

Redefining Hyperfemininity: Claiming Femme Power through Love and Celebration

(Femme)

by

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Abstract

My research delves into the complex interplay between hyperfemininity and gender performance within my own life, employing autoethnography as a methodological lens. Guided by the theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is constructed through repeated actions and behaviours, I examine my commitment to performing hyperfemininity—a style entrenched in heterosexist and sexist ideals. The exploration encompasses interconnected aspects such as girlhood, agency, control, power, and the gaze.

As a self-proclaimed feminist, lesbian, and woman, I confront my initial research question: “Why am I so girly?” Through my thesis, I argue that my hyperfeminine performance, coupled with an embrace of girly aesthetics, serves as a purposeful assertion of power and control in my life through love, and is potentially disconnected from the male gaze.

Engaging with contemporary feminist theory, particularly issues related to identities and categories, my study begins but extends beyond personal introspection. A significant portion of the thesis is a gallery show, titled *Femme*. These artworks, depicting themes of celebration, love, and blissful femininity, add a unique visual and personal dimension to the exploration of hyperfemininity within my identity. Oil paint’s inherent connection with ‘high art’ is juxtaposed with collage— a medium associated with juvenile, uncontrolled, free expression— and work in tandem to further explore the complex contradictions within feminine performance.

In essence, my thesis is a multifaceted examination that navigates the complexities of hyperfemininity, intertwining personal narratives with theoretical frameworks and visual representations. Through this comprehensive approach, I aim to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, identity, and feminist theory.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	5
The words we use	5
A note on ‘Women’ in theory	6
Performing ‘girl’, doing ‘girly’	10
Hyperfemininity and new definitions.....	12
Feminism and more indescribability	16
Lesbian	19
Invisibility	23
Pain	23
Biraciality	26
Performance and Persona	29
Reclaiming cuteness	29
Looking like a Lesbian.....	32
Online or IRL	38
Girlhood	42
Controlling a body	42
Power	46
Love as Methodology	49
Pink Art.....	54
Bibliography	59
Appendix	63

Introduction

The words we use

The language we use is important. Lately I find myself taking longer pauses than usual to search for accurate words when I'm explaining something. Especially in conversations or arguments when the opposition seeks to misconstrue your words on purpose, I'm finding it more and more imperative to choose my words carefully. Perhaps because the purpose of this paper is a to defend, I subconsciously equate this to an argument where I am passionate about making myself clear.

As I approach my 30s, I find that I—thankfully—do not cry as often in a debate or argument. This has always been a frustrating aspect of myself that has continuously gotten the better of me. Explaining 'my side' of a disagreement would always end with me red in the face, with tears threatening to spill over—the opposition would always ask me why I was crying, and by then, my argument was already deemed worthless. Either I'm a stupid, over-emotional girl who can't take criticism, or worse, I'm attempting to weaponize my tears to get sympathy. It's hard to explain this to someone who doesn't have this instinct; no, I'm not upset, I'm not sad, I'm truly trying to get my point across. This is an aspect of myself that I would do anything to trade. As I get older, I find people respect me more—I guess I no longer pass for an immature teenager and my pauses in arguments are understood as thinking, rather than trying to hold back tears.

This chapter is me "finding my words," where I explore the reasons why I use certain words in this paper and in my life. I acknowledge the "lack of better words" that I run into and look at how some words and definitions have changed in time. This paper will take an approach that is almost narrative, where I connect my experiences to theory that journeys from my initial

research question, “Why am I so girly?” into an exploration that compels me to dissect and interrogate the words and definitions I use.

A note on ‘Women’ in theory

As a woman, as a feminist, as an artist, I read academia and consider where I am placed. I scroll through social media where people discuss ‘women things’, and no one is confused what ‘woman things’ are. However, when reading theory, I often must inquire on who they are referring to when speaking of ‘women’. Somehow too broad and too narrow, who is ‘woman’?

In the context of academia and intersectionality, the category of ‘woman’ is often discussed. In the paper written by Lena Gunnarsson titled, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” she notes the emerged reluctance of using the word ‘women’ when discussing feminism.¹ Gunnarsson disagrees with Judith Butler’s approach to intersectional feminism where Butler states that it is “impossible to separate out ‘gender’” within the intersections of power relations such as race or class;² rather, Gunnarsson points out Judith’s contradiction, and affirms that ‘woman,’ being one of those ‘parts’ that intersect, is therefore something that can be reasonably distinguished. The critique that using the word ‘woman’ as a category in theory and feminism is that referring to all women, regardless of race or class (or other defining parts), is essentially affirming that they are part of a homogenous group. Philosopher Naomi Zack challenges that ‘sameness’ or commonality has an inherent connection to ‘difference’ with its duality— by saying women have a similarity that make them ‘women’, women are therefore all

¹ Lena Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (2011): 25. doi:10.1177/1464700110390604.

² Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” 27.

different.³ Gunnarsson argues that the lack of categorization or “anticategoricalism” puts gender and therefore ‘women’ on the backburner for the sake of intersectionality.⁴

Whether or not I agree with Gunnarsson or Butler on the matter of categorizations, or theoretical and concrete ideas of what a ‘woman’ is, I suppose personal experiences dictate whether categorization inhibits or encourages broader understandings of gender, power relations, and how they intersect in daily life. Where I boldly claim myself to be a biracial, lesbian women, it would be unreasonable for me to demand self-categorizations from others. As I stand firmly at one end of the spectrum (for argument’s sake), I can understand someone at the other end—we are connected in our opposition and duality. But as I acknowledge the spectrum where I stand, I must recognise the vast space between us, where our language is limited.

So, what does distinguish what a woman is, and why does Lena Gunnarsson assert that the term ‘women’ has largely decreased, as noted during a feminist conference she attended in 2008?⁵ These musings, I’d like to point out, only briefly touch on the conversations of trans bodies and people—whether on purpose to ignore, or rather to subtly include those (trans or cisgender) that fall into the gender binary of man (or transman) and woman (or transwoman); this does not account for those outside the binary. Gunnarsson speaks as someone who is afraid of the outcomes that erasing ‘woman’ from theory and feminism has, but also as someone who looks at gender within a binary.

Perhaps that is the answer then? ‘Women’ is inherently linked to feminisms, and—in my opinion—is not on the verge of erasure. As you will come to know, I am an over-empathetic idealist and think that the broadening of our understanding of what feminism is, what ‘women’

³ Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” 28.

⁴ Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” 28.

⁵ Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women,’” 35.

is, will further clear up and tighten, and thus further cement its meaning and importance. Our broadening is not erasing but *defining*. By understanding gender, ‘men,’ ‘women,’ transness, and those who are outside the binary, we are closer to realizing and redefining ‘women’ without the fear of it being left behind.

In *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, written by Caroline Criado Perez in 2019, Perez starts the book looking at how ‘Man the Hunter’ has played a part in shaping the narrative of evolution and subsequently resulted in modern studies and data collection that primarily ignores women; a majority of our beliefs of history, health, science and sociology has been contrived with data that is missing a crucial 50%.⁶ The reason I mention this awful truth is as a brief reminder that ‘women’ has a low likelihood of being buried while ‘man’ continues to be the default. The subconscious focus on men has thus allowed women-only gyms, women-specialized doctors, women-only train cars, etc. If history has made ‘man’ the default, ‘women’ will always be used to specify. This terrible reality reminds us that academic musings (and maybe fear-mongering), like Gunnarsson’s article exist only as such.

In “A Metaphysical Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’,” written in 2007 by Maya A. Goldenberg, she investigates similar ideas about ‘woman’ as a category in feminist theory and politics.⁷ Goldenberg looks at feminism’s role—how mainstream philosophies have failed to include women’s interests, issues or lived experiences and therefore created a need for a counter-philosophy that included them.⁸ She contemplates the category of ‘woman’: “it is because of this criteria of sameness that the conflict of unity and difference

⁶ Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (United Kingdom: Abrams, 2019), 4.

⁷ Maya J. Goldenberg, “The Problem of Exclusion in Feminist Theory and Politics: A Metaphysical Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’” *Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 140, doi:10.1080/09589230701324603.

⁸ Goldenberg, “Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’,” 141.

arises, as there seems to be no one attribute or experience shared by all women.”⁹ By nature, ‘woman’ is ambiguous, with its only similarity being that of ‘non-man’, problematic for the sake that cars, dogs and air is also ‘non-man’. In this paper, Goldenberg makes a refreshing proposal to create new, expansive categories for women; we make the categories, and the world reflects it.¹⁰

The pluralist allowance for multiple social-identity group memberships resolves the problem of exclusion when constructing a category of ‘woman’ because membership in the category no longer defines what a woman is or what she should be.¹¹

The problem with using ‘woman’ is its simultaneous generalization and ambiguity. Goldenberg suggests that the solution to this problem is to simply create more categories themselves.

I ask myself “why does this even matter, Stephanie? What is the point of mentioning this?” My point is this: my usage of the word ‘woman’—especially within an academic realm, has deeper context that I need to address. My usage of ‘woman’ may be different than other theorists, and my intention is to acknowledge the broader social and academic conversations, without being misconstrued. My usage of the word ‘woman’ refers to myself and those who also identify as such, as well as those who linger outside the binary but have their own unique connection to ‘woman’ or womanhood. The ‘woman’ I refer to in this paper does not have a concrete definition, with the intention of inclusivity, diversity and—dare I say—rebellion.

Being a ‘girly-girl’ is inherently connected to ‘woman’—both are often discussed from the outside, evaluated, and theorized, used to specify, to clarify, to categorize. Being hyperfeminine is often associated to womanhood, yes, and I speak of it as a woman. My art

⁹ Goldenberg, “Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’,” 141.

¹⁰ This is under theory that categorization goes hand-in-hand with creation. By creating new categories, imposing new laws and connections to patterns, we have are imposing our own structuring to the world. “My proposal to construct a cohesive category of ‘woman’ by women is a move for women to be worldmakers.” Goldenberg, “Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’,” 148.

¹¹ Goldenberg, “Investigation into Constructing a Category of ‘Woman’,” 150.

exists as art made by a feminist—an intersectional feminist—and by someone who hopes their contribution to the theoretical ‘woman’ will help further understanding of what it means. I speak for myself, my womanhood and girlhood, but with consideration and empathy for others.

Performing ‘girl’, doing ‘girly’

I took my first “Women and Gender Studies” course when I was 19, whilst majoring in Dramatic Arts. Granted, I hardly attended that class because it was located at a farther campus, and I was too preoccupied with my own youthful suffering to care—honestly, I’m surprised that I remember any of the theories I was taught.

Years later when I took another “Gender and Sexuality Studies” at another school where I majored in Drawing and Painting, my teenage angst was depleted, and I found myself excelling in class. Of course, one of the initial theories was of performativity, to which I was mildly familiar. Over the years I realized how much I have subconsciously understood Judith Butler’s theories as ‘truth’ and thus understood aspects of myself through the lens of performativity. I wonder if this view of the world has granted me more torment or comfort; only until recently did I realize that not everyone viewed the world this way. Some people, to my surprise, never questioned these parts of themselves, sometimes never hearing about performativity at all.

Written in 1990, *Gender Trouble* is a staple in gender and queer theory—suggesting that society’s idea of binary genders as fixed identities are instead societal constructs that are reinforced through repetition.¹² Performative acts like crossing one’s legs or ‘man-spreading,’ are repeated actions that have been learned and mimicked, consequently reinforcing the gender.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 162.

Yes, these actions are often reinforced by authority, assuring you “sit like a girl,” but they are often reinforced through subconscious acts of mimicry. No one told me to twirl my hair, I started that habit subconsciously, just as my brother was never told to *not* twirl his hair. He easily performed ‘boy’ and I easily performed ‘girl.’

