In March of 2012, Ms. Magazine’s blog ran a month-long “Future of Feminism” series, which was billed as “celebrating organizations and ideas that represent the future of feminism.” The author of the series covered a variety of topics, and portrayed them all—even those that have generated significant debate within feminism—in a generally positive light. The glaring exception to this was her article on trans feminism (ominously entitled “Transfeminism and Its Conundrums”), which framed the movement as a “controversy” that is fundamentally incompatible with certain basic tenets of feminism. As far as I can tell, this was the only “Future of Feminism” article in which she gave equal space to arguments against the featured feminist submovement. I strongly disagreed with the article, as did a number of commenters, and Ms. blog graciously gave me the opportunity to post a rebuttal. Here’s what I wrote:

Trans feminism—that is, transgender perspectives on feminism, or feminist perspectives on transgender issues—is one of many so-called “third-wave” feminisms. Its origins are closely linked with other feminist submovements—specifically, sex-positive feminism, postmodern/poststructuralist feminism, queer theory, and intersectionality. These strands of feminism represent a move away from viewing sexism as an overly simplistic, unilateral form of oppression, where men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed, end of story.

Instead, these feminisms recognize that there are numerous forms of sexism—that is, numerous double standards based on a person’s sex, gender, or sexuality. In addition to traditional sexism (where men are viewed as more legitimate than women), there is heterosexism (where heterosexuals are viewed as more legitimate than homosexuals), monosexism (where people who are exclusively attracted to members of a single gender or sex are viewed as more legitimate than bisexuals/pansexuals), masculine-centrism (where masculine gender expression is viewed as more legitimate than feminine gender expression), and so on.

There are also other forms of marginalization prevalent in our society, such as racism, classism, and ableism. As feminists of color have articulated, these do not act independently of one another, but rather intersect with and compound one another. A woman of color doesn’t face racism and sexism separately; the sexism she faces is often racialized, and the racism she faces is often sexualized. This concept of intersectionality is now very well accepted among many contemporary feminists (albeit not by those who continue to adhere to a unilateral men-oppress-women-end-of-story approach to feminism).

Trans feminism is rooted in this idea that there are multiple forms of sexism that often intersect with each other, and with other forms of oppression.

Although some feminists have historically framed sexism in terms of patriarchy, early trans feminists forwarded the gender
binary—being nonconsensually assigned a female or male sex at birth—as a way to describe the myriad forms of sexism in our society. Those assigned a male sex are expected to grow up to identify as a man, to be masculine in gender expression, and to be exclusively attracted to women; those assigned a female sex are expected to grow up to identify as a woman, be feminine in gender expression, and be exclusively attracted to men. Anyone who fails to conform to the gender binary—whether an intersex child, a tomboyish girl, a gay man, a transgender person, etc.—is marginalized by society, albeit in different ways. The gender binary concept was an attempt to create a synthesis between feminist, queer, and transgender activism, and it has become quite popular among many feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists since its inception.

Trans feminists have also focused on how trans people are impacted by institutionalized cissexism—forms of sexism that construe trans people’s gender identities and expressions as less legitimate than those of cis people (those who are not trans). Cissexism—or as some describe it, transphobia—can be seen in how individuals, organizations, and governments often refuse to respect trans people’s lived experiences in our identified genders/sexes; in the discrimination we may face in employment or medical settings; and in how trans people are often targeted for harassment and violence.

While some examples of cissexism are quite trans-specific, others have strong parallels with what women face in a male-centric society. For instance, trans people and women are routinely objectified and deemed incompetent to make informed decisions about our own bodies, and our perspectives and lived experiences are often not taken seriously by cis people and men, respectively.

Of course, cissexism does not occur in a bubble. It occurs in a world where other forms of sexism and oppression exist. For instance, trans feminists such as myself have articulated the concept of transmisogyny—that is, the way cissexism and misogyny intersect in the lives of trans women and others on the trans female/feminine spectrum. Transmisogyny explains why the lion’s share of societal consternation, demonization, and sexualization of transgender people is concentrated on trans female/feminine individuals. Cissexism also intersects with other forms of marginalization—for instance, victims of transphobic violence are overwhelmingly trans people who are poor, who are of color, and/or who are on the trans female/feminine spectrum.

So basically, that’s it: Trans feminism is not a conundrum. Rather, it is simply one of numerous third-wave feminisms that take an intersectional approach to challenging sexism and oppression. The only thing different about trans feminism is that it extends this feminist analysis to transgender issues, which have been largely overlooked or misinterpreted by feminists in the past.

The article “Transfeminism and Its Conundrums” gave credence to those feminists who refuse to acknowledge cissexism or intersectionality, and who instead frame trans issues solely in terms of male privilege. In the past, such feminists have dismissed trans feminism, depicting trans men as being “female” traitors who transition to attain male privilege, and trans women as being entitled “men” who transition in order to infiltrate women’s spaces. While this rhetoric has mellowed somewhat over the years, some feminists still argue that trans women have no right to participate in feminism because we were not socialized female, or because we may have benefited from male privilege in the past.

