

Femme on Femme: Reflections on Collaborative Methods and Queer Femme-inist Ethnography¹

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the queer dimensions of conducting ethnographic research with/in “ones own community” and on the possibility of queering ethnographic writing. Focusing femme-on-femme research and modes of representation, I argue that collaboration with research subjects queers research conventions and contributes to a reconsideration of what counts as theory, particularly with regards to femininity and its place within queer feminism. Here I first discuss two queer feminist ethnographic models for conducting research within sub-cultural communities to which one belongs. I then address ideas about home/community and how ideas of distance continue to structure ethnographic knowledge production. The central discussion centres on a retrospective reflection on the joys and dilemmas of collaborative work drawing on research for the book *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (Volcano & Dahl 2008). In particular, I scrutinize the dichotomy between the theorizing academic and her “informants” arguing that femme-inist ethnography highlights citation, collaboration and co-production of ideas.

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*But you don't look like a lesbian... I am the double-take
The queerest of the queer
So secure in my sexuality
That tonight I'll wear a dress
Which hugs my waist and hips*

*But you don't look like a real lesbian...
So you tell me what's real
While I shake out my hair
Kick off my heels
Peel off your shirt and tie
And push you into the pillows*

*But you don't look like a normal lesbian...
You're damn right, I'm not normal
I'm a subverter of society
And all its expectations
So perverted, I love women
And that includes myself.*

Rosie Lugosi 2000, 12²

Introduction: The Queerest of the Queer

Despite the kinky associations of the title and the assertiveness of the opening poem, the primary concern of this article is *not* the queerness of girl-on-girl desire per se. Rather, inspired by queer feminist scholars Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh's declaration that a femme scientist "solicits

loving, grateful collaboration" (2002, 169), it offers some reflections on the queer dimensions of conducting femme-inist ethnographic research with/ in 'one's own community' and on the possibility of queering ethnographic writing. It seems to me that while queer theory is growing increasingly salient in interdisciplinary gender studies, to 'straight' science there is always something academically queer about the desire to be with and write about one's own, even if it is not a territorialized, localized or even always visibly recognizable stable community.

Since 2000, I have written around the particular topic of femininity and sexual politics in Sweden (Dahl 2003, 2006 and 2008) as well as on queer feminist politics more broadly. As a self-identified femme (activist) and 'scientist', (to use Duggan and McHugh's terminology), I explicitly aim to rethink and re-present the meaning of femininity: that often means I am both subject and object of both research and activism. That is, I both participate in, and study, queer feminist movements that seek not only to render femmes visible, but also to call misogynist contempt for femininity into question and to explore how femininity is queerly lived and practiced. In this work I am often asked about how I can study something to which I also claim political and sexual belonging. These are questions that suggest underlying anxieties around the issue of objectivity. The subtext, it seems, is that despite decade-long epistemological discussions, there is still anxiety around the complex issue of 'objectivity'.

Like Rosie Lugosi in the above poem, I want to be assertive and clear from the beginning: this article is a rhizomatic rather than linear discussion and a twist on what counts as proper, real and 'normal' ethnographic research. It is motivated by queer political hopes for the uses and potentialities of academic work. Like those of many of my queer and feminist predecessors, colleagues and students, my stakes in femme-inist ethnography originate in and are part of queer and feminist movements that extend beyond the

2 Poem reprinted with permission from the author.

ivory tower and our always exciting theoretical debates about the nature of gender, desire, aesthetics and politics. I take my departure in Duggan and McHugh's brazen manifesto that proposes that the femme scientist is in "the third phase of research", beyond explanation and demonstration (the first phase) and beyond relativity (the second) and with an explicit aim. For me a central part of such an aim is to address collaborative methods and the politics of visual and ethnographic knowledge production and representation. I argue that a central value of queer studies resides in collaborations and conversations that aim to produce knowledge collectively.

In this article, I will first meditate on some existing queer feminist models for conducting research within subcultural communities to which one belongs, drawing on lesbian anthropology and interdisciplinary queer studies. I then address the false dichotomy of home/away and how it structures ethnographic knowledge production with the aim to rethink community through movements, networks and figurations rather than geopolitical boundedness. The central part of the article centres on my recent work with gender variant visual artist Del LaGrace Volcano and the subjects of our book *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2008) considering it as *one* example of how one might conduct such femme-inist ethnography. I particularly call into question the dichotomy between the theorizing academic and her 'informants'. Honing in on the issue of writing and textual representation, I discuss how femme-inist ethnography may contribute to a reconsideration and re-representation of not only *l'écriture femme-inine*, as a way to write femme differently, but also perhaps the meaning of femininity within and beyond queer communities.

While I draw on more than ten years of ethnographic work on and with different communities that I consider myself belonging to (Dahl 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2008), in this piece I focus on what I call *femme-on-femme*. I argue that methodological frameworks of collaboration and co-production

of ideas can queer research conventions and contribute to a reconsideration of what counts as theoretical work, particularly with regards to femininity and its place within queer feminism. In so doing, I want to further work that explicitly critiques the radical individualism, self-congratulatory nature and liberal understandings of both positivist social science and other projects that assume unified and coherent subjects and objects. I highlight the collaborative dimension of knowledge making and subject formation, because, as the lesbian political theorist Shane Phelan (1989, 5) notes, as political and scientific understandings of the world, abstract individualism "isolates us from one another, both as objects for analysis and as subjects engaged in social intercourse".

Femme/inist Beginnings

I opened this article with a poem by Rosie Lugosi, a self-declared 'lesbian vampire queen' from Manchester, England and an internationally touring queer performance artist, not only because the poem captures audiences but because it addresses some of what initially drew me, a femme-inist ethnographer, to researching and writing about queer femininities in general and about femmes in particular. Since 2004, Rosie has not only been a research subject, along with many other femmes in the transnational web of femme activism and cultural production that I have both participated in, studied and written about (Dahl 2008 and 2006; Volcano and Dahl 2008), but she has been an interlocutor, textual critic and close friend. I invoke her work to point to the impossibility of making pure distinctions not only between identities such as 'lesbian', 'femme' or 'woman', but also between subjects and objects of research. With the help of this poem, before we plunge into the politics and poetics of femme-inist ethnography, let me briefly explain how I use the term femme and how I arrived at conducting femme-on-femme research via feminist and queer ethnography.

In brief, the term femme (or fem)³ stems from pre-Stonewall, Anglo-American primarily working-class subcultural contexts and has historically been used in reference to feminine lesbian, most often coupled with a masculine lesbian, the butch (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1992, among others). Today's meaning and use of femme often exceeds that of earlier eras, insofar as self-identified femmes are no longer (only) erotically tied to butches (although many are) and they do not always identify as lesbians or even as women (Dahl and Volcano 2008; Burke 2009). Some femmes, though not all, argue that it reflects a femininity "taken back from being the object of the masculine gaze", that "transgresses expectations of women, but also expectations of femininity" (Livingston in Burke, ed., 2009, 25) and many state that they *intentionally* seek to *queer* femininity. To most femmes I have interviewed, a feminine aesthetic – that is, clothing, garments, accessories, make up and so on, is central to a femme expression⁴.