I guess that the trouble lies when performing one’s gender isn’t as agreeable. After understanding how heterosexist gender norms are uplifted and cemented through acts of repetition, one would surely question their part in its reinforcement. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests that subverting gender norms through parody and imitation can help destabilize the binary.

An interesting thing happens when I come out to people. They say, “I never would have guessed—you’re so girly,” subtly equating my femininity with heterosexuality. Is this what Butler means by “subversion?” Personally, all I can do is laugh at the absurdity of myself being straight. Performing “girl”, doing “girly” has subsequently uplifted the heterosexual matrix up until the moment I clarify my sexuality! Even amongst my lesbian or sapphic peers and women I’ve dated; I’ve had to continuously declare my sapphic inclination and “prove” myself as one of them—something I’ll return to in later chapters.

...think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.¹³

With that, I ask myself: why do I continue to perform “girly,” when it mainly acts as reimplementations of the heterosexist norms to which I don’t subscribe to? Is simply understanding gender and performativity enough to subvert the norms like Butler suggests?

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 164.

Hyperfemininity and new definitions

One of the first papers I read on hyperfemininity was called “Hyper-femininity¹⁴ as Decency”¹⁵ while I was researching for my “Girly-girls, Fake Nails and the (Gay)ze” series.¹⁶ The article looked at the performances of hyper-femininity in former USSR women who migrated to northern Italy to work as live-in maids or care workers.¹⁷ Cvajner explores how their exaggerated expression of gender was an assertion of self-respect while having to work jobs they found degrading.¹⁸

My previous series was an exploration of a small part of the lesbian and sapphic social culture I was a part of, where I had conversations with those within the community about internal biases, growing up and their opinion on hyperfemininity. During our conversations, I decorated their nails with long acrylic sets—some of them confessing feeling uncomfortable with such a loud display of femininity whilst some felt empowered. Afterward, I painted portraits showing off their nails along with their acrylic set, and a few excerpts from our conversations. This exercise, along with the article by Martina Cvajner spurred on my interest in hyperfemininity and performativity.

Primarily, in “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” Cvajner wonders why these particular women insist on portraying themselves in a ‘objectifying’ manner, when it only encouraged further stigmatization in the community.¹⁹ The stereotypical “gold-digger from Eastern Europe”

¹⁴ In relation to this article, I will refer to hyperfemininity as the single word, rather than the previously known conjoined word, “hyper-femininity.”

¹⁵ Martina Cvajner, “Hyper-Femininity as Decency: Beauty, Womanhood and Respect in Emigration,” *Ethnography* 12, no. 3 (2011): 356–74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24048143>.

¹⁶ Stephanie Camille, “Girly-girls, Fake Nails and the (Gay)ze,” 2022.

¹⁷ Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 356.

¹⁸ Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 356.

¹⁹ Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 358.

was already a disliked caricature among the locals and Cvajner embarked on answering her questions of why the women would continue to ‘play into’ this “male-defined notion of beauty and seductiveness”²⁰ that was perceived as “pushy [and] overbearing.”²¹ She also looks into other scholars who wonder why certain Western women “are not outraged by the re-sexualization and re-commodification of women’s bodies in popular culture, but actively perceive it as [...] an ideology of irony, sexual confidence and autonomy.”²²

In a study written in 1991, titled “Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct,” Sarah K. Murnen and Donn Byrne attempt to make the connection between the problem of rape and its connection to hyperfeminine women.²³ Their research goes under the same established assumption that males who immensely adhere to the male gender role experience sexual aggression—therefore the extreme adherence to the female gender role by women is connected to sexual passivity or submissiveness.²⁴ This study employs a “hyperfemininity scale”²⁵ to conduct their research, that would be hilarious if it weren’t so exasperating. The scale consists of questions where the subject would answer *a* or *b*, (* Indicates the hyperfeminine choice)²⁶ with questions such as:

“A. I would rather be a famous scientist than a famous fashion model.

B. I would rather be a famous fashion model than a famous scientist. *”

Or

²⁰ Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 358.

²¹ Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 358.

²² Rosalind Rosalind, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times,” *Subjectivity* 25, no. 1 (2008): 432-435. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.28. and “From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women’s Bodies in the Media” Rosalind Gill, MR Online, 2009. Both quoted in Cvajner, “Hyper-femininity as Decency,” 358.

²³ Sarah K Murnen and Donn Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 28, no. 3 (1991): 479, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812715>.

²⁴ Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 479.

²⁵ Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 482.

²⁶ Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 482-483.

“A. Sometimes I cry to influence men. *

B. I prefer to use logical rather than emotional means of persuasion when necessary.”

Or

“A. I try to state my sexual needs clearly and concisely.

B. I sometimes say “no” when I really mean “yes”. **²⁷

Another Study written in 1994 titled “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct” has a similar direction, tying hyperfeminine women to passivity (or encouragement) of male aggressors in the cases of rape or sexual assault.²⁸ However, with both studies, I find the title and discoveries misleading. If the intention is to further explore the concept of hyperfemininity,²⁹ the intense focus on rape and malicious characterizations of hyperfeminine women in both articles is both confusing and vexing. In the concluding paragraphs, McKelvie and Gold describe hyperfeminine women as “the manipulative siren using her sexual wiles to “catch” a man,” whilst describing the feminine woman as “the demure, obsequious woman who is sexually withholding.”³⁰ The authors even note their biases in the final paragraph, stating that the “positive aspects of femininity were not measured – warmth, gentleness, empathy, and generosity.”³¹ Judging by the content of the piece, I am not surprised.

Frustratingly, the authors of both these studies are frequently cited in other papers that refer to the definition of hyperfemininity.

Hyperfemininity is defined as an exaggerated adherence to the stereotypic feminine gender role, involving the use of sexuality to gain or maintain romantic relationships with

²⁷ Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 483.

²⁸ Melissa McKelvie and Steven R. Gold, “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 31, no. 3 (1994): 219. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812915>.

²⁹ McKelvie and Gold. “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct,” 225.

³⁰ McKelvie and Gold. “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct,” 225.

³¹ McKelvie and Gold. “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct,” 227.

men, the belief that these romantic relationships define their success, and the preference for traditional male behaviors in their partners.³²

In a final study regarding hyperfemininity, it was found that “women low in hyperfemininity were less attracted to and preferred the macho man less as a husband and sex partner,”³³ suggesting that their research found that hyperfeminine women were more attracted to hypermasculine men.

After looking through these commonly cited studies, I wonder where their definition stems from. Hyper, normally meaning ‘super’, ‘above and beyond,’ or ‘excessive,’ is used in hyperfemininity as a prefix to indicate ‘morally negative’ or perhaps ‘characteristically undesirable’ femininity. As previously stated, these studies³⁴ seem to focus on sexual passivity (or encouragement of masculine sexual aggression), low desire for personal growth and success outside of relationships,³⁵ and an aggressive attitude toward other women.³⁶ Broadly, feminine = good, caring, trustful, and hyperfeminine = bad, self-serving, deceiving.

As any word we have encountered, there are layers to its understanding. On social media and passing conversation between two feminine people, the term “hyperfemininity” would rarely align with these negative attributes highlighted in these articles. I am not suggesting that women do not have and are not capable of having all the traits emphasized above, rather, I wish there was a word to that encompassed both traits of femininity (positive and negative), but *hyper*.

³² Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 483.

³³ Kristine L. Maybach and Steven R. Gold, “Hyperfemininity and Attraction to Macho and Non-Macho Men,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 31, no. 2 (1994): 96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3812749>.

³⁴ Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct,” and McKelvie and Gold, “Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct” and Maybach and Gold, “Attraction to Macho Men.”

³⁵ “Job competitiveness and job concern were negatively related to hyperfemininity scores.” “For example, regarding social-related variables, it was found that hyperfeminine women were more likely to think that marriage was more important than a career.” Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 486, 488.

³⁶ “Hyperfeminine women were more likely to have negative attitudes toward [other] women.” Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement,” 486.

For my research, I'd like to attempt to separate hyperfemininity's definition from heterosexuality, men, and the male gaze. As a lesbian, and someone who came out relatively young, I hypothesize that attraction and emphasis on male attention play a minor (but perhaps inescapable) role in my self-expression. The research I heavily focus on in my paper is hyperfeminine performance and style, which these articles only briefly touch on. For a lack of a better word, I will continue to use hyperfemininity, but defined as such:

Hyperfemininity is defined as an exaggerated adherence to the stereotypic feminine gender performance, expression, and style. Frequently accompanied by the exaggerated adherence to the stereotypic feminine gender role. This is often due to several combined motivations outside of the common understanding that hyperfemininity is a result of and directly connected to heterosexuality. Visually, hyperfemininity is characterized by its exaggeration and amplification of traditionally feminine style but is not directly related to one specific portrayal and can be adopted into a multitude of aesthetics.

Feminism and more indescribability

Feminism is another word I wish to briefly touch on. Defining a word such as this, especially during an era that focuses on its faults and contradictions, right or wrong, all or nothing, this feat feels somewhat impossible. Rather than defining and going through the multiple waves of feminism, and how it has uplifted or failed certain women, I will instead investigate how I currently understand feminism.

Because of "the rise of global capitalism, the expansion of information technologies, crises of environmental degradation," broader understanding of sexuality, and exposure to the spread of media-led representations of femininity, third-wave feminism is a reaction and an

attempt to adapt.³⁷ Third-wave feminism—from my understanding—navigates in a space where we all have a broader and sometimes conflicting understanding of gender and other intersections, sitting in between second-wave and postfeminism.³⁸

Postfeminism is often seen as epistemological break regarding feminism—a sort of new and improved feminism, sometimes synonymous with third-wave feminism and distinct from second-wave feminism.³⁹ ‘Post’ suggests ‘after,’ which I understand as after theory, or under a new understanding. I don’t subscribe to postfeminism myself, I wouldn’t label myself a postfeminist, for the fact that postfeminism seems to be largely connected to capitalism—although this seems to be an inescapable characteristic of any wave of feminism—and is again primarily (or solely) focused on White, middle-class women’s struggles (or accomplishments).⁴⁰ For some, postfeminism is actually the detachment from feminism itself, partially due to the rise of an individualistic mindset, which generally insinuates that a woman’s successes or struggles are rightfully earned and detached from any sort of systematic oppression. To me, postfeminist’s motivations and ideals are rooted in a sort of utopia that seldom exists. It works to assume that feminism as a movement is no longer necessary while the goal of equality has been reached during the 90’s, and therefore, women currently have the freedom of choice, mainly for work and personal life.⁴¹ For example, this is suggesting that women have the free choice and power to be a stay-at-home mother or career-worker, if they really tried hard enough.⁴² Some postfeminists

³⁷ Shelley Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and ‘New’ Femininities,” in *New Femininities*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 279-280.

³⁸ Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity,” 282.

³⁹ Jessica Ringrose, “Introduction: Postfeminism, education and girls.” in *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36-37.

⁴⁰ Ringrose, “Introduction: Postfeminism, education and girls,” 33.

⁴¹ Ringrose, “Introduction: Postfeminism, education and girls,” 33.

⁴² Ringrose, “Introduction: Postfeminism, education and girls,” 33.

position women “as the primary benefactors and winners of the globalisation in the twenty-first century,” and even, their successes as “having been won over at the expense of men.”⁴³

Third-wave feminism is not without critique too; similarly, postfeminism was shaped in an individualistic society and therefore “must go beyond advocating for women’s right to choice and self-expression and interrogate the substance of those choices in a critical way.”⁴⁴ Truthfully, this was the sort of feminism that I grew up learning; one focused on arguably postfeminist “girl power,” “girl bosses”⁴⁵ and even popular movements where pre-teen girls declare they are “not like other girls.”

The feminism that I subscribe to⁴⁶ and the feminism that I find is standard amongst my friends and peers is one that is unfortunately predominantly indescribable due to its contradictions—similar the indescribability of ‘woman’. There is no one perfect definition of woman, as there is no one perfect definition of the feminism that I engage with in my life. There is not one type of woman I have tied to feminism.

