

**“YOU CAN ONLY DENY ME FOR SO LONG BY SAYING THAT I DON’T EXIST”:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF RACIALIZED FEMMEPHOBIA AND FEMME
INVISIBILITY**

by:

Céline Françoise Donelle, B.A.

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Carleton University

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Abstract

This is a research project exploring the intersections of femme subjectivity, femmephobia, and race and racism. Specifically, I critique an essentialized understanding of femmephobia which centralizes ‘unmarked’ white femme bodies, and thus silences the experiences of queer racialized femmes. By way of semi-structured interviews with ten queer racialized femmes and an exploration of corporate media representations of racialized queer femmes, this thesis examines how discussions of race and racism are integral to discussions surrounding femmephobia and femme invisibility. I argue both that corporate media productions increase invisibility and erasure for femmes but also how this invisibility and erasure has shaped the experiences of racialized queer femmes in particular.

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Dedication

To all the femmes who have moved mountains.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

they will say that femininity is not powerful.

but i have stopped traffic simply by going outside. i have suspended time. i have made everyone watch. i have shed every category, word, and lie. i have etched myself so deep inside, they will never forget me.

i have found a way to live forever.

they will say femininity is not powerful.

so i will put on my dress.

so i will go outside.

so i will prove them wrong.

—Alok Vaid-Menon, *They Will Say*

My interest in femme invisibility and femmephobia started years ago when I first came out. I have always considered myself a feminine person and as far back as I can remember I have always been drawn to femininity. I saw femininity as simultaneously strong, resilient, soft, and magical. Growing up in a heteropatriarchal Acadian culture, I internalized many of the messages told to me, specifically that being assigned female at birth and being feminine meant I was cisgender and heterosexual and that being assigned female at birth and being attracted to men *definitely* meant that I was heterosexual. There were few sources telling me that it was okay to be feminine, Acadian, and queer. I navigated my teen years in this way, convincing myself that I was a cisgender straight girl. After all, society had convinced me that there was only one way to be a queer girl—butch—and that was always something I knew I was not. I came out¹

¹ I understand my experience of coming out as the moments where I told my parents and friends that I was queer. I want to acknowledge that peoples “out status” is not a perfect binary that can be answered in a yes or no question, even for myself. Echoing the words of Tumblr user

and was met with uncertainty. My mother told me she was confused because I never played sports and really liked makeup and skin care. Similar to the time a group of butch queer girls asked me why I knew so much about *The L Word* for a ‘straight’ girl. For years I attempted to ‘butch’ it up, desperately trying to combat this deep sense of invisibility I felt navigating both queer and hetero spaces. It was not until much later in my undergraduate degree that I met other queer femmes and this changed everything. Some femmes I met were girly with freshly manicured fingernails and a face full of makeup. Others were in bands and played sports. I met femmes who loved other femmes, something that I was told was impossible. I often think of this tweet by user @jpbrammer (2017): “remember what it felt like when you saw a queer person owning it, and it gave you permission to be yourself? You’re that person to someone”, and all the queer femmes I have met throughout my life rush through my mind.

I was excited to undertake this project in my graduate studies, knowing fully once I walked through those doors that I wanted to explore femme invisibility and femmephobia. The more queer femmes I met, the more I realized that we all had different experiences navigating femme invisibility and femmephobia. This work was inspired by conversations between my partner and I. She is a brown queer femme and I’m a white non-binary queer femme. Although we both embrace femininity and femme subjectivity, we navigate the world and experience femmephobia and femme invisibility in very different ways. I was aware of the multiplicity of femme through these experiences and conversations—one that echoes Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker’s (2002) conceptualization of femme as informed by the “complexities of marked bodies” (p.5). There was very little literature on racialized femmes’ experiences of

homogabi (2017), “our closets can be temporary, transient, or something that we only return to from time to time [...] but it’s important for cis/straight people to understand that The Closet is not a leap from people not knowing your identity to everyone knowing. Someone can be simultaneously Out and in The Closet at the same time, and most people are”.

femmephobia and invisibility, fat femmes' experiences of femmephobia and invisibility, poor femmes experiences of femmephobia and femme invisibility (let alone a fat, poor, racialized femmes' experiences navigating femme invisibility and femmephobia). I wanted to undertake a project that did not reify femmes that exist and navigate these experiences as white, wealthy, thin, cisgender, lesbians. This project aims to disrupt and deconstruct what we think of when we hear the term 'femme' and who fits into this category. It is my belief that to further understand how femme invisibility and femmephobia operate, we must account for how racialized femmes experience this violence, prioritizing those voices that have often been erased from the discourse on femme subjectivity.

