

**The Femme, the Mother, and the Lesbian Feminist: Rereading Queer Theory's Difficult
Family Relationships**

Laura Brightwell

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies

York University

Toronto, Ontario

January, 2025

© Laura Brightwell, 2025

Abstract

The Femme, the Mother, and the Lesbian Feminist: Rereading Queer Theory's Difficult Family Relationships argues that queer theory propels itself forward by abjecting phenomena it frames as the normative, the outdated, and the politically regressive. Queer theory's methodological paranoia, often articulated by its commitment to antinormativity, creates problems for real-life queer subjects. I examine the implications of this framework for the queer femme, the mother, and the lesbian feminist. By re-evaluating the place of each figure in queer theory, I find a bridge to reintegrate critical considerations of femininities and culturally feminized experiences, including the maternal, into queer theory. Life writing by queer femmes is one site of queer feminist narrative that explores femininity beyond its characterization as a patriarchal imposition. Femme authors Dorothy Allison (1994; 1996), Beth Brant (2019a; 2019b), Joan Nestle (1998; 2003), and Minnie Bruce Pratt (1988; 1990; 2005) vindicate cultural figures and discourses that are associated with the feminine and the normative. These include the family of origin, the mother, the femme, and the lesbian feminist. I read queer theory's flight away from feminism and femininity in the context of the field's inaugural framing as the study of sexuality as opposed to a feminist concern with gender. I then explore femme writers' counternarratives to the coming out story to argue that a return home might repair our relationship to that which has hurt us. Taking a reparative approach to abject mothers offers one way for queer to reconcile itself to its own horrifying mother, the lesbian feminist. Femme writers recuperate the 'bad' mother in their life writing to gesture toward a femme theory that finds points of solidarity between queer and straight feminine subjects. This dissertation offers a new orientation to queer theory's own coming out story and a reparative approach to the ideas queers and feminists find ourselves troubled by, specifically the feminine, the maternal, and outdated feminisms. I weave intellectual genealogies and life writing to investigate the legacies of many families: families of feminist and queer thought; families of origin; chosen families; and created families, and each family's effect on queer communities and individuals.

Dedication

To Graham, Greer, and Maeve—my own little created family.

To my family of origin for being the point on the map to which I continually return, the people
I could never leave behind.

And to the queer femmes who died while I was writing this dissertation and without whose
dreaming this work wouldn't exist: Dorothy Allison, Amber Hollibaugh, Minnie Bruce Pratt,
and Elizabeth Freeman. Rest in power, femmes.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation wouldn't exist without the support of my partner, Graham McGlynn, who encouraged me to write throughout many obstacles, including a global pandemic, two pregnancies, and having two young children. He also proofread this dissertation twice. I couldn't have done this without you. I am also indebted to my supervisor Chloë Brushwood Rose who was endlessly optimistic, supportive, and firm, and gently pushed me throughout the long, evolving process of coursework, comprehensive exams, and writing this dissertation. Thank you, Chloë. I have learnt so much from your guidance and have thoroughly enjoyed your company. I can't imagine what this PhD process would have looked like without you!

I have found the intellectual company of several femme academics endlessly generative for my research. I was lucky to be part of a cohort of brilliant femme academics who were thinking and writing about femme at the same time as me, including Andi Schwartz, Allison Taylor, and Sarah York Bertram. Thank you in particular to Andi for asking me to join your research project. It's been a dream. My heartfelt thanks to Eva Karpinski for being endlessly supportive throughout the whole PhD and reminding me to be intellectually rigorous in my writing and to Alice MacLachlan for jumping on to the dissertation committee in the last months. It's been wonderful to have both your expertise and perspectives. A big thank you to Bobby Noble for guiding me in Chloë's direction and supporting this work on the other side of the gender binary.

Thank you to Jenna Danchuk and Sarah York Bertram for being such excellent colleagues, to members of the GWSSA, and departmental admin superstars Lindsay Gonder and Yemi Adebisi for helping me navigate the behemoth that is York. And of course, a shoutout to all my children's childcare providers, especially Mia Forbes and Charlotte Leach, without whom I would never have been able to complete this work.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Chapter One: Introduction: From the Femme to the Mother	1
Project Outline	1
My Investment in This Project	4
Methodology	7
Femmes and Femmephobia	7
Femme Life Writing	10
Queer Community	15
Time Period	18
Methodological Limitations	21
Summary of Chapters	25
Contribution to Knowledge	28
Chapter Two: Anti/Normativity: Queer Theory's Turn Away from Femininity	32
Introduction	32
'Sexuality, Not Gender'	33
Queer Antinormativity	39
'Performing Gender': The Influence of Gender Performativity	41
Queer Theory Casts Femininity as Normative	43
Conclusion	51
Chapter Three: Bringing Queer Theory Home: Reparative Readings of the Femme Life Writing	54
Introduction	54
Homonormativity and the Family	56
The Femme as Mediator	58
Reparative Practices: An Alternative Way of Approaching the Past	59
Dysfunctional Families: The Family of Origin	62
Dysfunctional Families: The Chosen Family	68
Femmes Return to the Family Home	73
Conclusion	78
Chapter Four: Don't Lose Your Mother: Reclaiming the Queer Feminist Legacy of the 'Bad' Mother	81
Introduction	81
"Lose Your Mother": Queer Daughters and Straight Mothers	82
Femme Life Writing and the Mother	85
The Deviant (Hetero)Sexual Mother	88
The Queer Femme Mother	94
Conclusion	106
Chapter Five: A Femme in Drag as Her Mother: Reconciling Queer to the Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other	109
Introduction	109
The Horrifying Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other	111
A Queer Femme-inist Drag	114
Lived Memories of the Mother	117

Loving the Horrifying (M)Other	121
Femme Dykes Against the Blurring of Time	126
Deep Lez Mothers.....	127
Conclusion: What Would it Take to Defang This Monster?	129
Chapter Six: Conclusion	132
Summary	132
Implications and Significance	134
Contributions to Sexuality Studies and Gender Studies	135
Expanding Femme Theory	137
Limitations	139
Femme as a Singular Identity	139
Paranoid Readings	141
Expanding Frameworks of the Family	142
Future Research	143
Reintegrating Sex into Queer Theory	143
Femmes' Created Families	144
Further Narratives of Queer Parenthood	146
Looking Back to Move Forward	147
References	149
Appendix: List of Femme Life Writing Surveyed	176

Chapter One: Introduction: From the Femme to the Mother

Project Outline

In this dissertation I contest the positioning of the feminine and the feminist in queer theory. I argue that queer theory has historically positioned feminine gender expressions as retrogressive and anti-feminist and removed considerations of cultural sites that are coded as feminine from queer theory. I read femme life writing to argue that queer theory's investment in frameworks of antinormativity contributes not only to femmephobia in queer culture, but also to the marginalization of trans and queer subjects who are racialized, working-class, femininely gendered and/or who have commitments to phenomena that are culturally coded as feminine, such as mothering, domesticity, and other forms of care work (Driver, 1999a; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010). Queer theory's divergence from the feminine and the feminist has made the queer femme illegible as queer, casts the mother and mothering as inherently normative, and constructs the lesbian feminist as the symbolic repository of unwanted feminisms, such as the trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF), white feminism, sex-negative feminism, and gender essentialism. I (re)turn to each of these three figures via the lens of femme life writing to excavate how they came to be seen this way and ask if queer theory can make space for more nuanced critical examinations of femininity and feminism.

My experiences of femmephobia over two decades of moving in various queer communities, and my shift into motherhood in the past six years, have each in their own ways led me to question my place in queer community and culture. My (re)turn to the site of femme life writing has been part of my attempt to find my own lineage as a queer femme writer and someone who has been so angered by femmephobia. I've encountered little discussion of femininity, outside of its function as a patriarchal construct, throughout my reading and graduate work in Sexuality Studies and Gender Studies. Instead, it feels like femininity in these fields still functions as an unspoken shorthand for white, hegemonic femininity and as a sign of oppression (Dahl, 2012). Writing by femmes has been the only

site in which I've found my gender and sexuality, and that of other femmes I know, represented accurately and in detail.

This dissertation believes in theory. I argue that our queer and feminist theories have very real effects on queer and feminist cultures and the lived experiences and well-being of people who move in these cultures. Queer theory to date has used frameworks of antinormativity to validate trans and queer identities in the face of lethal discrimination (Serano, 2013). While different queer theorists have taken antinormativity to mean different things (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015), it has often been taken as a critique of oppressive cultural norms of gender and sexuality (Shotwell, 2012; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). This critique extends to identities and sexual practices that are seen as heteronormative (Serano, 2013; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Antinormativity argues that queer and trans subjects' deviation from norms of gender and sexuality exposes heterosexuality and cisgender identity as cultural constructs, rather than biological facts (Butler, 1999; Hall, 2009; Walker, 2001). This framework is particularly present in communities of queers who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) and dyke culture (Serano, 2013). For these queer and trans subjects, an investment in antinormativity valorizes gender expressions and sexualities that deviate from feminine gender expression. AFAB queer subjects on the masculine spectrum, such as butch lesbians, trans men, and other masculine-of-centre and 'androgynous' queers are seen as subversive political actors (Anderson, 2012; Dahl, 2014; Serano, 2013), while feminine subjects, such as cis and trans queer femmes, trans women, feminine-of-centre lesbians, and even the identity 'lesbian,' can be seen as reproducing oppressive cultural norms (Serano, 2007; Wiegman, 2012). While queer theory situates queer masculinities, especially for AFAB subjects, as a site of emancipation from enforced gender roles, there has been little work outside of a small body of femme scholarship and life writing addressing the queer potentialities of embodying femininity (Dahl, 2012; 2016).

Queer theory and culture's investment in antinormativity also makes queer subjectivity a tenuous position; something that queer subjects can fall out of if they fail to 'do'

queer correctly. This threat is particularly present for femmes (Brightwell, 2018). Femme theory to date has countered femmephobia and femme invisibility by situating femme within this framework of antinormativity. Femmes, we argue, are queer because we ‘do’ femininity differently to cisgender straight women (Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Gomez, 1998; Hollibaugh, 2000; Leong, 2009; Senyonga, 2020): we challenge hegemonic feminine aesthetics and behaviour (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Davis, 1992b; Maltry & Tucker, 2002); and often orient our desire toward queer sexual partners rather than or as well as cisgender men (Browne, 2009; Davis, 1992a; Pratt, 2005).

This dissertation shows that the framework of antinormativity doesn’t work for many queer and trans feminine subjects. Femmes report that we are often misread as straight, cisgender women by other queers (Birtha, 1995; Eves, 2004; Hoskin and Taylor, 2019; Mishali, 2014). Femmes are often only recognized as such when out with a butch partner (Eves, 2004; Gomez, 2011; Maltz, 2002; Martin, 1996). Experiences of femme invisibility are compounded if we engage in culturally feminized phenomena such as domesticity, child-rearing, elder care, or sexual relationships that appear to take ‘normative’ forms including monogamy and being partnered with a cis-passing man (Bercuvitz, 1995; Findlay, 1998; Stelly, 2009). For example, punk femmes and high femmes who display an exaggerated feminine aesthetic tend to be more easily recognized as queer (Galewski, 2005; Gomez, 1998; Walker, 2012). But femmes who can’t or won’t perform a white-coded, high-femme aesthetic, including femmes with disabilities (Platt, 1992; Wachsler, 2009), fat femmes (Platt, 1992), low femmes (Elena, 1995; Schwartz, 2018b), Black femmes (Bryan, 2002, Senyonga, 2020; Shackelford, 2016; Tinsley, 2022), Brown femmes (ALOK, 2017), East Asian femmes (André & Chang, 2006; Yu, 2009), and other femmes of colour whose femininity looks different to a white, hegemonic norm, are often not identified as queer. As a binary framework, antinormativity facilitates too simplistic an understanding of what queerness and transness are, what they look like, and what forms of political resistance they can take.

In this dissertation, I outline the effects of queer theories on queer culture's perception of feminine aesthetics and culturally feminized phenomena; that is, everyday experiences that are characterized as belonging to a feminine realm. Scholars have documented the femmephobia of gay male and queer dyke and trans communities, suggesting queer culture's problematic relationship to the feminine (Bergling, 2001; Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Brightwell, 2018; Nguyen, 2014). Yet queer theory and culture's frameworks of gender have rarely been interrogated for the ways in which they understand femininity. I explore queer theory's desire to run away from the feminist and the feminine in various forms, including second-wave feminism, the lesbian feminist, and compulsory femininity for people who are AFAB. I show how these various erasures of gender augment femmephobia in queer culture and I seek to reincorporate culturally feminized phenomena into queer studies. I look at femmes' relationships to other phenomena that are culturally coded as feminine, in particular the site of the family home and the figure of the mother. By doing so, I point to connections between queer and straight femininities and highlight the ways in which queer and feminist knowledge can be shared between sites that are culturally coded as straight and those that are coded as queer.

My Investment in This Project

I started my PhD determined to write a dissertation about femmephobia. I was so mad about the femmephobia I had encountered in queer communities across various cities. Living in Montreal in the mid-2000s, I found that there was a general hesitation to adopt feminine styles, and there were few butches and femmes I could find in my predominantly anglophone, middle-class, youth-oriented graduate student circles and events. In the late 2000s in London, UK, there was a prevalent butch/femme aesthetic in the queer community I moved in that often took the form of Victorian-esque dandy for transmasculine folk and 1950s housewife vintage for femmes. I enjoyed this, but noticed that the most lauded femmes were white, thin, and conventionally beautiful. I then moved to Berlin, Germany, in 2010 and was a femme fish out of water. There was a punk uniform of masculine-of-centre

androgyny, short haircuts, black clothing. To wear a skirt, let alone a red or pink one, was shocking. The aesthetic wore on me. I felt unattractive, unfuckable. I stopped wearing skirts but also started getting angry. I wrote a blog and created a collaborative zine about the femmephobia I experienced. I created workshops on sexism in the queer community and co-organized a femme cabaret, The Berlin Femme Show, attended by 600 people. I found the power of working with other femmes to change culture. When I moved to Toronto in 2012, I found that there were more femmes and femme appreciators, but the anger stayed with me.

I started this project intending to write about femmephobia in queer theory and culture. I turned to femme life writing because it seemed that femmes had been countering feminist, lesbian, and queer stories about femininity by articulating femme identity on their own terms since the 1950s (Nestle, 1992a; Stafford, 2010), yet knowledge from a femme standpoint hasn't been taken up in queer or feminist theory and studies at large until very recently (Dahl, 2012). I read life writing published in English, in North America, by American and Canadian femmes who explicitly identify as such, to trace the nature of the femme complaint about our erasure and exclusion from both the feminist and the queer archive. The femme life writing I encountered in anthologies of the 1990s and early 2000s that discussed femme identities, and the few essay collections, poetry collections, and memoirs by self-identified femme authors, have been the main site in which I have encountered discussions of femme identities, femmephobia in lesbian and queer communities, and femmes' experiences of marginalization. These anthologies, collections, and memoirs are often published by small, independent presses that aim to publish feminist contents and/or work by people who experience social oppressions, and by academic publishing houses. Some of these publishing houses, such as Alyson Publications and Firebrand Books, have since shut down and many of these books are out of print. The publications I looked at span 1998 to 2020, although the majority of these were published during the 1990s and early to mid 2000s.

I wanted to provide a comprehensive survey of this body of work, to see what had and hadn't changed for femmes over the decades. I wrote chapters about femme invisibility and femmes' experiences of gender-based oppression. But as I wrote, I changed and so did the project. I've had two kids and taken two maternity leaves in the past six years. I've seen my domestic workload increase dramatically and my doctoral progression delayed by the demands of parenting two young kids during a global pandemic. I've also found a different connection to my own parents after years of fury at their homophobia and conservatism. I especially have more empathy toward my mother as my own position has pivoted from that of the wronged queer child to a frustrated mother trying to balance my own desires—career, creative, sexual—with the needs of my children. I feel like I have become the middle-class part-time working-mom stereotype. My shift into motherhood has also compounded my invisibility as a femme.

So, I guess it makes sense that in this project I have ended up writing about femmes' connections to their family homes and their difficulties reconciling their political beliefs with the families and communities they came from. Amber Hollibaugh (2000) speaks to the two homes she has wanted to run away from; her childhood home and her lesbian-feminist and left-wing activist communities. She wants "to write about how impossible it is to blindly flee—but never forget—a complicated community of birth or a complex and imperfect radical movement" (Hollibaugh, 2000, p. 7). Dorothy Allison (1994) declares that as a teenager she "wanted to run away from" her difficult family, both "who we had been seen to be" by others and "who we had been" (p. 19). But Allison (1996) also argues this attempt to run away always fails because you always "take your world with you" (p. 4). I am not much like Hollibaugh or Allison. I come from an upper-middle-class background. I was expected to be a doctor or a lawyer. I've always had a financial safety net. Allison and Hollibaugh were the first in their family to get a high school diploma. They were expected to become mothers to many children, work in low-pay jobs, and struggle to survive like the women of their families before them. They have worked harder than I've ever known and have spoken out against

injustice in the face of terrifying consequences. And yet their words have resonated with me. I also learnt glamour from my grandmothers and mother. I, too, have faced discrimination for what I look like and who I fuck in my lesbian and queer communities. In the anglophone, francophone, and German-speaking queer communities I have lived in—namely in Leeds and London in the United Kingdom, Berlin, Germany, and Montreal and Toronto in Canada, I have also found the promise of a welcoming queer community to be a common dream that is never quite realized. In a sense, this dissertation is about families. Intellectual families and the inheritances they both negotiate and generate. Feminist inheritances. Families of origin, chosen families, and the families we create. The ideas that we choose to invest in structure our homes and our communities. They shape who is and isn't welcome, who is and isn't seen. Like many stories, this dissertation explores where I do and don't belong, as a queer femme and mother, and how all my families—disciplinary, of origin, chosen, and my own little nuclear family—have shaped my political imaginary.

Methodology

Femmes and Femmeophobia

Femme is a contested term whose usage has shifted in the past decade. Many straight and queer people now use femme to denote anyone—queer or straight—who looks feminine, or as a synonym for 'woman' (Whittall, 2021). However, femme has several specifically queer and trans lineages. Lesbian historiography locates the term 'fem' or 'femme' emerging from North American bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s (Kennedy & Davis, 1997; Nestle, 1992a). Femme also has roots in Black U.S. ballroom culture that emerged from Harlem in the 1960s, in which 'femme queen' refers to Black trans women (Bailey, 2014). Femme is also used in cross-dresser communities, where assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) cross dressers refer to their feminine presentation as "being on femme" (Schwartz, 2023, 14:36). While for some, femme isn't a trans identity, for other femmes both AMAB and AFAB, femme denotes transgender identity, variously including being a trans woman (ALOK, 2017; Serano 2013), transgender (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997), or

nonbinary (Shackelford, 2016). For this research project, I am referring specifically to the experiences of femmes who are involved in queer dyke culture, whether AMAB or AFAB. This includes femmes who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, nonbinary, or trans. Owing to my choice of research object—published life writing by authors who explicitly identify as femme—the majority of the writers I read were AFAB. The five authors that I investigate in most detail—Dorothy Allison, Jewelle Gomez, Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt—are all AFAB femmes, born in the 1940s, whose life writing speaks to the lesbian-feminist movement of the late 1960s to 1980s and early queer movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

Queer femmes have negotiated discourses of antinormativity that understand femininity as inherently normative since North American lesbian bar culture of the late 1940s to early 1960s. Femmes have positioned their femininity as an overt, ‘in your face’ sexual style that differs from hegemonic, modest, middle-class femininity (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Stafford, 2010). As Asha Leong (2009) puts it, it’s “femme like ‘fuck you’” (p. 71). This framing responds in part to the accusation that femmes are fake, temporary lesbians who will eventually revert to heterosexuality (Nestle, 1992a; Serano, 2013). It also articulates femme according to the terms of queer and feminist discourses (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012) and to fit into a queer visibility politics that only recognizes queer subjects by their gender transgressions (Walker, 2012). This idea of the femme as a distinct, recognizable queer style is particularly present in femme culture of the 1990s through to the early 2000s (see for example, Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Harris & Crocker, 1997a; Hollibaugh, 2000). However, this understanding of femme style as different to hegemonic femininity is still present today (see for example, Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Jolie, 2020; Schwartz, 2018b). In this dissertation, I understand femme as a queer gender identity and sexuality with a historically specific lesbian and queer lineage. I don’t understand the femme as an inherently normative or antinormative identity.

Rather, I explore the ways in which queer discourses of antinormativity have produced femme as an identity that is continually refracted through this lens.

Femmephobia is a similarly contested term that historically has been used to denote negative attitudes toward the feminine gender expressions of feminine queer women and feminine queer men (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Conte, 2018). While some recent theorists expand the definition of femmephobia to encompass negative attitudes toward femininity in culture at large (Hoskin, 2021; Whiley et al., 2022), in this dissertation I use the term femmephobia in the sense of pertaining to queer feminine subjects to retain the specificity of this form of sexism. My experiences in queer dyke communities as a cisgender femme have led me to wonder: Why do communities comprised of people who identify as queer and feminist often manifest negative attitudes toward femininity? What is the place of femininity in both queer and feminist thought? I therefore restricted my examination of femmephobia to the experiences of femmes in dyke communities.

I came to this dissertation wanting to prove the fact of femmephobia and understand why lesbian and queer communities have historically been, and continue to be, so femmephobic. I observed that transmasculine identities were lauded for being politically subversive in queer dyke communities, while transfeminine identities were seen as normative. This was also an academic idea, sparked by the influence of Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, and subsequent academic writing about queer or trans masculinities (see for example Halberstam, 1998; Noble, 2004; Prosser, 1998), with little simultaneous investigation of queer or trans femininities (Dahl, 2012). I wondered if inquiring into the place of femininity in queer theory would reveal something about the place of femininities in queer communities. Following Ulrika Dahl's (2012) observation that critical masculinity studies has become an increasing popular field yet, until very recently, there has been no equivalent exploration of femininity, I sought to intervene in feminist theory's tendency to treat femininities as an effect of patriarchal culture and queer theory's apparent forgetting of queer femininities altogether (Mishali, 2014). My research objectives were to

find out: 1) how queer theory understands gender, especially femininity; 2) How femmes have been marginalized within lesbian, queer, and feminist movements; 3) How femmephobia intersects with other forms of marginalization; 4) How femmes understand their identities and respond to the stories others have told about them.

The questions I brought to my dissertation required that I identify sources written by people who explicitly identify as femme and address questions of femme experience in their work. To avoid problems of accidentally claiming non-femme writers as femme, I restricted my reading to texts by authors who have stated they are femme either in the text or in records of their public life. I wanted to look at the experience of queer femmes, rather than feminine lesbians, to bring the intellectual and feminist lineage of this specific queer identity to the fore. There has been little academic attention paid to queer femininities, in contrast to the wealth of literature on queer masculinities (Dahl, 2012). In this context, femme life writing constitutes an “archive of femme experience” (Harris & Crocker, 1997a, p. 6) in the absence of the representation of femme identities and experiences in lesbian and queer cultural production at large.

Femme Life Writing

I use the term life writing to signal the breadth and diversity of narrative forms of the femme non-fiction I read. I follow Smith and Watson’s (2010) broad definition of life writing to include any “writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject,” which can include biographies, novels, historical, or otherwise “explicitly self-referential” (p. 4) texts. This generous definition allows me to include the various forms of writing in which femmes discuss their identity and lived experiences, including poetry, collections of essays, short non-fiction contributions to anthologies, book-length memoirs, and one short story. It seems pertinent to me that some forms of life writing, especially those that concern feminized or racialized subjects, such as narratives about women’s domestic lives, slave narratives, and coming-of-age stories, have historically been devalued owing to their perceived inability to appeal to a masculine, imperialist sense of ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ (Marlatt, 1990; Smith and

Watson, 2010). Each of the texts I discuss in this dissertation host the author's recounted experiences, and some contain fictionalized elements, such as Beth Brant's (2019a) first-person narrative of an Indigenous woman in nineteenth-century New York State or Nestle's (1998; 2003) ventriloquization of her dead mother's voice. Given that both our memories and self-narratives are never comprehensive or factual, but rather subjective (Boyd, 2008), I take femme life writing as an archive of what Murphy et al. (2016) call a "written record of subjective experiences of queerness" (p. 4) rather than historical record. I read life writing for its theoretical implications (Karpinski, 2011), specifically in relationship to dominant tropes in queer theory (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021).

Many of the interests Smith and Watson (2010) state can propel life writing resonate with the interests of queer writers (among many culturally marginalized subjects): a claim to rights, to visibility, the expression of grief, and the demand for reparation in the face of injustice. A desire to give voice to and make visible particularly propels the femme life writing anthologies I read such as: *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992b), edited by Joan Nestle; *The Femme Mystique* (1995), edited by Lesléa Newman; *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002), edited by Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri; and *Visible: A Femmethology Volumes One and Two* (2009), edited by Jennifer Burke. This claim to visibility is central to rights discourse—one needs to be recognized before rights can be granted or reparation can be made (Walker, 2001). It's also a femme concern given the phenomenon of femme invisibility, whereby so many femmes are not recognized as queer in their queer and lesbian communities owing to their feminine gender presentation (Eves, 2004; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; VanNewkirk, 2006; Walker, 2001). To understand life writing as a form of redress also draws attention to its analytic component, whereby it can critique the operation of power within the dominant culture from the standpoint of the culturally marginalized subject (Marlatt, 1990). This framework aligns with femme author Nestle's (2003) understanding of life writing as a way of giving voice to those often marginalized in dominant histories.

Queer writers are repeatedly drawn to autobiographical genres for their ability to showcase marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives (Stewart, 2017). This is perhaps because subjects who deviate from the norm are “forced to speak [their] objection” (Mishali, 2009, p. 152) out loud. The 1990s saw a proliferation of published femme life writing (Levitt et al., 2003), both in the form of single author monographs and anthologies. Autobiographical writing has also been a central component of queer theory, queer studies, trans studies, and feminist studies (Stewart, 2017). It has been read not only to bring “critical attention [to] queer subjectivities,” (Stewart, 2017, p. 64), but also to challenge and reframe heteronormative ideologies. It may be understood in feminist and queer studies that to say something about the self is to say something about the culture (Riessman, 2007).

Femme life writing published during the early 1990s is part of a wider surge in the publication of gay and lesbian literature driven by the social justice movements of the 1970s and the activist response to the AIDS crisis (Nava, 2021). Femmes writing in the 1980s and 1990s state their desire to voice histories and experiences that have been marginalized within second-wave feminism, lesbian feminism, and the Civil Rights movement (Allison, 1994; 1996; Gomez, 1993; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle 1998; 2003). Femme anthologies of the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s respond to the devaluation of femme identities as anti-feminist and ‘not queer’ in early queer culture (see for example, Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Burke, 2009a; 2009b; Harris & Crocker, 1997a; Munt, 1998; Newman, 1995). The late 1980s to early 2010s was the most prolific era for femme life writing published in print, but femme memoirs and poetry continue to be published in more recent years (see for example, Dawn, 2013; Horlick, 2015; Jolie, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). Writing by femme trans women or transfeminine queers has particularly burgeoned in recent years (see for example, ALOK, 2017; Shraya, 2016; 2018; Serano, 2007; 2013; Thom, 2017; 2019; 2023). Life writing may now be a well-established academic field, but femme stories have been and still are culturally marginalized. Femmes continue to discuss our experiences of femmephobia (see for example, Hoskin, 2019; 2020; Schwartz, 2018b;

Story, 2017; Taylor, 2022) and many of these femme life writing publications are now out of print and hard to find.

Femme life writing has been main site in which I've found my own femme gender, sexuality, and experiences of femmephobia reflected. This seems to be a common story among femmes. Femme writers often imagine femme life writing as a source of "untold" (Duggan & McHugh, 1996, p. 155) stories, knowledge transmission, and even a site of femme "lineage" (Coyote & Sharman, 2011, p. 25; Schwartz, 2019, para. 6). Femmes describe femme life writing as a way of 'finding ourselves' and others like us and coming into femme identity and desire (Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Maltz, 2002; Millersdaughter, 1997; Nnawulezi et al., 2015; Payne, 2002). Some even argue that without femme life writing we wouldn't know this identity, and the realization of our sexual dreams, were a possibility (Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Fetherston-Power, 2009; Henson, 1995; Thom, 2017; Wilson, 2009). Femme writers have argued that femme knowledge has not been taken up by lesbian and queer culture at large (Brightwell & Taylor, 2021; Hemmings, 1999; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 1992a), despite the proliferation of femme narrative forms. This omission creates the sense of repetition across decades of writing because it feels like not many people are listening, even if some are.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) writes that investigating non-traditional archives becomes crucial when exploring histories of marginalized sexual subjects, whose histories have been erased, made invisible, contradict official history, or are absent from institutional documentation. Andi Schwartz (2018b) uses Heather Love's (2007) theorization of 'feeling backwards' to explain femmes' "strong attachment to the fore-femmes found within femme theory" (p. 7). Like many others, queers and femmes can feel isolated, and therefore are driven to look to the past "to seek a community and a history" (Schwartz, 2018b, p. 7). As one of the few places where femmes' voices are heard, femme life writing has been used by scholars of femme experience to develop their own arguments. To take femme life writing as

an archive, then, is a deeply femme practice that continues the tradition of excavating femme voices.

To get a sense of the archive of femme life writing, I conducted a literature review of all the femme life writing in English, published in print, and written by people who explicitly identify as femme that I could find. Owing in part to the creation of small publishing houses that published feminist and lesbian content in North America and the UK during second-wave feminism (McKinney, 2018; 2020; Nava, 2021; Riley, 2018), nearly all of the femme life writing I read is written by either American or Canadian authors, and one collection—*Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (1998), edited by Sally Munt—was published in the United Kingdom. I am aware of two German books of life writing about femme, *Femme! Radikal—queer—feminin* (*Femme! Radical—queer—feminine*, my translation) (2009) and *Femme/Butch: Dynamiken von Gender und Begehren* (*Femme/Butch: Dynamics of Gender and Desire*, my translation) (2020), both by Sabine Fuchs. Swedish academic Ulrika Dahl has also written a prolific body of work on femme in English and Swedish, including the photographic tribute *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2008) in collaboration with Del LaGrace Volcano. However, femme may well be a predominantly anglophone phenomenon (Mirha-Soleil Ross, in conversation, 2024) and there are other culturally specific terms for queer gender identities and sexualities in many cultures.

I restricted my reading to memoirs, collections of autobiographical essays, and short stories, contributions to queer or femme life writing anthologies, and a few single-author collections of poetry. There is a huge proliferation of femme narrative forms on the internet, such as blogs and social media (Schwartz, 2018a). Yet as a trained literary scholar, I was drawn toward the printed and the long-form, the possibility of finding rare, out-of-print books, and reading them in conjunction to see what emerged. It also felt like these books constituted a more manageable archive. Despite the fact that life writing arguably contains fictional elements (Smith & Watson, 2010), I excluded works of fiction such as novels out of a perhaps misguided assumption that these are less reflective of their authors' life

experiences. I read seven memoirs, six single-author collections of autobiographical essays and short stories, six single-author poetry collections, and 11 edited anthologies. I also read several essays published in queer anthologies whose overall topic was not specifically about femme. In all, I read life writing by 110 femme-identified authors (see appendix for a complete list of the books I read). Despite being trained in literary theory in my bachelor's and master's degrees, I analyzed these texts using a thematic narrative analysis, which focuses on the context of what is being told, rather than a literary analysis of the form of the telling (Riessman, 2007, p. 1). I thus treat femme life writing as a repository of data that I approach through thematic analysis. This is part of a scholarly tradition of reading femme life writing to generate femme theory in the absence of many other considerations of femme experience in academic literature. My initial list of themes reflected the assumptions I brought to the texts (Riessman, 2007). These include femmes' accounts of femmephobia in lesbian-feminist and queer communities, femmes' negotiation of invisibility as queer subjects, femmes' stories about their gender, sex, desire, and relationships, and femmes' understanding of themselves as feminist subjects. But as I gathered the categories I was interested in, new categories I hadn't thought of emerged, such as the stories femmes tell about their experiences of their gender identity (e.g. femme as performative vs. innate, pleasurable vs. painful, not feeling queer, lesbian, or femme enough), the racialized inflections of femme in/visibility, femmes' critique of lesbian-feminist and gay respectability politics, femme writers' sense that they are recording lesbian and queer histories, femme writers' hope that their narratives will contribute to social change, and some femmes' deep connections to their mothers and families of origin.

Queer Community

In her poetry collection *a place called No Homeland* trans femme poet Kai Cheng Thom (2017) asks "What is this queer community that everyone keeps talking about?" (p. 31). Throughout my writing, I've found myself asking a similar question. What do I mean when I say queer community? Where is queer community located? Why do the geographically and

nationally specific queer communities that I've lived in feel similar? It is difficult to speak to an experience that is affective and that feels pervasive. I also run the risk of finding that the 'queer community' I have in mind isn't the same as the one conjured in other people's minds. I will therefore try to describe what I mean when I say queer community. The queer community that I invoke in this dissertation is similar to that described by Julia Serano (2007) in her critique of transmisogyny in the queer community in the United States almost twenty years ago:

It is a subgroup within the greater LGBTIQ community that is composed mostly of folks in their twenties and thirties who are more likely to refer to themselves as "dykes," "queer," and/or "trans" than "lesbian" or "gay." While diverse in a number of ways, this subpopulation tends to predominantly inhabit urban and academic settings, and is skewed toward those who are white and/or from middle-class backgrounds. In many ways, the queer/trans community is best described as a sort of marriage of the transgender movement's call to "shatter the gender binary" and the lesbian community's pro-sex, pro-kink backlash to 1980s-era Andrea Dworkinism. (p. 345)

Serano evokes an image of a youth-oriented queer community, whose modes of socializing are best suited to people able to engage in urban nightlife and graduate studies. The socioeconomic mobility and freedom of time this setting implies speaks to lifestyle (less likely to be a parent or primary caregiver), socioeconomic mobility (ability to pay rent in an expensive city, work part-time), and white privilege. Mary Senyonga (2020) and Kaila Story (2017) also convey this sense of a predominantly white, middle-class, and academic queer community in their recent accounts of their encounters with anti-Black femmephobia as Black femme professors. It is these kinds of predominantly white, predominantly middle-class, urban, youth-oriented, often academically involved, lesbian and queer communities that the femmes I read speak to in their critiques of femmephobia, classism, racism, and whorephobia.

Several theorists also speak to the idea of a queer sensibility that is part of feeling a belonging to queer culture. José Esteban Muñoz's (1999; 2009) body of work suggests shared queer investments and desires in its description of queer media practices and evocation of queer utopias. We might call these queer sensibilities, affinities, or even culture. Sara Ahmed (2006) argues that queer subjects—and indeed any subjects—know ourselves to be home by certain “landmarks or other familiar signs” (p. 1) that both “help us...find our way” (p. 1) and create a sense of group belonging. These landmarks generate a sense of common ground, tell us if we are home, and delineate the boundaries of the group. Ahmed's (2014) work on how emotions circulate also suggests that groups are bound by shared sensibilities and emotions, and that the existence of certain ‘others’ is perceived as a threat to the family or social order. Ahmed, Muñoz, and Serano (2007) each suggest that the circulation of certain practices, affects, and objects work to secure a sense of shared queer identity.

My understanding of queer community entails this sense of shared ideologies, beliefs, feelings, sensibilities and cultural objects. It is my assumption, as I move from Montreal to London to Berlin and then to Toronto that I will find ‘my people’ (McKinney, 2018). That there is a community to be found. Queer community for me evokes the cultural space, oriented around nightlife, activist events, and university-hosted events in which I have encountered the same femmephobic views and actions but expressed by different people in different places. It is shared culture; queer celebrities that no one outside of the queer scene has heard of, but who are rock stars to us. It is international, specific to Western countries, often dominated by the English language, and influenced by the history of queer activism and queer culture from the United States, despite many times being located elsewhere. U.S. cultural imperialism explains why so many of these ideas are found across different English-speaking countries in different contexts and in non-English speaking countries too. For example, my two years in Berlin taught me that Berliner queer culture is emphatically marked by queer culture from the United States, Berlin's historical and ongoing role as host

city to international activists, writers, and artists who often communicate in English, and Germany's current anti-fascist movements that emerge from its own particular national history.

In this dissertation, I argue that queer aesthetics and a commitment to countering gender norms constitute some of queer identity's signs of belonging. The first family I take up in this research project is a queer one, the social order that of a subculture. I investigate antinormativity as a shared belief, aesthetic and sign of belonging. If queer's investment in antinormativity shows us anything, it is that subcultures are bound by ideologies as much as dominant cultures. I hope to show how the investments queer makes serve to create a sense of group identity but also inevitably exclude certain others from the family home.

Time Period

What does it mean that I am returning to femmes' experiences of lesbian feminism and early queer theory to say something about queer community now? I started my project firmly rooted in the current moment—an investigation into femmephobia now—but reading femme life writing I found myself continually drawn backwards to the 1970s and 1980s. The first reason for this turn backwards is that the majority of the femme life writing I found was published during the late 1980s through to the early 2000s in North America. The proliferation of queer life writing in the forms of memoirs and anthologies in this place and time is part of a wider increase in the publication of memoirs during this period (Rak, 2013; Smith and Watson, 2010). The civil rights, second-wave feminist, and gay liberation movements had fostered the creation of lesbian, feminist and women-centred publishing houses in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Women's Press, Arsenal Pulp Press, and Sister Vision Press in Canada; Alyson Publications, Aunt Lute Books, Cleis Press, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Firebrand Books, and Naiad Press in the United States; and Black Woman Talk Collective, The Women's Press, and Virago in the United Kingdom (McKinney, 2018; 2020; Nava, 2021; Riley, 2018). Supported by a lesbian and feminist community that had "its own cultural infrastructure" (Nava, 2021), these publishers had more freedom to

publish lesbian and feminist content and there was a surge of lesbian and gay literature, including writing by Black writers, writers of colour, and Indigenous writers in the 1980s to 1990s. Seminal life writing from this time includes the anthologies *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) edited by Barbara Smith, *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* (1991) edited by Makeda Silvera, *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection By North American Indian Women* (1988) edited by Beth Brant, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992) edited by Joan Nestle, and the single-author books *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) by Audre Lorde, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa, *A Restricted Country* by Joan Nestle (1987), and *Trash* (1988) by Dorothy Allison, to name a very few. Many of these publishing houses, including Alyson Publications, Firebrand Books, and Cleis Press, were publishers of femme life writing during the 1990s and 2000s. A lot of these publishing houses have since closed and some have been acquired by larger corporations.

