ABSTRACT

FEMME FEM(ME)ININITIES: A PERFORMATIVE QUEERING

by Erin Douglas

Throughout my thesis I explore alternative fem(me)inities. Such femmes re-signify femininity by means of disidentification and parody and in turn trouble notions of authenticity. Queer fem(me)inities critique heteronormative conceptions of femininity and sexuality. The texts and theories that I use to inform my theoretical framework of fem(me)inities are: beside in Eve Kosofsky’s Touching Feeling, Judith Halberstam’s theories of minority femininities and masculinities in Female Masculinity, disidentifaction in Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues, queer parody in Mabel Maney’s Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, S/M in Sarah Water’s Tipping the Velvet, and the troubling of authenticity in Showtime’s television series The L Word. This project is an exploration of alternative gender and sexuality performances. The queer theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Ann Cvetkovich have been integral to my theory of femme fem(me)inities.
FEMME FEM(ME)ININITIES:
A PERFORMATIVE QUEERING

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Erin Joan Douglas
Miami University
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Advisor ______________________________
(Dr. Madelyn Detloff)

Reader ______________________________
(Dr. Katie Johnson)

Reader ______________________________
(Dr. Laura Mandell)
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Femme Fem(me)ininities: A Performative Queering

“People talk
about my image
like I come in two dimensions
like lipstick is a sign of my declining mind
like what I happen to be wearing
the day someone takes a picture
is my new statement for all of womankind

I wish they could see us now
in leather bras and rubber shorts
like some ridiculous team uniform
for some ridiculous new sport
quick someone call the girl police
and file a report”


Introduction

Judith Halberstam wrote Female Masculinity “to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (Halberstam 9). The “queer subject” position that Halberstam specifically takes up is how female masculinity “challenge[s]” dominant notions of masculinity. Using Halberstam as my model, I “explore queer [and fem(me)inine] subject position[s] that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity.” My goal is not to answer the question of “what is femininity?”, but rather to investigate how “Minority masculinities and femininities destabilize binary gender systems in many different locations” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 29). The focus of my project is “minority femininities.”

In an attempt to investigate such moments of troubling, I offer a queer reading of femininity rather than approaching femininity in its traditional forms – I look at what femininity does when taken out of heteronormative contexts. I do not propose that fem(me)inity seeks out or claims authenticity; instead, I theorize how fem(me)inity challenges realness. Femmes “trouble” the notion of femininity and how we read markers of femininity. My theory uses disidentification and parody as tools to analyze, re-read, and interpret moments of femme fem(me)inity.

Throughout my thesis I explore alternative fem(me)ininities. Femmes re-signify femininity by means of disidentification and parody and in turn trouble our notions of
Queer fem(me)ininities critique heteronormative conceptions of femininity and sexuality. My theory works from a Foucauldian standpoint. Foucault’s conception of power is that power is constantly around us everywhere, and we can pick up mobile power even though power is not always easy to pick up. He writes, “it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93). In other words, power does not work in top/bottom or power/powerless binary formations but rather as a web of relations.¹ The texts and theories that I use to inform my theoretical framework of femme fem(me)ininities are: beside Eve Kosofsky’s Touching Feeling, Judith Halberstam’s theories of minority femininities and masculinities in Female Masculinity, disidentification in Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues, queer parody in Mabel Maney’s Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, S/M in Sarah Water’s Tipping the Velvet, and the troubling of authenticity in Showtime’s television series The L Word. This project is an exploration of alternative gender and sexuality performances. The queer theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Ann Cvetkovich have been integral to my theory of femme fem(me)ininities.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of beside informs my methodology of femme studies, which is to look at femme theory beside theories of female masculinity. In Touching Feeling, Sedgwick discusses the problems with dualistic thinking and even the impossibility of escaping dualism: “But of course it’s far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking – and to expose their often stultifying preservation – than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought. Even to invoke nondualism, as plenty of Buddhist sutras point out, is to tumble right into a dualistic trap” (2). When we mindfully try to separate butch/femme representations from their dualistic relationship, we often fall right back into the “dualistic trap.” Rather than trying so diligently to break the dualistic relationship of femme/butch, we should instead look at the relationships “beside” each other:

¹ "The points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior. Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remodeling them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds" (Foucault 96).
Beside is an interesting preposition also because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. . . . Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (Sedgwick’s emphasis, Touching Feeling 8)

Beside is a relation of subject positions, theories, or “elements” etc., and the relation is not deterministic – one subject position does not determine (or overtake) another subject position. Looking at femme fem(me)inities beside female masculinities opens up a space for the exploration of the “desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing” relationships that exist between fem(me)inities and female masculinities (Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 8). In doing so, my theories of femme fem(me)inities are able to be more thoroughly complicated. Theories of female masculinity inform my theory of femme fem(me)inities particularly Judith Halberstam’s Female Masculinity. The characters that perform female masculinity – Jess in Stone Butch Blues, Jane in Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, Nan in Tipping the Velvet are looked at “beside” representations of femme fem(me)inities.

In addition to reading femmes "beside" female masculinities, brazen femmes also perform a troubling of normative binary gender relations. Brazen femme performance reinforces a queer discourse that challenges heteronormativity. The brazen femme’s fem(me)inity makes those who view her question their notions of gender and sexuality. Brazen femmes defy traditional notions of femininity by the way they perform a fem(me)inity that is outrageous and excessive – very diva like – and non-heteronormative. Both brazen femmes and femmes are queer, but brazen femmes are self-aware of their queer performance, and they mark themselves as queer. This awareness of the performance allows for the performer to consciously play with gender in a way that makes the audience aware that no performance of gender and/or sexuality is “authentic,” “natural,” or “original.” Also, brazen femmes are a mode of cultural intelligibility for femme lesbians – meaning the brazen femme illustrates to dominant society that femininity
too can be a marker of queer sexuality.² Because brazen femmes strut their stuff and speak their performative speech acts loudly declaring their queerness, they announce that femmes too are very queer. Furthermore, femme desire and sexual performance show how brazen femmes redefine fem(me)ininity and penetration in their sexual performance. On the other hand, femmes differ in the respect that sometimes their queer identities are depicted relationally to female masculinity. For example, Theresa in Stone Butch Blues says that her butch partners mark her as a lesbian rather than her marking herself as a lesbian. If Theresa were a brazen femme, she would mark herself as a lesbian rather than having her butch partners mark her as such. The main difference between femmes and brazen femmes is that brazen femmes have a self-announcing claim to a queer identity and queer performance rather than femmes’ relational claim to their queer identity and performance. But it is imperative to understand that both femmes and brazen femmes disrupt the notion that femininity is connected with heterosexuality and show a variety of performances of femininity – queering femininity. There are numerous connections between femmes and brazen femmes. The goal is not to set up a dichotomy between femmes and brazen femmes because the femme occupies multiple and disparate spaces – continually moving, transforming, performing, etc.

Through an analysis of all of the varying femme performances cited above I hope to provide a critique of heteronormativity specifically through my evaluation of traditional femininity. In my reading, traditional femininity refers to a heteronormative femininity but not necessarily a heterosexual femininity. There are many instances of heterosexual women performing their femininities in non-normative ways – one example being the femme fatale. The focus of my thesis is to explore alternative queer fem(me)inities, but there is much work to be done on investigating the varying types of heterosexual femininities that question the conventional or traditional category of femininity. My exploration of traditional femininity by

² The significance of alternative gender performances and cultural intelligibility is expanded upon by Butler in Gender Trouble: “In a sense, all signification takes places within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (185). Butler says that gender is citational – we are constantly citing gender scripts. Within a variation of repetition, “subversion” and alternative gender performances can “become possible.” Cultural intelligibility is that this subversion or alternative gender performance is recognized by dominant culture, and cultural intelligibility is possible because of the citationality of gender. For example, disidentification becomes a “subversion of identity” because it cites the previous performances and performs them in alternative ways.
means of feminist and psychoanalytical criticism shows some of the past work on femininity and illustrates how others have defined femininity. It is necessary to lay out previous theoretical frameworks of traditional femininity in order to see what a queer theoretical framework can offer to the study of femininity. I investigate Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mary Ann Doane’s “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” and Sigmund Freud’s “Femininity.” Mulvey and Freud characterize femininity based on passivity whereas Doane questions this connection and theorizes femininity as masquerade.

Freud’s work in psychoanalysis is still used in literary theory, and his theories are deeply embedded in present Western culture with his work on female sexuality, dreams, the Oedipus complex, and phallic symbols etc. His work on female sexuality is persistent today through the common conception in heteronormative sexuality that women must experience orgasm through heterosexual intercourse rather than clitoral stimulation. He writes, “With the change in femininity the clitoris should wholly or in part hand over its sensitivity, and at the same time its importance to the vagina” (Freud 582). This concept is common today with many heterosexual women who focus on a lack of vaginal orgasms rather than the ability to orgasm through clitoral stimulation. Clitoral stimulation is now an acceptable way for a woman to have an orgasm, but the main traditional understanding and significance of orgasm still lies in vaginal and simultaneous orgasm within heterosexual intercourse. To find the persistence of the obsession with vaginal and simultaneous orgasm pick up modern day women’s magazines like Cosmopolitan or Marie Claire – in most monthly issues there are sex tips and “Dear so and so” letters asking about sexual concerns focusing on vaginal orgasms. The vaginal orgasm still seems to be valued in twenty-first century American culture as more important than clitoral orgasms. So either the twenty-something women of the twenty-first century are reviving Freud’s theory, or his theories of female sexuality are and have been persistent in heteronormative conceptions of women’s sexualities. And most of Freud’s theory on femininity is about femininity “hand[ing] over” aggression as one accepts her "rightful" feminine passivity. Freud makes the distinction between passivity and “passive aims”: “One might consider characterizing femininity psychologically as giving preference to passive aims. This is not, of course, the same thing as passivity; to achieve a passive aim may call for a large amount of activity” (Freud 579). Still femininity is defined by “giving preference to passive aims.” Freud at times questions the
connection between passivity and femininity, but then in the end of his lecture he says that the progression of femininity is to become passive especially with regards to sexual acts.

Masochism is another element of femininity that Freud describes, and this masochism is connected to women’s social oppressions. Freud does not overlook the role of society and culture in determining what femininity means and how women are supposed to enact it: “The suppression of women’s aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed, as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards. Thus masochism, as people say, it truly feminine” (Freud 580). Freud connects masochism with oppression – the groups of people that are oppressed and whose “aggressiveness” must be “suppressed” become masochists. Leo Bersani and Ann Cvetkovich disrupt Freud’s notions of masochism. In chapter two and three of this thesis, using Cvetkovich and Bersani’s troubling of psychoanalytic understandings of femininity and masochism, I investigate how top femmes vary from traditional femininity through their aggressive sexual performance, and how they disrupt this binary of feminine with masochism.

Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” uses a Freudian lens to interpret femininity and applies this theory to cinema through the conception of the male gaze. The first part of Mulvey’s theory is that, “An idea of woman stands as a linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies” (34). Mulvey is describing Freud’s theory that the woman symbolizes a lack because she lacks a penis – when the girl child sees she is without a penis, she feels herself to be a lack. It is precisely women not having a penis in a patriarchal culture that defines the penis with phallic power. Mulvey tries to clarify why cinema is so punishing towards women. Her answer relies upon castration anxiety that the image of woman presents to a male spectator.

Then, Mulvey goes on to describe how the male gaze links being a “female” with being “passive”:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure,

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3 In the beginning of “Femininity,” Freud questions the connection of femininity to passivity: “I shall conclude that you have decided in your own minds to make ‘active’ coincide with ‘masculine’ and ‘passive’ with ‘feminine’. But I advise you against it. It seems to me to serve no useful purpose and adds nothing to our knowledge” (579).
which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey’s emphasis 39-40)

One must wonder if what Mulvey refers to is that femininity is defined as “passive,” rather than the “female” per se. The “role” that women are said to play in Mulvey’s theory is connected to their gender performance and as Butler says bodies are gendered as well. Femininity is passive because of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” – to be the one doing the looking is “active” and to be looked at is “passive” according to Mulvey. Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” says that women are always looked at whereas men do the looking; therefore, women are powerless and men have the power. According to Mulvey, men have the power to structure the gaze – what is looked at, who is looked at, and how subjects are looked at. Queer fem(me)inity and the femme fatale disrupt this binary and re-signify this “to-be-looked-at-ness” as “active” and disrupt the active/passive binary. If we take a Foucauldian analysis of power into account, we can explore how the “erotic spectacle” wields power as well. For example, in chapter one, I discuss how the character Milli in Stone Butch Blues re-signifies her “erotic spectacle” through her erotic dancing as a performance that can wield power.

Unlike Freud and Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane’s “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” does not link femininity with passivity – in fact Doane discusses how femininity is positioned in power relations: “Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations. And the growing insistence upon the elaboration of a theory of female spectatorship is indicative of the crucial necessity of understanding the position in order to dislocate it” (434). Throughout her article, Doane “dislocate[s]” prior theories of femininity questioning past theories of the male gaze, “what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?” (422). Doane’s analysis “dislocates” and disrupts theories of femininity and “passivity” as well as re-signifies femininity as a position and performance that can wield power. Femininity is noted as a performance in Doane’s theory of femininity as a masquerade. In Doane’s theory, femininity as a masquerade
does differ from traditional femininity precisely because, “The entire elaboration of femininity as a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a place culturally assigned to woman. . . . The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipuuable, producible, and readable by the woman” (433). The masquerade of femininity is demonstrated as being different from traditional femininity because of the “distance from the image” – “the image” is the representation of traditional femininity. The performance of the masquerade of femininity must be “readable” as an alternative performance of femininity. Queer fem(me)inity and the femme fatale are performances that are examples of Doane’s “femininity as a masquerade.”

Unlike Freud and Mulvey’s theories of femininity, queer fem(me)inity disrupts the connection of femininity on female bodies by choosing to be fem(me)inine rather than having female bodies determine femininity. The femme is the girl “Refusing the fate of Girl-By-Nature, the fem(me) is Girl-By-Choice” (Duggan and McHugh 166). Femmes and brazen femmes choose to be fem(me)inine rather than a “woman” because femmes know that “women” do not have to be feminine. Queer femmes see alternative performances of gender on female bodies – female masculinity, transgenderism, androgyny, etc. Gender is no longer defined by bodies but rather by the performance one chooses. Femmes interrogate the "appropriate" and "intelligible" connection of femininity on female bodies.

Judith Halberstam disrupts the binary between gender and bodies as she moves beyond the butch/femme dyad to focus on female masculinity in her book Female Masculinity. My intention is to do for femme fem(me)inity what Halberstam does for female masculinity, focusing on fem(me)inity in non-heteronormative frames through the exploration of alternative fem(me)inities. The femme’s performance is connected to erotic desire because she claims the right to her sexuality as well as her sexual desire in a way that has been denied to women participating in heteronormative femininity. Some non-normative heterosexual women also re-signify their “erotic spectacle” and femininity. Femmes perform femininity in alternative, non-normative, exaggerated ways – some examples of women that might not claim a queer sexuality, yet perform alternative femininities would be divas, sex workers, femme fatales, etc. Brazen femmes define themselves as femme by performing queer fem(me)inity in a way that wields power in the performance of an identity that was traditionally denied power.
Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh’s “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto” is a significant contribution to an emerging field of femme studies because they start to explore femme representation as a type of performance that varies from traditional femininity: “Fem(me) is the performativity, the insincerity, the mockery, the derision of foreplay – the bet, the dare, the bringing to attention of the suitor, the one would provide (her) pleasure. The performer who demands performance in return, the player who brings pleasure into play” (Duggan and McHugh 165). In the sense that Duggan and McHugh illustrate that the femme is a “performer who demands performance in return,” they are beginning the work on brazen femme representation as a type of disidentification. The femme is not complacent in her performance of fem(me)ininity nor does she merely replicate a traditional femininity. Similar to the concept of disidentification, the femme is aware of her performance and aware of the effects of her performance.

