

# Femme Theory: Refocusing the Intersectional Lens

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to develop a theory of subversive femininities or femme theory. It argues for the inclusion of femmephobia in intersectional analyses and provides the theoretical groundwork necessary for feminist theorists and researchers to incorporate an analysis of femmephobia into their studies of oppression.  
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## **Résumé**

Cet article cherche à élaborer une théorie des féminités subversives ou « femme theory ». Il plaide en faveur de l'inclusion de la phobie « femme » dans les analyses intersectionnelles et fournit les bases théoriques nécessaires pour que les théoriciennes et les chercheuses féministes incorporent une analyse de la phobie « femme » dans leurs études de l'oppression.

Despite the advancements of mainstream feminist politics, the feminized remains subordinated. While traditional sexism is largely met with social disapproval, the devaluation of femininity receives social approval or remains undetected. Little academic attention has been paid to the “naturalized” subordination of femininity, which contributes to a striking pervasiveness of feminine devaluation or femmephobia. Due to its ability to masquerade as other forms of oppression, and the cultural tendency toward its naturalization, feminine devaluation remains obscure. This elusiveness has allowed femmephobia to evade being labelled a form of oppression within dominant feminist theories, including intersectionality.

Intersectionality is argued to be one of the most “important theoretical contribution(s)” made by women's studies and related fields (McCall 2005, 1771). Born out of Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectional analysis is a methodology employed to demonstrate how discourses of resistance can themselves function as “sites that produce and legitimize marginalization” (Carbado et al. 2013, 303-304). The term “intersectionality” was introduced to critique “single-axis frameworks,” the argument being that women's social movement and advocacy elided the vulnerabilities of women of colour. The concept has since expanded from its nascent “two-pronged” analysis to a more multifaceted analytical approach (Hoskin et al. 2017). Consequently, intersectionality continuously brings researchers to unexplored places, reframing social issues in a way that makes “new solutions imaginable” (Carbado et al. 2013, 306). The goal of intersectional analysis is to go beyond the mere comprehension of social relations of power to “bring the often hidden dynamics forward in order to transform them” (312). Following intersectionality's trajectory, the introduction of femmephobia within intersectional analysis brings forward new ways to conceptualize social phenomena as well as new solutions.

## Femininity in Feminism

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir declared, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1989, 267). Beauvoir marked a fracture between sex/gender and, more specifically, the distinction between “female” and femininity. These fractures set in motion the grounds for Western feminist critiques of biological determinism and essentialism. In drawing this distinction and uncoupling “womanhood” from femininity, feminism began to distance itself from femininity, which they had come to understand as the oppressor. Femininity became synonymous with female subordination, with male right of access, and with disciplinary practices enforced under patriarchal rule. In other words, femininity became the scapegoat of patriarchal oppression (Serano 2007). Germaine Greer (1970) described feminine people as “feminine parasites,” as subhuman and incomplete (22; Stern 1997, 189). Kate Millet (1977) theorized femininity as a form of “interior colonization” and to be lacking both dignity and self-respect (25). The feminist history of anti-feminine rhetoric can still be evidenced in current Western feminist theories and pedagogies (Hoskin 2017b).

While there has been a great deal of focus on the deconstruction of femininity, there has yet to be a significant scholarly analysis of how the devaluation of femininity intersects with interlocking systems of oppression or the theoretical potentialities of fem(me)inine intersections. Yet, the number of individuals who have commented on feminine devaluation, femme, and queer femininities through non-academic media speaks to the significance of these issues (e.g., <http://bffemme.tumblr.com>; <http://fuckyeahqueerfemme.tumblr.com/about>; <http://tangledupinlace.tumblr.com>). Further, although feminist scholarship has distinguished sex from gender, there is a failure to address the intersection of gender (masculinity and femininity) as unique from intersections of sex. While French theorists, like Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, laid the foundations for such an inquiry, most intersectional interrogations of “gender” are conflation of sex categories and overlook the intricacies of how femininity and masculinity interact within systems of domination.

The homogenization of feminine intersections or multiplicities gives “power to one of the most fundamental mechanisms of sexism” (Mishali 2014, 58). Arguably, the monolithic understanding of feminin-

ity has also contributed to the current environments in which femininity is a) devalued and policed and b) remains undetected as an intersecting source of oppression. This article first examines the psychosocial and feminist literature overlooking feminine devaluation and demonstrates the undercurrent of feminine intersections connecting these experiences. Then, by conceptualizing femme and patriarchal femininity, the necessary groundwork is laid to understand the pervasiveness of feminine devaluation and the application of femmephobia within intersectional analyses. Until a multifocal understanding of femininity and femme is developed, researchers cannot understand how deviations from hegemonic norms of femininity function as a source of oppression. As will be explored, the homogenization of femininity, and the subsequent erasure of femme, contributes to the failed recognition of femmephobia as an oppressor. By using a scholarly lens to interrogate feminine devaluation, this paper argues for the inclusion of femmephobia in intersectional analyses and provides the theoretical groundwork necessary for feminist theorists and researchers to incorporate an analysis of femmephobia into their studies of oppression.