Of course, male privilege is a real phenomenon. In my book Whipping Girl, I discuss my own experience with male privilege—and
losing it post-transition—at great length. However, trans people’s experiences of male privilege vary greatly depending upon the direction of one’s gender transgression or transition, the age one transitions (during early childhood, as a teenager, or at various points in adulthood), one’s sexual orientation, whether one “passes” as cisgender, one’s race, and so on. For instance, many trans men of color say that whatever male privilege they have gained since transitioning has been very much offset by the increased visibility and the societal stereotypes of black men as predators that are constantly being projected onto them by others. It’s impossible to talk accurately about male privilege—or any aspect of sexism—without framing it in terms of intersectionality.

The myth that there is some kind of universal women’s experience was debunked by women of color, among others, long ago. All of us have different life histories; sexism impacts each of our lives somewhat differently, and each of us is privileged in some ways but not others. Some feminists may obstinately insist that cis women have it far worse than trans women, or that traditional sexism is far worse than cissexism, or heterosexism, but the point of feminism is not to engage in this kind of oppression Olympics. Rather, the point is to challenge societal sexism and other forms of marginalization. This is what trans feminists are focused on doing.

When trans feminism is reduced to a debate about whether trans women “count” as women or as feminists, it’s a disservice not only to us, but to feminism as a whole.

**RECLAIMING FEMININITY**

CHAPTER SIX

Over the last few years, my femme identity has very much informed the way that I relate to myself as a trans woman, as a queer woman, and as a feminist more generally. If you were to ask a hundred different femmes to define the word “femme,” you would probably get a hundred different answers. Having said this, most femmes would no doubt agree that an important, if not central, aspect of femme identity involves reclaiming feminine gender expression, or “femininity.” It is common-place for people in both the straight mainstream as well as within our queer and feminist circles to presume that feminine gender expression is more frivolous, artificial, impractical, and manipulative than masculine gender expression, and that those of us who dress or act femininely are likely to be more tame, fragile, dependent, and immature than our masculine or “gender neutral” counterparts. By reclaiming femininity, those of us who are femme are engaged in a constant process of challenging these negative assumptions that are routinely projected onto feminine gender expression.
While reclaiming femininity is an important part of our femme identities, the specific ways in which we engage in reclaiming, re-appropriating, and re-conceptualizing femininity differs from person to person based on our varied experiences, struggles, and histories. I have found that my life history as a transsexual woman has led to me having a somewhat different view of femininity and femme identity than that commonly held by the majority of cissexual femme women. In this chapter, I will explore some of these differences. My hope is that, rather than drawing a sharp distinction between trans femmes and cis femmes, what I have to say will make clear the many similarities that we share. And rather than dis-identifying with my trans experience, it is my hope that cis femmes (and other readers) will draw parallels between my struggles and experiences and their own.

Many of my thoughts regarding the similarities and differences between cis and trans femmes grew out of my experience at the Femme 2006 conference, which took place in San Francisco in August of that year. At the time, I was about three-quarters finished writing the book that would eventually become Whipping Girl. My main purpose in writing the book was to debunk many of the myths and misconceptions that people have—both in the mainstream and within feminist and queer communities—about trans women and femininity. Focusing simultaneously on both femininity and trans women was no accident. I had spent five years doing trans activism up to that point—conducting transgender 101 workshops, writing essays critiquing media depictions of trans people, and working to challenge trans woman exclusion from lesbian and women’s spaces. And the one thing that came up over and over again was the way in which trans women and others on the trans female/feminine spectrum receive the bulk of society’s fascination and demonization with regard to trans genderism. In contrast, people on the trans male/masculine spectrum have remained relatively invisible. This disparity in attention suggests that those of us on the trans female/feminine spectrum are culturally marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms per se, but because of the specific direction of our gender transgression—that is, because of our feminine gender expression and/or our female gender identities. And while it has become common for people to use the word “transphobia” as a catchall phrase to describe anti-trans sentiment, it is more accurate to view the discrimination and stigma faced by trans people on the trans female/feminine spectrum in terms of trans-misogyny.

I have found that many people who have not had a trans female or trans feminine experience often have trouble wrapping their brains around the concept of trans-misogyny, so I will offer the following two anecdotes to help illustrate what I mean by the term. Once, about two years ago, I was walking down the street in San Francisco, and a trans woman happened to be walking just ahead of me. She was dressed femininely, but not any more feminine than a typical cis woman. Two people, a man and a woman, were sitting on a doorstep, and as the trans woman walked by, the man turned to the woman he was sitting next to and said, “Look at all the shit he’s wearing,” and the woman he was with nodded in agreement. Now presumably the word “shit” was a reference to femininity—specifically, the feminine clothing and cosmetics the trans woman wore. I found this particular comment to be quite telling. After all, while cis women often receive harassing comments from strange men on the street, it is rather rare for those men to address those remarks to a female acquaintance and for her to apparently approve of his remarks. Furthermore, if this same man were to have harassed a cis woman, it is unlikely that he would do so by referring to her feminine clothing and makeup as “shit.” Similarly,
EXCLUDED: MAKING FEMINIST AND QUEER MOVEMENTS MORE INCLUSIVE

someone who is on the trans masculine spectrum could potentially be harassed, but it is unlikely that his masculine clothing would be referred to as “sh*t.” Thus, trans-misogyny is both informed by, yet distinct from, transphobia and misogyny, in that it specifically targets transgender expressions of femineness and femininity.