The study of alternative femininities demonstrates how femininity becomes a performance of a remade fem(me)ininity. Femmes do not signify traditional femininity – in fact, if they represent femininity at all, it is “femininity gone wrong.” According to Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri in Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity femme fem(me)ininity is:

‘femininity gone wrong’ – bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy. Femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs. Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies and femme is the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine. We are not good girls – perhaps we are not girls at all. (Rose and Camilleri 13)

Femmes question and defy the category of “woman” to the point that they might not be defined as “women” at all. Fem(me)ininity is not merely about the clothes one wears but rather about a performance that cannot be “pinned down”: “Femme’s combative ‘nature’ emerges, but this does not define her essence or her essential irony. What cannot be seen, what cannot be held or pinned down, is where femme is – she cannot be domesticated. Her wilderness is mercurial, encompassing the earthly and metaphysical. . . . Femme is the blade – fatally sharp; a mirror reflecting back fatal illusions” (Rose and Camilleri 11-12). This aspect of femme performance that is not able to be “pinned down” is why fem(me)ininity cannot be explicitly defined. Like the term queer, fem(me)ininity resists a unified definition. It is precisely this lack of definition that is a moment of resistance. Defining an identity category femme or what explicitly femme
fem(me)inity is, is not my goal as a femme theorist. At the time a unified definition is established, play will be lost, fem(me)inity will be “domesticated,” and the performance will be “pinned down.” Part of the significance of femme fem(me)inity is a self-announcing claim to fem(me)inity that would be lost if only certain people were able to claim femme as an identifier. The comment that femmes are a “mirror reflecting back fatal illusions,” demonstrates how femme fem(me)inity critiques traditional femininity and shows it its flaws. The femme fatale also “reflect[s] back fatal illusions” by her fatal and exaggerated performance of femininity. Femmes are not confined by femininity: “We are troubled and troubling. Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of femininity. Here, we indelibly mark ourselves femme” (Rose and Camilleri 12). The representation of femme is “troubling” to some viewers because it disrupts their perception of femininity as powerlessness.

One way that femmes actively mark themselves as fem(me)inine is through their erotic performance, which is similar yet different to the femme fatales erotic performance. The brazen femme performance re-signifies the femme fatale representation. In Yvonne Tasker’s chapter “‘New Hollywood’, New Film Noir and the Femme Fatale” she describes the formula femme fatales must follow:

Drawing on a tradition of representation in which women are mysteriously seductive but evil, in which ‘woman’ is not only defined by her sexuality but also by the power that this generates. . . The femme fatale in both her 1940s’ and her ‘new Hollywood’ incarnations is defined by at least four significant aspects. First, her seductive sexuality. Second, the power and strength (over men) that this sexuality generates for the femme fatale. Third, the deceptions, disguises and confusion that surrounds her, producing her as an ambiguous figure for both the audience and the hero. Fourth, as a consequence the sense of woman as ‘enigma’, typically located within an investigative narrative structure which seeks to find ‘truth’ amidst the deception. (Tasker’s emphasis 120)

The femme fatale is “seductive but evil,” and although, as I discuss in chapter two, Bridget in Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy is “seductive,” she is not evil. This is the first differing characteristic between the brazen femme and femme fatale – the brazen femme’s performance is
not tied to evil. The main way in which the brazen femme differs from the femme fatale is in her use of power. Rather than being defined by her “power and strength over,” the brazen femme is defined by her ability to wield power. Bridget has no desire to have power over Jane – her lover. The brazen femme wields her power, but she is still a kind and caring partner. Mary Ann Doane expands upon the femme fatale’s type of power in *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis*:

> Her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the line between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its *carrier* (the connotations of disease are appropriate here). Indeed, if the femme fatale overrepresents the body it is because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independent of the conscious. In a sense, she has power *despite herself*. (Doane’s emphasis 2)

The femme fatale is depicted as having power, but not being the “subject of power.” The femme fatale is depicted as having “power *despite herself*.” This analysis of power does not address the femme fatale picking up power herself and wielding it like brazen femmes and femmes do in *Stone Butch Blues* and *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy*. I demonstrate how brazen femmes actively wield power in their performance of fem(me)inity and this power is not “*despite*” themselves.

Unlike Doane, who still references femininity as a mask, Butler theorizes that gender is not like a mask, “it is certainly *not* a question of taking on a mask; it is a matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition” (Butler’s emphasis, *Bodies That Matter* 7). Butler investigates gender as drag. When most people think of drag, they think of drag queens or kings. Butler demonstrates how all gender is drag. The way we enact our performance of gender is through drag – be it through the dress or the suit one wears, the way one moves, etc. As Butler says, “I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 174). Here Butler references the “expressive” versus “definitional” debate about gender. Rather than thinking there is an interior essence that is “expressed” through gender performance, Butler theorizes that
gender is “definitional” and that we continually cite these gender definitions. The “mock[ing]” of an “essential” “gender identity” is a visual performance that subverts the notion of an “authentic” gender performance.

After discussing gender as a fiction and drag, Butler then goes on to describe gender parody. It is important to note that not all gender is a parody because in order for gender to be parodied, one must be self-aware of gender performance and consciously parody traditional performances. Queer parody is specifically what I use in Butler’s theory to explore alternative femininities and what fem(me)inity does. In Gender Trouble, Butler does talk about queer sexualities as gender parodies: “The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (Butler 174). My exploration further investigates “the sexual stylization of butch/femme” performances as types of queer parodies.

Like disidentification, queer parody offers us a site to look at how femininity is remade and parodies traditional gender performances. But more significantly, the importance is in what the performativity of femme parody does. Butler defines performativity in Bodies that Matter “not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). The majority of the time, citation reinforces dominant discourse and “the effects that [discourse] names,” but queer parody is citations with difference that challenges dominant discourse. Butler exemplifies how a “displac[ing]” “gender norms” can be achieved through gender performance: “The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Butler, Gender Trouble 148). Queer fem(me)inity works to “displace the very gender norms” of traditional femininity through the citation of that performance with a difference. In chapter two, I discuss this concept with how makeup is cited as a tool that wields power – a citation with a difference.

It is in the “how to repeat” that new gender performances can be performed and agency can be claimed – an example of this subversive possibility would be queer parody. Questioning authenticity, essentialism, and gender norms are important aspects of queer parody:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and
mimetic—a failed copy, as it were. . . . And yet this failure to become ‘real’ and to embody ‘the natural’ is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of a gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted effects. (Butler, Gender Trouble 186-187)

Here Butler demonstrates that part of the significance of parody is that it shows everyone that they are not “real” or “natural,” but rather they are “constituted effects.” The ability to demonstrate that all gender performances are “constituted effects” comes from the “subversive laughter” that the performances of parody evoke. The amusing “imitation” shows the audience that everything is an “imitation” – “imitations” for which there are no “originals.” Because parody conveys its message through laughter, it is a highly effective mode of communication. Since parody lacks a defensive tone, it does not cause the readers or viewers to take a stance against the message that is conveyed. What happens if the parody is misunderstood, does parody just replicate stereotypical performances of gender? Even if the spectator does not understand what the performer attempts to do with parody, parody still changes and challenges stereotypical performances by extreme exaggeration – it is never a mere replication or faithful citation.

This extreme exaggeration is connected to disidentification. Butler comments on the importance of disidentification in Bodies that Matter:

Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern. (Butler’s emphasis 4)

Parody – like disidentification – performs representations in ways that take up power and re-signify representations and/or performances that are not seen by dominant society as wielding power. Butler describes how disidentification can “mobilize” and “materialize” “feminist and queer politics” rather than the attempt to emulate normalization through the “identifications” with dominant culture. As I explore further in chapter two, Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy
shows how fem(me)inity in femme parody takes up power and performs femininity in alternative ways.

Disidentification is another theory that informs my work on femme performance as an alternative performance of femininity. José Esteban Muñoz defines disidentification in Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics as: “a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy” (39). This “recycling” is important because rather than creating a completely new performance, disidentification takes an existing performance and “recycles” it into an alternative performance of identity. The significance here is that identity is “recycled” rather than created anew; disidentification takes what is devalued and already “invested with powerful energy” and “recycles” it into an empowering performance of identity. The result of disidentification is that “identity is recycled and remade” (123). Muñoz says that, “It is important to emphasize the transformative restructuration of that disidentification” (39). The “transformative restructuration” reorganizes and takes up existing power – using a Foucauldian conception of mobile power. Unlike counter identification, disidentification puts the responsibility back on the viewers, the traditional representation, or those that appear to hold the power and questions the original definition. Disidentification is also a theory for the acting subject. Because performance is about interaction between the performance and the spectators, a brazen femme’s theatrical performance causes her viewers to question their essentialized notions of femininity. This concept is explored further in chapter one with an investigation of a multitude of femme performances in Stone Butch Blues. For example, drag queens perform their fem(me)inity in exaggerated ways that make viewers question not only their pre-existing conceptions of femininity but also the connection between bodies and genders. Queer femme disidentification could help the definition of heterosexual femininity from being so binding and normative as well. The study of queer fem(me)inity opens up how we define femininity as a whole; in turn, enabling a multitude of performances of heterosexual femininity and queer fem(me)inity. Muñoz theorizes that “undermining notions of authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices” is integral to disidentification, which is a way to understand femme fem(me)inity as a form of disidentification (139). The femme undermines the “authenticity” of traditional femininity by taking what is devalued in traditional femininity and re-signifying a new femme fem(me)inity.
José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification is reflected in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of shame, and investigating the two theories in dialogue with each other furthers the exploration of the performance of femme fem(me)inity. The study of shame is integral to the topic of femme performance specifically with regards to femme lesbians because some femme lesbians lack the cultural intelligibility of their queer sexualities and are assumed to be heterosexual because of their performances of fem(me)inity. In chapter one, I discuss the connection of shame to Theresa’s character in Stone Butch Blues because shame is within her identity as a result of dominant society’s misreadings of her queer sexuality. Shame is connected to femme representation because “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is” (Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 37). And in the case of the character Theresa, shame also “sharpens the sense of what one is [not]” – her fem(me)inity does not mark her as a lesbian.

The connection can be made between shame and disidentification when Sedgwick describes shame as “But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating” (Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 36). Indeed, Sedgwick shows us that shame is not merely a feeling that we have; shame is integral to identity formation. Shame is part of identity but works differently for various identities. Like disidentification, shame “interrupt[s] identification” as it works to “make identity.” An important point here is the “interrupt[ing of] identification” because it allows for the fiction to be seen; therefore, causes a distance that enables a critical reading of the dominant representation allowing for new performances and identities to be made. Just like disidentification, shame is composed of “‘toxic’ parts”: “The forms taken by shame are not distinct ‘toxic’ parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process by which identity itself is formed” (Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 63). Because the “‘toxic’ parts” are integral to identity formation, we see how disidentification is a necessary process in new identity formation. Some might wonder why disidentification? Why not just create a new representation and leave the “‘toxic’ parts” behind? Here Sedgwick shows us why disidentification is necessary in the politics of changing representations. It is not possible to leave the “‘toxic’ parts” behind and create a new identity because the “‘toxic’ parts” will always be within identity. The femme is “toxic” in her performance of sexuality.
In the chapters that follow, my theories of femme fem(me)inities are investigated through: chapter one femme disidentification in *Stone Butch Blues*, chapter two queer parody and the performance of femme gender and sexual desire in *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy*, chapter three penetration and femme active sexual performance in *Tipping the Velvet*, and chapter four the troubling of authenticity in *The L Word*. The theories of traditional femininity, femme fatales, gender performance, gender performativity, queer parody, and brazen fem(me)inity are explored in relation to alternative performances of femininity in popular culture – popular *culture* literature as well as television. My theory demonstrates how the performance of fem(me)inity is queer – in turn contributing to the cultural intelligibility of queer femmes.
Chapter One

The Erotic Femme Challenge: Femme Disidentification in Stone Butch Blues

“\textit{I wanted to be seen, to mark the moment and be marked by it. I dared the viewer, the imagined viewer to look... This image, this femme, calls for a redress, demands an exchange. In the words of Duggan and McHugh, she is ‘the performer who demands performance in return’}” – Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri’s Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity (11).

The novel Stone Butch Blues is about the struggles butches and femmes faced in the 1950’s-1990’s. Jess, the main character in the novel, occupies a position of female masculinity, and she is troubled because she constantly struggles with her gender performance. Even when Jess transitions to become a man, she is still left with a feeling of not fitting. The novel not only explores queer masculinity, but it also investigates queer fem(me)inity. Jess describes the power of femme performance, “‘But what gets it for me is high femme. It’s funny—it doesn’t matter whether it’s women or men—it’s always high femme that pulls me by the waist and makes me sweat’” (Feinberg 274). The power of the high femme here is very apparent; high femmes cause Jess to “sweat” illustrating that queer fem(me)inity does wield power – sexual power. Here, Jess demonstrates that there are not only high femme women, but also high femme men (MTF’s and drag queens), and that it is not the biological sex that turns Jess on but the performance of high femmeness.

Specifically in this chapter, I analyze femme representations in Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues. As Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri note in Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity, “Many femmes are lesbians, but femmes are also drag queens, straight sex workers, nelly fags, all strong women and sassy men” (Rose and Camilleri 13). Throughout this chapter, I explore femme representation as a form of disidentification through the character Theresa, sex workers (pros), and drag queens in the novel Stone Butch Blues. These characters take what is devalued in traditional femininity and remake fem(me)inity into a performance of identity that is empowering. Their performances of alternative fem(me)inities rely on previous

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4 The exact time line of the novel is not mentioned, so this time line is an estimate according to the time period the historical events in the novel took place.
representations of powerful and dangerous femininity – the femme fatale. They perform femininity in a way that both recycles and reshapes the old category – thereby re-signifying femininity.

My investigation of femme disidentification will first address the performance of drag queens because of their interrogation of femininity on only female bodies. Then, my exploration moves to an analysis of femme lesbian and sex workers’ drag and disidentifications. I interrogate this idea and explore how femme lesbians and sex workers can be just as theatrical in their performance as drag queens. Performance studies show us that there does not need to be a stage to have an audience. If we look to Butler’s theory of drag, she says that “genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth of a discourse of primary and stable identity” signifying that gender is merely a fiction or a script that we perform (174). For Butler, we are all in drag because of the fiction and performance of gender. Drag queens, sex workers, and femme lesbians are in drag, performing their queer fem(me)inity in alternative ways.

Some drag queens perform femmeness as a form of disidentification on stage to show the audience that there is nothing essential about the connection between gender and biological sex. The performative effect of drag is demonstrated through Butler’s insights in Gender Trouble:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. . . . In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.

(175 Butler’s emphasis)

Drag illustrates that gender is based on imitation and citation; in turn, drag demonstrates that realness itself is a fiction. The drag performance also illustrates how biological sex is gendered through cultural assumptions about how bodies are gendered. In Stone Butch Blues, Peaches, a femme drag queen, discusses the problem of connecting sex with gender when she talks to Jess about how she felt when her dad dressed her up in suits:

‘It’s funny, seeing you trying on that suit, all excited and everything. I remember my father making me buy a suit for Sunday service. When I dreamed of dressing up, child, it wasn’t
no suit. I’ll tell you that much. I dreamt about something, you know, tasteful—with spaghetti straps. Kinda low cut,’ she drew a finger across her bodice. ‘I felt like a ballerina in a three-piece suit.’ (Feinberg 59)

Feinberg causes her readers to question the connection between biological sex and gender. Gender becomes a performance that anyone can perform but still only in particular ways. Jess, a butch, feels more comfortable in a suit and Peaches, a femme drag queen, feels more at home with herself wearing dresses “with spaghetti straps.” Both characters demonstrate the performance of gender and how our perceptions of sex are gendered when we think that women and men must dress in certain ways to perform their genders correctly.

In the drag show, Peaches and Justine enact femmeness as a form of disidentification. Peaches demonstrates the power that femme fem(me)ininity wields, and the drag show exemplifies how “identity is recycled and remade” (Muñoz 123). Jess is enthralled by the power of Peaches’ performance: “Peaches’ dress shimmered as the spotlight illuminated her. What a breath-takingly beautiful human being. ‘Stop in the name of love,’ she grabbed a fistful of my tie as she sang, ‘before you break my heart.’ Her lips close to mine. I gasped, caught in the power of her performance” (Feinberg 61). Peaches’ performance even causes Jess to have a physical reaction – she gasps. Peaches is described as a “human being” showing that femme representation is not gendered by female bodies.

