LOW FEMME, LOW THEORY: AN ETHNO-ARCHIVE OF FEMME INTERNET CULTURE

ANDI SCHWARTZ

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, AND WOMEN'S STUDIES
YORK UNIVERSITY TORONTO, ONTARIO

APRIL 2020

Abstract

Low Femme, Low Theory: An Ethno-Archive of Femme Internet Culture is a collection of four papers detailing the findings from my dissertation research, a six-month online ethnography of femme internet culture. In the first paper, I develop an understanding of femme memes as particular audiovisual content found online that appropriate and mobilize public symbols to address the devaluation of femininity. I examine three genres of femme memes, and use the frameworks of low theory and bedroom culture to argue that femme memes are a way of doing femme theory, or a way of making sense out of femmes' lived experiences and femmes' feelings (Halberstam, 2011; McRobbie, 1991; hooks, 1991). In the second paper, I develop an understanding of "softness" as a contemporary femme aesthetic and poetic that employs hyperfeminine symbols, emotionality, vulnerability, and emphasizes collaboration and interdependence. I use the framework of vulnerability and emotions to argue that softness counters the individualist, masculinist modes of thinking that were introduced by and dominate white, Western thought and continue to permeate existing forms of theory, including existing femme theory and scholarship (Petherbridge, 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Jaggar, 1989). I argue that a soft femme politic makes "femme" more capacious and inclusive. In the third paper, I develop an understanding of selfies as a practice in vulnerability, a practice that is strategically mobilized by femmes to (re)shape femme identity, create femme connections and communities, and make political claims about femme lives. I draw from feminist readings of selfies as well as perspectives on art therapy to make a case that selfies serve both a political representational and communicative function (Murray, 2015; Pham, 2015; Lupton, 1997). In the fourth paper, I develop an understanding of "femmeships" as femme friendships that are both political alliances and communities of care. I draw from scholarship on description as method and from queer (sub)cultural theorists to make a case for the importance of describing femme internet culture, in particular the ordinary, everyday interactions or relationships that are its foundation (Marcus, Love & Best, 2016; Halberstam, 2008; Muñoz, 1996).

Dedication

For all the femmes — especially the hardest femme I know, my mother. I hope I can make you all proud.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the advisors, faculty, administrators, and students of the Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies department at York University for their support and guidance throughout my graduate studies. Thank you to: Bobby Noble for being the first to assure me that my project was valuable when I had doubts, and for directing me to Chloë. Lindsay Gonder and Sue Sbrizzi for being the administrators of my dreams. My fellow students, especially Jenna Danchuk and Trina De Souza, for helping me navigate departmental and institutional quirks and my first years of teaching, and Emily Colpitts, Sarah Redikopp, and Morgan Bimm for guiding and supporting me through my defence. An extra thank you to Morgan, for always being my sounding board and making grad school fun. Allyson Mitchell, both as administrator and supervisor, thank you for your consistent support, feedback, and kindness. Thank you to Susan Driver and Andil Gosine for being fantastic course directors and teachers that I learned so much from, and for offering thoughtful and critical feedback and encouraging support as members of my committee. Thank you to Ulrika Dahl, the external examiner of my dreams, for engaging so thoughtfully with my work. And of course, thank you to my supervisor, Chloë Brushwood Rose. Without you, I don't know how I would have finished my Master's, let alone my PhD. Your pragmatic optimism always made the next step seem doable, even easy, especially in times when I could only focus on the problems. Getting to hear your perspectives and discuss ideas with you was invaluable; your mentorship has meant so much to me. I will truly miss not having an excuse to have coffee with you once a month!

I would like to acknowledge and thank the three anonymous reviewers who read an earlier version of Part 3: The Future is Soft: Soft Femme Aesthetics and Poetics and offered very valuable feedback and suggestions. Thank you also to Kaitlin Blanchard for giving me free run of your bookshelves, for your academic gossip and commiseration, and for talking me through problems with my methodological and theoretical frameworks. I am also deeply grateful to the femmes I interviewed for this project: @dyingbutfine, @rs, @redthreadtarot,

@daintysmith, @iambriellenicolewilliams, @failureprincess, and @femmesupremacy. Thank you for your generosity, and sharing your time and insights with me.

I would also like to thank my partners, past and present, Sara Gallipeau and Michael Fong for keeping me loved, cuddled, and fed throughout my graduate studies. Thank you especially to Michael for coming to hear me speak, reading drafts, and asking me questions about my work; I didn't know how much I needed someone outside of academia to think what I do is important and interesting. Thank you for your technical support in recording my interviews and storing my files. Who knows what would have happened if left to my own devices. Thank you, also, to Trudy Fegan for your mock defence questions and your numerous copy edits, even when you had no idea what I was writing about, and to all three of you for making sure I had a life outside of grad school.

Finally, thank you to my boss Stan Jeong and all my co-workers for accommodating my schedule and taking my shifts so I could focus on writing and teaching. Thank you for all the rides home and acting impressed by all my small achievements. At many points and in many ways, this job was truly a lifeline.

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Part One: Introduction

My dissertation contends with the problem that in North American culture, women and femininity are perceived and treated as inferior to men and masculinity as a result of long-standing patriarchal social structure. Following this unequal balance of power, women's ways of knowing and *l'écriture féminine* (Cixious, 1976) have historically been dismissed and trivialized, urging the need for Women's Studies departments and programs to develop at universities (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). However, even within feminist and queer theory, femininity is seen as negative. Foundational feminist theory has conceptualized femininity as a patriarchal construct that harms and oppresses women. Luce Irigrary (1985) wrote,

> "femininity" is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity. The fact remains that this masquerade requires an effort on her part for which she is not compensated. (p. 84)

Early feminist writers from Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/2004) to Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1989) to Betty Friedan (1963/2013) critiqued femininity for being a frivolous and trivial pursuit that redirects women's attention away from intellectual matters, and thus, helps to maintain women's inferior and dependent status. During the second wave of feminism, writers like Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Susan Brownmiller (1984) continued to detail the ways in which feminine expectations of heterosexuality, dress, and mannerisms waste women's time and prevent them from pursuing higher goals. Foundational femme theorist Ulrika Dahl (2012) says that even now the legacy of femininity being positioned as superficial and trivial in feminist theory makes even the interest in studying it politically suspect (p. 61).

In feminist literature, femininity has also been positioned as deeply harmful to women, as well as superficial. Angela Davis (1981) articulated the racial hierarchies created through notions of Victorian "womanhood" that privilege white women and dehumanize Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and bell hooks (1981) have also argued that Black women are

denied access to the category of “woman” on account of their race. “Women” were stereotyped as fragile and passive — characteristics that are nearly synonymous with “femininity” — and the legacy of slavery meant that Black women were never allowed this luxury. hooks argued that this made “women’s liberation” seem to be “a white women’s issue,” as Black women were conditioned to deny their womanhood and, by extension, the sexist oppression they faced (1981, p. 1). For lesbian-feminist writers like Monique Wittig (1981) and Adrienne Rich (1980), lesbians also existed outside the social construct, “woman,” for which heterosexuality is an essential part. If femininity is commonly understood as a set of attributes associated with women — or the correct way of being a woman — then being set outside of womanhood means also being set outside of femininity. In this way, femininity is theorized as a patriarchal and white supremacist concept in feminist theory. These scholars describe its critical functions as perpetuating women’s subordinate status and maintaining hierarchies within the category of women, in which lesbians and women of colour are relegated to the bottom. These understandings of femininity remain dominant within the feminist discipline, despite challenges posed by third wave feminists (Wolf, 1990; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000) and femmes (Nestle, 1992; Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). Neither third wave feminists nor femmes disagree with or dismiss the concerns raised by the feminist scholars outlined here, but they offer a more complex understanding of femininity. While femininity has been understood a mode of oppression, they also see how it has been a site of pleasure, empowerment, and even reclamation.

In this study, “femme” is understood as a queer identity that is determined by a political engagement with femininity which manifests through one’s values and style. I’ve come to this definition through my own experience, speaking to other femmes, and reading about femme’s rich histories. Femme’s origin is rooted in lesbian bar culture in North America of the 1940s and 1950s (Nestle, 1992; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). During this era of queer repression, femmes often accompanied butch lesbians: on the street, their style was a strategy to pass as a

straight couple to avoid harassment and violence, but inside the bar, butch/femme was an erotic exchange (Nestle, 1992; Moraga & Hollibaugh, 1992). Femme theory — which encompasses anthologies, memoir, and academic work — has conceptualized femininity as subversive, radical, and empowering within a queer context.

Writers like Joan Nestle (1987) and Minnie Bruce Pratt (1995) have reclaimed and revalued femininity through discussions of sexuality: they have argued that butch/femme sexual and romantic relationships have offered an avenue for femmes to reclaim their feminine gender and sexuality, and to find sexual pleasure — something that was not easy or acceptable for women, especially during the 1950s when these queer women were coming of age. Butch/femme offered femmes a way to be comfortable, confident, and appreciative of their bodies. It offered a way to have a sexual relationship that was chosen rather than obligatory, and it enabled femmes to find sexual pleasure on their own terms. This generation of writers has also reclaimed and revalued the femininity embodied by femmes by detailing the care work performed by femmes that contributed to the well-being of the lesbian community. In addition to performing traditional feminine tasks, like keeping house, femmes, due to their more normative gender expression, were also more financially stable than butch lesbians, which enabled them to care for butch lesbians in multiple ways. Femmes have written about the emotional and financial support that femmes extended to butches during this time, which enabled their loved ones to live the gender and life they chose, which in turn helped to carry gender politics forward (Nestle, 1992; Pratt, 1995). Queer femininity then, has been a crucial element of both lesbian communities and gender politics.

Femme literature has conceptualized femme as a sexual and relational style, but also as a queer gender. Though Wittig (1981) used butch as a “perfect” example of existing outside the man/woman binary, femme theorists have argued that femme identity is comparable to butch identity in its gender-queerness. In contrast to heterosexual women, femmes are said to be aware that femininity is not natural; it is a performance of gender identity rather than an

expression of anything innate (Hollibaugh, 2000, p. 245). Iconic femme lesbian writer Joan Nestle has written, “my femme style is what I have chosen to do with my womanness” (1992, p. 267). This critical self-awareness and agency makes femme a radical and subversive identity; it makes femme a dialogue with femininity rather than a passive acceptance of it. Femme theorists have argued that femme remixes and remakes femininity. In the foundational anthology *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002) editors Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri wrote, “femme is femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs” (p. 2). Instead of being passive, accommodating, and servile, queer femininity is conceptualized as complex, radical, and theoretically beguiling (Galewski, 2005; Hemmings, 1999).

The femmes in my study defined femme with great variation. For them, femme is at turns an empowering identifier; a way to understand one’s gender and sexuality at the same time; a performance of extreme femininity — not for the male gaze, but for other femmes; a mode of resistance, subversion, and rebellion; a method for survival or way to cope; a place of (be)longing; and perhaps both more simply and more elusive, a powerhouse, and a galaxy of possibility. As these capacious definitions show, femme is not simply femininity reprised. It could be said that femme wrestles with femininity, studies femininity, equips itself with femininity, and builds what it can from these encounters with femininity: armour, community, theory.

The present work is part of the emergent field of critical femininity studies, a field which begins from the absence of critical inquiry into femininity in academia, especially the disciplines, queer theory and women’s and gender studies (Dahl, 2012, 2016; Paechter, 2018). Some of the priorities of this field include: unhinging “femininity” from women (Dahl, 2012; Paechter, 2018), considering the queerness of femininity (Brightwell, 2017; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019); considering how femininities relate to each other, including understanding the differences and hierarchies among femininities (Paechter, 2018), considering affective attachments to femininity (McCann, 2018), building a body of literature that examines feminine

experiences, embodiment, and perspectives (Stardust, 2015; Dahl, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016; Chamberland, 2016; McCann, 2017), and considering femininity beyond "the phallocentric order" (Dahl, 2012, p. 58), or in other words, theorizing femininity beyond the rhetoric of subordination, sexualization, objectification, and "superficial narcissism" (Dahl, 2012, p. 60). Both existing femme literature and newer work comprising critical femininity studies has illustrated the low status of femininity in mainstream society, as well as the low status of femininity and femmes in queer culture — including existing queer and feminist discourse — a phenomenon commonly referred to as femmephobia (see for example: Nestle, 1992; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Hollibaugh, 2000; Volcano & Dahl, 2008; Dahl, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017; Brightwell, 2017; Hoskin, 2017).

Leading critical femininities scholar Ulrika Dahl (2012) draws on French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixious to outline the field, hoping the development of critical femininity studies — or *études* and *écritures* femme-*inine* — will remedy the apparent discomfort or anxiety felt in queer, women's, and gender studies about taking femininity seriously as a subject of study, an anxiety that has led to femininity's under-theorization and suspect status (p. 61). With similar hopes, in my dissertation I seek to resist the marginalization of femininity by restoring status to femme knowledge. As feminized bodies and knowledges have been systemically and historically barred from the sanctioned realms of knowledge production (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993), I follow femme thought to the margins where it has been shuttered and to the alternative spaces where it persists and expands. In the contemporary moment, there is perhaps no domain more accessible or more readily mobilized by marginalized groups than the internet; this is where I focus my study. *Low Femme, Low Theory* is an online ethnography of femme internet culture. In its composite papers, I examine the "stuff" of femme internet culture — including aesthetics, selfies, memes, and social networks — to answer the questions driving my research: 1) What are online femme practices? 2) What do these practices tell us about contemporary femme culture? 3) How is femme culture situated in a broader

cultural context? 4) How does femme culture push back against the dominant culture that seeks to exclude and erase it?

Theoretical Framework

Softness: Vulnerability, Emotionality, Care

Softness is a critical aspect to this project that threads itself through each composite paper. I understand softness as an aesthetic, a politic, and a theoretical approach. It is best described as a combination of hyperfemininity, emotional vulnerability and sensitivity, and reflexivity and care mobilized for collective and individual healing. What I have come to term "softness" shows up in femme internet culture in a number of ways: an aesthetic that is hyperfeminine and soothing; a political position that challenges individualism and masculinist bias to recuperate the feminine; and a mode of interacting or relating to the self and others that centres on emotions, care, and validation. The language of softness comes directly from artists found through Instagram, with artist Lora Mathis being the most referenced for their work titled "Radical Softness as a Weapon" (2015). Femmes on Instagram reference softness in different ways: "tenderness" and "radical vulnerability," for example, are other ways femmes talk about the same approach. To ground this concept in academic theory, however, I turn to scholarship on vulnerability, affect, and care.

Stemming from the Latin "vulnus," meaning wound, vulnerability is largely experienced as a threat, and is thus figured as a shortcoming in Western modernity (Drichel, 2013, p. 5). Vulnerability is framed as a problem—trapped in a "frame of war"—and elicits a defence response which seeks closure, or impenetrability (Drichel 2013, p. 8). Scholars like Judith Butler (2004) and Jasbir Puar (2017) have been critical of how nation-states mobilize vulnerability to enact racialized violence and enforce borders and nationalism. In addition to the violence and oppression detailed by Puar and Butler, this defensive response to vulnerability is critiqued for its readiness to foreclose relationality, which is said to be the condition for the

possibility of pleasure, satisfaction, and even, vulnerability scholars argue, an ethical life (Drichel, 2013, p. 13).

Many have been critical of the notion that vulnerability necessitates violence, and of the requisite violence that disavowing vulnerability causes (Butler, 2004; Drichel, 2013). Vulnerability scholars call for a different approach. Instead, they encourage us to consider the ways in which vulnerability can be enabling as well as limiting. For example, Rosi Braidotti (2006) has been critical of the Kantian impulse to view pain as an obstacle, arguing that pain and fracture are actually the conditions of possibility for transformation (p. 243). Pain is useful, she says; vulnerability forces one to think about the material conditions of being interconnected (Braidotti, 2006, p. 249). A shared understanding of social and physical vulnerability is said to offer the moral motivation for social struggles against injustice (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 597). Petherbridge writes, “Fragility is what requires us to work harder at cooperative forms of interrelations” (2016, p. 601), illustrating how vulnerability might inform an ethics of non-violence.

For feminist legal theorists, vulnerability discourse offers a better model for conceptualizing equality. Martha Fineman (2008) develops the concept of vulnerability to argue for a more responsive state and a more egalitarian society. She, like other feminist theorists, is critical of the version of “equality” that stems from John Locke’s philosophy of liberal individualism, arguing that his model of equality is reduced to “treatment of sameness,” and fails to take into account existing inequality of circumstances, or disrupt persistent forms of inequality (2008, p. 2-3). Fineman argues that the vulnerable subject must replace the autonomous and independent subject in legal discourse (p. 2). Similarly, Maneesha Deckha (2015) calls for an animal turn in law (p. 51), advocating the use of vulnerability discourse rather than equality discourse to advance animal interests (p. 48). Like Fineman, Deckha argues that vulnerability discourse focuses on the dependence that embodiment engenders, more

effectively respects differences, and avoids flattening equality to mean “treatment of sameness.”

Others have considered how vulnerabilities structure social hierarchies of worth. As mentioned, Butler (2004) and Puar (2017) consider how the vulnerability of the state is used to classify those considered threats and those granted citizenship, and how these classifications are racialized. Others have considered how the vulnerability of disability breeds interdependencies (Clare, 2017). Suzanne Bost (2008) uses the term “shared vulnerability” to argue that bonding over shared corporeal boundary states, like illness, may build more powerful alliances than identity politics can offer. These scholars position the human as inherently interdependent, suggesting that the autonomous, independent adult subject that traditional Western ethics is centered on is, in fact, a myth (MacKenzie et al., 2013, p. 5), and a new formula for ethics is required.

Indeed, several feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s proposed a new model of ethics based on relationships of care. Like many others, Virginia Held (1987) is critical of a conception of rationality that assumes humans are independent, self-interested individuals. She says “contractual thinking” (which permeates sociality so that we view even human relations as contractual) ignores the experiences of women: women are traditionally positioned outside of contract society, since the home and family are considered the private sphere (Held, 1987). She aims to rethink society from the perspective of mothers to develop a different understanding of rationality. She suggests we export to wider society the relations suitable for mothering, instead of attempting to impose contractual thinking on relations; just as relations in the family should be based on concern and caring, various relations in wider society should be characterized by more concern, care, openness, trust, and human feeling (Held, 1987). In other words, she sees relations between children and mothers as a model for society. Other scholars, like María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) have extended this notion of care to the non-human world. Caring for, or considering our interdependence with the non-human world is said

to develop politics and ethics, particularly environmental ethics. Stacy Alaimo (2009) has argued that vulnerability can foster an environmental ethics, that recognizing the substantial interconnections between human corporeality and the "more than human world" can impel ethical and political responses (p. 23).

For these scholars, care, interdependence, and ethics stem from recognizing one's inherent vulnerability; vulnerability becomes enabling as well as limiting. This is similar to how I conceptualize, analyze, and theorize softness throughout this project. Softness becomes about recognizing vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and corporeality; it becomes about using these vulnerabilities to connect to others, to seek and offer support, to affirm oneself and others; it becomes about envisioning a better kind of world, and fashioning a politic to achieve it. Through these papers, I explore the relationship between softness, vulnerability and femme. Femininity has a long history with vulnerability. The negative framing of vulnerability foretells a gendered reading of it, a gendered reading which has deeper roots in Western philosophy. In the tradition of Western thought, there exists a divide between the mind and body. In this division, the mind is considered superior to the body because it is rational, while the body is considered weak, needy, and vulnerable. As a result, intellectual pursuits became associated with men and masculinity, while women and femininity became associated with the perils of the body, including emotionality, neediness, and desire. This creates a firm alignment between women, the body, vulnerability, and inferiority. Feminist scholars have endeavoured to reconsider this branding of the body, vulnerability, femininity, and women in general. I continue this tradition in femme-inist thought by seeking to consider what is enabling and valuable about softness, femininity, and femmes in particular.

Crucial to my project, too, is a consideration of vulnerability in an online or digital context. Scholars of social media and digital publics are critical of this so-called online vulnerability. First, anxieties about the authenticity or "realness" of online intimacies, communications, and identities have abounded since the internet's invention (Turkle, 1997;

Baym, 2015; Dobson, Carah & Robards, 2018). More recently, there are concerns about how (over)sharing on social media generates profits for the corporations that own them, and teaches algorithms to order relationships and replicate social hierarchies (Dobson, Carah, & Robards, 2018, p. 4, 9, 20). So even while I consider the political, theoretical, and affective potential of vulnerability displayed by femmes online through the following papers, it is not possible to uncritically sanction vulnerability as the ultimate political intervention, just as it is not possible to uncritically sanction femininity as the ultimate political intervention, given the critiques levied by feminists, and particularly feminists of colour and trans feminists; both are what Eve Sedgwick (1993) might call "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (p. 15). These realities make Danielle Petherbridge's (2016) approach to conceptualizing vulnerability the most appealing. She aims to chart a middle ground through vulnerability, seeing it as neither positive or negative, but potentially either (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 591). Petherbridge (2016) considers vulnerability as a political question, rather than one of ontology or ethics (p. 589). Similarly, what I find compelling about softness is not whether online expressions of it can be deemed "authentic" or "good" or not, but what online expressions of softness can do. More specifically, I ask what kind of politics a discourse of softness can generate, and what kind of connections an orientation to softness can facilitate.

Femme-inist Epistemology

French feminists through the 1970s used the term *l'écriture féminine* to explain how women are excluded from the dominant culture at the foundational level of language. Through a critique of Sigmund Freud's theories of gendered sexuality, Luce Irigaray (1985) argued that women's subordinate status is maintained through the production of philosophical discourse that uses biased, androcentric methods that only work to confirm existing social ideas about women. Hélène Cixous also contends that psychoanalysis — along with all human sciences — reproduce the masculine view (1976, p. 884). Later, authors Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff went on to argue that contemporary epistemological theories exclude traditional women's

knowledge by defining all knowledge as propositional, and other ways of knowing as “mere tales or unscientific hearsay” (1993, p. 217). Through an examination of the decline of midwifery and the rise of the OB/GYN, Dalmiya and Alcoff reveal how women’s knowledge — gained through bodily or community experience — has been dismissed and trivialized in preference for male-dominated, scientific, propositional knowledge, and how women themselves have been barred from entering into these accepted realms of knowledge production (1993).

The devaluation of the feminine occurs in mainstream, established academic fields and more recent and critical approaches in the academy, like feminist theory, as outlined above, and queer studies. Since queer theory’s introduction to the academy, butch, androgynous, and transmasculine perspectives have been seen as more radical than femme perspectives because they reject naturalized femininity and the gender binary in a very obvious way. The apparent impulse to denounce and/or overlook femininity in feminist and queer theory precludes a nuanced theory of femininity and further marginalizes femininity and femme identity through the creation of queer and feminist hierarchies. Similar to the manner in which women's knowledge, writing, and cultural production has been marginalized in the dominant culture and academy, femme knowledge, writing, and cultural production, too, has been underwritten in the academy, even in the fields of queer and feminist theory.

As much as my research seeks to challenge feminist theorizations of femininity and the status of femininity (and femmes) within the Women’s Studies discipline, my dissertation is a decidedly feminist research project. It has been conducted in the department of Gender, Feminist, and Women’s studies at York University and is indebted to the legacies of feminist theory and feminist research practices (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In particular, I understand my work as a femme-inist epistemology project that seeks to further challenge established notions of research and theory by using the cultural and knowledge productions of femmes, a group of marginalized or minoritarian subjects. This framework draws from feminist researchers like

Donna Haraway (1988), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Sandra Harding (1993), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who critiqued existing research and research practices for excluding women, and advocated for epistemologies and methodologies that valued and were informed by marginalized perspectives. Following these scholars, I am critical of existing research practices in feminist and queer studies for overlooking or excluding femmes and femininities, and seek to offer a femme-inist intervention in feminist and queer theory. Seeking to locate femme theory in cultural texts found online, like selfies and memes, can be understood as an extension of the political and epistemological project foregrounded by Dalmiya and Alcoff and many other feminists that includes examining sexism in knowledge production, reclaiming marginalized knowledge, and rethinking how we value the feminine.

Irigaray calls to reopen philosophical discourse to "pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them 'render up' and give back what they owe the feminine" (1985, p. 74). She says we must use interpretative rereading to examine how the system is created and how it works. Further, she says paying attention to silences in discourse is equally important to paying attention to its content, shape, and function, a project taken up by those feminist researchers cited above. Replacing these silences, she says women must theorize their own existence, especially their own pleasure since silence on this matter upholds the logic of discourse. Irigaray says self-representation is necessary to disrupt phallic discourse and phallic desire in discourse (1985, p. 77). Cixous also urges women to write about women, for this act would go beyond modifying power relations, it would bring about "a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis" (1976. p. 882). This writing and its resulting shift is set to grow out of silences, out of marginality, out of lack. Cixous says it is impossible to define a practice of feminine writing, but it "will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever

subjugate" (1976, p. 883). This, I posit, is true, too, of femme epistemology, and is the reason I employ the concept of "low theory" to locate it.

There are many pre-existing strategies to take seriously the knowledge produced outside the academy. Kath Weston distinguishes between "straight theorizing" and "street theorizing" (1995); José Muñoz understands cultural workers as theory producers (1999); Tavia Nyong'o proposes a "punk or punk'd theory" (2005); and Jack Halberstam (2011) borrows "low theory" from Stuart Hall, to name a few. Using the term "theory" to describe the knowledge gleaned from cultural productions demonstrates how altering our understanding of knowledge can improve upon existing epistemological theories. Understanding theory as knowledge that may be produced culturally and communally may be particularly useful when examining femme theory. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam uses "low theory" and "popular knowledge" to seek alternatives to neoliberal ideologies and "to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations" (2011, p. 2). If low theory holds the potential for uncovering alternatives to dominant ideologies and challenging hegemony, then it is particularly apt to use this method to read value, queerness, power, resistance, and subversion into the feminine in a culture that often devalues the feminine and femmes by presuming their heteronormativity, weakness, and investment in "passing" in a patriarchal, heteronormative world. I argue that due to their cultural alignments, femme theory is low theory; femme culture is low culture. Further, low theory is what enables me to take the internet seriously as a site of not only cultural production, but knowledge production as well.

Irigaray locates power in the so-called "feminine lack," as Halberstam does in "the in-between spaces" (2011, p. 2). Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014) also locates power and potentiality in subject positions that are typically considered socially inferior. In his book *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (2014) he reassesses the effeminacy and sexual "bottom" position associated with Asian American men, specifically citing alliances with femme lesbians and femme thought. In the spirit of unhinging femininity

from women's bodies, I draw from this work to consider how alliances can be forged between those associated with the social and philosophical position of the feminine, including women, femmes, and queer and racialized men. Nguyen resists the strategy of remasculinization to justify the sexual bottom position, and instead seeks a way to oppose racism and heteronormativity that does not scapegoat femininity (Nguyen, 2014, p. 14). His solution lies in affirming what he terms "bottomhood" — similar to what femmes have done with sexual "passivity" or "receptivity" (Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1992). Nguyen theorizes bottomhood as a sexual practice and a worldview; it is a model for coalition politics that centres on affirming an ethical model of relationality (Nguyen, 2014, p. 2). Just as Irigaray writes:

> One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject" that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference (1985, p. 76),

Nguyen, too, advocates reclaiming bottomhood — a social, sexual, political, and aesthetic point of view that no one wants to assume (2014, p. 26). These theorists posit a manner of disrupting phallocentrism that starts from the place of the feminine. Rather than conform to standards of pre-existing phallic discourse, these theorists prefer the continued development of a feminine theory. As Irigaray advances the concept of *l'écriture féminine,* Halberstam advances the concept of low theory, and Ngyuen advances the concept of bottomhood, my aim is to advance the concept of femme-inist epistemology. Femme-inist epistemology sheds masculinist standards, including those located in queer theory and community, and produces knowledge and culture in and out of alternative spaces. Femme-inist epistemology recuperates feminine ways of knowing and revalues feminine bodies of being to create feminine bodies of knowledge — whether these feminine bodies belong to women or not.

Intersectionality

As I follow the feminist imperative to challenge the phallocentric order in my research, I also follow the feminist principle of intersectionality. Intersectionality was introduced by the Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who examined the failure of anti-discrimination legislation to account for Black women's experiences of workplace discrimination. Anti-discrimination policy considered discrimination on grounds of either race or gender, not both, so many Black women's claims were dismissed (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw argues for a new kind of analysis and against the single axis framework that dominates anti-discrimination law (1989, p. 139). Her analysis extends beyond legal matters, as she says in order to contend with Black women's intersectional experiences, Black liberation politics must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy, and feminist theory must include an analysis of race (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167). In addition to scholars who have focused on the intersection of race and class, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) points to other scholars who have constructed intersectional analyses on more general terms or as applicable to different groups, which expands the possibilities of analysis (p. 201).

While Crenshaw's work is foundational, this mode of analysis predates the coining of the term "intersectionality." In the early 1980s, Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks developed ways of theorizing the complexities of Black women's lives and imagining liberatory movements. It was Lorde who famously orated in 1982, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Blackpast, 2012, n.p.). She connected the issues confronting many groups of marginalized people, including anti-poor legislation, gay shootings, burning of synagogues, and attacks on women, among others. She said, "Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust" (Blackpast, 2012, n.p.). Her call was for a movement that encompassed all of these struggles. Similarly, hooks' 1981 work, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* is critical

of the tendency for anti-sexist and anti-racist organizing to be seen as separate. She writes, “My life experience had shown me that the two issues were inseparable, that at the moment of my birth, two factors determined my destiny, my having been born black and my having been born female. […] To both groups I voiced my conviction that the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism were naturally intertwined, that to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence” (hooks, 1981, p. 12-3).

As these Black feminist thinkers posited in the 1980s, intersectionality can be seen as a critical mode of analysis and a strategy for building political resistance movements on the foundation of alliances. In considering how intersectional analysis might be most useful in policy application, Yuval-Davis cautions against “additive” constructions of intersectionality that only considers the experiential, and against essentializing or conflating various social divisions, like “Blackness” or “womanness” (p. 195). She insists there are different levels of intersectional analysis that can be both material and representational, including institutional and intersubjective (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 198, 205). While my work on femme does not consider policy implications, Yuval-Davis’ call for specificity — to consider how different social divisions or categories constitute each other in a particular time and place — remains an important one. Much of my project on femme considers femme communities and politics, so considering intersectionality as a strategy for building alliances and informing political differences is also important to my work. In these ways, intersectionality has been foundational in feminist thinking and organizing, but it has also been fundamental to theorizing femme identity and community.

Memoirs penned by femmes Minnie Bruce Pratt (1995), Joan Nestle (1987), Amber Hollibaugh (2000), Dorothy Allison (1996), and Jewelle Gomez (1993) demonstrate that, to borrow Lorde’s phrase, the femme struggle cannot be a single-issue struggle, and it never has been. The idea that femme identity is about more than queerness or femininity — that it is intersectional — is well supported throughout these texts. In addition to their queerness, the

authors often write about their working class and otherwise non-normative backgrounds. These backgrounds are often articulated through stories about mothers, women who did not learn propriety and did not pass it along to their daughters. In telling their personal stories, these femmes have often drawn images of mothers who, by a middle class standard, were too sexual, drank too much, spoke too loudly or too crassly, whose lives often demanded a toughness to shroud their femininity. As a result, these women embody contradictions of femininity and womanhood, which are drawn to a white, middle-class, heterosexual standard. The mothers of femme memoirists are often described as sexual and sexualized, admired, sometimes submissive, always performing "women's work," but also necessarily strong, tough, callous, and, sometimes, stone. This combination of feminine and masculine traits, the contradiction of gender roles, is often what defines femme, and enables a queer analysis of working class women's embodiment of femininity. Janine deManda has argued that subversive femininity can be about more than queer sexuality, and that policing the term "femme" is alienating. She writes:

> In case you haven't put these concepts together before, queer women are not the only women who have ever been told they aren't really women and who have labored to reclaim themselves from misogynist, femininity despising overcultural norms. The women I grew up around were poor, rural, working class women, some of whom were mixed bloods and/or gimps, too, who were told by almost every overcultural message that they were not real women because they didn't qualify for the incredibly narrow, absurdly constrained category of "appropriately feminine". (deManda, 2011)

deManda argues that there is more than one way to come into a femme identity, to "queer" femininity, or to be excluded from normative ideals of womanhood.

Femme politics and analysis also encompass more dimensions than class. The femme memoirs I refer to above were not written by femmes who lead single-issue lives or who experience single-issue oppression; they write about sex worker solidarity (Hollibaugh 2000;

Nestle 1987), the politics of race and solidarity across races (Hollibaugh 2000; Nestle 1987; Allison 1995; Gomez 1993), their roles in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Nestle 1987; Gomez 1993), and experiences of or witnessing anti-Semitism (Nestle 1987; Gomez 1993). They write about anti-war and anti-capitalist movements, sex positivity, and HIV/AIDS advocacy (Hollibaugh 2000; Nestle 1987). All of these struggles have been taken up by femmes because all of these struggles were connected with femme struggles. The femme writers discussed here have all helped create a complex femme narrative through telling their stories of growing up poor, Black, mixed-race, or Jewish, of working in the sex trades, of marching on Washington, and of standing in solidarity with trans folks. Arguably, in light of all this nuance, femme theorizing lends itself well to countering many types of oppression in addition to femmephobia; femme politics are intersectional, rather than developed around a single axis.

In these papers, I take an intersectional approach in considering how femininity is accessed or bestowed unevenly on women and femmes based on intersecting social categories including race, class, ability, and sexuality. My analysis considers how different social categories, predominantly race, gender, and ability, shape the experience and embodiment of femme. My research aims to consider "femme" as a diverse and intersectional category, paying attention to social differences between femmes as well as the presences and absences in the archive of femme knowledge and cultural production I have curated. This has meant holding on to the feminist critiques of femininity outlined above, as well as seeking to consult with and include a diverse sample of femmes in my fieldwork. Through my research, I find that femmes are a subcultural group that reaches across time and space. Femme has no location, but it has a long history. Femme plays with feminine aesthetics, yet there is no uniform. There are many ways of being and looking femme, some of which are captured here. Femmes are diverse, so a study of them must be intersectional. However, my findings also suggest there are some uniting principles among femmes online: they are united by their

subversion of online practices, their political engagement with the feminine, and, of course, their unrelenting dedication to each other.

Significance and Contribution

My project's significance comes from its contributions to the important and emerging field of critical femininity studies, which as a whole stands to make significant contributions to queer, gender, and feminist theory while challenging the queer exclusion of femininity and the negative and limiting feminist framing of femininity. While I want to follow Dahl's (2012, p. 58) resistance to adhering to the institutionalization of knowledge that focuses on use-value and professionalization — and a fixation on "novel contributions" — my research project is unique even in this field, as it is one of the first to study queer femmes in the context of the internet, bringing critical femininities and internet studies together using feminist theory and queer and cultural studies methodologies. While many studies in critical femininities do theorize queer femme-ininity, my work also offers ethnographic evidence of queer femme online subcultural norms and practices that does not yet exist in the academy. Giving the context of femmephobia and femme erasure described above, this evidence is crucial to documenting a rich subculture as well as posing an epistemological challenge. The result is an ethno-archive of queer femme internet culture that challenges the existing framing of femininity and femme in queer and feminist fields of study.

