots and my A-shirts." Betty had a similar experience:

Growing up and learning about dykes it was very androgynous and sort of from a feminist angle like what gay was, very not gendered in a specific way. Like the Indigo Girls are an example. But there was this very teeny tiny picture of gay and I had no language for gender until I went to college and it occurred to me [that queer gender could include femme].

As did Charlotte:

I came out as queer in college when I was a sophomore I guess, and sort of understood queer to be very linked with gender. Especially being someone who was so adamant about being included as someone who wasn't queer for so long, I really felt the need to legitimize myself. A lot of times, not just in my situation, that means proving that you have a gender outside of [the] norm. Femininity was not valued in my community. I went through a time of being pretty terribly butch, for lack of a better word, or attempting to be like that and it never really fit.

This “teeny tiny picture of gay” and the need to “legitimize” one’s self by inhabiting a masculine expression led these now femme identified people to consciously produce a gender expression that felt foreign to them. In these ways, they were not just rejecting femme identity, but femininity. Patricia, who also attempted a more masculine presentation when she first came out talked about her early queer rejection of femininity:

I remember being like a dyke in jeans and ripped t-shirts and a baseball hat and this old school butch came up to me, (and at the time I probably would not have known that she was an old school butch), but she asked me to dance and she was like, *your hands are so feminine* and I was so freaked out! I didn't know how to respond because I hadn't learned any language around that yet ... not until I started reading. (Now I would know how to respond. I would KILL to have that happen! <laughs>) At the time, I was totally...I was so upset. I went home and journaled about it for days. Part of me wanted it so bad and part of me was so upset because I didn't know how to act in that kind of situation. There were no femme...I had no one-on-one femme role models back home in Maine.

Even though part of Patricia “wanted it so bad,” being treated in a feminine manner made her “so upset” because she had learned to reject her own orientation toward femininity. Importantly, she acknowledges that she could not conceive of a positive femme identity because she had no “femme role models.”

The above stories tell a tale of rejecting femininity because it is subculturally associated with an inauthentic claim to queerness. However, some participants suggested that the queer

rejection of femininity stems from a larger cultural dismissal of femininity. Two femme men provide examples. Stephen, a femme trans man who used to identify as a butch lesbian, wrote this in Femme Affinity Group's zine about remembering his previous identity:

[It is a] laughable image, of me as butch, me the swishiest tranny fag bitch imaginable. My silly fat self trying so hard to find a little community, posturing and pretending I wasn't just as dangerous as those femmes in the bar. Being a boy who didn't know boy was an option. Being a fag who made out with gay boys but would never let anything happen to maintain my lesbian identity. Being a femme who distrusted femininity, fearing what it reflected about me and my image.

Stephen tells a complicated tale of gender identity: he was posturing a butch persona and rejecting femininity because that was a norm in his lesbian community, but he was also searching for a queer male effeminacy at a time when he did not know that "boy" or "fag" were options for him. As he said, he was a femme, who "distrusted femininity." In an interview with Randall, a trans man who was until recently femme identified, he told me a similar story of rejecting femininity to compose an authentic male identity:

Well when I first came out as trans I really tried hard to really like squash any amount of femme in me and tried to butch it up. I didn't do a very good job, but I tried really hard. I got really... I became a huge jerk because I was trying to be somebody I wasn't. I was trying to fit into all these really macho cultural stereotypes and it just really wasn't working very well and I kind of, I was living in Rhode Island at the time, and I kind of started to embrace being a little more feminine but I didn't really have a lot of language for it. There weren't a lot of femmes in the community I was in at all. So everything I really knew about femmes was stereotypes. I didn't even really know it was an identity that people were empowered by.

Like Patricia, Stephen and Randall tell stories of not having femme role models, of not knowing that femme is "an identity that people were empowered by." The latter two stories tell a more global tale of gender mandates: queer women may be encouraged to reject femininity to maintain a queer identity, but these trans men also felt pressure to reject femininity to project an authentic male self.

It is significant that men and queer women feel pressure to reject femininity. Abby suggested that any rejection of femininity is married to a misogynist valuing of masculinity. Describing why she was reluctant to identify as femme, she said, “I definitely had my own internalized sexism going on.” Several years ago she attended a discussion series in Seattle on the topic of femme identity. She reflected:

We ended up having these meetings. Probably 20, 30 people came. And so ... once again, I didn't identify as femme, I was just interested. Mostly I was interested in challenging my own sexism. Why was I afraid of femininity? Why was I so against femininity? As a feminist, I had to kind of take a look at that. Especially because as a feminist I was raised to question how we devalue women. Not necessarily gender, but women. The equation, being equated, the devaluation of femininity.

Just as Stephen and Randall broaden the conception of femme stigma to trans men who have to suppress the desire to express femininity, Abby made a connection between femme stigma and misogyny. In order to identify as femme, Abby had to “investigate” her own “internalized sexism” which led her to devalue femininity.

For some participants who were already feminine expressing, there was still a reluctance to identify as femme because it was a label that other people put on them rather than an identity that they freely chose. As Emma said, “Before I self-identified as femme, people were putting that label on me and I wasn't really hip to that groove. I didn't think that was cool. I think that's part of why I resisted it so furiously.” Similarly, Rose, who says that she currently “sometimes” identifies as femme, explained “I identify as femme when I self identify, not when somebody looks at me and says, ‘this is what you are.’” She explained her early experiences with being told “this is what you are”:

It was in Albuquerque, is where I started to learn about queerness, but the gender identities in the groups that I started to come out into were either butch or femme and I didn't know what either of those were and I was told that I was femme. I don't like to be told that I'm anything so without evening knowing what it was I said *no, I'm not*.

Rose rejected femme identity, without knowing what it was, because it was an identity that she had not self-elected.

As Charlotte suggests, it is common for people to not have an understanding of femme, “I think that I felt like my partner at the time identified as butch so I understood myself to be femme at that point. But I didn’t have an understanding of it as femme that existed on its own; it was more like femme as a compliment to someone else’s identity.” Like Rose, Charlotte had the experience of being called femme before she identified that way. She told me, “Because [my partner at the time] was butch and pretty well respected as someone who was butch at the time, there was an assumption that I was femme and I didn’t feel that way. I didn’t feel that way.” For Charlotte, this issue of being labeled as something she did not identify as came to the surface when her college group of friends decided to start a “dyke fraternity” composed of butches and a “ladies’ auxiliary” composed of femmes:

They decided that there would be frat boys and there would be a ladies’ auxiliary which was totally fucked up. Totally fucked up. I think now as someone who is secure in my gender identity, [I] would be like, *yeah, what? Ladies Auxiliary!* But there was also this implication that the ladies’ auxiliary was like the second best, and their job was to support the frat boys and be at their beck and call and make the pies for the drinking games. Fuck you! I was so angry. They told me I would have to be in the ladies auxiliary and I was like that’s not cool. You can’t do that. You can’t police gender and you can’t determine what my gender should be.

It is important that Charlotte now identifies as femme, *and* that she would have had a different kind of response to the idea of a ladies’ auxiliary if she had freely chosen to be part of it. This is reflective of Chapter 5’s discussion of how femme identity diverges from hegemonic feminine mandates in that it is a femininity connected to conscious choice.

For participants who either continue to struggle with femme identity or who have previously rejected femme identity, there was also the belief that femme identity was too narrowly defined to include them. Rose, for example, does not always identify as femme

because she does not want to be expected to be feminine all the time. She said, “I don’t want to be limited to being feminine within the identity of femme because I’m not always.” Stephanie and Brittney, burlesque performers who I interviewed at the same time, had this conversation about negotiating femme identity:

Stephanie: It’s hard to categorize. You know, I think something we celebrate is open fluid sexuality. I identify myself as queer, bisexual. Sometimes I wake up and I think, I feel like a pretty princess. And I want to wear my pretty pink dress and the next morning I’m like...

Brittney: I want to dig in the dirt!

Stephanie: I want to eat a raw cow and wear my wife beater and like, look like hell.

Brittney: I don’t think I identify with anything even though I’m definitely femmey.

Stephanie: I’ll definitely be considered a butch sometimes. Like if I were to go out in public some people would be like, *woah. Butch dyke!*

Stephanie’s conception of “queer” is having both sexual and gender fluidity; she parallels being bisexual with having both masculine and feminine gender characteristics. Of course, femme identity should not be encouraged for people who would not choose it. However, many femmes would argue that there is room for masculine characteristics within femme identity. That is, “dig[g]ing in the dirt,” or “eat[ing] a raw cow,” could be performed by people who identify as femme. The idea that femme identity means living up to a narrowly defined concept of femme kept many participants from identifying with the gender concept. Abby said, “I felt like I didn’t measure up in some ways,” because “there was this total history and culture and expectation that I wasn’t sure was quite me.” Lucy felt similarly:

I moved here and was being called femme a lot and didn’t feel like it was an identity that was mine to claim. It also wasn’t an identity that I was claiming originally. It was an identity that was being put on me. All the history I knew around femme identity was ... like I didn’t know a modern movement around femme. My advisor in college identified as femme and was raised poor and working class and she was ... a lot of my information around femme was around history, and theory, and books. Not just theory, but like Dorothy Allison, stories ... Really what I knew was a historical perspective of femme and

not really a modern day movement around femme and also sounded very generational and it wasn't mine to take on.

Lucy, like several other participants, rejected femme identity because it was something that she was labeled; what she knew of femininity was a historical conception of femme that was generationally and class based. It was learning a "modern day movement around femme" which made it an identity she could adopt.

So, part of the redefinition of femme identity must focus on rejecting feminine stigma, promoting it as a self identity, and broadening the concept to include vast experiences that might be called femme.

Intra-Community Definitions of Political "Femme"

When I asked participants to tell me what femme meant to them they eventually provided an answer. Many of them prefaced their answer by telling me that the power of femme identity is that it is not neatly definable. Michelle said, "Femme means a zillion different things in a zillion different contexts to a zillion different people." Emma said, "Femme has always felt really ambiguous to me and that feels really good. Nobody can really tell you what that is. It hasn't really been set in stone, yet." She noted that people identify with femme because it is indefinable, "I don't think that is an answerable question [what femme means]. I'm really actually glad that it's not. I don't want it to become something that people can gloss [over] like *this is what a femme is*. I'm glad that people take it up now as something that's not [definable]." Notably, participants told me that femme identity is being discussed and organized around in queer communities rather than more mainstream gay and lesbian communities [discussed further in Chapter 5]; this reverence for an indefinable identity is influenced by modern femme's placement in queer communities.

Paradoxically, femme's definition is being rearticulated in the context of a movement built around identity politics and queer deconstructivist ideas about gender and sexuality. So, although femme participants were weary of a fixed definition of femme, they also offered loose meanings of the identity for them. This section offers a four part discussion of this loose definition: the physical and beyond-physical characteristics of femme; femme as an intentional identity; femme as a celebration of femininity; and I end this section by discussing controversies of inclusion around sexual orientation and transgender people. Importantly, these loose understandings of femme are part of a modern re-articulation of femme identity in the context of a movement that seeks to redress femme stigma in queer communities.

Physical and Beyond-Physical Characteristics of Femme

As I will discuss a little later, many participants felt that the essence of what femme means went beyond physical dimensions of feminine presentation. However, part of the complexity of femme *identity* is that it is also projected in an external presentation. Renee told me:

A lot of [femme] for me is about presentation and style. I think that's a very very large part of it. As much as I would love to say it's an attitude, I think it's all about perception. When people look at you, they're not going to say she's femme because of her attitude. They're going to look at you and say she's femme, she's dressed in girly clothes.

Although part of the project of redefining femme is centered on broadening the concept of femininity so that self identification is more central to femme identity than conventional feminine presentation, Renee argues that external presentation is still important because the perceptions of other people matter. For Renee, femme identity must be validated by an audience's understanding that femininity is being expressed. Serano (2007) believes that femininity is an internal impulse to externally decorate the body. Consider Ruth's concept of what femme means:

The other thing I tend to recognize about femme identity is that it's about beauty and grace. I think bringing beauty into their lives in general. Femmes always compliment people on beauty. They'll say, *I love your earrings, your shirt is really beautiful or your hair*, whatever it is. I notice that not everybody notices those things and comments on them. It's very affirming. There's so much ugliness in the world. To have people who can recognize beauty and bring it out, is really wonderful.

Like Serano (2007) believes about femininity more generally, Ruth argues that femme identity is – not just about beauty and grace – but about “bringing beauty into their lives” in opposition to “all the ugliness in the world.” In this way, femme identity is a conscious commitment to recognize feminine decoration, rather than taking it for granted.

For others, this internal identity that has an external effect means that femme identity – built on the assumption that all gender is socially constructed – gives femme identified people the freedom to play with gender in a hyper-expressive way. Michelle explained:

I think one thing [femme] means for a lot of people is hyper-femininity. I think it means taking what some people call *the trappings of femininity* and exaggerating them as a reclamation process. I think they say it's one thing to have sort of feminine traits or to, I guess, subscribe to feminine ideas, but it's an entirely other thing to take those ideas and exaggerate them and make a point about them.

The external expression of femme identity illustrates a “reclamation process” of conventional femininity and an “exaggeration” of those traits to “make a point.” The “point” of a hyper-femininity is that it no longer looks like “natural gender.” Participants often talked of femininity (and masculinity) in extremes. For example, talking of femininity as being related to glitter, boas, and high heels (or masculinity as being related to digging in the dirt, eating a raw cow, and wearing a wife beater as Brittney and Stephanie did earlier) may seem confusingly stereotypical for people who purport to think about gender in a complex fashion. Importantly, as Michelle illustrates in the above quote, talking about gender in extremes illustrates their “point” that political femme identity is based in an assumption that there is no natural gender: whether someone is male or female, he or she can choose an extreme presentation of femininity or

masculinity. When a female person *chooses* femininity, she may over-produce it to convey her stance that it is a choice.

Cisgendered women's production of an exaggerated femininity proves that they conceive of all gender as performative. Katie compared her femininity to trans women for this reason:

My kind of femininity, I tend to associate it more with trans women. I've actually been told that I pass really well, and I think from trans women, that is a huge complement to get and multiple times, because I'm in a lot of trans spaces, have been thought of as a trans women. For me, what's queer about it is the hyper-femininity. I identify with drag queens and I do identify with trans women, I do identify with the choice to wear a short dress down the street and what that means. And that's very queer, to me.

Just as West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that trans women learn about gender difference (and deference for women) because they consciously learn how to perform femininity as adults, Katie compares her femininity to trans women's femininity because she is conscious of "the choice to wear a short dress down the street and what that means." The idea that she is putting femininity on and does not have to, is "very queer" to Katie. Several participants agreed, using words like "hyper-femininity" to describe what femme means and several also talked about having a solidarity with other people who consciously do femininity, as Katie does. Irene told me, "For me, a lot of my femininity is...there's another aspect for me that is almost like drag queen."

Katrina also felt this way:

The closest I ever came before I had words to identify [as a queer femme] was that I started to identify as a fag or a drag queen. Um ... because in the expression of femininity that drag queens do, they're not trying to look like real women, there's no pretense that they're trying to look like a woman on the street. They're taking the concept of femininity and sort of bastardizing it and making it into this huge, explosive, overly expressive thing. I was like, that's kind of like what I do!

Before Katrina knew that femme identity was an option, she was drawn to the femininity of drag queens who do not try to "look like a woman on the street," but "bastardize" the concept of femininity to make it hyper-expressive. When Katrina found out about femme identity, she realized that these ideas were similar and began identifying as femme:

I started to think that there's no such thing as a natural femininity, that it's all performance and if it's all performance then why not just do it in a way that's fun and makes me feel fun and silly and expressive? So I started to identify as femme ... Post-college, I just started saying, I'm femme.

Although she felt a connection to drag queens when she was younger, it was when she started to believe that "there's no such thing as a natural femininity" that brought her to femme identity. Femme participants tended to agree with her, a constitutive part of femme identity is the belief that femininity is socially constructed.

Again, all of these participant comments about hyper-femininity are based in a theoretical assumption that natural gender is a farce. That is, in discussing the external possibilities of femme, they are commenting on the internal belief system on which femme is based. Sabrina commented, "I hope that femme is not just about fashion because if it is, what the hell are we doing?" Talking about coming to femme identity, Ruth said, "I guess I found it very confusing because I was like, well I have long hair, but that doesn't make me femme. You can have long hair and not be femme. Or you can wear skirts and not be femme." Femme identity is more than feminine expression; it encompasses ideas about gender and an internal way of being.

Most participants saw femme as a uniquely queer identity [discussed later] and one whose participants are critical of the assumption that gender can be a natural. For these reasons, participants described femme in opposition to conventional feminine attitude markers. Lucy said that femme identity is not "the superficial things that people often interpret it as," like "shaving your legs." Instead, she said that femmes she knows are "smart, stubborn, creative." Blake said she equates femme with, "power, a little bit and demanding respect and commanding attention, a lot of attention." Like Blake, Danielle said, "there's a certain power about [femme] in that you're demanding the attention of onlookers. I mean, demanding." They see their femininity as

“powerful,” in opposition to how many of them see mandated versions of femininity, because they have chosen to identify with it. Edith commented:

I was sort of trying to explain to someone what butch was and I realized that it’s the same thing, to me, as being femme. It was this gentle strength. I think strength has a lot to do with it, for me. I know femininity is generally associated with passivity and weakness and following other people and being less direct. It’s not at all like that for me. I see that’s how my mom operates in the world. I am the opposite of that. I am annoyingly direct and don’t let anyone tell me that I can’t do something and if they do I’m going to work really hard to do it just for the enjoyment of proving them wrong.

In paralleling what femme means as the same thing as what butch means, “a gentle strength,” Edith positions femme as a queer and consciously chosen identity. Importantly, her version of femme is the “opposite” of conventional versions of femininity.

Whether participants focused on external markers or personality characteristics that define their idea of femme, they all saw femme identity as something that becomes part of them. That is, someone can be feminine expressing, even hyper-feminine expressing, and not be femme; someone can be feminine and be strong, demanding of attention, and direct – and not be femme identified. Although the above physical and mental characteristics describe how they envision femme, they must coincide with a sometimes indescribable feeling that one is connected to femme identity. As noted in Chapter 5 by Danielle, “it is something that can’t be taken off.”

Katrina commented further on why femme identity describes her more than drag queen:

With a drag queen, there is more of an assumption that I am trying this on right now and go back to something else in a minute. Whereas for me, this really is ... whether I try to fight it or not ... who I am... it really is. I went through all sorts of different looks and phases in my life and every one of them I just wasn’t being true to my own personality and my own drive and my own choices, right? It was a long process of becoming. There’s not an idea that I’ll try it on and then set it aside for a more normal appearance later.

Likewise, Patricia said:

It always feel more like my core, like who I am inside not the expression on the outside. It’s about being queer although I do know some straight femmes. It’s about how you behave when you’re interacting with people. To me, it defines my every interaction, it’s why I behave the way that I do. Even if it’s in my everyday business, like today I felt very

femme all day at work even if I was not in a queer situation. It's the core. It's the why I feel the way that I do and it's why I choose to do the things that I do ... it's because I feel femme.

Comments like femme identity is “who I am” or that it is “my core” tell us that femme identity is something highly personal; it is possibly something that cannot be contained in describable characteristics. Ruth agreed, “For me, to one day identify as femme, from an outside perspective, probably nobody noticed the difference, but I felt the difference. I felt like the leaves on the trees were brighter and greener.” Ruth continued to present her femininity the same way and her personality characteristics remained the same – she was the same person. Femme identity, as identities are meant to do, crystallized the ways she thinks about herself in the world.

Intentional Femme-ininity as a Resistant Gender Identity

Femme participants explained that even though they feel oriented toward femininity, they see femininity as socially constructed and their own femininity as performative. Montana explained how her orientation toward femininity, which feels natural to her, can still be thought of as social, even performative: “I was born with a lot of very feminine traits, that's just how I am. I also perform femininity. You know, I wasn't born knowing how to put on fake eyelashes or how to walk with my hips swaying, but I do them because I learned how to do them.” Patricia also felt this way:

I think [femme] is a choice. I think maybe femininity just happens. It's that whole nature versus nurture thing. Like when I came out as gay I was extremely feminine, but I didn't have a name for it, and I never would have thought it was an identity – it was just the way I dressed, but then it's a conscious choice to take on sort of being femme because again, you have to verbalize it.

For Patricia, “femininity just happens” in the way that she feels naturally drawn to it, but femme is an identity, that has “a name” for describing a conscious femininity. It is the verbalized identification with femme identity which marks its divergence from femininity. As Michelle, said, “There's a difference between feminine and femme.” Patricia went on, “I'll go to a

primarily lesbian bar and I'll see a lot of women who look femme to me, but maybe queer femme is more of a political identity because when you stop and talk to them they just identify as lesbians or gays [who are feminine]." Again, femme is an identity which encompasses more than just looking feminine.

Because femme is a conscious feminine identity, the femininity of femmes is thought of as consciously produced. Actually calling the production of femininity a performance, Danielle said, "Being femme, you get a lot of good opportunities for performance for maniacs like myself. Strut around, get yourself together, look pretty and get some attention." I asked her, "You mean performance in the everyday, not your burlesque?" She answered:

No, [not my burlesque]. I'm talking about when I wake up in the morning and I decide what I'm going to put on for the day and how I'm going to interact with people. I think that a lot of gender is performance. I know for me it is. I know that when I'm home by myself there's not much that's femme about me. Are you kidding? I'm sitting there with my shorts and my beer and, you know, eating on the couch and legs wherever, but when I leave the house I'm excited to go and present myself to the world as something that excites me.

Danielle refers to her everyday gender presentation choices as "performance" and discussing her public presentation of femininity in opposition to a more natural state of being home alone. Just as Chapter 5 argued that queer femininity diverges from hegemonic femininity because queer women are exposed to a gender process which exposes the un-naturalness of female femininity, participants argued that femme identity is based in a conscious choice to take on feminine characteristics. Edith reflected:

Feminism was such a huge part of coming into my own skin as a woman and as a queer woman. I sort of channeled through feminism and kind of ended up going back to some of those compulsory indicators of femininity, but I did it intentionally. I chose them. It wasn't just like, this is how women are. I mean, I went through the overalls and no makeup, whatever and that just really wasn't me. It was what I thought I was supposed to do to be queer identified. Going back, I think it's that intentionality, to me, that makes it femme.

Edith takes on “compulsory indicators of femininity” but feels that she chooses them. This was also true for Betty:

I think [femme is] a validating form of expression and I think it’s really empowered. I shave my legs now because I really enjoy it. I don’t shave my legs because I think I need to, I don’t shave my legs because I think it makes me a more attractive woman. I think it’s been the most liberating thing in the world for me to take all of these patriarchal connotations, as much as I’m able, off of feminine expression. It’s really freed me up to be really confident about, what are the motivations for this expression.

Both Edith and Betty reject the idea that women must be feminine and that the conscious decision to be feminine frees femininity from its “patriarchal connotations.”

The kind of consciously chosen feminine identification inherent in femme identity allows femmes to identify with certain aspects of femininity. Michelle spoke to this concept and also suggested that the most important aspect of femme is self identification:

For me, it comes down to my gender identity being something that I have control over, not something I was handed, but something that I picked up myself, maybe that’s the difference for me [between femininity and femme]. I’m not feminine because someone told me I was supposed to be or I’m a woman and that’s the way I’m supposed to move through the world. I’m femme because I have hand selected the parts of femininity that work for me, left out the ones that don’t work for me, and taken those cherry pickens and made my own kind of femininity.

Michelle reiterated, “I think that you don’t come across femme identity just by happenstance; I think it’s a very intentional move. People going through their daily lives being feminine aren’t femme because it’s a gender identity. It’s something that has to be claimed.” Abby succinctly said, “In essence, [femme is] about intentionally valuing femininity and embodying that.”

Charlotte agreed, “What my femme identity is is that it’s about a conscious femininity. It’s about understanding what society says is feminine and choosing it anyway and not choosing all of it.” As did Katie, “Femme to me means intentional femininity.”

Making the defining characteristic of femme identity a consciously chosen identity, rather than looking feminine, allows for a broad conceptualization of who can identify as femme. Betty

said, “What makes someone femme is someone who wants to be femme.” Katie said, “I have a really broad idea of what femme is as far as including trans folks and genderqueers and people I may not read as femme identifying as femme.” And Charlotte, “I think femme is what you choose to identify it as. Personally I’m very invested in self identification as the biggest piece of what femme is.” In addition, Annabelle said:

To me, it’s just anyone who self identifies as a femme [is femme]. Sometimes you meet someone...like I might meet someone who doesn’t look at all femme to me, but they identify as femme. Like, there’s femme boys and stuff. To me, it’s just about self identifying as femme.

Foregrounding claiming the identity as the most important aspect of femme identity means there can be “femme boys.” Betty also talked about expanding her own definition of femme by focusing on femme identity being about intentional femininity and self identification:

I used to define femme by what it wasn’t and I can’t do that anymore. You know, I used to say that femme is just for women; I used to say that femme is just for queer women. I think femme is a gender expression. I think femme is an empowered and reclaimed expression of femininity in a way that feels empowering and positive for the doer, for the person that is claiming femme.

Rather than define who may identify as femme, as she used to, Betty has decided that femme is its own gender expression that is “empowered” and “reclaimed” and feels “empowering” for the person who is claiming it.

The above concepts, articulated by cisgendered women who are femme identified and focusing on the importance of femme identity being an intentional femininity and a conscious identity, create a description of femme that is resistant to the gender order. That is, although they are articulating a female femininity for themselves, their belief that femininity is performative and that anyone can claim a femme identity suggests that they believe gender identities should all be freely chosen and not based in mandates associated with biological sex. Katrina explained:

For me, identifying as a queer femme is sort of saying...even though I’m making another category ... it’s sort of saying fuck you to all of that...For me, I believe that all gender is a

performance and so I'm going to call a spade, a spade. For me, identifying as a queer femme is really identifying as a female-bodied drag queen and I love that. I think it's very exciting. It's indicative of deeper, my deeper philosophies and values of sex and sexuality and all of those things.

These philosophies around sex and sexuality include a rejection of gender mandates based on the patriarchal assumption of natural sex. Katrina said, "What I don't want is the assumption that I have to perform any number of things. I want it to be freely chosen...I don't do this because it's assumed that I will, like taking a breath." That is, even though she is a woman choosing femininity, calling her femininity a choice removes femininity from a necessity for women. She went on, "Another part of identifying as a queer femme is a little bit of a political statement that femininity is not in and of itself bad. It is when we use these things to restrict ourselves and each other into unchosen roles or unhealthy roles that those things become bad." Danielle also explained:

I find [femininity] oppressive to people who haven't done enough introspection about what it means. Those people are being oppressed by it. The people who haven't analyzed [it] for themselves. The people who are doing [it] by default or the people who do it because this is what they think, this is what it will get them and they don't know any other way and they wouldn't be able to [do] otherwise or something.

Both Katrina and Danielle admit that femininity has historically been oppressive. Danielle continued:

When you go home and really think about it, when you embrace everything and make sure that it truly is who you are rather than just accepting it by default. Then I think it's when you've gotten to the point of no longer being oppressed by something that's used to oppress people.

