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(Re)figuring Femme Fashion

To ask whether clothes make the femme is to pose a rhetorical question that opens up onto a broader set of issues about the relationship of gendering to commodification, history, spatio-temporal modes of apprehension and the political economy of desire.¹ (Kath Weston 2002:741)

AS I GO through the familiar, deliberate and yet by now habitual, ritual of getting ready for a night out, like most femme/inists, I am compelled (if not forced) to engage in both the cultural and political implications of these deeply pleasurable and time-consuming practices.² With the thrill and the chill of the eternal femme question *what to wear?*, I ponder not only my own wardrobe but the centrality of dress in the history of (femme) lesbians and queers.³ Sifting through layers of garments whose symbolic meanings are always already imbricated in queer and feminist histories and archives, I know that femmes have not always, or everywhere, been known to dress or theorize for (feminist, lesbian or queer) success. But if, in a lesbian and queer time and place (Halberstam 2005), the late 1990s was the time of drag kings and of queer/female masculinities taking theoretical and representational center stage in Anglo- America and Western Europe, perhaps Joan Nestle is right: ours is the decade of

the femme and of the queerly feminine.⁴ The last few years' organizing, writing and performances by, with and for femmes certainly confirms what this issue of *lambda nordica's* covergirl, Bird la Bird declares, in her cheeky play on the language of fashion: femme invisibility is "so last year". Through figurative sketches, in fashion and in writing, this rhizomatic essay is a contribution to l'écriture femme-inine,⁵ driven by the desire to (re)figure femme fashion and to suggest that emerging from archives, ethnographic snippets and garments is a figuration rather than a unified subject of queer identity politics.⁶

Rummaging through my closet of borrowed, traded, purchased and made garments, and in my combination of a particular, but neither unique nor original outfit and argument, I remain inspired by the queer femmes in urban sub-cultural settings in the US, Western Europe and Australia with whom I work, live and research. With Pandora's curiosity I reopen the dress up box, not to once again unleash the plagues and diseases that the trappings of femininity have cast upon womankind. Nor am I concerned with determining the proper objects of a femme dress up box or identity, because to me femme is a sex which is not one (Irigaray 1985), that is to say, she is neither universal, singular nor fixed and stable.⁷ My concern is with fashion(ing), and my spectre is in part that of the fashion theorist concerned with reading the semiotics of garments or Western trends in feminine consumption but more importantly, mine is the speculum of the femme-inist ethnographer (Dahl forthcoming) who mirrors herself in (the theories of) others through both participating in and writing femme movements and aesthetics. Departing from the intellectual labour and layers of femme fashioning then, I offer speculations of a speculum held up at particular moments in time. If both phallogocentrism and the many feminist projects that

seek to dismantle it have linked the laborious nature of femininity to narcissism and self-objectification, I follow Duggan & McHugh's femme-inist manifesto which declares that "mirrors are not the pool in which (the femme) drowns" (2002:165). Instead I propose that in individual and collective ways, through technologies of feminine fashioning and writing, femmes mirror each other. As imaginary and hopeful figures then, femmes are joined not (only) in our libidinal relationships with fashioning a queerly feminine body image, but in orienting ourselves towards particular objects and subjects (Ahmed 2006), and in reflecting back to the world.

As I labor to shave my legs, glue on fake eyelashes and glitter, curl my peroxide hair and shine my knee-high Doc Martens, not only do I wonder *who will recognize me* as a proper desirable object – or desiring subject – on that particular night or in the political economy of desire for sisterhood and sex more broadly. I also think of how imbricated the technologies of femme-ininity (wigs and lashes, curling irons and mirrors, to name just a few) are in the making and (re)vision of femme bodies, both within and beyond heteropatriarchy. Opening the beauty and dress up boxes of femme fashion I propose a somatechnics of femme subjectivity that reflect a politics of location in feminist and queer communities of embodied knowledge. As Pugliese and Stryker argue, a somatechnics approach "troubles and blurs the boundary between embodied subject and technologized object, and thus between the human and the non-human, and the living and the inert, and it asks us to pay attention to where, precisely, a prosthesis stops and a body starts" (2009:1470) and as Nikki Sullivan (2006:563) notes, it is also centrally concerned with the imbricated relationship of bodies of flesh and bodies of knowledge.

Through the repeated rituals of fashioning and the technologies of body modification and alteration that many of us are engaged in,

and with an interest in how feminine subjectivity materializes, my fashioning and intellectual concern, in the closet and in the text, is with how "clothing, body, and performance come together in dress as embodied practice" (Tranberg Hansen 2004:373), and in how femme fashion, as trans femme Andy Candy recently put it, might be understood as "the embodiment of feminist history".⁸ In this essay I can only gesture towards my hope that with a somatechnics approach to femininity, we may begin to move beyond the politics of recognition so central to our liberal identity politics, in which anxieties about being "femme enough" and concerns with identifying what makes something "queer" at times interrupts larger concerns. Through revisiting the beauty box, I want to see if we can move in the direction of what Elizabeth Grosz calls "a politics of imperceptibility", whereby the queering of femininity through fashioning leaves "its trace and effects everywhere but never being able to be identified with a person, group, or organization" (2005:194). For Grosz, this is "not a politics of visibility, of recognition and of self-validation, but a process of self-marking that constitutes oneself in the very model of that which oppresses and opposes the subject" (ibid). Femme ways of self marking and our indebtedness to the technologies of femininity, are both like/not like (Minh-Ha 1990) those of feminine subjects more broadly, and I want to go beyond the humanist paradigm so central to liberal identity politics and feminism.

Applying red lipstick and polish – the two beauty technologies that most mark me and that I and many femmes with me cannot imagine a day (of writing) without – I do not, as so many have before me, worry about being stopped at the door to any club, even if excessive femininity since the days of Joan Riviere's (1929) classic account of womanliness as masquerade, has been cast as at odds with the laws of both the phallic order of intellectuals and those of

lesbian authenticity. I know that for me as for many other femmes who write, speak and perform, figuring femme inevitably involves writing, speaking and performing (from) the (fashioned) body and the intellectual labor of (writing) femme fashion is itself an embodied practice constituted in humble gratitude and conversation. It emerges from and returns to ongoing dialogues of (red) painted lips that speak together, to boots marching in femme-inist struggle and to nails clicking against the keyboard; this is what connects me to increasingly transnational, virtual and visual communities of femmes, here and elsewhere; and it keeps me alive and hopeful. In the architecture of femme thinking, make up, accessories, dress and feminine living spaces are not the superficial and transitory to be contrasted with the deep and structural, but rather, I contend, they are variations in scale (Bonnievier 2009:203). The epistemology of the femme closet to which I here return, defies a clear distinction queer and not queer, and it is not (only) a private, domestic matter of consumption and narcissism nor a simple outing, but rather, its colorful and contested contents are intimately tied to the architecture of bodies and communities, like cosmetics are to cosmos, and ornaments tied to orders and structures (ibid:204).