I begin with a brief examination of the role that femmes have played within queer communities and movements. Within a North American context, femme has been defined in literature as “an identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as femininity that is embodied by those whose femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned” (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, p.101). For the purpose of my project, I want to build on this definition and offer an understanding of femme that is transgressive, queer, and liminal—a subjectivity that asks us to push against rigid boundaries of identity and as something that cannot be entirely defined. My understanding of femme subjectivity echoes poet Brandon Wint's (2015) conceptualization of queer: “Not queer like gay. Queer like, escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like...and pursue it”.

Throughout my project, I problematize femme and butch subjectivities that focus solely on white cisgender lesbian-identified women. Although some femmes are lesbians, not all

femmes are. Femmes can be queer, bisexual, or pansexual. Femme also transcends rigid gender binaries and can identify along the gender spectrum. As a result, femmes play complex roles in various communities reinforcing their seemingly enigmatic presence. The literature on this topic continues to ignore the ways in which femmephobia and femme invisibility is a racialized experience for queer femmes of colour. Though understandings of femmes have since shifted to include a multiplicity of femme subjectivities, which intersect with various other categories of identities (Nestle, 1993; Harris & Crocker, 1997; Brushwood and Camilleri, 2002), there remains work to be done regarding specifically the intersection of queer femininities and race and racism. This thesis works to fill that gap by examining racialized queer femmes' experiences of femmephobia and femme invisibility. Through the process of ten in-depth interviews with femmes in two Canadian cities, this study aims to examine how, for racialized queer femmes, femmephobia and femme invisibility is racialized and how media representations play a large role in upholding this invisibility and erasure. My study is two-fold: I am interested in both understanding how corporate media has increased invisibility and erasure in large ways for femmes but also how this invisibility and erasure has shaped the experiences of racialized queer femmes in particular. The power of representation, that is, the moment a person or group of people witness an embodied representation of themselves in cultural venues, like art, music, or film, is experienced as a moment of validation and legitimacy. By showing the relationship between the representations of femmes in corporate media and discussing some of these representations with my narrators, I show the power these ideals and stereotypes have in reinforcing marginality especially for racialized queer femmes.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explains how I conceptualize femme within my work and how historically the term 'femme' has had a multiplicity of

meanings. Section two includes a discussion on methodology, especially my use of qualitative interviews to explore the intersections of queer femininities and race and racism. I explain some of the challenges and problems I encountered during this process and the gaps they produced in the following analysis, particularly in Chapter three. In section three, I situate myself within my research—as a white non-binary Acadian settler and femme—forgoing this work. Here, I include discussions of positionality and situated knowledge, as well as outlining the debates existing within literature dealing with insider/outsider status for researchers. Finally, I offer a brief summary of the thesis chapters to come.

Contextualizing Femme Within my Work

Within a North American context, butch subjects were situated as the true and authentic lesbian, a discourse that operated to erase femme subjectivities in the past and in the present. Often forgotten is how the association between bisexuality and femme subjectivity played a role in this validation/erasure process. I briefly explore the role bisexuality plays in this process by offering a short history of bisexuality and its association with femme subjectivity. By contextualizing the butch/femme dichotomy and bisexuality, this section examines the idea of femme in North American historical perspectives.