Justine’s performance is not described with as much “power” as Peaches’, but Justine still exudes confidence in her performance, “Justine walked straight toward me—slow, absolutely steady on her spike heels as the music rose. ‘Hello stranger,’ she draped one arm over my shoulder, ‘it seems like a mighty long time.’ I could get to like this” (Feinberg 61). Justine’s performance is “slow, absolutely steady” showing the confidence she feels in performing her femmeness. Both drag performances exemplify femme representation as a form of disidentification because they take what is devalued about dominant notions of femininity, in this case dress, makeup, movement, and song, and remake fem(me)ininity into a femme representation that is empowering. In the performance of traditional femininity, makeup and sexy clothing are seen as markers of sexual oppression. The femme fatale remakes femininity by means of her sexual performance. But unlike the drag queens performances, the femme fatale in film is either killed or forced to conform to conventional femininity at the end of her narrative.
Drag queens masquerade as femme by wearing make up and sexy clothing and singing and dancing seductively, thereby wielding the power of their sexualities. Queer femmes have agency when performing their femmeness because they perform for themselves as well as for others. On stage, these drag queens exude sexuality making people “gasp” at the power of their performances.

Femme disidentification demonstrates an empowering entitlement to sexuality or the ability to be sexual especially with the example of pros or sex workers in Stone Butch Blues. In the novel, Jess becomes romantically involved with Milli, an ex-pro who goes back to her life as a pro because as Jess says: “‘There’s parts of the life you like a lot’” (Feinberg 108). Even before Milli goes back to her work as a pro, in the first encounter between Jess and Milli, we can see how Milli radiates her sexuality, “hands on her hips, looking me up and down as if the bike and I were one lean machine. Her body language, the gleam in her eyes, the tease in her smile, all combined into an erotic femme challenge. Milli set the action into irresistible motion by lifting one eyebrow” (106). Milli is the one who starts the action by initiating “an erotic femme challenge.” We observe a questioning of power structures because rather than seeing the femme viewed as a sex object here, we see Milli objectifying Jess, the butch. Objectification does entail power, and in this case the butch appears to be the object, which goes against traditional notions of heteronormative femininity where femininity only exists as the object of desire and not the subject of desire. This concept goes back to Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze and how women connote a “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 40). In this case, Jess’ female masculinity occupies the “to-be-looked-at-ness” position rather than femininity.

One of Rose and Camilleri’s goals in femme studies is to “release” femmes from “binaristic” structures: we need to be “[r]eleased from the strictures of binary models of sexual orientation and gender and sex, [r]eleased from the ‘object position’ where femme is all too often situated” (Rose and Camilleri 12). Thus we see that, as the femme troubles the binaries of femininity/masculinity and feminine/woman, queer fem(me)ininity acknowledges that femininity is not tied to passivity or female bodies. Queer fem(me)ininity is a performance rather than an essentialized category. The femme breaks many binaries, including the “object position,” which dictates femininity as the object and not the subject of desire. Since the femme is the subject desiring, we can see how queer fem(me)ininity is a varied performance of gender. Because the sexual desire is mutual between Milli and Jess, both occupy the subject and object of desire.
positions, demonstrating that one can be a subject and object of desire rather than having to be either/or. Occupying both the subject and object of desire, both queer fem(me)inity and queer masculinity trouble the binary of subject/object power relations and redefine heteronormative notions of femininity and masculinity.

Jess is very resistant to Milli going back to being a pro because she wants to “protect” Milli. Milli illustrates that femmes do not need to be “protected.” My use of the word “control” is not meant to illustrate a complete control, but rather that femmes are active agents in their performances and subjectivities. Milli yells at Jess in frustration because Jess tries to tell her what to do: “‘Nobody,’ she sputtered in rage, ‘nobody tells me how to run my life, not you, not anybody. You got that?’” (Feinberg 107). When Jess encroaches on Milli’s territory, she sticks to her ground and maintains control over her life. Milli isn’t ashamed of being a pro, which is illustrated when she tries to explain to Jess the difference between her and the women who dance just to pay the bills: “‘They’re hometown girls who turn tricks to pay the rent. They’re ashamed of what they do. They aren’t into the life in the same way as the rest of us. We’re different… My people are the women I dance with. That’s who watches my back.’ Milli was a pro’s pro” (Feinberg 109). For Milli, being a pro is another way for her to re-signify her sexual performance.

Milli enacts disidentification through her erotic dancing where we see she is the one in control of her performance and her sexuality:

Maybe I thought Milli wore an outfit when she danced. It wasn’t that it mattered, I just realized I had never wondered about it. I took in the sights and sounds and smells of the world in which she worked. I listened to the music she danced to: *I never loved a man the way that I, I loved you…* I could see immediately who was working the room. It was, of course, the women. But you could tell more by their attitude than their sex. That was, after all, a job. It paid well for women who could take care of themselves. And Milli could take care of herself. (Feinberg’s emphasis 111)

Jess sees “immediately” that the women are the ones “working the room” – they are in control of their performances. Jess comes to understand Milli’s femme power and realizes that Milli can “take care of herself.” Milli’s femme representation works as a form of disidentification because
she takes what is devalued about femininity, in this case her body, and uses her body to empower her sexuality. Both the femme fatale and Milli re-signify the “erotic spectacle” as something that can wield power, but their uses of power are very different (Mulvey 40). Milli’s performance differs from the femme fatale’s representation because Milli is not depicted as having “power despite herself” but rather as wielding power (Doane’s emphasis, _Femme Fatales_ 2). This femme performance demonstrates the power of the erotic that the brazen femme represents.

The character of Theresa is another example of femme lesbian representation. Theresa performs her femme representation as a form of counter identification when she saves Justine from being physically assaulted by the police: “Theresa slipped off her high heels. ‘Take your hands off her,’ Theresa told the cop. Her voice low and calm. ‘Leave her alone.’ Theresa walked slowly toward the cop with the high heels at her side. I held my breath. Georgetta took off both her stilettos and held one in each hand. She walked over to Theresa. They exchanged a look I couldn’t see and stood side by side” (Feinberg 129). Theresa “slip[s] off her high heels” – a supposed marker of feminine oppression – and uses them as weapons. Theresa risks her life at this point in the novel; because the police are armed, her femme performance has the potential of being fatal and is actively combative. After reading this passage, high heels and femme performance take on a whole new meaning. Theresa is empowered and in control of her femme performance, and we can see here how Theresa has recycled femininity remaking it into a femme fem(me)ininity. This exaggeration of femininity seems disidentificatory, but Theresa responds directly to the police officer – her action reinforces the existing power structure. Theresa identifies with the power structure and then counter identifies with the police officer by threatening him with her high heel. This counter identification does not change the power structure rather it responds directly to it. In survival, counter identification can be necessary, but it does not open up the possibility for changing the structures of power like disidentification. This example of counter identification illustrates how there are other methods of resistance besides disidentification. Theresa needs counter identification at this moment in the text to save her friend from being assaulted. There are times when counter identification is a necessary site of resistance.

Not only does Theresa show femme representation as a form of disidentification, but constructing her character is also Feinberg’s way to illustrate the problem of cultural
intelligibility of femme lesbians. When Jess decides to transition to “become” a man, Theresa cannot stay with Jess because of her lack of cultural intelligibility:

‘I put on my lipstick and high heels and walk down the street arm in arm with you, Jess. This is my life, and I’m damn brave to love who I love. Don’t try to take that away from me… If I’m not with a butch everyone just assumes I’m straight. It’s like I’m passing too, against my will. I’m sick of the world thinking I’m straight. I’ve worked hard to be discriminated against as a lesbian.’

(Feinberg 151)

Here, Feinberg shows the dilemma that most femme lesbians face when they live in areas where the dominant perception of a lesbian is more masculine. Theresa’s butch partners mark her as a lesbian, and she is not willing to give that up and appear to live as a straight woman. This response is indicative of Theresa not performing a brazen fem(me)inity because her partners mark her as queer rather than her marking herself as queer. Theresa’s queer identity is depicted relationally rather than a self-announcing claim to a queer identity. If Jess performs male masculinity rather than female masculinity and passes as a man, then Theresa will appear to be a heterosexual woman. Theresa’s visibility is completely dependent on Jess’s lesbian status or female masculinity. In this context, the femme lesbian is not marked as a lesbian, which causes her to pass against her will. Thus we see the disjunction between identifying as a lesbian personally and not having dominant society view one as such. Having the desire to be marked and “to be discriminated against as a lesbian,” is the desire to be culturally intelligible as a lesbian. Even though Theresa is criticized for her femme performance by the lesbian feminists at the university she works at, she continues to perform her femmeness. In Stone Butch Blues, we see how Theresa is accused of buying into a false consciousness: “Some of the lesbians from a newly formed group on campus had mocked her for being femme. They told her she was brainwashed” (Feinberg 135). Feinberg criticizes the concept of false consciousness by her exploration and sympathy for the femme characters in her novel.

Theresa’s anger here does not come from not being able to perform her femmeness, but rather from not being read as a lesbian. Theresa is upset about dominant society’s misreading, and this feeling is connected with guilt, which Sally Munt explores in butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender: “Femme shame can also occur when her lesbianism is not perceived as
‘enough,’ when her lipstick, heels, and hair leave her hanging around at the bar, unseen, unrecognized, unadorned. Femme shame can turn into femme guilt when she is able to pass” (Munt 5). When femmes are not recognized as lesbians in their performance of gender, shame becomes a part of their identity formation. The study of femme representation as a form of disidentification as well as brazen femmes’ self-announcing claims to their queer sexualities could help to bring cultural intelligibility to femme lesbians.

Theresa’s character has been read as a committed lesbian feminist, which is why she must leave Jess when Jess transitions to become a man. In Ann Cvetkovich’s An Archive of Feelings, she too paints Theresa as a lesbian feminist:

Stone Butch Blues is structured as a letter that will articulate the feelings that Jess was unable to express to her ex-lover Theresa when they broke up, a parting prompted by Theresa’s increasing commitment to lesbian feminist culture and her inability to support Jess’s painful conclusion that she wants to take hormones and pass in order to circumvent the harassment as well as dislocation she experiences as a ‘he-she.’ (73)

Instead of focusing on Theresa’s desire, Theresa’s character is figured relationally to lesbian feminism and to Jess or rather “her inability to [be a] suppot[ive]” partner to Jess. In Stone Butch Blues, Theresa is very frustrated with the lesbian feminists on campus because they criticize butch/femme relationships and her femme performance. Theresa does not stop performing her femmeness as a “commitment to lesbian feminist culture” nor does she stop dating butches. In fact, Jess sees Theresa later in the novel with her new butch partner. Theresa’s desire for female masculinity rather than male masculinity could be part of the reason that Theresa does not support Jess’s transition. Theresa’s desires teach us about different performances of masculinity and how femme desire disrupts the masculine feminine binary that exists primarily on the basis of singular definitions of masculinity and femininity. Femme desire points out the alternative forms of masculinity and femininity and that all types of femininity don’t necessarily desire all types of masculinity. Rather than figuring her as an inadequate partner, we should instead explore Theresa’s femme desire.

Assuming fem(me)ininity deliberately is empowering. Disidentification demonstrates to dominant society that femme fem(me)ininity is not a mere replication of heteronormative
femininity, but rather critiques femininity, performs fem(me)inity in empowering ways, and
remakes femme fem(me)inity. The study of disidentification furthers scholarship on femme
performance and alternative femininities. Disidentification shows us how femme performance is
made and queered. Femmes are “(re)making femininity [to] fit their own queer frames” (Rose
and Camilleri 14). We see how femme performance is composed of more than just femme
lesbians – drag queens, sex workers, and male-to-female transgendered women add to the
performativity of femme fem(me)inity. There is more work to be done on exploring femme
representation within Stone Butch Blues. I was not able to explore the femme performance of
Ruth the male-to-female transgendered character or Edna another brazen femme in the novel.
Transgender studies add much to the performance of queer femininity. Evaluating femme
representations in Stone Butch Blues leaves the reader with no doubt that femmes wield power.
Femmes trouble our notions of heteronormative femininity and masculinity because they show
the inaccuracy of the power relations expressed by theorists like Laura Mulvey and Sigmund
Freud.
Chapter Two

Queer Parody and the Performance of Femme Gender and Sexual Desire in *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy*

Queer parody offers us an interesting space to explore femme performance and desire. Particularly, in Mabel Manney’s 2001 novel *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy*, queer parody is a tool that demonstrates the “possibilities of intervention” in the current discourses that mandate “correct” ideas of gender “essentialism.” As Butler notes, “The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 188). The queer parody within *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* shows us sites that through “subversive repetition[s],” there are “possibilit[ies] of contesting” the notions of “correct” gender and sexuality performances. The novel challenges hegemonic binary systems of gender, and queer scholarship gives us tools for understanding what goes on in the novels – the performativity.⁵ And hopefully through fem(me)inine gender performances, femme performance will become “culturally intelligible” as queer. In other words, brazen femme performance illustrates that femininity too can be queer and offers performances of alternative femininities.

This Next Kiss could be Your Last – Lipstick and the Brazen Femme’s Weapons of the Trade:

*Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* is a queer parody about butch/femme relationships and spy girls. Jane Bond, a butch woman, the main character of the novel pretends to be her brother James Bond and plays the spy game for a few days. Jane falls in love with Bridget a femme who is a G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girl. Bridget’s femme performance is seductive, strong, intelligent, and aggressive. According to Harris and Crocker’s “Mysteries, Mothers, and Cops: An Interview with Mabel Maney”, *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* is Maney’s way of parodying the notion of femme as “limiting”: “I think that a lot of people have been influenced

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⁵ “Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness” (Butler 190).
by negative images of femininity so that they think femme is limiting, but, for me, it’s absolutely the opposite” (Harris and Crocker 72). We see that Maney feels that fem(me)ininity offers femmes alternative performances of femininity that are not “limiting.”

Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy is a parody of James Bond and more specifically the “Bond Girls.” The Bond girls have had three decades of performing in James Bond movies from the 1960’s to 2002, and over the last three decades we can track the changing image of women over the time periods. Interestingly enough, there is even a documentary on the Bond girls titled Bond Girls are Forever (2003) that tracks the changing images of the women as well as what it means to be a Bond girl. Watching the early Bond films leaves one with the image of half naked, defenseless women falling into Bond’s arms. The first Bond girl is Honey in Dr. No (1962) whose entrance is memorable with her walking out of the ocean with her white bikini and knife strapped around her waist. Honey at first appears to be a brazen femme with her aggressive performance, but she soon conforms to the damsel in distress image of heteronormative seduction plots. The documentary states how Honey created the “new woman” image for the sixties, and one might say that the Bond girls are the conduct literature for the women of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Conduct literature for women arose in the eighteenth-century, and these conduct pamphlets were designed to teach women how to be feminine. Because of the image of the “new woman” in the eighteenth-century, conduct literature taught the roles of the “new woman” – how to: present oneself to acquire a husband, be a wife, be a mother, etc. Nancy Armstrong’s “The Rise of the Domestic Woman” details women’s conduct literature in the eighteenth-century. Magazines are one form of modern conduct literature – Good House Keeping teaches women cooking and cleaning tips, Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan teaches young women how to get and keep a man and the correct way to be fashionable. Film and television are also forms of conduct literature because these popular culture representations teach girls and women the “correct” performance of femininity. Currently, there is a surge of films that teach girls how to become feminine women: What a Girl Wants (2003), Princess Diaries (2001), 13 Going On 30 (2004), etc. Just as eighteenth-century conduct literature taught women the “new woman” performance, so James Bond films teach women what kind of woman they “should” be. The Bond girls tell viewers how they are supposed to act as women. After Honey comes out of the water, Bond tells her he will not take her shells and she responds aggressively, “I promise you won’t either” (Dr. No). Even if at times
the Bond girls of the sixties have an aggressive spark, they soon fall to be “dames” in distress always being the cause of Bond’s capture and needing to be rescued. Also as the character M. (played by Judi Dench) says to Bond in Golden Eye (1995), “I think you are a sexist misogynistic dinosaur” (Golden Eye). And throughout the sixties well into 2002, we can see Bond’s sexism as well as the sexism of the writers with character names such as Honey, Pussy Galore, Xenia Onatopp, etc. Even when the women do not seem interested in men or just not interested in Bond, he uses brutal force to “change” their minds. Specifically, we see this with the character Pussy Galore in Goldfinger (1964). Pussy Galore seems to have no sexual interest in Bond, but then after he wrestles her to the ground and forcefully kisses her, she succumbs to his passion and embraces him. In the book, Pussy Galore is a lesbian whom Bond converts, but in the film her lesbianism is not explicitly named (Bond Girls are Forever).

