

**But You Don't Look Like a Lesbian:
The Portrayal of Queer Life Through a Feminine Experience**

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CSU Student Research Competition

Abstract

Much of the literature surrounding the experiences of queer women¹ revolves around the nonconforming characteristics of their lives, such as their sexuality, choice in partners, masculine gender presentation, or connection with a gay/queer community. A small amount of scholarly material available details the conforming attributes these women possess, especially those of women of color. Perhaps one of the most conforming attributes a queer woman can embody is a feminine gender appearance. By embodying a queer identity, these women are automatically tagged as different and all other identities are sidelined by their queerness. For a woman to embody a feminine appearance, she then directly falls in line with the expected and socially acceptable female gender presentation. In doing so, she walks society's streets with an assumed heterosexuality. Because there are few studies that revolve completely around the experiences of queer feminine women, especially in their involvement with queer social justice pursuits, a collective case study dedicated to their experiences will ultimately enhance the discussion revolving queer politics and queerness in general. I will detail how femininity is articulated within a queer woman's experience by interviewing a total of 10 queer feminine women. By studying a marginalized and understudied population, I will increase the awareness and understanding of femininity in relation to queer experience, queer politics, and queer theory.

Narrative

Queer theory embodies three main premises: 1) A critique of normativity 2) The belief that gender and sexual identities are artificial and unstable and 3) Sexual norms constitute a distinct hierarchy (Mann 233-35). My study's overriding purpose is to enhance queer theory. In order to do so, I aim to detail how femininity is articulated in the life of a queer woman in such a

¹ In this paper I will use the term *queer* to reference sexualities that are not heterosexual or gender binary. Considering that this paper focuses on women, *queer* will denote female-bodied women who are lesbian, bisexual, fluid, or any other non-heterosexual label.

way that will highlight the discrimination feminine queer women face in their pursuit of queer social justice efforts as well as their unique search for social affirmation.

Similar to Cathy Cohen's racial critique in her piece *Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?*, I choose to focus on the idea that "...if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin" (Cohen 438). To date queer politics has less transformed hegemonic sex and gender identities, but more reinforced the binaries through its tendency to classify everything into either 'heterosexual' or 'queer'. Feminine queer women are located at a rare intersection of sex and gender. This particular junction allows for an opportunity to probe society's need to categorize. This need is present even within a politics that wishes to remove any affiliation with identity politics, or any tendency to differentiate others based on sex and gender.

I will embody Cathy Cohen's method of critique to queer theory and politics as I uncover the marginalized discrimination feminine queer women endure. This semi-queer/semi-conforming case study will illustrate the immense impact queer theory has on demonstrating queerness, as well as feature what queerness really means. While on the one hand queer feminine women who can pass for straight may confer a quasi-privilege within heterosexual spaces, my study explores how queer women's outward expression of femininity may in fact be marginalized within queer spaces. If queer politics centers on non-normative gender performance, then what does this mean for gender conforming queers?

My work in progress features the completion of 8 out of the 10 interviews. I will conclude the interview process by the end of March 2013. My findings present the experiences

of feminine queer women; 3 identify as White/European, 2 as Latina/Multiracial, 2 as Asian, and 1 as Black. The women range from the age of 20 to 27 and all of them are either current college students or recent college graduates.

Through the completed interviews I began to notice similar trends between the participants' experiences. These 'Queer Dynamics' will aid in my quest to bare queer theory's radical potential. The first is the identity of a *Hard Femme*. Not to be mistaken with the typical femme, the hard femme is political and adopts the identity 'queer'. While the hard femme still looks more feminine than masculine, she does not believe in the concept of needing to "wear the pants in the relationship". Instead, as she embraces the empowerment that comes with a feminine identity, the hard femme believes she can "wear the dress", and thus does not equate her femininity as a relinquishment of power and independence. As empowering as being a hard femme is, it is difficult to combat society's deeply rooted connotations of femininity. As Michelle (*pseudo*) states:

"Based on my femininity I am easily accepted, easily digestible, because people can look at me and men for example, they can imagine that I'm straight, my mom can imagine that this [queer identity] is a phase."