Flipping through corsets and push up bras, mini skirts and rows of high heels, as all fashionable scholars, I think about the radical US feminist Susan Brownmiller, who in her widely circulated work on *Femininity* argued that "to care about feminine fashion, and do it well, is to be obsessively involved in *inconsequential* details on a serious basis" (1984:81).⁹ I too have been inspired by the past seasons' theoretical wardrobes which has thrown out the seductive but reductive feminist trend to see feminine fashion as simply a straight jacket and a dress code for sexualized subordination and objectification in a racist and ageist patriarchy. Femmes and fashion scholars like

Elizabeth Wilson (1985) alike have repeatedly disputed feminist arguments which in the end only seem to reproduce patriarchy's own contempt for femininity. Refusing to repeat the idea that fashioning is merely surface and that "beneath" these garments is something "authentic", I linger in lingerie, mark with mascara and theorize with threads. If for Brownmiller feminine clothing simply "has never been designed to be functional, for that would be a contradiction in terms. Functional clothing is a masculine privilege and practicality is a masculine virtue. To be truly feminine is to accept the handicap of restraint and restriction, and to come to adore it" (1984:86), as a scholar and critic, I have been redressed by postmodern theories of gender in general and queer theory in particular. Yet, I remain cautious about the tendency to over valorize the radical potentiality of subversion, and the idea that we may be able to wear lipstick ironically (Lewis 2006), is itself an irony within late capitalism. I acknowledge that my personal ability to reconsider "true femininity" and to contribute to its resignification, is in part due to the number of years I have walked in the world and the classed and racialized privileges with which I can do so, especially when I dwell in cosmopolitan settings with multiple, diverse and sizeable queer communities. Discussions about femme fashion needs to be brought out of the reductive discussions about what constitutes emancipation and examine how consumption and adornment is integral to how femme subjectivity *materializes*. With fashion theory, I want to see dress as an embodied technology of both gender and desire, inextricably tied with soma, and think about how queer femininities manifest both in and beyond the spaces made by queer communities that are always already imbricated in and never outside of capitalism's logic of production and consumption (Joseph 2000) and what its consequences are.

As I keep trying on dresses and ideas in the privacy of my parlor,

with or without a femme sister present to guide my taste, it matters that at this particular moment, I am not alone in rewriting and redressing the implications of *what to wear*. Thanks to lesbian historians, archivists and writers, I also know that "we", the femmes in these Western contexts, indeed have a history and that it not only concerns our queer desires for female masculinities; it has something to do with the specificities of how we dress (Kennedy & Davis 1993; Nestle 1992). As queer scholar Arlene Stein notes, in lesbian subcultures prior to the second wave of feminism, for femmes and butches "dress was a reflection of sexual style, a signal to potential sexual and nonsexual partners, a clue to one's sensibility on a range of related issues, and a pretty good indicator of whether you worked as a secretary or an elevator operator" (1995:478-479) and the working class roots and routes of femme queerness remain crucial. If with the onset of lesbian feminism, particularly in the English-speaking world, criticisms of the butch/femme community arose on account of its alleged imitations of heterosexuality and femmes were seen to be complicit with patriarchal values of femininity on account of dress and thus to be "unfit" feminists, it still matters that those who set the agenda are rarely those to whom this is an arbitrary matter of white middle class choice. What Blackman and Perry calls a "feminism that celebrated the 'real' woman beneath her make up and aimed to set her free from the confines of tight skirts and high heels" (1990:63) has rarely been that of sluts, whores and femmes to whom dress acts are ways out of the confines of a heterosexualized order of respectability. If we assume that fashion at its most basic is about a style of dress that a significant proportion of a social group adopts at a given time (Owyong 2009), then the mass movement of frocks, heels and lipstick within (queer) communities continues to feminize the urban landscape with a difference.¹⁰ Insisting that dress acts re/

define the epistemology of the lesbian closet, contemporary femme (activists) propose that femme is, in the words of Sydney's Femme Guild, "a radical queer embodiment of femininity 'camping' out in bodies regardless of sex or race or class" and as Atlanta's Femme Mafia puts it, "femme is an umbrella under which we find solace, not an exclusionary or restrictive predetermined formula" (Volcano & Dahl 2008:20). With a politics that engages with the continued commodification and objectification of femininity in late capitalism, femmes centrally demand "sexy without sexism" as the London Bird Club puts it.¹¹ Still, as a collective body, femme writings and narratives repeatedly embody and express the struggles femmes have had both with "true femininity" and with being taken seriously as feminists and as queers on account of dress. As anthropologist of fashion Karen Tranberg Hansen notes, "dress readily becomes a flash point of conflicting values, fueling contests in historical encounters, in interactions across class, between genders and generations, and in recent global cultural and economic exchanges" (2004:372). Reading femme fashioning as imbricated in feminist and queer theoretical and political frameworks offers the dual possibility of investigating both individual and collective identity, among femmes and between femmes and other subjects, feminine or not.

Considering as I might anyway, the direction in which my adorned body is moving, and whom I will be moving with, I remain mindful of how fashion(ing) continues to place differently situated femmes. Out of the femme closet and archive of writings falls not only fabulous outfits but feminist skeletons against which that very fashioning continues to measure itself. Postcolonial scholar and film maker Pratibha Parmar recalls her entry into British feminism in the 1980s and how, on the one hand, it helped her reflect on what she calls "unreconstructed femininity" but feminism too required following certain dress co-

des. She recalls: "I had to visibly mark my emerging feminist identity – eyebrows were no longer tweezed, legs were no longer shaved and of course not a touch of make-up. On came the dungarees and off went the cleavage and the figure-hugging trousers. I tried desperately to look less feminine and ended up looking a bit soft butch, a bit androgynous and a bit bland and amorphous" (2008:92). To Parmar's mostly white university consciousness-raising group, she was "oozing with femininity", and upon sharing a story of sexual harassment, Parmar's sisters insinuated that her (racialized) feminine aesthetic was itself the problem. Parmar movingly accounts for how she cut her long hair, and thus also a symbolic tie to her mother and a heritage where the feminine ritual of washing and oiling hair had been a central bond.