The second example of trans-misogyny that I’d like to share occurred at an Association for Women in Psychology conference I attended in 2007 (for those unfamiliar with that organization, it is essentially a feminist psychology conference). One psychologist gave a presentation on the ways in which feminism has informed her approach to therapy. During the course of her talk, she discussed two transgender clients of hers, one on the trans male/masculine spectrum, the other on the trans female/feminine spectrum. Their stories were very similar in that both had begun the process of physically transitioning but were having second thoughts about it. First, the therapist discussed the trans masculine spectrum person, whose gender presentation she described simply as being “very butch.” She discussed this individual’s transgender expressions and issues in a respectful and serious manner, and the audience listened attentively. However, when she turned her attention to the trans feminine client, she went into a very graphic and animated description of the trans person’s appearance, detailing how the trans woman’s hair was styled, the type of outfit and shoes she was wearing, the way her makeup was done, and so on. This description elicited a significant amount of giggling from the audience, which I found to be particularly disturbing given the fact that this was an explicitly feminist conference. Clearly, if a male psychologist gave a talk at this meeting in which he went into such explicit detail regarding what one of his cis female clients was wearing, most of these same audience members, as well as the presenter, would surely (and rightfully) be appalled and would view such remarks to be blatantly objectifying. In fact, in both of these incidents I have described, comments that would typically be considered extraordinarily misogynistic if they were directed at cis women are not considered beyond the pale when directed at trans women.

As both of these anecdotes demonstrate, expressions of trans-misogyny do not merely focus on trans women’s female gender identities, but more often than not, they specifically target her feminine gender expression. Trans-misogyny is driven by the fact that in our culture, feminine appearances are more blatantly and routinely judged by society than masculine ones. It is also driven by the fact that connotations such as “artificial,” “contrived,” and “frivolous” are practically built into our cultural understanding of femininity—these same connotations allow masculinity to invariably come off as “natural,” “sincere,” and “practical” in comparison.

For example, when a woman wishes to charm or impress someone, she is often described as using her “feminine wiles.” But when a man tries to charm or impress someone, nobody ever accuses him of using his “masculine wiles.” Instead, he is simply seen as being himself. The word “wiles” is defined as “a trick, artifice, or stratagem meant to fool, trap, or entice; a device.” This is how people typically view feminine gender expression: as manipulative, insincere, and artificial.

There is a common, yet false, assumption that those feminists and queer women who favor trans woman exclusion are primarily concerned with the fact that trans women were born male, that we have experienced male privilege, that we have had or may still have penises, or that we may still have residual “male energy” (whatever the fuck that is). I would argue that the growing acceptance, and even celebration, of trans male and trans masculine folks within queer
women's communities over the last decade demonstrates that this supposed fear of maleness and masculinity is largely a red herring. Rather, in my many encounters with cis feminists who are hesitant or resistant about including trans women's voices and issues within the feminist movement, almost invariably, the first thing they mention is what they consider to be our “over the top” or “exaggerated” feminine gender expression: the way we supposedly dress hyperfemininely and wear way too much makeup, that we turn ourselves into “caricatures” of “real” women. Janice Raymond chided trans women for the fact that we supposedly, “conform more to the feminine role than even the most feminine of natural-born women,” and Robin Morgan claimed that by doing so we “parody female oppression and suffering.”

Anyone who knows multiple actual trans women knows that this monolithic image of trans women as “hyperfeminine” is nothing more than a ruse, one that typically grows out of an uncritical acceptance of media depictions of trans women, or out of stereotyping based on one or two actual trans women the person may have seen or met (and who were obvious as trans precisely because of their especially high femme presentation). Actual trans women differ greatly in our personal styles and gender expressions. Some are rather conventional in their femininity, while others are understated, and still others strive to be fabulously feminine. Some identify as femme dykes or femme tomboys. Other trans women are very androgynous in their manner of dress and gender expression, and still others dress and identify as butch. So what purpose does this monolithic image of trans women as hyperfeminine serve? Well, in a world where femininity is regularly disparaged as being manipulative and insincere, such images reinforce the popular cissexist assumption that our female gender identities are “fake” or “contrived,” and therefore not to be taken seriously. Indeed, in the eyes of society, trans women are seen as doubly artificial, both because we are trans and because we are perceived as feminine.

As I became more and more aware of the ways in which anti-feminine sentiment is used to undermine and delegitimize trans women, I began to realize the ways in which I had unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) distanced myself from femininity in order to gain acceptance in the queer community. When I first began attending and performing spoken word at queer and feminist events back in 2002 and 2003, I definitely played down my femme side and played up my tomboy side. And you know what? It worked. I became relatively accepted in those circles. I honestly don't think that I would have been accepted so readily within San Francisco's queer and feminist communities if I attended those first events dressed in an especially feminine manner.