The femme writers who were published during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s comprise both the generation of writers who were active in 1970s and 1980s lesbian feminism who witnessed (and propelled) the shift into 1990s queer culture, and those who were young adults in the 1990s. Thus, navigating the ideologies of lesbian-feminist culture of the late 1960s to mid 1980s and early queer culture of the 1990s and early 2000s is often a key theme in these texts. The proliferation of femme life writing during this period makes it well-situated to reflect on the ideologies of the lesbian-feminist movement and those of early queer culture. The burgeoning of femme life writing at this historical moment led me to examine the turn from lesbian feminism to queer culture, and to draw comparisons between the two moments via the lens of femme narrative.

A second reason I turned to these specific texts is that these femmes' descriptions of their encounters with lesbian feminism resonated with my own experiences of queer community, despite my younger age. Femme writers have taught me that classism, racism,

femmephobia, and whorephobia manifest in similar ways across different decades, that early queer theory was forged by lesbian-feminist thinkers, and that despite cultural changes misogyny is a constant. Serano's (2007) observation that the contemporary queer community has dual lineages in the 1990s transgender movement and the pro-sex feminism that came to the fore during the 1980s feminist sex wars highlights that the current queer community emerges out of and has been shaped by prior political movements. Queer theory thus both usurps lesbian feminism and remains tied to it (Freeman, 2010). This theoretical lineage is perhaps what I sensed when I started to look at the connections between queer theory and lesbian feminism. Several writers and artists speak to this idea of a lesbian and queer community cast across time and connect the current queer community to the lesbian-feminist movement. See for example, Cait McKinney's investigation into the information economies of the homophile (2018) and lesbian-feminist (2020) movements to tell readers something about queerness today. Or Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue's creation of an immersive, walk-through lesbian-feminist haunted house that allows participants to encounter the unwieldy spectres of lesbianism feminisms past that continue to haunt us queers in the present (Mitchell & McKinney, 2019). Theory by queer feminists, especially Victoria Hesford (2013) and Heather Love (2007), also emphasizes lesbian feminism's function as a sticky site that keeps popping up in queer studies and culture no matter how much we try to repress it.

The publication of femme life writing during this political moment highlights similarities between queer theory and lesbian feminism's understanding of femininity, despite queer theory's claim to diverge from lesbian feminism (Fraiman, 2003; Hesford, 2013; Huffer, 2013). Femme life writing has led me to my claim that femininity has been understood in a simplistic manner throughout these two movements and remains tethered to the normative and the hegemonic in contemporary feminist and queer thought. Femme life writing is also one lens that complicates this simplistic framework and lends itself to alternative readings of femininity as variously innate (Birtha, 1995; Crone, 1995; Lemberg,

2009), chosen (Baker, 1995; Tweedy 2009a; 2009b), a kind of drag performance (Bomb, 2009; Hollibaugh, 2000; Lewis, 2012b), different from hegemonic femininity (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Davis, 1992a; Ohme, 1995) and not tied to the AFAB body (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; André & Chang, 2006). I follow femme life writing's complication of queer femme-ininity to claim that both feminist and queer theories need to develop more nuanced and intersectional accounts of femininity rather than understanding 'femininity' as synonymous with white, heterosexual, middle-class, sexually modest hegemonic femininity.

Methodological Limitations

Femme Life Writing and the Family.

After my second maternity leave during my PhD, I found that I returned to these books with different questions. My experiences of domestic drudgery, the hormonal waves of incubating and raising two babies, and my renewed understanding of institutionalized sexism as a mother and primary caregiver drew me to femmes' framing of their own mothers and their seeming determination—to paraphrase Hollibaugh—to bring what they'd learnt as activists and queers back home. These femmes' commitment to the family of origin struck me: here is another culturally feminized site that is overlooked in queer theory. In queer narratives, the family home is often configured as that which the queer subject must flee from to find their own, new home in queer community (Gordon, 2005; Saxey, 2008). I returned continually to Biddy Martin's (1996) critique of queer antinormativity: "Implicit in these constructions of queerness, I fear, is the lure of an existence without limit, without bodies or psyches, and certainly without mothers" (p. 70). To bring a femme lens to my reading seemed to entail interrogating the relationship between how queer femmes and how other feminine women are positioned in queer thought. This framework aligned with my long-term suspicion that the elevation of the queer femme as antinormative at the cost of casting heterosexual women as normative bought into misogynist attitudes overall.

My original framing of my project created some methodological limitations. The questions I first brought to my project that asked about femmes' experiences of their identities and sense of community belonging in the face of femmephobia were not those I ended up addressing comprehensively in my final dissertation. Although I kept my investigation into the place of femininity in queer and feminist theory, my experiences as a mother led me to an expanded understanding of inheritance as both theoretical and familial and of femininity as both a gender presentation and culturally feminized behaviour. I reread queer and feminist thought as a theoretical inheritance that has shaped anglophone academia in the overlapping fields of queer, sexuality, and gender studies. I came to understand the lesbian feminist as a 'bad mother' in the eyes of her truculent child, queer theory. And I tied my increased interest in mothers back to femme theory. I followed Nestle (1998; 2003) to read how 'bad mothers' can be aligned with queer femmes—both are accused of doing femininity in the wrong way. And I expanded my consideration of femininity to include the place of culturally feminized phenomena such as child-rearing and domestic labour in queer theory. I deleted three chapters I had written examining femmephobia, femme invisibility, and feminist theory, and turned my attention to families and mothers.

While I found femme a productive lens through which to explore these questions, taking femme life writing as my main data source created some limitations. There has been a proliferation of life writing by nonbinary and transmasculine parents, lesbians, and gay men about their experiences of parenting (see for example, Bergman, 2013; Berney, 2021; Moraga, 2022; Savage, 1999; Summers, 2014). However, there is little published writing by queer femmes about their experiences of parenthood. My examination of queer femmes' experiences meant that I couldn't investigate the ways in which queer and trans gestational parents of all gender identities navigated expectations of femininity and the 'mothering' role. The relative lack of writing by femmes about parenting also left me unable to address another familial form—the family that femmes create by deciding to raise children. I suspect that AFAB femme parents may not write about their experiences of parenting precisely

because in appearing to be a mother (whether or not they use that term) they seem to affirm the naturalized association between the AFAB body, femininity, compulsory heterosexuality, and compulsory motherhood. In this dissertation, I argue that this association between femininity, the AFAB body, and motherhood is what leads queer theory to disavow femininity.

Finding Femmes.

Relying on explicit femme self-identification means that I can't claim writers who don't say they are femme as femme even if I want to. This framework led me to omit writers who may seem femme but say they aren't or may have been femme but I couldn't find the archival evidence to confirm it. Working on this dissertation and the project "On Our Own Terms: An Oral History and Archive of Queer Femme Community and Culture in Toronto, 1990-2000" has revealed to me the ways in which my own positionalities as a white, cisgender, middle-class, British femme, and settler in Canada have shaped my research. While femme is not a white identity, to claim femmeness or queerness as that which merits investigation first may be a function of whiteness (Brushwood Rose in conversation, 2024). While there are Black femmes, femmes of colour, and Indigenous femmes in the femme life writing I read for this project, most of the writers are white. Furthermore, the long-form femme life writing I read, such as memoirs and essay collections, was predominantly written by white or white-passing authors. Gomez (1993), who describes herself as a Black, Wampanoag, and loway lesbian and femme, is the notable exception. Relying on femme identification thus prioritizes an understanding of femme that is used in predominantly white and lesbian spaces and ignores other terms that articulate queer femininities, such as the use of the term 'fish' in both African American lesbian communities of the 1960s and contemporary culture among trans women to denote passing as straight or cisgender (Harris & Crocker, 1997c; Thom, 2016). Additionally, in the context of ongoing femmephobia, racism, and transmisogyny that exist within queer communities—the very topics that brought

me to this project—this bias is reflected in the fact that more white and cisgender femmes have been published in print.

This Project and Femme Today.

The cultural landscape of femme has changed a lot since I started the PhD program in 2015. My original desire to investigate femmephobia was owing to my experiences of femmephobic interactions and attitudes in queer communities in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany in the 2000s and 2010s. At the time there was relatively little academic writing on femme, and to propose the critical study of femininities in the humanities and social sciences was a radical proposition (Dahl, 2012). However, since the late 2010s, there have been a lot more publications addressing femme and a group of mostly early-career scholars (of which I am one) has been defining femme theory and willing into being the academic field of Critical Femininity Studies. Some key publications include the journal special editions “Queering Femininity” (*lambda nordica*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2, 2016), “Queer Feminine Affinities” (*feral feminisms*, No. 7, 2018), “Femme Theory” (*Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2021), and the books *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art for Survival* (2022) by Omise'eke Tinsley and *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation* (2018) by Hannah McCann, among many book chapters, articles, and non-academic publications.

Alongside the increase in critical work on femme, there has been an uptake of the term in mainstream culture, with femme being used by non-queer and non-trans people to denote feminine gender expression (Whittall, 2021). My project spans this timeline and is part of this emerging discourse. However, in my dissertation I use femme to denote a specific identity claimed by trans and cisgender women that refers to embodying a combination of feminine gender expression and non-heterosexual desire, and that came into lesbian discourse in mid-twentieth century North American lesbian bar culture (Nestle, 1992a; Stafford, 2010). Femme is an identity that queer femmes intentionally claim to denote a non-heterosexual sexual orientation and non-hegemonic version of femininity (see for

example, Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Davis et al., 1992; Eves, 2004; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012). I am therefore hesitant to claim queer and feminine writers as femme unless they have stated their identification with the term.

Summary of Chapters

This dissertation is driven by my questioning, like many children, of where I belong. To which community, which theoretical tradition, which family? Do I belong in a queer community and culture that often doesn't recognize me on account of my femininity? In a feminist theory that has cast femininity as inherently patriarchal? Or in a queer theory that doesn't seem to like lesbians, feminisms, cisgender or trans women very much? Where I started out in this dissertation—trying to understand queer culture's femmephobia—isn't where I ended up—interrogating queer narratives' flight away from manifestations of the normative, including the femme, the family of origin, and the mother. Yet, it's all connected, isn't it? In a sense, this dissertation is about feminist and queer inheritances. Legacies. Finding a family where we belong. Finding a place for ourselves as outlawed queer subjects. The unhappy marriage of lesbian feminism and queer theory. The queer femme who has been kicked out of the house entirely. Like any child, and especially those who have been kicked out of home, the queer femme asks, how do I make space for myself? How do I fit? Where do I belong? Do I belong in this home? In these academic fields?

In this dissertation, I highlight some of the limits of and problems in queer theory's use of antinormativity. Investing in this framework, which requires the designation of a norm in contrast to which the antinormative can know itself, has contributed to the marginalization of feminine gender expressions, feminine subjectivities, and culturally feminized phenomena in queer theory (Martin, 1996). The lesbian feminist, the femme, the mother, the nuclear family, and the domestic realm are variously framed as oppressive, oppressed, or politically regressive. This characterization of all feminine subjectivities and phenomena is simplistic and anti-feminist. The below chapters each address a figure that queer theory has abjected, or rejected, to propel itself forward: the femme, the family of origin, the mother, and the

lesbian feminist. This line of inquiry is genealogical in that it asks how the present (queer, femmephobic) moment came to be (Meadmore et al., 2000). I challenge the assumption that to be queer is to be antinormative and ask how the designation and disavowal of the normative affects certain queers, most especially those with ties to femininity. Each of these chapters is informed by femme life writing, and Chapters Three, Four, and Five take femme life writing as a key source of knowledge.

In Chapter Two, "Anti/Normativity: Queer Theory's Turn Away From Femininity," I address the questions I have been grappling with for the past nine years. What is the relationship between queer theory and queer culture? How has queer theory understood the feminine? Does queer theory even address femininity at all? Asking these questions took me back to queer scholars' stories about the inception of queer theory: its divergence from lesbian feminism in order to establish itself as a field; the relegation of gender inquiry to feminism only; queer theory's framing as a discipline that interrogates norms of gender and sexuality; and the influence of Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. I argue that each of these gestures has contributed to the disavowal of the feminine in queer theory and its characterization of femininity as inherently oppressive and normative. Queer theory's disciplinary investments have ramifications for feminine queer subjects, especially cisgender and trans queer femmes. This chapter provides the context from which femme life writing emerges as a key site for femme thought and theorizing.

In Chapter Three, "Bringing Queer Theory Home: Reparative Readings of the Family in Femme Life Writing," I argue that queer theory's flight away from the family of origin is another manifestation of its investment in antinormativity. I read femme life writing to complicate queer narratives that cast the family of origin as a hostile home to the queer subject, and queer community as the welcoming home for the runaway queer child. Femme writers describe the hostility of lesbian-feminist and contemporary queer communities to their gender and sexual identities and return to the site of the family home in order to recuperate their family members from their abjection as undesirable, poor, working-class subjects. They

work to undo the binary framework of antinormativity, which advocates rejecting the families that have hurt us, and work toward a reparative framing of the family of origin. This alternative approach to that which has harmed us moves queer theory away from the binary theoretical framework of antinormativity and suggests the potential of reparation across political divides.

In Chapter Four, “Don’t Lose Your Mother: Reclaiming the Queer Femme-inist Legacy of the Bad Mother,” I turn my attention to the potential queerness of the mother; both the mothers of queer children and the queer femme mother herself. Femme writers Brant (2019a), Nestle (1998; 2003), and Pratt (1990; 2005) hold the figure of the ‘bad’ mother alongside the queer femme to emphasize how both are subject to social sanctions for their refusal to conform to gendered sexual norms. Nestle describes her inheritance of a queer maternal legacy from her overtly sexual mother, Regina, who gives her the tools she needs to survive as a sexual outlaw growing up in mid-century New York City. Brant and Pratt narrate lesbian mothers who have lost custody of their children after coming out in the 1970s in the United States. Both mothers inhabit a desiring maternal subjectivity in their desire to be with their children and pursuit of sexual fulfilment outside of the heterosexual marital contract. Brant compares this experience to that of a nineteenth-century Indigenous mother whose children have been sent to residential school. She thus highlights how the imposition of white settler, nuclear family forms are complicit in a colonial project and harmful to many subjects. By emphasizing the potential queerness of the ‘bad’ mother and her deviant maternal legacies, these femme narratives recuperate the mother from her status as normative subject in queer theory and point toward a femme theory based on points of solidarity between different culturally abjected femininities.

In Chapter Five, “A Femme in Drag as Her Mother: Reconciling Queer to the Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other,” I return to the spectre of the lesbian feminist as the emblem of unwanted feminisms and prejudices that have haunted queer theory since its inception. I follow Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) argument that the lesbian feminist haunts queer studies

classrooms with her threat of pulling queer back into the nightmare politics of “essentialized bodies, normative visions of women’s sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of color, the working class, and the transgendered [*sic*]” (p. 62). By imagining lesbian feminism as queer theory’s own horrifying mother, I investigate the possibility of a reparative approach to this cultural figure. I take Freeman’s vision of a femme in drag as her mother as a metaphor for the kind of relationship queer could develop to feminism to create a queer feminist theory. Femme life writing by Allison (1994; 1996) and Nestle (1998; 2003) gets closer to the mother who has hurt us. By writing her point of view and at times resuscitating her voice this approach models a desire to understand the abject mother’s point of view. Taking this queer feminist approach as a model for how queer theory can relate to lesbian feminism suggests a more productive way of relating to our unwanted intellectual lineages.

Contribution to Knowledge

Taken together, these chapters challenge the separation of lesbian (feminist) and queer subject, feminism and queer, queer and straight femininities, heterosexual mothers and queer daughters. Femme life writing demonstrates the importance of crafting more nuanced frameworks of femininity and motherhood within queer theory. It also points toward an intersectional femme politics that seeks feminist solidarity across differing experiences of embodying culturally abjected femininities. Femme writers demonstrate the ways in which queer frameworks of gender and sexuality often ignore how identities are always racialized and classed, and imagine a political home that can hold these nuanced experiences together. Femme writers also emphasize how many heterosexual women are culturally abjected on account of being the ‘wrong’ kind of woman. These femme writers are committed to upholding the rights of the whore and the sex worker, the ‘ordinary woman,’ the mother, and cisgender and trans women writ large, especially those who are feminine. In the spirit of intersectionality, they open queer up.

My project shows the importance of feminist and queer theory to queer people’s—in this case queer femmes’—lived experience. Our communities are shaped by these theories

in palpable ways. What do our theories mean for queer people's wellbeing? How does framing queer identity as antinormative affect queer femmes' lived experiences? This project argues that the theories we take have very real effects on our cultures and people's lived experiences and well-being. This dissertation primarily looks at writing that is 30 to 40 years old but has significance for how we live, experience, and understand femme identities today. Femme life writing reveals that the same questions have been carried through generations of femmes: How do we, queer femmes, negotiate hegemonic constructions of femininity? What do we do when faced with a lesbian or queer community that doesn't recognize us, or considers our femininities unthinking replicas of patriarchal femininity? How do we find a place for ourselves as gendered, sexual subjects? It is perhaps femmes' experiences of various forms of gender-based oppression, such as whorephobia, the queer and feminist construction of femininity as artificial, compulsory heterosexuality, hegemonic femininity, and gendered labour, that leads us to insist on forging a queer feminist analysis. In this dissertation, femmes ask what effect does queer theory's abjection of femininity have on the heterosexual women we love, such as our mothers and sisters, and the women we are politically committed to; those we recognize as also oppressed by norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class? It is the femme's feminist commitments that lead us to interrogate the construction of gender in queer discourse and culture.

I found myself drawn to the idea of a reparative framing of queer and feminist throughout the last two years of writing this dissertation but couldn't see where the idea of reparation came into the femme life writing I was reading. I came to see that the desire to go backwards can be a reparative, rather than regressive, affect. Queer theory is propelled by its flight away from the normative (Warner, 1991; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Yet the abjected continues to have a pull on us, precisely because of the strength of our desire to run away from it (Kristeva, 1982). By abjecting the feminine, the maternal, and the lesbian feminist, queer theory ensures it will continue to experience the pull of those cultural figures and ideas it has abjected (Freeman, 2010; Love, 2007). In this dissertation, I am particularly

concerned with how queer theory remains troubled by the lesbian feminist, femininity, and culturally feminized phenomena, such as mothering and parenting generally, domestic labour, and care work. Queer theory is an inherently progressive project that seeks a better future for queer subjects (Love, 2007). It is thus often drawn toward utopian tropes (Love, 2007). However, as Heather Love (2007) argues, “an absolute refusal to linger in the past may entail other kinds of losses” (p. 10). The losses that I excavate here are the removal of feminist investigations from queer studies, and queer theory’s abjection of femininity owing to its association with patriarchal ideology.

Femme writers seem to intuitively understand the importance of looking backward even as we move forwards. Femme writers often tell stories of their return to the family home and the importance of their mothers, and families of origin, to their lives. In doing so, they contradict the queer coming out narrative, which suggests queer subjectivity is only fully realized by leaving a homophobic family of origin and finding a better home in queer community (Gordon, 1999; Saxey, 2008). Femmes’ desire to return home contradicts this progressive, utopian impulse in queer theory. Femmes often find that the queer home they dreamed of is imperfect in its failure to be intersectional and even its hostility to some queer subjects on account of femmephobia (Levitt et al., 2003; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Mishali, 2014), racism (Bryan, 2002; Kofi-Bruce, 2009), classism (Allison, 1994; Hollibaugh, 2000), ableism (Munson, 2009; Wachslar, 2009), transmisogyny (Serano, 2007; 2013) fatphobia (Taylor, 2022), beauty norms (Cogan, 1999; Huxley et al., 2014; Hammidi & Kaiser, 1999), and other forms of discrimination that we also see in the straight world. Therefore, for femmes, the search for a better home entails a reckoning with some of the cultural figures and affects that queer theory remains haunted by. In this dissertation, I look at femmes’ reckonings with femininity, the mother, and the nuclear family. By returning home, femmes hope to bring their families of origin back with them, and dream of a new political home that can, to paraphrase Amber Hollibaugh (2000), accommodate all of our wild and beautiful desires.

The current political context of the culture wars increasingly reveals the harm of political narratives built on binary oppositions. These include the idea present in mainstream culture, the far-right 'Parental Rights Movement,' and queer narratives that the queer child and the straight parent are fundamentally opposed, and the understanding of the parent as an inherently heterosexual and cisgender position, which seems to forget queer and trans parents altogether. The violence of our current political discourses suggests that we need to have difficult conversations between opposing cultural actors (Cvetkovich, 2019; Tompkins, 2019), share our points of view, and find a common ground. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) theorization of reparative practices, which seeks to counteract divisive narratives by creating an empathetic view of the Other as "at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care," is a way "to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment" (p. 137) in potentially hostile environments. I read femmes' narratives of returning home as a reparative practice that seeks to confront that which they are troubled by. Allison (1994) writes, "The first rule I learned in writing was to love the people I wrote about—and loving my mama, loving myself, was not simple in any sense." (p. 237). It is so easy to hate that which has harmed us. It's so much harder to love it. This dissertation is my imperfect first step, my own stumbling toward something I can't quite see, but fervently wish for: a feminist queer theory; a welcoming queer home.

Chapter Two: Anti/Normativity: Queer Theory's Turn Away from Femininity

Introduction

The field of sexuality studies was inaugurated by key feminist thinkers of the 1980s as a field dedicated to the study of sexuality, as opposed to gender, which was seen to properly belong to feminism (Rubin, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). In this chapter, I argue that queer theory's move away from gender via multiple disciplinary gestures has had catastrophic consequences for queer and sexuality studies' ability to account for subjects who experience marginalization based on gender as well as sexuality, and queer theory's ability to be intersectional overall. Casting gender as feminism's proper object (Butler, 1994) contributed to queer theory and queer studies' abjection of the lesbian feminist, who it understood as a ghoulish figure of gender essentialism, transphobia, classism, and racism (Freeman, 2010). The move away from lesbian feminism was also a move away from lesbianism as an identity (Wiegman, 2012).

These gestures of 'moving away from,' writ large, originate from queer theory's disciplinary investment in antinormativity. Queer theory has sought to legitimize studies and embodiments of queerness by arguing that to take an antinormative position is politically subversive of these norms. Gender performativity is probably queer theory's most popular articulation of the idea that to express a difference from the norm can be subversive. However, interpretations of gender performativity that suggest performing 'the other gender' is politically subversive have augmented the preexisting devaluation of femininity in lesbian and queer cultures and communities. Femininity is assumed to be normative because it is culturally correlated with oppressive, compulsory femininity (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Serano, 2013). It is therefore understood to be incompatible with feminism (Hoskin, 2017a) and even lesbian (Eves, 2004; Levitt et al., 2003; Wonderland, 2009) or queer identity (Carter and Noble, 1996; Senyonga, 2020). The structural exclusion and denigration of femininity has contributed to many problems within queer culture and organizing, including the idea that queer femmes are temporary or fake queer subjects (MacLachlan & Sreedhar,

2012), transmisogyny (Serano, 2007; 2013), whorephobia (Hoskin, 2017b; Payne, 2002), and the omission of considerations of culturally feminized experiences such as mothering, parenting, and other forms of care work from queer theory and activism (Driver, 1996; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010). In this chapter, I argue that queer theory's refusal to consider femininity beyond its characterization as a patriarchal affect has contributed to each of these misogynist attitudes and omissions in queer culture and thought. Central to this chapter is my belief that queer theory has real-life effects on queer people's self-understanding and political vision. In short, queer theory contributes to the shaping of our queer worlds.

I started this investigation into queer theory owing to my own experiences of femmephobia in queer communities across different cities, countries, and languages. I wondered about the connection between queer theory and culture. Not finding much discussion of femme in queer and lesbian academic literature, and experiencing so much femmephobia in queer communities, I turned to the queer theory that has profoundly influenced me and the queer communities I've moved in. This chapter emerges from my deep dive into early queer theory to find out whether the feminine is indeed absent here. I ask, Where is the feminine? Why is the feminine absent? What, if anything, has absented the feminine from queer theory? The disavowal of the feminine repeats throughout queer theory written by queers who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) and cisgender gay men. In this chapter, I concentrate my analysis of the effects of this disavowal on subjects who move in queer dyke communities and who identify as femme.

'Sexuality, Not Gender'

Early queer theory has different origin stories. Of concern to this project are two in particular: 1) As a field that could take on the study of sex, sexuality, and homophobia, rather than the study of gender oppression, which was seen as exclusively belonging to feminism (Butler, 1994; Hemmings, 2016); 2) As a corrective to a lesbian feminism that was increasingly seen as old-fashioned, racist, gender essentialist, and sex-negative (Case, 1997; Huffer, 2013; Martin, 1996). The term "queer theory" was coined by Teresa de

Lauretis in 1990 to name a conference she organized at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Writing about her invocation of the term, de Lauretis (1991) hopes that a queer theory might be able to “transgress and transcend” (p. v) the additive model of ‘gay and lesbian’ in 1970s and 1980s gay and lesbian studies to incorporate an intersectional analysis of sexuality that also accounts for gender, class, race, and geographical location. The idea of a queer theory quickly gained traction owing to this promise to move beyond single-issue identity politics and critique the broader structures of sexuality and gender (Duggan, 1992; Halperin, 2003). However, the scholars who imagined the field of sexuality studies in the 1980s first posited a divide between the analysis of sexuality and the analysis of gender in order to legitimize sexuality as the main object of study (Butler 1994; Huffer 2013; Lamos, 1997; Martin, 1996; Wiegman, 2012; Zimmerman, 2007). The feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s had caused a rift among feminists and many felt there was not adequate room within feminism for the exploration of women’s sexuality, in particular lesbian sexualities (see for example, de Lauretis, 1991; Rubin, 1993). Emerging out of a frustration with second-wave feminism’s failure to properly account for sexuality, these theorists imagined a new field that could address sex, sexuality, and homophobia, rather than the study of gender oppression, which was seen as already partially accomplished by feminism (Butler, 1994; Hemmings, 2016).

Gayle Rubin (1993) cites the lack of progressive, political writing about sexuality within lesbian feminism as the instigator of her call for a separate space in which to create a “genuinely liberatory body of thought about sexuality” (p. 148). In her 1984 article “Thinking Sex,” Rubin (1993) argues that the analysis of sexuality should be undertaken in a new field, separately from the analysis of gender, in order to fully account for their separate histories and realities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) argues similarly in *Epistemology of the Closet* that the study of gender was at that time more developed than the study of homophobia and states her intention to explore discrimination solely based on sexuality. Rubin and Sedgwick thus inaugurate the new field of sexuality studies by differentiating it from a feminist

investment in gender. They argue that this turn away from gender is necessary to allow marginalized sexualities to emerge as a distinct field of study. By ignoring gender-based oppression and the intersections of gender and sexuality, queer theory presented a very real divergence from lesbian feminism, which saw lesbianism as a feminist practice (Allison, 1994). For Rubin (1993), this is a temporary divide, as she hopes that “in the long run” (p. 170) sexuality studies and feminism would reincorporate the studies of gender oppression and sexual oppression respectively. Some see this challenge to “undo ‘compulsory heterosexuality’” (Stewart, 2017, p. 62) and interrogate homophobia as early queer theory’s prime imperative. Queer theory’s origin story thus begins with a turn away from gender. This division between the study of gender and sexuality was the opposite of what de Lauretis (1991) had imagined when she called for an intersectional queer theory that could bridge the divide between a homophobic feminist movement and sexist gay rights movement.

Queer theory’s disavowal of gender is of concern to queer feminist theorists who argue that early queer theory thus painted a reductive picture of feminism as only concerned with gender and not sexuality, race, class, and other sources of oppression (Butler, 1994; Hemmings, 2016; Jagose, 2009). This characterization casts feminism as unable to account for queer inquiry and irrecoverably outdated (Hemmings, 2016). Queer, by contrast, is aligned with the new, the future and the multiple (Fraiman, 2003; Hemmings, 2016). The separation of queer from feminist also forced lesbians, as subjects who experience both sexism and homophobia, to choose between a feminism that is coded as outdated and heterosexual, and a masculinized queer theory that may not take lesbians’ specific needs into account (Hemmings, 2016). This separation leaves queer theory implicitly unwilling to address the experiences of lesbians and queer women, which are necessarily interwoven with feminist needs (Duggan, 1992). Feminist theorists argue further that queer theory’s turn away from feminism (seen as a concern with gender-based oppression only) configures masculinity as universal and gender-less, and codes ‘gender’ as femininity only (Hemmings, 1996; Martin, 1996; Mishali, 2014). In turn, gender, now synonymous with a

'heterosexualized' femininity, becomes "sutured to" (Hemmings, 2016, p. 85) feminism.

Femininity, associated with the hegemonic and heterosexual, is consequently removed from queer inquiry (Fraiman, 2003; Hemmings, 2016; Martin, 1996; Mishali, 2014).

'Queer, Not Lesbian'

Queer theory's turn away from gender is compounded by its coding of lesbian feminism as outdated. Although de Lauretis' (1991), Rubin's (1993), and Sedgwick's (1990) work is each rooted in feminist thought, the unintended consequences of their distinction between queer and feminist inquiry is to retroactively cast 1970s and 1980s (lesbian) feminism as passé and invoke a new queer theory as à la mode. Emerging in part out of its distinction from a lesbian feminism that is seen as unable to account for inquiry into sex, race, and class, queer displaces and replaces feminism as the more contemporary, knowledgeable theory that's got the answers (Jagose, 2009; Martin, 1996). This move away from lesbian feminism is compounded by negative stereotypes about the lesbian-feminist movement, and feminists in general, in mainstream culture.

Most active is the stereotype of the 'hairy lesbian-separatist feminist,' which both functions as shorthand for our cultural memory of second-wave feminism and is used to dismiss feminist concerns today (Hesford, 2013). Bonnie Zimmerman's (1997) sarcastic description of the stereotypical lesbian feminist describes how we imagine this figure: a "flannel shirt androgyne[,] closeminded, antisex puritan[,] humorless moralist[,] racist and classist ignoramus[, and] essentialist utopian" (p. 163). Students and academics currently working in the fields of gender studies and sexuality studies are familiar with this stereotype of the lesbian feminist as well as her function as a shorthand for an undesirable, regressive feminism (Hesford, 2013). In queer theory classrooms, lesbian feminism stands in for 'bad' feminisms, including essentialist ideas about women's gender and sexuality, as well as racism, classism, transphobia, and prudishness (Freeman, 2010). The lesbian feminist is "typecast [...] as old-fashioned and passé" (Jagose, 2009, p. 160); the 'bad' feminist you don't want to be (Cruikshank, 2007). Consequently, the lesbian feminist functions in queer

studies as an “affective repository” (Hesford, 2013, p.16) of undesirable feminisms; an archival shorthand which serves to legitimize queer theory’s apparently more contemporary projects (Hesford, 2013; Wiegman, 2012).

One effect of queer theory’s disavowal of its lesbian-feminist past is to associate ideological differences with generational differences and imply that every member of a political generation shares the same beliefs (Hemmings, 2011; Henry, 2012). We see this characterization in the waves model of feminist political progression, whereby the latest wave supersedes the previous with an implicitly better analysis (Hemmings 2011; Henry, 2012). This metaphor is particularly present in depictions of second-wave feminism as ideologically, racially, and sexually homogenous (Henry, 2012). By shaping lesbian feminism as both politically and temporally outdated, queer theory positions itself as the progressive, new solution to an undesirable past movement (Hemmings, 2016; Huffer, 2013, Jagose, 2009; Wiegman, 2012). This rejection of the past propels queer theory’s use of utopian metaphors, which de Lauretis (1991) invokes when she hopes that a queer theory will be able to imagine “another discursive horizon” (p. iv).

Femme life writing shows us that characterizations of lesbian feminism as prudish, sex-negative, racist, and predominantly middle-class do have some basis (Allison 1994; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 1998). However, these characterizations of lesbian feminism as politically homogenous are clearly reductive (Case, 1997; Hesford, 2013; McBean, 2015). The retrospective characterization of lesbian feminism as politically passé effectively erases the diversity of the movement’s members and the dissenting views within lesbian feminism itself (Case, 1997; Hesford, 2013). One of the effects of this simplistic characterization of lesbian feminism is to occlude the vibrant sexual cultures that members of the lesbian-feminist movement created and enjoyed (as evidenced in the work of Patrick Califia [1980], Dorothy Allison [1994], and Nestle [1998; 2003], to name a few) and recast lesbian feminism as a whole as monogamous, vanilla, and prudish (Case 1997). Another effect of the characterization of lesbian feminism as a racist and mostly white movement is to situate the

theories of Black women and women of colour such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, and the Combahee River Collective as 'not lesbian feminist,' when these authors write their critiques from within the movement. This characterization also obscures the fact that working-class women, Black women, and women of colour such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks were at the centre of lesbian feminism (Cruikshank, 2007).

Queer theory's disavowal of lesbian feminism also occludes the ways in which lesbian feminism and early queer theory overlap temporally and theoretically (Martin, 1996; Jagose, 2009). After all, the presence of sex-positive and anti-racist feminists within lesbian feminism contributed to the heated ideological debate known as the feminist or lesbian sex wars, and the emergence of queer theory as a break from the lesbian-feminist movement. Theorists like Judith Butler, Patrick Califia, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gayle Rubin are all figures that have been widely discussed in and claimed by queer theory, but who were also active in and started publishing during the lesbian-feminist moment. For Annamarie Jagose (2009), it is precisely figures like Butler, who straddle both feminist and queer theory, and the overlapping lesbian-feminist and queer timelines, that demonstrate "the permeable and coeval character of feminist and queer inquiry" (p. 164). Some feminist theorists also argue that 1990s queer theory tends to over cite its theoretical 'fathers,' such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida (Duggan, 1992), while ignoring its lesbian-feminist 'mothers,' such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Simone de Beauvoir, the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Monique Wittig (Case, 1997; Faderman, 1997; Fraiman, 2003). This tendency contributes to queer theory's omission of explicit gender analysis and unconscious masculine bias.

The distinction between queer and feminist theory creates a space for the examination of queer sexualities. However, it does so at the cost of coding sexuality as masculine and eliminating the examination of sexism from queer theory. Sexual identities that are inherently gendered, such as the lesbian or bisexual woman, are disappeared from

theories of sexuality (Walters, 1996), and the feminine is redefined as inherently conservative and normative (Fraiman, 2003; Hemmings, 2016; Martin, 1996). This removal of overt considerations of gender from queer theory both reinforces an implicit masculine bias and ignores the effects of gender-based privileges and oppressions on queer subjects and queer culture. Queer individuals who experience discrimination based on gender, especially feminine cisgender women, trans women, and feminine men, are not accounted for in this picture. The distinction between feminist and queer inquiry also privileges the experiences of cisgender white gay men within queer studies. In this way, the relegation of gender to feminism and sexuality to queer studies precludes an intersectional analysis (Smyth, 1998).

Queer Antinormativity

These feelings of antagonism, wanting to get away from, divest, or diverge, and a longing for alternative “discursive horizon[s]” (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iv), are central affects in queer theory. Several theorists note queer theory’s antagonistic stance toward its theoretical predecessors: early twentieth-century research on sexual ‘deviance’ (Love, 2015); 1970s and 1980s lesbian and gay rights discourse (Duggan, 1992; Halperin, 2003); second-wave feminism (Fraiman, 2013; Hesford, 2013; Martin, 1996); and, specifically, lesbian feminism (Fraiman, 2013; Hesford, 2013; Martin, 1996). This interest in running away from echoes throughout many of queer theory’s tropes, including its divergence from considerations of gender and identity politics, the abjection of lesbian feminism, the removal of the lesbian in general, and in queer theory’s embrace of antinormativity. Queer’s underlying desire to escape the (painful) past to seek a better future may originate in its status as a social and political group “constituted by historical injury” (Love, 2007, p.1). Consequently, queer is often marked by a kind of “reverse discourse” (Love, 2007, p. 2) that is oriented against that which it disavows. This turn away from the past deadens it, denies that it can ‘touch’ or hurt us “in the present” (Love, 2007, p. 10) and thus protects us from further homophobic and transphobic harm. In one sense, queer theory is an optimistic genre; it suggests that the pain

of oppression can be escaped, that the past can't touch us, and hopes for social transformation. We can see this optimism in queer theory that explores utopian possibilities (see for example Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2009). However, there is also a negativity to queer theory's tendency to reject the things that have hurt many cisgender queer women and AFAB queers, including compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory femininity.

The adoption of an oppositional stance is so widespread in queer theory that in 2015 Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson state that "a mode of critical resistance" (p. 5) is the unifying posture of all queer inquiry. Queer theory's oppositional posture has been variously cast as "dissent" (Duggan, 1992), "subversiveness" (Halperin, 2003, p. 341), "subversivism" (Serano, 2007, p. 346), "nonnormativity" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6), "disidentification" (Wiegman, 2012, p. 96), "divergence" (Huffer, 2003, p. 8), and most commonly "antinormativity" (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). In the words of David Halperin (2003), "if it's queer, it's politically oppositional" (p. 341). This oppositional stance is central to and generative for queer theory (Duggan, 1992; Halperin, 2003, Shotwell, 2012, Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

To claim to be antinormative, queer theory needs to designate a norm against which it can move. The norm exists as a symbolic status quo that enables investigation into queer theory's objects of interest (Wiegman, 2012). This norm is implicitly bad, and taking an antinormative position is therefore to be desired (Shotwell, 2012). This framework often leaves the norm itself undefined (Shotwell, 2012; Wiegman and Wilson, 2015). Since its inception, queer theory has evolved as a transdisciplinary commitment in the academy that can be taken to 'queer' just about anything. Its interests extend to troubling colonial narratives, reimagining ecology, crip studies, transgender studies, and more, as well as continued investigations into norms of race, dis/ability, sex, sexuality, and gender, and how they influence cultural frameworks of sexuality and gender. Queer is an open form, its concept of the normative "constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation" (Duggan, 1992, p. 23) and contingent on the object of investigation. For Wiegman and Wilson (2015),

it is precisely the animating force of antinormativity's "negative capability" (p. 5) that allows queer theory to endlessly regenerate itself by emphasizing that queer's work is never done.