"Why are you wearing that skirt, that make up, those shoes?...I thought you were a feminist?" is a question that white working class femme poet Tara Hardy often got in the US feminist nineties and that many still get today. In the essay "Dirty Girl", she critiques a feminism that aims to "liberate" women from the shackles of housework and traditional femininity. Coming from a long line of working-class women who were raised to labor and service so that the women of the upper classes "could remain unsmudged, uncalloused, and monochromatically pale" (ibid:132), and where mothers did not necessarily raise girls to be "truly feminine", Hardy argues that to her being femme is about creating a loud and unmistakable femininity as an act of resistance. She declares that "I'll just keep whacking off my leg hair and painting myself with loud lipstick and putting on bright colors. I will not be a pale, muted thing to serve anyone else's idea of 'liberation' (ibid:135). Transfemme-inist Andy Candy when reflecting on her fashioning technologies state that "if I would be dependent on make up, I would be stuck in a traditional woman's role, but if I come all made up to a meeting at *Kvinnohuset* where eve-

ryone is wearing Gudrun Sjödén or is butch, my accessories become interesting because I have renegotiated them in a conscious way".¹²

The willingness, readiness and thoughtfulness with which the femmes I know and work with are able to explain, defend and discuss the rationale behind a skirt, a lipstick, or a pair of boots tell us something about the femme fashioning as the embodiment of feminist and queer history. As Lisa Walker's (2002) work on femme sexual style and so brilliantly shows, second wave debates about the oppressiveness of feminine fashion are particularly important because much of identity based politics since have become concerned with "looking like what you are". Walker too recalls how in the late eighties she "dutifully tried to accommodate [her]self to the uniform of hiking boots, jeans, and untucked flannel shirts" (2002:183).¹³ She critiques the politics of visibility within racial and queer politics, and reminds us that appearance has come to be understood as expressive of not only interiority in terms of identity but also of (feminist or queer) gender ideology. Indeed, as Beverly Skeggs (2001) has shown, the kind of femininity that from the eighteenth century onward has been understood as consumption, delicacy and fashioning and that white middle class heterosexual women have been wanting to distance themselves from, has never been available for or associated with working class women nor for women of color, and yet, it remains the measuring tape for the medical establishment's assessment of the authenticity of most transwomen. Embodied and spatialized, the figuration of femme has to do with how we move, the degree to which we are visible as queer to our own and to the world at large, and with the embodied experience of being subjects of feminist activism. And, as Blackman and Perry noted 20 years ago, "the assumption that feminine clothing casts the femme into a submissive heterosexuality (currently more controversial than the

assumption that masculine clothing casts the butch into a dominant heterosexuality) can only be made if one first accepts that gender is the only explanation for the erotic pull of difference” (1990:72).

Even if we are ”raised to cleanse, tone and moisturize” as femme fashion theorist Reina Lewis put it (Volcano & Dahl 2008:20), feminine socialization takes many forms and lines of flight. Delivering a talk called ’Lesbian Dress Acts’ and wearing ”killer heels, posh tights, pencil skirt and décolleté” (2006:1), Reina Lewis reflects on her own shifting fashion in relation to various broader feminist and lesbian political trends and points to how not only garments but hair and make up style become central political statements and reminds us that for many femme-inists, it is the only way to reconcile wearing make up. Lewis humorously proposes that working out what postmodernism was about amounted, among other things to ”being able to wear lipstick ironically” (ibid:2). Lewis reminds us that with postmodern theories we not only acquired new ways of thinking bodies of knowledge but new approaches to the meaning of fashion and style whereby it was possible to ”draw attention to the manufacture of femininity, using it to deadly effect” (2006:2–3). Lewis points to how the *political* economy of desire for both sisterhood and women shapes what we might call the phenomenology of feminine fashion, insofar as being a lesbian and orientating herself towards women rather than men allowed her to distance herself from heteronormativity. Gesturing towards what has since become a key feature of contemporary femme style – the ”intentionality” of feminine aesthetics among femmes, Lewis shows the significance of context. Unlike Brownmiller who argues that women ”do not dress for other women, except to show off their stuff competitively” (1984:97), Lewis reminds us that in a political economy of desire, dressing for women rather than men makes inhabiting femininity as a feminist easier to reconcile.¹⁴



Prathiba Parmar, London 2007
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Attaching fishnets to garters as I do on most days, and considering Lewis' insights, I know that my orientation is not primarily towards dominant culture and what it may make of me. I am not anxious about how the value of femininity might become an obstacle to sisterhood, and my support stockings are not those of heteronormative feminism where the solution is to burn the bra rather than to share it with a sister. In fashioning a femme figuration, my fishnetworking and stitching together of garments and ideas primarily privileges what Basque femme writer Itziar Ziga calls "my sisters of corset and struggle" (Volcano & Dahl 2008:73). In a femme time and space, sisterhood is built not on exclusionary identity politics, even if its fabric is intimately tied to our affinities with those pleasurable materials. It is true that we sometimes taxonomize ourselves in terms of style; the clicking heels of a high femme, the oil change capacity of a diesel femme, the hippie roots of a feral femme, or the boot-kicking politics of a power femme (Volcano & Dahl 2008). Enmeshed in the political economy of desire indexed by terms such as 'bottom' or 'top', I suggest, with feminist fashion scholars Buckley and Fawcett, that fashion constitutes a language of conversation between femmes (2002:9). Archival and ethnographic work has taught me that among femmes "style wars" (if there is such a thing) have taken on a new meaning since the mythical heyday of lesbian feminism (Blackman & Perry 1990; Lewis 1997, 2006).¹⁵ As the diverse range of femme representations in performance, writing and politics reveal, femme closet politics reflect not only a wide range of fashionable cultural citations from saris to corsets and boots to heels, but a different kind of epistemology and outing and while we're out, femme dominated events might have more in common with drag shows than *Project Runway*. Even if Fendi chooses queer fat femme icon Beth Ditto as its model (Tea 2009) and femme designers such as Sossity Chiricuzio