Gaga Feminism, inspired by—but not limited to—the pop singer Lady Gaga, who is described as a “symbol for new kind of feminism,” by Jack Halberstam in his book titled, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the end of Normal*.⁴⁷ As a global sensation and icon, her hyper-visibility in pop culture allowed her to introduce evolving ideas of gender and sexuality to a broader audience where collective ideas of feminism were yet to be adapted with the

⁴³ Ringrose, “Introduction: Postfeminism, education and girls,” 24.

⁴⁴ Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity,” 288.

⁴⁵ Popularized for appearing as liberating and empowering, “girl bosses” have all the aesthetic qualities of desirable femininity, with character traits desirable within the patriarchy, such as leadership, control and self-reliance. “Girl power” is criticized for its identity rooted in capitalistic value and postfeminist’s pseudo-liberation. Michelle S. Bae, “Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism,” *Visual Arts Research* 37, no. 2 (2011): 28–40. doi:10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0028.

⁴⁶ I would currently label myself as an intersectional feminist, to acknowledge that the intersections of identities, such as race or class, change the experiences of women. This also attempts to acknowledge how past (and current) feminisms have significantly only focused on the experiences of white women.

⁴⁷ Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 5.

contemporary forms of consumerism culture of the late 2000s.⁴⁸ Gaga Feminism is not limited to Lady Gaga's iconic performances on and off the stage, but rather how her rise to fame helped integrate gender politics for a new generation.⁴⁹ By mixing politics and performance, Gaga feminism challenges the 'normal' in the spirit of anarchy with absurdity reminiscent to Dadaism. While Gaga feminism is celebrated for its freedom from the rigidity of other feminisms, it is critiqued for its vagueness regarding systematic oppression. Although a thrilling book, I find Jack Halberstam's ideas concerning gender and feminism slightly limiting and condescending, although I can't quite place exactly what I'm missing. To be frank, I don't know what kind of feminism I am applying in my paper, and my lack of clarity may appear wishy-washy—but maybe declaring its feminist intent is enough. Perhaps someone else would find my ideas of gender and feminism lacking and condescending too. Maybe I'm reading too much theory. Maybe I'm too sensitive.

Lesbian

I came out to my friends when I was 14 years old as bisexual. Bisexuality is unfortunately a common steppingstone identity for those coming out, and although I recognize it as a valid and legitimate identity, I soon revised my identity to lesbian and haven't changed since. Lesbian, as a label that is defined using words I have previously labeled as "undefinable" and as the only identity in the common acronym (LGBTQ+) that explicitly doesn't involve men, it is a label that is bound to have debates.

⁴⁸ Halberstam *Gaga Feminism*, 7.

⁴⁹ Halberstam *Gaga Feminism*, 7.

‘Lesbian’ has unfortunately been an identity that has been used by TERFs⁵⁰ as a “gotcha” to trans people and those who support them. In “TERFs aren’t Feminists,” published in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* in 2023, Baker A. Rogers address the common assumption of an overlap between TERFs and lesbians, the distinctions between them, and how lesbians⁵¹ largely “despise TERF ideology and argue that lesbians must stand in solidarity with trans people in the fight for social justice.”⁵² TERF ideology can be explained with their sex essentialism, which aligns female biology with gender (aka, trans women aren’t women because they don’t have the right parts), and trans exclusion (aka, trans women should be rejected in women-only spaces).⁵³ Similarly to me, a large majority of the interviewees had never encountered TERFs in “real life,” only online—some even believing that it was mostly an “online problem.”⁵⁴ A lot of them also noted the general assumptions online were that TERFs are mostly lesbians, and a majority of lesbians are TERFs—assumptions that the interviewees wholly deny seeing in “real life.”⁵⁵ A concluding point for this paper was to state that although this connection is disguised as a common and expected link between TERFs and lesbians, this divide only works to further marginalize lesbians, when solidarity is needed to face more pressing issues that face women, trans and non-binary people, like healthcare, housing, employment and education.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Trans exclusionary radical feminists.

⁵¹ Research completed in the US in 2021, with 49 participants who identify as lesbian, queer, gay, or other identities, but agreed under the “lesbian” identity solely for the sake of unity between respondents. The respondents had various gender identities, races, and education level. The age ranges from early 20s to late 50s.

⁵² Baker A. Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists: Lesbians Stand against Trans Exclusion,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, (2023): 1, doi:10.1080/10894160.2023.2252286.

⁵³ It is noted that a majority of those who are TERFs, are Western, White, able-bodied, cisgender women; therefore suggesting that TERF rhetoric is largely a strain of white feminism. Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists,” 3.

⁵⁴ It is important to note that on page 17, Rogers’ intention is not to discredit the any trauma faced from TERFs, but to “demonstrate that many lesbians are already a part of the fight for trans justice.” Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists,” 11.

⁵⁵ Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists,” 17.

⁵⁶ Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists,” 17.

The association between TERFs and lesbians is quite ironic when thinking about how lesbians have also been excluded from feminist movements in the past—in 1969, a popular feminist writer, Betty Friedan said that lesbians were “Lavender Menaces” who would undermine the Women’s Movement.⁵⁷ This seems to be a similar and outdated motivation TERFs have today regarding trans and nonbinary people. Again, the reason I bring up TERFs at all in this section is to defend my identity label and the popular misconception that I encounter by even those who are part of the queer community. I assert that my association with the label is one enriched by love and acceptance.

As someone who is straight-passing⁵⁸, I find I must come out often and consistently repeat and defend my identity; as I will later discuss, my feminine performance is often linked to heterosexuality and a need for male attention. But I struggle to clearly define ‘lesbian.’ In “Lesbian Identity from a Social-Psychological Perspective” written by Charlotte Chuck Tate and published in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* in 2012, Tate also attempts to distinguish the definition of what a lesbian is, falling into the same difficulty of defining what a woman is—in the end, they ultimately create two models (neither that I completely agree with) on what a lesbian identity encompasses.⁵⁹ Although I have some disagreements with this paper, it shows that this definition is frequently discussed, tweaked and molded depending on the person defining it, their other knowledge of gender studies and what year it is rehashed by academics.⁶⁰ Rodgers in the study previously mentioned notably did not define it and also included a diverse group of people who identified with a gender identity other than cis woman/female; the author

⁵⁷ Eleanor Medhurst, “Dressing Dykes: A History of Lesbian Fashion,” The Feminist Lecture Program, February 5, 2024.

⁵⁸ Referring to style and performance.

⁵⁹ Charlotte Chuck Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective: Two Different Models of ‘Being a Lesbian.’” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 18. doi:10.1080/10894160.2011.557639.

⁶⁰ Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity.”

stated that this demonstrated “that not only is the lesbian community becoming more accepting of other communities, but the community itself is becoming ever more diverse in terms of gender and sexual identities”.⁶¹ In “The Lady Vanishes: On Never Knowing Quite Who is a Lesbian,” author Kath Weston notes the differences that could be a result of discrepancies between cultures.⁶² Even the understanding of behaviour vs. identity, or even its connection to erotica and porn genres can differ the definition between understanding.⁶³

So, are lesbians women who are only attracted to women? Or perhaps non-men who are only attracted to non-men—both definitions seem to equally raise the blood pressure of different groups of people; one for reasons of being “too narrow”, while the other is an act of erasure of ‘women’. I obviously tend to lean on the latter definition, but I’d like to note a double standard: does ‘gay’⁶⁴ mean men who are only attracted to men, or non-women who are attracted to non-women? And I wonder why this identity isn’t under the same scrutiny as lesbians. I think we know the answer.

Henceforth in this paper, I will periodically be using “lesbian” and “women” in the way “guys” is sometimes used to refer to everyone irrespective of gender, similarly in the way that Baker used “lesbian” with respect to other identities. I will also use the broader (yet, more specific) term, “Sapphic”⁶⁵, which is commonly understood as an umbrella term that includes the

⁶¹ Rogers, “Terfs Aren’t Feminists,” 18.

⁶² Kath Weston, “The Lady Vanishes: On Never Knowing, Quite, Who Is a Lesbian,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, (2009): 141.

⁶³ Behaviour, ie: someone who has only slept with women, but does not call themselves a lesbian. Identity, ie: someone who identifies as a lesbian, but marries a man. Weston, “The Lady Vanishes,” 14.

⁶⁴ ‘Gay’ referring to the ‘G’ in LGBTQ+, not the umbrella term that is similarly used like ‘Queer’.

⁶⁵ Derived from the Greek poet, Sappho. Sarah Prager, “Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered.” *JSTOR Daily*, January 29, 2020. <https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/>.

lesbian identity, as well as bisexual, pansexual, WLW⁶⁶ and queer identities of women and non-men.

The slow transformation of the lesbian flag is another instance of lesbian solidarity and inclusion. In “Flags and Fashion,” also published in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* in 2023, the author, Medhurst describes the modification of a lesbian flag that was initially created by a gay man, Sean Campbell in 1999⁶⁷, then a “lipstick” lesbian flag popular in the 2010s⁶⁸, to the popular “sunset” lesbian flag created by a “Tumblr user Emily Gwen to explicitly include “gender non-conformity” and “unique relationships to womanhood”⁶⁹.”⁷⁰

I attempt to unravel this identity in defense of and in celebration of it. I love being a lesbian. My connection to womanhood, my femininity, my love and desire for women and my compassion for my community fills me with bliss. Although language is sometimes limiting, my lesbian identity lives beyond the words that are hard to dissect.

Invisibility

Pain

Pain has a way of making someone feel crazy. My crooked, compressed, and fractured spine, overly tight muscles and stretchy connective tissue disorder leaves me with the

⁶⁶ WLW stands for “Women loving women”. A term popular online, which is often used to clarify an image, act, scene, moment, etc. that is not necessarily referring to identity labels. Two women kissing can be described “WLW”, without disclosing the sexual identity of the people, just the act.

⁶⁷ Created by Sean Campbell, “depicting a black triangle with a labrys (double-headed axe) on a rich purple background.” Eleanor Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion: Expressions of Solidarity through Lesbian Clothing.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, (2023): 11. doi:10.1080/10894160.2023.2246250.

⁶⁸ This flag was popular until 2018, where the creator was outed for posting transphobic content online. It is characterised by a white stripe in the middle, surrounded by a pink to red gradient stripes. Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion,” 11-12.

⁶⁹ Emily Gwen as quoted by Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion,” 12.

⁷⁰ This flag is similar to the “lipstick” lesbian flag with the white stripe but includes an orange to pink gradient. This flag is now widely seen as the default lesbian flag.

unfortunate burden of chronic pain. Over and over, I'm met with doctors who prescribe me birth control, and high doses of painkillers after suggesting that the pain is "all in my head", or perhaps a result from being fat.⁷¹ It's truly maddening. On good days, I pop an Advil and apply a few Salonpas patches to my back and carry on. On bad days, I'm stuck in bed, unable to merely roll over without shooting pain that leaves me panting. I lay there and tear at my hair and bite at the skin on my fingers until I bleed from helplessness and frustration. I slam my hands against my legs until they bruise, against my head until I see stars. I ask the universe "Why? Why me?" And I beg "please I'll do anything." My pride chokes under the force of humiliation when I have to ask people to slow their pace when walking, or to take the elevator only one floor up. I look lazy and unfit in my body that is perceived to be able. "No no," I say, "I just have a bad back." No, I can't go hiking for our date, no I can't even be sure I'll last walking around the market, and I won't humiliate myself by asking if we can sit down for a bit so I can rest and pop a few more painkillers.

After a few self-help books, meditation sessions and journaling prompts, I've accepted my pain, forgiven my body, and let go of my pride and humiliation—but I can't help but anger when those who tell me to let go of these parts of myself don't feel the pain that I am consistently laden with. Sure, maybe an "I don't deserve this" attitude has seldom helped me, but accepting my pain in defeat and rolling over to die is not the solution I'm looking for. I am not ashamed of my limitations, I feel betrayed.

