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ABSTRACT
Using femme theory, Foucault, and queer failure as analytical frameworks, the current paper demonstrates the role of feminine failure in resisting and subverting systems of oppression, subsequently providing the minute shifts in power necessary to expand the terms of patriarchal femininity. More specifically, the current paper draws on contemporary modes of art and aesthetics to examine the productive potential of failing to embody patriarchal femininity, positing this failure as a form of femme resistance. By hijacking cultural signifiers of adornment, femme and feminine failure celebrate that which is culturally shamed (queer, fat, disabled, variant, poor, and racially minoritised bodies), expose systems of erasure, challenge binary systems of meaning, and promote feminine growth. Examining each of these themes in turn, the current paper argues that feminine failure challenges the pillars of patriarchal femininity and discursive systems of normativity. To this end, femme as a theoretical framework demonstrates the freedom of failure by exposing the heterogeneous multiplicities of femininity, and offering possibilities that normativity never could. This critical discursive essay contributes to the emergent application of femme as a theoretical framework.

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Waxing and waning throughout western history, feminine expressions and aesthetics have moved from an adornment of royalty and of spiritual significance, to an indicator of a woman’s virtue, a sign of dishonesty, and the subject of social criticism and satire (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; Eldridge, 2015; Martin, 1996; Serano, 2007). This historical flux challenges the cultural claim to naturalised feminine inferiority rampant in the west, and demonstrates that current western heteropatriarchal conceptualisations of femininity are not transhistorical but, rather, have been shaped by cultural, political and religious climates throughout history (Deliovsky, 2008; Schippers, 2016). While the genealogy of femininity is beyond the scope of a singular paper, this history provides a context to re-examine feminine epistemologies, provoking the reader to think beyond current cultural imaginaries. Drawing on contemporary modes of art and aesthetics, the following discursive essay excavates femininity from its historical use of adornment, demonstrating its modern use as a tool of resistance against hegemonic systems of oppression. Using a Foucauldian framework, in addition to Hoskin’s (2017b) femme theory and Halberstam’s (2011) queer failure as analytical anchors, the current paper examines feminine failure (i.e. deviations from patriarchal feminine norms) as a productive tool of resistance. Through failure, feminine aesthetics, erotics, and expressions celebrate cultural sites of shame, expose systems of erasure, challenge binary systems of meaning, and promote feminine growth. These challenges posed by feminine failure unhinge the discursive systems of patriarchal femininity, and resist the cultural ideal of a singular and ahistorical femininity.
Femme scholarship

Femme identities

Historically, the term ‘femme’ has been used to reference queer femininities, often specifically how queer women do femininity (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1992).² Femme, like butch, was originally born out of America’s postwar working-class lesbian culture (Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003). Within this body of work, femme resists dominant notions of lesbian aesthetics and, by extension, sexologists’ understandings of ‘homosexuality’ as sexual inversion (Faderman, 1991; Hemmings, 1999; Hirschmann, 2013; Walker, 2001). Further, femmes dislodged the arbitrary connection between gender performance and sexuality, an important part of modern femme phenomenology (Martin, 1996; Somerson, 2004; VanNewkirk, 2006). Together and separately, femmes and butches share a history of simultaneously ‘reproducing’ and challenging heterosexual patterns of relating, while subverting heteropatriarchal systems of sex/gender/sexuality (Eves, 2004; Munt & Smyth, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). Indeed, within traditional models of butch/femme, gender performance has always included an element of political resistance (Carter & Noble, 1996; Levitt & Hiestand, 2005; Nestle, 1992). This history has paved the way for both modern invocations of femme, as well as expansions on prior forms of femme resistance.

Femme theory: femme as a theoretical framework

Noting the lack of theorisation that centres femininity, scholars such as Connell (1987, 2005) and Schippers (2007) have urged for additional research focusing on the intersection of femininity. The application of femme theory and centring femme in the examination of femininity more broadly is a means of remedying such a gap. Femme theory grounds its analysis in what brings femme identities together and, in the focus on similarity, allows for simultaneous complexity. Consequently, femme as a theoretical framework offers a unique insight into femininity and the study of feminine diversity (e.g. Hoskin, 2017a; McCann, 2018b).

Contemporary femme literature is a growing body of work, comprised of academic, personal, and cultural productions committed to challenging the exclusionary nature of patriarchal femininity (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Dahl, 2011, 2012, 2017; McCann, 2018a; Walker, 2012). Contemporary (re)iterations of femme are embodied by individuals who claim ‘multiple identities over a broad spectrum of sexual and gender differences’ (Blair & Hoskin, 2016, p. 101), including, but not limited to, ‘sassy queer men; unapologetically sexual straight women; trans women; crip bodied femmes who refuse to be desexualised or degendered; and femmes of colour who refuse to approximate white beauty norms’ (Hoskin, 2017b, p. 99). Beyond an identity, femme is an enactment (Maltry & Tucker, 2002), a politic (Serano, 2013), an erotic³ (Nestle, 1992), an adjunctive or noun (Bergman, 2006) and a critical analytic, which requires bringing the multiplicities of femininities into focus (Dahl, 2017; Hoskin, 2017b, 2018, 2019). As such, femme potential ought not to be reduced to an aesthetic – or, perhaps, even an identity.

While this body of work articulates numerous invocations and definitions of femme across gender and sexualities (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Burke, 2009a, 2009b; Spoon, 2011), what brings them together is their re-writing and disruption of patriarchal femininity (Cvetkovich, 2003; Dahl, 2011, 2017; Duggan & McHugh, 2002; Galewski, 2005; Marston, 2011; Taylor, 2018; Volcano & Dahl, 2008). Drawing on contemporary femme invocations, Hoskin’s (2017b) ‘femme theory’ conceptualises femme as femininities that veer from patriarchal sanctions of femininity. Consequently, this body of literature suggests femme’s queerness to be characterised by failure. Femme is agential femininity, forged from the ‘crucibles of difference’⁴ (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).

Femme theory is informed by, but separate from, femme identities. Femme scholars like Dahl (2017) outline how self-identification as femme and intentionality with regards to femme embodiment, although important for some femmes, is not necessary or privileged in the application of femme theory. Instead, femme is conceived of as encompassing a plurality of ‘femmebodiments’ or
the ‘infinite intra-categorical variations of femininity’, that are distinguished by the subjects’ affective, embodied, and subjective experiences of feminine difference from patriarchal femininity (Dahl, 2017, p. 36). Consequently, and as is consistent with a queer framework, the current paper purposefully positions femme as a boundary-dweller who slips between discrete categories and elides clear definition. This operationalisation of femme is akin to Schippers (2007) notion of pariah femininities, which she describes as a set of characteristics that deviate from the norms of femininity. In their deviation, pariah femininities, like femme, contaminate the relationship between masculinity and femininity, and erode gender hegemony more broadly (Schippers, 2007). Similarly, femme theory brings the various ‘femme’ invocations come together, and applies what this ‘coming-togetherness’ can do as a political or theoretical framework. It does not erase but, rather, highlights the cohesion across intersecting femme identities informed by dimensions of class, race, sexuality, gender identity, and ability.