Lugosi's poem can be read as speaking to the place of femmes both within mainstream culture and lesbian subcultures, and by extension to the associations of femininity with passivity, superficiality and normativity. According to most arguments in their deployment of classic feminine attributes, femmes don't *look* like lesbians (Walker 2001). Since the onset of lesbian and feminist theorizing and activism, femmes have variously been dismissed 'less feminist' and 'less queer' than others, either because in their

desire for butch women they 'imitate' heterosexuality or because in their gender expressions they 'pass' as straight, which then is taken to mean that femmes are 'less oppressed'. The rise of queer studies and movements that celebrate masculinity in women have given substantial attention and merit to butch gender in the last decade (Halberstam 1998; Rosenberg 2000; Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Femmes, even though often politically controversial, have received less theoretical and visual attention, and even when they do, it is mostly in relation to their presumed butch partners⁵.

The lack of queer recognition is a theme that many femmes, like Rosie Lugosi, address and rework through their writing, activism and performance – within local and transnational movements that have grown in size and exposure around Europe, North America and Australia in the past five years or so. A central part of recognition *is* visibility and thus much contemporary femme organizing is concerned with this. Rosie's poem can thus be read as a by now classic queer activist strategy of resistance and anti-assimilation and of speaking back to powerful majoritarian and minoritarian identity norms (Rosenberg 2002). Simultaneously, as Rosie makes clear, femmes call into question the idea that we should be able to *see* who is queer (and who is not) (Walker 1993, 2001) and this, it seems to me, is central to the complexity of femme. That is, femmes are both like and unlike other feminine folks in the world.

3 There are two spellings (femme; fem) and divergent histories of their respective use as well as different contemporary uses of the terms (cf. Volcano and Dahl 2008; Crocker and Harris 1997). These are also used and contested in diverse ways in different femme communities in Europe and North America. Space limitations prevent me from a longer discussion about this issue here and thus I use femme as the umbrella term. It should also be noted that the terms butch and femme are also used within middle class lesbian and queer contexts, but I find it important to acknowledge their working-class origins.

4 For a discussion of femme fashion and embodiment, see Dahl 2009.

5 There is by now a significant archive of diverse and powerful writings by and about femmes, including several anthologies such as Nestle (1992), Harris and Crocker (1997), Rose and Camilleri (2002), Dawn and Kelly (2005) and Burke (2009), as well as memoirs such as Nestle (1987), Hollibaugh (2000), 'guides' such as Rednour (2000), poetry like that of Gomez (1988), Hardy (2000 and 2006), Newman (1995) and Pratt (1995). Among notable theoretical/academic discussions by and on femmes and (queer) femininity are Martin (1996), Walker (2001), Gopinath (2005), Rodriguez (2003), Cvetkovich (2003) and Tylor (2003). As is evident here and everywhere, this article, like my work and life as a femme, owes much to this legacy.

Queer Feminist Ethnography and Studying 'One's Own Community'

Within this historically emergent subject trajectory, many femmes, like Rosie Lugosi, insist that 'loving oneself' is a radical act on the part of femme-inine subjects who so often face contempt and danger and are subjected to very structured and conditional appreciation in a racist and heterosexist world. While this is an important political move, consistent with feminist empowerment, and while countering outside criticism is central to femme activism, in this article I will argue that femme-on-femme research is no more a narcissistic project about studying oneself or advancing a personal agenda, than any other research. Contrary to the objections I often receive from a wide range of academic colleagues to whom distance seems important regarding my potential to be 'objective' (and therefore, presumably, more scientific) propose that by claiming belonging in a femme movement enables *both* affirmation *and* self-critical scrutiny, which in this article concerns that of the research process itself. By calling the unity and stability of identity categories into question and reflecting on multiple relations of power at work both in the world and in research, my work aims to explore geopolitically, historically and (sub)culturally specific understandings of what it means to queer femininity in and across a couple of urban queer subcultural communities in Western Europe and North America; communities in which I myself dwell⁶. Chicana feminist theorist Cherrie Moraga notes that, indeed, "to be critical of one's culture is not to betray one's culture" (Moraga 1983, 108) and I propose that through a collaborative and differentiated understanding both of research, community making and subject formation, the method and effect of self-scrutiny changes.

6 Those communities are located in Stockholm, Malmö, Copenhagen, Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, London, San Francisco, Atlanta and Sydney. Needless to say, the degree to which I am part of these communities differs over time and in depth, with Stockholm, London, San Francisco and, recently, Sydney, being the primary ones.

In contemporary gender and queer studies, methodologies are a central node in conversations about scientific legitimacy and coherence, as well as in those about feminist visions about a different kind of science. Indeed, methods are far more often subject to discussion and contestation among colleagues and with students, than the (queer) 'theories' that are increasingly canonized within interdisciplinary gender studies. It is certainly difficult, if not undesirable and impossible, for interdisciplinary fields of knowledge to agree on a box of methodological tools in the way that, for instance, many disciplines within the social sciences, including anthropology, tend to do. However, it seems that it is social scientific and cultural research that deals with *speaking subjects* rather than representations that tend to register fundamental and epistemological questions and concern. In a field so explicitly concerned with questions of power then, is it possible and ethical 'to represent' others? Can one speak on anyone's behalf? Ethnography has grappled with such questions for a long time, and in what follows, I discuss some ways that ethnography has been used within queer studies, with particular attention to models for thinking about reframing the positivist assumptions about relations between subjects and objects of research.

Based in ethnographic work conducted in what is often presented as radically different cultures and distinct communities, anthropological cross-cultural analyses have been important in challenging understandings of gender and sexuality as universal, predetermined, binary and fixed. That said, the discipline of anthropology remains at least phantasmatically dominated by studies of non-Western contexts, and research on sexual cultures within Western contexts is a fairly recent topic. Existing studies on North American queer subcultural contexts, including Ester Newton's

(1979) work on female impersonators and on queer community formations (1995) and Kath Weston's (1991) work on queer family formations, have been groundbreaking both within and beyond anthropology. Many have become 'queer classics' as well as significant within activist work against sexism, racism and homophobia. Tracing a legacy of collaboration of research and activism, I here draw attention to two models; the collaborative ethnohistorical model of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) on a working class white and African-American butch-femme community and the interdisciplinary queer methodologies presented by Judith Halberstam (1998, 2003) in her work on female masculinities and queer subcultural formations. I chose these particular pieces of research because they offer inspiration for how I might conduct femme-inist research.

In researching and writing *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) anthropologist Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy joined forces with Madeline Davis, a librarian/singer-songwriter and activist, and together they built their long study drawing on their community involvement and friendships. Their motivation was political: in the early eighties, Kennedy and Davis note, "the entire [US] feminist movement became embroiled in the debates about women's sexuality and its practices" (1996, 175) and in that moment, working class lesbians were not considered legitimate subjects, either of politics or of research. Their project, which took 14 (!) years to complete, was guided by a wish to give voice and visibility to a marginalized community and to provide a commentary to the feminist movement of the time. Kennedy and Davis knew that they were writing from a marginalized perspective with respect to their professions as scholars and as feminists. Wanting to "give back" to their communities was more important than the prospect of 'professional advancement' and, among other things, they shared their royalties with the oral history project that enabled their work.