This, of course, is not just a trans woman issue; it is a femme issue. It's not just the heterosexist mainstream that promotes the idea that masculinity is strong and natural while femininity remains weak and artificial. In today's gay male communities, masculinity is praised while femininity remains suspect. In today's queer women's communities, masculinity is praised while femininity remains suspect. If one wants to be taken seriously in these communities, then they will inevitably feel a certain pressure to conform to the community's masculine-centric ideals. I can't tell you how many of my cis queer female friends have shared with me stories similar to my own, of how they really tried to butch it up when they first came out as lesbians or as dykes, because they really wanted to be accepted and to be taken seriously.

For me, as a trans woman, my attempt to distance myself from my own feminine expression was particularly poignant. After all, I had spent most of my life coming to terms with my feminine
inclinations. As a kid, I repressed my feminine tendencies for fear of being called out as a sissy or fairy. As a young adult, I began to reclaim them, to feel empowered by them, and I lived openly as an unabashedly feminine boy for several years before I decided to transition. So it's sadly ironic that after my transition, I felt the need to play down femininity once again in order to be taken seriously as a queer woman and a feminist.

It was through conversations with my femme-identified friends—some who were trans, but many of whom were cis—and their sharing with me their own struggles with being feminine in a queer culture that is so masculine-centric, that I began to embrace my femme identity around 2005. So when the Femme Conference came to San Francisco in 2006, and when I was invited to do spoken word at one of the performance events, I was ecstatic. For me, it represented a sort of a publicly-coming-out-as-femme moment. It was also important for me because I was convinced that trans women and femmes were natural allies. I believed this not only because of the overlap between these two communities (for example, individuals such as myself who identify as both trans women and femmes), but because both groups share a history of being considered suspect in lesbian communities because of our feminine gender expression. My belief that trans women and femmes were natural allies also stemmed from my own experience in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I generally found that the cis queer women who were most willing to stand up for their trans sisters, and to call their peers out on transmisogyny, were almost always femmes.

However, when I attended the conference, I found that my belief that trans women and femmes were natural allies was not shared by all of the attendees, not by a long shot. So for me, the conference was a bit of an emotional roller coaster ride. I want to share some of these moments, both the good and the bad. My purpose for doing so is not to call anyone out or to make people feel defensive. Neither is this a critique of the conference itself, because I feel the organizers sincerely intended the space to be inclusive and welcoming of trans feminine voices. Rather, I am sharing these moments with you in the hope that it might offer some insight into where trans women such as myself are coming from.

First, there was the love and appreciation I felt among the artists with whom I shared the stage at the performance—especially my friends Meliza and Celestina, with whom I performed. Their love gave me the strength to do something that I had never done before: to perform for a predominantly queer women's audience while wearing make-up, heels, and a dress. And a rather slinky dress at that. I'm sure this may not sound like such a big deal to many femmes, but anyone who has been on the receiving end of as many trans-women-are-caricatures-of-real-women comments as I have would surely understand.

After we performed our piece, I was on cloud nine, excited by how well it went and how well it was received. But I was brought back down to earth by a well-meaning audience member who stopped me to tell me that she enjoyed the piece. And before I could thank her, she added, “And you look so real. I never would have guessed.” On the outside I smiled, but on the inside all I wanted to do was cry.

Then, there were the events that occurred during a “Femininities, Feminism, and Femmes” panel that followed a film screening of the movie *FtF: Female to Femme* (and a number of other short films). Many of the conference attendees seemed to love *FtF*, and I myself enjoyed much of the film—it included some excellent interviews, and I especially appreciated the fact that it depicted “femme” without automatically pairing it with “butch.” But
personally, I found it difficult to get around a recurring scene in the film (that was apparently meant to provide comic relief) that depicted a femme support group that was obviously meant to be parody of trans support groups. Having attended trans support groups myself, and having seen grown adults emotionally break down because for the first time in their life they were sharing their crossgender feelings with other people, or because they had lost their jobs or family after deciding to transition, I found those scenes to be disturbing. To draw what I feel is an apt analogy, as someone who has survived an attempted date rape, I would be offended if someone were to do a parody of a rape survivor’s support group. Similarly, as someone who for much of my life would have rather been dead than have anyone else know about my transgender feelings, I found the parody of trans support groups to be offensive (despite the fact that it was probably not the filmmakers’ intention to offend trans people).

Thankfully, the panel that followed the film was designed to present different perspectives within the femme community, and it included a trans woman, artist and activist Shawna Virago. Shawna brought up her similar feelings about the film, and how she felt that it invisibilized the cis privilege most of the conference attendees enjoy. I was grateful that that perspective (which I shared) was voiced. It made me feel like my own voice was included in the conversation.