Conversely, patriarchal femininity refers to homogenised femininity, which is produced through essentialism and the enforced adherence to intersecting racial, able-bodied and cisgender norms (Hoskin, 2013, 2017b). Moreover, patriarchal femininity functions to naturalise the current understandings of femininity and feminine beauty. Though similar to hegemonic or normative femininity, patriarchal femininity differs in its specific reference to the regulatory power and gender policing (i.e. femmephobia) used to maintain normative femininity. To this end, femmephobia is defined as the systematic devaluation of femininity and gender policing that regulates deviations from intersecting feminine norms (Hoskin, 2019).

Patriarchal femininity and femmephobia work in tandem. For example, patriarchal femininity requires docile bodies assigned female at birth that maintain white heteropatriarchal cisgender standards of able-bodied normativity (Hoskin, 2017b). Those who veer from normative standards of femininity are targets of femmephobia, which works to subordinate and maintain the ideals of patriarchal femininity (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Hoskin, 2017b). This conception of patriarchal femininity is consistent with some feminists’ arguments that femininity is an oppressive construct imposed upon women to (re)produce them as powerless objects (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; de Beauvoir, 1949; Friedman, 1963). Take, for instance, the patriarchal feminine norm of thinness, or whiteness, and how this patriarchal feminine imperative informs oppressive beauty ideals (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 2002). Conversely, femme is femininity that cannot or will not approximate these norms.

The distinction between patriarchal femininity and femme is not to (re)produce a binary between the two but, rather, to emphasise and explore the ways patriarchal femininity – as an abstract ideal with very material consequences – is always already out of reach (Butler, 1990). For instance, as patriarchal femininity is largely conceptualised as an unattainable ideal (Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984), all feminine expressions fail in varying ways at (re)producing patriarchal femininity. Hegemonic norms flatten out the difference (Bordo, 1993), and patriarchal femininity is no exception. Patriarchal feminine norms serve as the ideal against which the individual is continuously judged, measured and corrected, which erases variability (Bordo, 1993). Thus, centring multiplicity through femme does not create a binary but, rather, illuminates the variation that already exists. Femme multiplicity also reveals opportunities to explore how feminine failures might differentiate between those gender norms that undo feminine subjectivity, and those that make feminine lives more liveable (Butler, 2004). Therefore, this branching out of femme is not an exclusionary practice of drawing boundaries around particular femininities but, instead, a practice of inviting-in. Through this invitation, we illuminate the reach of feminine resistance where it may have once been assumed complacent (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Brownmiller, 1984). To this end, a goal of the current paper is to highlight forms of feminine resistance that are often eschewed due to the lens through which femininity is typically interpreted. Importantly, this practice of inviting-in is consistent with contemporary femme scholars’ calls for resisting strict demarcations between queer femme and femininity and, instead, theorising femininities in relation to one another (Galewski, 2005; McCann, 2018a; Walker, 2012).
While hinging femme theory on the shared commonalities across femme invocations may run the risk of positing a universal femme identity, this is not the intended outcome. Rather, the distinction should be made between femme as a theoretical framework and femme as an identity. Femme theory is not a particular definition of femme, nor does it claim a universal definition of femme. For instance, while many people identify as queer, queer theory does not claim to be a particular definition of queer identity (Jagose, 1996). Rather, like femme, queer is both an identity, an adjective, and a theoretical framework. Specifically, femme theory is a theoretical framework used in the analysis of femininity, gender and power. Queer theory dissects and interrogates all of the dimensions that are wrapped up in heterosexuality (e.g. binary gender, sex, discrete sexual categories), which quickly makes heterosexuality as a construct untenable and unintelligible. In doing so, queer theory offers alternate ways of understanding sex/ual categories (Sullivan, 2003). The same could be said for femme theory’s examination of femininity. Femme theory unpacks the various dimensions of identity that make up ‘femme’ – understood as failed femininities – asking how these identities are anchored within a femme identification and what is shared across these various invocations. Such a framework is important to the growing area of critical femininities, offering a dimensional understanding of femininity by highlighting cohesion while drawing attention to the complexity of femininity.

Femme mercuriality is, thus, a purposeful tool to dislodge the reductive norms of patriarchal femininity (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). It is precisely through its inability to be pinned down that femme, like queer, does not allow for a discrete binary division but instead offers opportunities to move, adjust and blur boundaries (Shildrick, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Thus, rather than implying binary division, this distinction brings the ways in which femininity has always been a mode of resistance into focus, even where this erasure is subsumed into normativity. Similar to queer theory, femme theory is an analytical tool useful in the erosion of the boundaries around patriarchal femininity.

In straying from patriarchal norms of femininity, femme exposes the resistance lying within feminine multiplicity. Moreover, just as femme has come to reflect and encompass many identities, so too has femme resistance expanded to reflect modern social issues. Cognizant of femme’s multiple embodiments and theoretical contributions, resistance is theorised in the failure to (re) produce norms of patriarchal femininity; and it is in feminine failure that the potential for the proliferation of alternate femininities can be explored.

Power, failure & femme resistance: the current paper

Using a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1978) analysis of power and Halberstam’s (2011) theory of queer failure, the current paper examines how feminine failure functions as a counter-discourse to resist patriarchal femininity. Specifically, the current paper engages with Foucault’s (1978) argument that, where power operates there is also resistance, which takes the form of counter-discourse. Similarly, Halberstam (2011) contends that failure occurs where subjects fall outside of dominant social norms, and that this failure is productive insofar as it offers conceptual space to critique and resist such norms. In this way, alternatives are embedded within dominant structures of power, and failure has the potential to uncover these alternatives. Thus, ‘failing’ offers resistant and more creative ways of being (Halberstam, 2011). Indeed, recent scholarship on queer(ing) fatness, for instance, has drawn on Halberstam’s (2011) theory of queer failure to create space to reconsider and chart alternative notions of fat sex/uality (White, 2016) and to theorise fat temporalities (McFarland, Slothouber, & Taylor, 2018). (Re)claiming failure is, therefore, productive for (re)thinking femininity and challenging patriarchal femininity, because counter-discourse is born from such failures (Halberstam, 2011). The counter-discourse of feminine failure creates space for alternate femininities and, consequently, challenges the normative, racialised, and ableist (re)production of patriarchal femininity. Importantly, rather positing failure as the most effective or sole mode of
feminine resistance, the current paper (re)frames individuals’ inevitable failures to (re)produce patriarchal femininity as a site of potentiality (McCann, 2018a).

It is within these multiple branches of thought – power and resistance, queer failure, and femme theory (Hoskin, 2017b) – that we situate the current paper. According to femme theory, femmes ‘fail’ in one principal way: they fail at (re)producing patriarchal femininity. McCann (2018a), too, notes the relationship between femme and failure, arguing for ‘the possibilities opened up via mistakes’ that can reveal ‘the radical possibilities of femme’ (pp. 126–127). However, to our knowledge, there has yet to be an analysis of the multiple intersections and modalities of feminine failure, nor this failure’s potential to resist broader structures of power. Moreover, while the idea of femme as failing patriarchal femininity is chronicled throughout femme literature and scholarship, few scholars have used femme theory, as distinct but emerging from femme identities, to analyse broader phenomena such as discursive systems of normativity and oppression.