If femininity is chosen, a product of introspection, removed from a default assumption that women should be feminine, then it is no longer oppressive. In this way, even though their expressions are aligned performances of female femininity, they see their gender identities as productions that evade female feminine mandates. In this way femme femininity (even when it is produced by cisgendered female people) is a gender resistant identity.

A Celebration of Femininity as a Challenge to Patriarchy

Just as intentional femme identification is a response to being “labeled” femme, femme participants told me that their femme identities are, in part, a response to a cultural (and subcultural) devaluation of femininity. Participants kept acknowledging that a major part of their choosing to identify as femme is a conscious decision to “celebrate” femininity. For Katrina, femme identity has given her a context for celebrating her own femininity. She said:

Through my coming to identify as a queer femme, along that narrative was learning to love myself and learning to love myself in a very powerful way. I know very few women – and I’m not saying this to be boastful or to brag, it actually is sad – I know very few women who are as confident as I am, who move through the world just sort of I don’t know, confidence is the only word I can think of for it. If you want to call it arrogance, fine. All I know is that I don’t say the terrible things in my head that I used to say to myself, I don’t pick myself apart. I don’t belittle myself. I mean, we all have our bad days, right? Part of coming to identify in a certain way was saying you look this way and you have these tendencies and that’s fine and that’s beautiful and you can celebrate that and you can love that.

Ruth also felt that femme identity had given her “a permission to celebrate and express femininity [in a] way that [she] didn’t feel before.” She said:

[Before identifying as femme] I felt like I had to suppress aspect[s] of femininity because well, in general, our culture is not very supportive or encouraging [of femininity]...to be feminine in our culture is to be considered weak; it’s looked down on. If you want to succeed in the office, you know, you can be feminine but only to a certain extent because then you’re a slut or a whore or you’re sexualizing the workplace. I think there’s just a lot of messages that femininity is limiting and for me to see that it doesn’t have to be limiting, and it can be expanding. I keep going back to the word celebratory.

Cultural understandings of femininity tend to be limiting and derogatory. Although patriarchy mandates that women be feminine, it also produces misogynist ideas about femininity so that feminine women are punished for their gender productions. For Ruth, femme identity has allowed her to counter those “limiting” mandates of femininity with the idea that it can be “expanding” and “celebratory.”

During our interview, Montana shared a definition of femme she heard articulated by keynote speaker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha at a femme conference in 2006. She prefaced by telling me, “everyone in the room broke down in tears so it’s clearly something that’s powerful to a lot of people,” and that it “resonates profoundly” with femmes. For Leah, and for Montana, “femme [is] a way of being a girl that doesn’t hurt.” After telling me this definition Montana’s eyes welled up with tears and she said it was “one of the most powerful and amazing things [she] had ever heard.” Again, all women are held accountable for the expectation that they perform femininity and hence receive social rewards for being feminine; paradoxically, feminine productions that receive social rewards are narrowly conceived and exact “hurt” on the doer. Again, femme provides choices in femininity and a celebration of femininity that does not hurt.

For Katrina, Ruth, and Montana femme identity has provided a context to redefine femininity, so that it may be celebrated in their own lives. However, this femme celebration of femininity extends beyond the individual: it offers a critique of feminine devaluation more broadly. For example, Abby said, “[Femme] is a whole identity. It really is very political for me. It’s truly about unapologetically valuing femininity.” Similarly, Montana said that “in order to discuss femme identity, we also have to talk about the fact that all of these things that are considered feminine, that have historically been associated with women, are devalued in this culture and so the idea of saying proudly, yes, these are things that I enjoy doing and they’re feminine is important.” In these ways, femme is a project of personal reclamation for participants, but it is also related to a larger political project of reclaiming femininity.

Certainly the celebration of femininity that femme identity provides has the most immediate consequences for femme identified people. However, the “celebration” is part of a

larger critique of the devaluation of femininity and thus holds deep political challenges to patriarchy. So, femme is defined as a conscious identity rather than an assumption of female femininity, but it also produces new ideas about femininity. That is, femme identity offers a challenge to patriarchy's conception that women are naturally feminine *and* that femininity is naturally inferior to masculinity.

Femme Controversies: Sexual Orientation and Transgender Questions

When I asked participants to tell me about what femme means to them or how they came to identify as femme, many of them would tell me a sexual orientation history. For example, when I asked Montana, "Maybe you could tell me about coming to identifying as femme." She said, "Sure. For me, femme is a queer identity even though I totally respect anyone who is not queer who wishes to identify as femme. But for me personally it is very connected to my queer identity." Abby told me, "Femme for me is definitely part of my sexuality. It's how ... it's somewhat...it helps [describe] who I'm attracted to, the dynamics I'm attracted to, what I like to play with." Irene also said, "Femme to me, to me personally, femme means both in my sexuality, my intellect, the way I relate to people, mainly everything I do, the way I dress, the way I show myself to world, to my friends and family." Montana, Abby, and Irene tell personal stories of femme being queer identities. Notice how each of them uses phrases like "for me" and "personally" – indicating that they do not wish to solidify femme as a queer-only identity for other people. Part of the sensibilities associated with queer identities, in which femme tends to be located, is that they are fluid and freely chosen; in not placing a queer border around femme identity, they recognize this complexity.

Although I never asked participants if someone had to be queer to qualify as femme or if heterosexual women could identify as femme, several participants brought it up on their own. Renee said, "femme, for me, is I'm feminine and I'm very queer and I want you to see that I'm

queer and I want you to get it.” Annabelle responded to my request to define femme, “I think it’s someone who appreciates femininity and is queer and leans toward things that are feminine. Queers that lean toward femininity.” For Renne and Annabelle, and other participants who would define femme this way, queerness is an unquestioned aspect of femme identity. Crimson, however, was aware that there is some debate about this concept. She said, “I know of conversations [amongst] other femmes that some femmes think straight women can be femmes. I am not of that class of people. I think femme is queer.”

Some femmes believe that if one of the defining characteristics of femme identity is that someone is intentional about their femininity, then it is possible for heterosexual women to be femme. Two interviewees brought up that they believed the definition of femme should be widened to include heterosexual women. Interestingly, they both provided Dolly Parton as an example, someone who is hyper-feminine, whose fan base has been queer for decades, and whose sexuality has been rumored to be not-quite-heterosexual. Randall talked about the movie “9 to 5” and how the “women in that movie were so fucking amazing,” “especially Dolly.” In the movie three very different women, one of them played by Dolly Parton, take over their workplace and exact revenge on their sexist boss. Randall conjectured that if this were a news story and not a movie, that many queer femmes would reject the possibility that these women were femme. He said:

I think that a lot of people would see them and be like, *oh they’re cool, but they’re not like us, but they don’t understand the ...* and they would use a whole bunch of fancy language to talk about what these women didn’t understand and I think it’s like playing into and reinforcing the stereotypes that are placed on women. Instead of being like I’m not going to entertain the idea that people who are feminine are stupid and you know, [they think these people are] making random moves that maybe cool but they don’t know what they’re doing.

Betty agreed with him. She once had a friend who would claim that Dolly Parton was femme and she would respond, “Nu uh!” because, as she said, “I don’t know if Dolly Parton has ever

heard the word.” She went on, “I used to be really defensive about straight women not being femme. It was almost sort of a classist stance because I was expecting people who identified as femme to articulate the femme, right? Just because you can’t articulate it doesn’t mean you’re not.” While calling people “femme” who have likely “never heard the word” goes against what others say is a main criteria of femme identity, that is a freely chosen identity, Randall and Betty are interested in femme being seen as an identity of feminine empowerment.

For them, it is exclusive to demand that someone be able to articulate a femme identity. Randall said, “People like to think of themselves like, *well I have an analysis of my gender so my gender is better* and I think that’s really messed up.” He believed that he saw women of color, working class women, and trans women dismissed as not-femme because they did not have the same articulation of femme that many queer femmes do. He suggested that if those women were embraced for their “awesome” femininity, that there may be a broader movement, “Somebody doesn’t have to have the same kind of analysis to like, you know, [share] some common ground with.”

Although anyone would agree that reclaiming femininity is an admirable process for any feminine person, it is undeniable that femme identity has a uniquely queer history. As Blake said, “Femme is a word that only queer people use.” Further, it seems unlikely that heterosexual women would be clamoring to count as femme identified, and not only because they have yet to hear the word. Femme not only connotes a celebration of femininity, but a belief that gender is not natural. As Katrina was quoted as saying earlier, “straight women can identify as femme. Straight women don’t” because by and large, heterosexuality is built on the assumption that masculine and feminine genders are real, fixed, and immovable. For femmes who argue that femme is a queer identity, they are articulating the definitional qualities of not only celebratory

femininity, but also self identification, a rejection of natural gender, and its historical locality in queer communities. As Michelle said, “My evolution as a queer person led me to femme. And so they’re inextricably linked for me now, even though I know in my mind that they’re separate things, separate issues.” Articulating femme as a queer identity does not suggest that there is a barometer of authenticity based on sexual partners, but that queer communities offer a context for the blossoming of femme identity.

Where femme has historically been a label used to describe feminine lesbians [see Kennedy & Davis, 1993], the modern definition of femme articulates it as a unique gender identity with queer sensibilities about gender. This new articulation is summed up by Charlotte who said, “At this point in my life, I feel like being femme is my gender identity. I am not a man or a woman, I am femme. That is something that is entirely different from my sex, and from mainstream thoughts about gender and labels.” Crimson, who answered the demographic survey question, “what is your gender?” with the simple response “femme,” felt similarly. She said, “I think there’s a definite difference between how I was taught that women are and who I am as a femme ... I feel for me personally that as a woman, my femme self transcends that ... it’s just a totally different category for me now.” The idea that femme is a different identity than “female” or “woman” challenges the idea that femininity is natural for women.

This articulation of femme identity was also present in the performance community of The Queen Bees burlesque troupe [burlesque is discussed further in Chapter 7]. Several of them told me in interviews that they proudly referred to themselves as “bioqueens,” drag queens who are “biological women.” Two participants acknowledged that some members of The Queen Bees would refer to themselves this way, but that they personally have come to distance themselves from the term. Lucy said she now rejects the term because she believes “nothing is

biological,” noting that if “bioqueens” wanted to emphasize the performative nature of gender, they would refrain from words like “biological” to mark their difference from people assigned male at birth. Although Montana respects people who choose to identify this way, she explained that, for her, it is a “problematic” term because it potentially co-opts the unique experiences of transgender people. Rose, a participant and former Queen Bee who still believes in the radical potential of the “bioqueen” label, explained why she promotes The Queen Bees as drag queens when she talks about the troupe, “Whenever I talk about The Bees I always say we were drag queens. I always say it to get a reaction out of people ... and I always get a reaction out of people...People are always like, *what do you mean? No you’re not. Drag queens are this, this, this.*” She would then explain that they used the term because they view themselves as people who perform hyper-femininity, even though they were assigned female at birth; they see all gender as drag. I asked her if any gender variant or genderqueer people in her queer community had a conflict about the use of the term. She answered:

I often say to someone who says that something is not ok around gender or sexuality, my standard answer is, challenge yourself to rethink these things. I mean, that’s what folks really need to do. It’s all freakin’ fluid. It’s all one big fluid process and to not allow folks to identify in a certain way is really really ... it can be really harmful to people and communities. It lacks the creative ... it takes away the creativity of people. Who are we to say, this is ok, this is not ok?

Rose asserts two important aspects associated with femme identity. First, “it’s all freakin’ fluid,” suggesting that a feminine woman is just as unnaturally produced as other gender categories like masculine woman or feminine male-born person. Second, she argues that self identification is primary in gender identification.

There is a trend in defining femme identity as so critical of the assumption that gender is natural that, as Charlotte suggests, femmes are no longer women. That is, some femmes see their femme gender identity as a unique category. Because femmes see their femme identity as

something they transitioned into, there is a trend of some (female-born) femmes identifying as transgender. Abby, the only participant who felt this way, explained her position:

Because I'm a political organizer and because I'm political, I see [transgender] not just as an individual identity. I do see it as a movement that can be about gender liberation. It's kind of broader than individual people who feel they're not their real gender and then changing. That's certainly part of it, but there's more to it too. And as I've just been learning about people's journeys, I've clearly thought about how I fit in that. Thinking about how people describe the coming out phase, and that this is a unique gender and it just sounds very similar to me as I've come out as femme. And I don't see myself [like other women]... I see [feminine] straight girls as allies, but we're different. I see feminine queer women as allies, but there's still a difference [if they don't identify as femme]. Seeing the differences in that and the complexities in that, it's totally subtle. No one else ... they're not going to look at somebody else and say, *oh you're different genders*.

Like other transgender people, Abby believes that she had a “coming out” phase associated with becoming femme and that hers is a “unique gender.” However, there is more to her choice to identify as transgender. Most of Abby's interactions with trans people have been with trans men; as she notes, trans women often occupy different communities leaving queer women and trans men in the same community. Part of her motivation in identifying as trans is, as she said, “a reaction” to the attention given to the performance of masculinity in queer communities. She said:

Femmes have been put in the position of a support person, SOFA [Significant Others, Friends, and Allies of trans people], or whatever it is. And it's not recognizing femme as an actual identity. [But femme is] still the same formula of what other trans men are talking about. This is political too. Putting femininity in the dialogue around gender. Being trans, and being genderqueer, just giving it, if you will...I don't think it's had a legitimacy that other identities have because of sexism in the queer community.

Bringing these ideas together, she finalized, “It might be a reaction, but really I think here's the formula almost of what trans is and realizing that femme fits that formula of what is genderqueer.” For Abby, identifying as trans because she identifies as femme challenges the “sexism in the queer community” by demanding a dialogue about femininity and asserts that

femme identity is uniquely different from other female femininities – it is a gender identity that she has moved into as an adult.

Other female participants did not describe identifying as trans. Although they live in different cities and he does know Abby, Randall, a once femme identified “man with a trans history,” was aware that some cissexual female femmes identify as trans as part of their femme identity. Offering some generosity about the phenomenon, he said, “I can kind of see where [femmes identifying as trans] happens because there’s this thing in queer communities where you’re supposed to have the most radical gender and you get the points for having the most radical gender.” Still, he rejects the idea that femme (for cissexual female people) is possible:

I feel like sometimes [the idea that people get more credit for having a radical gender] translates into people who are femme and cissexual being really adamant about the fact that they have a genderqueer identity and calling themselves trans when they’re not. It’s just...I think...being trans...I believe in self identity, people can identify however they want, but being trans is like a real identity and a real experience and like sometimes with using language in a broad way where words don’t mean anything can turn into this thing where a word meant something and then other people took it away and then other people who still need that word are like, *what do we do about that? I don’t have that anymore*. It doesn’t mean that anymore and it means that people are expecting something else.

He argues that being trans “is a real identity” and “a real experience.” In some ways, he is calling Abby’s analysis of femme female femininity being trans an abstract exercise in gender theory. Theoretically she has moved into a gender identity that is different for her than the female feminine woman she was socialized to be. For Randall, this is not a “real” trans experience because it does not involve a physical transition and it does not involve confronting difficulty in dominant society. He went on:

My trans history has not always been a fun thing. It’s not something that I want. It’s not even something that I claim anymore. I don’t, you know, I’m proud of myself as a transsexual and a trans person; it’s not something I would change about myself, but it’s not something that I want[ed]. It’s not something that I asked for. It’s something really gross that happened to me that I had to deal with and I became a better person for it.

Abby argues that the articulation of femme identity as a trans identity – a unique gender identity that must include a marked shift from the gender one used to be – rejects the naturalness of female femininity; Randall argues that this idea unfairly co-opts transgender oppression. In some ways, this claim to transgender status made by some femmes resembles a broader argument in transgender communities. The idea that gender can be “queered” from a variety of perspectives and experiences is in conflict with the idea that transgenderism is a “real” condition composed of a body-mind gender conflict.

One last aspect of the intersection of femme and trans identities occurs when transgender people identify as femme. Where the above discussed how some femme identified people come to identify as transgender, there are also cases of transgender people coming to identify as femme. I was only able to interview one transgender person, Randall, who, significantly, no longer identifies as femme. However, his trans man identity and femme identity coincided at one time. While this may not be a controversy of femme identity, it does hold unique challenges. Femme identity has historically been located in lesbian communities; my participants suggest that it has shifted into a broader queer location. Femmes in the femme movement promote the idea that one must neither be currently female, nor have been born female, to identify as femme. Still, most femme identified people are queer non-transgender women. Although femme communities express an openness to include transgender people, few trans people are attracted to the identity. While trans women would confront a unique set of circumstances if they chose to identify as femme, I was not able to interview any of them. During my time in Atlanta’s Femme Mafia I was informally told that a femme identified trans man attempted to go to a femme-only event and he was asked to leave because he “obviously wasn’t femme” [author’s field notes]. Portland’s Femme Affinity Group included a few core members who were transgender. None of

the other organizations I profiled had core members who were out trans women. Randall, at one time, was one of the trans male members of the Femme Affinity Group. He explained the special circumstances involved in his expressing femininity:

Like a year ago I started taking hormones and still was really heavily identifying as femme and felt like taking hormones was going to allow me to even further the expression of my femme identity because I knew I was going to start passing more. And not passing and presenting as femme was something that I automatically got punished for like people getting my pronouns wrong and stuff so that was sort of an exciting prospect for me. It was something that stopped me from expressing femme a lot. So when I started hormones I got really really campy and really femme for kind of a while. Not more femme, but I really femmed it up for a long time.

As Randall and Stephen have been quoted earlier, trans men may feel like they are held to a stricter code of masculine expression because they are the mercy of cissexual people validating their claim to male identity. When Randall expressed more femininely he got “punished” by people not reading him as male – mispronouncing him as “she” because they assumed his femininity meant he identified as female. He assumed that taking testosterone would help people read him as male, which freed him to “femme” it up. After taking testosterone for a year he feels that he is about to start “passing” consistently and this makes him want to express femininity less. He went on:

Especially because like at this place of being on hormones where if I dressed femme I pretty much don’t pass but if I dress a little less femme...I’m on this line where I’m about to start passing almost a lot and it’s just easier for me to pass a little bit sometimes if I don’t look or act as femme which I think is just where I’m at on being on hormones right now so I’m turning it on and off right now. It’s about knowing the right time to express it.

Serano (2007) suggests that trans women are punished for being transgender *and* the choice to be feminine in a patriarchal order that denigrates femininity. Trans men who express masculinely are certainly held accountable for being transgender, but as Randall suggests, trans men who also wish to express some feminine characteristics are also doubly marked as inferior in the gender

order. As he says, if he manipulates his actions by acting less feminine, he can gain some legitimacy by “passing” as male.

Both the sexual orientation and transgender controversies embedded in femme identity illustrate the current fluctuation in its definition. Femmes in political femme communities are invested in transforming gender identity, in creating femme as its own gender identity. Involved in this process is a certain amount of boundary-drawing – beyond defining what a femme is, they must also define who gets to be a femme and the consequences of people in different social locations employing the identity term. Consistent with other New Social Movements, a great deal of femme political work is focused on individual transformation and identity talk. In other social movement terminology, they also indicate the simultaneity of collective identity work and deconstructive queer politics. In one sense, they are building a definition of who is femme and who is not femme, and creating borders around these identity definitions – a process of collective identity. However, in another sense they are actively dedicated to blurring the boundaries and coherence of sex categories, gender categories, sex, and sexuality – a commitment to queer deconstructive politics.

The Process of Femme Identity: Meeting Other Femmes

Thinking in sociological terms about gender as outlined in Chapter 2, because femme has moved from a label placed on people to a consciously chosen identity, the identity is processual. That is, femme identity happens over time and there are turning points associated with articulating a femme identity. As Abby said, identifying as femme was not “an aha moment. It was over time.” Part of why femme identity happens “over time” is because femme is a subcultural gender identity option; dominant culture does not provide a word for women who choose to be feminine. As Danielle said, “I didn’t even hear the word femme until I was ... 22 or something like that.” And as Katrina said, “I think that it’s been a long process of becoming

and it's only been fairly recently that I feel like I had a real word to put to [myself] that I was actually comfortable with." After learning about the potential of a queer femme identity Katrina joked that "hindsight is 20/20" because her orientation toward femininity makes sense through the lens of queer femme identity.

For some, learning about femme identity happened through reading books about queer culture. Irene told me, "I first heard the term femme...I remember I was reading something on stonewall [a riot that ignited the modern gay rights movement] when I was probably 16...I read the word femme and it all kind of clicked together. I started using the word when I was 16."

Similarly, Betty told the story:

I read *Stone Butch Blues* which was the first piece of fiction that had any butch femme in it. That was given to me by a friend. I felt like I came home. I was like, *what have I spent the rest of my life doing?* So it was like, it was it's not so much as a light bulb went off as I walked through the front door of where I was supposed to live.

For Irene, reading about the possibility of femme made something "click" and led her to identify with it since that time; For Betty, reading about femme may not have been an immediate "light bulb" moment, but the potential of the identity offered by the book allowed her to understand herself more thoroughly. Significantly, she said that it was as if she had "walked through the front door of where [she] was supposed to live" – learning a historical account of a queer feminine identity in the famous work, *Stone Butch Blues*, solidified unarticulated notions she had held of herself and had not been able to express.

For other participants, it was more common to first learn of the word "femme" as a negative label. For them, femme identity was not possible until they learned of a broader definition of what femme could be. For example, Charlotte said:

I came to understand that femme was an identity that existed outside of other people's [masculine] identities and that it was mine and that I could own it and that I could be like, I could be someone who was both masculine and feminine, someone who defied conventional standards about what is femme.

That is, another reason femme identity happens over time is because self identified femmes have to challenge the internalization of negative assumptions about femininity (and the femme label) in order to understand femme identity as a concept that is broad and complex enough for them to take on as their own.

In the way of collective identity, it is important that nearly all femme participants came to femme identity through meeting others who identified as femme. Ruth reflected that, although she had heard of the word femme and non-femme identified friends had been referring to her as femme, she did not identify as femme for some time. This is because, as she said, “I think it was primarily because I didn’t know other women who identify as femme.” She went on to explain:

It’s only after meeting other femmes and realizing that femmes can totally kick ass in their own wonderful ways that, that I came to see my femininity and my queerness as not mutually exclusive. I think some of it is about having role models and access to that.

It was through meeting other femmes, which she said was “liberating and terrifying,” that she was able to explore the possibility of identifying as femme.

Meeting people who embody femme identity shifts the identity from a concept to a lived reality. Katie said that moving to Seattle and meeting femmes was a turning point for her own identity. She said, “[I] met other folks who identified as femme and realized that that was an option to identify that way, and more importantly, an ok thing to identify as.” Montana reiterated the following about when she met other femmes, “I knew that femme was an identity I could happily claim as mine.” Also, meeting femmes who are diverse example of femininity provide multi-dimensional possibilities for femme identification. Abby told me that the following was integral in her process of coming to femme identity, “I met some fabulous femmes who were high femme. I just thought they were fantastic. They were so empowered around their femininity. I really admired that. I was like, wow, that’s pretty damn cool.” Akin to

Abby's story, Annabelle told this story about meeting the first femme identified person who "inspired" her:

I've always been feminine, but I wasn't [always] femme identified ... I remember the first femme I met where I felt like, *oh my god, I'm like her, we're the same* was this femme. I met her ... she was younger and more in my scene, in the punk scene, a little more queer and radical than the femmes I met before. She was like a drag queen. I don't know why I just identified with her more. She inspired me. She was a femme activist. She was a different type of femme, it made me realize that there are all types of femmes.

Annabelle had previously heard of femme identity and in college she had known lesbians who were femme identified; it was not until she met someone in her "punk scene," who was "radical" and "queer" that she felt like she could also identify as femme. Similarly, Randall reflected:

[I] started hanging out with these two femmes and getting to know about femme and getting really excited about femme. I still didn't know it was something I could claim because I didn't really know any men who identified as femme and I especially didn't know any trans men who identified as femme. I didn't really know any trans men at all and then I came to Portland and met a friend of mine who was a trans man and identified as femme and was really living his life and expressing his gender in ways that I really admired and really wanted and didn't really, had not known that was a possibility for me.

For Randall, meeting cissexual femmes allowed him to get "really excited about femme," but it was not until he met someone more like him that he learned it was "a possibility" for him.

These narratives of coming to femme identity reiterate the new definition of femme identity: it is a unique concept, separate from female femininity and it is an identity which demands conscious articulation. Likewise, it is significant that for most participants self identification as femme was born from social interaction with other femme identified people. This underscores the necessary sociality of gender identities and specifically the unique social workings of queer femme identity.

The Sociality of Femme: New Feminine Meanings

This chapter has illustrated competing subcultural definitions of femme: for some non-femme identified people femme is a label placed on feminine people which signifies exclusion

from authentic membership in queer communities and a misogynistic dismissal of femininity; for femmes, in response to this damaging label of femme, femme has been defined as an identity which is freely chosen, celebratory of conventionally feminine characteristics, and resistant to assumptions that women *must* be feminine. While the “femmephobic” femme label is built on assumptions internalized from dominant culture, femme identity is a modern development articulated in the context of a movement. That is, the concept of femme as a distinct identity, and femmes as a united group of people, is a process of collective identity.

Femmephobic presumptions about feminine people in queer communities prompted people oriented toward femininity to assert their valid participation in queer communities – they have articulated femme as a positive and fulfilling identity and [as I will detail in Chapters 7 and 8] they have created femme organizations dedicated to femme solidarity and visibility and burlesque troupes dedicated to the artistic celebration of femininity. In turn, these organizations and troupes provide an added dimension to the project of femme definition. For example, Lucy said that being part of The Queen Bees burlesque troupe “strengthened [her] relationship with [her] femininity and [her] femmeness.” Similarly, discussing what Femme Mafia has offered Atlanta’s queer community, Danielle said:

People know Femme Mafia, people know the name. People know pretty much what it’s about so if you say, *I’m part of it* that automatically [conveys], like *oh, you guys are rad, you guys are pretty cool. You’re all the hot girls... always out there having fun, very confident, very self assured. And doing your part to involve the community.* [We’re] discussing our gender expression and just taking our place. I think a lot of Atlanta has definitely benefitted from that. I think we’ve also given permission for the rest of the people around us to bring up their femme, to become even more femme than they had been because we’re here. And so I think just in terms of modeling, I think it’s done something to add more diversity out there. I think there are more femmes because of femme mafia.

Burlesque troupes and femme organizations provide contexts for femmes to “strengthen” their own identities through their participation with the group, and they offer other might-be-femmes

new possibilities in understanding the potential of femme identity. As Danielle said, there might be “more femmes” because of femme organizations.

Where femme, as a label or an identity, has always been social in that its meanings are transmitted through interaction with other people, femme identity becomes institutionalized in the context of organizations and performance groups.

CHAPTER 7
FEMME ORGANIZATIONS AS A CULTURAL QUEER PROTEST

“Femme Mafia absolutely became a part of me.” [Betty]

“What can we do as a group to insulate and protect our own? Which is one of the things I’ve loved about the mafia. We’ve explored the base of what it means to be femme.”
[Sabrina]

“Gimme a F-E-M-M-E
What’s that spell? Solidarity!
You don’t know who we are?
It’s pretty clear.
We’re sassy femmes
And we’re genderqueer.
Femmes are joining forces,
You can hear the roar.
We’re not gonna be invisible anymore!
It’s not about what we wear
Or who we fuck.
We’re strong and fierce
And we’ve had enough!
Femmes unite!
Show them yr might!
Femmes unite!
Come out and fight!”
[Femme Affinity Group zine]

According to femme participants, not only do femme organizations “become a part of” its members and “protect [their] own,” they are dedicated to “uniting,” showing “might,” and “com[ing] out [to] fight.” In social movement sociology terminology, they are organizations, like other GLBT organizations, who fight the indignity of marginalization and who want to redress their low status. However, unlike most other Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender [GLBT] organizations, their target is the queer community itself.

