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## Playing Femme and Not Playing it Straight: Passing, Performance, and Queering Time and Place

Leanne Dawson

*This article ties together femme history, theory, and culture to foreground a femme spectrum and an ever-expanding femme archive. The original reading of performers Bird la Bird and Rosie Lugosi considers the significance of visibility and the voice for the femme subject who may or may not “pass” as straight, while arguing that the femme can both problematise and mobilise queer theory, namely performativity and temporality, giving rise to a queer femme temporality that does not focus on traditional family structures and the future and can instead empower women and femininities across the spectrum.*

Femme, taken from the French for “woman,” its pronunciation anglicised, has been used in the lesbian context since the 1940s, when it became a common term in working-class U.S. bar culture to describe feminine women who desired and partnered with other—usually masculine—women, known as butches (Kennedy and Davis 1993).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the Black counterparts of the butch and femme were called stud and fish, respectively. The former, still in use today, conflates masculinity with sexual prowess while the latter reduces feminine women to their genitalia and the misogynistic idea that the vagina has an unpleasant odour. These butch-femme and stud-fish communities of the 1940s and 1950s considered butches and studs to be the true lesbians and suspected femmes may turn to heterosexuality at the first opportunity, reminiscent of the argument by sexologists and psychoanalysts that if women partnered with women their desire had to be masculine, thus establishing the notion that the relationship between sex, sexuality, and what would become known as “gender” was causal: homosexuals were called “inverts” and the masculine lesbian’s desire was heterosexualised, leaving the feminine lesbian, whose sex and gender are supposedly aligned, difficult to justify. In explaining the sexuality of the lesbian in terms of her (masculine) desire, appearance, and behaviour, the feminine lesbian was a puzzle that could not be solved, with sexologist Havelock Ellis arguing that she is not truly a lesbian, but a woman who is “not usually attractive to the average man” (1975, 87) and therefore engages in sexual and romantic relationships with women due to a lack of other opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

In order to fight against femmephobia, this article opens with an overview of femme history, theory, and culture to create a femme spectrum and a femme archive. I read the performances of Bird la Bird and Rosie Lugosi to argue that the femme can shatter binaries by being simultaneously queer, monstrous, and maternal. Indeed both performers increase the visibility of, and give a voice to, femme and queer feminine identities. This original reading, therefore, foregrounds the femme to both problematise and mobilise queer theory, namely performativity and temporality, for a queer femme temporality that does not focus on traditional family structures and the future (e.g., the “biological clock,” martyrdom and the daily routine, and women “losing their looks”) and can instead empower women and femininities across the spectrum.



### Femme Pasts: Binaries, Policing, Erasure

Despite femmephobia existing both within and beyond gay communities, the proliferation of femme subjects, including in working-class nightlife establishments, continued beyond the U.S. context. In the United Kingdom, The Gateways nightclub opened in Chelsea, London in 1931 and from 1943, if not before, established itself as a meeting place for minority groups, who were frequently discriminated against elsewhere. This focus on nightclubs as queer spaces of low culture—unlike much lesbian history and representation, which has tended to focus on high culture, the wealthy, and elite—will return to the fore in my discussion of femme performers, Bird and Lugosi, throughout this article.<sup>3</sup> The Gateways closed in 1985, but lives on in cultural references including *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich 1968) starring Beryl Reid as June “George” Buckridge and Susannah York as Alice “Childie” McNaught, a butch-femme pair. Like the aforementioned patronising arguments about femmes, Childie is presented as naïve in both name and character, for the filmic plot plays to the notion that femmes are unworldly heterosexuals.

Second-wave feminism was strongly influenced by the anti-essentialism of Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking 1949 text, *The Second Sex*, which Beauvoir wrote after seeing how Jews were othered during the atrocities of National Socialism and she went on to argue that woman, too, is subordinated to second place in the binary system, in which the first is considered a norm or positive, while the second position is regarded as lacking. A series of binaries traditionally tied to man-woman are masculine-feminine, active-passive, logic-emotion, and public-private, for men were expected to go out into the public sphere and work while women took care of domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare in the private realm of the home. We will see shortly how both Bird and Lugosi shatter these binaries with their public performances, which simultaneously queer the maternal. While we must acknowledge that second-wave feminism helped women gain rights, there were some problems with it. Femmes and butches were often considered outdated, uneducated, and an embarrassment to the androgynous, primarily middle-class and white, lesbians of the second-wave movement in Europe and North America, for lesbians were encouraged to replicate feminist dress codes with the goal of erasing strongly gendered styles from lesbian communities (Case 1993, 296).<sup>4</sup> This gendered styling of the body was significant as the butch was considered a “failed woman” and the femme was “hyper-woman,” with her supposed excessive femininity (Munt 1998, 3). Ironically, to deny a woman’s right to femininity is as coercive as imposing it upon her, which is a complaint frequently levied against hetero-patriarchy due to the repeated reinforcement of a fictional link between femaleness and femininity. During the “(Feminist) Sex Wars,” which included the notorious Barnard College conference, “The Scholar and the Feminist” (24 April 1982), debates about the femme were reignited. The Sex Wars comprised two sides of feminists debating butch and femme, as well as topics such as pornography and sadomasochism. Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia, Carole Vance, Ann Snitow, Amber Hollibaugh, Dorothy Allison, and the femme co-creator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City, Joan Nestle, were in favour of freedom of gender and sexual expression while Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Robin Morgan, Sheila Jeffreys, and Julia Penelope argued that the above practices kept women in a subordinate position (Nestle 1998, 121).<sup>5</sup> As the 1980s progressed, there was a cultural shift from proscriptive feminism and binaries to spectrums of identity, via the queer movement, for which the AIDS epidemic and lack of response to this by the Reagan administration in particular saw LGBTQ+ people unite in a way they had not done before and still have not done since. Queer was reclaimed from its use as a slur to act as an



