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Femme interventions and the proper feminist subject: Critical approaches to decolonizing western feminist pedagogies

Rhea Ashley Hoskin^{1*}

Abstract: As it currently stands, little academic attention has been paid to the systematic devaluation of femininity or femmephobia. By adopting “femme” as a critical analytic, this paper dislocates femininity from its ascribed Otherness and demonstrates how empowered femininities have been overlooked within gender studies. Femme, as the failure or refusal to approximate the patriarchal norms of femininity, serves as the conceptual anchor of this study and is used to examine how femmephobic sentiments are perpetuated within Contemporary Western Feminist (CWF) theory. This perpetuation is propped up by the thematic marginalization of empowered femininities from the texts chosen for gender studies courses, revealing a normative feminist body constructed through the privileging of identities that maintains femininity as white, middle-class, normatively bodied, and without agency. The excavation of an empowered feminine subject from the margins reveals the foothold of normative whiteness embedded within feminist pedagogies. Using a thematic analysis of how femininity is taken-up within textbooks used in gender studies courses, the current paper demonstrates how intersections of femininity have yet to be addressed within dominant Feminist theories. The femme—as a queer potentiality—offers a way of (re)thinking through the limitations of CWF theory and the paradoxical preoccupations with the absented femme.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Curriculum Studies; Pedagogy; Cultural Studies; Cultural Theory; Gender; Feminism; Race & Ethnicity; Subcultures

Keywords: femme; feminist pedagogies; feminist theory; femmephobia; femininity; whiteness

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Nearly every university in Canada offers either a Women's/Gender Studies degree, or at least some programming within this field of study. One of the goals of Women's & Gender studies is to understand the multiple dimensions of social inequality. The current paper examines how one of these intersections has been largely overlooked in Canadian Women's Studies curricula: femininity and feminine expressions. An overview and analysis of feminist anthologies used to teach undergraduate Feminist Theory courses at Canadian institutions from 2010-2011 demonstrates how the failure to recognize the complexity of femininities maintains a normative feminist subject at the core of feminist thought.

1. Introduction

While it is generally frowned upon to ridicule an individual for being female, many of our cultural idioms are rooted in the assumed subordination of femininity—a social norm that largely remains unchallenged (Serano, 2007, 2013). Patriarchy can be understood as a social system in which men hold power (Hannam, 2012). Specifically, this social mechanism of male dominance enforces gender roles, gendered inequality, and can be perpetuated by men and women alike. Under patriarchal rule, femininity is synonymous with weak, passive, subordinate, unqualified and inherently oppressive (Serano, 2007, 2013). Even within feminist movements, anti-feminine rhetoric can be found among “first-wave” feminists who saw femininity as a social construct that obscured women’s true abilities (Bryson, 2003, p. 16). Second-wave feminists re-iterated anti-feminine sentiments by theorizing femininity as a form of “interior colonization,” lacking dignity or self-respect (Millett, 1977, p. 25), and feminine people were deemed “feminine parasites” (Greer, 1970, p. 22), “man-made,” and “mutants” (Daly, 1979, p. xi). Discursive feminine devaluation has come to inform “third-wave” (or contemporary Western) feminist theorists, including Naomi Wolf, who relates femininity to a “German instrument of torture, the Iron Maiden: a coffin euphemistically painted with a smiling young woman on the outside and metal spikes on the inside” (Wolf, 2002, p. 17). The historical and continued presence of anti-femininity within Feminist Theory and pedagogies illustrates the “depth of which such norms have become part of a taken-for-granted cultural framework within dominant North American thought” (Stafford, 2010, p. 90). This is not to disqualify the important work and change that came out of these critical engagements with femininity, nor the important role they played in furthering feminist agendas. Rather, this is to facilitate cognitive space for alternate conceptualizations of femininities, and to begin carving out space for feminine folks within Feminist Theory and movements.

The following paper will explore how femininity is taken-up within contemporary Western feminist (CWF) theory. This will be achieved through a qualitative thematic analysis of feminist anthologies used to teach undergraduate Feminist Theory courses at Canadian institutions from 2010 to 2011. In so doing, this paper reveals the ways in which femme is both an impossible feminist subject and a site of critique. Using a queerly racialized lens and the absented femme as analytical anchors, this study argues that the current body of Feminist Theory cannot bear non-white femme expressions.

2. Femme literature

Classical femme literature has primarily focused on “femme” within a butch/femme vernacular (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1992). Contemporary femme authors have been critical of this reductive pairing, arguing that butch/femme can function to Other and define femme in relation to butch, while assuming that femininity is performed for another (i.e. the butch). As such, contemporary femme authors highlight the complexities and mercurial nature of femme identities (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Volcano & Dahl, 2008). What these multiple invocations of femme share is a rejection of patriarchal feminine norms and scripts. Hoskin (2013, *in press*). In other words, Femmephobia is the policing or devaluation of femininity that works to maintain patriarchal norms of femininity—whether intentional or otherwise.

Hoskin (*in press*) observes 4 subtypes of femmephobia: ascribed, perceived, pious and femme mystification. Ascribed femmephobia is embedded within cultural idioms and the associations we ascribe to femininity. Perceived femmephobia is blatant discrimination, exclusion or mistreatment as a result of perceived femininity. Femme mystification facilitates a process of dehumanization whereby the individual perceived as feminine is reduced to an object, or subhuman. Finally, Pious femmephobia functions to shame the perceived feminine subject by “positioning the perpetrator as morally superior or intellectually enlightened” (Hoskin, *in press*).