But then, the first question immediately following the panelists’ opening statements came from a cis woman who suggested that Shawna “didn’t get” the film, that it was “just a spoof.” She then added that she felt that Shawna’s comments were “divisive.” The word “divisive” is a red flag for me. I can’t begin to tell you how many times I have heard trans women, or allies of trans women, called “divisive” when we call out people on their transphobia or trans-misogyny. In contrast, I have never once heard anyone use the word “divisive” to describe cis queer women who make trans-misogynistic comments, or who organize or attend queer women’s spaces that exclude trans women. The fact that acts that marginalize trans women are not typically described as being “divisive” implies that there is a presumed and unspoken “one-ness” that exists in queer women’s communities that implicitly precludes trans women.

The most difficult moment for me at Femme 2006 occurred during a keynote talk that I attended in which the speaker made three separate disparaging remarks about trans women. The first comment came out of the blue (as she was not discussing trans people or trans issues) when she referred to herself as a “bio-dyke” and defined that as someone who is born female and who is attracted to other women who are born female. (By the way, I am a biologist by trade. And I can assure you that I am 100% biological!) Anyway, I tried my best to ignore that remark. But then, a little later on in her talk, she made two more comments. The first was a rather confusing comment that seemed to legitimize queer women’s fears of “accidentally” becoming attracted to a trans dyke—a sort of lesbian version of The Crying Game syndrome, I suppose. Shortly thereafter, she dusted off the thirty-year-old stereotype of the trans woman who “takes up too much space” at a lesbian meeting. This last comment was particularly infuriating for me given the fact that (like virtually all queer women’s events these days) there was a significant turn out of trans male/masculine spectrum folks (even despite the fact that it was a femme-themed conference) yet there were hardly any trans women in attendance. So for the speaker to suggest that trans women “take up too much space” in a community where we have almost no voice and are often explicitly unwelcomed is both illogical and offensive.

My immediate impulse after hearing that comment—being the rebel rouser that I am—was to begin to craft a biting response for the
question-and-answer session that was to follow. But then I realized how pointless that would be, as I would be playing right into her stereotype of me as “taking up too much space.” She had placed me in a double bind. So, upset and without any other obvious recourse, I walked out of the session. I wasn’t trying to make a statement or anything. I honestly just wanted to get as far away as possible. I wanted to go home.

During that long walk (as it was a large conference room), a couple things were going through my mind. First, I felt very alone. There was no evidence that the audience at large was bothered at all by these comments (although, after the fact, I found out that there were others who were also disturbed). Second, the phrase “trans woman exclusion”—which I had used countless times in my activism to change the policy at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and other women’s events and spaces—suddenly popped into my head. For all of my work rallying against “exclusion,” here I was leaving a queer women’s event that I was explicitly invited to. In a sense, I was excluding myself, not because of any policy, but because I found the atmosphere and rhetoric in that room to be intolerable. I was leaving because I was made to feel like I didn’t belong.

This latter form of trans woman exclusion, driven not by any formal policy, but by a more general sense of disregard or disrespect for trans women, typifies many queer women’s events and spaces. Often, when trans women ask me when I’m performing next and I tell them that it is at a queer women’s event, they will tell me that they’d rather not go because they do not feel comfortable or safe in those spaces, because they have been harassed or belittled at similar events before. In most cases, these women are sexually oriented toward women and identify as lesbian or bisexual themselves. But they want no part of queer women’s events because of the unchecked trans-misogyny that is often pervasive there.

Anyway, I walked out of that talk, and it’s very likely that I would not have come back to the conference if it weren’t for the fact that an amazing cis woman named Tara followed me out. She stopped me in the lobby to tell me that she was embarrassed and disturbed by the speaker’s comments, and she showed me much love and support in a discussion we shared just outside of the session. She let me rant for a couple minutes about how upset I was over those comments. And she listened. And that’s really what I needed right then, to be listened to. To be reminded that my voice, my thoughts, my feelings still counted, at least to somebody.

In a way, what happened at that keynote talk and at the panel after the *F* film screening, while frustrating and difficult for me, also had a silver lining. These events provoked discussions about trans woman irrelevancy within queer women’s communities—discussions that were long overdue. I don’t think that such dialogue would have occurred at any other predominantly queer women’s event. I believe it happened then and there precisely because it was a femme conference—because many femmes recognize trans women as being a vital part of the femme community.

Two years later, I was invited to give one of the keynote talks at the Femme 2008 Conference. Because of my experience at the previous conference, I attended Femme 2008 with somewhat different expectations than I had before. For one thing, I no longer believe that femmes and trans women are “natural” allies. In fact, in retrospect, the very phrase “natural allies” strikes me as rather oxymoronic. Being an ally is not something that comes naturally. It requires work. To be an ally, you have to listen. You have to be willing to stand by your ally’s side, even when it is not directly in your interest to do so.
I still believe that trans women and femmes make good potential allies, as we both face discrimination (both in the straight mainstream and within our own LGBTQIA+ communities) because of our feminine gender expression. And in similar (and sometimes different) ways, we are both working to reclaim femininity, to be empowered by our own feminine gender expression despite the negative and inferior connotations the rest of the world projects onto us for it. And trans women and femmes share another important attribute: We are survivors. The rest of the world may assume we are weak and fragile because of our feminine inclinations, but in reality, living with other people’s relentless misogynistic bullshit has made us tenacious bad-asses.