umbrella term—free from the strict categorisation of medical discourse—for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans subjects.<sup>6</sup> Such grassroots queer politics and culture outside of the academy contributed to queer theory within.

Judith Butler's text at the dawn of queer theory, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) challenges investment in gender binaries, crediting Beauvoir's insight in *The Second Sex* into what is now known as "gender" as a process, a becoming; summed up by the line "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1997, 249). Butler emphasises the body as a discursive surface, stating that it is not possible to derive the kind of sexuality someone practices from their appearance, and arguing that acts and bodily gestures simply give the impression of an internal core. She terms this gender "performativity" and goes on to distinguish it from the bounded act of staged performance (1993, 234). However, Butler sometimes looks through rather than at the femme and frequently confines the femme subject to the butch-femme binary.

To pass is to not be recognised as a member of a group to which the person in question belongs, and can apply to ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability status, etcetera or, frequently, an intersection of these. Notable historical examples of passing to escape persecution include light-skinned Black people being read as white in the racially-segregated United States and Jews passing as "Aryan" in Nazi Germany. The term passing has since been used in relation to sexuality and gender: gay men and lesbians who wish to keep their sexual orientation private or who dress and act in a way that is often erroneously considered to be heterosexual—like some femmes—and transgender people who are read as cisgender.<sup>7</sup> By definition, while some people "pass," others "fail" (Bernstein Sycamore 2006, 2) and it is those who do not pass who are often most celebrated in queer theory. Indeed the passing femme is sometimes dismissed or ignored both in and outside of the academy, due to the preference for gender trouble: those considered more subversive, more *queer* because of their disruptive surface text, regardless of sexual acts or desire. Certain visual signifiers, most notably those linked to gender "crossing," are frequently read as signs of a queer sexuality, recalling homophobic and essentialist discourse from times gone by, and rendering invisible the cis femme whose queer sexuality is erased when she is read as straight. This brief overview demonstrates why cultural and theoretical interjections on femme subjects by femmes themselves are necessary.

In 1992, Joan Nestle, who had co-created and housed the Lesbian Herstory Archives to promote inclusivity, create visibility, and offer a space for all lesbian history, including silenced femmes, declared that "the decade of the fem" (1992, 3) was upon us, although she later admitted to her naivety in not predicting the focus, both in and outside the academy, on female masculinity. To rehabilitate the femme subject position, scholars and authors, particularly in the United States, have created a body of academic and anecdotal literature. Biddy Martin's *Femininity Played Straight* argues that femininity is used as a conservative position, against which others can be presented as radical, highlighting both feminism and the queer movement's sometimes negative attitudes towards the femininity of cisgender women (1996, 119), that is women whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.<sup>8</sup> Passing should not be downplayed, however, for infiltration and camouflage, whether with or without intention, can both transform and unsettle in a covert way.<sup>9</sup> Enforced visibility is oppressive, while emancipated visibility is necessary in social justice struggles. In her work on drag, Marjorie Garber claims the "hegemonic cultural imaginary's" desire to see and interpret otherness is to "guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question" (1992, 130).



Since the mid-2000s there has been a marked focus on temporality within queer theory, including J. Jack Halberstam's *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), which includes ideas that can be mobilised to empower the femme subject while underlining the femme's queerness. Halberstam argues that queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction (2005, 1), meaning they do not maintain the linearity and repetition of a normative life schedule, that is heteropatriarchy's fixation on the binary and futurity. For Halberstam, those with "queer" lifestyles, even if their gender and sexuality are heteronormative, include drug addicts and club kids who live life in "rapid bursts" (2005, 4). Of course recent lesbian and gay politics has devoted much attention to the normalisation of the gay subject through rather unqueer battles, such as for civil partnerships, the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and various forms of legally recognised parenthood, like adoption and birth certificate inclusion for same-sex parents. While the femme may sometimes be considered not queer enough if her surface text is read as heteronormative and allows her to "pass" as straight, the femme's desire is queer and there is room for non-normative politics and life schedules, departing from the focus on repetition and futurity, instead opening up a queer temporality.<sup>10</sup>