Further, as this project contributes to the field of critical femininity studies and internet studies in unique ways, it also contributes to femme theory. In emphasizing femme cultural productions in my work and analyzing their significance in a broader context, this project offers a theory of femme as a cultural producer in addition to existing theories on femme as a sexual and relational style and queer gender. My emphasis on softness reorients femme theory away from more entrenched objects of inquiry, like butch/femme desire and the hard femme. I argue that the potential of femme theory lies not in its rejection of patriarchal femininity, but rather in its ability to hold feminist (and other) critiques of femininity *as well as* ongoing, affective

attachments to femininity (McCann, 2018). Contemporary femme scholars Dahl (2017) and Hannah McCann (2018) conceptualize femme as an affective category, which invites an analysis of what political potential lies in an embrace of the feminized qualities that make up systems of care — interdependence, emotionality, and vulnerability — as well as the much-analyzed feminized aesthetics, like make-up, short skirts, and high heels.

Methodology: Building an Ethno-archive of Femme Internet Culture

My research occurs at the intersection of digital culture and femme identity. The goal of this project is to take femme internet culture seriously in order to locate a body of femme thought. My entry into graduate studies was fuelled by a desire to document what I understood as femme theorizing in online spaces, specifically on the micro-blogging site Tumblr. As an avid Tumblr user, I felt like I learned more from Tumblr about feminism and queerness than I ever did in say, my undergraduate work in Women's Studies. I saw the exciting and engaging text and images posted by femmes in this online space as doing incredibly significant work to define and redefine femme identity and culture. My PhD research examines cultural objects produced online by femmes which, I argue, contain valuable knowledge about femme culture, and play a role in structuring and generating femme culture. My research has shifted away from my interest in Tumblr to focus on the social media application Instagram, mirroring shifts in online activity and user participation. My methodology for studying femme internet culture on Instagram draws from scholarship on online ethnography, visual discourse analysis, and the archive.

Online Femme-inist Ethnography

Ethnography is a method often associated with social science disciplines interested in producing empirical research, namely anthropology (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 4). Elana Buch and Karen Staller (2014) say that ethnography is a form of research that attends to the social relations and cultural practices of groups of people, and tries to understand these relations in a broader political, economic, and historical context (p. 107). The ethnographer tries to

understand another "life world" by using the self, meaning interpersonal skills and reflexivity are critical to this method (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 108). Ethnography is characterized by long engagements with a research field and long relationships with research participants (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 109). It was first developed by European and American researchers in the early 20th century who were interested in understanding groups of people that were very different from themselves, but has evolved to include a number of approaches, including feminist ethnography (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 109, 111), "nativist ethnography" or ways of studying one's own community (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 112; Dahl, 2008, 2011), and online ethnography (Hine, 2017). Since the online world is a central site of human experience now, conducting ethnography online is seen as legitimate and necessary (Hine, 2017 p. 4). This traditional method has been adapted for an online context, retaining the foundational principles of immersing oneself in a culture for an extended period of time and recording one's observations about the daily practice and values that are gleaned from participant observation. For my online ethnography of femme internet culture, I created a researcher account on Instagram (which stated my intent to research the community and included my contact) and immersed myself in the community for a period of six months. My modes of participation and observation included liking and commenting on posts, making my own posts, following accounts, and taking notes and screen captures of particularly noteworthy content.

According to Christine Hine (2017), there are three general approaches to online ethnography, the most current being a "multimodal approach," which contextualizes the online world within the offline world, and considers the internet as more than just as a textual media (Hine, 2017, p. 3). This is particularly apt for studying Instagram, a platform that is both textual and visual. To adequately analyze the content produced here, I also draw from visual discourse analysis as outlined by Boris Traue, Mathias Blanc, and Carolina Cambre (2018). Traue et al. (2018) call for a mode of analyzing images that considers semiotics as well as principles of design, as images are part of an interdiscursive world (p. 331). They propose an approach they

call sociology *with* the image, an approach that seeks to resist both logocentrism and iconocentrism (p. 328, 330). They see the image as a cultural product worth understanding on its own, but also insist on the importance of studying the process of producing the image, and considering how the image then produces society. Visual discourse analysis, as it is rooted in a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, is concerned with issues of power; Traue et al. (2018) consider what is "visible" in an image is determined by existing social discourse. In this framing, "visibility" is akin to "sayability" (Traue et al., 2018, p. 329).

Christine Hine has argued that an ethnography that occurs exclusively online is "no longer helpful in the face of an internet that is multiply embedded in diverse frames of meaning-making both online and offline" (2017, p. 7). She says blended, mobile, or networked research designs demonstrate the complexity of lived experience across different spaces (Hine, 2017, p. 7). Hine also states that online-only studies can offer insight into the "dynamics of interpersonal relations and exploring contemporary practices of meaning-making and identity formation" (2017, p. 12), but it is still important to make the broader theoretical aspirations clear. Following Hine's preference for contextualized online studies and Traue et al.'s understanding of visibility, I argue that femme internet culture cannot be understood without looking at the broader culture, including offline cultural norms. While considering how power is deployed is important in analyzing any image, this mode of analysis is especially pertinent in reading images produces by femmes, a marginalized community of queer subjects, as the codes and symbols and their particular usages may be structured by their marginal standpoint. Here, the link to my theoretical framing is clear: theories of women's and femmes' marginalization are key in understanding why femme culture thrives in alternate spaces, like blogging platforms and social media sites.

Because I already identify as a queer femme, I am positioned as an insider in the culture I am studying. This is not unusual in online ethnographies (Hine, 2017, p. 10), and the blurring between researcher/archivist and participant/cultural producer is not unusual in studies of

queer subcultures (Halberstam, 2008). I draw on Ulrika Dahl's (2011) femme-inist ethnography methodology to conceptualize a study of "one's own community." Dahl argues that studying one's own community queers the traditional notions of being "home" in the academy and "away" in the ethnographic field (Dahl, 2011, p. 10). In the ethnographic tradition, distance signals "objectivity" which renders the research "scientific" (Dahl, 2011, p. 5). Closing the psychic gap between researcher and informant by doing a study of one's own community is part of the necessary queer challenge to notions of what "counts" as theoretical work. Femme-inist ethnography also enables collaborative methods, which question the hierarchy between the researcher and her informants (Dahl, 2011, p. 3). Collaborative methods means understanding subjects not just as informants, but as experts and co-producers of theory (Dahl, 2011, p. 8, 13-14), a notion I apply to my own research through citational practice. With my participants' consent, their comments and ideas are attributed to their real Instagram usernames rather than anonymized,[1] marking a departure from traditional practice in academic research. Dahl writes that through its use of collaborative methods, her project *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (Volcano & Dahl, 2008) reveals "a tremendous amount of clues to the specificity of each subject's legacy and agency, as captured in one moment in time in a particular location," and thus acts as an ethno-archive, rather than a conventional ethnography. Following Dahl, my project will act as an ethno-archive of femme-inist epistemology.

An Archive of Femme Feelings

Notions of the archive are fundamental to framing my research, as I am documenting evidence of femme knowledge and cultural production, as well as arguing that the particularities of these productions are shaped by the politics of knowledge production itself. This is a perspective on archives that most scholars share, which comes from Michel Foucault's work on archives in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*

[1] Except for the user @rs, which is an anonymized username.

(1972). Kate Eichhorn (2013) writes that the archival turn in humanities and social sciences has long made it possible to understand the archive as not just "a repository for documents" but also a site of knowledge production (Eichhorn, 2013, p. 2-3), that is not only oriented toward the past or concerned with recovering history, but is actively involved in producing the present (2013, p. 4-6). The impulse to document evidence of femme culture is a political one, informed by the legacies of feminist research that challenged androcentric bias in the academy by producing studies that included women's stories and perspectives (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 4). It is a response to femme erasure in both culture and the academy, an effort to make space for *l'écriture féminine.* The impulse to document evidence of femme culture is also an affective one, as this is a culture and community that I see myself in, that I see as valuable. Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) work on archives validates such an impulse. She sees archives as affective, and states that emotional memory can produce archives (perhaps unusual ones) (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 242). Memes and selfies may make for unusual archival material, and there is no shortage of femme feelings — my own and my participants — in the documentation of femme aesthetics, politics, and friendships.

Framing my work as an archive invites me to acknowledge my role a curator, and to think critically about what is included and excluded in the archive I've created. Some of these inclusions/exclusions are my responsibility, while other inclusions/exclusions are the will of individual community members, who chose or declined to be part of my study. My impulse to archive is driven by my personal investment or stake in the femme community, and my belief that this community is valuable and worth remembering. While presenting some of my research at an academic conference, another academic (whose name I do not know) asked, "what about those that want to be forgotten?" This question brings into focus the tension of doing research on, or even with, marginalized groups — even feminist research. Many of my participants were excited and enthusiastic to be included in my project, while others I contacted were more ambivalent and ultimately declined to participate, either explicitly or by

not responding to my requests, sometimes even after lengthy exchanges about my intent and framework. Some femme Instagram users agreed to let me use their memes or selfies, but declined to be interviewed. Notably one user, @femmes4memes_, gave me permission to use her memes with credit, but "[didn't] particularly feel like being interviewed." The femme behind this account has since passed away — a great loss for the femme community and for femme internet culture. I highlight this loss for both my research and my community as an example of the always partial and incomplete nature of the archive; someone or something will always be missing, sometimes permanently. @femme4memes_ work remains online, at least for now. But what if it is deleted by Instagram, as it has been in the past? How will we remember @femme4memes_' work, how will be remember her? We may not.

The incompleteness of my archive is further complicated by the technological affordances of the platform I worked with, Instagram. The Instagram algorithm shows posts to users based on their "engagement" — likes, comments — with other posts: the more you "like" one type of content, or content by a particular user, the more it shows up in your feed, pushing out other types of content. This means that even potentially following a vast array of Instagram accounts, any user only sees a small portion of the content generated and shared by these accounts on the homepage of the application. My feminist training, particularly using intersectionality and feminist epistemology as foundational concepts, offers a way to attempt to minimize the exclusions. Using these concepts as a framework means asking critical questions about who is included, in terms of gender, race, class, ability, and more, and considering what structures may be enabling these inclusions. Below, I elaborate on the specific social/cultural make up of my participant group.

The partial and incomplete nature of the archive is one of its fundamental aspects. As Foucauldians argue, the archive is political, an exercise in exerting power. The archive is rooted in the colonial project of organizing history to produce a particular national narrative, a narrative that strategically excludes certain bodies and silences certain narratives, while privileging

others (Stoler, 2002; Lalu, 2008). Post-colonial, queer, and feminist interventions in archival methods and theory challenge what "counts" as an archive. Scholars have used the body (Gopinath, 2010), mess (Manalansan, 2014), ephemera (Muñoz, 1996), the everyday, and affect (Cvetkovich, 2003) — the anti-monumental (Gopinath, p. 2010, p. 165) — to construct their various archives. My archive is comprised of selfies, of memes, and social networks — phenomena that are tied to the body, the everyday, and the ephemeral, that are also anti-monumental. Working with these queer, feminist, and post-colonial interventions is useful for framing the significance of these internet-based productions, for insisting on their preservation. The scholars cited above offer a model of subverting the archive, of working within structures of power.

Another question posed to me in the course of conducting my research was, "how subversive can something be if it takes place within the corporate-owned structure of Instagram?" To answer this question, I turn again to Traue et al.'s (2018) notion of visibility. Marginalized subjects, such as femmes, are versed in "resemiotization," of developing modes of communication that appropriate symbols and codes and subvert their dominant meanings. What is "visible" or legible to a more mainstream audience may appear benign, or nonsensical, but its true meaning is clear to those engaged in the process of (re)producing (sub)culture.

Method

Establishing the Field, Situating Myself, and Gaining Access

To conduct my research I created a public Instagram account under the username @acafemmeic. As mentioned above, I declared my intention to use the account to research femme internet culture through both the account's description and by making an introductory post. I included my email and a link to my personal Instagram account for the sake of transparency and accountability, which I saw as an important component of building trust with my participants. I followed other femme accounts (public only) that I located through using my insider knowledge of the femme community, searching #femme hashtags, and a snowball

method of finding femme accounts through other femmes, either by direct recommendation or through observing lists of followers, likes, and comments. Following feminist methodologies and the feminist principle of intersectionality, I sought to follow a diverse array of femme Instagram accounts, and looked specifically for femme accounts that focused on intersecting marginal identities, like racialization, disability, fatness, and trans gender identity.

As a participant-observer, I posted on my researcher Instagram account, followed other accounts, liked and occasionally commented on other posts, chatted with other users using the Direct Message (DM) function, and eventually set up formal interviews. Over the course of my fieldwork, I made four posts, acquired 79 followers, and followed 114 users. Building rapport with participants is a critical aspect of ethnography, so participating in femme internet culture in these ways — especially before I contacted individuals for formal interviews — was important to me and my method. My first post was an image of my pink fieldwork notebook laying on a white furry rug, and the caption introduced myself and my project, and stated my intention to research femme internet culture using the profile. This post received 29 likes and generated three comments, mostly femme accounts giving me permission to "spy on" their accounts for my project (this mirrored the informal language I used in my own post). This post also prompted my first DM chat with a user (@femmesupremacy) who I later interviewed.

My second post followed the conventions of femme selfie culture I had been observing: it was a crying selfie with the caption, “reading Judith Butler like” with the hashtags #VulnerabilityTheory and #RadicalVulnerability. The caption and hashtags indicated that my tears were a reaction to Butler’s work on vulnerability (and they were!). As I will detail in the papers that follow this introduction, radical vulnerability and crying selfies are common themes and genres of femme internet cultural productions. This post received 22 likes and one generic “nice picture” comment (from an account that seems to be spam).

My third post was a repost of @femmesupremacy’s post they made after our interview. It is a pink image with white text that reads “Radical Vulnerability.” They captioned it:

> i [sic] had a fantastic time talking with @acafemmeic about queer femme insta culture, taking selfies in public & taking selfies while crying, femmeships (what i call #femme4femme friendships), trauma & healing on the internet, & creating communities [heart emoji] thank you @acafemmeic for thinking of me! it was really lovely sharing my experiences & thoughts & musings with you [flower emoji] #radicalvulnerability #queerfemme #pink

I reposted this caption and added:

> We had an emotional conversation about the life-saving and life-giving possibilities of femmeships (plus some other stuff like the importance of The Grid [laughing emoji]). All about that aesthetic life! I loved it. Thank you for your vulnerability, as always. I'm so happy this is how I get to do research [heart emoji]

This post received 23 likes.

Using the repost function and the caption to further discuss our interview made visible the connective potential and community-building that occurs on the platform, which is the focus of the final paper in my dissertation. This post also points to the complicated nature of privacy in my study in particular, and studies of the internet in general, one major ethical hurdle in online research. It is possible to conceptualize content posted and conversations conducted online as public, and therefore, "fair game" for researchers. However, online researchers have developed more nuanced guidelines to navigate internet privacy. Rebecca Eynon, Jenny Fry, and Ralph Schroeder (2017) emphasize being sensitive to the values, aims, and expectations of privacy in the specific online context of study. Though users may not use technological means (ie. passwords and other privacy settings) to keep their posts and conversations hidden, this does not necessarily negate the expectation of privacy. In contexts where there is a higher expectation of privacy, the more like human subjects the online representations should be treated (as opposed to treated them as texts); conversely, the more public the online representations and expressions are, the more the posters and posts can be treated as authors

and texts, rather than as human subjects. Raymond M. Lee, Nigel G. Fielding, and Grant Blank (2017) advise seeking informed consent in instances of high expectations of privacy. Because I follow Dahl's methodology that conceives of participants as co-producers of theory and adds the third version of "citing" to the feminist ethnographic principles of "siting" and "sighting" (2011, p. 10), my approach is more in line with treating online representations as authors and texts. However, where I wanted to use screen captures or direct quotes from the interviews I conducted, I negotiated with my participants the level of privacy or anonymity they expected and desired. Because I conducted a study of a community of marginalized subjects, I anticipated privacy being a serious concern for many. All of my participants consented to use of their images for this study and to attribution for their comments to their usernames,[2] as mentioned above. Some femmes asked to see the images I chose or asked to see drafts where I used direct quotes from our interviews before agreeing to their use and attribution.

My fourth and final post on the @acafemmeic account is a video of me uploading my chapter files to an email to send to my supervisor. This video has been viewed 73 times and received 24 likes and eight comments, all congratulatory comments with lots of emojis.

Data Collection

In the early stages of my six-month study, I made fieldnotes on my daily observations and reflections on the day's posts. As is typical of fieldnotes, mine were both descriptive ("On the feed today there is a meme about strap-ons/harnesses") and analytical ("Thinking now, too, about how selfies are used as processing tools…") (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 132). I kept track of general trends, like how femmes responded to holidays, major news stories or other events, as well as noted particularly interesting individual posts ("I am also interested in thinking more about @rs's affirmations that are seemingly direct at all their followers…"). As I began to see significant themes emerging, I followed the ethnographic norm of "collecting social artefacts" (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 135) and used both screenshots and Instagram's "Save"

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[2] Except for the user @rs, which is an anonymized username.

function to file posts into the following categories: selfies, memes, friendships, and softness. Selfies and memes were easier to spot and categorize than posts I eventually categorized as "friendships" and "softness."

Following emerging themes is typical of qualitative research. Friendship researcher Patricia Rind (2002) has described the process in which a theory is developed as more data is collected as "grounded research" (p. 6). Similarly, Elana D. Buch and Karen M. Staller (2014) say ethnography is "iterative," meaning emerging evidence helps to refine or reformulate theoretical ideas (p. 118). Often, posts would be saved in multiple categories. These themes shaped the questions I would later pose to the femmes I formally interviewed. Using the Save function meant that I could organize my data as I went, but also meant I risked losing the posts or evidence of a theme if they were deleted from Instagram. Screen captures are more permanent, but more difficult to organize.

In October 2018, I started sending out interview requests via Instagram DM. I asked a total of 15 femme Instagram accounts to participate as an interviewee; seven agreed while some declined, some did not respond, and some agreed initially but did not respond to later attempts to get in touch. I invited femmes to interview based on their level of engagement and/or output: femmes that seemed to be "hubs" of the online femme community were of great interest to me (Barabási, 2011). I also aimed to interview a diverse range of femmes. I did not ask my interviewees to describe their social/cultural identities — apart from explaining their relationship to femme — but through the interviews and my observations of their online activity, I deduced the following: of my seven interviewees, one was straight and six were queer (two also used the term "lesbian" in addition to "queer"); four were white (three of whom have medium to strong ties to white ethnic identities, such as Italian) and three were racialized; four were cis women, one was a trans woman, and two were non-binary (none identified as men); two did not mention mental illness or other disability and five talked openly about their

disabilities and mental health struggles; five did not mention their body size and two self-described as fat.

I conducted seven formal, one-hour, semi-structured interviews; one in person interview, one phone interview, and five video interviews. My interviews are shorter than in other studies that rely solely on interviews as data because, as part of an online ethnography, I also had access to and analyzed participants' Instagram accounts, which included ample visual, written, and sometimes spoken information, opinions, and perspectives. When asked, I provided a list of questions to the participant before the interview. I recorded the audio of the conversations (with permission) to later transcribe. As mentioned, I used the most pertinent themes that emerged from my observations and fieldnotes to draft interview questions, as well as asked questions that were specific to each participant, their content, or their online activity. I began each interview with an explanation of my research with time for questions. I asked every participant to talk about "femme" and their relationship to the identity before beginning the conversation about femme internet culture. As is expected (and desired) with semi-structured interviews, sometimes the conversations went in directions I did not expect or anticipate, which sometimes led to readjusting my questions in subsequent interviews.

As I situated myself as an insider and a participant, and conceptualized my interviewees as co-producers of theory, interviews were often spaces of exchange and vulnerability. With my interviewees, I exchanged personal information and personal feelings about femme, including fears and anxieties. I was corrected and challenged through these interviews. We often laughed together and, as the conversation moved to heavier topics, we sometimes cried. When I completed all of my interviews, I transcribed them and then had two sets of data to analyze: screen captures or Saved images from Instagram, and interview transcriptions.

Analysis

I used Patricia Rind's (2002) method of coding interview transcripts to inform my own: starting with multiple codes and re-organizing the codes until they became grouped into more

general themes. However, unlike Rind I used colour codes to link related ideas together visually before assigning a written code to lines of text. The main themes that emerged from my transcript analysis were: femme politics, femme representation, femme community, and what I came to term "softness" — discussions of things like vulnerability, self-care, emotional support, and other therapeutic practices. Softness was also a theme that emerged in my analysis of my visual data. To analyze the memes, selfies, and other images I collected, I used visual discourse analysis as described above (Traue et al., 2019). This meant I analyzed both the visual cues and symbols in the image (including finding and watching the source films visually referenced in the memes I will describe later), as well as norms and practices of femme internet culture to understand what the image meant. I also contextualized this meaning in the broader social context to make claims about the significance of these femme cultural productions. I structured the writing of my dissertation around the following themes: memes, softness, selfies, and friendship.

Summary of Findings

I have written a manuscript dissertation consisting of four stand-alone papers that are intended for submission to different academic journals. Contributing several different works to several different publications helps to build the emerging field of critical femininity studies. Further, the manuscript format allows for the production of a range of academic contributions that will, by design, encounter different audiences, and fold femme-inist epistemology into different methods and fields. This expansive approach is ideal as my intention is to contribute to both the archive and development of femme-inist epistemology within the academy.

The first paper is titled "Low Femme, Low Theory: Memes and the New Bedroom Culture" and will be submitted to the journal *Feminist Media Studies.* This paper roots femme online practices in the girl-dominated traditions of DIY, fandom, and bedroom culture, adding meme-making to the geneaology of feminized knowledge production. I read memes using visual discourse analysis to develop the notion of femme memes: audiovisual content found

online that appropriates and mobilizes public symbols to address the devaluation of femininity. I argue that femme memes are political, and often humourous, modes of creating femme culture and femme theory online.

The second paper is titled “The Future is Soft: Soft Femme Aesthetics and Poetics” and will be submitted to a special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on Femme Theory. This paper traces the history of femme aesthetics and theory — a history that is rooted in lesbian culture — and, through analysis of the aesthetics and poetics of femme internet culture, claims soft femme is the present/future dominant femme trope. I articulate the ways the shifts in femme theory mirror shifts in feminist and queer theory in the academy, linking hard femme theory to post-modernism and soft femme theory to vulnerability and affect theories. I argue that the turn away from hardness and irony toward softness, earnestness, and “authenticity” is a strategy for recuperating the feminine, even or especially the parts of it that have been previously left behind by femme theory. The possibility of authenticity online has been debated since the advent of the internet; this paper demonstrates that the question of authenticity still animates the study of the internet. I endeavour to avoid collapsing “authenticity” and “vulnerability,” or making judgements about how authentic the performance of vulnerability online is, and seek instead to question femme internet culture’s attachments to notions of authenticity and vulnerability.

The third paper is titled “Radical Softness: Selfies as a Practice in Vulnerability” and will be submitted to a special issue of the journal *Psychology and Sexuality* on Critical Femininities. In this paper, I consider the ways femmes have historically grappled with vulnerability, and consider the current relationship between femmes and vulnerability. Through analysis of femme selfies, I argue that femmes strategically mobilize vulnerability via selfies to generate femme theory and femme community. I contribute to the recent tradition of feminist reparative readings of selfies, and consider this reparative reading of selfies as a reparative reading of femininity and feminized modes of thought and expression. However, I resist a utopic reading

of vulnerability by considering both the benefits and costs of being vulnerable: I consider which femmes have the privilege of leveraging vulnerability, and which are made more vulnerable to attack based on their intersectional social identity.

The final paper in this manuscript dissertation is titled "Femmeship: Political Alliances and Communities of Care" and will be submitted to the journal *Women's Studies in Communication.* While the previous papers relied more heavily on intertextual analysis of visual media, this paper is primarily constructed through interview data. In this paper, I develop the concept of "femmeship:" a friendship between femmes that acts as both a political alliance and care network. This paper considers online communication as a technological affordance of Instagram that ignites femme connections online. I consider the significance of such connections, finding that femmeships are both politically sustaining and emotionally beneficial. I argue that the act of femmes sustaining and aligning with each other is politically rooted in the pursuit of revaluing feminized modes of interaction and expression, as well as feminized bodies.

Throughout the papers in my dissertation, I demonstrate how femme theory and femme subjects offer a nuanced and recuperative embodiment of the feminine, and challenge the dominant perception of the feminine as a patriarchal construct that harms women. As femmes (many of whom are not women) grapple with femininity, they build a version that is divorced from patriarchy and oriented, rather, toward other femmes. Femme interventions in femininity uncover what is pleasurable and productive about femininity; such findings pose a challenge to the misogynist and femmephobic framing of the feminine, and insist, rather, on its pleasures and possibilities.

Part Two: Low Femme, Low Theory: Memes and the New Bedroom Culture

Introduction: What do you meme?

The term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976. Though an "enthusiastic Darwinist," Dawkins admitted that some human behaviours cannot be explained by genetic concepts of evolution. In particular, Dawkins was curious about human behaviours that evolve "at rates which [are] orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution" (1976, p. 189). These behaviours included language, fashions in dress and diet, ceremonies and customs, art and architecture, and engineering and technology (Dawkins 1976, p. 190). Behaviours like these, he argued, seem to propagate through imitation rather than genetics. Dawkins said we need a word for this new, non-genetic "replicator," this small unit of cultural transmission, this unit of imitation that is responsible for the evolution of many human behaviours (1976, p. 192). Drawing from the Greek word *"mimeme,"* meaning "to imitate" and the French *"même,"* meaning "same," Dawkins called the new replicator a "meme."

Dawkins' definition of meme included examples of small units of culture that spread through imitation, like "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (1976, p. 192). More recent definitions remain similar. According to Eileen Botting, Christine Wilkerson, and Elizabeth Kozlow (2014), memes are "widely recognizable yet variously replicated symbols of ideas" (p. 14). Internet users use the term "meme" to describe particular audiovisual content (Shifman, 2013, p. 13); Carl Chen defines memes as an "extremely contagious and often very humorous part of internet culture" (2012, p. 7). In the current moment, the colloquial usage of the term "meme" refers almost exclusively to online content.

The memes I focus on in this paper are variations of a particular digital form known as the image macro. Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift (2015) describe an image macro as simply "pictures superimposed with witty captions for humorous effect" (p. 330). The website Know Your Meme dates the genre back to the year 1905, but the online version became

widespread on the discussion board 4chan; one of its most successful memes, LOLcats, serves as a prime example (Figure 1). Other examples include “Advice Animals” like Socially Awkward Penguin and Business Cat (Figure 2, 3). All of these series involve user-made derivatives of an original — a vital aspect of internet memes, according to definitive meme scholar Limor Shifman. She defines internet memes as “a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance; b) that were created with awareness of each other; and c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed by many users on the Internet” (Shifman, 2013, p. 8).[3]

Figure 1. LOLcats example. Cheezburger [digital image]. (2010). Retrieved from: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/cheezburger)

While there is much to be said about memes, what is of particular interest to me in this paper is considering their political and communicative functions. Carl Chen (2012) says memes work to solidify the boundaries of an online community, as a close reading of a community’s memes illuminates the group’s norms of expression, its values, and its shared interests (p. 7). Further, he says establishing these group norms leads to the fostering of critical judgement in the membership, and even the creation of political action (Chen, 2012, p. 7). Shifman also contends that memes are a form of political participation. Political memes are about making a point, she says, a way of participating in a debate about how the world should look (Shifman, 2013, p.

[3] Here, a distinction must be made between a meme and viral content. Limor Shifman (2013) says that the central attribute of memes is their “sparking” of user-created derivatives, including parodies, mash-ups, and remixes (p. 2). Memes are driven by various means of copying and imitation (Shifman 2013, p. 4)—the poor copying-fidelity that Dawkins identified. Remixing is the essential difference between the memes and viral content: a meme is an existing idea or trope that DIY media-makers create their own version of before sharing, whereas, viral content is shared without remixing or remaking its original meaning.

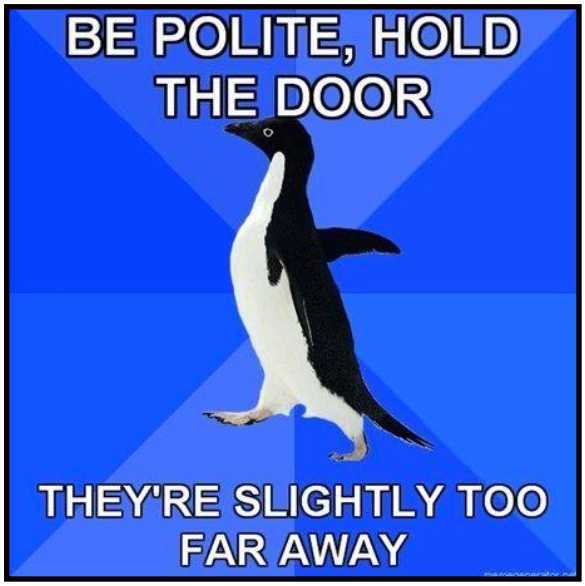

Figure 2. Socially awkward penguin [digital image]. (2009). Retrieved from: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/

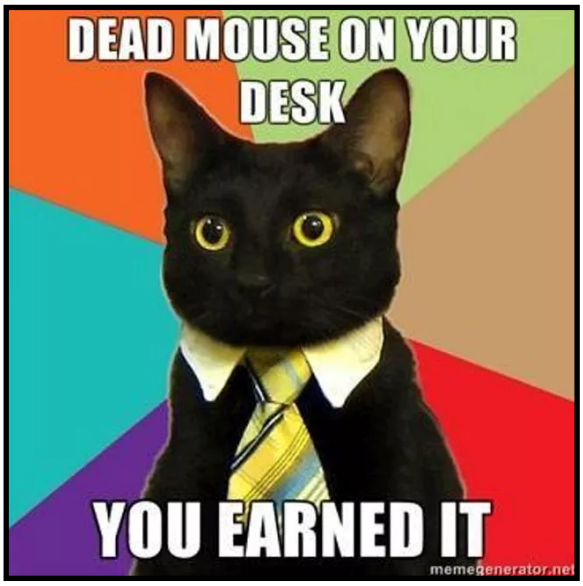

Figure 3. Business Cat [digital image]. (2011). Retrieved from: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/business-cat)

120). Memes can act as forms of persuasion or advocacy campaigns, as forms of grassroots action, and as modes of expression and public discussion (Shifman, 2013, p. 122-123). They enable the spread of political slogans and enable ordinary people to personalize them, a function exemplified by the 'We Are the 99%' meme (Shifman, 2013, p. 128). (Figure 4, 5, 6) Memes expand the range of participation options in democracies, sometimes even representing democracy itself in non-democracies (Shifman, 2013, p. 144).

One political function of memes is enabling the creation of political discourse in corporate-owned spaces, like on Tumblr, Facebook, or Instagram. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) say feminist community is forged in these spaces through participation — the doing of feminist cultural production (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 340). They see memes as a way to conceptualize "the affective, technological, and cultural politics of digital feminism and contemporary modes of action" (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 331). Further, they say that online participation through meme propagation represents a new arena of bottom-up expression, similar to past iterations like "culture jamming" (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 331). Following

Dawkins' understanding that memes propagate culture, Rentschler and Thrift say that memes propagate feminism, and this is a way of "doing feminism" online (2015, p. 331). Botting et al. (2014) define feminist memes as "dominant clusters of public symbols that embody the political ideas and influence of the movement for women's liberation from patriarchy" (p. 14). Rentschler and Thrift (2015) say feminist meme propagation represents ways of "doing, making and sharing feminism via social media platforms" (p. 331). In this paper, I follow this definition to develop an understanding of femme memes and femme meme production. I draw on traditions in girlhood studies, feminist theory, and queer theory to look to the lo-fi, low-culture artefacts I categorize as "femme memes," and argue that they demonstrate theoretical perspectives on femme subjectivity, politics, and culture.

Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of an older white man holding a handwritten sign that read, "WHILE MY TAXES WERE BAILING OUT MY BANK, MY BANK WAS SQUEEZING ME. I AM THE 99 PERCENT.

OCCUPYWALLSTREET.ORG

5 OCT 2011

US ARMY VETERAN"

I am the 99%, 1 [digital image]. (2011). Retrieved from: https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/we-are-the-99-percent-creators/

Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of a white man holding a handwritten sign that read, "IN 3 HOURS MY CEO MAKES MORE THAN I DO IN A YEAR!

I AM THE 99%

YOU ARE THE 99 %

WE ARE THE 99%"

I am the 99%, 2 [digital image]. (2011). Retrieved from: http://cultcritic.net/2011/11/10/occupy-wall-street-demanding-what-theyve-earned/

Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of a young brown man holding a handwritten sign that read, "My mother is drowning in debt so I can earn a degree that offers NO FINANCIAL SECURITY

We are the 99%
occupywallstreet.org"

I am the 99%, 3 [digital image]. (2011). Retrieved from: https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2011/9/30/1021758/-

Femme is a queer identity that has multi-faceted histories. Femme emerged out of lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States (Nestle, 1992), with roots also

in the drag and ball culture dominated by Black queers and trans women, originating in Harlem in the 1960s (Bailey, 2014). Femme has many histories and many roots, and has evolved to encompass any queer and political engagement with femininity (see for example Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Connell, 2012). Despite historically being a pillar of queer culture, femmes' contributions are overlooked and femme expressions are devalued because femininity is devalued in Western culture more broadly. In queer communities, femmes have often been suspected of occupying a kind of interloper position; often femmes are assumed to be "not really queer" based on their feminine appearance, which is understood as "normative," or too eager to reap the "passing" (as heterosexual) privileges associated with femininity. While many femmes have pointed out serious flaws in this logic — for example, passing as straight is not always a privilege, especially when one wants to be seen as belonging to a queer community, and that femininity only awards this so-called passing privilege to cisgender women — the assumption of femme flightiness remains static. The understanding of femme as an interloper awards femmes a lower status in queer communities, which often results in erasure, discrimination, and violence.

Much of femme literature to date has argued that femme is an identity and gender expression that is queer, subversive, and radical (Nestle,1992; Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Hollibaugh, 2000; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). Femmes continue to circulate this political disourse on the internet. Following the scholarship on memes cited above, I define femme memes as particular audiovisual content found online that appropriates and mobilizes public symbols to address the devaluation of femininity — in the form of, for example, femmephobia, misogyny, sexism, transmisogyny, and misogynoir — and simultaneous, intersecting forms of oppression.

My study of femme memes comes from a larger study, an online ethnography of femme internet culture on Instagram. Through my six-month study, I found that femme Instagram accounts engage with politics through selfies, memes, screenshots, and other types of posts.

The political issues that femmes are evidently concerned with are wide-ranging and topical. During my six-month study, femme Instagrammers posted political commentary about current events like school shootings, policy changes like SESTA/FOSTA, holidays like Valentine's Day, or new films like *Black Panther* (2018). Femmes also posted about ongoing social/political issues like consent, self-love, body and fat positivity, racism, anti-blackness, and violence. Both politics and humour play a significant role in structuring meme culture in general as well as femme memes specifically. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) say, "Internet memes are often meant to be funny, connecting people through shared jokes, but they also express personal modes of testimony and serious political expression" (p. 331). Femme memes are political, and often humourous, modes of creating femme culture and femme theory online.