3. Fractures in feminism

There is a long history of fractures within feminist movements, along with a body of literature chronicling these failures (Grande, 2003; Hannam, 2012; Hooks, 1981; Mishali, 2014; Serano, 2007, 2013; Wini, 1996). The concept of fractures refers to the exclusionary practices or spaces overlooked as a

result of hegemonic normativity (i.e. heteronormativity, cisnormativity, normative whiteness, etc.). The fracture happens when those whose identities have been relegated to the margins begin to carve out space for their lived-realities within feminist movements. The 60's and 70's marked a movement of gendered, racial and sexual silences within feminist movements (Wini, 1996) and set the tone for modern feminist debates surround the homogenization of feminist movements, the notions of global sisterhood (Mohanty, 2003) and the ways in which individuals are simultaneously imbricated as both oppressor and oppressed within systems of domination. While these fractures were thought to undermine the solidarity among feminists, and threaten the momentum of the movements (Hannam, 2012), they often mark a shift toward greater inclusivity and richer intersectional approaches. Intersectionality refers to the interconnectivity of social categorizations of identity (Carbado et al., 2013). It is a tool to examine the “multiple dimensions of oppression and how various axes of identity negotiate (i.e. appease or magnify) discrimination” (Hoskin et al., 2016).

One particular fracture is the exclusion of femme lesbians during the 1970s (which some would argue continues today (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Dahl, 2014)), whereby femmes had to “change their style and appearance in order to be accepted” within the feminist movement (Maltry & Tucker, 2002; Mishali, 2014, p. 55; Nestle, 1992; Sheiner, 1997; Soares, 1995; Stafford, 2010, p. 81). Androgynous or “less feminine” outer appearance was required as a “feminist uniform” of sorts, and refusal to denounce femininities was seen as “a sign of false consciousness and estrangement from the feminist project” (Mishali, 2014, p. 56).

These exclusionary practices signaled to many femmes that, because of their gender expression, they were not worthy or entitled to the liberation of other women (MacCowan, 1992; Mishali, 2014). As such, the treatment of femininity within second wave feminism became a new form of oppression operating both within the feminist movements and in society at large (Mishali, 2014). Resultantly, femmes became ashamed, being told their gender expression was “weak,” “stupid,” “old-fashioned,” “self centered,” “male defined,” a tool of the patriarchy, and a symbol of “low class” (Donnelly, 1995, p. 34; Mishali, 2014, p. 56). In this way, the exclusion of femininity within feminist movements not only signified the valuation of androgyny but also upper-middle class and, as the current paper will argue, racial privilege.

The histories of Feminist fractures demonstrate how feminism can itself function as political spaces of exclusion. These fractures have been evidenced in political movements, in addition to Feminist Theory and pedagogies. For example, transwomen have been subjected to “fierce and extended scrutiny” within Feminist literature (Connell, 2012, p. 857). Critical Disability scholars have expressed a sense of alienation rooted in feminist theory’s failure to “recognize disability perspective” (Lloyd, 2001) and the subsequent failure to “integrate the concerns of disabled women into its theory” (Morris, 1993, p. 55). Importantly, these histories show how the practices and spaces of exclusion have given way to stronger intersectionality. As argued by Rohrer (2005), the interrogation of these fractures or failures can offer “expanded theoretical landscapes and additional tools for use in feminist social justice struggles” (p. 34). As echoed from past feminist scholars, liberation is a decolonizing endeavor that requires unlearning (Green, 2007) and must therefore take an intersectional approach when theorizing sources of oppression. Systems of oppression are inextricably linked. Eliciting change therefore requires that feminists look beyond sexism, toward the ways in which multiple axes of oppression mutually enforce one another (Hannam, 2012, p. 88).

4. Hegemonic normativity

Universality, and the homogenized experiences of “women” have been mostly based on the experiences of white middle class women (Zinn et al., 1990). Intersections of femininity and race have a shared history of exclusion within the majority of mainstream western feminist movements and theory. This is not to suggest that race is not already gendered and vice versa. Similar to the ways in which femme subjects were required to relinquish their femininity in order to partake in feminist movements, women of color have been asked to deny parts of themselves as a means of maintaining homogenous goals of feminism (Hooks, 1981). Feminism’s failure to engage race and its

subsequent complicity with normative whiteness has been termed “Whitestream feminism” (Grande, 2003). This discourse of Whitestream feminism is dominated by white women and is principally structured based on the experiences of white privilege (Grande, 2003, p. 330). Far from being race-neutral, patriarchal femininity is “always already raced as white” (Deliovsky, 2008, p. 58). Patriarchal femininity maintains white women as the “Benchmark woman” and idealized femininity (Deliovsky, 2008; Hoskin, *in press*). Previous literature has commented on normative white femininity as a white capitalist patriarchal compulsion (Bartky, 2010; Deliovsky, 2008). This compulsion necessitates an absented presence of race, whereby whiteness is invisible and re-established as the norm (Deliovsky, 2008).