While I feel that these shared experiences provide fertile ground for us to build an alliance upon, I also must recognize that there are many femme-identified folks who do not view trans women as potential allies and who do not see us as a part of their communities. Many femmes are indifferent toward trans women and our issues, and still others are downright antagonistic (as was evident at Femme 2006).

I have come to realize (and have written about this in Whipping Girl) that there tend to be two prevalent and very different attitudes regarding what queer communities should look like and who they should include. The first—which is the one I favor—views queer community in terms of alliances built on shared experiences and interests. As a kinky femme-identified trans woman who just so happens to get it on with the ladies, I seek alliances with other women, with other femmes, with other transgender-spectrum folks, with others who engage in same-sex relationships or BDSM, and with fat, disabled, and intersex folks who share the experience of being made to feel that their bodies are unworthy and inferior to those of other people. Furthermore, as someone who experiences marginalization because of my queerness and transness, I also recognize the importance of creating and fostering alliances with people who are marginalized in other ways, for example, because of their race, class, and so on. For me, community is not so much about surrounding myself with people who are “just like me,” but rather about learning from and supporting others who share issues and experiences that are similar (yet somewhat different) from my own.

This alliance model exists in sharp contrast to the second view of queer communities, which is centered on sameness rather than difference, on closed, insular communities rather than open ones. Many lesbian and gay communities are built according to this model, as are those segments of the queer community where one must constantly tout their über-queer credentials, lest they be accused of being “assimilationist,” conformist, or simply passé. Queer people who prefer closed, insular communities typically insist that their own ideologies, values, expressions, and norms are not merely different, but superior to those who have more conventional genders and sexualities. And those gender and sexual minorities who don’t quite conform to those community standards are typically seen as having no place within the community.

When I was first coming out as a dyke, I really wanted to fit in, to be accepted. I was really hoping that the dyke community would become a home for me. Unfortunately, it hasn’t. While I’ve met a lot of really great, amazing, supportive women in those spaces, I’ve also had a lot of really sucky interactions with people who are either apathetic or antagonistic toward trans women. I’ve come to realize that I will never fully be accepted within lesbian or dyke circles because of the ways in which I differ from the majority: because I am a trans woman, because I am a femme, and also because I have
recently come out as bisexual. In a world where many women define “lesbian” as being in opposition to maleness, in opposition to heterosexuality, and in opposition to femininity, I realize that I literally have three strikes against me. So I have instead decided to embrace the fact that I am lesbian kryptonite, as my existence blurs all of those distinctions, calls into question all of those oppositions. I no longer have any desire to try to gain inclusion or “acceptance” within lesbian-or dyke-centric spaces. Fuck insular communities that are centered around any identity. I’m no longer looking for a home; I’m looking to make alliances.

While many of us may call ourselves “femme,” it is important for us to acknowledge that we are all socially situated in different ways, and this often results in each of us having our own perspectives on femininity and femme identity. Sometimes I find it difficult to talk about my very different history—specifically the fact that I was socialized male (or as I would put it, forced against my will into boyhood) because it is so often cited by trans-misogynistic women as evidence that I don’t belong in lesbian or women’s spaces, because I am not a “real” woman. But at the same time, I feel that often the most important conversations to engage in are also the ones that leave you most vulnerable. So in the last part of this chapter, I am going to throw all caution to the wind and talk about how my very different trans history has led to me having a very different perspective on femininity and femme identity than that held by many of my cis femme sisters.

It seems to me that for many cis femme dykes, a major issue that they must reconcile in their lives is the way their feminine expression seems to be at odds with their queer identity. This can lead to invisibility—that is, because they are feminine, they are often not read by others as queer. It can also result in having their queer and feminist credentials constantly called into question by those who view femininity as an artifact of compulsory heterosexuality and therefore, inherently conformist. In an apparent attempt to challenge accusations that they are conformists, or that they reinforce sexist stereotypes, many femmes have instead argued that their gender expression is subversive because it is employed toward queer ends, thus challenging heterosexism. Or they might argue that their gender expression is merely a performance, one that makes visible the ways in which gender itself is constructed. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha put it in her Femme 2008 keynote talk, this is the idea that femme gender expression is “ironic and campy.”

Now I can certainly relate to the notion of feminine expression as performance. As someone who has to “dress down” for my day job, I know that when I do get the chance to dress up for an occasion, there is a definite sense of doing something different, of putting on a different exterior than I normally do. Having said that, even when I’m at my most outwardly feminine, the feeling that my gender expression is a “performance” does not even come close to how contrived and self-conscious I felt back before my transition, when I had to wear male-specific clothing (e.g., putting on a suit and tie when attending a wedding). So while you can make the case that both masculinity and femininity are “performances,” for me, feminine expression feels way more natural. It resonates with my sense of self in a way that I don’t really have words to describe. It just feels right to me, where as masculine expression always felt wrong.