I position memes as a continuation of "bedroom culture," a term coined by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in 1976 to describe how girl culture has historically developed at the margins of public and subcultural spaces. Through meme production, femmes — a subculture within the already-marginalized group, queers — participate in subcultural practices and, using their marginal position as a vantage point, create their own rich subculture-within-a-subculture. Bedroom culture shares principles with "low theory," a queer framework which argues that "low" cultural forms (as opposed to high cultural forms, like fine arts) are a rich site of knowledge and cultural production, especially for marginalized social groups. I will argue that both bedroom culture and low theory are practices informed by feminine and queer perspectives, and thus memes, which are informed by the logics of bedroom culture and low theory, are a feminist and queer practice. Meme making, in its contemporary iteration, is a practice rooted in feminine ways of thinking and being, and, in the particular forms I examine here, a mode of making meaning about femme subjectivity and culture. I develop an understanding of femme memes as a way of theorizing femme subjectivity, experience, and politics that is embedded in the feminized tradition of bedroom culture.

Theoretical Framework

Low Femme, Low Theory

To make this argument I draw on bell hooks' notions of theory and theorizing (1991). hooks resists the notion that theory is an elite practice, and explains theorizing as "making sense out of what was happening" (1991, p. 2). She opens her essay by writing,

> Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting — the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (hooks, 1991, p. 1)

Following hooks, I understand femme theorizing as making sense out of femmes' lived experiences and femmes' feelings.

It is critical to make space for this un-elitist understanding of theorizing, considering the barriers that restrict access to formal knowledge-making processes. While hooks understands theorizing as a place of healing — indeed, as a liberatory practice — she also acknowledges the potential for exploitation within formalized processes of theory. Drawing from Katie King, hooks discusses the politics of citation, arguing that the hierarchical setting of academic theory production enables white women scholars to draw from women of colour scholars without giving proper credit (hooks, 1991, p. 3). The academic standards of what "counts" as theoretical work (for example, the privileging of the written text over oral narratives) create the conditions that enable white women scholars to turn to the works of white men scholars, rather than women of colour scholars (hooks, 1991, p. 4). As hook demonstrates, academic theorizing is not neutral, nor is it representative of all knowledge.

Theorists who have found themselves structurally excluded from the academy or the production of "high theory" — like women, femmes, and racialized people — have created alternative approaches, as evidenced by the emergence of Women's Studies, African-American

or Black Studies, and Indigenous or Aboriginal Studies, to name a few. Queer theory is another alternative approach which first emerged as a protest of theory (Nyong'o, 2005, p. 84). But Tavia Nyong'o has responded to the apparent reification of queer theory by calling, instead, for a punk or punk'd theory, wondering if scholars "can contribute to the cultivation of a punk spirit of anticapitalist subculture, art, and politics?" (2005, p. 20). Kath Weston (1995) outlines two different ways of 'doing' theory: straight theory — "the kind with philosophers, footnotes and seven-syllable words" — and street theory — "the activity that engages people as they go about their business" (p. 348). She calls for more work in queer studies that bridges the two approaches (Weston 1995, p. 349). This chapter aims to answer that call, and gathers further inspiration from Jack Halberstam's project *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), a book which

> darts back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing. (p. 2)

Halberstam purposely risks not being taken seriously by using artefacts from popular culture — like the animated show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-present) — in order to reroute around "tried and true" theoretical pathways (2011, p. 5). He insists that rich theoretical terrains are missed when we stick to these pathways; there is richness that can only be discovered by those willing to lose or to fail (Halberstam 2011, p. 7). Halberstam calls this approach "low theory," an approach I adapt for positioning femme memes as sites of theory.

Femmes are already low theory practitioners: many of the texts that theorize and archive femme identity, subjectivity, and experience are memoirs and anthologies, rather than explicitly academic works (see for example Nestle, 1987, 1992; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Hollibaugh, 2000; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015). Further, femmes are arguably incredible failures in their own right. Though often portrayed as fabulous, femme has been considered a failure on many counts; in fact,

failure is an inherent part of femme identity (Schwartz, 2018; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). Femme's queer sexuality has been considered a failure to achieve idealized femininity. For example, in defining femme, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri wrote: "Femme might be described as 'femininity gone wrong' […] Femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs" (2002, p. 2). From within the queer community, this "failure" has been celebrated as embodying anti-normativity and subverting gender stereotypes. However, within the queer community, femme's feminine gender identity has also often been treated as a failure to achieve feminist, queer, or lesbian expectations.

Since the 1990s, much of queer theory and many queer communities have emphasized anti-normativity as the standard of queer expression; this has enabled the privileging of butch, genderqueer, or transmasculine voices and expressions, and the simultaneous erasure and marginalization of femme voices and expressions in queer and lesbian culture (Brightwell, 2017). To counter this marginalized position, many femmes have emphasized the performativity of femme identity, rendering it similarly anti-normative and queer. This, in turn, created a high femme standard of which several scholars remain critical. For example, Robbin VanNewkirk has wondered:

> where does that leave those of us who don't *glide through space*, but are just walking to get somewhere whether there is an audience or not? Can I still be subversive if my actions are not always a manipulative and tactical strategy for resistance? What if the subversive potential of femme identity becomes an expectation that I cannot always fulfill? (2006, p. 77 [emphasis in original])

It seems that if failing is the method of low theory, then femmes are among its top scholars.

Memes are also aligned with low theory. Carl Chen (2012) has positioned memes as low or "folk" culture, arguing that memes are more aligned with "kitsch" than high culture. He uses Clement Greenberg's definition of kitsch that describes the category as essentially predigested art that spares spectators the effort of analysis (Chen, 2012, p. 12). Chen writes, "consuming

the internet meme has no challenge compared to higher culture, which could be intellectually stimulating and have other rewards," (2012, p. 12). While I would disagree that memes are always so simplistic — meme literacy ranges from simple to complex, and can require an understanding of pop culture, current events, internet lingo or "text speak," and particular subcultural issues, to name only a few of the possible requirements — Chen's argument makes sense considering that some memes, like LOLcats, started as a subcultural form but quickly became standardized and commercialized (2012, p.12-3). This demonstrates that some memes lose their potency, and simply become hegemonic or normative.

While both femmes and memes are often interpreted as low status or low culture, there is potential in this position, as Halberstam indicates. Some popular or general-audience writing on memes, like that found on the *Bust Magazine* blog (Johnson, 2017) or the website *Medium* (Hoins, 2016), suggests that the form is an example of Neo-Dadaism, an art and cultural movement that uses found images, humour, and the absurd to, much like low theory, subvert the established norms of the art world. Considering these perspectives, memes can be understood as moving between high and low culture, blurring the boundaries as they go. Similarly, Elizabeth Galewski (2005) has, following Paul Ricoeur, understood femme's ability to shuttle between the commonplace and the alien as a disruption to the straight-queer binary. She says, "the femme's passing presents an opportunity for questioning and remaking preconceptions of the queer" (Galewski, 2005, p. 200). The productive potential of these spaces in between high and low culture, and queer and straight cultural legibility suggests that femme memes have much to offer in terms of political and cultural theory.

Bedroom Culture

Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber made a similar argument about girls' participation in youth subcultures. They introduced the notion of "bedroom culture" as a way to explain how, due to patriarchal restraints, girls participate in subcultural activity differently than boys. Specifically, they argued that girls' subcultural participation was relegated to the marginal,

private sphere of the bedroom. Girls faced certain risks in participating in subcultural activity that boys simply did not. For example, McRobbie and Garber argued that girls were less likely to hang out on the street, as loitering was seen as sexual invitation (McRobbie, 1991, p. 5). This was risky for girls for a number of reasons, including the difficulty of obtaining birth control, and the primacy of a "good" reputation (McRobbie, 1991, p. 5). As a result, girls communed in their bedrooms where they could safely engage in subcultural activity and avoid upsetting the patriarchal standard that granted more freedom to boys. Girl culture developed in the bedroom as a subculture within a subculture, one that consisted of experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading "the mags," sizing up the boyfriend, chatting, and "jiving" (Kearney, 2006, p. 22). In the privacy of the bedroom, girls could safely explore their sexuality through fantasy, daydream their way into defining their identities and finding escape, and become active members and consumers of subcultural texts (McRobbie, 1991, p. 13-4).

Though the term "bedroom culture" was coined in the 1970s, the concept itself is not so recent. Tara Puri (2013) examined the role that dressing room dynamics played in fostering female relationships in Victorian literature. She argues that the link between clothing and identity in Victorian society made the process of dressing an important one, revealing the dressing room as an intimate space where "homospectatorial display" and genuine friendship were enacted (Puri, 2013, p. 504). Similar to McRobbie's claim that post-war British boys were more likely to take up public space than girls due to the gendered realities girls and boys face, in the Victorian home men's spaces were the public, large, and central rooms, and women's spaces were private and peripheral, mirroring the social value and expectation placed on each gender (Puri, 2013, p. 504). In light of the social circumstances of the times, both McRobbie and Puri point to the bedroom or dressing room as the site of female bonding and culture.

While McRobbie's understanding of bedroom culture is one primarily premised on the consumption of culture, Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) amends this theory to argue that the bedroom is also a site of cultural production and political action (p. 21). Kearney says what was

missing from McRobbie's analysis of bedroom culture is the scrapbooking, letter writing, and newsletter production that occurred in these spaces (2006, p. 23). Though Kearney emphasizes girls' production, she understands consumption and production as interdependent cultural forces, noting that girls often "appropriate and reconfigure" commercial media texts when making their own (2006, p. 4).

The link between bedrooms and cultural production also has a long history: even in ancient Greece, the loom could be found in women's private chambers, or "gynaikonitides" (Weissberg, 2010, p. 667). Sigmund Freud, too, found evidence of women's contribution to civilization in the bedroom when he admitted: "Women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization, but one technique which they may have invented is that of plaiting and weaving" (qtd. in Weissberg 2010, p. 667). Though handicrafts have been assumed to not require intellect, creativity, or reflection, they have been reclaimed by contemporary feminists, like Kearney, who emphasize their pedagogical function, their potential as a grounds for socializing, and their encouragement of creativity and self-expression. In her book *Girls Make Media* (2006), Kearney details the cultural artefacts produced in the bedrooms of the 1990s, including zines, DIY films, and homepages. The advent of "inexpensive, user-friendly media technologies for amateurs" meant that girls' cultural productions began to circulate beyond the bedroom, "long understood as the primary location for girls' creative endeavours" (Kearney, 2006, p. 2, 3). While certainly not all femmes are girls or women, the marginal position they occupy in both queer and mainstream spaces mirrors the marginalization faced by women and girls. Accordingly, we can surmise that femme cultural production occurs in marginal or private spaces.

The New Bedroom Culture

New communications technology has complicated notions of private and public space. Nancy Baym (2015) writes that cell phone users doubly privatize public space, and that media-rich bedroom culture creates privacy and solitude (p. 5). This blurring of the boundaries

between public and private has enabled DIY, lo-fi cultural productions to slip into the mainstream. To illustrate, Henry Jenkins (2006) recounts the impact of a series of images titled "Bert is Evil" created by Filipino-American high school student Dino Ignacio. These Photoshop-ed images showed the *Sesame Street* (1969-present) character, Bert, in scenes with undemocratic political leaders, terrorists, and other "unsavoury" characters. One image, featuring Bert and Osama Bin Laden, circulated (unironically) as far as political protests in the Middle East. In recounting this story, Jenkins wrote, "from his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy" (2006, p. 2).

Memes fit into the tradition of bedroom culture in a number of ways. As Jenkins indicates when he writes, "from his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy" (2006, p. 2), memes are made in the private space of the bedroom, with the technological assistance of a personal computer or smartphone, making the bedroom a site of production. Just as girls' and women's handicrafts that were created in their private spaces have been assumed to not require intellect, creativity, or reflection, memes are similarly dismissed as trivial or nonsensical — hardly considered important cultural artifacts. Thus, I see meme-making as aligned with the feminized legacy of bedroom culture and, therefore, as a practice that utilizes feminized or marginalized modes and perspectives. Marginalized perspectives are frequently critical of the dominant perspective and, when considered on their own, offer much insight into subcultural identities, values, and practices.

Memes have always played an important role as venues for expressing opinions and subverting established order, and in this fundamental sense there is nothing new in their latest digital incarnation, except becoming more public (Shifman 2013, p. 149). Public spaces have long been understood as places of political exchange, so as memes become more public, they also become more political. The same is true of girls' bedroom culture: Kearney notes that communications technologies made it possible for girls' cultural productions to circulate outside the bedroom, and this has had an impact on culture overall. She writes:

> In fact, during the early 1990s, numerous records, zines, and films created by female youth were introduced to the large pool of American popular culture. By the end of that decade, several of those recordings have received second releases, many of those zines were being mass-produced and archived at libraries, and a considerable number of those films were appearing on television and in international film festivals. [...] As a result of the increased presence of girl-made media, American popular culture is becoming further diversified and democratized. (2006, p. 3)

The drive to diversify and democratize media is certainly a political impulse, one that, in the case of girls' culture, both critiques the exclusion of girls' narratives, and works to override this exclusion. The diversification of media is a political project that extends to many marginalized groups beyond girls, and this often begins in marginal or subcultural spaces, including social media platforms like Tumblr and Instagram that allow users to disseminate their own content on a wide scale (Connell, 2012; Fink & Miller, 2013; Nicholson, 2014). In this sense, we can understand memes as a product of the new bedroom culture, as they are a DIY or user-generated cultural product borne out of private or subcultural spaces. Further, they are often specific to subcultural or marginalized groups, and have the potential to carry political messages beyond the subcultural space in which they were generated. My focus on femme memes reveals a critical response to dominant perspectives on femininity and the existence of a vibrant femme subculture.

Femme Memes

Shifman argues that we should consider memes from a communication-oriented perspective, as sharing memes can be understood as both a form of distribution and communication (2013, p. 19). Social bonds form around memetic in-jokes; people who "get it" see themselves as belonging to a community (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 343). "Getting" a femme meme is predicated on a number of literacies: understanding the norms and values of queer culture, understanding pop culture references, understanding current events and current

political climates, and understanding meme formats in general, are all important in reading femme memes. Consider the three-panel meme made by Instagram user @xenaworrierprincess shown in Figure 7. (Figure 7, 8, 9) To understand it, one must recognize the subject in the images as Robyn, the Swedish pop star who, like many pop stars, is something of a gay icon. One must also recognize the images as stills from the music video for Robyn's song, "Call Your Girlfriend." One must also recall the lyrics to the song — "call your girlfriend/it's time you had the talk/give your reasons/say it's not her fault/but you just met someone new" — to know it is a break-up song. One must also have an understanding of queer relationships, especially the tendency for lovers and friends to overlap in the queer community, and recognize the overlaid text as text messages on a smartphone. Reading all of these components then indicates that this meme is about the apparently common queer experience of processing a complicated queer relationship, the common-ness of this experience being that which makes the meme relatable and, therefore, funny (let alone imagining Robyn performing your break-up). Lesbian or queer women's relationships and their complications are a common theme of @xenaworrierprincess' memes and, judging by her following of over 30 thousand, these themes have hit a collective nerve.

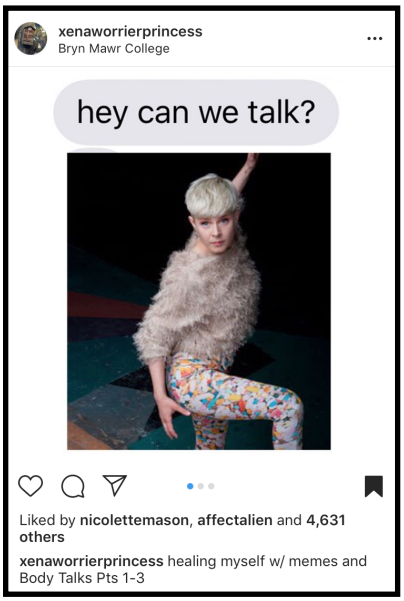

Figure 7. Robyn meme part 1, by @xenaworrierprincess [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/BWviq-QlUjs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

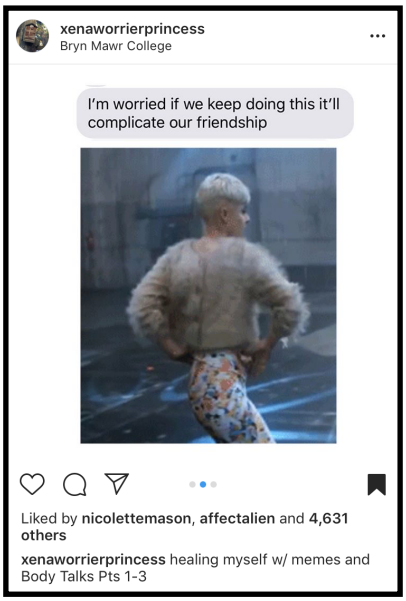

Figure 8. Robyn meme part 2, by @xenaworrierprincess [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/BWviq-QlUjs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

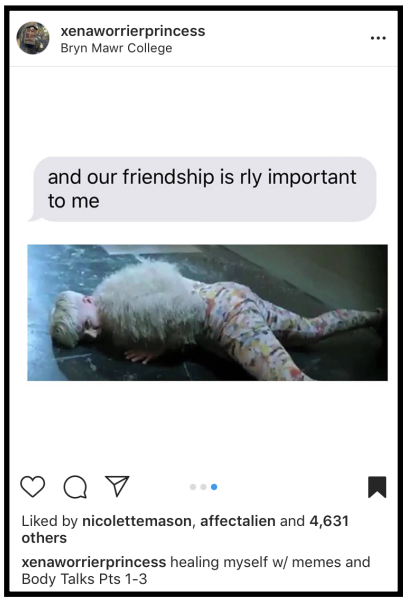

Figure 9. Robyn meme part 3, by @xenaworrierprincess [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from: https://www.instagram.com/p/BWviq-QlUjs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

Queering Femininity with Casual Misandry50

One theme that consistently runs throughout @xenaworrierprincess' memes is "casual misandry," a concept that can be described as criticism or denigration of men played for humourous effect among queer and feminist communities. This is usually understood as a coping mechanism for women, non-binary, and transfeminine people in light of the misogyny, sexism, and violence they often experience at the hands of men. Figure 10 shows one of @xenaworrierprincess' casual misandry memes. The text reads "tfw [the feeling when] when [sic] a man," and the image responds, "je telephone a la police [sic]." This is a common exaggerated joke-response to minor things one finds reprehensible, like putting pineapple on pizza: "I'm calling the police!" The meme indicates that anything a man does, even something minor, or even the anticipation of a man doing something, is immediately considered

Figure 10. Misandry meme, 1, by @xenaworrierprincess [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Be1WFtWgRfj/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

unacceptable and reprehensible, and must be stopped and punished.

Another femme Instagrammer whose memes are also central to femme internet culture, @failureprincess, makes a misandrist meme every Monday and hashtags it #MisandristMonday. Some of them, pictured below, appropriate common memetic images to imagine dancing in the scorn of men (Figure 11), pouring out a drink when it's discovered that eye contact with men is a main ingredient (Figure 12), and trying to make a meal out of your respect for men's opinions, only to find that you have none (Figure 13). Though the notions implied or shown in the actual memes are abstract or absurd, and are meant to be taken as jokes, the conceptual framework in which they are produced can also be taken as a feminist imperative. It is a liberating idea to be so free of men's opinions and judgements and their impact, which has been long known as oppressive and even violent to women, that one could feasibly imagine shamelessly dancing in their judgement, refusing their attention outright, or openly disrespecting their opinions without fear. Read this way, casual misandry can be understood as a prefigurative feminist strategy for enacting a future or alternative reality free of sexist oppression. These misandrist memes create a space on Instagram in which this femme-inist fantasy becomes a reality.

The limit of prefigurative politics, like the circulation of any counterdiscourse, is its sizable task: unseating hegemonic discourse. Catherine Connell has noted a similar difficulty of a fat-positive femme fashion Tumblr blog, *Fa(t)shion February* to convince a wider audience to accept its fat-positive (and queer and gender-non-conforming) politics (2012, p. 219). @failureprincess' misandrist memes have also had their "critics": the meme-maker told me her memes have been reported enough times by online trolls that they are frequently removed by Instagram for allegedly "violating community guidelines." This type of online trolling effectively stifles the potential of misandry as a feminist strategy or critique; women, femmes, and non-binary folks are unable to post any content critical of men — or sometimes even containing the word men or man — without risking deletion or trolling. However, this problem has generated creative solutions, namely a new genre of memes and other online content that sarcastically praises and placates to men. For example, @failureprincess' new weekly meme theme is, "Thanks, man! Monday." Reading these memes requires an added layer of literacy as further symbols and phrases undergo the process of resemiotization (Traue et al., 2018), producing further nuances that work to reproduce femme-inist subculture.

There are both possibilities and limits to this kind of prefigurative or counterdiscursive political strategy. Connell writes that *Fa(t)shion February* can be understood as a boundary public or virtual counterpublic in that it "offers users a respite and a place of belonging in the context of the exclusive, elitist, and oppressive confines of mainstream fashion" (2012, p. 221), while simultaneously failing to achieve a grander social shift. Similarly, misandry memes may fail to convince all of the reality of patriarchy and sexism, but provide a space in which sexism and patriarchy can be shed, even fleetingly, and a site through which femmes may catch sight of each other and know that they are part of a community.

It is significant, however, that misandry is often a method of critique employed by both heterosexual, female feminists and femmes. Reading casual misandry as a theme of femme

memes reveals the work that femmes do to queer femininity, as well as the pressures they are under to perform their queerness.

Figure 11. Misandry meme, 2, by @failureprincess [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BlA4MLsFAlV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

Figure 12. Misandry meme, 3, by @failureprincess [digital image]. (Accessed 2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/failureprincess/ **(**Image has since been removed). Image reproduced with permission.

Figure 13. Misandry meme, 4, by @failureprincess [digital image]. (Accessed 2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/failureprincess/ **(**Image has since been removed). Image reproduced with

Distancing oneself from men becomes a femme burden when femmes are treated as suspect, as straight imposters or interlopers. Misandry must be performed by femmes for the rest of the queer community to prove their belonging within it; it is a reassurance that femmes' femininity is not embodied for the purpose of men's approval, nor performed for the benefit of passing as heterosexual. Femme misandry becomes a mode of reinforcing the very queerness of femmes' femininity. At the same time, femmes must perform misandry for men in order to assert the same thing: femmes' femininity is not for men's consumption, a distinction which is

crucial to make in the attention economy of the internet (Davenport & Beck, 2001). This distinction is made explicit in one selfie caption — not a meme — written by myself on my personal Instagram account,"@affectalien," that I followed from my researcher account (@acafemmeic).[4] The selfie shows @affectalien (me) in a pink nightgown, laying across a bed with an unfriendly, defiant expression. The caption reads:

> feeling a lot of inarticulate-able rage about living in a culture that alienates and maligns you at every turn, that is always already right, to which the only responses are a snark-off that will only ever be "cute" and exhausting or honest/earnest criticism that will also always be exhausting but seen as scary, crazy, or too much because you never stood a chance in the first place so I guess the only thing I can say is misogyny and femmephobic bs are way too insidious and real and my femininity is never for you, always always a protest against you and yr whole damn culture #todayinmicroaggressions #uglyfeelings #endmaleculture #hackitup [knife emoji, lipstick emoji, knife emoji, lipstick emoji, knife emoji, lipstick emoji].

This caption makes explicit the claim that the misandrist memes make more subtly: that femmes' femininity is not for men and is actually a protest against male culture. Making this claim demonstrates how femmes weaponize femininity against the devaluation of femininity, women, and femmes. Femmes embody femininity deliberately, but also deliberately refuse the male gaze; this is a protest against the ways in which femininity has been imagined and treated as consumable, and works to undo the naturalized linkages between women, femininity,

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[4] I included my personal Instagram account in my online ethnography because I already identify as a queer femme, and so I am positioned as an insider in the culture I am studying. This is not unusual in online ethnographies (Hine, 2017, p. 10), and the blurring between researcher/archivist and participant/cultural producer is not unusual in studies of queer subcultures (Halberstam, 2003). I draw on Ulrika Dahl's (2011) femme-inist ethnography methodology to conceptualize a study of "one's own community." Dahl argues that studying one's own community queers the traditional notions of being "home" in the academy and "away" in the ethnographic field (Dahl, 2011, p. 10). In the ethnographic tradition, distance signals "objectivity" which renders the research "scientific" (Dahl, 2011, p. 5). Closing the psychic gap between researcher and informant by doing a study of one's own community is part of the necessary queer challenge to notions of what "counts" as theoretical work. It is fitting to use autoethnographic methods for queer and feminist research: authoethnography is often critiqued for being self-indulgent or narcissistic and lacking in rigour but feminist and queer scholars have long questioned the notion of scientific objectivity, or that research can be value-free, as I outline above (for more see: Messing, 1987; Smith, 1974; Harding, 1992).

heterosexuality, and patriarchy. The version of femininity performed in misandrist femme memes, even when embodied by women, is not heterosexual, it is not passive or deferential to men, it is not demur, placating, submissive, or polite. Instead, femininity is here in turns defiant, flippant, and always queer; it is a political protest against the systemic devaluation of femininity that upholds the patriarchal standards which position women as subordinate to men, and femmes as subordinate to other queers. Through misandrist femme memes, femmes theorize femme identity as a queer version of femininity that resists normative figurations and definitions.

While femme memes resist some norms of femininity through the theme of casual misandry, they also reinscribe norms in other ways. The frequent reliance of femme memes on stock images and celebrity or pop cultural images codes femme as white, cisgender, and able-bodied. Using popular images from *The L Word* (2004-2009)*, Clueless* (1995), or of Jodie Foster and Lana Del Rey is effective since they are widely recognizable, but it also reinforces the notion that femme is a white identity, which often erases the actual identities of the memers themselves, and flattens the actual diversity of the identity category as a whole. @failureprincess acknowledges the limits of using stock photos in the caption of one of her #MisandryMonday memes, which describes that, through the process of making the meme, she learned that "fall is for white people." The meme shows a pile of leaves labelled "ignoring the unsolicited opinions of men," and a young Black girl jumping into it, labelled "me." The implication of this caption is that images of white people participating in fall activities were readily available while it was difficult to find a fall-themed stock image of a person of colour. @failureprincess herself is a femme of colour (she uses the descriptor "Blaxican" in her Instagram bio), so her very existence refutes the notion that femme is an identity solely occupied by white bodies. However, even from this standpoint, it remains difficult to resist the reinscription of whiteness due to the images that are widely available. In early 2019, the website *Broadly,* a *Vice Media*-owned news site for women, non-binary folks, and queers,

launched “The Gender Spectrum Collection” — a gender inclusive stock photo library. Because my field work took place in 2018, this stock image library was unavailable to the meme makers in my ethnography, but it will be interesting to see how this and potentially other future “alternative” stock image libraries transform the genre of femme memes.

Refiguring Femme Invisibility

Memes re-use stock image photos or pictures of a celebrity, albeit with an alternative meaning. Most of the time, these are images of white people since they are seen as neutral, or as the default, and face fewer barriers to success or fame than people of colour do. White people are celebrated more readily by society at large, and seen as beautiful more often. Though stock images are meant to be generic or neutral, political memes play on this notion of generic — positioning white people themselves as generic, bland, or the butt of the joke. This is what memes do — they re-code the meaning of images to mean or represent something other than what they were intended to. This means that even though many femme memes (or other subcultural memes) depict white bodies, whiteness is not always presented uncritically, or positioned as supreme. Stock images also typically depict thin, normatively attractive, able-bodied, cisgender, people, which is not representative of the populations reappropriating these images, nor of the messaging conveyed through their use.

Femme memes utilize the same tropes as other memes, meaning many femme memes use generic images of white people or images of white celebrities, especially women. And though the reliance on normative images of femininity can evoke criticism for white-washing the identity, femmes do use normative images of femininity in critical and queer ways. For example, femme Instagram memers use popular, normative images of femininity to interrogate femme invisibility and femmephobia, which works to queer or disrupt the images’ normative meanings. The humour of these femme memes lies in re-coding normative feminine images as queer, as well as the #relatable femme feelings conveyed in the captions.

Figure 14. Femme invisibility meme 1, by @xenaworrierprincess [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BUU4oNZj4aI/?igshid=b2t6geoynmq3 Image reproduced with permission.

Figure 14 shows a @xenaworrierprincess meme using a two-panelled still from the film *Clueless*, a 1995 film based on Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815). The star of the film, and the figure shown in the images, is Cher Horowitz, a white, thin, heterosexual high school student with immense class and social privilege who, in the film, undergoes a transformation to understand her privileged position and become (slightly) more empathetic to the less privileged. The images show Cher in an obscenely large pile of clothing, apparently distressed. Fans of this film will know that in this scene, Cher is looking for a particular shirt — her "most capable-looking outfit" — to wear as she takes her driver's test. @xenaworrierprincess reinterprets this distress as a classic femme dilemma. Her text reads: "when yr running 20 minutes late, but you can't decide if yr outfit is femme or just straight girl realness." Here, @xenaworrierprincess alludes to the femme-specific anxiety about appearing straight when actually embodying one's true queer, gender identity. This anxiety is fuelled by the suspicion within the queer community that femme is parading as queer when she is actually straight; femme is always at risk of "turning" or betraying her community. In light of this concern, it becomes all the more important to the femme to be recognized as queer, to not appear to be betraying the community, in order to achieve acceptance.

The success of @xenaworrierprincess' meme lies in its ability to tap into this suspicion and anxiety that all femmes experience — a #relatable experience — and to render it funny and lighthearted by signalling the distress through a symbol of normative femininity. The same strategy is utilized in another of @xenaworrierprincess' memes that uses the image of Lindsay Lohan in her role in *The Parent Trap* (1998). In this 1998 remake of the 1961 film, Lohan plays a set of twins hellbent on reunited their estranged parents. Part of the strategy is to scare off the new female love interest in their father's life. In order to do this, the character Lohan plays must play up her helplessness and brattiness to direct her father's attention away from his love interest, and simultaneously expose the love interest as the cold-hearted, child-hating, "gold-digger" that she is. In @xenaworrierprincess' meme, she recodes this brattiness as queer. She uses a still from the film that shows Lohan holding two drinks and screaming. The two drinks are labelled "my femme identity" in one hand and "my desire for dyke nods and other queer visibility" in the other. These are visually coded as separate, almost binaristic, entities. The double-fisting posture signals a strong desire for both, yet the impossibility of enjoying both simultaneously. This positioning reveals just how separate — even opposite — femininity in women and queerness are understood to be, which is itself a theorization of how queer femmes are rendered invisible.

As depicted in both memes, femmes (coded as Horowitz and Lohan's character) are faced with the unhappy choice of maintaining or honouring their identity, or community recognition; it can never be both, though both are desired. The characters played by Lohan in the film are similarly trying to get everything they want: the female love interest gone, their parents reunited, and their family back together. Fans of this film will recall that in this scene, the twins played by Lohan have devised the perfect meeting of their parents, only to have their father fall in a pool at the critical moment. The scream that results from this snag in the scheme reads, in the femme meme, as frustration with the dissatisfying ultimatum presented to queer femmes: queer visibility, or femme identity (Figure 15).

The humour of the memes examined in this section lies in reimagining and recoding normative images of femininity as queer, and as telling #relatable queer stories — of offering oft-repeated femme narratives. The humour depends on the consumers of the memes recognizing themselves in these queer stories; of being 'in' on the joke, or getting 'it'; of being part of the community. In political and philosophical terms, the Hegelian concept of the "struggle for recognition" of one's identity has become a measure of justice, taking on three forms: love, rights, and esteem (Honneth, 1995). Recognition of one's dignity, for example, is understood as a human right (Honneth, 2004), but many members of marginalized or subaltern groups have been denied such recognition (Anderson, 1995, p. x). I draw from Danielle Petherbridge's (2016) understanding of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition to emphasize its role in the development of femme culture.

Humans are inherently vulnerable in three ways, according to Honneth: in terms of corporeality, before the law, and to the possibility of the "denigration of one's personality or lifestyle or membership in society" (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 596). Given humans' social and interdependent nature, this denigration could be devastating, and thus recognition is a vital response to humans' inherent vulnerability. In fact, the development of a "positive relation to the self" depends on "affirming relations of recognition" (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 596). Femmes are perhaps even more vulnerable to this denigration as they are routinely misrecognized as what they are, even within their already-marginalized groups: queers, queer women, or lesbians (Walker, 1993; Hemmings, 1999). Recognition, then, becomes instrumental to the development of subculture.

Lauren Berlant (2008) positions recognition as the opposite of abandonment (p. 11), and the desire to belong or to be recognized as powerful enough to create genres of feminine identity that structure women's culture, what she argues stands as the first mass cultural "intimate public" in the United States (p. viii-ix). According to Berlant, an intimate public "operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and

things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" (2008, p. 5). In the intimate public of femme internet culture, memes are one of those "things" that express femmes' core interests and desires. Thus, we can understand the function of the meme as going beyond producing a laugh; the meme produces femme community itself by creating genres of femme identity. In the example of the *Clueless* and *Parent Trap* memes described above, "femme invisibility" is rendered a genre of femme identity that forges a sense of belonging via recognition. In general, understanding memes fosters a sense of belonging: Rentschler and Thrift (2015) have said that understanding a meme helps to forge social bonds, and enables individuals to see themselves as part of a community (p. 343). Inferring from the number of likes each femme meme discussed above received at time of writing, it seems that each meme tapped into a widely-experienced femme feeling and thus made a number of femmes — 1594 and 4757 femmes to be exact — feel connected. Not only does "getting it" make the meme feel funnier, it also makes femmes feel *more femme* and thus, feel more connected.

Figure 15. Femme invisibility meme 2, by @xenaworriperprincess [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bc2YYd-lNGF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

In these memes, @xenaworrierprincess uses popular or "low" cultural artefacts (these are not

exactly considered high-brow films), personal experience, and community-based knowledge to communicate the theory that femme is invisible to the queer community due to femininity's association with cisgender, heterosexual women. While @xenaworrierprincess is mostly presenting this invisibility as a weakness or frustration, she also uses images of normative white femininity and recodes them as queer. In doing so, femme invisibility is exploited for its own queer cause: femmes' inherent queerness is revealed through this configuration. Femme (il)legibility has been a thorn in the side of femmes and a source of anxiety for both lesbian and straight communities. These memes demonstrate that femme can be subtly mapped onto normative images of femininity, infiltrating them and queering them from the inside out. Invisibility offers malleability and furtive, fleeting movement; after all, femme is the "*passante*, the one who passes by, as well as the one who passes" (Hemmings, 1999, p. 459). Femme is at once nowhere and everywhere, meaning her illegibility may be her very marker of queerness. In configuring femme memes in this way, @xenaworrierprincess is presenting a theory of the root of femme invisibility and, by queering normative images of femininity, a theory of femme's queer potential.

Low Theories, Low Feelings

Memes help to illuminate the boundaries of community, and Carl Chen (2012) says they also help to illuminates a group's norms of expression, its values, and its shared interests (p. 7), much like the texts and other "things" associated with intimate publics (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). One of the particular values held by the femme community, or genres of femme subjectivity, that is revealed in studying the "stuff" of femme internet culture is vulnerability. In femme memes, vulnerability is embraced through using personal experiences to make #relatable content, such as acknowledging and talking about mental illness and trauma, body dysphoria, and oppression, among other topics. Instagram user @femme4memes_[5] has made a meme using her own crying image with overlaid text about self love that also serves as an affirmation

[5] The person behind @femme4memes_, Nia Fae Loy, passed away in 2018.

directed to others. It reads: “tfw you’re a flawed human being with a lot of shit to work on but you’re surviving and learning to be better and no matter where you are in that process you will always be worthy of love.” (Figure 16) The combination of the text and the use of the memer’s own emotional image instead of a stock image photo or image of a celebrity suggests that she is using her own experience to frame her message, as well as the possibility that the meme’s “pep talk” or affirmation is meant for herself as well as directed to others.