Whether I was interviewing members of the Femme Mafia in Atlanta, the Glitter Revolutionaries in Seattle, or Femme Affinity Group in Portland, when I asked what the purpose of their organization was, they all shared the same answer: to promote femme solidarity and femme visibility within their queer communities. Irene said of Femme Affinity Group, “definitely

promoting femme visibility was the main thing, [but also] femmes just meeting ... for me, it was just that it was there.” And Randall said of it, “[It’s] about building femme visibility. It was an activist and social organization at the same time. I think part of it was to build femme community.” Similarly, Michelle provides a lengthy reflection about the need for Atlanta’s Femme Mafia:

It was having a place where people could be seen and be celebrated because there was so little room for that in Atlanta’s queer scene at the time. Number one: you wouldn’t be recognized [as queer] by anyone in a queer setting. In fact, you would be kind of scolded for being out of place. Getting off at the wrong train stop or whatever. And then you certainly wouldn’t be celebrated. If they were going to let you hang out, they certainly weren’t going to talk about you like you were great. I’m so grateful that we have Femme Mafia, so grateful to [The Donna] who came along and said, *this is ridiculous! It’s time to celebrate us, damn it!* So I’m hoping that will happen everywhere. I do see it springing up a lot. That was the original goal, to have safe space set aside to be recognized, to say, *you’re queer and I know it and I’m glad you’re here.* You know? Like <laughs> um, kind of like the protest slogan [We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!], but it was so important and so vital and filled this hole in so many people’s hearts. It’s just like *ahhh, you see me as I am*, it’s amazing. You know? Also, not only do you see me as I am, but you love it! You love that I am who I am and you understand why I am who I am. I don’t have to explain it all the time. I don’t have to deal with your stupid questions like *you look so normal, you could get a normal man.* It really came down to that in the beginning. We were so excited that we didn’t have to deal with everyone’s crazy bullshit. At least one night a month. One night a month we didn’t have to deal with it anymore.

Michelle is “grateful” for the Femme Mafia because it is an organization that made an intervention into queer community practices that were hostile to femmes: where the larger queer community dismissed them as inauthentic members of the queer community, Femme Mafia recognized them and celebrated them. In many ways, organizations like this exist as a kind of support group with a political agenda. In the ways that Femme Mafia offered a sense of community for femmes – a place to build solidarity amongst people who experience femininity and queerness in concert with one another – the organization “filled a hole in so many people’s hearts.”

This is why Betty told me that Femme Mafia “became part of [her],” because, as Sabrina said, the Femme Mafia “insulate[s] and protect[s] [their] own.” Femme organizations are

responses to pervasive femmephobia in queer communities; they are interventions into the isolation and lack of space for femmes in queer communities. That is, experiences with femmephobia politicize femmes: it makes them yearn to share moments with people who have been treated similarly (so they may reach individual changes) and it establishes the need to promote visibility so that femmephobia will be challenged (so they may reach community changes).

Throughout this chapter I will elaborate on why these femme organizations highlight solidarity and visibility as the primary goals of femme organizing and detail the ways they achieve their stated goals. One section below is dedicated to each topic; I began each section with an event I attended which illustrates the goal of solidarity or visibility.

Although I have observed several events organized by the Femme Mafia, Femme Affinity Group, and Glitter Revolutionaries, I begin the following sections by focusing on a sleepover organized by Femme Mafia and a pride parade femme contingent organized by the Glitter Revolutionaries. They each illuminate key elements that are important in building theory on the topic of queer femme organizing. This approach is similar to Messner's (2000) article in which he witnessed an entire season of his son's soccer games, but chose one game to ethnographically examine. Messner's approach to studying "moments" is inspired by Hochschild's (1994) description of "magnified moments," which she describes as "episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes [later]" (Hochschild, 1994: 4, quoted in Messner, 2000: 766). I use these examples alongside interview data to offer ethnographic depth to the interviews I conducted and to echo the purported goals of interviewees.

Femme Solidarity

In November of 2007 Femme Mafia announced that they would hold a slumber party at a Mafia Femme's home. The evening of the sleepover more than twenty femmes attended: of them, seven femmes slept over and the rest of the attendees came to take part in the festivities, but did not sleep at the host's house. More than half of the femmes who attended did not stay to sleep over; instead, they came to take part in slumber party activities (eating junk food, pedicures, gossiping), but left the party to go on dates, go home to their partners, or to meet people for other engagements. In many ways the slumber party is a queered performance of conventional teenage femininity; the fact that several femmes took part in the sleepover, but did not sleep over speaks to the performative aspects of the event – what was important about the “sleepover” was not actually sleeping over, but the events of the evening. At the same time, in that it is a queered performance of conventional femininity, the sleepover is used as a tool to promote solidarity amongst its members.

Before attending Femme Mafia's slumber party, I noticed that their website had posted pictures of the slumber party from the previous year; photographs showed femmes: in pajamas; wearing cold cream and bioré strips across their noses; dramatically posing for the camera; or making silly faces. This year they painted their nails, knitted, and got pedicures with hot massage tubs. The refrigerator was full of beer, wine, and soda; the freezer was full of ice cream. Tables of food held cheese and vegetable trays, potato chips, cookies, and brownies. Even though everyone announced that they were full from the spread of food, about two hours into the evening they ordered pizza so that, as one attendee said, “it would just be more sleepoverish.” Later, when we decided to watch a movie, we chose “The Craft” because its plot centers on the friendship of a group of teenage girls; excitedly someone commented, “I think there's even a sleepover scene in the movie!” Throughout the evening there was a self-conscious

attempt on the part of Mafia members to make the event as close to a traditional sleepover as possible.

The sleepover is a symbol of American girlhood. Girls come together at someone's home, eat junk food, talk about makeup, groom themselves or each other, watch movies – and they fantasize about romances with boys. According to Wolf (1998), girlhood culture is constructed to train girls into an appropriate adult heterosexual femininity. Where boys may focus on personal interests, the interests of girls are molded into future (hetero)sexual lives. For instance, she argues that young girls value relationships with other girls (and that if their lives were allowed to develop along these lines, they might prefer romantic relationships with women), but that culture ensures their future heterosexuality by selling them boy bands, and gossip magazines about teenage boy actors. In this way, the sleepover is a kind of heterosexual milestone for young girls. It is a pubescent heterosexualizing lesson. It is an event of non-romantic homosocial bonding that sets girls up to be women who find platonic love with each other and romantic love with boys. Adult women do not have sleepovers; the sleepovers they had as young girls have already groomed them for friendships with women and romantic relationships with men.

The adult queer slumber party is an illustrative example of the contradiction presented by queer femininity. Like queer femininity itself, the adult queer slumber party is deceptively similar to heterosexual feminine mandates of girlhood, but subverts those mandates by its very similarity to it. Said differently, because of queer femininity's separation of heterosexuality and femininity, the use of dominant femininity performances (like the slumber party) subverts heteropatriarchy's rationale for femininity. Adult queer feminine women having, as they called it, "an old fashioned sleepover," has several important functions: First, as one of the goals of the

organization is to build “femme solidarity,” the slumber party is utilized to enable homosocial¹ (in this case, femme only, not just girl only) bonding. Second, it is a campy performance of girlhood which allows the organization to symbolically reclaim a femininity that they have been coerced to reject in lesbian communities.

More specifically, I interpret the sleepover as an example of an event wherein members can find solace in private moments with other people who are like them, who understand their femininity experiences in queer communities. As discussed previously, because both dominant culture and lesbian subcultures expect lesbians to reject femininity, queer femme members of Femme Mafia must articulate their femininity in a way that heterosexual women do not. At some point, queer feminine women must consciously choose to be feminine because of the lesbian mandate of androgyny or masculinity (and suspicion of femininity). Because heterosexual women are always expected to be feminine they may not have a conscious moment of choice around their femininity.

The performance of the sleepover is one way in which this occurred in Atlanta’s queer women’s community by Femme Mafia declaring that they were having a slumber party (with all that slumber parties represent) and that only femme-identified people were allowed to attend. The slumber party itself allowed discussions to happen that also disrupted the silent mandates of heterosexual femininity and lesbian masculinity. For example, 24 year old Nicole was talking to a group of about seven femmes and she asked them how they felt about being feminine when they first came out. Although she had acknowledged her attraction to women for some time before that, she had resigned herself to “spending her life with a man” and “keeping [her]

¹ It should be noted that this event was *homosocial* and not *homosexual* – I witnessed no hints of sexual encounters between the femmes this evening. The focus was on femme friendship bonding rather than sexual bonding.

distance from gay people so that no one would think [she] was gay.” About a year before the slumber party she decided to begin dating women:

The problem was I didn't know any lesbians so I took a straight friend of mine with me to My Sister's Room [a local lesbian bar]. I wore jeans, a black top that tied up, and heels. [The femmes listening cued, stating that she must have looked cute.] I know! I thought I looked cute. I still think I looked cute. Well, I got to the bar and saw that everyone there was wearing cargo shorts and had really short cropped hair. I said to myself, *Is this what it means to be a lesbian? Do I have to cut off all my hair and wear men's clothes?* It's naïve, but I thought...I would rather not be gay. If it means giving up being feminine, I would rather not be gay. I was naïve then. I didn't know I could have both [Nicole, author's field notes].

Feminine heterosexual women are not in a social position to have this conversation. It is possible that feminine heterosexual women have self conscious reflections about their femininity but lack the community resources to have conversations about it; it is also possible that because of their privileged space within sexuality and femininity those who enjoy their femininity do not question it. Importantly, the kind of internal negotiation Nicole describes is unique to queer feminine women. Further, the need to have a group discussion about this identity negotiation is unique to queer feminine women.

Where masculinity may be understood to signal queer sexuality to queer and heterosexual people, queer feminine women are more often in a position in which they have to verbalize their sexual orientation (Stein, 1993). This may mean that a more complicated discussion about sexual orientation emerges. For instance, Joanie announced the question to the room, “Here's a good question: if you're dating a transman, do you become straight or bisexual?” Sonia, a femme dating a transman answered her, “well, I identify as queer.” While for Joanie a femme dating a transman made her heterosexual or bisexual, Sonia articulated her identity as queer; other women commented that they knew of women maintaining a lesbian identity when they were dating men.

Masculine women are seen as queer (both by mainstream culture and other queer people) regardless of their sexual partners because their masculine identities visually mark them as queer. Historically femmes have been ostracized from lesbian communities because of their suspected sexual relationships with men (Stein, 1993). However, since the 1990's, several events have made this position untenable, especially in queer communities that espouse goals of gender and sexual inclusion [please see Chapter 9 for a lengthier discussion of the politics of this queer shift].

Femme Mafia's organizational response to these shifts has been to welcome femmes of all genders and sexual orientations into their organization; this was evident in the sexual orientations represented at the sleepover and the discussions femmes had about their sexual orientations that evening. Instead of trying to assert that femmes are authentically lesbian and should thus be accepted as queer enough, the organization is asserting that the queerness of femme identity does not rest on having exclusive sexual relationships with women.

One of the ways this is achieved is through talk about masculine people having sex with men. For instance, a femme in a non-monogamous relationship joked that her transman boyfriend was "such a fag" because he always seemed to have sex with men more often than women. Likewise, a femme dating a butch said that a couple of years ago her butch had sex with a male friend while she was visiting her family in Ohio. When her butch partner returned and told her she assumed that she would be angry, but she said, "Why would I be mad about that?" By extending bi-positive sentiments to men and masculine women, femmes in Femme Mafia legitimate the idea that masculine queers can sleep with men thus delegitimizing the stereotype that femininity means sleeping with men. In this way, they make the statement that people of all genders sleep with men *and* that if femmes sleep with men it does not detract from their

queerness. Importantly, this is also related to the common sense politics of sex-positivity in femme organizations; members often espoused positive beliefs about non-monogamy and sex outside the context of relationships.

The constant discussions of gender, sexual orientation, and sex are clearly ways that adult queer slumber parties diverge from conventional girlhood slumber parties. Significantly, the slumber party was suggested as a Femme Mafia event because it represents “girl” bonding and was meant to encourage femme bonding. The event allowed these conversations about gender and sexuality to occur; that is, femmes bond through a verbalized reflection of their queer gendered experiences. This is why a key principle of femme organizing is the building of solidarity between members, allowing femmes to find community with likeminded others.

As the above description of the sleepover (and conversations that occurred during it) suggest, femme organizations provide a context for community-building and support from other femmes who have shared similar experiences in queer communities. Recall from previous chapters that femmes experience “femmephobia” in queer community. Femmephobia is multidimensional; it includes: invisibility in public when femmes are not recognized as queer; social alienation even once they announce their queer identity; and stereotypes placed on them because of negative conceptions about femininity.

Dominique, a mafia femme, answered this way to the question “Why Femme Mafia?” on the organization’s web page, “Because we are all tough broads who need to band together and fight oppression and be fabulous and glossy while we do it. We need each other’s camaraderie to get us through – we need that girly girl love and support.” It was common for people involved in femme organizations to reiterate this sentiment: they fight femmephobia and provide an opportunity to “look fabulous and glossy while [they] do it.” Part of the satisfaction derived

from membership in a femme organization is being surrounded by people who present as femininely as they do. As Dominique's quote suggests, "camaraderie" from people who are "girly girl[s]" is essential to "get [them] through" their experiences as femmes.

A reflection of themselves through the eyes of other queer people who have similar gender presentations offers a politicizing solidarity. Patricia said:

I just love the celebration of that kind of queer femininity. [I always ask femmes] like, *have you ever been to a Femme Mafia event?* I just love it! Sometimes there will be like 50 of us and we are dressed <taps the table with the tips of her fingers> to the nines! And trying to outdo each other, but in this healthy competition way because we love each other. Like it's all about, *oh my god, your shoes are hotter than mine.* I just love that. And that empowers me.

Danielle also felt this way:

I went to my first few events and everybody was dressed in their Sunday best essentially. Wearing the best outfits and everyone was so complimentary of each other. Everyone was really supportive and really excited about each other and I was like, *Oh my god. This is a community I want to be a part of. This is so wonderful.*

It may seem strange that Patricia would feel "empowered" by femmes who "dress to the nines" and compliment one another's shoes; it may also seem strange that Danielle was moved to be part of an organization because everyone wore "the best outfits." However, these narratives tell stories of a deeply felt internal feminine self being allowed to intersect with their queer selves in the same moment. Said differently, femme organizations allow them to express a queer femininity and meet others who understand queer feminine expression.

While it might seem vain or shallow to place so much importance on external decoration, the impulse to gather with people who present the way they do actually represents something much deeper. Although Danielle and Patricia talked about stylistic elements of finding femme community in the Femme Mafia, they also reflected on how finding people with those gender presentations resounded with their internal femme identities. Patricia also said:

My girls. I just love my girls. I just love... it's so nice to get dressed up and go out with people you know are celebrating you for that very reason alone and you may never even talk about femme identity. We're just talking about shoes and nails but [it] just amazingly gets me through the month knowing that I have that to look forward to. I love it.

And Danielle also said:

My first connection with the femme community was really through the Femme Mafia. I was like, there's more people like me? Like really? You know? It's ... and you guys are queer and into queer politics and you're this femme? Like, amazing! I had never seen that face before. So it was really exciting to be a part of.

Patricia gets through the month knowing that she has at least one opportunity to gather with "her girls" because she knows that they will "celebrate" her for her femininity. Even if they never discuss femme identity specifically, she feels understood by them in a way that she would not feel understood by non-queer feminine women or non-femme queer women. Danielle furthers this idea by explaining how the Femme Mafia was exciting for her because they were externally like her, but also had queer sensibilities like her.

In a challenge to the femmephobic idea that feminine expression and feminine interests are antithetical to radical queer identity, femme organizations provide atmospheres that reiterate the potential for these things to coincide. As Erica, a Mafia Femme writing on their website about what Femme Mafia has meant to her, said "The Mafia reminds me that I'm no less of a queer for getting facials, watching America's Next Top Model, or wearing stilettos. I can be superficial. I can be angry. I can be political. I can be sincere. And I can be lovely." That is, femme organizations are places where femmes can meet other femmes who share their interest in external feminine presentation and exemplify complicated queer, radical, angry, intellectual points of view. Betty told me:

For me meeting all these young incredible femme women was probably the most amazing thing I've ever experienced because en masse...there's all these incredible femme women. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced. To see all these faces looking back at me and to know that they were all queer femme women.

Betty describes her time in Femme Mafia as the “most beautiful” thing she had ever experienced because it was an opportunity to meet queer femmes “en masse” – groups of femmes who offered “incredible” representations of queer femme experience. Importantly, this sense of community creates an arsenal for dealing with femmephobic experiences in queer communities. Katie said, “I think that like we have to be in touch with each other. It’s not an option [for me]... if I’m going to exist as a femme in the queer community, I have to know that there’s other people there.” This is the political context of femme organizations. It is not just that they meet others who are like them, but that they meet others who are like them, who have been alienated by their community because of their gender presentation, and who think this should change.

Annabelle told me that she loved being part of Femme Affinity Group because she “really loved having a femme community” because “[I] liked having a place where we could discuss issues we all felt connected to.” Charlotte agreed:

[Femme Affinity Group] changed my community and my group of friends, and how, how we made space to talk about those things that were kind of unsaid. It gave me a space, and other people a space, to talk about the shit that sucks about being femme, about being femme in a community that doesn’t recognize you. I think it also gave us an opportunity to try and change that.

Part of the rationale for needing femme community is, of course, that femmes share unique experiences in queer communities. As Kelly said, “Part of why I want to spend time with other femmes is because of the commonality there” because “There’s a lot of experiences coded into the femme experience. I don’t need to constantly talk about it with other femmes, but it gives me a lot of commonality.” Significantly, the story she told to underscore the commonality of femme experience was that she “gets tired of having to constantly constantly come out as a lesbian.”

She said:

A lot of femmes have had the experience of walking into a lesbian bar and have people look at them like, *well, why are you here?* Um. Again, it’s not as bad as it used to be and it’s not as bad in Atlanta as some other places, but I’ve heard that there are still some dyke

bars out there where if a girl walks in in a dress people are not going to be terribly friendly to her because they're going to assume that she's just a straight sightseer or some girl out for a cheap thrill or something like that.

Being seen as heterosexual, and hence being isolated from queer community, is an aspect of femme experience that has been discussed previously in the section on femmephobia. What is significant about Kelly referencing this kind of moment is that she does so at the exact time in the interview when she discussed the importance of femme organizations. That is, femme organizations intervene into this negative treatment and in some ways offer a solution. The solution is solidarity from people who have had a similar experience. Emma said, "I think that [femme organizing is] definitely about visibility and recognizing people's queer identities and orientations around sexuality. For me, that's the most important part."

This is something I noticed time and again during my ethnographic research: during various events femmes would tell stories to each other of feeling alienated; always, there would be a response which validated the storyteller's feeling of alienation as real (and not imagined) and which validated queer femme identity. If queer collective identity has coalesced as a masculine-only enterprise, then it is logical that femmes would not be recognized as queer because of their female femininity. However, when femme interviewees talked about feeling invisible *and* alienated, they gestured to something more profound than the assumption that they should probably be masculine because they are queer. Feeling "invisible" is a consequence of the queer collective identity of masculinity. For instance, Charlotte wrote the following in the Femme Affinity Group zine about the invisibility of queer female femininity:

There was a time about three or four years ago when I didn't think I was femme. Where I dressed in too big clothing and wore cowboy boots to change my walk to a swagger. In retrospect, I realize I was trying to prove myself. I wanted everyone to know I was queer as much as I knew I was. I wanted them to notice me. I wanted to be hot shit.

Invisibility is not being recognized as queer. Feeling “alienated” is perhaps a result of that invisibility, but it is more specifically a reference to being rejected by other queers once a queer identity has been projected by femmes. Members of femme organizations told me that they felt actively ostracized by other queer people, even in situations where they felt it was reasonable to believe that they are queer: people would ask them if they were in the wrong bar; a femme in Atlanta had a cigarette thrown at her in a lesbian bar; femmes have had service refused to them in lesbian bars; femmes tell me that the queer community makes them feel “undateable” because of stereotypes about them; as Emma said, they feel “ineligible” to be truly part of the gay community because they are femme. Throughout this chapter I use the words “invisibility” and “alienation” frequently and interchangeably. Although they are different in degree, they stem from the problem articulated by femmes of finding female femininity incompatible with queer identities.

Femme organizations help femmes deal with feelings of alienation. For example at a Femme Mafia brunch after an outing to a zoo Danielle walked up to the table looking distraught; when someone asked her how her night was she said, “let’s just say that last night I learned there are some places femmes shouldn’t go.” A femme responded, “maybe you should tell us so we can all heed the warning.” The Donna agreed with Danielle, “We’ve all experienced that.” In this instance, Danielle brought up the alienation she experienced to a group of people she knew would understand; The Donna offered consolation that is not an individual experience, it is something that all femmes experience.

Similarly, at another event a Mafia Femme, Ruby, told the group that she went out the other night in a crowd of masculine women; a gay man walked up her and said, “lesbians! I love lesbians!” and then he turned to her and said, “You’re not a lesbian! I know. I can tell. You’re

not a lesbian!” she continued, “and I was like, okay. Thanks.” Although this is a story of a gay man, not another queer woman, disregarding her sexual orientation, none of the queer women she was with defended her. The Donna said, “[you should have said] why don’t you tell that to all the pussy I eat?” The group laughed; Ruby laughed and said, “yeah!” The solidarity offered by femme organizations confirms the validity of feminine presentation and the authenticity of queer identities claimed by feminine women. Ashley, a Mafia Femme, told me this about why Femme Mafia was so important to her at my first Femme Mafia event:

This organization has been really vital for me. When I first came out I cut my hair really short and had it spikey and dyed it blonde and the reaction I got from the community was great. I was accepted, you know? But I just decided that wasn’t me...then when I came to Atlanta [and I was feminine], I would walk into a place like [My Sister’s Room] and I would feel like an island, like an alien. You know, people would assume I was straight or bi-curious – people made fun of me to my face; I remember literally having to hold back tears.

Again, invisibility and alienation work in concert with one another. When “people would assume [that Ashley] was straight or bi-curious” they made her feel invisible by not recognizing her queer identity; when “people made fun of [Ashley] to her face,” they made her feel alienated by socially rejecting her. In these examples femme organizations provided a safe haven for femmes who have been alienated by other queer people because they are femme: Danielle could tell her story to a table of people who validated that the same thing has happened to all of them; Ruby could have the experience of being told that she is not a lesbian humorously counteracted by people who understand that her femininity and sexual orientation can coincide; and Ashley could have the experiences of feeling “like an island” and “like an alien” dissipate through an organization that is “vital” for her because of its ability to offer femme community.

Femme Visibility

Significantly, femme organizations begin with the concept that femmes need support from other femmes; eventually this translates into a need to change the community. That is,

femmes establish these organizations to provide solidarity for femmes who feel alienated, but the logical next step is to challenge the source of that alienation. Ruth discussed both of these ideas:

For me, [the reason for femme organizations] goes back to validation and affirming femininity. And, you know, it's like not just about gender expression but, like, that this can be a powerful way to be in the world. It's about getting more support to be in even more different. You're already down for the count because you're queer and you're a woman, and add femininity on top of that, it's just ... I don't think any person wants to choose to be even more marginalized. I think it's about carving out space and making it so a young queer femme can walk into the Wild Rose and nobody gives her a second glance, or if they are it's because they're interested not because they think she's in the wrong place and they're defining, they're asserting their territories. You know? You're too feminine, you don't belong here. I think it's exciting for me because 10 years ago I didn't have that.

For Ruth, femme organizations provide “support” but they are also involved in “carving out space” so that in the future young queer femmes will not feel as isolated by queer communities as femmes do now. This is why alongside femme community, which provides individual support, femme organizations work toward femme visibility, which seeks to establish a grander change at the level of community. In some ways, invisibility is seen as the reason for alienation. That is, if queer people saw more constant examples that it is possible to be feminine and queer, they would not ignore femmes as potentially queer (making femmes feel invisible) or ostracize femmes (making femmes feel alienated). The immediate solution for femmephobia is solidarity because it allows individual femmes hurt by the low status of femininity in queer communities to have friends and a meeting place; the long term solution for femmephobia is visibility so that they might shift queer collective identity to include feminine women.

In June of 2008 the Glitter Revolutionaries organized a femme contingent in Seattle's pride parade. Two days prior to the main event a group gathered at one of the members' homes – a femme who is also a member of the Von Foxies – to make a banner for the contingent. Craft supplies and burlesque costumes were everywhere: there were feathers, sequins, boas, fabric with leopard print, vinyl with flames, and a lot of glitter; eventually we deconstructed several

Hawaiian leis, originally used for a burlesque costume, to build a letter on the banner. The banner was a tarp measuring about 3 feet by 6 feet. They hot glued pink lace to the back of it and used the materials to spell out “FEMME PRIDE” in different colors with different textures; they hot glued a pink boa underneath the words.

The morning of the pride parade we met downtown at a designated location assigned to us by the larger committee organizing the event. About 15 femmes and 5 allies gathered to march, dressed in gold dresses, floral dresses, pink skirts, fishnets, and high heels; 2 of the femmes wore matching vinyl hot pants and tube tops, outrageous makeup, with wigs and huge platform heels that made them over 6 feet tall. Before we started marching the leader of the organization, Emma, walked around everyone and asked if she could dump either silver or gold glitter on people; everyone was covered in one or both of the colors of glitter. As we walked the crowd shouted and cheered for the femme contingent; the cheers mainly came from masculine lesbians who seemed to be performing an expected attraction for feminine women and gay men who seemed to be celebrating the demonstrations of femininity. As we passed the announcers they read the statement that the Glitter Revolutionaries supplied, that they provide solidarity and visibility for femmes and the crowd cheered.

In many ways, I found the cheering of the crowd counter-intuitive. After the march, I wrote on my notepad, “Why did they cheer for us? Isn’t the point [of the contingent] that they don’t celebrate us?” There are several ways to answer my questions from that day. First, during our interview Michelle said the femme organizations are popular because “the femme movement is fun to look at.” In her group, the Femme Mafia, Atlanta’s community was “hostile” to them when they formed, but eventually paid them a lot of attention: they had articles written about them in the gay newspaper, the same lesbian bars where femmes could not get served drinks

asked them to have events, other organizations asked them to co-sponsor events. Perhaps this is because, as Michelle suggests, femmes are “fun to look at.” It is also important who was cheering: gay men, who have long had to contend with mainstream notions that they should reject femininity; feminine women who had no context to celebrate a “femme identity,” and masculine women – the cheerers who whistled, shouted, and cat called the contingent. In many ways the latter celebration speaks to the simultaneous sexualization and alienation that happens to femmes previously discussed in Chapter 6. Finally, it might be said that the femmes were demanding celebration through their visibility stunt. I asked Emma, the leader of the contingent, if she was surprised by the cheering; she said yes by nodding affirmatively. I followed up, saying that I assumed there might be some booing. “Booing?” She said, “Oh no, that would *not* be happening,” allowing inflection in her voice to imply that the femme contingent would have taken strong action on booing members of the audience. Perhaps on a day that was celebrating the visibility of the GLBT community, the femme contingent’s point that they should also be celebrated was conveyed.