## Literature Review: The Elephant in the Room

For over three decades, psychosocial and feminist research has overlooked the thematic undertones of feminine devaluation and femmephobia. Take, for instance, the different consequences of gender deviance for those designated or coercively assigned male at birth (DMAB/CAMAB/AMAB) compared to those designated or coercively assigned female at birth (DFAB/CAFAM/AFAB). Developmental psychology has concluded that boys face more repercussions than girls for gender role violations (Kilianski 2003, 38). As children, feminine boys are at a greater risk than masculine girls for being “ridiculed or bullied” and experiencing peer rejection from group activities (Taywaditep 2001, 6). Boys are more likely to experience isolation and they receive fewer positive reactions and significantly more criticism from peers and teachers for expressing femininely compared to girls who express masculinely (Fagot 1977, 902; Harry 1983, 352). In Beverly J. Fagot’s (1977) study, girls did not receive negative feedback by from their peers for gender transgressions and were less alienated as a result of their gender expressions (Harry

1983, 355). Fathers were found to place more importance on their boys acting “like boys” than their girls acting “like girls” (351), which may explain why feminine boys are also at a greater risk for having a distant relationship with their father, suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety (Taywaditep 2001).

Trans youth on the feminine spectrum face cissexism at an earlier age and report more instances of being physically victimized than those on the masculine spectrum (Grossman et al. 2006). Similarly, trans women are at a higher risk for “verbal, physical and sexual harassment” (Jauk 2013, 808). As a result, childhood gender non-conformity among people DMAB has a greater association with later suicidality than for those DFAB (Harry 1983, 350). Moreover, parents of trans feminine youth were more likely to think that their child needed counselling (Grossman et al. 2006).

The experiences of feminine devaluation and policing are not limited to those DMAB, but extend across sexual and gender identities. Sociological theories and empirical studies have noted a privileging of masculinity in both gay male and lesbian communities (Serano 2013; Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; Taywaditep 2001). A broad cultural example is the privileging of tomboys and the subjugation of “sissy-boys” (Taywaditep 2001). This broader cultural phenomenon of masculine privileging exists in lesbian communities as well. For example, in a study on sexual and romantic attraction, both gay men and lesbians considered masculinity to be the most valued and attractive: gay men tended to value gender conformity or “masculinity” and lesbians tended to value gender nonconformity or masculinity (Taywaditep 2001; Miller 2015). Further exemplifying the privileging of masculinity within LGB communities, Rhea Ashley Hoskin and Karen L. Blair (2016) found that gay men were willing to date trans men, but not trans women, and lesbian women were also willing to date trans men, but not trans women. In other words, while participants demonstrated sexual fluidity between their stated sexual identity category and their stated objects of desire, this fluidity rarely included trans women.

Femme theorists have written extensively on masculine privileging within lesbian communities, which led many femme individuals to feel “inauthentic” as lesbians or feminists (Mishali 2014; Hoskin

2013, 2017a; Blair and Hoskin 2015, 2016; Levitt, Gerish, and Hiestand 2003; VanNewkirk 2006). Karen L. Blair and Rhea Ashley Hoskin (2015, 2016) discuss femme-identified individuals’ experiences of exclusion and discrimination within the LGBTQ community as a result of their feminine expression. Participants described a unique processes of identity development in which they felt their femininity to be unaccepted by their community. As a result, many participants described feeling this aspect of their identity to be “closeted” at one point in their identity development. These experiences contribute to feelings of isolation, subsequently impacting the mental well-being of femme-identified people (Mishali 2014, 61). Furthermore, there is a growing body of research that demonstrates how feminine gender presentation in terms of appearance “may be related to risk of adult sexual assault” while those who present more androgynously or masculinely report fewer cases of sexual victimization (Lehavot, Molina, and Simoni 2012, 278).

Several empirical studies have demonstrated a prejudice within gay male culture against those who are perceived as feminine. Sociological studies have shown the undesirability of, hostility toward, or even contempt of femininity among gay men (Fields et al. 2012; Sanchez and Vilain 2012; Taywaditep 2001; Miller 2015; Fagot 1977) as well as greater fear, hostility, and discomfort toward feminine gay men in society more broadly (Glick et al. 2007; Jewell and Morrison 2012). Research on the underground community in 1910s and 1920s New York found that middle-class gay men were “dissatisfied with the woman-like gender status” of gay men and adopted the label “queer” as a means of distinguishing themselves from feminine gay men (Taywaditep 2001, 7). This group of queer men further distanced themselves from feminine gay men by reserving derogatory terms, such as “fairies, faggots, and Queens,” for effeminate men “whom they despised” (7).