are redressing North American queers, femme fashioned bodies often involve investments in (and critiques of) high-end fashion. As Sossity put it in a recent interview "While I don't subscribe to the theory that dressing 'sexy' makes me either a bad feminist, or 'asking for it', I won't wear clothing that would keep me from being able to do my work or defend myself, or is made by unethical companies".¹⁶ As I read the semiotics of my own eclectic closet and its indebtedness to the styling of my sisters, I'm thus reminded of Indra Windh's insight that a *generous* "borrowing, stealing and trading...the collective rituals of dressing up, doing make-up, making hair, trying on wigs, hats and shoes" (Volcano & Dahl 2008:53) is part of the performance of dress as an embodied practice and of making femme relationships. These activities, I contend, also constitute a form of material citational practice where femmes are inspired by those who have come before and by one other – and they reflect particular individual and collective histories and cultural legacies.¹⁷ Yet, like much *feminine* labor, this fashioning and conversing and the relations that they foster is rarely acknowledged or interrogated, but rather at best taken for granted, at worst dismissed or ridiculed.

Lost in thought, I am still in my closet and considering whether, say, my latest of many polka-dotted dresses (one with a wide shiny plastic belt and purchased at a cheap teeny-bopper store in Stockholm) is the right choice for the evening (as opposed to the gorgeously expensive burgundy colored neo-vintage dress from Wheels & Dollbaby my lover gave me for Christmas). Pondering the history and meaning of these garments, I know that once out of the closet, they become part of broader semiotic systems (Owyong 2009) wherein they will be read differently if I wear big boots or heels, or if I shave my armpits or not, and of course depending on where I go out on that particular night. As Sossity noted, the political economy of

consumption is central to femme debates on fashion; and moreover, garments are often taken to be cues for classed (and thus racialized or age and size specific) positions within and beyond queer communities. One's love for, say Chanel insignia, may however tell us more about about aspirations and identities in motion than about fixity and political coherence. And as Tara Hardy puts it, if working class femmes claim what is seen as "traditional femininity", it is "precisely because it was *not* part of our cultural heritage" (Hardy:134).

Noting, as I might on a cool night, that the "authentic" (read: manufactured in the 1950s) coral red coat I got as a hand-me-down from a friend in San Francisco goes great with the cheap remake dress, I may take pleasure in a particular kind of queer twist on highly stylized femininity brought about by mixing old and new and referencing a particular era. Vintage and recycling constitutes a trend of mixing and remaking that is not unique to this historical moment, but that very much characterizes it and, indeed, me.¹⁸ While considering current trends and the mythico-nostalgic place of the highly stylized and always inherently "Americanized" 1950s (recycled and reinvented), within both queer sub-cultural formations and current vintage trends (see Weston 2002), I have come to see that it is particularly, though not exclusively, in white-dominated cultural formations that this particular performative is invoked. Does this, I wonder as I buckle in a narrow waist, reflect a yearning for pre-gay liberation times of that highly stylized butch-femme public culture (Kennedy & Davis 1993)? Is it campily citing and reworking a racist and heterosexist era and if so, is this because, as Reina Lewis (2006:2) put it, postmodernism has taught us that not only lipstick but all feminine technologies now operate through irony?

Finding, as I often do, that my fishnets are full of runs and that I'm perpetually late, boots will speed up my stomping while heels

will make me 2 inches taller than most of my lovers, I'm reminded of conversations with femme poet Daphne Gottlieb, who like many other femmes I know traces her own femme fashion to the punk movement of the late eighties. College queer theory courses taught Gottlieb that both her fashion and her desires were "gender transgressive" (Burke 2009:17), but upon first moving to what she calls "the butch-femme capital of the universe", San Francisco, she found femmes who "pursed their pretty little lips at my suede-like shaved head, flicked imaginary lint off their pretty little skirts, and flocked away with each other" (Burke 2009:18). In an account that tells us about how fashion becomes a language of femme conversations and relationships, Gottlieb notes that she preferred the Punk Rock Femmes with whom politics was coupled with hair dye rather than "silly things" like eyebrow waxings. The perfect femmes then turned punk rock too, she recalls, and "wanted to know where I bought my boots" (2009:18). The labor and technologies of femininity, the tweezing and make up, in other words, are always entangled with ideas of feminist labor and fashion. Ambivalent about an unreflected celebration of 1950s vintage, Gottlieb says that "something I have against the current vintage femme thing is that it is highly conservative by nature and speaks to the politics and mores of a conservative time – one that actively oppressed women and minorities, lest we forget – is this really something we want to romance?"¹⁹ By contrast, Gottlieb insists that "in the early 90s there were femmes who looked like punk rock girls rather than "Girls" – they didn't have to trade on femininity to be femme, if that makes sense. Their femininity was declarative, demonstrative, and not merely signified". In a femme time and place and in communities of taste, dress acts are never innocent and fashion becomes a site of conversation and contestation, where feminist ideas of how to negotiate how to walk in the world

as a feminine being are never reducible to the garments themselves.

Still the row of polkadots speaks to me. Being one of many adorned in those, as I was in the Femme Guild's float and part of a section aptly entitled "Americana" in the marketplace of the commercialized Sydney Mardi Gras festival in 2009 – or in any pride parade for that matter – I have no hopes for originality or uniqueness and I know the complicity of creative queer outings with late capitalism. Indeed, as Miranda Joseph (2000) notes, contemporary invocations of the very concept of community among queers and other dissidents (including one of femme taste) are never outside of but rather, always already deeply imbricated within late capitalist logics of production and consumption (Joseph 2000). This leaves us very little realistic possibility of being radically "alternative" or "anti" anything, even as we strategically display our fashion and have a momentary strength in numbers. We are indeed, unique just like everybody else. This does not mean we are all the same, rather, we are differently situated in relation to legacies of (cultural) imperialism and our relationships to the idealized iconography and practice of 50s style motherhood and wifery, mistressing and sluttiness, are inevitably entangled with histories of the familial and familiar whether we are African American, Irish, Lebanese or Swedish. Attending to those tells us more about relations between femininities than about our presumed penis envy.