After episodes of pain, when I come back into the real world with long decorated nails, pink hair, a full face of makeup and a dress, people say, "Oh, I could never," but sometimes it feels like this is the *only thing I have*. If I cannot be without pain, can I at least be beautiful? The

⁷¹ Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 357, 407-48, 426.

days where I don't despise my body, can I not decorate it? Because if my body can give me anything, it has given me hair to dye, skin to mark, nails to embellish; if my body gives me pain, it also gives me beauty. My pain is an integral part of me—something that I symbolize with depictions of painkillers and pain patches that are collaged into my paintings. It shows my pain, but it also shows the patience and care I have for my body.

I wonder if pain has made me so feminine. How could I embody stereotypic masculine performance characteristics like dominance, stoicism, or aggression, when my pain has made me sweet, forgiving, nurturing and gentle? I wonder if my pain has made me patient and overly empathetic.

Femininity is previously described by Mcklevie and Gold as passive and demure, and hyperfemininity as loud and more aggressive.⁷² After redefining it in this paper, I'd rather understand hyperfemininity and femininity not as opposites of each other as Mcklevie and Gold would like. Hyperfemininity, visually, takes up more space and consequently tends to be seen as malicious towards men and feminine women— "space", meaning social or physical space. Now I wonder if this motivation to deliberately take up space is an act of rebellion in the same vein as Goldenberg's suggestion of making more expansive categories of what 'woman' is— or in this case what we know femininity as—or Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* that encourages subversion of 'normal' or 'classical' forms of femininity.⁷³ I also wonder if these motivations work in tandem to ensure I am visible where I feel invisible.

⁷² McKelvie and Gold. "Hyperfemininity: Further Definition of the Construct," 225.

⁷³ Halberstam *Gaga Feminism*. Goldenberg, "Investigation into Constructing a Category of 'Woman'."

Biraciality

While thinking about how invisible pain needs to be vocalized to be deemed valid, I consider how the feeling of invisibility touches other areas of my life. My hidden disability⁷⁴ requires that I clarify certain aspects of myself or actions I take. I sometimes connect this to my White-passing⁷⁵, straight-passing appearance—in someone’s eyes, I’m White, straight, and able-bodied, up until the moment I clarify I am not. Even then, people have their doubts, and this sometimes requires me to explain multiple times.

Like other multiracial and biracial people, my race feels like it has never been up to me; I am considered white in one place, Asian in another, and something completely different somewhere else⁷⁶. Racial identification has always been a fundamental part of the structure in Western society and politics, and is a core social identity for those in the West,⁷⁷ so I largely discount and ignore remarks from monoracial people suggesting that my racial identity doesn’t matter. There seems to generally be a lack of research and understanding conducted on mixed-race people and their experiences growing up⁷⁸, with a majority of race research on monoracial people. The interviews highlighted in Basu’s “The Role of Gender in the Experiences of Biracial College Students,” show the social pressure that these college students face at home—two students shared their experience of asking their parents for advice regarding self-identification, ultimately leaving them more confused; unless the parent is biracial themselves, they do not

⁷⁴ The popular term for disabilities that aren’t visually recognizable. These also include mental health and pain disabilities.

⁷⁵ In this instance, I am referring to the monoracial “white”.

⁷⁶ Rhea M. Perkins, “Life in Duality: Biracial Identity Development,” *Race, Gender & Class* 21, no. 1/2 (2014): 217, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496970>.

⁷⁷ This study looks at several different biracial heritages and how their racial self-identification is connected to their gender, class or religion. The intention is to consider identity theory, which states that “the self is composed of multiple identities, and the meaning and influence of a particular identity depends on its relation to other identities.” Lauren D. Davenport, “The Role of Gender, Class, and Religion in Biracial Americans’ Racial Labeling Decisions.” *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 1 (2016): 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24756399>.

⁷⁸ Perkins, “Life in Duality,” 211.

understand the “culture clashes” and the feelings the child encounters when they recognize their racial differences from both their mother and father.⁷⁹ In the case of self-identification, Psychologist, Maria P. Root in 1996 stated that there are only five options for a biracial⁸⁰ to identify.⁸¹ The first option is to “accept the racial identity given by society”, the second is to identify as the minority race, the third is to identify as White (if the features are ‘passable’), the fourth is to identify as biracial, and lastly is to identify as both.⁸² All of these options have their problems and are all dependent on their unique experiences. In surveys that ask you to self-declare your race, I am usually faced with options that simply do not apply to me—personally I do not identify as solely White or Asian, or even “bipoc”⁸³ or “racialized” and I am stuck with my mouse hovering over the options.

Focusing just on appearances, I find with the rising popularity of racially ambiguous beauty, “Blackfishing,” or “Asianfishing,” the perception of what each race looks like has been skewed.⁸⁴ Influencers online now have hair textures, skin colours and facial features that don’t classically align with their race, and this uptake of racial ambiguity acquired from plastic surgery and makeup blurs the lines of what a monoracial person can look like, leaving mixed-race people having to defend the legitimacy of their backgrounds.⁸⁵ Evidence shows that the students in the

⁷⁹ Andra M. Basu, “The Role of Gender in the Experiences of Biracial College Students,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 1 (2010): 102, doi:/10.2979/racethmulglocon.2010.4.1.97.

⁸⁰ For this study conducted in 2008, college-aged biracial children of one Black parent and one White parent were analyzed. The five options listed could be adapted for other biracial identities, however, this list relies on the implication that the biracial has one White parent and one minority-race parent. Perkins, “Life in Duality,” 215.

⁸¹ Maria P Root as quoted by Perkins, “Life in Duality,” 215.

⁸² Perkins, “Life in Duality,” 215.

⁸³ Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour

⁸⁴ Natalie Morris, “Why Celebrating ‘mixed-Race Beauty’ Has Its Problematic Side,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/08/why-celebrating-mixed-race-beauty-has-its-problematic-side>.

⁸⁵ The subreddit r/mixedrace on Reddit.com is a community of mixed-race people. One of the most popular tags under this subreddit consist of rants by mixed individuals who recall experiences where they have to defend their race to people who insist on dismissing them. A common occurrence is when a mixed-race individual is accused of “black-fishing,” or appropriating a racial group they are a part of. “r/mixedrace: Wiki,” Banjjak313, Reddit, September 2023, <https://www.reddit.com/r/mixedrace/>

previously mentioned study, biraciality and racial ambiguity are often interpreted as a close association to Whiteness, "the white community and white standards of beauty," regardless of if they had any White racial background.⁸⁶ The mere perceived proximity to Whiteness simultaneously invalidates their racialized existence, whilst placing them as the "opposer" in regard to racial loyalty.⁸⁷ Although someone such as myself who reaps the benefits of White privilege cannot fully understand first-hand experiences of racism— and I don't mean to discredit people who have faced such— using the "suffering test"⁸⁸ to devise whether someone is part of that community or not is subjective and boils race down to the level someone is discriminated against. Race is more than just a label in a society hell-bent on discussing identity politics, but it is also an embodiment of history and culture.

As I mentioned before, I don't like to identify as one or the other race, much preferring to use the term "biracial" for myself. When I was younger, I would refer to myself as "half Filipino, half White." Scholars such as Bettina L. Love and Ashley N. Patterson look at biraciality through a more spiritual lens, arguing that in their eyes, "a spiritual self is one who is cognizant and embracing of all aspects that make up that self,"⁸⁹ thus, the process of self-identifying must encapsulate the person's whole self, rather than fractions (due to limited language or understanding).⁹⁰ Love affirms that identity (and therefore, accurate labels) are important for a

⁸⁶ The students were asked to disclose the race they primarily date—most said White. This paper analyzed the experience of multi/biracial students and their sexuality and gender expression regarding being seen as "exotic." Chandra D. L. Waring, "They See Me as Exotic... That Intrigues Them: Gender, Sexuality and the Racially Ambiguous Body," *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 307, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496947>.

⁸⁷Bettina L. Love, "Chapter 6 Visionary Response: Biracial Identity, Spiritual Wholeness, and Black Girlhood," *Counterpoints* 454 (2013): 154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42982251>.

⁸⁸ On the "Suffering Test," Piper explains, "I have sometimes met blacks socially who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, requires me to prove my blackness by passing the Suffering Test: They recount at length their recent experiences of racism and then wait expectantly, skeptically, for me to match theirs with mine." Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition*, no. 58 (1992): 4–32, doi:10.2307/2934966.

⁸⁹ Ashley N. Patterson, "Chapter 6: Can One Ever Be Wholly Whole? Fostering Biracial Identity Founded in Spirit," *Counterpoints* 454 (2013): 145, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42982250>.

⁹⁰ Patterson, "Fostering Biracial Identity Founded in Spirit," 145.

person to situate themselves in the world.⁹¹ This makes me wonder how I interact with my other labels and identities that don't visually fit with me, and makes me wonder if the defensiveness I have regarding my race is a product of being consistently interrogated for it in a society that puts such gravity on identification.

Although there is no direct correlation between my biraciality or White-passing appearance to my hyperfeminine performance, there is a correlation between identity and self-expression. If my race is misinterpreted, I hope my character is not; I hope I am just as unapologetic, pink and soft as I appear. I hope I am surrounded by other biracial people.

Notably, I make the intention in my work by including subjects and models who are of mixed-race heritage. Especially with the paintings depicting the Sapphic couple who are repeatedly shown in my work, as they are a representation of me, I found it important to include someone who had similar experiences as myself. As I have mentioned in this chapter, having certain aspects of myself visible is important to me—when I am requesting models to reference in my paintings, I want people who reflect aspects of myself.

Performance and Persona

Reclaiming cuteness

In the book called *The Cute*, edited and compiled by Sianne Ngai in 2023, Ngai analyzes the “cute” as an aesthetic judgement category, like beauty, zany, the gimmick, or the sublime.⁹² When we call something gimmick-y, we are making a judgement that the thing is untrustworthy,

⁹¹ Patterson, “Fostering Biracial Identity Founded in Spirit,” 145.

⁹² Sianne Ngai, “Introduction,” in *The Cute*, ed. by Sianne Ngai, (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2022), 12.

cheap and overall negative.⁹³ Cute is a bit different for the fact that when we label something cute, we are aestheticizing “unhappiness, helplessness and deformity [...] it also always involves an act of sadism” on the part of the judge⁹⁴ As Ngai puts it, “cute is in fact an aesthetic of or about minorness – or what is generally perceived to be diminutive, subordinate, trivial, and above all, unthreatening.”⁹⁵ In this book, there are plentiful opinions on cute-ness, some focusing on the obvious negative and problematic aspects of it that emphasises, eroticises, and upholds power imbalances—nevertheless, there are an equal amount of counter-critiques that look at the “agency of those who willfully act or have been made cute; that cuteness can be strategically chosen as well as externally imposed; [and] that it can be a survival strategy.”⁹⁶ This is the aspect of cute that I am most interested in—like femininity, on surface level, yes, it is a tool for oppression, but only considering it in this limited view denies women and those who take part of cute or feminine performance of agency.

When discussing femininity, girly-ness, beauty, and cuteness, I find there are three main levels of reflection. On the first level, women who partake in certain feminine styles, acts, and performances, are understood to be too weak-minded to recognise their own oppression; femininity is therefore demonized and rejected because of its direct connection to gender norms and sexism. The second level: women recognise and use their femininity to their advantage—they know that their femininity upholds the patriarchy, but they will reap the benefits they can. Lastly, feminine styles, acts and performances can potentially exist detached from the patriarchy and men— yes, there is acknowledgement of its associations, but its primary motivations are

⁹³ Ngai, “Introduction” in *The Cute*, 13.