Not only are feminine gay men at a greater risk of in-group discrimination, such as romantic rejection from their community (Taywaditep 2001, 11), they are also at greater risk of being subject to anti-gay attitudes in society at large than are masculine gay men (Glick et al. 2007, 55). Feminine gay men suffer from lower psychological well-being, higher anxiety, lower self-esteem, and have a higher risk of clinical depres-

sion when compared to masculine gay men (Taywaditep 2001; Weinrich et al. 1995). In a revealing study, Sanjay Aggarwal and Rene Gerrets (2014) explored gay men's elevated psychological distress. Despite high levels of LGBTQ equality, gay men in this study were three times more likely to report a mood or anxiety disorder and ten times more likely to report suicidal ideation. In part, this study attributes the psychological health discrepancies between same-sex and mixed-sex oriented men to the privileging of masculinity, evidenced in both LGBTQ communities and dominant culture. While the results of this study exemplify femmephobia, it remains unnamed as a point of theoretical intersection within the work. By employing femme theory, researchers can begin to better understand the origins of health discrepancies, such as those cited above, and to better understand dominant cultural responses to male femininity.

Lisa Jewell and Melanie Morrison's (2012) article "Making Sense of Homonegativity" showcases the dominant cultural responses to male femininity. The results from their analysis indicate that participants' homonegativity was "characterized by feelings of discomfort when confronted with homosexuality and perceptions that gay men are effeminate" (351). Both male and female participants described a gay relationship as consisting of a "masculine" and a "feminine" partner and said that they were "particularly bothered by the partner who acts feminine" (359). As with much of the current research looking at homonegativity, Jewell and Morrison did not examine the cultural devaluation of femininity as a fundamental component underlying homonegative responses.

Jewell and Morrison's (2012) findings can be analysed in terms of Julia Serano's (2007) "effemania," a term she uses to describe the stigmatization of "male" expressions of femininity or men's entrances into the "feminine realm." Serano explains this phenomenon as the result of the hegemonic hierarchical positioning of masculinity above femininity, whereby the policing of femininity becomes permissible. Serano (2013) also discusses the concept of trans-misogyny (50) illuminates prejudices specifically targeting trans women—a concept which brings insight into the work of Viviane Namaste.

Namaste (2005) has written about the prominence of trans sex workers among those accounted

for by the Transgender Day of Remembrance, adding that, of the total murders, nearly 100 percent were male-to-female. Although the site frames the murders as "anti transgender hatred and prejudice," Namaste understands these crimes as compounded by a form of "gendered" violence, a crucial aspect that is erased when framed exclusively as targeting trans people (92-93). In a profound way, Namaste's work illustrates the intersections of femininity and Serano's (2013) theory of trans-misogyny. However, the underlying theme of feminine devaluation as it applies across genders and sexualities remains absent. Arguably, the violence Namaste speaks to could be understood as a form of policing bodies that deviate from patriarchal models of femininity (Hoskin 2013).

An overview of the literature finds a variety of critical terms developed to describe the subordination and policing of femininity including anti-femininity (Kilianski 2003; Eguchi 2011; Miller 2015); trans-misogyny (Serano 2007, 2013); effemimania (Serano 2007); homonegativity (Jewell and Morrison 2012); femi-negativity (Bishop et al. 2014); sissyphobia (Eguchi 2011); anti-effeminacy (Sanchez and Vilain 2012); femiphobia (Bailey 1996); slut-shaming/bashing (Tanenbaum 2015), misogynoir (Bailey 2014), and so on. To date, empirical work has demonstrated the links between antifemininity, homophobia, and misogyny (Taywaditep 2001; Kilianski 2003). These co-occurrences suggest an underlying causal mechanism such as a general aversion to femininity (Kilianski 2003). Yet, while such issues surfaced within academia over 30 years ago, there remains a gap in psychosocial and feminist literature as this underlying causal mechanism of feminine devaluation continues to inform social oppression but has remained unidentified. As evidenced above, there are multiple sources of oppression rooted in the devaluation and policing of femininity, each targeting a different social group. Each is rooted in the negative associations with femininity, but there has yet to be feminist or psychosocial research examining the overarching connections among these oppressors.

### **(Re)Conceptualizing Femme**

In order to understand femmephobia as a mode or vector of oppression, one must also establish the norms against which those who deviate are policed. To do this, I will operationalize the femme subject by using

the femme lesbian as a theoretical point of departure from which to expand and explore deviations from patriarchal models of femininity.

Patriarchal femininity is the hegemonic femininity, propped up by essentialism (or essentialized femininity) and typically forced onto those DFAB. It is the subject of much feminist literature, which deconstructs or critiques femininity. Patriarchal femininity necessitates the alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality and the adherence to racial and able-bodied norms. Not only is it imperative that these “female” bodies be thin and able-bodied, to be “truly feminine,” they must also be “white” (Deliovsky 2008, 56). This construction of femininity must also be offered up to a heterosexual male gaze and be obedient to hegemonic heteropatriarchy (Mishali 2014, 59). Under patriarchal rule, femininity is only “acceptable” (not to be confused with valued) in one mode: white, heterosexually available, DFAB, able-bodied, passive, self-sacrificing, thin, young, lacking self-actualization, and simultaneously negotiating Madonna/Whore constructs. In this model, femininity is reserved exclusively for those designated female at birth.