Kennedy had done 'proper fieldwork' previously and notes that being in "their own nation" (as they put it) and sharing a common lesbian identity and activist pasts not only contributed to, but also shaped their research process (1996, 175). Their point of departure was one of recognizing that aging working class butch and femme lesbians are marginalized in multiple ways; as pre-Stonewall lesbians, as carriers of 'old-fashioned' gender, and as working class. Kennedy and Davis chose to render the subjects of their study anonymous unless they wanted otherwise, largely as a measure of safety for their friends and as a way of not altering relations within the community. Drawing on collaboration, ethnohistory, interviews, community involvement and political activism, Kennedy and Davis produced a ground-breaking study of a butch-femme community which not only contributed to a rethinking of lesbian gender, it also provided a model for how queer scholars, myself included, might engage and produce knowledge with and for our own communities.

Judith Halberstam is another scholar who engages in collaboration with 'her own community'. Like many queer, feminist and cultural studies scholars, Halberstam questions the kind of research that assumes that 'truth' can be drawn from 'raw data' in survey (or other) form, but also argues that ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing have their merits for queer work. In her groundbreaking study *Female Masculinity* (1998) Halberstam cites anthropologist Ester Newton as her butch academic role model, stressing in particular her influence with regards to crafting intellectual projects around issues that are also of great personal importance.

In *Female Masculinity* Halberstam introduces what she calls a queer methodology of interdisciplinary work that she famously defines a "scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally

excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (Halberstam 1998, 13). A queer methodology, she argues, brings together methods that are often cast as being at odds and refuses disciplinary coherence (1998, 13). In other words, the queerness lies both in the subject of research, the eclectic array of ‘data’ and in the ‘strangeness’ of mixing methods from different traditions. This model is one of few ‘concrete’ methodological proposals for queer studies. To my mind, it is also queer in the sense it makes it possible to show how queer subjectivities are formed out of an eclectic array of (sub)cultural references and reworkings of popular cultural representations.

Throughout her work, Halberstam provides a model for the butch scholar doing research as a member of the communities she studies. Drawing on participant observation among drag kings, she has produced work that has been both inspiring and useful to a wide readership, something that is demonstrated through her popularity in queer subcultural press. At the same time, Halberstam’s analysis in *Female Masculinity* depends on a distinction between what she does as a ‘scholar’ and what the subjects of the work do in *their* work. Halberstam also insists on mixing methods in part because conventional methods like interviews may or may not give interesting answers to questions like “why do you like to dress up in drag?” (1998, 243). In other words, she is not primarily interested in the subjective experience of performing drag, but rather in its representational effects and the effects of subcultural production. Queer theory has offered insights into the difference between the performativity of all gender and intentional performance that aims to subvert. Many scholars labour to point out how queer genders call the stability of all genders into question (cf. Munoz 1999; Butler 1990; Westerling 2007 and others). Yet, it seems to me that here Halberstam’s own readings of cultural representations sometimes remain separate from those of her subjects, thus leaving intact the authoritative voice that reads and explains representations. Is this an

inevitable effect of research and writing technologies that continue to insist on single authorship? Or does it suggest that there is a limit to the value of interviews themselves when it comes to theorising queer gender?

In her more recent work on queer temporalities and subcultural lives, Halberstam develops her points about modes and motivations for queer studies further and notes that “minority subcultures in general tend to be documented by former or current members of the subculture rather than by ‘adult experts’” (2003, 321). Furthermore, queer subcultures are themselves marked by blurred distinctions between what Halberstam calls the ‘archivist’ and the cultural producers. Many occupy both positions or coexist in the same networks, and, as she puts it, “new queer cultural studies feeds off of and back into sub-cultural production” (2003, 322) – and this includes her own work on female masculinities. In other words, work on queer subcultures tends to both rely on collaboration and furthermore, to challenge presumed distinctions between the researcher and her ‘objects’.

It seems then, that most often in queer and feminist cultural studies, ethnography is *one* of many methods used by interdisciplinary scholars working on themes, issues, or identity formations rather than bounded communities. Halberstam’s call for eclectic methodologies and her model for queer subcultural archival work is innovative, inspiring and useful for a project aiming to rethink the meaning of femininity within and through feminist theory, in queer communities and in subcultural production of art and life. As Halberstam notes, subcultural formations and productions are characterized by a complicated relationship to ‘experts’ and studies thereof must take this into consideration. Questions of collaboration and authorship remain difficult to address, especially since academic knowledge carries a particular weight and we live in a culture that fosters celebrity worship including queer scholars and performers. It seems to

me that the dilemma here is mainly that academic technologies of analysis and interpretation often produce distance, and that within queer studies as a whole, ethnographic work is not central but rather comes second to theoretical or literary work.

Femme-inist figurations

Trained in cultural anthropology and simultaneously deeply informed by post-colonial and feminist critiques of a discipline that has strong roots in positivist and colonialist science, I am convinced that at its heart, ethnography offers interesting tools for making both knowledge and community. I locate what I call femme-on-femme research as part of a feminist project and call upon a tradition of queer and feminist ethnography. To me a *femme-inist* ethnography is that which takes femininities, rather than women, as both objects and subjects of study. It is motivated by a wish to reconsider (and change) the meaning of *femininity* rather than to, as classic feminist ethnography has aimed, to ‘improve’ the conditions of women.

To that end, I approach femme not as a narrow subcultural lesbian identity category but as a historically emergent *figuration* (Braidotti 1994; Haraway 2004; Castaneda 2002). As Claudia Castaneda (2002) notes, a figuration is at once literary, material-semiotic and embodied, constituted through particular practices and interpretations, including scientific and feminist ones. To me this means that the femme figuration is not outside of feminist and queer theorizing, but rather emerges in dialogue with and as part of such labour. By putting this figure to work, I follow Rosi Braidotti who argues that “the difference between a figuration and a classical subject position is an accountability of one’s location – which is not the same as a self-appointed position – it is a collective and shared spatiotemporal territory”

(1994, 12–13). Below I discuss how one might take accountability for one’s location as a *femme* scientist through departing from the shared spatiotemporal territory of theorizing femme-ness. In contemporary femme activism, that territory is often made through differently situated engagements with feminist themes such as objectification, relations of power, critiques of normativity and visions of a femme-inine future.

Queering Community, Home and Academy

Let me now pause to ask: what does it mean, then, to study ‘one’s own community’? First of all, any study of a ‘community’ requires that we define that community – in time and space as much as in movement and this requires a discussion of how belonging to such a community is structured. Halberstam (2003) notes that the idea of community implies a permanent population, often tied to a neighbourhood, and that conventional family models often are the implicit building blocks of such communities. There is indeed a rich literature concerned with geographic perspectives on queer community formation (Browne et al. 2007), including critical perspectives on the making of ‘gaybourhoods’ and the changing nature of queer communities over time (Bell and Valentine, 1995). According to Halberstam, a subculture differs from a community insofar as it is transient, extra-familial and based in oppositional modes of affiliation.