5. Current study

The centering of a normative white feminist subject has been criticized within feminist scholarship, but there has yet to be a contribution to the ways in which the constructs of femininity and non-whiteness, both made invisible, intersect to reveal the mechanism of normative whiteness within feminist theory. Mishali (2014) argues that the homogenization of femininity is a fundamental mechanism of sexism. The current paper will demonstrate how the homogenization of femininity not only perpetuates sexism and femmephobia but also reproduces whiteness as the norm. The concept of normative whiteness exposes how femininity is always already racialized (Bartky, 2010; Deliovsky, 2008), but does not tease apart the ways femmephobia maintains normative whiteness.

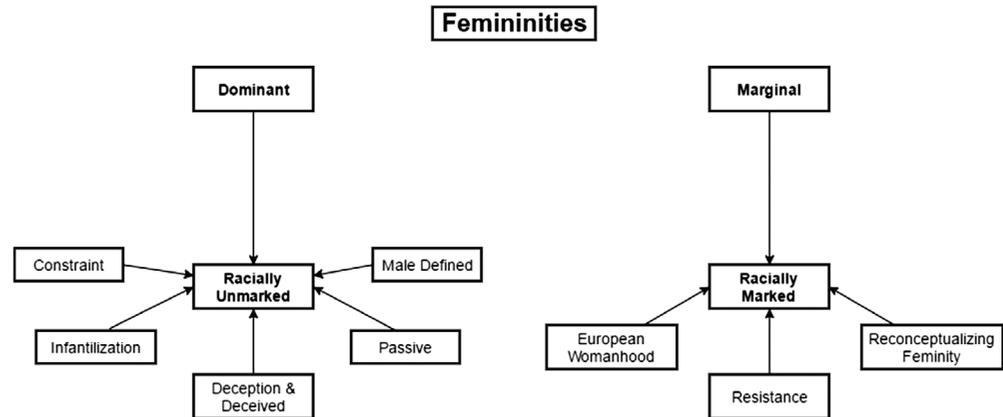
The current paper will explore the legacy of fractures within CWF theory and how the homogenization of femininities (and subsequent overlooking of femme) is anchored within normative whiteness. This analysis will be facilitated using Hoskin’s (*in press*) conceptualization of femmephobia and can be framed within the context of the 2nd wave, as feminists of the 1960s and 1970s began to push the boundaries of feminist goals and practices of inclusion. In this way, the current study connects in its goal of pushing the boundaries of feminist pedagogies by examining theories of sameness that contribute to hegemonic normativity.

6. Methodology

To conduct this study, a list of literature used to teach undergraduate Feminist Theory courses in Canada from 2010 to 2011 was compiled (see Appendix A). This was achieved by contacting twelve gender/women’s studies programs across Canada requesting syllabi for undergraduate feminist theory/thought courses for the 2010–2011 academic year. A list of useable literature was compiled, such as anthologies and readers used to represent feminist theory/thought in academic settings across Canada during this timeframe. Those that were not useable included courseware and reading kits, which could not be reproduced. Twelve programs were contacted, nine of which responded. This provided me with a sample of nine feminist theory anthologies for my cursory review. A list of “flag words” was used to note the sections pertinent to how femininity is taken up within feminist thought. These words were: *body*, *perform*, *feminine*, *masculine*, *embody*, *femme* and *butch*. After conducting a cursory review of the nine anthologies using the flag words, the sample was narrowed down to six anthologies. Anthologies whose cursory review did not provide substantial data for my analysis did not move forward in my research process. For example, anthologies were not included if they had insufficient references to masculinity and/or femininity (Appendix A).

- (1) Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women’s Lives*.
- (2) Rose Weitz, ed. *The Politics of Women’s Bodies. Sexuality, Appearance and Behavior*.
- (3) Viviane Namaste. *Sex Change. Social Change*.
- (4) Althea Prince and Susan Silva-Wayne, eds., *Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women’s Studies Reader*.
- (5) Georgia Warnke, *Debating Sex and Gender*.
- (6) B. A. Crow and L. Gotell, *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women’s Studies Reader*.

Figure 1. Organization of themes. This figure illustrates the organization of basic themes, organizing categories, and global themes.



Seeking to gain “illumination and understanding” of how femininity is taken-up within texts used to teach Gender Studies courses made the current analysis particularly well suited for qualitative methods such as analytical categories and thematic analysis (Golafshani, 2003). Thematic analysis was used to aid in systematizing large amounts of textual data by “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This method is particularly useful in the analysis of Gender Studies texts, to find repeated patterns of meaning in addition to both a summative reflective of reality as well as to delve deeper to unravel “surface reality” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The thematic analysis was conducted through the use of Braun and Clarke’s 6 phases: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review themes; (5) define and name themes; (6) produce report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken, in which the themes were driven from the data, rather than attempting to fit the data to pre-existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The only exception to this was the use of Hoskin’s (2013) typologies of femmephobia.

Constant comparison was used throughout the data analysis process to examine the data relevant to each thematic category (Pope et al., 2000, p. 114). The process of constant comparison not only examines dominant themes, but also considers the role “deviant” cases. Finally, thematic networks were used to organize the textual data and assist in exploring the overt structures and underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). To conduct the thematic network, initial themes, otherwise known as basic themes were identified, which were then placed into organizing categories. Organizing categories were then linked to global themes (see Figure 1).