In response, the current paper examines the productive potential of femme or feminine failure, and posits this failure as its own unique form of queer resistance. Building upon the ‘loud’ and ‘visible’ ‘performances’ of improper – and, thus, failed – femininity privileged in earlier femme literature (Dahl, 2011; Maltry & Tucker, 2002), the current paper focuses on both intentional and unintentional femme embodiments, arguing that both are productive forms of failure. This approach to considering feminine failure follows McCann’s (2018a) contention that (re)reading experiences of femme embodiment via a framework of failure creates space to consider ‘femme as less controlled and mindful than is often argued’ (p. 126). Thus, the current paper offers a valuable contribution by bringing together the various ways in which femme failure has been taken-up within empirical femme scholarship, narrative-based literature, or cultural productions, and using this ‘coming-togetherness’ as a theoretical lens through which to understand broader cultural phenomena. For the purposes of the current paper, this broader cultural phenomenon refers to discursive systems of normativity and the way these systems ensure the containment of patriarchal femininity through the erasure of multiplicity, and the (re)enforcement of both shame and binary systems of meaning. Indeed, bringing together diverse articulations of the ways in which femme ‘fails’ generates a larger theory; namely, femme theory (Hoskin, 2017b).

A (brief) note on methods

The goal of the current paper is not to define femme identity or experiences; nor is this paper an analysis of femme literature. Rather, the current paper is an application of femme theory that draws insight from previous femme scholarship to analyse phenomena outside of a discretely femme experience. By pulling examples outside of ‘femme’, the current paper offers a novel application of femme theory that considers the utility of feminine failure and resistance beyond the immediate experiences of femme-identified folks. In particular, we use femme theory to explore how failure to conform to patriarchal feminine norms offers a strategy of resistance, drawing examples from contemporary modes of art and aesthetics. Thus, rather than examining femme identity or experiences, we use femme theory to ask: what is accomplished and what strategies of resistance emerge from the failure to reproduce patriarchal feminine norms? In particular, this paper analyses feminine failure as a social production, while considering and re-framing this failure as pushing back against structures of oppression.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is not to provide a systematic review of the literature on failure for those who self-identify as femme, but to present a discursive essay that uses femme theory, an emergent theoretical framework akin to queer theory, to understand deviations from patriarchal femininity. This is achieved through Halberstam’s (1998) scavenger methodology which ‘uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately excluded from traditional studies of human behavior’ (p. 13). A scavenger methodology draws on principles, sources, and methods from a variety of disciplines and methodological frameworks, even where doing so disrupts disciplinary coherence or appears contradictory. Halberstam (1998)
uses a scavenger methodology for studying female masculinities, establishing this methodological approach as useful for exploring marginalised gender and sexual subjectivities and, thus, fitting for our analysis of fem(me)ininites. Dahl (2010) also notes the utility of a scavenger methodology for researching fem(me)ininites, drawing on multiple methodologies such as archival research, textual analysis, and ethnography to examine contemporary meanings and experiences of fem(me)ininity. Thus, the current paper brings together a variety of materials and methods of analysis to explore feminine failure and/as femme resistance.

**Celebrating cultural ‘sites of shame’**

In the mid-1990s, queer scholars began theorising gay and/or queer shame, and used shame to create space for anti-normative queer cultures and activisms, which served as alternatives to post-Stonewall gay pride politics (Halperin & Traub, 2009; Love, 2007; Sedgwick, 1993). In this line of thought, ‘shame’ is an affect that challenges the normalising logics of mainstream gay and lesbian movements and scholarship (Halperin & Traub, 2009). To minimise shame’s destructive potential and maximise its productive potential, Sedgwick (1993) argues that shame should be (re)conceptualised: shame should not be posited as toxic to a group or individual identity, nor as something to be excised or overcome. Instead, shame should be recognised as integral to, and residual within, culturally shamed identities. Shame’s productive potential, thus, lies in how it can bring subjects together by emphasising mutual experiences of abjection and rejection (Crimp, 2002; Sedgwick, 1993).

Femme scholarship illustrates how sites of deep cultural shame harbour the seeds of hope and liberation (Erickson, 2007). Celebrating one’s shame – one’s Otherness – dislodges the inner working of normative systems of oppression. For this reason, there are strong systems in place that keep subjects ‘from critically knowing and drawing power’ from sites of shame (Erickson, 2007, p. 43). Thus, the borders that divide subjects are the borders that are the most heavily policed. Those who transgress these bounds – by way of any non-normative embodiment – are policed by the discursive use of cultural shame. These non-docile subjects expose the permeability of normative rule and the inherent instability of cultural claims to subjecthood. Conversely, the failure or refusal to be shamed opens up sites of resistance. Therefore, by extension, feminine failure can mobilise shame to (re)value non-normative subjectivities and embodiments via the celebration of Otherness and the creation of community.

The defiant relationship between shame and feminine failure is exemplified by Erickson’s (2007) articulation of crip femmes (or ‘femmegimps’), whose failures offer a reconceptualisation of femininity that openly defy assimilation. Crip, queer and femme all run parallel in their pushback against constraints of normativity and illumination of compulsory identities (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002; Hoskin, 2017a; McRuer, 2006). While crip bodies are frequently feminised, they are paradoxically degendered and desexualised – rendered void of their signifying subjectivity (Clare, 1999; Erickson, 2007; Tremain, 1996). Degendering and desexualising crip bodies maintain disability as a source of shame (Finger, 1984; Magnet, 2005). Using failure and sites of shame as resistance, however, crips uproot cultural associations of disability to radically invoke femininity as a means of claiming sexuality and subject status within the cultural imaginary. For example, as a means of challenging normative paradigms of ‘sexy’, the performance project Sins Invalid celebrates and centralises artists with disabilities as a way of offering a vision of ‘beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities’ (Sins Invalid, 2012); performances which Sins Invalid co-founder Patricia Bern describes as a ‘celebration of being both hot and disabled’ (Smith, 2016).

Commenting on the intertwined relationship between patriarchal femininity and western standards of beauty, Bern notes that ‘part of [Sins Invalid’s] work is to liberate the idea of beauty from an ableist, heteronormative, patriarchal, racist – more of a white supremacist – vision that’s rooted in a profit-driven motive’ (Allen, 2013). In other words, as described in their tagline, Sins invalid is
‘An unashamed claim to beauty in the face of invisibility’. In this way, Sins Invalid demonstrates how the refusal to be shamed and the celebration of difference can open-up beauty, offering a space within which crip bodies reject standards of normativity. Specifically, the stories shared by the performers offer pathways to unity across oppression, ‘laying a foundation for a collective claim of liberation and beauty’ (Sins Invalid, 2012). Moreover, by refuting sexless portrayals of people with disabilities, the stylisation of Otherness and celebration of difference works to reimagine the erotic.