Radclyffe Hall's (1928) novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, popularized sexology's concept of the sexual invert². The novel was highly controversial as it played a role in promoting images of

² According to Joan Nestle, the feminine lesbian became a subject in sexology in 1909, where she is described as “an effeminate tribadist” who is “often preoccupied with personal beauty and is somewhat narcissistic” (Nestle, p.143). Whereas the butch was first described as a “sexual invert” meaning “a man trapped inside a woman's body” (Nestle, p.143). Based on inversion theory forwarded by sexologist Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, gay men and lesbians were “inverts”— “people who were physically male or female, but internally the ‘opposite sex’” (Eisner, 2013, p.14). So, inversion theory posits that lesbians and gay men were simply “heterosexual people born in the wrong bodies” (Eisner, 2013, p.14). The femme was characterized as “[...] a little fool without any realization of the warped sexuality

lesbians as ‘man-ish’, conflating sexuality and gender identity as did early sexology literature. Many lesbian authors, such as Jane Rule (1975), outlined the absurdity of *The Well of Loneliness*’ status as the “bible” of lesbian literature, arguing that Hall “worshipped the very institutions that oppressed her, the Church and its patriarchy” (Rule, p.61). With the concept of the sexual invert being catapulted into more mainstream venues, via *The Well of Loneliness*’ popularity, the understanding of butch subjects as true lesbians quickly took hold.

By the 1920s, a (white) working-class lesbian subculture, in which butch and femme roles were clearly pronounced, emerged in big cities in North America (Faderman, 1991). There is evidence to show that ‘femme’, or ‘fem’, and ‘butch’ were documented officially as terms as early as the 1930s³ (Zimmerman, 2000). Femme and butch communities were formed by the 1940s and 1950, offering a place for social-sexual relationships to flourish (Kennedy & Davis, 2014). In their work, *Boots of Leather Slippers of Gold*, Kennedy and Davis (2014) interviewed lesbians who actively participated in these communities. These historians found that the narrators considered butches as the “true lesbian” (Kennedy & Davis, p.143), exemplifying how discourses privileging butch subjects as the true lesbian were still prominent several decades after both early sexology writings and the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*.

As theories of inversion became a way to pathologize butch subjectivity, the construction of butches as the true lesbian was also solidified through associations of femmes as bisexual. Bisexuality, as a socio-medical term and as a concept, emerged around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Researchers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Henry Havelock, and Magnus Hirschfeld considered bisexuality “either a physical or psychological

which is prompting her actions” (Nestle, 1992, p.143).

³It should be noted that there is no exact date in which these terms became significant markers of subjectivities within lesbian communities.

condition, having traits of what was once thought of as ‘both sexes’” (Eisner, 2013, p.14). Following inversion theories, bisexuality was used to describe what we now call intersexuality (Eisner, 2013, p.15). Bisexual persons were seen as psychologically intersex. Sigmund Freud was the first to use the word bisexuality within discussions of desire. According to Freud, everyone is born bisexual and is the ground from which ‘healthy’ heterosexuality or ‘pathological’ homosexuality emerged. Many myths of bisexuality, such as bisexuality as a “phase” or an “unfinished process” can be linked to Freud’s early definitions of bisexuality (Eisner, 2013, p.16). Femmes were pathologized as “more apt to be bisexual and also apt to respond favourably to treatment⁴” by sexologists, forwarding that femmes and bisexual persons are ‘confused’ and with the proper ‘guidance’ and ‘treatment’ can become heterosexual and ‘cured’ (Nestle, 1992, p.143). Therefore, femme erasure was both informed by depictions of the butch lesbian as the ‘true, authentic lesbian’, as well as the pervasive discourse of the femme as bisexual—both of which operated to forward ideas of femmes, and bisexuals, as ‘inauthentic’ queer women.