What also strikes me is the fact that, while being dressed up as a guy felt very artificial and contrived to me, other people tended to read my masculine presentation as natural. In contrast, when I am wearing feminine clothing, it may feel natural to me, but other people tend to see me as being “all dolled up.” This touches on what I said
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earlier about "feminine wiles" and femininity being seen as inherently artificial. In our culture, masculine expression seems to arise out of who one simply is, whereas feminine expression is always viewed as an act, as a performance.

This is why I recall from this idea of femme gender expression as "ironic and campy," as a form of drag or performance, as it plays into the popular assumption that femininity is artificial. I am particularly sensitive about this because, as I mentioned earlier, others often view me as doubly artificial both because I am trans and because I am feminine. The assumption that my gender is artificial or a performance is regularly cited by those who wish to undermine or dismiss my female identity. I refuse to let anyone get away with the cissexist presumption that my gender must be a "performance" simply because I am a transsexual. And I similarly refuse to let anyone get away with the masculine-centric presumption that my gender must be a "performance" simply because I am feminine.

I also find the notion of femininity as performance to be somewhat disingenuous and oversimplistic. I mean, I can "perform" femininity. I can put on makeup, skirts, and heels. I can talk with my hands or twirl my hair if I want. But performance doesn't explain why certain behaviors and ways of being come to me more naturally than others. The idea that femininity is just a construct or merely a performance is incompatible with the countless young feminine boys who are not self-conscious about their gender expressions, who become confused as to why their parents become outraged at their behavior, or why the other children relentlessly tease them for being who they are. Many such children find their gender expression to be irremovable, and they remain outwardly feminine throughout their lives despite all of the stigmatization and male socialization to the contrary. Other femininely-oriented male children learn to hide their feminine gender expression in order to survive, but at a great cost.

I was one of the latter children. I know that for many cis queer women, femininity is something that others foist upon them, an unwanted burden, an expectation that they are unable or unwilling to meet. This is perhaps why so many cis lesbian feminists have gone to such great lengths to argue that femininity is artificial, a mere artifact of patriarchy. But for me, femininity was like ether or air—it was always there, just waiting for the chance to leak out of me. When I think about gender expression as being a "performance," I think about myself as a kid, watching my S's when I spoke to make sure they didn't linger. "Performance" was me fighting back the urge to be more animated with my hands when I talked, or learning never to use words like "adorable" or "cute" nonsarcastically. "Performance" was going to the barber to get my hair cut short like my parents wanted it, when what I really wanted was to let my hair grow long. Like I said, for me, masculinity always felt artificial, while femininity felt natural.

Natural. The word natural has become super fucking taboo in queer and feminist circles. Usually when I utter the word "natural" in such settings, I feel as though the queer theory police will bust into the room at any minute and arrest me for being an essentialist. People are quick to toss around accusations of "essentialism" without really giving much thought to what that word actually means. An essentialist is someone who believes that all women are the same: that we are all naturally feminine, that we are all naturally attracted to men, and so forth. Essentialists view women who are not feminine, or not exclusively attracted to men, as unnatural. As artificial.

I am not an essentialist (despite the fact that some have accused me of that). I do not believe that all women are the same; I believe that all women are different. I believe that women naturally fall all over the map with regards to gender expression and sexual
orientation. I believe that there are no wholly “artificial” genders or sexualities. I believe that many of us experience natural inclinations or predispositions toward certain gendered and sexual behaviors. But these inclinations do not exist in a vacuum—rather they arise in a culture where gender and sexuality are heavily policed, where they are defined according to heterosexist, cissexist, transphobic, and misogynistic assumptions, where they intersect with racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of oppression. I would argue that this view of gender and sexuality is not essentialist. It is holistic.

As I alluded to earlier, it is common for people to have somewhat varied opinions regarding what the word “femme” actually means. For me, having a holistic view of gender and sexuality, I would suggest that most of us who are femme share two things in common. First, we find that, for whatever reason, feminine gender expression resonates with us on a deep, profound level, in an inexplicable way that isn’t easy to put into words. The second thing that we share is a sense of being different, perhaps because we are lesbian or bisexual. Perhaps because we are trans women or feminine men, or we fall somewhere else along the transgender spectrum. Or perhaps because our bodies fall outside of the norm in some way, because we are fat, or disabled, or intersex. Or perhaps we experience some combination of these, or maybe we are different in some other way. Because of our difference, we each have to make sense of what it means to be feminine in a world where we can never achieve the conventional feminine ideal, and in a world where feminine gender expression and sexualities are plagued by misogynistic connotations. For me, that’s what femme is. It’s a puzzle we each have to solve. And because we are all different, we will each come up with a different solution, a different way of making sense of, and expressing, our femme selves.