Amongst the cheering, the announcer called, “and check out how they walk in those heels.” Femmes from the contingent would shout to the crowd, “Happy Pride!” and “Aren’t we pretty?” Several of them would walk to the sides of the march, offering hugs and kisses on the cheek while they wished people a Happy Pride. Two of the femmes approached a man protesting the march, holding a sign that said “homosexuality is sin.” They approached him and tried to give him a kiss on the cheek and wish him a Happy Pride; he backed up from them so they could not kiss him and shook his head to indicate that his answer was no. They joked, “come on, don’t you want to turn us straight?” and then they turned to each other and kissed

heavily for a minute before breaking up the kiss with laughter and running to catch up with the femme group who had moved on while they stopped to talk to him.

Alongside the cheering from masculine women and gay men, the contingent crossed feminine women in the crowd who joined the march. Often there would be a group of gay men with one feminine woman and the men would point to her and shout, “she’s femme, she’s femme!” or there would be a lesbian couple with one feminine woman; in either case, the contingent would shout for them to join us and several of them did. Interestingly, they looked markedly different from the femmes who organized the contingent: a couple of the joined marchers looked to be about 17 or 18 and were very conventionally feminine; one of the femme lesbians who joined was in her 30’s and had blond hair, wore a tiara, a light pink skirt and pink heels and a shirt that read, “femme.” Later someone referred to her as “The Ladies Home Journal femme,” illustrating that they too saw her as a far more conventionally feminine woman than themselves. The specific difference in style may have been an affiliation with queer communities (that the femme contingent organizers shared) and an affiliation with the more mainstream gay and lesbian community (that the joiners shared). This was evident to me in their feminine presentations because the queer femmes were decidedly more outrageous in their presentation. It was also evident to me in the reactions to the contingent of the joiners: femme organizing is squarely located in queer communities; mainstream gay and lesbian communities are not necessarily having widespread discussion or organizing around femme identity.

The women who joined the march were shocked that we were present; their demeanor – running to us, taking pictures with us, hugging us, shaking their heads and saying “I can’t believe you guys did this” and “this is so awesome” – showed their deep isolation and their gratefulness

for queer feminine presentations being highlighted as a possibility. Katie, who marched with the Glitter Revolutionaries that day, also noticed these things:

There were women who ran out and joined the march with us; there were women who ran out and like took a picture with us and [said] *thank you so much*. You would see these women just like, *thank you so much, thank you for being there*. The other thing that was interesting, that I haven't thought a lot about was like a femme with a lot of gay men and having the gay men point out at her like, *she's femme too!* kind of like something happening that was really interesting. Out of all the interactions I saw that was the most common, to see all these gay men or other people pointing to the femme they know and I think that speaks a lot to the lack of community and people really knowing that and being like, *oh my god, I know a femme and she's not here with all these other femmes*. Interesting thing. Lots and lots of gay men being like, *she's femme and you should talk to her*.

The queer femmes who organized the contingent did so to combat the invisibility of femmes in queer communities; the response they received from people who the organizers perceived to be even more isolated reiterated the need to form a femme presence in queer communities. Katie went on to say that it is because femmes are so invisible that a visibility demonstration like the femme contingent in the pride parade is needed; she said, "I think because in the queer community feminine identity does feel so invisible, [the contingent gave] some visibility and sense of understanding and community." For her, a femme contingent in the pride parade was "really awesome" and "really necessary."

When I asked Emma why she organized and participated in the femme contingent, she jokingly remarked, "I got to wear an awesome dress. Who would turn down an opportunity to march in a parade and look fabulous and have people scream at you because you're gay and they're gay and they really think you're pretty?" She then more seriously reflected:

[The femme contingent is meant] to get people thinking about what it can mean to be femme. I think that is absent a lot of times. [People think] femme is some antiquated thing from lesbians in the 60's and 70's and it's no longer a relevant way of expressing gender. Just to let people know that we're still out there and we look really hot.

Importantly, Femme Mafia and Femme Affinity Group also organize femme contingents in their local parades. I did not visit Atlanta during pride celebrations because it was in conflict with my

other ethnographic research, but they are rumored to have a major presence in Atlanta's gay pride celebrations. For instance, I was checking into a hotel in Atlanta one night and the desk clerk asked me what I was doing in town; because of her masculine presentation I read her to be a lesbian and I told her I was in town studying the Femme Mafia, wondering if she knew of the organization. She replied, "yeah, yeah, the Femme Mafia – they pull some stunts during pride. They're alright. They're fun." When I asked her what kind of "stunts," she replied, "just wild stuff. Colorful. Always fun and really out there."

Although Portland's 2008 pride celebration was the same weekend as Seattle's, I was able to attend their 2007 pride weekend and the Femme Affinity Group had organized a contingent in the "dyke march," a march that takes place a day before the general pride parade dedicated to dyke visibility. I attended a Femme Affinity Group meeting where they planned the contingent in the march; as one femme noted, "obviously we want to be a visible force in the march." About 35 femmes and femme allies marched in the 2007 dyke march: they all wore black, white, and hot pink; they wore buttons that read "femmes unite" with hearts; their banner was hot pink and read, "femmes unite." Interestingly, Femme Affinity Group is not composed of only dykes; while many femmes in the organization may identify as dykes, others markedly do not. Even male femme-identified people marched in the dyke march. In some ways this illustrates the historic location of "femme" in lesbian/dyke communities even as its meaning has shifted to include people who are not lesbian/dyke identified (or even people who are not women). Also, it defines who femmes (in Portland) want to give them recognition.

In general, pride parades are meant to establish recognition of sexual difference: they are moments of demonstrating the existence of GLBT people, of celebrating that existence, and of suggesting that there should be more of an everyday acknowledgment of their existence. In

short, they are moments of GLBT visibility. It is poignant then that femme organizations decide to demand *femme visibility* during pride parades and dyke marches. It is a significant parallel of isolation and marginalization: in organizing contingents, femmes are telling the larger GLBT community that femmes are ignored in ways that mirror dominant culture's erasure of GLBT lives. It is also an important demonstration of where femme activism occurs: it asks for change from other GLBT people; it is not directed at non-queer dominant others. Dyke marches have also historically made this demand: they were established in response to the focus of men's experiences during gay pride celebrations and to make visible the unique circumstances of dykes (Ghaziani & Fine, 2008).

Certainly the femme movement is not the only form of organizing that takes place within queer communities, developed by and directed toward queer people. There is a long history, for example, of organizing to challenge hierarchies of gender, race, and class within GLBT organizations (Armstrong, 2002).

Femme contingents tended to be so emotional for the actors involved, perhaps *because* it was a protest directed at their own community. Certainly all activists feel an emotional connection to their activism, but it is perhaps true that people have a higher emotional investment in their activism when the target of their protests are members of their own community. As Lucy said, "how painful it was, identifying as femme and hearing really femmephobic shit in my community. It's more painful, personally, for me, in my own community."

Femmes in the femme contingent were involved in a moment of pride celebration, of telling dominant culture that they refused to be silent around queer sexual orientation and that they were in fact committed to celebrating it and celebrating each other; they were also involved in a femme contingent of that pride celebration, of telling other queer people that they refused to

be queer in narrowly defined ways and they were committed to celebrating their gender identities and the defiance of people who presented like them. Katie reflected:

Oh my god. I think that marching was really powerful for me. One of the things was that the femmes would cheer when the femmes would march and I saw a lot of masculine identified or differently gendered folks clapping in huge recognition of the queer community, that I don't felt like arose in all these other places. But it felt good to see queers acknowledge that we're there and we're a huge part of the community and that it takes a lot of guts to live in the world the way that we do. I felt like there was some recognition there.

For Katie, the march was “powerful” because she felt recognized by other queer people. Having a femme community in Seattle, she is used to having “solidarity” with other femmes, or recognition of her experiences from other femmes. The femme contingent was a protest of femme invisibility and a demand for recognition; when non-femme people cheered for the femmes, Katie felt that they recognized what is usually ignored – that femmes “are there” and a “huge part of the community” and that it “takes guts to live in the world” the way femmes do.

Katie's feelings about the Glitter Revolutionaries' femme contingent illustrate the larger rationale for femme visibility demonstrations in queer communities. All of the femme organizations I studied said they were dedicated to femme solidarity and femme visibility; the most obvious event dedicated to femme visibility is the femme contingent in the pride parade, but visibility demonstrations happen in less obvious ways as well. For instance, Femme Affinity Group would wear buttons, patches, and t-shirts that said “femmes unite” regularly; they would flier Portland with statements about valuing femmes. As Charlotte said, through these actions, “We gained visibility and pretty legitimately. We showed up and wore our patches and our shirts and we were like, *what up? We're here.*” This “we're here” logic is connected to larger GLBT visibility attempts. She is specifically referencing Queer Nation's slogan, “We're Here. We're Queer. Get Used To It.” Michelle also referenced this slogan earlier in this chapter when she said that femmes saying to each other “you're queer and I know it and I'm glad you're here”

was “kind of like the protest slogan.” This connection makes sense. Other GLBT organizations have focused on visibility as a path to redress the harm of discrimination. When Queer Nation said, “We’re Here. We’re Queer. Get Used To It,” they demanded that heterosexual society deal with their queer presence; when femmes say, “what up? We’re here,” they demand that other queer people deal with their presence in their community.

Also, Femme Mafia would hold “takeovers” of lesbian frequented establishments which meant that they would organize an event where 40 to 50 femmes would gather at a venue that is usually unfriendly [unfriendly in terms of service and treatment from other patrons] to femmes and dance, drink, or eat. These are not conventional protests where social movement actors might stand outside an establishment and protest patrons with signs. Because femmephobia is “subtle like subtle racism,” as Abby said, the protest is also subtle: they attend venues and demonstrate that femmes are a large portion of the community. As Danielle said, “I love the idea of going out as a huge bunch of dressed up femmes and taking over a place, showing that we take up space and we’re allowed to.” This group visibility has had personal consequences for her too, “It’s given me an opportunity to have a lot more visibility. People definitely know me now. I mean one of the taglines [of Femme Mafia] is *earn your reputation, so.*” Not only does Danielle note that Femme Mafia’s visibility demonstrations tell people in queer communities that femmes will take up space and that “they are allowed to,” but they have also given her a personal feeling of visibility in her community.

The goals of femme visibility are two-fold: they provide a protest of femme invisibility in queer communities and they promote an opportunity for femmes to personally feel more recognized as members of the queer community. This was true for Charlotte who said:

One thing that in my personal life that I’ve done to combat that femmephobia and that invisibility is just to hang out with a gaggle of femmes and to demand attention as a crew

or to make attention, or give each other the attention that we don't get from the larger community. If you don't have it, you have to make it and you can't depend on people giving it to you, you have to make it yourself.

From Charlotte's point of view, femme organizations, a "gaggle of femmes," or a "crew" will garner attention, which creates visibility for femmes in queer community; they also provide visibility for each other because they see each other as they understand themselves to be. Abby, a member of the Queen Bees who also marched with the Glitter Revolutionaries, reiterated this point:

As a single femme – not just whether or not I'm partnered, but single out in the community – there's a different feel versus when we're together and taking up space so that's ... I think I feel much more invisible as a single femme versus when we're all together, like in a tribe, if you will. It's no fun being invisible. I also think, when I'm with other femmes, maybe I'm not more visible, I just feel more visible. Which is really important, if you feel more visible, that's kind of the point.

Katie also spoke to how different it feels for her to be with a group of femmes:

I think that without a posse of femmes I feel really uncomfortable and I stick out, and that sometimes I'm not very welcome, but then I feel like when I'm entering spaces with my femmes and it's like, *oh my god the femmes showed up*, then it feels different.

Significantly, Abby and Katie juxtapose being alone in queer spaces with being in a "tribe" of femmes, a "posse" of femmes, or, as Katie also said, "with my femmes," intimating the bonds of femme identity. Katie's feelings on "sticking out" or not feeling "welcome" dissipate when "the femmes [show] up." Although groups of femmes occupying space where other GLBT people gather would have the effect of demonstrating the existence of femmes in queer community, it more immediately offers femmes in the group a feeling of visibility. As Abby said, perhaps she is not more visible, but she feels more visible.

Again, the rationale for femme visibility is both to challenge the larger queer community on its femmephobic denial of femme existence *and* the personal fulfillment of feeling publicly

recognized as femme and queer. Consider both of these statements made by Charlotte about Femme Affinity Group. First she discussed what the group accomplished in Portland:

I remember meeting somebody who told me they were scared of me because I was a part of FAG and I was like, *yeah, we're a fucking force to be reckoned with*. I think that we were seen as a united front, as a force, as a legitimate force. We gained a legitimacy. We marched in dyke march and people are cheering, they're like, *we didn't even know we had a femme group! That's awesome!* I think that did change the landscape.

Next, she discussed how Femme Affinity Group's visibility affected her:

As far as [Femme Affinity Group's] lasting power [in Portland], I really couldn't say. I could only say for me personally and I think it did change a lot about I see myself and how I see my community, the way I see the femme community in Portland. Personally, it changed my landscape.

Certainly all movements affect both individual and social change. However, in that femme organizations exist because of a grievance that has to do with the identities of its members, the individual changes are perhaps more central to the movement experience. That is, the promotion of visibility affects community change, but it also allows the individuals involved to feel more immediately visible.

Although they are not interested in policy changes and instead focus on cultural changes, femme organizations offer a glimpse of conventional political work: they create solidarity amongst marginalized members of their community; they demand visibility and recognition from people they feel have ignored their presence. However, the femme movement is comprised of more than just this kind of organizing. In the next chapter we spend some time thinking about the possible political contributions of feminine performance art and how this work creates queer community possibilities for femme identity and feminine celebration.

CHAPTER 8

BURLESQUE: PERFORMANCE ART AS QUEER CULTURAL PROTEST

“Art tells our history. If we look back to the history and the books that have been burned, all we have is art. That’s what tells it. I think that through reading that and seeing that, I think people ... it’s not just queer people. [Queer people] just have more boxes we have to get out of. If we’re queer and brown and big and whatever more boxes ... once you have to open one, you have to open more. If you look back there’s always been that bard in the castle picking on the king right before his face through art, you know, the court jester. Politics have to grow up. If you can make them laugh, they may not realize they’re being educated or challenged or whatever the case is.” [Cynthia]

“[Performing with the Queen Bees] wasn’t just about entertainment. I do gogo dancing now. That is just about entertainment. That is not about being political in my head. That is just visual enjoyment and I do it because the money is good, but this? We didn’t get paid for this! We didn’t make any kind of profit off of it. We killed ourselves over it. We fought with each other. We cried. We went through major body revelations. We went through so much.” [Rose]

“I was a founding member [of the Queen Bees] who didn’t have a lot of [prior] experience in performing and didn’t truly value art as a legitimate form of social change organizing. Now I’m a poster child for the importance of political art as a tool for political, social, and institutional change. In fact, I feel no movement will be successful without the voice of artists and I strive to bring the political artist movement to the forefront of a new generation of progressive activists.” [Abby]

For people accustomed to traditional politics, performance art may seem to be the furthest thing from political activism. Where femme organizations are not exactly taking part in traditional politics, such as demanding rights-based changes from the state, it is far easier to see the activist intentions of femme organizing (in that they are organizing, creating a sense of solidarity, and even marching), than it is to see the political intentions of burlesque.

During our interview Johanna, a burlesque performer in Atlanta, told me, that groups like the Femme Mafia are “very overtly” saying “we are feminine and we are taking up space,” but that she was not sure if burlesque did. She paused and said, “I guess burlesque, being the one person on stage, does, but much more subtly.” She continued, “[It is] political to me, but it’s also performance. It’s not traditional activism, I suppose. That’s what I’m thinking of – the rallying.” Of course if Johanna compares burlesque to traditional activism – to rallying – it does

not meet the requirements of political activism. However, once she thinks of activism more abstractly she is willing to concede that it more subtly counts as femme activism; it demands that feminine queers be able to “take up space” in a different way than femme organizations.

After we had this conversation I asked Johanna overall, considering all of her experiences, if she believed burlesque was political. She replied:

I think it’s political if you make it political, so there’s that. The straight girls I [have] perform[ed] with, hate their bodies. They get up on stage and pantomime that they love their bodies and that they love them so much they’re showing them off – not political. That’s not loving, that’s not positive. On the other hand, when you have an intention behind it, like *I’m a woman of color and you think my sexuality should be this way and I refuse to pander to that* or you’re a woman of size and you’re like *I know you think my fat ass shouldn’t be in the street in cut offs, but I’m about to make you look at me and want me*. I think the intention behind any performance is what makes it political.

In some ways, Johanna is arguing that who is doing the burlesque matters. For instance, how one feels about the body she is displaying to the audience matters. If someone loves a body she is supposed to disdain, but shows it to the audience and demands admiration, this can be politically challenging. More specifically, she tells us that the intentions of the burlesquers matter: burlesque is an art form; it can be political but must be intended to be so. For example, in her own work, she told me about how she challenges her audience on raced sexual politics:

I feel like black women’s bodies and sexualities are looked at in this really stereotypical way, like the classic Sapphire thing. [So] I feel like when black women do burlesque, it just takes on this really overt political tone that you’re not experiencing with women who look white. I kind of feel like people are expecting me, when I go out on stage as a black woman, people are expecting me to have this high energy, dancey, happy, Josephine Baker, jiggaboo, coon kind of thing going on and [I like] to defy [that]... a lot of what I like to do, at least the basic concept of my character, is that I defy [those] expectations. I’m a black woman who is not crawling on the floor or dancing a little jig, wearing a banana skirt, leopard print, bone through the [hair].

Although black women can certainly unthinkingly do burlesque, just as some white women do, Johanna acknowledges that black women’s bodies have a history of sexualization that cannot be compared to white women’s sexual objectification (Collins, 2005); she responds to this political

awareness in her routines. By creating a very classic burlesque character, complete with fan dances to old Billie Holliday songs, she “defies” the expectation of how she should be sexual and entertaining to her audience.

As the opening quotes attest, art is a uniquely useful way to approach social change. As Blake said, “I think it’s a way to get to the audience too. They may not go to a political rally, but they’ll go watch burlesque.” That is, burlesque can certainly reiterate political ideas to likeminded audience members, but it also holds the potential to politically challenge the audience about what they currently believe. Because it is an artistic performance, you can speak to people who may not be drawn to traditional organizing. Similarly, Abby said:

These [burlesque] shows, I think, gave a voice to people’s ideas and thoughts and ways of being and how they see the world. It was a relief. It wasn’t preachy. It was fun and campy. You saw something that was reflective of how you see the world. It wasn’t preaching (not that all political organizing is preachy). I think [performance is] also [a] consciousness raising too, but in a subtle way that you don’t even know you’re learning and I think that’s way more effective than being judgmental toward people and saying *you should think this way*. It’s consciousness shifting. I think that’s what art can do. And so I’m a strong believer that in any movement there needs to be art involved.

Montana agreed:

I think that art, to me, is the most profound and beautiful way to affect social change. That doesn’t mean you have to get on a stage and [provide an] artistically and politically relevant show that gives us the answer[s] to issues that have been haunting us for years, but if you can make people laugh in a way that’s uplifting, if you can give people hope, show them it’s ok for them to be who they are. There’s all different kinds of ways to be on stage. It’s very powerful. It’s an opportunity I take very seriously. I enjoy it. You can be on stage and be political and be funny and have a good time. To me, art is the best way I can think of to actually evoke social change, one of the key elements.

Importantly, discussing burlesque performance art as activism is not an academic argument created here; it is very much understood as a form of political activism by the performers themselves.

It is perhaps because the performers I interviewed saw art as a means to survive and resist oppression that their performances were so political for them. Betty said that art and

entertainment are “natural expressions” and that they are ways “to step out of your hard life, bad relationship, shitty job; it’s necessary.” She went on, “It doesn’t surprise me when I hear stories of places where horrible things are going on like war and people [are] making merriment, doing dances, whatever they’ve got.” Reflecting on her own experiences with creating entertainment she told me that when she first started performing burlesque a friend of hers told her she wanted her to become a “queer hero.” Her friend told her, “you need to become a queer superstar so we can adore you,” about that Betty said, “I thought [that] was very interesting. We, as a queer community, need that. We need queer rockstars.” Significantly, Betty was moved to explain that queer communities need “queer rockstars” while she was talking about how people can “make merriment” in oppressive situations.

For some, burlesque is a form of entertainment; for others, it is a form of art. For the burlesque performers I interviewed, it was an art form that they used to make political points. Through burlesque they create critiques of dominant sexual and gender meanings that are harmful to queer people. Where femme organizing specifically challenges the queer community on its femmephobia, burlesque subtly challenges the queer community’s femmephobia by illustrating that feminine queers can provide an entertaining protest of homophobia, sexism, and gender rigidity. As this chapter illustrates, burlesque is an avenue through which feminine queers become the “rockstars” of the queer community.

Burlesque as a Sexuality Challenge

Burlesque is most obviously about sex. There is no removing the current performance art, whose original manifestation gave rise to modern stripping (Shteir, 2004), from the realm of sex and sexual gratification. One of the goals of any burlesque performance is to sexually excite the audience. This has unique political consequences when the performers and audience

members are queer and when queer sex is the central theme. Consider these events from my ethnographic research:

At the 2007 pride festival event in Portland the Rose City Sirens performed a series of dances individually and then performed a group finale. In one of the individual performances, a troupe member – slender, with short femininely styled hair and outrageous makeup, wearing a white ribbed tank top, suspenders and tight-fitting short skirt – ended her dance by standing on a speaker and pouring two bottles of vodka over her body. She shimmied and rolled her hips as the liquid poured over her body and made her white shirt sheer enough to see through it. The crowd roared, hooted and clapped. Next to me, a woman stood with her mouth agape, staring up at the performer. Another woman next to her – presumably a stranger – asked her, “are you going to be alright?” She replied, “I think so. That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

At a fundraising event in which the Von Foxies were featured performers, two members of the troupe entered the stage wearing floral dresses, pearls, and white gloves. One of them sat in a white garden chair while the other sang her the song that played on the speakers. The lyrics announced her love for the woman she sang to, “You’re smart, you’re funny, you’re lovely, and you believe that human rights violations are wrong.” The woman being sung to smiled and nodded enthusiastically. The woman who was singing paused with the music, “but there’s just one thing I need to know...do you take it in the ass?” The woman being sung to jumped out of her chair and shook her head from side to side, indicating that her answer was no. They followed each other around the stage, with the pursuer trying to convince the pursued to submit to her sexual request. Finally the pursued took the pursuer by the shoulders and turned her around; the pursued lifted her own skirt, to reveal a dildo¹ strapped in by a harness around her

¹ a phallic-shaped instrument used for penetrative vaginal or anal sex.

hips. She motioned back and forth as if she were anally penetrating her. The audience laughed and clapped. The performer who had been requesting to be the penetrator, and was now the penetrated partner, turned her head toward the audience and smiled. Then she stood up, lifted her own skirt and turned the other dancer around, revealing her own dildo strapped in by the same method. She moved back and forth as if anally penetrating her and the other one smiled to the audience.

Significantly, this was not merely a scene about sex; this was a scene in which two conventionally feminine women engaged in anal intercourse with each other. As such, the Von Foxies sought more than just sexual interest from their audience; they also evoked a challenge to standard understandings of how feminine women can have sex. Feminine girls, in dresses and pearls, can be attracted to each other and they can have sex that we might not expect them to have. In this case, the sex that we may not expect them to have is a penetrative act that is profoundly symbolic of a source of stigma for queer people in the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS] era (Hollibaugh, 1996; Schulman, 1994).

Another example includes the political content of the on-going theme of safer sex messages in the performances I observed. On one evening, The Queen Bees performed such a message at a fundraising event for a queer youth organization. The announcer, a drag queen, called out to the audience, “Wanna avoid the sting of sexually transmitted infections? Safer sex is sweet as honey when The Queen Bees whip it, whip it good.” Four members of the troupe entered the stage: two of them wore very feminine outfits and two of them were in masculine drag; after entering the stage the song “Whip It” began playing. The performance had two different segments. During the first, the two dancers in masculine drag engaged each other by looking intensely at each other. One of them dramatically pointed to the other and they danced

toward each other; their encounter culminated in mock anal sex. Behind the two engaged in the mock sex act, a tall blond troupe member, wearing a nurse's dress with condoms, gloves, and dental dams of various colors hanging off of it, danced around them with a wild look on her face. Another troupe member held a sign that read "boy meets boy." Before the end of this segment, she flipped the sign over to read, "That's a wrap," implying both that a condom was wrapped over a penis and that the sexual encounter had come to an end. Both of the dancers who were in drag undressed until they were wearing black bras and gold hot pants. They walked up to each other with flirty looks on their faces and the sign holder displayed a sign that read "girl meets girl." Parodying lying in bed, one of them held up the corners of a large white sheet so that the audience could only see her head and shoulders; the other performer knelt in front of her and was lost behind the sheet. The nurse threw safer sex tools at the duo and the performer we could see threw her head back in pleasure and silently contorted her face to make happy movements with her mouth. To conclude this act the sign holder displayed a sign that read, "Hot Dam!" – a double entendre that remarked on the hot sex that had happened and the use of a dental dam. To conclude the whole performance, all four members moved to the front of the stage, dancing. They snapped latex gloves on their wrists, snapped their fingers in unison, and walked off the stage. The political intent in this performance – that safer sex can be erotic in male-male or female-female encounters – was especially clear because its venue was a fundraiser for a queer youth organization.

Similarly, one evening two of the Von Foxies performed a safer sex message against an erotically charged dance to the song "Feel Like Makin' Love." Dressed in the same floral dresses and pearls that they wore during a previous performance, the two demonstrated interest in each other by smiling demurely and lifting the hems of their dresses. Using a giant notepad

resting on an easel, one of them showed the other pre-drawn pictures of safer sex techniques. After a few examples of condom use and dental dam use, there was a cartoon of a hand and a latex glove. The next page showed a hand cupping itself upside down so that four of the hand's fingers were on top of each other and curved upward; it was labeled "the duck." The performer being shown the pictures enthusiastically nodded her head, clapped her hands, and jumped up and down. The one showing her the pictures took her hand and led her behind a sheet so that the audience could only see her head and shoulders. The one who led her there dramatically removed a latex glove from a box, snapped it on her wrist, and winked at the audience. She knelt under the sheet and the standing performer threw her head back in pleasure. The kneeler reached her arm out from behind the sheet and held up two fingers and then disappeared behind the sheet again; the standing member of the troupe threw her head back dramatically. Then the kneeler showed the audience three fingers; and then four; and then "the duck." Like The Queen Bees performance above, The Von Foxies used their performance to teach people about safer sex techniques and bragged about the erotic possibilities of queer sex.