Traditionally, femme has been understood as a feminine cisgender lesbian who is attracted to a masculine or “butch” lesbian (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Levitt, Gerrish, and Hiestand 2003; Nestle 1987; Munt 1997). In their fight for agency, by living, building, fighting, fucking, and loving within a queer community and context, femme lesbians were able to carve out space for feminine identity expressions that veer from patriarchal norms. Femme lesbians were the sexual deviants sexologists could not explain away (Hirschmann 2013, 144), who built queer gender communities with their butches while fighting for feminine valuation within those spaces. Their fights provided the crucial groundwork for theorizing feminine intersections and devaluation.

In contrast to patriarchal models of femininity, the femme lesbian “fails” to maintain the sanctity of patriarchal femininity in her self-actualized expression of femininity, the object(s) of her sexual desires, and her resistance to male right of access to the feminine. However, femme has become a term that covers many identities. Research conducted by Blair and Hoskin (2015) demonstrates that this understanding is an inaccurate depiction of the lived experiences of femmes. Ac-

ording to their study, femme self-identification spans across sexual and gender identities and demonstrates the many intersections of femininity. Similarly, many femme theorists have articulated femme identities beyond cisgender lesbians (Dahl 2011; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002; Volcano and Dahl 2008; Coyote and Sharman 2011; Harris and Crocker 1997). What, then, does it mean to be femme? How do the multiple invocations of being femme connect to one another?

Femme is a form of divergent femininity that strays from the monolithic and patriarchally sanctioned femininity. Femme follows the same logic and application as queer in that both queer and femme are deviations from the celebrated norm. Consequently, both queer and femme provide critiques of normalcy and compulsory identities. Neither queer nor femme is reducible to singular applications: both can be used as nouns, adjectives, identities, embodiments, expressions, political invocations, or as a theoretical framework. Using a ‘failed’ model of patriarchal femininity, such ideals are carried down the line of normative feminine standards. There are many ways the invocation of femme identity may veer from the feminine cisgender lesbian model: sassy queer men; unapologetically sexual straight women; trans women; crip bodied femmes who refuse to be desexualized or degendered; and femmes of colour who refuse to approximate white beauty norms, to name a few. Each of these modes of intersecting feminine embodiment challenge one or more of the architecture of patriarchal femininity and can therefore be understood as femme.

Ergo, femme identity (and femmephobia) is applicable to diversely positioned bodies and describes a range of experiences across various intersections of difference. To this end, femme is femininity dislocated from—and not necessitated by—a female body or a female identity. Femme challenges the “normative correlations between gender [sex] and sexuality” by “remapping and renegotiating the terms in which femininity is articulated” (Mishali 2014, 66). Femmephobia, on the other hand, operates to dichotomize and normatively police bodies whose use of femininity blurs boundaries of sex, gender, and sexuality and to shame bodies that make use of feminine signifiers. Femme is femininity reworked, (re)claimed as one’s own and made in one’s own image (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002; Serano 2013)—a type of “disruptive” (Erickson 2007, 44),

rogue femininity (Coyote and Sharman 2011, 205). By rejecting the masculine right of access to femininity, the femme subject collapses systems of meaning and signifiers of heterosexual hegemony. In this way, femmes give “feminine signifiers new meaning” (Levitt, Gerish, and Hiestand 2003, 99). Femme is the abnormal occupation of feminine normality (Erickson 2007, 44), meaning femininity embodied by those to whom recognition as feminine is culturally denied or who do not comply with norms of “proper womanhood.” In other words, femmes are those whose feminine expressions are culturally “unauthorized,” and who refuse to and/or do not approximate the ideal norm of what patriarchal femininity constitutes.

While many articulations of femme identity exist, what they share is a commitment to “reclaiming” and exposing the intricate intersections of femininity (Serano 2013, 48). Consequently, femme enactments are in constant dialogue with the negative assumptions projected onto femininity, challenging and disentangling the naturalized associations of patriarchal femininity. When femmes reclaim agency through the deliberate choice to present femininely, they are denied the cultural ideal of womanhood as one who forgoes agency and relinquishes the power of self-determination. Patriarchal femininity is understood as an “obstacle to subjecthood” (Dahl 2014, 607) and an expression of femininity done for another. Agential embodiment and self-actualized expressions of femininity represent a direct affront to patriarchal femininity, which necessitates selflessness and a denial of self-expression. One of the ways in which femme differs from patriarchal femininity (also known as hegemonic or essentialized femininity) is on “the ground of context and subjectivity” (Mishali 2014, 59). While patriarchal femininity promotes the pacification of the feminine subject, femme intersections necessitate an active subjectivity: femininity becomes a source of power and strength, rather than subordination (Nnawulezi, Robin, and Sewell 2015; Levitt, Gerish, and Hiestand 2003). In other words, patriarchal femininity and femmephobia operate by attempting to turn an active (femme) subject into a passive object.