One reason why I forward holistic views of gender and sexuality is because they allow us to finally put to rest “the femme question.” People who dismiss femininity—who consider it frivolous, or vain, or a patriarchal trap, or a product of socialization, or an artifact of the gender binary, or whatever—have been fucking with femmes for far too long. Their attempts to try to artificialize or naturalize our feminine gender expression (rather than accepting it as natural and legitimate) is the same sort of tactic that occurs when homophobes assume gay people are looking for an “alternative lifestyle,” or just haven’t met the “right person” yet. It’s the same bullshit that occurs when bisexuals are accused of being “confused” or of “still having one foot in the closet,” or when people assume that trans men transition to obtain male privilege, or assume that trans women transition in order to fulfill some sort of bizarre sex fantasy. We shouldn’t have to explain why we are trans or why we are queer, and by the same reasoning, we shouldn’t have to explain why we are feminine!

Once we accept that on some level feminine expression is natural, that for some of us—whether female, male, both, or neither—it resonates with us on a deep profound level . . . once we accept this, then we can tackle the real problem: the fact that femininity is seen as inferior to masculinity, both in straight settings and in queer and feminist circles. Once we accept the fact that femininity exists and it needs no explanation, then we can focus on debunking the countless double standards, like that masculinity is strong while femininity is weak, that masculinity is tough while femininity is fragile, that masculinity is practical while femininity is frivolous, that masculinity is active while femininity is passive, that masculinity is rational while femininity is overly emotional, and of course, that masculinity is natural while femininity is artificial. Once we get beyond having to account for why we are feminine, then we can finally make the case that all of the dismissive connotations and meanings that other
people associate with feminine expression are merely misogynistic presumptions on their part.

This is why I also take issue with the notion of framing “femme” as transgressive or subversive because, unlike conventional femininity, it occurs within a queer context. This argument seems to buy into the assumption that expressions of femininity that do not occur in a queer context somehow reinforce the gender binary, or heterosexism, or the patriarchy, or what have you. And I think that is really fucked up! My mother is a heterosexual cis woman. My sisters are heterosexual cis women. As heterosexual cis women, they experience some privileges that I do not experience. They are accepted in the straight mainstream way more readily than I will ever be. But they are marginalized in their day-to-day lives because they are feminine. To argue that they are reinforcing the binary, or the patriarchy, or the hegemonic gender system, because they are conventionally feminine (as opposed to subversively feminine) essentially implies that they are enabling their own oppression. This is just another variation of the claim that rapists make when they insinuate that the woman in question was “asking for it” because of what she was wearing or how she behaved. I understand why male rapists try to blame the victim in this way, but for the life of me I cannot understand why we as feminists and queers buy into this same sort of mentality.

I’ll be the first one to admit that the expectation that all girls and women are, or should be, conventionally feminine marginalizes and injures many people. Those who are androgynous, or tomboys, or butches, or on the trans masculine spectrum face disdain for their gender non-conformity. And many women who tend to be feminine are routinely made to feel embarrassed, ashamed, unworthy, and disempowered because they don’t quite meet society’s practically unattainable standards of beauty. But the problem here is not femininity, but expectations. What we as feminists should be challenging is compulsory femininity, rather than femininity itself.

If there is one thing that all of us femmes have in common, it is that we all have had to learn to embrace our own feminine expression while simultaneously rejecting other people’s expectations of us. What makes femininity “femme” is not the fact that it is queer, or transgressive, or ironic, or performative, or the complement of butch. No. What makes our femininity “femme” is the fact that we do it for ourselves. It is for that reason that it is so empowering. And that is what makes us so powerful.

As femmes, we can do one of two things with our power: We can celebrate it in secret within our own insular queer communities, pat ourselves on the back for being so much smarter and more subversive than our straight feminine sisters. Or we can share that power with them. We can teach them that there is more than one way to be feminine, and that no style or expression of femininity is necessarily any better than anyone else’s. We can teach them that the only thing fucked up about femininity is the dismissive connotations that other people project onto it. But in order to do that, we have to give up the self-comfort of believing that our rendition of femme is more righteous, or more cool, or more subversive than anyone else’s.

I don’t think that my femme expression, or anyone else’s femme expressions, are in and of themselves subversive. But I do believe that the ideas that femmes have been forwarding for decades—about reclaiming femininity, about each person taking the parts of femininity that resonate with them and leaving behind the rest, about being femme for ourselves rather than for other people, about the ways in which feminine expression can be tough and active and badass and so on—these ideas are powerful and transformative.
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I think that it’s great to celebrate femme within our own queer communities, but we shouldn’t merely stop there. We need to share with the rest of the world the idea of self-determined and self-empowered feminine expression, and the idea that feminine expression is just as legitimate and powerful as masculine expression. The idea that femininity is inferior and subservient to masculinity intersects with all forms of oppression, and is (I feel) the single most overlooked issue in feminism. We need to change that, not only for those of us who are queer femmes, but for our straight cis sisters who have been disempowered by society’s unrealistic feminine ideals, for our gender-variant and gender-non-conforming siblings who face disdain for defying feminine expectations and/or who are victims of trans-misogyny, and also for our straight cis brothers, who’ve been socialized to avoid femininity like the plague, and whose misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and so on, are driven primarily by their fear of being seen as feminine. While I don’t think that my femme expression is subversive, I do believe that we together as femmes have the power to truly change the world.