For the purpose of this inquiry, the anthologies collected cannot represent “current feminist scholarship” as circulated by recognized Canadian institutions in their entirety. They do not represent the field or Canadian feminist pedagogies broadly, but begin to give insight into femininities within Feminist theory. However, while representation in this context is not possible, theoretical saturation of all possible categories within the textual data were filed, such that no new patterns emerged within the final anthologies. Subsequent references to a general body of feminist theory will be specifically referring to the data collected from these sources. The purpose of this research is to look at complete literary works that “represent” feminist theory, as demonstrated by their use in Canadian undergraduate gender studies courses, to generate how femininity is theorized and taken up. Specifically, this research is interested in what kind of environments these discussions create in relation to femininity and the feminine subject. However, what this analysis does *not* do is speak to the context of these texts and how these texts are taught and frames within the course.

7. Normative whiteness and femmephobia

The first set of basic themes included infantilization, male-defined, deceptive/deceived, and passivity. These themes were organized as “Racially Unmarked,” and in the Global theme of “Dominant Theories.” The second set of basic themes include European womanhood; resistance and rebellion;

and re-conceptualizing the feminine. These themes were organized into “Racially Marked,” and in the Global theme of “Marginal Theories” (see Figure 1). In organizing the basic themes of how femininity is theorized within gender studies course texts into organizing themes, the differences between racially unmarked femininity (constituted by dominant theories) and racially marked femininity (liminal references) became clear. The terms “racially marked” and “racially unmarked” refer to the slippage of queer and feminist theory into whiteness as the norm. By leaving dominant theories “unmarked” by racial identities, feminist theory has largely fallen into a trap of normative whiteness (Dyer, 2005; Rothenberg, 2005). The pattern of “unmarked” categories of identity, be they by race, sexuality, or sex, is one that produces conditions not only for compulsory heterosexuality but also for a two-sexed system that is perpetually informed by a white, middle-class, cisgender heterosexual, and able-bodied woman. Moreover, the failure to account for racial intersections of gendered expressions assumes a white normative subject and, operating within a white supremacist settler society, upholds culturally embedded normative whiteness (Dyer, 2005; Rothenberg, 2005).

As argued by Rothenberg (2005), “this culturally encouraged invisibility has been an essential part of the power of whiteness” (p. 2). This phenomenon is traceable within dominant Western feminist theories of femininity and, as such, makes the feminist theories under examination, a project about whiteness. The following overview of feminist theory demonstrates how feminists reproduce femmephobia in their critique of femininity as they produce the feminine subject as inherently subordinate by conflating patriarchal femininity and femininity more broadly. Teleologically, the bias against multiple gender compartments informs and reifies the patriarchal and masculinist footings that prop up feminist theory.

The following section outlines dominant theorizations of femininity within gender studies course texts, which have been categorized as racially “unmarked” and inherently white. Following this overview, insight will be provided into some of the ways empowered femininity exists at the margins of these texts, demonstrating that the disempowering of femininity is a colonial project. Prior to this critical intervention of feminist theory and pedagogies, it is imperative to note that, as Cherrie Moraga articulates, “to be critical of one’s culture is not to betray one’s culture” (Moraga, 1983, p. 108). While the current study is critical of the embedded femmephobia and subsequent normative body maintained through CWF theory and pedagogies, this paper should not be read as being at odds with feminist projects. On the contrary, it is my hope that this paper furthers feminist endeavors toward an inclusive pedagogical future.

8. Dominant themes: Racially “unmarked” femininity

8.1. Infantilization and femininity

A conceptual theme evidenced in gender studies course texts is that of femininity as inherently infantilizing. Femininity is described as “smooth, rounded, hairless ... soft, unmuscled—the look of the very young,” a “characteristic of the weak, of the vulnerable,” and bearing “eunuch traits” (Sontag, 2004, p. 277). Feminine “behaviour” is described as “childish, immature,” and “weak” (Sontag, 2004, p. 281). To this end, dominant theories in Gender studies course texts conclude that femininity is synonymous with infantilization. For example, the conflation of feminization and infantilization are reproduced by Judith Lorber, who explains that female sports teams are marked “in ways that symbolically feminize and trivialize them—the men’s team is called Tigers, the women’s Kittens” (Lorber, 2010, p. 18).

Within dominant theorizations, femininity is equated with a youth serum that keeps women in a larval state and prevents them from “achieving the maturity of which they are capable” (Friedan, 2004, pp. 71–72). Within this theme feminine practices are described as producing “inferiorized” bodies (Bartky, 2010; Hartley, 2010). Women are described within gender studies course textbooks as being “fed” femininity—similar to an infant being fed—“by magazines, television, movies and books” (Friedan, 2004, pp. 71–72). Rather than allowing the feminine subject (which largely remains a racially *unmarked* “woman”) the agency to choose her gender expressions, the gender studies

theorization of feminine expressions conjures up images of women being forcibly fed that which keeps them in the “state of sexual larvae” (Friedan, 2004, pp. 71–72). Arguably, re-producing understandings of femininity as inherently infantilized and immature maintains the sub-human (or at least not fully human) treatment of feminine persons, contributing to objectification of feminine subjects. These theoretical links are concerning considering Kilbourne’s (1979) analysis of popular culture. Kilbourne (1979) argues that the step after objectification (of a particular trait or a categorization of persons) is dehumanization and violence (Kilbourne, 1979).