The truly interesting aspect about the documentary Bond Girls are Forever is the struggle it had between representing the Bond girls as a conduct manual for women and for reading the Bond girls as a mere fantasy. One of the actresses who played a Bond girl, Jill St. John, is asked what she thinks of feminist criticism of Jame’s Bond films to which she replies that they are “bad sports” (Bond Girls are Forever). She then mentions that Bond girls are not supposed to “really” represent women – Bond movies are not meant as social commentaries. But then the next time she talks, she mentions how the Bond girls are “a role model for future a woman” (Bond Girls are Forever). These actresses do seem rather empowered by their performances in the Bond films. And later films such as Golden Eye and Die Another Day (2002), give certain women roles that demonstrate their intelligence and ability to take care of themselves – for example Judi Dench as M. and Hallie Berry as Jinx an American spy. In Die Another Day, even M. gets herself in a situation where she must be rescued, specifically from following her maternal or “womanly” impulses. The Bond girls’ performance reinforces the heterosexual matrix especially in the sixties, which is what is being parodied in Maney’s Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy.

The fact that the spy girls in Maney’s novel are called the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. girls is an intentional parody of the popular song in the sixties “Georgy Girl” by The Seekers. The lyrics of the song suggest that georgy girls need to try a little harder to make themselves pretty to catch a man:

Hey there! Georgy girl Why do all the boys just pass you by?
Could it be you just don't try, or is it the clothes you wear?
You're always window shopping but never stopping to buy.  
So shed those dowdy feathers and fly a little bit.

Hey there! Georgy girl  
There's another Georgy deep inside  
Bring out all the love you hide and  
oh, what a change there'd be,  
The world would see a new Georgy girl.

Hey there! Georgy girl  
Dreaming of the someone you could be  
Life is a reality, you can't always run away.  
Don't be so scared of changing and rearranging yourself.  
It's time for jumping down from the shelf a little bit. (The Seekers “Georgy Girl”)

The lyrics of “Georgy Girl” show us that georgy girls are not that pretty because “the boys just pass [them] by.”⁶ The georgy girls are “scared” of life and are depicted as being afraid of sex by “always run[ning] away.” Obviously, Maney parodies the “Georgy Girl” song because her G.E.O.R.G.I.E. girls are queer, strong, beautiful, sexual, aggressive, and they don’t try to “run away” from anything. When Bridget falls in love with Jane, Bridget doesn’t “change [or] rearrange” herself.

Within Maney’s Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, makeup takes on new meaning through the performance of fem(me)inity. Makeup and spy games are part of the performances of the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls:

Powder Puff Cosmetics, a small company that produces quality cosmetics sold directly to the customer. Each day, a small army of girls in mod pink minis hop on their equally pink scooters and travel door-to-door, offering free beauty consultations. . . . This modest enterprise is, in reality, the London headquarters of the Greater European Organization of Radical Girls Interdicting Evil

⁶ This line could be a reference to “feminine inverted,” which I will discuss in chapter three.
(G.E.O.R.G.I.E.), a group of brave girl spies whose sworn mission is to stop people like N. and his chauvinistic, bumbling cronies from destroying the world. (Maney 64-65)

Femmes have to stop the male spies from “destroying the world.” The cosmetic business is the cover up for the spy agency. Also, the girls have fun with their makeup, using makeup as weapons and in their gender performances. Maney redefines makeup as a powerful weapon that can be used to save the world. Makeup is the “tool” that these brazen femmes pick up to redefine their performance of gender and sexuality: “There is only a taking up of tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler, Gender Trouble 185). This “taking up of tools” that Butler discusses is how we must “take up” existing tools and use them in a performance that interrupts normative performativity thus redefining what gender performance does and signifies. The G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls’ tools are makeup and other traditionally feminine accessories. Through their brazen femme performance, the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls redefine their “tools” as well as their performance of gender. The G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls are a disidentification with the Georgy representation and Avon ladies. These brazen femmes take what is devalued in the Georgy and Avon lady representations and perform these representations in new ways which re-signify Georgy and Avon lady representations, making a new identity that is valued and wields power.

The makeup accessory that Maney specifically redefines with extreme power is lipstick. Not only does lipstick allow femmes to match their outfit with their makeup or make their lips look kissable, but it is also used as a weapon. Before lipstick could be used for a seductive weapon, but in Maney’s novel lipstick becomes lethal: “‘Kiss Me Deadly,’ Bluma said. ‘Kills on contact. Farewell My Sweet—same fatal results, but takes a little longer. Flight to Fantasy—leaves the kissee in a narcotic daze. This one can last for the life of a marriage! Seventh Heaven—contains a knockout drug. Vérité—a truth serum. Charmer, a hypnotic. Always wear the protective balm underneath the Deadly Shades’” (Maney 162-163). This femme fatale lipstick can be used to get someone to tell the truth, put someone in a hypnotic state, put someone in a fantasy like state, or kill someone slowly or quickly. Whatever the spy girl’s need, she has a lipstick to help her do the deed. Maney takes lipstick and redefines it in a

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7 Maney comments on her obsession with lipstick in her interview with Harris and Crocker, “Yes, lipstick. I admire people who wear lipstick. I am always asking people what their brand is, or their color, but I can’t date someone who wears lipstick. I also see femininity as being a source of power” (Harris and Crocker 75).
way that wields power for femme lesbians. It is interesting that Maney chooses lipstick because of the phrase “lipstick lesbians.” “Lipstick lesbian” has been a phrase used to signify femmes who try to “assimilate” into heterosexual culture: “Lipstick lesbianism, even if it exists more in media than in real life, does indicate social change among lesbians, for television’s Ellen encapsulates the hope of acceptance and so is assimilationist, resolutely apolitical, and upwardly mobile” (Newton 162). Esther Newton’s view of lipstick lesbians suggests that she thinks they are “apolitical.” Maney parodies the conceptions that lipstick lesbians are “apolitical” and trying to “assimilate” by having her lipstick lesbians politically involved in saving the world and being queer undercover agents.

Most of the weapons that the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls have are tools that assist in their fem(me)inine performance from lipstick, lipstick containers, compacts, makeup cases, to hair pins. Another deadly side of lipstick is the “single-shot lipstick-tube gun” (Maney 66). Then we have the compact that is used as a radio transmitter: “She took the compact from her purse, raised the antenna, and spoke into the microphone hidden underneath the powder insert” (Maney 202).8 The great thing about the compact radio transmitter is that no one would ever suspect its uses – not only can it be used to touch up femme’s makeup, but it also can be used as a method of communication between other spy girls. The makeup case is where all the spy girls’ weapons are contained: “it was easy to forget that under the sweet-smelling samples was a secret compartment with all the tools of the spy trade. A lock-picking kit. Gas grenades. Steel-tip tranquilizer darts. A subminiature camera concealed in a cigarette pack. Invisible-ink top secret cipher panties. And a Beretta 7.65mm pistol with silencer” (Maney 163). And to think, most people assume just makeup is the only accessory in makeup cases. This parody makes us question what really lies underneath the powder and blush and what that powder and blush can be used for. The parody redefines makeup as a tool that wields power and is a way of using weapons that don’t cause the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls to be caught in their spy missions. Unlike James Bond who is caught in all of his films at one point or another, the spy girls weapons are concealed so that no one would suspect their uses. Part of the ability to conceal is that makeup is not thought of as a weapon that wields power other than the power of seduction. This redefinition of feminine tools as items that wield power is significant because these tools are

8 The parody here is from On Her Majesty’s Secret Service when Blofeld gives his girls compacts that are to brain wash them and make the girls help him destroy the world without their knowledge.
traditionally not defined with power. James Bond’s “manly” spy tools have always been
invested with value and the ability to wield power because of the masculine privilege connected
to masculine accessories. None of the spy tools Bonds uses have been thought of as being
unimportant: cars, watches, pens, etc. – his spy tools are not disidentificatory. The
G.E.O.R.G.I.E. spy girls are able to pick up mobile power and use it to their advantage, showing
that femme performativity illustrates intelligence and the ability to wield power are part
fem(me)inity.

The other items that assist the spy girls in saving the world are hairpins. These brazen
femmes use their hairpins to unlock doors and break into offices: “So she removed a hairpin
from her tidy bun and broke into his office” (Maney 50). These brazen femmes differ from
traditional femmes because they redefine their fem(me)inine items with power rather than using
them in a non-questioningly way or to emulate a traditional femininity. Why would Maney
choose makeup and other traditionally feminine accessories as tools of the spy girl trade? Why
not just have the G.E.O.R.G.I.E. girls carry around semiautomatics and tool boxes? Maney as a
femme herself is writing her own queer parody about femme performance because she feels that
culture’s view of femininity is “absurd”: “especially in this culture where to be a femme, or
feminine, is not respected. I see images of idealized women who don’t even look like any
women I know, and they are always on display, or they are victimized. In a way, this culture has
ruined femininity. I have to divorce myself from how I really am a femme as opposed to the
culture’s notion of femininity, because it’s so absurd” (Harris and Crocker 75). The reason
Maney creates her queer/femme parody is to point out the “absurd[ity]” of “culture’s notion of
femininity.” Maney shows us how femme performance is an alternative femininity when she
suggests that femmes must “divorce” themselves from “culture’s notion of femininity.” This
“divorc[ing]” suggests the non-normativity about what femme performance does. Femme
performance does not emulate traditional femininity. As Maney suggests, femme fem(me)inity
is not “victimized” nor is it about an image of women in magazines that don’t “look like any
women [we] know.” Femme fem(me)inity is about being “respected” and reclaiming
fem(me)inity from the “ruins” – this is what femme performativity teaches us.

Fem(me)inine items are also used as seductive power. Brazen femmes use
seductive/provocative performances and wield power with them – they are not ruled by the threat
of victimization or being labeled as a “slut.” Also, specifically through Bridget’s performance we see that intelligence and strength are parts of her seductive quality:

From the top of her pink vinyl cap to the tips of her square-toed, midcalf shiny white go-go boots, she was a vision. Her strawberry-blond hair was styled in a saucy flip that framed a determined-looking jaw, and her lips were full and rather sulky in appearance. It was the kind of mouth people used to call sinful, a mouth just begging to be kissed. The overall impression of a pet waiting to be stroked was leveled by wide green eyes that shone with intelligence and strength. She looked expensive, a bit headstrong, and very kissable. Loving her would be very agreeable, Jane thought. (Maney 71-72)

Here we see that Bridget looks very seductive and this seductive beauty has some amount of power over Jane because “Simon had never seen Jane so thoroughly undone” (Maney 72). This scene differs from heteronormative seduction plots because fem(me)ininity is depicted with “intelligence” and as “headstrong.” In heteronormative seduction plots, femininity is represented as passive and needing to be saved like cited before in James Bond narratives. Jane represents the move from heteronormativity to queer. At first she starts out as heteronormative wishing for her old life with Astrid and living like a married couple. Astrid is a top femme but hides her lesbianism – has the desire to pass as heterosexual – and wants to appear traditionally feminine. Both Astrid and Bridget possess strength because they are both tops, but Bridget likes being queer and does not perform traditional femininity. Bridget’s clothing represents an extreme exaggeration and excess of femininity and is more provocative than someone would wear that does not try to stand out, while Astrid’s goal is to blend in with heteronormative society. Also, Bridget desires Jane’s performance of female masculinity in contrast to Astrid who tells Jane to wear skirts. This desire for Jane’s performance of female masculinity is a marker of lesbianism and marks Bridget and Jane as being queer – precisely the reason Astrid does not want Jane to perform her female masculinity. Jane’s move to desiring Bridget takes her out of heteronormativity with her desire for an aggressive fem(me)ininity that possesses strength,

9 It is important to note the word “expensive” here because femme performance is demonstrated to be rather classist. Taking into account all the femme accessories one must buy, an analysis of class in femme performance needs to be further explored.
intelligence, and queerness. This progression to dating a brazen femme takes strength on Jane’s part because desiring someone non-heteronormative, strong, intelligent, and seductive is anything but easy. Bridget demonstrates that being seductive can wield power. Bridget chooses her fem(me)inine performance because she knows that other gender and sexuality performances exist. This femme performance combines seductiveness with intelligence and strength, which challenges the heterosexual matrix and normative notions of femininity.

Not only does Maney offer us sites to explore femme seductive power through femmes’ appearances, but she also demonstrates the power femmes wield in their sexual performances as well. Maney’s parody offers us a site to explore femme desire particularly femme’s aggressive sexual desire:

Bridget leaned over the table, fully aware that as she did so her zipper migrated south. When she saw the expression on Jane’s face, she knew Bibi had been right when she said this was an outfit that paid for itself in just one date. She covered Jane’s hand with her own small, cool hand, and stroked her palm with her frosty-white nails. She’d kiss her soon enough, but first Jane would have to squirm a bit more. (Maney 55)

Bridget is in control of her sexual performance because she makes Jane “squirm” and wait for her initiation. Furthermore, she is “aware” of her sexual performance when she is “aware” that “her zipper migrated south.” It is Bridget, not Jane, who will initiate this first kiss and the sexual performance that will follow. This scene differs from heteronormative performances of masculine and feminine relations because the brazen femme wields the power of the initiation rather than being charmed by masculinity as in many scenes of the James Bond films. Just as the femme fatale, the brazen femme shows us that she can take matters into her own hands and initiate the sexual performance that is to come. But unlike the brazen femme, the femme fatale “is not the subject of power but its carrier” (Doane’s emphasis, Femme Fatales 2). Bridget is depicted as a “subject of power.” This seduction scene may not differ from the classic butch/femme seduction plot, but it does illustrate how butch/femme relations queer traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.
Bridget sets up the sexual scene when she arrives at Jane’s apartment after the bar escapade. We see Bridget’s aggressive femme sexual performance when Bridget tries to have her way with Jane the morning after the bar scene:

‘I was having the most marvelous dream,’ Bridget murmured as she began unbuttoning Jane’s shirt. She slipped her hand under the rough cotton and cupped one breast. Jane took a sharp inward breath, her nipple sore from last night’s lovemaking. When Bridget replaced her hand with her mouth, Jane ceased to protest. Bridget used her tongue to trace a path down Jane’s belly while her hand steadied Jane’s hip. She managed to undo the top button of Jane’s trousers before Jane grabbed her wrist. Bridget twisted out of her grasp, and, none too gently, pushed Jane back onto the bed, pinning her wrists with one hand while unzipping her trousers with the other. ‘You’re pretty strong for such a small girl,’ Jane said, laughing, as she halfheartedly struggled to break free. ‘Just do what I say and no one will get hurt,’ Bridget whispered as she slipped her hand into Jane’s trousers. ‘God, you’re bossy.’ ‘You don’t know the half of it,’ Bridget replied. Jane had a feeling she was about to find out. (Maney 108)

Here we see that femme sexual performance can be rather aggressive and reciprocal. This reading offers us a place to look at femme sexual performance as “active” rather than the stereotypical representation of femininity as “passive.” And the femme fatale representation does blur the active passive binary but her power is “over” rather than a reciprocal sexual exchange. Maney’s parody explores femme sexual performance as “active” and aggressive, which complicates the active/passive binary. Since neither Jane nor Bridget is passive, their sexual performances illustrate the inaccuracy of the active/passive binary. Also, Bridget and Jane often switch roles in their sexual performances, which allows for power play. Femme performance here queers the active/passive binary showing that power can be played with, sexual roles can be changed, and queer fem(me)ininity and masculinity do not occupy fixed positions on the active/passive binary.
Maney’s queer parody blows apart stereotypical butch/femme representations – she points out the absurdity of butch/femme stereotypes. Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy parodies dominant conceptions of butch-femme relationships as well as the notion that performances of femme fem(me)inity and female masculinity are imitations of heteronormative conceptions of gender. Maney uses the representation of the femme fatale and re-signifies what this representation does when put into the queer context of brazen fem(me)inity.
Chapter Three

Penetration and Femme Active Sexual Performance in *Tipping the Velvet*

Penetration is a sexual act that is within the active/passive binary in heteronormative discourse. In heteronormative straight sex, the active performer penetrates whereas the passive performer is penetrated. Butch/femme sexual performances can complicate this active/passive binary in their sexual performances of penetration. In Ann Cvetkovich’s recent book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, she looks at butch/femme sexual performance and defines femme sexual performance as “receptive” rather than “passive”: “Femmes also provide a range of ways of being open without being passive or stigmatized, rewriting the meanings of vulnerability and receptivity” (81). Here Cvetkovich complicates the active/passive binary – “receptive” is a way to queer femme sexual performance and the act of penetration. As Cvetkovich notes, being penetrated is a “vulnerable” act, femmes “rewrite” this sexual act and their sexual performance is not linked with “vulnerability.” Cvetkovich’s theory mainly focuses on femme bottom’s active desire. I use Cvetkovich’s theory to inform my own theory that femmes “rewrite” or redefine the position of being penetrated as “receptive” and “active” through top femme sexual performance. Through my reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, I demonstrate how the top femmes re-signify “receptivity” and “activity” in femme S/M sexual performances. Top femmes demand to be penetrated, do not exhibit a loss of control, and they definitely wield power in their performance.