Both conventional and subcultural definitions of community carry strong connotations of familiarity and belonging, and often a sense of being “at home”, in the sense of being amidst that which is familiar, comfortable and affirming. In short: a warm, fuzzy feeling. As Miranda Joseph notes, “identity-based movements invoke community to mobilize constituents and validate their cause to a broader public” (2002, vii) precisely because of its affective connotations. In her polemic against the romanticization

of community, Joseph instead argues that rather than primordial, “communal subjectivity is constituted through practices of production and consumption” (ibid, viii) and that the rhetorical invocation of community is imbricated in and deployed by capitalism. In this article, the aim is not to fetishize (femme) community, but rather to propose that research is, as much as identity construction, part of these practices of production and consumption. As Joseph notes in her conclusion, if communities are made and enjoyed, then “a great deal of agency resides with the producers of community to make our collectivities more disruptive rather than less. In order to do so we must read the social relationships in which our communities are imbricated and assess the implications of our political goals and strategies, of the actions we do in fact all take all the time” (ibid, 172).

In writing about femme communities I thus depart from Joseph’s insight that community is always already imbricated in, not outside of late capitalism. Those that I study are neither merely local nor is membership and formation stable over time, even if they are intimately tied to particular locations. Femme movements are not exclusionary but rather, like most subcultural communities, they are open to new members whose politics and aesthetics are recognisable while simultaneously, like many queer community formations they rework the meaning and implications of familial and sexual bonds (cf. Weston 1991). Conducting fieldwork within femme movements thus requires knowledge of local histories and the specificity of queer identity politics, but equally it needs attention to how, when and why certain ideas and people travel. Attending and conducting research at conferences, pride events, performances and other kinds of cultural events, private parties or clubs, reveals that community is made and remade through the events that bring people together. These events both create and reflect community and there it is clear that visible cultural clues, including aesthetics of dress and desire, as well as queer kinship

networks, are central to generating a sense of being ‘home’ and ‘being in one’s community’. As such, and following Joseph, like all communal subjectivities, even as they offer critiques of mainstream culture, femme subjectivities and the queering of femininities are always already constituted through practices of cultural production and consumption.

As Joseph’s work indicates, social scientists have long been sceptical of certain romantic conceptions of community belonging as tied to a nostalgic sense of feeling at home, in the comfort zone, and at ease with the order of things that seem familiar rather than strange. Postcolonial and feminist anthropologists in particular have challenged the masculinist and eurocentric underpinnings in how tropes of ‘home’ and ‘away’ structure ideas of proper ethnographic work. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Dahl 2004) following Gupta and Ferguson (1997), anthropology – and academia in general – often assumes that one is (quite literally) ‘home’ in the academy (or where one studies) and ‘away’ in the field. These days and to many of us, these tropes are reminders of hierarchies that have been central to the making of a particular knowledge/power regime which excludes women, queers and non-Western subjects. As such, the (if ever phantasmatic) dichotomy of home/away points to the racial and classed markings of the academy and assumptions of who belongs there – because as countless scholars of colour, women and queers have noted, an academy that is often sexist, racist and homophobic is certainly not ‘a fuzzy warm home’ by default. Indeed, marginalized and critical academics have often created their own spaces of home both within and outside of academia, largely by choosing to foster different conversations and knowledge projects that are critical of the increasingly capitalist and certainly still colonialist makings of “straight” social scientific research. Furthermore, feminists have noted that home is always already gendered and as such it is not simply the place of the familiar, the safe and the comfortable, but equally a place of violence, labour, and generational and gendered hierarchies (Martin and

Mohanty 1986). At the same time others have argued that it is the place of both subjugated and empowering knowledges (Sawyer 2008; hooks 1990; Young 2005). For queers, home as a familial space may well be a place where one is not welcome, or where one does not want to belong, and thus making and redefining home is often central to the making of community, and this may not always be territorialised and localised.

Some readers may now object and argue that none of these tropes prevail in a post-modern academy. However, the frequency with which I get asked, by fellow feminist scientists as well as other colleagues how I can be *both* a femme activist advocating for femme-inist strategies and femme visibility *and* study that very movement points to how what I here call tropes of home and away structure research and above all carry strong messages about the need for distance between analysis and immersion. The related and frequent question of whether my work can be seen as 'scientific' (rather than 'ideological' or 'activist') also suggests that the positivist roots of social science live on in the sense of privileging and encouraging analytic distance and that there is a continued split between theory and practice. Indeed, even within queer and feminist contexts, there seems to be a kind of hangover of objectivity hovering around knowledge production. The epistemological underpinning of anthropology's main methodology, 'participant observation', is of central importance here, as it builds on the idea that one is to 'become', not 'be' part of a community. The good anthropologist is close enough to explain it, but not 'too close' so that she loses distance and starts speaking on her own behalf. While anthropologists are frequently asked to speak on the behalf of subjugated groups, a clear distinction is made between 'activism' and 'science'. In that procedure, 'key informants', who are often presented as 'friends' but rarely as authorities, are central to the ethnographic project. These actors act as brokers and tricksters – they are able to explain and translate the cultural context in question, but they are rarely understood as co-producers of knowledge.

While much work has been done to unpack such epistemological starting points, this persistence of this legacy, I argue, still makes for rendering the queer scholar of queer phenomena a rather queer, as in improper, researcher. While projects concerning cross-cultural perspectives on same-sex desire and critiques of heteronormativity are often groundbreaking and important, I argue that if queer is about critiquing norms, then calling research and writing conventions that presume stable distinctions between subjects and objects into question should remain central to queer studies and methodologies.

It is clear that we are neither fully at home nor fully outside of any community we aim to study. Rather, as science studies scholar Karen Barad (2003) points out, research subjects and objects always already exist in the same universe and they are always in intra-action. However, as feminist theorist Nina Lykke (2008) notes in a discussion of Karen Barad's work, limitations and boundaries are necessary for scientific projects. Although classic methods often presume that the relation between them exist prior to the research process, Lykke proposes that we begin by defining and contextualizing both research subject and research *and* the relation and boundary between subject and object, but not once and for all but rather temporarily. Through doing this, we also make clear the particular stakes or interests we have in our work (Lykke 2008, 167). Furthermore, while Lykke argues that situating our knowledge is tied to 'siting' and 'sighting' – that is, to locating and situating the researcher and the particular technologies of research that are being used (including interviews, anonymity, encounters) – femme-inist ethnography involves a third dimension which I call *citing*. At best, queer ethnographers who work in 'their own communities' belong to both and manage to queer the research process itself by rendering the familiarity of research conventions strange (queer). To further this point, the remainder of this article discusses some dimensions of the work with *Femmes of Power* as one example of how collaborative science

might be made and what the effects of femme-on-femme research are. It is not suggested as an exemplary model, but rather as an opportunity for reflection and hopefully an offer of inspiration which itself draws on the models by queer and feminist ethnographers that I have presented here.

