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# The “Homofeminine” Lesbian: An (Un)Intelligible Identity?

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## Abstract

This paper examines the “homofeminine” lesbian – an (un)intelligible identity that grapples with notions of intelligibility as an identity on the cusp and borders of intersectionality between heterosexual and lesbian cultures. Through this I will question how identities that appear normative in their conforming genders, but are anti-normative in their non-conforming sexualities, subvert and transcend Western culture’s social norms, yet equally remain (in)visible and trapped by the power-discourses that generate these norms. I will argue that theories of intelligibility must reflect a greater discourse of diversity, creating bodies of (un)intelligibility, rather than focusing on notions of difference and otherness that proliferate the gap between intelligible and unintelligible bodies.

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The term “homofemininity” was originally coined by the gay activist editor of *Drummer* magazine, Jack Fritscher, in 1977. The term was under-defined in comparison to his concept of “homomascularity”, receiving little notoriety or conceptualisation, which has persisted until now. In the 1970s, Fritscher, as editor in chief of *Drummer*, felt the necessity to invent a new vocabulary to articulate “the love that once dared not speak” in order to have specific words, “gay words,” that related to sexual identity and erotic-play that had previously remained inarticulate. When expressing his use of the term “homomascularity”, Fritscher stated that,

I focused my high-concept term not on sex, as in the word homosexuality, but on gender identity for masculine-identified men. I designed homomascularity as a calm and supportive word, unlike the word hyper-masculinity which, because of the prefix hyper, sounds like a clinical analysis of the bad, exaggerated, and swaggering machismo of insecure males straight and gay. Respectful of female-identified lesbians in leather, I coined, at the same time, the coordinate term homofemininity.<sup>1</sup>

Other than suggesting “homofemininity” as a coordinate term, Fritscher does not articulate what this term conceptualises, maintaining it as an elusive enigma. Comparable to how “homomascularity” signifies a calmer, more supportive word that breaks from the exaggerated machismo of hyper-masculinity, I intend to position “homofemininity” as a similar, calmer notion of hyper-femininity, one that can be performed by females considered both heterosexual and/or lesbian femme. Whilst Fritscher states that he focuses the term not on sex, but gender-identity, I equally feel that this term needs greater clarity within the gender/sexuality dichotomy and relation, particularly with the supposed correlation between specific gender, sex and sexual preference. Similar to Fritscher’s position that “homomascularity” is a masculine-identified homosexuality, “homofemininity” will be situated in similar terms within this paper, as a feminine-identified homosexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Fritscher, “The Academy: Incarceration for Pleasure,” in *Drummer* 145, December 1990, as found in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer Magazine*, at [www.JackFritscher.com](http://www.JackFritscher.com)

However, lesbian cultures have already constituted the terms butch and femme that generate gendered binary oppositions within these sexual identities, so why would the conceptualisation of "homofemininity" be useful in terms of intelligibility between gender and sexual identity? Whilst I understand the significance of roles played by the constructs of "butch-femme" interactions, due to the loaded, heavily theorised and often negatively positioned connotations of butch-femme relations, I believe their identity constrictions require an alternative re-evaluation of lesbian culture. Similarly, femme has often been conceptualised as an "inauthentic" lesbian and in a hierarchical relation to butch, once again inscribing the negative with femininity and the positive with masculinity. Within *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls*, Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker note that,

It is ironic that the very visibility as lesbians that makes butches targets of homophobia in public spaces also makes them more visible as "real" lesbians than femmes in the context of a lesbian community. While both butch and femme positions have been vexed within lesbian and feminist communities, the visibility of butches has often empowered them to speak for butch-femme. Thus femmes have been seen neither as "real" feminists within feminist communities nor as "real" lesbians within lesbian communities.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, I want to posit the theorisation of "homofemininity" as a more ambiguous concept of lesbian femininity that draws upon androgynous modes of femininity, stepping away from the continuation of a binary opposition to masculine identities and the negative positioning of femme. However, by suggesting a "middle ground" between femme-butch, where femininity is not "actively" performed and masqueraded in the same way as it has been materialised as such within femme's consideration of femininity, I will consider how this "in-between" identity negotiates the borders of heterosexual and lesbian communities, questioning the term's level of intelligibility. Since "femme" has been theorised or perceived as hyper-feminine or consciously performing femininity, the "homofeminine" lesbian diverges from this to sit on the precipice between butch and femme that still "passes" under the radar of heterosexual society. Subsequently, I hope that querying how a more inclusive consideration of diverse femininities in both lesbian and heterosexual communities could make her identity more intelligible and that the recognition of (un)intelligible "border-treading" bodies may provide an alternative, more sinuously subversive approach to undoing gender and its synonymous connection to both sex and sexuality.