⁹⁴ Daniel Harris, “Cuteness,” in *The Cute*, ed. by Sianne Ngai, (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2022), 41.

⁹⁵ Ngai, “Introduction” in *The Cute*, 12.

⁹⁶ Ngai, “Introduction” in *The Cute*, 18.

entirely disconnected (as much as it is possible). Level one is rejection, two is rebellion, three is reclamation. Although difficult for the fact that femininity exists in direct opposition to masculinity, I purpose that we can understand femininity and cuteness in an entirely different lens; understandably this position is both idealistic and borderline delusional. No, I'm not suggesting that we live in a utopia that forgets the part that gender norms and sexism play regarding aspects deemed cute or feminine, I am merely suggesting another potential motivation for its expression. Essentially, women are not stupid. If expressions of femininity, like cuteness, is solely about being powerless and pathetic, while simultaneously upholding damaging gender norms and power imbalances, why would women even take part of it at all. And if it is only about manipulation, where does this con stop? Are cute things, cute people, cute women playing a long game of manipulation over other cute things? No, I argue cuteness can be embraced and implemented with intensions separate from passivity, necessity, or rebellion— same with femininity.

Part of my reasoning to attempt to separate cuteness from levels one and two are because of cute's connection to disability. As previously mentioned, I have a lot of pride and I don't think I perform or act cute in a performance of submission or rebellion necessarily. When we call something cute, it "can be as much of a dismissal as a compliment," because of its underlying pity.⁹⁷ Interestingly, Daniel Harris in "Cuteness", written in 2001 affirms that cuteness should not be mistaken for physically appealing or attractive, rather it is more closely relation to the grotesque.⁹⁸ Something intentionally short, stubby and useless sits on the boarder of cute or intensely pitiable, due to its neediness- its inability to survive alone.⁹⁹ Has misunderstanding of

⁹⁷ Ngai, "Introduction" in *The Cute*, 14.

⁹⁸ Harris, "Cuteness" in *The Cute*, 40.

⁹⁹ Harris, "Cuteness" in *The Cute*, 40.

the connotations of cuteness confused me into misinterpreting something of an insult? I wonder if someone with a visible disability has a different experience with cuteness and sees it as demeaning; to which I have thus appropriated. But notably in William Ian Miller’s “Anatomy of Disgust,” written in 1998, he makes the connection between the judgement of cute, and how it maybe elicitors of love.¹⁰⁰ He agrees that calling something cute is similar to the act of looking down, but also feelings of softness, disarmament and grace,¹⁰¹ producing feelings of tenderness, compassion and—most notably— love and attraction.¹⁰²

Looking like a Lesbian

“Can you tell I’m a lesbian?” I ask my friends before we head out to the bar. This is a common question asked between my friends and I, for a multitude of reasons: to attract a potential girlfriend, attract a potential friend, keep men away, and to—most importantly— look exactly how I feel. Sure, people say, “just wear what you want,” and “that stuff doesn’t matter,” and maybe it doesn’t matter just like anything else—but I don’t take style advice from people who think looking good and feeling right doesn’t matter. In a small way, not looking like a lesbian feels a lot like not looking like my race. Being misinterpreted as monoracially White is frustrating—being raised on my mother’s food, my mother’s culture, my mother’s religion is erased from my features, to be misread by any passerby and only corrected when verbally bringing it up. Being misinterpreted as straight doesn’t necessarily erase any of my genetic,

¹⁰⁰ William Ian Miller, “Anatomy of Disgust,” in *The Cute*, ed. by Sianne Ngai, (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2022), 64.

¹⁰¹ Millers, “Disgust,” in *The Cute*, 64.

¹⁰² Ngai, “Introduction” in *The Cute*, 14.

racial, or cultural history, but verbally coming out feels like an exhausting and repetitive process.¹⁰³

In my teenhood, I would hold my breath while my heart raced after I disclosed my sexuality to someone. My coming-out was just as traumatic and life-altering as any queer person's worst nightmare and having to relive this in bite-sized format for years was a hell that was only quelled by my stronger desire to live truthfully, surrounded by people who understood me. I came out at half my current age, so frankly, I don't really remember being 'in the closet'. I do, however remember feeling a sudden vigour to want everyone to know I was gay, but back in the late 2000s-2010s, finding lesbian or gay representation was few and far between— even when there was gay representation, lesbians were mostly hidden. At first, I tried to dress like two musical artists I greatly looked up to, Tegan and Sara, but quickly realized that I hated it and absolutely nothing could make me want to cut my hair off. I tried my hand at dressing “bohemian” or “hipster,” which only makes me cringe in hindsight because honestly, I wasn't very fashion-forward enough to pull it off. At age 16, my best friend and I went down the street from our high school to a tattoo parlour during lunch break and I got a septum piercing. Finally, I looked like a lesbian.

In a hilarious article published in 2017, titled, “A Practical Guide to Lesbian Identification in the 21st Century,” author Anna R. Westhaver recounts the growing difficulty when identifying lesbians, especially when short hair is popular with heterosexual soccer moms

¹⁰³ Bell hooks, as quoted by Walker mentions the dangers of equating straight-passing experiences with white-passing experiences because it can diminish the experiences of racialized people who cannot “take off” their race. This is a valid criticism which I agree with for the most part, however, this argument does not account for those who are biracial or have the qualities to pass for white and neither for the few men who “are perceived as femme and some women who are perceived as butch no matter how hard they try to conform.” Lisa M. Walker, “How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking like What You Are,” *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 879, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174910>.

and plaid flannel is a popular style amongst hipsters.¹⁰⁴ In obvious satire, Westhaver states identifiers such as: “If she has coloured hair and/or piercings (especially if it is a piercing of the septum) she is probably queer,” and “if, when walking to your potential lesbian, you notice that in her eyes there lies the fiery glow of predatory lust that is characteristic of every lesbian, she is queer,” and “avoid all those with “soccer mom” hairstyles [...] this is a common decoy employed by the heterosexual woman to confuse and distract the general public.”¹⁰⁵ While reading this, I found myself laughing out loud and sending quotes to friends—this “lesbian identification” system is one that relies on stereotypes that I’m all too familiar with, and highlights the prevalence of femme invisibility. Westhaver states that a woman who is wearing designer heels and sways her hips as she walks (something that touches on style and performativity) is not a lesbian.¹⁰⁶ If her voice is cheerful, she mentions her fondness of Pink Uggs or Strawberry Daiquiris, she is NOT, but if she wears steel-toed boots and mentions body hair, she IS.¹⁰⁷ I am under no delusion that Westhaver is serious with this article, but this brings to light stereotypes that are still common even amongst my small Sapphic community in 2024. Even while on dating apps, my lesbian “authenticity” is investigated and interrogated by those who think I am lying merely because of my appearance). In “How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Politics of Looking like What You Are,” Lisa M. Walker mirrors this experience, stating essentially, that femmes are assumed to be straight women who are “taking a break” from heterosexuality and the patriarchy.¹⁰⁸ Reading this part, I must admit, makes me sneer a bit. This

¹⁰⁴ Anna R. Westhaver, “A Practical Guide to Lesbian Identification in the 21st Century,” *Counterpoints* 485 (2017): 237, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45136271>.

¹⁰⁵ Westhaver, “21st Century,” 238.

¹⁰⁶ Westhaver, “21st Century,” 239.

¹⁰⁷ Westhaver, “21st Century,” 238.

¹⁰⁸ Walker, “How to Recognize a Lesbian,” 868.

article was written in 1993, before I was even a thought and I find myself surprised by a feeling I know all too well.¹⁰⁹

Like a thorn in my side, I am not necessarily damaged, and I cannot claim that I am discriminated against, but I sure am peeved. In “Standing OUT/Fitting IN,”¹¹⁰ author, David J. Hutson even highlights the uneven harassment that butch lesbians would face regarding police brutality in the 1950s-80s; lesbians and gays who could pass were more likely to dodge persecution.¹¹¹ I admit that in my experiences, if my partner appeared to be “one of the guys,” they were much more likely to be harassed physically, while I still was safe because they didn’t feel comfortable hitting a “girl”.

One of the participants in the study conducted by Hutson said that before they came out, they were afraid of wearing “gay clothes” and appearing gay, but afterwards felt compelled to dress in the clothes they were too afraid of wearing before.¹¹² Another participant expressed how the change to a more lesbian style was almost immediate after their coming out, rejecting traditionally feminine clothing and makeup, and embracing body hair.¹¹³ A common problem that the lesbians in this study faced was “not being butch enough”—one of the lesbians expressed how they wanted to be more identifiable in queer spaces, and didn’t want to be misinterpreted as a straight ally, even admitting to dressing less feminine to “pass” in lesbian bars.¹¹⁴ As previously mentioned, “passing” as heterosexual is important for safety, and I

¹⁰⁹ My intention in this section, or this whole paper, to paint mascs and butches as predatory, misogynistic or align them with my experiences with men.

¹¹⁰ This study discloses that it “remains skewed toward white, middle-class experiences of identity and appearance” in the US. David J. Hutson, “Standing OUT/Fitting IN: Identity, Appearance, and Authenticity in Gay and Lesbian Communities,” *Symbolic Interaction* 33, no. 2 (2010): 229, doi:10.1525/si.2010.33.2.213.

¹¹¹ Hutson, “Standing Out, Fitting In,” 215.

¹¹² Hutson, “Standing Out, Fitting In,” 222.

¹¹³ Hutson, “Standing Out, Fitting In,” 222.

¹¹⁴ Hutson, “Standing Out, Fitting In,” 226-227.

recognise my privilege in this aspect. However, the yearning to pass as something that I authentically am will continuously be a source of irritation.

Walker notes how visibility has been used as a “tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics, in which participants often symbolize their demands for social justice by celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for discrimination;” for example, the gay pride movement was highlighted by having cross-dressing and drag as a signifier, or the Black Power Movement with their slogan that emphasizes symbolic value: “Black Is Beautiful.”¹¹⁵ This gives power to the visible and helps distinguish those who are part of the movement or not—again, a problem of “passing” being a direct connection between either being us or them.

In “The Lady Vanishes: On Never Knowing, Quite, Who is a Lesbian,” written by Kath Weston in *The Journal of Lesbian Studies* in 2009, Weston tries to confront the question: how can you tell who is a lesbian?¹¹⁶ Weston recounts the activist movements in the 70s that tried to disapprove the myth “that lesbians are inevitably butch, and gay men invariably effeminate,” to illustrate that people who think they have never met a queer person, probably has—this arguably did more harm than good, with rival activists insinuating that gay people were “hiding in plain sight.”¹¹⁷ Both handlings emphasize the impossibility of telling who is queer, especially during initial scrutiny.

Lavender and Violets¹¹⁸ were a code for lesbians to signal to one another of their attraction—this tradition to use codes in clothing is deeply ingrained within lesbian culture.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Walker, “How to Recognize a Lesbian,” 868.

¹¹⁶ Weston, “The Lady Vanishes,” 137.

¹¹⁷ Weston, “The Lady Vanishes,” 137.

¹¹⁸ Prager “Four Flowering Plants.”

¹¹⁹ Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion,” 1.

Codes as “obvious” as wearing masculine attire, like those favoured by diarist, Anne Lister in the early 1800s, or as subtle as wearing the pinky rings popular amongst British lesbians of the early 1900s, are among many ways in history that lesbians signaled to one another of their existence.¹²⁰ Lesbian fashion historian, Eleanor Medhurst mentions many codes that most-notably, are relatively masculine—she notes how, even with photographic evidence from “lesbian bars,” femme lesbians would not be recorded as such in history unless sitting with (or on) their masculine-presenting date.¹²¹ This brings into question how many lesbians and sapphics have been lost in history for presenting femme (either by necessity, or by preference).