The link between being penetrated and passivity is illustrated through Freud’s theory of female sexuality. Freud’s theory of femininity says that the development of femininity is to discover “passive instinctual impulses”: “Along with the abandonment of clitoral masturbation a certain amount of activity is renounced. Passivity now has the upper hand, and the girl’s turning to her father is accomplished principally with the help of passive instinctual impulses” (Freud 592). The original questioning of passivity with femininity is lost and the binary is reinstated with femininity having “passive instinctual impulses.” And one of the key moves to “passivity” is giving up “clitoral masturbation.” There is “activity” in “clitoral masturbation” that is supposed to be “handed over” in order for women to become “feminine” and participate in the correct sexual performance: “The male pursues the female for the purpose of sexual union, seizes
hold of her and penetrates into her” (Freud 578). Being “penetrated” and passivity are culturally linked, a concept disrupted in this chapter’s discussion of the action of being penetrated. This “activity” occurs both in Tipping the Velvet and in Cvetkovich's theories of penetration.

Cvetkovich re-signifies the activity of being penetrated. S/M is another moment of disidentification in certain femmes’ performances. Like Cvetkovich, I connect femme performance to S/M and trauma studies. It is important to note that as Cvetkovich theorizes, that penetration has been historically and culturally connected to trauma. Penetration makes us think of trauma and vulnerability because of the connection with penetration and domination as referenced earlier with Freud. But as Cvetkovich notes, “It is possible to ask how penetration comes to mean domination or trauma without presuming that these are natural connections, and how it can materialize not just gendered and sexualized forms of power but hierarchies of race and nation as well” (51-52). We cannot “presume”, in other words, that there are any “natural” connections between “domination,” “gender,” and “penetration.” Specifically, Cvetkovich discusses butch/femme sexual performance with regards to trauma: “They also negotiate the traumas of the social world within sexual relations that are complex economies of embodiment and sociality. Sexual practice serves as a vehicle through which trauma can be articulated and reworked, often in somatic ways, and writing about it makes those practices public” (66). We can apply Cvetkovich’s theories to writings about femmes. Whether queer parodies or femme stories, the act of writing puts queer “sexual practices” into the “public” and gives queer scholars a vehicle to look at butch/femme sexual performances in new ways, which in turn “reworks” our notions of gender performances and adds to queer performativity.10

Cvetkovich connects butch/femme sexualities, relationships, and sexual performances as a response to past sexual abuse, past oppressions, and national traumas. My use of “response” illustrates that butch/femme sexual performances can be a way for those who have experienced sexual trauma to finally feel ok with and want sexual experiences. The “numb” “reconfigure[ation]” of “butch dykes” suggests that “butch dykes” who have been sexually abused can “reconfigure” their trauma through butch/femme sexual performances (81). 11 The

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10 This concept will be further explored in the next chapter when I look at the television series The L Word putting queer sexual acts in the public through the televised medium.

11 “The sexual and emotional intimacies of touching and being touched are made public within butch-femme sexual discourse, which builds sexual public cultures around the sharing of sexual experience. . . . As both sexual and emotional publics, butch-femme cultures serve as a resource for rethinking the presumptions about penetration and vulnerability that underpin trauma theory” (80-81)
use of the word “numb” indicates sexual trauma because people who have experienced sexual abuse can become “numb” when trying to be sexually intimate. The “vulnerability” that femmes experience with penetration is also a link to sexual abuse. Femmes who experience sexual trauma may feel vulnerable to penetration but still desire it in butch/femme contexts. This “desire to be touched” is something some lesbians have not experienced until they have been in butch/femme relationships. For some lesbians, butch/femme relationships are a way for some to be able to be sexual without fear and for the first time actually desiring.

Putting queer theory in dialogue with trauma theory offers us new ways to explore how people respond to trauma through their sexualities. Cvetkovich connects trauma studies to queer theory as a way to, “appreciate the creative ways in which people respond to [trauma]. Moreover, queer theory and trauma theory are fellow travelers because they seek ways to build not just sexuality but emotional and personal life into models of political life and its transformations” (48). Cvetkovich’s connection of trauma theory with queer theory looks at sexuality as an approach to trauma. Specifically, Cvetkovich mentions S/M as an approach to sexual trauma: “Both staged performances and sexual activities, especially ones with an overtly performative dimension, such as S/M and other kinds of role playing, can knowingly court the relation between sex play and incest . . . . Minkowitz tops as a way of playing with trauma; her fantasies of control ward off the threat of victimization” (87-88). Topping can be a way for those who have experienced sexual trauma to play with power and feel that they are in control of the sexual performance. Without the sense of control for some that experience sexual trauma, sexual play and pleasure can be impossible. Obviously not all people who experience sexual trauma perform S/M in their bedrooms, but some find S/M a way to experience sexual pleasure and have found “creative ways in which . . . to respond to [trauma]” (Cvetkovich 48).

Both Cvetkovich and Leo Bersani offer us a new theoretical framework to approach S/M that differs from Sigmund Freud’s conception of the femininization of masochism. In Leo Bersani’s “Foucault, Freud, Fantasy, and Power,” he describes the power play that occurs in S/M. S/M offers a space where only those who want to be dominated are and power structures are played with: “in S/M we can step out of the roles whenever we like. Since S/M shares the dominant culture’s obsession with power, it simply asks that culture to consider exercising power in contexts where roles are not fixed and no one is really or permanently harmed. It proposes, that is, playing with power” (Bersani 19). One can see how sexual and social barriers can be
played with through S/M relationships. Power is played with and reversible as the roles in S/M are reversible. S/M plays with power in a conscious way – power is always within sexual relations but within S/M power is made more apparent. According to Foucault, nothing is outside of power, not even sex. Unlike other power relations, “The practice of S/M depends on a mutual respect wholly unnecessary, and generally absent, from relations between the powerful and the weak, underprivileged, or enslaved in ‘normal’ society” (Bersani 17). Whether one is a top or a bottom, both performances are respected and neither is undervalued. S/M has the ability to be “self-shattering in that it disrupts the ego’s coherence and dissolves its boundaries” (Bersani 25). The study of masochism is necessary in an exploration of queer femininity because the femme disrupts the connection that femininity must be linked to masochism. In studies of traditional femininity, Freud links femininity with masochism and, in turn, passivity. Top and bottom brazen femmes re-signify masochism and disrupt the binary relation Freud creates.

Tipping the Velvet is a text that completely redefines the way we look at the femme’s role in being penetrated, which is significant because it teaches us what penetration can do when taken out of heteronormative contexts. In the second part of the novel, the main character Nan becomes Diana’s “tart” (Waters 248). Nan at this point in the novel performs female masculinity and dresses as a man to pass on the streets of London unscathed and so that she can do as she pleases. Diana watches Nan as she performs sexual acts for men on the streets dressed as a man. All the while Diana knows that Nan is not a man and desires the alternative type of masculinity that Nan performs. Diana is a very rich lesbian who is coded as femme and who propositions Nan to be her “tart” after their first sexual interlude. The reader can be at first taken aback by the aggressive and direct performance of Diana because normally these characteristics are not aligned with femininity. Diana illustrates how femme performance is a varied performance of gender because her performativity does not reinforce the heterosexual matrix or heteronormativity. Diana takes control of her sexual desire and sexual performance in a way

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12 Bersani shows the “reversibility” of S/M roles when he says, “But S/M also argues for permeability of the boundaries separating the two. The reversibility of roles in S/M does more than disrupt (if only momentarily) the assignment of fixed positions of power and powerlessness (as well as the assumptions underlying such assignments about the ‘natural’ link between dominance and particular racial or gendered identities” (Bersani 22)

13 The femme fatales also demonstrates an active role in sexual performance.

14 When I use the term “heteronormative,” it is important to note that I am not using the term as interchangeable with heterosexuality. The heterosexual couple can be non-normative just as the lesbian or gay couple can be normative. In normative sexual performances, the feminine is aligned with passivity. As mentioned previously, the femme fatale disrupts this connection of passivity with femininity, but her performance is not normative.
that is not only “receptive,” but also very “active” as well. Diana exerts herself as an active performer when she creates the sexual scene in which she is penetrated:

Finally she pulled away, and seized my wrists. ‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘Not yet, not yet!’ With my hands still clasped in hers she led me to one of the straight-backed chairs and sat me on it, the dildo all the while straining from my lap, rude and rigid as a skittle. I guessed her purpose. With her hands close-pressed about my head and her legs straddling mine, she gently lowered herself upon me; then proceeded to rise and sink, rise and sink, with an ever speedier motion. At first I held her hips, to guide them; then I returned a hand to her drawers, and let the fingers of the other creep round her thigh and buttocks. My mouth I fastened now on one nipple, now on the other, sometimes finding the salt of her flesh, sometimes the dampening cotton of her chemise. Soon her breaths became moans, then cries; soon my own voice joined hers, for the dildo that serviced her also pleased me – her motions bring it with an ever faster, ever harder pressure against just that part of me that cared for pressure best. . . . Then in another moment I could think nothing, only shudder, and the pleasure – mine and hers – found its aching, arching crisis, and was spent. (Waters 243)

Diana is more than just “receptive” to penetration when she was the one to “lower herself” upon Nan’s dildo. The “activity” in Diana’s performance of being penetrated is demonstrated by her “rise and sink” and “her motions” that bring Nan to climax. Not only is Diana very active in the sexual performance itself, but she also sets up the sexual scene telling Nan to put on the dildo, indicating to her “Not yet!”, and leading her to the chair. Diana takes control of her own desire and when she shows Nan how to play her role, Nan and Diana’s sexual performance fulfills both of their desires. Without Diana’s “orders” so to speak, Nan would not have known how to pleasure Diana and in turn herself. Diana verbally and physically directs her desires, redefining the femme sexual performance as “active,” and her sexual performance is connected to that of a dominatrix or a top. Although femme desire is depicted as very “active,” butch desire is not depicted as “passive” or “inactive.” Nan is directed in the act of penetration by Diana, but Nan is
still an active performer in the act of penetration as well as other aspects of the sexual
performance. Nan does not need direction on where her “fingers” “creep” or what to do with her
“mouth.” Desire is what drives the sexual performance. Yes, Nan is a love slave, but as Bersani
says, “S/M, . . . partly due to the frequent reversibility of roles, partly as a result of demonstration
S/M has often been said to provide power of bottoms, or presumed slaves” (14). Bottoms do
wield power and their position in the sexual performance is not demeaning or undervalued nor is
it determined by gender performance. A femme can be a bottom and a butch the top just as a
femme can be the top and a butch the bottom. Also, it is important to note that the roles are
reversible and tops and bottoms can and do switch performances. But this top/bottom
relationship is taken to the extreme when Nan becomes Diana’s “kept” lover. The economic
power that Diana holds over Nan seems to diminish the power play that can occur through the
sexual relations of S/M. The roles are not reversed nor does this lack of economic power
“provide power of bottoms.” My goal is to look to moments that fem(me)ininity is shown to
differ from normative notions of femininity, and Diana does offer us a space to explore
alternative femininity.

The butch becomes the “tart” whose job is to service femme desire in this parody of
gender and sexuality. At times, we see the femme in the role of the prostitute, but in this case the
butch is the “kept woman” as we see when Diana propositions Nan for the job: “‘My dear, I have
said: you should have pleasure for your wages! You should live with me here, and enjoy my
privileges. You should eat from my table, and ride in my brougham, and wear the clothes I will
pick out for you – and remove them, too, when I should ask. You should be what the sensational
novels call kept’” (Waters 248-249). Diana creates the terms of their relationship and
performances. Not only does Diana dress Nan and create a performance she finds desirable, but
also Nan must “remove [her clothes], too, when [Diana] should ask.” One must wonder if Diana
isn’t confused with “ask[ing]” and “demanding” because her comment does not really suggest
that Nan will have much of a choice in objecting to pleasure Diana. The main choice Nan has is
at this moment when she must decide if she will be Diana’s “tart.” Here one may think that
Waters reinstates the active/passive binary because Diana seems to be in control and Nan
controlled. In S/M, the active/passive binary is complicated because of the reversibility of the
roles and the valuing and respect of both tops and bottoms. Again, economic power must be
taken into account, which complicates the active/passive binary. Diana not only exhibits control
in the bedroom, but she also has the desire to control Nan’s entire life. Nan’s performance of a bottom is valued but is completely controlled. Still, the S/M relationship defies heteronormativity through gender positions not determining power relations and the valuing of both the dominatrix and the submissive slave. S/M demonstrates the inaccuracies of the active/passive binary because the passive or submissive performer wields power as well – no one is powerless or inactive.

The sexual performance of Nan and Diana continues to redefine femme sexual performance as a performance that wields power and resistance to heteronormativity. This sexual performance is tied to the “perverse” and parodies traditional notions of the “perverse,” which is demonstrated when Nan describes her new found desire: “the opening of this box, as I have said, never ceased to stir me – I was like a dog twitching and slavering to hear his mistress call out Bone!” (Waters 267). Much of this quote has double meanings. The “opening of” the “box” is literally the excitement and desire that Nan obtains from opening the box that contains the dildo, and one can also take this quote to mean that the “box” Nan is continually “opening” is her new found lust for the “perverse.” Of course dominant culture would see Nan’s stint as a rent boy as “perverse,” but she does not mention the desires that she finds “perverse” until her relationship with Diana. Nan experiences indescribable pleasure in the performance of what she sometimes sees as “perverse.” It is important to note that Diana – the femme – introduces Nan to the “perverse.” There is a troubling in this performance of “perversity” because femininity is normally aligned with innocence and virtue neither of which Diana chooses to perform. Even within early twentieth-century psychoanalytical studies the “feminine inverts” were considered to be the ones that had to be “coerced” into relationships with “masculine inverts”:

[The feminine invert] does not choose her sexual expression, but is coerced into it. Another perception was that the feminine invert expressed inversion because she had been rejected by men and had no other option. In his work ‘Sexual Inversion in Women,’ Havelock Ellis notes that feminine inverts ‘are the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by’ (qtd. in Halberstam 76). Within both of these configurations, the feminine invert is not consciously resisting her given gender and sexuality, but either
acquiring it by default or misunderstanding it. (Maltry and Tucker 91)

Here we can see that the perception was that masculine invertes were looked at as “corrupting” the feminine invertes into lesbianism. Ellis later goes as far to say that the feminine invert has the most chance of being converted back into heterosexuality. Thus we see that the feminine invert is still aligned with the traditional virtues of femininity. Within Tipping the Velvet, the tone of the novel suggests that Diana corrupts Nan challenging Ellis’ conceptions of the feminine invert. In fact, it is Diana who opens up Nan’s desires to a world of “perversity” and pleasure. What femme performance does when tied to “perversity” is that is shows that the fem(me)inine is not necessarily virtuous. And that unlike Ellis’ view, femmes are not “corrupted” into lesbianism because of their gender performance of fem(me)inity.

Both performers, the penetrated and penetrator, take on active roles in this sexual performance of disidentification. I use disidentification here because the sexual performance of butch/femme redefines the act of being penetrated in a new way that values a role that is traditionally devalued and viewed as disempowering. The performance is noted by Nan when she refers to her and Diana as an “act”: “We were a perfect kind of double act. She was lewd, she was daring – but who made the daring visible?” (Waters 282). Diana’s desire cannot be “daring” without having it “visible” to someone else. Diana’s “daring” and “active” performance is significant because it demonstrates that Diana’s desire for penetration is “daring” precisely since she is not vulnerable. The enjoyment of being penetrated without the fear of vulnerability that can be achieved through being a top, allows us to see that femmes can redefine the sexual act of penetration on their own terms.