One foundational aspect of patriarchal femininity is essentialized femininity: the idea that femininity is the result of one’s sex as assigned at birth and determined by one’s anatomy alone. In other words, patriarchal femininity is supported by a biological de-

terminist view of gender. This essentialist notion is one of the footholds of patriarchal femininity. However, for femme theorists, femininity is deliberate (Mishali 2014; Nnawulezi, Robin, and Sewell 2015), chosen, and *not* born out of a culturally imposed assignment of sex/gender binaries such as essentialist femininity. Femininely expressing folks who refuse to be shamed for their bodies, their minds, and their hearts exemplify femme. Femme is a “failed femininity”: namely the failure or refusal to approximate the patriarchal feminine norm of white, cisgender, able-bodied virtuosity.

### **Femmephobia and Femme-Negativity**

Femmephobia (also known as femme-negativity) differs from misogyny or sexism in its focus on gender and femininity as opposed to the latter’s focus on sex and femaleness. Feminist theory has distinguished sex from gender, but there has yet to be a comparable distinction of sexism/misogyny from the manifestations of feminine devaluation as an intersection of oppression within systems of domination. Femmephobia, or femininity as an axis within the interlocking systems of oppression, has largely been overlooked within the literature and unidentified within empirical research, despite findings that support its presence. Arguably, “misogynist conceptualizations of the female body have created insidious cultural norms wherein associations with traits deemed feminine come to be seen in a derogatory light” (Stafford 2010, 81). Indeed, a historicization of femmephobia will trace its foothold to the legacy of misogyny and sexism. However, sources of oppression are social viruses, which continue to shift and mutate. Through the incorporation of an increasingly fine-tuned intersectional lens, we can begin to tease apart the many layers of social oppression and develop a nuanced understanding of feminine intersections. Intersectionality is not a finite goal; it is an ever-shifting project—a theoretical framework necessary to tackle the viral nature of social oppressors.

### **Theorizing Femmephobia**

Femmephobia is typically understood as prejudice(s) toward femme-identified persons. In alignment with the conceptualization of femme, the concept of femmephobia must be broadened to reflect the multitudes of different forms of femmeness. In other words, femmephobia and femme as a critical intervention or

theoretical framework should be accountable to the various femmes and femme enactments, irrespective of whether an individual identifies femininely, androgynously, gender variantly, or rejects gender identification altogether. Therefore, I argue that femmephobia is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone who is *perceived* to identify, embody, or express femininely and toward people and objects gendered femininely. More specifically, the individual is targeted for their perceived deviation from patriarchal femininity. By arguing femmephobia as a phenomenon found across a range of intersectional identities, I do not aim to homogenize and unify experiences, but rather to demonstrate the reach of femmephobic oppression and move toward its inclusion within intersectional analyses.

There are, for instance, countless victims reported in the news as having been targets of homophobia. But homophobia alone does not explain the specific targeting at stake. These experiences are underscored by (“failed”) femininity and require an analysis of femmephobia. Take, for example, the Florida man, Ronnie Paris Jr., who killed his three-year-old son for being too “soft” (Rondeaux 2005, n.p.). Similarly, 15-year-old Raymond Buys was tortured and murdered by members of the “Echo Wild Game Training Camp” who promised to turn “effeminate boys into manly men” (Davis 2013, n.p.). More recently, a sixteen-year-old high school student in Oakland set fire to eighteen-year-old Luke Fleichman’s skirt while they were riding the AC transit bus (Bender, Harris, and Debolt 2013). Like the others, Fleichman became a target due to their perceived femininity. This violent targeting of femininity in those who do not uphold patriarchal sanctions stands in stark contrast to the more flexible range of culturally sanctioned masculine expressions of female identified persons.

Crimes such as these, which operate on the basis of (perceived) gender expression, may be rooted in femmephobia. Operating within an androcentric patriarchy, those maintaining signifiers of the subordinate gender of femininity, become targets. Moreover, expressions, signifiers, or embodiments of femininity are culturally understood as a justification for degradation. I argue that, when culturally unsanctioned bodies are read through this lens, femmephobia complicates and compounds the effects of various intersections of identity and multiple oppressors. Femmephobia is a cultural

phenomenon that devalues and polices femininity, as well as perceived expressions of femininity, across intersections of difference.

These acts of violence can be understood, in part, as a revolt against unsanctioned forms of femininity—femininity on and by bodies that do not uphold a patriarchal model of womanhood. Within hegemonic gender systems, there exists a rigid distinction between femininity and masculinity. Failed masculinity descends into femininity, as evidenced by the words effeminate and emasculate. The notion of “failed masculinity,” for which there is no equivalent feminine concept, can be historically linked to female bodies being constructed as inadequate versions of male bodies (Stafford 2010). “Manhood” or “masculinity” is itself defined through the repudiation of femininity and the ability to distance itself from feminine traits (Norton 1997; Kilianski 2003). Masculinity risks “slippage” into the feminine whereas femininity itself “denotes slippage” (Stern 1997, 193). In other words, masculinity is elevated above femininity within the gender hierarchy and femininity is inherently “failed.” In this way, the maintenance of masculinity cannot be addressed without the incorporation of femmephobia.