#### The Femme Spectrum: Queering Time and Place

Femme groups and gatherings—comprising those who do and do not pass—contribute to femme visibility while strengthening networks across traditional borders and boundaries: bodily, geographical, and temporal. *Femme 2006: Conversations and explorations*, held in San Francisco, was the first conference to exclusively explore femme identity.<sup>11</sup> Much like the freedom of the term queer, once reclaimed and appropriated by LGBTQ+ subjects, *Femme 2006* helped to demonstrate that femme identity has become a broad spectrum, including cis femmes, trans femmes, male femmes, those who partner with butches, with other femmes, with some or all identities in between, or with no one. Speakers and attendees helped to expand femme to anyone who wished to self-identify and claim the term.<sup>12</sup> This focus on a femme spectrum is positive for those who have called the femme identity apolitical or not queer enough. While cis femmes who pass as straight are often subject to misogyny and homophobia, such as sexual harassment and claims they have not found the right man, we cannot downplay the danger faced by trans and non-binary femmes:

gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of the transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. (Butler 1988, 527)<sup>13</sup>

Indeed the whole spectrum of femme identities are on the receiving end of toxic masculinity and other negative effects of heteropatriarchy.

Anthropologist Ulrika Dahl and photographer Del La Grace Volcano attended *Femme 2006* to both present and gather material for their book *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2008), which consists of photographs of femmes, European and North American, to whom Dahl either authors letters or poses questions, or who write their own short essay on femme identity. Like *Femme 2006*, and the three subsequent *Femme* conferences in the United States (Chicago; Oakland; Baltimore), their book demonstrates a trend for excess: hyperbolic



femininities and what I read as queer femme temporalities. For example, Mistress Morgana's home and dress appear to make her an ideal 1950s-style housewife, but she is a femme photographed in 2006, who instructs on BDSM, and lives only with chickens in her San Francisco abode (Dahl and Volcano 2008, 129). Also included is the "flicka" (girl), who is part of the Stockholm asexuality movement and, at age 24, is interested in "childish, naïve, crazy girly things," therefore pushing back against norms because she does not "identify as a grown-up" (Dahl and Volcano 2008, 164), and therefore helps us to re-read the aforementioned filmic Childie in a more positive way. The book is overflowing with other forms of dissonance relating to queerness, femme subjectivity, time, and place, including: fat femmes, one of the key strands throughout all U.S. Femme Conferences; trans femmes; "bearded ladies"; heavily-tattooed femmes, and so on, thus using the power of image to disrupt the way feminine women have been set up as heteronormative objects bound to a strict binary. The central femme subjects of this article, both Lugosi and *Femmes of Power* cover girl Bird actively invite the reader to look at them within the book, just as they do with the audience when onstage.

A non-academic focus on a spectrum of femininity, traditional and alternative, in clubs, pubs, and performance, is of note as many LGBTQ+ venues have become increasingly feminised in recent years and Sarah Schulman's keynote speech, "Writing Lesbian: The First Thirty Years," at the 2013 Brighton Lesbian Lives conference, claimed that this is tied to the depoliticisation and commercialisation of both lesbianism and queerness, although it must be stated that linking consumerism and apoliticism to femininity replicates negative second-wave discourse about femininity. Furthermore, women have often been patronisingly tied to consumerism and, for a significant period of time, were denied any role in politics.<sup>14</sup> Rather, such depoliticisation is due, in part, to the fact that the last major LGBTQ+ political movement was queer, revolving around the AIDS crisis, while the main focus of LGBTQ+ politics in recent years is decidedly unqueer: the normalisation of gay lives via same-sex marriage, etcetera, therefore a heterosexual life schedule of marriage, parenthood, and a focus on the future, which stands in opposition to a queer temporality and introduces a binary of the normalised "good" gay subject and the queer LGBTQ+ subject.

Temporality and the maternal were queered when Bird appeared at the Baltimore edition of the Femme Conference in 2012, where she "held court" on gender, sexuality, and class in the United Kingdom. Her aesthetics underlined the significance of the intersection of these as her headscarf and rollers highlighted a stereotypically northern English, working-class femininity, although some audience members, primarily from the United States, may not have immediately understood these cultural references and nuances. The headscarf and roller look was considered to be one from years gone by, although it has experienced a—very public—resurgence in Liverpool, North West England in recent times, where it is common to see heteronormative, heterosexual women walking through the city centre in full make-up and rollers during the daytime on a Saturday, while shopping and preparing for the night out to follow and is closely linked to WAG culture.<sup>15</sup> This very public outing of the hair in the midst of styling by Bird (who is now based in London) and Liverpoolians, stands in opposition to the privacy of such tools of femininity in the past, when women confined their rollers and preparation for appearing in public to the private sphere of the home. This appearance foregrounds the oft concealed labour in the process of creating a feminine aesthetic.

Bird, her name reappropriated from British English working-class sexist slang for a young woman or girlfriend, created a queer temporality in an already queer space through her hyperbolic northern English working-class femininity as her vintage hair and make-up would not have led to dissonance in the private sphere of an earlier time period and/or a different





geographical location. Her classically made-up, red-lipped face cites 1940s and 1950s style glamour, while her multiple tattoos, including a chest piece and heavily inked limbs, nod to the traditions of a working-class masculinity, rather than femininity, particularly due to the *site* of their placement on body parts that mean they are also in our *sight*. While aspects of her femininity may lead Bird to be misread as straight, the tattoos and embracing of what can be read as a wonderful feminine “excess” prevent her from being read as too straight-laced and conventionally heteronormative.