Petherbridge (2016) defines vulnerability as a “general openness toward he other” that is characterized by ambivalence (p. 591). More specifically, this openness can be corporeal, indicating both a richness of sensuality and sensual encounters with the other and the world as well as a propensity for suffering, psychological, which affirms the individual and provides the capacity for positive relations to the self, and finally, vulnerability can also be understood as an openness to the other, or a form of interdependence that attends to the individual’s needfulness and requires social action and cooperation, but also contains the possibility for abuses of power (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 598). Understanding vulnerability in these ways, I argue that for @femme4memes_ revealing the emotions described above is an act of vulnerability. Here vulnerability becomes an act of generosity as it is offered to others as a form of solidarity or support. The meme takes a risk in assuming that the feelings of self-worth that @femme4memes_ is struggling with is a struggle also felt by others; this type of risk is necessary to precipitate connection.

As in the queer femininity and femme invisibility memes discussed above, a sense of belonging — feeling connected or feeling like you are part of a community — is established through recognizing oneself in the subject or message of the meme. Selfies don’t have the market on digital self-representation cornered, according to Kat Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan (2017); they say the hashtags #EDC (every day carry) and #GPOY (gratuitous picture of yourself) also constitute the self online (p. 141). They consider the #GPOY commonly used on Tumblr and found that the tag filed actual selfies, but other things, too, like .gifs (a moving

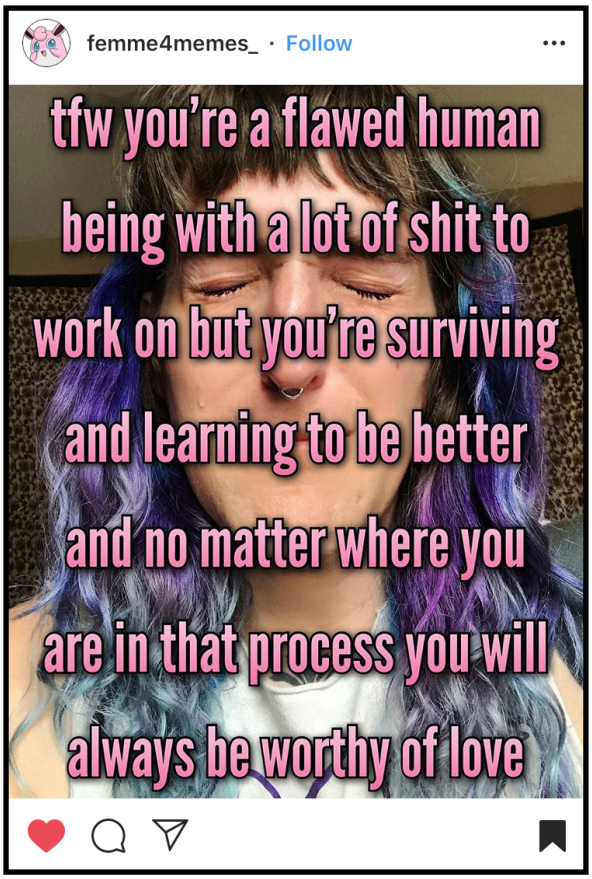

Figure 16. Low feelings meme, 1, by @femme4memes_ [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bm66Qq5HZ9Yv_BPzG6eo5lL_Nra9S-EP0a-vOc0/?igshid=1o911gfp5b7qa Image reproduced with permission.

image file) and screenshots (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017, p. 144). Tiidenberg and Whelan's argument that self representation in digital communication goes beyond performances of embodiment provides a framework for understanding the making and sharing memes as an act of self-representation or identity creation. A similar tag used on Instagram that I have referenced throughout this chapter is #relatable, which denotes content that resonates with the user posting or sharing it. Tiidenberg and Whelan see tagging non-selfie images with #GPOY as a strategy to make statements one feels embarrassed, uncertain, or vulnerable about (2017,

p. 147), and memes like those made by @femme4memes_ is no exception. In this case, this is less about 'getting' what is framed as a joke, and more explicitly about feeling less alone.

Instagram user @dyingbutfine is similarly forthcoming about her mental health struggles, and uses memes to share her experiences and express her frustrations. Figure 17 is one of @dyingbutfine's memes that discusses the connective possibilities of vulnerability, but laments that trauma is a primary way that femmes can bond with one another. @dyingbutfine's memes typically utilize images of Barbie dolls with overlaid text about mental illness or trauma. In Figure 17, two Barbie dolls are positioned poolside, and the overlaid text narrating the image reads: "When you and a femme you've never met bond over deep talks about trauma & sexual assault prevention and it's nice to get real and make a new pal but you wonder what the two of you could have had a profound first chat about instead if you both weren't burdened by the presence of so much heavy bullshit in the scene."[6] Much like Petherbridge's positioning of vulnerability as ambivalent, @dyingbutfine's meme takes a nuanced and critical approach to the connective power of vulnerability, a power I position largely as a strength of femme internet culture throughout my analysis. @dyingbutfine questions why it must be on these terms — through the shared experience of trauma, sexual assault, and mental illness — that femmes can readily connect?

The tone of this line of questioning, like much of @dyingbutfine's memes — and, indeed, the name of account itself, "dying, but fine…" — is one of resignation; it's not a call to action, but rather the bitter musings of an exhausted and overburdened feminist trying to survive in a deeply misogynist, capitalist, and ableist world. This sentiment has its place in femme political movements. In fact, it is similar in tone to Ann Cvetkovich's work on public feelings (2003) and political depression (2012), which seeks to connect negative affects experienced by individuals to the larger political systems at work. Cvetkovich, among other scholars like José Muñoz (2006), frames depression — famously characterized by inertia — as

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[6] The scene that @dyingbutfine refers to is the alternative music scene in Toronto, of which she is a part of as a drone music artist, performing under the stage name Bridgitte Bardon't.

productive, as a method for understanding, responding to, and even resisting the current political climate through creation and alternative thinking. Thinking with Cvektovich and Muñoz, @dyingbutfine's negative affects have arguably led to the creation and production of memes, which implicitly circulate a critical counterdiscourse, and help to solidify the boundaries of femme internet communities.[7] This consideration allows us to think of low theory in a different way: as the theories produced by affective or emotional "lows." The affective lows experienced by @dyingbutfine, @femme4memes_, and others lead to political questioning and theorizing — why are things the way they are? Does it have to be this way? Can we change it? This line of questioning corresponds to hooks' understanding of theorizing, as an endeavour to make sense out of pain. Though both memers use the popular or "low" cultural form, memes — consisting of other popular or low cultural artefacts like selfies, Barbie dolls, and internet lingo — to produce theoretical perspectives and questions, they are also low theorists in a different sense.

Both of these memes demonstrate that vulnerability is a norm in femme internet culture, here expressed as openness about trauma and negative emotions, including those that stem from living with mental illness. The emphasis on vulnerability and emotionality signifies a reclamation of the feminine, as vulnerability (of all kinds) has been positioned as a weakness in Western philosophy, and femininity has been positioned as weak and irrational (Drichel, 2013). Reclaiming the feminine is a femme political imperative, but the emphasis on emotionality and vulnerability illustrate the politics of softness that colour contemporary femme internet culture. Previous emphasis in femme texts has been on hardness, irony, performance, and subversion (see for example, Duggan & McHugh, 1996), not marking much of a departure from Western, masculinist philosophical values. The shift toward embracing vulnerability in femme internet culture marks potential new directions for femme theory as a whole. The methods I am reading

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[7] While the maker behind the @dyingbutfine account does not identify as queer, her occasional use of the term corresponds with a political understanding of femininity as resistance to gender oppression. The @dyingbutfine account resonates with many femmes who face similar issues around mental health, and thus continues to be a part of femme internet culture.

as modes of vulnerability — the use of one's own images and experiences — also illustrate Tiidenberg and Whelan's (2017) assertion that non-selfie images, like memes, can also be modes of self-representation. In foregrounding emotions, especially negative ones, low femmes are also producing representations of themselves, ones that resist the high-octane, high-heeled image of the femme that is similarly resisted by scholars like VanNewkirk (2006). In utilizing vulnerability in memes, femmes offer a theory of femme as a political thinker and feeler, and diversify the images of femme in contemporary culture.

Conclusion

The production of femme memes is a way of theorizing femme subjectivity, experience, identity, and politics, and a practice embedded in the feminized tradition of bedroom culture. The memes I have examined in this paper work to position femme as queer, to disentangle femininity from heterosexuality, and to reclaim and revalue the feminine via vulnerability. Through memes, femmes have produced theories on femme invisibility, the inherent queerness of the femme identity, and positioned the low femme as a political thinker and feeler. These theories counteract dominant ideologies of the femme as apolitical, as normative and invested in normativity, and as privileged for "passing" as heterosexual. These dominant ideologies reveal the general disparaging attitude toward femininity and femmes.

While femme memes, like most popular culture, continues to rely on representations of white, cisgender, able-bodied, and normatively attractive bodies, they often queer these representations and, in doing so, circulate critical counterdiscourse. While femme memes rely on these images, the images themselves are not representative of the femmes who make memes. It is interesting to note that at least two of the femmes whose memes I examined in this chapter, @femme4memes_ and @failureprincess have been targeted by trolls and, as a result, have had their memes and entire accounts deleted by Instagram. This is a common occurrence for feminist Instagram accounts — disgruntled users will "report" their content to Instagram until it is deleted for allegedly "violating community guidelines." However, it seems

that the content that disgruntles anti-feminist internet trolls the most in this small sample is that created by a white, openly trans femme and a cis, self-identified “Blaxican,” fat femme. Perhaps nothing exposes the political function of memes — and the political necessity of them — more than this uneven reality of running an Instagram meme account.

There are limits to circulating femme memes on social media, such as the over-privileging of whiteness, the abuse experienced by trans femmes and femmes of colour, and the fact that despite producing content that entertains tens of thousands of users of a corporate media platform, none of this content actually belongs to its producers, generates revenue, or is even protected by the corporation. Despite the limits, the gains remain real: femme memes act as more accessible sites of femme theory, as well as forms of self-representation and communication which forge social bonds and help to solidify femme communities online. Continuing to occupy the figure of the *passante* and to utilize the methods of low theory, femmes use corporate media spaces in subversive, if ambivalent, ways.

Figure 17. Low feelings meme, 2, by @dyingbutfine [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BWV0WIKFkfr/?igshid=111kihaph14j4 Image reproduced with permission.

Part Three: The Future Is Soft: Soft Femme Aesthetics and Poetics

An Introduction to Softness

In 2017, the Dairy Farmers of Canada started plastering photographs of people crying across billboards (Figure 1). This was part of their new advertising campaign that toted the slogan, "If it's made with Canadian milk, it's worth crying over;" on closer inspection, the well-dressed people in the beautiful photographs are crying over spilled milk and ice cream. This campaign came on the tails of Scotties Tissues' 2016 advertising campaign, which also used photographs of people crying. This "The Tissue for Any Issue" campaign had consumers trying to decide if the crying person in the ad was upset because they had a broken heart or a broken phone, if their team lost or if their team won. Wonder Bread followed a similar line in early 2018, producing a video advertisement proclaiming "the power of softness" — the company's new slogan. Jumping from images of kids watching wars wage on the news, teens fighting via text message, children being left out in the school cafeteria, and adults showing up to a friend's cancer treatment, the voiceover claims,

> We live in a tough world and it seems to be getting tougher. And while the toughest may survive, it's the softest who thrive. Softness isn't weak, fragile, or afraid. It's truly being there for a friend. It's helping those who need it most. It's powerful and full of courage. And sometimes, it's the softest touch that hits the hardest. So let's redefine what softness means. Let's show the world the power of softness.

The advertisement finishes with the distraught youth in the ad breaking into smiles and eating sandwiches made on Wonder Bread, America's famously soft bread.

Corporate advertisements that utilize images of people crying and highly emotional moments are part of a larger cultural turn to softness, perhaps even evidence of the commodification of the turn to softness that is largely preceded by feminist and queer work. In this article, I develop the concept of "softness," and consider the intersection of femme and softness. Femme theory has always grappled with vulnerability and the tension between

hardness and softness, so I see the cultural turn to softness as informed by femme theory, as well as a way of furthering the project begun by femme theory: reclaiming femininity.

For this project, I conducted an online ethnography of femme internet culture on Instagram. I created a researcher account (@acafemmeic) and followed other femme accounts that I located through searching #femme hashtags and a snowball method of finding femme accounts through other femmes, either by direct recommendation or through observing lists of followers, likes, and comments. Throughout my six-month study, I made notes on my observations, interviewed seven femme Instagram account operators, and screen captured relevant posts, some of which I analyze below. By considering data from my ethnography, including screen-captured selfies, field notes on femme internet aesthetics, and interview transcripts, I trace the emergence of the soft femme through both aesthetics and poetics, specifically the poetics of self-love, healing, and affirmations. I argue that the turn to softness enables femmes to further recuperate the feminine — a long-term project of femme theory. Specifically, the turn to softness expands the notion of femininity as it has been understood in gender studies and society more broadly: as a set of aesthetics or appearance, particularly one that limits women's freedom and agency (see for example, Beauvoir, 1949; Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984, Wolf, 1990). In femme internet culture, softness often means exploring feminized traits — like being emotional, empathetic, and vulnerable — that are discounted in a Western, masculinist society that devalues femininity in broad strokes. While softness does inform contemporary femme aesthetics, it also works to shift the understanding of femme identity and femininity away from simply a normative and idealistic set of aesthetics, a move that makes room for more diverse subjects to claim and feel a sense of belonging to the category and community of femme.

What I have come to term "softness" shows up in femme internet culture in a number of ways. It is an aesthetic that employs symbols of hyperfemininity, like pastel colours, and vulnerability, both physical and emotional. Softness is also a political position that challenges

individualism and masculinist bias while recuperating the feminine. Finally, softness is also a mode of interacting or relating to the self and others that centers on emotions, care, and validation. In particular, the soft femme can often be found through hashtags like #toughandtendergirls and #radicalvulnerability. The soft femme posts crying selfies and affirmations, and is interesting in healing and charting their journey on social media. The soft femme finds comfort and strength in being vulnerable and emotional, often in public — or at least in the public space of Instagram. Soft femme utilizes hyperfeminine aesthetic sensibilities or "girly" signifiers like bows, flowers, pastel colors, and baby animals combined with political messages, particularly those around self-love, de-stigmatizing mental illness, or finding strength in one's sensitivity.

Softness is gendered and racialized. Men and boys are barred from accessing softness through the discourse of hegemonic or toxic masculinity, an understanding of masculinity that makes demands like, "man up," and boasts that, "boys don't cry" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Conversely, softness is expected of women, who are similarly admonished for expressing anger or independence (Jaggar, 1989, p. 164). This varies along racial lines: the stakes and standards are higher for Black men and women, whose anger is presumed, feared, and criminalized with devastating effects, while Asian men and women are already assumed to be softer, meeker, and more feminine than others. White women's presumed fragility (what some might consider "softness") has indeed been violently leveraged against trans women, non-binary, and racialized people in service of cissexism and white supremacy. However, in the contemporary context, while softness is still most associated with young, white women, it is accessed by queer people of a variety of races and genders, often radically and critically so.

Toronto-based femme artist and performer @daintysmith often uses the hashtag #toughandtender on her selfies. When asked about it, she said,

> I created the "#toughandtender" hashtag because I am a Black, queer, femme woman who lives with chronic pain, and it was really important for me to be able to speak about

> the full complexity of my humanity. I have a hard time sometimes trying to remind people of my humanity, that I'm a person too, that I have feelings, that I am sensitive. I'm a Black woman, and so the "Strong Black Woman" narrative is something I've been raised with my whole life, it's something that's been told about me, to me my entire life. So, I wanted to talk about what it means to be sensitive, what it means to have feelings, what it means to be a person who is strong and also soft. The strong narrative takes a lot out of you. You're not allowed to be someone who's scared, you're not allowed to have anxiety because you're supposed to be a superhero in a particular way. And I think that's really important […] but we have to leave room for nuances, and for that the fact that we're people, we're human beings, and we have feelings just like anyone else. So I started using that because I really want to talk about being both of those things, and they're not contradictory.

Here, @daintysmith talks about the difficulty Black women face in accessing softness or tenderness — what vulnerability scholars say is the very foundation of humanity (Butler, 2004; Fineman, 2008; Petherbridge, 2016). Black women are often assumed and expected to be strong and resilient, not tender or soft, as evidenced by the trope @daintysmith references, the "Strong Black Woman."

Patricia Hill Collins (2004) says the Strong Black Woman ideal has often been used to mark Black women's failure to achieve "normal" (ie. white) gender role expectations. This ideal sees Black women as "too strong" and encourages them to defer to Black men as leaders for the good of the entire Black community (Collins, 2004, p. 184). The belief in Black women's unending reserve of strength excuses their dehumanization, as @daintysmith points out. bell hooks (1981) has also detailed the dehumanization and stereotyping of Black women in the United States. According to hooks, this began with the enslavement of African peoples in America. Forced to labour in the fields, Black women were also forced to assume "manly" work and therefore a "masculine" role by white, Western standards (hooks, 1981, p. 22). hooks says

that white women labouring in the fields was rare, but when it did occur, these women were not seen as worthy of the title, “woman” (1981, p. 22). The masculinization of Black women in America continued well after slavery ended, with the stereotype of Black women as matriarchs or “man of the house” perpetuated by social scientists (hooks, 1981, p. 71). This stereotype still has roots in slavery, as white slaveowners invented myths of Black women’s unique strength to explain why they were able to cope during slavery (ie. take on forced masculinized, manual labour as well as feminized, domestic labour) as a way to maintain the white gender order, specifically, the dominance of white men and the oppression of white women (hooks, 1981, p. 71).

These myths and stereotypes effectively stripped Black women of womanhood and femininity (as defined by white, Western doctrine) and their vulnerability — their very humanity. The effects of this have been devastating: Black women were routined sexually assaulted and raped by white men during slavery and since its abolition, and these acts of violence were not and are still not considered as egregious as the sexual assault or rape of white women (hooks, 1981, p. 53). While Black women are more vulnerable to violence, they have not been treated as vulnerable or worthy of protection. In fact, white men and women alike blamed Black women for their own assaults because of the additional stereotype of Black women as innately hypersexual (hooks, 1981, p. 59). Even still, hooks says that white feminists have romanticized the Black female experience and Black women’s resilience in the face of oppression. She says that this focus on strength seemingly conflating *enduring* oppression with *overcoming* it, and overshadowed the ongoing oppression of Black women, functioning as an excuse to overlook it. As a result, the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype was no longer seen as dehumanizing, but rather a badge of “black female glory” (hooks, 1981, p. 6). Considering this context, it becomes clear why claiming softness or using the hashtag #toughandtender is a radical act for Black femmes like @daintysmith.

My research in this chapter shows that many femmes across Instagram demonstrate an interest or political stake in (re)claiming softness. I find that (re)claiming softness as a femme trait is a strategy used to challenge the white-centric, cis-normative ideal of femme-ininity. (Re)claiming softness is a political intervention in a culture that shames and devalues feminine traits and feminine subjects, ultimately furthering the project of femme theory.

Vulnerability and Femme Theory

One of the key theoretical anchors for understanding softness comes from theorizing vulnerability. Stemming from the Latin "vulnus," meaning wound, vulnerability is largely experienced as a threat, and is thus figured as a shortcoming in Western modernity (Drichel, 2013, p. 5). Vulnerability is framed as a problem — trapped in a "frame of war" — and elicits a defence response which seeks closure, or impenetrability (Drichel 2013, p. 8). This framing foretells a gendered reading of vulnerability, a gendered reading which has deeper roots in Western philosophy, where there exists a divide between the mind and body in which the mind is positioned as superior because it is rational, while the body is rendered weak, needy, and vulnerable. As a result, intellectual pursuits became associated with men and masculinity, while women and femininity became associated with the perils of the body, including emotionality, neediness, and desire, creating a firm alignment between women, the body, vulnerability, and inferiority (Jaggar, 1989; Mackenzie et al., 2013). As far back as Plato, Western epistemology has also cast out emotion, seeing it as oppositional or antagonistic to rationality, reason, and knowledge (Jaggar, 1989, p. 151). Because of the dominance of rationality and the binary between reason and emotion, emotions, like vulnerability, are associated with women and coded as feminine, and therefore, less valuable (Jaggar, 1989, p. 164). Feminist scholars have endeavoured to reconsider this branding of the body, vulnerability, emotions, femininity, and women in general. Alison Jaggar (1989) has challenged the separation of reason and emotion, arguing that emotion actually plays a significant role in knowledge creation; she says the "dispassionate investigator" is a myth. Further, Jaggar argues that emotions have instrumental

value, but are also necessary to human survival (Jaggar, 1989, p. 161). She says, “Emotions prompt us to act appropriately, to approach some people and situations and to avoid others, to caress or cuddle, fight or flee. Without emotion, human life would be unthinkable” (Jaggar 1989, p. 161). Similarly, feminist vulnerability scholars Catriona MacKenize, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2013) write that, “to be a human being is to be a particular kind of animal whose existence and flourishing depend on social relations with others, including relations of care” (p. 5); they argue that the “autonomous, independent adult subject” is a myth (p. 5).

While there is much that could be said about vulnerability, I focus on scholars who offer critical approaches to vulnerability that enable a focus on its political implications. Danielle Petherbridge (2016) aims to strike a middle ground through vulnerability, to articulate an iteration of it that is not tied to ontology nor ethics. She is critical of how the use of vulnerability in ethics translates into increased paternalism and surveillance when incorporated into governmentality (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 590-591). Additionally, Rachel A. Lewis’ work on vulnerability represents an attempt to undo the harm caused by vulnerability rhetoric in humanitarian discourse that positions Black lesbians as weak and their oppressors as powerful (2016, p. 206). Further, Ulrika Dahl points out that vulnerability is not accessible or desirable to all, as it is tied to a white, bourgeois, heterosexual femininity (2017, p. 42). The effect of this association is that white femininity is always already seen as vulnerable, and reinforces the harmful trope of the “Strong Black Woman” that is used to elide the violence done to Black women and other women of colour, even by white women (Dahl, 2017, p. 43). These critical approaches to vulnerability are useful in understanding the politics of embodying what I term softness. Following Petherbridge (2016), I understand vulnerability as a “general openness toward the other” (p. 591), but also following these other critical approaches, I understand vulnerability as riskier and less accessible for some femmes than others, particularly, femmes of colour. This paper follows this theoretical tradition by exploring both the limits and political possibilities of vulnerability.

Considering how vulnerability can be both enabling and limiting is not new for femmes. Historically, femmes have rejected the equation so popular in Western thought of feminine and weak, or vulnerable, by creating and embodying more nuanced and queer feminine genders, like “hard femme” and “stone femme,” which qualify femininity. While a politicized and nuanced understanding of vulnerability seems to have reached critical mass at this contemporary moment, it is something queer women have long engaged with. This suggests that the queer femmes at the centre of my research are well poised to mobilize the turn to softness to further complicate ideas around vulnerability and femininity, and turn the femme project of recuperating femininity into one with a much wider reach. This chapter seeks to illuminate what is enabling about (re)claiming softness in femme internet culture. Particularly, what connections, identities, and politics are created out of the femme turn to softness?

Femme is a queer identity that has multi-faceted histories. Femme emerged out of lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States (Nestle, 1992), but is also rooted in the drag and ball culture dominated by Black queers and trans women, originating in Harlem in the 1960s (Bailey, 2014). Femme has many histories and many roots, and has evolved to encompass any queer and political engagement with femininity (see for example Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997; Connell, 2012). Of course, like any identity with a history this long and varied, there are many iterations of femme. We may recognize the post-war femmes of the 1950s, who protected their butch lovers by enabling them both to “pass” as a straight couple in a time of heavy queer repression (Figure 18). This is the femme that, along with butches, sex workers, leatherdykes and other members of kink or BDSM communities, has been deemed “unenlightened” and “apolitical” by some feminists, particularly those in the 1970s and 1980s (MacCowan, 1992).

We may also recognize the hard femme of the 1990s and early 2000s, who emerged as a highly performative and ironic feminine figure (Duggan & McHugh, 1996). Hard femme’s development coincided with the introduction of queer theory to the academy — a product of

post-structuralist thought. The butch lesbian and transgender and genderqueer identities were of particular interest to queer theory during this time because they were seen as transgressing gender norms in a very direct or visible way. These identities were conceptualized as subversive, transgressive, queer, and radical because they posed an open challenge to the gender binary, gender roles and gender identities that had become naturalized. These ideas were also present outside the academy. However, this seemed to create a hierarchy of queerness that relegated femmes to the bottom. In response, femmes used similar post-structuralist language to position "femme" as an equally subversive, queer, deviant, and radical identity; femme was conceptualized as subversive for remixing or deconstructing femininity (Duggan & McHugh, 1996; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002).

Figure 18 Still from the film *Last Call at Maud's,* showing butch and femme lesbians sitting around a table in a bar. Poirier, P. & Kiss, K. (Producers) & Poirier, P. (Director. (1993). *Last Call At Maud's* [digital image from motion picture]. USA: Maud's Project. Retrieved from https://www.kanopy.com/product/last-call-mauds

There were also moves to consider femme on the transgender spectrum. It was not uncommon for femmes to draw comparisons between their performance or presentation of femininity and that of a drag queen. Amber Hollibaugh, in her conversation with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, argued that since femme is highly performative and a put-on version of femininity, there is an element of transgenderism in high femme identity (Hollibaugh, 2000). These femmes said that femmes' femininity is categorically different from heterosexual women's femininity because femmes de-naturalize femininity and make it a spectacle, while straight women believe in natural femininity (Hollibaugh, 2000). Elsewhere, Piepzna-Samarasinha also wrote:

> Femme is queer. Drop a femme into a straight bridal shower and she'll stand out as much as a drag queen would. Femme in the working-class, often colored, contexts I have experienced it in is brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious. It goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass [sic] feminine propriety. Femme women, like MTFs, construct their girl-ness and construct it the way it works for us. At our strongest, we are the opposite of feminine heterosexual women who are oppressed by their gender and held to impossible media standards designed to foster hatred of one's body. (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997, p. 142).

Here, Piepzna-Samarasinha emphasizes the intersections of different social categories that create her version of femme. For Piepzna-Samarasinha, femme is about defying white middle-class ideals of femininity. Without these intersections, it would just be femininity, not femme. Piepzna-Samarasinha also makes comparisons between femme and other gender-benders, like transfeminine people. The brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious descriptors Piepzna-Samarasinha applies to femme here illuminates the meaning of the hard femme, a figure that is further illustrated by the cover of Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri's anthology *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002): the hard femme is more likely to appear wielding a knife in leather than, say, crying in a Polly Pocket skirt, like a soft femme (Figure 19).

The cover of *Brazen Femme* illustrates the femme negotiation of vulnerability, the question of how to combine both hardness and softness: the knife and tough-looking black clothing contrast the abundance of exposed flesh, the particularly vulnerable inner thighs and particularly feminine cleavage. However, the turn to softness reveals a slight shift in emphasis in femme culture. Rather than understanding their gender presentation as "ironic" and "performative," soft femmes understand their gender presentation as earnest and "authentic." The soft femme extends femme's embrace of femininity; it strives to be more emotional, to wear more pink, to further resist masculinist ideals. Many generations of femme theorizing have made the soft femme possible, and now the soft femme carries forward the femme project of recuperating the feminine, particularly its weakest parts, the girlish, emotional, and pathologized parts, that have yet to be sufficiently reclaimed.

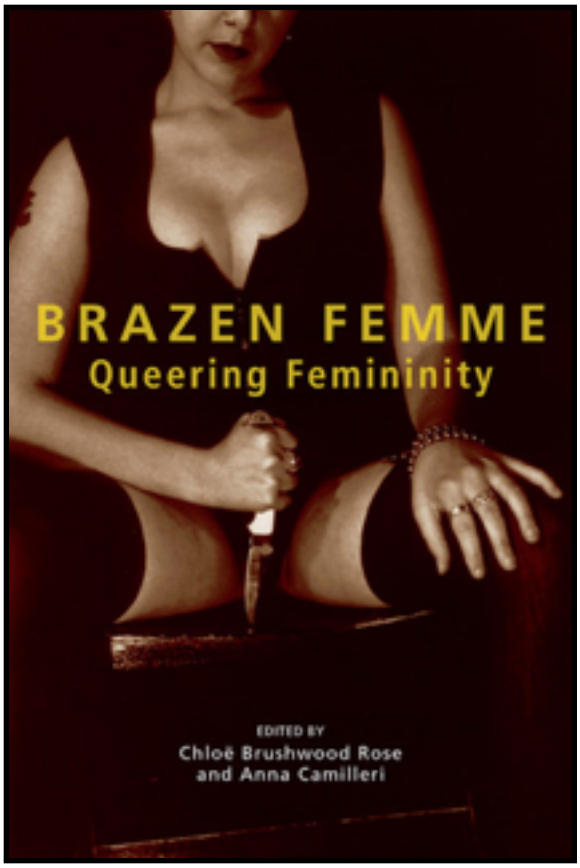

Figure 19 Cover of *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002) [digital image]. (Accessed 2020) Retrieved from https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/283473.Brazen_Femme Image reproduced with permission.

Soft Femme Aesthetics and Poetics

I now turn to a selection of six screen captured images that demonstrate a number of shared visual strategies in femme internet culture that I understand as aesthetically soft, including the use of ample negative space, low contrast, and pastel colours. These images combine visual strategies with text which further conveys an orientation toward softness. Figure 20 is an image of black text on a white background that reads, "You gonna cry about it or boss up?

First of all imma do both." The image itself is soft: the simple font and ample negative space is underwhelming rather than overwhelming; its aesthetic, then, is soothing and gentle. The text dispels the myth that crying and toughness are mutually exclusive. Owning up to crying, or at least wanting to cry, works to destigmatize the expression of emotions, and demonstrates a shift toward embracing soft qualities. The second image (Figure 21) is a multi-panelled image of white text on pastel-coloured backgrounds with text that reads, "You are loved. You are important. You are beautiful. You are worth it." This image is aesthetically soft: the colours are pastel, the contrast is low so the letters are almost indistinguishable against the background, and the text is repeated, like a mantra. Like Figure 20, the use of blank or negative space increases the soothing quality of the composition. Further, these are messages that demonstrate an interest in healing one's self-worth or self-perception, an inherently soft project to take on. Figure 22 and 23 are also images of text that use similar visual strategies: low contrast, blank space, and, in the case of Figure 23, feminized symbols. Figure 23 shows a picture of a light-skinned hand holding a jar of pink flowers along with overlaid text that dispels the myth that sensitive is weakness; it offers a mantra-like prescription for healing that instructs, "Protect yourself. Cry. Honor the truth. Seek balance. Rest. Ask for more. Do better." Figure 24 is a picture of a white or light-skinned hand holding a notebook open to collage-style diary entry that reads, "Being soft is an act of resistance." A diary is a feminized symbol, most often associated with girlhood. The collaged entry is made of hand-drawn flowers, a pasted-on doily, and a combination of hand-drawn and magazine-clipped letters. Though this image is visually "busier" than the others included here, the collage style harks to childhood arts and crafts, also a pastime associated with girlhood, or recommended for stress management, and thus the style remains feminized, or soft. The message of the text itself, like the other images collected here, refute the assumption that softness is weakness and in fact takes this sentiment further by calling softness an act of resistance. What is being resisted is unclear, although the image was posted by an Instagram account that focuses on femme healing,

which suggests softness might be a way to resist further traumatization; it might be a way to recover, a mode of coping or surviving. The final image (Figure 25) is a line drawing of a feminine body that, like most of the other images, depends on blank space and pastel pink to evoke a sense of softness. The illustration includes the hand-drawn text, “There is is so much strength in this softness that I have found.”

The images described here are representative of the soft aesthetic found on femme internet culture. They share a number of visual strategies, like ample negative space, pastel colours, and low contrast. They also share symbolic references, like flowers and girlhood, which solidify the relationship between softness and (hyper)femininity. Significantly, the images are posted by white femmes and femmes of colour, signalling that despite how softness may be culturally coded, it is accessed by both racialized and white femmes. For all of its gentleness, I understand the turn to softness as a radical movement, as a movement to reclaim feminized qualities as valuable — a quintessentially femme movement. For racialized women, especially Black women, who are historically excluded from the traditional definition of womanhood and femininity, claiming softness is an especially radical move.

The shared interest in redefining softness (often coded as sensitivity or emotions in these images) as strength can actually be understood as a rejection of masculinist ways of thinking: if women, femmes, and other feminized people defined strength, what would it look like? It seems it would look like softness: sensitivity and emotionality. Circulating the discourse of softness on Instagram is one way femmes demonstrate the prioritization of feminized perspectives or “women’s ways of knowing” over masculinist modes of thought. There is a theoretical component to softness as well as an aesthetic component, which can be read through visual cues as well as the use of text.

The Poetics of Healing

Just as I described the hard, high femme as converging with post-structuralist queer thought in the academy and queer community, I see the soft femme as converging with the

attention to vulnerability and emotion and/or affect within feminist and queer scholarship[8], as well as the community interest in healing from and coping with trauma, mental and chronic illness, and disability. In an essay in *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), Piepzna-Samarasinha responded to odes to femmes penned by butch or masculine queers that revere perfect eyeliner or five-inch heels. Piepzna-Samarasinha asked, "But what about when you're a femme and you're too depressed and fucked up to perfect that eyeliner wing? What about when you're femme and suicidal and you've been in the same sleep pants that smell bad for weeks?" (2018, p. 196-7). These questions intentionally reveal the labour behind the beloved femme presentation, a gesture of vulnerability that is similarly replicated online. This demonstrates one of the ways a shift toward vulnerability and softness in femme discourse presses at the edges of the femme category, making it capacious enough to include femmes with disabilities, chronic or mental illness, or trauma who may not always look the part.

Femme identification has already been understood as a mode of healing (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2002; Cvetkovich, 2003), but the vulnerability enabled by social media platforms like Instagram, particularly by posting selfies and sharing details of one's life, experiences, and feelings, has exploded this potential. According to Eva Illouz (2007), the ability to communicate one's emotions and recognize the emotions of others is the emotional style of modernity (fostered by the needs of capitalism). Similarly, Sherry Turkle (2011) has observed that younger generations who have "grown up tethered" — meaning grown up with the level of connectivity made possible and normalized through mobile devices and social media — will share emotions, usually via text message or social media, before they are fully formed or felt. Indeed, sharing and even oversharing are the norms of social media (Kennedy, 2018). While some of these perspectives are quite critical of the tendency to share emotions, Jenny Kennedy (2018) argues that sharing brings us into a sense of belonging with others, and oversharing can be understood as a quest for greater intimacy (p. 277). Likewise, Illouz (2007) says that some of

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[8] See for example Cvetkovich, 2003; Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004.

Figure 20 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a white image with black text that read “You gonna cry about it or boss up?

First of all imma do both.”

You gonna cry about it or boss up? [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg7QqHEhvkI/?igshid=nwhloqs2dphf

Figure 21 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a multi-panelled image with pink, coral, green, aqua, blue, purple, yellow, and pink pastel backgrounds. The text on top of the pastel backgrounds read “YOU ARE LOVED. YOU ARE LOVED. YOU ARE IMPORTANT. YOU ARE IMPORTANT. YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. YOU ARE WORTH IT. YOU ARE WORTH IT.”