8.2. Femininity as male defined

Femininity is frequently conceptualized in gender studies course texts as “male defined” or “performed” for a central masculine subject, which thereby reduces the feminine Other to an object. As previously noted, similar pairings are heavily critiqued within *Femme* literature, particularly those assuming fem(me)ininity to be done for masculine or butch partner. For example, femininity is described as a “male standard” and a “male-defined role” (Martindale, 2004, pp. 361–363): a “trained horse” for male desires (Bartky, 2010, p. 83). Within the theme of male-defined, lesbianism is taken-up as being at odds with femininity. This juxtaposition works to maintain femininity as a signifier for heterosexual availability and male/masculine right of access over the feminine, thereby erasing the presence of feminine queer women. Sandra Lee Bartky’s work exemplifies this conceptualization. She writes:

In the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality, woman must make herself ‘object and prey’ for the man: it is for him that these eyes are limpid pools, this cheek baby-smooth (as cited in de Beauvoir 1968, 642). In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other. (Bartky, 2010, p. 86)

As exemplified by the above excerpt, it is the feminine subject who renders themselves an object and, more pressingly, an object *for* the masculine subject. The gender expression of the feminine subject is thought to be a result of an internalized male gaze and subsequent false consciousness. Other feminist scholars described femininity as the process of bodily or self-objectification (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 64; Wendell, 2004) by accommodating male or masculine needs and marking themselves as “[an object] of male desire” (Lee, 2010, p. 107). Conceptualized as performed for a masculine subject, femininity becomes a signifier of that which lacks self-determination. Additionally, by virtue of their femininity, feminine subjects are considered at “risk” for “unwanted male sexual attraction” (Weitz, 2010, p. 226). The line of thought that femininity is fundamentally performed for a masculine subject is at the root of the cultural ideology in which feminine subjects are blamed for their own victimization. In other words, constructing femininity as performed for a masculine subject (or male) reinforces the dominant ideologies of rape culture.

8.3. Deception and deceived: The mask of femininity

The next thematic category evidenced within gender studies texts is femininity as both deception and deceived. There are many dichotomous understandings of femininity within dominant culture. One particular dichotomy that manifests within this body of literature is this conceptualization of femininity as both deceptive and deceived. Women’s use of cosmetics is described as a “desperate” “disguise” (Bartky, 2010; Weitz, 2010) a “masquerade” (Warnke, 2011, p. 67); a form of “concealment” (Rice, 2004), “tired decorations” (Forsyth, 2004, p. 13) and a “theatre of their enslavement” (Sontag, 2004, p. 278). While feminine adornments are described as protective in their utility of disguise, the authors argue that by “protecting themselves as women, they betray themselves as adults” (Sontag, 2004, p. 282). By once again infantilizing femininity, the theories of feminine deception contribute to the objectification and ornamenting of that which is feminized.

Although femininity is constructed as inherently deceptive, feminine subjects are simultaneously thought of as being “duped” into practices and expressions of femininity—complacent in their own

subordination. Within this body of literature, debates exist regarding the development of a model that “incorporates social pressures and agency” as opposed to the dualistic approach that oversimplifies “free will” and “false consciousness” perspectives (Gagné & McGaughey, 2010, p. 193). In the “freely chosen” paradigm, the feminine subject’s choice is still theorized as being constructed under the oppressive standards of men’s interests (Gagné & McGaughey, 2010, p. 194). Since women who “choose” to engage in feminine practices do so according to standards that are “constructed by men and serve men’s interests,” it is concluded that “women are culturally coerced” into feminized beauty practices (Gagné & McGaughey, 2010, p. 194). In other words, they may make the choice, but it is not in circumstances of their own choosing—an analysis that effectively minimizes the potential agency of feminine subjects. Either side of this argument renders the feminine subject a passive, cultural dupe.

8.4. Feminine constraint

Femininity is thematically described in these texts as a form of constraint. For example, within this theme femininity is described as a form of “constraint,” a form of “control” (Wendell, 2004) a “disciplinary practice” (Bartky, 2010; Crow & Gotell, 2004, p. 282; Weitz, 2010; Wendell, 2004), a reduction of space or “containment” (de Beauvoir, 2004; Hartley, 2010), and those who adopt feminine practices are charged with “mistaking their bondage for freedom” (Forsyth, 2004, p. 12). The adornment of bodies in ways that signify femininity are described as making “girls movements smaller, leading girls to take up less space with their bodies and disallowing some types of movements” (Martin, 2010, p. 35). The feminine subject is “trained” to stand with their “stomach pulled in, shoulders slightly back and chest out” (Bartky, 2010, pp. 82–83). In line with the previous thematic category of “male defined,” this posture is described as being done for a masculine subject’s gaze. Conversely, if this description of comportment were used to describe a masculine subject, it would depict a stance of pride and strength.

Feminine people are said to “subject” themselves to the “additional constraint of high-heeled shoes,” which throws the body “forward and off balance: the struggle to walk under these conditions shortens [their] stride still more” (Bartky, 2010, p. 82). While these arguments have validity, they also overlook several aspects of femininity’s ability to *take up* space. For instance, femininity often takes up more visual space through adornment than masculinity, and while heels can impede one’s movement they also require a tremendous amount of strength and balance and make the subject taller, allowing them to take up more space. It is conceivable that, operating in a Western framework within which the privileging of masculinity is naturalized, there is limited cognitive space to perceive femininity in this way.