There’s a lot of codes I am privy to, some that I will refrain from sharing purely to maintain their secrecy and there are also many that I take part in that do not limit my high-femme expression—a lot of these codes that I favour have to do with my hyperfemininity itself. “Gay-dar,” or perhaps my lesbian intuition ensures my accuracy when differentiating who is a high-femme lesbian, and who is a hyperfeminine heterosexual woman, and no, it’s not their nails.¹²² I would argue that high-femme lesbians wear their femininity as one would wear a costume for a performance (similarly, but differently than drag). Since lesbian fashion is so ingrained with codes and secrecy, symbols, styles, and accessories are amplified and worn like a signal that is potentially more subtle than flagging¹²³—although admittedly, incorporating lesbian flag colours into my hair and accessories is something I am a fan of. “Sensible footwear,”¹²⁴ a classically lesbian staple, is something I gleefully take part in, offering me the support that my spine craves

¹²⁰ Medhurst, “Dressing Dykes,” and Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion,” 1.

¹²¹ Medhurst, “Dressing Dykes.”

¹²² This is referring to my previous project titled, “Girly-girls, Fake Nails and the (Gay)ze” that attempted to investigate long fake nails and their history and biases within the lesbian community. Through research and conversations, I grew a broader understanding of stereotypes within the community and attempted to shed further light on prejudices and where they could possibly stem from. Camille, “Girly-girls.”

¹²³ This is the act of wearing the flag, or the colours of a flag to celebrate or express solidarity. Medhurst, “Flags and Fashion,” 3.

¹²⁴ Medhurst, “Dressing Dykes.”

for, whilst hopefully signalling my sexuality. In the paintings and collages that accompany this paper, my usage of the lesbian flag colours and items attached to lesbian codes are treated as symbols to subtly refer to my lesbian identity. Doc Martians and other combat boots are an example of popular Sapphic footwear, fondly being referred to online as “lesbian stompers.”¹²⁵ In the documentary produced in 1992, titled *Forbidden Love*, interviews are conducted with Canadian queer women who recount their lives in the mid-20th century.¹²⁶ One of the interviewees, Ruth Christine, tells the story of when she first went to a lesbian bar and how she was drawn to a woman wearing black leather boots, while another interviewee, Amanda White, had the coolest mullet I had ever seen.¹²⁷ Their stories highlighted how widespread these codes were amongst the Sapphic community. When Tumblr was at its peak, I remember seeing all sorts of lesbian subcultures, like cottage-core lesbians, granola lesbians, sword lesbians, lipstick lesbians, each with their own identifiers—again, I was slightly too unfashionable to partake in any subculture successfully.

Lately, I’ve been finding myself wondering how I can incorporate carabinieri onto my dresses and skirts, or if a mullet would suit me (hint: it won’t).

Online or IRL

One of the first books I read while researching hyperfemininity was Iris Marion Young’s *On Female Body Experience*, specifically the chapter titled, “Women Recovering our Clothes.”¹²⁸ She starts the chapter analyzing an ad for wool clothing that depicts a confident-

¹²⁵ AshMuu200, “lesbian stompers...” *Reddit*, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/LesbianActually/comments/wb36j0/got_my_stompers_a_few_days_ago_and_im_in_love.

¹²⁶ *Forbidden Love*.

¹²⁷ *Forbidden Love*.

¹²⁸ Iris Marion Young, “Women Recovering our Clothes,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing like a Girl” and Other Essays*, 63-74, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

looking woman walking across the page in a stylish patterned coat with the caption, “see yourself in wool.”¹²⁹ She does exactly that, imagining herself in this coat and how she would be perceived by her friends and colleagues, but always with this lingering feeling of being perceived by another. Young refers to this gaze only by “he” or “him”, describing how “his gaze is unidirectional, he sees [her], but [she] can’t see him.”¹³⁰ Who is this “he”? She corrects herself:

I am seeing myself in wool seeing him see me. Is it that I cannot see myself without seeing myself being seen? So I need him there to unite me and the image of myself? [...] So I am split. I see myself, and I see myself being seen [...] Can we separate the panels? I wonder if there’s a way we can get him out of the picture.¹³¹

In this quote, she is referring to the male gaze, a concept popularized in film theory and pop culture, implying that the camera is a man, as they are both the neutral subject and the one with power—this, in a way, positions women to partake in being “the watcher” along with men, either onto other women or onto themselves.¹³² Women then start to adapt by digesting their own visibility within the male framework, wanting to be that desirable woman they see on the advertisement, wanting to be seen in that same sense, because they’ve understood their existence in a patriarchal society that women are “the supreme object.”¹³³

In “Dynamics of Desire,” by Jill Dolan, she looks at lesbian pornography and performance, and how the male gaze is intertwined in even (and especially) this.¹³⁴ She explains the unique context that lesbians are in regarding fantasies—when there is no male, there is greater potential to subvert gender roles that is normally prevalent in heteronormative scenarios.¹³⁵ Dolan states: “power is not inherently male; a woman who assumes a dominant role

¹²⁹ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

¹³⁰ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

¹³¹ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

¹³² Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 65.

¹³³ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 68.

¹³⁴ Jill Dolan, “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 39, no. 2 (1987): 164, doi:10.2307/3207686.

¹³⁵ Dolan, “Dynamics of Desire,” 164.

is only male-like if the culture considers power as a solely male attribute. When a lesbian performer assumes sexual power in the lesbian performance space the reassignment of meaning becomes subversive.”¹³⁶ This understanding reminds me of the common question I used to attract from curious heterosexuals: “who wears the pants?” But no one wears the pants, and I am quite unfamiliar with pants, especially regarding sex. No, I am not ignorant to how power structures or porn works, but rather maintaining the delusion that my relationships, my sex can be disconnected from the influence of men. Even alone with another woman, even alone with myself, are my eyes those of the patriarchy? This question reminds me of an image I encountered online depicting a woman in a sheer, black lingerie nightgown with an obvious push-up bra, with the caption, “what my man sees before bedtime. No t-shirts and shorts, sorry,” which is then quoted/responded to by another user with “Women have really suffered. Even asleep you have to be performing.”¹³⁷

When I consider this, I reflect on whether I have complete power and control over my performance and persona. I am being gazed upon while alone, while wearing clothes, and potentially while having sex. I’d like to assert that any potential adherence to what is deemed desirable through the male gaze is coincidental, an act of subversion or an act of parody—again, I know how impossible this is, but perhaps if I state it enough, it will become an affirmation. If the power is within the gaze, I also wonder like Iris Marion Young: “I wonder if there’s a way we can get [the watcher] out of the picture.”¹³⁸

During the covid-19 pandemic lockdown, I spent hours and hours a day on my phone, constantly updating and interacting with my social media. I’d post photos smiling, photos of

¹³⁶ Dolan, “Dynamics of Desire,” 164.

¹³⁷ Wholelifeismeh and femininaura, “Women have really suffered...” *Twitter*, January 2024, <https://x.com/wholelifeismeh?t=wzo4eoawqi4uzajgqish8q&s=09>.

¹³⁸ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

what I ate, photos of my dog, just to prove that I'm doing well—no, thriving. I'd watch hours-worth of videos and reach the end of timelines that were supposed to be “endless.” The rise of TikTok was inevitable, with growing subcultures like “Lesbian TikTok,” or “QueerTok” gaining popularity.¹³⁹ Truthfully, I only had TikTok downloaded for about a week—my then-undiagnosed ADHD could not handle an endless stream of 30-second videos, so I deleted it for my own good. The popular platform is run by an algorithm that works by organizing content, analyzing what is being interacted with and curating a *For You* page that is focused on your interests.¹⁴⁰ In the article titled, “Now You See Me,” writer Nešović notes how fascinating it was to see lesbians performing ‘lesbian’.¹⁴¹ There were lesbian inside jokes, lesbian thirst traps, lesbian storytimes¹⁴² that “served to code their identity as legible,” even sometimes tagging *#lesbian* to clearly connect with their chosen audience.¹⁴³ Because of this specific medium relying on a selfie camera, the power to influence who the audience is (to an extent) and the blatant declaration of desire with thirst traps, “they seek to indulge the lesbian gaze, which is in this instance mediated through the algorithmic gaze of the platform.”¹⁴⁴ Here, Nešović is suggesting there is another gaze at work—one that ultimately holds the power on whether your content is shown or not, what content is censored and who to push to the exclusive *For You* page.¹⁴⁵ The algorithm is always analyzing and dissecting the content being created—yet another watcher in the room.

¹³⁹ Dunja Nešović, “Now You See Me: Visibility of the Lesbian Identity on Tiktok,” *Institute of Network Cultures*, October 8, 2021, <https://networkcultures.org/longform/2021/10/08/now-you-see-me-visibility-of-the-lesbian-identity-on-tiktok/>.

¹⁴⁰ Nešović, “Now You See Me.”

¹⁴¹ Nešović, “Now You See Me.”

¹⁴² A trend where the poster tells a quick story. Popularized on Vine, but is now used on more platforms like Youtube and TikTok.

¹⁴³ Nešović, “Now You See Me.”

¹⁴⁴ Nešović, “Now You See Me.”

¹⁴⁵ Nešović, “Now You See Me.”

I include this specific watcher in my work by incorporating windows, icons and social media imagery through paintings or collages. This is also a call-back to my previous series that was created during the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown where I felt isolated from the people I loved, and started painting what I saw on my screens as an act of appreciation for these windows. I was the watcher in this instance, and as social media and digital technology is so ingrained in my existence, I often include imagery that refers to it, often in a positive or neutral light.

Girlhood

Controlling a body

In *Unbearable Weight* written by Susan Bordo, she begins the book with references to the idea of mind/body dualism—in Western philosophy they are mainly separated, with the mind/soul being trapped within the earthly body that one must escape from to achieve greater enlightenment.¹⁴⁶ Bordo references the poem titled *The Heavy Bear* by Delmore Schwartz, where the body is a creature run by primitive and infantile instincts, “he is clumsy, gross, disgusting, a lumbering fool who trips me up in all my efforts to express myself”¹⁴⁷—interestingly, the body is referred to as he, similarly to how Iris Marion Young referred to “the watcher” in “Woman Recovering Our Clothes.”¹⁴⁸ In the poem, the body is something that needs to be maintained—no, controlled. Bordo asserts that food is something one can control, with hunger as something

¹⁴⁶ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁴⁷ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 9-10.

¹⁴⁸ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

you can have power over.¹⁴⁹ You are not your body, you—your mind—is stronger than your body, and you have the means to control it.¹⁵⁰

I think of my youth and how I used to understand my body. Before the aches and pains, there was grease, smells, hair, acne, fat; a never-ending list of how my body trapped me within it. In my girlhood, I felt trapped in a cycle of “fixing” these problems that would endlessly reappear. Despair engulfs me in my womanhood when I look back at photos—those that would make me flinch in self-hatred and disgust, I now only see a pretty (and insecure) young girl. Sometimes, I find myself wondering, as I lay in bed with excruciating pain, I wonder if the hatred I had for my body as a girl has caused it to hate me back. I apologize to it—to me, although it was neither of our faults. I try to vow to love her.

“Girlhood” is a word that usually has connotations of freedom, naivete and kindness, but I remember it a little differently than that. Although, yes, it had a measured amount of those qualities, as I moved from childhood into pre-teenage years, the disgust I had with my body engulfed me with shame and self-loathing. Bordo connects these feelings with the disorder, “anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, [and] can be seen as [...] a defense against the “femaleness” of the body and a punishment of its desires,” such as hunger.¹⁵¹ This “femaleness” was something that caused me anxiety, something I had to always keep up with, and the realization that this puberty was only the beginning of the uncontrollable maintenance felt like an inescapable uphill battle. Bordo mentions the differences of how women and men’s instincts and bodily needs are approached: “women's appetites require containment and control, whereas male indulgence is legitimated and encouraged.”¹⁵² Since I

¹⁴⁹ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 63.

