

Queering Femininity

IT IS LATE as I sit down to assemble editorial thoughts for this special issue on *queering femininity*. Late in the evening, late in the year, late in the production process. And it is not without trepidation that I assemble my own thoughts on the matters at hand; this is indeed a topic I have both affective and theoretical investments in beyond those of an editor keen to see yet another issue in print. As a theorist whose own “situation” is (queerly) feminine and whose own body of flesh and knowledge has been oriented toward the objects and subjects contained by the marker “femininity” for at least two decades, I still do not know how to define it; beyond suggesting that it cannot be reduced to sex or anatomy, nor to surface or ideology (cf. Dahl 2011), and it remains a mystique, a dark continent, the other, sexual difference and the utopic.

What I do know is that much like many of its queerly marked subjects, femininity as a topic, however defined, has a bit of a bad reputation in feminist theory; far too often tied to phenomena feminism seeks to eliminate; subordination, sexualization, objectification, commodification, vulnerability, and so on. Yet, paradoxically – or perhaps precisely because of this – femininity is also perhaps feminism’s most central problem and contested topic. If an editorial is a first impression, a nice package, a framing devise, this one is as imperfect as they come and yet it throbs with as much passion as its subjects do. In the final chapter of *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (reviewed in

this issue), aptly entitled “The Afterglow,” Latina femme scholar Juana María Rodríguez (2014, 187), who also writes in this issue, explains that she seeks to “foster a spirit of vulnerability that cultivates a willingness to risk imagining otherwise,” and so do I in this editorial. As an afterglow to a collection of new work by leading and emerging scholars in a field I want to call critical femininity studies, I hope that this issue can be one light in the coming and existing darkness of the season and in the world, a lady companion for the effeminate and queerly feminized among *lambda nordica*’s readers.

If it is difficult to determine theoretically, what femininity “is,” where it is located, and what it does in the world and in our field, it is also difficult to pinpoint what would make it “queer.” It is clear that to a great extent and in a range of ways, *feminine and feminized queer* subjects, especially those that are racialized or deviate from norms of size and ability, are at the bottom of multiple gendered hierarchies, including queer ones. That is, when femininity is not put up on an iconic, slightly parodic, larger than life pedestal to be celebrated, consumed, and scrutinized; or when it is not possible to transform into motherhood, nurture, care, (queer) femininity remains less than human. The continued contempt for femininity, especially as it gets expressed in bodies that do not fit neatly into binary boxes, or when it is read on a queer body, remains a sore point, for society as a whole, and that includes (feminist) activism and LGBTQ politics. Queerly feminine figures encounter misogynistic violence and hatred, get subjected to a particular form of exoticization, sexualization, victimization whereas others are at times told we are not “queer enough” (cf. Walker 2001), or even “straight.” Differently put, we could say that the question of femininity and its connotations in queer bodies organizes a lot of activism and might even be said to form the center of the (radical) negativity of (all) LGBTQ politics. If the Orlando tragedy teaches us anything, it is that some queer bodies risk more than others do. As we try to come to terms with this horrific mass shooting and what it means for a “unified” LGBTQ community, we cannot ignore how racialization and feminization along with economic marginalization are entangled in the production of queer vulnerability,

on and off the dance floor. As we go to print, take to the dance floor, and continue to show up at protests, we find strength in the bravery of generations of drag queens, trans* women, femme lesbians, and other feminine others who have paved the way for us today.

Queer Femininities in *lambda nordica*

Why a special issue on queer femininities, and why now? In recent years, (queer) femininities and queer perspectives on femininity have gained considerable interest internationally. Topics such as sex work, burlesque, girlhood and girls, femme identities, drag queens, and trans* femininities have become increasingly popular topics, especially among junior scholars and students, partly due to the contributions of queer theory and a continued strong investment in the subject of femininity and in feminine agency. Yet, in *lambda nordica*, like in several other Nordic journals, femininity has not been an overly popular subject. While a detailed review of all articles over the past twenty-five years is not possible in this brief editorial, I took a quick scan of the archives and it was telling; there are hardly any articles whose abstracts or titles suggest an interest in or focus on femininity as such. Concerning research on homosexual men, few have focused on theorizing effeminacy, feminine gender expressions, or femininity. When it comes to what is perhaps the most obvious subjects; drag and cross-dressing, a couple of articles have touched on the subject, and it is clear that as trans* and femme research enters queer studies, references to femininity increase. Yet on the whole, we might draw the conclusion that “same-sex desire,” between men or women, has in the context of research presented in *lambda nordica* come to mean precisely that; desiring “the same” (what exactly this means is unclear) and in most empirical articles little reference is made to *gendered* aesthetics and how those shape and are shaped by desire.