Lugosi’s gothic-style outfits ranged from latex catsuits to the velvet and lace of Victorian styling at all four U.S. Femme Conferences and at the first Italian Fem Conference and Great Fem Show at the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome (1 June 2013), which finally made femme conferences transatlantic.<sup>16</sup> My attendance at most of the aforementioned conferences and numerous other social, academic, and cultural events, both as a scholar presenting research and as a self-identified femme who passes in multiple ways, means I could not help but notice how the crowd of delegates in the United States, whether performers, presenters, or audience members, repeatedly reached a level of playfulness, excess, and exaggerated artificiality in their appearance and behaviour that is rarely matched in femme spaces in the United Kingdom, and much of Europe, with Lugosi and Bird offering two notable exceptions.<sup>17</sup>

Such international femme gatherings have gone on to inspire local networks in the United Kingdom. The 2006 event in San Francisco cast a spotlight on the Atlanta Femme Mafia, a group which aims to fight stereotypes about and demand respect for the femme, and since then Mafia groups have sprung up throughout North America and Europe, including the United Kingdom. Although there has, thus far, been no U.K.-based conference focusing on femmes—something I intend to change in the future—the academic conference, Lesbian Lives, which used to take place annually at University College Dublin, Ireland, was hosted at the University of Brighton, England in 2013 and foregrounded femme subjectivity when both Lugosi and Bird performed and presented with shows entitled “Gory Gory Alleluia! Rosie Lugosi The Lesbian Vampire Queen in performance” and “Holding Court with Bird la Bird,” before Garland gave a talk on “Performing Queer Femininity and Performing it all Wrong.” It is this notion of performing (queer) femininity wrong that I now turn to, for Lugosi and Bird *may* pass as heterosexual—although they are far from the traditional image of heteronormative femininity tied to heterosexuality—but their styling, behaviour, and use of the voice create an “*other* otherness” of a queer femme time and place (Dawson 2015b).

Lugosi and Bird’s respective websites foreground their own voices. Lugosi’s captures all of her artistic output:

an eclectic writer and performer, ranging from singing in post-punk gothic band The March Violets, through touring with the Subversive Stitch exhibition in the 90s to her alter-ego Rosie Lugosi the Vampire Queen, cabaret chanteuse and mistress of ceremonies. (Rosie Garland, 2012)

While Bird’s multi-talent is delivered in the first person:

I started out as a gallery based artist in the 90s. I gave art up cos what I made was worthy and boring. It took me ten years to start my practice again when I hatched my alter-eggo—Bird la Bird. I favour the music hall tradition to gallery based performance art. I come from a queer femme perspective but my art isn’t just about being femme and it’s for everyone [...]. Bird la Bird is a Show-woman and Mama of Bird Club, a Queer Femme cabaret night



for 21st Century Marthas and Arthurs. Bird favours collaboration to create multimedia spectacles straddling stand-up comedy and performance art. (Bird la Bird, 2012)

Both artists collaborate with others and stand alone, rather than in a binary, which is significant considering how the femme was positioned alongside the butch, and because of femme now being considered a spectrum. Here, the “Mama of Bird Club” queers the maternal via her mother hen creation of supportive and mutually beneficial networks. Femme theorist Martin claims to be particularly interested in “the feminine, played straight” and the assumption “that when [femininity] is not camped or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring” (1996, 105), but Bird’s demonstration of the maternal, via a queer creation of family, can also help to destroy the notion that femininity—whether played straight or not—and the maternal are easy bedfellows, particularly with regard to straight temporality. This focus on queer family, a family without the direct blood lineage upon which heterosexuality so strictly focuses, recalls trans femme author and activist Kate Bornstein’s use of Auntie. Bornstein addresses herself as such with the intention of creating queer family and elders for all LGBTQ+ people, including those who have been rejected by their biological family. Because of recent changes to the law in many countries, same-sex families are becoming increasingly normalised, but queers like Bornstein and Bird create a much more inclusive community/friend-family structure.

Bird’s inspiration, a six foot two, winged circus performer named Fevvers from Angela Carter’s *Nights At The Circus* (1984), adds a touch of monstrosity to the maternal, much like Lugosi’s vampire, whose (sexualised) kiss/bite supposedly creates eternal life, unlike the mother who creates and births finite life. Their queer maternal is removed from traditional settings and favours the night over the daily routine of normative life schedules and straight temporality.<sup>18</sup> Although Bird frequently foregrounds the female reproductive cell of the egg linguistically via puns (e.g., “alter-eggo”) she is not performing as the downtrodden martyr, who was traditionally expected to place the needs of her husband and children above her own, but as queer femme maternal. Lugosi’s vampire highlights that unlike the traditional mother, the vampire can give eternal life alone without the need for another person’s reproductive cells and who, also unlike the heteronormative, heterosexual mother, exists outside of straight time, due to immortality coupled with the queer time and space of the night, which lies in opposition to the heteronormative schedule revolving around highly regulated family life. Manchester-based Lugosi is well known on both the LGBTQ+ and the fetish scenes, with these two areas of “other” sexuality frequently intersecting, while Bird has been instrumental in creating and organising London club nights embracing queer femininity and alternative expressions of sexuality and gender. Both Bird and Lugosi often perform in club settings. The Birdclub, co-created with Maria Rosa Young, took place in a London working men’s club and foregrounded the historical link between the femme, working-class bar culture, and a supposedly unknowing femininity.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the bind between these femme performances and the public, night-time setting point towards Halberstam’s club kids, living in rapid bursts long after others have gone to bed. That femmes can exist in a queer temporality is extraordinarily positive multi-fold as it is women who most suffer within straight temporality, not only as they become mothers/martyrs, but also with regard to the passing of time such as the “ticking” biological clock and the way women are considered to “lose” their looks while men are frequently described using terms such as “silver fox.”