8.5. Traditional role: Passivity

The current section will discuss the theme of passivity when discussing or theorizing femininity. Gender studies texts analyzed in this study argue that women are encouraged to be “utterly passive/uncritical/dependent (i.e. “feminine”)” and have been singled out as “prime targets of pacification/feminization” (Ehrenreich, 1997, p. 69). Within this theme femininity is described as a system aimed at “turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men” (Bartky, 2010). While men and masculinity actively “choose,” women and femininity are passively “chosen” (Sontag, 2004, p. 282). In the process of pacification/feminization, feminine bodies are rendered “weak, frail” and in need of being “continually defended” (Sontag, 2004, p. 277). Femininity itself is theorized as “submissive,” (Lee, 2010, p. 116), without agency (Tolman, 2010, p. 135), and as being “at odds” with a woman’s independence and success (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 62). The conflation between pacification and femininity is echoed by Steinem (2004) who critiques subterfuge as a tactic to subvert oppressive systems, stating that while such an approach allows for a “passive, feminine stance while secretly rebelling,” she concludes that it is a “gigantic waste of inventiveness and time” (Steinem, 2004, p. 101). Bartky (2010) upholds this sentiment, stating that the rebellion is “put down every time a woman picks up her eyebrow tweezers or embarks upon a new diet” (2010, p. 95). Cognitive space is revoked from those who would argue otherwise, and feminine subjects are constructed as being “at odds” with feminist agendas.

Femininity is not only deemed passive, but also passivity itself is feminized. The conflation of femininity and passivity/subordination is challenged by the multiple manifestations of femme, whose lives and gender expressions do not reflect this naturalized equation of femininity with passivity. Passive, uncritical, and dependent are not interchangeable with femininity and the space claimed within feminist theory works to obscure and erase some of the many ways in which femininity can be empowering.

9. Racially marked femininity

The following sections will explore the second organizing theme of Racially Marked, along with basic themes of European Womanhood; Resistance and Rebellion; and Re-conceptualizing the Feminine. Global themes of dominant versus marginal theorizations of femininity in these texts illustrate a racially unmarked subject. As previously noted, the absence of a racial intersection functions to maintain the invisibility of whiteness. The following global theme will summarize the various ways in which femininity can, alternatively, be conceived as empowering—demonstrating that a femmophobic white-privileging perspective is embedded in dominant feminist theories. Examples of femininity as empowering were those racially marked by people of colour. Global themes, or dominant theories do not discuss race and thus leave the “unmarked” feminine subject to be assumed white, effectively naturalizing the white subject and embedding the privilege of whiteness in feminist theory. Moreover, when racially minoritized femininities are not exemplifying the ways in which femininity can be differently conceptualized, they demonstrate the impacts of white hegemony on constructing femininity as oppressive. An examination of racially marked femininities makes clear how femininity becomes a source of oppression in the hands of the colonizer.

9.1. European womanhood

Exploring the next theme of European Womanhood, the following section will discuss some of the ways femininity is constructed as inferior at the hands of the colonizer and through white supremacy, demonstrating how femmophobia is an issue of whiteness that requires a process of decolonization. European constructs of femininity and the colonization of Native femininities maintain femmophobic standards of femininity by upholding the white, feminine ideal as absolute. As discussed within the texts, the femmophobic hypersexualization of Native women has made it “nearly impossible for Native men to cherish” Native femininities, having grown up in a world within which dark-skinned femininity is rendered invisible or reduced to a sexual, yet disposable, object (Anderson, 2004, p. 234). The invisibility of dark-skinned femininities is evidenced as well as reproduced within central feminist theories that speak to an unmarked femininity.

As explained by gender studies texts contributors Hennessy and Rajeswari (1997), during colonization, the British division of gender roles created “two faces of the feminine” (p. 203). Western hegemony and monopoly over femininities maintains whiteness as central and signifying the “good” woman while the colonized subject is constructed as “bad” and is kept marginal (Hennessy & Rajeswari, 1997, p. 205). These constructions have been used to justify both emotional and physical violence. For example, the archetype of the squaw is rooted in colonial practices of dehumanization and is a complexly gendered and racialized violence (Rosenberg, 2004) that can be understood as a form of femmophobia. The authors in this thematic category speak to the risk of employing analytic frameworks that “obscure the complexities of gendered violence” (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 234). Intersections of femininity and femmophobia that are inclusive of racial dimensions deepen our analyses of gender and gendered violence, allowing us to develop strategies of resistance.

According to gender studies course textbooks, both Western and indigenous frameworks equate Native femininities with the land (Anderson, 2004, p. 230). The context of “control, conquest, possession and exploitation” of the earth is mirrored toward Native women (Anderson, 2004, p. 230). Initially, Native femininities symbolized the “exotic, powerful, dangerous and beautiful” (Anderson, 2004, p. 230). In order for the land to become “more accessible,” European colonizers needed to adjust this understanding of Native femininity as powerful, which was equated with their

perceptions of the land (Anderson, 2004, p. 230). Both the land and Native women (femininities) needed to be disempowered and made more accessible and “within the grasp of the white man” (Anderson, 2004, p. 230).