Femme-on-Femmes of Power: Starting Points and Encounters

Featuring over 60 people from 12 cities in seven countries, *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* is the result of more than four years of un-funded research and collaboration. Like Kennedy (Kennedy and Davis 1993) and Halberstam (Volcano and Halberstam 1999), but as a junior femme ethnographer (still a graduate student when we started) rather than an established academic, I was given an opportunity to collaborate with an artist/theorist on this project. Del LaGrace Volcano is not only an internationally recognized queer visual artist; working with him also presented an opportunity to apprentice with and learn from someone who has spent considerable time representing and reflecting on queer community formations and how they change over time.

Like many queer feminist authors and artists, Del and I were motivated by what we saw as a marginalization of a set of issues and subjects (femininity in general and femmes in particular) and by a desire to 'give something back' to our communities and allies. Like Kennedy and Davis, we understood ourselves to be community members and activists as much as we were identified as an artist and an academic. In some respects, the project can be seen as an example of the intimate and entangled relationship between queer research and cultural production that Halberstam (2003) discusses. Those featured have chosen to be visually and ethnographically represented and the book also further contributes to their validation, empowerment

and representation. However, as a corrective move that aimed to call attention to a subject, it raises issues of representation, that is, of who is being represented and what do they represent?

Unlike the members of the working class butch-femme communities in *Boots of Leather* (but like the drag kings featured by Halberstam (1998) and Volcano and Halberstam (1999)) our subjects do not share a common location. They are joined by an interest in queering femininity, by networks with each other, and in some cases, simply by participating in our project. Rejecting a more conventional social science model of assuming that there are clear and bounded definitions of any community studied, the book project did not follow a comparative and representative model where geopolitical categories like nation or city, or even ethnic or class identities, would be used for representative and generalisable purposes. Instead we began the project – like we both have done in our previous work (Dahl 2004 and 2007; Volcano and Halberstam 1999; Volcano 1991, 2000 and 2007) – in our own transnational queer kinship networks and communities and by making photographs and conversation with friends and acquaintances. At the same time, along with the subjects of our work, we continuously analysed the demographics of our communities and asked ourselves about silences and gaps, using what could be called a snowball method where meetings led to more meetings and introductions. We also presented work in progress in multiple contexts and to our different communities and networks along the way. We continuously solicited and followed suggestions from friends and traced conversational threads between the femmes we met, making the very selection process itself a reflection on femme genealogies.

That said, like all ethnographic work, the book is a partial and situated account that draws on some of these networks. It's also important to recognize that this book's femmes of power are all in positions where

they can be visually represented in a book like this and this represents a historical moment when to these particular subjects being (visually) represented in a book poses less of a risk and more of an opportunity for connection and recognition. This has its limitations and in some cases, work or family situations did prevent femmes who would have liked to be part of the project from participating. In that respect, the book can only offer a small glimpse into a particular network of queerly feminine folks to whom participation in a highly visualized project is desirable and possible.

As a femme-inist ethnographer my position constantly changed in the process and I often conducted participant observation in the process and the politics of the research itself. Our starting point was that within both mainstream and queer subcultural contexts, feminine matters tend to be laden with negative connotations of superficiality, objectification, sexualization and so on. However, our goal was more than a simple act of visibility, even if that is commendable in itself (after all, Volcano has been a central figure in rendering female masculinity visible); we wanted to explore alternative ways of representing femininity and feminine subjects. Volcano has developed what he calls a queer feminist methodology of making images *with* which is invested in making images with subjects who speak and speak back, rather than taking images *from* subjects who are given no voice (Volcano 2008, 14). As Del puts it: “The process of production is as important as the product. Digital photographic technologies enable the subject to give immediate feedback on their own image and for those that don’t reflect the subject as they want to be seen can be instantaneously deleted”⁷.

Through sharing many moments of making images with femmes, I was able to follow how collaboration works in the production of representation, and learn about the intimacy of photographic art and about the mutual trust

that is required in order to produce a carefully framed image with many layers. Through ‘participant observation’ in the photographic sessions, I gained a tremendous respect for the femmes who were willing to partake in the project and for the labour it takes to make images under what at times were rather difficult conditions of cold, rain, snow, crowd intervention and so on. In many cases, the very production of the image turned into a public spectacle, which in and of itself contributed to the reconfiguration of public representations of femininity. Close readings of the images produced, which the book invites but does not offer, also reveal a tremendous amount of clues to the specificity of each subject’s legacy and agency, as captured at one moment in time in a particular location. In that respect, *Femmes of Power* is more of an ethno-archive than a conventional ethnography.

As a collaborative project, working on the book brought together our respective and different networks, which meant that we did not always work together. For instance, Wendy Delorme in Paris and Maria and Signe in Copenhagen (see Volcano and Dahl 2008) came to the project through Del’s networks and photographs were made before we met. The warm day I met with Wendy in Paris and the cold December day when I took the train across the water from Malmö to Copenhagen to meet with Maria and Signe have stayed with me as remarkable instances of the joy of femme-on-femme ethnography. Like many other conversations, ours had started beforehand on email and has continued both as dialogue and through participation in virtual communities and collaborations in queer subcultural spaces long after our first encounter. Curiously, these crowded café conversations were more like reunions between old friends. Beginning with mapping itineraries, people, places we share (largely European and North American queer urban subcultural locations), we quickly moved into intense and deeply moving conversations about our lives. These were loosely structured around femininity, feminism, femmeness and desire, but more often turned into stories of being different, and

7 Personal communication with Del LaGrace Volcano, August 2009.

of family, community and life dreams. With a sense of shared interest and community, all conversations within this project zigzagged across time and space and we built on each other's arguments, cited other femmes we know, compared stories and found common threads. To be sure, a femme-identified researcher who is interested in meeting other femmes from an explicit sense of belonging to the same community and being interested in similar things sets up assumptions about a certain sharedness, even if it is more of a vague familiarity or sensibility, rather than something that connotes the sameness of family resemblance.

What makes for such easy first encounters? What enables the trust? Like most of my collaborators, I have been interviewed by queer researchers and journalists on numerous occasions and the at times seemingly contrived and distant neutrality that have accompanied such encounters have often generated awkwardness, as if though the interviewer participating in conversation may "pollute the data". While sometimes my apprehensions about the power of representation make me hesitate to do so, I always return to the same thing: If I wish my allies and collaborators to let me ask them questions and write about them, then should I not be willing to do the same for others? If I belong also to a community of researchers, then should I not assist my colleagues? As an activist, I know what it feels like to be interviewed and, more importantly, represented by others and this is useful and humbling experience because as Sharon Traweek (2009) has reminded me, epistemic privilege has a lot to do with whether or not one is able not only to say *yes* but *no* to being studied. Clearly, I can say no, but conducting 'participant observation' in an interview situation could also serve to simultaneously queer the science of interviewing and make the complex process of scientific knowledge production even more visible. It has also meant that I have gained a deep understanding of the difference between being cited as a scholar and as an "informant".