You are loved [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BgWGpMYj6ey/?igshid=1azvmvggjslf6

Figure 22 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image with a textured white background and multi-coloured text that read, “PLEASE DO NOT MISTAKE SENSITIVITY FOR WEAKNESS.”

Do not mistake sensitivity for weakness [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BgsHuJdh18t/?igshid=h6f8ubbh8abl

Figure 23 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a low-contrast image of a hand holding a jar of pink and white carnations with text over top that read, “PROTECT YOURSELF.

CRY.

HONOR THE TRUTH.

SEEK BLANACE.

REST.

ASK FOR MORE.

DO BETTER.

xo high.moon.femme

Protect yourself [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BgRmYpXFXHd/?igshid=r93uhckox7e4

Figure 24 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of a white hand holding an open notebook. On the pages of the notebook there are hand drawn flowers and collaged letters surrounded by washi tape and a doily that read, “Being soft is an act of resistance.”

Being soft is an act of resistance [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BfduZgDna23/?igshid=f6egl2y2scko

Figure 25. Strength in softness by Lizzi Morris [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BfyBj2FFH-4/?igshid=10lzk5qekk18r Image reproduced with permission.

the functions of emotional competence are: furthering intimacy, experiencing ordinary happiness, and addressing the volatile nature of selfhood and social relationships in late modernity (p. 69-71). Similarly, Amanda Lagerkvist and Yvonne Andersson (2017) have said that social media becomes a "lifeline" for many after they experience significant illness or the death of a loved one, a way to ground oneself in a new and often overwhelming terrain through digital tools like selfies (p. 558). I, too, see the potential of sharing one's emotions online to create connections with others and to enable individuals to make sense of difficult or painful experiences.

The focus of many of the posts I characterize as "soft" is often healing one's relationship to the self or the perception of the self after having gone through something traumatic, like sexual assault, or enduring ongoing trauma like living with daily sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or racism. Here, healing often takes the form of self love, seen through the spread of affirming messages, like those in the images above: "You are loved. You are beautiful. You are important. You are worth it." One of my interviewees, @rs often posts videos in which they recite affirmations, or selfies with captions that serve as affirmations, such as, "[…] Thank you, (yes, you, humxn/being reading this) babely babe, for being yourself and living so vibrantly. You light up my world. You are invaluable and your worth is not defined/ determined by your productivity. Stay dreamy and tender […]." They say these affirmations emerged out of a personal goal to locate their sense of worth, value, and attractiveness in how they perceive and treat themselves, rather than how others react to or perceive them. They understand these affirmations as being "tender" toward the self and others, and as a radical challenge to the impulse and social expectation to be emotionally guarded.

Another interviewee, @femmesupremacy, practices "radical vulnerability" by posting crying selfies or non-crying selfies with captions that detail their healing process or other feelings at the moment: "Sometimes that's crying in public, sometimes that's being sick in bed with lupus and fibromyalgia, or me feeling crazy confident because I did some bomb ass

fucking make-up or I'm wearing a really dope outfit." For @femmesupremacy, this kind of vulnerability is intentional and radical, the intention being to offer a "complex and authentic narrative of what healing can be like." They describe radical vulnerability as:

> […] this idea that if we share authentically and openly about ourselves and our lives and what's going on, specifically the things that we feel really shameful about like mental health issues, substance abuse, trauma, it not only opens up space for ourselves to feel lighter and to feel free from the shame of these things, it's also a way to reduce stigma and build community.

Softness (coded as "tenderness" and "radical vulnerability" for these femmes) enables femmes to inhabit a political position which values and validates themselves and other femmes by prioritizing femme healing and general well-being.

For @rs, "tenderness" is directly tied to femme identity, which they describe as: "[femme identity] for me is talking about feelings and vulnerability, and talking about being a neurodivergent person, being a survivor, being disabled. All of these things that are seen as weaknesses in society that I am really proud of […] I feel like that's how I express my femme, by being that much more emotionally open." A tender approach enables @rs to see femme identification as a way to celebrate and embrace the parts of them that are culturally coded as "weak." Linking femme and tenderness positions femme identification as a healing act, and positions femmes as healers.

Instagram user @redthreadtarot also understands femmes as healers through the alignment of femininity with intuition and an ethics of care. She described the link between femme and tarot, a spiritual practice that she is proficient in, and one that has become very visible and popular in femme internet culture:

> To me, femme has so much to do with that emotional labour and peace, and then what is tarot, right, what is witchcraft and working hard to be powerful in your intuition, right? That's what it is. Tarot is being like, "how can I connect with this other person right now

> and hold space for them?" And femmes are so good at doing that. Part of femme is holding space for other people, and that's what my tarot practice is, straight up: "how can I hold space for this other person?" And I think the self-care aspect, too, where it's like femmes are usually really good at holding space for everyone but themselves and I think witchcraft and tarot helps you to do that. It gives you that structure where you're like, "no, I'm going to do this ritual right now and it's for me and it will make me feel powerful and calm and good." So I think femmes are drawn to that. And I think that femmes, of course, are questioners. Cuz it's like, queer people question, right, because you're like, "oh, if this big thing that I've been told is not true in my own body then what else is not true?" […] I think witchcraft traditionally has been the woman who knows stuff and the woman who has questions, so that I think that goes really neatly with femmes. [...] But I do think femmes are witches. I think all femmes are witches, they just don't know it yet.

@redthreadtarot links tarot to femme not only through feminized practices like emotional labour[9] and intuition, but also through political ones, like questioning absolute truths. In doing so, @redthreadtarot, like @femmesupremacy and @rs, positions femme as a political and radical figure who challenges social norms and structures with their lived, bodily, and community-based knowledge.

Prioritizing one's healing through practices like affirmations or tarot readings utilizes feminized traits like intuition, vulnerability, and emotionality, but challenges the traditional view of femme-inine subjects as subordinate to and dependent on others. Other types of healing or ritual spirituality, like psychiatry or religions like Christianity, have been explicitly antagonizing, exclusionary, and violent toward queers and women. The rising interest in tarot and other forms of witchcraft or "alternative" spirituality (which has been ongoing since the 1960s, according to Karlyn Crowley [2011]) marks a movement away from these forms of harmful "healing" and

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[9] For more on emotional labour, see Luxton, 1980; Hothschild, 1983.

toward more inclusive, less punitive forms of guidance and healing that follow a different logic, a feminized logic rather than a masculinist one. In embracing softness as a mode of healing, the femmes described in this chapter use feminized practices to embrace and empower feminized subjects, which furthers the overall project of femme theory as recuperating the feminine. Both feminized practices and feminized people are seen as valuable through the turn to softness evident in femme internet culture. The online practices of these soft or tender femmes position healing as a femme practice, but also a femme political imperative.

Feeling Femme

In discussing softness, vulnerability, and tenderness through my interviews, the word "authentic" was so often repeated it is worth paying attention to. There has been anxiety around authenticity and the internet since the internet was invented (Turkle, 1997), and femininity has always seemed inauthentic or fake, especially in relation to naturalized masculinity. It is interesting, then, that being tender, soft, or vulnerable online is seen by my interviewees as an authentic way of being, especially, an authentic way of being femme. Lauren Bialystok (2013) says authenticity can apply "compellingly" to sex/gender identity (p. 122-3). She defines authenticity as "a condition of fidelity to an inner truth, a core substrate that is often cashed out as 'the real self' or one's 'essence'" (Bialystok, 2013, p. 122). She argues for a qualified embrace of essentialism — understood as identity traits rather than a gender binary (Bialystok, 2013, p. 123). Through her study of trans-identified folks, Bialystok argues that it is possible to have a true identity, and that sex/gender can be essential without being confined to a binary or other mandatory expression (p.131-2). Following Bialystok, it is possible to conceptualize femme identity as something authentic or essential to the self, and this understanding enables a widening of femme identity to include those who may not look femme, but feel femme.

Instagram user @rs is committed to affirming themselves and other femmes, but in doing so resists focussing on how "beautiful" or "sexy" femmes look in order to avoid further

objectifying or dehumanizing femmes, or reifying a femme ideal that is based on the thin, white, European, able-bodied norm of femininity. They say,

> You know, when you are femme and you don't look the way you've been told femme is supposed to look, it's hard to feel attractive and valuable. […] It's hard because no matter how much movement there is, we're still in a place where femme looks a certain way. And so with that I think that there are a lot of femmes that I follow [on Instagram] that are non-binary, and it's really awesome and affirming to see other people identify as femme and not experience that identity as a performance, but something really authentic and genuine to who they are. And also, it takes it out of this really, kind of essentialist notion that to be femme is to be a woman.

While I would complicate the binary set up here between authenticity and performance — and to do sufficiently is beyond the scope of this article and points to an area for further research and analysis — I understand the intention of this comment as an attempt to view certain traits and characteristics, like vulnerability and emotionality, as sufficient ways of performing femininity in order to expand the notion of "femme" to include more marginalized bodies and subjects, including those who are racialized, disabled, fat, trans or non-binary. Doing so has been affirming for @rs, who is white, non-binary, trans, and femme, as well as Instagram user @iambriellenicolewilliams, who is a Black, femme, trans woman. For @iambriellenicolewilliams, shifting her ideas of femme, like @rs, from "looking" femme to "being" femme meant finding a sense of inner peace and belonging. She said,

> For me at first it came from a place of longing. It was so cool for me finally to be able to identify as [femme] and not feel any strings attached to it. It wasn't like, "I have to fill this kind of a space up, and I have to look a certain kind of way, and I have to like…" you know what I mean? "Be this person who is all pretty and done up." […] It was crazy seeing all this beauty and all this glamour [on Instagram], which is what I love, but it was fucking my head up because I can't look like that every day, you know, so it was fucking

> me up. But I came to a place now where I feel like, you know, this where I am, this is what I bring. Femme is me. Femme is self-identification. It's autonomy, being able to feel like even if you don't fit the cis-normative or, like, white-centric view of what a femme is, what that entails, you don't have to adopt that. It's an innate thing. It's an innate thing. It's been innate in me since forever. And I just tap into that energy, you feel me? I tap into that femme goddess energy that's inside of me.

Like @femmesupremacy and @rs, @iambriellenicolewilliams found healing and belonging through affirming herself (in this case, her femme identity) rather than seeking validation from others. Doing this healing work prompted a shift not in how she conceptualizes her own identity, but in how she conceptualizes femme identity as a whole; affirming her femme identity despite being unable to attain an idealized standard of femme-inine beauty meant conceptualizing femme as an innate way of being — an energy — rather than an aesthetic form. Femme becomes something one can *feel* like, rather than something one must *look* like.

Under the turn to softness in femme internet culture, femme also becomes something one can *be* like. The "longing" to *be like* others that is articulated by @iambriellenicolewilliams represents a kind of vulnerability. Petherbridge summarizes Axel Honneth's theory of recognition as essentially the notion that the integrity of human subjects depends on receiving approval and respect from others (2016, p. 595). She further summarizes that, for Honneth, recognition is necessary for the development of a positive relation to the self, and this is achieved through affirming relations of recognition (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 596). Also drawing from Honneth, leading femme theorist Ulrika Dahl argues that there is vulnerability in wanting to be like others, to be with others, to be understood by others, and to be respected by others. In other words, we become vulnerable when we seek intimacy, connection, and community with others. Dahl writes, "While these may be sources of femme jealousy they are also sites of femme openings and bonding" (Dahl, 2017, p. 46). Vulnerability, then — the risk of seeking to belong and be seen — becomes the thing that holds femme communities together, what Dahl

calls “the glue of techne and soma emerging as a shape” (2017, p. 44). For @iambriellenicolewilliams, this kind of vulnerability led to a shift in conceptualizing femme. For @rs and @femmesupremacy, being radically vulnerable or tender online creates femme connection and community. For example, @rs says,

> I think I see all people as complex beings, but femmes in particular, because so much emphasis is put on the superficial, I make a very concerted effort to understand people beyond that, you know, their politics, their ethics, their trauma, whatever it is. [...] In my affirmations I usually speak more to who they are as a person rather than what they look like, and that for me has allowed for a lot of really positive, genuine connections.

The turn to softness in femme internet culture shifts the conceptualization of femme toward a way of feeling or being that is “authentic,” understood as being vulnerable with others about one’s emotions and experiences. This shift deemphasizes an aesthetic understanding of femme that has been quite exclusionary, perhaps especially for trans, non-binary and racialized femmes.

It is not a coincidence that these shifts are happening online. Recent internet studies contrast the past anxieties about online authenticity: Matthew Hart (2018) has found that Tumblr is perceived as a space of both emotional and embodied authenticity (p. 178), and Laura Favaro’s (2017) study of online women’s magazines framed online content as more “authentic” and “real” than print (notwithstanding the critique that this turn to authenticity is part of a branding strategy). The discourse of authenticity is enabled, and even demanded, by digital cultures, including femme internet culture.

The authenticity discourse that often accompanies soft femme culture, or the online performance of tenderness or vulnerability, marks a departure from not only the hard femme aesthetic form discussed above, but also from past political and theoretical emphasis on hardness, irony, and a particular flavour of performance that marked femme theory. For example, in their definitive femme essay, “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto,” published in the journal

Women and Performance, Duggan and McHugh wrote, “Fem(me) science questions the dignity and wisdom of anyone who would wear pink without irony […] Fem(me) science considers femininity a debased and fallen form of itself — a (pre)historic faux pas, an inexplicable lapse into a morass, a swamp of sincerity and sentimentality” (1996, p.156-157). Contemporary femme philosophies clearly have a different take on sincerity and sentimentality.

Dahl says the femme is understood as not only marked by a feminine aesthetic but by an orientation toward some objects and bodies and not others (2017, p. 37). The embrace of softness emphasizes these relational dimensions of femme identity, but shifts them toward community relations, or platonic intimacies among femmes, rather than reifying the butch/femme dyad — a coupling whose dominance has been challenged by many endeavouring to see femme as its own identity (see for example Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). Duggan and McHugh (1996) said that femme is never heterosexual and only desires queer masculinities (p. 155). Though they do not necessarily foreclose the possibility of #femme4femme desire, butch/femme relationships are, perhaps inadvertently, privileged here. In the butch/femme configuration, femmes have been valued for their erotic and emotional vulnerability (see for example Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1992), but Dahl calls for an analysis of vulnerability in spaces beyond “the bedroom” (2017, p. 45). Drawing from Lauren Berlant (2008), Dahl argues that the intimacy of touch exceeds that of bodies in the private sphere, and that femmes form “intimate publics” through their homosocial desires despite the threat of attack (2017, p. 45).

Berlant (2008) writes of “women’s culture” as the first mass cultural intimate public, which was marked by cultural commodities that simultaneously presumed and created a sense of a common women’s experience. While intimate publics are “juxtapolitical,” they remain seductive because “they magnetize optimism about living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous communitas” (Berlant, 2008, p. xi.) Being with similarly-oppressed others offers us a relief from feeling oppressed, a relief that is pleasurable and comforting enough to foreclose more active political engagement.

Berlant's concept of intimate publics has been frequently applied to the digital world (Kanai, 2017; Andreassen, 2017; Favaro, 2017; Dobson, Robards & Carah, 2018), while femme blogs have been conceptualized as other kinds of publics (Connell, 2012; Schwartz, 2016). Akane Kanai's (2017) study of digital negotiations of intimate publics through a framework of "girlfriendship" demonstrates the key differences of digital intimate publics, particularly the labour of Do-It-Yourself participation and the discernment and skill required to be successful in this realm (p. 298). Kanai says this required savvy and discipline contrasts the escapism that Berlant assigns to intimate publics, a contrast that allows me to remain convinced that, unlike Berlant's juxtapolitical intimate publics, femme internet culture is political and politically mobilizing, not only despite its pleasures and comforts but because of them. I argue that the softness — emotionality, vulnerability, relationality, and hyperfemininity — that circulates in femme internet culture is both a claim of belonging or sameness, and a political perspective.

While "sentimentality" and "complaint" structure women's culture (Berlant, 2008) and post-feminism structures young women's digital culture (Kanai, 2017), femme internet culture is structured by the politicized turn to softness. As mentioned, "oversharing" and "authenticity" are typical of all digital cultures, and this becomes politicized in femme internet culture under the rubric of recuperating the feminine, abstractly, and feminine subjects, materially. The emphasis for soft femmes in healing and affirming themselves and other femmes is the realization of Dahl's call for an analysis of vulnerability in spaces beyond "the bedroom"; they connect and support each other — even just by offering their stories or acting as a kind of "role model" — through their performance of vulnerability online. As soft femmes emphasize the importance of affirming other femmes, they continue the project engaged by Brushwood Rose and Camilleri (2002) and others of uncoupling butch and femme identities, and explore other forms of queer connection and solidarity. In femme internet culture, an emphasis on vulnerability enables a shift toward a more capacious femme identity and a plurality of queer alliances.

Conclusion: The Future is Soft

The soft femme appears in the spaces that have been opened up by critiques of hard or high femme, the figure which has so far dominated femme theory. One major critique of existing femme theory is the tendency to create a binary between queer and straight femininity, or as Lisa Walker (2012) puts it, between "radicalized bad girls" and "debased good girls" (p. 800). This not only excludes some femmes (like soft femmes) but Walker says it contributes to the construction of heterosexual femininity as victimization (2012, p. 798). Biddy Martin (1996), too, is critical of how gender and sexuality have been theorized in post-modern theory. She writes, "I am particularly interested, here, in a resistance to something called 'the feminine,' played straight, and in a tendency to assume that when it is not camped up or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring" (p. 73). Robbin VanNewkirk (2006) also writes of "queering femininity" as a curiousity, "as if femininity is manifested in a fixed and natural state that must then be modified or ruptured by the abnormal and therefore defiant queer impact" (p. 76). These theorists call into question the assumed difference between straight and queer femininity, particularly that one is chosen and therefore radical while the other is assumed to be adopted uncritically. While this construction may be useful to make femme seem subversive and radical, it is at the expense of other femininities and still assumes that some kind of natural femininity exists. Soft femme moves the understanding of femininity as a whole away from the narrative of victimization. Soft femme sees femininity as more than an oppressive set of aesthetics they have been duped into adopting, and they see feminine traits as sources of strength and sites of connection, rather than gendered expectations they are coerced into performing.

Another critique of existing femme theory is the tendency to privilege an ironic, campy, or otherwise highly visible or visual version of femme. For Walker, this is an impossible standard to maintain for an aging femme. She writes,

> Lately, the playground of consumer culture was becoming a minefield: shimmery eye shadows emphasized fine lines; matte red lipstick suddenly looked too brash; vintage clothes looked suspiciously like I might have bought them new. I had always been a conservative dresser, but now it seemed less a choice than a requirement. What, I wondered, was a middle-aged femme to do? What, indeed, did a middle-aged femme look like? (p. 796)

VanNewkirk also has anxieties about a performative femme:

> I resist the label of femme sometimes for the same reasons a quilter might resist the label of artist. This is particularly true when people start talking about high femme; versus what? Thankfully, you don't hear people talk too much about low femmes, but it still leaves me wondering if I can truly manage this identity. I can't help but feel like femmes are supposed to be confident and legendary creatures, not awkward and skeptical. (p. 76-77)

Both of these quotes from Walker and VanNewkirk point to a sense of rigidity within femme identity theory. There seems to be only one version of femme identity, one that is youth-centered, campy, and ironic. This singular definition of femme creates barriers to accessing both femme identity and community for those that are unable to maintain it. However, these critiques of high and hard femme also suggest that something that seems so rigid inevitably will crack. The resulting breaks in femme theory seem to suggest that other versions of femme identity must exist. Specifically, these critiques point to the possibility of a soft femme. An understanding of femme that marks emotionality, vulnerability, and other so-called "weaknesses" (like disability, neurodivergence, or being a survivor of sexual violence) as points of pride, is perhaps the antidote sought by critical femme scholars, who worried about living up to high femme's highly performative standards.

Part Four: Radical Softness: Selfies as a Practice in Vulnerability

Introduction

"Selfiegate" was the name given to the media scandal that took hold after three world leaders took a selfie together at the memorial for Nelson Mandela — despite the fact that the image that circulated was not, in fact, a selfie, but rather a photograph of the former US President Barack Obama, former British Prime Minister David Cameron, and former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt caught in the act of taking one while former First Lady Michelle Obama sat next to them wearing a stern expression. (Figure 26)

Selfiegate demonstrates — even just by virtue of it becoming a "scandal" — that selfies are frequently the source of much cultural anxiety. Some of the anxiety surrounding Selfiegate in particular stems from the fact that the selfie was taken at a memorial, what many believe should be a sombre occasion. The break in tradition — taking an informal moment to indulge in one's own smiling image when they should be mourning — seems to indicate to some a fearsome breakdown of white, Western, middle-class decorum. Some of the anxiety was caused by world leaders — who are supposed to be paragons of decorum — taking a selfie, which makes them appear youthful and unconventional, sparking charges of incompetence from opposition. Kate M. Miltner and Nancy K. Baym (2015) argue that, given the racial identities of the leaders, these charges of incompetence were actually largely rooted in racist and sexist ideologies. They point to the many stereotypes about Black men, Black women, and white women that were revived and circulated in the Selfiegate backlash as evidence.

In spite of this scandal, however, funeral selfies remain a genre, albeit "the most debased" genre, of selfies (Meese et al., 2015, p. 1818). While selfies are widespread, there remain judgements about who takes them, and where and when it is appropriate to do so. A funeral or memorial is not yet accepted as an appropriate time or place to take a selfie.

In this article, I follow existing scholarship on selfies to read femme selfies as both a representational tool and a communicative act. I argue that selfies are a practice in

Figure 26 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an AFP photograph of Michelle Obama sitting next to Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Helle Thorning-Schmidt as they took a selfie at Nelson Mandela's memorial service.

AFP (photographer). Selfiegate [digital image]. (2013). Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/how-would-you-handle-selfie-gate-101155

vulnerability, a practice that is strategically mobilized by femmes to (re)shape femme identity, create femme connections and communities, and to make political claims about femme lives and perspectives. My understanding of vulnerability is informed by Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds' (2013) taxonomy of vulnerability (p. 6) and Danielle Petherbridge's (2016) parsing out of vulnerability as constituted by corporeal openness, psychological openness, and an openness to the other (p. 598). I use James Meese, Martin Gibbs, Marcus Carter, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen and Tamara Kohn's (2015) notion of selfies as a form of "presencing" to pay careful attention to the details that femmes wish to communicate about their lives, and analyze what these details convey about femme aesthetics, femme community, and femme politics. I also follow scholars who argue that selfies are politically useful for marginalized groups for doing the critical work of self-representation, or introducing a minority perspective (Murray, 2015; Pham, 2015).

Understanding femmes' position in the queer community is essential for understanding why selfies are a meaningful tool of representation. Femme is a queer identity with multi-faceted histories. It originated in lesbian bar culture in the 1940s and 1950s (Nestle, 1992), but was also integral to the drag and ball scene that started in Harlem in the 1960s (Bailey, 2014). I define "femme" as a queer identity marked by a critical engagement with femininity that manifests in one's style and values. Because of the general status of femininity in our culture, femmes face femmephobia, a prejudice against the feminine, which plays out in a number of ways. In mainstream culture, femmes receive the same treatment as other feminine people:

they are subjected to sexism and misogyny; face discrimination, harassment, and violence; and are seen as vapid, frivolous, and the property of men. In queer culture, the same attitudes toward femininity and feminine people apply, but femmes are also seen as suspect, as not *really* queer, or not queer *enough* (Hemmings, 1999). In sum, femmes are marginalized in both mainstream and queer culture. Given this context, self-representation becomes essential for re-writing the negative narratives and images of femmes.

Countering limiting and stigmatizing images can be one outcome of feminist art therapy, according to Deborah Lupton (1997, p. 8). Through art and performance, feminists have taken up the post-structuralist notion of the body as a space upon which culture and meaning is inscribed (Lupton, 1998, p. 5). By understanding discourse as visual as well as textual, art and art therapy can become spaces to resist and reshape discourse about particular bodies and subjects (Lupton, 1997, p 4). Lupton situates feminist art therapy into Douglas Crimp's notion of cultural activism (1997, p. 6). As I will elaborate, Derek Murray (2015) and Minh-ha T. Pham (2015) situate selfies within discussions of art and resistance to argue that selfies are one way that marginalized communities do this political, representational work.

For this project, I conducted an online ethnography of femme internet culture on Instagram. I created a researcher account (@acafemmeic) and followed other femme accounts that I located through searching #femme hashtags and a snowball method of finding femme accounts through other femmes, either by direct recommendation or through observing lists of followers, likes, and comments. Throughout my six-month study, I made notes on my observations, interviewed seven femme Instagram account operators, and took screen captures of relevant posts. In what follows, I examine femme selfies to draw out the specifics of contemporary femme aesthetics, and the politics behind them. I find that femmes use selfies to illustrate femme aesthetics — close readings of which offer extraordinary insight into what "femme" means. I see selfies circulating in femme internet culture as a common way to make

oneself vulnerable and to share this vulnerability with others. I argue that femme selfies are a practice in vulnerability — vulnerability that is engaged strategically and politically mobilized.

I draw on existing vulnerability scholarship (Mackenzie et al., 2013; Petherbridge, 2016) to take up vulnerability in three major ways; I read vulnerability as physical and emotional/social, as well as read into the political possibilities of vulnerability. First, one is made vulnerable by their physical, human form. In this sense, vulnerability is often seen as a wound, weakness, or potential for experiencing injury or harm. Physical or corporeal vulnerability is also a way in which one can experience the richness of sensuality with the world and with others (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 598). In another way, one is made vulnerable by their social human needs. In this sense, there is a vulnerability in needing to be social, in needing to be accepted and loved. Finally, I discuss the political dimensions of vulnerability. Vulnerability is feminized in Western culture (Mackenzie et al., 2013) and, like all other feminized objects and subjects — including femmes — is often dismissed and discounted. What kind of politics arise from attention to these human vulnerabilities? What is political, feminist, and queer about vulnerability?

In taking, posting, and sharing selfies, femmes make themselves vulnerable by laying bare not only their faces and bodies, but their experiences and emotions, too. Analyzing how femmes' faces and bodies are adorned and presented in selfies, as well as which experiences and emotions are shared through selfies — and to what ends —enables a discussion of femme aesthetics and politics. Analyzing femme selfies through these frameworks of vulnerability leads me to argue that femmes utilize vulnerability to define femme aesthetics, form femme connections, and articulate femme politics through selfies. My argument, then, is that vulnerability is one of the critical axes of femme internet culture. Vulnerability has always been a fundamental yet fraught aspect of femme subjectivity, and its overt recuperation is gaining new momentum in contemporary femme culture.

As I show throughout this paper, the strategic outcomes of expressing vulnerability are making claims about femme subjectivity and identity, gaining support and making connections, and making political meaning out of femme experiences. However, there is another kind of strategy that should be considered. The femmes in my study are savvy internet users, and many are cultural workers who rely on social media for their livelihood. While there is a genuine interest in being authentic online, authenticity can also bolster one's personal brand. In her study of online magazines created by and for millennial women, Lauren Favaro (2017) finds that intimacy is fundamental to the job of magazine writing — every relationship, emotion, and occasion becomes currency, an opportunity for career advancement (p. 326). Online content is supposed to be snappier, sassier, and funnier than other forms of content, which creates the feeling of authenticity (Favaro, 2017, p. 327). In short, building relationships, intimacy, and authenticity is a branding strategy for online women's magazines (Favaro, 2017, p. 333). This turn to authenticity stems from the emphasis on intimacy and authenticity in Web 2.0 cultures more generally (Favaro, 2017, p. 328), which extends to Instagram and its users.

It is not part of my (current) inquiry to evaluate whether what I see as practices in vulnerability are authentic, calculated, both, or neither; rather, my point of interest is inquiring: to what ends is vulnerability being utilized? In service of what project — encompassing but also surpassing individual femmes' Instagram posts — is it mobilized? I argue that femmes use the vulnerability of selfies to make connections online, connections which lay the groundwork for on- and offline communities, some of which may be professionally lucrative for individual femmes. I also argue that femmes' documentation of their bodies and aesthetics are also ways in which femmes produce knowledge about the social and political world in which they live. In other words, selfies become a device for developing social and political theory.

Critical Perspectives on Selfies

The term "selfie" first appeared in 2002 on an Australian online forum (Murray, 2015, p. 491). In the simplest terms, a selfie is a self-portrait taken in the technocultural context of

smartphones and social media platforms. In more complex terms, Meese et al. (2015) define the selfie as a genre,

> a formalized category of media image and production which is structured by a number of stylistic conventions. These include the conflation of subject and photographer, a framing in which the subject dominates the foreground, a subject typically looking directly into the lens, and a perspective that is generally front-view from above. In addition to such stylistic devices, the selfie genre is dependent upon a technological context involving mobile phones and cameras to capture the image, and social media platforms for distribution of the images. (p. 1820-1821)

Meese et al. write that every social media platform has specific vernaculars, and selfies are the vernacular of Instagram (as hashtags are the vernacular of Twitter) (2015, p. 1820). What these descriptive definitions of "selfie" do not reveal, however, is the cultural value and meaning of selfies; selfies themselves rarely receive such neutral treatment. Suspicion of the selfie, like suspicion of the digital influencer, abounds.

Some differentiate between a selfie and a self-portrait, going so far as to say that selfies stigmatize self portraiture: one is an exercise in vanity, while the other is artistically motivated (Murray, 2015, p. 499). Selfies are often considered an expression of narcissism, according to Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym (2015), and are stigmatized as a result. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the judgement of selfies is also gendered. The combination of selfies' association with young women and the cultural devaluation of young women perpetuates the negative perception of both in an endless cycle: women are narcissistic because they take selfies, selfies are narcissistic because women take them (Maddox, 2017, p. 195). This charge of narcissism is widely held, but loosely defined: it is often flattened to an equation with self-absorption. Jessica Maddox (2017) contests this characterization as a whole, arguing that selfies are more aligned with exhibitionism than narcissism. Maddox's argument is based on Narcissus' failure to share his image, whereas selfies are, by definition, about sharing one's

image via social media (2017, p. 194). The emphasis on sharing in Maddox's argument points to the dual reading of the function of selfies that is important to this article: selfies are both a visual representational form and a communicative act.

Meese et al. explain the confounding genre of funeral selfies by arguing that "selfies often function as communication and are in fact communicating important affective information about a person's emotional circumstances" (2015, p. 1825). These authors read selfies as a form of "presencing," meaning a way of inserting oneself into a specific context and sharing it with others (Meese et al, 2015, p. 1819). To illustrate, the funeral selfie puts the subject into the context of a funeral and immediately brings that position to a wider social network. This is both a form of communication and a form of self-representation.

Both of these functions of the selfie can be read as political, radical, and resistant in certain contexts. For example, while young women are called narcissistic for taking selfies, they often see their selfies as empowering and as a radical act of resistance in a male-dominated culture (Murray, 2015, p. 490). Murray (2015) considers the overarching patriarchal context to argue that young women's selfies can be seen as an "aggressive reclaiming of the female body" and a "radical colonization of the digital realm" (2015, p. 490). Murray reads selfies as a post-feminist[10] self-representational strategy; a way of writing oneself into the narrative (p. 493-495). The post-feminist selfie aesthetic that Murray identifies is one that takes up long-standing feminist concerns, but in ways that break with the traditional values and methods of second-wave feminism. He writes,

> Constantly bombarded with objectifying and unattainable images of beauty in popular media, young girls in the blogosphere respond by constructing an image of themselves as a sexual fantasy, to be consumed online, and in the public domain. But I argue this

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[10] While the term "post-feminism" is quite loaded, complex, and lends itself to different meanings, Murray uses it to refer to the generation of young women that have come chronologically after the so-called second and third waves of feminism. Murray reads post-feminism as neither an outright rejection of earlier feminist values, nor a denial of the need for such feminism, but rather as the ongoing negotiation of feminism.

> gesture is not meant as titillation for the male gaze, rather it is designed to embrace femininity and sexuality; celebrate the history of women; reject unhealthy beauty standards promoted by the media; and advance a body-positive attitude. (2015, p. 495)

He reads the contemporary aesthetics of selfies against the aesthetics of feminist art and photography, like that of Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman, and argues that the representational tropes in both constitute a "female gaze" (Murray, 2015, p. 498). The female gaze, while still often utilizing the female body in general and the figure of the female nude in particular, is unconcerned with talking back to men. Rather, the interest here is representing women's perspectives, which still remain fraught with their own power dynamics, like those around race and class. Selfies embody the sensibilities of the female gaze and thus gesture toward the political dimension of selfie culture as a young woman's form of visual expressiveness. Therefore, selfies can be labelled "post-feminist art" (Murray 2015, p. 498) and become a useful tool for women's politically-motivated representations.

Like Murray, Pham (2015) situates selfies in feminist politics, particularly the women-of-colour feminist perspective that political movements are informed by embodied experiences and "situated knowledges" (2015, p. 224). She allows that selfies are a practice in vanity, albeit *networked vanity*, meaning that while vanity serves an individual's social needs, it is also strategically deployed to build social and political movements (p. 224). She situates selfies in a long history of multi-racial resistance through vanity that includes Black dandyism, the Filipino-American appropriation of the McIntosh suit, and Zoot Suits (Pham, 2015, p. 225-6). To consider selfies' place in this history, Pham looks at the #feministselfie trend that emerged as a response to the "White Feminist™" critique of selfies that did not consider how meaningful they can be for those who do not see themselves represented in mainstream media, particularly women of colour. Pham sees selfies as a way for women of colour to insert themselves into public space and, what's more, to change the narratives and images that

define them (2015, p. 232). In other words, selfies introduce a minority perspective (Pham, 2015, p. 232).

Visibility and Vulnerability: Femme Selfie Aesthetics

Feminist scholars have drawn a complex and often ambivalent portrait of vulnerability by weighing its limitations as well as strengths (Petherbridge, 2016; Lewis, 2016; Dahl, 2017). For femmes, vulnerability is made further ambivalent and fraught when it is tied to visibility, as it inevitably is. While femmes' queerness is often rendered invisible, femininity is hyper-visible and, therefore, hyper-regulated. Non-normative embodiments of femininity carry an increased risk of surveillance and regulation, as do feminine bodies that are read as racialized, disabled, trans, fat, or working-class. This is to say that while the vulnerability of selfies is a tool for increasing femme visibility and is often deployed in the politics of representation, visibility can make femmes vulnerable in undesirable and unintentional ways. Considering femmes' social positioning means recognizing that the vulnerability offered by visibility is an important means of connection where femmes perhaps have too few. At the same time, embodying or performing vulnerability is not always a choice, and does not always result in finding a supportive community. Visibility is tricky. Like vulnerability, it is not experienced equally, but remains a fraught and ambivalent category.

As several theorists have argued, selfies are a self-representational form which becomes especially important for marginalized communities. Judith Butler's (2004b) argument the gender itself is collectively-produced, relational, and referential, underscores how important self-representation can be (p. 1). She writes: "But the terms that make up one's gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)," (Butler, 2004b, p. 1). Drawing from Hegel, Butler argues that we are only constituted by recognition; we are only legible as our gender if we adequately perform the existing script (2004b, p. 2). Butler notes that this can be oppressive, as the conditions of recognition create hierarchies. But this can be a fruitful ground

for queer gender aesthetics. Butler says that sometimes we intentionally shirk recognition because we do not agree to its terms, and it is from here that we can enact change or build alternative worlds (2004b, p. 3).

