

# Hierarchies of Otherness

## The Politics of Lesbian Styles in the 1990s, or, What to Wear?

by Lisa Pottie

*Depuis quelques années, la lesbienne «féminine» (femme) est très bien vue. Cet enthousiasme a pour effet de créer une hiérarchie à l'intérieur de la communauté lesbienne, négligeant ou rendant impossible les autres identités telles la race ou la classe sociale, par exemple.*

*More troubling is the way in which the lesbian community has adopted feminine style as the standard.*

In their recent work, both Judith Roof and Judith Butler have optimistically declared that a feminine lesbian identity can call into question the operation of heterosexual binary structure. Roof states that

the Femme brings into question the necessary heterosexual orientation of the feminine woman, a challenge that potentially explodes any possible function of the woman as stabilizing and reassuring mirror for the man. (250)

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler avers:

For, if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man; and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire are mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies as a given gender, one

must desire a different gender. On the one hand, there is no one femininity with which to identify, which is to say that femininity might itself offer an array of identificatory sites, as the proliferation of lesbian femme possibilities attests. (239)

But both Butler and Roof's own comments should act as a caution against such optimism. Earlier in her book, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory*, Roof writes:

Configurations of lesbian sexuality are ... distributed and reflected through the range of discourses from theory to street language, not in any vastly different form, but rather in forms that reflect the same underlying heterosexual, phallogocentric, binary structure by which lesbian sexuality is constructed. (242)

Likewise, Butler acknowledges that

one is, at it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself. (241)

Given their cautions, one can then examine the "new" lesbian feminine identity that has been the subject of mainstream media attention in light of cultural configurations of lesbian sexuality, to see if it has indeed offered subversive possibilities. Nineteen ninety four's media blitz of lesbian chic was notable in part for its emphasis on feminine lesbians. Rather than assume that the media had suddenly become enlightened and comfortable with women who subvert the binary assumption of a heterosexual

norm, such attention should rather be regarded as an attempt to define lesbians as a group in terms of a reiterated feminine standard to which all women conform. Thus, lesbians are paradoxically reconstituted within heterosexuality.

More troubling, however, is the way in which the lesbian community has increasingly in the last few years adopted feminine style as the standard. *The Advocate*, *Out Magazine*, and *Deneuve: The Lesbian Magazine*, all middle-class publications, project an image of feminine lesbians which has also become dominant within lesbian bar culture. In effect, a new hierarchy of otherness is created within the community and confirmed by the mainstream media. The supposed threat of the lesbian, who "occupies the space of the inaccessible menace to phallic primacy" (Roof 243), is neutralized when lesbians are encouraged to be feminine. They are both less visible (more on visibility in a bit, however) and seen as more "like" straight women. In "Girls Who Kiss Girls and Who Cares?" Sue O'Sullivan notes that in contemporary popular

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media representations "two images of lesbianism exist at the same time, one young and provocatively attractive and fashionable, the second older, dowdy, prescriptive and overtly political" (92).

O'Sullivan warns that

if lesbians collude mindlessly

with the denunciations and angry stereotyping of an image of the lesbian feminist of the 1970s ... they are not just claiming pleasure and their right to be a different style of lesbian—they are also feeding into the larger societal forces which are out to denounce feminism's "excesses." (91)

Just such a collusion is occurring; a

"naughty," without the political significance attached.

Such a process is also distinct from what Roof thinks is happening around Butch/Femme roles:

What the multiplicity of the Butch/Femme configuration illustrates is the vast polymorphous diversity within the category lesbian, a denomination split within itself by multiple

scious masquerade in the 1940s and 1950s and do so today. Unlike the communicating of difference in style that Hebdige identifies with youth subcultures like punk, style within the lesbian community is more problematic and less uniformly subversive. Lesbians who adopt a feminine appearance do not necessarily appear in public only with butches, or even date only butches. In fact, they frequently date only one another.



*Images from the Rainbow Side of the Dark by B.A.N.S.H.I.I.*

hierarchy of style is policed within lesbian communities, communities that were once split in the 1970s, ironically, between lesbian feminists and the butch/femme working-class bar culture. Now, the identification of lesbian feminists with an older, passé generation has led to a dismissal too of a lesbian-feminist political critique of femininity as passé, no longer stylish. Ironically, the dismissal led to the recuperation of butch/femme roles, but on the level of chosen sexual style rather than working-class identity. Stripped of its historical context, the interest first in butch and now in femme feeds into a mainstream appropriation of lesbians as "fun" and

desires, diverse races, classes, ages, educational levels, sexual backgrounds and practices, political consciousnesses and physical appearances. A category by virtue of a binary gender system, lesbian sexuality exists as a coherent group only in contrast to heterosexuality and male homosexuality. (250)

This optimistic theoretical assessment ignores what actually occurs as one style or another becomes dominant. The effect of such internalizations of hierarchy are distinct from their intention, even if, as Sue-Ellen Case argues butch-femmes played a con-