Colonial perceptions shifted to render land and Native women as “open for consumption” and usable for the “colonizer’s pleasure and profit” (Anderson, 2004, p. 230). In addition, Native women refused to comply with colonizers, leading to them becoming the symbol of “troublesome colonies” and to the subsequent emergence of the “squaw” (Anderson, 2004, p. 231). The “squaw” image was used to police indigenous women’s failure to comply with the colonizer, which lent a hand to the construction of Native women as society’s “beasts of burden” and demonstrated “the superiority of European womanhood and femininity” (Anderson, 2004, p. 231). Subsequently, this construction worked to replace Native femininities with European femininities (Anderson, 2004, p. 231). This racially marked dichotomization of femininities is created through the implementation of Western frameworks and renders Native femininity oppressive. Within colonial frameworks, the “squaw” is the “failed feminine” counterpart of the “Indian Princess.” The Indian Princess began to be measured by her proximity to whiteness and white ideals. While she might never be able fully to appropriate the ideal feminine, her image upholds white supremacists’ ordering and functions to subordinate Native women by virtue of their likelier proximity to the “squaw.” Moreover, according to gender studies course texts, while the “(Indian) princess held erotic appeal for the covetous imperial male wishing to claim the ‘new’ territory, the squaw drudge justified the conquest of an uncivilized terrain” (Anderson, 2004, p. 231). From a queerly racialized femme perspective, the use of perceived “failed femininities” to justify violence, degradation, and conquest is the history and modern reality of the Western world. Moreover, histories of Indigenous femininities once again illustrate how the bifurcation of femininities turns the powerful into the powerless.

9.2. Resistance and rebellion

The next basic theme discussed under the organizing theme of racially marked femininity is “resistance and rebellion.” As described within the texts, negotiating one’s femininity can compromise other aspects of one’s identities. The exclusive critique and subordination of femininity within dominant feminist theories disregards the multiple ways in which femininity intersects with a racially marked subject. For example, within the texts South Asian women’s femininity is linked to the degree of “allegiance to an ethnic collectivity” (Handa, 2004, p. 171). According to theorists such as Amita Handa (2004), whose work is included in gender studies course texts, transgressions of femininity within South Asian communities are thought to be transgressing and breaking ethnic allegiances. From this South Asian perspective, transgressions of femininity can be labelled “white” or “Western” (Handa, 2004).

Femininity, specifically that which pertains to notions of women’s sexuality, marks the “boundaries of cultural and ethnic identity, preservation and authenticity” (Handa, 2004, p. 172). Certain notions of “womanhood, tradition and culture,” were used by both “British colonialists and Indian nationalists to forge a distinction between East and West” during struggles for national independence under British rule (Handa, 2004, p. 172). The femininity associated with cultural and ethnic identity is thought to be the “memory of all that is seen to be good from premodern times” (Handa, 2004, p. 172). As exemplified by South Asian women in Canada, what might be considered a feminine adornment, such as a nose piercing, can signify and reclaim ethnic/racial identity, specifically a link to South Asian heritage (Handa, 2004). In the dawn of modern India, the absence of nose piercings often distinguished a middle-class, educated “modern femininity from a traditional one” (Handa, 2004, p. 174). In a modern Canadian context, this feminine accessory can be used as an act of rebellion, a cultural assertion, and a way of “marking difference” by acknowledging and reclaiming differences that stray from a culture of whiteness (Handa, 2004, p. 174). This traditional feminine signifier is used to mark a space of difference from a whitewashed society. Within Colonial India, femininity was also used and inseparable from “politics of cultural authenticity, preservation and identity itself” (Handa, 2004, p. 176). Therefore, femininity was used to symbolize distinction and differentiation from the Western woman and the Western world (Handa, 2004, p. 176).

9.3. Re-conceptualizing the feminine

The final basic theme under the organizing theme of racially marked femininity is “re-conceptualizing the feminine.” There are multiple ways to conceive of the feminine and femininity. The following examples taken from gender studies course texts demonstrate the contradictory invisible presence of alternative ways of thinking through femininity. One conceptualization of the “feminine” that diverges from the racially unmarked, white subject embedded within dominant feminist conceptions of femininity is Hindu Prakriti (Nanda, 1997, p. 377). The Prakriti, otherwise known as Shiva’s “feminine principle,” is defined as “an ontological continuity between society and nature” which “excludes possibilities of exploitation and domination” and which brings women and nature together “*not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*” (Nanda, 1997, p. 377). As explained by Nanda (1997), ecological crises are a result of the symbolic death of Prakriti (Nanda, 1997, p. 377). This understanding of Prakriti demonstrates one of the multiple ways that femininity can be understood and reveals the complex ways dominant feminist theory has taken the assumed passivity of patriarchal femininity to be universal. There are many implications for the monolithic understanding of femininity that go beyond that which is critiqued within feminist theory, from spiritual, religious, to environmental.

For example, within some indigenous cultural contexts, there is a terrible price for cutting off one’s “feminine roots,” such as the severing of the motherline (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 212). Severing of the motherline refers to the loss of authenticity and authority of one’s womanhood (O’Reilly, 2004). In order to be reclaimed, one must “reconnect to the motherline” and to their feminine roots (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 212). The motherline grounds “daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history,” allowing them to derive strength from their sense of femininity (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 212). What may now be discredited and trivialized as “gossip and old wives tales” were once forms of “female oral tradition,” which reunited mothers and daughters, reconnecting them to the motherline and establishing gynocentric bonds needed to effect change in the “larger patriarchal culture” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 212).