Femme aesthetics grow from this place of critique which enables the production of a non-normative or modified version of femininity. Nichole Nicholson identifies such femme aesthetics through her study of selfies posted by femmes on Tumblr: a kind of mixing and matching of masculinity and femininity (2014, p. 73). She finds that these aesthetics are shared by numerous Tumblr femmes, indicating that these alternative codes of femme-ininity are recognized as such and reproduced, which indicates that femme culture spreads and can be traced through online platforms.

On Instagram, femmes often use selfies to show off their outfit or make-up of the day (#ootd and #motd, respectively). In doing so, they may draw attention to a specific aspect, like lipstick shade, printed skirt, or enamel lapel pins (Figure 27, 28). These posts signal the range of femme aesthetics: dark lipstick, a Polly Pocket skirt, and enamel pins show that femme can draw from goth or punk aesthetics, or a very youthful, girlish aesthetic. These posts also signal the inherent vulnerability of selfies. If vulnerability is understood to stem from the body, and all vulnerability is experienced in the body (Mackenzie et al., 2013, p. 8), then displaying and drawing attention to the body in such deliberate ways is a practice in vulnerability.

The social aspect of selfies (sharing them on social media) further emphasizes their vulnerability: these posts also sometimes serve as an invitation for interaction, like when user @immateriality asks “what do you guys think of my lipstick?” The selfies — displaying the body and inviting connection — are offered to a user’s followers to like, comment on, or just ignore.

Figure 27. @immateriality selfie 1 [digital image]. (Accessed 2019). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/sabrinamscott/ (Image has since been removed). Image reproduced with permission.

Figure 28. @femmesupremacy selfie 1 [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from instagram.com/p/Be0oOpnBGEn/?igshid=1v7iw5sdmj6kp. Image reproduced with permission.

Selfies illuminate femme aesthetics, and reading them can, at the very least, offer femmes a way into femme culture and community, a way of learning how to be recognizably femme. A deeper reading of these aesthetics, however, can illuminate the ways in which femme is defined, as well as to instigate discussions about the politics of belonging and femme visibility. I turn now to a closer reading of two examples of femme selfies that demonstrate how femme selfie aesthetics can offer commentary on the parameters of the category of femme.

Instagram user @rs posted a selfie that shows their body from lips to navel (Figure 29). In the image, they are wet and soapy from a bath or shower, and holding their glitter-manicured hand against their hairy chest. Visible, too, are the scars on their chest from top surgery, as well

as a gold dolphin necklace, beard, and silver lip piercing. This fits Nicholson's understanding of femme aesthetics as a kind of mixing and matching of traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" symbols: body hair, beards, and flat chests are coded as masculine, while glitter nail polish and jewellery are coded as feminine. The caress of the body shown in the image also reads as feminine, as an act of care and sensuality. Further, facial piercings on whitebodies, like @rs's, read as "alternative," positioning femme as an alternative feminine aesthetic. This particular combination of masculinity and femininity, as well as the visible top surgery scars, show that femme is an identity category that can be accessed by trans, genderqueer, and non-binary folks.

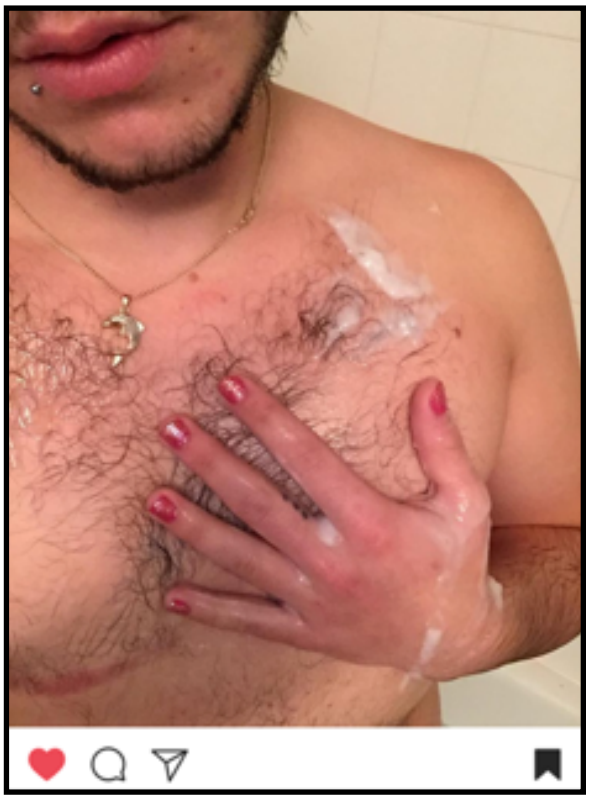

Figure 29. @rs selfie 1 [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from Instagram (link not provided for privacy reasons) Image reproduced with permission.

The symbols of the soap and manicure and the caption accompanying the photo place @rs in the context of a bodily-care practice, and shares this context with their followers. The caption @rs wrote, "COCONUT. OIL. / Glittery nails / Bath tubs / Being a babely tender hairyfemme Dreamboat. / The fact that my chest hair grows in the shape of a heart. / These are a few of my favourite things," suggests that this practice goes beyond a practice of caring for the body and extends to a practice of celebrating the body. As @rs identifies as and is visibly trans, this practice of celebration and simultaneous identification with femme ("Being a babely tender hairyfemme Dreamboat") is significant. Laying claim to the femme identity as a trans

person makes it possible for other trans people to do so, pushing the boundaries of femme wide enough to include trans, genderqueer, and non-binary people.

While this conceptualization of femme seems to be largely accepted, it does signal a transformation, or at least shift, from the dominant understanding of femme as a lesbian identity, especially that embodied by cis women. While many other queer women who do not identify as lesbian, as well as men and non-binary queers have laid claim to the femme identity since at least the 1990s, debates about whether non-lesbians are welcome under this categorical umbrella continue in contemporary forums like Tumblr[11]. It is unclear where or how trans and non-binary queers fit in where femme is defined as such (ie. if the definition of lesbian is trans-inclusive). In any case, @rs offers a model of what a trans or non-binary femme would (and does) look like, and confirms that trans and non-binary femmes do, in fact, exist, whether they are universally acknowledged or not. This act gives credence to Murray's theory of selfies as a (post) feminist representational form. Here, the selfie becomes a practice of taking up space and asserting one's right to do so, even within an identity category in which you are often imagined outside of. Considering this representational function, and riffing off of danah boyd's (2006) assertion that networking is a way of "writing community into being," selfies are a way that femmes write themselves into being. In this example, @rs is writing non-binary femmes into existence. This act of self-representation is political: it works to expand and reimagine the category of femme and to challenge cissexism within queer and femme communities that might contest this claim of belonging.

In making non-binary femmes visible, @rs demonstrates considerable vulnerability — physical, emotional, and political. They display their physical body being cared for and caring for itself. They lay bare their skin, hair, and scars — these the remnants of literal wounds which signify the body's physical vulnerability. Additionally, @rs makes a claim of belonging by using the term "femme," which renders them further vulnerable in emotional or social terms. Drawing

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[11] http://vag-enius.tumblr.com/post/159609732741/lesbianzoidberg-the-big-misnomer-about-butch

from recognition theory, femme scholar Ulrika Dahl (2017) says there is vulnerability in wanting to be like others, to be with others, to be understood by others, and to be respected by others, and here we see the desire to belong to a category and community, the seeking of connection. This vulnerability is productive, perhaps even strategically so. This selfie captures a moment of self-care, which signals independence, but the impulse to share it, to publicly claim femme and feminized forms of self-care, especially as a trans subject, hinges on the politics of vulnerability and interdependence. The invitation of the photo, to see me care for myself, models a politics of softness and vulnerability that is directed inward, rather than towards another, as femme's vulnerability has, historically, often been directed. It claims feminized care labour as valuable, while making it public. It claims emotionality, vulnerability, and care work as valuable parts of femininity not to be necessarily exorcised from the femme identity. It claims the trans femme specifically as worthy of care, and it claims that feminized labour need not always be in the service of others. In this selfie, vulnerability produces a certain visibility that makes the femme category both more capacious and more politically nuanced. Vulnerability and visibility, then, can be productive forces in femme selfies.

Visibility is complicated, however. While my earlier description of femmephobia makes it clear why femme visibility is incredibly important, visibility can also bring about violence. Even while femmes' sexual or gender identities may be invisible (Hemmings, 1999; Galewski, 2005), femininity in general is hypervisible, and in turn heavily surveilled and regulated. The urgency around femme visibility is heightened for femmes of colour, who are paradoxically both invisible as femmes and hypervisible as racialized subjects.

Even to a queer eye, femmes of colour may not read as such; femme is often imagined as a white category because of its visual references to normative femininity, which are coded as white. In 1981, Angela Davis articulated the racial hierarchies created through notions of "femininity" and "womanhood" that privilege white women and dehumanize Black women. bell hooks (1981) also argued that Black women are denied access to the category of "woman" on

account of their race. hooks argued that this made “women’s liberation” seem to be “a white women’s issue,” as Black women were conditioned to deny their womanhood and, by extension, the sexist oppression they faced (1981, p. 1). It seems Black women are always already disqualified from femininity as they are always already marked as ‘Other.’ More recently, Dominique C. Hill (2017) has said that Black bodies are automatically read as “queer,” a reading that has often elided her actual lesbian sexual identity (p. 434). She wrote, “my queer performance and lesbian identity is in actuality what [my students] deem a typical performance of Black femininity. Accordingly, the compounding of race and gender render Black femininity a queer and already non-normative representation of femininity” (Hill, 2017, p. 436).

The implication of this mapping of gender, race, and sexuality is that white women are seen as “unmarked” or normative while Black women are marked as queer, further implying that femininity is always already white, and white femme-ininity reads as “unmarked” or normative — in other words, straight — in cisgender women. Lisa Walker (2001) has argued that in the absence of marked difference in sexuality, femmes can carry signs of secondary difference from other systems of marking, like race (p. 56). Walker (2001) argues that in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) femmes are, in fact, marked by whiteness. This configuration of femme and femininity makes it clear why there are multiple Instagram accounts dedicated to increasing the visibility of femmes of colour.

Artist, activist, and Instagrammer @alokvmenon uses selfies to discuss the complications of visibility as a non-binary femme of colour. (Figure 30) On Trans Day of Visibility, @alokvmenon posted a selfie. The photo shows @alokvmenon dressed in a hot pink and teal floral-patterned jacket, which lays open to reveal chest hair. One hand fluffs their curly, pastel-pink hair, and they are further adorned with pastel purple lipstick, a nose piercing, and dangling earrings. Accompanying this selfie is this caption:

> today is trans day of visibility #TDOV ! & I just want to thank all of the good lighting i have found this past year for allowing me to gift the world such exquisite & masterful

selfies!!! representation is hard work! every day gender non-conforming people are putting ourselves at grave risk with little to no concern for our safety & dignity. we are constantly punished & ridiculed for being ourselves, and yet we still persist! this world is trying its best to disappear us, but bitch i am still here living my best transgenderly life taking my multivitamins & pulling looks!!! take that!!! 😘 #trans #nonbinary #queer #girlslikeus

Figure 30. @alokvmenon selfie 1 [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg_ko2uHi8-/?igshid=1mmu1dr5jthip Image reproduced with permission.

Like @rs, @alokvmenon demonstrates a femme aesthetic that pulls from both the traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine. The dyed-pink hair reads as alternative, while

the nose piercing on @alokvmenon's South Asian body reads as traditional — albeit for a woman, and while @alokvmenon does not identify as a woman, this could be read as a reference to traditional Indian womanhood or femininity. While bright colours are not uncommon for men in South Asia, the pink and teal jacket with ruffled shoulders reads as feminine in the Western context in which @alokvmenon currently lives (though @alokvmenon does not identify as a man either). The jacket, along with the pastel hair and lips contrast the visible chest hair, which reads as masculine. The combination of masculine and feminine touches signal gender non-conformity, but, also like @rs, @alokvmenon explicitly identifies as gender non-conforming in the caption, inserting genderqueer or non-binary subjects into the category of femme.

@alokvmenon's caption refers to the complexity and sometimes precarity of visibility. While this bright, genderqueer ensemble works to (re)shape femme aesthetics and the category of femme itself, this aesthetic has also seemed to invite discrimination, harassment, and violence from a cissexist, transphobic, and femmephobic public. Here, visibility as a gender non-conforming femme of colour creates a kind of vulnerability that is undesirable, that demonstrates the actual danger, violence, and wounding that is a risk of living in a human body — especially a non-normative one. @alokvmenon's response is one informed by contemporary femme internet politics, as they take up the practice of sharing their vulnerabilities with their audience of followers, thus making them public.

@alokvmenon makes themself vulnerable by naming the violence they endure, but also employs a flippant, flamboyant attitude, like when they "thank all of the good lighting i have found this past year for allowing me to gift the world such exquisite & masterful selfies!!!" Celebrating the transfeminine body in this way while simultaneously naming the violence it endures is a political act of resistance to transphobia, cisnormativity, racism, and femmephobia, especially as @alokvmenon explicitly attributes this violence to cissexism and transphobia. This political act utilizes the feminist strategy of laying bare one's body and lived

experiences, and connecting these experiences of the body to larger social systems. It is by connecting individual experiences to systemic oppression that selfies become political. Otherwise, expressive practices like art therapy or consciousness raising are limited, embodying what Dana Cloud (1998) calls the therapeutic: “a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon — the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing social order — but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict” (p. xiv). The function of this rhetoric, according to Cloud, is to encourage individuals to focus on their private lives rather than on reforming systems of power (1998, p. xiv). The political analysis of the selfies presented here certainly go beyond the personal to connect individual experiences with structures of power. @alokvmenon further politicizes their selfie as they explicitly refer to the representational work the selfie does to hopefully, ultimately combat this oppression, and acknowledges both the importance and difficulty of this work in the current cultural climate. This not only reiterates that selfies are useful to the politics of self-representation, but that femmes are wise to this valuable potential, and savvy enough to use it as a political platform. Here aesthetics are not neutral (if they ever are) but rather signal belonging within the category of femme, as well as within society more broadly.

The femme selfie aesthetic outlined in these two examples can be read as constituting a femme gaze, similar to the female gaze identified in post-feminist selfies by Murray (2015). In post-feminist selfies, Murray found that young women use nude, revealing, or sexualized images of their bodies to challenge sexism and represent women’s perspectives and feminist concerns. If, as Murray interprets, post-feminist selfie aesthetics can be understood as re-appropriating a symbol or form often used to perpetuate women’s oppression — women’s objectified bodies — then posting a celebratory, appreciative image of a transfeminine body while overtly challenging cissexism, transphobia, and femmephobia can be read as similarly flipping or challenging the gaze which objectifies femme bodies, here specifically non-binary femme bodies, both white and of colour. We can then read selfies posted by femmes that

challenge femmephobia through a combination of politicized rhetoric of vulnerability and brazenly feminine figures as constituting a critical femme gaze, an aesthetic sensibility derived from contemporary femme politics.

Femme Vulnerability

Vulnerability has long been a particularly femme concern. Vulnerability is understood to stem from the fragile human body (Mackenzie et al. 2013, p 8), and the body, because of this weakness and neediness, is understood as feminine; the body, vulnerability, and the feminine then all become understood as negative, shameful, and to be avoided (Dahl, 2017, p. 41). Western philosophy predicated on binaries like the mind/body split positions the feminine as inherently vulnerable. Further, if we read vulnerability as physical or corporeal — as the potential for wounding — then we can see how femme aesthetic choices, like wearing high heeled shoes, are often read as weaknesses, or vulnerabilities; femininity leaves femmes open to attack. Vulnerability is associated with the threat of violence, and nation-states and individual subjects alike aim to master invulnerability as a form of protection (Drichel, 2013, p. 6). This is seen through increased security policies, like those the United States mounted in the wake of 9/11 (Butler, 2004a), or even through the lesbian anti-vulnerability technology of "comfortable shoes" (Dahl, 2017, p. 42).

If we read vulnerability as emotional or social, we can see how femme's refusal to adopt the comfortable shoe in order to maintain her feminine aesthetic leaves her vulnerable to not only the perpetual violence directed at feminine bodies, but also to the queer and feminist critiques levied at those seen as placating to the (hetero)patriarchy. To illustrate, Dahl (2017) recalls Dorothy Allison's statement that "to be femme is to be willing to be genuinely miserable, humiliated, and full of feelings of inadequacy" (p 39). Dahl uses Allison's sentiment to understand how femme's relation to the conventional feminine leaves her vulnerable to critique and violence — mainstream, feminist, and queer.

However, queer femmes have theorized vulnerability as powerful and agentic in the context of sexuality. For post-war femmes, sexual and emotional vulnerability, especially in relation to butch lesbians, was a foundational aspect of femme identity. During this era, butch/femme was very much an "erotic culture" that denoted the masculine butch as the active partner who derived pleasure from giving, and the feminine femme as the reactive — not passive — partner, whose sexual pleasure was paramount (Kennedy & Davis, 1992, p. 73). Femmes fulfilled their sexual desires and sexual roles by making themselves sexually and emotionally vulnerable to their butch lovers. In conversation with Cherríe Moraga, Amber Hollibaugh says:

> Femme is active, not passive. It's saying to my partner, "Love me enough to let me go where I need to go and take me there. Don't make me think it through. Give me a way to be so in my body that I don't have to think; that you can fantasize for the both of us. You map it out. You are in control." It's hard to talk about things like giving up power without it sounding passive. I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting. I expose myself for her to appreciate. I open myself out for her to see what's possible for her to love in me that's female. (1992, p. 246)

Moraga responds:

> Yes, I feel the way I want a woman can be a very profound experience. Remember I told you how when I looked up at my lover's face when I was making love to her [...] I could feel and see how deeply every part of her was present? That every pore in her body was entrusting me to handle her, to take care of her sexual desire. This look on her face is like nothing else. It fills me up. She entrusts me to determine where she'll go sexually. And I honestly feel a power inside me strong enough to heal the deepest wound. (1992, p. 247)

Hollibaugh highlights how femmes' vulnerability and willingness to make themselves vulnerable to their lovers is often highly prized as well as deeply satisfying. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes more explicitly about femme sexual vulnerability:

> For me and many other femmes, the core of femme sexuality lies in femme hunger, in a particularly femme strength of sexual openness, *vulnerability*, and need. […] I need intensity; I need to get filled up and fed. To open up, give it all up and be loved, not hated, for my intensity, for how much pleasure I can feel and how *vulnerable* it makes me. It is a *vulnerability* that can be both incredibly powerful and incredibly terrifying. I must choose who I lie down with very carefully. (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997, p. 143, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Piepzna-Samarasinha details the strength of her desires and needs which positions her as vulnerable, as Western philosophy associates bodily needs, like desire, with vulnerabilities. Like it is for Hollibaugh, this vulnerability is a defining aspect of Piepzna-Samarasinha's femme sexuality. Not only do they both make themselves vulnerable by admitting — and relishing — their bodily desires, but by offering these admissions to another in hopes of finding acceptance. Vulnerability becomes both physical and emotional, as physical or bodily needs are wrapped up in the emotional need for connection.

In "The Femme Tapes," Madeline Davis, Amber Hollibaugh, and Joan Nestle talk about how to be a good femme lover, a crucial aspect of which is "finding a way around that incredible butch barrier to be the lover of a butch" (1992, p. 265). They say, "There's something kind of theatrical about being femme […] We are the ones who make the surroundings safe and appropriate. You know — it's hard work! But we will do almost anything for them, the women we love and need so much" (Davis, Hollibaugh & Nestle, 1992, p. 265). Femmes have often been tasked with using their unwavering openness or vulnerability to reach a closed-off butch lover. In the butch-femme erotic dynamic then, neediness, openness, and vulnerability become incredible strengths and skills, rather than weaknesses. Further, femmes have been said to do

the extra work of masking the dependency butches have on them in order to preserve butch's independent (self) image. Biddy Martin elaborates on this point: "femmes feign a kind of dependence that masks not only their own aggressions, desires, and autonomies, but also the butch's or man's dependence and limitation, facilitating a form of attachment based on a conventional distribution of gendered qualities" (1996, p. 41). While this relationship or exchange is arguably a pillar of femme identity, or at least femme history, it is not always been accepted without challenge or critique.

In the 1990s and early 2000s — an era dubbed "the Post-Modern Reign of the Queer" by Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh (1996) — some femme theory turned away from the emphasis on vulnerability and relationality, and endeavoured to conceptualize femme as independent rather than interdependent. From its origin in the 1940s and 1950s, femme was considered the counterpart to the butch: femme writer Joan Nestle says that butch and femme were so intertwined then that she assumed it was one word: butch-femme (Davis, Hollibaugh,& Nestle, 1992, p. 267). The theoretical impulse to pair femme with butch has made it seem as though femme is only legible as a queer subject when she appears in this coupled form. And so, Clare Hemmings (1999) tries to wriggle the femme out from under the erotic gaze, rejecting the notion that only the gendered gaze lends credibility to the femme. She argues instead that "we need to follow the trajectories of femmes on their own terms" (Hemmings, 1999, p. 460). Additionally, the anthology *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002) seeks to "unhyphenate" femme, finally — as in, examine femme outside of a butch-femme context (p. 12). More recently, Karen Blair and Rhea Ashley Hoskins (2015) try to conceive of femmes beyond the realm of cisgender lesbian women living in exclusive butch-femme communities; this is crucial partly because it is commonly held that butch identities can stand alone while femme identities are always in relation to their butch counterparts (p. 230). While seeking to move femme away from butch dependency, these iterations of femme theory reveal femme's historical framing as a relational identity, but lay the foundation for a new kind

of relationality: supportive femme communities. Contemporary femmes have seemingly returned to an emphasis on vulnerability, including the acknowledgement of physical, emotional, and social needs that extend beyond sexual relationships.

Feeling and "Lqqking": Soft Femme Aesthetics

While femme is an aesthetic identity category, it is arguably also an affective one, one based on feeling.[12] Aesthetics and feelings often become intertwined. For example, Dahl (2014) examines the "feeling of vintage" in femme movements. She questions the influence that 1940s and 1950s fashion continues to have on contemporary femme aesthetics. Dahl finds that for some femmes, namely white femmes, these vintage styles carry nostalgic feelings of attachment for their own working class roots, or for feminine elders like grandmothers and mothers. For Other femmes, the remnants from this period bring up very different historical feelings, like those associated with segregation and racism (Dahl, 2014, p. 612-3). Vintage garments elicit certain feelings for different femmes, which becomes problematic when they are assumed to be inclusive symbols for the community, like in one example Dahl discusses of a white-gloved fist standing in to represent femmes in an Australian gay pride parade (2014). That such symbols are (problematically) assumed to be meaningful — and carry the right meaning — to all femmes reveals that "femme" is a category constituted by affective orientations, by certain tugs on the heartstrings. The conceptualization of femme as an affective category, one structured by feelings and attachments, is made elsewhere in Dahl's argument that the femme is understood as not only marked by a feminine aesthetic but by an orientation toward some objects and bodies and not others (2017, p. 37), and by Duggan and McHugh's (1996) claim that femme only desires queer masculinities (p. 155). Femme is known for its affective attachments, be they vintage clothes or butch lesbians.

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[12] While the terms are often used interchangeably, Alison Jaggar (1989) suggests we might understand "feelings" as physiological or sensory, and "emotions" as more cognitive and socially constructed (p. 153-9). Affect seems to fall somewhere in the middle — defined by its "in-between-ness" — said to be a pre-cognitive, animating force that refers to "a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1-2, emphasis in original).

Femme's well-documented relationship to vulnerability also underscores its position as an affective identity. Ann Cvetkovich (2003), for one, has considered femme's vulnerability as both a sexual and affective dimension of femme subjectivity. She says femme sexual openness reveals an emotional desire to lose control. This impulse reveals a robust sexual appetite which, in a patriarchal culture, is discouraged for women. For many femmes, butch-femme relationships offer the opportunity to express this taboo desire; for femme literary icon Joan Nestle, butch penetration "destroys the years of numbness" (qtd in Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 64).

In closely reading an essay by Nestle, Cvetkovich writes, "Through the gift of taking, Nestle is able to live with her body, which comes to represent herself. More important than the physical acts, but inseparable from them, are the psychic effects of receiving attention," (2003, p. 65). Nestle positions touch as an antidote for sexual repression, what she describes as a "numbness," illustrating Cvetkovich's overarching argument that touch and trauma are both physical and psychic. The satisfaction that the butch-femme sexual exchange offers — "destroying years of numbness" — positions openness or vulnerability as both sexual and affective, and demonstrates that vulnerability, as an emotional state connected to the body, is desirable (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 58). According to many femme accounts, Nestle's and others, vulnerability is a shared femme experience; this underlines my understanding of femme as an affective category in addition to an aesthetic one.

So far, I have discussed how the aesthetics of femme selfies are structured by vulnerability, as femme selfies tend to expose femme bodies and experiences of trauma and touch. Now I focus more closely on how femme selfies reveal emotional vulnerability; how they expose femme feelings. Not only is femme partially constituted by the shared experience of vulnerability, but femme internet culture is constituted by the vulnerability of sharing these vulnerabilities with each other through selfies. Several scholars say a critical aspect of selfies is that they are shared on social media (Maddox, 2017; Meese et al., 2015) Being social, seeking belonging and acceptance, like femmes do through posting selfies and tagging them as

"femme," are ways in which they are rendered vulnerable (Dahl, 2017). It follows, then, that selfies are already premised on vulnerability. Selfies that communicate femme feelings reveal multiple types of vulnerability — physical, social, and emotional — and do so productively and, I argue, strategically. Like the connection femmes have often found in butch-femme relationships, sharing one's vulnerabilities has proven to forge much-needed connections online. In particular, crying selfies are useful tools to forge femme connections.

Crying selfies fit the definition of selfies as outlined by Meese et al. (2015, p. 1820-1) with the major exception that the subject of the photograph is crying or has been crying recently. Like funeral selfies, crying selfies may be considered a "debased" form of the selfie, as they are capturing an unhappy moment, one many would say is inappropriate or narcissistic to capture (Meese et al., 2015, p. 1818). Nonetheless, crying selfies are increasingly common. Instagram user @femmesupremacy often posts crying selfies, marked by visual signifiers like smeared eye make-up and visible tears. The caption on crying selfies will often provide clues as to why the subject is crying: for example, on the image shown in Figure 31, @femmesupremacy wrote "today's lqqk / things have gotten violent at home again (i need to survive another week before i leave) / lots of public crying 2day #radicalvulnerability #crybaby #sensitive #softfemme #femmemagic #publiccrying." Meese et al. (2015) argue that "selfies often function as communication and are in fact communicating important affective information about a person's emotional circumstances" (2015, p. 1825). Indeed, @femmesupremacy uses the selfie to communicate with their followers the particular difficulties of their current context, including the negative affects they are currently experiencing. In turn, the crying selfie also signals to @femmesupremacy's followers that the user is in need of emotional support, and offers an opportunity to provide it.

In a study of death and digital media, internet researchers Amanda Lagerkvist and Yvonne Andersson (2017) find that social media becomes a "lifeline" for many after they experience significant illness or the death of a loved one. Similar to Meese et al.'s (2015)

understanding of selfies as a form of "presencing," Lagerkvist and Andersson say social media offers a way to ground oneself in a new and often overwhelming terrain through digital tools like selfies (Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017, p. 558). Lagerkvist and Andersson (2017) see the selfie as "a gestural economy of affection": for example, the hospital selfie offers a way to elicit encouraging messages from others (p. 558). Conceptualizing the selfie as a gestural economy of affection is useful for theorizing crying selfies. The selfie pictured in Figure 31 prompted 33 likes and two comments. One user commented,

> I believe that public crying is both an act of radical vulnerability and great strength. I am really sorry to learn that you are enduring a recurrence of violence at home. You deserve unlimited peace, comfort, and healing. I am relieved to know that you are leaving your current living situation in a week, but am concerned about your welfare in the days before you move. Sending thoughts of protection and support [heart emoji].

Another user commented, "I'm sending love, I hope the violence stops. Message me if you want to talk [heart emoji]." In turn, @femmesupremacy liked each of these comments. These exchanges demonstrate the gestural economy of affection as outlined by Lagerkvist and Andersson: the selfie functions as an invitation to be present for others, an opportunity to form relations.

The crying selfie also functions as an indication of a soft femme politic and aesthetic. In @femmesupremacy's post they, perhaps ironically, refer to their crying image as "today's lqqk"[13] (look) and use the hashtag #softfemme, indicating that posting a crying selfie is an aesthetic choice, part of an a "soft femme" aesthetic that stands in contrast to "hard femme." Reading the "soft femme" aesthetic as performed by @femmesupremacy reveals that this femme aesthetic still combines masculine and feminine signifiers, though differently than the hard femme might. A soft femme politic encompasses reclaiming and revaluing feminized traits that have yet to be sufficiently reclaimed by femme theory, traits like emotionality and

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[13] This stylization originated on eBay.com to attract buyers to online auctions.

vulnerability. Like the femmes writing about the 1940s and 1950s, the soft femme finds strength in vulnerability.

In @femmesupremacy's crying selfie, the political interpretation of being soft femme is indicated by the hashtags #radicalvulnerability #femmemagic and #publiccrying. Being vulnerable or open about one's negative feelings with others is positioned as a radical act, and being emotional and crying in public is positioned as disrupting the status quo. The deliberate framing of the crying selfie as radical and disruptive suggests that posting one's crying image is a *political* choice as well as an aesthetic one, a political choice intended to challenge the myth of the autonomous, independent adult subject. In this crying selfie, @femmesupremacy explicitly acknowledges the politics of embracing and sharing one's negative emotional responses, or in other words, of making oneself vulnerable. @femmesupremacy frequently shares their feelings and images of their feeling self on Instagram while using the descriptive terms "femme" and "soft femme." Claiming the femme category in this way demonstrates that femme is about feeling and looking; it is an affective and aesthetic category, one that is malleable and expansive, currently shifting to encapsulate soft signifiers as well as hard.

The crying selfie uses vulnerability in a number of ways. It reveals a wound; here, an emotional wound. The crying selfie is evidence of pain, of hurt endured. Feminist theorizing of vulnerability enables us to think of the crying selfie as demonstrating a universal interdependence, an emotional neediness; it gestures to others that their encouragement and support is needed, that they are needed. And so, the crying selfie becomes a medium through which social or emotional needs can be met; as Lagerkvist and Andersson (2017) would say, the crying selfie operates within a gestural economy of affection. @femmesupremacy consciously and deliberately politicizes and mobilizes vulnerability through taking, posting, and sharing crying selfies. The crying selfie reveals femme to be an aesthetic and affective category, and, further, demonstrates that vulnerability is the very basis of femme internet culture: it shapes the aesthetic, the politics, and the network itself.

Figure 31. @femmesupremacy selfie 2 [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BXDQqlrhLv-/?igshid=1rjc2fmjgu6q9 Image reproduced with permission.

Selfies as Femme-inist Theory

Suzanne Bost (2008) uses the term "shared vulnerability" to argue that bonding over shared corporeal boundary states, like illness, may build more powerful alliances than identity politics can offer. Bost's work enables a reading of vulnerability as political as well as aesthetic and affective. If vulnerability is political, and selfies are inherently vulnerable, then selfies, too,

can be read as political. And, since I read selfies as deeply connected to the feminine because they are associated with young women and vulnerability, selfies become a promising political tool for femmes. If femme politics are about recuperating the feminine and insisting on its value, then a practice rooted in femininity, like selfies, lends itself easily to furthering femme politics. All iterations of femme have in common a political take on femininity — reclaiming it, deconstructing it, or queering it. This means that in addition to being an aesthetic and affective category, femme is political category and a mode of political critique. I argue that selfies are a practice in vulnerability as they are used to share one's image, thoughts, and feelings online. The particularities of sharing one's feelings online is rooted in the feminine.

In her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), Sherry Turkle discusses technology's impact on emotional styles. With some criticism, Turkle (2011) says that the "gold standard of autonomy" is used to privilege emotional styles that were predicated on boundaries rather than relationships. In her research, Turkle has observed that younger generations who have "grown up tethered" — meaning grown up with the level of connectivity made possible and normalized through mobile devices and social media — will share emotions, usually via text message or social media, before they are fully formed or felt. In fact, sharing one's feelings is the very method of discovering them. It seems feelings are not fully experienced unless they are communicated. This understanding of emotional styles may do much to explain the crying selfie phenomenon, as well as funeral selfies that Meese et al. (2015) focus on. Previously, the impulse to share would have been interpreted as pathological (to the tune of narcissism), but Turkle suspects this is becoming a generational style. Meese et al. (2015) corroborate this observation, noting that social media is increasingly where we go to process our inner thoughts and feelings (p. 1819). Our hyper-connectivity does not enable us to cultivate the ability to be alone and reflect on feelings in private, but rather it enables us to cultivate collaborative selves.

Turkle notes that the previous "gold standard of autonomy" rewards a culturally "male" emotional style, whereas an emotional style based on relationships rather than boundaries is more "feminine." Relatedly, Duggan and McHugh (1996) have said that collaboration is a vital aspect of femme science, further suggesting that collaboration is a decidedly femme-inine approach to understanding both one's self and the world. Selfies, (perhaps especially crying selfies) can be read as employing the feminized emotional style enabled by social media: selfies illustrate Turkle (2011) and Meese et al.'s (2015) understanding of social media as a way to collaboratively process or make sense of emotions and experiences. This is how bell hooks understands theorizing as well — as "making sense out of what was happening," (1991, p. 2). Femmes also use selfies and their captions to make sense out of what is happening — to unpack, reflect, and explain recent feelings or experiences. In other words, femmes use selfies to theorize, using personal experiences, images of their bodies or faces, and political analysis. Femme selfies, then, are a feminized mode of knowledge production as well as a form of presencing, a mode of communication, and a gestural economy of affection.

Femme Instagrammer @immateriality has used a selfie to reflect on the toll of rape culture, and the personal impact of calling it out online. (Figure 32) The image shows @immateriality laying in bed cuddling with a cat and wearing a serious expression. The caption reads:

> Inspired by all of the social media hubbub yesterday - a 'rape culture checklist' I wrote on Facebook now has 400+ shares - I decided to call out a guy who aggressively groped me early this summer. It wasn't even on a date - he didn't ask me for a date - it was after a tarot reading. I've been ignoring his advances ever since and it's been months and months. He messaged me again last week. This time I decided to reply, decline, say I'm flattered by the interest but did not like the nonconsensual groping of my body. The guy called me a liar, instantly replying 'that's not true and you know it.' After I text-yelled at him a bit he did admit his behaviour and said he did remember

> groping my ass. Then he said he's 'in therapy' and trying to be a 'good man' and told me to stop 'harassing' him. This is why we don't call out men, this is why we are afraid of you. We tell you you hurt us and you don't seem concerned or apologize, you call us liars because your self-concept as 'good' is more important to you than we are, our safety, our feelings, or our bodies. And this call out was so minimal. I have had much worse things happen to me. And still 'good men' can't take responsibility for the harms they cause. Today I am tired and sad; I am exhausted about rape culture. Most of the men on my feed have been dead silent. I see you. You're on notice and I am reclaiming my time. I would rather make art than educate you about rape culture. I have done enough. You can do the rest yourself. [leaf emoji] #gpoy #me #tired #mornings #stoprapeculture #metoo

@immateriality's image casts the user as vulnerable, as unarmoured: we see them lying in bed, wearing no make-up and no smile. This is significant when compared to the user's other posts that often show them heavily made-up, striking confident or sexy poses. @immateriality strategically accesses this vulnerability to underline both the pain and exhaustion that rape culture instills, which is made explicit in the caption. @immateriality allows their followers to witness this vulnerability; an embodiment of their words which theorize the unequal gender dynamic between a man and a white, non-binary, queer femme that enables rape culture to continue, as well as the effects of both the sexist harassment and the resulting emotional labour of trying to combat it. @immateriality's post is a clear example of grounding theory in the material, in other words, of making the personal political. In this way, @immateriality's selfie becomes an example of femme-inist theory as it relies on the cultivation of a collaborative self, utilizes vulnerability, and combines theory and praxis to ultimately advocate against rape culture and patriarchy more broadly.