Femmes may argue that they are more liberated, because they don't have to look like "dykes," and can be even more effective when they come out to straight people. But if one looks feminine, then one is less likely to be challenged by heterosexuals, and may consequently find less need to be out. In other words, the variations on femme make it easier for lesbians to be not seen, or if seen, to be reassuringly presented in the media as girls "who just wanna have fun." More practically, and less acknowledged in the assumption of the subversiveness of femme identity is the political reality of the continuing pressure to conform and the desirability of pass-

ing in many circumstances. Barbara Smith, in a 1977 essay, notes just such a reality which still exists:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining "straightness" is our last resort. Being out, particularly out in print, is the final renunciation of any claims to the crumbs of "tolerance" that nonthreatening "ladylike" Black women are sometimes fed. (171)

Within lesbian communities, which tend to be small and incestuous, any appearance code rapidly becomes the one valorized, partly as a means of confirming its value. Feminine appearing lesbians put pressure on other lesbians to conform, either directly or indirectly by ignoring them on the cruise. That femininity is, moreover, a white lesbian femme standard. Another reason for such conformity to codes of behaviour or representation is identified by Jan Zita Grover. She argues that

In the case of a woefully under-, un- or mis-represented subculture ... there are few or no examples to provide counter-arguments for the centrality of this particular identity or behaviour. As a result, subcultures are more likely to actively police members' behaviour and representations than are dominant cultures. (187)

Feminine lesbians are misrepresented by a mainstream media that recuperates them (briefly); that recuperation coincides with a reaction against the misrepresented lesbian feminists of the 1970s, and results in the policing of a consumer-cooperable style whose politics are sexual libertarian, if anything. The argument can be made that sexual libertarianism fits neatly into a consumption-based model of identities, and whatever radical meanings assigned to a

sexualized style are easily stripped from it in the process of the media consumption of style for resale.

The ephemerality of style codes is interestingly signaled in Lisa Walker's article "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What Your Are." Walker criticizes the undervaluation of the femme, which is the result, she argues, of an overvaluation of the visible, which becomes conflated with authenticity; consequently, the butch becomes the authentic lesbian. The problem she identifies is with the "process by which political value is attached to some sexual styles but not others" (882). She does, however, usefully comment on the double invisibility of lesbians of colour within a white lesbian community, and sees their critique as one which can allow the challenging of the "hierarchy of visible signifiers of difference that radical theories of subjectivity are still unable to evade" (887). Consequently, she calls for an analysis of the invisibility of the femme and of lesbians of colour.

Ironically, however, since the publication of Walker's article in 1993, the femme lesbian has become the valorized, the "visible" style, in both lesbian communities and mainstream media. What Walker misses is the point of her own article: rather than simply assigning value to one style or another, a truly radical critique of "the hierarchy of visible signifiers of difference" might privilege none or all, or find other aspects of identities to value and assess. Walker runs into the problem she identifies with the need to reclaim negative signifiers, which "can also replicate the practices of dominant ideologies that use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion" (888), because she still privileges not visibility but the visible as the site of the production of meaning.

The difficulty with any privileging of appearance codes is identifying not only the intention of the appearance, but the effect. It is easy to assume that the appearance style of a member of a subculture is, by virtue of subcultural

status, necessarily subversive. In fact, given the rapid co-option of styles by the media, from punk to lesbian chic, what is subversive today is fashion today, rather than tomorrow. Cultural studies is problematically entwined in the process, in its eagerness to claim significance and subversion for surface meanings as the means of encoding identities that are rightly no longer understood as integral or natural. As Dennis Allen notes, in Butler's argument, "reduced to a sexuality written on the surface of the body, gay or lesbian 'identity' becomes largely a question of the visible, of what the Butler saw" (137). He sees such a focus on the body as "overdetermining the materiality of lesbians and gays," and argues that it "has not led to any serious recognition that the gender and sexuality of straight men such as Jesse Helms are also performative" (137, 138). He further argues that through Butler's elision of interiority, and the consequent irrelevance of intention, "the signs of gay or lesbian sexual identity that are inscribed through corporeal performance become, implicitly, self-evident" and "begin to take on ahistorical, transcendental meanings that shortcircuit investigation of the field of signification and its political implications" (138). The meanings of identity become radically restricted; the experiential sense of being lesbian or gay is glossed over, as is "the highly complex accretion of non-sexual meanings" (138). Moreover, the concentration on corporeal performance of gender and sexual identities elides other identities, like racial ones, and limits the scope of investigation to western societies. In her materialist-feminist critique of the queer theory issue of *Signs*, Rosemary Hennessey argues the following:

...we need to be wary of analyses that assume sexuality is just a cultural issue.... One effect is that the construction of sexuality in all of its varied and contradictory formations threatens to become thematized, isolating preoccupation with the erotic

remapping of the body in the West from any connection to its structural organization through the global relations of difference. (969)

Jackie Goldsby also warns about the narrowing of focus in lesbian and gay studies:

As the gay community counters its marginalization by institutionalizing itself, I'm concerned about the erasure of race from gay political culture; that is, I worry that the subjective voice of people of color is being excluded from the crosstalk of culture and politics that's regenerating the gay community. It's no small matter that entire fields of knowledge are being constructed and political machines established that are once again inscribing the absence of people of color. (14)

The identification of a hierarchy of style subsumes differences in identity that are unmarked or differently marked, and that should be or are also politically significant, in the interest, to use Roof's words, of "a phallogocentric singularity [that] recuperates that which evades it" (252). Rather than optimistically theorizing about the subversive potential of a feminine lesbian identity, one should examine its practical effects, consider its historical context, and be conscious of its complex, not only subversive, interrelation with the heterosexual world.

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