As I layer my body with garment after garment, and eyes in excessive black look back at me adorning my surface, gearing myself up to face the world, I ponder the currently much over-determined discourse of subversivity and drag among queer theorists inside and out of academia. While this way of making face may very well be read as a strategy of mimicry, a way of parodying that which the feminine has been reduced to in a phallogocentric order, the idea that

femmes are distinguishable from other feminine subjects through their self-declared *intentionality* leaves me as dissatisfied as my asymmetrical eyeliner. Afterall, who can tell the real from the parody? In her critique of performativity theory, anthropologist Kath Weston (2002) locates its emergence and continued popularity *inside* the logic of late capitalism and flexibility and argues that it rests on "a culturally and historically specific (if problematic) notion of personhood that is rooted in bourgeois individualism" (2002:74). Aren't we all encouraged to believe that clothing does make the woman, and one can dress up or dress down, depending on mood? We cannot escape that we live in a consumer culture that not only presents us with highly gendered style options, these styles also signal other and often localized markers of belonging. I'm reminded of the insights of Danish femme Signe Flyvst who, when commenting on her favorite outfit said: "it's a commentary on being both consumer and consumed. My outfit is me. A bit vulgar, a bit *Fame*, a trashy housewife and pin-up in one. It's also my working-class roots. You can aspire to be middle class, but if you're proletarian you will never quite pass, just like as a woman you'll never fit into a man's world. We can play around with stereotypes and think we're in control of what we do, but we never fully are. It's never simply a performance" (Dahl & Volcano 2008:122). As Weston's argument at the opening of this article suggests, in the political economy of queer desire for sex and sisterhood, femmes critically engage the relationship of gendering to commodification and sexualization as delineated by feminists and that practicality might be better understood as matters of time and place, in the world and in one's life.

Still, as I polish my boots, I know that on any particular night of queer underground cultural production, when our lipgloss speaks together and regardless of what we have under our skirts, femmes

are a different set of commodities among ourselves (to paraphrase Luce Irigaray).²⁰ It is not enough to simply suggest, as feminists often have, that we are always and only objects, trained to look at ourselves through a phallic and objectifying gaze. This is in part because we, to speak with Sara Ahmed (2006), orient our femininely fashioned bodies towards other objects and bodies than our mostly heterosexual sisters. To yearn for a butch/queer gaze upon one's adorned body cannot be reduced to being in a pornographic male gaze, even if it does not save you from it. And once we give up the idea that gender is always and only binary and lost in the heterosexual matrix, we can finally consider relations between femininities and the ways that we engage our collective and individual histories. Femme fashion(ing), is always about *this sex which is not one*, about relations between femininities and between femmes.

Zippering up the corset-like top of that particular big-skirted, tutu-enhanced cheap black polka dotted dress, I am reminded of the implications of femme aging – including the potential ridiculousness of such a frock on a middle-aged girl who increasingly finds herself noticing advertisements for anti-wrinkle technologies, and the continued insistence among femmes of my own age cohort that we must deal with aging femininities and where they are in the world, good and bad. Caroline, a white British femme, recalled that in her twenties she was not into make up, but reflecting on the passing of time in her and the world, Caroline noted that "as a 40 year old I don't feel vulnerable anymore, it's like it sits better in my skin now. I love the subversion of reclaiming lipstick and heels, seamed stockings and the newly found rituals of waxing and shaving" (Volcano & Dahl 2008:84). Rosie Lugosi, the vampire queen from Manchester, notes that to her "femme does the unthinkable: she grows old. The worst betrayal and monstrous thing is for a femme to be crone and

sexy. To kiss the magic mirror that shows each new sag and wrinkle” (ibid:126). If fashion and dress involves an assembly of body modifications and/or supplements (Tranberg Hansen 2004:371) the semiotics of make up does not stay stable. Moreover, it matters that as femininity materializes in and through an emergent figuration of femmes who are equally likely to employ hormone technologies to enhance their feminine bodies during transition between genders, as they are between phases in reproductive cycles. Transactivist Shawna Virago notes that ”like most femmes, I’m always trying to understand the shifting parameters of my own femininity. I know first hand what it’s like to carve out self-defined space while experiencing sexism and looksism” (Volcano & Dahl 2008:163). She continues, pondering the difficulty of determining what femininity, let alone gender, is and says ”the best I can come up with is that it’s a lot like water-proof mascara, which claims to be permanent but actually comes off quite easily. But since I’ve been on estrogen I’ve become better at complex math and operating heavy machinery” (ibid). The shared pleasure of a tight revealing dress makes us equally grateful for tampons and corsets and girdles that hide protruding flesh and limbs.

And speaking of that time of the month and in life, I remain alerted to the significance of time and space in both our individual and collective femme fashion. My frequent visits to the US and regular scanning of archives of queer representations might suggest that in some places, second hand fake furs and leopard prints have become simply ”femme gear”, regardless of fashion trends. In Stockholm, however (before the recent return of burlesque-inspired fishnets, boas and fur, both in the broader repertoire of feminine aesthetics and within queer sub-cultural contexts), I rarely encountered femme-identified lesbians of my own generation – at least on account of *that* fashion. When I, dressed in another favorite garment, the

black slip, glowingly greeted legendary femme icon and writer Joan Nestle at an event of readings by femmes in Melbourne in 2009, she whispered smilingly, that she too used to wear her black slip, "back in the days", presumably meaning in a different time in history *and* life. While Joan and I belong to different generations, politically and culturally, and live in different parts of the world, our joint affinity for the slip and who we are when we wear it, becomes central not only in making ourselves recognizable to each other but also in creating a shared history and culture. While younger femmes in Stockholm have frequently remarked that to them my style (apparently I have one) reads as "stuck in the nineties", my wearing of "the Joan Nestle slip" is a homage to a particular genealogy of (American) femme history, passed on and recycled, much like the garments we so often find in vintage stores themselves.²¹ When asked what a contemporary femme closet might contain, Bird la Bird, femme organizer of London's Bird Club, said that hers contained "tight lace corsets, 50s' stockings and frilly knickers, very high heels, pencil skirts, big knickers, hold ups, opera gloves, East German army women's uniforms, nurse's and waitress uniforms, boas, fake Vivienne Westwood, punk 1970s – and I don't mean Kelly Osborne but Siouxi Sioux" (Volcano & Dahl 2008:81). Thus while femmes might be read in part through their particular and *feminine* style choices, whether it is that of the Femme Guild at Sydney's Mardi Gras, my own, or that of Bird, a wide range of eras and styles also coexist within any one dress up box.