The burlesque performances that had explicit safer sex messages derive from a queer political position that sexual activity is healthy and that the way to avoid contracting infections is through careful sexual engagement (Hollibaugh, 1996). As highlighted by queer AIDS activism, it is derived from an era in which the government attempted to keep gay men ignorant about safer sexual practices by denying information about contraction and instead recommending abstinence and from a community commitment to educating each other about such safety steps. Significantly, these are performances composed by women: queer women have a commitment to educating bi/gay/queer men about safer sex practices, signaling the overlap of queer men's and women's sexual ethics since the onset of the AIDS epidemic.

More broadly, we might say that queer burlesque is political simply because it is about queer sex. Said differently, because lustful sexual exchanges between members of the same sex are typically sanctioned, the opportunity to display one's body for a queer audience (or to visually/vocally appreciate another queer person's body) is unique to that environment. In short, because queer sexuality is politicized by non-queer dominant others, queer sexual displays are political. Renee told me, "I think just seeing ... just seeing women's bodies in general, they're always sexualized so when you add that in an equation of queer folks, it's kind of like ten times that. They're like wooooo. They're all really excited about it." Women's bodies are always sexualized, but they are not always sexualized by queer people. She explained further:

I think [queer] people sexualize it more because [queer sexuality] wasn't allowed so when you're in this queer environment, you know, you're really kind of amped to celebrate moreso than straight folks I guess. In straight...in audience, like burlesque performers in straight crowds, they're not yelling and celebrating, they're just kind of watching. You know, as opposed to yelling, screaming, and all that stuff. I definitely think there's a difference.

According to Renee, the different political cultures surrounding heterosexual and queer sexualities inform how the audiences behave in particular burlesque moments: because heterosexual sexualization is available everywhere, it is not as unique and therefore not as exciting as the opportunity to experience queer sexualization of a woman's body.

Certainly when burlesque performance is located in queer contexts it informs the kind of performances that are created. That is, the content may more specifically speak to sexuality and gender grievances queer people have with mainstream manifestations of those practices. The burlesque performers I interviewed told me that they performed for queer audiences because they get something from the audience and because they wanted to give the audience something: the audience allowed them to feel sexually appreciated in a uniquely queer way *and* they wanted to

give the queer audience an opportunity to experience an atmosphere where they also feel sexually free.

For the performers themselves a queer audience provides an expectation that the boundaries of sexual and gender conformity will be challenged, which allows for the creation of interesting performance art. Abby told me, “We’ve always performed for queer audiences so there was a level of sexual sophistication that we came to expect. Um...so we could take more risks.” Similarly, Lola said, “Being a queer burlesque troupe gives us more of a like freedom. Like if you think of the word queer, yes, it’s a word we use to describe our sexuality, but it’s also strange and different.” She went on to say that for that reason, “We can be strange and different and very gender fluid with a lot of pieces.” So, burlesque may be a form of performance that queer people use to make political points, but it is not political by its very nature; its creation by queer people and location within queer contexts that allows performers to make gender and sexuality critiques. Importantly, it is not just that the performers and the audience are not heterosexual, but they specifically subscribe to a queer orientation. Again, this is not a matter of same-sex attraction translating into radical political possibilities; this is a matter of queer politics informing how one is oriented toward the world. For example, Johanna explained that burlesque can be “typical” in that the performers can just be near nude women who are the “white beauty myth standard where you should be blonde and blue and size 6 or whatever,” and that this can even happen in non-heterosexual settings. She said, “but I mean, for the most part, I guess that would be a lesbian venue. I feel like when I perform with queers, there’s all sorts of great politics that go along with that so it’s all good.” These queer politics that go along with “queers” allows the performers to feel appreciated.

Importantly, performers I interviewed were invested in what they could offer the audience [discussed below] and what the audience could offer them in understanding the intentions of their performances. Crimson told me, “In a queer venue I feel like people know what femme is and they appreciate that. People just get it and they know the statement that’s being made without me announcing, this number is important because...” Similarly, when I asked Renee if it was important to her to perform for a queer audience she told me:

Definitely! Definitely! Because even when I was gogo dancing at the salsa club it was just like ok, I’m hired to dance. I’m just dancing, ok, great. It was fun because I love to dance, but ... I mean, I like the attention, but I didn’t feel any connection. With queer audiences you ... I feel like they really do appreciate me up there.

Where Crimson and Renee feel that queer people “appreciate” them, other interviewees brought up that queer venues feel safer to perform in because of the sensibilities queer people have around women’s bodies. Cynthia, a non-femme who calls herself a “female gentleman” and runs the Moxie Cabaret in Atlanta, told me that she has noted different reactions to burlesque based on the composition of the audience:

[Women’s reactions are] different from the male socialized reaction to tip. Like when men tip they’re expecting something in return. Totally subconscious, but the moment to be able to touch [a woman] or [they’re saying] *notice me, I’m tipping you. I’m giving you validation*. There is a physical manifestation of this. When women tip, they’re almost nervous; [it’s like the tipping means] I’m really saying thank you. It’s a very different behavior. Then depending on the place in straight places, there [might be] much more hooting and hollering, [like they are in a] frat house or strip club.

According to Cynthia, men have been socialized to view women as sexual objects that enhance their sense of themselves as dominant – men expect something in return for tipping a woman. Male privilege (which assumes female sexual subjugation in the service of male satisfaction) is regimented in society, evidenced by frat houses and strip clubs. For these reasons, women engage in sexual interaction with other women differently than men do.

Certainly some queer burlesque performers have been disrespected by queer audience members. Lucy, for example, told me that the Queen Bees sometimes had a problem with audience members inappropriately touching performers or catcalling during performances in a way that interrupted the routine. During one particularly trying evening one of the performers stopped the routine and said to the audience of queer women, “it’s a little better coming from you, but not much,” referring to how when men sexually harass women it is tied into a system of patriarchy and male privilege. Lucy told me, “I don’t think it’s any better. It’s rude and inappropriate.” Still, most of the performers I interviewed not only felt appreciated and understood by queer audiences, but felt safer. For example, Katrina, who also performed with the Queen Bees said, “There’s this entitlement that happens with straight audiences, like I am entitled to look at a nude woman’s body, that doesn’t feel the same in queer culture to me.” She explained why that is:

There’s just so much baggage when we don’t view gender as a choice, when we don’t view sexuality as a choice, when we don’t view sexual expression as a choice, there’s a lot of baggage in those identities. A lot of history of oppression so that for me, performing in front of straight men does not feel safe necessarily. It feels like I am a literally probably at some point putting myself in danger because I am enticing a man, I am ... then all this stuff comes up like who’s a slut? And all the words we use for sexually free women. So there’s, you know, like as a woman in the world, I am afraid of men to some degree because I’m afraid I can be hurt by them, I’m afraid I can be raped, I’m afraid of the labels of being a sexually free women around straight men, like slut, whore, and everything else. Not that all men buy into that. That’s not what I’m saying. But there’s baggage in these histories and there’s no denying that, you know? So for me, when I’m performing in front of a room of gay men who have no sexual interest in me, but are like “whew! Boobies!” you know? And a bunch of women who may or may not have a sexual interest in me, but they’re still women like me so there’s not this oppression, this history of violence, history of all this other fucking baggage. I can then feel truly freely sexual. I am being sexual and it is free and self defined and it is safe. To me performing in front of queer audiences just removes a lot of the baggage we deal with in our daily lives in a very gendered society.

Katrina recognizes that the “history of violence” inflicted on women by men, imposed by patriarchy, can have actual consequences in her life: she is actually afraid to be a sexual performer in front of heterosexual men. Her solution to feel “truly freely sexual” is to perform

for queer audiences. Rose similarly explained how she subverts patriarchy by performing for queer audiences in a way that is personally gratifying:

I'm not into giving dudes what they want. They already have it. They want to see a naked lady, it's not hard for them to get that. You know? I'm more into giving queer folks what they want and that just makes me happier. And I can't say that I would expect ... maybe this is total judgment and stereotypical of me, but I expect that I would be treated better by a queer audience than I would in a straight bar... That's another reason, feeling a little bit safer. I also do know that there can be very awful people in a queer audience. Not to say that a queer audience is heaven. I just prefer it. I prefer dancing for my people.

Importantly, the decision to perform for queer audiences because one does not want to “give dudes what they want” because “they already have it” is a political critique of patriarchy, but more immediately about personal gratification. Rose prefers to perform for queer people because they are “[her] people.”

Burlesque performance has sexual meaning for the performers because queer audiences reflect the image performers have of themselves; they feel validated and appreciated in their sexuality. However, the most obvious reason that burlesque has sexual meaning is that it is a sexual performance. Charles, a “boylesque” performer told me, “[burlesque is] about teasing people, and making people turned on. That's a huge part of burlesque, is playing into people sexualities, and getting them turned on. That's a huge part of burlesque.” That is, burlesque involves getting sexual pleasure, as discussed above, but it is also about giving sexual pleasure to the audience. Katrina explained how these aspects coincide:

I think the truth of the matter is that burlesque is a place where we give and receive sexual pleasure to some degree. And sexual pleasure can look a lot of different ways. I'm not going down on anybody. Nobody's going down on me. Nobody's touching me or anything like that, but yeah, I'm being sexual in front of an audience who is getting pleasure from that, that is sexual pleasure.

She continued to say, “The truth is, [burlesque] is about sex and sexuality and sexual pleasure.”

Burlesque is a sexual exchange; it is an interaction in which the performer receives gratification

from being wanted and appreciated and the audience receives gratification from watching them perform. Through this exchange persistent cultural ideologies about sexuality are challenged.

Involved in the process of burlesque performance is developing an ideology of sexuality that is then portrayed to the audience. That is, the burlesque performers I interviewed have spent their adult queer lives developing a critical perspective on sexuality and burlesque is one way that they bring this critique to the queer community. For instance, throughout the following quotes, notice how Katrina talks of her perspective on sexuality and then discusses the importance of portraying that to an audience. She asserts that sex is “literally everywhere” in our culture, but she also explains, “it is my belief that the majority of sexual messages we’re exposed to in the broader culture is not particularly a healthy sexuality. Not a sexuality that is freely chosen or empowering.” Instead, she explains, “I don’t think sex is bad. I don’t think it’s dirty. I think it’s awesome – when it’s coming from an informed place, when it’s freely chosen.” As an adult queer woman, she told me, she can now say this about her sexuality:

I can say, yes, sex has been used to hurt me in my life, but for the most part, as an adult person who chooses sexual encounters, I’ve had beautiful, amazing, celebratory, empowering experiences, ones where I benefit, it’s not just to pleasure somebody else, where my sexual pleasure is a primary component.

She continues to explain that through her burlesque she models this to her audience. “How beautiful is it that I can model some of that for somebody else? That’s pretty fucking beautiful and pretty fucking amazing.” According to Katrina, “burlesque can be really revolutionary and really beautiful” because “[it] transmits those messages and models that celebratory sexuality.”

Lola also agreed with Katrina’s conceptions of sexuality; she said, “The concepts of guilt and shame aren’t actually valid emotions. They’re just concepts. And the idea that sexuality, on any level, is negative or dirty or bad are also just concepts.” For her, burlesque is also a way that she criticizes the idea that sex is negative, “by [the Rose City Sirens] embracing burlesque and

embracing erotic performance art, it's creating a safe place for other people to experiment." She continued, "[it is] important for us and what we're doing, to [have] a really quirky approachable good presence off the stage so that people recognize that the wild sexy people we are on the stage is entitled to everyone." Stephanie, also talking about the Rose City Sirens, told me why they started their troupe:

I think we wanted to share that eroticism. [We wanted to show the audience] that it's for everyone. Sexuality is something that spreads all over the map. You know, [we wanted to] give the queer community a chance to have a bunch of quirky, funny, sexy ladies being role models for the community.

The burlesque performers I interviewed see themselves as people who have developed a radically different view of sexuality than the dominant one disseminated in larger culture. They tend to believe that sexuality should be freely chosen, positive and healthy, and queer positive. Burlesque is one opportunity to model this ideology to the audience and become sexual "role models."

In one fascinating example of this "role model" behavior, Colleen told me that although she is still queer identified she has only dated men for the past several years, but that she "perform[s] under a queer identity." When I asked her what she meant by performing under a queer identity, she told me that several of the Von Foxies' routines center on lesbian sexuality: she said that she performs "an ass number" and a "fisting number" with another woman in the troupe; there is also a "lollipop" routine that "ends with a lesbian orgy." She continued to expound on what "performing a queer identity" means to her:

I feel like I perform ... um ... lesbian or I perform girl on girl on stage when I haven't done that in real life in a long time. It's interesting ... I still feel culturally queer and politically queer but I don't actually have sex with women anymore. That's part of the persona that I am on stage because ... because part of what is important to me is expressing the entire range of options that I have for being a sexual person. And in doing that under the great lights on stage, with all the people watching, that it gives other people

courage to do it for themselves in their own bedrooms. So I feel like I perform ...it's another part of shooting beyond where I actually am. I perform a much wider range of sexuality than I actually do in my life anymore. I don't necessarily know that won't change. That's part of why I perform it. It's an option for me. It's ok. It's allowed. It's ... but it does feel kind of weird to be in a queer troupe and to be like the last time I slept with a woman was a billion years ago.

Although Colleen is not very interested in having sex with women right now it remains “an option” for her, it is “allowed,” because it is a form of sexuality she sees as being just as valid as other sexual exchanges. She performs this queer identity “under the great lights” on stage to model her belief that queer sexuality options should be available to anyone.

Femme activism, for the most part, is focused on challenging the subtle ways that femmephobia is perpetuated in queer communities; it is a subcultural form of activism rather than one that is directed at the broader culture. Burlesque slightly diverges from this pattern. It is an art form that takes place subculturally in queer communities, but is directed at dominant ideologies about sexuality. They are not attempting to challenge sexuality norms in queer communities, but to reject dominant sexual norms which have been used to hurt queers. However, because it is queer feminine women who are the actors in this political critique, their performance art simultaneously becomes a site of discussion about gender, femininity, and femme inclusion in queer communities.

Burlesque as a Gender Challenge

Although burlesque is most obviously about sex and sexuality, it is more subtly about gender. That is, the commentary made about sexuality is made through the performances of hyper-femininity and most burlesque performers are women who are feminine in their everyday gender expressions. Because the people offering critiques of homophobia and sex negativity are feminine women, burlesque protests the femmephobic idea that feminine women are inauthentically queer and erodes the invisibility of feminine women in queer communities.

Recall from the chapter about femme identity construction [Chapter 6] that femmes believe other queer women see female femininity as a sign of heterosexuality, compliance with patriarchy, and a generally non-radical gender. While burlesque's criticism of sex negativity poses a challenge to dominant ideology, the gender challenge being posed by burlesque is more subcultural: they are demanding that queer people conceive of femininity as potentially radical.

Centrally, burlesque is part of a broader performance art project in queer communities; it is related to other gendered performance art. Specifically, the burlesque performers I interviewed very much saw their burlesque as a new manifestation of drag performance. Drag queen performances have a situated history in gay men's communities (Rupp & Taylor, 2003). As Newton (1979) said, drag queens are "both performing homosexuals and homosexual performers" (20) in that their performances must always be understood as part of a gay subculture that influences and is influenced by their performances. Perhaps most significantly, drag queens celebrate one of the most socially despised "deviances" about gay life: gender nonconformity (Newton, 1979; Rupp & Taylor, 2003). Rupp and Taylor (2003) argue that drag has been "an important strategy in the gay and lesbian movement's struggle" (5) in that it can "serve as a catalyst for changes in values, ideas, and identities" (6). They argue:

Drag in the context of the gay community [is] primarily [a] transgressive action that destabilizes gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities (212).

In this way, drag is not only a "commercial performance," but also "a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality" (Rupp & Taylor, 2003: 2).

Although they felt an affinity with drag queens because of the femininity productions they were doing, many of the performers understood their performances as a kind of response to

the dominance of drag king performances in queer women's communities. Importantly, drag king performances were originally a response to prevalence of drag queen performances in GLBT communities [see Troka et al., 2002]. Drag king performances take the historical challenges to heterosexuality and gender rigidity offered by drag queens and place them in a different context; when it is masculinity rather than femininity being played with and female birth-assigned people rather than male birth-assigned people performing, the performances take on different meanings (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Shapiro, 2007). Most idyllically, drag king performances can foster political conversations about the harmful nature of masculinity and women's oppression through their comedic representations of men (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999). Although Halberstam (1997) found that very few of her drag king interviewees identified as masculine outside of their performances, Shapiro (2007) found ten years later that the feminist drag king troupe she studied became a conduit for many of the members to transition to male.

From the position of my interviewees, the presence of drag king performances in queer women's communities has only increased the attention given to masculinity in those communities [this is discussed below]. Further, many of the people I interviewed found that drag kinging had devolved from its original dedication to challenge harmful representations of masculinity and that instead, they revel in these depictions. The performers I interviewed were dedicated to creating social justice commentary in their burlesque, which they saw as divergent from some of the negative representations of misogyny and cultural appropriation in some drag king performances. Cynthia, the non-femme "female gentleman" who organizes Moxie Cabaret in Atlanta, told me that when she watches "crotch-grabbing drag kings" she "cringes." She told the story of one evening of drag king performance in Atlanta:

I remember I was sitting next to the Donna [of the Femme Mafia], and Vagina [Jenkins, a prominent Atlanta burlesque performer] and we were watching this show that they were

both presenting in. I think even the Donna had already gone up and talked about Femme Mafia and next came a white [drag] king with *pimp* [written] on a cup [he was holding] and the song was “B” [calling women bitches] and every single offensive thing you could imagine and I looked at [the two femmes I was sitting with] and their faces had dropped. The only thing I could do was walk up to that person and be like, *just in case you’re curious, that really offended some ladies...* Femme Mafia just said we are about female power and women of strength and here comes this *you’re my bitch, I’m going to whore you out* [type song]. I’m like, *what are you doing?* I’m not going to judge it. I’m going to respectfully express my opinion and instead I’m going to give the ladies a nice place to come [by organizing Moxie Cabaret] because I want a nice place to come.

Charles, a “boylesque” (male burlesque) performer, started his performance art as a drag king; he grew to feel similarly to Cynthia about some of the drag king performances he has seen:

With a lot of drag kings here in Atlanta (and I’m sure this is the case in other cities as well), they perform this concept of masculinity that is just completely disgusting to me. It’s a very frat boy mentality. You walk around the stage and you grab your crotch and you sing songs about bitches and hoers and shit that I would never want to perpetuate. And so the drag performances that I did try to do – the audiences didn’t know what to do with because it wasn’t what they were used to seeing. So I learned that drag kinging was not the art form for me.

Interestingly, Cynthia and Charles were the most vocal in their condemnation of drag kinging; neither of them are femme identified and neither of them are feminine women. Perhaps they feel more responsibility to condemn misogynistic acts of masculine people in queer community; perhaps the femme identified performers I interviewed had less latitude to criticize such a pervasive (masculine) art form in queer communities. Either way, the femme burlesque performers I interviewed may not have called drag king performances misogynist, but they saw burlesque as an intervention into the attention paid to drag kinging in queer communities.

The goal of burlesque performers was to insert themselves into the drag performance art community as a way to insert themselves in the gender dialogue going on in queer communities. Montana, a founding member of the Queen Bees who had previously performed “femme drag”

in the feminist drag king troupe the “Disposable Boy Toys”² told me this story about searching for a way to talk about her performances:

One of the members of the [drag king] troupe, his partner, Tristan [Taormino], lived in New York City or maybe he went to D.C. to the Great Big Drag King Show, but he came back so excited because he was like *there are these women and they're doing the same thing you are and they call themselves bioqueens!* and we were like *yeah! We have a name and that's great!* The first year we went to the IDKE [International Drag King Extravaganza], we had a name, it was what we called ourselves, and we wrote the *Bioqueen Manifesto*. Then even within the year, even before the Queen Bees started, the second year [I went to IDKE], we were totally called to task around that name and immediately realized how problematic that name was and we ... I just went back to calling myself a drag queen. Some people called themselves femme queens, some people just called themselves queens. The second year we went to IDKE, I was still with the Disposable Boy Toys then, it was before the Queen Bees were started, and I got there and they were like, *Look! We made bioqueen t-shirts for you!* And I remember being like, that, *oh, we don't call ourselves that anymore* and kind of having that feeling. I was pretty intense about wanting to stop using that term because of the problematics of it.

What Montana's story illustrates is the prior impossibility of hyper-feminine performance art by cissexual women before burlesque's popularity. Originally she was excited by the term “bioqueen” because it described who she was and what she was doing, but when she came to find the term problematic because of its suggestion of the importance of biological gender, she stopped using it. She went back to calling herself a drag queen; others called themselves femme queens or just queens. What is important about this story of naming is that femme performers were searching for how to describe their performance art in unscripted territory; they were performance artists without a genre. As Montana told me earlier in our interview about the process of naming, “I called myself a bioqueen for the two years I was involved with the Disposable Boy Toys simply because when I first started performing we didn't know what to call ourselves. We didn't know of other people doing this at all: femmes performing femininity, as

² This is the same feminist drag king troupe studied by Shapiro (2005; 2007). Montana concurred that this troupe was “amazing,” and “very dedicated to social justice.” They should not be confused with the drag king performances described by Cynthia and Charles.

drag.” Importantly, they had to define themselves in relation to other more understood genres: the femininity performances of drag queens and the masculinity performances of drag kings.

Again, the burlesque performers I interviewed were interested in creating their troupes because they saw them as artistic interventions into the attention given to masculine performances; burlesque was a way for people oriented toward femininity to perform.

Importantly, this perspective illustrates the appreciation many burlesque performers have for drag and suggests the previous exclusion of femininity in these performances. Abby said:

In the queer community, drag is definitely the art of queers. It’s all about gender bending and fucking with gender. That’s what the Queen Bees did and then we put in other elements too. We were always fucking with sexuality and gender. And, as queers, that’s what we get blamed for doing anyway. Here we get to do what we do anyway, but be celebratory and campy about it. We celebrate our unique voice.

If, as Abby suggests, drag is the “art of queers” it is important that people oriented toward femininity have a place to publicly “fuck with sexuality and gender.” Of course femme identified queer women could have been active in drag performance by performing masculine drag. However, burlesque provides an avenue through which the production of femininity becomes part of the queer community’s discussions about gender.

It should be noted that all of the burlesque performers I interviewed are feminine and that a majority of them also perform as drag kings. Several interviewees with the Queen Bees and the Rose City Sirens proudly told me, as Rose said, “we all did drag king stuff too” and at least one of the five Atlanta burlesque performers does drag king performance. I witnessed events where well known burlesque performers did drag: sometimes they offer the masculine counterpart to another burlesquer’s femininity performance, sometimes they perform a sole drag king number that could be interchangeable with other drag king performances; sometimes they perform drag and hyper-feminine burlesque in the same evening; sometimes they perform both in the same number. These performances of both masculinity and femininity in burlesque

troupes highlight the conscious and strategic decision to perform femininity (or masculinity) in the moments they choose to embody those genders.

What I have been suggesting is that burlesque is not a happenstance celebration of queer femininity; it is a consciously political intervention into the performance of masculinity. More broadly, we might say that its emergence was a reaction to the general privileging of masculinity in queer women's communities and that burlesque is one place where that is being protested. The emergence of the Queen Bees' troupe provides an excellent example: Montana, who had been a femme performer with a drag king troupe in California, had been active in trying to make the legendary organization the International Drag King Extravaganza recognize femme and femininity performances. She moved to Seattle and became active with a group of femmes who decided that Seattle's queer women's community privileged masculinity and punished femininity: they created a series of community conversations called "Queering Femininity"³ and decided to host a performance art night known as "the Femme Show." A group of women performed a queer femininity routine as part of the femme show; they received so much acclaim that they formed the infamous burlesque troupe, the Queen Bees. Lucy, an original member of the Queen Bees, also reflected on the social climate that birthed their troupe:

That's why the femme show happened in the first place. There was a lot of valuing around masculinity and masculine performance and drag queens, but not necessarily [bioqueens]. There was nothing on [bioqueens]. (I hate the term bioqueens, I hate bio anything, but that's how [some] folks identify). [There was] not a lot of valuing around queer burlesque or around bioqueens or around queer femme performance. That's why there was a Femme Show in the first place and then the Queen Bees debuted. It was sort of an accidental debut. I mean not really, but I don't think folks knew what it was going to become. Then they were like we should have a meeting and I was like, great! I'm in! Because it was mind-blowing and it was incredible.

³ The series of talks called "Queering Femininity" hosted by femmes should not be confused with the 2005 Seattle conference titled "Queering Femininities." Several interviewees asked me to make this clear because they felt that their social justice framework did not correspond with the allegation of racism, inattentiveness to class inequalities, and misogyny directed at the conference.

Again, the celebration of femininity is not an unintended consequence of burlesque; it is the goal of burlesque performance.

Although the burlesque performers I interviewed were feminine in their daily lives, they saw their feminine burlesque performances as a kind of drag because they were so hyper-feminine. Johanna explained:

For me, I work in a coffee shop where I get really dirty. I don't wear makeup on the daily. I have my natural hair on the daily. I ride my motorcycle to and from work and the femme that [my character] portrays, that's her character, is totally different from the kind of femme I am. So I definitely ... and I like that about it. I can put on this drag and there I am.

Meredith felt similarly; she said, “[drag kinging and burlesque is] like an extreme representation of one or the other. It's like, yeah, I wear makeup, but not everyday. I wouldn't necessarily be putting on lashes and wearing heels and taking things to that extreme.” For some burlesquers, it was the “extreme” femininity that made them see it as a drag performance. Rose reflected:

[Burlesque is drag because of] the amount of effort we would go through in costuming and the amount of sexuality and sexual energy that we would put forth on stage. I don't do that in my everyday life! There were folks who didn't recognize me because of how I am in daytime and what I exude on stage. That is ... I was definitely dressing up in drag, in a feminine manner. That's where the queen comes from. But I was dressing up in drag and exuding this personality, this sexual identity to its largest extent and I don't do that everyday...For me, that's drag. The costumes, the heels, all the makeup, all the big hair, the tits hanging out, the butt hanging out, you know? The wearing of all kinds of like toys that we would wear. That's all exuding something that's drag and so every time I did a show I considered myself to be in drag, whether I was a drag king or a drag queen.

In arguing that women – even if they are feminine in their everyday appearance – can produce feminine drag by creating hyper-feminine performances, the performers make an argument for the social construction of gender. That is, they beg the audience to see that women can be feminine and be doing drag. Whereas the culture usually understands “drag” to be a cross-gender performance (of men doing feminine drag or women doing masculine drag), these

performers suggest that drag is the hyper-performance of gender. This allows for a consciousness to emerge which views all gender, regardless of sexed body, as performative.

Further, many performers saw their burlesque as a kind of feminine drag that was an extension of their femme identity. Recall from earlier chapters that many of the femmes I interviewed understand their femininity as socially constructed and performative rather than natural; several of the burlesque performers I interviewed told me that this is precisely why they enjoy burlesque – because it is performative and they enjoy performing femininity. Danielle said:

[Burlesque is] essentially like getting to be like a drag queen and all [femmes] have visions of being like drag queens. Are you kidding? Yes. A lot of why I love burlesque so much is because I've seen drag shows for my whole life and seeing men or trans people express their femininity and perform in their femininity and get so much excitement from it. I was like, but wait, I'm a woman, I want to perform my femininity in this way! It's real campy, and real over the top, and real, you know. I want it to be as draggy [as drag queens].