Diana’s desire to control Nan in every area of Nan’s life makes her an unsuitable long-term partner for the conclusion of the novel. Diana is extremely jealous, which is shown when, “[Nan] had passed a month with her – had left the house only to stroll about the garden” (268). At the beginning of their relationship, Nan’s only audience is Diana because of her desire to control Nan. Diana even mentions that Nan has lasted longer than any of her other kept boys, which suggests that Diana feels some type of emotion for Nan. But Diana’s dominatrix desire for S/M makes her an unsuitable long-term romantic partner in Tipping the Velvet. “Perversity” must be kept in its place and only can exist for a brief moment. Even if the femme dominatrix might not make a good long-term romantic partner in the world of the novel, she still is a site to
analyze femme performativity. Diana’s sexual desire for penetration teaches us that femmes can desire penetration without being heteronormative and without exhibiting a loss of control. And although Diana’s control is taken too far, her and Nan’s sexual performance is a location to learn about queer desires.\textsuperscript{15}

In the conclusion of this section of the novel, the sexual performance of penetration is redefined yet again when Zena, who is not coded as butch or femme, becomes the penetrator. Zena and Nan become friends throughout this section of the novel both lamenting on how cruel Diana can be. At the end of this section of the novel, Diana has a party where she tells Zena to take off her undergarments to show her guests if she has a penis from living in a reformatory. Zena is mortified and Nan steps in saying no. Then, Zena and Nan must go upstairs and leave the party. Zena and Nan explore their desire for each other and then Nan suggests that Zena put on the dildo to which she happily complies:

When she saw the dildo, however, she coloured again, but seemed unable to tear her eyes from it. I felt a drunken surge of power and pride. ‘Stand up,’ I said – I sounded almost like Diana. ‘Stand up, and fasten the buckles.’ When she had done that, I led her to the looking glass . . . but the sight of Zena – gazing at herself with the dildo jutting from her, placing a hand upon the shaft of it, and swallowing, to feel the motion of the leather – proved more distracting than the bruise. At last I turned her and placed my hands upon her shoulders, and nudged the head of the dildo between my thighs. . . . She gave a cry. We stumbled to the bed and fell, crosswise, upon the satin. My head hung from it – the blood rushed to my cheek and made it ache – but now Zena had the shaft inside me and, as she began to wriggle and thrust, I found myself compelled to lift my mouth and kiss her. (Waters 322)

The act of penetrating here becomes a combined active performance. Nan starts out the performance when she shows Zena how to penetrate her when she “nudge[s] the head of the dildo between [her] thighs.” And then Zena’s desires push her forward in her sexual

\textsuperscript{15} Here I am not citing that sex should not be made public but rather than Diana takes her position as a top too far when she socially, financially, and every way possible to control someone.
performance and she penetrates Nan “Zena had the shaft inside me and, as she began to wriggle and thrust.” In this example, we see how both performers are very active in the act of penetration again complicating the active/passive binary. Penetration is queered.

The “perversity” of this desire for penetration must be relinquished at the end of Tipping the Velvet for a heteronormative and respectable relationship. Nan ends up with Flo, who is not coded as butch or femme but rather as a lesbian feminist. Their relationship is very normative with Nan staying at home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the baby while Flo goes off to work to help others – although Nan is butch, which does challenge heteronormative conceptions of gender. In other words, Nan is domesticated through this “respectable,” boring, and heteronormative relationship, but at the same time domesticity is re-defined through Nan’s butch performance. Their relationship is summed up as “unspilled boxes”: “We should do very well, I thought as Florence sighed and raised her hand to me at last; we should do very well, so long as the boxes stayed unspilled” (Waters 432). The “boxes” refer to previous relationships. This reference of “boxes” reminds the reader of the “box” Nan mentioned earlier that was an opening up of her “pervasive” desires. The “boxes” are to stay closed and “unspilled” – which is the place where queer desire is banished too. The ending scene of the novel is like a marriage scene when Nan says, “‘Oh, Flo!’ . . . ‘Only say – only say you’ll let me love you, and be with you; that you’ll let me be your sweetheart, and your comrade’” (472). Flo is a suitable life romantic partner because she is not queer – she is not in the theater like Kitty nor does she perform “pervasive” desires for S/M or penetration. Flo demonstrates the performance of activism but still desires normativity. As the title suggests, Tipping the Velvet, “tipping the velvet” is a phrase used to describe oral sex between lesbians. This reference of the title suggests that rather than offer a multitude of queer sexual acts that one sexual act is valued above all others – the sexual act of penetration between women is closed up in the “box” that hopes to remain “unspilled.” The ending of the narrative is “respectable” and normative and the questioning of sexual practices is lost.

Unlike Waters’ novel that concludes as heteronormative, Maney’s Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy does not end in normativity. Of course Bridget and Diana are both very different characters, and clearly Bridget would make the superior girlfriend with her brazen femme performance that is not about controlling Jane. Diana is too much of a top because not only is she a top in the bedroom, but she also must control Nan’s every move outside the
bedroom as well. Bridget is aggressive in her sexual performance and could be considered a sexual top, but in Bridget and Jane’s sexual performances roles are reversed allowing both Jane and Bridget to be aggressive in their sexual performances. Although Jane is very “undone” by Bridget, the relationship is not depicted as about control rather it is based on more equal relations. As Maney’s narrative concludes, Bridget is still shown to be the ideal girlfriend, and does not have to lose her aggressiveness or queerness but rather she just has to tell Jane the truth. From the conclusion of Maney’s novel, we can insinuate that Bridget and Jane will continue their romantic interlude but not despite passion and sexual pleasure. Bridget’s femme performance is not compromised nor does Jane have to find someone more “suitable.” In fact, Jane’s relationship with Bridget is her turn away from heteronormativity. Maney’s queer narrative remains queer as it concludes. Bridget’s brazen femme performance teaches us that fem(me)inity is queer, strong, intelligent, and seductive.

Queer parody is a site where the “natural” is “denaturalized.” The “natural” performance of femininity is shown to be a construction and is redefined in queer ways that go against the heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity. Makeup is shown to be a tool of the femme trade that is redefined as a tool that wields power. Lipstick and powder take on new meanings of power as weapons that save the world and of seduction. Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy and Tipping the Velvet demonstrate how femmes are not only active in their gender performances, but also in their sexual performances as well. Although femmes are being penetrated, as tops they are in control of this penetration and of their sexual desires. S/M when combined with femme performance teaches us that there are “creative” ways to respond to sexual trauma, and S/M offers us a space to look at power play and how penetration can be defined not by “vulnerability” but rather by pleasure.
Chapter Four

That's Not Me: Queer Performance's “Troubling” of the Desire for Authenticity in The L Word

“Perhaps even the quest to be adequately named, to posit meaning and being in relation to the identity and seeming fullness of the name, is inadequate as the primary condition framing the political for us”– Robyn Wiegman “Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern” (5).

We see femme lesbian representation everywhere in popular culture now: films, television, and magazine advertisements. Queer parodies such as Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy are a form of popular culture that even parodies dominant popular culture representations of traditional femininity. Femme visibility is widespread within popular culture. Just this past month, February 2004, there was a Bud Light advertisement in Curve – a lesbian magazine – that pictured two brazen femmes, one with a beer in her hand, and the image was suggestive of flirtation between the two. The advertisement says “…be yourself…”, which signifies that these women can be themselves through their brazen femme performance (5). The brazen femme representation is illustrated through appearance: one woman has a tattoo on the back of her right shoulder and the other woman wears a black lace low cut top with her cleavage as one main focal point in the advertisement. Both women are very fem(me)inine in appearance and demonstrate that for some lesbians to “be yourself” is to perform fem(me)inity. Not only does Curve show femme representation through advertisements, but also Girlfriends targets a femme audience as well with having advertisements for formal dresses with the caption “film fatale” (48-51). These “film fatale[s]” are sexy, chic, and very fem(me)inine. And both lesbian magazines contain advertisements for the television series The L Word with the slogan “Finally, a full season of lesbian drama – one episode and you’re hooked” (Curve 1). Some of us are “hooked” while others are upset.

Showtime’s new hit television series The L Word, produced by Ilene Chaiken and Kathy Greenberg and directed by Rose Troche and Daniel Minahan, is striking up heated conversations in queer and straight communities as well as in the academy. Recent articles written by Judith
Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick illustrate that conversations are taking place among queer theorists about what the series does and represents. Even though the show has its problems, it does raise some queer and cultural issues to the public – the public that can afford to buy Showtime. Some aspects of the show make me cringe, like the negative portrayal of butch representation, but still I find myself filled with the desire to turn on the television at ten on Sunday nights to watch the latest episode. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says in her article “‘The L Word’: Novelty and Normalcy”, “The simpler fact, though, is that I’m left eager to see more of these new friends with their bonds, families, fates, and ambitions” (Sedgwick B11). This desire is similar to the desire I felt watching Sex in the City season after season. My guilty pleasure – watching television that might not appear at first glance to be feminist or academic. But then I realized, my guilty pleasures offer moments that make political statements and/or challenge the way dominant culture thinks about certain issues.

From Sex in the City’s frankness of women talking about and experiencing sex to The L Word’s representations of queer sex, we can see moments where these popular culture representations can teach dominant culture something new. The two shows are obviously connected with the promotional line in The L Word of “the same sex different city.” One must wonder what this phrase, “the same sex but different city” means? The different city part of the quotation is obvious with Sex in the City being set in New York City and The L Word in Los Angeles. The confusion is in the part of the phrase “the same sex” – does sex refer to the physical act of sex? If so, “the same sex” is an odd phrase since The L Word can be seen as a lesbian version of Sex in the City. A more appropriate line might have been “different sex and different city.” Unless of course the line refers to same sex couples in which case it is appropriate, but the ambiguity of the line can cause viewers to question the intended meaning of the phrase. Sex in the City does briefly introduce lesbians into its series as “power lesbians” and when the character Samantha is in a short-term lesbian relationship. Both television shows are focused on friendship as well as romantic pursuits. These women bond with cosmopolitans in Sex in the City and over coffee in The L Word.

Where am I? : Viewer’s Desires for Real Lesbians on TV –

‘rather than rehearse the call for such ‘reality,’ one might make a plea for ‘real-ism’ – for reveling in the fantasy of filmic images that does not simply replicate an always already known ‘reality’ but rather takes pains to read (as well as takes pleasure from
So what is all the hype about with regards to The L Word? The L Word is the first television show devoted purely to lesbian representation – there is not merely one lesbian character but rather a multitude of queer representations. An important question to ask is what do these representations do? Just this past Tuesday, April 6th, 2004, NPR in Cincinnati conducted an interview about The L Word illustrating the attention the show has received – even in a conservative city in the Midwest. A main question that has been asked on radio shows and through articles is: does this show demonstrate “real” lesbian representation? In the Spring 2004 issue of Bitch, there were several calls for a “real” lesbian representation: “Yet despite my ever-growing list of complaints, my girlfriend and I watch the show intently each week—hoping for more real moments” (Watrous 11), “it plays more like a straight man’s wet dream than it does a realistic lesbian drama” (Hayes 13), and “the show’s writers and producers are perhaps trying to secure a wide fan base before shocking them with images of real-life lesbian lovin’ (and living)” (Nathan 16). Nathan cites the critique that the show has been normalized for a mainstream audience. And Chaiken has stated several times including in The L Word Defined that “more diverse” representations of lesbians will continue to appear as the series progresses.

The underlying desire of all of the quotes mentioned above is this desire for “realness.” This desire for a “real” representation makes me feel uneasy because it hints to a claim of an “authentic” lesbian performance. What would a show about “real” lesbian life and representations entail? How could anything ever represent everyone? Is television ever a “real” depiction of life or people? This idea of the show being like “a straight man’s wet dream” seems like an unfounded backlash against femme performance. Sedgwick responds to this claim of The L Word existing as a type of porn for straight male viewers, “I anticipate that its long-term audience will be not male porn hounds but the range of viewers, predominantly though not only female, who enjoy smart and well-made domestic drama, psychological and relationship-based, low on violence, criminality, and sensation” (Sedgwick, “‘The L Word’” B11). Like Sedgwick, I do not believe that the long-term viewers of the show will be straight men watching it to suffice a porn fantasy. I, along with some of my lesbian friends, watch intently each week anticipating the new narratives and drama to come.
One of the main critiques of the show is based on class, since not only do most of the women in The L Word drive fancy cars and have nice homes or apartments in Los Angeles, but also the audience must have a certain amount of money as well to even watch the show. One must have deluxe cable to have Showtime, which excludes many people from even being able to watch the series. I wonder how much femme performance relies on commodification? Commodification seems to be an intricate part of certain femmes’ performances with buying makeup, numerous different outfits, shoes to match, accessories, and purses upon purses – I have purses for every season and occasion. Robyn Wiegman in “Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern” discusses commodification and lesbian identity, “Music, clothing, vacation cruises, festivals, artwork, publishing—in all these areas, lesbian identity functions as the means for defining the specificities of both production and consumption” (3). “Clothing” and accessories are materials of “consumption” for femme “identity.” Femme “identity” “functions” by the commodification of fem(me)inine accessories that accent certain femmes’ performances. Shopping seems to be a fetish for some femmes – myself included – which is a classist aspect of certain femmes’ performances. The fetish for style and beauty is taken to the extreme in The L Word. The commodification of the lesbian image is connected with this desire for a real lesbian: “Rather than freeing myself from the commodity aesthetic, wouldn’t my claim to know the lesbian simply confirm my position as her most masterful consumer, a commodity myself now mastered by the image I take myself to be?” (Wiegman 2). Trying to represent real lesbians on television is not only commodifying lesbian sexuality, but it is also commodifying one’s idea of oneself. The idea of a real is a representation of oneself; therefore, the commodification of one’s own lesbian identity. This call for diversity of representations by means of real representations is the desire to see oneself rather than a diversity of lesbian images, which is addressed in The L Word Defined. Besides the criticism of The L Word being very classist, I am not sure why this desire for “realness” is important? Thus, I will explore what this desire for authenticity teaches us. I will look to different moments in The L Word that question and reify the desire for authenticity because The L Word attempts to complicate spectators’ demands for authenticity through parody. Certain viewers demand authenticity, but the show parodies this demand. Femme performance, gender performance, and racial performance combine for different claims and questioning of authenticity.
Part of this uneasiness about The L Word not being an accurate representation of lesbians seems to rely on the fact that the show focuses around a group of femme friends: “While the show might displace some stereotypes by not conflating lesbianism with masculinity, its characterization of all lesbians as swankily dressed femmes glosses over the diversity within LGBT communities and allows the mainstream to commodify alternative sexual lifestyles for straight audiences’ pleasure” (Nathan 16). Television as a whole does not try to represent diversity – hopefully within the future this lack of diversity will change. When people watch Friends, Will and Grace, and/or Sex in the City, they find all beautiful people (beautiful as defined by dominant culture) – not accurate depictions of all “real” life people. The L Word is focused on what a group of femme friends discusses and does. Rather than trying to represent all queer representations, the show focuses on the image of the femme. The series must have some type of scope because it would be impossible to represent all queer people on one television show. Femme representation is not about commodifying sexuality for straight audiences. Femme representation on The L Word causes viewers to question their notions of lesbians. The femme representations on the series could cause a mainstream audience to question the assumption that all women that perform femininity are straight. But like every television station, Showtime is a business and would a series with an all butch cast be renewed? I would like to think so because I along with many other lesbians I know would be avid watchers. Halberstam claims that, “some lesbians (non-white, non-feminine, non-reproductive) have come to represent the anti-consumer” (18). According to Halberstam, a show about butch representation probably wouldn’t be renewed because it would lack the qualifying elements to be consumed by mainstream culture. Possibly, women performing female masculinity might make a mainstream audience uneasy, which could be why Chaiken added more representations of female masculinity at the end of the series to ease her viewers into the variety of lesbian performances. Although I know the critique of the all femme cast is to criticize the show based on a lack of “realness,” my goal is to question the call for “realness” all together.

Halberstam discusses the problem of the male gaze and heteronormativity in her article “The I Word: ‘I’ is for invisible, as in real-world lesbians on TV.” Halberstam’s article is mainly about the lack of butch representation in television and a critique of heteronormativity on lesbian television. Halberstam depicts heteronormativity in The L Word because Bette and Tina are trying to have a baby, and they even bring a man into the bedroom at one point – how normative
heterosexuals might view lesbians. Further, Halberstam investigates the lack of gender performances in lesbian television and how that reflects heteronormativity. Also, Halberstam comments on the male gaze: “both women must be sexually appealing to men. If one lady is too butch, too aggressive, too mannish, the porno fantasy will vanish and the show’s marketing opportunities will be rendered impotent” (18). This section of Halberstam’s argument sounds very similar to Mulvey’s theories of the “male gaze” and the “erotic spectacle.” If Halberstam’s argument was based on the heteronormativity of femininity in television rather than the male gaze, her critique of lesbian television would have been strengthened.