Scavenging still, like queer researchers do for methods and data, through dress up boxes and beauty boxes in those daily rituals of transformation and fashioning, and often coming out with a similar theme regardless of the time of day, I theorize the labor of femme fashion as entangled with intellectual pursuits and consider the end-

less comments and frequent frowns my outfits have received at many academic conferences. Though I'm neither unique nor particularly prone to fashion trends, unless the conference is queer (which means fashioning is perhaps nearly as important as the content of one's work), such events have often made clear that my particular aesthetic carries clear class connotations and is rarely associated with the respectability of a tenured scholar or the upscale subtleties of academic chic. Indeed, like other femme scholars I know, I am often told that I should "dress my age" or that I "can afford nice clothes".

As I bleach and curl my platinum hair, its recurring dark roots marking both its repetitive labor and the passing of time, I know that the appearance of femininity is, as Beverly Skeggs (2001) has argued, both an achievement and a form of cultural capital and that skin, age and status are in many respects what allows me to "choose my dress" without any serious consequences. Out of the closet and into the streets, be it Sydney, Stockholm or San Francisco, I know that most femmes still must hold their heads high, because the burning shame that continues to regulate the respectability of femininity still gets to us. Wrapped in feather boas, sprinkled in glitter, oiled in lotions and perfumes, I enter the world as the world enters me, I am both subject and object, to myself and to the world, I am the objects that the feminized have been in history and I am never without the technologized objects that I require to fashion myself and the words that I write. Femme fashion(ing) is not only the garments that when recombined, recombine me on a molecular level, it is about making face and making soul (Anzaldúa 1990) through bodily adornments and modifications, it is about my tattoos and my piercings, the extensions and the razors, the hormone and the silicone as material and semiotic technologies, each containing labor including the labor to make the queer cultural formation that tends to wear lipstick and frocks move beyond its surface.

Through fashioning both arguments and outfits, this essay has sought to offer an(other) cheeky contribution to a reconsideration of *l'écriture femme-inine*, attempting if you will to merge what Irigaray once called *the specular make up of discourse* with a feminist discourse on make up. Writing, says feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti, "is, for the polyglot, a process of undoing the illusory stability of fixed identities, bursting open the bubble of ontological security that comes from familiarity with one linguistic site" (1994:115). Inspired by the femmes around the world with whom I work and live, I want to move beyond assuming that femininity is inevitably a masquerade solely produced by, for and within a phallo-centric order while simultaneously insisting on the continued specificity of feminine materiality. The 'I' that speaks from this politics of location in the language of fashion, does so as a copy without an original, as endlessly indebted to those with whom I make love, theory and community and I cite my fellow femmes as theorists of femininities (Dahl, forthcoming) even as I draw inspiration from a long line of scholars concerned with questions of fashion, style, performativity and embodiment. Afterall, while originality is a central fantasy of both high end fashion and scholarship, its reception always relies on communal literacy and the competency to recognize signs of belonging and familiarity. I maintain that copying and recycling are more sustainable metaphors, not only for a world on the brink of extinction where one person's new fashion continues to require another one's exploitation, but for academic work that although late capitalist publishing practices tells us we have to sell, sell, sell, would do better if it instead simply acknowledged its own imbricatedness in communities of intellectual taste.

As a figuration that shares a politics of location that goes beyond self-appointed identity, this goes beyond my own labor; femme

materializes through the collectively shared and constructed spatio-temporal territory and a queer economy of desire inhabited by femininely fashioned bodies. Thus, as the door to that femme space of my own remains open and pourus, I propose that to engage intellectually with the (femme) closet is not the narcissism of navel gazing or infatuations with one's mirror, but to go beyond the question of whether the dress makes the femme. Indeed, as Buckley and Fawcett note, "like the notion of 'becoming', 'fashioning' implies an endless process, rarely completed. Fashion can function then as a narrative of an individual life but it is one usually without closure" (2002:7). Unable to fashion an outfit or an article without the technologies that make me in the flesh and in writing, with fashion I am endlessly becoming femme, becoming subject, becoming writer; a queerly feminine body of flesh and knowledge.

This essay is written with *jouissance* within the project *Femme as Figuration: Rethinking Queer Femininities* funded by the Bank of Sweden's Tercentenary Fund and is in honor of Femme Fashionista Reina Lewis, who first taught me the intellectual and visceral pleasures and politics of (femme) fashion. I am grateful to all the femmes that I am in conversation with and this time in particular, to Maria Lönn, Andy Candy, Sossity Chiricuzio and Daphne Gottlieb. For comments on earlier drafts I thank Jami Weinstein, Ulla Manns, Maria Lönn, Dirk Gindt and an anonymous reviewer. Many of the quotes I invoke here have been published previously in Volcano & Dahl (2008) and as always, I'm indebted to Del LaGrace Volcano for the gift of collaboration. A version of this paper was given as a key note address at *(Re)Figuring Sex: Somatechnical Revisions* at Macquarie University, Australia, November 20 2009, and I also thank the fashionable and insightful participants of this conference.

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Notes

¹ The original "woman" is here changed to "femme" by the author.

² I use the term femme-inist to connote a queer feminist project, which to my mind departs from the notion that gender and sexuality are inextricably linked, and that

places femininity/ies rather than women at the center of its analysis and activism. Femme-inism challenges heteronormativity's continued reliance on a reproductive order whereby femininity is an effect of female bodies, where femininity is an ordering device pivoting around respectability and transgression, which inevitably produces racialized and classed norms and hierarchies of femininity, as well as bodily norms of age and ability that continue to be naturalized not only in the world but in the politics that seek to make a difference. See also Duggan & McHugh (2002).