### The Femme Archive: From NYC to the World

Bird and Lugosi's femininities simultaneously fight against depoliticisation and invisibility, onstage and off. Their performances can blur the lines of the bounded act/staged theatrical performance and the boundless act/gender performativity that Butler highlights (1993, 234) as they can happen anywhere and are neither confined to the stage, nor demarcated like a theatrical play. They may be planned or spontaneous, live or pre-recorded. This points us, once more, to a queer time and place. Many of Bird and Lugosi's live performances are recorded and freely available online, including on the artists' websites and YouTube, which help to remove obstacles associated with artistic and cultural events (e.g., a ticket fee, inability to attend due to location or fear of appropriating a certain (possibly middle-class+) space), thus sharing their "cultural capital" to help create a "social capital" of networks and queer community/family, rather than prioritising the "economic capital" (Bourdieu 1986) of profit for themselves. Indeed Bird uses such media to further shatter binaries, for she engages with high culture and academic theory, but makes this accessible in spaces and places where it would not normally be expected. This online archive of the femme, therefore, continues a tradition of visibility, accessibility, and inclusivity that Nestle created in the founding of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. While the time period meant that access to Nestle's original archive was dependent upon being in a certain city (NYC) at a certain time, the ability to access information on the internet of today allows a connectivity of femmes across time and place.<sup>20</sup>

Bird and Lugosi's videos, starring and created by femmes, offer a key interjection into femme representation, for the feminine "lesbian" is most frequently visually represented in pornography aimed at the heterosexual market: two women have sex in front of a male actor, for his and the viewer's pleasure, before he physically interrupts the scene to penetrate both actresses and simultaneously reinstate his power and hetero-patriarchal norms. Bird's agenda of highlighting femme visibility in film was emphasised via her work for London's 21<sup>st</sup> Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (since renamed BFI Flare), in 2007, for which she co-created a femme programme and performed at the screening of short film, *Fem* (Campbell X 2007), an audio-visual love note to femmes, in which she features. After the pornographic "femme," the second most frequent cultural representation of the femme is in the form of the vampire, a trend that has been seen in numerous movies including *The Hunger* (Scott 1983) and slightly less well-known films including *We Are the Night* (Gansel 2010), which explores lesbian separatist ideas promoted by Valerie Solanas and is just one of a very long line of lesbian vampire stories, such as *Vampyros Lesbos* (Franco 1971), a West German-Spanish horror film made in Turkey, and Belgian film, *Daughters of Darkness* (Kümel 1971), adapted from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871-1872).<sup>21</sup> As with the aforementioned pornography, the vampire is often sexualised and the creature, just like the femme, may "pass" (the vampire as human and the femme as heterosexual). Vampire Queen Rosie Lugosi demonstrates a will to pass as neither, while nodding to both vampirism and cinema history, even from the trend of the screened lesbian vampire as her name nods to Bela Lugosi (Béla Ferenc Dezsó Blaskó), the Hungarian-American actor who portrayed the title figure in Tod Browning and Karl Freund's 1931 horror film, *Dracula*.

During second-wave feminism, film theorist Laura Mulvey argued that woman in mainstream narrative cinema is set up as a spectacle of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975). Indeed femininity, both on and off screen, may offer to-be-looked-at-ness, but choosing to be a spectacle and playing with the binary of passivity and activity is distinct from the imposition of femininity. Both Lugosi and Bird actively set themselves up as spectacles, although the audience



interactivity encompassed in their performance and that they conceive of and write their own material makes them both *auteur* and star of their shows, blurring the traditional male-female, subject-object binary. Furthermore, that these shows take place on stage is significant as the stage is a unique place, not only of the supposedly “bounded act” of performance, but because it is traditionally one of the few public spaces (recalling the public-private binary) in which women could both work and draw attention to themselves. Indeed, the stage often incorporates a *site* and a *sight* of gender crossing, such as women playing men’s or “trouser” roles (Garber 1992, 255) and vice versa, for example, men starring as the pantomime dame, who is often ridiculed because femininity is wrongly seen as weak (again, going back to the binary), and something in which those assigned male at birth should not want to indulge. This also points to the often horrific treatment of trans women and non-binary people incorporating aspects of femininity. The stage has been employed in film, too, in order to show a different kind of gender and sexuality, such as Marlene Dietrich’s infamous tuxedo and top-hat-wearing characters, the boisterous femme fatale Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (von Sternberg 1930a) and the gender-bending Amy, who shares a kiss with a woman during her cabaret performance in *Morocco* (von Sternberg 1930b).<sup>22</sup> The stage is, therefore, a queer place that allows for various crossings and transgressions, although it must be noted that Bird and Lugosi’s performances are queerer than this as they are not simply acts bound to the stage.