I will explore how the "homofeminine" lesbian navigates city-spaces and the gazes of others that cement her as an arguably (un)intelligible subject; neither intelligible, nor unintelligible, but living on the borders of both heterosexual, patriarchal society and lesbian communities. I will grapple with the "homofeminine" lesbian's notion of intelligibility due to her ambiguous position of appearing both normative in her conforming gender to sex, yet anti-normative in her non-corresponding sexuality, which together subvert, transcend, but equally entrap her in the power-discourses that generate Western culture's social norms. To contextualise this paper, the concept of "intelligibility" will be put forth in relation to how Judith Butler has theorised

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

the term as the way in which “becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility”<sup>3</sup> is how an individual becomes intelligible. In other words, an identity becomes comprehensible by adhering to social norms, which often assume a coherent relationship between (biological) sex, gender and the sexual orientation and preferences of an individual. This assumed relationship arguably begins from birth, before the child can consciously perform coherent gender constructs, in that the observed genitalia automatically suggests an “innate” gendering essence, which is precipitated by the way in which the child is then clothed, spoken to and treated by those around them.<sup>4</sup> The social expectation of this assumed alignment of coherent gender to biological sex is often what in fact continues to produce and precipitate this supposedly synonymous relationship. The intelligibility of an identity is generated through repetitive performance that produces a continual and coherent gender identity that is recognisable within cultural norms. These norms prescribe specific performances that must be uttered in certain ways in order to be perceived as intelligible. Consequently, Butler articulates how the coherence of an individual’s intelligibility, whilst produced through performative utterances, is ultimately socially instituted and maintained through societally normative notions of sex, gender and sexual orientations.

In contrast, an unintelligible identity is constituted as a body that performs societally normative constructs when, according to the dominant mainstream standards that govern such bodies, it should not. For example, if a male body is considered to be performing a high level of femininity, this supposed incoherence between the male body and its gender performance may make this individual unintelligible. The actual femininity itself is not unintelligible, instead, what is perceived as less intelligible is the relation of this gender performance to the specific body subsuming this performance. However, when an individual repetitively undertakes this performance, this precipitates a set of behaviours, mannerisms and gender signifiers that generates an intelligibility whereby the individual becomes recognisable as someone who consistently undertakes those performances. Consequently intelligibility is not a static condition, but one in which there is potential for change and by examining an identity on the border between intelligibility and unintelligibility, I intend to question the assumed synonymy between sex, gender and sexuality.

Gender and the way in which it is inscribed upon/within the body often has a privileged relation to sight in the way in which an individual may wear certain clothing or exhibit certain aesthetics, behaviours, and mannerisms that suggest a level of coherent gendering of feminine or masculine traits. Sexuality, within its assumed relation to gender, has equally been perceived as obtaining a privileged relation to sight; therefore, as Amy Villarejo points out:

What does it mean to assert a “specular morphology” of lesbian, or lesbian as image? It means to suggest that lesbian has a privileged relation to sight, not as essence but as effect. I am not saying that lesbian is merely appearance, but that it is in appearance that lesbian frequently is. This is not to exclude or continue to denigrate touch, smell, sound, or taste (for surely at least some of us, save Queen Victoria, have felt, smelled, heard, and tasted lesbians), but it

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3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.

4 *Ibid.*

is to suggest that lesbian is most commonly seen. Why, and in what ways? What does it mean to see a lesbian, and what do we think when we think we have seen a lesbian? What are the politics of the look?<sup>5</sup>

Who has the right to look, to inspect the lesbian body? Within *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire*, Villarejo presents the lesbian as a position with a specific relation to sight. To see a lesbian means to place a specific set of beliefs, politics or sexualisation onto a body, and to acknowledge an identity that is anti-normative. A lesbian's visibility ensures that she will be looked at with the knowledge of whom she desires to attract, objectified as a lesbian rather than a heterosexual woman for a masculine gaze. Additionally, the environment arguably alters who has the right to see and desire. Lesbian bars or social spaces allow females to gaze upon each other. Knowledge of sexual orientation enables a permissive boundary to form, whereby if we are perceived as lesbian, we attract, welcome, allow or at least anticipate the gaze of other women upon us within these spaces. But what of the spaces where this potential right is muted and deemed either unacceptable or simply unrecognisable?

With the example of the female-only public bathroom, an extremely gender-specific space, one can grasp how fully ingrained normative gender constructs are in everyday spaces as well as how fundamental aesthetic-markers of femininity are to signifying the female body and how an individual is gazed upon within these spaces. Jack Halberstam emphasises the experience of inhabiting spaces that adhere to strict gendering, stating:

[...] women's rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity. Sex-segregated bathrooms continue to be necessary to protect women from male predations but also produce and extend a rather outdated notion of a public-private split between male and female society.<sup>6</sup>

For gender-ambiguous identities the uncomfortable experience of public bathrooms is one of the most problematic. Yet, this is equally applicable to "sexually-ambiguous" identities since mainstream society expects us to not only be visibly gendered and readable as female and feminine, but also heterosexual.

