

Object-Becomes-Subject: When Femmes Look Back

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Del LaGrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl:
Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities
(London: Serpent's Tail, 2008.)

A lot of mascara and ink has been spent conceiving passionate poetic theory about what the world looks like through a femme figure. (Dahl, 2008)

For casual visitors to the king- or queen-dom of 'queer', feisty and unashamed examples of 'gender bending' or 'cross-dressing' would perhaps seem most appropriately and obviously to epitomise the 'queer' undoing of normative gender stereotypes. Texts such as Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* might appear to uphold this assumption. Here, Halberstam argued groundbreakingly that genealogies of the masculine need to look as much to masculine women as to masculine men to make sense of the set of performative attributes and gestures that make up 'masculinity', effectively de-coupling maleness from its social counterpart and showing up the lack of inevitable fit between them.

In common parlance, 'drag' refers to the putting on of the garb and attributes of the sex to which one does not belong. Judith Butler was clear in her canonical *Gender Trouble*, that the binary genders of masculine

and feminine 'belong properly' to none, this 'belonging to a sex' being already part of a normative binary logic that excludes intersexed, trans- and gender-variant bodies and lives. Rather, genders are social constructions that straitjacket subjects as either male or female and then create by means of repetition and cultural approbation the illusion of sexual difference as naturally occurring gender.

In Butler's logic, then, there is nothing inevitable or natural about a self-identified woman putting on masculine *or* feminine 'drag'. Rather, there is ideology that *expects* one sort of performance rather than the other. But this expectation can be subverted and the meanings of gender subtly challenged when femininity or masculinity are performed ironically, excessively – in short with queer intent. In spite of this Butlerian insight, it is only relatively recently that scholars and activists have explicitly asked question about the meanings generated when queer women actively and self-consciously produce 'feminine' appearances, performances and identities as both sites of resistant gender politics and sources of allo- and auto-erotic pleasures. The collaboration between 'off-white, self-proclaimed hermaphrodyke' photographer, Del LaGrace Volcano, and Swedish 'femme-inist' ethnographer, Ulrika Dahl, resulting in the aesthetically wondrous and theoretically rich coffee-table-book-cum-radical-manifesto, *Femmes of Power*, is one such recent contribution to this growing body of scholarship and queer life documentary. It is at once a personal celebration of communities of femme queers, linked by their deliberately avowed and performed femme-ininity, across a series of national and continental

SQS
1/2011

63

Queer Eye
Reviews

Lisa
Downing

contexts, and an academic intervention in queer studies. As such, the book defies and redefines generic, as well as gendered, conventions.

In her introduction, Ulrika Dahl reflects upon her position as ethnographer, teasingly and thought-provokingly addressing the question of ‘femme science’, a term coined by Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh to whose femme scholarship the book addresses itself, and alongside which it finds a place. If science is a masculinist or phallogocentric endeavour, underpinned by its ambition of neutrality, mastery and possession, what is at stake when a queer femme speaks as an ethnographer? Focusing on the queer notion of plural selves, plural positionalities from which we speak and act, Dahl reconciles her identities as a social scientist and a queer femme activist, subject and lover, precisely by refusing to reconcile them, refusing to elide their tensions in order to make them fit a seamless illusion. The femme scientist is one who rejects ‘the imperialist fantasy of scientific “discovery” and question[s] a capitalist consumption logic that feeds on always inventing something new’ (p. 20); rather, she ‘solicits collaboration’ (p. 20) in her collection of ethnographic data. This reflection on feminist ethnographic method echoes Volcano’s photographic principle of making photos *with* subjects, rather than taking photos *of* them and the awareness of a history of domination underpinning portraiture: ‘The history of photography is also the history of the violent and ubiquitous exploitation of those who are considered marginal and disposable with the camera as its weapon of choice’ (p. 14). Volcano’s ethics of production is materially underpinned by the innovative ‘copyleft’ system, a form of copyright licensing in which the photographer surrenders certain rights over the distribution of the photograph, resisting the conventions of controlling and capitalising on the image created. An ethos of sharing – of both knowledge and images – runs through the book, then, uniting the collaborators’ methods and subtly, but insistently, rejecting the *taking from* that characterises mainstream art and ethnography. Thus the *doing*

differently of queer femme performativity is imported to the academic practice of sociology and the artistic practice of photography.