Ethnographers are trained to assume that rendering 'informants' anonymous is simultaneously a technology of objectivity and *the* way to avoid potential negative consequences for the research participant especially for those who are marginalised and who may experience a very clear and present danger of being subjected to discrimination and even hate crimes, such as in the case of Kennedy and Davis's (1993) work. However, a clear downside of anonymity is that it also serves to reproduce the hierarchy of a named author and the unnamed 'informant'. While full transparency is obviously impossible, rendering interview subjects anonymous actively reproduces the idea of the author as "theorist" and the interviewee as providing "illustrations" of the author's theoretical points⁸. After all, we rarely see references to anonymous research subjects in our bibliographies.

My starting point for femme-on-femme research was that we share interests and stakes in wanting to challenge the contempt for femininity that exists both within majoritarian society and to some extent, within feminist and queer spaces. Unlike second wave feminist researchers who in a rather romanticized sense aimed to "give voice" to marginalized and subaltern subjects, however, *Femmes of Power* was not a project that assumed that the femmes featured were in need of help for their empowerment. These femmes are indeed often – but not always or in every way – empowered femmes, who produce their own representations and narratives and tell their own stories through performance, art, writing, activism and teaching.

8 To give but one example, once in an interview I was asked to "stop talking" as I was "getting to close to the argument she wanted to make" on the subject of the interview. I was puzzled, and it revealed a presumed difference between an 'informant' who provides 'data' and a 'researcher' who provides 'interpretation'. I was to speak about certain aspects of my personal life relevant to the subject but was not to provide 'arguments' or 'theory'. Many femmes who are used to being interviewed recount similar experiences and often express scepticism of researchers for that reason.

They are willing and able to engage, to represent themselves and to be represented, and they share not only language, concepts and ideologies, but also spaces of intellectual and activist conversation. But by viewing femmes as co-producers of knowledge on a topic that generally has been tied to objectification, passivity, superficiality, etc, I wanted to challenge what counts as theory as well as the master voice of the interpreter who so often has reduced feminine subjects to anonymous narrators, or their (queer) images to superficial 'illustrations' of theoretical points. Actively aiming to decentre the scientific voice opens up ways of remaining humble and moving in and out of different positions of authority in a conversation. Nevertheless, questions remain: how then does one represent (members of) one's own community? Is it possible to queer the ethnographic genre? To explore these questions, I now turn to a discussion of femme-inist ethnography.

Femme-inist Ethnography: The Politics of Femme Representation

I'd love to live in a world where the sexual binary system is considered a silly tradition of thought; but we're not there yet. I hope my work helps to paint myself and others as 'Subjects', not 'Objects'. Trina Rose (in Volcano and Dahl 2008, 172).

Like many queer academics, I come to and through both queer/gender studies and ethnography with a love of writing and with an explicit feminist desire to contribute to a rethinking of the who, the what and the why of social scientific knowledge-making. In a cheeky way, inspired by the visionary experiments of writing sexual difference, I also want to reconsider what *l'écriture femme-inine* might look like. That is, what happens if we queer writing conventions and what might it do for reconsidering the meaning of

femininity? When our lipgloss speaks together, through this co-production of knowledge, can femme (science) reproduce femininity with a difference? As Kennedy and Davis note, "power in matters of *interpretation* is at the core of the research hierarchy. In part this is because interpretation and writing in the Western tradition are predominantly individual quests. But in part this is due to the entrenched nature of the social hierarchies of race, gender, and class" (Kennedy and Davis 1996, 185-86, my emphasis). Can femme-inist ethnography make a difference?

With equal weight given to text and image, the format of *Femmes of Power* is not only unusual in that it is neither coffee table art nor classic text book, it is also a conscious experiment in visual and ethnographic representation. The aim was to try and undo the implied hierarchies between the 'academic'/text and the 'artist'/image. And rather than letting images 'illustrate' text, or text 'explain' images, together with our designer Elina Grandin, we laboured to make them work *together*, with a hope for an added, less tangible, dimension in which the reader may be yet another (imagined) collaborator. In some respects, this is yet another way to queer ethnography; rather than a straightforward social scientific account with illustrations, the book consciously leaves many matters of interpretation up to its reader. While it is inevitably up to the readers rather than the producer to determine the queer effects of this project, here I want to further the reflections on the methodological dimensions of this work.

While the subject/object distinction is itself an inherent problem of the liberal paradigm, the gendered technologies of representation that are employed in research have been central to upholding that dichotomy. For instance, the classic image of the anthropologist 'in the field' often features a fully dressed, civilized man interviewing a naked, squatting and subordinate 'native'. The scientist records a cultural history as told by a key informant and simultaneously engages in implicit or explicit civilizing missions. He

becomes the author and the authority on the subject at hand. The relation of power is quite literalised in such images, the ethnographer on a chair and the informant on the ground. By contrast, let's consider Del LaGrace Volcano's image entitled 'the femme ethnographer at work' (see figure 10.2). In the context of the other images in *Femmes of Power* this particular image looks less like an arranged portrait but like many of Del's images, it also works by way of referencing and citing; in this case the history of (feminist) anthropology.



Del LaGrace Volcano, *the femme –inist ethnographer at work*, 2006, from Volcano & Dahl 2008.

In an explicit critique of male dominated science, methods deriving from feminist epistemology have suggested that 'women' are better equipped to study 'women' (Harding 1986). Since the death of the unified subject

of feminism, woman with a capital W, feminist scholars have become more interested in relations of power between women within the research process, particularly along axes of race, class, age, sexuality and geographic location. Furthermore, feminist ethnographers have also questioned and experimented with ethnographic form and scientific authority (Behar and Gordon 1996; Viesweswaran 1994, among others). Femme-on-femme might connote sameness but what exactly would that sameness be? Compared to the classic image of the ethnographer in the field, this image might be read as two equally positioned (as reflected in sitting next to each other) white women. Morgana Maye, the subject of this photograph, is roughly the same age as me, she is well versed in feminist and queer theory and at the time of this conversation pursuing a Ph.D. Given the centrality placed on race, class, age, gender and education, all this might suggest that femme-on-femme research is about equality through sameness.

Rather than assuming sameness or picking an example of a femme who might be considered 'different' along such axes of power to point to the politics of difference within femme research, let me instead reflect on the difficulty of reading visual clues. Reading the aesthetic codes of femininity we might ask what dress tells us about the spatiotemporal and socioeconomic dimensions of femme and what we need to know to understand them. Morgana's pearls, fur and silk dress might suggest a contemporary love of vintage, or it might suggest upper-class living. A queer feminist reading might see a casually, fashionably or rather scandalously dressed ethnographer, conducting an interview with a house-dwelling and very assertive femme in San Francisco's Castro neighbourhood and this uncertainty, I argue, might be read as a metaphor for the feminized complexity of both visibility and class in the early 2000s. If we add other information – such as that I am Swedish and that English is not my first language, that we dwell in urban subcultural contexts in Stockholm and San Francisco that differ significantly in terms of size, history, diversity

and range of options for consumption, entertainment and dating, and that Morgana is a sexual educator with a private dungeon, while I am a teacher of gender studies whose sexual practices are to be kept separate from my work – are we still ‘the same’?