Halberstam articulates the public bathroom as a pseudo-domestic space of "enhanced femininity"<sup>7</sup>, where gender is the primary enforced structure to suggest who is accepted and safe. For that reason, the public female bathroom is meant to be a safe female-only space, one of the few female-only spaces within the public sphere. If gender-ambiguous lesbians are no longer perceived as allies to heterosexual women in their unreadable femininity and anti-normative sexuality, then their presence within a female-only space is compromised, questioned and punished. They are no longer welcome, but feared and resented, similar to if a man had entered. Halberstam goes on to suggest that:

5 Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 56.

6 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 24.

7 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 24.

in these bathroom confrontations, the gender-ambiguous person first appears as not-woman (“You are in the wrong bathroom!”), but then the person appears as something actually even more scary, not-man (“No, I am not,” spoken in a voice recognized as not-male). Not-man and not-woman, the gender-ambiguous bathroom user is also not androgynous or in-between; this person is gender deviant.”<sup>8</sup>

I believe this is likewise fitting of the “homofeminine” lesbian. Within her “passing”, she is the woman-not-woman, dismantling the supposed synonymous relationship between gender and sexuality. Her “passing” is both the reason she is seen as a non-threat and threat, depending on whether her sexuality remains invisible or not.

Subsequently, the “homofeminine” lesbian is located within the intersectionality of a quieter, more sinuous homophobia of how femininity should align with heterosexuality, which is equally interlaced with a misogynistic sexism towards femininity and women as a whole. Yet, this homophobia is subtly articulated by heterosexual women and lesbians alike who either perceive femininity as a privileged gender for heterosexual women or a negatively, inauthentic gender for lesbians where hierarchies of power within lesbian communities denote femininity to a synonymous relationship with heterosexuality. Within *Homophobia: A History* (2000), Bryne Fone suggests varying types of prejudice that connote homophobia stating that, “those who suffer from narcissistic prejudice “cannot tolerate the idea that there exist people who are not like them.”<sup>9</sup> This functions greatly with regard to the lesbophobic relationship between “butch” lesbians and heterosexual women, yet the “homofeminine” I argue creates the reverse prejudice, making heterosexual women face the notion that there exists people who are like them, in the same spaces, but still different. The “homofeminine” lesbian is too similar when gazed upon by the heterosexual woman who can identify with her. When this similarity is exposed as a “façade,” the “homofeminine” lesbian identity creates a rupture in the synonymous relationship of women exhibiting femininity equalling a heterosexual orientation, which arguably forces heterosexual women to confront their own feminine performances, gazes and the stability of their labels that position their identities within heterosexual society.

Whilst it may be argued that unintelligibility can lead to experiences of fear of violence, insults and ostracism, particularly in spaces which elicit strict gendering regulations and enforcements, I argue that there is not just one set of social norms or constructs that a body can comply with and therefore measure their intelligibility against. Nowadays, I believe we must recognise the diversity of social norms continually affecting a body. Not only has the repetitive performance of mainstream patriarchal and heterosexual gender, sex and sexuality norms instilled notions of what is normative within us, but the repetitive utterance of butch, femme, drag, camp, transsexual and transgender identities has arguably generated alternative norms; more recognisable identities with certain behaviours, signifiers and constructs. Whilst these may still be considered anti-normative, they are nonetheless intelligible identities in certain spaces and communities; therefore, one can argue that various LGBTQ communities have generated their own notions of

8 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 21.

9 Byrne Fone, *Homophobia: A History* (New York: Picador, 2001), 6.

normativity and created alternative intelligible identities within these communities. For example, the reverse appropriation of gender aesthetics occurs within lesbian communities in which the butch is a female's norm and the "homofeminine" lesbian is arguably ambiguous within her androgynous "in-between" state, whilst the femme is often labelled as "fake" or "inauthentic". Therefore, whilst the butch identity may remain unrecognisable or less intelligible within mainstream society, its repetitive utterance as a lesbian identity has nonetheless produced butch identities as recognisable, intelligible identities within the space of lesbian communities.