¹⁵⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 85.

¹⁵¹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 17.

¹⁵² Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 26.

was a child, I would have the habit of restricting myself when I'm under stress, not giving into the painful headache, not giving into the sore back, not giving into the sharp stab of hunger, to assert full control over my body that belonged to me. This is a part of myself that I have (for the most part) healed from, but the way I used to dread the feeling of hunger, lest I lose control and give into my instincts, is a common fear amongst those with some eating disorders.¹⁵³

The young anorectic, typically, experiences her life as well as her hungers as being out of control. She is a perfectionist and can never carry out the tasks she sets herself in a way that meets her own rigorous standards. She is torn by conflicting and contradictory expectations and demands, wanting to shine in all areas of student life, confused about where to place most of her energies, what to focus on, as she develops into an adult. Characteristically, her parents expect a great deal of her in the way of individual achievement (as well as physical appearance), yet have made most of the important decisions for her. [She is] hooked on the intoxicating feeling of accomplishment and control.¹⁵⁴

I admit, that if I were in that same mindset, if I did not push myself to heal and critique the fashion and beauty industry that “punish young women through a self-imposed drive for complete perfection,”¹⁵⁵ I would still be in this endless chase. Bordo notes the distressing normalizing of plastic surgery and described it as another act a woman could take to attempt to reclaim power and control back in their life.¹⁵⁶ Procedures are seen as liberating. Even I have perused Instagram accounts for local “injector babes” who could fix the way my lips curl when I laugh, or that irritating wrinkle that appeared overnight on my forehead. Bordo asserts that she is not critiquing the individual, but the system and standards that women are held to.¹⁵⁷ In my work, I paint myself with these imperfections as an act of self-love. I include depictions of food and drinks I love to eat when I am celebrating, not restricting myself. This is a reminder that

¹⁵³ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 188.

¹⁵⁴ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 192-193.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Jane Kehily, “Taking Centre Stage? Girlhood and the Contradictions of Femininity across Three Generations,” *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 60, doi:10.3167/ghs.2008.010204.

¹⁵⁶ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 52.

¹⁵⁷ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 52.

hunger is not my enemy, and my body is not something I must be hell-bent on controlling and asserting power over.

I have the desire to “be a sensitive, caring lover... but [my body] only touches [women] grossly,” “I would face death bravely, but [my body] is terrified,” I would be limitless, but my body is bounded, even now.¹⁵⁸ I want to think but my body only wants to feel. These feelings are those I want to break through from, because I understand where they are rooted. I want to disconnect the memories of my girlhood from these patriarchal standards and let go of the mirage of “effortlessness” that validates arbitrary beauty and separates soft and sweet “femininity” and manipulative and selfish “hyperfemininity.” I am effort-full in my pursuit to see the limits of my body and celebrate all the ways it is good to me. The unease of girlhood forced me to enact control over my body, like it was my victim and only now do I see how much I love it—she is me, and I am her.

In the context that I have referred to it, “control” seems like the negative driving force; however, I want to stress that the lack of control I felt in my youth is what drove me to search for it over my body. In my womanhood, I have found this thing that I lacked, through community, love, self-acceptance, and celebration. There was a Tweet I read that asked, “how can I accept womanhood when I never got over girlhood?” to which someone replied with: “[you] can accept womanhood [without] getting over girlhood... hold them both in [your] hands, they [are] delicately intertwined”¹⁵⁹

Perhaps I received a gift from a friend—an objectively ugly piece of pottery that does not sit straight, painted a horrid pukey colour and has bumps and ridges in all the wrong places. She

¹⁵⁸ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 10.

¹⁵⁹ Loversinmoon, heavensghost, mothprincess and foragecore. “How can I accept womanhood...” *Twitter*, September 2023, <https://x.com/loversinmoon?t=TGHYVQDmgeeYxT6qIgeYdQ&s=09>.

is useless to hold flowers and does not go with the décor of my living room, no matter how hard I try to fit her in. But oh, I love her—how could I not? So instead, I place her in my bedroom, put my rings and trinkets in her, tie a ribbon around her waist and slowly fall in love with her pukey colour. In fact, I’ve found three more things with that same colour, and they look mossy and fresh together. My friend is delighted when she sees the gift in my room.

Power

If I have looked at control as something that is craved over oneself, I want to look at power as something over others. Power amongst others. Respect and agency amongst others.

The feminism I grew up understanding was one from pop anthems and Tumblr posts, with messages such as, “I can do anything I want, just like a man!” or “I don’t need a man because I am independent!” or “I can be sexy if I want to!” Bordo critiques this kind of feminism that focuses on the role of female agency and how it often perpetuates and re-establishes patriarchal culture.¹⁶⁰ Again, with this in mind, there are only two ways a misogynist would understand women who perform femininity in a normative way: women are compliant and do what they’re told, or women are rebellious and “frivolous body decorators.”¹⁶¹

This is quite the rock and hard place that we seem to come up upon, and the difference was set earlier with hyperfemininity generally being characterized by the latter of the two.¹⁶² I wonder then, how women who are seemingly “well-trained to meet the gaze that evaluates

¹⁶⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 51-52.

¹⁶¹ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 68.

¹⁶² Referring to Murnen and Byrne, “Hyperfemininity: Measurement.”

[them] for [their] finery”¹⁶³ would earn respect and power amongst those women who are characterized and “condemned as sentimental, superficial, [or] duplicitous.”¹⁶⁴

Because, seemingly, I cannot have both control and power. For instance, if the control of my body requires lip gloss (bear with me), and I am seen looking in a mirror to reapply it, this apparent vanity or superficiality could mark me as such. The application of lip gloss—to me—is a single step of a process, or a passing moment without a specific outcome, but is misconstrued as an act of shallowness. Again, “the male gazers paint us gazing at ourselves [...] the male mythmakers can imagine only narcissistic pleasures.”¹⁶⁵ A mere moment could also be read worse, as flaunting, teasing, mocking, or “inviting” of unwanted male attention.¹⁶⁶ Since feminine acts like wearing a skirt or putting on lipstick is now connected to the agency of women, they are now to blame for any unwanted advances of sexual assaults—if women have chosen this self-expression, they have chosen this outcome.¹⁶⁷

Truth be told, I am not a feminist theorist and I do not offer any solutions. Rather, I just highlight how the lack of agency, and the declaration of agency both can be used against expressions of femininity. This control that I feel over my body does not necessarily extend to those around me, and any power I feel is not automatically given just because I have agency to express myself. And just because I claim power over my body, does not mean I am not part of an oppressive system that reiterates that same patriarchal values in disguise of freedom of choice. I still assert my intentions, but that does not mean my intentions will be read accurately and I will not be misconstrued.

¹⁶³ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 68.

¹⁶⁴ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 68.

¹⁶⁵ Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 68.

¹⁶⁶ Unbearable weight page 17.

¹⁶⁷ Unbearable weight page 18.

“Post Girlpower” looks at the prevalence of the term “agency” within feminist discussions. Harris and Dobson note how rather than being critical of feminist issues, the idea of young women’s agency sees each individual as rational, self-sufficient and free.¹⁶⁸ But plainly, what if a woman is stupid? What if her choice is manipulated and she insists it’s her choice? For this reason, Harris and Dobson critique feminist research that stop at personal autonomy as validation for choices—this is not enough for them. There is harm when we equate all women’s agency as equal since every woman is different. For instance, some online movements and trends that focus on agency, women’s power, “self-improvement, pampering and indulgence [...potentially] re-inscribes young women within the disciplinary power of gender subordination.”¹⁶⁹

I wonder how I can place my research within this frame of thought. Am I validating my hyperfemininity solely because I insist it is my choice, and my choice alone? Previously, I stated that (I see) my hyperfeminine performance not as blind agreeance or necessarily rebellion, but as disconnection from the patriarchy. As much as I don’t want to be a victim of this system, I cannot and do not deny how it has made me (and other women) one. But when I reflect on the matter, I cannot guarantee that my performance is from submission or rebellion—are these the only choices? In all the scenarios, women are the reactors, the victims, the ones having to make the choice—and it better be the right one. Although I live in a patriarchal society, I must insist on the irrelevancy of men in my life. Apart from my father and brother, individual male influence on me seems minimal. Harsh, shocking or “mean,” perhaps for some, but the truth, nonetheless.

¹⁶⁸ Anita Harris and Amy Shields Dobson. “Theorizing Agency in Post-Girlpower Times,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 149, doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022955.

¹⁶⁹ Kehily, “Taking Centre Stage,” 60.

Either way you are once again stuck between a rock and a hard place. Shall I deny my feminine performance and become the much smarter and more informed butch? Shall I leave my immature feminine vices and unsubscribe from hyperfemininity to prove that I am not a mindless advocator of the patriarchy?

Love as Methodology

All in all, I really do understand why women and people are hesitant to embrace this hyperfeminine performance that I am so reverently defending in this paper. In November of 2023, a Twitter user posted “the amount of consumerism needed to maintain a normative standard of modern femininity is insane... from makeup to skincare to hair and nail appointments to body hair removal to fad diets... so much time, money, and self-scrutiny necessary to be seen as an “acceptable woman”,”¹⁷⁰ which went viral and was a big topic of discussion for a week online. I understand this sentiment and despise the specific connection femininity, post-feminism and consumerism has, and the rapid pace that these beauty standards grow and permeate through social media. The turnover rate for fashion trends is speeding up at an unheard-of pace—the newest style, the best skincare routine, the most flattering product that will make your feminine existence easier and better. You too can reap the benefits of being a beautiful woman, of appearing effortlessly perfect. This never-ending chase of beauty is meant to be exactly that: never-ending. “Perfection” is impossible by nature, “beauty” is impossible by design. When I started looking at hyperfemininity for my research, I was stuck on the feminine virtue of beauty, even considering defining it in the beginning sections along with feminism and

¹⁷⁰ Gothamshitty. “The amount of consumerism needed to maintain...” *Twitter*, November 2023, https://x.com/gothamshitty?t=_Y-Kykn5rJvAb19N01DMBA&s=09.

‘women,’ because is beauty not on a similar level of undefinable as these? Yes, symmetry, visual weight, and clarity are all things I could discuss about beauty, but the subjectiveness of the idea changes across countries and cultures. And like I mentioned, ‘beauty’ is not an unmoving thing and is subject to change depending on the trends— even as an artist, even as someone who tries to think critically about what is deemed ‘beautiful’ in the current society, I cannot pinpoint exactly what is and is not beautiful. A part of me thinks that as an artist, I would have some specialty on the subject, but stopped myself for two reasons. (1) Because I am an artist, I could find beauty in nearly anything and anyone, and regardless of that, (2) I wonder if ‘beauty’ deserves the consideration regarding my hyperfemininity at all. I deny the assumption that my hyperfemininity is a result of my pursuit to be beautiful. In my opinion, I dress in things I think are beautiful, and I paint in ways that could be beautiful, but I understand and accept that my aesthetic judgement is not one that is universal.

There was a post on Twitter that depicted a few cups with lipstick and lip-gloss stains on the rims with the caption: “lipstick marks on straws or on the edge of cups or cans has to be the softest most beautiful part of universal girlhood.”¹⁷¹ My initial reaction is to scoff at the broad statement—surely this is not the *most beautiful* part of girlhood. Instead, I paused and thought of my friends and the times we spend together and how our things look beautiful together. I think maybe the Twitter post meant what the lipstick marks represented: the moments, the friendship, and the love, not necessarily the visuality of the image; the image was most definitely not about the lipstick.