To a fem(me)inist, it seems that within LGBTQ research, femininity, including in queer (female) subjects, is often treated with a certain hint of that misogyny we see in society as a whole. One example of how femininity has featured in work on lesbians in this journal is Tamsin Wilton’s 1996 article “Den lesbiska kvinnan som subjekt och objekt i

den akademiska världen”[“The Lesbian Woman as Subject and Object in the Academy”], which offers an important overview of the place of the lesbian within a range of academic disciplines. Here the figure of the lesbian emerges as primarily defined by her desire for other women, by her existence outside the heterosexual matrix if you will, and as an object of empirical inquiry. Curiously, lesbian femininity becomes a somewhat paradoxical question for Wilton (as it did for many lesbian feminists at that time). When Wilton recounts an encounter at Kitty Lips, a “trendy lesbian club in London,” she offers the following striking empirical observation:

The audience largely consists of very feminine young women with lipstick, dressed in fluffy, pastel-colored tops and satin skirts. These hyper-feminine lesbian women felt no desire to dress in any particularly lesbian way and their desire for one another had nothing to do with heterosexual attempts to introduce a form of masculinity into the lesbian equation. This is a dramatic change from the boyish, androgynous lesbian women of recent years and from the traditional lesbian feminist’s very butchy exterior in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, many of the faggots at Kitty Lips were as lightly and femininely dressed as the lesbian women, with long hair manes and light, fluffy tops. In recent years, queer androgyny seems to have been pushed from the masculine to the feminine. The lesbian sex photographer Della Grace’s attempts to grow a beard already assigns her to an older generation in this unisex-tidal wave of femme/femme eroticism. (Wilton 1996, 24; my translation)

The description suggests that there is a “lesbian way” of dressing and that such a style does not include “hyperfemininity” and furthermore that recent (generational) change has brought a loss of a cherished androgynous ideal of lesbian 1970s. This observation of the coming of “lesbian chic” and its inherent deradicalization of lesbian gender is not unique to Wilton (cf. Blackman and Parry 1990) and whether, two decades later, Wilton’s prediction that queer androgyny has in fact given way to an alarming new form of femininity could be a great topic for a future

article.¹ What is remarkable to me about this is the degree to which an interest in feminine aesthetics for Wilton and some others signaled not only a move away from lesbian radicalism, but also from queer. Much remains to be said about the gendered dimensions of lesbian aesthetics in Nordic historical settings, but it seems that Hanna Hallgren's (2013, 115) observations in her work on the woman-identified woman of 1970s radical (lesbian) feminism, femininity has long had a bad name in these circles. According to Hallgren's analysis, any kind of "male identification" (which was understood as an identification with either femininity or masculinity) was disavowed and attributed to a different generation and class of lesbians all together. In lesbian (feminist) settings then, the return of femininity, it seems, conjures up the return of "heterosexist" understandings of gender. The obvious class dimensions of such an understanding, I would argue, deserves further study, as does the racial politics of a white-dominated lesbian (feminist) movement in a time that also saw growing numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in the Nordic context.² Suffice to say that the "problem" that a definition of femininity departing largely from white bourgeois experiences has posed for feminism has certainly (and often for good reason) spilled over to lesbian (feminist) critique.

With the arrival of the book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) promptly became the most cited feminist theorist in the Nordic region and with that came a serious questioning of any kind of stable gendered or sexual identity. In the largely Marxist-influenced and strongly social constructivist theoretical tradition that has dominated much of Nordic gender/women's studies, her account of the heterosexual matrix and ideas about the "subversion" of identity, led to a growing activist and theoretical interest in female masculinity and drag kings in Sweden and the Nordic region more broadly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the continuously contested conceptual shift from "sex" [*køn/kjønn/kön*] to "gender" [*genus*] included a widening of understandings of masculinity as not solely the domain or property of men, further supported by the popularity of J. Halberstam's (1997) book on the subject, it seemingly did not result in new ways to theorize (queer) femininity on a com-

prehensive level. Rather, from a femme-inist perspective (see Dahl, all) it seems that Biddy Martin's (1994, 119) critique of queer theoretical gender utopias and her argument that femininity often "becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other positions become figural and mobile" continues to ring true. Indeed, until recently, femininity, especially when it is expressed in bodies read as female, has not conjured up comparable interest or theoretical seriousness. Rather, queer femininities continue to get read either as "straight" or get placed in the camp of the ironic and theatrical, and remain in the superstructure of the superficial.