³ I feel the need to point out right away that my work is not primarily concerned with accounting for or explaining what femme is or isn't to readers unfamiliar with queer culture but rather to investigate femme as a figuration and a set of figurative modes that queer femininity. Indeed, for political and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clear in this essay and that ultimately pertain to the inevitable exclusions that arise by discursive determinations of the form and content of any identity category (see Butler 1991), I try to avoid identifying and defining femme as such. Yet, as the comments of reviewers and critics consistently make clear, leaving definitions open means that my writings lose "scientific validity" and read as too "within a subculture" (see also Dahl, forthcoming), thus often making my work read as an exercise in the identity politics that I remain critical of. Let me thus state from the beginning that my empirical ethnographic work is *primarily* concerned with a diverse range of queer women/feminine beings in urban settings in major cities in the US, Western Europe and Australia to whom a *feminine aesthetic* is central to their subjectivity and to whom femme is a meaningful way of explaining parts of their gender. My personal understanding of femme is rooted in and routed through Western lesbian/queer subcultural contexts where femme both historically and in the present is constituted by her relationship to butch via a sexual aesthetic and a particular kind of lesbian eroticism, especially in working class communities of all colors. At the same time, it should be noted that the contemporary use and meaning of femme exceeds such a definition and that femmes are not (only) defined by their erotic tied to butches or female masculinities and that femmes may not identify as lesbians or even as women (Dahl and Volcano 2008; Burke 2009). As among others Kath Weston has shown, femme is at times also used as a term used to describe

feminine gender among gay men (2002:76). Inspired by the brilliant work of critical race theorist and Deleuzian film scholar Kara Keeling (2007) on the place of the black femme in the construction of cinematic common sense, I look forward to the day when these kinds of footnotes are not needed and femme can be a figure in her own right.

⁴ Personal conversation with pioneering femme writer and activist Joan Nestle in Melbourne, March 2009. – See for instance Halberstam 1997; Rosenberg 2000; Volcano & Halberstam 1999.

⁵ *Écriture femme-inine* is, of course, a conscious play on the concept of *écriture* feminine, first coined by Hélène Cixous (1976) and often associated with the school of sexual difference. In brief, this is an experimental mode which seeks to investigate the relationship between body and writing and to challenge what is seen as phallogocentric modes of writing characterized by linearity. While for Cixous and others, such writing is intimately tied to the experience of 'women', often tied to a (reproducing, mothering) female body, *écriture femme-inine*, to my mind, not only concerns the writings by and for femmes (who may or may not be /born/ women) but it is also concerned with the relationship between (queer) femininity, writing and subjectivity.

⁶ Through using the concept of *figuration*, I want to contribute to a broader feminist project that is hopeful and visionary. As a concept still in a state of becoming, I draw on the work of Castaneda (2002), Haraway (2004), Braidotti (1994; 2002) and Barthes (in Sullivan 2001). Through out her scholarship, Braidotti stresses relations between women, emphasizes a Deleuzian becoming and proposes a nomadic consciousness as necessary for a disidentification with oppressive structures and these modes offer me a way to reconsider femininities. Braidotti (1994) proposes that one way of getting out of the dead-lock of modern theories of the subject, and ultimately of identity politics, and to consider feminist subjectivity in new ways, is to think in terms of feminist *figurations* (see also Haraway 2004). She also argues that in these postmodern times, we are in greater need of figurative myths and political fictions than theoretical systems. *Figurations*, Braidotti contends, are historically and culturally situated through a politics of location, which is not to be reduced

to "self-appointed identity" but rather is "a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatio-temporal territory". Braidotti proposes a nomadic consciousness as necessary for a disidentification with oppressive structures and thus a way to reconsider femininity. Focusing transformation rather than fixity, she argues that "figurations materially embody stages of metamorphosis of a subject position towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to become" (1994:13). In a slightly different vein, Claudia Castaneda (2002:3–9) moves through science, bodies, and worlds and proposes that a figuration is simultaneously semiotic and material, constituted through particular scientific practices and interpretations implicated in power relations, which is useful for thinking about what Sullivan (2006) calls the relationship between bodies of flesh and bodies of knowledge. As Sullivan notes, following Barthes, a figuration is that which both constitutes and exceeds representation (2001:159). This essay is inspired by the hopeful idea that femme can be understood as a "political fiction" constituted in part by and through figurative dress acts that are intimately tied to readings of feminist and femme archives and stories. Understood as a figure in movement, a figuration of bodies, femme, I brazenly argue, have the audacity to propose that femininity can move in ways that no text or garment may ever fully capture.

⁷ To many Nordic scholars, particularly to those who have accepted the critique of essentialism launched by queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990), drawing on the work of French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray (1985) might seem at odds with a project to rethink queer femininities. Indeed, for Irigaray, there is no distinction between sex and gender in social constructivist terms; which, to put it simply and for our purposes here, means there is no distinction between femininity and female sex. By invoking Irigaray here, I do not mean to suggest that femme is reducible to female morphology (reproductive organs and potentiality of a womb). For me, part of the brilliance of Irigaray's work is the inspiration that the poetics of her arguments offer; and I share her desire for what to write the feminine differently through what I here call *l'écriture femme-inine*.

⁸ While Tranberg Hansen's article is primarily concerned with the state of the anthropology of fashion, her approach, like mine in this essay, is clearly inspired by

fashion scholarship. For further discussion on these concepts, see also Eicher & Roach-Higgins (1992:15) and Entwistle (2000:11), among others. – Andy Candy: Email interview, November 2009, on file with author.

⁹ Brownmiller is perhaps best known for her "rape classic", *Against our will: men, women and rape*, which was one of the first feminist accounts of rape, published in 1975. In *Femininity*, a book that has been translated to many languages and that remains in print, Brownmiller takes on femininity as a topic in a sustained way that few feminists since have. She proposes that women are all, to some degree, "female impersonators"; an argument that can be traced through out feminist literature addressing femininity, from Riviere's "Womanliness as masquerade" (1929) to Tyler's *Female impersonators* (2003). For more information on Brownmiller, see also <http://www.susanbrownmiller.com>. (accessed December 29, 2009).

¹⁰ Here I am following Owyong (2009:192), who in turn follows Sproles and Burns (1994:7) in proposing that unlike dress, fashion is "the style of dress that is temporarily adopted by a discernible proportion of members of a social group because that chosen style is perceived to be socially appropriate for the time and situation". In other words, I take femmes to be a discernable proportion of a queer, lesbian and/or feminist community and social group. As Owyong notes, what is fashionable in one time and place may thus not be in another.