I recently read bell hooks’ *All About Love* to find peace with the pain I’ve been experiencing. Lately it feels like I’ve cried all the tears I could possibly cry, and there has been

¹⁷¹ Mahrugarita. “lipstick marks on straws or on the edge of cups...” *Twitter*, January 2024, https://x.com/mahrugarita?t=QEbu3p0_p2ARCy4YNFdg5w&s=09.

an extra vigour to my self-expression and performance. I see how my presence is more patient, my words softer, my hyperfeminine style louder. The way hooks speaks about grief and sadness over family dysfunction felt relevant to the grief and devastation I felt with my body; she explains how although she was hesitant at first to try affirmations, she soon found they slowly “helped restore [her] emotional equilibrium.”¹⁷² I tell myself things like “I did not bring this pain upon myself,” or “I can clearly express my needs and they will be compassionately met,” or “there is not a limit to the love I am given.” Overall, they are rooted in love, self-acceptance and compassion.

In my youth, these affirmations would feel childish. hooks mentions how “young people are cynical about love. Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart. [...] To them, love is for the naive, the weak, the hopelessly romantic.”¹⁷³ As previously mentioned, although I am a grown woman, I still have my girlhood self within me (for better or for worse). Love leads to heartbreak and disappointment, with hate more akin to success and perseverance. In movies, the one who loves too much is naive, but the one who is primarily negative is a realist— but “once we begin to replace negative thinking with positive thinking, it becomes utterly clear that, far from being realistic, negative thinking is absolutely disabling.”¹⁷⁴ Having hatred for my body and disdain for my circumstances seldom brought me the peace and love I yearned for. The relationships born of chaos rarely bloomed past initial romance into a type of healing love that I craved. hooks speaks of the power of love and how it

¹⁷² bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*. (New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022), 57.

¹⁷³ hooks, *All About Love*, 11-12.

¹⁷⁴ hooks, *All About Love*, 57.

has the potential to heal and create loving communities, if one chooses to change the way they think and act.¹⁷⁵

Again, this feels a tad bit silly, using love as the thing that heals all. I think back to one of the first classes I attended at OCAD University to pursue my MFA, and I think about the “about me” presentation I threw together to introduce myself to my peers and professors. I described myself as an artist who is biracial, who has a previous bachelor’s degree in dramatic arts, has a puppy named Cinnamon and who is ultimately, “a lover (not a fighter).” It was funny at the time, and I thought I was breaking the ice by being somewhat quirky. My present self is content in the way I have come full circle.

I love my body, and I love decorating her. I love my community and friends. I love those who have accepted me or caused me difficulties. I love painting and making art. I love sitting in my studio with the quiet company of fellow artists. I love doing my nails and makeup. I love the moments I’m not in pain and I love how I fearlessly keep going when I am. When I’m loudly talking about my thesis and screaming words of love, I hope it won’t be misunderstood. hooks describes the same frustration when her focus on the topic of love is misunderstood as her “desperation” for a man.¹⁷⁶ I am no bell hooks, but I think perhaps this experience is felt by a lot of women on a pursuit of understanding, especially around something so rooted in feelings.

So how does one express this love? There’s a common saying that goes “you cannot love someone until you love yourself.” Personally, I don’t subscribe to this ideology for the fact that I think loving yourself is immensely more difficult than loving others (but perhaps this is because I’m a lover). I think self-love looks different to everyone—while for some, it is going to the gym,

¹⁷⁵ hooks, *All About Love*, 16.

¹⁷⁶ hooks, *All About Love*, 13.

some it is reading a book, some it is eating their favourite food, and perhaps for some, it is dressing up, performing gentleness, being feminine—overly so.

In *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam mentions something he called “sapphic sisterhood,” which is only mentioned once in the book, without explanation.¹⁷⁷ I sent the section to friends, asking what they think he could possibly mean with this phrase, but to no avail. In the context of myself being a lesbian and being relatively (aggressively) close with my friends, I wonder if he is referring to some of the relationships I practice. My close friendships have been critiqued before, to which I laugh in response, “is it codependency or is it community?” hooks mentions groups like Alcohol Anonymous and other group therapies: “while terms like “codependency,” which came out of programs for individual self-recovery [...] we still need to talk about healthy interdependency.”¹⁷⁸ Community “offers to individuals, some for the first time ever in their lives, a taste of that acceptance, care, knowledge, and responsibility that is love in action.” Powerfully, hooks states, “rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation.”¹⁷⁹

Essentially, celebration is the way to express love and love is the way we celebrate. Through acts normally associated with femininity, like gentleness, patience and compassion, self-love and love through community is possible, and perhaps inevitable. Community and family-building is fundamentally feminine.

In the beginning, I redefined hyperfemininity for the fact that the most common definition was rooted in misogynistic ideas of women and feminine performance. It focused on outcomes and characteristics, rather than reasons or visuals, something that I was more interested in. The caricature of the femme siren out to steal and manipulate men is a tired one in my opinion and I

¹⁷⁷ Halberstam *Gaga Feminism*, 30.

¹⁷⁸ hooks, *All About Love*, 162.

¹⁷⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, 162.

ventured to redefine it in a way that destabilized the focus from its male-centered definition. I embarked on a journey of self-interrogation to try to connect feminist and queer/lesbian theories. Through this, I have concluded that my hyperfeminine performance is rooted in love, deriving from a need of control and power since girlhood. I assert that my femininity (whether hyper or not) is an act of love towards my body and community. Invisibility is a factor of my identity that hides me from my own communities, and I consider this as one of the driving forces for my “hyper” self-expression.

My primary advisor for this thesis, JJ Lee would consistently call my art “unapologetic,” something I have come to adore about it. I love this word in a way that reminds me that I have nothing to apologize for—my hyperfemininity, my “girly-girl” art is not rooted in qualities that I demonize. But rather, an act of claiming power and control that my girlhood self so vehemently desired.

Pink Art

I used to participate in art shows and fairs where I would have a limited space to hang my work, which would in turn make all my pieces crowd together and play off each other in their joint saturation and girly aesthetic. During these shows, middle-aged men would be particularly vocal about how much my art “burned their eyes” as they walked by— if they happened to make their way closer to my work, they would scowl. Oppositely, young girls and women my age would run up to my work and look at me with stars in their eyes and tell me how much they get it, that my work speaks to them. Now, I do not intend to claim my work has some crazily deep meaning that only choice few people could understand, but by creating work that speaks to *me* and feels deeply personal, connecting intensely with the few is bound to happen. Girls with bows

in their hair, two-inch long nails and cute keychains would tell me how much they loved my aesthetic, and I would complement them back and tell them how much they matched my paintings. These girls were sapphic and queer and “girls-girls” who spoke to me with the type of respect that I seldom got from men or masculine people.

There was a DIY quality that I was drawn to in these people who connected to my work. They had stickers on their phones, and crocheted bags and iron-on patches on their coats. I think this “do it yourself” and “handmade” quality mixed with a style that was intentionally synthetic (ie, colours that were neon, styles that weren’t subtle) was something I was initially drawn to when I started researching hyperfemininity. When I would consider the reasons I was femme, I would look at other girls and consider them as well. Sure, I could think of myself in a cynical lens that chalked up my feminine performance to stupidity and naivete, but I cannot rightly pigeon-hole other women to the same cruel (and hypocritical) judgement. I am drawn to this effort-ful quality that I see in the hyperfeminine styles adopted by these women and I try to implement myself. Again, performativity is not just how one is dressed, but repeated actions, to which I am consciously and subconsciously re-performing—the styles I am drawn to are characteristically connected to the women who run up to me and interact with my work with adoration and gentleness, so my repetition of such performances is a reasonable outcome.

If we consider hyperfemininity and femininity in the way they are analyzed as opposites to each other by the academics I reviewed in this paper, the feminine would be effortless and not cause attention to itself, while part of the disgust towards the hyperfeminine is a reaction to the obvious work involved in its style and performance. But my hair isn’t effortless, just as my clothes aren’t effortless, just as my nails aren’t effortless. My painting isn’t effortless, and my education isn’t effortless, and my body isn’t effortless. The façade of effortlessness is created to

be digested by the watcher who looks in wonder and fascination with how easy and beautiful the woman is—the watcher looks at how cute and helpless the woman is. But again, this is the same watcher who is disgusted by the thing that *knows* it's cute and offended by the hyperfeminine woman who is negatively characterized as someone who is actively conning and using men. The watcher, in a sense, is the man who looks at my work in repulsion because it dares to not pretend to be effortless.

I work primarily with a saturated pink that speaks to the youthful girly-girl side of me, reminiscent of Barbie and other toys I played with when I was young. The layers of collage are composed of stickers and miniature paintings that show small parts of me, including painkillers, strawberries, coffee, and keychains. Small parts of me, some more important than others, that all cumulate into work that embraces the heavy-handedness and effort-fulness that I (positively) associate with hyperfemininity. I try to walk the line of disgust and annoyance that overly cute aesthetics potentially incite.

The large three canvases depict the same couple in different scenarios, spending time with one another, having private moments. The first piece I painted was inspired by a sapphic couple I saw on the subway—they were in their own little world, and I was drawn to their obvious comfort and safety with one another. I yearned for love like they had and committed the scene to memory so I could recreate it in a painting. I modified their little moment by including strawberries in my imagined scenario between the couple; when I first painted them, I was particularly inspired by “The Gift of Strawberries,” a chapter in *Braiding Sweetgrass* written by Robin Kimmerer that touches on thankfulness and the connection and generosity of the Earth.¹⁸⁰ From then on, I painted this fictional couple in other moments—to me, they started to represent

¹⁸⁰ Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (United States: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 22-32.

myself and became a part of me. Of course, romantic love between couples diverges away from some topics I focus on in this thesis paper, but the couple is a representation of myself within my pieces—I am them and they are me. They are in love with each other as I love myself, and they treat each other sweetly as I treat my body.

During the pandemic, my life was very online focused, where my large-scale paintings seemed unnecessary if they were to only be seen through a computer or smartphone screen. These years of painting small-scale out of necessity made me fall in love with the effort and grandness of large paintings but made me appreciate the flatness that was achieved by the digital art I saw thriving on social media. The artist friends I made connections with during this isolation continue to be a great inspiration to me, many of them using flat illustrator styles that I was unfamiliar with as an oil painter. Whether I knew it at the time, I grappled with my ideas of art and what it meant to use oil paint with its heavy association with ‘high art’ while adopting and taking inspiration from the ‘low art’ that I frequently saw online—a lot of the art I was drawn to was fan art¹⁸¹ or art that referenced pop culture, rather than the art I had grown accustomed to seeing as a student attending art school.

I adopted this flat, neon, unfinished, and ‘free’ style into my work, blending these qualities of high and low art. The grandness of its size and busyness incorporated the complicated feeling of my past girlhood that I still cling to. In my smaller works, the fleeting depictions of myself firmly intertwine my personal complicated experiences with my self-expression and performance that I attempted to dissect in this paper.

My initial research question, “Why am I so girly?” resulted in an answer that compiles girlhood frustrations and yearning for love and belonging. Invisibility spurs on my self-

¹⁸¹ Art created as a fan of something. For instance, a drawing a favourite fictional character or celebrity would be considered fan art.

expression to ensure I am visible where I feel hidden—even amongst my own community. My body, the thing that once felt like it trapped me, is something I celebrate and thank, through patience, gentleness, and adornment. Hyperfemininity, to me, is something that was necessary to re-evaluate in a lens that separated it away from its male-centered definition. As a lesbian, I assert that my girly-girl performance *can be* and *is* unattached from the male gaze (as much as it possibly can be) and is instead an assertion of power in a way that intertwines lesbian codes; any assumption that my femininity is connected to wanting male attention is vehemently denied. I begrudge the veil of effortlessness that is associated with femininity, and instead uphold the effort-fulness that hyperfemininity is characterized with. Overall, community, self-love (of all my motivations and qualities) and reclamation of control is the answer to my question. *Femme* is a visual representation of my journey to this answer, highlighting items and moments from this realization.

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Appendix

This exhibition photos are included in supplementary material.