As described by Magnet (2005), crafting sexual subjectivity for crip bodies holds the potential to re-imagine the erotic. While this sexual subjectivity redirects ‘the objectifying, exploitative, and harmful gaze of the ableist mainstream’ (Magnet, 2005, p. 173), it equally moves beyond such an approach, and toward the development of a critical oppositional gaze (i.e., ‘looking back’ as a form of political resistance) (Hooks, 1992). By invoking what Magnet (2005) terms ‘visual pleasure as opposed to the objectifying stare’ (p. 174), feminine failure returns this normalising gaze. Reclamation of crip sexuality, therefore, can be achieved through claiming one’s ‘extraordinary body’ (Garland Thomson, 1997; Magnet, 2005), by way of femme stylisation and celebrations of difference. Consequently, Sins Invalid’s (re)claiming of femininities, beauty and the erotic offers a useful example of the ways that feminine failure can be particularly productive for crip embodimts.

The adoption of femininity where it is otherwise disqualified works to reclaim the normalising gaze, while also challenging systems of sexual qualification. For instance, although makeup can be used as a normalising tool of patriarchal femininity, crip femmes’ strategic use of makeup highlights disability and draws attention to their ‘failure’, while reclaiming and ador(n)ing what an ablest world has attempted to shame (Hoskin, In Press). This is not to argue for the use of femininity as a means of assimilating into a non-disabled aesthetic (Magnet, 2005), thereby erasing visible signifiers of crip difference. Instead, feminine failure can be strategically adopted to highlight and celebrate those differences via the cultural currency of femininity. In doing so, feminine failure dislodges a fundamental mechanism of policing normative boundaries – shame. By celebrating Otherness and creating communities, crip femmes’ failures or refusals to be shamed open up sites of resistance.

Like makeup, fashion can police normativity through cultural sites of shame. Fashion and consumerism capitalise on aspirations of normativity, as well as feelings of failure that derive from cultural shame (Jhally, 2003). Fashion establishes the norms and boundaries into which consumers force their bodies, functioning as a normalising tool that produces bodies ‘easily distinguishable by sex, race, class and so on’ (Connell, 2012, p. 209). Despite mainstream fashion’s capitalisation on shame, like makeup, fashion can be pushed beyond its role as a source of oppression and used to reclaim and celebrate non-normative embodiments.

Femme literature emphasises self-identified queer femmes’ affective attachments to fashion. For instance, many describe the pleasures of creating outfits that express their fem(me)inine gender and sexuality, or the feel of certain fabrics against the skin (McCan, 2018a; Newman, 1995; Walker, 2012). Similarly, others have argued that the contemporary femme practice of posting ‘selfies’ of self-fashioned outfits on Tumblr generates empowered self-representations and communal femme aesthetics and cultures (Schwartz, 2018). Indeed, using fashion, femmes or femme embodiments repurpose the tools essential to the (re)production of normative femininity for their own ends: expressing and embodying myriad femininities. By forging their own femininity, femmes challenge fashion as a disciplinary tool, demonstrating how fashion can be used to celebrate differences. This celebration shows how fashion can create a sense of community among feminine subjects who, under the patriarchal rule, are often pitted against one another (Connell, 2012, p. 210). By nurturing community, feminine failure wields redemptive possibilities, as the knowledge gained within communities is where ‘real power is discovered’ and where members rediscover powerful means of challenging patriarchal oppression (Lorde, 1984, p. 111). This radical shift in feminine relationality illustrates how feminine failure can function as a tool that facilitates community building and
creates space for the transformation of recognition (e.g. destabilising the assumptions through which one categorises another).

Rather than performing a neoliberal resistance by claiming to step outside of discourse and throwing off the yoke of shame, feminine failure can negotiate the complexities and discursive use of shame. Similar to disidentification (i.e. identifying with and against oppressive discourses), feminine failure not only works within public spheres, but it also contributes to ‘the function of counterpublic sphere’, a space outside of the dominant ideology (Muñoz, 1999, p. 7). Following Crimp (2002) and Halberstam (2011), feminine failure produces space to (re)create the terms by which one is represented and recognised.

Femme fashion communities exemplify this negotiation of discourse, shame and community, by representing bodies that are typically excluded from participation in mainstream fashion (Connell, 2012). Mainstream fashion privileges whiteness, thinness, and able-bodied heterosexual femininity. Yet, through the stylisation of Otherness and the celebration of failure, fat, queer, racialised, and crip bodies find a tool of resistance in a site of previous erasure, shame or fetishisation – fashion. In this way, intersections of Otherness serve as resistance against normative systems that produce docile bodies, including mainstream fashion. Through failed femininity, counter-discourses are created that disrupt standards of normalcy and carve out spaces within which to challenge politics of body size, gender, and beauty.

Simultaneously, the counter-discourse produced by failed femininity exposes the limitless potentiality of unruly bodies. While mainstream fashion recommends articles of clothing that flatter and minimise unruly bodies (read: shame and render docile), intersections that highlight difference destabilise sources of shame as an insult (Connell, 2012). In other words, while mainstream fashion focuses on the minimising of difference and the capitalisation of cultural shame, femme fashion functions to reclaim and celebrate difference. In this way, fashion facilitates the articulation of femme subjectivity: challenging norms of gender, sexuality and embodiment, while publicly re/claiming what patriarchal culture has attempted to shame (Chalklin, 2016; Sloan & Mitchell, 2002).

It is precisely through mobilising the points at which femininity fails at patriarchal femininity that resistance is enacted. Femme fashion is a site of resistance because it showcases refusals to adhere to norms of patriarchal femininity and beauty. Femme gender expressions hinge on ‘a subversive and playful engagement’ with patriarchal femininity as a means of critiquing normative gender production (Connell, 2012, p. 213). Through its transmogrified mimicry of crip and fat-celebration, femme fashion counters hegemonic discourses of consumption that find a foothold in oppressive norms. Femme resists shame precisely by incorporating sites of shame into feminine embodiments, and drawing on cultural shame to create communities that value differences via failure. In these ways, femme fashion demonstrates how ‘failure’ to be shamed can create artful resistance.

For the fat-centric fitness group ‘Large as Life’ (LAL), aerobics and fitness-fashion brought together fitness, femininity, and self-expression. This self-expression facilitated the exploration of fat bodies in bold ways that are typically reserved exclusively for thin white women (Ellison, 2011; Hoskin, 2017c). Through the platform of aerobics, the LAL collective carved out space within 1980s popular culture, wherein fat women could challenge preconceived ideas about fat women, particularly the idea that fat women cannot be fit, but also the assumption that a fat body cannot be celebrated and enjoyed (Ellison, 2011). Ellison (2011) notes how aesthetics were central to LAL’s understanding of physical fitness. For the LAL group, leotards on fat bodies functioned as an extension of confidence and a way to talk back to the dominant body-shaming fitness/fashion industry (Ellison, 2011). Through their failure to approximate feminine norms of commercial fitness industries, LAL aerobics became ‘a site to solidify group identity and to rearticulate the meaning of the fat body’ (Ellison, 2011, p. 209). The queer and femme positionality of the fat women belonging to the LAL collective results precisely from this failure to embody normative (i.e. slender and fit) femininity. Like White’s (2013) conceptualisation of
queer, femme here is marked by a deviation from, or disturbance of, norms. Thus, in a world obsessed with the restriction and policing of femininity, feminine failure and femme embodiments – like the LAL, ‘femmegimp’, or Crip performers – refuse the estrangement from their bodies, expressions, and communities (Mohale, 2017).