¹¹ Quotes drawn from flyers of the Sydney Femme Guild (2009), an organization founded to promote visibility and solidarity among femme-identified folks in Sydney and internationally.

¹² Kvinnohuset: A women only space in Stockholm which prior to its closing was the subject to much controversy with regards to its policy on transexclusion. For a discussion on this, see Rosenberg 2006. Gudrun Sjödén: A well known Swedish designer, known for her colorful textiles and garments consisting of large pieces of cloth that, while 'feminine', hide more than they reveal. – Email interview November 2009, on file with the author.

¹³ Similarly, femme fashion theorist Reina Lewis reflects on the faux pas of a feminist wearing a pencil skirt in the early eighties (Lewis 2006).

¹⁴ Lewis writes: "My lesbian identity allowed me to distance myself from the hetero-

normative – and the fear of being objectified by the putative male gaze – in ways that their heterosexuality made much more complicated. Apart from the fact that I like sex with women way more than sex with men, there is something about being lesbian for me, as a self-identified feminist, that allows me to inhabit a mode of femme femininity that would be much harder for me as a straight feminist” (2006:3).

¹⁵ In brief, the term ‘style wars’ is sometimes used to connote the heated ideological debates between different configurations of lesbians in the 1980s, primarily in the UK and the US, whose understandings of aesthetics and sexual practices were incommensurable; those of leather and fetish wearing S/M practitioners and ‘lipstick lesbians’ versus those of lesbian feminists in particular. As Blackman and Perry note, the 1980s was a time characterized by increasing emphasis on lesbianism as a lifestyle and as linked to consumption and a growing pink economy, and they note that most lesbians were (and still are) more likely to follow broader fashion trends than those of queer and feminist minorities. See further Blackman and Perry (1990).

¹⁶ Email interview November 2009, on file with the author.

¹⁷ Such borrowing, stealing and trading practices are never innocent acts, rather they always already imbricated in a broader set of power relations and questions of cultural appropriation, including regarding fashion, are also sites of contestation among femmes.

¹⁸ See for instance, Palmer and Clark, eds (2005).

¹⁹ Email interview, November 2009, on file with author.

²⁰ In her book *This sex which is not one*, and inspired by Lévi-Strauss and Marx, Irigaray contends that within hetero-sexuality, inevitably a phallogentric order, women have no value beyond as commodities traded for their reproductive value among men and in order to maintain the social order. Woman thus lack value of her own beyond her ability to “mirror” the desires of men (1985:181). Irigaray argues that as a result, women’s relationships with one another (and thus, relations between femininities) are inevitably structured by rivalry and by being relations among commodities without possible identities of their own. It seems to me that much of the contempt for feminine aesthetics and for relations between feminine beings reproduces this notion that femininity reflects rivalry and lack of depth. In the hopeful

chapter 'commodities among themselves' Irigaray argues that a female subjectivity beyond heteropatriarchy will require a sociality among women and a language of their own. Femme communities and relationships, I contend, is one site in which to consider Irigaray's ideas and rethink femininities and where a reconsideration of fashion might constitute one element of such a language of conversation. While inevitably steeped in capitalist logics of production and consumption, fashion takes on a different meaning in a femme time and place than within the phallogocentric order that Irigaray's insights help us identify and dismantle.

21 I'm thankful to Reina Lewis for reminding me of this point. And indeed, as Ann Cvetkovich (1995) notes, queer archives provide role models and they touch us in our search for understanding our desires and aesthetics.

ABSTRACT

(Re)Figuring Femme Fashion

I samtida identitetspolitiska diskussioner har femmes kommit att bli kända främst för en feminin estetik, som trots sitt tydliga stilistiska ursprung i en lesbisk/queer begärsekonomi snarare än i heterosexuell femininitet, gör dem inte bara oigenkännliga "som det de är" utan också politiskt omstridda, inte minst av feminister som ser femininitet som en problematisk yta. På senare år har femmes i urbana västerländska queera och feministiska kontexter blivit allt mer synliga, såväl i skrud som i skrift och då inte sällan genom att betona intentionalitet, ironi och parodi. Även om dessa argument om femme-ininitet är uppfriskande och politiskt försvarbara passas de som hand i handske i en senkapitalistisk radikalindividualism där alla uppmantras att se sig som unika – precis som alla andra. Ett fokus på medvetna val ger oss heller inga svar på *hur* queer femininitet förkroppsligas eller hur vi ska förstå relationen mellan materialitet och teknologi. Gör kläderna verkligen en femme?

Med Pandoras nyfikenhet öppnar denna rizomatiska essä den alltid lika omstridda feminina utklädningslådan och beauty boxen – inte för att varken ännu en gång fördöma och förkasta de plågor och smärtor som femininitetsattributen och

dess trivialiserade arbetsinsatser orsakar dess bärare, eller för att likt en förkunnande modeexpert, hylla en korrekt och queer femmegarderob för en växande femme-inistisk rörelse där femmens osynlighet är ”så förra året” utan för att fundera över femme mode som ett förkroppsligande av feministisk och queer historia. Med hjälp av modemetaforer och mot bakgrund av queera arkiv, är detta textexperiment en installation och en situation, och ett personligt, politiskt och etnografiskt inspirerat bidrag till att skriva den femme-inina kroppen som en somateknisk figuration snarare än en enhetlig identitetspolitisk kategori och där såväl språkande som skapande ingår i figurerandet.

I en essä som söker att figurera textualitet och materialitet samtidigt tas läsaren med till en femmegarderob som handlar mindre om queer synlighet och osynlighet och mer om kosmetikans plats i kosmos, femininitetens plats i feminismen och spegelns plats i spekulerandet. Här praktiseras det feminina arbetet med såväl kroppslig/klädesmässig som textuell estetik genom till synes triviala men alltid intellektuella feminina påklädningsritualer där olika argument och plagg prövas och kommer till uttryck. Genom att låta femme figurera snarare än enbart manifesteras och genom att betona hur såväl plagg som idéer lånas, byts, stjäls och (om)skapas, vill texten inte bara visa tänkbara kombinationer av plagg och hur de kan förstås eller förkastas, utan också pläderna för att femininitetsteknologier inte kan skiljas från utan är en del av en femme-inin subjektivitet.