#### Femme Mouths: Active, Monstrous, Powerful

Garland does not just command to be looked at, but also demonstrates a strong power over language during her shows, reinforced by her work offstage, such as her debut novel, *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013), as well as short stories and anthologised poems.<sup>23</sup> This manipulation of language is highlighted onstage using the vampire mouth, which kisses/bites to convert humans into vampires and, in the case of lesbian vampire tales, to queer—used here as a verb—heterosexuals. Lugosi is not only a femme, but a femme fatale and the vampire mouth is described as:

giving the lie to the easy separation of the masculine and the feminine. Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses [...] the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive. With its soft flesh barred by hard bone, its red crossed by white, this mouth compels opposites and contrasts into a frightening unity. (Craft 1984, 109)

Homing in further on the vampire mouth, especially that of the queer female vampire, it is significant to note that fangs, Lugosi’s artificial addition to her body, can penetrate and thus act as a lesbian phallus, made possible by fetishism. This is the process of substitution through which other body parts or things stand in for the phallus as the “original” signifier of lesbian desire and, as Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter*, “the displaceability of the phallus, its capacity to symbolise in relation to other body parts or other body-like things, opens the way for the lesbian phallus, an otherwise contradictory formulation” (1993, 84). The fetish of Lugosi’s lesbian phallus is further highlighted via her fetishwear costumes, while the prosthetic aspect of her fangs nods to her power over language, a prosthetic range of signs used to represent signifieds, both objects and abstract ideas. Garland writes and performs her own poetry, but also adapts the lyrics of familiar songs, such as Otis Redding’s 1965 *Respect*,



famously covered by Aretha Franklin in 1967, in which Lugosi changes the lyrics and r-e-s-p-e-c-t to v-a-m-p-i-r-e, thus combining pastiche, parody, collage, and quotation, aesthetic and linguistic, in her shows. The femme mouth is often considered a passive mouth, for the butch-femme communities outlined at the start of this article expected femmes to be sexually passive to their active butches, which has left a legacy of femmes often being considered “pillow princesses” who do not perform oral sex or penetrate. The active, piercing mouth of the vampire femme rubbishes this notion, compounded by the loud, public mouth of the stage performer, who orally expresses her power.

Bird employs such techniques, too, although frequently in a more politically overt manner and amplified thanks to her Liverpoolian accent. This is significant considering her inspiration is a non-human creature, a bird/woman, for subjectivity is dependent upon the linguistic anchor and ability to speak. While “Holding Court,” Bird claimed to “put the fun back into feminism and the camp back in to communism” and this blend of political activism and entertainment is routed through femininity, such as the creation of a Femme Pride Bird Float: “Femme Invisibility: So Last Year!” for London Pride in 2007, to foreground queer femininities at an event which started as a protest, but has transitioned into one of entertainment and commercialism. While Lugosi is inspired by vampirism and offers filmic intertextuality, Bird also draws on monstrosity to highlight femme visibility with her link to Fevvers, citing literature. Carter’s novel plays with a fairytale style to deliver a hazy concept of time, which, again, ties to a queer temporality, as well as a consideration of visibility and a comment on class. Like Lugosi and Bird, Fevvers exhibits herself and invites the gaze, with the repetition of “look at me!” (2012, 13).<sup>24</sup> Beauty and supposed monstrosity relate to the hetero-patriarchal idea of doing femininity right or wrong, of passing or failing, which is usually inverted in straight and queer venues, for female masculinity has often been permitted in gay and lesbian venues without question, while the femme had to justify and prove herself to gain entry. Indeed it is for this reason Bird created the Femme Police (2009) to subject non-femmes to the type of policing feminine women have often been the victim of at gay events, while mocking that age-old problem of not looking queer *enough* and the idea that sexuality can be read on the body. “Gay Shame... Goes Girly,” hosted at Brixton Academy as a creative rebellion against mainstream pride events and to offer satire on the commercialisation of the LGBTQ+ community, featured Bird, dressed as a highly-stylised police woman, “arresting” non-feminine attendees.<sup>25</sup>