**Challenging binary classification through fem(me)inine failure**

Power is productive and normalises bodies that, in turn ‘serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination’ (Bordo, 1993, p. 26). Representation is a means through which production is facilitated. Representations homogenise and smooth out all differences that disturb expectations and normative systems of identity. Homogeneity upholds ideas of normality and functions as a model against which the self is measured, judged, and corrected. Similarly, femmephobia plays a role in the maintenance of representation by homogenising and policing femininities that stray from patriarchal models of femininity (Hoskin, 2013, 2017b). Keeling (2007) argues that excavating ‘alternate ways of knowing and thinking requires the creation and adoption of new concepts and paradigms’ (p. 5). Arguably, femme theory and feminine failure not only develop new paradigms of identity, but also new representations (Samuels, 2003). Femme (re)presentations do not attempt to persuade people to act or think differently but, rather, focus on embodiment and materiality as a means of changing normative feminine scripts (Rice, 2015). By failing to embody normative standards of patriarchal feminine beauty, femme aesthetics, erotics, and expressions challenge binary systems of meaning. This is achieved through femme’s exploration of multiplicity that spans across discursive identity formation and breaks away from binary logistics.

However, breaking away from binary logic cannot be achieved through the invocation of multiplicity alone. In order to challenge dualistic frameworks, the margins must be made central (Bordo, 1993). Femme and feminine failure achieve this challenge to dualistic frameworks by (re)claiming femininity and carving out space for femininities of the margin (Hooks, 2000). In redesigning femininity, femme rejects binary discourses that prop up heteronormative sex/gender congruencies. Within dominant systems of binary thought, femininity is perpetually relegated to the status of Other. To this end, that which is Othered becomes feminised (Minh-Ha, 1990). This Othering is not maintained ‘from above’ but, rather, executed through multiple processes (Foucault, 1978). For example, the power exercised by cultural binaries maintains a hold on hegemonic systems of sex and gender.

Discursive binaries of heterosexuality have constructed both femininity and femaleness as a property of men or masculinity. If men/masculinity are of culture/mind and women/femininity are of nature/animal; men, therefore, dominate, own and ‘tame’ feminine bodies. However, by broadening femininity and moving away from its binary relegation, femme and feminine failure enable a ‘reclaiming of the body’ (Mishali, 2014, p. 58). Bodily reclamation is achieved by challenging the notion of a homogenous femininity. Femme failure shifts the terrain of patriarchal femininity from a fixed category into a multifaceted, postmodern identity that resists definition through unstable, fluid, and fragmented notions of the self (Bordo, 1993). Femme erodes the rigid binary demarcations, making the unified notion of subjectivity ‘no longer tenable’ (Bordo, 1993, p. 228). By evoking the femininities of the margins, and confusing the bounds of identity, femme and feminine failure fray and fragments the edges of the proper self.

Not only does femme challenge normative correlations between gender and sexuality; it also reconfigures the terms by which femininity is articulated (Hirschmann, 2013; Mishali, 2014). In order for heterosexual hegemony to remain ‘intact’, binary systems of classification need to maintain culturally intelligible subjects (McRuer, 2006). As abject, femme does not ‘respect borders, positions or rules’ of cultural intelligibility (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Femme is an abject existence within a broader contemporary western patriarchal culture where feminine subjects more generally are positioned as abject ‘Others’, alongside queers and people of colour (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Oliver, 1994). Femmes are the ‘queer groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the
dominant world nor completely within [their] own respective cultures’ (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2001, p. 222). In the failure to approximate patriarchal norms of femininity, femme does not ‘fit’ and, for this reason, poses a threat to dominant systems of power (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2001). Through feminine failure, femme does not allow hegemonic binary logistics to remain intact.

Erosion of binary logistics give femme the potential to challenge dominant systems of power, such as the conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality that continues to uphold femininity as signifying ‘consent’. This is achieved through self-actualisation, whereby femme resists the discourse that feminine expressions necessarily serve the purpose of enticing another. For example, femme dislodges the imperative that femininity is done for the sole purpose of pleasing a masculine gaze. The assumption that femininity is performed for a masculine gaze, and not as a self-actualised expression (Hemmings, 1999), gives way to the cultural ideology that feminine dress (i.e. skirts, makeup, etc.) is ‘asking for it’. As such, femme resists rape culture that reduces the feminine subject to a mere object of masculine desire, or for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Moreover, femme destabilises the notion that femininity is visibly knowable ‘as an indicator of sexuality’ (Hemmings, 1999, p. 454) subsequently undoing dominant cultural common-sense associations of gender and sexuality. By fraying dichotomous boundaries of gender and sexuality, femme interrogates the heterosexual matrix and patriarchal privileging of masculinity, and reclaims feminine bodily sovereignty.

Further challenging the binary division, femme fails to maintain boundary distinctions between Us/Them or Subject/Abject, and expose a liminality that ‘blurs accepted categories’, causing us to question the adequacy of how we organise the world (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 112). In particular, crip femmes provoke cultural ‘anxiety of an inherent fluidity’ revealing the ‘putative failure’ of one’s own ‘boundaries of distinction and separation’ (Shildrick, 2007, p. 232). Crip femmes threaten the normative subject by posing a symbolic endangerment, while exposing the insecurity and vulnerability of normative conventions. Normativity’s fragile hold on order and control is maintained by boundary structures (Shildrick, 2007). Intersections of disability and queerness both fail to meet the standard ideals of patriarchal femininity, which in turn exposes the freedom in failing to uphold normativity. Both queerness and disability must be ‘visible’ in order to preserve binary classifications of sexual and able-bodied difference. Through feminine failure, femme collapses systems of meaning and demonstrates how ‘invisibility’ itself can be used as an ‘alternative political strategy’, functioning to unsettle structures that police the boundaries of community, identity and inclusion (Hirschmann, 2013, p. 146). Consequently, the ambiguity offered by failure and invisibility serves as a political strategy, which disallows the sharpening of normative binaries (Garland Thomson, 1997).