'Performing Gender': The Influence of Gender Performativity

While the norm in queer theory is in flux, for queer theorists who want to reimagine gender and sexuality outside of oppressive frameworks, the antinormative is generally understood to be positioned against Western patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality (Duggan, 1992; Shotwell, 2012; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). In this subset of early queer theory, the normative is "a constrictive and restrictive force, delimiting the range of subjectivities one might inhabit in terms of sexuality and gender" (Shotwell, 2012, p. 991), or, as Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson (2015) put it, the "tyrannies of sexual and gender normativity" (p. 1). In early queer theory of the 1990s, queer theorists were specifically interested in challenging homophobia and heteronormativity (see for example, Berlant and Warner, 1998; Warner, 1991). One of the main theories that queer theory uses to challenge homophobia and heteronormativity is gender performativity. In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in which they developed their theory of gender performativity. Butler's theory of gender performativity is so influential that *Gender Trouble* has been claimed as one of queer theory's foundational texts alongside work by Rubin and Sedgwick (Halperin, 2003; Jagose, 2015; Wiegman and Wilson, 2015). Gender performativity aims to expose the mechanisms by which norms of gender and sexuality are socially constructed. Butler argues that there is no fixed reality of biological sex or gender, rather individuals in a society participate in the illusion of fixed sexes and genders through their continuous repetition of acts that carry cultural meaning. For Butler, the feminist and queer relevance of gender performativity is its ability to challenge oppressive norms of gender and sexuality by explaining how these norms are culturally reproduced, naturalized, and normalized (Jagose, 2015). It is Butler's hope and achievement that the theory of gender performativity unpacks the causal relationship between biological sex, gender, and

sexuality that is assumed in heterosexist, homophobic and misogynist ideologies (Martin, 1996).

The immediate popularity of gender performativity was in part owing to Butler's (1990) use of preexisting countercultural queer practices such as drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme relationships as examples that reveal the hidden mechanisms of gender performativity (Jagose, 2015). Butler's theory linked these practices with subversion (Jagose 2015), thereby suggesting that 'cross-gender' performances can challenge heteronormative gender roles (Walker, 2001). *Gender Trouble* suggests that these acts highlight the mechanisms by which heteronormative gender identities and sexualities are naturalized. In each case, the queer person's visible difference from norms of gender and sexuality exposes those norms as cultural, rather than natural (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Martin, 1996). Gender performativity has been taken in queer culture to suggest that queer people can subvert gender norms through their individual gender presentation (Hall, 2009; Jagose, 2015; Walker 2001), despite Butler's (1999) protest that this is a misreading of their work. Interpretations of gender performativity have therefore linked gender identities that deviate from cultural norms with political subversion, and gender identities that appear to coincide with cultural norms with the normative and conservative. This emphasis on individual gender expression suggests that antinormative gender expressions are acts of political subversion in themselves (Jagose, 2015).

The cultural resonance of *Gender Trouble* created a language with which queer gender identities that had been ridiculed and seen as imitations of straight gender identities, such as butch, could now be considered in their own right and seen as viable "political and erotic option[s]" (Roof, 1998, p. 33). Gender performativity's suggestion that queer gender identities can expose the hidden mechanisms of heteronormativity has been taken up in queer theory and queer culture at large to frame queer people's deviation from norms of gender and sexuality as a positive, politically radical difference. This valorization is especially poignant in the context of queer people whose visible difference from gender norms exposes

them to homophobic and transphobic violence. However, this interpretation of gender performativity attributes a lot of agency to the antinormatively gendered individual (Shotwell, 2012) and inadvertently places a lot of emphasis on what queer people look like (Martin, 1996; Walker, 2001). Gender performativity has generally been taken up in queer culture to mean that “cross-gender identification” (Martin, 1996, p. 73) and specifically masculine gender expressions for people who are AFAB are seen as inherently subversive, while feminine gender expressions for people who are AFAB and feminine trans women are seen as inherently normative (Martin, 1996; Serano, 2007; 2013).

Gender performativity’s separation of biological sex and psychological gender resonated with ideas that were already present in queer culture. Lesbian feminism also understood masculine characteristics on lesbians as a form of political subversion. Lesbian feminism argued that adopting an androgynous aesthetic was a way for lesbians to escape oppressive norms of femininity and heterosexuality (Hollibaugh, 2000; Martin, 1996; Pratt, 2005; Stafford, 2010) and saw femmes as dupes of an imposed patriarchal femininity (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Mishali, 2014; Pratt, 2005). However, in practice, lesbian feminism’s ‘androgynous’ aesthetic often looked masculine (Faderman, 1997; Martin, 1996; Mishali, 2014). Thus, both gender performativity and lesbian feminism associate ‘real’ lesbian identity with masculinity, and a masculine aesthetic with political subversion. The widespread omission of considerations of feminine performances of gender outside a small body of femme scholarship (see for example Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Galewski, 2005; 2008; Nicholson, 2014) is striking given Butler’s (1990; 1993) use of drag queens to highlight the cultural construction of gender in *Gender Trouble* and their in-depth discussion of trans ball performer Venus Xtravaganza in *Bodies That Matter*. Even though Butler (1990) uses butch/femme as another example of gender performativity, only queer masculinities have been taken up as examples of gender subversion in queer studies at large, whereas queer femininities remain largely under examined (Dahl, 2012).

Queer Theory Casts Femininity as Normative

Queer theory's interest in 'antinormative' and 'performative' gender expressions contributes to the longstanding cultural association of lesbianism with masculinity in Western culture. European sexology, mid-century lesbian bar culture in North America, and lesbian feminism have all associated a 'real' lesbian identity with female masculinity and temporary or fake queerness with the femme (Hemmings, 1999; Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Martin, 1996; Mishali, 2014; Nestle, 1992a; Walker, 2001). Maltry & Tucker (2002) trace this "privileging of masculine lesbian identities" (p. 91) back to sexological theory of the 1900s that associated sexual 'deviance' with 'gender inversion'. Sexology used the concept of gender inversion to understand lesbianism and gay identity. Gender inversion conflated "cross-gender identification" (Walker, 2001, p. 4) with sexual desire by understanding the lesbian 'invert' as inherently masculine and therefore desiring other women, and the gay male 'invert' as inherently feminine and therefore desiring other men. This logic associated 'real' lesbianism with butch gender presentation and understood the feminine lesbian as a fake lesbian, temporarily seduced into the 'wrong' sexual object choice by the masculine characteristics of her partner (Walker, 2001).

The cultural influence of gender performativity has contributed to mischaracterizations of femmes in queer culture as fake, temporary lesbians or queers, and normative. Despite Butler's (1999) protest that gender performativity should not be seen as a "paradigm of subversive action or...as a model for political agency" (p. xxiii) per se, queer theory has placed a lot of emphasis on performing visible difference from norms as a form of political agency (Shotwell, 2012; Walker, 2001), an idea which has trickled down into queer culture. Gender performativity both depends on and emphasizes queer theory's disciplinary commitment to antinormativity (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015), which sees countering norms of gender and sexuality as the most politically expedient way to challenge them (Jagose, 2015). Individuals are thus encouraged to prove their transgression of these norms via their aesthetic (Martin, 1996). Queer theory and culture celebrate gender presentations that don't align with presumed biological sex and equate visible differences from norms of gender and

sexuality with subversion of and resistance to these norms. What in the 1990s was called terms like “cross-gender identification” (Martin, 1996, p. 73) and “gender fuck” (Gomez, 1998, p. 103) has become associated with political subversion across much queer theory (Martin, 1996). Femme writers Amber Hollibaugh (2000) and Joan Nestle (1998) observe that the surge of academic and cultural interest in gender transgression in the 1990s accounted for butch and transmasculine queer identities but failed to consider the femme. Owing to the AFAB femme’s apparent correlation of biological sex and psychological gender, she or they are seen as ‘normative’ and incapable of political subversion. Queer theorists have tended to see gender transgressions in the form of butch identities, transmasculinities, and drag king performances as inherently subversive of norms of gender and sexuality (Fraiman, 2003; Maltry & Tucker, 2002). The general interest in gender transgression has led to the creation of a large body of work in queer studies that focuses on transmasculinities and a corresponding lack of considerations of queer and trans femininities (Dahl, 2012; 2016; Maltry & Tucker, 2002). Femininity, when discussed, has been positioned as “apolitical” (Maltry & Tucker, 2002, p. 95) at best, or inherently heteronormative at worst (Fraiman, 2003; Hemmings, 2016; Martin, 1996). It is only very recently that femme theorists have taken up Dahl’s (2012) call for a critical femininity studies and interest in such studies remains confined to a relatively small group of academics.

Early queer theory often used the figure of the transgender person as a metaphor for gender transgression and subversion (Fraiman, 2003; Prosser, 1998; 2006). Under this schema, the transgender person challenged the foundations of heteronormativity through their representational gender crossing. This metaphor became so common in queer theory of the 1990s and 2000s that, in 2010, Elizabeth Freeman stated contemporary queer theory primarily represents lesbian identity via transmasculine embodiment. Femme scholars and writers observe the idealization of masculine aesthetics in queer feminist communities from the 1990s on (Brightwell, 2018; Leong, 2009; Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Serano, 2013; Taylor, 2018). Femininity, which is already understood as an imposed patriarchal norm in lesbian-

feminist culture, and therefore artificial, once again becomes associated with normativity in 1990s queer culture (Martin, 1996). Additionally, 1990s queer culture tended to see non-binary identification in trans people as subversive but understood trans people who are transsexual as normative because they appear to ‘uphold the gender binary’ (Prosser, 1998, 2006; Serano, 2013). Queer theory’s interest in challenging the heteronormative correlation between biological sex, gender, and sexuality via acts of gender transgression manifests in practice as a celebration of queer masculinities and a denigration of femininity in queer feminist communities.

Martin (1996) explains the effect of queer culture’s emphasis on antinormativity for its positioning of femininity and the feminine individual:

Queer emphases on anti-normative display enjoin us to be different from conventional norms of femininity by defiantly cross-identifying. Conceptually, then, as well as politically, something called femininity becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other positions become figural and mobile. (p. 93)

According to interpretations of gender performativity in queer culture, it is the queer person’s visible difference from norms of gender and sexuality that exposes those norms as cultural, rather than natural (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Martin, 1996; Serano, 2007; 2013).

Consequently, all queer subjects who do not look recognizably different from cultural norms of gender and sexuality, such as the AFAB femme, become “identified with acquiescence to [cultural] norms” (Mishali, 2014, p. 64) and “cannot be seen as resistant in any capacity” (Maltry & Tucker, 2002, p. 95). Theories of gender transgression thus associate the combination of feminine gender expression and female sex with heterosexuality, normativity, and political conservatism (Fraiman, 2003; Martin, 1996; VanNewkirk, 2006).

This marginalization of femininity on a theoretical level has contributed to the marginalization of femmes and other feminine queer subjects in queer culture (Hemmings, 1999). Femme writers argue that queer theory’s investment in the rhetoric of gender transgression, gender performativity, and antinormativity augments femmephobia (Rugg,

1997; Samuels, 2003; Walker, 2001) by only recognizing queer subjects when they are seen to disrupt mainstream culture's correlation between biological sex, 'natural' gender and heterosexuality (VanNewkirk, 2006). Discourses of gender transgression, gender performativity, and antinormativity thus reinforce the preexisting cultural idea that 'real' lesbians look butch and that femininity can only signify heterosexuality and normativity (Mishali, 2014; Walker, 2012). This association of femininity with normativity also amplifies femme invisibility, whereby femmes are often not recognized as queer in queer communities and must out themselves continually (Eves, 2004; VanNewkirk, 2006). Because the femme's gender presentation appears to coincide with hegemonic femininity, she is illegible as queer under this schema (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Martin, 1996; VanNewkirk, 2006). As Arlene Istar (1992) writes about her experiences of femme invisibility in lesbian culture from the late 1960s to early 1990s, "we have no way to perceive traditional feminine traits as being lesbian" (p. 383). In queer narratives, and in queer and mainstream culture, the cisgender femme can only signify as queer when next to a butch partner, whose visible transgression of gender norms makes the couple's queerness recognizable (Eves, 2004; Hemmings, 1999). The idea that femininity is incompatible with queerness contributes to the preexisting suspicion of the femme and the assumption that she is an inherently unstable queer subject (Mishali, 2014).

This positioning of femininity as normative and consequent destabilization of the femme as a queer subject manifests in femmephobic attitudes toward femmes in queer culture. While some argue femmes' ability to pass as cisgender heterosexual women protects them from homophobic or transphobic abuse in mainstream culture (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012), cisgender and trans femmes both experience prejudice based on their femininity within queer subculture (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Mishali, 2014; Serano, 2013). The stereotypes that femmes have internalized patriarchal values (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Senyonga, 2020), are 'brainwashed' into their femininity (Elena, 1995), or 'aren't really feminist' (Hoskin, 2017a) are all manifestations of the idea that femininity is a cultural norm

and an artificial patriarchal imposition. The idea that femininity makes the femme an unreliable queer subject manifests in the idea that femmes and feminine trans women are deceitful or fake queers (Levitt et al., 2003; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Tinsley, 2022), that femmes are only temporarily queer (Hemmings, 1999; Hurst, 2009; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012), or not political, out, lesbian, or queer enough (Dahl, 2016; Galewski, 2008; Levitt et al., 2003). Femmes' femininity is thus seen to negate their queer sexuality (Wonderland, 2009). The idea that femmes are apolitical, bad feminists, or brainwashed is especially telling as it highlights queer culture's false correlation between transmasculine gender expression and subversive political action and transfeminine gender expression and political conservatism. Femmes have also internalized these ideas, with many reporting that they don't feel queer enough owing to their femininity (Mishali, 2014; Schwartz, 2018b; Shackelford, 2016; Tinsley, 2022; Walker, 2012; Yu 2009) and that they feel the need to prove their queerness to other queers (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Tweedy, 2009a). These ideas have manifested in negative attitudes toward femmes in queer cultural spaces, such as being made to feel unwelcome (Langford, 1995), sexist remarks about femmes' appearances (Wells, 1995), or the use of femme as a pejorative term (Bomb, 2009; Wells, 1995).

Queer culture's adulation of masculinity and suspicion of femininity is also present in misogynist attitudes toward trans women. Trans women experience virulent misogyny in both mainstream and queer culture (Serano, 2007). Femme trans women observe that queer dyke culture in the 2000s and 2010s celebrates trans men but not trans women (Connelly, 2009; Serano, 2007; 2013) and note the dominance of people who express masculine gender identities in queer/dyke communities, but relative lack of people assigned male at birth (AMAB) who express feminine gender identities (Serano, 2007). Even though transfeminine people 'defy the gender binary' as much as transmasculine people and therefore theoretically fit into queer culture's correlation of non-normative gender expressions with subversive political practice, feminine trans women are still seen as

‘upholding the gender binary’ (Serano, 2013). The fact that non-normative gender expressions are only seen as subversive when they entail transmasculinity highlights the fact that masculinity is seen as a natural gender identity and femininity is seen as inherently artificial, no matter whether it is expressed by a cisgender woman, trans woman, or feminine gay man.

In turn, this coding of the queer feminine as normative reinforces that transmasculinity appears transgressive by contrast (Fraiman, 2003; Martin, 1996; VanNewkirk, 2006; Walker, 2012). Just as feminism becomes queer theory’s “straight guy” (Jagose, 2009, p. 165), so does the femme become the foil to the butch or transmasculine queer’s queerness (Martin, 1996; VanNewkirk, 2006). This idea that butches “fuck gender” (Walker, 2001, p. 10), while femmes reinforce the naturalization of cultural gender identities, contributes to the privileging of butchness and transmasculinities within queer culture (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Mishali, 2014). In contrast, cisgender femmes’ “queerness is [often] subject to challenge” (MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012, p. 56) via the stereotypes of femme as temporary, fake, or brainwashed.

This coding of femininity as normative limits the breadth of queer theory’s scope. Queer theory often privileges phenomena that are culturally associated with the masculine (Driver, 1996; Fraiman, 2003). Included in the phenomena that queer studies has enthusiastically embraced and associated with masculine subjects are “mobility, independence, extended identification with youth culture, grungy/alternative modes of consumption, [and] risk-taking” (Ward, 2010, p. 241). Early queer theory thus often fails to incorporate culturally feminized phenomena—such as reproductivity, parenting, care work, and healthcare—and address the material needs of queers (Johnson, 2005; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010). In the words of Martin (1996), “radical anti-normativity throws out a lot of babies with a lot of bathwater” (p. 77). Queer theory’s investment in gendered expressions of antinormativity limits what queer theory can do and whose interest it serves. The achievements of second-wave feminism effected real, material changes in the lives of North

American, Australasian, and Western European women, including interrogation of traditional gender roles, reproductive rights, financial independence, workplace equality, and domestic violence. However, queer theory's "embrace of performative disruption" (Huffer, 2013, p. 13) is at odds with feminist inquiries rooted in examination of the material effects of cultural discourses on gendered subjects (Martin, 1996). Queer theory's tendency to overlook the material effects of gender discourses on queer subjects underestimates the difference that gender identity and assigned sex make to a queer person's experiences (Faderman, 1997; Martin, 1996). Included in aspects of queer people's lives that queer theory overlooks are structural realities and "everyday social practices" (Eves, 2004, p. 480), a consideration of the ordinary, and "the dilemmas of the average people that we also are" (Martin, 1996, p. 77). Some theorists identify this interest in transcendence as part of a return to a patriarchal, Eurocentric philosophical tradition in queer theory's citation practices (Case, 1997; Duggan, 1992; Faderman, 1997). This citation practice in turn manifests as an interest in themes of transcendence, utopianism, optimism, and futurity (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Several feminist theorists identify queer theory's interest in metaphors of escape and transcendence as a masculine narrative (Case, 1997; de Lauretis, 1997; Faderman, 1997; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010). Notably, Sue-Ellen Case (1997) correlates the interest in taking a 'transcendent' authorial position with an interest in being 'beyond gender' and masculinity.

It's also important to consider that much queer theory is written by queer (and some straight) women and trans men who have variously experienced femininity as a constraint (Martin, 1996; Serano, 2007). The association of feminine embodiment with entrapment is a feminist as well as a queer affect (Martin, 1996; Serano, 2007). In a patriarchal world, to be feminine and a cisgender or trans woman are still undesirable and difficult realities for many reasons. To explore tropes of disembodiment is therefore understandable. However, several theorists suggest that this interest in the immaterial comes at the cost of an interest in people's everyday realities (Johnson, 2005; Nestle, 1998; Walters, 1996), what Martin (1996) calls the 'ordinary' aspects of life. An escape from a misogynist, homophobic and

transphobic reality also entails escape from the aspects of life that tie us to the social and social responsibility. Queer theory's interest in divesting from material realities leads to concerns that queer theory is abstract and elitist, even as it expresses an interest in activism and community (Faderman, 1997). While it is a productive exercise to imagine a different, good life for queers, gesturing toward 'other ways of being' and 'other worlds' does not tell us how to survive lethal discrimination in our world (Cohen, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Martin, 1996). This enticing picture of an "existence without limit" (p. 70) is unable to account for many topics of relevance to queers, especially queer women (Martin, 1996).

Disembodiment, utopian dreams and similar rhetorical devices should not replace a concern with challenging the material realities of sexist, racist, and classist and other intersectional forms of oppression in queer culture nor be substituted for political action. Theorists and writers who experience discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender, as well as sexuality, remind us that theories that are too abstract not only fail to provide an intersectional analysis but also fail to propel real-world change. Patrick Johnson's (2005) desire for "a meatier politics of resistance" (p. 136) than that articulated by Butler (1990) and other theorists suggests the importance of being rooted in the material to create an effective political strategy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that early queer theorists imagined the nascent field of queer studies as an interrogation of sexuality that diverged from feminism's interrogation of gender-based oppression. The effects of this divergence are still felt in the objects queer theory continues to take up today. As a field inaugurated in part by lesbian-feminist theorists who rejected aspects of lesbian-feminist thought, queer theory has calcified the preexisting cultural association of the lesbian feminist with prudishness, gender essentialism, racism, classism, and a lack of humour. The feminist sex wars, in which a pro-sex faction of lesbian feminists split from other lesbian feminists who understood many kinds of sex and gender expression as inherently oppressive, provide one of the historical contexts for the

emergence of queer theory as a field of study. Some lesbian feminists felt that a new discursive space was needed for the discussion of lesbian sexual practices, transgender identities, pornography, BDSM, sex work, and other sexual practices (Rubin, 1993). While this discursive turn away from gender served to legitimize sexuality studies and early queer theory, it also cast gender as feminism's proper object and removed gender analysis from early queer theory.

The turn away from a lesbian feminism cast as regressive and old fashioned is one manifestation of divergence, or running away from, that resonates throughout many of queer theory's tropes. The desire to challenge oppressive norms of gender and sexuality led queer theory to associate non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices with subversion of these norms. Non-normative gender expressions are thus understood as inherently antinormative. Most notable is Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which has contributed to the association of cross-gender performance with political subversion. It is notable that in queer dyke culture masculine-coded gender identities are seen as subversive, whereas feminine-coded gender identities on queers are seen as normative and inherently oppressive. Discourses of antinormativity and gender performativity thus compound the femmephobia that femmes have experienced in queer dyke culture since the late 1940s (Nestle, 1992a). The consequences of these theories have been disastrous for both cisgender and transgender femmes. Discourses of antinormativity and gender performativity reinforce the cultural association of femininity with artificiality, internalized oppression, and fake lesbianism. These stereotypes are active in misogynist characterizations of trans women, AFAB femmes, and feminine gay men. The abjection of the feminine also leads to the omission of culturally feminized phenomena and the everyday material needs of queer subjects—queer women in particular—from queer theory's scope.

As a queer femme and feminist caught up in this split, I am asked to choose between my gender (femininity), my feminist needs as a cisgender woman and mother, my political beliefs, and my commitment to queer culture and community. I don't highlight queer theory's

tendency to run away from gender, the material, and the oppressive, messy aspects of embodiment—of queer people's lives—to reject queer theory, which I have loved and which forms part of my intellectual inheritance. Rather, I hope to call queer theory into queer feminist concerns. I want queer theory and queer culture to be more accountable to the feminine, to the culturally feminized experiences that so many queers live, and to its lesbian-feminist past. The disciplinary separation of queer from feminist has had ripple effects throughout queer theory, in the objects it will take, what it believes to be of interest, and who it can account for. By naming the coding of gender as femininity only, the removal of gender from queer analysis, and the predominant interest in both queering and transgressing gender in queer theory and culture, I highlight how these gestures create problems for feminine queers and queers who have commitments to the family of origin and their own created families. Naming this removal creates space for considerations of femininity and feminism to be reincorporated into queer theory and move toward a feminist queer theory that can address more of the material needs of queer subjects.

Chapter Three: Bringing Queer Theory Home: Reparative Readings of the Family in Femme Life Writing

“For example, my grandmother, who is homophobic, nonetheless must be included in the struggle against oppression in spite of her bigotry.” (Johnson, 2005, p. 130)

“I am Edna McCune’s lesbian granddaughter and I was finally going home”
(Hollibaugh, 2000, 1p. 173).

Introduction

I’ve run away so many times. I’ve run away to find a solution—to escape my homophobic family and depression. I’ve run away from a place I felt I didn’t belong back to somewhere I hoped I could belong, only to find that the community I had left no longer existed and my problems came with me. I fled from my parents as a young adult and spent my twenties into my thirties furious at them. It was only when I moved from the United Kingdom to Canada that I felt free to be myself. And it was only when I had children that I started to accept my parents for who they are.

Like other queers who moved beyond their parents’ imaginations, I took my world with me. I am continually drawn backwards to my family of origin despite our differences. There is something my family can give me that I cannot get elsewhere. Shared experiences, unspoken understanding, a culture shared over a childhood. A childhood friend once said about my family that, for a family who has so much conflict, it’s also striking how much we love each other. I have found that my love for my parents and my home has left an indelible mark on me. The landscape that I grew up on, the muddy red soil of Devon and the crashing waves of Cornwall constitute my idea of natural beauty. I am continually drawn backwards to the English countryside, my family. My mother in boots in the garden. My father in a waxed Barbour jacket coming in from checking the cows. Becoming a mother myself has only

reinforced this connection as childhood memories bubble to the surface and I am drawn backward even more. To make sense of my own childhood, to address the difficult and the happy memories, and to explore my own new social position and role as a mother.

Sara Ahmed (2006) asks “What does it mean [for us] to be orientated” (p. 1) as queer subjects? “How do we come to find our way?” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1). The objects our academic disciplines and cultural discourses take present us with choices, decisions to be made. These objects serve as “landmarks” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1) that anchor us in a space, a place. “They gather on the ground, and they create a ground upon which we can gather” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1). The landscape that these discourses shape is, by definition, delineated by these ideas. Our discursive and disciplinary orientations create inclusions and exclusions, possibilities and impossibilities. It does, as Ahmed (2006) argues, make a huge “difference... ‘what’ or ‘who’ we are orientated toward” (p. 1). For many queers the family of origin is a site of homophobia and/or transphobia that we need to leave to come out, to feel that we can be ourselves. As the story goes, it is by leaving our families of origin and entering an urban queer community that we find ourselves as queer adults (Gordon, 1999; Saxey, 2008). Yet to leave our families of origin can also entail a loss for some queers: of love, culture, and people. This loss is felt especially acutely by queer subjects whose class, race, and cultural backgrounds differ from those of the hegemonic culture and queer communities that are predominantly white and middle-class (see for example Gomez, 1993; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nnawulezi et al., 2015). In the words of Black, Wampanoag, and loway femme Jewelle Gomez (1993), casting the out queer subject and the family of origin as inherently incompatible cuts queer people “off from...a kind of fulfillment only available from” (p. 13) our families. By entering queer communities, we may know we are—queer—but we may also miss an orientation to the culture, the place, and the people of our first home.

Both queer and right-wing narratives of family and childhood pitch queer and straight subjects, the presumably straight parent and the queer or trans child, against each other. The subject position of the queer and/or trans parent, who straddles the antinormative

position of the trans and/or queer subject and the normative position of parent, is rendered invisible by this framework. In the context of escalating political polarization, especially divisive discourses around children's access to queer and trans-positive education and gender-affirming care (see for example Dubé, 2023; Mitchell, 2023; Parry, 2024; "The Canada-Wide Protests," 2023; Yurcaba, 2023), finding a way to reconcile the positions of heterosexual parent and queer or trans child, is increasingly important.

In this chapter, I consider the femme as a mediator between the family of origin and the chosen family. Femme life writing provides a counternarrative to the young queer subject's rejection of the family of origin, and the idea that queer community is always an ideal home for the adult queer subject. I read Dorothy Allison's (1994) collection of essays *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* and memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1996), Jewelle Gomez's (1993) *Forty-Three Septembers: Essays*, and Amber Hollibaugh's (2000) *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* as examples of reparative approaches to the tropes of the family and home; both the family of origin and the political home of queer community. These femme writers refuse the separation of queer versus straight, antinormative versus heteronormative, that facilitates the divide between the queer subject and the family of origin. By doing so, they hope to forge a new home, perhaps a new family, where they can bring all of their queer selves, political beliefs and cultural contexts, and incorporate their families of origin into their political vision.

Homonormativity and the Family

I build on my suggestion in Chapter Two that queer's investment in antinormativity as a central trope originates in a desire to run away from "historical injury" (Love, 2007, p. 1), specifically the homophobic and transphobic idea that to be queer and/or trans is an "affliction" (Serano, 2013, p. 198). The family of origin is another site of historical injury for many queers who are temporarily or permanently rejected by their family of origin, or otherwise injured by homophobic or transphobic attitudes within their families. Many families continue to reject their queer or trans children when they come out, forcing them to leave to

find a new home in queer community (Bailey 2014; Levitt et al., 2015; Lowrey, 2010; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). In the typical coming out narrative, the queer community becomes a replacement family, affording young queers the safety and acceptance that the family of origin cannot (Bailey 2014; Levitt et al., 2015). As queers we orientate ourselves against heteronormative narratives, which include the linear narrative of “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2). We embrace an antinormative life. However, by setting ourselves against the heteronormative, so often embodied by the image of the reproductive family, the home, and the mother (Driver, 1996; Fraiman, 2003; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010), we turn away from our families of origin. We look to queer communities to offer us a new home, one where we might feel welcome and belong. Yet this new home is often incomplete or flawed, especially for queers who experience additional oppressions on account of their gender expression, race, class background, sexual preferences, or dis/ability, to name a few experiences. We may have chosen a new family, but it is also dysfunctional.

I’m aware of the arguments that accessing same-sex marriage and nuclear family forms is one form of assimilation to the colonial, white supremacist, patriarchal state (see for example Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2020; Halberstam, 2005; Edelman, 2004). I’m also aware that to return home isn’t possible or desirable for many queer subjects. However, I also want to suggest that family doesn’t always have to be coterminous with assimilationist cultural practices in queer thought. The return home for the femmes I discuss in this chapter is fraught and not idealistic. Here lies the political productivity of the (re)turn to a flawed home: it is productive to disrupt the oppositional stories we tell about families and queers, children and adults, and queer and parental subjectivity, in both mainstream and queer culture. Femmes’ return in these narratives to their family of origin is not symptomatic of a desire to return to a nuclear family structure, but rather to drag their families forward—or perhaps sideways—with them into a social structure that enables their heterosexual family members, whose lives have also been curtailed by their circumstances of gender, sexuality, class,

poverty, geographical location, and race, to experience more freedom of choice. My hope is that by exploring femmes' narratives of family and home this chapter will suggest more ways for queer and straight subject positions to find a common ground.

The Femme as Mediator

Many femme writers intuit that the femme who is assigned female at birth (AFAB) can be a mediator between queer and straight communities (André & Chang, 2006; Galewski, 2008; Gomez, 1998; Hemmings, 1998; Sharman, 2011; VanNewkirk, 2006). This femme exists outside of queer frameworks of gender and sexuality as a feminine and AFAB queer subject. Many femmes feel stuck in-between queer and heterosexual social worlds on account of their combination of femininity and queer sexuality. In her introduction to *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, Joan Nestle (1992a) describes the femme as “the most ambiguous figure in lesbian history” (p. 15). This illegibility exposes the femme to charges of inauthenticity, both by a heterosexual culture who thinks they “just need a real man” (Pratt, 2005, p. 133) to make them straight, or a queer culture that sees them as temporary or fake lesbians (Levitt et al., 2003; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Walker, 2001). This ostracization is compounded by further experiences of marginalization, for example belonging to Latinx community (Ortiz, 1997; Sandoval, 1997), being middle-aged (Walker, 2012), or being bisexual (Hemmings, 1998).

Although the construction of lesbian sexuality as innately masculine exposes femmes to negative attitudes in queer communities (Walker, 2001), femmes also write that they can use their in-between positioning strategically, to challenge assumptions in both queer and straight contexts (Galewski, 2008; VanNewkirk, 2006). In Robbin VanNewkirk's (2006) words, the femme can “strategically move between ideological positions, subversively rendering them problematic” (p. 82) because they are often mistaken for a heterosexual woman in both straight and queer contexts. Elizabeth Galewski (2008) argues similarly that femmes can challenge “the queer-straight dichotomy” (p. 294) by looking straight but acting queer. Femmes' ability to “engage in certain forms of political behaviour...that might be shut

off from butches” because of their “feminine appearance” (Galewski, 2008, p. 293) is their “own special femme strength” (Davis, 1992b, p. 268) that enables femmes to challenge assumptions about queers in the heterosexual world and “stand up” (Sharman, 2011, p. 89) against heterosexism and homophobia. Femmes’ reframing of femme invisibility as a strength suggests that their ability to move between straight and queer contexts allows them to reveal and question ideological frameworks that themselves were previously invisible. Allison’s (1994; 1996), Gomez’s (1993), and Hollibaugh’s (2000) ability to move between their chosen families of lesbian, lesbian-feminist, and other left-wing communities and their families of origin may therefore be a particular femme ability not afforded to all queer subjects. In their ability to move between these different families, femmes may be able to challenge a polarizing politics that frames queer subjects’ family of origin and the chosen family, and the (presumably straight) parent and the queer child as inherently opposed. Their queer, female and feminine subjectivity ensures their commitment to the feminist concerns shared by their mothers and sisters and their fierce commitment to a queer politics.

Reparative Practices: An Alternative Way of Approaching the Past

The idea that you should run away is an understandable response to pain, but it isn’t the only one. Queer theory tends to run away from the ideas it is troubled by. These include, the normative, the feminine, the lesbian feminist, gender essentialism, and the ever-looming threat of failing to be intersectional. The trajectory of the queer child coming out and into adult queer subjectivity by fleeing their family home mirrors the narrative of the nascent queer movement running away from its lesbian-feminist mother. These progress narratives imply that self-realization is achieved by running away from a terrible past, often framed as hostile parents, toward a better future. The temporal, spatial, and gendered dimensions of these stories correlate to those of antinormativity, with its flight from the past, rejection of the feminine, and hope for a different, utopian place in the future. The progression of knowledge implied by these metaphors of divergence causes problems for a feminist queer studies, and feminist and queer subjects, because they advocate forgetting or rejecting the past

(Hemmings, 2011; Hesford, 2013) and tend to rely on depicting feminine aesthetics and culturally feminized phenomena, such as but not limited to child-rearing, domestic labour, and care work, as 'normative' and hence unqueer (Driver, 1996; Fraiman, 2003; Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) work on paranoid and reparative critical practices, originally published in 1997, offers a way to understand queer theory's desire to run away from that which troubles it and models an alternative approach to these objects. Sedgwick suggests that queer studies is driven by its methodological commitment to 'paranoia' as both a set of negative affects and a mode of critique. For Sedgwick, paranoia in the context of queer studies describes the field's assumption that society's mechanisms of power are always 'out to get' the deviant queer subject. Queer studies therefore directs its critical energies toward discovering and interrogating power's normative and oppressive workings. However, Sedgwick argues that the knowledge a paranoid position elicits isn't always useful. Sedgwick posits that the discovery of oppression doesn't tell us what to do with that information and a paranoid theory can't produce any new knowledge—it can only confirm what we already think we know. Sedgwick notes the negative affects of "hatred, envy, and anxiety" that characterize the paranoid position and describes it as "a position of terrible alertness to...dangers" (p. 128). It is, for Sedgwick, a defensive theory that is naturally drawn toward simplistic, binary frameworks.

Driven by a framework based on opposition, and characterized by the negative affects of disdain, hatred toward and anxiety about the normative, antinormativity certainly sounds like a paranoid critical mode. Black queer theorists argue alongside Sedgwick that queer theory's tendency toward a binary framework of queer versus straight obscures "the multiple and intersecting systems of power" (p. 24) that govern individuals' lives (Cohen, 2005). These "homogenizing tendencies" (Johnson, 2005, p. 127) tend to displace or fail to address the concerns of not only Black lesbian mothers (Moore, 2011), for example, but also any queer subject who experiences other axes of oppression in addition to sexuality. These

theorists suggest that a binary framework is insufficient to examine the very real differences that race, class, and other forms of oppression make to “the distribution of power” (Cohen, 2005, p. 25) within queer communities.

Sedgwick (2003) suggests that one alternative critical approach to the objects queer studies is troubled by is to employ a reparative practice. Instead of a paranoid stance, which tries to forestall further injury and pain, a reparative stance attempts to get pleasure from the flawed object to mitigate the damage caused. Sedgwick follows psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s theorization of infant-to-mother relationships to argue that the reparative process is a way of loving an object by reframing it in an image that is more palatable and “satisfying,” that one can identify with, and which can then “offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” (p. 128). The reparative position allows a different orientation toward the hated and loved object than disavowal because it understands the other as complex and allows for various, often contradictory, affects. A reparative understanding of the object takes “the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137). This effort to love the damaged object is also a way of finding a way to take care of the self. The reparative position thus suggests possibilities for pleasure, reparation, and survival in hostile environments. For Sedgwick (2003), reparative practices suggest a way for marginalized subjects and communities to gain “sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (pp. 150-151). A reparative approach to problematic cultural objects already propels many queer and feminist studies of popular culture (Tinsley, 2022).

The desire for reparation may be particular to queer subjects who experience multiple axes of marginalization such as sexism, classism, and racism; it is an anti-racist and queer feminist affect. Both Black queer theorists and/or queer feminists have directed their reparative attention toward queer theory itself. See for example, Patrick E. Johnson’s (2005) invocation of his grandmother’s use of the word ‘quare’ to theorize a field that is more accountable to subjects who are both Black and queer. Or Omise’eke Tinsley’s (2022)

description of the ability to get sustenance from flawed cultural objects as a Black femme strategy of survival. Additionally, many queer feminists take a reparative approach to a queer theory that has often abjected the feminist. The queer feminist theorist's response to the queer/feminist split is to refuse it, to commit once again to queer *and* feminism because this approach "seems...more theoretically and politically promising as a form of resistance than a queer decision to split from feminism" (Huffer, 2013, pp. 8-9). Allison's (1994; 1996), Hollibaugh's (2000), and Gomez's (1993) movement between the chosen family and the family of origin suggests the potential for mediation between these positions.

Reparative narratives may offer the potential to reconcile, or bring closer together, apparently oppositional positionalities and concerns. As such they are a useful tool with which to read femmes' relationship to the site of the family home, as well as femmes' commitment to a flawed lesbian community. The femme's interstitial positioning propels their dual commitment to their family of origin and chosen family. Femmes often desire to go home, and to connect their family of origin back to their adult experiences of activism and political belonging. The trope of returning home is symptomatic of femmes' desires to find a complete home; one that can address their cultural background, race, class, and gender positionalities, political beliefs, and sexual desires. It isn't enough for these femmes that they have escaped a heteronormative and oppressive trajectory; they also want to return to their first home and bring their family of origin into their better future with them.

Dysfunctional Families: The Family of Origin

Femme life writing often troubles the conventional coming out story, which centres the child's experience as a closeted queer person as the cause of their teenage difficulties, and the flight from the family home as a movement toward liberation and self-realization (Gordon, 1999; Saxey, 2008). Femme narratives also complicate the mainstream story that the family home is the safest home for the child (Allison, 1996; 2018; Hollibaugh, 2000; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015) and the queer narrative that the queer or lesbian community always offers queer subjects an alternative, safe home outside a hostile family of origin

(Camilleri, 2004; Gomez, 1993; Thom, 2017). Femme life writing thus juxtaposes the failure of the nuclear family to accommodate the queer child alongside the failure of the adult lesbian or queer community to offer a refuge to all queer subjects (Hollibaugh, 2000; Pratt, 2005; Thom, 2017). Here, the femme's fluid movement between ideological positions enables their critique of both. Femme writers observe that both the queer child and the adult femme are asked to suppress aspects of their self-expression to fit into their families of origin and chosen family (Hollibaugh, 2000; Nnawulezi et al., 2015).