Martina Ladendorf's (2007) reception study of the TV-series *The L-Word* confirmed that feminine aesthetics are not tied to lesbians' understandings of themselves or of other lesbians. Ladendorf (2007, 16) observes that in the series, "those who dress in skirt and dress are in a minority, they are not readable as lesbians" and she contends that the style presented by the immensely popular series *The L-Word* is also new lesbian style which her informants call a "a mixture of the ironic masculine look, androgynous clothing and a more lesbian chic fashion" (17). In line if you will, with a growing interest in queer popular subcultural styles, in 2009 we presented a special issue on queer fashion edited by Dirk Gindt, where questions of "female" or "feminine" ways of dressing were discussed by Philip Warkander (2009) in relation to queer subcultural fashion and by myself in relation to the lesbian and queer femme in relation to feminist theoretical and activist critiques of feminine aesthetics (Dahl 2009).

In 2008, the first issue solely dedicated to drag, guest edited by Kalle Westerling and Anna Olofsdotter Löw came out. Here there are several discussions of the complexities of drag, and while "cross-dressing" on stage and other related questions had been somewhat discussed before, this issue was the first comprehensive one on this topic. Along with Westerling's (2006) book *La dolce vita*, about the drag troupe After Dark, this issue helped shed new light on what can be learned about femininity through the mainstreamed reception of feminine drag but since then the king seems more interesting than the queen, including in gender studies. Of course, there have been works by and on queer

feminine bodies more or less indirectly; in 2014, femme scholar Michela Baldo offered an analysis of the distinctly queerly feminine body of a researcher as a way to consider the trouble that queer theory makes in a disembodied academic space. In our most recent issue, Nina Lykke (2015) writes beautifully about the figure of the queer femme widow, raising, as many femme activists and scholars have (Hollibaugh 2000; Walker 2012), the question of ageing, illness, and death in relation to femme livelihoods.

So, what then, is the state of (queer) femininity these days? Certainly, the topic of (queer) femininity is neither new nor without a strong legacy, including in the Nordic region, and the field is certainly bigger than what is reflected on the pages of this journal or within this editorial. A quick scan of what has come out in gender studies in the past decade or so makes clear that queer theoretical approaches and critical and intersectional analyses of heteronormativity have been tremendously important for new ways of thinking about femininity.

Within contemporary gender and queer studies in the Nordic region, few would now contend that femininity is a property or an essence, or the visual expression of an authentic inner (heterosexual) core; even if many feminist traditions continue to understand it as an external imposition and oppression. Canonical scholarly traditions, especially in the Nordic region, are epistemologically and politically invested in the idea that gender is “constructed,” perhaps in part because most of its political projects and that of gender equality in particular, relies on such a formulation. It is clear that gender is not simply the externalization and formation of what has historically been called sexual difference or sex, rather, it emerges relationally and processually in/between bodies and through time. Yet, in gender theory more broadly, “social constructivism” has in effect mostly meant an understanding of femininity as “the *process* through which *women* are gendered and become specific sorts of *women*” (Skeggs 2001, 297; my emphasis), with process drawing our attention to both psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches and with woman remaining the key subject.³ Even if Monique Wittig’s (1988) contention that femininity is always already the effect of heteronormative and binary conceptions of gender

and sexuality led her to argue that lesbians are not women has proven revolutionary to some, the investments in and subversions of heterosexual understandings of femininity that so many queer activists and theorists engage with, demand that we continue to take the topic seriously.

For that and other reasons, myself and some others have long been asking the question: Why is there no field called (critical) femininity studies? How might we create a field of inquiry and activism focusing on that, which has seemingly been the abject antithesis of our very intellectual existence, namely the speculum of (queer) femininity? Can we theorize the speculum of (queer) femininity beyond a simple story of its links to subordination, sexualization, objectification, superficiality, and so on, and what is at stake when all we do is argue for its agential and emancipatory qualities? Going back to past issues of *lambda nordica* and to summarize this brief and partial review of our own archives, it is interesting to note that we offered an entire issue dedicated to masculinity in LGBTQ research – which we could say is rather symptomatic of the larger field of gender studies, where the field of masculinity research has been growing exponentially for the past ten, fifteen years, with its own conferences, journals, and research programs – in 2009, it has taken until now for us to focus entirely on the topic of (queer) femininity. This issue will not answer all, if any of the possible questions relevant for critical femininity studies, but it does offer some new perspectives.

Queering Femininity: This issue

As I stated at the beginning of this editorial, this particular issue has been long in the making; taking form for about two years now, and put together it can be seen as one set of contributions to such an emergent field. Among the wide range of potential contributors whose work continue to inspire us and to foster what we might call “critical femininity studies” we are proud to present this double issue that features new work by leading and emerging scholars; four reviewed articles, and two essays. The majority of articles and essays in the issue are in Swedish this time, but as is increasingly the case for us who are located in the Nordic region, we go back and forth between the two languages.

First out in this issue is media scholar and feminist theorist Jenny Sundén, whose innovative and provocative piece, “Glitch, genus, tillfälligt avbrott: Femininitet som trasighetens teknologi,” seeks to develop our understanding of gender in general and femininity in particular by approaching femininity as something inherently technological and thus always already broken or faulty. By connecting this approach with feminist theories of somatechnics and technical materiality, Sundén alerts us the significance of what she coins “glitch,” that is what (temporarily) interrupts and gets stuck. Just like technology, Sundén contends, gender is constantly shaped by disruptions and noise and by challenging and interrupting cis-gender, glitch has a subversive potential.

Maria Lönn’s piece “Den brutna vithetens opacitet: Om femininitetens renhet och färgskala,” discusses white femininity departing from her doctoral dissertation project in gender studies and from interviews with Russian women, living in Russia and Sweden, concerning their relationship to makeup. Lönn shows how the idea of “natural” makeup becomes a way of maintaining boundaries between “natural” and “artificial” bodies, or “civilized” and “uncivilized” femininities. Lönn argues that white femininity must be understood as a construction, something that becomes evident among other ways through how an unmarked “natural” femininity demands artificial means, such as makeup, to maintain its hegemonic position.

In “Pariafemininitetens återuppståndelse: Diskurser om skådespelerskor runt sekelskiftet 1900,” theater and performance scholar Héléne Ohlsson explores what moving beyond normative femininity might have meant in *fin-de-siècle* Sweden. She departs from a case study of actress Ellen Hartman’s comeback after a scandal where she broke her contract with Dramaten, the Royal Dramatic Theater, left her marriage, and fled the country with a lover. Ohlsson contends that rather than assuming an apologetic stance, Hartman embraces a kind of diva femininity that exceeds normative femininity ideals of the time, and that it is precisely through this strategy that she reaches fame; she is successful with her audience and, not unlike contemporary queer feminine performances, manages to turn her challenges into successes.

In one of the issue's two texts in English, "Femininity in Transgender Studies: Reflections from an Interview Study in New York City," performance artist, transactivist, and gender scholar Alex Alvina Chamberland builds on her MA research and discusses trans femininities among transfeminine activists in New York City. In the Scandinavian setting, the femininity embodied by "sissies" has thus far largely been addressed in terms of homophobia as a fear of the feminine "out of place" and not in terms of femmebodied genres of femininity (cf. Dahl 2011). As the title suggests, Chamberland argues for the ongoing need for more research on trans* femininity especially from intersectional perspectives. Building on, among others, biologist and trans* theorist Julia Serano, Chamberland works from a definition of femininity as "the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are *typically associated* with those who are female" (Serano 2007, 320; my emphasis). The participants in Chamberland's study describe their experiences of harassment in public space and detail how their trans femininities are less valued than those of trans masculinity. Informants also account for their experiences of what Chamberland calls "the hypersexualization/desexualization paradox," that is how they on the one hand are hypersexualized by so called "tranny chasers," and on the other desexualized by homosexual men who value masculinity over femininity. Taking their stories seriously as sources of insight, Chamberland argues for trans* feminism and its historical legacies while also maintaining the political dimension of gendered power regimes.

From the perspective of continued *queer* contributions of theorizing femininity, drag queens, and transwomen have at times been used as figures that prove more "successful" in the temporary or prolonged processes of becoming women in Beverley Skeggs (2001) terms as outlined above. Within certain areas of feminist theory and activism, this has more frequently been taken as evidence either of the impossibility of women to live up to an ideal or of the inherent "superficiality" or arbitrariness of femininity (it is surface and dress), not as an indication that this is a complex process of materialization that exceeds our current epistemologies. Here Sundén and Chamberland's contributions to this

issue could provide productive contributions to such discussions. Arguing that femininity can be read as an always already broken or faulty technology, and extending multiple theoretical trajectories, Sundén asks us to consider whether any kind of femininity could ever be deemed “natural” or successful. For Chamberland, insisting on the specificity of trans* feminine bodies’ experiences in a misogynist world, offers a double critique; both to a version of transgender studies, which does not acknowledge gender hierarchy, and to any study of femininity that intentionally or not, continues to tie its expressions to cis-gendered female bodies and to omit or ignore the situation and experiences of trans* feminine subjects.

As our essay, we are pleased to present new work by fiction writer and literary scholar Maria Margareta Österholm. In her 2012 dissertation, Österholm introduced the concept gurlesque to a Swedish academic audience. In this issue, Österholm extends her discussion of gurlesque, an aesthetic which in her understanding mixes feminism, femininity, the cute, and the disgusting in ways that refigures our understandings of the subject at hand. Departing from a figuration she calls Projekt Jord [Project Earth], from feminist theory, and from Energiskan, a figure from a Swedish children’s TV show in the 1980s, Österholm gives theory a body, a place, and a space in a poetic essay about the possibilities that gurlesque and queer femininities offer.

Last but not least, under *We’re Here* in this issue, we are delighted to present Juana María Rodríguez’ piece, “Queer Politics, Bisexual Erasure: Sexuality at the Nexus of Race, Gender, and Statistics,” that raises an oddly forgotten or often ignored issue in contemporary LGBTQ studies, namely bisexuality. With the help of statistics and by connecting bisexuality with questions of race, Rodríguez shows how bisexuality remains an invisible category also within the field of queer femininities. She further explores how attending to bisexuality can contribute to a more nuanced discussion not only of sexual practices, but also of social justice.

Put together these articles and essays both build on existing scholarship and offer a range of new ways to theorize femininity, from the role

of makeup in the construction of civilized and natural white femininity, to rethinking the strategic use of pariah femininity in late 19th century theatric circles, from placing the question of trans* femininity at the center of critical femininity studies to considering the state of bisexuality in LGBTQ politics, and boldly suggests that there is promise to be found both in glitchy imperfections and the inherent grossness of gurlisque. That said, this special issue certainly does not exhaust femininity as a question for queer (feminist) studies, for gay analysis, for masculinity studies or as an empirical question in queer research and analysis. To that end, we hope to see more focus on the complexities of femininity, and to contribute to dialogue around how to theorize the *queerness* of (all) femininity as well as the role of relations *between* femininities. And while the production process for this issue has had more than a few glitches and extended “temporary disruptions,” you may be pleased to know that as this issue goes to print, our next issue, on queer temporalities will soon follow. However relevant our special issue topics hope to be, it could be said that if femininity and the editor, who is passionate about it, are characterized by both time optimism and perpetual delay, tellingly, questions of temporality seem, at this stage, to be both timely and on time. Happy reading!

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NOTES

1. Wilton's observations about Del LaGrace Volcano are particularly amusing, especially given that Volcano about a decade later made a book about queerly feminine subjects (Volcano and Dahl 2008).
2. An important contribution to studies of lesbian life in Sweden is Dina Avrahami's (2007) doctoral dissertation on lesbian "immigrants" and their experiences of racism and homophobia, but also of same-sex desire and their understandings of lesbian gender. Many informants explain that they grew up as "tomboys" and continue to disidentify with heteronormative conceptions of femininity but several informants also stress their strong identification with femininity and "womanhood."
3. Skeggs' (social scientific) femininity theory has inspired much important empirical work in the area of what I want to call critical femininity studies, including Fanny Ambjörnsson's (2004) dissertation on how class, race, and sexuality shape the femininities of Swedish high school girls. For other Swedish work that thinks critically and intersectionally about femininity, see Lena Sawyer (2006), Catrin Lundström (2007), Katarina Mattsson and Katarina Pettersson (2007), and Lena Sohl (2014).