If we linger for a minute on this ‘ethnographic encounter’ itself, it matters that like many of our subjects, Morgana is accustomed to doing photo shoots. That is, she is not only extremely articulate about her understandings of femininity, feminism, and performativity, but she carefully and capably negotiated, and at times even orchestrated the photo shoot. Our initial encounter, like those with many other femmes in the book, was routed through a then shared lover. This to me points to the workings of queer kinship in the process of femme-on-femme research and yet our desires and sexual practices differ significantly in many other respects including that mine became to obey hers. A great admirer of the power of the feminine, I found myself fascinated and willing to go along with every step, which pointed to the complexity of femme-on-femme desire, if not (only/always/ever) sexual, then at least in terms of appreciation.

Lastly, if we expanded the anthropological definition of ‘studying up’ (Nader 1982) beyond studying epistemic power and understand it to mean studying things we admire rather than things we do not have access to, this image to me also points to the awe with which I conduct my research. Many of the subjects of my research are well-known authors, performers and artists whose work I often cite in my writing. Femme-on-femme research is a queer part of such a trajectory. It is often said that an image says more than a thousand words, and this image may or may not signal our affects in the situation. Reading the subtleties of visual and textual representations in *Femmes of Power* does require a certain queer cultural literacy as they both engage and disrupt expressive and scientific conventions.

According to Clifford, “ethnographic truths are inherently partial – committed and incomplete” (1986, 7). It seems to me that the idea of the detached and lone scientist as labouring away producing original ideas is itself a fiction held up by the conventions of anthropology⁹. Inspired by this idea – that ethnographic truths are always partial and that ethnography is by and large a poetic fiction and an experiment with form – my understanding of femme-on-femme ethnography stresses the dialogic, the non-original, and the fictional dimensions of both identities and ideas.

For instance, in the letter-portrait of Morgana Maye, I aimed to go beyond the eerie surface of the images of her and convey not only our encounter and my admiration, but how Morgana herself accounts for her own fictional invocations of a 1950s suburban housewife aesthetic. “To me femme is about taking the things that oppressed me and using them” she said, while also insisting on being astutely aware and critical of the racist reality of the United States in the 1950s that it inevitably references¹⁰. Explicitly feminist and equally queer, Morgana insists that this aesthetic “captures the essence of traditional female strength and beauty” and that “the 50s is a decade of full bodied women and absent fathers”. While Morgana, like

9 In a recent set of reflections on the future of ethnography, David Westbrook (2008) sets up precisely this archetype and writes, consistently referring to the academic with male pronouns: “consider the classic story: a young man leaves Paris or some such center for the ‘field,’ armed with a notebook, a bit of reading, rather inchoate beliefs in the importance of cultural specificity and underlying humanity, and an earnest yet pleasing manner. After some months or years of talking to, indeed living among, members of another culture, the young man returns and writes up his findings about life elsewhere – our ethnographer has mapped a culture, made it available to the world outside (or at least, made it available to Western academics)” (2008, 9). Whether any anthropologist ever lived up to this ideal or not, it is clearly still there as something to measure oneself against.

10 For a discussion of the circulation of 1950s aesthetics and the politics of whiteness, see my forthcoming piece entitled ‘White Gloves?’ in *Australian Feminist Review*.

Rosie Lugosi's poem suggested, "doesn't look like a real lesbian" in her simulacrum of femininity, she also critiques contemporary beauty ideals and fantasies of a classic nuclear family. Rereading the 1950s as an era where the mother was the centre of the domestic universe, Morgana Maye also queers 'mommy' in her work as a professional dominatrix specializing on age play. Her industriousness and her own understanding of both 'mommy' and of femininity, she explained, is inspired by her own mother and best friend, whose entrepreneurship as a Mary Kay lady¹¹ taught her economic independence and to appreciate the magic in rituals of femininity.

Does the letter-form, whereby the narrative is one of addressing the subject herself in an intimate way make for a better kind of partial account? While my aim with engaging my fellow femmes was to challenge the tradition of individualism within ethnography, a key part of interpretation is providing a narrative frame, which I did for the majority of the texts in the book. Obviously, I chose not only the narrative form but the citations and anecdotes in order to paint a particular picture – one which mixes interviews with long answers, brief thematic overviews and portraits which highlight admiration rather than deconstruction or explanation¹². I'm not sure. But engaging my fellow femmes as theorists of femininity, featured with name and image, and in a dialogue where they had the final say on how they were represented not only reflected but aimed to generate community and conversation and it extended the dialogue between us

11 In brief, Mary Kay is a brand of cosmetics sold through networks and via parties for invited guests that is now a global multi-million dollar industry. Like Avon and Tupperware, it has been one way for women who were primarily homemakers to make extra income.

12 As the initiator of the book, Del was invested in the politics of textual representation and felt it important that other voices were represented. These authors were Pratibha Parmar, Kentucky Fried Woman, Amber Hollibaugh, Campbell Ex, Lois Weaver and Itziar Ziga. Rather than 'representing' any one particular authentic experience, these authors were central interlocutors and dialogue partners in the process of making the book.

through the writing process¹³. Duggan and McHugh (2002) propose that the femme scientist solicits loving and grateful collaboration, and this can be seen as an attempt to experiment with such an approach. As a whole the book aims to provide many voices and textual forms, with the hope that together they point to some expressions of an emerging figuration. In addressing the text to femmes and in refusing to do the explicit work of explanation, it also explores the boundaries of how one does or even values science and to whom one is to address oneself.

The central downfall of not building text on anonymized accounts was that it was more difficult to address what some interlocutors have called 'the thorny aspects' of femme politics and community making. In particular, moments of critique of fellow femmes and other queers in some respects had to be downplayed as putting things in print can have powerful effects. It also meant that there were things that were said in interviews that did *not* end up in the book – as subjects changed their mind or decided other things than those that I considered significant were more important. While some critics are quick to point out the lack of attention to tension and disagreements as a shortcoming of the book – and once again, hinting towards the notion that this would make *Femmes of Power* less 'scientific', to me this raises questions about the inevitable limitations of any kind of representational 'outing'. If there is some kind of 'truth' that nobody is willing to state publicly, then what kind of truth is it? How might one address such issues in an ethical way?¹⁴ If the aim of rethinking *l'écriture femme-inine*, like the effort to correct the lack of visual representation of queer femininities, is also to write femininity differently, then is it not also

13 This approach includes this piece as well, where Morgana Maye, as before, has given consent and input to this discussion, corrected misunderstandings and altered terms she did not find accurate.

14 For one attempt to do so, see my forthcoming article 'White Gloves?' in *Australian Feminist Review*.

worth highlighting moments of generosity, exchange, community and solidarity to counter the moments fraught by tension and strife? Returning again to the social hierarchies outlined by Kennedy and Davis (1996), it is clear that issues concerning power structures in society as a whole cannot be undone, but they may be ethnographically and representationally challenged.

Conclusion: The Future of Femme Science

In this article, I have reflected on the ethnographic practice employed in the work on *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* and situated its motivations against a legacy of queer, feminist and “straight” anthropological practice. While the project was informed by ethnographic methodological sensibilities and in particular by feminist ethnographic discussions about power and representation, it is clear to any reader that it is not a conventional ethnography. Rather, *Femmes of Power* might be seen as a form of queer archive containing photographs, interviews and snippets of ephemeral, fleeting moments of encounters (cf. Munoz 1996).