She went on to tell me that wearing “long eyelashes and feathers and full drag make up” and “red lipstick” is “unbelievably exciting.” Meaningfully, she said, “You could never feel more femme than that.” Similarly, Crimson said that after her first burlesque performance she “wanted to do it all the time” because “it was just the epitome of intensifying and playing up femininity.”

Katrina agreed, “I think [burlesque performance] was the ultimate conclusion of the way I express. Just really taking the performance of gender to the most literal place.” It may seem that the points made in these last few pages are in contradiction with one another: the idea that burlesque is drag because it is different from one's everyday femininity does seem to conflict with the idea that burlesque is drag because one sees her everyday femininity as performance and drag. Certainly, it is possible that these interviewees felt differently about their femme identities and their burlesque personas. However, I believe that they are actually saying something quite similar to one another. In their own ways, they assert that female femininity can be seen as

produced and unnatural: performers who see their drag as different from their everyday femininity are still asserting that female people can perform femininity which disarticulates femininity from the natural realm; performers who see their drag as similar to their everyday “drag” maintain that this disarticulation of femaleness and necessary femininity exists in their everyday experiences.

Burlesque is one way to produce political messages through art. Through burlesque, performers critique dominant sexual ideology that is narrowly construed as heterosexist, homophobic, sex negative, and unhealthy. Because it is an artistic labor undertaken by feminine queer women, it criticizes the idea that masculinity is the only way to achieve a radical queer gender. That is, burlesque’s queer cultural protest is two-fold: first, it protests larger social (sexual) oppressions that affect queer people; second, it challenges people to accept female femininity as performative and queer. That is, because it is an art form brought to life in queer communities by femmes, femmes are challenging other queer people to see them as contributors to the maintenance of queer communities. Succinctly, Abby told me, “The uniqueness [of burlesque] is that it brings femme visibility.” Similarly, Lola told me that she performs burlesque with the Rose City Sirens for femme visibility reasons; she said, “I feel very strongly about having a very highly femme, like, fierce, like erotic presence in the queer community.” Just as burlesque is one artistic way to achieve broad political goals, it is one way to achieve femme activist goals.

Burlesque is not an organized form of femme activism, as femme organizations are, but burlesque performances are related to a femme movement. Lucy said this about the intention behind creating the Queen Bees, “There was an intentionality, like, [we were saying] *we are asserting queer femme identity into the conversation and we are intentionally inserting ourselves*

as part of the drag community. [We were making the statement], we are here, so fucking deal with us.” Johanna told me that although it may be easy to think of burlesque as a way that women objectify themselves as objects of desire because they are believed to be “just going along with the feminine ideals,” it is not that simple; she said, “it’s actually really political and the opposite of all that because it demands that you look at it.” She went on, “Burlesque is taking up space, putting on makeup, too much glitter, too much makeup. It’s loud and obnoxious and on top of that, it demands your attention. That, to me, is the goal of my femininity.” Burlesque is able to “demand attention” and “demand that [we] look at it” precisely because of the social and political climate queer people are experiencing now. So, although burlesque is may not be conventional femme activism, it is possible because of, and certainly part of, the femme movement.

So far I have offered analysis on participant understandings of their femininity, on the group construction of a political femme identity, and on the unique political contributions of femme organizations and burlesque performances. In the subsequent chapter, I discuss the significance of the femme movement, why it is emerging at this political moment, and how we may use it as an example to think about waves of GLBTQ activism which exist in oceans of social change.

CHAPTER 9
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FEMME MOVEMENT: QUEER ACTIVIST WAVES,
CURRENTS, AND OCEANS

When I began my research in 2007, I saw femme organizations and femme performance art like burlesque as abstract forms of political activity. I actually suspected that people involved in the organizations and troupes did not see their participation as political; I expected them to describe their activities as “fun,” “social,” or “artistic.” However, as soon as I started my ethnographic observations, my view changed: the political commentary in burlesque numbers was overwhelming and constant; the ways that the Femme Mafia created space for femmes in lesbian bars that were unfriendly to them reminded me of other queer visibility actions like dyke marches; the ways that Femme Affinity Group linked femme concerns to broader social justice issues of gender inequality, fatphobia, and homophobia awed me. It became obvious that the people I was studying saw themselves as political activists. Still, I lacked the imagination to understand what this political work meant. That is, I did not conceptualize femme expression, activity, and organizing as a femme movement until I began conducting interviews. In my first interview in Atlanta, with Sabrina, she talked about how Femme Mafia was really integral to the current femme movement; astonished, I asked, “there’s a femme movement?” She said, “of course.” Other femmes in Atlanta mirrored this conceptualization of femme organizing as part of a movement; Danielle called it “the femme revolution.” This trend continued throughout my interviews in Seattle and Portland. I believed that I was being creative for seeing political activism in their organizing; they saw themselves as building a movement.

In this chapter, I reflect on previous chapters through the lens of sociology and social movement literature to detail what I now see as the significance of the femme movement in the broader context of gender and sexual politics. Specifically, I argue that the femme movement must be seen in terms of a uniquely queer version of a New Social Movement; it is a feminist

inspired, queer current in the current Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer [GLBTQ] activist “wave.” Although U.S. feminist activism has long been conceived of in terms of waves, or periods of heightened activism that is influenced by its historical time (Taylor, 1989), scholars interested in GLBTQ politics do not tend to use a wave analogy to explain sexuality activism. In part, I borrow the wave concept to discuss a queer movement because conceiving of activism in terms of waves conveys the idea that generation is important. That is, as Whittier (1995) has argued, movement actors have unique philosophies about their cause and specific ideas about how to agitate for change based on *when* they were politicized. This is because shifts in movements before them influence how their movement will proceed. For the femme movement, their grievances about femme stigma have merged with political conversations in feminist and GLBTQ communities on essentialism, separatism, sexual ethics, femininity, and gender identity to create a common sense model for femme organizing.

Significantly, femmes in GLBTQ communities have always learned how to survive in the face of feminine stigma; they have resisted in creative, unique, and radical ways. By talking about a femme movement, I am not suggesting that modern queer femmes are politically savvy and that femmes in earlier generations were not. The kind of femme resistance we are seeing now is an organized resistance; it is political work that is self-described as a movement – that is the modern incarnation of femme resistance. It is perhaps best to clarify that I mean to talk about the femme movement of today – beginning around 2000 and continuing into the present time.

The Femme Movement: Cultural and Contentious Politics

As stated throughout, the femme movement occurs at the level of cultural politics. As Michelle said, femme identity is not “politicized in terms of state or federal regulations,” but that at the same time, “femme identity will always be political.” When I asked her why femme is

political, she highlighted that femme is especially political in this moment of organizing in queer communities. She said:

I think that femme is political right now because it is a movement, because people are on the front lines of queer discussion saying, *femmes are queer too*. We have a voice and we need that to be heard, we demand for that to be heard. And so for that reason, especially in this moment, in this political climate, femme identity is hugely political.

Speaking of her own experience in Atlanta, she reiterated the feelings of alienation other femme interviewees told me. She said, “[Non-femme queer women] treated us like trash. It’s hard to explain. It’s hard to articulate for me. It was more of a feeling...It’s just... it’s so hard to articulate; there was just this obvious shunning.” Importantly, these feelings of alienation eventually led to femme organizing. She continued:

It was interesting because [before Femme Mafia] [femmes] were not banded as a community. We didn’t know it was happening to each other. We thought it was just happening to us. That was so amazing when Femme Mafia started, that we got together and said, *this happened to you? This happened to you? This happened to you too? Wait, what?* And realized there was this open hostility toward all of us and I guess [we thought there would be] strength in numbers.

Michelle explains a classic example of movement beginnings: individuals are treated badly by people who have authority; they believe that it is only happening to them until they talk about their experiences with others; through consciousness raising, they discover a pattern of ill treatment against their *group*; they take political action when they realize that there might be “strength in numbers.”

In many ways, the femme movement unravels in ways which mirror more traditional movements. However, its specific manifestations are unique to the ways in which gender and sexuality movements tend to progress. Further, the femme movement provides a specific example of a gender *and* sexuality movement which is instructive for how we may think of these kinds of movements. The femme movement is another testament to the claim by Van Dyke,

Soule and Taylor (2004) that the permeation of gender and sexual oppression means that these movements often redress grievances at the level of culture.

Although cultural movements may be distinct from more traditional movements, they are not immune to the conflict associated with political work. During my time with femme organizations and burlesque troupes affiliated with the femme movement I found them to be rife with conflict. Some of these conflicts revolved around defining membership of the organizations, constructing a decision-making structure for the organizations, and race and class inclusion. First, as detailed in Chapter 6, in creating a group definition of femme, who gets to be a femme is a matter of conflict. Recall that in constructing what it means to identify as femme, there were debates about the definition of the word: femmes argued about whether or not it was a queer-only identity or if it could include heterosexual women and (some) femmes argued about whether or not femme counted as a transgender identity. In addition, there was talk of whether or not someone had to *look femme to be femme*. The emphasis placed on self identification solidified that officially someone did not have to express in conventionally feminine ways to count as a femme. However, organizations constantly battled the wider cultural idea that femmes must look feminine in expected ways.

Second, although not elaborated on in previous chapters, it is important to recognize that how organizations and troupes should be organized was contentious. Several of the organizations – most notably the Femme Mafia and the Queen Bees – disbanded, in part, because of their political structure. For instance, the Femme Mafia lacked a formal structure for much of their existence. Although there is now a President, a Co-President, and organizing committees, in the beginning, as Betty said, “[they] had no formal board. Nothing.” Paradoxically, Femme Mafia’s beginning had no formal organizing committee, but they did have “a Donna,” a leader

who was associated with the functioning of the entire organization. This hierarchy also led to difficulties. Betty continued on the topic of how the organization was structured, “well, there was the Donna, which I think is repulsive.” Crimson also said, “I think it’s just a hierarchical fucked up thing, to be the Donna and have everyone else be your minions. It just starts off badly and goes in that direction.” Although it was my impression that the role of the Donna meant a serious allotment of organizing responsibility and that the title was meant to be campy rather than serious, members of the organization felt that Femme Mafia “became about the Donna rather than the femmes,” as one participant told me. Conversely, the Queen Bees structure was built on a philosophy of non-hierarchical cooperation – every decision was met by consensus and every performance piece had several hours of group discussion dedicated to its political consequences. All of the performers associated with this organization told me that it was “exhausting” work and the number of hours they dedicated to the troupe is the reason that they “burnt out” and eventually disbanded.

Third, the femme movement has major problems of race and class inclusion, with the majority of its members being white, middle-class, and college educated. This was true in my sample, which my ethnographic observations confirm reflects the larger community. Although all of the regions I visited had race and class problems, they were most contentious in Atlanta’s Femme Mafia. What is fascinating is that Seattle’s and Portland’s organizations and troupes lack infighting about race and class diversity because they have the most extreme problems: they are the most homogenous in race and class; Atlanta’s community had the most race and class diversity and the most verbalized difficulties around those issues. Moxie Cabaret, Atlanta’s queer performance troupe, was the most successful in racial diversity. The evening I observed them, a majority of their performances were performers of color. Cynthia, the organizer of

Moxie, told me that the goal of Moxie is to “turn culture on its head” so that “whatever the majority is – white, male, heterosexual, thin – becomes the minority.” They are quite successful; three of the four performers I interviewed from Moxie were women of color and they did not discuss race issues in the Moxie Cabaret. All of those women, however, discussed race problems within the Femme Mafia: membership of femmes of color in Femme Mafia is not representative of the number of femmes of color in Atlanta’s queer community; femmes of color who were involved in the organization felt “tokenized”; the Femme Mafia does not frame itself as specifically anti-racist and they do not do enough to reach out to femmes of color. Interestingly, women who were very high up in the organization when I spent time with them were women of color: the Donna is biracial, one of the vice-Donnas is Latina, the other (then) vice-Donna was biracial (she once described herself as “half-Jamaican, but looks white.” However, none of these women are black. In the racial climate of Atlanta, racial inclusion might mean taking specific strides to dull the historic tensions of white-on-black racism. Femme Mafia operates under a philosophy of colorblindness: they are not specifically racially exclusive, but they do not make attempts to be anti-racist. Because of this colorblind logic, their events tended to pander to white femmes, especially in venue. For instance, at a Femme Mafia brunch one morning, I witnessed a black femme say that they should hold an event at Apache, a spoken word club; another black femme said, “Femme Mafia? I think that place is a little black for Femme Mafia.” Another time, I went to dinner with the Femme Mafia that would be followed by an event at a club called Traxx: when I arrived there were only two black women and one white woman at the table (when usually there were at least fifteen people attending during that time); when I asked why so few people had shown up that evening, one of the black women told me, “the place we’re going to tonight is a black club and I think a lot of the white women in Femme Mafia might feel

uncomfortable coming tonight.” Even when event organizers attempt to be inclusive, by organizing events at black clubs for instance, the white femme base of the organization makes it unsuccessful. This is still a fault of the larger organization: without an anti-racist ideology, they allow white femmes to be members without investigating their own racism and they only participate in surface level attempts to include femmes of color.

These kinds of contentions are not unique to the Femme Movement. The contests I highlight here parallel contests in other forms of dyke and queer politics. Ghaziani and Fine (2008) offered analysis of Chicago’s Dyke March, noting the conflict involved in organizing around the category “dyke.” Like the femme movement, dyke marches are (at least in part) directed at the gay community rather than the dominant culture: they emerged as a demonstration of dyke visibility toward male-dominated gay pride celebrations. Although the official logic of the event is that it is an inclusive event welcome to anyone who self identifies as a woman who loves women, the dyke march finds itself in conflict over defining group membership (e.g. Who is a dyke? Who is welcome to attend?) and the political structure of the organization (e.g. Who should be included in making decisions? By what process should decisions be made?). Organizers fought unyieldingly at meetings, bitterness emerged about “white college girls” running the organization, questions of inclusivity waged. According to Ghaziani and Fine (2008), dyke march organizers have, in many ways, reproduced the inequalities that their organization was established to combat. When conflict in an organization is tied to the group identity, infighting ensues. That is, “Infighting is not just about *personal* disagreements; instead it entails on-going, *collective* disputation that is linked to conceptions of group identity and culture” (53). Understanding an organization’s conflicts helps illustrate their “idioculture,” or a merging of ideology and small group culture. Said differently, conflict and infighting helps

establish how movement participants “do ideology.” The contentions in the femme movement – disagreements over who gets to be a femme, how organizations should be structured, and race/class inclusivity – are examples of femmes wrestling with culture. Perhaps queer attempts to wrangle ideologies are all the more complex because they are managing dominant culture’s ideologies and subcultural queer ideologies.

According to Cohen (1997) it may be the femme movement’s location in queer politics that births its antagonisms, especially its issues of race and class inclusivity. She argues that although queer politics offered hope in their antiassimilationist strategy to reorient how people understand and respond to the very nature of sexuality, it has not actually offered a truly transformative radical politic. Instead of attacking gender and sexual binaries, queer politics has instated and reinforced new binaries, such as the dichotomy between heterosexual and everything “queer.” It has not gone far enough to imagine the ways that power influences privilege; ignoring that power is multifaceted (and does not just exist along lines of sexuality), it has disregarded marginalized people on both sides of the heterosexual and queer binary.

Although there are fascinating specific parallels between the femme movement and other feminist and queer movements, it is useful to look beyond specific parallels – to dyke marches, failures of queer politics, or otherwise – and instead look at general parallels between the histories of feminist activisms and GLBTQ activisms. To understand the situated context of the femme movement, it is fruitful to understand how it emerged. We are seeing the femme movement today because of movements that have come before it. As the femme movement is feminist (but also queer) and queer (but also feminist), it is an example of a current movement birthed from the entwinement of feminist and queer politics.

The Femme Movement and Lesbian Feminism? Feminist Waves and a Queer Shift

In order to reflect on the significance of queer women's political modes of behavior today, it is essential to discuss an earlier form of non-heterosexual women's political work and community building. Lesbian feminism came out of a radical branch of 1970's feminism which was opposed to liberal feminism's inclusion tactics and instead focused on flamboyant tactics (Echols, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Radical feminists, a faction of the women's movement, pursued personal transformation and formed communities that were meant to be utopian feminist societies. They held gender oppression to be a primary oppression and stressed women's commonality because of their belief in a sex-class system (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Whittier, 1995). In the mainstream women's movement of the 1970's disputes over sexuality and sexual orientation became more frequent, mounting to the "gay-straight splits" where lesbians were purged from major organizations and lesbians began to establish their own separatist societies (Echols, 1989; Rosen, 2000). Some trace the beginning of lesbian feminism to 1971 with the creation of the Furies, the first separatist lesbian organization (Echols, 1989). In fact, lesbian feminism is defined by its separatist beliefs (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Many believe that disputes over sexuality drove radical feminists away from the movement and left liberal feminists in control of the mainstream feminist movement. Lesbian feminism is a kind of cultural feminism; importantly, some feminists have been concerned that the rise of cultural feminism has meant the de-politicization of radical feminism and de-mobilization of the women's movement (Taylor & Rupp, 1992). Cultural feminism has been criticized as a way of life that retreats from politics into "lifestyle" (Taylor & Rupp, 1992; Whittier, 1995). However, Taylor and Whittier (1993) argue that radical feminism gave way to a new cycle of feminist activism sustained by lesbian feminist communities. Lesbian feminist communities are an "abeyance community" which had the ability to absorb highly committed

feminists in a climate that was hostile to radical feminist organizing. Some scholars suggest that the perseverance of lesbian feminism illustrates that feminists have not retreated, but learned how to challenge power structures in ways that are culturally possible (and will therefore lend itself to movement longevity) (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; Whittier, 1995).

Taylor and Whittier (1992) define lesbian feminism as a “social movement community” which “sustain[s] a collective identity that encourages women to engage in a wide range of social and political actions that challenge the dominant system” (350). It operates at the national level only through connections amongst local groups; it is decentralized and segmented. It is a movement that relies on cultural activism: they develop counter institutions, a politicized group identity, shared norms, values, and symbolic forms of resistance (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Their activism can be found in establishing communities that stress feminist solidarity and connections between women, newsletters that convey woman-identified sentiments, women’s music festivals, women’s bookstores, and even lesbian travel agencies (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; Whittier, 1995).

It is the structure and philosophy of lesbian feminist political organizing that is perhaps most similar to the femme movement. That is, although young queer women often vocalize a rejection of lesbian feminism, young queer women’s political consciousness is imbued with lesbian feminist ideas of political activism. Like lesbian feminists, young queer women in the femme movement believe that individual transformation should be a primary political focus, and that political work accomplished subculturally can challenge dominant oppressive structures. Their organizational attempts to be inclusive and reject hierarchies also mirror lesbian feminist organizational structures (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). There are even subtle similarities in their views on political identity like the similarity between the way that lesbian feminists

distinguished between “the lesbian who is a staunch feminist and the lesbian who is not of the vanguard” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992: 359) and the way that politicized femmes distinguish between queer femmes and feminine bisexual and lesbian women who presumably do not have a consciousness around their femininity. That is, lesbian feminists believed that it was not enough to be a lesbian, but that one needed to have a feminist consciousness around what it meant to be a lesbian; queer femmes rationalize their movement around femininity by disassociating themselves from people who are uncritically feminine.

However, the femme movement also significantly diverges from lesbian feminism in its gender and sexual ideologies. Taylor and Rupp (1992) claim that the three greatest “sins” perpetuated by these forms of lesbian feminism were essentialism, separatism, and building alternative cultures. While it may be said that the effort femmes put into building femme-safe spaces illustrates a promotion of an alternative queer culture, it is firmly opposed to essentialist beliefs about gender and sexuality and separatist philosophies. Along these lines, there are four outstanding differences on gender and sexuality philosophy between lesbian feminists and femme movement participants.

First, lesbian feminists see themselves as women; femmes see themselves as queers. According to Taylor and Whittier (1992) part of lesbian feminist consciousness was shifting lesbian identity away from a gay identity: being a lesbian did not mean being a gay woman, it meant being a woman-identified woman. That is, lesbian consciousness shifted lesbian identity away from a deviant sexual identity to a slightly more acceptable feminist identity. This philosophy also helped lesbian feminists reject solidarity with gay men. Queer women in the femme movement may have feminist concerns with gender inequality, but their movement is

squarely within queer communities; their most salient identity is that they are queer, not women or feminists.

Second, lesbian feminists rejected feminine expression and femmes, clearly, do not. In what Devor (1989) has called “gender blending” lesbian feminists assumed that rejecting patriarchy meant rejecting expectations of feminine beauty. Taylor and Whittier (1992) explained that lesbian feminists wore loose clothing that enabled movement, wore short hair or simple haircuts, did not shave their body hair, and wore no makeup. Although femmes reject the patriarchal expectation that all women perform femininity and the expectation that women manipulate their appearances for male approval, they believe that their feminine expression does not make them complicit with patriarchy.

Third, lesbian feminists rejected a myriad of sexual practices that they believed harmed women through a promotion of rape culture (as with sadomasochist practices) or the objectification of women (as with any practice that sexualized women’s sexual anatomy) (Whittier, 1995). This position also aided the rejection of solidarity with gay men because lesbian feminists judged gay male sexual practices like the use of pornography, anonymous sex, and intergenerational sex as oppressive (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Conversely, the femme movement is a movement of sex radicals: the philosophy of movement participants assumes a queer rejection of sexual normalcy; femmes use sexual displays to feel empowered and prove their membership in queer sex radical culture.

Fourth, lesbian feminists believed in essential differences between men and women and femmes believe in fluidity in bodies, gender identity, and gender expression. As Gamson (1995) notes, the goal of celebrating gender nonconformity and including transgender people in their political ideas marks a movement as queer. This is perhaps one of the femme movement’s most

major divergences from lesbian feminism because it speaks to a much deeper conceptualization of gender and sexuality. The femme movement is deeply concerned with destabilizing ideas about the naturalness of sex, sexuality, and gender; lesbian feminism is most deeply concerned with the status of women. This divergence of the femme movement – one that marks it as inspired by feminism, but maybe not squarely feminist – makes sense if we understand the femme movement as generationally unique.

Feminist Waves

In general, American feminist activism has varied in its goals and structure according to the historical, social, and political climate surrounding the movement throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. To distinguish time periods within the movement that has spanned three centuries, feminist activism has come to be known by its “waves” (Dicker, 2008). The first wave of American feminist activism, from the late 1800’s to the 1920’s, revolved around educational and work opportunities for women, but was most marked by the suffragist movement to earn women the right to vote (Dicker, 2008). The second wave of the 1960’s and 1970’s is perhaps most associated with what American feminism is: it was a movement comprised of multiple factions, dedicated to both legal reform (Rosen, 2000; Lorber, 2005; Dicker, 2008) and radical cultural change (Echols, 1989; Whittier, 2005; Rosen, 2000); its goals focused on gender problems in fields as broad as education, work, family life, reproductive rights, violence against women, and images of women in the media (Lorber, 2005; Dicker, 2008). Third wave American feminism, occurring since the 1990’s to the current time, is marked by its focus on individual change, cultural issues, and an intersectional analysis of gender which also pays attention to race, class, and sexuality (Henry, 2004; Walker, 2004; Lorber, 2005).

While critiqued by some feminist scholars, for the purposes of this dissertation, this model for thinking about activism is useful because it accounts for how movements are built

based on the social and cultural opportunities movement actors have in their historical moment. For instance, the second wave molded its goals for gender equality around the cultural opportunities in the American 1960's culture where other movements for racial equality, sexual freedom, and peace were waging (Taylor, 1989); the third wave is creating a movement built on the successes and failures of the previous wave and the cultural supposition that we are living in a "post-feminist" age (Henry, 2004). Importantly, understanding feminist activism in terms of "waves" allows for an analysis of what happens in between heightened periods of activism. For instance, Taylor (1989) has suggested that feminist movements do not end in between waves, but that they enter "abeyance" where activists refrain from traditional activism but maintain their social networks so that they may organize when the cultural climate is more conducive to activist challenges.

A Modern Gay and Lesbian Movement, But Are There Gltq Waves?

If one were to chart feminist movement activity over time, it would be easy to visualize the analogy of "waves" – there are clearly defined periods of heightened activity followed by lulls in activity. That is perhaps why the feminist movement has so consistently been discussed in terms of waves while other movements have not. Drawing from social movement sociology and the historical and sociological literature about GLBTQ political work, I argue that GLBTQ activism might also be understood as flowing in a similar fashion to what feminist scholars have recognized as waves of feminist activism in that GLBTQ activism ebb and flow in relation to the external sociopolitical forces which allow movements to emerge, flourish, or end. This also helps explain why the femme movement is queer (and not simply feminist) politics *and* feminist (and not simply queer) politics.

As stated earlier, sexuality scholars tend not to describe GLBTQ activism using a "wave" analogy. Plummer (1995) provides a notable example. He argues:

...shifts in consciousness and identity [amongst gays and lesbians] have their parallels in the shifts in community and culture on a wider scale. The history of gay community passes through complementary stages: three main ‘waves’ can therefore be detected” (89).

He describes the waves as follows: first, there was “exploration” (89) wherein underground networks established covert meeting places; second, happening around the end of the Second World War, saw the beginning of law-reform organizations; the third, from the 1970’s to the present, has focused on “coming out” and allowed for the institutionalization of gay life. I use the idea of waves in similar fashion, to convey the idea that shifts in the culture allow for certain political narratives, identities, and work to emerge. However, my delineation of these shifts, or waves, in GLBTQ activism differs slightly from Plummer’s (1995) description.

In what follows I detail the ways in which I see a possible delineation of GLBTQ activist waves. The first emergence of the 1950’s, referred to as the homophile movement (Adam, 1987), might be called the first wave. The 1970’s gay liberation movement (Adam, 1987), might be called the second wave. The late 1980’s emergence of radical direct action, in response to the onset of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS] epidemic (Edwards, 2000), might be called the third wave. Finally, the rise of a successful mainstream movement, increasingly dedicated to corporate-funding institutional reform politics (Ward, 2008), might be called the fourth wave. To be clear, this is my interpretation of one way to think about waves of GLBTQ activism; I recognize that the distinctions between waves may be taken up differently by other scholars.

Although there is evidence that organized gay life existed in the U.S. prior to World War I, the modern U.S. gay and lesbian *movement* is often portrayed as having emerged in the 1950’s in what is referred to as “The Homophile Movement” (Adam, 1987; Seidman, 2004). The context of the 1950’s in the U.S. was one of social panic and fear of outsiders, a time when the nation was struggling to ensure a feeling of security after the initiation of the Cold War, and a

time when conventional nuclear family values were touted as the American ideal (Seidman, 2004). It was also during this time that the image of a “polluted homosexual” became the national scapegoat for American political fears: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) listed homosexuality as a mental illness; homosexual behavior was a criminal offense; McCarthy’s The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) sought to persecute communists who they believed were hiding in homosexual communities; and the closet became a routinized structure for gays and lesbians to hide from the homophobic persecution of their day (Seidman, 2004).

The Homophile Movement of the 1950’s was composed of secret meetings of organizations whose political goal was integration and respect for gays and lesbians; they sought legal protection, a reform to sodomy laws, and an end to police raids of gay establishments (Adam, 1987). The two most famous organizations were the Mattachine Society, a gay men’s organization established in 1951, and Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization established in 1956. Importantly, from the inception of gay and lesbian political organizing, gay men and lesbians organized separately from one another (Adam, 1987). This might be said to be the first wave of GLBTQ activism in the U.S.