Like Halberstam, I have my reservations about the series, but I tend to agree more with Sedgwick’s reading of the series which demonstrates the sites of resistance and normalization in the narratives of The L Word. There are queer moments in the series just as there are problematic aspects of the desire for normalcy and the male gaze that watches lesbians have sex in a few of the episodes. I don’t propose a reading of the male gaze and how the feminine lesbian characters only exist to please a male gaze. As Jennifer DeVere Brody says in “The Return of Cleopatra Jones”:

Examining the returns of different returns and arguing that the yield (stopping point and cumulative product) depends on the field of desire – both the vintage and vantage from which one looks – this essay participates in the recent shift in cinema studies away from an emphasis on the psychoanalytical paradigm of the (straight) male gaze central to feminist film criticism of the 1970s and toward a 1990s cultural studies perspective that foregrounds the active role of the viewer in determining a film’s or any other cultural product’s meanings. (88-89)

Brody’s article participates in a complex interrogation of the viewer and the subject that helps us to redefine the role of a filmed subject as more than just suiting a heterosexual male gaze. The viewer has an “active role” in understanding as well as critically exploring “a film’s or any other cultural product’s meanings” or a television series with regards to The L Word. The “active role” of the viewer can inform my interrogation of the viewers’ desires for authenticity in The L Word. The “active role” demonstrates that viewers’ desires can influence their interpretations, and they can put their desires onto television shows or films. Some audience members’ desires
for authenticity in The L Word show their “active role” as viewers and negates the heterosexual male gaze argument.

The “A” Word: Ambiguity and Authenticity in The L Word –
The L Word has a very ambiguous relationship with viewers’ desires for authenticity especially with the character Alice. The character of Alice is played by Leisha Hailey, and both the February 2004 issue of Curve and The Advocate reference Hailey as “the only ‘out’ lesbian in the cast” (Schenden 35). Does the fact that Hailey is a lesbian have anything to do with how we can analyze her performance of queer fem(me)ininity on the show? It is odd that many of the articles I have read on The L Word have referenced Hailey’s sexuality, thus authenticating her lesbian performance. The other characters in the cast offer sites of exploring fem(me)ininity as well, especially Bette with her need for control and her “power lesbian” performance, but the sexuality of the actresses seems to come up again and again in articles and interviews.

Grosz interrogates this idea of an authentic lesbian performance, “The question is not am I—or are you—a lesbian but, rather, what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, with what bodies of our own, and with what effects?” (Grosz, “Refiguring Lesbian Desire” 80-81). Grosz asks us to question the concept of authenticity and not ask the question who is a lesbian but rather explore “lesbian connections” and the “effects” of the “invest[ment]” of “sexuality” and “bodies.” So rather than concentrating on who is and who is not a lesbian in The L Word, we should instead explore the different “lesbian connections.” And through our questions about the series, we should interrogate “what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in.”

Tina’s femme performance in The L Word seems like an authentic performance of traditional femininity, and her character illustrates the problems of this normative role. Tina quits her job so that she and Bette can have a baby – a more “authentic” feminine performance. We see Tina as the caregiver to Bette, her friends, and to the child that is within her while she is pregnant. She does all the traditionally feminine roles in her and Bette’s relationship – it is her job to cook, take care of the laundry, and she lets Bette make all the financial decisions, with which Tina expresses a discomfort at one of their group therapy meetings. After Tina loses the
baby, she becomes very involved and an activist in non-profit work. There are moments in the series when Tina questions her role and exerts some amount of power by not precisely conforming to the “authentic” feminine image. At one amusing point in the series, Bette asks Tina where one of her suits is, and Tina tells her it is at the dry cleaners. Of course Bette wants her to go pick up the suit to which Tina responds “I’m having a really busy week” and asks Bette to have her assistant pick up the suit (The L Word). Bette stands there aghast because she doesn’t expect Tina to step out of her traditional role. The importance here is not about the suit but rather about Bette’s response to Tina not doing exactly what she asks her to. Bette stands there with a look on her face that can be read as “What?” because Tina has stepped out of her “authentic” feminine role. As the show progresses, Tina’s character seems to get stronger as she steps farther away from her “authentic” feminine performance. And Bette is less than supportive about Tina’s new performance when she leaves her a message sarcastically saying, “I know you are busy saving the world” (The L Word). Tina takes pride in her new performance and redefines how we view a more traditional performance of femininity. Still, this volunteer work falls into the realm of conventional femininity because it is a rather traditional role for heteronormative wives. Tina becomes very involved in her volunteer work even using her previous business skills to obtain a high powered attorney for the non-profit organization.

Although Tina’s character causes us to question our notions of traditional femininity, she illustrates the problems of putting oneself in that traditional role. At the end of the series when Tina leaves Bette, I – along with many other audience members – question what she will do. Her work at the non-profit organization is volunteer work; she doesn’t have any type of income apart from Bette’s. Tina in this case shows us the dilemma of the traditional housewife role. Luckily, she has Alice who will let her stay with her while she finds a job to support herself, but not everyone may have friends who are able to offer that type of financial assistance. It is assumed that Tina will not have a problem finding a job because of her previous job experience, but her character still illustrates that being completely financially dependent on your partner can cause problems. Tina’s character shows us the problems of lesbian couples emulating heteronormativity especially because Bette treats Tina as a traditional housewife and as an object. And even though Tina’s character attempts to question and redefine her role in this heteronormative relationship, she is still left in a bad space and illustrates one of the many problems associated with normativity.
Grosz, in *Space, Time, and Perversion*, expands upon this issue that just occupying a gay or lesbian subject position doesn’t automatically assume that one lives a queer life:

and lesbians and gays can of course produce sexual relations that duplicate as closely as they can the structures, habits, and patterns of the straightest and most suburban heterosexuals (but succeed only rarely). So simply being straight or being queer, in itself, provides no guarantee of one's position as sexually radical: it depends on how one lives one's queerness, or renders one's straightness, one's heterosexuality as queer. (217)

Grosz expresses that it is not the sexuality that one occupies that makes the person queer but rather the way in which the person performs his or her relationship roles. *The L Word* demonstrates normalization of some lesbian couples via Bette and Tina’s relationship. This normativity that some gay and lesbian couples strive for is not only about the private couple but also about the normalizing discourse of some gay and lesbian politics. Michael Warner discusses this problem of making gay and lesbian politics about normalization in his *The Trouble With Normal*. “Instead of broadening its campaign against sexual stigma beyond sexual orientation, as I think it should, it has increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex. Repudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians” (25). The problems with normalization stretch far beyond the individual couple to the world of politics. Politics is a space that exists to change lives, and queer scholars strive for politics that create a “queer world” rather than normativity (Warner and Berlant 177). Tina’s character is just an individual representation of the negative effects of normalizing lesbian life. The normalizing discourse only creates the same problems and oppressions that exist in heteronormative life. The spaces of normativity on *The L Word* show us the need for a “queer world.”

The other claim to authenticity in *The L Word* is Bette’s struggle for an authentic racial performance. Bette’s search for racial and sexual authenticity questions spectators’ views of authenticity. *The L Word* does not seriously address the issues of race because the show does not portray race within the context of the Los Angeles culture in which it purports to represent but rather with authenticity. The lack of racial diversity in *The L Word*’s cast is not reflective of Los Angeles. *The L Word* also shows us how gender, sexuality, and race are all connected
without having to claim one identity above the rest. Sedgwick discusses how the show references multiplicity:

Bette, however, like Beals, is only of partly African-American descent, and the show’s early episodes begin to ramify the implications of that in her relationships with Tina, with their prospective child and the choice of a sperm donor, with her partly alienated half-sister Kit (Pam Grier), and with her inflexible father (Ossie Davis), whose approval she continues to need. It is too early to tell how revealing these issues may reach beyond Bette’s family and into her community. What is clear already, though, is the difference made by the show’s generous contextualization of its characters’ intertwined lives, where no single character, relationship, or issue need be a lesbian one. (Sedgwick, “‘The L Word’” B11)

Sedgwick points out the significance of The L Word’s grappling with race and the importance of all aspects of identity being “intertwined” rather than having to be about a singular lesbian issue. Sedgwick hopes that Bette’s private struggles with race will become public – the series’ comments on race do make it to the larger community, meaning the television community. But in the immediate television show itself, these racial struggles do remain in the private lives of the characters. Bette’s character demonstrates similar struggles between her sexuality and racial performances. Since Bette is visually coded as a femme lesbian, she is not marked as a lesbian and the show illustrates how she must “come out” as black as well.16 Brody discusses the idea of race, gender, and sexuality all being connected, “race cannot be divorced from gender/sexuality as an analytic category. In thinking the category ‘race,’ one must implicitly think ‘sexuality.’ . . . it is more important to try to write a counternarrative that emphasizes the interrelatedness of race and sexuality. . . . The problem here is that gender is always already imbricated with ‘race’ and/or culture” (94-95). Here Brody shows us that race, sexuality, and gender are all connected and it doesn’t make sense to figure them separately. Through Bette’s character, we can apply Brody’s theory and look at the “interrelatedness” of race, gender, and sexuality. Throughout the

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16 The brazen femme’s performative speech acts are what declare her queerness because dominant culture still misreads fem(me)ininity as heterosexual. Bette is visually coded as femme but acts rather butch, which I will address later in this chapter.
series, Bette struggles with an authentic racial performance. In episode eight, Bette tells Yolanda, an African-American lesbian, that she doesn’t define herself as exclusively white or black. Bette starts to struggle with her racial performance in the beginning of the series when her partner Tina seems to forget Bette is bi-racial, and Tina is conflicted about having a bi-racial child. A constant lack and sadness pervades Bette’s character, and we see her move away from Tina – her white partner – toward Candace – a woman of color. Candace offers Bette some type of authentic racial performance. Their attraction is depicted as almost carnal. Bette’s desire is a need to not only consume Candace but also her race as well, which is very problematic. Even though Candace is Latina or Chicana and Bette is part African American, Bette sees a racial link with Candace being a woman of color also. Bette even bites Candace in their sexual performance physically marking the act of consumption. The series puts forth some essentialist views of race that only other people of color would understand each other and therefore allow for racial growth and understanding.

Early in the series Bette and Tina try to have a baby, which adds to the plot of racial authenticity. Halberstam critiques this narrative when she writes, “a TV lesbian couple must be trying to have a baby”, and she seems very resistant to television focusing on lesbians having babies (Halberstam, “The I Word” 18). To an extent, I agree with Halberstam’s analysis because the narrative of lesbians having babies is very normalizing. On the other hand, in The L Word, the baby that Tina and Bette try to have is significant to the plot of racial authenticity. The beginning of the series starts out with Bette and Tina arguing about having an African-American sperm donor. Tina is resistant to the idea of having an African-American donor because she says that she doesn’t know what it means to be black, to which Bette responds, “I think I can make a contribution in that department” (The L Word). At this moment, Tina seems to forget that Bette is bi-racial, and Bette’s African-American identity is invisible. Then, the two decide to have the African-American donor (on Tina’s approval) precisely so that the baby will look like them both – another claim to authenticity. The baby functions as a connection between Bette and Tina, which maintains their interracial relationship. Bette continues to struggle with her racial identity while Tina is pregnant, and Bette thinks that she is “falling out of love” with Tina (The L Word). This “falling out of love” is connected to Tina being white, and Tina’s lack of racial

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17 This example illustrates how the series does not seriously interrogate the idea of race because it seems like all women of color are depicted as being the same.
understanding and awareness makes her an unsuitable partner. The baby must die in order for Bette to continue her search for her authentic racial performance. Bette comes in late to one of Tina’s doctor’s appointments, and the doctor must tell her that the “baby’s heart stopped beating” (The L Word). The final connection between Bette and Tina is severed through the baby’s death. And two episodes later, Bette and Candace kiss – thus we see Bette erotically move away from her relationship with Tina.

**Butch Femme Dangerous Desires: The Heteronormative Representations of Butch/Femme Desire in The L Word** –

Bette and Candace’s relationship can be viewed as Bette’s desire for a certain racial and butch/femme performance. The racial relationship between Candace and Bette is very complex because at the same time that Bette identifies with Candace she also views her as a racial other. Bell hooks in *Eating the Other* says that “Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger” (186). Part of hooks’ chapter is about white male culture consuming women of color for certain sexual performances. Although hooks refers to white culture consuming racialized “others,” her theory can be applied to Bette’s desire to consume Candace. This quote seems to reflect Bette’s desires for Candace. Looking at hooks’ theory in lesbian and different racial contexts can bring her theory new applications outside the original scope of the chapter. And Bette clearly sees sex with Candace as “more exciting, more intense, and more threatening,” which makes Candace a racial other according to hooks’ definition. This “lure” for “the combination of pleasure and danger” is a combination of a desire for a certain racial and sexual performance. The “pleasure and danger” aspect of Bette and Candace’s sexual performance is tied to Bette’s femme desire. Within the scope of the series, Bette seems to strive for an authentic lesbian performance through her femme desire for female masculinity. *The L Word* vacillates between representing butch/femme relationships as a type of authentic lesbian performance and as heteronormative. Unlike Tina, Candace is visually coded as more butch. Although Candace has long hair, she is a construction worker who carries herself in a more masculine way that demonstrates her female masculinity. The first time Bette and Candace have sex, Candace pushes Bette onto the bed and holds her arms down saying “You can’t always be in control” (The L Word). And at this moment, we can interpret that Candace has named Bette’s desire – the desire to not be in control in at least one area of her life. Up to this point,
Bette has been in control of: her career, taking care of Tina financially, and she is the one all her friends envision as the financially stable figure. This loss of control is a release that Bette needs, even if only momentarily. Candace makes love to Bette, and Bette is able for a brief moment to relinquish control. And Candace and Bette’s sexual performance as well as the other queer sex acts in the series exist as a *counterpublic* because it makes queer sex public. Bette and Candace having sex in a hotel room isn’t making queer sex public, but the fact that *The L Word* is televised does make queer sex public for mainstream audiences to see. *The L Word* makes queer sex public rather than individual sex acts that occur in the series – it is precisely this televised medium that works as a *counterpublic*.

Bette’s desire to be in control and yet controlled at certain moments takes a traumatic turn at the end of the series. At the end of the series, Tina realizes that Bette cheated on her with Candace and is in a manic state. This final scene between the two women is extremely violent with Tina starting off the violence by hitting Bette. Then, Bette seems to take back control violently and sexually through the final rape like scene between the two women. Bette pushes Tina onto the bed holding her hands down and Tina writhes away and keeps trying to push Bette’s hands away as Bette tries to penetrate her saying “No!” and screaming. Tina bites Bette. And then the scene takes a turn towards a violent seduction because it ends with Tina sitting on top of Bette as Bette penetrates her. Bette is holding Tina’s hips, and after Tina orgasms, the two hold each other. It is ambiguous if this scene is designed to be read as a rape or a violent consensual sexual encounter. In the beginning of the scene, Tina clearly was not consenting to the sexual act. The control that Bette let go of in her sexual performance with Candace, she seems to take back in a traumatic and non-consensual way with Tina. This scene is another moment where the series goes back to stereotypical notions of butch performance being linked with aggressiveness because it seems that Bette is taking on Candace’s sexual performance, but Bette’s butch performance is a misreading of Candace’s *dangerous* desire. Bette wanted Candace to be aggressive and the sexual act was consensual whereas Bette’s aggressive sexual desire was rape rather than butch femme sexual play. And Candace’s aggressive sexual performance is connected to her female masculinity in the stereotypical binary of masculinity/aggressiveness. Unlike Maney’s *Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy* or Waters’
Tipping the Velvet. The L Word relies on stereotypical butch/femme representations. And this misreading of butch/femme representation is linked to the derogatory view of butch representation that the series at times portrays – linking butch sexual performance to rape is obviously a derogatory representation of female masculinity. Bette and Candace’s characters demonstrate The L Word’s stereotypical representations of butch being linked with aggressive and femme connected with passive.

The L Word has a very complicated relationship with butch/femme performance because it seems to be represented as an authentic lesbian performance – even if butch/femme performance is termed in the series as “old school” (The L Word). At times the show offers the option of the performance but at other times butch/femme performance is viewed in a very derogatory manner. In the first episode where butch/femme performance is explored, Dana and Jenny are at a butch/femme bar in Los Angeles and comment on how it is like they are back in the 1950s. And then in the last episodes of the series, Kit (a “straight” woman) falls for Ivan (a drag king). Kit continually refers to Ivan as “he,” and Ivan doesn’t seem to mind – in fact Ivan never genders him or herself with pronouns. Ivan just wants to be whatever Kit wants Ivan to be. Bette and Kit argue about Ivan, and Kit makes reference to butch/femme role playing in a very demeaning fashion. Butch/femme performance is something Bette terms as “old school courting” although she herself possesses femme desire for female masculinity (The L Word). Even though one might say that Kit and Bette participate in types of butch/femme performances, at times they still do not rethink their heteronormative notions of butch/femme representation.