Femmephobia functions to (re)claim “misused” femininity, as expressed by those who veer from culturally authorized versions of patriarchal femininity, with the outcome of maintaining the sanctity of a white ideal womanhood (with femininity as its signifier). Femmephobia uses forms of policing to retract femininity for the purpose of retaining cultural signifiers of white female-bodied submission and heterosexual availability. By defining particular expressions or intersections of femininity as unsanctioned, femmephobia limits gender expression to that which is authorized. As a result, femmephobia homogenizes femininities and maintains the ideology of a monolithic femininity.

### Typology of Femmephobia

Like any source of oppression, femmephobia has come to take on various forms. There are four primary ways femmephobia manifests: ascribed femmephobia; perceived femmephobia; femme-mystification; and pious femmephobia. Internalized femmephobia can manifest in any category and can result in self-imposed limits on what is expected of oneself, how one expects to be treated by others, and the resultant acceptance of

mistreatment on the basis of feminine devaluation. The internalization of femmephobia results from the deliberate conditioning and erosion of the individual by the surrounding femmephobic society until one has adopted and naturalized feminine devaluation.

### ***Ascribed Femmephobia***

Ascribed femmephobia manifests structurally and ideologically, drawing on the cultural associations of feminine subordination as a tool to “demote” the target. These associations are informed by the historical legacy of misogynist conceptions of female bodies as inadequate or failed versions of male bodies. Manifestations of the cultural indoctrination of feminine subordination are well documented in social research, as evidenced in the ways that masculinity is evaluated more positively and with greater symbolic value than femininity (Hooberman 1979; Miller 2015).

Ascribed femmephobia is embedded into daily lives through language, ideology, discourse, and processes of gendering. As mentioned above, the words “emasculate” and “effeminate” connote a hierarchical placing of masculinity above femininity, whereby masculinity descends into the realm of femininity with implications for one’s power, dignity, sense of self, and social standing. Notably, there is no equivalent masculinized concept. Much of ascribed femmephobia is linguistically embedded. It is a process of gendering, which denotes inferiority by making use of the subordinated status of femininity. For example, derogatory terms such as “pansy,” “sissy, fairy, queen, and faggot” not only suggest the equation of men’s sexual desire for other men with feminine qualities, but it also relies on the socially inherent subordination embedded within these feminized terms (Taywaditep 2001; Eguchi 2011; Schatzberg et al. 1975).

Practices of feminization are used in a myriad of ways: to insult, humiliate, disempower, or even justify violence and subordination. These practices demonstrate how feminine signifiers are understood as innately inferior and those who adorn them are conceptually demoted. The function of feminization is illustrated by perceptions of disability: the disabled body is perceived as “weak and helpless” (Hirschmann 2013, 141). By this logic, the disabled woman could be identified as hyper-feminine; however, they are perceived as unfeminine because of their “perverted femininity insofar as their

impairments cause them to fail to meet standard ideals of” patriarchal femininity (141). Similar to the ableist equation of disability as weak and therefore feminine, the associated signifiers of femininity are adopted in order to maintain the status quo (re: disability as inferior) or to infer subordination.

Social media has been bombarded with images of a “feminized” Vladimir Putin, Rob Ford, Kim Jong-un, and Donald Trump. One of the images is a parody of Putin on the cover of *Time Magazine* in makeup (Hackett 2013). Similarly, images of Trump, Ford, and Jong-un in drag and/or makeup have been circulating on social media sites. These images draw on the symbolic inferiority assigned to feminine signifiers as a way of humiliating and belittling those in power.

### ***Perceived Femmephobia***

While ascribed femmephobia employs cultural associations to subordinate the target, perceived femmephobia targets a subject as a result of their *perceived* femininity. Perceived femmephobia displays overt contempt and devaluation strictly on the basis of perceived femininity, femme identity, or what is femininely gendered. As with other types of femmephobia, perceived femmephobia frequently acts as a type of gender policing and arises overtly as a result of one’s perceived femininity. In contrast to the ideology and semantics underlying ascribed femmephobia, perceived femmephobia is manifest in the overt ridicule and trivialization of, or condescension toward, feminine enactments and is often used as justification for violence, harassment, or exclusion. Ascribed femmephobia is an ideological condition where we are socialized to associate femininity as subordinate. Perceived femmephobia is often the result of these internalized ideologies and results in overtly violent, oppressive, and exclusionary consequences. For example, masculine gay men expressing “disgust” with the “effeminacy” of other gay men or dating profiles that explicitly state “no femmes need apply” exemplify perceived femmephobia (Taywaditep 2001, 12; Eguchi 2011, 48; Miller 2015).

### ***Femme Mystification***

Femme mystification confounds femme by dehumanizing feminized bodies and rendering the feminine subject a cultural dupe. It is a type of gender policing that operates by separating femininity from



humanness—by eroticizing, exoticizing, and objectifying. This process of mystification attempts to naturalize femininity (by presenting femininity as innately tied to specific identities and bodies) while simultaneously upholding its ascribed artificiality. Femme mystification refuses to understand femme as a chosen identity and, in this refusal, denies feminine agency. In a similar vein to trans-mystification, which Serano (2007) describes as emphasizing the “artificiality of transsexuality [which creates a] false impression that...assigned genders are natural [while] identified and lived genders are not” (187), femme mystification operates to emphasize feminine artificiality, thereby creating the reciprocal effect of masculine naturalization. For example, a participant in Blair and Hoskin’s (2015) study described femme as being “dehumanized” in queer communities and regarded as “either fuckable decorations or not there at all” (240). Similarly, Shinsuke Eguchi (2011) notes that, while gay male culture belittles feminine men, they will nonetheless engage in sexual relations with those who they ridicule.