The femme body and politics combine in Bird’s show, *People’s Pussy*, which queers and mocks Conservative politics. The work was influenced by the Communist Manifesto and Busby Berkeley, as reflected in Comrade Birdski’s outfit: a red jacket with oversized gold epaulettes, simultaneously recalling military and majorette, bookended by a red headdress and red knee high socks. Birdski tears off a pair of white bloomers to appear (thanks to flesh-coloured hosiery) nude except for a communist red star covering her pubic area. Bird’s queer/ed, politicised genitalia reflects her monologue attacking the use of “cunt” as an insult. Her prime example is “fucking tory cunts,” to which she responds, “you can say tory cunt, but leave my cunt out of it because my cunt is a communist! [...] entry into my cunt is purely based on merit,” as she gestures towards her brain, “not credit,” linguistically foregrounding politics and class status, before ridiculing then Mayor of London Boris Johnson for getting stuck on a zip wire when celebrating Team Great Britain’s first gold medal in the 2012 Olympic Games. Bird declares that her cunt would have severed the line with her “razor-sharp vagina dentata,” recalling another life-giving hole that penetrates, just like Lugosi’s mouth. *People’s Pussy* closes with Birdski’s cunt playing *The Internationale*. Like the vampire, fictional, surreal, and part of culture rather



than any social or political reality, Marxist Bird hints at an *other* time and an *other* place with her queered femininity, sexuality, and politics, simultaneously destroying the notion that the femme is unknowing and apolitical. In the pared-down (by Bird's standards) performance at the Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF), of which I am Chair and to which I invited Bird in 2015 as part of my agenda of making both the femme and working-class subjects more visible and included in queer spaces, Birdski asked audience members to approach the stage and have a look at her "cunt." This recalls fellow femme performance artist Annie Sprinkle's "Public Cervix Announcement" (1992), during which she told audience members to come to the stage and examine her cervix, thus allowing Bird to create a link to other femme performance and contributing to the femme spectrum.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, David Cameron was revealed to be pictured on Bird's cunt when audience members approached the stage, which returns us, once more, to a queer maternal and a queer temporality: the birthing of a Conservative prime minister, close in age to Bird, from a femme vagina at a queer public event.<sup>27</sup>

#### Femme Presents: Futures and Pasts

So, a femme may incorporate a queerness in the presentation of femininity, queer desire in the feminine subject, a queer temporality rather than a normative life schedule, all of these, or none. The femme, a varied and ever-changing identity, even within a single subject, exceeds a stable definition, which is positive considering how medical discourse has repeatedly attempted to categorise, label, and define in order to exclude or "cure" those with a non-normative gender and/or sexuality. Femmes such as Lugosi and Bird play with the concept of passing to offer a blurring of performance and performativity; a femininity sometimes considered extreme, artificial, and monstrous, allowing their visibility and voices to politicise and prioritise the femme. They simultaneously create a femme maternal through queer incarnations of family, including the femme past (present, and future) of the archive, which also helps to queer time and place, showing that even when the femme appears to be "played straight," the subject is so much more. This series of snapshots from the femme spectrum aims to provide an overview of identities and networks, mapping some of the field, while leaving gaps and spaces in which other self-defined femmes may wish to insert themselves.<sup>28</sup> This spectrum ensures that there is an ever-growing space that can embrace a femininity that rejects and actively works against elements of cisheteropatriarchy.

#### Notes

1. The femme is somewhat of a site of linguistic absence in many languages, so the French term is borrowed. In contrast, there are numerous words for the butch across a broad range of languages and this linguistic inequality compounds femme invisibility. I use femme, which can be an adjective or a noun, over "lipstick lesbian" as the latter reduces femininity to a single signifier.
2. Here I employ the female pronoun, although the butch-femme binary has expanded to a spectrum of identities; indeed those who identify as femme include male femmes and genderqueer femmes. For more information on the sexologists and history, see Dawson (2018).



3. This “low” culture stands as a refreshing change to the “high culture” and representation of privileged lesbians in texts such as *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall 1928).
4. Such gendering was considered to be old fashioned and typical of the uneducated working-class and/or people of colour (Martin and Lyon 1972; Jeffreys 1993) and the most notable group rallying against this was the Daughters of Bilitis in the United States.
5. For further information, see Carole Vance (1984). This is not to say that the butch did not also suffer, but both the direction of this article and the word limit prevent an adequate analysis of the butch subject position.
6. See Michel Foucault (1978) for an in-depth look at how the homosexual was categorised and medicalised.
7. For an exploration of passing in relation to LGBTQ+ identities and “class,” see Dawson (2015b).
8. Lisa Walker considers the construction of identities through the trope of visibility, primarily in relation to race, arguing that privileging visibility has become a tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics, “in which participants often symbolise their demands for social justice by celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for discrimination” (1993, 868). Walker argues that theorists examine the performance of visible differences as the locus of political agency because of its potential to deconstruct foundational categories of identity such as race, gender, and desire, but goes on to problematise the privileging of visibility, because “subjects who can ‘pass’ exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity, they tend to be regarded as peripheral to the understanding of marginalization” (1993, 868).
9. For further discussion of the passing femme in relation to infiltration and camouflage, see Dawson (2012).
10. In this context I am using her and sometimes use she, but it is important to recognise that pronoun use depends upon the individual, with many femmes identifying as he or they, and others coining their own pronouns.
11. Keynotes were delivered by authors and activists, Jewelle Gomez, Hanne Blank, and Amber Hollibaugh, who had taken part in the Sex Wars debate at the aforementioned Barnard Conference.
12. The 2012 Femme Conference homepage claims it “seek(s) to explore, discuss, dissect, and support Queer Femme as a transgressive, gender-queer, stand-alone, and empowered identity and provide a space for organising and activism within Queer communities” (femme2012.com) and the lack of hierarchy is encouraged as the event is organised by a rotating collective of peers. There has since been three further Femme Conferences: Chicago in 2008, with keynotes Dorothy Allison, Julia Serrano, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Veronica Combs aka Vixen Noir; Oakland in 2010 featuring Kate Bornstein and Moki Macias and, most recently, Baltimore in 2012 with Nomy Lamm and UK-based filmmaker, Pratibha Parmar offering keynotes.