In her discussion of the murder of transgendered Brandon Teena, Judith Halberstam notes that the archive of materials surrounding this case provides a kind of “immaterial repository” for ideas about life and offers a record of the complex interactions of desire, race, class, sexuality and gender (2005, 33). Halberstam joined a growing group of queer scholars interested in considering archives. Ann Cvetkovich, for instance, proposes that cultural texts can be read as “an archive of feeling” where emotions are “encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (2003, 7). Halberstam notes that “the archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of

queer activity” (ibid, 169–170). Read as an archive, *Femmes of Power* reveals a lot of emotion, ranging from joy to rage, from seduction to hope and as a collaboratively produced volume it also illustrates one of Halberstam’s main points: it is not only academics who are interested in queer archiving. *Femmes*, as cultural producers and theorists of queer femininities, are also in their stories and crafting of photographic collaborations, reworking and re-narrating the archive of queer and feminist activist life itself.

To conclude this rhizomatic meditation on queer methods, and return to the question of what ‘real’ and ‘normal queers and science look like posed with Rosie’s poem, I want to return to the wisdom of my fellow femme theorists. ‘Femme is a frequency you tune into’, mused Caroline, a London based femme, when she reflected on her particular understanding of desire, aesthetics, aging and body politics (Volcano and Dahl 2008, 30). As such, it is tied to an archive of feelings, a set of ephemeral, intangible dimensions (Munoz 1996). To Caroline and many other lesbian femmes, the desire for butches was the starting point for their own understandings of being femme, but femme *movements* are built from a wish for solidarity with other femmes. Femme-on-femme ethnography, similarly, might be understood as, in part, a response to the privileging of masculinity (even if it is ever so delightful to many of us), as a tuning into a frequency of sisterhood and queer community and a yearning for femme community.

If Halberstam’s (1998) proposal for queer methodology is about scavenging among methods and taking those most useful for the project at large, then it is perhaps particularly suited for studying communities clustered around the pleasures of closets and rituals of “borrowing, stealing and trading”, as Swedish drag artist Indra Windh put it (Volcano and Dahl 2008, 53). Like Halberstam’s trajectory, my ongoing work on queer femininities draws on multiple methodologies; archival research, ethnographic engagements, participation in community events and

politics. Beyond being humble and recognising the power in copying the wisdoms of others rather than attempting originality, tuning into the frequency of femme-on-femme research has at once been an invitation to femme sisterhood and a recognition that neither my own position nor that of my research subjects nor relations between us are stable. Many femmes argue that engaging with femininity means undoing what French femme Wendy Delorme calls “our inherited self-hatred and trust issues, because in most societies, women are raised to think they are worth nothing, aside from beauty” (Volcano and Dahl 2008, 106) and work against stereotypes of femmes as “bitchy, stealing each other’s boyfriends, being competitive ... a residue from straight culture”, as Caroline put it (Volcano and Dahl 2008, 182). To me, this signals a commitment to sisterhood and solidarity, not a declaration of perfection.

Femme-on-femme is, I would argue not simply about existing within and reflecting communities, it is also a methodology committed to making community. It is about seeing research as part of, not outside of, social movements, and seeing the research process itself as something that works towards the formulation of community in its (researchers’) execution. It draws on conversations and exchanges in closets and kitchens as well as in clubs and gutters, in Internet communities and emails as well as in conference settings and panels. Like the vampire queen Rosie Lugosi, the femme scientist comes out at night and like queers of all kinds, she hangs out in public, in bathrooms and behind the scene. Like other queer researchers then, she scavenges and collects clips, fanzines, songs and pieces of clothing, and she records frequencies and energies. To that end, femme-on-femme means sharing not only ideas and writings, but sometimes also beds, resources and lovers ethically; it means seeing every encounter as an opportunity not to make scientific authority but to make community and it means recognising the theorising not only of femme ‘scholars’ but of strippers, burlesque artists and community activists through their live

and living art. Above all, it means acknowledging that academics and our concepts are always already part of networks and not outside of them.

So is femme-on-femme research a narcissistic project of self-promotion and homogeneity? Is it about lack of scientific distance to oneself? Standpoint-oriented feminist researcher Gabriele Griffin (2009) recently argued that feminist research can be divided into those who study that which is different and those who study that which is the same and that both methods lead to both compromise and being compromised. Omitting the contributions made by theorists like Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990), Donna Haraway (1991) and Chela Sandoval (2000) with regards to the position of the in/appropriated other, the trixter and the differentiated consciousness of an oppositional subject, Griffin seems to argue that while feminists have been critical of studies of difference (read: with subjects whose power positions are structurally different), researching ‘the same’ often leads to emotional investments that blur scientific vision. I argue that femme-on-femme research is neither and both, and that a shared engagement with queer femininities works as a point of entry to opening up questions about the materiality and performativity of the feminine, not as a final destination or bounded entity.

Doing femme-on-femme research with folks who range in age between their late teens and their sixties, who come from diverse class backgrounds and belong to a wide range of ethnic communities, requires being mindful of the social hierarchies, especially in these times of sex, class and race war on an increasingly globally interconnected scale. It is not only important in terms of the relationship between an academic, middle-class subject (by professional default and social democratic aspirations) and the subjects of my work, but equally importantly in terms of understanding relations of power *within* femme communities and among femmes. As Halberstam (1998, xiii) notes, many queer researchers labour to tread the fine line of not

letting the personal be too weighty while at the same time not becoming so theoretical that the work loses significance in relation to what is often very complex, marginalized and personal experiences. Like Kevin Kumashiro (2002), a queer scholar dedicated to anti-oppressiveness and a pedagogue interested in questions of methodology and with a long history of working with activists, I have investments in my own research and those certainly need to be scrutinized. In my case, it is the *potentiality* of reconfiguring femininity that interest me and to that end, I draw out dimensions that I find particularly innovative and interesting, rather than attempting to present a unified understanding of femme identity. If queer work is about breaking down boundaries and contributing to a methodology that also serves an agenda for social change and if writing something also participates in producing it, then femme-inist ethnography aims to address such questions of political investment, as I have done here.

Engaging and presenting the subjects of the study as co-producers of theories and ideas, *Femmes of Power* was an attempt to perform the approach of siting, sighting and citing – while keeping the very notion that we both coexist and need to be separate at the centre. I agree with Rosi Braidotti (1994) when she says that in our contemporary moment, we need political fictions as much as we need theoretical systems. To that end, femme-on-femme research, like femme work in general, is greedy but humble, visionary but not proscriptive, reproductive but with a pleasurable difference. Fem(me) science, Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh propose, “calls for a revaluation of all feminine values; it aims not to explain, or instruct, but to evoke and provoke those passions frequently seething under controlled, objective, and didactic prose” (2002, 169). Perhaps in the end, femme-on-femme research as part of femme science, is indeed “addressed to the future, a future where femininity as we know it... will have been completely superseded” (2002, 186).

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