Another outcome of femme mystification is the cultural tendency to conflate androgyny or gender-neutrality and masculinity. Masculinity lays claim to normativity and denies “its status as stylization,” which solidifies its naturalized standing. This naturalization has allowed masculinity to stand in as a “gender free,” “gender neutral,” or “androgynous” mode of gender expression while solidifying the artificialization of femininity. Femininity is “put on” whereas masculinity is seen as a natural state of genderlessness. Through the construction of femininity as artificial, femininely identified people are reducible to objects or regarded as subhuman. It is this revoking of agency that makes possible the reinstatement of femininity as a patriarchal tool because it works to erase particular feminine embodiments and intersections by upholding masculine as natural and feminine as a construct. Perceivably feminine people are thus mystified, objectified, and dehumanized.

### *Pious Femmephobia*

In 2011, a Canadian police officer named Michael Sanguinetti conducted a ‘personal safety’ workshop at York University at which he told the participants: “I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this—however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to

be victimised” (Ringrose and Renold 2012, 333). This “famous line” exemplifies pious femmephobia: shaming the feminine person or enactment through positioning the femmephobic offender as morally superior or intellectually enlightened, which is thought to therefore justify the “consequences” of transgressions against patriarchal feminine norms. According to Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold (2012), much of victim blaming discourse is embedded in the “cultural belief that women are the bearers of morality” (334). By perpetuating the cultural enforcements of female morality, victim blaming maintains patriarchal norms of femininity as virtuous.

A historical tracing of the word slut demonstrates the workings of pious femmephobia, making clear the connection between “sex, women, service, class, dirt and pollution” and solidifying feminine deviations from patriarchal norms as a source of pollution (Attwood 2007, 234). When used by other women against women, the term slut functions as an “exorcism of the unclean” with the aim to establish the user’s virtue and status (234-235). Patriarchal femininity requires subjects to walk a “very narrow tightrope” between Madonna/Whore constructs: on the one hand, ensuring their sexual attractiveness and, on the other, “without the taint of sexuality” (238). In its “move away from a traditional—feminine, romantic—sexuality,” the “slut” is a femme embodiment (238) and, through the rewriting of slut as a signifier of shame (Ringrose and Renold 2012, 336), political invocations of “slut” or SlutWalk can be understood as a femme project. SlutWalk is a sex-positive movement working to “reclaim” and “disrupt negative associations of femininity with sexuality” (Tanenbaum 2015, 5). Although critiqued for its failure to attend to intersectional differences of race, SlutWalk challenges the assumed masculine right of access over femininity that is embedded within discourses of “asking for it.” In this way, “slut-shaming” is exemplary of pious femmephobia, arising out of the self-professed moral superiority of the perpetrator. Other examples include, but are not limited to, understandings of hyper-femininity as “without dignity” or “self-respect,” inviting of sexual assault (or “asking for it”), victim blaming, and makeovers that include the gentrification of “appropriate” feminine expressions.

While society may not condone sexual violence, there are many ways in which society contrib-

utes to sexual victimization, including the naturalization of femmephobia. For example, failed femininity (or femmephobia) informs rape culture for both DMAB and DFAB survivors. Deviations from patriarchal femininity are attributed to sexual victimization among those DMAB and DFAB. Men and women alike are accused of “inviting” harassment by way of their perceived femininity (Stafford 2010, 89) and feminine attire is routinely described as being “dressed to be killed” (Mishali 2014, 58). Specifically, feminine gay men are charged with provoking “onerous criticism” as a result of their gender expression (Taywaditep 2001, 8). Furthermore, while female survivors are blamed for failing to maintain “ladylike standards,” male survivors are “feminized,” blamed for being “unmanly,” or the suggestion is made that their “weakness” somehow provoked the attack (Davies, Gilston, and Rogers 2012, 2810). Femmephobia is at work when deviations from patriarchal femininity and subsequent failed femininity are considered causal variables of sexual victimization. Even notions of the “good” and “bad” victim are informed by femmephobia and deviations from patriarchal norms such that legal understandings of “sexual violence against women...are more dependent upon a woman’s ability to meet the requirements of hegemonic femininity” (Pietsch 2010, 136). In this way, rape and systems of (in)justice function as another type of gender policing of feminine expression. Furthermore, rape myths exemplify the ways in which perceived femininity is implicated in the claim to a masculine right of access to feminine bodies. In these examples, any sex can be blamed for inviting criticism or violence as a result of their perceived misuse of femininity.