13. Black trans Femme artist, Travis Alabanza, for example, is helping to change and shape how femme is seen. The way that Alabanza is subject to transphobic abuse in public also unfortunately makes clear that not passing leads to a great deal of hate crime and danger.
14. Women have frequently been disparaged for buying clothes and cosmetics, despite pressure to be feminine, and have also traditionally undertaken food shopping as part of the domestic chores of the private sphere of the home. Despite this, the “pink pound,” that is gay spending power, is frequently tied to men as, whether straight or gay, the gender pay gap means they typically earn more than women. In relation to politics, women were dismissed as less intellectual than men in the second position of the logic-emotion binary and had to fight for the right to vote.
15. “Wives And Girlfriends” of footballers frequently foreground a highly-stylised working-class aesthetic and are often mocked because of this.
16. Although held in a theatre, the Italian event comprised academic papers during the day with theatre shows and art displays on an evening. It was not affiliated with the U.S. conferences.
17. My academic background is firmly in the Arts (French and German Studies) and my research analyses the representation of the femme in literature, theatre, archives, and—primarily—film, so while I am qualified to speak on the femme subject, I do not come from the perspective of an anthropologist, ethnographer, sociologist or suchlike, making these lay observations.
18. Lee Edelman’s monograph *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) was written prior to so many countries legalising same-sex marriage and variations of adoption, and uses the queer relationship to AIDS and (non-)reproduction to argue that this link to premature death and lack of procreation limits the homosexual future. Edelman discusses the “Child as the emblem of futurity’s value” (2004, 4) and heteronormativity’s focus on the investment in, and sacrifices for, this future, controversially claiming we should, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorised; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws, both with capital ls and small; fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (2004, 29).
19. As well as The Birdclub, Bird has been involved with alternative nights at Club Wotever and Duckie.
20. For more on the lesbian archive, including the repositories of the Lesbian Herstory Archive (NYC) and Spinnboden (Berlin) and lesbian film as archive, see Dawson (2018).
21. For more information about the lesbian vampire and the influence of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, see Dawson (2010) and for an overview of the lesbian vampire trend within queer European cinema in the United States and Europe, see Dawson (2015a).





22. The Weimar period delivered not only *The Blue Angel*, but also *Girls in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), in which the protagonist, a boarding school girl still in costume from a trouser role as the lead in Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos* (1787), waits until she is drunk before taking to the stage once again to declare her love for her female teacher.
23. Garland's poetry draws from fairy tales, religion, and goddesses, queering and recuperating iconic images of femininity.
24. Bird La Bird's performance art includes *Opus*, 2011; *People's Pussy*, 2011; *Cockney Venus - Femuseum*, 2011; *There's an Elephant in the Room*, 2009; *Rank*, 2009; *Holding Court - A period drama*, 2009; *Up Your Art with the Society for Cutting up Couples*, 2009; *You'll feel the Back of My Hand in a Minute*, 2009; and *High Femme Mass*, 2009, while she has created and performed group pieces including *The Daughter*, 2011 and *The Fabric of Butch Femme*, 2010.
25. Also performing as part of *Gay Shame Goes Girly* was American-born femme performance artist and scholar, Lois Weaver, co-creator of the WOW Café Theatre space for women, queers, and trans people in New York City's East Village and—with Peggy Shaw, narrator of Campbell X's aforementioned *Fem*, which Weaver starred in—Split Britches theatre company, which has focused on butch and femme performance, nodding to a network of queer femme art.
26. See Dawson and Treut (2014) for more on Annie Sprinkle's work.
27. Although I was lucky enough to see *People's Pussy* live at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow as part of SQIFF, the earlier version I refer to here is currently easily accessible for free on YouTube (see Bird 2012). Elements of this performance are included in my research-based documentary, *Femmes on Film*, about femme reality and representation, past and present. For more on this performance and SQIFF, see Dawson and Loist (2018).
28. Indeed femme is gaining ground: from the femme conferences in the United States to academic writings on femme identity and even events such as *Fabulous Femmes at Glasgow Women's Library*, which I hosted as part of the SQIFF, to create a space for femmes to speak about the significance of their identity. Femme is also moving beyond those with a queer sexuality. At the aforementioned Italian Fem conference, U.S. female to female drag queen, Fauxnique simultaneously declared her heterosexuality and her femme status, while here in the United Kingdom, I have worked as academic consultant to performance artist Jenny Wilson, another heterosexual, cis "female to female" drag queen, who is interested in what femme identity can do to queer her femininity, with the aim of proliferating the notion in her own art, thus continually expanding the femme spectrum. So, in times when many gay and bisexual subjects and their lifestyles are being normalised via the aforementioned laws and rights relating to family in several Western countries, now straight, cis women are claiming an identity traditionally tied to lesbianism: femme, and that is rather queer.



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