(In)visibility: exposing systems of erasure and claiming space

Similar to the invisibility faced by traditional femmes (Weber, 2015), contemporary femmes continue to face invisibility, erasure and exclusion (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016). While discussing their feminine queerness, the Black South African gender non-conforming performance artist Desire Marea poses the question, ‘What is my life if I am not visible?’ (as cited in Mohale, 2017). In the rejection of dualistic imperatives, femme exists on the shoreline between the visible and the invisible (Keeling, 2007), creating a space, a borderland (Sandoval, 1997) and a ‘mestiza consciousness’ (Anzaldúa, 1987) within which to nurture creative resistance. Feminine failure is a liminal state that exposes systems of erasure and (re)claims space. This is achieved by straddling (in)visibility (or paradoxical visibility), which functions to destabilise normativity. Take, for instance, the paradoxical visibility of Black feminine subjects, who face a compounded burden in their systematic relegation to cultural Otherness. By virtue of sex, and the cultural connotations of sex and gender, Black femininity represents the temptations of the flesh and the moral downfall of white men (Bordo, 1993). By virtue of race, Black femininity is seen as intrinsically animalistic and undeserving of privacy or respect (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). Finally,
the historical legacies of slavery have rendered Black femininity as not only animalistic, but also a commodity, an object, and property (Bordo, 1993). This compounded burden has contributed to a culture where Black femininity is never perceived as rapeable, because it is not perceived as having personal space, modesty, or reserve (Bordo, 1993). This construction of Black femininity is perceived to be at odds with the patriarchal model of femininity, which necessitates whiteness, modesty, and reserve. Consequently, Black femininities are often targeted for violent enactments of ‘feminisation’. This policing is a means of punishing perceived racialised gender transgressions and pushing Black subjects toward an ideal that normative whiteness paradoxically prevents them from ever attaining (Keeling, 2007). More broadly, colonisation, slavery and misogynoir (i.e. the intersection of gender and race that forms biases against black women) (Bailey, 2013) work to dehumanise and control feminine bodies – to erase their personhood – which has contributed to state-sanctioned and institutional violence. Within a racialised system of gender, Black feminine expressions are inherently ‘failed’, unauthorised, and subject to discipline and punishment (Hoskin, 2017a; Keeling, 2007).

This whitewashing of femininity has made it difficult to conceive of a Black femme subject or even recognise the appearance of Black femininity within the cultural imaginary (Keeling, 2007). This is exemplified by the entrenchment of normative whiteness within queer female communities today, demonstrating how even femme aesthetics and signifiers can erase the histories and experiences of femmes of colour by (re)producing colonial and racist logics (Dahl, 2014). Indeed, Black femmes and femmes of colour experience paradoxical visibility; they are simultaneously present, often hyper-visible, yet largely invisible or unauthenticated as femme or feminine. Hyper-visibility, as conceptualised in Black feminist thought, refers to the perpetual scrutiny faced by Black femmes, who are judged on the basis of their di-disciplinings of life (Keeling, 2007, p. 149). By forcing the viewer to see whiteness and rethink the perception of femininity as white, the presence of Black femininity nuances feminine epistemologies. While the Black feminine subject is ‘often invisible’ (but nonetheless present), when they become visible their appearance ‘stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different or differently’ (Keeling, 2007, p. 2). To draw on femme performance artist Siya Ngcobo, femme is the ‘courage’ to tell institutions that systematically refuse to recognise the humanity of femmes of colour, feminine subjects, or crip bodies to ‘fuck off’ (as cited in Mohale, 2017). It is precisely through the failure and refusal to maintain patriarchal feminine standards of normative whiteness that Black femmes claim personhood, while resisting the erasure and dehumanisation of femininities of colour.

As described by Siya Ngcobo, South Africans come from a continent and culture where ‘bodies have always been adorned’ (as cited in Mohale, 2017). The legacy of colonisation and apartheid have severed the ties to culture, the land, and to bodies. The embodiment of feminine multiplicities, or femme, pushes-back against cisnormative white femininity, and challenges the colonial imperative that femininity is something to be ‘desired, manipulated, or destroyed’ (Mohale, 2017). Yet, as a result of their invisible presence, when femmes of colour appear, their self-actualised feminine expressions challenge histories that construct femininity as belonging solely to white, cisgender women. When revealed, Black femmes resist femininity as white and, through their reclamations, resist the histories that have used femininity against them. Femininities of colour are
gender expressions that ‘ought not to’ have survived their histories of violence, and that survived in spite of masculinist histories of genocide and colonisation (Keeling, 2007). This survival, as for all survival, hinges on the ability to ‘take our differences and make them strengths’ (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). The moment Black femmes become visible they reclaim the femininity of colonised people and ‘mock European’ gender constructs (Hoskin, 2017a). Their presence and self-actualised ‘failures’ symbolise perseverance, resistance, strength, and the power of femmee enactments to challenge systems of oppression. In this way, bodily adornments function as a process of decolonisation, and a reminder of survival.

Similar to the way femmes of colour illuminate normative feminine whiteness, the REDress Project uses feminine fashion to highlight the invisibilised loss of Indigenous women. The REDress Project is an ‘aesthetic response to the more than 1000 missing and murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada’ (Black, 2014). This project is comprised of 600 red dresses, which are installed in public spaces throughout Winnipeg and across Canada as a ‘visual reminder of the staggering number of women who are no longer with us’ (Black, 2014). The red dresses draw attention to both gendered and racialised aspects of the violence faced by Indigenous women and evoke a presence of Indigenous women through the marking of their absences (Black, 2014). In doing so, the RedDress Project uses feminine fashion to refuse compliance with patriarchal and racialised standards of femininity that require the invisibility of Indigenous women.

Whether through complicating cultural binaries, or challenging colonial narratives, femme demonstrates the beauty in destruction (Mohale, 2017). This beauty offers the opportunity to question, re-imagine and re-write normativity. Painting his presence (Miss Chief Eagle Testickle) into nineteenth century landscapes, the Two-Spirit Swampy Cree Canadian artist Kent Monkman rewrites North American histories and the mythology of the frontier. Monkman’s campy-Cher-inspired alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, is an ‘Indigenous rebuttal to the anthropological idea of the berdache’ whose presence pays tribute to Two-Spirit people, whom colonisers tried to erase (Morris, 2011; Scudeler, 2015, 2016, p. 163). Miss Chief is often depicted as a flamboyant, whip-wielding avenger, sporting thigh-high red boots, Louboutin high heels, a pink headdress, bead-work-bedecked high heels, gauzy pink loincloth, pink heels or a white-beaded purse (Everett-Green, 2017; Scudeler, 2016).

Miss Chief’s diva personae provides Monkman with what he describes as a personality large enough to go against the ‘large problems’ of racism, homophobia, as well as the colonisation and erasure of Two-Spirit people (Mattes, 2008; Morris, 2011). Donning feminine accoutrements, Miss Chief carves out space within the frontier mythology, which has been the exclusively masculine realm of ‘cowboys and Indians’ (Morris, 2011). Within this space, Miss Chief challenges the values embedded within the original nineteenth century paintings, offering alternate visions of the world and Indigenous people (Morris, 2011). Through Miss Chief’s colourful erotics, Monkman finds an ‘effective strategy of engagement’ for confronting legacies of colonialism (Morris, 2011). For example, in recent celebrations of Canada’s self-proclaimed 150th birthday, Miss Chief appeared in the foreground of a portrait of the Fathers of Confederation, nude and in stilettos (Everett-Green, 2017).