The multiple versions of femme identities and practices that expose and celebrate themselves throughout the book similarly resist the ascription of sameness – while nevertheless drawing on solidarity, continuities and community ethics. ‘Femme’ is rendered multiple and multi-layered throughout by considerations on the part of Dahl, Volcano, and the book’s subjects and co-creators, of the intersecting factors of nationality, ethnicity, class-mobility and identifications. ‘Femme’ is not understood as the simple counterpart of ‘butch’ in a lesbian couple here; though at moments and in certain contexts it may well appear as such. Straightforward and permanent binary either/ors are entirely exceeded by the complex and multi-layered stories and images that are produced. In short, as Dahl puts it, femme ‘never sits still and she is always in relation’ (p. 20).

In its commitment to re-imagining ‘femme’ apart from ‘its heterosexist history’ (p. 20), the book engages with those involved in sex work and fat activism; with ‘transfemmes’, bearded ladies, and queer dykes who play with stereotypes of the ‘exotic’, ethnically-marked female, opening the horizon of meanings for those forms of femininity that are subjugated or marginalised in heteronormative narratives. ‘Dyke Marilyn’, for example, is a character performed by Maria Rosa Mojo on London’s club scene. She incarnates humorously ‘the bastard child of Marilyn Monroe and Jimi Hendrix who inherited Jimi’s looks and Marilyn’s guitar skills’ (p. 48). She at once debunks and re-creates in celebratory fashion a ‘white idol of femininity’ with ‘black roots’ – the pun on hair dye and ethnic origin a typically femme queer strategy for playing with and undermining the language of categorisation. In Volcano’s photograph (pp. 46–47), she takes a provocative stance in the foreground of a London tourist site, Piccadilly Circus. Dressed in a feather boa, red basque and holding a guitar, she

dominates the city scene, gazing straight at the viewer, a snarl playing over her red lips. Dyke Marilyn, in her dismantling of categories of ethnicity and iconic femininity, embodies the copy without original, showing up through her ironic citation of Marilyn's sexiness the very constructedness of feminine desirability in the heterosexist mode, and making it signify otherwise. She imbues it with a queer femme feistiness that both makes us look and that looks back at us challengingly.

San Francisco-based Dominatrix and BDSM-educator, Mistress Morgana, similarly adopts strategies of ludic parody and deliberately faulty citation to re-encode and queer the meanings of sex work and domesticity. A 'twisted Martha Stewart' (p. 129), her persona is that of a paradoxically kinky-yet-prim 1950s housewife, photographed (pp. 128–9) in the setting of her floral-bedecked retro kitchen. In this image, she smiles warmly and proffers a plate of home-made cupcakes, made from eggs laid by her hens whose names, we are told, are Rita Hayworth and Sophia Loren. The deployment of vintage glamour aesthetics at once appeals to a sense of women's history and, in its queered form, suggests pleasurable ways of recuperating images and modes of femininity loosened from their ideological linchpins. This double-use of history for reverse discourse is adumbrated in the attention Mistress Morgana accords to the context of some of the fetishes with which she engages: a desire to serve Morgana in 1950s domestic servitude is accommodated so long as it is accompanied by an 'awareness of the racist reality of that decade's McCarthyism and American Apartheid' (p. 130). Insisting on the necessity to ethically contextualise our desires and practices, Morgana's form of erotic domination suggests a groundedness in political consciousness that separates queer femme kink from much of its un-self-reflexive heterosexual counterpart. It is, perhaps, in attending to the uses of history to inform the present and shape the future that the overarching ambition of *Femmes of Power* – 'to explode the meanings of femininity' (p. 26) – might be achieved.

As a personal footnote to this review, I had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with the *Femmes of Power* project when Ulrika Dahl and Del LaGrace Volcano agreed to perform a presentation based on it at a colloquium on 'Queer in Europe' that I co-organised with Robert Gillett in Exeter in September 2008. As a scholar of international queer, I found both the publication of the book and the series of presentations and launch events that accompanied it to be a genuinely important event in queer her-story; a visual and verbal dis-articulation and re-framing of so many deleterious and still persistent ideas about femininity – within LGBT cultures, as well as in the heterosexual mainstream. This is a book that engages the senses as well as the intellect; an encounter with it is a synaesthetic and intersubjective interaction with the other and the same. It is my belief that everyone could benefit from an encounter with *Femmes of Power*. Finally, as a leopard-print-clad, shiny-boot-shod, queer-identified femme, who would *never* be brave enough to present myself to the camera, I rejoiced in this book in a spirit of rarely experienced recognition, understood in the capacious French sense of *reconnaissance*, which etymologically encompasses gratitude as well as identification.

Works cited

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