Instagrammer, burlesque dancer, and arts worker @daintysmith has posted a photo of herself and written about reflecting on deep and complex conversations she was having about

Figure 32. @immateriality selfie 2 [digital image]. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BaWfCPTHTL0/?igshid=4rx8igqxyfq4 Image reproduced with permission.

race, art, and navigating life. The black and white image shows @daintysmith outside, holding a strong pose against the trunk of a tree. She wears a black cropped tank top and a flowing black skirt, hiked up to reveal the skin of one of her legs. Her gaze passes above and beyond the camera, intentionally looking to the distance with determination and confidence. (Figure 33) The caption reads:

> Reflecting on the conversation tonight on art, access, vulnerability, black bodies, the spaces we navigate, the construction of always being seen. I am still digesting all the

things that were said. And on the beautiful and complicated ways we create, make art and performance and tell stories with our whole selves.

I don’t think there are any easy answers. And maybe there never will be. But I am so grateful to be in that space with those brilliant artists. And so inspired by the beauty, resilience and resistance of African, Indigenous, Latinx, Caribbean, South Asian, disabled visionaries. And so comforted and proud of our wild magic that continues in spite of everything. Photo by @veronezia of @pheonixrisingstudio

#storyteller #artheart #storiesmatter #create #vision #shapeshifter #magic #witchlife #selflove #performer #artistlife #creativelife #workingartist #heartwork #healing #crafting #dreams #visioning #thejourney #believe #hearthealing #gottahavefaith #thegodinme #survivorship #thrive”

Figure 33. @daintysmith selfie 1 [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bf2HyBvlr_z/?igshid=5pgitnbvq5qq Image reproduced with permission.

@daintysmith's post takes up a critical position that recognizes marginalized groups' oppression as well as their resilience. Citing this history and current reality as a black femme positions @daintysmith as vulnerable to the effects of white supremacy, colonization, and

patriarchy. She also appears vulnerable in the photo, with the skin of her arms and one leg exposed. However, this vulnerability is matched by strength in her stance and her gaze which seems to look confidently into the future. She appears strong and hopeful, combining vulnerability and strength through both her words and self image — perhaps the very embodiment of resilience. Further, the hashtags @daintysmith uses describe art as "heart work," as healing, perhaps especially for survivors of colour, demonstrating that @daintysmith accesses multiple vulnerabilities in her work (this Instagram post included). Accessing vulnerability becomes a strategy through which to theorize or make senses of the role of art in healing, the material impact of racism, colonization, and patriarchy, and the resilience and value of racialized and disabled communities. This post also reveals that these ideas or theories stem at least partially from conversations with others, signalling the collaborative nature of this knowledge and the femme-inist politic behind its creation.

Both of these examples demonstrate how femmes access vulnerability strategically to create and share knowledge. The images matched to the caption are impactful. Not only do they illustrate the sentiments in the caption, but they ground the theory in something that feels relatable and accessible: selfies. I read sharing one's image as a vulnerable act, and so I see selfies as inherently vulnerable — especially in these examples where the femmes are exposed, both physically and emotionally, through the particular arrangement of their bodies, the sharing of experiences of violence, and the admission of tender feelings. This vulnerability is useful in fostering the theorization of femme lives. Following bell hooks' understanding of theorizing as "making sense out of what was happening," these femmes draw on their own experiences and their own bodies to make sense of the specificities of the current social context. Using the tools at their disposable — in this case, selfies and Instagram — they circulate their theories. This kind of lo-fi and collaborative knowledge production is made possible by the shift to feminine emotional styles that Turkle (2011) witnesses and ascribes to "growing up tethered."

Selfies, then, usher in new ways to produce social theory that is rooted in traditionally feminine values and traits, like vulnerability and collaboration.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the relationship between femme and vulnerability through a study of selfies. I have argued that selfies are a practice in vulnerability, since all vulnerability is ultimately experienced in the body and selfies are about exposing one's body online. Other interpretations of vulnerability say being social, emotionally needy, or dependent on others signals vulnerability as well, in which case selfies remain inherently vulnerable as they are largely defined by being shared on social media for likes and comments — online signals of social acceptance and social capital. My reading of femme selfies reveals that femme thought has historically grappled with the complexities of vulnerability, including the unwanted and undesirable effects it can cause. The negative properties of vulnerability do not affect all femmes evenly. In fact, vulnerability is experienced very differently for femmes of different races and different gender identities, a social fact that alters how each femme strategically accesses vulnerability. I argue that femmes use vulnerability strategically to inform their aesthetics, make connections with others, and produce theory.

An area of further research may inquire how accessing vulnerability strategically can be read either as authentic or inauthentic. Authenticity online has been a concern since the internet was invented, and this would serve as a contemporary and nuanced way to return to these debates.

Part Five: Femmeship: Political Alliances and Communities of Care

Introduction: Femme and Online Communities

"Online communities" have been conceptualized as such since 1993 when Howard Rheingold introduced the term. The community metaphor was so powerful that it banished other prominent metaphors for the internet, like the "information superhighway" (Parks, 2011, p. 105). Though communities have traditionally been understood as groups of people bounded by shared geographical space (Parks, 2011, p. 107), many internet scholars have developed an understanding of internet groups as communities (Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1997; Shade, 2002; Gajjala, 2004; boyd, 2006; Driver, 2007; Baym 2000, 2015; Gray, 2009; Papacharissi, 2011; Connell 2012; Fink & Miller, 2013; Nicholson, 2014). In his work on queer subculture, Jack Halberstam (2008) is critical of the notion of community, arguing that quests for community are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity (p. 29). He says the stake in "community" is a conservative one, based in Christian values (Halberstam, 2008, p. 29). Subcultures offer critiques of the organic nature of community by showing how it is forms of "unbelonging" that make community possible (Halberstam, 2008, p. 29). This queer critique of "community" makes it easier to conceptualize femme communities in a different way. In this paper, I examine how femme communities are constructed online through particular forms of online communication. Using scholarship on online communication and online communities as a framework, I develop an understanding of femme friendships as political alliances and care networks. One of my interviewees, @femmesupremacy, used the term "femmeship" in our interview to describe the connections they make with other femmes. In this paper, I further develop the term "femmeship" to understand femme connections as politically significant friendships that take the form of political alliances and communities of care.

Femme is a queer identity with multi-faceted histories, originating in lesbian bar culture in the 1940s and 1950s (Nestle, 1992). It also has significant roots in the drag and ball culture

that started in 1960s Harlem (Bailey, 2014). Currently, I define femme as an identity marked by a critical and queer engagement with femininity that often manifests in one's style and/or values. For this project, I conducted an online ethnography of femme internet culture on Instagram. I created a researcher account (@acafemmeic) and followed other femme accounts that I located through searching #femme hashtags and a snowball method of finding femme accounts through other femmes, either by direct recommendation or through observing lists of followers, likes, and comments. Throughout my six-month study, I made notes on my observations, interviewed seven femme Instagram account operators, and took screen captures of relevant posts. I focused on what I am calling "the stuff" on femme internet culture: memes and selfies, and the politics they communicate. However, I also became interested in what is not so readily communicated through the visual: the connections and networks that are the very foundation of any community and, indeed, of social media itself. I am fascinated by cultural artifacts, what they mean, and what they tell others, but I am also curious about the ongoing practice of community, the daily maintenance of subculture, and what these practices mean to insiders. Relationships are a critical aspect of social media, but where do they occur? How are they maintained? What are the real or material effects of online community? What is the immaterial effect, the emotional impact? Anecdotally, I have known of several femmes who have formed meaningful bonds online: best friends, even spouses. I wanted to hear more about these relationships.

Sometimes friendship is visible on social media: friends and followers lists offer valuable insights into the bounds of community (boyd, 2006); posting group pictures or tagging friends in pictures on social media is one way to solidify or demonstrate friendships or other intimate relationships (Renold & Ringrose, 2017). But my hunch (informed by my own experience as a social media user) is that relationships are established and nurtured more often behind the scenes: through likes and comments, through sharing images privately, chatting via direct messages, or moving beyond the platform entirely. Public displays of friendship are notable,

but I also sought to examine friendship that happens in private, ordinary, and everyday ways. These two spheres are not easy to parse out completely: public and private are not separate — especially in the digital age. Trying to analyze the "real" versus the "performative" remained a tension throughout my analysis.

Some of the difficulty lies in capturing evidence of these connections to adequately analyze them. How can these connections be studied, especially if they are difficult to see? Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best (2016) say that description makes objects and phenomena available for analysis (p. 2), so interviews in which femmes describe in detail their online connections, friendships, and how they came to be, are critical to capturing data about relationships formed online.[14] In interviews, I was able to ask follow up questions or ask for an example to flesh out what a femme friendship formed on Instagram is like. Asking femmes to describe their online friendships is the best way to collect data about online relationships, but Marcus, Love, and Best also liken description to representation (2016, p. 2), so it also becomes significant and powerful to make space for marginalized communities to talk about their practices and relationships. According to José Esteban Muñoz (1996),

> Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere — while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (p. 6)

For Muñoz, understanding the anecdotal or ephemeral as evidence "grants entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories" (1996, p. 9), which, he says, is made evident when examining existing archives of evidence. In this sense, without narrative forms like anecdotes or description, we would lose accounts or evidence of queerness.

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[14] Except for one (@rs), my interviewees consented to having their comments attributed to them (one even specifically requested it), so their real usernames appear alongside the quotes I selected to include from our interviews. However, the usernames of specific femme friends of my interviewees have been redacted for privacy, as their consent for inclusion was not given.

Description has offered us insight into women's culture, including Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's study of female friendship (1975) and Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's study of bedroom culture (McRobbie, 1991). While I do not equate femmes with women, I use these studies as examples of methods for studying marginalized and feminized subjects and communities. Creating records of queer subcultural life works to preserve their history and legacy. In this sense, Halberstam (2008) says that academics can play an important role in the construction of queer archives and queer memory (p. 33). He says that the more records of queer subcultural life we have, the more the subculture can claim or take credit for its work and resist the erasure caused by scavengers from the dominant culture (Halberstam, 2008, p. 32-3). There are not yet enough studies of (only) femme communities to create a substantial framework, which means describing femme communities at length both provides a historical account and offers future scholars necessary texts and objects with which to work. Description offers a place to begin, and a necessary beginning. My interviewees with seven self-identified femmes is only the beginning of understanding femme friendships online. In this paper, I use long quotes from my interviewees and recount details from my interviews to describe the particularities of femme friendship practices. I do not resist interpretation entirely: as I worked with my interview transcripts, a narrative of femme friendships did emerge; I came to understand femmeships as both political alliances and care networks.

Femme, as a queer identity, is marginalized in mainstream society and, as a feminine identity, is further marginalized within queer communities, which are still susceptible to patriarchal and misogynist values that position women as subordinate to men and feminine as subordinate to masculine. Given this marginal status, building femme community becomes critical. Femmes often find each other through online platforms like Instagram, and build their communities from there. Despite the persistence of the community metaphor, framing online communities as valuable is somewhat fraught. Online communications and communities are

often seen as “cheap substitutes” for “the real thing,” but many scholars say the internet offers a number of technological affordances which actually aid the formation of community.

In her book, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2015), Nancy Baym writes that face-to-face interaction is granted a certain “specialness” because it allows for a full range of social cues and is irreplicable, and thus, computer mediated communication (CMC) is treated as a diminished form of communication. She argues that CMC should rather be seen as a new and eclectic mixed modality, combining face-to-face communication with writing (2015, p. 51). Rather than settling for a diminished form of communication, Baym says that we amend CMC to suit our desire to connect. Emoticons (now emojis) are examples of social cues created specifically for mediated communication, which enrich our online experience and capacity to connect. Shaka McGlotten (2013) also challenges the hierarchy created between face-to-face and virtual intimacy. He suggests the assumption that virtual intimacy is a diminished imitation of "the real thing” echoes assumptions that queer relationships are diminished versions of “the real thing” — monogamous, heterosexual intimate relationships (McGlotten, 2013, p. 7). McGlotten argues that intimacy is always virtual, in that it refers to immanence and potentiality, rather than something concrete, but this does not mean it is not “real” (McGlotten, 2013, p. 8).

Similar to how Baym says we adapt CMC to suit our desire to connect, danah boyd (2006) argues that we harness online tools to foster a sense of community on the internet. For example, she says that the process of “friending” on social media helps “write communities into being” (boyd, 2006, n.p.). In less defined online spaces (ie. social networking sites vs. closed groups like MUDs), friend networks define the boundaries of a community (boyd, 2006). These scholars contest the hierarchy between CMC and face-to-face communication, and move to understand CMC on its own terms. Creating communities through “friending” or, in other words, creating a “networked public,” allows users to connect via shared connections rather than shared interests (boyd, 2006). Many online communities, especially the older forms of online communities like multi-user domains (MUDs) and Usenet groups, are formed through

common interests or practices, like participating in specific fandoms, rather than common connections, or mutual friends. There are, then, at least two ways of conceptualizing online communities: as interest-based or as friend-based. I understand femme networks as formed through a hybrid of these approaches: femmes connect to specific people because they share interests or identities.

Femmeships Online: Consent, Compliments, and Transcending Time and Space

Compliments and Consent: Establishing Femme Communication Styles

Computer-mediated communication can help form communities by allowing users to actually connect to each other, as these femmes demonstrate, but CMC can also help communities form through the development of distinct communication styles that become part of a groups' identity. Perhaps especially on the internet, a medium that combines visual and written elements (Nakamura, 2007), communication style is as important as aesthetics in the forging of group identity (Nicholson, 2014). Baym outlined this argument in her study of the Usenet group "rec.arts.tv.soaps" (r.a.t.s.), a closed online group for fans of soap operas (2000). This group formed through a shared interest, but developed its group identity in a myriad of ways. Baym characterized this group as a community of practice (2000, p. 22). Baym found that certain aspects of the group's communication style, including an apparent commitment to friendliness (2000, p. 129) and the encouragement of "tangents" about members' personal lives (2000, p. 132), were practices that significantly contributed to the group's identity. In my research, I found that femmes also utilize specific communication styles, often connecting with each other by offering compliments and support.

For @iambriellenicolewilliams, complimenting other femmes was a way of building her following. She says, "I started scouring the femme tags and certain BoPo [body positive] tags and shit like that, I would just follow and find people and just show mad love. I would show them mad love on their pictures and stuff like, 'oh, you look cute,' just complimenting and stuff

like that." Instagram user @redthreadtarot, a professional tarot reader, describes her how cherished friendship with an older femme started over Instagram:

> She followed me first, but said some really sweet things [...] she wrote some comments on my Instagram that were kind of inviting conversation and were really kind. She bought a tarot reading from me and we just started messaging on Instagram and I gave her my number, I was like, 'why don't we just text?' And we started texting a lot."

These two anecdotes reveal a norm in femme communication style: offering compliments as a way to initiate connection.

Another norm of communication among femme internet communities is offering and asking for emotional support. This was named by the majority of my interviewees as a positive function of the communities on social media. While I have written about the prevalence of vulnerability and emotions in femme internet culture elsewhere, and return to this discussion below, the particular way that femmes engage in emotional support work via the internet is worth noting here. While privacy issues are always a concern online, my interviewees say the technological affordances of Instagram help them maintain important boundaries, a key aspect of emotionally supporting oneself. Almost every femme I interviewed told a story about receiving hurtful or harassing comments online, and revealed that it is common practice to delete such comments or messages and block the accounts responsible for them. Doing so made it easy for femmes to dismiss or ignore negative messages about themselves.

Some femmes also discussed maintaining healthy boundaries when seeking emotional support. For example, @femmesupremacy is very open with their Instagram followers about their struggles with mental health, and will include a request for support in a photo caption as needed. They said:

> posting invitations for people to contact me is really helpful for me because reaching out is really, really difficult for me because I feel like such a burden to people. So if I post that "I am struggling, can someone check in if they have the time?" and someone

> reaches out to me, I'm like, "oh, okay they have the time and energy and I'm not being a burden, I'm not wasting their time, they want to be here for me." For me, that's feels like a safe way to ask for help or to get help.

@femmesupremacy speaks to the emotional difficulty in reaching out, since those with mental health issues are often made to feel like a burden for having these issues in the first place. This is further complicated by potentially being an actual burden if the person they seek support from has limits on the time or capacity they can devote to providing emotional support at any given moment. Posting requests for support as part of an Instagram caption offers a way around this as it reduces the chance of rejection for the person in need of support by leaving the request open, and puts less pressure on a single person to provide support as there is the potential for many to respond. Further, this practice is informed by the feminist principle of consent, which is most commonly applied to sexual activity (at least in theory), but is increasingly applied to emotional support among friends, as it is here.[15] In constructing their requests for support in this way, @femmesupremacy acknowledges that potential supporters are not obligated to respond to their request, but can respond to the degree that they feel able or comfortable.

Consent principles also inform @rs's mode of complimenting other femmes on Instagram, which usually focuses on something other than femmes' appearances. @rs says:

> I think another facet of my account that other people are struck by is language around consent. So, it can be a really uncomfortable experience for someone to comment on someone else's picture and say something about their appearance because it just furthers the objectification, or it can. So, I'm someone who, when I reach out, I always ask, "is what I posted okay and if it's not please feel free to take it down. This is coming from me genuinely appreciating you as a person and not at all coming from a place of

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[15] In fact, in November 2019, the notion of asking a friend for consent before discussing emotional or heavy issues, or asking for emotional support has become a meme. https://junkee.com/im-at-capacity-memes/231435

> me reducing you to your parts." And I, in my affirmations, I usually speak more to who they are as a person rather than what they look like, and that for me has allowed for a lot of really positive, genuine connections.

Consent-based principles inform the ways femmes ask for support and offer compliments to each other, which are notable communication styles that represent norms in femme internet culture.

The Boundaries of Femme Communities: Transcending Time and Space

One of the most fruitful affordances offered by the internet is the possibility to form relationships that transcend space (Baym, 2015, p. 100). This is particularly useful for femmes who may live in communities with few other femmes or queers present. My interviewees emphasize physical location as a barrier to finding other femmes, and thus as a reason to find each other online. Instagram user @redthreadtarot says, "something I've always lacked is other femmes around me in real life [...] I live in New England, which seems like there should be more." Instagram user @femmesupremacy says,

> it's harder to meet people who are similar to me. Even in D.C. it was difficult, I had to go to Baltimore to find people similar to me but in Ithaca it's like… [laughs] I'm in upstate New York, you know. I know that there are queer people here, I work with them, and I have friends but it's hard to find people. But it's not hard to find people on Instagram, not at all.

In these passages, femmes refer to their particular geographical locations as barriers to finding femme community. They evoke assumptions about the social make-up of their geographical communities to paint a picture of their queer isolation, whether it seems surprising or expected. Regardless of how much may be made clear about the actual demographics of these physical places, it is clear that femmes often feel isolated from other queers, and relate these feelings to their locations. In articulating these feelings of isolation, femmes also speak of the internet as a kind of antidote, an opportunity to find others like them, which is clearly a femme desire.

Instagram also helps femmes build friendships across other kinds of distances. Three of my interviewees described valued friendships that formed between themselves and queers of what they considered to be a different generation — two with older femmes and one with a younger butch. Instagram user @redthreadtarot describes her older femme friend as a queer role model. She says, "I said to her, 'I'm so grateful that our paths crossed on Instagram' because she's not someone I would connect with, I would probably be teaching her kids, you know what I mean? She's not someone who would, like, be in my community that I would look to as a friend, and she's just like, dope as hell." Instagram user @iambriellenicolewilliams has also formed a valued friendship via Instagram with a femme she considers an "elder," a relationship I will revisit in depth below. Instagram user @failureprincess, who considers herself an "older millennial," has made a friendship with a younger butch user through Instagram. She says,

> But [my younger butch friend] is like 10 years younger than me, not someone I necessarily would have met out at the bars [...] And that's a really cool connection for me to have: someone who is lesbian-identified, butch, in San Francisco, who is so much younger than me. That's a world that I am really fascinated by, first of all, and secondly she's so smart and talented as a writer and Instagrammer.

All of these interviewees speak of their friendships with those younger or older with gratitude and admiration, and acknowledge Instagram's role in making these valued relationships possible. The internet helps femmes traverse not only geographical distances, but distances of time, too. It enables femmes to gain access to other femmes and queers outside their immediate peer group and outside their current geographical location.

How @redthreadtarot's friendship with her older femme friend evolved is typical of femme Instagram friendships: they often begin online through compliments and other supportive gestures, and eventually move beyond the platform to include other communication, like sending text messages, snail mail, or meeting face-to-face, offering the

opportunity for face-to-face communication, tangibility, and touch that some critics of internet culture say remains an invaluable part of human connection (Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015). Though femme friendships are not contained to Instagram, many femmes appreciate what kinds of connection are enabled by the platform, like connections with femmes who are physically far away or who are outside of their peer group. For some femmes, beginning friendships online is preferable because online friendships "don't start at the beginning," a notion offered by @daintysmith.

For @femmesupremacy, who is candid about their healing and recovery processes on Instagram, online friendships are easier because, "people know my story before they meet me the first time and so it's easier for me because I don't have to tell that story over and over again [...] It feels like when we meet for the first time we've been friends forever." Instagram user @daintysmith says that, even though she is sometimes "thrown" by how much strangers know about her from viewing her profile, knowing things about each other in advance is a good way to connect. She says it is a valuable tool to overcome

> social shyness [...] especially with adults because we don't know how to have platonic intimacy or we don't know how to be friends with each other. [...] Instagram is a really great way for folks to message each other and take some of that fear and that awkwardness away. There's sort of a built-in level of comfortability because you're seeing this person, you know what kind of coffee they like, you know what I mean?

The unique way friendships form on Instagram can be especially helpful for people who are shy, socially anxious, healing from trauma or in recovery, or any others who may need an extra layer of sensitivity or comfort to feel safe enough to extend the vulnerability required to form a connection.

Femme friendships that begin on Instagram ultimately transcend the platform; they transcend geographical boundaries and generations; they become sources of healing, even motivation to stay alive. As I transcribed my interviews and listened to our voices break as we

talked about what femme friendships mean, it became clear that describing them as friendships is insufficient.

"FEMME SHARKS DON'T EAT OUR OWN": Femmeships as Political Alliances

Stemming from the Greek "philia," friendship has long been understood as political. The overarching principle of philia is, essentially: one should seek to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies (Baltzly & Elipoulos, 2009, p. 4). In ancient Greece, it was essential for one's friend group to support each other's politics, and thus friendship had a public, civic, and political function (Baltzly & Elipoulos, 2009, p. 9). For Aristotle and his peers, friendships ought to be formed for the "highest good" (Baltzly & Elipoulos, 2009, p. 5) and could only be formed between "morally virtuous people" (Caine, 2009, p. x); this and the civic understanding of friendship meant that only men were considered capable of friendship (Caine, 2009, p. xii). It wasn't until the 19th and 20th centuries that women were thought to be capable of friendship as well (Caine, 2009, p. xii).

According to several historians and more contemporary scholars, women's friendships have often occurred in private spaces, shaped by gender segregation and the divide between public and private spheres (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; McRobbie, 1991; Caine, 2009). Adrienne Rich, citing Nancy Chodorow's work, says that the social fact that women tend to take on (or are thrust into) the bulk of parenting, or "mothering-by-women," means that women become the primary relationship in each others lives, while men become "emotionally secondary" (1980, p. 635). These friendships are often claimed as having incredible personal value, as well as being foundational to women's (and girls') culture. Rich, in reading Meridel LeSueur's novel, *The Girl* (1978), writes, "sex is thus equated with attention from the male, who is charismatic though brutal, infantile, or unreliable. Yet it is women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" (1980, p. 657). This belief is maintained by historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and feminist scholar Angela McRobbie (1991), and, if amended to a non-binary understanding of

feminized people, can be applied to femmes. Rich argues that compulsory heterosexuality forces women to deny or ignore this primary bond with other women, and thus women's continued dedication to each other can be interpreted as an act of resistance (1980, p. 659). She draws on Audre Lorde's (1978/2007) understanding of the erotic on so-called "female terms" — as that which is unconfined to the body, but rather an energy — to understand all female-to-female relationships on a "lesbian continuum," whether they identify as lesbian or not (Rich, 1980, p. 650-1).

Responding to the historical oversight of women's friendships, or even mixed-sex friendships, is the basis for understanding the subversive potential of friendship. For example, responding to Jacques Derrida's writing on friendship, Jennifer Doyle sees male/female friendships as queer, as a form of attachment that can "disturb both the presumption of an 'us' and 'them' and the opposition of desire and friendship" (2007, p. 325). Here, I aim to think of femme friendships as political because, like Doyle's queer friendships, they subvert foundational philosophies of friendships and the binary of desire and friendship, but also because, like Aristotle's philia, they can be understood as political alliances, with the political impetus to resist patriarchal norms.

For some femmes, the link between femme friendships and politics is already explicit. User @redthreadtarot said,

> I feel like femme friends just help with a sense of isolation or feeling crazy, especially — I hate to say "the way things are now" because things have always been shitty, but I think it's particularly scary right now and vulnerable-feeling. Like, trans people are going to get written out of the law, women's rights are being repealed. So, it makes me feel hopeful. Like, other femme friends make me feel hopeful and safer. It's like, "there's other people out there like me, there's other people that have these struggles, and I'm not alone."

@redthreadtarot references her current political climate in the United States as a reason for needing femme presence, positioning said femme presence as politically soothing. This reveals an understanding of femme connections — other people "like me" — as political alliances, similar to the Greek understanding of philia; the shared political interests are assumed among femmes, making all femmes seem like friends. For some femmes, shared understanding among femmes is seen as automatic, like for @rs who says, "There's also an incredible tenderness and camaraderie that I feel with femmes. [...] I feel like I can let my guard down when I'm with other femmes, like 'you get this.'" For others, notably femmes of colour, Instagram offers a way for femmes to be together and learn how to be better allies to each other, not because of an automatic shared understanding, but because of conscious effort. User @daintysmith says, "So much of social media is about women coming together, you know what I mean, about people coming together in spite of our differences. White women, Black women, women of colour, becoming better allies to each other." All three of the above quotes from my interviews reference political structures: @redthreadtarot references the current political climate in the United States, @rs uses the word, "camaraderie," which stems from the French word for comrade, and so has an explicit political connotation, much like the word "allies" used by @daintysmith. In this sense, femme friendships can be understood as political alliances, as comrades with common grounds and "collaborators in common projects" (Baltzly & Eliopoulos, 2009, p. 6).

The process of becoming better allies, flagged by @daintysmith and others, is important to note. Though many of my interviewees spoke of their femmeships as sacred and almost mystical, this is not always the case, nor does this understanding always come easily. Misogyny, sexism, transphobia, racism, and ableism are said to pit femmes against each other. The notion of femme competition is so prevalent in queer communities that many writers have addressed it. This writing marks a critical resistance to a harmful, heteronormative norm: that women must compete with each other for male approval and protection. The act of writing this

resistance is worth noting because it demonstrates the commitment to political solidarity among femmes.

Arena Thomson describes femme competition as stemming from feelings of jealousy and insecurity in the dating world. Thomson writes,

> Is she smarter than me? Will her seemingly perfect body make my own disordered thinking and self-loathing flare up? Is she a force in her community, always giving and inspiring? [...] It is a particularly painful kind of jealousy; one that turns me against the very individuals I value, adore, and think the world is better for. (2016)

This passage describes the tension between loving other femmes, but feeling compulsively jealous or otherwise threatened by them. Thomson and others tie femme competition and other difficulties in relating to each other as productions of oppressive social structures. Femme writer Clementine Morrigan has linked femme jealousy to misogyny:

> This is about my embodied experience as a femme (sometimes) woman who has been taught to believe that my worth and worthiness is tied directly to my desirability. This is about living in a culture that teaches me (and all of us) that feminine people are consumable and that we are in competition with each other. [...] We are taught to regard each other with suspicion and fear, to perform our desirability the 'best', to have all the femme skills down from winged eyeliner to feminist politics to care work to acting like it all comes easily and naturally [...] (2018, p. 140-141).

In a review of femme writer Kai Cheng Thom's work, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016), Brett Cassady Willes writes that the book centers femme relationships, including their difficult and messy aspects. Willes notes that sometimes these difficulties stem from living under systems of white supremacy and transmisogyny. In an interview with the website *Apt613*, Thom said,

> In my experience, trans women have very, very complicated relationships with one another — we are each others' only true siblings in many ways, the only ones who can

> understand what it means to live in this transmisogynist society. And, like siblings, we are usually thrown into fierce competition with one another, for resources and for space. (Pepper, 2017)

While not all trans women are femmes, of course, Thom is speaking from her own experience that she identifies as femme. Elsewhere, Mia Mingus has detailed how ableism has been a barrier to femme solidarity, most notably in her well-known keynote-turned-blog, "Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability." Mingus wrote,

> I don't politically identify as "Femme," even though I get the lived experience of being a femme of color in so many ways. And frankly, much of this is because I have had horrible interactions with self-identified femmes of color, much of which has been because of their ableism and ignorance around how ableism, white supremacy and gender oppression get leveraged everyday in service of each other. (2011)

Evidently, there is much social and political baggage femmes must traverse to reach an understanding of their connections with each other as sacred. This realization illuminates the political resistance embedded in femmeships; loving each other is an act of resistance, and one femmes take on intentionally.

As much as my interviewees did sometimes naturalize or mythologize their connections to each other, they did also understand these relationships as requiring effort and maintenance, whether through feminized emotional support work, or the political work of using their relative privilege to uplift more marginalized voices and perspectives. For example, @femmesupremacy describes the effort they put into their long distances femmeships: "I am a really good pen pal. I send people colouring book pages and little sticker flakes and colourful Band-aids and decorate things with washi tape and put stickers on everything — and Lisa Frank stickers, too, which are hard to find." While this description reveals the effort that goes into creating and maintaining caring networks, other descriptions reveal the more explicitly political work of

world-making. Instagram user @rs, who is a white, trans femme, named uplifting marginalized voices as an explicit goal of their Instagram use:

> A lot of the femmes that I follow are folks who identify as fat femmes, you know, are disabled, are people of colour, are indigenous, you know, are hairy. Those are the kind of femmes I want to support [...] With the power I have to amplify somebody's voice, I want that to be a voice that's marginalized.

From @iambriellenicolewilliams perspective, who is a Black, trans femme, this is a collective femme goal that is appreciated. She says,

> I've noticed that the white femmes are really big on uplifting femmes of colour to the forefront, which I think is really important. I like the fact that I'm seeing that a lot on Instagram, the righting of the wrongs. It doesn't matter where you go, [racism] is always there [...] but I feel like they're committed to doing the change and to doing the work and stuff. I gotta give the community that at least.

This political discourse demonstrates that not only are femme friendships political alliances in the sense that they create spaces for, as Nancy Fraser would say, withdrawal and regroupment (ie. giving and receiving support) (1990, p. 68), they also become their own public in the Habermasian sense: they form a space in which discourse is deliberated, shown here through the negotiation of the politics of representation (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). Femme internet culture is, therefore, worth studying on its own; it is a space that has developed its own norms of communication, aesthetics, and values — indeed, its own culture.

That femme friendships act as spaces of political rest and reprieve as well as spaces for developing political discourse mirrors the structure of female friendships in modern history. Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argued that within the private sphere, women developed a "female world" (1975, p. 9) that operated on its own structures and logics. She characterizes this world as one serving emotional functions, like the giving and receiving of empathy and support, and practical functions, like passing skills and rituals between generations (Smith-

Rosenberg, 1975, p. 14, 16). In this world, she says, “They valued each other. Women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 14). Similarly, femmes create their own structures, politics, skills, and rituals, and make considerable efforts to value each other, despite the social and political obstacles.

As Thomson indicates, femmes yearn for connection and relationships with each other. This is theorized by femme scholar Ulrika Dahl (2017) as a kind of vulnerability akin to Axel Honneth’s recognition theory. This yearning is made clear by the abundance of writing that theorizes the phenomenon of femme competition, and by the efforts to reclaim these cherished relationships from patriarchy, white supremacy, and the like. For example, the first line of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s “Femme Shark Manifesto” (2011) states in all capitals, “FEMME SHARKS DON’T EAT OUR OWN.” Later, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes,

> WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER,
>
> RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE EACH OTHERS’ WEALTH.
>
> HOS BEFORE BROS, ALWAYS!
>
> FEMME SOLIDARITY AND LOVE FOR EACH OTHER
>
> IS A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE. (2011)

My interviewees demonstrate how deep of a commitment this is in femme culture, and broader analysis shows that the commitment femmes make to valuing and supporting each other is often a political battle. Femme sharks may not eat their own, but this refusal is only possible alongside the political work of unlearning attitudes toward women and femmes, especially those that are further marginalized by white supremacy, ableism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and other oppressive structures. It is a conscious and political effort made by femmes, as evidenced by the meme made by @failureprincess shown in Figure 34. The image shows a stock photo image of two white, feminine women smiling at the camera and shaking hands with each other, but each holding a weapon — a gun and an axe — behind

their backs. This is an obvious illustration of the cultivated myth of female competition, or "cattiness" between women. @failureprincess, horrified by the image, reimagines the two women as "other femmes" and "me," and as holding "friendship, laughter, love, life" and "my eternal gratitude and the same, I hope" behind their backs instead of weapons. The caption reads, "I #femmefriday -ified this horrendous stock photo a while back because I love femmes so much, but sometimes I'm shy." The original stock photo image speaks to the social expectation or cultural norm that women view each other as competition, and @failureprincess' revisioning of it demonstrates the political effort femmes make to resist such patriarchal notions by supporting each other, even when it may feel difficult. @failureprincess says she loves femmes "so much" but is sometimes shy, which speaks to the vulnerability Dahl argues is inherent in wanting to be like others, to be with others, to be understood by others, and to be respected by others, or, in seeking intimacy, connection, and community (Dahl, 2017, p. 46).

Figure 34. Femme competition meme by @failureprincess [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BpsZ9RwFo71/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

Feeling Like Family: Femmeships as Communities of Care

Friendships have long been included in queer kinship formations and communities of care. One the seminal works on queer families, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991) by Kath Weston started with the observation that "lesbians and gay men [were] busy recasting close friends as kin" in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Despite the myth that queer

sexuality forecloses family ties, there has been literature on gay families since the 1980s (Weston, 1991, p. 1). The types of kin formations that Weston examines in her book often include close friends, and are referred to as chosen families. These kind of queerly configured families, she says, expand the notion of family beyond just couples and kids (Weston, 1991, p. xviii). Further, chosen families defy the two frameworks used to describe American kinship within kinship studies: the order of nature, or blood ties, and the order of law, or legal binds like marriage (Weston, 1991, p. 3). The idea of choice is central to queer families, as well as love, which in gay discourse is seen as necessary and sufficient for defining kinship (Weston, 1991, p. 7).