Consequently, when considering the question of what makes an identity intelligible, one must also ask – in what situation? In what community? By whose constructs, recognitions and standards? Minority cultures have generated, performatively entrenched and normalised their own normative constructs, in which various markers of desirability and aesthetics signify a body's inclusion within their respective contexts, adding to a further struggle for visibility and recognition within marginal sexualities for those who do not "fit" the generated norms created by these communities. If norms are considered to be regulated spatially and temporally by varying cultures and communities, then one can begin to understand the "homofeminine" lesbian like Sally Munt's *lesbian flâneur*<sup>10</sup>, trespassing the borders of sexual geographies without fully inhabiting or settling anywhere, nomadic and continuously misrecognised wherever she goes. For the "homofeminine" lesbian, her aesthetic similarity to a heterosexual, feminine woman arguably makes her less intelligible, through continuous misrecognition as belonging where she herself does not want to belong. Consequently, highlighting the multitude of (un)intelligible bodies may be beneficial to critiquing the terms of what is considered intelligible, whereby an identity, such as the "homofeminine" lesbian, could hold positive possibilities of change by demonstrating the incoherence of gender and sexuality alignments from a position of "similarity," rather than difference. By doing so, this could potentially establish the need for more inclusive modes of intelligibility or at least broader understandings of what is intelligible.

If the way in which discourses of power and knowledge interplay is deliberated upon in similar contexts to Butler's consideration of their relationship, whereby:

The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Michel Foucault makes plain, a question of power. Having or bearing "truth" and "reality" is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way that power dissimulates as ontology.<sup>11</sup>

Then perhaps the continual theorising of the Other in opposition to the norm needs to consider an alternative route, one that desists legitimising the same mechanisms it desires to dismantle. What was once subversive in its classification as Other and challenging to social norms has now arguably become naturalised through discourses of power and knowledge of this Otherness. The growing visibility of varying minority cultures and communities means that they have generated their own social norms, constructs and modes of identity that signify a body's inclusion

<sup>10</sup> Sally Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur," *Mapping Desire*, eds. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 27.

within certain contexts, even if this signification may be classified as Otherness to mainstream social norms.

Although Butler argues for the necessity to track the breaking points of the field of intelligibility, to meet its discontinuities and points of failure, where the site of intelligibility cannot be constituted,<sup>12</sup> I believe this must be expanded upon to address the way in which the Other no longer necessarily tracks the discontinuities of intelligibility, because it continues to uphold societal expectations and norms simply by being the comparison to the normative, where anti-normative identities have become naturalised to an extent in their own acknowledged categories. Therefore, rather than exploring these identities with notions of difference and Otherness, perhaps we should look to track these border-treading identities from notions of sameness, to challenge the normative breaking points or discontinuities within their own constructs and what this means in relation to intelligibility.

The “homofeminine” lesbian is a *spatial flâneur*, tightrope walking the borders of different communities, neither intelligible nor unintelligible, but never truly belonging. The context in which the body is situated, as well as the affect of spatial, temporal and human bodies upon the self, continuously problematises normative constructs of gender, sex and sexuality. Although the performance of gender is not static or a presupposed identity, but generated through daily actions, arguably these utterances rely upon social contexts that are not necessarily homogenous to heterosexual, patriarchal society, but to the community one desires recognition and livability within. The “homofeminine” lesbian, as an identity misrecognised and ultimately invisible to certain gazes, assists in demonstrating the complexity of intelligibility and how vast the grey area between intelligible/unintelligible and recognised/unrecognised is when negotiating diverse cultures and communities, which highlight that society and social norms are themselves continually altering depending on the performative utterances of identities.

The approach to intelligibility requires greater elasticity to reflect diversity, recognising border-treading identities of (un)intelligibility that highlight discontinuities within the very constructs of sex, sexuality and gender norms. Whilst this paper is by no means an exhaustive study, I hope it provides a starting point for further discussion on the way in which “similarity” and the rupturing of assumed gender and sexual orientation alignments in regards to the “homofeminine” lesbian could facilitate the undermining of synonymous relationships between gender, sex and sexuality, which have not only been naturalised in heterosexual society, but also LGBTQ communities. Ultimately, since no-one truly embodies society’s normative constructs, we should highlight how the normative is as varied as the anti-normative, creating a more inclusive, diverse and less presumptuous intelligibility of identities, where aesthetic markers of stereotypical or normative gender, sex and sexual subjectivities are no longer heavily relied upon. Butler reflects upon the power of certain identities, such as drag, and how they enter into the political field:

They make us not only question what is real, and what “must” be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted. These practices of instituting new modes of

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12 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 215-216.

reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished face, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.<sup>13</sup>

The "homofeminine" lesbian as an in-between or more androgynous mode of feminine lesbian produces a similar affect, albeit in more elusive terms, in which the norms are not questioned by comparatively highlighting differences or Otherness, but by exposing the very mechanisms that apparently produce such social norms as deficient and incomplete. Ultimately, through greater visibility and recognition of (un)intelligible identities as scenes of lived embodiment on the borders of varying cultures, perhaps these bodies, always in the mode of becoming, will not only generate new modes of reality, but highlight how society's current modes of reality are already questionable, already unable to confine to us in written stone.

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13 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.