By queering ‘accepted visual codes’, Miss Chief commands the audience’s visual attention, causing them to rethink the present absence, or paradoxical visibility, of Indigenous people within colonial narratives, as well as the scarcely acknowledged ‘aboriginal inhabitants of the territories under discussion’ (Everett-Green, 2017). Thus, using ‘aesthetic activism’ (Rader, 2011, p. 5), Miss Chief shows how both erotics and imagination are keys in decolonisation, and how feminine expression can propel a process of sovereign erotics – a land claim through sovereign erotics of disidentification (Scudeler, 2016).

Sovereign erotics ground ‘healing and resurgence in indigenous ways of knowing’ (Scudeler, 2015, p. 20); it is the erotic wholeness of healing from ‘the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive’ (Driskill, 2004, p. 51). Providing a counter-narrative through Miss Chief,
Monkman displaces hegemonic colonial history and moves toward sovereign erotics (Scudeler, 2015). The failed femininity of Miss Chief, surviving colonial attempts at erasure, refusing invisibility and rejecting the colonial gender binary, represents the ‘embodiment of new histories’ (Scudeler, 2016, p. 111). Monkman explains that colonisation disallows Indigenous people to ‘look back’ and to ‘remember where [they are] from’ (Milroy, 2012; Scudeler, 2015). In this way, Miss Chief’s paradoxical visibility ‘looks back’, while her erotic and affective ties provide a tether to a pre-colonial past (Scudeler, 2015).

Paradoxical visibility can also be traced within fat femme experiences. For example, fat femmes are hyper-visible for their fatness (Moon & Sedgwick, 1990), yet invisible as (queer/feminine) subjects (Taylor, 2018). For example, Black fat femme Ashleigh Shackelford (2016) narrates her experiences of paradoxical visibility such that Black fat femmes are often ‘hypervisible to the thin white/non-black bodies we take space from, but invisible to humanity, body autonomy and sexual agency. Queerness is often denied to us; we’re read as non-sexual beings…we’re seen as undesirable and inhuman’. Fat femmes fail to meet the standards of patriarchal femininity, which dictates that feminine bodies must be visible only insofar as they are pleasing to the male gaze. Moreover, because fat bodies signify the unfeminine (but paradoxically feminised), queer fat femmes face a compounded invisibility, creating an additional obstacle to the cultural intelligibility of their gender identities and feminine expressions. In this way, the paradoxical visibility of fatness further contributes to femme invisibility. Thus, fatness, along with blackness, complicates the ways femininity constitutes paradoxical visibility and is not only rooted in feminine failure, but also normative standards of embodiment and sexuality (Taylor, 2018).

With erasure and paradoxical visibility come the reduction and policing of symbolic and physical space. The dictates of patriarchal femininity require feminine subjects to take up as little space as possible. Previous research demonstrates the gender differences in weight-based discrimination, such that those assigned female at birth are more heavily policed than those assigned male (Saguy, 2012). Saguy (2012) connects this discrepancy to how women’s fatness specifically violates gender norms. Feminine space policing is also exemplified in the tagline on personal classifieds stating ‘No Fats,’ ‘No Femmes’ or ‘Masc Only’, demonstrating the space withheld from feminine LGBTQI+ community members (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Han, 2008).

While fat femmes may find spaces to be physically inaccessible because of their material bodies, femme subjects more generally may experience an ideological form of space-policing whereby their subjectivities are devalued and excluded (Taylor, 2018). Working-class femmes also face marginalisation for taking up ‘too much space’ when they use ‘vulgar’ language, speak loudly, or dress in loud prints (Tiffe, 2014). However, Albrecht-Samarasinha (1997) describes the centrality of taking up space to her working-class queer femme of colour identity. She states that ‘femme in the working-class, often [people of colour], contexts I have experienced it in is brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious. It goes far beyond the standards of white middle class feminine propriety’ (Albrecht-Samarasinha, 1997, p. 142). In refusing to be policed for taking up space, feminine failure thus creates both symbolic and physical space for alternate feminine embodiments.

The common threads linking these phenomena are feminine space: those for whom femininity is ascribed or adopted face policing for ‘taking up too much space’. Thus, like the paradoxical visibility of black femininities, the erasure of indigenous femininities, or the space withheld from fat femininities, the visibility gained through femme and feminine failure pushes back against feminine erasure, and histories of colonisation and slavery, while claiming space for a multitude of femininities.

**Monstrous outgrowth and resisting feminine infantilisation**

Feminine failure resists patriarchal feminine beauty standards through the promotion of feminine growth. Halberstam (2012) describes the political invocation of ‘sublime mutation’ as a necessary component in the furthering of social change. Evoking politics of ‘sublime mutation’
requires ‘making detours around the usual, and distorting the everyday ideologies that go by the name of Truth or common sense’ (Halberstam, 2012, p. 143). As previously discussed, feminine failure celebrates the collapse of current sex/gender systems and breaks away from essentialised pairings of female/femininity. Similar to other queer and feminist figures, femme celebrates the ‘monstrous outgrowth of the unstable concept of woman’ and the rejection of socially inscribed categorical imperatives by way of sex, sexuality, race, ability, class, body size, or age (Halberstam, 2012, p. xiii). As discussed, femme scrambles discursive binary coordinates (male/female, active/passive, in/visibility), giving way to new meaning. For example, Cvetkovich (2003) discusses the ways femme sexuality disrupts common associations between femininity, penetration, and passivity, requiring an alternative understanding of sex. Many other scholars challenge the naturalised associations between femininity and femaleness (Dahl, 2012; Maltry & Tucker, 2002). By attending to intersectional and multiple forms of femininity, femmes and femme failure not only break apart homogenised patriarchal femininity, but also promote feminine growth.

The promotion of feminine growth is at odds with patriarchal femininity, which maintains femininity as inherently infantilised or infantilising (Hoskin, 2013, 2017a). Within the dominant cultural imaginary, femininity is to be ‘smooth, rounded, hairless .. soft, unmuscled – the look of the very young’ (Sontag, 2004, p. 277). For those whose feminine gender expression is already ‘disavowed’ and dispossessed, or who are perceived as undesirable as a result of their ageing, variously abled or formed bodies, feminine failure is a radical invocation of femininity.

Much like crip, fat and racialised bodies, the freedom with which the feminine ageing body expresses sexuality and femininity is revoked (Deutsch, Zalenski, & Clark, 1986). As the body ages, temporary able-bodiedness becomes increasingly prominent and the feminine subject strays further from patriarchal standards of feminine normalcy and beauty. For example, Walker (2012) describes her anxieties around embodying fem(me)ininity in middle-age, citing how her fem(me)ininity is increasingly read as ‘old fashioned’, rather than ‘campy’, which she feels is evidence of her failure to be properly fem(me)inine. Among other prescriptions, patriarchal femininity is reserved for able-bodied youth. In short, aging femininity increasingly fails to approximate patriarchal norms of femininity and, in this failure, exposes feminine multiplicities and myths of a homogenous feminine norm. Here, it should be emphasised that older persons, along with aged expressions of femininity, are theorised as temporarily queer (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017).