Weston reflected on some of the things that made her relationship with other lesbians "feel like a family": sharing a meal in a domestic setting, exchanging material assistance, like picking up mail or feeding the cat, and giving or receiving emotional support (Weston, 1991, p. 104-105). Later she describes the similarities of actions of "chosen families" and other relations, including responsibilities like caring for the ill and pooling financial resources, and more intangible binds like a shared history and, specifically, the experience of having weathered storms together (Weston, 1991, p. 113-115). I borrow this list from Weston to use as criteria for "feeling like family" to examine how femme Instagram users use metaphors of family to describe their relationships with each other. Many of the references to family made by my interviewees match this list, while others break with Weston's descriptions of families of choice.

Some of my interviewees use metaphors of family to impress the importance and significance of their connections with other femmes. For example, @femmesupremacy says they took to Tumblr to share their personal story of being sexually assaulted, and then started hearing from other survivors of violence "who thanked me for sharing my story and for the work that I've done around healing justice [...] So I have a lot of connections with femme survivors in the community, that is my family, basically." It seems that in @femmesupremacy's case, emotional support is a key factor in facilitating the feeling of family, consistent with Weston's

findings. Giving and receiving emotional support is a key theme in femmeships for @iambriellenicolewilliams, too. She describes a point when she felt like the community she created through her Instagram page was

> facilitating some kind of healing, cuz I would talk about real life shit going on with me, and people would be like, "damn, I feel that, I'm going through the same thing" [...] there was so much healing going on in the comments because I would ask for advice from like the elder femmes, I would call on them like, "I need some collective auntie, mama, queer elder femme energy on my posts" [...] a lot of these older femmes that I love and revere, respect, and have done so much for our community will come on the post and offer their words [...] that, for me, was really nice.

In this story, @iambriellenicolewilliams tells about seeking emotional support from fellow femmes, following the norms in communication within femme internet culture, as established above. In her pursuit of advice, @iambriellenicolewilliams similarly uses metaphors of family, seeking "mama, auntie, queer elder femme energy." Using these words positions femme as its own distinct kinship network that has mamas, aunties, and elders.

The understanding of femme as an intergenerational kinship network breaks with Weston's research on family. She says that gays and lesbians usually referred to their chosen family as "sisters" and "brothers," denoting peer relationships (Weston, 1991, p. 117). Weston uses this example to support her argument that chosen families transform notions of kin, rather than represent derivatives of them; gays and lesbians are not "simply" trying to replace their parents by forming intergenerational bonds, they are transforming conceptions of kin by forming peer relationships they call family (Weston, 1991, p. 116). However, intergenerational femme relationships are important to my interviewees. As mentioned earlier, three of the femmes I interviewed, when asked about a femme friendship they've made on Instagram, told a story about forming an intergenerational friendship. @redthreadtarot talks about forming a friendship with an older femme:

> she shared a lot with me and she just has this awesome life story. She's, like, a generation older than me [...] But she's literally become one of my, like, dearest friends, I talk to her almost every day she is just so cool. [...] I just love [her] because she's, like, an adult. I've always said this, I want queer role models and there just aren't that many around me.

@iambriellenicolewilliams tells the story of becoming friends with a femme who she considers a femme elder:

> Let me tell you something. Like my motherfucking sister, [name and username redacted], go follow her, she's amazing. They're dope. I met them through Instagram and my whole objective was like, "I'm going to make you love me cuz you're amazing and I just love your page and I feel like we would be great together" and we fucking are. Like, we're so cool now. They live in L.A. but they came down to New York for Fashion Week [...] they were staying over at their daughter's house so I got to go over to Bushwick [...] and that whole experience to me, that was like some real femme community shit [...] getting to meet [my older femme friend] and meet her gay children.

Unlike chosen families as Weston understood them, femmeships do include intergenerational bonds with "just friends" in which younger femmes look up to older femmes for support, advice, and to be role models. Often, these bonds are described using metaphors of family: mama, auntie, elder. Femmes' interest in intergenerational bonds — particularly the maternal — has shown up in other cultural productions, namely blogs and performance art, often in queer and even monstrous ways (Dawson, 2017), suggesting that seeking intergenerational bonds or maternal figures is a key way that femme kinship networks differ from the types of queer chosen families outlined by Weston.

Intergenerational bonds seem to be a site where pooling resources and material assistance is enacted, two criteria for "feeling like family." In talking about her bond with her older femme friend, @iambriellenicolewilliams discusses the importance of legacy. She

references her Capricorn sun sign and the low average life expectancy of trans women of colour as reasons why "legacy" is a concern:

> The average trans woman's life expectancy is 30-35 years old. So I'm 25, you feel me. I'm like 10, 15 years away from that. And it's like, God forbid anything would ever happen to me [...] my parents would be straight, they wouldn't have to worry about shit. [...] Just being able to have those conversations with [my older femme friend] like, whatever happens to you, you're good, you know what I mean? [...] These kind of connections and shit is about saying, "I'm going to take care of you." For me, that's some shit I'm taking up right now is making sure her legacy is straight, we're going to be fine. Me and your children, we're going to be Gucci.

Here, @iambriellenicolewilliams is talking about ensuring that those she considers family will be provided for in the unfortunate case of death. In this case, the kin of those she considers part of her chosen family become her concern as well; she is willing to provide for the kin of whom she considers her own kin.

For many of the femmes who use metaphors of family, knowing each others' past struggles seems to be site of bonding. Weston cites shared history and "weathering storms together" as experiences that elicit the feeling of family, which is applicable here. For @femmesupremacy, other femme survivors feel like family because they all know the experience of surviving sexual assault, even if their experiences differ. While Weston meant a personal shared history, shared history can be interpreted as having similar experiences as well. When @iambriellenicolewilliams asked her femme elders for advice and support as she was going through a hard time, their emotional support and presence could be understood as helping her "weather the storm," as they used their insights from similar experiences to help guide the younger femme. However, acknowledging that the femme elders have experiences vastly different and vastly beyond their own also lended itself to femmes' feeling like family. @redthreadtarot notes her older femme friend's "awesome life story" of overcoming many

obstacles that she hasn't had to face herself. She says her older femme friend has "had just a really different life than me," citing this as one of the reasons she's grateful to have met her older femme friend via Instagram. Similarly, one of the foundations of @iambriellenicolewilliams' respect and admiration for her older femme friend is the knowledge that the older femme has "lost so many people" and "given so much to our femme community." Shared experiences and weathering storms together make queers feel like family, but different experiences, specifically "weathering storms" so that the younger generations may benefit from their efforts and wisdom is a key aspect of femmeships as well.

The desire to connect with femmes of different generations can perhaps be explained by Rich's assertion that "lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning" (1980, p. 649). While Rich sees this as a method for enforcing compulsory heterosexuality, it can also be interpreted as the basis for the hunger for femme history and femme elders. Since femmes have been closely related to lesbians, much of femme history is repressed when lesbian history is repressed. While this occurs, Rich argues that through the rubric of compulsory heterosexuality, even women's friendships and alliances — and the very knowledge of such things — have been repressed, the combination of which potentially forecloses the preservation or inheritance of much of femme history, and the mechanisms through which to pass on or inherit the stories, values, and norms that make up femme culture. Through connecting with older femmes, younger femmes gain access to femme histories that have been systemically silenced, which explains the desire and appreciation for forming relationships with older femmes.

Conclusion: The Mythology of Femmeships

The connections made between femmes on Instagram are characterized as more than just friends, often they feel like family. Femme connections can be better described as femmeships: politically significant friendships that take the form of political alliances and

communities of care. My interviewees often referred to femme connections as family, or used family metaphors to explain their relationships to other femmes. For the femmes I interviewed, feeling like family means giving and receiving emotional support, pooling resources and providing material assistance, and receiving advice and wisdom from older generations. Finding common ground or coming from similar backgrounds or similar experiences also fostered a sense of kinship among femmes, while coming from vastly different backgrounds and experiences helped to distill a sense of respect, or even reverence, among femmes of different generations. Ultimately, many of the shared experiences are based on the very fact of being femme. The significance of the bonds and community that stem from the femme identity cannot be understated, though it may be somewhat difficult to understand.

While @iambriellenicolewilliams talked about death as a reason to care for femmes, @femmesupremacy talked about femmes as a reason to stay alive. They referred to femmeships as a lifeline. In our interview (and in many places online) @femmesupremacy explained that they are in recovery for addiction and they have borderline personality disorder, a disorder for which one of the effects is chronic suicidality; both of these factors have made staying alive challenging at times. @femmesupremacy credits their femme community for helping them stay alive, which is worth quoting at length here:

> As someone who's recovering from substance abuse where there's a high potential for overdose, the femmes in my life have saved my life, like literally, not just theoretically. There are time when I would have gone out and used or, like, literally killed myself if it wasn't for someone who was in my life who cared enough to not, like, call the cops, but remind me that my existence matters and is important [...] If I die there would be loss and grief and mourning. I've witnessed femme friends in my community commit suicide, and it's really hard to think about that. And I just think that it would impact all these femmes that I love and care about, but also even complete strangers would be impacted by it because we're that type of community, you know? Sometimes that

> keeps me from harming myself, knowing that it would devastate people and the community that I am so deeply committed and invested in.

This passage is significant for several reasons. Here, @femmesupremacy highlights the link between suicide and mental illness and/or disability, a link that Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha (2018) says is especially salient because of ableist attitudes in society, including in queer communities. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes specifically about the toll femme suicides take on surviving femmes, a pain that @femmesupremacy seems to know as well. The anticipation of causing this type of pain is a significant reason that @femmesupremacy says they avoid self harm. What is particularly interesting is that in making this admission, @femmesupremacy illuminates how deeply connected the femme community is, and how much femmes mean to each other even in the abstract. Knowing that other femmes exist is enough to love them, and knowing that other femmes love you, even if they are strangers, has been enough to keep @femmesupremacy alive at times. While I have tried to communicate the significance of femmeships by analyzing them as political alliances and kinship networks, @femmesupremacy indicates that there is still something elusive and unnameable about the connections made between femmes.

This is further illuminated by @failureprincess, a writer, comedian, and meme artist. @failurepriness has created memes debunking or challenging the myth of femme competition, and says her own lived experience works to debunk these myths as well:

> I think with the emergence of discussion of #femme4femme attraction and femme communities, this is hopefully dying out but I still hear it, this idea that femmes are in competition with each other for butch attention or whatever. I always knew that wasn't a thing, because I'm a girls' girl [...] "There's more drama with women" — I always knew that was a myth, but it's harder sometimes in smaller communities, especially for someone who is attracted to masculine people, often being accused of that sort of behaviour. I already knew this, but it was such a cementing thing for me to do the

> performance I did in Portland and meet so many femmes I knew from the internet that live in Portland, coming out to support me at my show, that was just amazing. That's just the power of femme community. We always just gravitate toward each other and want to root for each other. And that's still not understood by non-femme people. […] It's one thing to show support online […] but if you have been in the community long enough, you know there's certain people that don't really like each other but you still see them interacting online in pleasant ways. […] Coming out to someone's show or wanting to have coffee with them when they're in town, that's what true community and support looks like. I've seen that and I want to show it to others as well. [...] I'm not even going to try to explain femme to straight people anymore, but I'm glad that we can talk about it among ourselves.

In this lengthy quote, @failureprincess acknowledges the myth of female or femme competition, but uses her personal experience to challenge it. Even recently, when the L.A. native performed in Portland, Oregon, many femmes showed up to support her, evidently destroying the myth that femmes are in competition and thus will not or do not support each other and providing further evidence that femmeships often start online but frequently move offline. @failureprincess is one among many of my interviewees that state that femmes support each other *on principle.* User @rs suggested there is something inherent among femmes that cultivates an understanding and supportive atmosphere; @femmesupremacy draws from their own experience of loving and supporting femmes, even from afar, that dying via suicide would be detrimental to the community, and that is often enough of a reason to avoid doing it. Even when pressed to explain the value of femme friendships, @redthreadtarot responded, "how much time do you have?" The value of femme friendships, or femmeships, takes on a mythical or mystical quality: it cannot be explained, you simply must know it to know it. If nothing else, this speaks to the incredible personal value that femmes place on their relationships with other femmes: too sacred to even speak of.

While the mythology of femmeships is deeply intoxicating, it is important to consider its potential limits. As expressed above, some femmes have the privilege of taking the political alliance of femmeships for granted, while other necessarily see it as an ongoing political battle. The femmes I interviewed clearly demonstrate a deep commitment to supporting each other, at least publicly. However, as @failureprincess indicates, public femme support can sometimes be a public, political action that obscures actual, personal conflict. In a recent public talk, Kai Cheng Thom, an author referenced above, spoke of the political decision to never speak poorly of other trans women in public. These decisions are rooted in the political resistance to female/femme competition described above.

Figure 35. Chosen family meme by @dyingbutfine [digital image]. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Brx0Q8UnreA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link Image reproduced with permission.

Family, of course, is fraught, even when evoked metaphorically. For example, Halberstam understands the family as a normative institution that queer subcultures develop alongside and in opposition to (2008, p. 27). David Eng writes that the homonormative family still excludes racialized queers (2010). Instagram user @dyingbutfine, who identifies as straight but in many ways is aligned and engaged with the political uses of the queer term "femme," made a meme encapsulating the limits or anxieties of chosen family. (Figure 35) Over the image of a Barbie doll tucked in bed at Christmastime, @dyingbutfine writes,

> realizing glorifying ‘chosen family’ can be just as stressful & triggering as fetishizing traditional holiday gatherings & instead building a personal yearly tradition of sequestering yrself w/ enough food & tea to take space from everyone’s bullshit & peacefully work thru yr own.

It seems that even evoking family in a queer and/political context cannot avoid reinforcing normative social hierarchies.

While the tensions of being in community may not have come forward in my research, the existing writing on “femme competition” confirms such tensions exist. It is through efforts to acknowledge and dismantle racism, transphobia, ableism, and more that such strong femme alliances can be formed. The continued work to dismantle oppressive structures may also lead to future findings of less guarded and more nuanced public narratives of community, in which femmes may begin to speak publicly about the limits of solidarity within the femme community.

Part Six: Conclusion

Low Femme, Low Theory: An Ethno-Archive of Femme Internet Culture is a collection of four papers detailing my findings from my dissertation research, a six-month online ethnography of femme internet culture. My research considers "the stuff" of femme internet culture — including selfies and memes — and situates these cultural artefacts into the wider context of femme history and culture in North America.

In my first paper, "Low Femme, Low Theory: Memes and the New Bedroom Culture" I develop an understanding of femme memes as particular audiovisual content found online that appropriate and mobilize public symbols to address the devaluation of femininity. I examine the political and communicative function of three genres of femme memes — those pertaining to femme invisibility, casual misandry, and negative affects — to argue that femme memes are a way of doing femme theory, or a way of making sense out of femmes' lived experiences and femmes' feelings (hooks, 1991). I use the frameworks of low theory and bedroom culture to argue that memes are informed by feminine and queer perspectives, and thus memes are a part of femme science, a method for developing femme epistemology (Halberstam, 2011; McRobbie, 1991).

In my second paper, "The Future is Soft: Soft Femme Aesthetics and Poetics," I develop an understanding of "softness" as a contemporary femme aesthetic and poetic that employs hyperfeminine symbols, emotionality, vulnerability, and emphasizes collaboration and interdependence. I use the framework of vulnerability and emotions to argue that softness counters the individualist, masculinist modes of thinking that were introduced by and dominate white, Western thought and continue to permeate existing forms of theory, including existing femme theory and scholarship (Petherbridge, 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Jaggar, 1989). I argue that a soft femme politic makes "femme" more capacious and inclusive, as well as furthers the project of femme theory that is recuperating the feminine.

In my third paper, “Radical Softness: Selfies as a Practice in Vulnerability,” I develop an understanding of selfies as a practice in vulnerability, a practice that is strategically mobilized by femmes to (re)shape femme identity, create femme connections and communities, and make political claims about femme lives. I draw from reparative, feminist readings of selfies as well as perspectives on art therapy to make a case that selfies serve both a political representational and communicative function (Murray, 2015; Pham, 2015; Lupton, 1997). In this paper, I also consider the complex relationship between visibility and vulnerability, and between vulnerability, authenticity, and Web 2.0 cultures (Turkle, 1997, 2011; Favaro, 2017).

In my fourth paper, “Femmeship: Political Alliances and Communities of Care,” I develop an understanding of “femmeships” as femme friendships that are both political alliances and communities of care. I draw from scholarship on description as method and from queer (sub)cultural theorists to make a case for the importance of describing femme internet culture, in particular the ordinary, everyday interactions or relationships that are its foundation (Marcus, Love & Best, 2016; Halberstam, 2008; Muñoz, 1996).

Low Femmes and the New Technoculture

These papers are bound together by a focus on vulnerability, low theory, and, of course, femme culture and community. I draw from feminist philosophical takes on vulnerability to understand vulnerability as corporeal/physical, social/emotional, as well as a political intervention. In Western philosophy, vulnerability is (m)aligned with the body, with women, and with the feminine, making an embrace of vulnerability or the taking of vulnerability as a starting point an act of resistance to white, Western, masculinist, liberal theory. While femininity is largely understood as a product of white, colonial, patriarchy, femmes utilize the vulnerability of their bodies, emotions, and connections to create an aesthetic, poetic, and politic that counters the discursive dominance of the white, cis, heteronormative feminine ideal. In the creation of a femme science that opposes racist, classist, heteronormative, and patriarchal

ways of knowing — especially, of knowing the feminine — vulnerability is an invaluable tool, an essential weapon wielded by the femme scientist.

Femmes further unravel the sanctity of sanctioned theory by rejecting its objects and methods. Femmes don't dabble much in high theory; even the high femme prefers to stay put, taking in the view from the bottom, revelling in *l'écriture féminine,* creating lo-fi, low cultural artefacts, and low theory from a place along the margins (Muñoz, 1999; Nguyen, 2014; Cixious, 1975; Halberstam, 2011). Memes are associated with the subcultural, the kitsch, the nonsensical, the DIY or lo-fi (Jenkins, 2006; Chen, 2012; Kearney, 2006); softness delves into low feelings, allies with girls, eschews individualist notions of the expert for recognition of collaborative creation and sustenance (Illouz, 2007; Jaggar, 1989; Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017); selfies revel in the body, the internal, and defer to the visual (Murray, 2015; Pham, 2015); femmeships rejoice in the everyday, the ordinary, and the ephemeral that must be described and remembered, that cannot be measured or, sometimes, even explained (Muñoz, 1996; Halberstam, 2008). These are the blocks that have built femme internet culture, revealing the feminine shape of social media and its technological affordances, placing more question marks behind the assumption technology is inherently masculine.

Evidence that counters this assumption predates the internet. Sadie Plant has charted women's close relationship with technology through history in her book *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997). Ada Lovelace and her invention, the analytical machine — which was the precursor to the computer — occupies a central place in Plant's analysis. Plant goes on to tell the stories of many women, including Grace Hopper, a software writer for the first programmable electric computer, who coined the terms "computer bug" and "debugging" (1997, p.127), American female "computers" who calculated firing tables for missiles, bombs, and shells during World Wars I and II (1997, p. 145), and the vast numbers of women who worked at the centre of communications technology as telephone operators, secretaries, and typists. Through her storying of women's relationship to technology, Plant

suggests that women are well suited to technological work; women, she suggests, are not unlike machines. Not only did women work directly with communications technology, but as secretaries or in other supporting roles, women have processed words, kept records, done sums, and filed accounts — essentially functioned as human computers (Plant, 1997, p. 36).

Similarly, Donna Haraway (1991) uses Chela Sandoval's work to argue that "woman of colour" could be a cyborg identity, one that lends itself well to navigating the informatics of domination. Christopher L. McGahan also cites Sandoval's work that argues "US Third World Feminists" have differential consciousness that enables them to better navigate technoculture (2008, p. 142).

In a move that is particularly useful for femme theory, other scholars have considered how technology is connected to not only women, but the feminine. Sherry Turkle's (1997) writing on "the triumph of tinkering" suggests that feminine qualities are of particular value when working with technology. She refers to tinkering, like bricolage, as a way of learning and knowing that involves working close to the program — a kind of "soft mastery" (p. 56). She writes that "softness" is associated with the undisciplined, the unscientific, and the feminine (p. 56). She writes that "soft" is a "good word" for flexible or non-hierarchal, and for cognitive values like relationality, negotiation, and attachment.

These works suggests that technology is the domain of the marginal, a tool best stretched to its limits by those necessarily seeking alternative forms of creation. Indeed, Lisa Nakamura (2007) writes that there are racial differences in how the internet is used: people of colour use the internet more as an expressive medium than a consumer medium (p. 182). My research strengthens the intriguing yarn woven by Plant, Haraway, McGahan, Turkle, and Nakamura and produces its own spin-off: technology is femme. Femmes are among those that find potential in the in-between places, that make use of the lo-fi and low feelings, that know low theory intimately.

Limitations and Contributions

As appealing and even seductive as Plant's perspective is, it can be seen as painting a gloss over the reality that women were selected for jobs like telephone operator because they were assumed to have "the necessary patient temperament, dexterity, and willingness to work for cheap wages that this occupation necessitated" (Shade, 2002, p. 17). The feminization of this labour force quickly turned into a "female job ghetto" (Shade, 2002, p. 19). Haraway points out that this type of exploitation continues in late capitalism, is exacerbated by globalization, and now targets the most marginalized women, specifically "Third World Women" (1991). So, while femininity has earned women a ticket to the heart of communications technology, it was (and is) seen as an exploitable resource.

For all its potential, the internet has disappointed as well. Many scholars have already burst the enthusiastic bubble early internet adopters apparently dwelled in when they believed the internet would eliminate racism, sexism, and oppression in general. Scholars like Lisa Nakamura (2007) and Christopher McGahan (2008) have traced the existence of race online, and many like Shaka McGlotten (2013), Andil Gosine (2007), and Radikha Gajjala (2004) have illuminated the existence of racist and sexist hierarchies in online communities of marginalized peoples. These social hierarchies replicate themselves in femme internet culture, as those with more race, class, and gender privilege are often, still, the most successful. Instagram remains a corporate-owned platform on which the potential for real resistance is always under debate. On and offline, there are tensions between activism, cultural production, and surviving in late capitalism: how is literacy and competency in weaving political words and images leveraged for personal and professional benefit, and how might political potency be extinguished for the corporate good? These are questions my research, framed as it is, does not explore. A different framing would have produced different questions and, perhaps, some answers to these questions.

The project I did undertake has its own limits. My scope was limited by time available, language, and geographic location. I spent six months studying femme internet culture, but much more time could be taken. I only speak and read English, which limits which posts I can understand and which nuances I can catch. Though the internet is theoretically global, global access to the the internet is not universal, a fact which produces more limits on the scope of this project. I attempted to interview more, but ended up interviewing seven femmes; more (and even more diverse) perspectives would have strengthened or perhaps altered the claims I have made. The research I conducted does make contributions to several fields, most notably critical femininity studies and digital media studies.

Critical femininity studies is an emergent field that aims to take up femininity as a legitimate object of inquiry, parallel to the way masculinities have been taken up in feminist, gender, and queer studies (Dahl, 2012). *Low Femme, Low Theory* is a collection of four separate papers that will be contributed to four different journals, including the Journal of Lesbian Studies, Feminist Media Studies, and more. The manuscript design of this dissertation will help to further expand the field of critical femininity studies by engaging with various frameworks, methodologies, and audiences while retaining a critical focus on femininity.

While femme is a frequent subject of study under the rubric of critical femininity studies, as it is in this study, my research uses femme to offers a critical commentary on the feminine more broadly. In my view, recuperating and reclaiming the feminine is a longtime project of femme theory, and my work helps to urge this project along. In my collected papers, I have argued that an orientation toward softness and an embrace of vulnerability help to shift understandings of femme and femininity as limiting aesthetic categories, and reconsider these as affective, cultural, and political categories (Dahl, 2017; McCann, 2018).

My research also contributes to the diverse field of digital media studies, drawing from a number of existing studies and literature on selfies, memes, and communities. While there

are a number of studies on (post)feminism and digital media[16], race and digital media[17], queer youth and gay men and digital media[18], fewer studies on queer women or femmes and digital media exist.[19] As I suggest above, it is imperative to bring a feminist and intersectional lens into the field of digital media studies to produce more nuanced studies; focusing on femme internet culture is my way of offering a nuanced analysis to the field.

Further potential lies in bridging both these fields, in bringing the feminine and the technological together. Reevaluating the relationship between the feminine and technology works to reimagine how the technological and the feminine are positioned in the Western social imaginary. Throughout this collection of papers, I have revealed the alliance between the feminine and the technological, arguing that the technological affordances of the social media platform Instagram are informed by feminized (and otherwise marginalized) values, perspectives, and knowledges. Technology becomes feminine and the domain of the marginal; technology becomes a feminized tool, a tool with which to conduct femme science.

Linked to technology and theory, the feminine becomes useful, productive, valuable, and cerebral — not instead of embodied or emotional, but because it is embodied and emotional. In this configuration, the feminine and the femme do not become valuable because of an alignment with American masculinity (Galewski, 2005), or a distance from heterosexual women (Hollibaugh, 2000), or a subversion of the feminine (Duggan & McHugh, 1996; VanNewkirk, 2006; Walker, 2012), or even a failure to be achieve femininity (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019); it is valuable because of its commitment to occupying

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[16] See for example, Kanai, 2017; Favaro, 2017; Fotopoulou, 2016; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, Murray, 2015, Thelandersson, 2013

[17] See for example, Pham, 2015; McGahan, 2008; Nakamura, 2007; Gajjala, 2004

[18] See for example, Fink & Miller, 2013; McGlotten, 2013; Gray, 2009; Driver, 2007; O'Riodian & Phillips, 2007

[19] See, Connell, 2012; Nicholson, 2014; Chaplin, 2014

feminized cultural spaces and utilizing feminized ways of knowing. It is valuable for recuperating the feminine, forcing us to rethink how we value what has been feminized.

As I articulate it, femme theory does not resist femininity per se, but rather it resists the dominant ways of thinking about femininity, the cultural codes that say that femininity is weak, passive, superficial, frivolous, and intended for the consumption of men. In other words, femme theory resists masculinist and patriarchal modes of thinking — without selling femininity down the river. Femme theory is capacious enough to hold both feminist critiques of femininity, and attend to the pleasures of and attachments to femininity. Femme theory knows that 'femme' is not entirely subversive, or outside of the norms of femininity; it does participate in, benefit from, and perpetuate some norms that are oppressive. Rather than resist femininity, femme theory uses femininity. Femme theory would rather resist all kinds of masculinist thinking and offer another way of thinking, of strategizing. Femme theory resists individualism and embraces collaboration, it emphasizes relational and embodied ways of knowing, and it uses feminized knowledge to inform solutions and, in doing so, elevates that very feminized knowledge to a higher status.

Future Research

Some of the questions I could not address in this project continue to hold my attention. One day while scrolling through the femme Instagram feed, I noticed one professional tarot reader had posted a photo and caption about how grateful they were for their followers and clients all over the world. "I don't know how you guys keep finding me!" they wrote. As I kept scrolling, another post by this tarot reader appeared, but as a sponsored post — a post that enjoys a wider viewership for a fee. "So," I thought, "they do know exactly how their clients keep finding them." This instance and the interviews I conducted with other participants — several of whom are working artists, "makers," or freelancers — led me to wonder about authenticity, vulnerability, and social media. The idea of authenticity on the internet has long

been considered fraught and tenuous (Turkle, 1997), and I see a fruitful exploration of this question through terms of affect and the gig economy.

I understand "the gig economy" as an economic environment in which precarious, unstable, and temporary jobs are the norm, and thus many individuals hold multiple part-time jobs, often colloquially called "side hustles." Social media has enabled many to build independent businesses or practices which fit into this landscape. Further, social media seems to be changing the entire economic structure: while we may complain that digital influencers like Kim Kardashian don't really "do" anything, their success means that our very notions of labour, work, and jobs must be called into question. What does it take to become a digital influencer, or an otherwise successful practitioner in the digital age? How important are the feelings of authenticity, vulnerability, and accessibility in building a personal/professional online brand? Vulnerability and "friendliness" have been noted as useful in establishing online connections in difficult times, like sickness or death (Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017), and building online group identities (Baym, 2000), but what does it mean for these affective states to become commodified, to be enacted for the purpose of gaining an audience — an audience willing to subscribe to one's Patreon? Existing research that considers vulnerability, affect, and social media would be useful in exploring these additional questions (Baym, 2000; Donath & boyd, 2004; Turkle, 2011; Papacharissi, 2012; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015; Lagerkvist & Andersson, 2017, Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018).

Further, I am curious about the specific gendered dimensions of affect, social media, and the gig economy. While all digital influencers must strike a workable balance of authenticity, vulnerability, and accessibility, women's authenticity is disproportionately scrutinized, their vulnerability criticized, and their accessibility taken for granted. Does the reliance on these feminized affects to be "successful" reify gender norms for young women entrepreneurs? Is the feeling of friendship that is cultivated on Instagram merely a mask to hide a business savvy that does not align with idealized femininity, or is it an important part of a DIY

ethos, perhaps inherited from 1990s riot grrrl culture? How do young women entrepreneurs use social media to generate the feeling of friendship between themselves and their clients, and why? These are questions toward which future research on femme internet culture could be oriented.

The first in-depth study of femme internet culture, *Low Femme, Low Theory,* considers the stuff of femme internet culture, specifically, memes, aesthetics, selfies, and networks, to reveal the feminine shape of social media and, thus, its political potential. Following theorists like Luce Irigaray (1985), Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014), and Jack Halberstam (2011), I have argued for an embrace of the low or marginal position; I suggest meeting femme in this place where it has been stationed, busily weaving cultures and knowledges out of rejected soft or feminized qualities and symbols. On close inspection, femme internet culture is revealed to be an a resistance to and a reprieve from the dominant culture that clings to white, Western, and masculinist values. Visiting this subcultural space offers an invitation to rethink our conceptions of emotionality, vulnerability, interdependence, and femininity, and see what can be made and remade once we embrace them.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Discuss the project and my goals for Low Femme, Low Theory: An Ethno-Archive of Femme Internet Culture.

1. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the research or research process?

General Questions

1. Can you tell me about your femme identity? What does it mean to you? How is it shaped by social categories like race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality?
2. Can you tell me about your online activity? How long have you been online? What sites have you used? Where do you post most often?

Theme 1: Femme Memes and Blog Posts

1. Can you tell me about how you started making memes/writing blogs? What prompted or inspired you?
2. Why do you continue to make memes/write blogs? What message are you trying to communicate? What are the key themes? Are your memes/blogs related to your life or identity?
3. How has your practice shifted, either thematically or otherwise? Can you give an example?
4. Can you describe what the experience has been like? For example, what kind of feedback do you get? How much? How often? In what ways has becoming a memer/blogger impacted your life? How does it feel?
5. What do you think the significance of memes/blogs are? Explain.

Theme 2: Femme Selfies

1. Can you tell me about the moments in which you take selfies? How do you feel? What are you doing? What moments constitute a selfie? Why?
2. Can you tell me about the relationship between the image you take/post, and the caption or hashtags that accompany it? For example, are the captions personal? Do the images feel personal? What are you trying to say or communicate by posting selfies? Can you give an example?
3. Do you typically share your selfies? In what ways, and with who? What kind of feedback do you receive about your selfies? For example, likes, comments, followers? How does this feel?

Theme 3: Femme Friendship

1. Can you tell me about a femme friendship or other femme connection (like romantic partnership) that has formed via the internet (either blog, Instagram, or something else)? Is this a rare occurrence? How often does this happen?
2. How did the internet play a role in making this connection, and how does it continue to play a role in sustaining this and other connections? Do your online friendships ever move offline? Do your offline friendships ever move online? How does that feel?
3. What platforms have you made femme friends on? How did you connect? What brought you together and what did you bond over? Can you be specific?
4. Have you had negative social experiences online? Tell me about that.

5. Have you had negative social experiences offline? Tell me about that.
6. How does making femme friendships online compare to making femme friendships offline? How do they feel? Do you prefer one over the other? Why?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Study Name: Low Femme, Low Theory: An Ethno-Archive of Femme Internet Culture

Researcher name: Andi Schwartz (Principal Investigator)
Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies Doctoral Program at York University
(aschwart@yorku.ca or andi.j.schwartz@gmail.com)

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to develop insight into how femmes, queer feminine people, use social media to form communities and connections, and to produce and circulate political discourse. This research is important considering that queers face discrimination from mainstream society, and femmes face discrimination in queer communities.

To carry out this research, I am undertaking a six-month ethnography of femme internet culture, paying particular attention to selfies, memes and blog posts, and social networks. This research is for my doctoral dissertation, and may also be used for conference presentations or papers before my dissertation is completed. My aim is to publish this research in academic journals upon completion of my dissertation.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

I would like to observe and document your online activity via your social media account (including the production and posting of selfies, memes, and blogs, as well as public interactions with other femme accounts via comments or "likes") for six months. I would also like to conduct a semi-formal interview with you about your experiences online and in online communities. Where possible, these interviews will be conducted in person; otherwise, they will be conducted via Skype. Interviews will take between one and two hours to complete. I will ask you about your online activity, including your experiences and intentions, as well as the personal and political impact this activity has produced.

Risks and Discomforts:

Participation in this project does not involve any risk or discomfort to you.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:

By participating in this study, you and other participants may benefit from having an opportunity to discuss your online experiences, and showcase your work and/or ideas. Your contributions will offer insight into femme culture and community, a community that is often marginalized.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality:

Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research.

Though I will keep your information confidential, I may not be able to ensure the anonymity of your online data. If you consent to the use of your memes, selfies, or blog posts, reference to these materials may make them recognizable or searchable to others (ie. through direct quotes or reproduction of the image). In an effort to reduce the loss of privacy, I will only document Instagram or Tumblr content that is already in the public domain. Names and usernames will be changed to better protect your privacy.

I will be documenting the online content through screen capture. I will be documenting the interviews via audio or video recording, and transcribing them in an electronic document. I will safely store your data on a password-protected USB drive that only I will have access to. Any hard copies of documents, including Informed Consent forms and hand-written notes taken during interviews, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet that only I will have access to. All of these files will be stored until September 1, 2023 when electronic files will be deleted, the USB will be reformatted, and the hard copies will be shredded.

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at aschwart@yorku.ca or my supervisor, Chloë Brushwood Rose at brushwood-rose@edu.yorku.ca and/or 1 (416) 736 5004. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies at gpdgfws@yorku.ca and/or 1 (416) 736-2100 ext. 40104.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

There are two ways to participate in the study. You may consent to one, or both. Please sign and date only the sections that correspond to the type or participation you are consenting to.

I _____ consent to participate in Low Femme, Low Theory: An Ethno-Archive of Femme Internet Culture conducted by Andi Schwartz. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form.

My signature below indicates my consent to participate by **1) allowing my online data, including selfies, memes, and blog posts, to be collected via screen capture and analyzed for the project.**

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Principal Investigator

My signature below indicates my consent to participate by **2) being interviewed by the Principal Investigator in person or via video chat.**

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Participant

Signature _____ **Date** _____
Principal Investigator

Additional media release consent:

I _____ consent to the use of images (including photographs, videos, art, and memes) posted through my online account, _____
(indicate the name of the account), in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles [ ] Yes [ ] No
In academic presentations [ ] Yes [ ] No
In thesis materials [ ] Yes [ ] No

Signature: Date:

_____ _____
Participant: (name)