This relationship between Kit and Ivan questions gender and sexuality because: (1) Kit has to question what she thinks about her desire for only male masculinity and (2) since Ivan does not claim a sexed position in an either or context. As Kit tries to explain to Ivan that she is a straight woman and cannot offer Ivan what Ivan deserves, Ivan asks Kit if she knows what she wants. Kit at this point says no, and the audience can tell she is troubled because Ivan makes her happy. Kit is faced with the need for categorization because even Bette criticizes her for being unfair to Ivan. Ivan’s smart response to this categorization is to say “how do you know I can’t give you what you want?” (The L Word). And then in the final episode, Ivan does her or his drag king performance for Kit. The key words in the song are “If you want another kind of love, I’ll wear a mask for you” (Leonard Cohen “I’m Your Man”). Ivan demonstrates that gender performance is like a “mask” that can be changed. This analysis of gender does not take into
account Butler’s theories of gender that gender performance is not like putting on and taking off clothing, but it does introduce the concept of gender performance to a mainstream audiences/dominant culture that still might see gender as essential and tied to biological sex. So although The L Word has a long way before understanding or exploring Butler’s theories of gender performance, it does at least address the notion of gender performance to the public. Kit and Ivan’s relationship defies and questions categorization; therefore, it is a site of resistance. It is this continual resistance and desire that makes the shows messages concerning butch/femme performance very ambiguous.

The Possibilities of Queer World Making through Parody in The L Word –

Looking at The L Word as a type of “queer world making” can be informed by José Esteban Muñoz’s theories of television and counterpublicity. Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics theorizes how television can intervene in “majoritarian” “public discourses”: “I am interested here in unveiling moments in which the majoritarian public sphere’s publicity—its public discourse and reproduction of that discourse—is challenged by performances of counterpublicity that defy its discriminatory ideology. Counterpublicity is disseminated through acts that are representational and political interventions in the service of subaltern counterpublics” (Muñoz 147). Here Muñoz references the need to make queer sex acts public – queer sex in television becomes a “counterpublic.” Making queer sex acts public is “political,” and it challenges heteronormative representations of “appropriate” public sex. Muñoz’s idea of a “counterpublic” can be connected to Berlant and Warner’s idea of a “queer world” and “queer culture”: “we want to promote as the radical aspirations of queer culture building: not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (Berlant and Warner 170). Like Muñoz, Berlant and Warner want “queer culture” to create a “queer world” where heteronormativity is not the “referent” of queer life. Certain aspects of The L Word contribute to this idea of a “queer world” making and the idea of a “counterpublic” through the main focus being same sex and bisexual desire rather than heterosexual desire. The series does bring about “intelligibility” to certain queer performances from being a popular culture representation about queer women. And the series definitely makes queer sex acts public through the representations of lesbian sex on a televised medium. A significant site of “queer world making” in The L Word is the questioning
of authenticity through parody. Parody offers us a site to explore “queer world making.” Muñoz’s theory is not only resisting heteronormativity, but also the idea of white as universal: “The mode of counterpublicity I am discussing makes an intervention in public life that defies the white and heteronormativity of the majoritarian public sphere” (Muñoz 148). The L Word, although it may participate in normativity at times, does resist “heteronormativity” and the universal position of “white.” An example of Muñoz’s theory through The L Word is with the character of Bette who continually questions her racial performance as well as her performance of sexuality as previously mentioned.

Alice is a character who is very femme and parodic in her performance, which questions an authentic lesbian performance. Elizabeth Grosz questions this idea of an authentic lesbian representation with her goal to “characterize lesbian desire beyond its usual models of representation” (Grosz, “Refiguring Lesbian Desire” 68). We can use Grosz’s theory to analyze The L Word in order to move beyond “usual models of representation” through the exploration of femme representation and queer parody that troubles claims to authenticity. Specifically, Alice performs a type of brazen fem(me)ininity through her hard edge and her claiming of bisexual as queer. Alice has a tattoo around her bicep, which contributes to her hard edge appearance. Alice is the character with the witty comments about the queer community. And her humorous comments are the ones that seem the most “real” yet also are the most parodic: the chart, the comment that “friendship is another word for foreplay for lesbians,” and her avid claims to her bisexuality (The L Word). Being sexual is a key part to Alice’s character – she enjoys sex with men and women. Although her acceptance of all genders is questioned when Alice has problems with dating Lisa, a male identified lesbian, Alice comments that she wants to either be with a lesbian who is a woman or have uncomplicated boy girl sex. For Alice, it seems like being with men is just about the sex whereas being with women is about sex and relationships. All we hear Alice say about being with men is the desire to have uncomplicated sex where there are no worries about giving equal time. But when Alice wants to be in a relationship, we see in the final episode her go to Dana. This scene is amusing and a parody since we are reminded of Alice’s previous comment that “friendship is another word for foreplay for lesbians.” When Dana’s cat dies, Alice is the one who comes running and makes the arrangements for Dana’s cat’s funeral – another moment of parody. At this point in time, Dana is involved with another woman, but the season ends with Alice arriving on Dana’s doorstep.
telling her she can’t marry this other woman and kissing her. Dana returns the kiss passionately, and for the first time Dana does not look awkward being sexual with another woman.

An authentic lesbian performance is questioned and reified throughout The L Word. Throughout the series this authentic lesbian representation or performance is resisted through parody. In the second episode of the series, the group of friends sets out to find out if Dana’s new romantic interest, Laura, is in fact a lesbian. Their spy mission is a re-visioning of a queer Charlie’s Angels with the music even matching the recent movie replications. Laura obtains points in the straight and lesbian columns for the way she walks, the shoes she wears, how she responds when she sees Bette and Tina kissing, etc. The parody here comes from how we read cultural codes as signs that mark lesbianism even though we know that not all lesbians perform in the same way. The women communicate with each other back and forth via their cell phones and even say “abort the mission” at one point (The L Word). It is humorous that Laura loses lesbian points for being so “femmie” when most of the women in the group are very “femmie” themselves. The only two who are said to “scream” “dyke” are Shane the “baby butch” of the group and Dana the pro tennis player.¹⁹ These comments and the rating of Laura seem to suggest there is an authentic lesbian performance of sorts, but the parody of Charlie’s Angels points out the questioning of authenticity. The spy mission is parodied further when they conclude that Laura isn’t a lesbian and then later Laura kisses Dana in the locker room and says now Dana won’t have to have her friends try to determine if she is a lesbian.

Although The L Word has its moments of normativity, the series also has its moments that resist normativity. At the same time that there is a desire for an authentic lesbian performance, authenticity and normativity are questioned through the parodic aspects of the show. The cat funeral mentioned above is supposed to make fun of the stereotype of lesbians and their cats. Alice’s chart that connects most of the lesbians in Los Angeles because of who everyone has had sex with, the idea that “friendship is another word for foreplay for lesbians,” and Dana and her girlfriend moving in together after having sex once – these parodic exaggerations are not designed to codify a “real” but rather make us question authenticity. Not every lesbian has a cat, has sex with her friends, or is connected to all the lesbians in her queer community based on sexual experiences. The L Word points out that there is no “authentic”

¹⁹ Late in the season we have seen more androgynous and butch representations, but these characters are not main characters yet still contribute to diversity of lesbian performances.
lesbian representation or performance. Also, the example of Dana getting engaged to her girlfriend after what seems to have been only a few days is meant to be comic as well. It parodies the joke that lesbians bring a U-haul on the second date, which is specifically mentioned early on in the series. Through laughter, these parodies cause us to question stereotypes of lesbian culture and even assumptions about authenticity. Muñoz points out the possibilities of television, “Here is where I see the televisual spectacle leading to the possibility of new counterpublics, new spheres of possibility, and the potential for the reinvention of the world from A to Z” (160). The L Word is a type of “counterpublic,” and hopefully in the future its “possibilities” and “potential” for “reinvention” will be explored further with the seasons to come and new possibilities of “queer world making.”

And as The L Word comes to a close, the last image we are left with is not a romantic couple but rather friendship. Friendship is the bond that outlasts most romantic partnerships. We are left with Alice holding Tina as she cries, desperately engulfed by despair, and we know that there are times in all of our lives when we need a friend to hold us up and hold onto us. It not only illustrates the importance of romantic bonds but also of the ties of friendship as well. How is The L Word different than other normative television shows? As Angela Watrous notes in her “confessions of an l word fence-sitter”, “Because while The L Word frequently seems like a show for straight people who are curious about lesbians, I still find it thrilling to watch a show about lesbians. For once, I don’t have to unconsciously change the pronouns every week in order to relate. And if it weren’t for The L Word, I might not have realized how very much I needed that” (11). So despite all the series’ problems, it does fulfill a need for some people and that cannot be underestimated. Unlike Halberstam’s view that “lesbians on TV now are no better off than in the 1970s”, people like Sedgwick, Watrous, and I see the show for its possibilities as well as its flaws (18). But now after the season has ended and plots have become more complex, maybe even Halberstam has a different perspective on The L Word. Halberstam’s concerns about butch representation in The L Word are very important because the series at times is very derogatory with regards to representations of female masculinity. For example, there is one episode where butch lesbians are referred to as “hundred footers” because they can be spotted as lesbians “from a hundred feet away” (The L Word). Shane, who is the butch of the group, is the only one who is really punished for her mistakes. Sherri’s – Shane’s love interest – husband threatens to kill Shane. No other character in the series thus far has been punished to the extent
of death threats besides Shane. This desire for The L Word and what the series could represent does not have to be either or, it can be both and. We can look at the sites of resistance and the sites of conformity to try to negotiate what the series teaches us about queer American culture of 2004.

The L Word reflects the show’s desires for and resistance of authenticity as well as about our own. An interesting phenomenon that the show has caused is this discussion about “real” representations. This desire for the “real” is also a desire for an “authentic.” The conversations about diversity of representations have caused us to really think about diversity and the lack thereof. But when this desire relies on an argument about what is “real,” I tend to think that there is no “real” or “authentic” performance or representation. And through the attempt to emulate “reality,” we just create another version of inauthenticity. There will always be a lack in representation, and representing the “real” is impossible. My fears of trying to represent the “real” aspects of queer lives are that (1) there are no universal “real(s)” for everyone and (2) that queer will become normalized. Discussions about diversity are productive, and I do hope that someday we see more diversity in popular culture but not to create some “real” portrait of life. One of the lessons queer theory offers us is to question notions of authenticity. Maybe we should instead investigate how we can begin to (re)define the medium of popular culture in order to create diversity that does not rely on authenticity.
Conclusion

One of the significant goals of femme theory is to see alternative fem(me)inities as queer. A reason for this project was to bring cultural intelligibility to queer fem(me)ininity. Dominant culture’s constant misreading of my fem(me)ininity was part of my desire behind this project. Because of my fem(me)inine appearance, I am constantly read as heterosexual – the pain of not being read as queer is where my desire to queer femininity came from. I hope that after the study of the performance of fem(me)inity is further explored, and dominant culture understands that fem(me)inity too can be queer on female or male bodies, that dominant and queer culture will not read fem(me)inity on female bodies as a determinate sign of heterosexuality.

Throughout this project, I have learned that the problem is not with femme invisibility but rather with dominant culture’s misreading of the femme. When I first came to this project two years ago in the beginning of my Master’s work, my scholarship started with femme invisibility. My thesis has taught me that the femme is very visible – we just need to make her fem(me)inity culturally intelligible as queer. My thesis was designed to be an exploration of how femmes remake femininity by means of disidentification and parody and in turn trouble our notions of authenticity. This study of alternative femininities shows that there is no authentic performance of gender or sexuality and in turn helps to make alternative gender and sexuality performances culturally intelligible.

It is most critical that we read the texts Stone Butch Blues, Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, Tipping the Velvet, and The L Word through the study of femme performance to interrogate the performance of fem(me)inity as well as the connection of fem(me)inity on only female bodies. Fem(me)inity is a performative queering of gender and sexuality through the use of disidentification and parody. The figure of the brazen femme troubles our notions of authenticity by illustrating the alternative performances of femininity. Also, fem(me)inity demonstrates that there is no one “authentic” performance of femininity. Explorations of minority fem(me)ininities can further theories about gender, sexuality, and authenticity.

Theories of femme fem(me)ininities are crucial because they open up an analysis of femininity as a whole. I hope many discussions will follow about the study of minority fem(me)ininities, and these discussions will contribute to a re-signification and re-valuation of femininity. Definitions of traditional femininity need to be opened up so that dominant notions
of femininity are not constraining or undervalued. Theories of alternative fem(me)inities show
the constructedness of gender and how power is mobile and can be picked up and wielded in
order to perform gender citations with a difference. These citations of femininity with difference
challenge binary notions of gender. Also, studies of queer fem(me)inity demonstrate the
connection between gender and sexuality and how dominant culture can read gender markers as
a sign of sexuality.

In a thesis about fem(me)inity, it is only fitting to conclude with fashion, and Robyn
Wiegman in “Introduction: Mapping the Lesbian Postmodern” gives insights into thinking about
how “the lesbian is fashioned”: “But where and whether the lesbian is fashioned by ‘us’ or for
‘us’ or even in high disregard of ‘us,’ her fashioning is complicated, indeed contradicted, by the
context of commodification in which ‘she’ and ‘we’ are embedded—a context so thick that
politically we can no longer afford to be naïve about it” (4). It is important to think about how
“the lesbian is fashioned” and how femininity is “fashioned”:

Perhaps she is off to the side, assessing (and despairing over) her
hardly optional options: a lifestyle, an orientation, some sexless
difference that busts up the trinity without varying its routine. If
she appears outright, wearing boots and flashing her whips and
nipple clips, she is debated according to contemporary sex-correct
definitions. If she shows up in her party dress, she risks being
dismissed as too overtly unqueer. So much is at stake, it seems, in
her practice and practical definitions, so much rests on categorical
fashion. (15-16)

Wiegman’s words are reminiscent of the bind of fem(me)inity that this thesis has explored.
She tells us that the significance of how “the lesbian is fashioned” is precisely important because
fem(me)inity is either criticized for being too sexual by “contemporary sex-correct definitions”
– the brazen femme – or as “too overtly unqueer” because of her readable fem(me)inine markers
– the femme. How “the lesbian is fashioned” needs to be opened up so that fem(me)inity is not
read as “too overtly unqueer.”

Fashion and fem(me)inine accessories are integral to the performance of queer
fem(me)inity. And as Halberstam says, “Perhaps femininity and its accessories should be
chosen later on, like a sex toy or a hairstyle” (269). At this point in Female Masculinity,
Halberstam discusses how female children should not be forced into femininity. Rather than having femininity being a determinant performance based on one’s female body, it should be a performance that one – either male or female – chooses to perform. High heels, lipstick, and sex toys can be chosen to fashion one’s queer performance of fem(me)inity.

To go back to Ani DiFranco’s song “Little Plastic Castles,” from which this thesis started, the study of queer fem(me)inity offers the performance of fem(me)inity not tied with the anxieties that:

> People talk
> about my image
> like I come in two dimensions
> like lipstick is a sign of my declining mind
> like what I happen to be wearing
> the day someone takes a picture
> is my new statement for all of womankind  

(26-32)

Stone Butch Blues, Kiss the Girls and Make Them Spy, Tipping the Velvet and The L Word demonstrate that readable fem(me)inine markers are not a sign of “declining mind[s]” nor are queer fem(me)ininities a “statement for all of womankind.” My theory of femme fem(me)ininities helps to ease the pain and anxiety that Ani DiFranco’s lyrics express. No longer are high heels, lipstick, and short skirts seen as merely tools of patriarchal oppression but rather as tools that can be wielded in fem(me)inine performances to challenge dominant conceptions of femininity. Fem(me)inity that is chosen can be re-signified and re-shaped into a performance that people could want to perform rather than being forced to perform. Fem(me)inity as a performance people desire to perform – let me gloss my lips, slide on my black silk nylons with my black mini skirt, and grab my copy of Brazen Femme Queering Femininity – it is time to perform.
Works Cited:


