Femme Life Writing: No Femininities Left Behind

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Queer theory and femme theory to-date have articulated the femme as queer by using the framework of antinormativity, which valorises the femme in contrast to a presumed hegemonic, heterosexual femininity (Maltry and Tucker 2022). While this frame has proved an effective way to explore femme-ininity in its own right, it keeps heterosexual femininities abjected within femme theory and creates an adversarial relationship between queer femmes and straight women (Eves 2004; Galewski 2005). In this article, I consider the benefits of exploring the queer femme[1] in relation to abjected forms of straight femininity. I'm interested in forms of feminine inheritance, holding families of origin alongside queer subjectivities, and political solidarity between various expressions of femininity that are culturally seen as unacceptable, deviant, or 'wrong.' I look at alternative frameworks for imagining femme outside of the binary rhetoric of antinormativity by seeking solidarity between different forms of femininity that are considered culturally unrespectable. In this context, the femme's deviation from norms of gender and sexuality can be reimagined as point of connection with various culturally abjected femininities.

This article looks towards a new model of femme theory based on solidarity between culturally abjected femininities. I understand femme theory in this context as a framework for political work, for challenging the harmful status quo of culture at large, and for understanding and conceptualizing femme identity. I read writing by Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, Raechel Anne Jolie, and Amber Dawn, to explore the extent to which femme identities can be informed by white trash femininities, deviant maternal femininities, and sex workers' experiences.

I use this space to take up questions from my in-progress doctoral dissertation, which looks at femme life writing to challenge the inherent masculine bias in queer theory. I'm interested in theoretical frameworks that reinsert feminised positions and concerns, such as parenting, domestic labour, care work, and aging, back into a

1 'Femme' is a term that is rooted in both North American lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s (Kennedy and Davis 1994) and the African American ballroom scene of the 1960s (Bailey 2014). It is also a term used by many queer-identified subjects to situate their femininity in relation to their queerness (Taylor 2018). For the purposes of this article, I am looking at writing by cisgender femmes who are assigned female at birth.

queer theory that has been accused of being elitist and inaccessible (Faderman 1997). I'm also interested in complicating the idea, implicit in many theories of femme identity, that femme is a more enlightened, feminist, and queer form of femininity than straight femininity. I find this idea problematic in that it frames straight femininities as inherently oppressive and unthoughtful. In this sense, I take femmes' autobiographical writing as an intervention in feminist and queer studies. I hope that these alternative ways of considering the queer femme will set the stage for new ways of thinking our foundational theoretical commitments.

Femme life writing can encompass many forms of writing, such as memoirs, essays, contributions to anthologies, online blogs, and social media posts (Schwartz 2020). Full-length publications of femme life writing started to be published in the memoir boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rak 2013). Among the most notable is the publication of the anthology *The Persistent Desire* (Nestle 1992) and memoirs by writers such as Dorothy Allison (1988, 1994, 1996), Jewelle Gomez (1993), Amber Hollibaugh (2000), and Joan Nestle (1998, 2003). This boom was followed by the publication of several femme anthologies that speak to a resurgence of femme culture in the 1990s and 2000s.[2] Femme memoirs continue to be published today and memoir remains a popular genre among queer writers, probably because there is still so little representation of queer identities and lived experiences in mainstream culture.

Despite the many negative attitudes that have existed towards femmes and femininity in lesbian, feminist, and queer culture since the 1950s, femmes have cultivated their own understanding of their gender identities and sexualities and have a strong sense of their identity as feminist and queer in the face of sexist stereotypes (Vaisseau 1995; Duggan and McHugh 1996). Femme life writing is in conversation with ideas about femmes and femininity that circulate in feminist and queer thought. Overall, femme life writing seeks to expand feminist and queer stories of femininity beyond the idea that femininity is a patriarchal imposition and to communicate femmes' own understanding of their gender identities and sexualities.

The accusation of inappropriate sexual behaviour and 'trashiness'—a coded class insult—has been levelled at femmes from within lesbian-feminist and queer communities (Mishali 2014; Rugg 1997). Working-class femmes' aesthetic has been seen as 'too sexual' (ibid.). Additionally, butch/femme relationships have been dismissed as too working-class and too visibly erotic, and therefore unrespectable (Nestle 2003; Pratt 2005). Working-class femme is therefore often aligned with working-class heterosexual femininity, in that both are considered trashy and deviate from the societal norm of modest, middle-class white femininity.

2 Key examples are Harris, L. and Crocker, E. (1997) *Femme. Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*. New York: Routledge; Newman, L. (ed.) (1995) *The Femme Mystique*. Boston: Alyson; Rose, C. B. and Camilleri, A. (eds.) (2002) *Brazen Femme. Queering Femininity*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp.

Femmes often describe their aesthetic as overtly sexual and intentionally in-your-face (Harris and Crocker 1997; Stafford 2010). Femmes are often sex workers (Blewett and Law 2018; Hollibaugh 2000; Payne 2002). Many femmes write that femmes share points of political solidarity with sex workers. These writers see a connection between femmes and sex workers in their deviation from hegemonic femininity (Blewett and Law 2018; Harris and Crocker 1997) and their shared historical penalisation under so-called moral decency laws (Blewett and Law 2018; Nestle 2003; Payne 2007).

In two books published in the 1990s, Dorothy Allison (1994, 1996) draws connections between her childhood in South Carolina in the United States, her relationship with her mother, aunts, and sisters, her femme identity, and her lesbian-feminist politics. Allison says that her desire to tell stories about the women of her family who were called "dirty fucking trash" (1994: 236) for their poverty and teenage pregnancies is one of the main reasons she writes. Allison's writing expresses a respect for domestic femininities and a connection to her family of origin that is unexpected in conventional coming-out narratives, which often talk about running away from the nuclear family in order to find the queer protagonist's 'true self' (Saxey 2008). Allison's experiences lead her to be critical of the lesbian-feminist movement she lived in as a young woman, which either misunderstood working-class women or simply failed to account for them altogether. Her understanding of her family shows her the importance of developing a feminist theory and activism that can address and include the needs not only of middle-class lesbians, but also of working-class women and straight women.

Allison's account of her own femininity and sexuality is deeply interwoven with the femininity of the women in her family of origin. When Allison falls in love with her first girlfriend Cathy, who is addicted to heroin, she learns that she is just like her mother and sisters. She writes, I am "female and feminine in the most traditional sense, foolish and damaged and hopeful" (Allison 1996: 249). Allison's masochistic desire for her girlfriend is the same her mother and sisters experience for the abusive men in their lives. Being a queer femme doesn't protect Allison from bad relationships and devastating heartbreaks. In fact, Allison enters into lesbian desire through this destructive, formative relationship. In the poem *the women who hate me*, Allison (1991) counters the lesbian-feminist belief that to be a lesbian is a more feminist choice than to be a heterosexual woman. In this poem, Allison describes her butch lover's punch to her face as an echo of the violence her stepfather inflicted on her mother. She declares "I do not believe anymore in the natural superiority/of the lesbian, the difference between my sisters and me" (Allison 1991: 29). Here, being a lesbian femme does not protect Allison from domestic violence, which her sisters and mother also experience.

We see similar themes about the commonality between straight femininities and queer femininities in femme life writing today. In her memoir *Rust Belt Femme*,

Rachael Anne Jolie also situates her femme gender within a tradition of strong, working-class women who are dismissed as white trash. Jolie connects femme's hypersexual aesthetic to white working-class women's femininity. Jolie articulates her femme identity as a blend of her middle-class grandmother's "Old Hollywood chic," the style and attitude of the working-class women who raised her in rural Ohio, and "the languid and aggressive femininity of alternative nineties women" (2020: 63). Jolie describes the women who raise her as "white, but not the right kind" (ibid.: 161). She sees femme as connected to the trashiness of these women, in that "they are both in the practice of embodying the deviant" (ibid.: 160).

Like many other femme writers, Jolie's femme identity is informed by working-class femininity. Jolie suggests that femme's working-class roots, brash aesthetic, and overt sexuality share commonalities with white-trash women's femininity. Both are excessively feminine in their aesthetic and excessively sexual. Referring to the working-class white women who raised her, Jolie describes her femme gender as "a product of this ragged but persistent femininity" (ibid.: 162).

For Jolie, both white-trash femininity and femme offer a way of dissenting with oppressive systems of class, gender, race, and sexuality through embodying an improper aesthetic and behaviour. She says of the community of women who raised her in rural Ohio in the 1990s: "their unfit bodies and sensibilities were undesirable, and […] eventually I'd want to be undesirable too if it meant I didn't abide an oppressive system" (ibid.: 161). Jolie's connection of her queer femme heritage to her childhood community and family offers a vision of femme femininity that is "contingent" on forms of straight femininity (ibid.). Jolie's connection between the working-class community of her childhood and her own femme sensibility paints a picture of a queer femininity that learns from traditions of straight femininity that are also culturally maligned.

Femme life writing also emphasises the importance of femmes' mothers and families of origin to the formation of femmes' gender identities and sexual desires. For some femmes, their mothers are the perpetrators of, or complicit in, sexual violence (Hollibaugh 2000; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2015). For others, their mothers are absent, perhaps selfish figures (Gomez 1993; Nestle 1998, 2003). Yet, they are also women who model strength, glamour, and sexual freedom to their children.

Femmes often see their mothers as models for their own femininity and as kinds of femmes themselves (Bryan 2002; Camilleri 2004; Hollibaugh 2000). Femmes whose mothers' behaviours and sexualities defy social norms describe a feminist, matriarchal inheritance that informs their identity (Allison 1994, 1996; Nestle 1998, 2003; Hollibaugh 2000). Femme life writing also connects femmes' experiences of social ostracism to their mothers' experiences of classism, sexism, racism, and whorephobia (ibid.). While queer narratives often cast families of origin and the successful queer adult as opposed (Driver 1996), femme writers chal-

lenge this separation of queer community and family, crafting a feminist, feminine lineage.

Joan Nestle is well-known (among femmes) for her writing about her mother, Regina. In two chapters originally published in 1987, "My mother liked to fuck" and "Two women: Regina Nestle, 1910–1978, and her daughter, Joan, 1940–," Nestle (2003) aligns her experiences as a queer femme in lesbian-feminist communities with her mother's experiences of whorephobia and classism. Throughout her writing, Nestle refuses to distinguish herself from Regina, the woman who is both "whore and mother," who she describes as pulled in different directions by her love for sexual adventure and her duty to take care of her children (1998: 77). Both mother and daughter are sexual outlaws in their own ways; both pursue "illicit loves" (Nestle 2003: 81). Regina has relationships with married men and engages in sex work. Joan is a lesbian, sex worker, activist, and femme who has relationships with butches.

Nestle's father died before she was born, leaving her working-class Jewish mother to raise two children without any family help in 1940s New York. Her mother survives by working hard and developing sexual relationships with her bosses and other men, sometimes embezzling money from her employers. Nestle describes her mother as someone who was socially ostracized for being an overtly sexual single woman and monetizing her relationships, but who insisted on her right to be sexual in spite of social disapproval. Nestle connects her mother's experiences of social ostracism to her own experiences of discrimination for being an out lesbian from the 1950s on. Her 1987 homage to her mother, "My mother liked to fuck", paints an alternative picture of motherhood to that common in cultural feminist theories of the time, in which mothers were seen as nature-oriented goddess figures, fulfilling their biological destiny. Nestle's mother is messy, complex, often a bad mother. She leaves her children in order to pursue sexual adventures and her gambling renders her and her children penniless and homeless for a time.

Nestle describes Regina as "a woman who did not want to be a mother" (ibid.: 75). She is a woman whose sexuality, much like her daughter's, refuses to be constrained by social norms. In this sense, Nestle claims her 'bad' mother as a model for her own sexual autonomy. Nestle inherits her mother's lifelong belief in "a woman's undeniable right to enjoy sex [and] to actively seek it" (ibid.: 115) and dedicates her own life to the understanding and pursuit of desire, sex, and to challenging any dogma—including feminist theories—that advocate the censorship of sexuality. Nestle imagines her mother asking her daughter to "help to change the world so no woman feels shame or fear because she likes to fuck" (ibid.: 117).

Unlike the femmes who describe mothers that try to regulate their daughters' bodies and control their transgressive sexual and social behaviour, Regina recognizes her daughter's sexual difference and gives her the tools she needs to survive. Nestle writes, "[m]y mother liked sex and let me know throughout the years both the punishment and rewards she earned because she dared to be clear about enjoying

fucking" (ibid.: 114). The legacy Regina leaves her daughter is one of sexual courage and rebellion. The lessons she learns from her mother teach Nestle to reject the feminist politics of her time that excludes working-class, heterosexual, 'unrespectable' women like Regina.

Dorothy Allison, Rachael Anne Jolie, and Joan Nestle, as well as many other femme writers, use writing to challenge the separation of queer femmes from straight women in queer politics. These writers' experiences lead them to explicitly discuss what is often only implicit in queer and feminist theory. That is, its middle-class bias and inability or refusal to account for straight women, working-class women, and sex workers. Queer politics here is not separate from or against the family of origin, but rather learns from it. These writers contradict the tropes usually deployed by queer narratives and queer theory. These tropes include coming-out and coming-into queerness as a break from the family and queer culture's interest in separatist communities. I'd like to see a queer feminism that holds different kinds of sexual outlaws together and that doesn't abject one group of people in order to advocate for another. I want my scholarship to contribute to this rethinking of norms and gesture outside of the binary antinormative so that these messy feminine experiences can be included in queer theory and femme theory.

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