Like many queers, femme writers often depict their families of origin as who they must break from to realize their queer subjectivity and avoid a heteronormative fate (Allison, 1996; Hollibaugh, 2000; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). However, femmes also consistently frame their writing as a corrective to lesbian-feminist and queer political narratives they find harmful (Allison, 1994; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 2003; Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997). Femmes often use writing to reconcile their desire for lesbian and queer community with their experiences of marginalization within these communities (Camilleri, 2004; Coyote & Sharman, 2011). These writers also contextualize the harm their families of origin inflict on them as children within their parents' own negotiation of oppressive family formations and sexism, classism, and racism (Allison, 1994; 1996; 2018; Camilleri, 2004; Gomez, 1993; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020; Nestle, 1998; 2003; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). In the sense that they understand their families as both "damaged" and "good" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137), these writers take a reparative approach to their families of origin. Femmes' reparative readings of mothers, fathers, siblings, nuclear and extended families are rooted in a queer feminist position that emphasizes the interconnected nature of our "sexual, racial, and economic" (Hollibaugh, 2000, p. 15) histories. Femme writers' desire to return home also aligns with some femmes' attempt to recuperate heterosexual women, particularly their mothers, into their queer femme-inist politics.

Life writing by Dorothy Allison (1994; 1996), Amber Hollibaugh (2000), and Jewelle Gomez (1993) exemplifies reparative approaches to the tropes of the family and home—

both the family of origin and the political home— in femme life writing. Each of these femmes were born in the 1940s in the United States into working-class families. Allison and Hollibaugh were born in working-class, rural communities; Allison to a white family, Hollibaugh to a white mother and Romany father. Gomez was born in Boston into a working-class, Black and Indigenous American family. Both Allison and Hollibaugh are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and describe a family legacy of poverty, teenage pregnancies, and curtailed dreams and desires that each writer interrupts by leaving home. Gomez experiences her family of origin as loving but fears coming out to them as lesbian will interrupt her close connection with her heterosexual mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Each of these writers forges an alternative life path to that of their foremothers, but they also return continually, almost compulsively, to their family in their writing. In Hollibaugh's (2000) words, she uses life writing "*to confront the family I came from, to discuss what it meant to me to be who I was, what it meant to try to go home*" (p. 173, emphasis in original). Both Allison and Hollibaugh write about their socioeconomic, geographical and racial background to redress the mainstream stories told about their poor families which depict them as "too comically downtrodden, too pathetic" (Hollibaugh, 2000, p. 14) or "dirty fucking trash" (Allison, 1994, p. 236). Gomez situates her lesbianism as her continuation of her family's matrilineal line of independent, non-hegemonic womanhood.

In *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*, Hollibaugh's (2000) essays emphasize that it is not only her queerness that marks her as different from her family, but also the social mobility inherent in her being the first of her family to graduate high school, leave rural California, and forge a different trajectory to that laid out for her by her socioeconomic and racial context. Hollibaugh's flight from the family home is propelled not only by the fact that she is a lesbian, but also by her desire to escape abuse at the hands of both her parents and the limited socioeconomic options available to her. The only girl of her generation to survive to adulthood, Hollibaugh leaves to find a chance of doing "anything different than the generations of women [in her family] who had gone before" (p. 25).

Hollibaugh's adult life as a writer and activist is a deviation from that of her matrilineal line: her white grandmother's hard work as a socioeconomic migrant from the American Midwest; her mother's "terrible sadness and fury" caused by the "choiceless expanse" of the semi-desert town "she could never escape" (p. 26). Hollibaugh understands the "rift" between her and her family as not only "a struggle over...the women I desired" but also "over class and hope" (p. 174). In this context, it is partly what Hollibaugh's queerness signifies that causes her family's fear—a difference from the rest of her family and the possibility of a life that none of them could have imagined. As Hollibaugh writes, "Their fear of my queerness came as much from moving outside the expectations of our family as it did from sex" (p. 175). Here, it is in part the child's queerness that propels her departure from the family home and allows her to escape the socioeconomic constraints experienced by the rest of their family.

In her collection of essays, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*, Allison (1994) writes that the return to the family of origin goes against the expectation that, as a lesbian and feminist, the coming out story, lesbian romance, or overtly political story might be the focus of her storytelling. She frames her desire to return home as a way of addressing that which she has been haunted by: the poverty and violence of her childhood; her love for her mother; and vindicating the women of her family in the face of their cultural abjection. Allison writes that, as a child, she wanted to run away from her family to escape their socioeconomic context. She was ashamed of her poor, Southern, white "trashy family where the boys all went to jail and the women all made babies when they were still girls themselves" (Allison, 1994, p. 237). Allison describes her desire to flee:

I wanted to run away from who we had been seen to be, who we had been. That desire is one I have seen in other members of my family. It is the first thing I think of when trouble comes—the geographic solution. Change your name, leave town, disappear, make yourself over. What hides behind that impulse is the conviction that the life you have lived, the person you are, is valueless, better off abandoned, that

running away is easier than trying to change things, that change itself is not possible.
(pp. 19-20)

Allison suggests that the desire to run away from the past and start anew is often instigated by injury and shame. This desire to run away is one we see in many young trans people and queers who experience transphobic and/or homophobic prejudice in their families of origin. However, queer feminist critiques of queer's theory's divergence from lesbian feminism argue that the past can and does touch us in the present, despite or perhaps because of our attempts to repress it (Cvetkovich, 2003; Freeman, 2010; Hesford, 2013; Mitchell & McKinney, 2019). Discussing queer theory's love of "reverse discourse" (p. 2), Heather Love (2007) argues that this desire to run away from "historical injury" (p. 1) denies this ability of the past to 'touch' or affect us "in the present" (p. 10). Love also argues that the past is also "something dissonant beyond our control, and capable of touching us" (pp. 9-10) now. Even after running away, those painful pasts continue to touch us, if only in our imagination.

Despite Allison's (1994) and Hollibaugh's (2000) desire to flee, both are haunted by their families of origin. As Allison (1996) writes in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, "I ran because if I had not I would have died. [But] no one told me that you take your world with you" (p. 4). In this sense, the queer individual's desire to run away from home is often propelled by the same desire to run away that propels queer as a discipline. The coming out narrative mirrors the temporal and spatial trajectories of antinormativity, which requires disidentification from the place of the painful past in to propel it toward a better future located elsewhere (Wiegman, 2014). The trope of the young queer leaving a rural family home that is cast as a site of homophobic oppression to move to an urban centre that houses a welcoming queer community is, like antinormativity, a paranoid narrative because it assumes that "change...is not possible" (Allison, 1994, p. 20). Hollibaugh's and Allison's narratives counter this trajectory and assumption in that they both figure a return to the family home and offer a different perspective on their families of origin.

Allison's (1994) stories and essays hold together her traumatic past filled with family she loves dearly and the adult life she yearned for but couldn't imagine as a child—her life as a femme lesbian, activist, and queer mother. Despite running away from her embarrassing, white trash family as a young adult and throwing herself into the lesbian-feminist community, Allison feels pulled backwards toward her family and wants to enter an “understanding” rather than “contemptuous” (p. 26) relationship with them. Allison (1994) describes her childhood and her mother's, aunts' and cousins' grim realities as “the central fact of [her] life,” the thing she has “spent [her] life trying to overcome or deny” (p. 15), and the story that she most needs to tell. Allison returns compulsively to the site of the family home and stories about the women of her family. She describes the story of her mother as her primary story, the one she feels compelled to write:

What I began with was the story of my mother's life, my mother as a girl of fourteen, dropping out of school and pregnant with me, proud and stubborn and ashamed....I worked my way back to that story, knowing it was the one I needed to tell to be able to write. I had to believe in the use of writing, and the primary use was to reject hatred, simple categories, shame. The first rule I learned in writing was to love the people I wrote about—and loving my mama, loving myself, was not simple in any sense. (Allison, 1994, pp. 236-237)

Allison suggests that she can't tell a story about her sexuality, desires, or political vision without first talking about her mother. Like Hollibaugh, Allison's writing is motivated by wanting to get closer to her family, and in particular her mother, against the “deep estrangement from their view of the world” (p. 26) that she feels living in an urban lesbian-feminist community far away from her family in South Carolina. Allison uses her writing to ‘touch’ her family; to enter into the pain and realities of her childhood and her relatives' lives and generate an empathetic view for the people who hurt her. By rejecting simplistic stories told about families like hers and writing the complicated story of a particular place, time, and set of circumstances that her characters can't escape, including a mother who both loved

her fiercely and who also failed to protect her from her stepfather's sexual abuse, Allison produces an empathetic, reparative narrative of the family that both hurt her and loved her, and that she both loves and was ashamed of. I read Allison's emphasis on the importance of loving the people she writes as a reparative practice. Fully embracing the flawed object of our love requires that we diverge from simplistic observations and binary categories and produce a more complicated picture.

Black femme and Indigenous American writer Jewelle Gomez (1993) describes a similar need to reconcile her queerness with her family of origin in her collection of essays, *Forty-Three Septembers*. Gomez's essays pay homage to her father and the women who raised her, her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, to whom she is "bound by so many things, not the least of which is looking so alike" (p. 13). Unlike the families of origin described by some femme writers, Gomez's family members are not necessarily homophobic. Gomez first encounters lesbian and gay literature on her father's bookshelves and learns the word "bulldagger" (p. 10) from a story her grandmother recounts with fondness of being asked to dance by a butch lesbian. However, there is still a silence around her sexuality that impedes Gomez's sense of connection to her family. In her early thirties, Gomez feels distanced from her family because she hasn't explicitly come out to them, despite their tacit acceptance of the 'friends' she brings on her visits home. Gomez's experiences resonate with those of other Black femmes who write about being torn between belonging to a Black community that is implicitly coded as heterosexual and a queer or lesbian community that is culturally coded as white (Bryan, 2002; Nnawulezi et al., 2015; Shackelford, 2016).

Dysfunctional Families: The Chosen Family

The queer coming out narrative narrates the teenage queer subject's flight from the family to live as an out queer adult. Queer theory validates queer subjects' often necessary flight from the family home by reframing it as a politically subversive deviation from a heteronormative life narrative (Bersani, 1987; 1995; Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011).

Being queer throws you off a certain life path; parenthood, monogamous coupledness, and the lifestyle associated with the nuclear family no longer feel like an inevitability (Halberstam, 2011). Many queer theorists take this deviation from a 'normal' heterosexual trajectory as an opportunity to explore the alternative values that can be assigned to queer lives (Bersani, 1987; 1995; Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011). In this context, queer's claim to antinormativity is an assertion of pride that seeks to counteract the shame the nuclear family and mainstream culture may express at the view of its queer children, and which in turn those queers may also feel.

Queer community affords some queer subjects more freedom of sexual and gender expression, but it comes with conditions attached to who can sit at the family table. Femme life writing tells us that queer community often isn't the welcoming home that queer subjects hope for. Femmes write that femmephobia leads them to feel alienated from queer community (Craig, 2009; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Papez, 2009), and to experience both femme identity (Hollibaugh, 2000; Papez, 2009, Sheiner, 1997) and queer community (Marrero, 2009, Thom, 2017) as complex, painful sites. Femme writers also observe that femmephobia impedes the creation of community between femmes (Craig, 2009; Davis et al., 1992; Lowrey, 2009b; Pratt, 1997; Rugg, 1997), which contributes to femmes leaving lesbian and queer communities (Hankin, 1997). Femmes' experiences of these various forms of femmephobia, which are compounded by racism (Bryan, 2002; Story, 2017), transphobia (Serano, 2013; Thom, 2017), classism (Allison, 1994, 1996; Hollibaugh, 2000; Rugg, 1997), ableism (Jones, 1995; Platt, 1992; Wachsler, 2009), and lookism (de Vries, 2009), tell us that queer is often a dysfunctional family. Femmes' narratives suggest that the idea of the queer community as a welcoming refuge is, like the safety of all homes, to some extent a myth. Femmes' experiences of a hostile queer community also propel their return home to their families of origin, and their attempt to reconcile these two families, in order to dream of a different home.

As adults, both Allison (1994) and Hollibaugh (2000) throw themselves into lesbian feminism and social justice movements. However, despite their hope that these communities would offer them the safe homes they were looking for, both find that their lesbian-feminist communities are unable to understand their working-class socioeconomic context and femme gender identities and sexual desires. Allison (1994) situates the femmephobia she experiences in the lesbian-feminist movement within the context of class:

I know that I have been hated as a lesbian both by 'society' and by the intimate world of my extended family, but I have also been hated or held in contempt...by lesbians for behavior and sexual practices shaped in large part by class. (p. 23).

Allison experiences homophobia at the hands of her family of origin and mainstream culture, and femmephobia in her lesbian-feminist community for being a working-class femme who practices BDSM and desires butches. She argues that the predominantly middle-class lesbian-feminist movement associates butch/femme relationships with a past, working-class lesbian bar culture that it positions itself as superseding. The cost of this claim to social respectability is to make lesbian-feminist communities an unwelcoming home for working-class femmes like Allison and to leave Allison caught between three partially hostile homes: the family of origin; mainstream culture; and lesbian-feminist community.

Despite their hope that joining the lesbian-feminist community would enable them to fully inhabit their sexuality, the conditions of their acceptance in lesbian feminism require Allison (1994) and Hollibaugh (2000) to disavow their childhood experiences, their socioeconomic class, and their femme gender identities and sexual desires. As young adults, Allison and Hollibaugh hide their working-class backgrounds and femme gender and sexuality to blend in with their new lesbian communities. Allison writes that she temporarily separates her "activist life" (p. 16) from her sexual life as a femme who dates butches and practices BDSM in order to integrate into the lesbian-feminist community. Hollibaugh hides her occupation as a sex worker, letting her movement colleagues assume that she is a graduate student with wealthy parents like the majority of her peers. Allison's and

Hollibaugh's experiences echo those of other femmes, for whom the "need to belong" (Allison, 1994, p. 17) to lesbian or queer community is so acute that we will temporarily tone down or hide our femme identities in order to fit in (see for example Crone, 1995; Istar, 1992; Lowrey, 2009a; Sheiner, 1997; Young, 1995). Like Hollibaugh, who writes that she experiences suicidal ideation at her failure to reconcile her femme gender and sexual desires for butches with her lesbian-feminist political beliefs, Allison experiences the self-abnegation required of her in her political lesbian community as a source of anguish:

Finally, I recognized that part of my grief came from the fact that I no longer knew who I was or where I belonged. I had run away from my family, refused to go home to visit, and tried in every way to make myself a new person (p. 33).

Having cut herself off from her family of origin and the culture she was raised in, Allison feels disorientated. Belonging neither to the lesbian-feminist community she has chosen as an adult, nor her family of origin, Allison loses the cultural, class, geographic, and racial background that are essential to her sense of self and the formation of her working-class, kinky, femme sexuality. Both Allison and Hollibaugh ultimately refuse a belonging to community that is predicated on denying aspects of their lives they experience as essential. They find both the family of origin and the lesbian-feminist 'alternative family' are incomplete refuges that demand conformity as a condition of acceptance.

Hollibaugh (2000) also frames her desire to return to her childhood home as a way of reconciling her adult experiences as a dyke, sex worker, and activist to those of her child self:

I was tired of running from myself and my own history....I wanted everything—differently. I wanted to take all that I had discovered home, take these movements that I was a part of or that I had helped create back to the trailer court and so take all my own selves back to the places and the people who had birthed me and who I had never wanted to leave in order to have a life determined by hope. (p. 10)

Hollibaugh's writing places the home—configured as both the family home and the political home—at the centre of her writing. While the queer reader might anticipate the 'home' of *A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* to be that of queer community, Hollibaugh's memoir is as much about a return to her family of origin as it is about finding a home for her gender and sexual identities and political beliefs. This collection's titular dream of a different kind of home is a journey toward a community that can accommodate her sexuality, her political beliefs, and her socioeconomic cultural background; all of her "sexual, racial, and economic history" (p. 15). What Hollibaugh wants "differently" (p. 10) is to integrate the two homes and to bring everything she has learnt back to her family.

Hollibaugh's (2000) statement that her "history didn't seem to fit together with the dreams [she] harbored and the movements [she] joined" (p. 15) speaks to the perceived incompatibility of her adult life in lesbian-feminist community both with her working-class background and her femme gender identity and sexual desires. Hollibaugh hopes that making intersectional connections between her seemingly distinct experiences will be politically transformative. Throughout her personal essays, Hollibaugh connects her sexual desires, political beliefs, and gender identity to the people she comes from. Hollibaugh's location of her sexual desires within her personal history illustrates one of her central arguments in *My Dangerous Desires*—that our unique, "varied histories" form a "map" (p. 97) of our desires. Hollibaugh brings everything to the table—sex, desire, politics, her family—and shows how these seemingly disparate pieces fit together.

Gomez (1993) also experiences the political movements she joins as a teenager and adult as incomplete refuges. She critiques the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, each of which addresses only one aspect of her experience either as a Black person, woman, or lesbian. Gomez first becomes involved in activism during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Yet, she finds that the movement refuses to consider the experiences of Black women, let alone Black lesbians. Gomez is deeply critical of the misogynist thread in the civil rights movement in which Stokely Carmichael's 1964 statement

“the only position for women in the Movement is prone” is “heartily greeted” (p. 49) by Black men. Gomez ascribes this myopic attitude to the civil rights movement’s refusal to consider both race and gender as axes of oppression. Gomez also encounters this binary framework in Black feminist and lesbian communities of the 1970s and 1980s, in which other Black women see her as ‘not really Black’ because she is a lesbian, and white lesbians assume she is heterosexual because she is Black. Gomez wrestles with the inability of any political movement to encompass her needs and desires as an “African-American, loway, Wampanoag, Bostonian, lesbian, welfare-raised, artist, [and] activist” (p. 73). Faced with the heteronormativity of Black culture, sexism of gay culture, and racism of white lesbians, Gomez writes, “I’m left to wrestle with who I’m writing for and...speaking to” (p. 73). Her position as a Black femme lesbian leaves her in-between communities.

Femmes Return to the Family Home

Allison’s (1994; 1996), Gomez’s (1993), and Hollibaugh’s (2000) critiques of the ways the family of origin and politicized lesbian community are constructed as irreconcilable demonstrate that the separation of the queer subject and their family of origin is untenable for queers who experience marginalization based on their class, gender, sexual practices, and race, in addition to their sexual orientation. The dream of home each of these writers’ crafts is not only of a home for the sexual outcast, but also a wish that they didn’t have to leave their families behind in order to realize their sexual desires. Hollibaugh and Allison hope for a political home that can house the dreams and needs of their poor, working-class, white family members who were trapped by their socioeconomic circumstances. Gomez’s writing also suggests that the construction of the family of origin and the chosen family as incompatible doesn’t ring true for all queer subjects, especially for those who experience additional social marginalization on account of racism, classism, and sexism. As a Black femme, Gomez wants and needs a connection to the women of her family and the wider Black community of her childhood.

Allison's (1994; 1996), Gomez's (1993) and Hollibaugh's (2000) writing shows how the narrative of the political home as a replacement for the family home fails for them as women variously from working-class, white, Romany, or Black communities, sex workers, femmes, and as women who want to maintain a connection to their family and culture of origin. These writers each describe being bound to their families on account of their shared contexts of class, race, and geographical location. Despite her flight from a difficult childhood and abusive family members, Hollibaugh expresses pride at the legacies of her white settler grandmother "who ended up in this desert town with her children and her willpower, raising her daughters alone" (p. 173) and her Romany grandmother who worked as a sex worker and was branded by the Ku Klux Klan alongside her son, Hollibaugh's father. As an adult, Hollibaugh still calls Oildale, California, her home and identifies herself both by her sexual identity and her family of origin. It is Dorothy Allison's experiences of being raised poor in the US South by a family who was seen as white trash, and the ways pregnancy and raising children circumscribes the lives of the women of her family, that keep her ideologically bound to her family in spite of her difference from them both as a lesbian and as someone who obtained a college education and gained socioeconomic mobility. Gomez emphasizes the importance of her father and the women of her family to her sense of belonging. She finds that a predominantly white women's movement is unable to offer her the cultural connection to her Black identity she can only get from her family and community of origin. It is only after coming out to her family of origin and connecting her experiences of being in her family to that of being in the women's movement that she feels comfortable in both settings.

Gomez (1993) frames her writing as a search "for the redemptive family, whether it is political or social, that will accept and support me" (p. 73). It is partly Gomez's experiences of racism within a culturally white women's liberation movement and lesbian community that affirms her need to maintain a connection to her family of origin. Gomez writes that she longs for a political language that can see "the connection between all of our struggles" and speak to all her experiences as a woman who is "Black, female, raised poor, [and] lesbian"

(p. 97). Similar to Allison (1994) and Hollibaugh (2000), Gomez finds lesbian community a partially hostile home and feels drawn backwards to her family of origin to access the sense of fulfillment that only they can provide. It is only when Gomez comes out to her family that “being a Black woman and a lesbian” (p.12), which she had previously experienced as irreconcilable, blend together. Throughout *Forty-Three Septembers*, Gomez emphasizes the legacy of sexual and intellectual independence that her family members pass down to her. Gomez’s family of origin is far from the stereotype of a heteronormative nuclear family. She writes that her sense of self has been variously shaped by her resolutely single great-grandmother who raised her, her grandmother who taught her “how to swim against the tide of prevailing opinion and propriety” (p. 27), her mother who gave up custody of Gomez and refused to be “bound up directly with the lives of [her] children” (p. 64), and her father who lived happily between two wives, each supportive of the other, introduced Gomez to music, queer literature, and modelled an open-hearted, gracious Black masculinity.

It is only when she frames her lesbianism as a continuation of these legacies of sexual and social independence that Gomez (1993) is able to hold together her lesbianism and her identity as a Black woman. Gomez writes that she recognizes the independent spirit of the women who raised her in the faces of the women in the lesbian-feminist community she joins:

Perhaps the convergence came when I saw the faces of my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother in those of the community of women I finally connected with. There was the same adventurous glint in their eyes, the same determined step, the penchant for breaking into song and for not wanting anyone to take care of them.
(p. 13)

Gomez’s reframing of her lesbianism as a continuation of her matrilineal inheritance subverts the idea that heterosexual femininity and lesbian (and femme) identity are inherently opposed. Rather than seeing the women of her family as ‘normative,’ Gomez understands them as already living a ‘different’ life as independent, artistic, Black women, each of whom

has their own relationship to familial structures. To be a lesbian is Gomez's way of continuing this legacy. Upon recognizing this connection, Gomez feels a sense of intergenerational connection and psychic integration. She writes, "my desire became part of my heritage, my skin, my perspective, my politics, and my future. I was certain that it had been my past that had helped make the future possible" (p. 12). Being accepted by her family allows Gomez to integrate her Black identity with her lesbian identity and inhabit a more holistic version of herself.

Gomez's (1993) determination to bring her lesbian self into her family home, and her imaginative connection of her lesbian community to the spirit of the women of her family, symbolizes her refusal of a choice between politicized lesbian identity and family of origin that rings false for her. Rather than maintaining a separation between her family of origin and her lesbian, feminist community, Gomez imagines a common ground between the two; a shared point of connection that allows Gomez to integrate her identity as the youngest woman in her remarkable family with her experience of herself as a feminist and a lesbian. By reconciling her family of origin to her queerness and connecting her intersectional experiences as a Black lesbian who was raised poor, Gomez finds her own ground—a sense of belonging—and is able to bring her whole self to her family and her politics.

Allison (1994; 1996) and Hollibaugh (2000) also describe tremendous grief at separation from their families of origin. Despite the oft-repeated injunction to leave the family of origin behind, both feel continually pulled backwards toward their family. In her 1984 essay "Sympathy of the Blood," Hollibaugh describes the way she is haunted by the Californian desert landscape of her childhood:

Through twenty years I have dreamed this land, smelled it, hated it, wanted it, and been afraid to return. The running from it caused a hollowness which stretched across most of my adult life, invaded and seduced my dreams, weighed on my mind, and [has] been a part of all I feared as a radical and as a dyke. (p. 174)

The landscape of Hollibaugh's childhood forms a reference point to which she is continually drawn as an adult. Here, the painful past haunts Hollibaugh in a similar way to the lesbian feminist's ongoing haunting of queer studies (Hesford, 2013; Freeman, 2010). Hollibaugh feels conflicted about her future-oriented work as an activist and her disavowal of her family as a young adult. Hollibaugh's description suggests that she needs to maintain a connection to her family of origin and the culture of her childhood to experience a sense of wholeness. As she enters her thirties, Hollibaugh is drawn home to reckon with her personal history. Yet she experiences this interjection of the difficult past as a threat to the adult self she has constructed.

Hollibaugh's (2000) description of her return home showcases a reparative approach to the family of origin; what can happen when two sides of a dispute finally speak. Hollibaugh describes her first return home in twenty years, to visit her dying grandmother, as an expression of her desire "to confront and ultimately accept myself" (p. 13). Similar to Allison, Hollibaugh finds that she can't heal from her traumatic childhood until she confronts it. Hollibaugh recounts an explosive argument she has about her anti-war activism with her male cousins, who are veterans of the Vietnam War, and one of whom is now a police officer, during this visit home. Hollibaugh recounts her cousins' hurt feelings at her long disappearance, their worry for her, and their accusation that she might have thought they "were too stupid to be bothered with" (p. 177). Hollibaugh's reply speaks to her concerns that she wouldn't be accepted as a member of the family if she were out as a lesbian, a femme who desires butches, or as a left-wing activist:

If I'd stood in front of the Bakersfield City Jail protesting racism, would you have busted everyone but me? If I'd ridden up on the back of my dyke lover's motorcycle, would you have asked us to stay overnight? If I had come home that way, would you have been asking when I was coming to the next big family picnic? (p. 177)

This recounted conversation shows the perspective of both the family of origin who was left behind by the queer child and the now adult queer child who moved away. Each side's fears

are grounded in a partial truth. Her cousins' assumption that Hollibaugh thought they "were too stupid to be bothered with" may be an accurate assessment of the paranoid feelings of superiority that percolate left-wing and queer activist culture, in which the queer activist feels enlightened in comparison to the 'normative' heterosexual population. As Sedgwick's (2003) theory of paranoia highlights, left-wing critical theories do suggest the possession of superior knowledge that the average person doesn't have. Hollibaugh may also be right that her family's homophobia would have caused problems if she had brought a butch lover home. By writing both sides' perspectives, Hollibaugh stages a reparative argument that shows the productive potential of confronting that which troubles us in order to fully acknowledge and learn from it (Tompkins, 2019).

Hollibaugh (2000) emphasizes that this frank conversation, which facilitates her and her cousins' later reconciliation, could only have happened when they were no longer young adults. Hollibaugh writes:

We could not have talked before. We had been too arrogant, too sure we were right. But, since then, we had all been pulled apart by...the unexpected circumstances and forces we could not control. Finally, we could accord each other our differences (p. 177).

Here, the perspective of the older queer adult differs from that of the queer youth, who runs away to escape discrimination and find a better life. As we age, we are drawn home again to reckon with our childhood. It is only by going home that this frank conversation between family of origin and queer family member and consequent movement toward reparation becomes possible.

Conclusion

Each of these femmes' stories complicates the typical coming out narrative, which situates the queer youth's flight from the family home as a movement toward self-realization, sexual, and political liberation (Gordon, 1999; Saxey, 2008). Allison's (1994; 1996), Gomez's (1993), and Hollibaugh's (2000) account of the losses they experience at leaving their

childhood home behind, and the inability of their lesbian communities to accommodate their sexual desires, gender identity, socioeconomic, and geographical contexts propels each of these writers back to their families of origin in order to reckon with their legacies and reconnect with the cultures of their childhoods. As Hollibaugh puts it, she returns home because she longs “to hear again...a culture of similar expectations and longings, of lives rooted in familiar desires and in the regular stories of simply desperate needs, understated and quite ordinary” (p. 14). However, this return home is not a homonationalist return to a nuclear family model. Rather, Allison and Hollibaugh want to help their family of origin escape the contexts that have also defined and limited their lives, even if only in their imagination. Rather than framing her family of origin as a site of homophobia and heteronormativity, Gomez highlights that both her family of origin and her chosen family are already non-normative. In doing so, Gomez finds a way to reconcile her queerness with her Black identity, which she had previously experienced as irreconcilable.

Their experiences of hostility in adult lesbian or queer communities propel Allison’s (1994; 1996), Gomez’s (1993) and Hollibaugh’s (2000) returns home. These experiences may make femmes more predisposed to embrace reparative narratives about the family of origin. Many femmes and other queer subjects who experience multiple axes of oppression continue to find queer community an inadequate home for all their sexual, political, and cultural needs. The femme’s precarious position in-between queer and straight identity is echoed in these femmes’ feeling that they belong completely neither to their family of origin nor their chosen family of lesbian, lesbian-feminist, and left-wing political communities. However, this interstitial positioning also allows them to act as a mediator between their queer and straight communities. Being in-between exposes femmes to suspicion and femmephobic attitudes within lesbian and queer communities. But it also allows them to do the political work of compromise, negotiation, and dialectical navigation in order to work toward a new political framework that can incorporate and address each family’s concerns.

Allison (1994; 1996), Gomez (1993), and Hollibaugh (2000) each write about their families not to go backwards to the place of the past, but to pull their families with them into their desired future. For these femmes, writing is a way of imagining the home that they haven't yet found. These femmes' literary and actual returns to the family home suggest the potential of reparative, rather than divisive, strategies to work through the difficulties we encounter in our families, whether they be our chosen or family of origin. The choice to leave the family of origin behind completely and adopt a new family may be, in Sedgwick's (2003) words, "a paranoid...stance" (p. 126). Our family has hurt us, and therefore we run away and leave them behind. Yet, in the current context of the culture wars, we see the violent harm caused by political polarization and 'us versus them' mindsets. This polarization is particularly harmful to queer and trans subjects in the current context of right-wing attacks on queer and trans children's access to safe education and gender-affirming healthcare (see for example Dubé, 2023; Mitchell, 2023; Parry, 2024; "The Canada-Wide Protests," 2023; Yurcaba, 2023). These femmes' perspectives on the family of origin as both "damaged" and "good, ...and requiring and eliciting love and care" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137) offer a more nuanced approach. By holding the people that have hurt us close and seeking to understand them we may find some kind of reparation.

In this chapter, I argue that the decision to return home may move toward more reparative constructions of queer identity. I see the gesture of disavowal inherent in the coming out narrative as an echo of the move away from the normative, in all its forms, that propels queer theory's adoption of antinormativity as its central tenet. The reparative approach is a choice "to encounter" our sites of injury "on something other than oppositional terms" (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015, p. 2). It is neither homonationalist nor queer separatist. It is more politically productive to have difficult conversations and imagine ways of bringing positions that have been cast as irreconcilable closer together than to reject those who have harmed us out of hand. This approach is a queer-femme-inist and anti-racist decision on both an interpersonal and disciplinary level.

Chapter Four: Don't Lose Your Mother: Reclaiming the Queer Feminist Legacy of the 'Bad' Mother

"What can I make of these recollections clouded with childhood loneliness and female-driven violence?" (Hollibaugh, 2000, p. 26)

"Sex then, no matter how dangerous. Sex then, no matter the cost." (Allison, 1994, p. 156)

Introduction

Femme theory to date has articulated the femme as queer by using frameworks of antinormativity, which valorize the femme as politically subversive in contrast to an implicitly hegemonic, heterosexual femininity (Fraiman, 2003; MacLachlan & Sreedhar, 2012; Eves, 2004; Galewski, 2005; Hemmings, 1999; Walker, 2012). Queer antinormativity responds to the cultural obligation to conform to gender and sexual norms by claiming the value of living an antinormative life. In this chapter, I perform a thematic narrative analysis of writing by Beth Brant (2019a; 2019b), Joan Nestle (1998; 2003), and Minnie Bruce Pratt (1988; 1990; 2005) in order to challenge queer theory's association of the normative with reproductive sexuality and the cultural figure of the mother, I navigate the connections femme writers Beth Brant, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt forge between their own queer sexual desires and the culturally abjected figure of the 'bad' mother.

Joan Nestle (1998; 2003) reclaims her heterosexual mother Regina as a sexual outlaw in mid-century New York City as an overtly sexual, single, working mother who monetized her sexual relationships. Nestle thus incorporates Regina into discourses of queer subjectivity. Both Beth Brant (2019a) and Minnie Bruce Pratt (1990) narrate stories of lesbians who lose custody of their children when they come out as lesbians in the 1970s. Brant's and Pratt's insistence on narrating lesbian mothers who love their children fiercely

and insist on inhabiting a queer sexual subjectivity in spite of severe social sanctions refuses the distinction between maternal and queer subjectivity and the false choice between maternal desire and sexual autonomy. Indigenous femme Brant also connects the phenomenon of lesbians who lose custody of their children in the 1970s to the state-sanctioned kidnapping of Indigenous children into the residential school system. Highlighting the way in which both heterosexual marriage and the settler state claim women and children as male property (Tallbear, 2022), Brant locates Indigenous and queer maternal subjectivity as sites of resistance to patriarchal violence. These deviant maternal legacies challenge the assumption that the heterosexual mother's legacy to her queer children is always one of gender and sexual conformity.

“Lose Your Mother”: Queer Daughters and Straight Mothers

While queer theory has addressed some forms of kinship, these considerations have been confined to queer family structures that exclude the work of raising young children, such as the drag house system in Black ballroom culture in the United States (Arnold & Bailey, 2009), “communities of those engaged in non-normative sexual practices” (Park, 2013, p. 18) such as kink and polyamory, and communities comprised of “social and political alliances” (Park, 2013, p. 18) between subjects who embody non-normative gender expressions and/or sexualities. When addressed by queer theory, the nuclear family structure has largely been explored “as an institution through which ‘abnormal’ sexuality is regulated by the state” (Park, 2013, p. 18). I follow Shelley Park's (2013) argument that it is partly queer theory's association of child rearing with normative “practices, schedules, routines, and concerns” (p. 18) that preclude considerations of reproductive sexuality from queer theory. Susan Fraiman (2003) also connects queer theory's abjection of the maternal to its desire to move away from its own lesbian-feminist mother and her interest in the maternal. There have been a few considerations of the queerness of the child in queer theory (see for example Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011; Stockton, 2009), but the act and fact of having children is assumed to be inherently normative (Fraiman, 2003; Park, 2013).

Queer parents like me are urged to parent in an antinormative way in order to counteract this assumption (Epstein, 2005; Averett, 2021).

Queer theory's understanding of antinormativity as the antithesis of the family and its associated concerns excludes aspects of life that are stereotypically feminized and/or of concern to women, such as the domestic, care work, mothering, parenting, and the nuclear family, from "the radical vision of queer cultures" (Driver, 1996, p. 32). In queer studies, the heterosexual life path, including the nuclear family, monogamy, parenting, and the domestic are understood as examples of the socially and politically normative that exercises harm on the queer subject (Driver, 1996; Martin, 1996). Susan Driver (1996) criticizes this "division between the sexual subject who transgresses social taboos and codes and the mother who represents 'cultural norms' and thus 'stands outside such transformative possibilities'" (p. 30). This understanding of the mother replicates the misogyny of mainstream culture, in which the mother and the housewife are also cultural shorthand for the hegemonic feminine, constrained female sexuality, the domestic, and the boring (Dove-Viebahn, 2021). This framework denies the reality that many queer subjects have commitments to their created families and families of origin. Child-rearing families are entangled with many 'ordinary' concerns, such as care work, gendered labour, and financial survival to name a few (Martin, 1996; Ward, 2010). Queer theory thus ignores many everyday, material aspects of queer people's lives.

One example of this framing of motherhood as inherently normative is Jack Halberstam's (2011) description of the mother as "the place of history, tradition, and memory and the [queer] daughter as the inheritor of a static [patriarchal] system which she must either accept without changing or reject completely" (p. 125). Halberstam's stereotypical mother accords with idealized maternal subjectivity in that she is implicitly white, middle-class, and heterosexual (O'Reilly, 2021). Her default whiteness, heterosexuality, and socioeconomic status facilitates Halberstam's assumption that this mother is invested in upholding the cultural norms that simultaneously idealize and trivialize her role as mother.

For Halberstam, the only possible relationship between heterosexual mother and queer daughter is one in which mothers teach their daughters how to be ‘good women,’ the only intergenerational knowledge transmission normative; that is to adopt the hegemonic feminine, the heterosexual, and the reproductive function. Halberstam then invites queer daughters to “lose” (p. 124) their mothers in order to break from this heterosexual and heteronormative narrative. To come into herself as a queer subject, the queer daughter must reject her mother’s legacy. In the context of the cultural expectation that all women be feminine, enter a heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationship, and become mothers, the dissociation of queer subjectivity from maternal subjectivity frees queer and trans subjects who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) to express their queer genders and sexualities and deviate from this culturally enforced trajectory. However, pitching the queer daughter against the heterosexual mother also ignores the reality that many queer subjects are mothers and that many queer daughters feel connected to their mothers.

This blind spot in queer theory, what Driver (1996) calls queer theory’s “systemic incapacity to overcome conventional views of motherhood” (p. 32), denies the possibility of the queer mother, the heterosexual mother, the working-class, and non-white mother, and the mother who can be claimed as queer via her inhabitation of an antinormative maternal subjectivity (Driver, 1996; Park, 2013). In this context, Halberstam’s (2011) command to “lose your mother” (p. 124) in order to find a new, queer life threatens other losses as well. Such losses include the exclusion of some feminized subjectivities from consideration within queer theory, augmenting queer theory’s inability or refusal to address the material realities of many queer people’s (and especially queer women’s) lives, and precluding more nuanced accounts of queer people’s entanglements with aspects of life that are framed by queer discourse as normative.

In this way, discourses of heteronormativity and antinormativity render queer theory unable to recognize any aspects of queer subjects’ lives that overlap with those of heterosexual subjects, especially those of heterosexual cisgender women (Carter, 2005;

Moreira, 2018). Material concerns such as funded childcare, parental leave, custody rights, healthcare, income equity, and elder care are feminist concerns that many queers share with the straight population, especially queers who are AFAB and/or belong to other marginalized groups, such as Black communities, communities of colour, working-class communities, and people with disabilities. In her exploration of lesbians' experiences of parenting, Luciana Moreira (2018) argues that in order to "understand lesbian motherhood better" we need to move beyond a simplistic analysis of "the good transformative queer and the bad normative assimilated individual" (p. 3). Instead, it may be more productive to consider the ways in which queer mothers and queer families may both conform to and resist the gender and sexual norms of the nuclear family (Averett, 2021; Moreira, 2018).