While aging femininity is scorned for its mere existence (i.e. continuing to express femininity) and is, thus, invisibilised; it is simultaneously demeaned for not approximating a youthful, feminine norm. Again, resistance occurs in this paradoxical visibility. Patriarchal femininity requires femininity to fade gracefully and silently; to become invisible, and accept the disposability of femininity within the current power structure. In its youth, patriarchal femininity is to be seen, not heard; in its old age, it is to become entirely non-existent. But, by creating space in a masculine privileging world where ageing femininity refuses to be erased, ageing femininity (i.e. failed femininity) celebrates that which is culturally shamed, denied, and invisibilized. Moreover, in a system that continuously and progressively devalues femininity with age, ageing femininity constitutes a revolt against idealistic youth. For example, donning big round glasses, bright colours, and bold jewellery, the flamboyantly-dressed-97-year-old fashion icon Iris Apfel uses her clothes and style to compose a new vision of what it means to age as a feminine person (Maysles, 2014). It is by failing to approximate patriarchal feminine norms that ageing, crip, fat, and/or racialised femininities expand beyond current notions of femininity, while re-humanising the feminine subject and challenging discursive norms. Femininity’s failure to become invisible and maintain femininity as infantile challenges the patriarchal stunting of femininity. If ageing under patriarchal feminine rule means ‘a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification’ (Sontag, 2004, p. 272), femmes’ self-actualised ‘failed’ femininities promote feminine growth and unhinge the inner-workings of cultural sexual qualification.
**Conclusion: ‘failing’ femininity and femme resistance**

Power relations are complex; they continuously spawn new ‘forms of culture and subjectivity’ as well as ‘new opportunities for transformation’ (Bordo, 1993, p. 27). Although dominant discourses remain in a continuous state of renegotiation because of resistance from the margins, change emerges gradually through minute shifts in power (Foucault, 1978). In using femme and queer failure as theoretical frameworks, the current paper demonstrates how feminine failure functions as a tool of resistance, providing the minute shifts in power necessary to elicit change. By hijacking cultural signifiers of adornment and using them to celebrate that which is culturally shamed, feminine failure resists the oppressive hold of patriarchal feminine norms, the ableism that desexualises and degenders variant bodies, and hegemonic hierarchies of beauty. Disrupting the boundaries and barriers established through patriarchal feminine norms, feminine failure ‘looks back’ at normalising gazes and serves as a catalyst of change (Rice, Chandler, Liddiard, Rinaldi, & Harrison, 2016). By exposing feminine multiplicities, femme as a theoretical framework demonstrates the freedom in feminine failure, offering possibilities that normativity never could. Failed femininity creates ‘new and multiple representations of embodied difference’ (Rice et al., 2016, p. 1) and gives way to ‘raw and powerful connection’ within which ‘personal power is forged’ (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). Rather than (re)producing a progressive femininity/patriarchal feminine binary, using femme as a theoretical framework exemplifies the inadequacy of these binaries for understanding multiple feminine subjectivities, while negotiating complexities, contradictions and revelling in feminine failure.

According to Lorde (1984), the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. The master uses tools of signification, representation and recognition to train docile bodies, maintain systems of normalcy and deny subjecthood via cultural intelligibility (Lorde, 1984). Non-docile bodies who cannot fit within the boundaries of social normality are disciplined. One such disciplinary tactic is the erasure of non-docile bodies from public view – in other words, through the master’s signification, representation, and recognition. The reclamation of space by fat femininity, the visual and cognitive space carved out by ageing, Black and Indigenous femininities, and the sexual space reclaimed by crip femininity serve as resistance against docility and against the master’s tools. Their refusal to remain docile produces a ‘category crisis’ (Samuels, 2003) and serves as a reminder of the slippage between ab/normality (Wendell, 1996). It is in this defiant relationship with normality where femme and feminine failure not only find comfort and strength, but also resistance (Clare, 1999; Erickson, 2007).

Although femininity has been theorised as a tool of the Patriarchy, the current paper demonstrates that, perhaps, femininity was never the master’s tool after all. Rather, femme’s failed femininity is a tool of critical deconstruction and resistance that finds strength in the forging of difference (Lorde, 1984). Femme can be used to queer, subvert, and dismantle the very architecture of the master’s house: oppressive systems of meaning and classification. Femme (re)signifies and (re)presents femininity to open-up systems of recognition. Femme is a counter-discourse to patriarchal feminine norms of beauty and aesthetics; it is inherently failed and remains in constant dialogue with hegemonic dictations of normativity. Just as Garland Thomson (1997) extends Bakhtin’s theory of ‘disorderly bodies’, we argue that femme offers the disorderly embodiment necessary to challenge existing social order. Femmes are unruly, non-docile subjects who dislodge patriarchal claims of a naturalised, ahistorical femininity.

Like other queer feminist frameworks, femme also works towards ‘undoing’ womanhood, and *unbecoming* woman (Halberstam, 2012, p. xvi); while pushing toward the further mutation of categorical systems anchored upon oppression and inequality. Through this framework, femmes cannot live in the house that culture has built for them: they seek to tear it down, to ‘reimagine the very meaning of the house’, for only then can it be rebuilt (Halberstam, 2012, p. xvi). Through failed femininity, femme claims space that normativity attempts to withhold: by virtue of their sex, gender, sexuality, race, or body. Femmes occupy and carve out spaces wherein femininity can
break away from reductive patriarchal feminine norms. To find value in that which is deemed worthless; to find love in that which is shamed; to adorn that which is abject; is to embrace femme as a tool of resistance.

Notes

1. The term feminine failure refers specifically to patriarchal femininity.
2. For an elaboration of this term see (Hoskin, 2017b).
3. In some articulations of femme, the erotic is central to emphasize the pleasures and relationality of femme subjectivity, such as Nestle's (1987, 1992) writings on fem(me) sexuality. Erotics refer to the powerful personification of love, and empowered creative energy (Lorde, 1984). When adopted from a femme perspective, the erotic is an assertion and reclamation of the feminine life-force (Lorde, 1984). Erotics are also defined as a mix of desire, pleasure, wounding and the ‘interrelations with others, the land, and ancestors’ (Rifkin as cited in Scudeler, 2015, p. 21). Conversely, the suppression of the erotic is a fundamental component in the maintenance of oppressive power.
4. Although Audre Lorde’s work on the erotic is not about femme, we use Lorde’s notion of the erotic as a theoretical framing to help think through femme beyond a mere aesthetic.
5. Some examples of femmephobia include patterns of femme exclusion and masculine privileging within gay men’s communities (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), lesbian communities (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Taylor, 2018) and LGBT+ communities more broadly (Blair & Hoskin, 2018).
6. While a traditional femme identity exists in terms of the history of femme, it should be noted that femme has never been traditional in the conventional sense and has always been radical.
7. Queer studies scholars, specifically those engaging in queer of colour critique, remind us that, as queer positionality subjugates through and across oppressive narratives, queer has come to describe non-normative positionalities (e.g. Alimahomed, 2010; Haritaworn, 2008; Lim, 2016; Muñoz, 1999).
8. ’No fats, no femmes’ also elicits consideration of exclusionary norms of masculinity and embodiment in gay male cultures that marginalize fat and/or feminine subjects.

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