While there are many factors involved, and many overlapping subtypes of femmephobia, pious femmephobia is particularly rampant in social media. Take, for instance, Amanda Todd, Rehtaeh Parsons, Megan Meier, or Rachel Ehmke. Meier and Ehmke took their own life at the age of 13 as a result of the social policing of what could be argued were transgressions against patriarchal femininity: Meier was bullied for being fat and called a slut; Ehmke was called a prostitute and a slut (Hodge 2012). Canadian teenager Todd took her life at the age of 15 as a result of an older man persuading her to show her breasts and the subsequent harassment and slut-shaming by her peers (Hodge 2012).

Parsons, a 15-year-old girl, committed suicide after a gang rape during which one of her rapists took a picture, which was circulated among her peers who continued to harass her. Prior to her death, Parsons experienced severe slut-bashing, slut-shaming, and victim-blaming (Brodsky 2013).

Pious femmephobia works to create an unequal power relation between the victim and the perpetrator, which circulates around the internalization and naturalization of oppression, whereby society, the victim, and/or the perpetrator come to expect such oppression. In other words, “if you’re a ‘slut’ you’re expected to feel dirty, guilty, inferior, damaged, and not worthy of respect or love” (Hodge 2012, n.p.). These tragedies have several commonalities: each of them constituted a perceived transgression against patriarchal femininity in a culture of rape. To merely label such phenomena bullying, sexism, or misogyny is to overlook a specific type of gender policing that directly targets femininity and, specifically, any perceived deviations from patriarchal femininity.

To further this analysis, it is arguable that the feminine subject was targeted for the perceived ‘immoral’ use of femininity, rather than sexuality. By failing to attend to the role that femininity plays in these experiences of violence, social theorists cannot address the root cause of oppression at stake: femmephobia. In this way, the incorporation of femininity within intersectional analysis pushes the boundaries of an intersectional lens and provides a holistic look at social phenomenon, compatible with the current state of social issues.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, femmephobia is embedded in many aspects of social reality: from language to the foundations of western culture such as the associations projected onto femininity. Far too often, these associations and the meaning we ascribe socially are left unexamined, giving way to the naturalization of femmephobia. Feminists need to begin challenging the “dominant cultural construction of what it means to be feminine” or risk continuing the repression and denial of feminine subjectivity (Stafford 2010, 88). If feminists fail to attend to the feminine multiplicities that challenge dominant cultural constructions, they risk reconstituting femininity as an “object of hetero-male/

masculine desire” and further contributing to the objectification of feminine people (88). Unfortunately, as it currently stands, femmephobia remains difficult to detect in its naturalized state, which passes too often as justifiable grounds on which to devalue or oppress an Other. The pervasiveness of femmephobia can also lead to difficulties identifying it because it is typically compounded by other social influences and has yet to be disentangled from intersecting systems of domination. Intersecting modes of oppression, such as racism, transphobia, fatphobia, colonialism, homophobia, ableism, and classism, operate alongside femmephobia. As Gloria Yamato (1990) explains, sources of oppression do not function in isolation, but rather are “dependent on one another for foundation” (22). While Yamato made this argument nearly thirty years ago, the claim to interlocking oppression is well backed by current psychosocial research and continues to hold true. Take, for instance, the co-occurrence of homonegativity and misogyny (Kilianski 2003); the tendency to hold white women as the “Benchmark Woman” (i.e. normative whiteness embedded in femininity) (Deliovsky 2008; Hoskin 2017b); or the ways in which “masculinity is also intrinsically linked with race” such that racial stigma against gay Asian men is inseparable from perceived femininity (Miller 2015, 643; Eguchi 2011).

All forms of oppression are facets of the same system, working to mutually reinforce and uphold one another. In the support of a specific facet, one lends a hand to the validation of the entire matrix of oppression. To fight against one facet, it is necessary to push the boundaries of intersectionality and to interrogate interlocking systems of oppression in their entirety. No single source of oppression operates in an isolated category; they are overlapping and subject to change. The interlocking nature of oppression, therefore, underscores the necessity to view femmephobia within a holistic intersectional framework of multiple sources of oppression.

The cultural devaluation of femininity, not simply in terms of misogyny and sexism, but also as committed against those perceived to embody femininity, is a key component that is overlooked when theorizing oppression. Theoretical endeavours aimed at dismantling systems of domination have underestimated the pervasiveness of femmephobia and overlooked the intersections of femininity more broadly. Indeed, much

of feminist thought has focused on challenging femininity itself, rather than patriarchal femininity (Serano 2013, 68). One must begin employing an intersectional lens to tackle the “real” problem of femininity: “the fact that femininity is seen as inferior to masculinity” in straight settings, queer and feminist circles, and by society at large (67). Although femme is both an identity and an enactment, it is also a critical analytic, which requires bringing the multiplicity of femininities into focus. Until an intersectional lens that is inclusive of femmephobia and cognizant of feminine intersections is adopted, the subordinate state of femininity will remain naturalized. The terrain of intersectionality has yet to integrate gender (more specifically, femininity) as an axis within systems of domination. This failure has allowed femmephobia to remain undetected as a contributing oppressor. As such, the incorporation of feminine intersections and femmephobia push the current boundaries of intersectional theory towards a holistic and nuanced understanding of the mutating systems of domination.

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