Femme Life Writing and the Mother

I return to femme life writing as one site of queer discourse that often refuses the distinction between queer and maternal subjectivity. Femme narratives frequently describe mothers who experience social marginalization or violence on account of their race, class, marital status, or sexuality (see for example Allison, 1994; 1996; Brant, 2019a; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 1998; 2003). Thus, the mother in much femme life writing is already different to the implicitly white, heterosexual, and middle-class idealized mother imagined by Halberstam. While femme theory has often mobilized the femme's queerness by emphasizing her difference from a straight femininity that is presumed to be inherently hegemonic and oppressive (Eves, 2004; Galewski, 2005), some femme theorists have expressed concern about leaving straight women out of femme's political vision (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997; Walker, 2012). As Barbara Cruikshank worries in conversation with Joan Nestle (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997), doesn't "this culture of fem leave other women behind? And say, well, fuck you, you are the work horses of the world anyway?" (p. 113). This narrative framework also leaves femmes unable to articulate aspects of feminine experience that they share with straight women lest they be threatened with falling out of queer subjectivity. These experiences include not only parenting (Pratt, 1990), but also concerns

about aging and beauty norms (Walker, 2012), sexual desire for masculinity (Allison, 1996), and shared cultural experiences of race, class, ability, and nation, to name a few. To counter this hierarchical tendency in feminist, queer, and queer femme discourse, some femme theorists have suggested developing a politics of solidarity between trans women, AFAB femmes, and cisgender heterosexual women who are each marginalized on account of their feminine gender expressions (Galewski, 2005; Serano, 2013). Femme mothers also draw parallels between their experiences as queer sexual and gender outlaws and being the ‘wrong kind’ of mother (Brant, 2019a; Franet, 2009; Pratt, 1990).

In this chapter, I argue that femme life writing opens up space for imagining allegiances between the queer femme and the ‘bad’ mother in their shared social transgressions (Driver, 1999a; 1999b). Femme writers challenge queer and patriarchal constructions of maternal subjectivity and the family by expressing a desire to go home and recuperate their families of origin from their abjection as undesirable state subjects (Allison, 1994; 1996; Brant, 2019a; Hollibaugh, 2000), seeking to understand their mothers’ flawed and complex parenting (Allison, 1994; 1996; Nestle, 1998; 2003; Hollibaugh; 2000), situating femme gender as an inheritance of their socioeconomic, racial, and geographical locations (Allison, 1991; 1996, Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020), framing their mothers as models of non-normative sexual expressions (Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020; Nestle, 1998; 2003), describing the agony the separation of mothering from queerness causes them as a queer femme mother (Brant, 2019a; Pratt, 1990), and detailing the harm inflicted on them by the violent reinforcement of a white settler nuclear family norm (Brant, 2019a). Femme writers thus offer accounts of their mothers that refuse simplistic binaries between reproductive heterosexuality and non-reproductive queer sexualities and ‘heteronormative’ and politically subversive subject positions and look toward more complex frameworks of queer and maternal subjectivity.

Femmes often understand themselves as gender outlaws, a term that became popular during queer discourse from the late 1980s on, to valorize femme identities within

the terms of queer antinormativity (see for example Bercuvitz, 1995; Johnson, 1992; Warner Candela, 1995). Less discussed is femmes' understanding of themselves as sexual outlaws as articulated by Madeline Davis (1997) and Joan Nestle (1992a; 2003) among others. Femmes have been seen as sexual outliers from not only mainstream culture, but also from lesbian and queer communities since the language of femme or 'fem' was first used by lesbians in lesbian bar culture of the 1950s (Kennedy & Davis, 1997; Nestle, 1992a; Stafford, 2010;). Femmes have been accused of being 'too sexual' and 'trashy' from within lesbian-feminist and queer communities (Mishali, 2014; Rugg, 1997) and of directing their desire at the wrong object, including butches (Davis, 1997, Nestle, 1992a; 2003), or cisgender and trans men in the case of bisexual femmes (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Hemmings, 1998). Femmes have countered these classist, biphobic, and femmephobic discourses by describing their aesthetic as intentionally sexual and "in your face" (Hankin, 1997, p. 55). Additionally, many femmes are sex workers and see a connection between femmes and sex workers in their embodiment of non-normative femininities (see for example Blewett & Law, 2018; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 2003). Working-class femme thus has several points of connection to working-class heterosexual femininity in that both are considered trashy and deviate from the societal norm of modest, middle-class white femininity (Jolie, 2020). Femme theory to date has taken up the cause of femme as a cultural 'bad girl' and used that as a point of connection to align the queer femme with other feminine subjects who are also social outlaws, such as sex workers, other overtly sexual women, and 'white trash' femininities (Harris & Crocker, 1997b; Jolie, 2020).

I extend these points of commonality between femmes and other cultural 'bad girls' by considering the figure of the 'bad' mother as a queer femme role model. In contrast to the idea that the queer child's sexuality is a deviation from that of their parents, many femmes see their gender style or their sexual desires as something that connects them to, rather than separates them from, their family of origin (see for example Allison 1991; Kofi-Bruce, 2009; Bryan, 2002; Camilleri, 2004; Gomez, 1993; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020; Nestle,

2003). In many femmes' writing, the 'mother' is no longer an abstract figure but an individual who models femininity, and/or a fully realized sexuality, and who both fails and supports their queer child. Femmes' mothers are allowed to be complex, real, individual; both difficult and admirable. These femme writers' vivid accounts of their mothers suggest what is lost by a queer theory that refuses to consider mothers, the domestic, and the site of the family home.

Femmes often return to their mothers—mothers who are complicated, abusive, neglectful, and who arguably failed to transmit 'proper' feminine sexuality and gender expression to their femme children—and claim their queer maternal legacies. Femme life writing tells us that femmes' mothers are sometimes the perpetrators of, or complicit in, familial abuse (see for example Allison, 1996; Hollibaugh, 2000; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015), do try to transmit oppressive beauty norms to their daughters (see for example Harris and Crocker, 1997d; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015; de Vries, 2009), and reject their daughters when they come out as queer (see for example Pratt, 1990). But femme writers also describe their mothers as women whose defiance of social norms informs their own, queer, identity formation (see for example Gomez, 1993; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020; Nestle, 1998, 2003). These writers emphasize that their mothers model non-hegemonic femininities (see for example Bryan, 2002; Camilleri, 2004; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020), insist on their right to sexual fulfillment (see for example Nestle, 1998, 2003; Pratt, 1990, 2005), and give their femme children the tools they need to survive as sexual and gender outlaws (see for example Bryan, 2002; Nestle, 1998; 2003). Here, femme life writing emphasizes the importance of femmes' mothers and families of origin to the formation of their gender identities and sexual desires. These complex maternal figures inform femme writers' understanding of racialized and classed forms of gender and sexuality. While queer narratives often cast families of origin and the queer adult as diametrically opposed, femme writers challenge this separation of queer community and family, and emphasize their mothers' queer maternal legacies, crafting a femme-inine and femme-inist maternal lineage.

The Deviant (Hetero)Sexual Mother

Joan Nestle (2003) is a femme writer and activist who names herself “a pornographer, a queer, a whore” (p. 156). Nestle writes extensively about her mother Regina, who was a Jewish single mother in 1940s New York City who loved sex, monetized her sexual relationships, and was socially ostracized for her sexual deviations. Nestle describes her own commitment to combatting homophobia and sexual censorship as a lesson learnt from her mother’s model of outlaw sexuality. Nestle’s comparison between the experiences of the femme daughter and the heterosexual mother bucks the trend in femme theory to define the femme in opposition to the heterosexual woman (Hemmings, 1999). She thus points the way toward a new kind of femme theory that seeks points of solidarity between culturally abjected femininities.

Regina Nestle was a working-class, Jewish woman who was widowed before her daughter Joan’s birth in 1940. Rejected after her husband’s death by both sides of the family, Regina is left to fend for herself. She has relationships with and embezzles money from her married employers and uses various forms of sex work to survive. In the three chapters Nestle publishes about her mother—“Two Women: Regina Nestle, 1910-1978, and Her Daughter, Joan, 1940-” (2003), “My Mother Liked to Fuck” (2003), and “Regina at the Races” (1998)—Nestle gives detailed accounts of the influence Regina’s sexuality has had on her own beliefs about sex and sexuality. Regina loves sex, prides herself on being “a *good lay*” (Nestle, 2003, p. 84, emphasis in original), and is driven by her search for sexual fulfillment. Regina refuses to renounce her voracious sexuality at a time when being an openly sexual woman, never mind working, single mother, was reviled. As such, she provides a model of fiercely independent female sexuality to her femme lesbian daughter.

Like many queer femmes, Regina fights for her right to be sexually determinate and to escape the demands of white, modest, middle-class hegemonic femininity. Regina is anything but the idealized asexual mother. Nestle’s (2003) stories illustrate a close and embattled relationship with the mother she describes as both “a sexual victim and a sexual adventurer” (p. 115). Nestle’s accounts of her mother emphasize both the social punishment

Regina is subject to for her sexual transgressions as well as Regina's pleasure in her sexuality. In Nestle's words, "My 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" (p. 114). Regina's refusal to contain her sexuality and her defiance of social sexual norms leads her to be socially ostracized by other women and her love of gambling threatens her and her children's security. Nestle is sexually assaulted by one of Regina's lovers, Nestle and her brother are homeless for a while when they lose their home owing to debt, and Regina is also homeless just before her death in 1978. Even though as a child she wants to "to flee this woman whose passions overflowed, making whatever security we had achieved so impermanent" (p. 71), Nestle insists on forging a reparative reading of her mother. Nestle celebrates her mother's difference, despite the danger that Regina's refusal to give up her sexuality places herself and her children in. By telling the story of her inheritance from her mother, Nestle describes an alternative maternal lineage to that imagined by Halberstam (2011), in which the heterosexual mother enforces her queer daughter's conformity to gender and sexual norms. For Nestle, her mother's insistence on "her right to sexuality," even when it "was killing her" (p. 79), provides a model of independent female sexuality that guides her own pursuit of sexual liberation.

In answer to her own question, "What do I do with this legacy—a mother who wills me her views on fucking, her despair, her outrage?" (p. 84), Nestle (2003) crafts a feminist, sex-positive legacy of matrilineal defiance. The knowledge Regina transmits to her femme daughter is how to survive as a sexual outlaw. Nestle inherits and celebrates her mother's lifelong "belief in a woman's undeniable right to enjoy sex [and] to actively seek it" (p. 115). She describes these lessons as Regina's "legacy" (p. 84) to her. In response to her own question, why does she write about her mother, Nestle replies:

[To tell] the rules she broke, the knowledge she had of her difference, the things she told me that mothers were not supposed to tell their daughters—as if she knew I needed this to survive in my life of sexual difference—all this is one reason. (p. 72)

Regina's claim to her sexuality in the face of severe social sanctions, including homelessness and social ostracism, teaches Nestle about the damage done by a lesbian or queer respectability politics that would also deny some subjects such as sex workers, butches, and femmes a seat at the proverbial table for being too visibly queer and sexual. Nestle's writing showcases her lifelong commitment to fighting a lesbian and gay respectability politics that only affords a few, 'respectable' queers freedom from social persecution. Nestle (2003) writes, "I know this bargain, and it is a killing one. We are offered respectability if we 'tone down' our lesbian selves; we are offered safety if we separate ourselves from the easily recognizable other" (p. 105). Despite expressing discomfort with her daughter's sexuality, Regina recognizes her daughter's sexual difference and gives her the tools she needs to survive it. This maternal legacy is a world away from those mothers who attempt to regulate their femme children's expressions of femininities and control their transgressive sexual and social behaviour (see for example Henson, 1995; Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2015; de Vries, 2009).

Nestle (2003) describes the lessons she learns from her mother as a child, including the pleasures of femininity, sexuality, and sex, and of "not being a mother" (p. 74). Nestle recounts a memory of watching her mother get ready to go out, when she was about eight:

The Bronx, 1948: My mother, strong and beautiful, stands in front of the foyer mirror, straightening the veil of a dark smart hat, in a checkered dress, perfumed. I sit on the floor, looking up at her, knowing already in my little girl's head that this is a woman who is glorying in not being a mother and also knowing that she is preparing for lovemaking. (p. 74)

Here, the heterosexual mother teaches her lesbian daughter the pleasures of sex, sexuality, and femininity as an overtly sexual style. Nestle's writing opens space up to reimagine motherhood outside of a place of social conformity, heteronormativity, and modest sexuality. Instead of attempting to regulate her daughter's 'deviant' sexuality and overtly sexual gender expression and encouraging Nestle to become a mother herself, Regina models an

autonomous and explicit female sexuality that takes pleasure in autonomy and non-reproductive sexuality. The heterosexual mother transmits an antinormative maternal legacy to her lesbian daughter that contrasts sharply with Halberstam's (2011) account of the heterosexual mother's normative legacy.

Nestle's narratives also highlight the sexuality of the child in contrast to a conservative ideology that frames the child as presexual (Fraiman, 2003; Stockton, 2009). In the satchel of writing Regina leaves to Nestle upon her death, Regina recounts experiencing strong sexual desires as a child. She describes herself as "*a little girl*" who "*sensed the sexual order of life*" from an early age and "*wanted to be quickly and passionately involved*" (Nestle, 1998, p. 69, emphasis in original) in it. This first-hand account of the child as sexual speaks back to the cultural idea of the child as innocent and in need of protection from perverse desires. Acknowledging the sexuality of the child creates space to grant children more autonomy over their gender and sexual identities, rather than understanding them as agents of their gender and sexual expressions only when they legally become adults.

Regina's battle for sexual autonomy resonates throughout Nestle's descriptions of her mother. Regina is "a woman whose passions overflowed" (1998, p. 71) and who at times "scorned the label mother" (2003, p. 114). In her dislike of the mothering role and her 'excessive' sexuality, Regina is unlike the idealized white, middle-class, heterosexual mother, whose sexual desire is reserved for her husband, contained within a monogamous marital structure, or perhaps even absent, subsumed by the desire to parent (O'Reilly, 2021). Regina's claim to her sexual autonomy is similar to many femmes' refusal to give up their feminine style, desire for butches and transmasculinities, penetrative sex, and kink in the face of lesbian-feminist dogma that made them social outcasts within lesbian community for their desires (Allison, 1994; Hollibaugh, 2000). As Nestle (Davis et al., 1992) says in conversation with Madeline Davis and Amber Hollibaugh, "My mother gave me a legacy of difference. I felt different because I was the daughter of a woman who did not have a husband, who had lots of lovers, who was never protected...except by her own fortitude" (p.

259). In this sense, Nestle's account of her "mother's life...evokes and implicates" (Driver, 1999b, p. 121) her own. Nestle emphasizes that both the 'bad' mother and femme daughter are sexual outlaws in their own ways because both pursue "illicit loves" (Nestle, 2003, p. 81). Nestle's ode to her emphatically non-domestic mother aligns with the tradition of celebrating rebellious women in femme writing and femme culture. Regina may be straight, but her sexuality is deviant. Nestle's (2003) depiction of her mother offers a vision of sexualized maternal subjectivity that is rare, even now. Providing a model of autonomous female sexuality outside the heterosexual marriage contract constitutes Regina's "legacy of difference" (Davis et al., 1992, p. 259) to her daughter.

In a conversation with younger femme Barbara Cruikshank, Nestle (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997) connects the excessive sexualities of the femme daughter and heterosexual mother to her understanding of the femme's political and sexual "allegiance..., with bad girls of all kinds" (p. 113) including sex workers, pornographers, and anyone whose sexuality is considered 'too much' or 'abnormal.' Nestle states that she tries to use her writing and public speaking to convey "respect for" and to "create spaces for [all women's] sexual desire" (p. 113). Nestle sees her lifelong dedication to defending pornography and all women's right to sexual self-determination as a way of building solidarity between all kinds of cultural 'bad girls':

That is for me a profound way of building solidarity that leads me not to betrayal but to a different kind of territory. I have taken the position of defending pornography and prostitution because I feel that women get abused so terribly *because* they are desiring beings and when they connect to sex in a public way, they endanger their lives. The whore in all women, the girlfriend who says yes to another man, the wife who has an affair, the woman who says no or yes in her own voice, is what patriarchal society wants to beat down. (p. 113, emphasis in original).

Nestle firmly places the responsibility for the danger sexually rebellious women like Regina encounter in the hands of "patriarchal society" (p. 113), rather than at the feet of her mother.

Nestle understands her mother as someone who chooses “to be a woman on her own terms rather than those prescribed for her” (p. 99). In their conversation, Nestle and Cruikshank understand femme as a figure with an allegiance to anyone who is socially ostracized by their choice to place “desire at the forefront” of their personal “ambitions” (p. 113). This alliance includes ‘bad’ mothers like Regina, who at times prioritized her own desires over the needs of her young children. Nestle’s writing suggests connections between the ‘excessive’ sexuality of her mother and queer femmes, each of whom faces social sanctions for their ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour and is made a “sexual outlaw” (Harris & Crocker, 1997b, p. 100) in their own way: femmes by their refusal to give up their sexual desires and femininity in the service of a desexualized lesbian-feminist politics (Davis, 1997); the overtly sexual single mother by her refusal to contain her sexuality to the domestic sphere and by monetizing her sexual relationships. Regina is thus recuperated into a femme-inist politics that seeks connections between “sex workers, whores, [and] queers” (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997, p. 113), anyone who refuses to conform to modest, middle-class, white, ‘respectable’ standards of femininity. Nestle’s work points to an underexplored territory of femme theory, one that understands how all kinds of women are endangered by the demand to conform to hegemonic femininity. Regina’s legacy to her daughter is precisely a lesson in maintaining erotic independence in the face of patriarchal forms of power that want to subsume women’s sexuality into the site of the domestic, sexually modest, and reproductive. This maternal legacy informs Nestle’s queer femme identity and politics. Here the queer femme and the sexual mother are both different kinds of women “for whom there [is] no vocabulary” (Nestle, 2003, p. 78) in that they are both social and sexual outlaws.

The Queer Femme Mother

In this section, I turn my attention to the femme mother in the life writing of Minnie Bruce Pratt (1988; 1990; 2005) and Beth Brant (2019a; 2019b). I read Pratt’s 1990 poetry collection *Crime Against Nature* to explore how Pratt is cast as a ‘bad’ mother for her refusal to give up her lesbian sexual desires in service of her heterosexual marriage and custody of

her children. Pratt's poetry navigates discourses of queer and maternal identification that are seen as mutually exclusive and imagines a new space for simultaneous maternal and queer identification. In *Crime Against Nature*, Pratt describes the social punishment she is subjected to for her deviation from normative motherhood as an overtly sexual, queer mother. She emphasizes the losses that lesbian mothers incur when both mainstream and queer culture refuse to see them as mothers. Indigenous femme writer Beth Brant compares the experiences of lesbians, such as Pratt, who lost custody of their children in the 1970s after coming out to that of Indigenous mothers whose children have been stolen by the white settler state. Brant narrates a lesbian mother whose ex-husband has claimed custody of her daughter. Like Regina Nestle and Pratt, Brant's character refuses to give up her lover in order to, potentially, regain custody of her child. She thus refuses to sacrifice her lesbian sexuality in the service of conforming to normative motherhood. Whereas Nestle tries to get closer to her heterosexual mother from her perspective as lesbian, femme daughter, Brant and Pratt attempt to reconcile the figures of the lesbian, overtly sexual woman, and mother from their point of view as queer femme mothers.

We all know the picture of the 'ideal' mother: she prioritizes her children's needs above her own, is white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, in a monogamous relationship with a cisgender man, and not overtly sexual (O'Reilly, 2021). Pratt's (1990) decision to come out as a lesbian and leave her husband, and to prioritize her sexual fulfillment above her duty to the nuclear family, make her an abject mother in the eyes of the culture of the time. Like many lesbian mothers in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and Canada (see for example Epstein, 2009; Hart, 2009; Garner, 2004), Pratt loses custody of her children in 1975 under a North Carolina sodomy law in which her consensual sexual relationship with another woman is understood as a 'crime against nature' that makes her an "unfit" (1990, p. 21) mother. Pratt's penalization under a centuries-old sodomy law illustrates that it is her queer and overt sexual expression that is deemed obscene; a crime against a mother's nature. Pratt's experience mirrors Regina Nestle's, despite their different sexual

orientation. Both are punished for their overt, extramarital sexual desires and their deviation from monogamous heterosexuality is deemed even more obscene because they are mothers.

Referring to her choice to inhabit queer sexuality and to her relationship with transgender activist and writer, Leslie Feinberg, Pratt (2005) describes herself as “not pure enough for a mother, too young in my flirtatiousness, and with the wrong husband” (p. 167). Pratt well understands that her choice to inhabit her sexual desires, even at the cost of losing her children, makes her “inhuman” (1990, p. 115) in the eyes of her ex-husband, her own mother, and the law. Pratt describes how her ex-husband and own mother perceive her as a “monster” (p. 114) after leaving her husband for another woman: “they abhorred me: / my inhuman summer, the crime of moving back and forth / between more than one self, more than one end to the story” (p. 115). Pratt’s inhabitation of an oxymoronic position—mother and overt, queer sexual subject—make her incomprehensible. Pratt represents a cultural impossibility: she is a sexual feminine subject who insists on her right to sexual realization in the face of severe social sanctions and a mother who declares her ongoing commitment to her children.

Brant’s (2019a; 2019b), Regina’s (Nestle, 2003), and Pratt’s (1990) sexual need and their insistence on their right to sexual autonomy in spite of social sanctions resonates with what many femmes called their “femme hunger” (Nestle, 1992a, p. 16), a term that was coined in conversations between femmes in the 1980s to describe femmes’ sense of their irrepressible sexual need and desire (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Davis, 1992b). Reflecting on a conversation with Hollibaugh and Nestle in 1982, Madeline Davis (1992b) describes the femme friends’ “mutual hysteria at finding someone else who recognized that hunger, that desperate need, that desire to be ‘fucked senseless’ and to know that we have, do, and would put up with some incredible shit to get it” (p. 268). Here, Davis positions femmes as autonomous sexual agents who, like Regina and Pratt, insist on their right to sexual fulfillment in spite of the negative social repercussions they face for their sexual

desires in both the lesbian-feminist movement and mainstream culture. Femmes' "battle to love our flirtatious, seductive, calculating, knowing, innate femme power" (Davis, 1992b, p. 269) is a fight that Pratt adopts and that resonates with Regina's lifelong battle for sexual autonomy.

Brant (2019a) and Pratt (1990; 2005) both describe the punishment visited upon lesbian mothers whose sexual desires are both overt and oriented toward the 'wrong' object. Pratt's queer sexuality exceeds the boundaries of the marital home. If to be a mother is to embody the epitome of what a good woman is supposed to be and do, then Pratt, who kisses her female lover in front of her children, can't be allowed to be a mother. In *S/he*, Pratt (2005) recounts the long nights she spends travelling cross-state in order to visit her children at her own, disapproving mother's house:

[My children] were forbidden to be in my home because I wasn't what a woman should be. I was too much woman, I was not woman enough. I was too interested in women, in sex, in my own sex....No home except loneliness, living in the in-between places. (pp. 92-93)

Pratt's ex-husband deems her too deviant a mother to be allowed in her children's home; she has to take the children to her own mother's house in order to visit them. *Crime Against Nature* shows how Pratt is caught between two homes; the domestic home with her children that she is no longer permitted to reside in and the lesbian community of the 1970s, neither of which can accommodate her full self. Pratt (1990) recounts her ex-husband's demand to choose between the children and her lover: "*Choose, choose. ... / There was no place to be / simultaneous, or between*" (p. 18, emphasis in original). Pratt (1990) emphasizes the pain this false choice causes her as she moves "back and forth / between more than one self" (p. 115): lesbian and mother; her lover and her children; her new home and her mother's house.

Throughout her writing, Pratt (1990) insists on being "more than one self" (p. 115); both mother and sexual subject. Pratt asserts that these two aspects of her identity are indivisible; that hers is the "body of a woman, a mother, [and] a lesbian" (p. 25). In this way,

Pratt speaks back to the claim made by both homophobic, mainstream culture and some lesbian feminists (see for example Wittig, 1992) that lesbians are not women because they step outside the heterosexual cultural role assigned to women. Pratt's poetry contradicts the construction of motherhood and sexuality, and lesbianism and motherhood, as mutually exclusive subject positions through its portrait of lesbian motherhood. Pratt's poem "All the Women Caught in Flaring Light" evokes motherhood as a site of pain and silence for the patrons of a lesbian bar. In this poem, Pratt challenges both the mainstream belief that lesbians should not be mothers and the silence around children and motherhood in the lesbian community of the 1970s and 1980s. Pratt paints vivid portraits of lesbians who have lost custody of their children, or who hide their status as mothers out of fear of losing custody, such as "tall pale Connie, / rainbow skirts twirling" who cries at night "for her children shoved behind the father" or Martha, "a dyke looking hard as a hammer / ...Who would call her a mother?" (p. 31). Pratt's poem illustrates that lesbians are one of the few women for whom the statement that "women *are* mothers, aren't they?" is no longer "obvious" (p. 29, emphasis in original), no longer even believable:

If I said in your ear, through metallic guitars,
These women are mothers, you wouldn't believe me,
 would you? Not really, not even if you had come
 To be one of the women in that room. You'd say:
Well, maybe, one or two, a few. It's what we say. [*sic*] (p. 30, emphasis in original)

Pratt's poem illustrates that we perceive queerness and motherhood as mutually exclusive and explores the disastrous consequences of this invisibility for lesbian mothers, including herself. Pratt evokes the pain of loss "running like water through the glittering room" (p. 30) of the lesbian bar; a pain that is rarely spoken out loud and is therefore invisible to the collective lesbian community. In doing so, Pratt speaks back to the exclusion of considerations of mothering from lesbian culture.

Like Pratt, Indigenous femme and Two-Spirit writer Beth Brant (2019a) narrates a story of a lesbian mother who loses custody of her child after coming out in the 1970s. I follow Smith and Watson's (2010) broad definition of life writing, which can include self-referential works of fiction, to include Brant's short story in this chapter. This reading is supported by biographical knowledge of Brant's life and her own framing of her story. Brant was an Indigenous (Quinte Bay Mohawk) lesbian and femme, born in the same decade as Jewelle Gomez, Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, and Minnie Bruce Pratt. In her short story "A Long Story," originally published in 1985, she draws parallels between the historical (and, at that time, ongoing in Canada) kidnapping of Indigenous children into residential schools and the cases of lesbian mothers of the 1970s and 1980s who, like Pratt, lost custody of their children after coming out. Brant herself was a femme lesbian who had three children at a young age with an abusive husband and later came out after leaving her husband in her thirties. Unlike her two protagonists in "A Long Story," Brant retained custody of her children.

"A Long Story" presents the first-person narratives of two mothers who have lost custody of their children; the first located in 1890 in what is now called New York State and the other in 1978, presumably also in the United States. The first narrator offers the perspective of an Indigenous mother to the first generation of stolen children who were taken away from their community and sent to residential school; the second is a lesbian mother who has lost custody of her daughter after coming out, and whose racial identity is unspecified. While the story is fictional, it refers to two historically accurate themes. The first theme is the state-sanctioned kidnapping of Indigenous children in the United States and Canada for over a hundred years starting in the late eighteenth century (Adams, 2020). The intention behind removing Indigenous children from their families was to effect cultural genocide by eliminating and assimilating Indigenous peoples into the white settler, Christian national body and to transfer land ownership into white hands (Tallbear, 2022). The second theme is the phenomenon of lesbians living in the United States and Canada who lost custody of their children in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s after coming out. Brant's

positionality as an Indigenous woman and lesbian who left her abusive husband in the 1970s serves as a bridge between these two experiences of state violence against women who deviate from a white settler, middle-class, heterosexual, monogamous, married, Christian ideal.

“A Long Story” is a work of fiction, yet its title suggests a generalization, the repetition of the same story across time and place. Brant (2019a) contextualizes her story with a dedication and two epigraphs. The first epigraph is a direct quotation from a New York State newspaper in 1892 noting one day’s departure of 40 Indigenous children to a residential school from the local train station. The second is a quotation from a memoir, *Legal Kidnapping*, in which Anna Demeter (1977) describes losing custody of her children after leaving her abusive husband in the 1970s. These two epigraphs signal historical truths, brought to life by these two mothers’ fictionalized narratives. Brant also dedicates her story to her two great-grandmothers, suggesting the historical importance of these stories to her own foremothers. Similar to Pratt, Brant’s 1970s lesbian mother, Mary, refuses to relinquish her relationship in order to regain custody of her daughter, despite her lover offering to leave. Mary declares, “Lesbian. The word that makes them panic, makes them afraid, makes them destroy children. The word that dares them. Lesbian. I am one. Even for Patricia, even for her, I will not cease to be!” (p. 62) Like the other mothers in this chapter, Mary presents a maternal subjectivity that refuses to sacrifice her sexual desire, even at the cost of losing custody of her children.

Both Brant (2019a) and Pratt (1988; 1990) critique the patriarchal law in which women and children are considered the property of men in 1970s United States. Brant (2019a) extends this critique to the cultural assimilation of Indigenous children that took place for over a century in the United States and Canada via the residential school program and is arguably continuing in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; Tallbear, 2022). The otherwise unnamed Indigenous mother in the nineteenth-century narrative refuses to recognize the new,

Christian names that she and the children have been given and the assimilation of her children and community into white settler society. The only name she accepts for herself is “*Nisten ha*” (Brant, 2019a, p. 56, emphasis in original), which means mother in Mohawk. In response to her daughter’s letter home in which she says she “is being taught to sew aprons” and “will be going to live with the schoolmaster’s wife [as] a live-in girl,” this mother asks “What is a *live-in girl*?” (p. 58, emphasis in original) and declares this child with a new name is a stranger to her. Unlike Halberstam’s (2011) narrative of mothers who encourage their daughters’ assimilation into ‘respectable,’ white settler femininity, this mother refuses to recognize her daughter’s assimilation into white settler femininity and her daughter’s new social positioning as a servant to a white, middle-class woman. “A Long Story” thus presents the reader with a vibrant image of maternal resilience and refusal in this Indigenous mother who refuses to conform to new, white settler social norms and laws, even as she, her children, and her family face genocide and cultural annihilation.

Brant’s (2019a) second mother in “A Long Story” also refuses the gender and sexual norms of mainstream culture in the face of losing custody of her daughter. While Mary’s race is unspecified, her daughter’s “dark braids” (p. 57) echo the long black braids cut from the head of the Indigenous mother’s son in preparation to send him to residential school. Mary’s fear that her daughter will be taught to hate her lesbian mother also resonates with the cultural devastation of the 1890 plot, in which the two stolen children are given new, Christian names and trained in white settler masculinity and femininity. While the first mother is faced with a dark, terrible future, Mary, like Pratt (1990), reclaims her lesbian sexuality as a source of “power” (Brant, 2019a, p. 60) in the face of the system that casts her and her lover as an inappropriate family for a child (Burford, 2013). Mary’s lover, Ellen, offers to leave so that Mary might regain custody of her daughter, but Mary refuses and the couple have sex:

Our hair braids together on the pillow. Brown, black, silver, catching the last light of the sun. We kiss, touch, move to our place of power. Her mouth, moving over my

body, stopping at curves and swells of skin, kissing, removing pain. Closer, close, together, woven, my legs are heat, the center of my soul is speaking to her, I am sliding into her, her mouth is medicine, her heart is the earth, we are dancing with flying arms, I shout, I sing, I weep salty liquid, sweet and warm it coats her throat.

This is my life. I love you Ellen, I love you Mary, I love, we love. (Brant, 2019a, p. 60)

Brant crafts what Arianne Burford (2013) describes as “an erotics of power” that reclaims Indigenous lesbian and maternal bodies from their abjection by “the legal system” and “settler colonialist discourses” (p. 175). Here, sex is what Brant elsewhere calls “a physical prayer” (Brant, 2019b, p. 173)—a sexuality that is connected to spirituality and the natural world. For Mary, lesbian sex is reparative; “medicine” that removes pain, and grounds her in a sense of connection to the earth, herself, and her lover. In the context of the ecological devastation the Indigenous mother of the 1890s presages, sex offers Mary another way of connecting to the natural world and her spirituality. The braids of the two women intermingling on the pillow echo and replace the braids of the stolen children; the weaving of the two lover’s bodies suggesting a wholeness accessed by sex experienced as healing. Brant’s use of braiding and weaving as metaphors suggests the many forms of repair—textile, relational, historical, legal—that the philosopher Elizabeth Spelman (2002) explores in *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*. Spelman argues different forms of repair have many different practical, psychological, and social functions. One reading of repair is “the creative destruction of brokenness” (Spelman, 2002, p. 134). The two lovers’ braids evoke the children who have been lost and yet weave together to create something new; a fabric of lesbian erotics that offer a sense of psychological healing and being “grounded” (Brant, 2019a, p. 60) in the face of centuries of maternal, cultural, and ecological loss.

In her essay about working toward an anti-racist feminist consciousness, “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” Pratt (1988) writes that her sense of home and a place in the world is bolstered by her conformity to white settler, heterosexual, sexually modest,

femininity, and complicity in the ongoing colonization and racial segregation of the land and society in the U.S. South. This illusory safety comes crashing down when she comes out as a lesbian and loses custody of her children, spurring her toward realization of the geographical and social marginalization of others on whom her white settler, middle-class privilege is based. Pratt observes that her sense of entitlement in the 1970s is contingent on her presenting a 'respectable,' heterosexual, white separatist femininity: "I had expected to have that place with my children. I expected it as my *right*. I did not understand I had been exchanging the use of my body for that place" (p. 27, emphasis in original). As soon as Pratt acts out of her social place by coming out as a lesbian, or joining the civil rights movement as a white woman, she is punished for her deviation from hegemonic femininity. Thus, Pratt reveals how heteronormative, colonial ideals of 'family' and 'home' are always linked "to specific legacies of race, gender, and class privilege" (Driver, 2010, p. 216).

There is no happy ending in Brant's (2019a) short story, and Pratt (1990) never regains custody of her sons. Faced with the inadequacy of the lesbian community to include her mother self, and her designation as an 'obscene' mother under North Carolina law, Pratt dreams of a different yet currently "unknown" (p. 14) home where she can be with her children. In "Poem for my Sons," the first poem in *Crime Against Nature*, Pratt writes that she wants her children to remember her "as a woman making slowly toward / an unknown place where you could be with me" (p. 14). This address to her sons introduces the collection, framing her integration of lesbian space with children's space as a wish she offers to her now adult children. Pratt frames her life as a struggle toward an "unknown place" where she can be both fully realized sexual subject and full-time mother.

Yet, *Crime Against Nature* does imagine another end to the story in Pratt's (1990) fantasy of a reunion between the lesbian mothers and all their "lost children" (p. 33). Pratt's reconciliatory vision at the end of her poem "All the Women Caught in Flaring Light" is one imaginary evocation of this new home. Pratt attempts to reconcile the hypersexualized space

of the lesbian bar with that of the child by imagining all the “lost children” coming into the lesbian bar:

All the women

here see their lost children come into the dim room,
the lights brighten, we are in the happy ending,
no more hiding, we are ourselves and they are here
with us, a reconciliation, a commotion of voices. [*sic*] (p. 33)

Here, the culturally hypersexualized space of the lesbian bar, which has historically been constructed as a space for ‘sexual deviants’ (Wolfe, 1992) and that was and is used as a space for cruising, hosts all these women’s lost children. That the children come into the lesbian bar to reunite with their mothers is striking owing to the cultural construction of children as innocent and in need of protection from sexually deviant subjects such as lesbians and gay men (Stockton, 2009). This is Pratt’s assertion: “children / and women, lovers, mothers, lesbians. Yes [*sic*]” (p. 26). Pratt’s reparative vision is a brief, fantastical realization of her own dream to hold these aspects of herself together, to bring her whole self to lesbian community and to parenting, and to find a space where she can be both sexual self and mother. By holding both children and their lesbian mothers in the imaginary space of the lesbian bar, Pratt crafts a vision of queer motherhood in which the maternal self is integrated with the sexual self, and in which children are allowed to be with their queer mothers.

Pratt (1990) frames her insistence on her right to her sexual autonomy as one of her feminist lessons to her sons. In “Poem for my Sons” Pratt writes: “I can only pray: / That you’ll never ask for the weather, earth, / angels, women, or other lives to obey you” (p. 14), asking her sons to be non-patriarchal men, different to their father. Pratt holds together her fierce love for her children with her feminist beliefs, part of which entail the importance of allowing women sexual and legal autonomy. These beliefs are wrought from her own struggle toward sexual self-realization and to maintain her relationship with her sons after

coming out. Pratt's dedication to her sexual autonomy and that of other women is her own 'deviant,' that is queer feminist maternal legacy to her sons. She describes the path she could have taken—pretending to be heterosexual in order to get her children back—but asserts "I did none of that. In the end my children visit me / as I am [*sic*]" (p. 120). In Pratt's writing, explorations of sex, desire, queer masculinities, and queer femininities stand alongside her experiences of mothering. Pratt inhabits the position of doubly desiring maternal subject. She not only directs her desires toward her children (she desperately wants to have custody of them), but she also inhabits a maternal subjectivity who desires otherwise. She directs her desires outside of the heterosexual marriage contract, toward the 'wrong' object, and insists on her right to sexual autonomy at the cost of losing custody of her children.

Pratt's writing speaks back to her abjection as a 'bad' mother for coming out as a lesbian and leaving her husband. Like Regina, Pratt insists on reclaiming her sexual autonomy in spite of social repercussions. In doing so, she leaves a feminist legacy to her sons; that women must be free to realize their own sexual desires. In contrast to her legal designation as an "unfit" (Pratt, 1990, p. 21) mother, deemed too sexually deviant to be granted custody of her children, Pratt's writing paints a portrait of a mother who loves her children desperately, but who also chooses sexual survival over pretence, and hopes for a place where they can all finally be together. By claiming her fierce commitment to her sexual autonomy and to her children, Pratt challenges the construction of lesbian identity and motherhood as mutually incompatible. She writes, "My body of a woman, a mother, a lesbian" (Pratt, 1990, p. 25). Pratt imagines a different place, a new home, where she can be both sexually realized female and feminine queer subject and mother to her children. In crafting this vision, Pratt points the way toward reintegrating considerations of parenting and mothering in queer theory, which to date has "often remained silent on matters related to the [child-rearing] family" (Averett, 2021, p. 291), especially the work of raising children (Park,

2013). Pratt's modelling of a desiring maternal subjectivity challenges queer theory's designation of parenting as a site of heteronormative reproduction.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explore the femme and the 'bad' mother as sexual outlaws who are both subject to social sanctions on account of their 'deviant' sexualities. This exploration of the femme as a sexual outlaw has to date been overlooked by discourses of femme identity that focus on femme as a gender outlaw on account of her queer and feminine embodiment. I argue that these femmes' and mothers' shared experiences point toward a new kind of femme theory, one that seeks points of solidarity between queer femmes and other feminine subjects who are culturally abjected on account of their non-normative gender expressions and sexualities. Brant (2019a; 2019b), Nestle (1998; 2003) and Pratt (1988; 1990; 2005) each negotiate discourses of antinormativity to incorporate the figure of the 'bad' mother into their understanding of antinormative sexual expression and draw an alliance between the 'bad' mother and the queer femme. By tracing the connections Brant, Nestle and Pratt make between femme and maternal subjectivity, I challenge both queer theory's and white settler, Christian, mainstream culture's construction of the mother as inherently normative. For each of these writers, sexual 'hunger' and the refusal to conform to gender and sexual norms is what unites the aberrant mother with the femme.

Each writer refuses the distinction between the queer sexual subject and asexual maternal figure. Nestle (1998; 2003) writes that her mother taught her how to survive as a sexual outlaw and emphasizes Regina's deviant maternal legacy. Brant (2019a) and Pratt (1990) insist on the lesbian mother's right to sexual autonomy even at the cost of losing custody of her children. Brant's and Pratt's simultaneous inhabitation of and desire for a lesbian femme and maternal subjectivity challenges the construction of the ideal mother as self-sacrificing, asexual, and in a nuclear family. Sex, for Brant, is reparative; a way of claiming autonomy in the face of the disenfranchisement of lesbian and/or Indigenous mothers. Pratt hopes that her refusal to abnegate her sexual desires in the service of being a

'good mother' teaches her sons a feminist lesson about the importance of female sexual autonomy. Brant's, Nestle's, and Pratt's portraits of motherhood defy the binaries of heterosexual vs. lesbian, sexual vs. maternal identification, and sexual vs. maternal desires that saturate white settler, patriarchal ideologies and popular culture (Driver, 1999b). These narratives counter heteronormative ways of thinking about mother/daughter relations (Driver, 1999b) and interrupt the framing of the mother as inherently heteronormative and complicit with white, middle-class, settler, heterosexual, and sexually modest hegemonic femininity.

These complications of the cultural figure of the mother challenge queer and some femme theory's assumption that heterosexual femininity and child-rearing families are inherently normative. The family each of these femme writers explores is decidedly non-nuclear: from Nestle, the daughter of a single, working mother in the 1940s; to the Indigenous mother whose children have been stolen; and the lesbian mothers who have lost custody of their children. Here, the white settler, middle-class nuclear family structure is framed as inherently harmful both to mothers who deviate from idealized, white, middle-class, heterosexual, monogamous, hegemonic femininity, and to their children. These femmes' desire for both the mother and the child is a desire for a non-patriarchal family, a home where mothers and children can be together outside the gendered, sexual, and racialized constraints of the nuclear family.

Instead of "critically queer" narratives in which the queer daughter has to sever from the normative mother in order to realize her queer subjectivity, Brant's (2019a; 2019b), Nestle's (1998; 2003) and Pratt's (1990; 2005) writing each emphasizes the potential for connections between "lesbians, mothers, and lovers" (Driver, 1999b, p. 112). I take these portraits of maternal desire as one way of incorporating considerations of mothering into a queer theory that overwhelmingly omits considerations of mothering, the domestic, and care work on account of their association with the heteronormative. These portraits affirm that queer forms of mothering are possible, and that mothers need not subsume all their desires in the service of raising their children. These are queer feminist portraits: Nestle holds her

mother close instead of following the command to 'lose her mother' in order to realize her own queer subjectivity; Brant and Pratt insist on inhabiting both maternal and queer subjectivity and refuse the separation between sexuality and mothering. Each of these femmes narrates a version of motherhood that refuses conformity, even at dire costs, and claims the mother's sexual autonomy. By holding these different kinds of cultural 'bad girls' together, Brant's, Nestle's and Pratt's narratives outline some of the benefits and limits of discourses of antinormativity for feminine queers, queer mothers, and women, and forge a vision of feminist solidarities between queer and straight femininities.

Chapter Five: A Femme in Drag as Her Mother: Reconciling Queer to the Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other

“Do you know your lineage? You know, lineage. The people who preceded you in history. Not your bloodline, not your family tree. Nothing so flimsy as biology or genetics. Lineage, rather, is made up of the people who, in their lifetimes, fought the same battles we are fighting now, struggled toward the same goals.” (Payne, 2002, p. 47)

“I am my mama’s daughter.” (Allison, 1994, p. 225, emphasis in original)

Introduction

In this chapter, I suggest that reimagining queer theory as “the spawn of second-wave feminism” (Carter & Noble, 1996, p. 26) offers a queer feminist and reparative approach to lesbian feminism’s problematic legacy. The metaphor of spawn, which often refers to abject forms of reproduction in horror movies and is used in queer communities to lovingly and irreverently describe the children of queer parents (“queer spawn”), strikes me as an apt way to describe the generative and magnetic relationship between queer theory and lesbian feminism. In this chapter, I imagine the lesbian-feminist movement as an unwanted mother, whose legacy is rejected by her adult queer children, yet which those children continue to reckon with (Fraiman, 2003). I propose that a queer feminist genealogy of lesbian feminism’s intellectual legacies could work toward creating a queer theory that is less invested in paranoid and divisive frameworks, such as anti/normativity. In this chapter I hold the lesbian-feminist mother and her queer child together to work against the misogynist impulse in queer scholarship to reject the feminine and the mother. My argument complicates queer’s positioning of itself as the progressive solution to the problems it has identified in lesbian feminism and offers a different vision of queer feminist legacies that

seeks to recuperate those unfashionable figures of the lesbian feminist, the mother, and the queer femme from their abjection within queer theory and culture. This chapter has been driven by the questions that have haunted me throughout writing this dissertation. How can we reframe the position of the feminine and the maternal in queer theory and culture? Can queer theory address the material realities of feminized subjects, including the femme, the mother, and the heterosexual woman? How can we get queer and feminist to ‘touch’ each other?

Below I read Joan Nestle’s (1998; 2003) and Dorothy Allison’s (1994; 1996; 2018) attempts to get closer to their now-deceased mothers in their writing as a model for the queer femme daughter’s reparative approach to her problematic mother. This approach is an extension of my examination of the femme as mediator in Chapter Three. Many femmes write that they invoke their mothers’ bodies in their own sense of style (see for example Bryan, 2002; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020; Kofi-Bruce, 2009). Yet few get as close to their mothers in their writing as Allison and Nestle, whose mothers continue to haunt them throughout their lives. Despite the harm Regina Nestle and Ruth Gibson caused or were complicit in, their queer femme daughters work hard to reconcile themselves to their problematic mothers and use their writing to ‘touch’ their mothers beyond death. For Nestle and Allison, this project of recuperating the mother’s body soothes the painful legacy each mother has left them and is a feminist practice that works to counter the abjection of sexual women, heterosexual women, and working-class women by their contemporary lesbian-feminist culture and mainstream culture. I take Nestle’s and Allison’s reincorporation of the maternal as a framework for a potential queer femme-inist approach to queer theory’s own problematic mother, lesbian feminism.

My reading is inspired by Canadian artists Allyson Mitchell’s and Deirdre Logue’s lesbian-feminist haunted house “Killjoy’s Kastle” and Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) idea of “temporal drag” (p. 62). These two intellectual projects inform my reading of Joan Nestle’s (1998; 2003) and Dorothy Allison’s (1994; 1996; 2018) writing about their mothers as

reparative performances. These various performances of previous generations, familial and feminist, offer a potential new approach to reconciling queer and feminist. I follow these queer feminists to argue that getting closer to that which harms us, and looking at it in the light of day, may show it to be less scary and more familiar than we had previously thought. By extending the metaphor of a femme in drag as her mother to the level of intellectual inheritance, I suggest that this reframing of lesbian feminism and queer theory's relationship offers a way for queer theory to acknowledge its debts to and reconcile itself with its lesbian-feminist mother.

The Horrifying Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other

In 2013, my friend Bon and I visited the first iteration of Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue's interactive art installation and lesbian-feminist haunted house "Killjoy's Kastle" in Toronto. This tongue-in-cheek installation evoked the horrifying spectres and stereotypes of lesbian feminisms past and present, and memorialized lesbian-feminist practices and organizations that are now dead and gone. Mitchell and Logue hired actor friends to play the roles of "demented women's studies professor tour guide" (King, 2019), "Lesbian Zombie Folksingers," and "Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies" (Mitchell & McKinney, 2019, p. 5). Visitors encountered scenes and installations such as "The Terrifying Tunnel of Two Adult Women in Love" and the graveyard of lesbian-feminist organizations past and exited via the Processing Room where feminist academics and writers—"Real-Life Feminist Killjoys" (Mitchell & McKinney, 2019, pp. 5-6)—encouraged them to share their feelings about the experience.

I read this haunted house, produced by queer feminists for a queer feminist audience, as an irreverent reckoning with the stereotypes of lesbian feminism past. Even though the installation was intentionally provocative, the level of controversy it raised within Toronto's queer communities was unexpected, even for the artists (Mitchell & McKinney, 2019). Apart from the expected vilification in the right-wing press for 'using taxpayer's money to make lesbian-feminist art' (Warmington, 2013), many queers who encountered the

installation were also disturbed by aspects of the experience they found racist and transphobic and expressed their rage and discomfort in discussions on social media (Cvetkovich, 2019; Mitchell & McKinney, 2019). What has lived on for me over the past decade is my enjoyment of the haunted house's irreverent engagement with stereotypes, my sadness at the ephemeral nature of lesbian-feminist and queer organizing, art, and events (the ghosts of which Killjoy's Kastle raises and of which Killjoy's Kastle itself is one example), and the very active feelings it raised in those who encountered it both in real life and online. The revivification of these ghosts of lesbian feminisms past evoked problems—most notably racism and transphobia—that persist in many queer communities and cultures today. Killjoy's Kastle exemplifies the difficulty of negotiating our lesbian-feminist past. It seems that even evoking the spectre of the lesbian feminist, with her associations with racism, classism, sex negativity, gender essentialism, and transphobia, raises those terrifying affects again. For me, what Killjoy's Kastle reveals is how active the spectre of the lesbian-feminist is in queer culture and thought today, no matter how much we try to repress her. And that the more we disavow something, the more it has the power to haunt us.

Queer studies and culture has abjected the lesbian feminist, making her the epitome of everything we queers don't want to be: racist; transphobic; essentialist; prudish; and classist (Freeman, 2010). The lesbian feminist is a cultural figure "saturated with affect" and an enduring "site of personal and social tension" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11) for queers today. Susan Fraiman (2003) argues that queer theory's abjection of the maternal is a direct response to lesbian-feminist paradigms that cherished the mother's body. Framing the lesbian feminist as a mother also furthers the perception of that movement as anti-sex and unsexy because that's how we view mothers in mainstream culture (Fraiman, 2003). By abjecting mothers overall, queer wants to move away from its own difficult mother, lesbian feminism, and the problematic politics, such as gender essentialism, transphobia, racism, and sex negativity, that are associated with her. In a matricidal twist on the Oedipal scene, queer attempts to "kill off" (Faderman, 1997, pp. 222-223) its lesbian-feminist mother to

justify its own ascension (Fraiman, 2003). However, this attempt only seems to increase the lesbian feminist's ghoulish "pull" (Freeman, 2010, p. 62) on the queer present. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) describes this relationship—queer's unwilling attachment to lesbian feminism—as a form of "temporal drag," (p. 62) in which the lesbian feminist threatens to pull queer backwards into a regressive politics. This progress narrative works to legitimize queer as a field of study, theory, and social movement in the present (Fraiman, 2003; Jagose, 2009). However, the continued pull of the lesbian feminist on queer highlights that abjection only serves to increase the ability of the abjected to scare us. In order to transform this relationship, queer must reckon with these sticky feelings today.

In its rush to disavow the essentialist, racist, and transphobic spectre of the lesbian feminist, queer has, perhaps unintentionally, run away from aspects of feminism that many queer people still need (Huffer, 2013). Its performative escape from heteronormative gender, cast as femininity, has been disastrous for queer subjects who maintain a commitment to feminism and femininity. However, the work of queer feminist theorists argues that we can feel a belonging in both queer and feminism. Rather than subscribing to a teleological model in which the new generation knows better than and usurps the preceding one, I ask what can we learn from our mothers, lesbian feminist and otherwise? As a reparative approach that holds different and difficult things together, a queer feminist genealogy may, to paraphrase Sam McBean (2015), allow dyke-identified queers to feel "a belonging in" lesbian-feminist history that "does not require a complete identification with [that] past" (p. 152). In this way, a queer feminist approach contrasts with queer frameworks of antinormativity that disavow the lesbian feminist because of the politics she is taken to represent. By suturing together the terms feminist and queer, queer feminist theorists hope "to challenge the overassociation of certain objects with normativity and others with transgression in and of themselves" (Hemmings, 2016, p. 91). Thus, queer doesn't have to displace feminist. Queer and feminist history can be reimagined as "sharing space" or can even be reframed as "indistinguishable...at points" (Hemmings, 2016, p. 91).

A Queer Femme-inist Drag

The tongue-in-cheek nature of femme drag offers one way to approach queer's unwanted lesbian-feminist past. Femme theory often frames femme identities as antinormative, in that they differ from a hegemonic femininity embodied by heterosexual women (see for example Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Duggan & McHugh, 1996). As Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri (2002) put it, femme is "femininity gone wrong" (p. 13). Many femmes express this idea by articulating their femininity as a kind of drag and aligning themselves with drag queens (see for example Bomb, 2009; Frost, 1995; Hollibaugh, 2000; Lewis, 2012b; Lowrey, 2009a). In *Rust Belt Femme*, Raechel Anne Jolie (2020) also links the femme aesthetic to being working-class and embodying a "trashy" (p. 160) style that deviates from modest, respectable, white settler, middle-class femininity. Articulating femme gender as antinormative claims femme as a political, subversive gender identity (Galewski, 2005). This idea of femme-ininity, femininity but with a difference, suggests that femme style is inherently referential. It calls attention to what it isn't—hegemonic femininity—in its excessive style, and incorporates references to a working-class, overtly sexual style in order to position itself as a refusal of middle-class, sexually modest, heterosexual, idealized femininity.

Femme writers often frame their femininity as an intentional iteration of their mothers' style (see for example Camilleri, 2004; Jolie, 2020; Hollibaugh, 2000), or as a deviation from a modest or middle-class style that their mothers tried to enforce (see for example de Vries, 2009; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). Femmes also often see their mothers as models for their own femininity and as femmes themselves (see for example Bryan, 2002; Camilleri, 2004; Harris & Crocker, 1997b; Hollibaugh, 2000; Jolie, 2020). Thus, femme style is often generational, in that it refers to a prior femininity; something we see in the prevalence of a 1950s pin-up aesthetic as one popular expression of femme style (Dahl, 2014).

Elizabeth Freeman (2010) takes up this intergenerational referentiality of femme style in her use of femme drag as an allegory for 1990s queer feminism's relationship to its own

problematic mother, lesbian feminism. Freeman reads Elisabeth Subrin's (1997) film *Shulie*, a 1990s queer feminist remake of an unreleased 1967 documentary about radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, as a kind of intergenerational feminist conversation. Subrin's shot-by-shot reenactment replaces the original documentary subject with actors that look incongruously contemporary. Freeman interprets Subrin's 1990s queer feminist remake as a deadpan but obvious drag in which the queer daughter takes on the form of a renowned feminist foremother. For Freeman, this reenactment "intersects with" and perhaps reproduces "feminist concerns about generationality, continuity, and historicity" (p. 65). Rather than the campy performance of the drag queen, Freeman reads *Shulie*'s drag as a performance that produces an effect "neither...of continuity nor...of complete repudiation but instead...of disjunctive, sticky entanglements and dissociations" (p. 70). The simultaneous dissociations and associations this performance generates create a not-quite-homage-to, not-quite-critique-of, Firestone and the radical feminist politics she is associated with. Instead, the 1998 remake evokes 1990s queer feminism's nuanced "entanglement" (Freeman, 2010, p. 70) with 1960s and 1970s radical feminism. Freeman's reading of *Shulie* as an act of curious and odd retrospection speaks to Julia Serano's (2007) understanding of queer discourse both as a product of the 1990s transgender movement and a reaction to the sex-negative beliefs of radical feminism.

It is therefore striking to me that Freeman (2010) reads *Shulie*'s 1997 "temporal drag" (p. 62) of the feminist foremother through the allegory of Freeman's own queer femme embodiment of her mother. Freeman explains:

For instance, If I renounce my mother and wear her body as my 'own' gender, I certainly don't wear it as she did at the moment of my supposed Oedipal renunciation of her, circa 1969. But if I disseminate my mother's body in all its former glory onto the surface of my own in clothing, hairstyle, gesture, or speech patterns, I don't look or sound normative at all. As 'Mom, circa 1969,' my appearance writes onto my body not only the history of my love for my mother (or even the spending of her youthful

body on the making of my own) but also and crucially *at least two historically distinct forms and meanings of ‘womanhood.’*” (p. 70, emphasis in original)

For Freeman, to perform a drag of your own mother is a distinctly femme practice that she connects to the intergenerational referentiality of many femme aesthetics. Thus, femme style can be seen as doubly referential. It denotes queer identity, but it often uses a deliberately disjunctive split to do so in that it refers to both a contemporary queer identity and a now-outdated feminine style. While many femme theorists and writers read femme style as a disavowal of hegemonic femininity (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Vaisseau, 1995), I am interested in Freeman’s reading of femme style as a performance of both normative and queer femininities at the same time. Amber Hollibaugh (2000) describes femme as a self-conscious performance: “not being a girl [but] watching yourself be a girl” (p. 245). Perhaps, after all, femme can be a drag of a normative femininity that honours our mothers while it produces our own, distinct form of femininity. In this way, femme drag signifies “*at least two historically distinct forms and meanings of ‘womanhood’*” (Freeman, 2010, p. 70, emphasis in original) in the production of its particular feminine queer subjectivity.

Freeman (2010) connects her femme drag of her mother to 1990s queer feminism’s entangled relationship with 1960s and 1970s radical feminism. This reading of the 1997 *Shulie* models one way for contemporary queer feminism to approach its lesbian-feminist past. To perform a drag of the lesbian-feminist past isn’t to replicate it, but—like Killjoy’s Kastle—to enliven it, with a difference. A queer femme-inist way of relating to queer’s unwanted lesbian-feminist past could perhaps take up some of lesbian feminism’s specific commitments (to create queer spaces, resist compulsory heterosexuality), and those that overlap with second wave feminism at large (reproductive justice, equal pay, funded childcare), without committing to its problematic elements and spectres that manifest in contemporary queer culture via the figure of the Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF), racism, sex negativity, whorephobia, and classism. I take Freeman’s idea of a

femme in drag as her own mother as inspiration for my reading of Allison (1994; 1996; 2018) and Nestle's (1998; 2003) imaginative and literary embraces of their mothers in their own writing. By getting close to the bodies of their mothers, these femme writers model a reparative approach to the different kinds of mothers that haunt us. Perhaps to perform a drag of a flawed (feminist) mother is one way of negotiating our complicated relationship to this important, yet problematic history as contemporary queer feminist subjects.

Lived Memories of the Mother

When I think of a femme in drag as her mother, I think of a picture of Joan Nestle (2003) in her "famous black slip" ("Two Women" chapter) that is printed in *A Restricted Country* and is perhaps the most recognizable image of Nestle that I have seen in my research. This photo was taken by Susan Fleischmann at the 1987 Lesbian Smut Writers Conference and features Nestle, then in her mid-thirties, resting her face on her hand, looking to the side with a knowing smile, and wearing what is clearly underwear; a black slip with adjustable spaghetti straps and a lace trim on the chest. I read Nestle's choice to wear lingerie while presenting at a conference on lesbian porn as a performance—a drag perhaps—of her reputation as a lesbian sexual outlaw. But is Nestle's black lingerie also an intentional or unconscious evocation of her mother?

Throughout her writing, Nestle (1998) tries to get closer to Regina, the woman who she describes as both "whore and mother" (p. 77). Regina Nestle was a single, working Jewish mother in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s who embezzled money from and had affairs with her married employers. Regina was a woman who loved and claimed her right to sex, even though the social sanctions she experienced as an overtly sexual, single woman caused her and her children to temporarily lose their home and Regina to become financially destitute at the end of her life. In her accounts of her mother, Nestle juxtaposes her own writing with excerpts of Regina's journal entries that she inherits upon her death and ventriloquizes her mother's voice as she imagines what Regina would tell her were she alive. She also fictionalizes Regina's sexual relationships, writing sensual sex

scenes based upon Regina's relationships: Regina having sex with Nestle's father on a bed of furs in the furriers where both worked; kneeling at the feet of a merchant sailor "while clouds of Channel [*sic*] No. 5 toilet water wafted over her head" (Nestle, 1998, p. 83). In that she allows her mother to speak beyond her role as mother, both by including Regina's writing and telling fictional stories of Regina as a sexual subject, Nestle grants her mother independent, non-maternal, and sexual subjectivity (Hirsch, 2021).

The title of Nestle's (2003) essay about her mother's death, "Two Women: Regina Nestle, 1910-1978, and Her Daughter, Joan, 1940-," holds the two women's names together as if an epitaph, claiming them as joint historical figures. Nestle's juxtaposition of her own and her mother's words, her description of her own erotic adventures across her body of work, and her invocation of Regina's sexual adventures blur the line between voices and sexual experiences of femme daughter and heterosexual mother. Nestle (2003) remembers watching her mother get ready to go out as a little girl and her recognition as a child that her mother is enjoying both getting ready for sex and the opportunity to shift into a non-maternal role. Nestle's (1998) stories about her mother are saturated with the five senses; almost as if she is trying to resuscitate Regina's body:

Mother, tonight I can smell you. I can hear the sounds of your girdle and full-line bra being peeled off your body. I can see you standing at attention in the basic black sheath you always wore, a sturdy black column except for the prison of flesh that always escaped the prison of the foundation garments. Why, at fifty-seven, do I remember your body so? Is this the lesbian daughter claiming her desire for her mother, the first woman whose smell meant seduction and loss, security and homelessness? Or is it the huge need to touch you, to feel your hand on my arm, ...and the need to pull you back from where you have gone?" (p. 82)

Nestle situates Regina as the first woman in the lineage of all the women Nestle has loved, linking her to Nestle's lesbian, sexual history. This fleshy portrait suggests that Nestle is haunted by the body of her mother, who she can smell, hear, and see almost as if she is still

present. Nestle understands her sensual evocation of her mother as an attempt to pull Regina back from death. However, unlike the idealized, altruistic mother who conveys a sense of security to her heterosexual children (O'Reilly, 2021), Nestle's desire for her mother has always been tinged with loss. Nestle's is a desire for a mother who was not always there, whose insistence on sexual autonomy at times put her children in danger. Yet Nestle does not yearn for a different, self-abnegating mother, but rather Regina, the mother who taught her femme lesbian daughter the importance of sexual autonomy and how to "survive" her "sexual difference" (Nestle, 2003, p. 72). At the end of her mother's life, Nestle (2003) writes, "I wanted the mother back who was a woman who did not want to be a mother" (p. 75). Nestle situates Regina within discourses of risk and non-domesticity that contrast with the usual characterization of the mother and the feminine as a site of safety and security (Ward, 2010). She claims and celebrates her mother's risk-taking and refusal to be domesticated.

In her exploration of narratives in which daughters write about their mothers, Marianne Hirsch (2021) argues that some daughter/mother plots can buck the Euro-American trend in which "the heroine's singularity is [often] based on a disidentification from the fate of other women, especially mothers" (p. 114). In her longing for non-patriarchal accounts of maternal subjectivities, Hirsch mourns that if the mother "speaks as mother, she must always remain the object in her child's process of subject-formation; she is never fully a subject" (p. 146). According to the logic of patriarchal discourse, the mother must become other or disavowed to enable the daughter's entrance into adult, sexual subjectivity. However, Nestle's narrative seems to be a project of intentionally voicing Regina, giving her a voice outside of the simplistic role of 'mother' and thus enabling the production of Regina the literary character's independent, sexual subjectivity.

Nestle's (2003) writing about her mother is a "project of inscribing [her and her mother's] voices and histories...as distinct yet intertwined" (Driver, 1999b, p. 113). Upon her death, Regina leaves few material reminders of her existence but bequeaths her daughter

“two satchels of scribbled writing” (Nestle, 2003, p. 70). Nestle gives voice to Regina’s words posthumously by publishing excerpts of Regina’s writing that are interwoven with her own stories about her mother. Nestle resuscitates her mother through her publication of Regina’s diary entries, interlaced with passages authored by Nestle in which she imagines what Regina might say, her imaginary accounts of her mother’s sexual escapades, and in the parallels Nestle draws continually between the importance of sex in her own life as a femme ‘sexual outlaw’ and in that of her mother. Nestle’s writing moves between mother’s and daughter’s voices, the latter often ventriloquizing the former so that the two women’s narratives overlap. Regina’s and Nestle’s voices are at times almost indistinguishable. As Nestle (1998) writes, “Her words, my words, her desire, my desire, her body, my body” (p. 85). In her own literary drag of her mother, Nestle ensures that Regina’s memories and desires live on.

In this context of the mother revived through the force of her daughter’s maternal desire, I read Nestle’s (2003) “famous black slip” (“Two Women” essay) as a deadpan drag of Regina’s “basic black sheath” that she wore to get ready for “lovemaking” (p. 72). Nestle’s sexual style not only pays homage to her mother but is also part of a femme tradition of overtly sexual style (Stafford, 2010). Like many femme daughters (see for example Kofi-Bruce, 2009; Bryan, 2002; Hollibaugh, 2000), Nestle adopts her mother’s sexual style. That this is a signature black slip that Nestle often wore to host salons and public readings implies hers is an ongoing performance. As Freeman’s (2010) reading of *Shulie* suggests, Nestle’s performance simultaneously evokes her contemporary femme subjectivity and that of her heterosexual mother, holding these “*two historically distinct forms and meanings of ‘womanhood’*” (p. 70, emphasis in original) together. Nestle’s accounts of her mother “give rise to an erotic memory [of the mother] that is lived and written in the flesh of a femme lesbian daughter” (Driver, 1999b, p. 120). This embodied memory is felt both in the sense of Regina’s presence Nestle crafts in her writing and in Nestle’s personal sexual style. The mother who left so little material behind to mark her life lives on in her daughter’s writing,

memory, body, and even Nestle's own legacy. Nestle sees her own activism around female sexuality as a way of taking up Regina's feminist "sexual legacy" (p. 114), including the lessons she taught her daughter about the importance of sexual autonomy. Regina's incarnation extends beyond the page into her daughter's lifelong commitment to activism against censorship and patriarchal discourses about women's sexuality, and for women's sexual autonomy.

Loving the Horrifying (M)Other

Like Nestle (1998; 2003), Dorothy Allison (1994) has a complicated relationship to her mother who is both a source of love and the person who failed to protect her from childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Allison cites her mother as the reason she writes, declaring that she must tell "the complicated and painful story of how mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl" (p. 34). Through her socioeconomic contextualization of her mother's choices, Ruth Gibson's apparently indefensible actions become comprehensible to readers from different cultural contexts. Ruth was born in South Carolina into a poor white family and had had her first baby (Allison) and seen the child's father leave her by age 17. She later married Allison's stepfather who raped Allison repeatedly as a child. Yet, despite knowing this, Ruth stayed with her husband. Allison's radical empathy and in-depth contextualization of her mother's choices is what allows her to vindicate her mother's memory and portray Ruth Gibson as sympathetic, rather than monstrous. Both Allison and Nestle's narratives of their mothers as flawed but still deserving love and empathy are reparative readings that perhaps allow some reconciliation with their experiences of their mothers as people who, at times, threatened their security or failed to protect them as children. This "empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137) soothes the child's contradictory experience of the loved (m)other. Allison's attempt to get closer to her mother through her writing is an act of reckoning with her mother's complicated legacy and continuing to love her mother despite the harm done to Allison as a child.

Allison (1996) loves her mother, aunts, and grandmother fiercely, yet as a child she is “horrified” (p. 38) by their ugliness, which she later understands as their socioeconomic reality expressed in their bodies: years of disappointed dreams; hard, underpaid work; and being “exhausted, angry, and never loved enough” (p. 37). The adult Allison (1996) identifies her childhood prayer, “do not let me become them” (p. 38), as a patriarchal perspective; one that refuses to consider the socioeconomic realities of these women’s lives and sees them only as abject and “ugly” (p. 37). Allison (2018) wants to “rescue” (p. 44) her mother from the classist, sexist perspective that sees “the women of [her] family [as] measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt” (Allison, 1996, pp. 32-33). She counters this patriarchal narrative by producing her own feminist narrative voice. Allison juxtaposes her account of her childhood horror at the sight of her mother’s, aunts’ and cousins’ bodies with contextualization of the hardships they endured. Allison’s (1996) fierce reclamation of her mother writes against the cultural stereotype of poor white people in the U.S. South and her mother’s, aunts’ and cousins’ own beliefs that they aren’t “worth anything at all” (p. 83). This alternative reading of her family is one way in which Allison tries to recuperate her mother from abjection and dismissal.

Allison (2018) crafts an account of her mother’s body as beautiful, in contrast to the cultural perspective of women like her as ugly. She claims a corporeal connection to her mother; getting closer to and taking on the mantle of her mother’s body. Allison writes that when she left home as a young adult, “Mama grew into my body like an extra layer of warm protective fat, closing around me” (p. 45). Allison describes her increasing embodiment of her mother as she ages, repeating her “bulldog angry glare” (p. 45), her quick temper, and her visceral swearing. Yet it is Ruth Gibson’s hands and feet that form the metric by which her daughter measures her health as a child; their premature aging suggesting her death. As a child, Allison attempts to stem the passage of time by rubbing lotion into her mother’s feet to eradicate the tired lines from her mother’s body. But the skin of her mother’s hands always remained “large-veined, wrinkled, and bruised” (p. 34), a sign of her physical labour

and exhaustion. As an adult, Allison imagines that her own hands are her way of embodying her now-deceased mother's body in hers: "Nothing marks me so much her daughter as my hands—the way they are aging, the veins coming up through skin already thin. I tell myself they are beautiful as they recreate my mama's flesh in mine" (p. 45). Allison reads her own aging hands as a loving incarnation of the flawed mother, one part of the mother's body that she was not able to rescue from their premature aging. Allison's reading of her hands as simultaneously her own and her mother's resonates with Freeman's (2010) idea of a *femme in drag* as her mother whose performance both "writes...the history of [her] love for [her] mother" and "the spending of her [mother's] youthful body on the making of [her] own" (p. 70). This is not, however, the *femme in vintage wear* who signifies her difference from hegemonic femininity by juxtaposing outdated feminine styles with her own contemporary positionality (Dahl, 2014; Freeman, 2010). Instead, Allison's is a passionate embodiment that attempts to drag the loved object back from death by signifying her mother's own "historically" (Freeman, 2010, p. 70), geographically, socioeconomically, and ethnically specific form of femininity alongside her own.

Allison (2018) claims a corporeal link to her mother across the distance placed between them first by geography then by death. As an adult, Allison requires space from her abusive stepfather and the geographical distance interferes with her relationship with her mother. However, Allison insists she maintains a connection to Ruth Gibson through her embodied echo of her mother's body. Allison writes that her mother's actions and words are carried in her and her sisters' bodies, even at a remove:

At any moment of the day we know what she will be doing, where she will be.... We know, not only because her days are as set and predictable as the schedule by which she does the laundry, we know in our bodies. Our mother's body is with us in its details. She is recreated in each of us; strength and bone and the skin curling over the thick flesh the women of our family have always worn. (p. 34)

This sense of an embodied, almost psychic connection demonstrates Allison's ongoing orientation toward her mother and commitment to her family despite the difficulty posed by geographical distance, her mother living with her stepfather, and her own upwards socioeconomic mobility. Allison is continually oriented toward her mother; she knows where her mother is and by that she knows who she is. Following Sara Ahmed's (2006) queering of phenomenology, a philosophy that believes "consciousness is always directed 'toward' an object" (p. 2), Allison's is a "queer phenomenology" that redirects "our attention toward different objects, those that are 'less proximate' or even those that deviate or are deviant" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3). Allison rejects the law of the father, as embodied by her stepfather, and claims a maternal authority in a distinctly non-patriarchal narrative that allows both mother and daughter's subjectivities to coexist (Hirsch, 2021).

Like Nestle (2003), who cites Regina's "sexual legacy" (p. 114) to her queer daughter, Allison (1994) claims these culturally despised women as her lineage. Allison writes that her personal feminist and lesbian lineage starts with her mother. In the short story "Skin, Where She Touches Me," Allison (1994) returns to the deaths and legacies of Cathy, "the first woman [she] ever fell passionately in love with" and her mother, "the first woman [she] ever understood to be deeply hurt and just as heroic" (p. 226). Allison (1994) writes that she is driven to write to tell stories about and recuperate these, the "two most important women in [her] life;" the women she "cannot stop talking about" (p. 225). In contrast to queer culture's understanding of the nuclear family as inherently normative and inimical to radical queerness (Roulston, 2021), Allison (1994) claims both her mother and her first lover as women whose lived realities have "shaped" (p. 225) her own deeply intersectional, feminist perspective that seeks to understand how all of our lives are determined by our gender, geography, socioeconomic, and racial locations, as well as our sexuality. By citing her mother and her first lover as the most influential people in her life, Allison suggests a queer subjectivity with dual lineages from both the family of origin and the queer community.

Both Nestle (1998) and Allison (1994) invoke their mothers' bodies almost as if they were their lovers. Nestle (1998) describes rich, fictional accounts of her mother having sex. Allison brings her mother's body with her when she leaves home. However, Allison (1994) insists that this orientation toward and embrace of the mother isn't what it sounds like:

I talked about my mama with the passion of a lover, obsessively, proudly, angrily, tenderly, insistently. I knew, too, that what it sounded like wasn't what it was, that I did not want to possess her but to free her. (p. 236).

Like the queer femme, who isn't the heterosexual, cisgender woman that she appears to be (Walker, 2001), Allison's posthumous possession of her mother isn't what it looks like.

Sedgwick's (2003) reading of reparative practices is useful again here to understand Allison's narrative as an attempt to 'free' Ruth Gibson from the judgment of others and to remake her mother from a reparative perspective. In turn, this new narrative of her mother soothes Allison's deeply painful memories of her and the ways in which her mother had failed to protect her daughter from sexual abuse while simultaneously loving her profoundly. Allison (2018) writes, "I did not want to be my mother's lover.... I wanted to rescue her the way we had both wanted her to rescue me" (p. 44). Allison's writing about her mother is her way of rescuing her mother, trying to pull her back from death and from all the hardships she had to endure.

Allison's (1994) writing includes italicized sections where Allison writes a kind of prose poem about "*my skin, my mama's skin, my sisters' skin*" (p. 225, emphasis in original). This is a femme drag of the mother, in which her skin becomes her mother's skin, claiming her mother, her and her sisters' shared lineage: "I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told, women I have known, women who have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all" (Allison, 1996, p. 38). Allison understands her own deadpan drag of her mother as a way of holding the stories of women who are abjected by mainstream culture, who perhaps cannot speak for themselves. Allison's approach resonates with Sedgwick's understanding of drag as a reparative

practice. Similar to Allison, Sedgwick writes that drag often isn't what it seems. Rather than a parodic, denaturalizing, or mocking practice, Sedgwick (2003) argues that drag can also be read as a reparative, loving practice whereby queer people can extract "sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has...been not to sustain them" (p. 151). Allison's incorporation of her mother is a loving practice that seeks to counteract the self-hatred and shame experienced by Allison, her sisters, her mother, and all the other women of the family. Allison (1996) acknowledges the cruel ways in which her family's socioeconomic circumstances affected their lives: their teenage pregnancies; Allison's inability to get pregnant owing to an untreated STI transmitted from her stepfather; her mother's and aunts' early deaths from cancer; the childhood deaths of so many members of the family; the abusive marriages; the hard work, little pay, and disappointed dreams. Allison's writing performs a transubstantiation of this pain and rewrites each of her family members as beautiful in order to love and heal both them and herself.

Femme Dykes Against the Blurring of Time

Both Allison (1994; 1996) and Nestle (1998; 2003) allow their mothers subjectivity outside of their role as mothers. Nestle includes her mother's first-person narratives, tells fictional stories of her sexual adventures, emphasizes Regina's deviant sexual legacy to her daughter, and imagines what her mother might say to her from beyond the grave. Allison's contextualization and description of how her mother's body is affected by her hard work and illness, combined with her description of her mother's desperate love for her, produces an empathetic portrait of a woman whose socioeconomic circumstances allowed her so little choice. Allison (1994) writes about her mother and her first lover to hold "onto them, even as [she did] when they were alive" (p. 225). In Allison's (1994) words, "*While I live and sing [mama] does not die*" (p. 243, emphasis in original). It is almost as if Allison feels she can keep her mother alive through the force of her desire for her, as expressed in her writing.

Nestle also hopes that her writing will keep the memory of her mother alive. Nestle (1998) declares to her reader, "while I live and you read my words, we have built a dike

against the blurring of time” (p. 85). I read this statement as Nestle’s determination to stop the passage of time that would leave working-class, ordinary, and unrespectable women like Regina lost to history. Both Allison and Nestle try to hold onto their mothers and make sure their memory and legacies endure. Nestle (1998) publishes an excerpt of Regina’s writing, in which Regina declares that “*the worst thing that [can] happen to a human being [is] to die and not have anyone know that you have lived*” (p. 85, emphasis in original). Nestle ensures that Regina lives on in her own writing, allowing her mother a complex subjectivity that contrasts with the simplistic stories often told about mothers (Hirsch, 2021).

Allison’s (1994; 1996) and Nestle’s (1998; 2003) writing about their mothers models reparation as both empathy and vindication. By narrating the circumstances of their mothers’ lives, they produce an empathetic view of their mothers who are otherwise viewed as ‘bad.’ Providing this same context also allows Allison and Nestle to vindicate their mothers’ choices, both to the reader and to themselves. In Allison’s (1994) words, “Death is the point at which, if it has not already been claimed, vindication becomes possible. Death changes everything” (p. 226). These femmes’ written drags of their mothers aren’t a simple reproduction of the original but simulacra that intend to comment on the original (Freeman, 2010). The temporal model of a femme in drag as her mother suggests a different relationship between the problematic past and the queer present; one that acknowledges the problems inherent in that past but doesn’t abject or reject it. Allison’s and Nestle’s drag of their mothers invokes the horror of the harm that was done to them, the queer femme daughter, by their heterosexual mothers, but also allows the reader to understand their mothers’ particular contexts.

Deep Lez Mothers

Freeman (2010) calls her queer interest in “the time of [second-wave] feminism and other dinosaurs” a “Deep Lez” (p 85) project. Weirdly, or perhaps to be expected in small queer, feminist, and academic circles, Freeman (2010) borrows this phrase from Allyson Mitchell, one of the creators of Killjoy’s Kastle, who in turn borrows the term from a gay male

friend who describes a macramé wall hanging as “deep lez” (p. 85). This description is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that lesbian-feminist artists often took up culturally feminized craft practices to deliberately move away from the toxic masculinity associated with traditional artforms (Haynes, 2019). Mitchell and Logue’s *Killjoy’s Kastle* was an immense, multimedia craft project, using crochet, plaster cast, tie dye, spray paint, sewing, collage, and draggy performances of lesbian-feminist stereotypes to create an immersive audience experience. I read Allison (1994; 1996) and Nestle’s (1998; 2003) deeply empathetic, touchy-feely invocations of their dead mothers as another “deep lez” practice that brings the difficult past into the present, touches and examines it, and allows us queers to consider both the positive and negative aspects of lesbian feminism’s cultural legacy. To apply a deep lez approach, as Mitchell and Logue do in *Killjoy’s Kastle*, allows us to take positive lessons from the objects we love, irreverently reviving but not necessarily reproducing the problematic aspects of their personhood. If I extend this idea of a queer femme drag of a foremother to the level of academic discipline or feminist generations, it suggests the possibility of a different relationship between the queer present and the horrifying spectre of the lesbian-feminist past. Following Sedgwick’s (2003) theory of a reparative approach to that which horrifies us, the reparative allows for recognition of both the “good” and the “terrible” (p. 146) in the past:

Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 146)

It is painful to look at the lesbian-feminist past, but it might be a relief to permit ourselves to do so as queer spectators. To develop a relationship to the feminist past, even when that past has horrifying aspects, is ethically crucial for a queer theory that still so often disavows the feminine, the feminist, and the material concerns of many queer subjects. We can acknowledge the horrifying aspects of the lesbian-feminist past— transphobia, racism,

classism, political lesbianism, and restrictive aesthetics—without needing to sediment that past into a singular narrative. Embracing these “sticky entanglements” (Freeman, 2010, p. 70) with our feminist foremothers is a more productive approach to the phenomena that haunt queer theory than to run away from them altogether. What Mitchell’s and Logue’s *Killjoy’s Kastle* shows us is that queer cultures’, queer studies’, and queer peoples’ feelings about lesbian feminism are still very active and that the spectre of lesbian feminism’s racism and transphobia continues to hurt us. But by turning back to the lesbian feminist, and looking at her in the light of day, perhaps we will come to some kind of terms with the monstrous mother who haunts us.

Conclusion: What Would it Take to Defang This Monster?

By turning backwards to look at the resonance of the lesbian feminist in queer theory and culture today I am not advocating a return to that culture, but rather excavating a queer feminist genealogy which acknowledges the roots of some of our queer ideas in lesbian-feminist ideologies (Carter and Noble, 1996; Case, 1997; Faderman, 1997). Perhaps one reason the echoes and phantoms of lesbian feminism continue to horrify us queers and feminists is because she still appears to manifest in right-wing and white-centric so-called feminisms today. These include the figure of the TERF, the dominance of white feminism, the right-wing invocation of ‘women’s rights’ in trans-exclusionary and anti-migrant policies in the Global North, and the configuration of the ‘veiled Muslim woman’ as the carrier of patriarchal oppression (Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022), to name a few instances of feminism gone awry. Whether these are rightly her spawn is unclear. Yet the horror she suggests continues to be reproduced in these right-wing co-optations of feminism.

Freeman’s (2010) image of a femme in drag as her mother suggests a queer femme-inist entanglement with lesbian feminism as a way of touching, rather than disavowing, the troubling past. Looking closely at the lesbian feminist and considering what she might have to offer is one way of reincorporating the feminist into queer theory. Allison (1994; 1996) and Nestle’s (1998; 2003) written drag of their mothers pulls them forward into their lesbian,

femme present and incorporates the needs of working-class, heterosexual women like Ruth and Regina into their queer political visions. By refusing to abject the mothers who hurt them, and instead holding them closer, they pull Regina Nestle and Ruth Gibson out of the objectifying and binary narrative of 'bad' mother, assign their mothers voice and agency, and generate the reader's empathy for these culturally abjected women. I take this embrace by the femme daughter of her complicated mother as a metaphor for a reparative queer feminist approach to queer theory's own horrifying mother, the lesbian feminist. By embodying our mothers, we parody them but also lovingly evoke them. We transform their gender performances into something different, not quite normative, and perform both our own subjectivity and theirs at once (Freeman, 2010). This drag performance of an outdated femininity is, of course, very femme (Dahl, 2014; Freeman, 2010). It is also feminist in its refusal to abject both past feminist movements and the cultural figure of the mother despite all that she is associated with in the white supremacist cultural imagination, including idealized white femininity, domesticity, the nuclear family, and constrained sexuality.

Allison's (1994; 1996) and Nestle's (1998; 2003) emotionally driven approach contrasts with the dispassionate posturing of queer theory, which denies its affective investments in the move away from its 'big drags'; the lesbian feminist, the maternal, and the feminine. This denial is perhaps why such negative emotions explode out of the queer spectator who confronts the horrifying spectres of lesbian feminism past. A reparative approach to our problematic mothers suggests the potential of new, more nuanced relationships to our intellectual foremothers. Encouraging queer theory to acknowledge its status as lesbian-feminist spawn and explore this lineage is one part of reconciling queer to feminist and moving toward a queer theory that is more able to address feminist concerns, including repositioning the feminine, the femme, and the mother.

To insist upon queer's lesbian-feminist lineage is, for me, a queer feminist argument that works against the abjection of previous generations of feminism (Hemmings, 2016) and the ongoing misogynist impulse in academic scholarship to reject the work of women

(Brushwood Rose, personal communication, 2024), the feminine, and mothers. This investigation challenges the progress narrative that is central to how both feminist movements (Hemmings, 2011; Henry, 2012) and the queer movement (Duggan, 1992) have been framed. We need to look at our disciplinary inheritances face on to reckon with their legacies and decide which parts of those legacies we want to take with us (perhaps a politics centred in consideration of gender-based oppressions, material assistance for marginalized groups, reproductive justice, and equal pay) and which parts we want to leave behind (such as transphobia, femmephobia, classism, and racism).

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Summary

The Femme, the Mother, and the Lesbian Feminist: Rereading Queer Theory's Difficult Family Relationships explores some of the negative effects queer theory's disavowal of femininity has on queer subjects who are feminine and/or have a commitment to culturally feminized phenomena. The figures of the femme, the mother, and the lesbian feminist each function as an other within queer frameworks that serve to affirm queer theory's more contemporary, progressive, and subversive politics. After exposing queer theory's turn away from femininity and its associated subjectivities, I then hope to repair this relationship through reparative readings of femme life writing. Femmes' nuanced accounts of femininity, maternity, and the family as queer, racialized, classed, and geographically and historically contingent expand and complicate the understanding of femininity and culturally feminized phenomena in queer thought. Through these readings, I work towards a more feminist queer theory. This project stems from my own experiences as a queer femme and queer femme mother. This dissertation is my own loving critique of theories and fields that have both sustained me and hurt me, and my own journey toward a queer femme-inist politics that can consider feminisms and femininities.

In Chapter Two, "Anti/Normativity: Queer Theory's Turn Away from Femininity," I argue that early queer theory turned away from feminism and the analysis of gender-based oppression to legitimize itself as a new field of study that could address queer sexualities. Unfortunately, this turn away from gender augmented preexisting sexism and transmisogyny in queer communities, especially within those predominantly comprised of assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) queer subjects. This flight away from gender also entailed a turn away from lesbian subjectivity, apparently irrevocably outdated by its association with the terms lesbian feminist and 'woman,' as if to name lesbian sexuality or womanhood is in itself gender essentialist. Central to this chapter is my argument that the theories feminists and queers

create have real-life effects; we live by them. Queer theory's turn away from femininity, lesbian subjectivity, and the lesbian-feminist movement has augmented femmephobia, transmisogyny, and negative attitudes toward femininity in general within queer culture. The ripple effects of these divergences are still being felt today. This chapter was written over several years and propelled by my own, personal disappointment at the femmephobia I encountered in queer communities. It makes sense, then, that after addressing my disappointment with my chosen family, queer community, I turn in the following chapter to reconsider the family of origin.

In Chapter Three, "Bringing Queer Theory Home: Reparative Readings of the Family in Femme Life Writing," I explore the adult femme's interstitial position between the family of origin they have left behind and the chosen family they have found. The femme can use their position as an illegible queer subject to challenge assumptions in both queer and straight spheres; a dialectical navigation that can suggest new, more inclusive, political frameworks. Writing by Dorothy Allison (1994; 1996), Jewelle Gomez (1993), and Amber Hollibaugh (2000) demonstrates that leaving the family of origin behind isn't always tenable for queer subjects who experience oppressions based on race, class, and gender as well as sexuality and want or need to maintain a connection to their family of origin. These writers narrate their experiences of classism, femmephobia, whorephobia, and racism in their chosen families of the lesbian-feminist and women's movement and reveal that the dream of a perfect home is to some extent illusory. However, in the femme's fluidity of movement between their chosen families and families of origin the femme suggests the possibility of reconciliation between these ideologically separate families.

In Chapter Four, "Don't Lose Your Mother: Reclaiming the Queer Feminist Legacy of the 'Bad' Mother," I outline some of the harms done to queer and straight mothers by restrictive frameworks of the nuclear family that refuse some mothers' right to motherhood and/or frame them as 'bad' mothers. I recuperate the promiscuous mother, queer femme mother, and Indigenous mother from their abjection as 'bad' mothers under white settler,

patriarchal ideology and explore how narratives by and about these mothers challenge and expand the limited frameworks of motherhood in both queer theory and patriarchal thought. Narratives by the queer femme who is daughter and/or mother demonstrate that motherhood is not always inherently heteronormative and can be in resistance to patriarchal gender and sexual norms. These narratives outline the bad mother's queer feminist legacy to her children that entails the modelling of an 'outlaw' femininity and resistance to racist, classist, and sexist patriarchal ideologies. This contribution expands a femme theory that has until now valorized the queer femme as antinormative by depicting heterosexual women as inherently normative to suggest points of solidarity and political alliance between queer femmes and other cultural 'bad girls.'

In Chapter Five, "A Femme in Drag as Her Mother: Reconciling Queer to the Lesbian-Feminist (M)Other," I take the intergenerational referentiality of femme drag as a productive metaphor for exploring alternative ways queer can relate to its horrifying mother, the lesbian feminist. Reading the lesbian feminist as a mother to queer theory not only highlights her continued abjection and persistence as the figure of an Other, unwanted politics in queer theory and studies, but also emphasizes that lesbian-feminist thought has been generative for queer theory. Dorothy Allison's (1994; 1996) and Joan Nestle's (1998; 2003) loving invocation of their own mothers' bodies in their life writing via the lens of femme drag suggests a nuanced and reparative approach to the mother that troubles us. These writers' desire to "rescue" (Allison, 1998, p. 44) their so-called 'bad' mothers from their cultural abjection speaks to my own interest in the legacy of lesbian feminism and its ongoing affects and effects. Looking at our disciplinary inheritances in the light of day would allow queer theory to acknowledge its affective relationship to its 'big drags' the lesbian feminist, the maternal, and the feminine, and forge a less explosive relationship to its undesirable past. Getting closer to queer's lesbian-feminist lineage could allow queer to move toward a queer theory that is more able to address feminist concerns.

Implications and Significance

Contributions to Sexuality Studies and Gender Studies

This dissertation contributes to and expands the fields of sexuality studies and gender studies. I show that queer and feminist theories have very real ideological effects on the form queer and feminist communities take. They shape these communities and in doing so define who is included and excluded (Derrida, 2005; Serano, 2013). Femme life writing is one productive site that highlights the influence of queer and feminist theory on queer and feminist culture and voices the experiences of some of those who are marginalized by these ideologies. I read femme life writing for its in-depth examination of femininities to reincorporate a feminist analysis of gender-based oppression and femininities back into queer theory. Examinations of femme life writing, as well as writing by feminine queers or queer women generally, are one way of getting at critical considerations of feminized experiences as they intersect with queer sexualities, gender expressions, class, race, and other experiences. Femme narrative is particularly adept at addressing experiences of femmephobia, transmisogyny, whorephobia, sex-negativity, gendered labour, class, and race, and how these intersect with other sites of oppression. There remains, of course, a need for many different research projects that examine femininity beyond its depiction as a patriarchal imposition (Dahl, 2012).

Becoming familiar with femme life writing of an earlier generation has taught me that many of the concerns femme writers addressed in the 1980s and 1990s are very present in queer culture of today. Femme has been kept in a subordinate status to queer masculinity since it came to the fore as a North American, mid-twentieth century lesbian identity (Nestle, 1992a; Stafford, 2010; Taylor, 2018; Tinsley, 2022). The lack of examination of femme in the fields of sexuality studies and gender studies until very recently suggests femininity's subordinate status in these fields. Femininity is often taken as singular in sexuality studies and gender studies and framed as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and inherently normative in both queer and feminist theory (Hemmings, 2016). My research on cultural characterizations of the mother, the femme, the lesbian feminist, and families reveals the

need for both sexuality studies and queer studies to extend their considerations of femininity beyond gender presentation to include mothering and other culturally feminized phenomena; that is, the everyday experiences that are characterized as belonging to a feminine realm. These include, domestic labour, child-rearing, care work more generally, other forms of unpaid labour, and more. These explorations should be coterminous with examinations of race, class, assigned sex, sexuality, ability, age, and other significant experiences.

Queer and feminist theory has often been accused of being too abstract and elitist in its language (Faderman, 1997), and of failing to address and improve the material realities of queer subjects (Cohen, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Martin, 1996; Nestle, 1998). This is especially true of those who experience oppression based on race, gender, dis/ability, and class, as well as sexuality (Cohen, 2005; Johnson, 2005). In this dissertation, I argue that this disavowal of the material and the everyday is connected to queer and feminist theory's characterization of femininity as normative and its disavowal of second-wave feminism and lesbian feminism. Including considerations of queer subjects' experiences of femininity and culturally feminized phenomena, such as pregnancy, child-rearing, domestic labour, other forms of care work and gendered labour, and how these experiences intersect with other sites of marginalization, goes a little way to address these material realities. Obviously much more work is needed. A marriage of theory that both dreams the future and addresses material realities in the present day would be perfect.

In the context of a queer theory that has legitimized its ascent by coding second-wave and lesbian feminism as politically regressive (Fraiman, 2003; Hesford, 2013), looking back and acknowledging queer theory's intellectual inheritances from lesbian feminism works against this generational model of political progression, whereby the next movement legitimizes itself against a past it casts as outdated, insufficient, and problematic (Hemmings, 2011). There are rights won during second-wave feminism that remain vitally important today and have not yet been instituted or are being eroded in some Western countries. These include the reversal of reproductive rights such as access to abortion, contraception,

surrogacy, and reproductive technologies like intrauterine insemination and IVF (see for example “Italy Passes Law”, 2024; Sherman et al., 2024), unequal (see for example Wong, 2024) or non-existent access to funded childcare, impeding trans childrens’ access to gender-affirming care (see for example Bellefontaine, 2024; Parry, 2024), and closing gender studies departments at universities (see for example Mandler, 2023; Oppenheim, 2018). The increase in these gendered attacks makes it more urgent that queer theory be able to address the lived realities of queer subjects in the present as well as look towards future discursive horizons.

Expanding Femme Theory

Femme theory is a subset of queer theory and contributes to the fields of gender studies, sexuality studies, and critical femininity studies. Femme theory to date has examined and countered femmephobia and femme invisibility by understanding queer femme identities within the framework of antinormativity. The queer femme can be reclaimed from their or her association with the normative feminine by framing femme-ininity as inherently different to, and subversive of, hegemonic femininity (VanNewkirk, 2006). Many femme theorists have argued that femmes ‘do’ femininity differently to straight women (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Duggan & McHugh, 1996): we challenge hegemonic feminine aesthetics (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Dahl, 2014; Walker, 1998); subvert heteronormativity by desiring other queers as well as or instead of cisgender heterosexual men (Browne, 2009; Davis, 1992a; Pratt, 2005); and experience our femininity as a site of empowerment rather than oppression (Carolyn & Bewley, 1998; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Lewis, 2012a; Tweedy, 2009b). While this framework has effectively reclaimed femme as queer, it does so at the cost of abjecting heterosexual femininities as inherently normative, and perhaps even brainwashed (Galewski, 2005; Hemmings, 1999; VanNewkirk, 2006). This is the same narrative that queer culture has levelled against the AFAB femme (Pratt, 2005; Senyonga, 2019; Wells, 1995) and trans women (Serano, 2013; Thom, 2017). It is also

representative of how feminist theory has understood femininity until very recently (Hemmings, 2016; Horsley, 2023).

This dissertation expands femme theory to consider points of solidarity between queer and non-queer feminine subjects who are each abjected on account of their socially unacceptable femininities. One of the starting points for this dissertation was my critique of femme theory's tendency to use frameworks of antinormativity to understand femme as politically subversive. Staging the 'antinormative' queer femme against the 'normative' heterosexual woman is yet another example of a polarizing political discourse that precludes identification between femininized subjects. My consideration of points of solidarity between queer femme femininities and heterosexual femininities represents a new turn in femme theory. The complex sites of identification these femme authors find with their mothers, sisters, and other heterosexual women acknowledge the material effects of gender discrimination on all feminine subjects. In this way, they reincorporate a feminist analysis of femininities into queer theory.

Responding to the question of whether femme culture abandons heterosexual women, Joan Nestle (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997) replies that we need to support all women who experience oppression on the basis of their sexual desires. We see this solidarity in Nestle's writing about her mother, Regina. Nestle forges an allegiance between the heterosexual woman who is socially ostracized for her promiscuity and the queer femme who is also oppressed based on her sexuality. However, Nestle also acknowledges that queer or feminist theories fail to be feminist when they "abandon domesticity" (p. 113), that more 'normative' feminine experience. Observing femme mothers at a lesbian event, Nestle (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997) writes "even though X is in a butch-femme relationship, at that moment...what I saw were women, 'good' women. Doing the good woman thing" (pp. 113-114). Nestle's own narratives, as well as those of Allison (1994; 1996), Brant (2019a), Gomez (1993), Hollibaugh (2000), and Pratt (1988, 1990, 2005) each challenge this association of mothering with being a 'good woman.' However, these femme narratives still

don't explore points of commonality between the queer femme's and heterosexual women's experiences of *conforming* to social norms. The theory of feminist solidarity I forge between the queer femme and cultural figure of the 'bad mother' in Chapter Four is limited to women whose sexuality contravenes social norms. Queer theory and femme theory have both yet to address the aspects of queer people's lives, and especially those of queer women, that overlap with heterosexual women's more 'normative' experiences. A femme theory that only sees points of solidarity between antinormative feminine subjects inevitably can't account for aspects of queer femme experience that seem to correlate to the social norm, such as mothering within a nuclear family, or being the primary parent in a masculine/feminine relationship. I don't want to erase the historical and sexual specificity of femme. But it's worth asking if the queer femme is always a "different creature" (Nestle & Cruikshank, 1997, p. 113) from heterosexual women.

Limitations

Femme as a Singular Identity

This study focused on life writing that has been published in print by writers who self-identify as femme. In defining my study this way, I found that I read far more stories by AFAB and white femmes than femmes who are assigned male at birth (AMAB), and/or Black femmes, and femmes of colour. This bias may speak to the historical and ongoing marginalization of trans women from lesbian-feminist culture of the 1970s and 1980s and dyke-oriented queer culture of the 1990s and 2000s (Serano, 2013), as well as the historical construction of transfeminine identities as inherently heterosexual within trans women's communities (Pihlak, 2023). This discrepancy also suggests the well-documented racism present in second-wave and third-wave feminist communities (Combahee River Collective, 2023; Taylor, 1998).

However, femme life writing is multiglossic. In my survey of femme life writing published in print I read 110 femme-identified authors. While the majority of these writers are white, I read writing by Black femmes, East Asian femmes, South Asian femmes, Latinx

femmes, Indigenous femmes, and other femmes of colour for this research project. Femmes write how ableism, racism, classism, whorephobia, and ageism intersect with their experiences of femme identity and queer community. This dissertation explores how femme is negotiated through lenses of class, sexuality, race, gender, and nation. Further areas of exploration include more in-depth examinations of the ways femmes' experiences of race, dis/ability, class, age, sex, and sexuality affect our access to community and belonging.

My turn to femmes' accounts of mothering and the family of origin led me to focus on the long-form memoirs and collections of essays published by Dorothy Allison (1988; 1994; 1996), Jewelle Gomez (1993), Amber Hollibaugh (2000), Joan Nestle (1998; 2003), and Minnie Bruce Pratt (1988; 1990; 2005), which in turn limited my discussion of race primarily to the perspective of white-passing authors, excepting Jewelle Gomez who is Black, Wampanoag, and Ioway. Including fictional writing by Indigenous femme Beth Brant under Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2010) generous definition of life writing allowed me to expand my examination of white settler family forms in the context of North America's historical and ongoing colonization. However, I would like to further address experiences of racialization as they intersect with constructions and experiences of 'good' and 'bad' mothers, families that remain unrecognized by, and families that are legalized by the white settler state.

One of my significant claims in this dissertation is that taking either sexuality or gender as the primary axis of consideration in queer theory leads to a single-issue and non-intersectional political framework. By originally coming to this project out of a personal desire to deconstruct and refute my experiences of femmephobia as a feminine-presenting dyke in predominantly white queer communities, I approached the question of femmephobia from a white settler and cisgender bias. But recent scholarship on trans history shows that the idea of trans women's exclusion from lesbian community is to an extent a self-perpetuating myth that ignores the presence of trans women in second-wave feminist and lesbian culture (Cousens, 2023). Femme also has a rich and differently positioned history in different queer

cultures and communities, such as cross-dressing culture (Schwartz, 2023), African American ballroom culture (Bailey, 2014), sex work culture (Monica Forrester, personal communication, August 23, 2024), and as a sexual and gender identity for lesbians or queer women (Kennedy & Davis, 1994). When I first started to identify as femme in the early 2000s, I had only heard the term in relation to dyke culture and was unaware of its history in Black, trans, and sex work contexts.

Femme is also a term that has been more widely taken up over the past ten years. Femme is now often used by heterosexual women to denote looking feminine, a sense that moves it away from its specific meanings in 2SLGBTQ+ culture (Whittall, 2021). Femme has become such a common word in mainstream culture, that even I—a scholar of femme—have started to feel a kind of anxiety that I don't know what femme is given its increasingly wider usage and new meanings. All these contexts and uses complicate approaching a research study from the axis of femme identity. In future research, I aim to destabilize the idea that femme identity is fixed or singular. For example, I will approach questions of queer feminine experience from a different standpoint rather than taking femme identity as the primary axis of enquiry. Potential research ideas include experiences of historically-, geographically-, racially- and/or culturally-specific networks such as the Clit Lit reading series organized by femme writer Elizabeth Ruth in 1990s Toronto, the intersectional community-building work of employees at the Toronto Women's Bookstore in the 1990s and 2000s, and contemporary queer and feminine parents' experiences of gender, sexuality, and belonging in Southern Ontario.

Paranoid Readings

My focus on the reparative in this dissertation is an experiment. I ask what could getting closer to that which we queers have rejected, what we run away from, could do for our sense of wellbeing and belonging. Yet all this is not to disavow the necessity of the need for paranoid readings in the context of historical and contemporary racist, classist, colonial, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies. Rather, I follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) to

argue that paranoid readings' project of exposure doesn't necessarily entail a next step.

What do we do with the harm, discrimination, even genocide that we've exposed?

Reparative readings may work best to address the past, but in the context of ongoing harms they may not be useful. There are some harms that can't be repaired and many cases where repair may not be desirable (Spelman, 2002). Brant's (2019) and Pratt's (1988; 1990; 2005) stories about children who have been taken away from their mothers are paranoid narratives in that they expose the harm of heteronormative, homophobic, and colonial frameworks of the family. But in their imagined expansion of the acceptable family and accounts of sex they explore forms of reparation that soothe ongoing harm. I include these narratives in my dissertation to demonstrate that in their exposure of the harms visited upon queer and racialized mothers they suggest the need for queer theory and studies to incorporate more nuanced critiques of the mother and the family, rather than replicating their characterization as inherently white, middle-class, heterosexual, and nuclear.

Expanding Frameworks of the Family

Is the return to the family home an assimilatory practice? When are queer family forms not a reproduction of the white settler nation state? Why do we tend to assume nuclear when we hear the word family? These are some of my questions that remain even as I hope to have somewhat answered them. I am aware that queer theorists have critiqued the legalization of same-sex marriage as an assimilatory practice that affords some queers access to social respectability, while not challenging the social institutions that perpetuate homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, and colonization (Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2020; Halberstam, 2005; Edelman, 2004; Tallbear, 2022). Yet none of the family forms in this dissertation are nuclear (except my own) and each writer describes the harm visited upon themselves as queer, working-class, and racialized subjects, and upon their families of origin or their created families by classism, racism, sexism, ongoing and historical colonization, and the imposition of white settler, Christian, patriarchal, heterosexist, and misogynist familial structures. In this dissertation, I redefine family as something that exceeds biology,

the nuclear family structure, and heteronormativity. Families are ideological and transmit their ideologies throughout the generations. However, these ideologies can be feminist as well as patriarchal. Families can revolve around intergenerational child-rearing but can also form sideways across a generation, joined by political commitments, shared cultures, race and ethnicity, and sexuality. Families therefore share experiences of cultural marginalization. The families that femmes narrate in their life writing comprise all these configurations. Femme narratives thus offer expanded frameworks of the family and trouble queer theory's association of family with nuclear, heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and other patriarchal values.

Future Research

Reintegrating Sex into Queer Theory

My research on femme life writing demonstrates the need for further narrative research into experiences of desire and sex. Tim Dean (2015) argues that queer theory omits accounts and critical examinations of sex in favour of focusing on sexual identity in order to gain academic institutionalization and social respectability. Susan Fraiman (2003) adds that queer theory is particularly unable to address female desire. In contemporary culture, queer femme is mostly understood as a gender identity (Whittall, 2021), and discussions of femme scholarly work focus on femme's relationship to hegemonic femininity. However, upon reading femme life writing, it became clear to me that femme is also a very sexualized identity. Many femmes, especially those writing in the 1980s and 1990s, understand femme as a mode of desire as well as gender (Allison, 1994; 1996; Davis 1992b; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 1998; 2003; Pratt, 2005). These femmes framed sex as vitally important to their sense of self. Queer femmes' visceral accounts of sex, and their insistence on the importance of sexual fulfillment, often at the cost of social ostracization (Allison, 1994; Brant, 2019a; Hollibaugh, 2000; Nestle, 1998; 2003; Pratt, 1990), is one site where queer subjects refuse this desexualization of queer identity. Examining femme life writing with this

in mind could work toward reincorporating narratives about sex and desire back into queer theory.

Femmes' Created Families

In this dissertation I mostly explore families of origin, both biological and theoretical, and chosen families—families of thought and communities of shared experience. I reckon with femmes as the queer daughters of ‘bad’ mothers, as ‘bad’ mothers themselves, members of dysfunctional families of origin, and members of dysfunctional chosen families. Apart from Brant’s (2019a) and Pratt’s (1988; 1990; 2005) accounts of queer motherhood, there is little discussion in femme life writing of queer femmes’ created families. Many femmes write about their relationship to their families of origin and to the chosen family of queer community. There are several memoirs about parenting as a lesbian (Berney, 2021, Dumesnil, 2013, Schilt, 2015), cisgender gay man (Savage, 1999), AFAB nonbinary or trans parent (Belc, 2021; Bergman, 2013), butch mother (Moraga, 2022; Summers, 2014), or as a trans woman (Boylan, 2013). But there are few published accounts of parenting by self-identified femmes. Michelle Tea’s (2022) *Knocking Myself Up: A Memoir of My (In)Fertility* is one very recent exception whose existence I only learnt of while writing this conclusion. Dorothy Allison, who is a mother, rarely mentions her son Wolf and the family she created with her partner. She writes that the stories about her mother, her extended family of origin, and her experiences as her mother’s daughter are the ones that she “needed to tell” (Allison, 1996, p. 236). The anthology *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume Two* contains two short pieces by femmes on this subject. In one, Leslie Freeman (2009) describes wanting to set a feminist example of independence to her children, and in another, J.E. Franet (2009) briefly mentions being a surrogate. While I have no doubt that more of the 110 femme authors I read are mothers, these experiences were not what they discussed in their contributions to anthologies. One reason for this lack of femme life writing about mothering may be precisely because of the naturalized association between the AFAB body, feminine gender

expression, and gestational motherhood in both mainstream and queer culture (Averett, 2021; Fraiman, 2003). Queer femme writers may not want to appear to reify this association.

Further work is needed to address the families femmes create when we raise children, and the various structures, practices, and institutions within which these families are shaped, such as single parenthood, adoption, assisted reproduction, blended families, poly families, and families with more than two parents. This lack of femme narratives about parenting also leaves me unable to address whether femmes' own created families may be a space where they hope to resolve the tensions they experience between their family of origin and their adult chosen family, femmes' own reckoning with their now maternal femininity, and how femmes' experiences as mothers propel their confrontations with their own mothers. The time of my life in which I wrote this dissertation is also at play in the omission of queer mothers' created families. I had two children while writing this dissertation and was still very much reckoning with my experiences of my own family of origin that had been raised again by becoming a mother myself. I was particularly drawn to Allison's writing about her difficult relationship with her mother, and perhaps at the time understood myself more as a queer daughter reckoning with her own family of origin and childhood than as a queer mother. If I were to write this dissertation again, I would start at a different place.

Indeed, as I began writing about femme mothers, I kept thinking about Maggie Nelson's (2015) memoir of queer motherhood, *The Argonauts*. Nelson crafts a deliciously sexual picture of motherhood, like Pratt's writing about her sexuality and Nestle's stories about Regina. But Nelson doesn't identify as femme (Brushwood Rose in conversation, 2016) and therefore I didn't incorporate *The Argonauts* into my dissertation. Additionally, while I do think queer femmes or feminine queer women (like Nelson) may have a particular perspective on motherhood, this queer perspective is not limited to feminine mothers. Cherríe Moraga's (2022) memoir of butch motherhood raises many of the same questions as those raised by Pratt (1990; 2005) and Nelson. Moraga taught me that the experience of being queer, a woman, and a mother prompts many queer mothers to think about the

desexualization of motherhood in the cultural imaginary, the unequal labour of being the gestational parent, and to highlight the difficulties of maintaining sexual relationships while parenting young children. These are *feminist* concerns that arise from the embodied experience of being the gestational parent and are not unique to feminine mothers or to mothers at all, given that fathers and nonbinary parents can also be gestational parents. Additionally, queer mothers who aren't gestational parents might also have concerns about gendered labour and the place of sex within their role as mothers. Writing about queer motherhood more generally would also allow me to delve into the archive of lesbian-feminist and second-wave feminist writing about the maternal and create a more expansive project.

Further Narratives of Queer Parenthood

One site where queer femmes' and straight women's experiences overlap is parenting, and perhaps especially being perceived as a mother. The fact that there were so few published accounts by femme writers of their experiences as parents has also fuelled my interest in conducting further research on queer parenting. This dissertation reveals a significant lack of critical considerations of queer parenting in the fields of queer studies, childhood studies, and kinship or family studies. The existing literature on queer families focuses primarily on the point of view, healthcare, and education needs of queer and trans children and youth (Dyer et al. 2020; Gilbert, 2014; Jiménez, 2009; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). Scholarship on lesbian mothers has focused on the gender development of their children (Gibbs, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1981), the experiences of children raised by lesbian or gay parents (Tasker, 2005), and the experiences of non-gestational lesbian mothers (Bergen et al., 2006). There have been some accounts of queer parents' (especially lesbian mothers') experiences of becoming parents (Brushwood Rose & Goldberg, 2009; Lewin, 1993; Sullivan, 2004), but not many about their narrative self-understanding upon becoming parents. Despite some exploration of queer maternal subjectivities, this work hasn't been taken up by queer studies at large (Roulston, 2021). I aim to address some of these omissions by conducting future research on how becoming a parent affects queer and/or

trans peoples' experiences of belonging to and recognition by their cultural communities, their sexuality, and their gender.

Looking Back to Move Forward

The Femme, the Mother, and the Lesbian Feminist: Rereading Queer Theory's Difficult Family Relationships reveals the gendered, temporal, racialized, and classed dimensions of queer theory by exploring its flight away from femininity, from a feminism cast as belonging to the past, and its assumption of white, heterosexual, middle-class, and sexually modest feminine and maternal subjects. Each of these suppositions result from queer theory's disavowal of gender, cast as femininity only, to legitimize itself as a field of study and to many AFAB queer subjects' suspicion of femininity owing to our experiences of imposed feminine norms. This project argues that many queer people's lives are always already entangled with feminist needs. I explore the ramifications of queer theory's disavowals and assumptions for the femme, queer mothers, and ultimately any queer subject who is impacted by gender-based discrimination. I am interested in becoming accountable to feminine queer subjects of all genders who experience marginalization both within queer communities and mainstream society, and to the feminisms of the past that have made the queer today possible. This is an alternative project to a utopian venture that wants to run away from the past. By exposing the damage in the past via the lens of femme experience, I hope that this dissertation not only "makes visible the damage that we live with in the present" (Love, 2010, p. 29) but also works to change that present by interrupting the reification of harmful theoretical gestures.

I argue that queer theory's investment in antinormativity has contributed to its characterization of femininity as a normative gender expression and its omission of nuanced, critical considerations of femininities. These assumptions have augmented femmephobia in queer communities and contribute to queer theory's difficulty taking the culturally feminized aspects of queer people's everyday lives into consideration. By highlighting these difficulties, I propose that queer theory needs to incorporate more nuanced explorations of femininity,

the domestic, mothering, and feminist histories in order to produce more feminist and intersectional analyses. My turn to femme life writing written during the lesbian-feminist movement reveals that lesbian feminisms were always multiglossic, that early queer thought originates from within the lesbian-feminist movement, and that queer femmes face similar discriminatory attitudes within past lesbian-feminist and queer culture today owing to our femininity. I hope that highlighting the cultural work of femme writers and activists will draw queer community members' attention to the rich history of intersectional theory and activism that has been at the heart of queer, lesbian, and feminist organizing for decades. By interrupting queer theory's progress narrative, I excavate what was always already there: femme writers' nuanced critique of binary frameworks, their interest in hopeful and reparative political frameworks, and their deeply intersectional understanding of queer peoples' lived experiences.

References

- Adams, D. W. (2020). *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928* (2nd ed.). University Press of Kansas.
- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Albrecht-Samarasinha, L. L. (1997). On Being a Bisexual Femme. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 138–144). Routledge.
- Allison, D. (1988). *Trash*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1991). *The women who hate me: Poetry, 1980-1990*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1994). *Skin: Talking about sex, class and literature*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1996). *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Penguin Books.
- Allison, D. (2018). *Trash*. Penguin Books.
- ALOK. (2017). *Femme in Public*.
- Anderson, K. (2012). GENDER, DESIRE, AND FEMINISM: A Conversation between Dorothy Allison and Carmen Vázquez. In N. A. Boyd & H. N. Roque Ramirez (Eds.), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (pp. 130–145). Oxford University Press.
- André, A., & Chang, S. (2006). And Then You Cut Your Hair'. Genderfucking on the Femme Side of the Spectrum. In M. B. Sycamore (Ed.), *Nobody Passes. Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* (pp. 254–270). Seal Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza = La frontera*. Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Arnold, E. A., & Bailey, M. M. (2009). Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 21(2–3), 171–188.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720902772006>
- Averett, K. H. (2021). Queer parents, gendered embodiment and the de-essentialisation of

motherhood. *Feminist Theory*, 22(2), 284–304.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700121989226>

Bailey, M. M. (2014). Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 21(4), 489–507.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.786688>

Baker, V. (1995). Femme: Very Queer Indeed. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 50–54). Alyson Publications.

Belc, K. M. (2021). *The Natural Mother of the Child: A Memoir of Nonbinary Parenthood*. Counterpoint.

Bellefontaine, M. (2024, October 31). Alberta tables bills on transgender youth health care, students' pronouns, opt-in sex education. *CBC News*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-tables-bills-on-transgender-youth-health-care-students-pronouns-opt-in-sex-education-1.7370006>

Bercuvitz, D. (1995). Stand By Your Man. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 90–94). Alyson Publications.

Bergen, K. M., Suter, E. A., & Daas, K. L. (2006). “About as Solid as a Fish Net”: Symbolic Construction of a Legitimate Parental Identity for Nonbiological Lesbian Mothers. *Journal of Family Communication*, 6(3), 201–220.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327698jfc0603_3

Bergling, T. (2001). *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior*. Haworth Press.

Bergman, S. B. (2013). *Blood, marriage, wine and glitter*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in Public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547–566.

Berney, J. (2021). *The Other Mothers: Two Women's Journey to Find the Family That Was Always Theirs*. Sourcebooks.

Bersani, L. (1987). Is the Rectum a Grave? *October*, 43, 197–222.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>

Bersani, L. (with JSTOR E-Books - York University). (1995). *Homos*. Harvard University

Press.

- Birtha, B. (1995). *Femme at Heart*. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 285–289). Alyson Publications.
- Blair, K. L., & Hoskin, R. A. (2015). Experiences of femme identity: Coming out, invisibility and femmephobia. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(3), 229–244.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2014.921860>
- Blewett, L., & Law, T. (2018). Sex work and allyship: Reflections on femme-, bi- and whorephobia in queer communities. *Feral Feminisms*, 1(7), 58–65.
- Bomb, C. (2009). Femmenemy. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 140–144). Homofactus Press.
- Boyd, N. A. (2008). Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 17(2), 177–189. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0009>
- Boylan, J. F. (2013). *Stuck in the Middle with You: A Memoir of Parenting in Three Genders*. Crown.
- Brant, B. (Ed.). (1988). *A gathering of spirit: A collection by North American Indian women*. The Women's Press.
- Brant, B. (2019a). A Long Story. In J. Gould (Ed.), *A Generous Spirit: Selected Work by Beth Brant* (pp. 55–62). Inanna Publications and Education Inc.
- Brant, B. (2019b). Physical Prayers. In J. Gould (Ed.), *A Generous Spirit: Selected Work by Beth Brant* (pp. 169–177). Inanna Publications and Education Inc.
- Brightwell, L. (2018). The exclusionary effects of queer anti-normativity on feminine-identified queers. *Feral Feminisms*, 7, 15–24.
- Brightwell, L., & Taylor, A. (2021). Why femme stories matter: Constructing femme theory through historical femme life writing. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 25(1), 18–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1691347>
- Browne, C. (2009). The Lament of the Dolly Lama. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 169–172). Homofactus Press.

Brushwood Rose, C. B., & Camilleri, A. (Eds.). (2002). *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Brushwood Rose, C., & Camilleri, A. (2002). Introduction: A Brazen Posture. In C. Brushwood Rose & A. Camilleri (Eds.), *Brazen femme: Queering femininity* (pp. 11–14). Arsenal Pulp Press.

Brushwood Rose, C. T., & Goldberg, S. (2009). *And baby makes more: Known donors, queer parents, and our unexpected families*. Insomniac Press.

Bryan, T. J. (2002). It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin'. In C. Brushwood Rose & A. Camilleri (Eds.), *Brazen femme: Queering femininity* (pp. 147–159). Arsenal Pulp Press.

Burford, A. (2013). "Her Mouth is Medicine": Beth Brant and Paula Gunn Allen's Decolonizing Queer Erotics. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 17(2), 167–179.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.691845>

Burke, J. C. (2009a). *Visible: A femmethology, volume one*. Homofactus Press.

Burke, J. C. (Ed.). (2009b). *Visible: A femmethology, volume two*. Homofactus Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge.

Butler, J. (1994). Against proper objects: Introduction. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6(2), 1–26.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (10th ed.). Routledge.

Butler, J. (2002). Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual? In *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?* (pp. 229–258). Duke University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822383871-008>

Caldwell, J., & Sinha, V. (2020). (Re) Conceptualizing Neglect: Considering the

- Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children in Child Welfare Systems in Canada. *Child Indicators Research*, 13(2), 481–512. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-019-09676-w>
- Califa, P. (1980). *Sapphistry: The book of lesbian sexuality*. The Naiad Press Inc.
- Camilleri, A. (2004). *I Am a Red Dress: Incantations on a Grandmother, a Mother, and a Daughter*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Carolin, L., & Bewley, C. (1998). Girl Talk: Femmes in Discussion. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 109–121). Cassell.
- Carter, C., & Noble, J. (1996). Butch, femme, and the woman-identified woman: Menage-a-trois of the /90s? *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de La Femme*, 16(2), 24–29.
- Carter, J. (2005). On Mother-Love: History, Queer Theory, and Nonlesbian Identity. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14(1/2), 107–138.
- Case, S.-E. (1997). Toward a Butch-Feminist Retro Future. In D. A. Heller (Ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (pp. 205–221). Indiana University Press.
- Cogan, J. C. (1999). Lesbians Walk the Tightrope of Beauty. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 3(4), 77–89. https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v03n04_11
- Cohen, C. J. (2005). Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics? In E. P. Johnson & Mae. Henderson (Eds.), *Black queer studies: A critical anthology* (pp. 21–51). Duke University Press.
- Combahee River Collective. (2023). The Combahee River Collective Statement. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 307–318). Rutgers University Press. <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/detail.jsp?Entt=RDM4433231&R=4433231>
- Connelly, S. (2009). In the Shadow of the Valley. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume Two* (pp. 148–159). Homofactus Press.
- Conte, M. T. (2018). More fats, more femmes: A critical examination of fatphobia and

- femmephobia on Grindr. *Feral Feminisms*, 1(7).
- Cousens, E. (2023). *Trans feminist epistemologies in the US second wave*. Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Coyote, I. E., & Sharman, Z. (2011). Introduction. In I. E. Coyote & Z. Sharman (Eds.), *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* (pp. 23–26). Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Craig, T. (2009). Femme(In)visible or Gender-Blind? In *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume One* (pp. 123–127). Homofactus Press.
- Crone, M. (1995). One Femme's Dreams and Aspirations. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The Femme Mystique* (pp. 253–258). Alyson Publications.
- Cruikshank, M. (2007). Through the Looking Glass: A '70s Lesbian Feminist Considers Queer Theory. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 11(1–2), 153–157.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v11n01_11
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An archive of feelings: Trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2019). Processing Killjoy's Kastle: A Deep Lez Performance. In A. Mitchell & C. McKinney (Eds.), *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey ghosts, feminist monsters, and other lesbian hauntings* (pp. 123–136). UBC Press.
- Dahl, U. (2012). Turning like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 20(1), 57–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2011.650708>
- Dahl, U. (2014). White gloves, feminist fists: Race, nation and the feeling of 'vintage' in femme movements. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 21(5), 604–621.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.810598>
- Dahl, U. (2016). Queering Femininity. *Lambda Nordica*, 21(1–2), 7–20.
- Dahl, U., & Volcano, D. L. (2008). *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (1st ed.). Serpent's Tail.
- Davis, M. (1992a). Epilogue, Nine Years Later. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A*

- femme-but*ch reader (pp. 270–271). Alyson Books.
- Davis, M. (1992b). Roles? I Don't Know Anyone Who's Playing: A Letter to My Femme Sisters. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A femme-but*ch reader (pp. 268–269). Alyson Books.
- Davis, M. (1997). Forever Femme: A Soap Opera in Many Acts and an Agony of Analysis. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 163–169). Routledge.
- Davis, M., Hollibaugh, A., & Nestle, J. (1992). The Femme Tapes. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *persistent desire: A femme-but*ch reader (pp. 254–267). Alyson Books.
- Dawn, A. (2013). *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- De Lauretis, T. (1991). Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3(2), iii–xviii.
- De Lauretis, T. (1997). Fem/Les Scramble. In D. A. Heller (Ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (pp. 42–48). Indiana University Press.
- de Vries, G. (2009). Rebel Girl: How Riot Grrrl Changed Me, Even if it Didn't Fit Just Right. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 163–168). Homofactus Press.
- Dean, T. (2015). No Sex Please, We're American. *American Literary History*, 27(3), 614–624. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajv030>
- Demeter, A. (1977). *Legal kidnapping: What happens to a family when the father kidnaps two children*. Beacon Press.
- Derrida, J., Dutoit, T., & Pasanen, O. (2005). *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan: Vol. v. Vol. 44* (3rd ed.). Fordham University Press.
- Dove-Viebahn, A. (2021). Queer eye for the housewife: Julianne Moore, radical femme-ininity, and destabilizing the suburban family. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 25(2), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1691350>
- Driver, S. (1996). Can queer theory radicalize “The Mother's” body? *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de La Femme*, 16(2), 30–32.

- Driver, S. (1999a). Feminist sublimations, queer disidentifications: losing touch of maternal sexuality. *Tessera*. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1923-9408.25150>
- Driver, S. (1999b). "My Mother Liked to Fuck": Reading Joan Nestle's Queer Desire for Maternal Desire. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*. <https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/2820>
- Driver, S. (2010). "I had to make a future, willful, voluble, lascivious": Minnie Bruce Pratt's Disruptive Lesbian Maternal Narratives. In E. Podnieks & A. O'Reilly (Eds.), *Textual mothers/maternal texts: Motherhood in contemporary women's literatures* (pp. 215–226). Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Dubé, J. (2023, September 8). Gender-identity policies for kids are gaining attention in Canadian politics. Here's what to know. *The Globe and Mail*.
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-lgbtq-student-parental-consent-schools/>
- Duggan, L. (1992). Making it perfectly queer. *Socialist Review*, 1(22), 11–31.
- Duggan, L. (2020). The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo, D. E. Pease, & D. D. Nelson (Eds.), *Materializing Democracy* (pp. 175–194). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822383901-008>
- Duggan, L., & McHugh, K. (1996). A fem(me)inist manifesto. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 153–159.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571236>
- Dumesnil, C. (2013). *Love Song For Baby X: How I Stayed (Almost) Sane on the Rocky Road to Parenthood*. Ig Publishing.
- Dyer, H., Sinclair-Palm, J., & Yeo, M. (2020). Drawing queer and trans kinship with children: Affect, cohabitation, and reciprocal care. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 42(4), 257–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2020.1724764>
- Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press.
- Elena, A. (1995). Words from Feminine Ass: One Femme's Story. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The*

- Femme Mystique* (pp. 26–28). Alyson Publications.
- Epstein, R. (2005). Queer parenting in the new millennium: Resisting normal. *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de La Femme*, 24(2–3), 7–14.
- Epstein, R. (2009). Introduction. In R. Epstein (Ed.), *Who's your daddy? And other writings on queer parenting* (pp. 13–32). Sumach Press.
- Eves, A. (2004). Queer theory, butch/femme identities and lesbian space. *Sexualities*, 7(4), 480–496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460704047064>
- Faderman, L. (1997). Afterword. In D. A. Heller (Ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (pp. 221–229). Indiana University Press.
- Fetherston-Power, E. (2009). Journey to Femme. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 142–143). Homofactus Press.
- Findlay, H. (1998). Losing Sue. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 133–145). Cassell.
- Fraiman, S. (2003). *Cool men and the second sex*. Columbia University Press.
- Franet, J. E. (2009). In/Visible Femme. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume Two* (pp. 109–113). Homofactus Press.
- Freeman, E. (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press.
- Freeman, L. (2009). Essence and Artifice. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume Two* (pp. 17–23). Homofactus Press.
- Frost, W. (1995). Queen Femme. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 295–299). Alyson Publications.
- Fuchs, S. (2009). *Femme! Radikal—Queer—Feminin*. Querverlag.
- Fuchs, S. (2020). *Femme/Butch: Dynamiken von Gender und Begehren*. Querverlag.
- Galewski, E. (2005). Figuring the Feminist Femme. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 28(2), 183–206.
- Galewski, E. (2008). "Playing up Being a Woman": Femme Performance and the Potential

for Ironic Representation. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 11(2), 279–302.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.0.0035>

Garner, A. (2004). *Families like mine: Children of gay parents tell it like it is*. HarperCollins.

Gibbs, E. D. (1989). Psychosocial Development of Children Raised by Lesbian Mothers: A Review of Research. *Women & Therapy*, 8(1–2), 65–75.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v08n01_06

Gilbert, J. (2014). *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education* (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Gomez, J. (1993). *Forty-Three Septembers: Essays*. Firebrand Books.

Gomez, J. (1998). Femme Erotic Independence. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 101–108). Cassell.

Gomez, J. (2011). Femme Butch Feminist. In I. E. Coyote & Z. Sharman (Eds.), *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* (pp. 67–78). Arsenal Pulp Press.

Gordon, A. (1999). Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 5(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-5-1-1>

Gordon, A. (2005). The retrospective closet. *Australian Historical Studies*, 36(126), 315–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610508682926>

Hajek, K., & Dombrowski, V. (2022). Contesting the meaning of gender: Right-wing populism and gender in Germany. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 95(Complete). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102633>

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Duke University Press.

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NYU Press.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.

Hall, D. E. (2009). *Reading Sexualities: Hermeneutic Theory and the Future of Queer Studies*. Routledge.

- Halperin, D. M. (2003). The Normalization of Queer Theory. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2–4), 339–343. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v45n02_17
- Hammedi, T. N., & Kaiser, S. (1999). Doing Beauty: Negotiating Lesbian Looks in Everyday Life. In J. Erickson & J. Cogan (Eds.), *Lesbians, Levis, and Lipstick: The Meaning of Beauty in Our Lives* (pp. 55–63). Harrington Park Press.
- Hankin, K. (1997). Femme Icon: An Interview with Madeline B. Davis. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 52–60). Routledge.
- Harris, L., & Crocker, L. (1997a). An Introduction to Sustaining Femme Gender. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.
- Harris, L., & Crocker, L. (1997b). Bad Girls: Sex, Class, and Feminist Agency. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 93–102). Routledge.
- Harris, L., & Crocker, L. (1997c). Fish Tales: Revisiting “A Study of a Public Lesbian Community.” In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 40–51). Routledge.
- Harris, L., & Crocker, L. (1997d). Mysteries, Mothers, and Cops: An Interview with Mabel Maney. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 68–81). Routledge.
- Hart, M. (2009). The Squeaky Animal Hat Club: A Queer Spawn Comes Out. In R. Epstein (Ed.), *Who’s your daddy? And other writings on queer parenting* (pp. 34–44). Sumach Press.
- Haynes, C. (2019, June 27). Going Beneath the Surface: For 50 Years, Harmony Hammond’s Art and Activism Has Championed Queer Women. *ARTnews.Com*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/harmony-hammond-12855/>
- Hemmings, C. (1998). Waiting for no Man: Bisexual Femme Subjectivity and Cultural

- Repudiation. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 90–100). Cassell.
- Hemmings, C. (1999). Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Theorizing Femme Narrative. *Sexualities*, 2(4), 451–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136346099002004005>
- Hemmings, C. (2011). *Why stories matter: The political grammar of feminist theory*. Duke University Press.
- Hemmings, C. (2016). Is Gender Studies Singular? Stories of Queer/Feminist Difference and Displacement. *Differences*, 27(2), 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-3621721>
- Henry, A. (2012). Waves. In C. Orr, A. Braithwaite, & D. Lichtenstein (Eds.), *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies* (pp. 102–118). Routledge.
- Henson, L., J. (1995). My Sister, My Blood, My Femme Lesbian Body. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 295–299). Alyson Publications.
- Hesford, V. (2013). *Feeling women's liberation*. Duke University Press.
- Hirsch, M. (2021). Unspeakable Plots. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Maternal theory: Essential readings* (pp. 135–152). Demeter Press.
- Hollibaugh, A. L. (2000). *My dangerous desires: A queer girl dreaming her way home*. Duke University Press.
- Horlick, L. (2015). *For Your Own Good*. Caitlin Press.
- Horsley, M. N. (2023). Femininity. In *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies Volume 2*. Routledge.
- Hoskin, R. A. (2017a). Femme interventions and the proper feminist subject: Critical approaches to decolonizing western feminist pedagogies. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1276819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1276819>
- Hoskin, R. A. (2017b). Femme theory: Refocusing the intersectional lens. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 38(1), 95–109.
- Hoskin, R. A. (2019). Femmephobia: The Role of Anti-Femininity and Gender Policing in

LGBTQ+ People's Experiences of Discrimination. *Sex Roles*, 81(11), 686–703.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01021-3>

Hoskin, R. A. (2020). "Femininity? It's the Aesthetic of Subordination": Examining Femmephobia, the Gender Binary, and Experiences of Oppression Among Sexual and Gender Minorities. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(7), 2319–2339.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01641-x>

Hoskin, R. A. (2021). Can femme be theory? Exploring the epistemological and methodological possibilities of femme. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 25(1), 1–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1702288>

Hoskin, R. A., & Taylor, A. (2019). Femme resistance: The fem(me)inine art of failure. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 10(4), 281–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1615538>

Huffer, L. (2013). *Are the lips a grave?: A queer feminist on the ethics of sex*. Columbia University Press.

Hurst, R. (2009). But I can be a femme in track pants, you know? In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 93–103). Homofactus Press.

Huxley, C., Clarke, V., & Halliwell, E. (2014). Resisting and Conforming to the 'Lesbian Look': The Importance of Appearance Norms for Lesbian and Bisexual Women. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 24(3), 205–219.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2161>

Istar, A. (1992). Femme-dyke. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A femme-butche reader* (pp. 378–383). Alyson Publications.

Italy passes law banning surrogacy abroad that activists say targets LGBTQ+ couples.

(2024, October 16). *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/italy-surrogacy-ban-1.7353868>

Jagose, A. (2009). Feminism's Queer Theory. *Feminism & Psychology*, 19(2), 157–174.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353509102152>

- Jagose, A. (2015). The Trouble with Antinormativity. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2880591>
- Jiménez, K. P. (2009). Queering classrooms, curricula, and care: Stories from those who dare. *Sex Education*, 9(2), 169–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810902829638>
- Johnson, E. P. (2005). “Quare” studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother. In E. Patrick. Johnson & Mae. Henderson (Eds.), *Black queer studies: A critical anthology* (<http://go.utlib.ca/cat/8112000>; pp. 124–157). Duke University Press.
- <http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822387220>
- Jolie, R. A. (2020). *Rust Belt Femme*. Belt Publishing.
- Jones, F. (1995). Femme in Progress. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 235–238). Alyson Publications.
- Karpinski, E. C. (2011). Speaking in “I”: The Interface of Theory and Autobiography in Nicole Brossard’s Life Writing. *Literature Compass*, 8(12), 911–920.
- <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00854.x>
- Kennedy, E. L., & Davis, M. (1997). The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950s. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 15–39). Routledge.
- Kennedy, E. L., & Davis, M. D. (1994). *Boots of leather, slippers of gold: The history of a lesbian community*. Penguin Books.
- King, M. (2019). Playing Demented Women’s Studies Professor Tour Guide, or Performing Monstrosity in Killjoy’s Kastle. In A. Mitchell & C. McKinney (Eds.), *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle: Dykey ghosts, feminist monsters, and other lesbian hauntings* (pp. 85–97). UBC Press.
- Kirkpatrick, M., Smith, C., & Roy, R. (1981). Lesbian mothers and their children: A

- comparative survey. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 51(3), 545–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1981.tb01403.x>
- Kofi-Bruce, K. (2009). Femme queening—An identity in several acts. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 54–56). Homofactus Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- Lamos, C. (1997). Sexuality versus gender: A kind of mistake? In D. A. Heller (Ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, feminists, and the limits of alliance* (pp. 85–95). Indiana University Press.
- Lemberg, A. (2009). Dirt roads and bucket baths: Practicalities of a portable femme Identity. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 75–77). Homofactus Press.
- Leong, A. (2009). The King of Femmes. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 70–72). Homofactus Press.
- Levitt, H. M., Gerrish, E. A., & Hiestand, K. R. (2003). The misunderstood gender: A model of modern femme identity. *Sex Roles*, 48(3–4), 99–113.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022453304384>
- Levitt, H. M., Horne, S. G., Puckett, J., Sweeney, K. K., & Hampton, M. L. (2015). Gay Families: Challenging Racial and Sexual/Gender Minority Stressors through Social Support. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 11(2), 173–202.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2014.958266>
- Lewin, E. (1993). *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7298/61h9-md42>
- Lewis, S. F. (2012a). Everything I know about being femme I learned from Sula' or Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism. *Trans-Scripts*, 2, 100–125.
- Lewis, S. F. (2012b). I Came to Femme Through Fat and Black. In *Hot & Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love & Fashion* (pp. 48–51). Seal Press.
- Lorde, A. (1982). *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Persephone Press.

- Love, H. (2007). *Feeling backward: Loss and the politics of queer history*. Harvard University Press. <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0717/2007017269.html>
- Love, H. (2015). Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 74–95.
- Lowrey, S. (2009a). Can You See Me Now? In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 160–162). Homofactus Press.
- Lowrey, S. (2009b). Searching for My History. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A Femmethology, Volume Two* (pp. 81–83). Homofactus Press.
- Lowrey, S. (Ed.). (2010). *Kicked out*. Homofactus Press.
- MacLachlan, A., & Sreedhar, S. (2012). Complicating Reason(s) and Praxis for Coming Out. In D. Cooley & H. Kelby (Eds.), *Passing/out: Sexual identity veiled and revealed* (pp. 43–73). Ashgate Publishing.
- Maltry, M., & Tucker, K. (2002). Female fem(me)inities: New articulations in gender identities and subversion. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(2), 89–102.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v06n02_12
- Maltz, R. (2002). Genesis of a Femme and Her Desire: Finding Mommy and Daddy in Butch/Femme. In M. Gibson & D. T. Meem (Eds.), *Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go* (pp. 61–72). Harrington Park Press.
- Mandler, C. (2023, March 26). *Florida bill targets “diversity, equity, or inclusion” on college campuses—CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/florida-hb-999-diversity-equity-inclusion-college-campus-bill-advances/>
- Marlatt, D. (1990). *Self-Representation and Fictionalysis*. Tessera.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1923-9408.23611>
- Martin, B. (1996). *Femininity played straight: The significance of being lesbian*. Routledge.
- McBean, S. (2015). *Feminism’s Queer Temporalities*. Routledge.
- McCann, H. (2018). *Queering femininity: Sexuality, feminism and the politics of presentation*. Routledge.

- McKinney, C. (2018). "Finding the Lines to My People": Media History and Queer Bibliographic Encounter. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 24(1), 55–83. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-4254504>
- McKinney, C. (2020). *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*. Duke University Press.
- Meadmore, D., Hatcher, C., & McWilliam, E. (2000). Getting tense about genealogy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 463–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050156413>
- Millersdaughter, K. (1997). A Coincidence of Lipstick and Self-Revelation. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 119–130). Routledge.
- Mishali, Y. (2009). Femme-Lesbian Autobiography, or How Can You Be Certain That You are That Way. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 144–154). Homofactus Press.
- Mishali, Y. (2014). Feminine trouble: The removal of femininity from feminist/lesbian/queer esthetics, imagery, and conceptualization. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 44, 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.09.003>
- Mitchell, A. (2023, November 28). Plan to ban pupils changing gender 'dropped' but teachers won't have to use pronouns. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/transgender-school-pupils-guidance-keegan-b2454613.html>
- Mitchell, A., & McKinney, C. (2019). Lesbian Rule: Welcome to the Hell House. In *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey ghosts, feminist monsters, and other lesbian hauntings* (pp. 3–20). UBC Press.
- Moore, M. (2011). *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520950153>
- Moraga, C. (2022). *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (2nd ed.). Haymarket Books.

- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). (1981). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. Persephone Press.
- Moreira, L. (2018). Queer Motherhood: Challenging Heteronormative Rules beyond the Assimilationist/Radical Binary. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(2), 14–28.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics*. University Of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York University Press.
- Munson, P. (2009). Fringe Dweller: Toward an Ecofeminist Politic of Femme. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 28–36). Homofactus Press.
- Munt, S. R. (Ed.). (1998). *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender*. Cassell.
- Murphy, K. P., Pierce, J. L., & Ruiz, J. (2016). What Makes Queer Oral History Different. *The Oral History Review*, 43(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw022>
- Nava, M. (2021, June 11). Creating a Literary Culture: A Short, Selective, and Incomplete History of LGBT Publishing, Part II. *Los Angeles Review of Books*.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/creating-a-literary-culture-a-short-selective-and-incomplete-history-of-lgbt-publishing-part-ii>
- Nelson, M. (2015). *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press.
- Nestle, J. (1992a). Flamboyance and Fortitude: An Introduction. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A femme-butche reader* (pp. 13–20). Alyson Books.
- Nestle, J. (1992b). *The persistent desire: A femme-butche reader*. Alyson Publications.
- Nestle, J. (1998). *A fragile union: New & selected writings*. Cleis Press.
- Nestle, J. (2003). *A Restricted Country* (2nd ed.). Cleis Press.
- Nestle, J., & Cruikshank, B. (1997). I'll Be the Girl: Generations of Fem. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 105–118). Routledge.
- Newman, L. (Ed.). (1995). *The femme mystique*. Alyson Books.

- Nguyen, T. H. (2014). *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Duke University Press Books.
- Nicholson, N. (2014). Tumblr femme: Performances of queer femininity and identity. *Carolinas Communication Annual*, 30, 66–80.
- Nnawulezi, N. A., Robin, S., & Sewell, A. A. (2015). XII. Femme-inism: In daily pursuit of personal liberation. *Feminism & Psychology*, 25(1), 67–72.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514563094>
- Noble, J. B. (2004). *Masculinities without men?: Female masculinity in twentieth-century fictions*. UBC Press.
- Ohme, C. (1995). Podsnappery: Twisting Through My Femme Identity. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 277–280). Alyson Publications.
- Oppenheim, M. (2018, October 25). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban bans gender studies programmes. *The Independent*.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/hungary-bans-gender-studies-programmes-viktor-orban-central-european-university-budapest-a8599796.html>
- O'Reilly, A. (2021). Normative Motherhood. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Maternal theory: Essential readings* (pp. 493–507). Demeter Press.
- Ortiz, L. (1997). Dresses for my Round Brown Body. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 82–92). Routledge.
- Papez, L., R. (2009). My White Picket Fence. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 50–53). Homofactus Press.
- Park, S. M. (2013). *Mothering queerly, queering motherhood: Resisting monomaterialism in adoptive, lesbian, blended, and polygamous families*. SUNY Press.
- Parry, J. (2024, March 12). NHS England to stop prescribing puberty blockers.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-68549091>
- Payne, K. (2002). Whores and Bitches Who Sleep with Women. In C. Brushwood Rose & A.

- Camilleri (Eds.), *Brazen femme: Queering femininity* (pp. 47–56). Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2015). *Dirty river: A queer femme of color dreaming her way home*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Pihlak, C. (2023). *A Movable Closet: Constructions of Femininity Among Twentieth Century Transfeminine Periodical Communities* [University of Victoria].
<http://hdl.handle.net/1828/15270>
- Platt, M. F. (1992). Reclaiming femme...again. In J. Nestle (Ed.), *The persistent desire: A femme-butch reader* (pp. 388–389). Alyson Publications.
- Pratt, M. B. (1988). Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart. In E. Bulkin & B. Smith (Eds.), *Yours in struggle: Three feminist perspectives on anti-semitism and racism* (pp. 9–63). Firebrand Books.
- Pratt, M. B. (1990). *Crime Against Nature*. Firebrand Books.
- Pratt, M. B. (1997). Pronouns, Politics, and Femme Practice: An Interview with Minnie Bruce Pratt. In L. Harris & E. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians and bad girls* (pp. 190–197). Routledge.
- Pratt, M. B. (2005). *S/He*. Alyson Books.
- Prosser, J. (1998). *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*. Columbia University Press.
- Prosser, J. (2006). Judith Butler: Queer feminism, transgender, and the transubstantiation of sex. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 257–280). Routledge.
- Rak, J. (2013). *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (2007). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.
- Riley, C. (2018). *The Virago Story: Assessing the Impact of a Feminist Publishing Phenomenon*. Berghahn Books.

- Roof, J. (1998). 1970s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch-Femme. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 27–35). Cassell.
- Roulston, C. (2021). Queer Parenting and the Challenge to Queer Theory. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études En Littérature Canadienne*, 46(1), 117–144.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1086613ar>
- Rubin, G. (1993). Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality. In H. Abelow, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (pp. 1–44). Routledge.
- Rugg, R. (1997). How Does She Look? In L. Harris & E. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians and bad girls* (pp. 175–189). Routledge.
- Samuels, E. J. (2003). My body, my closet: Invisible disability and the limits of coming-out discourse. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 9(1), 233–255.
- Sandoval, G. (1997). Passing Loquería. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 170–174). Routledge.
- Savage, D. (1999). *The Kid: What Happened After My Boyfriend and I Decided to Go Get Pregnant: An Adoption Story*. Dutton Adult.
- Saxey, E. (2008). *Homoplot: The coming-out story and gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity*. Peter Lang.
- Schilt, P. (2015). *Queer Rock Love: A Family Memoir*. Transgress Press.
- Schwartz, A. (2018a). Locating Femme Theory Online. *First Monday*.
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i7.9266>
- Schwartz, A. (2018b). Low Femme. *Feral Feminisms*, 7(1), 5–14.
- Schwartz, A. (2019, May 10). How memoirs by femmes became a second mother to me. *Xtra Magazine*. <https://xtramagazine.com/love-sex/how-memoirs-by-femmes-became-a-second-mother-to-me-154978>
- Schwartz, A. (2023, October 28). Rendering the Radical Contemporaneity of Femme: Trish

Salah and Leah Horlick in Conversation about the Femme Poetics of Ethnicity and Sexuality, the Fascist Politics of Transmisogyny, and Creating Culture At the Bar, On the Internet, and Beyond. In *Still Brazen: Twenty Years of Queering Femininity*.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/still-brazen-twenty-years-of-queering-femininity/id1713005687?i=1000632924499>

Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You. In *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity* (pp. 123–152). Duke University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smg37.9>

Senyonga, M. (2020). Reading and Affirming Alternatives in the Academy: Black Fat Queer Femme Embodiment. In *Thickening Fat: Fat bodies, intersectionality, and social justice*. Routledge.

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating Of Femininity*. Seal Press.

Serano, J. (2013). *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*. Seal Press.

Shackelford, H. (2016). Queer like me: Breaking the chains of femme invisibility. *Wear Your Voice*. <https://wyvarchive.com/queer-breaking-chains-femme/>

Sharman, Z. (2011). Looking Straight at You. In I. E. Coyote & Z. Sharman (Eds.), *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* (pp. 85–91). Arsenal Pulp Press.

Sheiner, M. (1997). A Woman's Prerogative. In L. Harris & L. Crocker (Eds.), *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls* (pp. 131–137). Routledge.

Sherman, C., Witherspoon, A., Glenza, J., Noor, P., & Glenza, A. W. with additional reporting by J. (2024, November 6). Tracking abortion laws across the United States. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jul/29/abortion-laws-bans-by-state>

- Shotwell, A. (2012). Open normativities: Gender, disability, and collective political change. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37(4), 989–1016.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/664475>
- Shraya, V. (2016). *Even this page is white*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Shraya, V. (2018). *I'm Afraid of Men*. Penguin Canada.
- Silvera, M. (Ed.). (1991). *Piece of my heart: A lesbian of colour anthology*. Sister Vision.
- Sinclair-Palm, J., & Gilbert, J. (2018). Naming new realities: Supporting trans youth in education. *Sex Education*, 18(4), 321–327.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1452347>
- Smith, B. (Ed.). (1983). *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology*. Kitchen Table: Women of Colour Press.
- Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2010). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Smyth, C. (1998). How Do We Look? Imaging Butch/Femme. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 82–89). Cassell.
- Spelman, E. V. (2002). *Repair: The impulse to restore in a fragile world*. Beacon Press.
- Stafford, A. (2010). Uncompromising Positions: Reiterations of Misogyny Embedded in Lesbian and Feminist Communities' Framing of Lesbian Femme Identities. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 35(1), Article 1.
- Stelly, A. (2009). Transition. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 21–22). Homofactus Press.
- Stewart, J. (2017). Academic Theory. In C. Richards, W. P. Bouman, & M.-J. Barker (Eds.), *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (pp. 53–72). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Duke University Press.
- Story, K. A. (2017). Fear of a Black femme: The existential conundrum of embodying a Black femme identity while being a professor of Black, queer, and feminist studies. *Journal*

of *Lesbian Studies*, 21(4), 407–419.

Sullivan, M. (2004). *The Family of Woman: Lesbian Mothers, Their Children, and the Undoing of Gender*. University of California Press.

Summers, A. K. (2014). *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag*. Soft Skull Press.

Tallbear. (2022). Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family. In S. Rayter & L. Halpern Zisman (Eds.), *Queerly Canadian, Second Edition: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies* (pp. 18–28). Canadian Scholars.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=7084289>

Tasker, F. (2005). Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children: A Review. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 26(3), 224.

Taylor, A. (2018). “Flabulously” femme: Queer fat femme women’s identities and experiences. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 22(4), 459–481.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1449503>

Taylor, A. (2022). “But where are the dates?” Dating as a central site of fat femme marginalisation in queer communities. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 13(1), 57–68.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1822429>

Taylor, U. (1998). The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis. *Journal of Black Studies*, 29(2), 234–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479802900206>

Tea, M. (2023). *Knocking Myself Up: A Memoir of My (In)Fertility*. Dey Street Books.

The Canada-wide protests over LGBTQ school rights | CBC Radio. (2023, September 22).

CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/frontburner/the-canada-wide-protests-over-lgbtq-school-rights-1.6974581>

Thom, K. C. (2016). *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir*. Metonymy Press.

Thom, K. C. (2017). *A place called No Homeland*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Thom, K. C. (2019). *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl’s Notes from the End of the World*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

- Thom, K. C. (2023). *Falling Back in Love with Being Human: Letters to Lost Souls*. Penguin Canada.
- Tinsley, O. N. (2022). *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art For Survival*. University of Texas Press. <https://doi.org/10.7560/321157>
- Tompkins, K. W. (2019). Reflections of a Real-Life Feminist Killjoy: Ball-Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergenerational Queer-Feminist Life. In A. Mitchell & C. McKinney (Eds.), *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey ghosts, feminist monsters, and other lesbian hauntings* (pp. 143–158). UBC Press.
- Tweedy, A. (2009a). Ignoring Childhood Messages and Breaking the Rules of Feminism and Professionalism: The Femme as a World-Straddling Other. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 37–46). Homofactus Press.
- Tweedy, A. (2009b). Subverting Normalcy: Living a Femme Identity. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 66–69). Homofactus Press.
- Vaisseau, R. (1995). I Am Not a Straight Girl. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 30–32). Alyson Publications.
- VanNewkirk, R. (2006). "Gee, I Didn't Get That Vibe from You." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 10(1–2), 73–85. https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v10n01_04
- Wachsler, S. (2009). A Decade Later—Still Femme? In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 38–53). Homofactus Press.
- Walker, L. (1998). Embodying Desire: Piercing and the Fashioning of "Neo-butch/femme" Identities. In S. R. Munt (Ed.), *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender* (pp. 123–132). Cassell.
- Walker, L. (2001). *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity*. New York University Press.
- Walker, L. (2012). The future of femme: Notes on femininity, aging and gender theory. *Sexualities*, 15(7), 795–814.
- Walters, S. D. (1996). From here to queer: Radical feminism, postmodernism, and the

- lesbian menace (or, why can't a woman be more like a fag?). *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 21(4), 830–869. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495123>
- Ward, J. (2010). Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression. *Sexualities*, 13(2), 236–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709359114>
- Warmington, J. (2013, October 31). Taxpayers funding “lesbian haunted house” in Toronto. *Toronto Sun*. <https://torontosun.com/2013/10/30/taxpayers-funding-lesbian-haunted-house-in-toronto>
- Warner Candela, A. (1995). For Charlie on the Eve of our Wedding. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 60–62). Alyson Publications.
- Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet. *Social Text*, 29, 3–17.
- Wells, J. (Ed.). (1995). Shopping for a Femme Definition. In *The femme mystique* (pp. 124–126). Alyson Publications.
- Wiley, L. A., Stutterheim, S., & Grandy, G. (2022). Breastfeeding, ‘tainted’ love, and femmephobia: Containing the ‘dirty’ performances of embodied femininity. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 13(1), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1757501>
- Whittall, Z. (2021, August 24). Femme Fatale. *Harper's Bazaar*. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a37258757/femme-fatale/>
- Wiegman, R. (2012). *Object Lessons*. Duke University Press.
- Wiegman, R. (2014). The times we're in: Queer feminist criticism and the reparative ‘turn.’ *Feminist Theory*, 15(1), 4–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113513081a>
- Wiegman, R., & Wilson, E. A. (2015). Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions. *Differences*, 26(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2880582>
- Wilson, J. (2009). Not so Much “MTF” as “SPTBMTQFF”: The Identification of a Trans Femme-inist. In *Visible: A femmethology, volume one* (pp. 26–29). Homofactus Press.
- Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays* (Louise Turcotte, Trans.). Beacon

Press.

Wolfe, M. (1992). Invisible women in invisible places: Lesbians, lesbian bars, and the social production of people/environment relationships. *Architecture & Comportement = Architecture & Behaviour*, 8(2), 137–157.

Wonderland, A. (2009). The Anonymity of Femmeininity. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 78–80). Homofactus Press.

Wong, J. (2024, November 4). Lower daycare fees are a game-changer. But federal plan to expand spaces still faces roadblocks, say experts. *CBC News*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/daycare-cwelcc-check-in-1.7365747>

Young, V. (1995). Femme in Your Face. In L. Newman (Ed.), *The femme mystique* (pp. 19–25). Alyson Publications.

Yu, J. C. (2009). Femme at Work. In J. C. Burke (Ed.), *Visible: A femmethology, volume two* (pp. 84–90). Homofactus Press.

Yurcaba, J. (2023, August 30). Over 30 new LGBTQ education laws are in effect as students go back to school. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/30-new-lgbtq-education-laws-are-effect-students-go-back-school-rcna101897>

Zimmerman, B. (1997). Confessions of a Lesbian Feminist. In D. A. Heller (Ed.), *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (p. NEED). Indiana University Press.

Zimmerman, B. (2007). *A Lesbian-Feminist Journey Through Queer Nation*. 11(1–2), 37–52. https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v11n01_03

Appendix: List of Femme Life Writing Surveyed

- Allison, D. (1988). *Trash*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1991). *The women who hate me: Poetry, 1980-1990*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1994). *Skin: Talking about sex, class and literature*. Firebrand Books.
- Allison, D. (1996). *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Penguin Books.
- ALOK. (2017). *Femme in Public*.
- Bornstein, K., Bergman, S. B., & Ebrary - York University. (2010). *Gender outlaws: The next generation*. Seal Press.
- Brushwood Rose, C. B., & Camilleri, A. (Eds.). (2002). *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Burke, J. C. (2009a). *Visible: A femmethology, volume one*. Homofactus Press.
- Burke, J. C. (Ed.). (2009b). *Visible: A femmethology, volume two*. Homofactus Press.
- Camilleri, A. (2004). *I Am a Red Dress: Incantations on a Grandmother, a Mother, and a Daughter*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Chrystos. (1993). *In Her I Am*. Press Gang Publishers.
- Coyote, I. E., & Sharman, Z. (Eds.). (2011). *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Dawn, A. (2013). *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Gibson, M., & Meem, D. T. (Eds.). (2002). *Femme/butch: New considerations of the way we want to go*. Harrington Park Press.
- Gomez, J. (1993). *Forty-Three Septembers: Essays*. Firebrand Books.
- Harris, L., & Crocker, E. (1997). *Femme: Feminists, lesbians, and bad girls*. Routledge.
- Hollibaugh, A. L. (2000). *My dangerous desires: A queer girl dreaming her way home*. Duke University Press.
- Horlick, L. (2015). *For Your Own Good*. Caitlin Press.
- Jolie, R. A. (2020). *Rust Belt Femme*. Belt Publishing.
- Munt, S. R. (Ed.). (1998). *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender*. Cassell.

- Nestle, J. (1992). *The persistent desire: A femme-butcht reader*. Alyson Publications.
- Nestle, J. (1998). *A fragile union: New & selected writings*. Cleis Press.
- Nestle, J. (2003). *A Restricted Country* (2nd edition). Cleis Press.
- Newman, L. (Ed.). (1995). *The femme mystique*. Alyson Books.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2015). *Dirty river: A queer femme of color dreaming her way home*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Pratt, M. B. (1990). *Crime Against Nature*. Firebrand Books.
- Pratt, M. B. (2005). *S/He* (New edition edition). Alyson Books.
- Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press.
- Serano, J. (2013). *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*. Seal Press.
- Shraya, V. (2016). *Even this page is white*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Shraya, V. (2018). *I'm Afraid of Men*. Penguin Canada.
- Thom, K. C. (2017). *A place called No Homeland*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Thom, K. C. (2019). *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes from the End of the World*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Thom, K. C. (2023). *Falling Back in Love with Being Human: Letters to Lost Souls*. Penguin Canada.