Most scholars use the Stonewall Riots of June 1969 to mark the beginning of a new era of gay and lesbian organizing, the era of the Gay Liberation Movement (Adam, 1987). The radical sociopolitical context of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s was far different from the repressive atmosphere of the 1950’s. The radical women’s movement, the student’s movement, the black power movement, and the general cynicism toward the American government after the Vietnam War helped created an atmosphere that was conducive to a radical liberation movement for gays and lesbians. Organizations like Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance focused on

visibility and coming out, used direct action tactics to challenge broad social inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, and celebrated a gay and lesbian counterculture (Adam, 1987). The gay liberation movement of the 1970's can be seen as a second wave of U.S. gay and lesbian activism. Although the homophile movement was quietly reformist and the gay liberation movement became loudly radical, they were connected in time in that the slowly paced work of the homophile movement built the impactful gay liberation movement. The cultural differences of the movements were due to their external sociopolitical environments. Importantly, the second wave of GLBTQ politics and the second wave of feminist politics parallel one another in time sequence. They were also similar in their multi-faceted approach to liberation.

In the latter part of the 1970's there was a sharp decrease in gay and lesbian activism: lesbians left the gay liberation movement and dedicated their lives to feminist struggle, small lesbian organizations, or a non-political lifestyle; many gay men left activism to experiment with the new sexual freedom easily found in gay meccas like the Castro in San Francisco (Schulman, 1994). The gay and lesbian movement experienced its first major lull (or what Taylor (1989) might call period of abeyance work) in activism.

I assert that the third wave of the GLBTQ movement emerged in the late 1980's in the U.S. The third wave of U.S. gay and lesbian activism was surprisingly radical for being located in the Reagan-Bush years of the late 1980's and early 1990's. In the mid-1980's the AIDS epidemic, and government inaction to it, incited the gay community to initiate a new wave of activism. The near-decade depletion of the gay male population, the government's total inaction to help people with HIV/AIDS, and the 1986 *Bowers V. Hardwick* decision, that maintained the criminalization of private sexual relations between members of the same sex, resulted in a

mounting anger amongst gays and lesbians (Schulman, 1994; Edwards, 2000). Fear of AIDS brought out a vocal and intense homophobia in the public that spawned new anti-gay initiatives at the national, state, and local levels (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; Schulman, 1994). This new homophobia made co-sex organizing with gay men a necessity for lesbians (Schulman, 1994; Stoller, 1995). In response to the AIDS crisis and the Bowers V. Hardwick decision, gays and lesbians held the 1987 March on Washington where they gathered in demand for increased civil rights and committed acts of civil disobedience on Capital Hill. ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power], which formed earlier that same year, was a focal point of the March (Edwards, 2000).

ACT UP was known for its street theatre actions, its intense media savvy, and its surprising success as an activist organization (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; DeLuca, 1999; Edwards, 2000). They have speeded drug approval, forced change in health care policy, challenged unfair drug prices, and thwarted anti-AIDS measures in government through an unorthodox social activism (Crimp & Rolston, 1990; DeLuca, 1999). They are perhaps best known for their die-ins, in which they took up a social space with their “dead” bodies to force people to view the devastation of the disease (DeLuca, 1999). One such action focused attention on Cardinal O’Connor, a high powered Catholic clergy member who repeatedly made anti-gay/anti-condom use statements, and who organized to stop initiatives to help people living with AIDS and safer sex campaigns. On March 10, 1989, in their “Stop the Church!” action they entered St. Patrick’s Cathedral while Cardinal O’Connor was speaking and mimicked dying in the aisles. Members who were not “dying,” stood and shouted at the cardinal, “You’re murdering us! Stop killing us! We’re not going to take it anymore! Stop it!” (Crimp & Rolston, 1990). As homophobia was the root of the government’s inaction when gay men were dying of HIV/AIDS, ACT UP sought to

challenge social attitudes surrounding homophobia as well as creating initiatives to help people living with AIDS (Crimp & Rolston, 1990). For example, they held kiss-ins in public places to challenge public decency, flaunt their sexuality, and force heterosexuals to confront their homophobia (DeLuca, 1999).

According to Gould (2002) ACT UP was able to create an emotional common sense that “marshaled grief and tethered it to anger” (177). This was ACT UP’s logic:

“If you feel grief, as we all do, then you should also feel anger towards those who have caused you to feel grief; and if you feel anger, you should join us in militant action to fight those who are responsible for turning a public health issue into the AIDS crisis” (Gould, 2002: 182).

For a period of five to six years, ACT UP was able to use the gay community’s grief around a health crisis to encourage direct action activism.

In the early 1990’s ACT UP found itself in the classic double-bind for AIDS activist organizations: they were simultaneously criticized for focusing too much on AIDS (and not enough on gay and lesbian civil rights) and for focusing too much on gays and lesbians (and not all people living with AIDS) (Edwards, 2000). During this time there was a split in AIDS activism(s). In a move toward increased conservatism and social respectability, the larger gay and lesbian movement chose to disassociate itself from the deadly AIDS virus and AIDS activists chose to focus their concerns on the treatment of people living with AIDS, regardless of their sexual orientation (Schulman, 1994; Edwards, 2000).

Gays and lesbians who were still dedicated to radical direct action formed their own groups. In 1991 Queer Nation, NYC was founded, as was the Lesbian Avengers, NYC in the following year (Schulman, 1994; DeLuca, 1999). Queer Nation’s tactics were to “cross borders,

to occupy spaces, and to mime the privileges of normality – in short, to stimulate ‘the national’ with a camp inflection” (Berlant & Freeman 1992: 152). Its members argued that since all queer people were not legitimated as citizens by the state, the proper response of GLBT people should be to swear primary affiliations to other queer people – for queer people to have a nationalist devotion to other queers (Chee 1991). While Queer Nation, as a political organization, only lasted two years, its influence on the ways in which GLBT people think of themselves has been much more long lasting (Bérubé & Escoffier 1991). For the Lesbian Avengers, activists maintained their intense criticism of society’s homophobia, but also vowed to incorporate fighting sexism into their organization’s purpose (Schulman, 1990). Importantly, the founding members of Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers were all trained as activists in ACT UP, NYC. That political environment taught them the publicity skills and direct action methods necessary to create their radical queer organizations. Like ACT UP, Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers were organizations dedicated to making queer existence possible and visible through radical direct action.

Although mainstream gay and lesbian organization also flourished at this time, radical queer activism was a mainstay of the time (Edwards, 2000). During the late 1980’s and very early 1990’s, the context of the AIDS epidemic created a political environment in which angry direct action was the most common kind of political effort in gay and lesbian communities, evidenced by the vocal presence of ACT UP at the 1987 March on Washington. The mainstream gay and lesbian decision to distance itself from AIDS activism and the emergence of organizations like Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers demarcate the modern divergence between mainstream gay and lesbian politics and queer politics. Militant AIDS activism “reoriented the object of gay pride away from community stoicism and toward gay sexual

difference and militant activism” (Gould, 2002: 177). Militant AIDS activism’s radical critique still exists in the ethics of queer politics today.

The GLBT community’s response to the AIDS epidemic was to organize in support of people living with AIDS *and* to organize in response to the reason underlying the government’s neglect of the health crisis: because the government’s inattention to the AIDS epidemic rested on a homophobic fear of queer sex, part of the radical response of AIDS activists was a celebration of queer sex and a direct action politic dedicated to the visibility of queer sex (Schulman, 1994; Warner, 2000).

However, not all gays and lesbians agreed that GLBT communities should promote a visible sexuality and not all gays and lesbians agreed on the tactics pursued to end the AIDS crisis. For instance, some gays and lesbians agreed with representatives of the state that gay baths should be closed to help stop HIV transmission while other gay activists argued that closing the baths would be a homophobic punitive measure (Hollibaugh, 1996). Although the debates emerged for different reasons, the debates in queer communities around sexual representation in the 1990’s were strikingly similar to the 1980’s sex wars in feminist communities (Hollibaugh, 1996). According to Hollibaugh (1996), “[the sexuality debates] rest on many of the same fundamental questions: the role of the State in regulating sexual behavior, the meaning of desire, and the need for danger in our erotic lives” (326-327) and goes on to say, “Perhaps the most important parallel involves the demand to control our own bodies” (327).

According to Warner (2000), the debates around sexual representation following the AIDS epidemic were the beginning of the political divide between mainstream gay and lesbian reformists who wished to sanitize gay and lesbian identity from its association with gay sex and queers who celebrated the unique political potential of queer sex and its representations. It is a

crystallized division that can still be seen today. Although it is not unimaginable for a queer kink-positive lesbian to want to get married to her partner, mainstream gay and lesbian organizations that advocate for the right to marry are often criticized for the ways they continue to desexualize gay identity (Warner, 2000; Goldstein, 2003) and queers who revel in sexual freedom and kink tend to reject reformist models of inclusion, such as marriage tactics (Warner, 2000; Goldstein, 2003; also see Sycamore, 2004).

Now there is something of a non-queer fourth wave that is more concerned with institutional inclusion than the previous wave. The shift from the third wave of gay and lesbian organizing to the fourth wave does not exist because of a lull in activism. Instead, the third and fourth waves must be conceived of differently because of their wholly antithetic approaches to activism. Where (what I am calling) the third wave was dedicated to direct action tactics and challenging ideologies such as homophobia, (what I am calling) the fourth wave is associated with lobbying and institutional inclusion. Specifically, current gay and lesbian politics are characterized by its focus on marriage, gay and lesbian parenting, and military service (Warner, 2000; Duggan, 2002; Goldstein, 2003). This new wave may be said to have started in 1993, marked by the 1993 March on Washington, focusing on these new platforms rather than AIDS (Edwards, 2000).

Although there is something to be said for gay and lesbian inclusion in existing institutions, some scholars have suggested that the price of inclusion is too high. Duggan (2002) has famously described these new movement goals as contributing to a culture of “homonormativity” amongst gays and lesbians wherein they deny queer difference in order to participate in “normal” American institutions. Bryant (2008) refers to the strategies initiated by the mainstream movement as “progay homophobias,” a phenomenon in which gay and lesbian

advocates internalize cultural antigay homophobia and create an antihomophobic response that is “progay” but also “homophobic.” Said differently, in order to garner rights that have been denied to them because of perceptions of gay culture, the mainstream gay and lesbian community attempts to distance itself from those perceptions of gay culture (namely sexual promiscuity and gender nonconformity) and, in turn, validate the homophobic notion that these are virtues that call for discrimination.

Further, these strategies have become successful; the mainstream gay and lesbian movement is a major movement. Ward (2008) argues that activist organizations have become part of the neoliberal establishment; LGBT organizations have become increasingly market-driven and profit oriented. This culture of profit, alongside the goals of institutional inclusion, means that gays and lesbians in mainstream organizations are willing to forfeit diversity, a cornerstone of the gay liberation movement, and queer perspectives, in order to succeed. Ward said:

Lesbian and gay activists embrace racial, gender, socioeconomic, and sexual differences when they see them as predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet suppress these *very same* differences when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy, or defiant (2).

With the rise of potential profit (or success in a capitalist society), the gay and lesbian movement has become even less diverse than its origins.

According to Armstrong (2002), the GLBT community recognizes that their “ethnic” status is markedly different from other ethnic types because a GLB sexual orientation (or transgender identity) is a category that people from very different backgrounds come to in later life. To mediate this problem, the community has reveled in the idea of “celebrating diversity,” both as a call to wider society to celebrate the sexual differences of its inhabitants and as a proud reminder that the community itself is diverse. However, since the 1980’s, the GLBT community

has received constant criticism from queers of color that this testament to diversity fails to include them (Armstrong, 2002; also see Ferguson, 2003).

As Ward (2008) would contend, creating the appearance of a unified gay community has been a political strategy. According to Bernstein (1997) there are times when identity based movements highlight their differences with the dominant group (in celebration of difference) and times when they find it politically useful to highlight their similarities with the dominant group (in suppression of difference). The current political strategy of mainstream gay and lesbian politics is one of suppression of gay and lesbian difference. It is produced to disassociate “gay” from “strange” or “abnormal,” and, more specifically to dissociate “gay” from “queer”; this particular strategy has meant a gay and lesbian disassociation from bisexual, transgender, and queer people in the social and political spheres (Gamson, 1995; Phelan, 2001). In what Phelan (2001) calls “a flight from strangeness,” gays and lesbians have attempted, as of late, to approximate normality by making the claim that the only difference between them and heterosexuals is the slight matter of sexual orientation and that they should therefore be entitled to privileges of the state [see also Warner, 2000].

Another way to think about activists who “celebrate difference” and those who “suppress difference” is Gamson’s (1995) description of “ethnic/essentialist politics” and “deconstructionist politics.” The former believes that clearly defined categories (e.g. to be a lesbian means to be x, y, and z) and collective identity are necessary for movements to be successful; the latter believes that clearly defined categories (e.g. lesbians can *only* be x, y, and z) are obstacles to success (Gamson, 1995). Importantly, I contend that these essentialist and deconstructionist politics may occur as factions of the same wave. That is, while I argue that the third wave of GLBTQ politics was more defined by queer deconstructionist politics and the

fourth wave is more defined by ethnic/essentialist reformist politics, there were hints of the other in each: the third wave saw mainstream politics and the fourth wave still has some queer political activity.

Queer politics, by setting themselves in opposition to gay and lesbian politics and because of their critique of gender and sexuality categories, tend to be more inclusive of bisexual and transgender identified individuals. Paradoxically, however, queerness is an attack on identity itself (Gamson, 1995). Because so many successful activist endeavors have based themselves on organizing around identity, there has been substantial concern over how successful queer politics can be (Gamson, 1995).

The queer deconstructivist politics undertaken in the 1990's have not disappeared. They continue as an undercurrent in the title wave of modern GLBTQ activism. That is, as the mainstream gay and lesbian movement has become more successful, and more institutionalized as a major social movement, queer cultural politics have also been developing to contribute cultural challenges as the mainstream movement creates institutional challenges. After all, Gamson (1995) argues that both deconstructivist and identity politics are necessary in this political moment. The femme movement provides an example of how this is so: they contribute changes that cannot be achieved by more mainstream politics; more mainstream politics achieve changes that they cannot.

Conceptualizing political activism in terms of waves helps contextualize movements in their unique social, cultural, and political climates. It also helps explain why actors make political decisions around their movement activity. That is, political actors are influenced by the time period in which they become activists. According to Whittier (1995) although there are many factors that distinguish political actors in a movement from one another, a key factor is

when participants are politicized, their *political generation*. Using her interviews with activists from the radical women's movement, she suggests that, "what it means to call oneself 'feminist' varies greatly over time, often leading to conflict over movement goals, values, ideology, strategy, or individual behavior." In short, political perspectives are shaped by when activists enter the movement.

Although Whittier was talking about feminist activism, my data suggest that this is also true of GLBTQ movement participants: political generation matters a great deal because of the major shifts that GLBTQ activism has undergone since its modern inception.

To reiterate, I have described a series of waves that comprise the history of GLBTQ activism in the U.S.: the first wave, of the 1950's and early 1960's, was typified by seeking legal protection and increased citizenry rights; the second wave, of the 1970's, was typified by a liberationist era philosophy that sought legal reform and criticized cultural ideologies; the third wave, of the late 1980's and early 1990's, was a response to the AIDS epidemic in the form of a radical direct action politics; the fourth wave, since the mid 1990's and continuing into the current time, is typified by institutional reform. Again, talking about these activisms in terms of waves offers a way of thinking about how the most dominant kind of activism in a specific time period is related to the social and historical context of its time; importantly, it does not deny that multiple kinds of activism can, should, and do exist inside the same wave.

I argue that the femme movement's emergence makes sense if we think of it in relation to feminist and GLBTQ movements and understand these, to some degree, in terms of ideas of waves of activism.

The femme movement is an identity based movement which relies on a political consciousness around femininity, gender identity, and queer identity; it positions itself within the

subcultural of the queer community and makes use of cultural politics to shift the community's ideas about femininity and contributions to the community made by feminine people. It is a movement that is birthed from feminist and GLBTQ movements that have come before it. Since the 1970's, feminism has deeply characterized lesbian cultures (Taylor & Rupp, 1993) and as such, modern queer women's communities are a manifestation of feminist *and* GLBT political debates. Queer women today exist in a community that has experienced lesbian feminism's legacy of radical feminism, the feminist sex wars of the 1980's and the pro-sex politic that emerged from it, the AIDS epidemic and the queer sex debates of the 1990's, third wave feminism, and queer and transgender debates that have emerged since the 1990's. The femme movement is a conglomeration of these developments. It is a movement that is deeply influenced by radical lesbian feminism in its structure, its focus on cultural activism, and its commitment to politicized identities. Because of its influences from sex radical culture, and queer and transgender debates, it is also a movement that fundamentally disagrees with much of the ideology of radical feminism. It is also its own unique kind of movement: it is a movement around femininity, around freedom of gender and sexual expression, and yet around inclusion from the broader queer community.

Oceans of Cultural Change and the Femme Movement As a Queer Current: Implications of Research

While the metaphor of waves helps to highlight how the femme movement is historically situated, my research presented in this dissertation suggests that to visualize how the femme movement came to be and what consequences it might have, it is actually better to extend the metaphor of waves of activism to include an entire ocean. An ocean of activism includes the intersection of movements, accounting for how distinct movements can be both divergent from and overlapping atop one another. It allows one to visualize the spikes in movement activity *and*

how they occur alongside other movement participation. Using this analogy, we might say that the femme movement is a current, one that flows alongside other currents, in the modern wave of GLBTQ activism and that the modern GLBTQ wave exists within an ocean of gender and sexual politics throughout history.

By discussing femme political logic and the histories of the feminist and queer waves of activism which have influenced it, I have been describing the frames of the femme movement. The idea of collective action frames employs the term “framing” from Goffman’s (1974) who described frames as “schemata of interpretation” which allow us “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences in everyday life (21). The terminology acknowledges that social movement framing is alive, and changeable: “This denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process” (Snow & Benford, 2000: 614). Framing analysis exists within a NSM paradigm of social movement scholarship because of its commitment to understanding the ideological dimensions of political work. That is, frame analysis seeks to understand how movement actors frame political problems and solutions; it suggests that political work does not automatically happen, but develops from the engaged activity of activists. According to Snow and Benford (2000), frame analysis’ core task is to understand how movement participants produce, maintain, and distribute ideas to the culture. They say, “[the framing process is about] meaning work – the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” (613).

Some movement framing is “strategic” (Snow & Benford, 2000: 624), deliberate or goal-oriented attempts to construct a certain image of the movement, while others are “discursively” (Snow & Benford, 2000: 623) created through talk, text, and interaction with others.

Importantly, movement logic – or movement “frames” – can, and often do, overlap with other movement logics (Snow & Benford, 2000). This idea – that movements learn from one another, have a common sense for dealing with cultural issues, and develop similar solutions – is especially useful in understanding the overlap of gender and sexual politics.

I want to spend some time specifically discussing the confluence of feminist and queer movements in the creation of the femme movement by talking about philosophies of sexuality and gender fluidity. That is, the trajectory of both feminist and GLBTQ ideas on sexual representation and gender identity are integral in the formation of the femme movement’s philosophies on these matters.

As is fitting with a queer movement, the femme movement holds a pro-sex philosophy. By this I mean that they reject stigma associated with multiple sex partners, or non-traditional sex acts and that they believe sexuality may be a path to liberation. This is perhaps most obvious with burlesque performance, as critiques of sexism and homophobia are brought to the audience through stripteases and simulated sex acts. However, pro-sex themes are also prominent in femme organizations. For example, the Femme Mafia held a “lube wrestling” benefit for the organization at a gay men’s leather bar – an event that surely would have been horrifying for many second wave lesbian feminists and one that conferred their status as an organization that was freely sexual and overlapping with “kink” communities. Also, the Femme Affinity Group published this cheer in their zine on the topic of Bondage/Domination/Sadism/Masochism

[BDSM]:

B-D-S-M
What does it spell? Fun!
Be a bottom, be a top
C’mon ladies, grab your crop!
Be a robber, be a cop
Once you start, you’ll never stop.

Tie me up, tie me down
Tickle me and bite me.
Sticks and stones may break my bones
But whips and chains excite me.
Get kinky, yea yeah, get kinky, uh huh!
I used to be (clap, clap, clap)
Vanilla plain (clap, clap, clap)
But now I've mastered (clap, clap, clap)
The art of pain, uh huh!
Safe! Sane! Consensual!

While there may be femmes in lesbian communities whose sexual ethics mirror lesbian feminists, politicized queer femme identity (in the context of the femme movement) holds a political common sense of sex radicalism. This is due to a generational shift in queer sexual ethics brought on by both feminist and GLBT positions on sexual representation over the last thirty years. According to Henry (2004), the use of the word “queer” amongst young women marks a generational shift that is meant to establish philosophical differences from lesbian feminists on the issue of sex.

People who espouse sex positive beliefs are responding to what Gayle Rubin has called a “sex negative culture,” (Rubin, 1993) in which there is a profound stigma against all things sexual *and* to the mainstream feminist logic that equates sexuality with women’s oppression (Queen, 1997). According to Califia (1994) people who reject sexuality norms and wish to promote a cultural overhaul of those norms are sex radicals. He states, “...being a sex radical means being defiant as well as deviant. It means being aware that there is something unsatisfying and dishonest about the way sex is talked about (or hidden) in daily life” (xiii) and goes on to say, “It also means questioning the way our society assigns privilege based on adherence to its moral codes, and in fact makes every sexual choice a matter of morality” (xiii). The potential for sex radical culture has been birthed from controversial debates over sexuality in feminist and queer communities.

Debates around women's sexuality have been present in feminist politics since the first wave of feminist organizing (Hunter, 1994) and have continued through the second wave's discussion of reproductive rights, lesbian inclusion in feminist politics, and patriarchal expectations of women's sexuality (Rosen, 2000). However, feminist sexuality debates are most associated with the feminist sex wars of the 1980's. The mounting friction over questions of pleasure, power, violence, consent, representation, and autonomy erupted at Barnard College's 1982 conference on "Pleasure and Danger" in women's sexuality: feminist activist group Women Against Pornography protested the conference wearing t-shirts that said "For Feminist Sexuality" on the front and "Against S/M" on the back; the Lesbian Sex Mafia, a New York City organization dedicated to "politically incorrect sex," responded with a speak-out the next day; the feminist magazine *Off Our Backs* covered letters to the editor on both sides of the debate for months following the conference (Hunter, 1994). Although the debate between anti-pornography feminists and anti-censorship feminists became the most visible and memorable disagreement during the sex wars (Duggan, 1994) the decade long debates also featured discussions on prostitution, lesbian/queer sexuality, sadomasochism, and even style/fashion aesthetics (Queen, 1999).

Some queer feminists claim that the sex wars created new erotic opportunities for queer women and that it changed the ways that queer feminists theorize about subjects like erotic oppression, sexual domination, and gender relations (Queen, 1999). For some "pro-sex feminists" the journey through the sex wars meant that they valued queer erotic identities over what had come to be seen as a judgmental feminism (Rubin, 1981).

Similar debates around erotic representation emerged within GLBT communities with the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic. Because the government's inattention to the AIDS epidemic

rested on a homophobic fear of queer sex, part of the radical response of AIDS activists was a celebration of queer sex and a direct action politic dedicated to the visibility of queer sex (Schulman, 1994). However, not all gays and lesbians agreed that their communities should promote a visible sexuality as a tactic pursued to end the AIDS crisis. For instance, some gays and lesbians agreed with representatives of the state that gay baths should be closed to help stop HIV transmission while other gay activists argued that closing the baths would be a homophobic punitive measure (Hollibaugh, 1996).

Importantly, one of the dividing lines between GLBTQ political models tends to be around issues of sexuality representation. Where the gay and lesbian ethnic identity model of political organizing tends to be rights-based, queer politics tends to be ideologically and culturally based (Gamson, 1994). For this reason, where a defining characteristic of mainstream gay and lesbian politics is their disassociation from queer sex (so that elites will believe their movement slogan that they are “just like everyone else”) (Warner, 2000), a defining characteristic of queer deconstructivist politics is the goal of creating a sex radical culture where queer sex is more visible and less sanctioned (Califia, 1994; Warner, 2000). Deconstructionist queer political philosophies reject the privileges of sexual normalcy and as such, its political maneuvers do not include lobbying the state for inclusion in its institutions; instead, queer political action takes place at the level of *cultural* change (Berlant & Freeman, 1992), with a great deal of emphasis on the empowering potential of queer eroticism (Califia, 1994; Warner, 2000).

As stated earlier, although feminist and queer sexuality debates emerged for different reasons, the debates in queer communities around sexual representation in the 1990’s were strikingly similar to the 1980’s sex wars in feminist communities. Both debates birthed cultures

which believe that political power can emerge from a cultural celebration of sex, pleasure, and erotic freedom (Califia, 1994; Queen, 1999).

Just as the sex-positive sentiment in the femme movement is the result of feminist and queer debates about sexual representation, the ability to frame female femininity as potentially revolutionary is a result of modern feminist and queer discussions about gender. Specifically, third wave feminism has offered a new vision of femininity and the transgender movement has offered queer communities a new discourse on gender identity and expression.

Amongst other shifts from second wave feminism, third wave feminism is known for its realization that second wave feminism was exclusive to many potential movement joiners because of its rigidity. Rebecca Walker (2004), an activist credited with naming the current nexus of feminist activity the “third wave” has said that there will always be young women who are adverse to feminism because of the stigma associated with challenging gender inequality but that there are many others who are “feminist but not Feminists” (xiv). For the latter group, she says, “we came to our radical consciousness in the heady postmodern matrix of womanist texts, queer culture, postcolonial discourse, Buddhism, direct action, sex positivity, and so much more” (xiv). That is, the third wave acknowledges that there are intersecting oppressions that must be confronted, that sex inequality must not be conceptualized as the most primary oppression, and that there should not be rules associated with how to be a feminist (Orr, 1997; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Lorber, 2005). Talking about third wave feminists Walker (2004) continued:

We find that the nexuses of power and identity are constantly shifting, and so are we. We find that labels which seek to categorize and define are historical constructs often used as tools of oppression. We find that many of our potential allies in resistance movements do feminism but do not, intuitively, embrace feminism (xiv).

The most major shift that third wave feminists have taken from second wave feminism has been to conceive of feminist activism as personally defined, not rule-oriented, and fluid.

Part of this new fluidity has allowed feminists to redress the informal feminist rules associated with gender expression and fashion, namely the rejection of femininity. As Scott (2005) explains, first and second waves of U.S. feminism have consistently argued that women attempt feminine presentations it makes her a “dupe of fashion, the plaything of men, and thus a collaborator in her [own] oppression” (1). She argues that at least one of the problematics of this argument is that it has always been women in power – race, class, educational, and sexual power – who have told other women how they should dress themselves. Further, she contends that decorating the body is not antithetical to a feminist commitment to gender equality.