10. Feminist theories of sameness: Femmephobia and normative whiteness

Authors cited in gender studies course texts, such as Enakshi Dua, Sherene Razack, bell hooks, and Himani Bannerji, have expressed concern over feminist theories of “sameness” and how they impact the experiences of women of colour (Pinterics, 2004, p. 78). Several theorists cited in gender studies course texts have noted that femininity is constructed in a way that refers only to white women (Warnke, 2011, p. 78). The overview of dominant theories of femininity suggests that this may be the case, echoing feminist histories of political fractures over uncritical invocations of sameness. Dominant theories of femininity are an “unmarked category against which difference is constructed” (Lipsitz, 2005, p. 68). Third-wave feminist theory is known for emphasizing the “need for greater acceptance of complexities, ambiguities and multiple locations,” highlighting the dangers of dichotomous thinking (Pinterics, 2004, p. 78). Yet, as gender studies course texts suggest, the acceptance of multiplicities and ambiguities has not been extended to femininity. While many third-wave thinkers criticize the second wave for its homogenization and essentializing of “woman” and “sisterhood” (Pinterics, 2004, p. 78), many third-wave thinkers continue to participate in the homogenization, essentialization and white-washing of femininity.

Bringing empowered femininity to the forefronts illustrates the invisibility of racially marked femininity within dominant feminist theories. Not only does the homogenization of femininity maintain a normative feminist subject, it also maintains femininity as white and racially marked femme subjectivities invisible. Though invisible, when she becomes present, the racially marked femme challenges hetero-racialized systems of gender, race, and sexuality that maintain femininity as white and heterosexually available to a masculine subject. Moreover, by claiming a gender expression that has been historically and contemporarily withheld from certain subjects by virtue of racial identity, bodily difference, or social location, the re/clamation of femininity in itself acts as a nuancing of powers. Racially marked femininities “rip open” dominant assumptions of femininity (Keeling, 2007, p. 144) and, specifically, those embedded within feminist theory. In so doing, the femme subject forces us to reconsider and rethink feminine assumptions, by way of race, in addition to

cisnormativity, heteronormativity and ableism. Though often invisible in their appearance, femmes of colour challenge the assumed normative subject within dominant culture and feminist theory. Ze is an identity that ought not to have survived histories of racist femmephobia, and one the white powers of normativity would like to erase. When ze appears, hir self-actualized feminine expression is a revolt against discourses and histories of white rule. Femmes expose dominant culture's naturalized identity formations and, within the current analysis, the embedded normative subjectivity within gender studies course texts.

11. Limitations and future research

The current analysis only scratches the surface of the multiple ways in which the homogenization of femininity as inherently oppressive maintains hegemonic standards of normativity: for example, crip femme bodies. Furthermore, the current paper was limited in its ability to claim broad representativeness of feminist pedagogies or feminisms. These texts cannot be claimed as representative but give us insight into femininities and feminist pedagogies. Texts used in classes are not always taken for granted but are also used as a tool of critical engagement. The current study exclusively examined the texts used, and could not address *how* they are used and engaged with. In this way, claims cannot be made about representation of feminist pedagogies, but instead, texts chosen for feminist courses. Future research should consider ethnographic, participant observation or focus groups to examine how these texts are taught, engaged with, challenged and problematized in order to further explore claims of representation of the current study's findings.

12. Conclusion: Thinking through the limitations of CWF theory

A reoccurring theoretical underpinning within queer and feminist literature is the slippage into a white norm facilitated by a racially unmarked analytical anchor. Dyer (2005) explains that, "as long as white people are not racially seen or named, [whiteness] function[s] as a human norm" (p. 10). This normative view makes whiteness invisible. By over-viewing literature used to teach undergraduate feminist theory courses in Canada between 2010 and 2011, the current paper illustrates another instance in which the white masculine subject is not only embedded but privileged as the norm. Consequently, this analysis functions to de-center the normative white subject assumed within feminist theory. Using a queerly racialized femme perspective, the current analysis of gender studies course textbooks suggests another potential fracture of feminism: feminist theory's wedding to patriarchal frameworks and tendency to erase femme identities, both of which prop up compulsory cis/heterosexuality and normative whiteness.

Within gender studies course texts, the feminine subject is the object of critique and not able to be "properly" feminist. Within dominant feminist theories, white femininity is present in hir otherness and in the critiques of hir femininity, but the racially marked femme does not exist even in absence. By decolonizing femininities, it becomes possible to understand how the racially marked femme has been overlooked or rendered invisible within gender studies at present. In the current study the racially marked femme is an impossibility, leaving the question of violence to haunt the absented presence of the femme. The femme—as a queer potentiality—opens up new ways to think about feminist politics. Born from the same historical fractures that rose out of the politics of sameness and the homogenization of identity categories, the femme subject exposes normative frameworks and guides feminist theory toward a more inclusive intersectional analysis.

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Appendix A

- (1) Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women's Lives*.
- (2) Rose Weitz, ed. *The Politics of Women's Bodies. Sexuality, Appearance and Behavior*.
- (3) Viviane Namaste. *Sex Change. Social Change*.
- (4) Althea Prince and Susan Silva-Wayne, eds., *Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women's Studies Reader*.
- (5) Georgia Warnke, *Debating Sex and Gender*.
- (6) B. A. Crow and L. Gotell, *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*.



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