There is an underlying societal assumption that because a woman dresses more feminine, she is straight. Michelle's femininity leads to straights, queers, and those in her family to imagine that she is straight. As a result, her feminine appearance results in society viewing her as less powerful than that of a masculine-identified person. However, Michelle explains that:

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

Michelle is essentially identifying herself as a hard femme. Moreover, she is speaking about the radical potential of queer politics. Michelle, a feminine queer woman embodies a

conforming gender appearance. However, her ability to combat stereotypical ideas associated with femininity sheds light on the fact that no matter how difficult it is to prove oneself to society, there still exists an internal strength in the hard femme.

This strength does fall victim to the pressure to “*Butch it Up*”, the second Queer Dynamic in my study. What I mean by this is that when asked if they ever felt a certain pressure to embody a more masculine appearance in order to be taken seriously as a queer woman, every woman in my sample responded with a resounding yes.

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

- Lara

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

- Kristina

All of the women in my study expressed a need to wear baggier clothes, cut their hair, or buy sneakers in order to be taken seriously as queer women. While the need to establish community and find partners is important, Britney speaks about a more internal dilemma:

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

The rejection Britney faces from her femininity pressures her to butch it up, thus creating a hostile situation. Furthermore, Gwen speaks about her view on the LGBT community:

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

Despite Gwen’s interest in participating in the LGBT community, her experience is that most of them view her as a straight girl and thus, treat her as an outsider. The need to establish

community is essential everyone, so when queers are rejected by their own simply based on the idea that “they don’t look gay”, a problematic dynamic occurs.

This dynamic gets extended into my final theme, *Queering Migration Implications*. Queers face rejection not only from society at large, but also from fellow queers and family members. When asked if anyone viewed their sexuality as just a phase, every woman said that a family member does so; Mothers tended to dominate this group. Reasons ranged from the fact that they are in college and thus are experimenting, or that their interest in women is the same as when they really wanted to play the violin in 3rd grade. The experience of mothers who have immigrated into America is one that is especially traumatizing for queer feminine women. As Michelle shares:

“The worst thing she said to me was, ‘That I wasted my entire immigration on you’ ... The phase thing is nothing in comparison to this. I don’t need to prove anything to people, but I feel like I have to prove something to my mom. Like it [her immigration] was worth it.”

People migrate into America with hopes of enhancing their life, and most importantly their child’s life. When Michelle came out as queer, her mother came to the understanding that her difficult journey of immigration was a waste. The mother believes that all of the hard work she endured, and the fact that she left her family and home country was worthless because what future could her queer daughter have in America? Furthermore, with a feminine appearance, Michelle is believed to be going through a phase because why would a feminine female find attractions in anyone other than a masculine male?

Within my work in progress I have found that the mixture of femininity and queerness create a hostile environment filled with rejection and disappointment. Despite the pressures to butch it up, and the consequences related to migration, the persona of a hard femme allows for the radical potential of queer politics to exist.

Works Cited

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics??" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. May 1997 3(4): 437-465.

Mann, Susan Archer. "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Queer, and Transgender Theories". Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity. Oxford University Press: New York. (2012): 211-255. Print

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

You are being invited to participate in a research study, which the Cal Poly Pomona Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved for conduct by the investigators named here. This form is designed to provide you - as a human subject - with information about this study. The Investigator or his/her representative will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. You are entitled to an Experimental Research Subject's Bill of Rights and a copy of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject, complaints about the informed consent process of this research study, or experience an adverse event (something goes wrong), please contact the Compliance Office within Cal Poly Pomona's Office of Research at (909) 869-4215. More information is available at the IRB website, www.csupomona.edu/research/irb.

Protocol Number: #12-152

But You Don't Look Like a Lesbian: The Portrayal of Queer Life Through a Feminine Experience

Dear Potential Participant,

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

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

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

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

By initialing this document here _____ you agree to keep all information said during the focus group private.

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

Counseling and Psychological Services

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

Phone: (909) 869-3220
Email: caps@csupomona.edu

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

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

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

Participant Name (Please Print)_____

Participant Signature_____

Date_____

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

- Voice Recording
- Note Taking
- No form of recording

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