The femmes I interviewed would not describe the femme movement as a feminist movement, third wave or no. However, I think it can be characterized as a queer movement with feminist concerns. Recall that although their movement activity is directed toward queer people with the intention of changes in queer communities, they saw the redress of femme stigma as related to the larger cultural devaluation of femininity. Because queer women’s communities are so infused with feminist principles, many interviewees told me that to come to a femme identity they had to reconcile misconceptions they held that being feminine meant being anti-feminist. Discussing how she came to see herself as a “high femme feminist,” Danielle told me:

[Atlanta] is the first place where I’ve seen super high femme feminists. It just didn’t exist to me before. Everyone has their vision of the feminist who’s the militant man-hater who’s a little butchy, a little androgynous, a little toned down, always wearing pants and flats, all of that. But it’s kind of like once you own [femininity], you know, for yourself, and you acknowledge what it is, what the performance of being femme is, once you own it, it can be an expression of your own feminism.

Again, while the femme movement is not located within a specifically feminist agenda, it is located within an ocean of feminist and queer politics: developments in feminism affect the trajectory of queer women’s politics. Hence, the eruption of third wave feminism has influenced how femmes see femininity. Ruth, someone who described herself as being in an age bracket of

second wave feminism, said, “Third wave feminism is really interesting because they’re saying *hey, femininity is great*. There’s a lot more room for femininity.” This third wave “room for femininity” is one component of the politicization of queer feminine identity in queer communities.

Alongside the rise in queer deconstructivist politics, the 1990’s saw a rise in transgender activism – a form of activism that was divergent from previous transsexual organizing and distinct from other movements (Broad, 2002). The transgender movement’s central practice is defining transgender identity and constructing future goals for action based on the defined identity (Broad, 2002). However, the construction of transgender identity has been quite contentious (Wilchins, 1997; Broad, 2002; Valentine, 2007). Some trans activists are invested in defining transsexuality as a definable medical category with boundaries which determine inclusion for identification and medical treatment while others are invested in transgender as an identity that may deconstruct rigid gender categories by offering people options beyond “woman” and “man” (Wilchins, 1997; Broad, 2002).

Although trans people have built communities and organizations that are distinct from GLBQ people, there has been a historical and current overlap of gender variance and sexual difference (Feinberg, 1996). Some of this overlap has been contested, especially by GLB people: Although trans people have been visible members of the modern gay and lesbian movement, evidenced by the drag queens and trans women present at the Stonewall riots, gays and lesbians have been reluctant to include them in major movement platforms (Rivera, 2002); lesbian feminists have vitriolically rejected both trans men (because of the supposition that they betray women by becoming men) and trans women (because of the supposition that they are unfairly appropriating women’s identities) (Califia, 2003; Rubin, 2003).

At other times the convergence of gender and sexual difference has been celebrated. Most notably, GLB people who espouse “queer” politics are often noting their willingness to include trans people (and gender variance) in their political model (Gamson, 1995). For queer women’s communities, one of most notable divergences from “lesbian” communities is queer women’s proximity to transgender people. In fact, femmes often have romantic and sexual relationships with trans men [see Stelly, 2009]. This was true for the people I interviewed: of the fourteen partnered femmes I interviewed, eight (or 57%) of them were partnered with trans men. This is an important development in the ocean of gender and sexual politics because the ideas about gender fluidity, gender freedom, and gender choices developed by factions of the trans movement have influenced femmes to think more critically about the choice to be feminine. Katie summed up a common idea expressed by femme interviewees:

I think, for me, dating a trans man has been really wonderful for me. And [it has been wonderful] for a lot of femmes ... being around people who have thought a lot about their gender and are really aware of the consequences of expressing it in the way that they do. That has really helped me. It’s provided a structure for thinking about my gender.

The development of a potentially radical female femininity is based on both the third wave feminist conception that femininity is not harmful and transgender movement ideas that people should be able to freely choose and express their gender.

The femme movement should be understood in relation to past (and current) waves of feminist and GLBTQ activism, but it is not neatly feminist or queer. Importantly, it is sex radical and inclusive of gender transgression – markers that illustrate its connections to current waves of third wave feminism *and* queer strains of GLBTQ activism. That is, the femme movement is shaped by both historical and current dynamics of both feminist and GLBTQ politics.

The femme movement is feminist in a number of ways. It shares surprising similarities to second wave radical feminist ideas about personal transformation, cultural politics, and

structuring organizations in non-hierarchical ways. Yet, it rejects second wave feminist notions that gender inequality is a primary oppression, that men and women are essentially different, and that particular kinds of sex are harmful to women. It is also informed by third wave feminist reclamations of femininity and ideas about intersecting oppressions. Yet, it is not a third wave feminist movement, as femme movement participants would describe themselves as located within the queer community, asking for change from GLTBQ people.

Although the femme movement is self-described as a queer movement, it is so influenced by gender concerns that it is not neatly a sexuality movement either. It is certainly queer in the way that femme activists prioritize their queer identities in their activism and in the way that they seek redress for femme stigma from other queer people. It is certainly influenced by modes of historical GLBTQ political behavior, especially conversations of sexual ethics, queer political sensibilities, and transgender inclusion debates. However, it is also infused with a feminist rejection to gender inequality. Recall that a key part of femme identity is rejecting the patriarchal conflation of femininity and inferiority – a major philosophy of the femme movement is based in gender liberation. That is, although they are located within queer communities, they are not necessarily asking for redress of a sexuality-based issue; instead, they are asking queer people for redress of a gender-based concern.

For these reasons – that the femme movement has both gender and sexual concerns and because it is deeply influenced by both feminist and GLBTQ waves of activism – I have suggested that it is useful to think of oceans of cultural change alongside our concept of waves, activist generations, and distinct movements.

This metaphor of oceans of gender and sexuality political work complicates the idea of activist waves by suggesting that politics are not only shaped by their historical time, but also by

other waves in the ocean, or other movements occurring around it. It further complicates our idea of activist generations by suggesting that multiple politicizing effects can occur in one generation. However, it is also a validation of these ideas. The femme movement is an example of a current, inside a wave, inside an ocean of activism; it is an example of an activist generation. The metaphor of the ocean allows scholars to think about the way the cultural politics of gender and sexuality are done today: through the merging of feminist and queer concerns, through the merging of feminist and queer histories, identities, cultures, and ways of agitating for change.

Thinking of activism in the context of generationally specific waves inside an ocean helps illuminate the total social context of political work. More significantly for gender and sexuality politics, the ocean metaphor helps elucidate the confluence of feminist and queer politics for specific communities. That is, young queer women have political concerns that are infused with both queer liberationist concerns that critique sex negativity, homophobia/heterosexism, and the rigidity of sexual orientation categories and feminist concerns that critique patriarchy, the cultural superiority of masculinity, and the rigidity of gender categories. In many ways, talking about politics in terms of an ocean is an intersectional perspective: it accounts for how people may be politicized when they occupy multiple communities. The femme movement is instructive for just that reason: it illustrates how a community of people who exist within a trajectory of multiple social movement communities – femmes in queer communities who negotiate both feminist and queer histories, sensibilities, and political concerns – make sense of their political social location.

The femme movement helps us understand the possibility of conceiving of oceans of activism, but the metaphor of oceans, which hold waves of activism, has broader implications for understanding social movements. Oceans are the broader field of social change which hold

distinct movements. Just as movements tend to have both institutional and cultural targets of their work, they are both distinct and overlapping: waves are distinct; the ocean is where movements overlap with one another.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The major limitations of this work are due to constraints of time and travel. The femme movement, as participants described it to me, is comprised of various (and varying) organizations all over the U.S.; many of them attempt femme political work in ways not discussed here. For example, if I had more time and resources I might have also observed and interviewed people involved in the Phi Delta Femme in Chicago, Illinois, a femme sorority that is surely differently oriented toward femme politics than other femme organizations. I might have spent time traveling with the Femme Porn Tour, a spoken word performance troupe, comprised of all femme identified people, who travel the U.S. performing artistic descriptions of sex from the point of view of femmes. Similarly, the Femme Show in Boston, Massachusetts, offers artistic commentary on sex, gender, and sexuality from femme standpoints. Also, this project might have been more strongly developed by researching the national femme conference which brings together distinct local femme activists together for the purposes of community building and strategy sharing.

It would have been useful to spend time observing other chapters of groups I studied; for example, Femme Mafia's other U.S. and international chapters. Also, I might have spent time observing the nuanced chapters of groups I studied, such as the the Femme Pirates in Tucson, Arizona (a divergent chapter of the Femme Affinity Group) or the Fat Femme Mafia (a Toronto, Canada group who melds the politics of Femme Mafia with fat positive body politics).

Other limitations include the race and class diversity of participants in my study. Although the percentages of women of color and working class people interviewed for this study

did tend to reflect the population of femme political communities I observed, it would have been responsible to over-sample these groups to insert their situated perspective into the conversation about femme identity and femme political work.

Future research in this arena must pay attention to the ways that femmes meld femme political goals with other political concerns. For instance, the aforementioned Fat Femme Mafia and the podcast *FemmeCast: A Queer Fat Femme Podcast Guide to Life* may provide examples of how femme political work and fat acceptance movements have parallel and complimentary goals in that they both attack insidious discriminations, find empowerment in pro-sex ethics and center on identity as a path to empowerment. Also, future research may engage in a broader investigation of femininity politics in queer communities; specifically, it would be intellectually beneficial to study gay male organizations that are dedicated to femininity politics such as the Radical Faeries.

CHAPTER 10
EPILOGUE: ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE FEMME MOVEMENT

The Queen Bees and the Femme Affinity Group have disbanded, Femme Mafia interviewees agree that the group has met its peak in popularity and since declined, and participant sentiments imply that the movement is too flawed to have any real longevity. Still, the movement actors I interviewed told me that the brief femme organizing they took part in helped contribute to profound changes in their communities. A common statement of participants is summed up by Irene; when I asked her what Femme Affinity Group has done, she said, “I think it’s easier now. Definitely. Being femme [is easier].”

As noted previously, the changes achieved in femme organizing are both personal and cultural in that femme organizing attempts to achieve a place for femmes to feel solidarity with other femmes (personal) and that it critiques queer cultural norms about gender and sexuality (cultural). When I asked Patricia if Femme Mafia had changed anything in Atlanta, she responded:

I know I have [changed because of it]. [I] feel like [I have] a sisterhood and I love the networking. I have a place to go if I ever need anybody. I have sisters that I know get me; all I have to do is show up and say *Hi, I’m femme* and they get me. They may not know exactly what it means to me, but there’s this immediate embrace and I’m understood. And I can laugh and have fun and be who I want to be; it’s being able to reach out to people all over the entire country. It’s grown. It’s gorgeous. I think it’s gorgeous.

For Patricia, the changes that Femme Mafia has achieved are personal: it provides “a sisterhood” and “networking” with other femmes; it provides her “a place to go if [she] ever need[s] anybody.” Similarly, Lucy told me that performing with the Queen Bees meant that she “got to be a part of something that felt like community and transformation.” She went on about the personal transformations brought on by the Queen Bees:

[In] my experience, [before the Queen Bees] walking into a bar in Seattle was [a bad experience]. As a femme I couldn’t get a date to save my life and as a big girl I couldn’t get a date to save my life and femininity didn’t seem valued. That was something that, if

you asked most of the Bees, you would have heard a lot of the same experience. I think that we, [the Queen Bees], along with Bent [a queer writing institute run by a femme], along with Miss Indigo Blue [a femme sole burlesque performer], along with other amazing performers, were able to sort of change some of that.

Significantly, although these participants told me about individual benefits that have come from femme organizing, it is pertinent to remember that these personal benefits are reflective of a wider cultural shift. The existence of a support network for femmes where Patricia can go and feel understood is a cultural shift in queer community; the availability of getting a date as a femme, getting a date as a “big girl,” and feeling that femininity is valued is a cultural shift in queer community.

In many ways, femmes are challenging queer culture to achieve changes for individuals. When I asked Charlotte if Femme Affinity Group changed Portland’s landscape, she said, “It changed my landscape.” Because the femme movement is based on questions of identity and inclusion, it makes sense that when I asked if their organization changed anything, interviewees would tell me that it changed things for them. Again, these individual changes are related to a cultural shift. In embarking on a journey to make individual femmes feel that queer communities value them, they create cultural changes. When I asked what being part of Femme Mafia meant to her, Renee said, “It was just kind of cool to be very visible, to be [part of] a large group and command attention. We were a pretty strong force for a good minute.” Personally, Renee enjoyed feeling “visible” and “command[ing] attention”; culturally, femmes created space where they demanded attention in that they were a “pretty strong force” in queer community.

The relationship between individual benefits and cultural changes are reciprocal. That is, femmes can feel more visible (or more included, or more appreciated) and that creates a cultural space where femme gender identity is visible (included, and appreciated); also, when femmes make cultural space for queer femininity, there are necessarily individual consequences.

Unrelated to our discussion about what Femme Mafia has achieved in Atlanta, Michelle was discussing the difficulty of femme women passing as heterosexual. I asked her, “Do you feel like that, sort of privilege of being able to pass, is held against femmes in queer communities?”

She responded:

All the time. All the time. In my experience, yes. Thank goodness for the femme movement, that’s changing [femme discrimination] a lot. When I first moved to Atlanta this scene was hostile, openly hostile to femmes, which was interesting because I had so many good experiences in Alabama, but everyone knew me there. Everyone knew my politics and knew that I had, you know, fought the man and all that kind of stuff, so I guess I had street cred in the queer community and when I came here, I had none. Nobody knew me here. And even though I was partnered with a very genderqueer person at the time and they would tell me, it’s a phase, clearly I’m going to leave her for some [man]...[I] just [got] the most insane bullshit from people when I first moved here. This community, thank goodness for Femme Mafia, because this community has changed dramatically. It’s amazing how much this community has changed in the last four years.

Notice how Michelle credits Femme Mafia with her diminishing experiences of discrimination. The emergence of the Femme Mafia has changed Atlanta’s queer community “dramatically,” so much so that she implies that individual femmes would not experience the negativity she experienced upon moving to the city.

Some of the organizations I have profiled have yet to reach much popularity, like the Glitter Revolutionaries, some of them have disbanded, like the Queen Bees, and some of them find themselves slowly losing the enthusiasm needed to keep them banded together, like the Femme Mafia. None of the organizations or troupes I studied have been organizing for more than ten years. In comparison to other movements, it seems that the femme movement may be comprised of many small, unaffiliated, and short-lived organizations. However, this does not mean that the organizations – or the movement – are unsuccessful. On the contrary, their success lies in being a building block for future cultural changes in queer communities. The activists I interviewed understand this. Kelly explained that Femme Mafia has inspired other femmes to politically organize:

People know what Femme Mafia is. They see them march in dyke march. I marched with them in dyke march last year and uh, you know, I think and there's a bunch of femme groups that have sprung up around the country and locally that are at least [partially] inspired by Femme Mafia. Sometimes it is [a] Femme Mafia [chapter], sometimes they call themselves Femme Pirates or whatever, but I think it's all inspired by Femme Mafia. It looks to me like it's really clear that there's a nationwide movement and [Femme Mafia, Atlanta] was one of the leading edges of the movement.

While femme organizations and burlesque troupes are unaffiliated in the way that they do not communicate or organize with one another, they do inspire one another; while femme organizations and burlesque troupes may be short lived, they may have lasting effects.

In many ways, the femme movement is telling of the ways in which new (gender and sexuality) social movements unfold. Importantly, like other culturally based movements, they build a piece of cultural change and so are part of movements that will be built in the future. Recognizing that her burlesque troupe was both influenced by prior femme activism in Seattle and that they were contributing to new formations of femme cultural challenges, Lucy said of the Queen Bees, "I don't want to be obnoxious and say we were it, but we were sort of a new wave [of femme activism]." The brief glimpses of popular femme organizing I have described have achieved personal and community specific transformations in the way that individual femmes feel that they have femme community and in the way that interviewees tell me their communities have changed to be more femme friendly. They have also become part of gender and sexual discourse in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [GLBTQ] communities. Just as the sex wars, third wave feminism, and the transgender movement have changed the terrain of gender and sexual conversations, so too has the femme movement.

Although social movement scholars have begun to recognize the importance of culturally based movements [see Van Dyke, et al, 2004], there is perhaps an impulse to disregard the impact of this kind of organizing. Also, there has been some concern that queer movements cannot be successful because of the queer goal to "destabilize" identity and the assumption that

movements needs “stable collective identities” to succeed (Gamson, 1995: 403). If we are going to deem the femme movement “successful,” which I believe it is, then we must first reorient our definitions of movement success. Just as queer nation was a short lived organization, rife with conflict, that had a lasting effect on how queer people perceive themselves, their culture, and each other (Bérubé & Escoffier, 1991), so too has the femme movement shifted queer communities’ perceptions of femininity, gender identity, and inclusion. Success does not mean state-directed politics or measurable policy changes, it does not mean longevity, and it does not mean serene agreement amongst members. The contributions of the femme movement may not be as identifiable by all queer people as queer nation’s lasting impression; it is possible that people who are not involved in the femme movement have no sense that it is occurring. However, they have made small changes by making it “easier to be femme” in queer communities. Perhaps more importantly, they have become part of a discourse in queer communities; their current of queer activism has forever changed the tide of discussion and organizing around gender and femininity for queer people.

APPENDIX A
CITY INFORMATION

Table A-1. Troupes and Organizations by City

The City	The Burlesque Troupe(s)	The Femme Organization
Atlanta, Georgia (SE, U.S.)	Moxie Cabaret	The Femme Mafia
Portland, Oregon (NW, U.S.)	The Rose City Sirens	Femme Affinity Group (FAG)
Seattle, Washington (NW, U.S.)	The Queen Bees and The Von Foxies	The Glitter Revolutionaries

Table A-2. City Demographic Information [gathered from the 2000 census]

Demographic Information	Atlanta, Georgia	Portland, Oregon	Seattle, Washington
Population	350,000	529,121	563,374
% over age 25 with a Bachelor's degree or higher	37%	32.6%	48%
Median Income	\$30,576	\$40,146	\$45,746
% living below the poverty line	27%	13%	11%
% white	33%	77.9%	70%
% African American	65%	6.6%	8%
% Asian	2%	6.3%	13%
% American Indian/Native Alaskan/Pacific Islander	less than 1%	1.1%	1.5%
% reporting other	less than 1%	3.5%	2.5%
% Latino/a of all racial groups	2%	6.8%	5.3%
% multiracial	1%	4.1%	5%
% foreign born	4%	13%	17%

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Instructions:

1. Please take a few moments to fill out this survey before we begin our interview.
2. If you do not wish to answer a question, for whatever reason, you may leave it blank.
3. All of the questions are open-ended so that you can use the exact words you would normally use to answer these questions.
4. You may use as many words as you like to answer these questions. For example, some people may have several words they use to answer the question, “What is your gender?” Please provide any words you would use.
5. Please do not place your name on this document. The interviewer will place a numbered code at the bottom of this page to connect the information to your interview.

Demographic Questions:

Gender

- (1) What is your gender?
- (2) Do you identify as “femme”?

Sexual Orientation

- (3) What words do you use to describe your sexual orientation?
- (4) How long have you identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or transgender? (if more than one of these applies, please list each identity and how long you have identified with each).

Race

- (5) How do you define your race?
- (6) How do you define your ethnicity?

Age

- (7) How old are you?

Residence

- (8) Where did you grow up?
- (9) How long have you been living where you do now?
- (10) Why did you move to the city you live in now?

Class and Occupation

- (11) How would you describe your social class background?
- (12) How would you describe your social class now?

(13) What is your occupation?

(14) What is the highest level of education you have completed?

(15) What is your personal yearly income?

(16) What is your household yearly income?

Dating and Relationships

(17) What is the gender identity (man, woman, genderqueer, etc.) of the people whom you typically date? (More than one answer is fine).

(18) What is the gender expression (masculine, feminine, androgynous) of the people whom you typically date? (More than one answer is fine).

(19) Are you currently single or do you have a partner (or multiple partners)?

(20) Do you have children? If so, what are their ages?

**If you do not currently have a partner (or partners), your survey is complete. Thank you.

If you currently have a partner (or multiple partners):

*these questions are asked in the singular “partner,” but if you have multiple partners, please provide multiple answers.

(20) What is your partner’s gender identity? What is their gender expression?

(21) What is your partner’s sexual orientation?

(21) What is your partner’s age?

(22) What is your partner’s race?

(21) How long have you and your partner been together?

(22) How do you describe the status of your relationship currently?

Thank You!

INTERVIEW CODE: _____

APPENDIX C:
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section 1: Feminine Understandings

- (1) What does society think it means to be feminine?
 - Generally speaking, what characteristics does society associate with the ideal form of femininity?
- (2) What is the general queer sentiment surrounding femininity?
 - do queer people encourage femininity?
 - why or why not?
 - what will it take for queer people to celebrate femininity?
- (3) What does it mean to you to be feminine?

Section 2: Femininity History

- (7) What does it feel like to be a feminine person in this culture?
- (8) What does it feel like to be a feminine person in queer communities?
- (9) Can you tell me about what it feels like to be a feminine person in your romantic relationships?
- (10) Tell me the story of how you came to identify as feminine.
History of femininity – race, class, age/generation, sexual orientation, region...
- (11) Have you always been feminine?
- (12) Was there a difference for you between being a *feminine* person and then *identifying* as a feminine person (femme)?
- (13) Before you identified as femme/feminine, what did you think of being feminine?
- (14) Can you explain some turning points for me in how you came to identify with femininity?
- (15) Why do you think you identify with femininity?
- (16) How does race factor into society's ideal conception of femininity?
 - How has your race factor into the way that you think about your femininity?
- (17) How does class – or one's socioeconomic status – fit into society's ideal conception of femininity?
 - How has your class background factored into the way you think about your femininity?
- (18) How does sexual orientation matter in society's ideal conception of femininity?
 - How has your sexual orientation factored into how you feel about your femininity?

- What has being queer taught you about femininity?

(19) How does generation matter in how one thinks of femininity?

(20) How does region in the country matter in how one thinks of femininity?

Section 3: Femme

[IF PARTICIPANT DOES NOT IDENTIFY AS FEMME]

(21) Why do you not identify as “femme”?

(22) Do you think that femme-identified people understand femininity differently than you do?

(23) What do you think it means to be femme?

[IF PARTICIPANT DOES IDENTIFY AS FEMME]

(24) What does it mean to be femme? Can you provide a general community definition of the word?

(25) What does femme mean to you?

(26) Why do you identify as femme?

(27) What is the difference between being feminine and being a femme?

(28) Do you know about the history of femme identified people in queer communities?

- Do you see yourself as part of that history?
- Why/why not?

(29) Has the meaning of femme changed? Why?

(30) Are all femmes similar in some way?

- what characteristics need to be present for someone to be “femme”
- how can femmes be different? What kinds of femmes are there?

Section 4: Organizational Experience

(31) What is the purpose of your organization?

- Is your organization deliberately trying to initiate social change in queer communities?
- Why do queer communities need this?
- Have you ever been in any other organizations that are dedicated to social change?
 - can you compare this organization to those? How are they different?

(32) How does your organization achieve this?

(33) If race, class, and age determine how people experience femininity, how does your organization pay attention to this?

- (34) How receptive are queer people [outside your organization] to what you do?
- (35) What has this organization meant to [the city interviewee resides in]?
- (36) What does this organization mean for queer politics more generally?
- (37) How did you become involved with this organization?
- why did you become involved with it?
- has it satisfied your initial desires?
- (38) What has being a member of this organization meant to you?
- (39) Has this organization shaped the way you think of your femininity?

APPENDIX D
TABLE OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table D-1. Table of Interview Participant Demographics

Pseudonym and Organizational Affiliation	Age	Sexual Orientation	ID as Femme	Race	Current Social Class	Occupation
Abby, Queen Bees	38	Queer; Queer Femme	Yes	White	Working class	Political organizer
Annabelle, Femme Affinity Group	28	Queer	Yes	White	Middle class	Customer Service Rep
Betty, Moxie Cabaret	30	Queer	Yes	White	Middle class	Office whore/ Part-time performer
Blake, Queen Bees	35	Bisexual	Often	White	Middle class	Research Scientist
Brittney, Rose City Sirens	27	Queer/ Bisexual	Mostly	White	Middle class	Server
Charles, Moxie Cabaret	20	Queer/Fag	No	White	Broke	Barista
Charlotte, Femme Affinity Group	23	Queer-Lesbian, Dyke	Yes	White	Middle class	Youth Educator
Colleen, Von Foxies	29	Queer	Yes	White	Lower middle class	Social worker
Crimson, Moxie Cabaret	21	Queer Femme	Yes	Black	Poor/ Black/ Fat/ Nappy-haired	Surly Waitress
Cynthia, Moxie Cabaret	35	Queer	No	White	Middle class	Manager
Danielle, Femme Mafia and Moxie Cabaret	26	Lesbian/ Queer/ Gay	Yes	Black/ Woman of color/ Biracial	Middle class	Social worker
Denise, Femme Mafia	41	Lesbian/ Gay	Yes	White	Middle class	Software Engineer
Edith, Glitter Revolutionaries	29	Queer/Dyke	Yes	White	Middle class	Graphic Designer

Table D-1 Continued.

Pseudonym and Organizational Affiliation	Age	Sexual Orientation	ID as Femme	Race	Current Social Class	Occupation
Emma, Glitter Revolutionaries	26	Queer	Yes	White	Upper Middle Class	Teacher for adults with disabilities
Irene, Femme Affinity Group	36	Gay/Homo, A drag queen who loves dykes in a femme's body	Yes	White	Upper Middle class	Psychologist
Johanna, Moxie Cabaret	31	Queer/Bi/Lesbian	Maybe	African Am	Working class/poor	Barista
Katie, Glitter Revolutionaries	23	Queer/Dyke/Bi (sometimes)	Yes	White	Upper/Middle Class	Non-profit assistant
Katrina, Queen Bees	33	Queer; Queer Femme	Yes	White	Lower middle class	Non-profit
Kelly, Femme Mafia	44	Queer/Lesbian/Dyke	Yes	White	Middle class	Student
Lola, Rose City Sirens	25	Queer/Lesbian/Dyke	Yes	White	Middle class	Sex Work; Exotic dancing
Lucy, Queen Bees	34	Queer	Yes	White	Middle class	Sex Educator
Michelle, Femme Mafia	29	Pansexual	Yes	White	Working class	Actor & Restaurant Server
Meredith, Queen Bees	31	Bisexual/Queer	Yes	White & Native Am	Working class	Preschool teacher
Montana, Queen Bees	33	Queer	Yes	White	Working class	Unemployed
Patricia, Femme Mafia	39	Queer	Yes	White	Middle class	Performer & Retail Manager
Randall, Glitter Revolutionaries	23	Queer	No	White	Middle class	Unemployed

Table D-1 Continued.

Pseudonym and Organizational Affiliation	Age	Sexual Orientation	ID as Femme	Race	Current Social Class	Occupation
Renee, Femme Mafia and Moxie Cabaret	28	Queer/ Lesbian/ Gay	Yes	Black	Between Working and Middle class	Student/ Researcher
Rose, Queen Bees	29	Queer	Most of the time	Latina	Lower-Middle class	Restaurant server, Gogo Dancer, Social Worker
Ruth, Glitter Revolutionaries	37	Bisexual/ Gay/Queer	Yes	White	Middle-Upper class	Non-traditional Librarian
Sabrina, Femme Mafia	33	Queer	Yes	White European	Upper-middle class	Quality Assurance Manager
Stephanie	24	Bisexual/ Queer	Sort of	White	Working class	Pizza delivery girl

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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