Bar culture became of significant importance for working class butch and femmes and their communities (Chenier, 2004). Dress code and butch/femme identity formation were especially linked. The postwar period brought about a social acceptance for women to wear pants, allowing butches to wear pants out on the weekend. This came to be known as the distinctive dress code for butches at the time (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). While butches were breaking gender norms by adopting a masculine style, femmes took their style inspiration from

⁴ Conversion therapy was, and is still seen by some, as a way of ‘curing’ homosexuality whereby clinicians attempt to alter patients’ sexual orientation (Zucker, 2003). This is done through the administration of electric shocks or nausea-inducing drugs while the clinician simultaneously presents homoerotic stimuli (Haldeman, 1991, 1994, 2002). Conversion therapy has also been related to religiosity, as research has consistently demonstrated that certain religious orientations are predictive of heterosexist attitudes (Tozer & Hayes, 2004).

the mainstream, meaning that a femme subjectivity would continue to be anchored in ‘traditional’ North American feminine codes that included pumps, dresses, and wearing make-up. Strict adherence to these dress codes was part of not just social interactions between butch and femmes, but they also played a role in how these interactions shaped sexual and cultural behaviours. For example, femmes garnered a considerable amount of respect by butches and were often admired (Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003). The bar scene was heavily constructed through class location and was often perceived as ‘tough’. Due to butch-femme communities and couples being represented as white and working class in much of the literature, there have been few historical analyses written on racialized femme-butch communities. There was a distinct division between ‘lesbian bars’ and ‘black bars’ in North America in the 1940s and 1950s and this custom remained long after segregation was abolished (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). House parties became prominent amongst black lesbians, and news reporting on violence during house parties was often the only way queer black women would come into the historical record (Woolner, 2014). Racial bias in recording lesbian history contributes to the prominent stereotype of the ‘criminal black lesbian’ (Woolner, 2014). Racialized queer women are often erased from narratives of lesbian organizing, especially regarding butch-femme communities. As Amy Hoffman (2014) outlines, discussing her involvement and experiences in the lesbian community in late 1970s Boston, “The alternative cultural institutions of the time, the bookstores and the performances and meeting places that I found so affirming and nurturing, were organized around the needs of young women like me: white, able-bodied, educated, and middle class” (p.138). Although butch-femme communities and roles were clearly pronounced during the 1940s and 1950s, the ‘history’ of these communities is often whitewashed—erasing the resilience and organizing of racialized queer femmes at this time.

Methodological Considerations

In order to illustrate the complexities of femmephobia and femme invisibility for racialized queer femmes, I used semi-structured, in depth interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a centering of racialized queer femmes' stories and their experiences to be privileged. My interview guide included some pre-determined questions, along with various open-ended questions that allowed the space to ask follow up questions and encourage dialogue (see appendix A for my questionnaire template). In this thesis, I do not intend to generalize the findings of this study. Following Corrine Glesne (1999), "the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize to populations, but to create in-depth understanding to inform future research" (p.43). My hope for this research is that it will further conversations surrounding femme subjectivity and inspire additional research on the topic.

Feminist researcher Sandra Harding (1986) outlines three forms of interview data collection that help inform feminist researchers' understandings of the social reality of their participants' lives. The first form of data collection that Harding outlines is listening to the participant. The second form pertains to observing participant behaviour. This form encourages researchers to be attentive to their participants' body language and other non-verbal cues. The third form is to examine the data collected (Harding, 1986). Qualitative interviews encourage participant testimonies and create a space where narrators' can share lived experiences. More so, interviewing as a research method allows narrators to represent themselves through the recounting of stories and experiences (Gurney, 1985; Herod, 1993; Schoenberger, 1992). Given the methodological gap in existing literature regarding the intersection between femmephobia, femme invisibility, and racism, interviewing racialized queer femmes allows them to share their own stories and views about their experiences. Using semi-structured in depth interviews allows

researchers to explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of the participants. However, using in-depth interviews presents distinct challenges such as ensuring emotional and physical safety for the narrators. Researchers using in-depth interviews to explore sensitive topics need to examine how their questions affect the answers provided. Susan Chase (2007) argues that the questions researchers ask while doing in-depth interviews influences the quality of data that is collected. I decided to use in-depth interviews for my work as it allows researchers to have flexibility in how questions are asked and to ensure that the participant's feelings, experiences, and thoughts are encouraged and validated. Within my own work, interview questions were developed to ensure that the interview accounted for participants' experiences and feelings. Moreover, in depth interviews allows researchers to place the participants' experiences at the forefront of their work, placing the narrators as the main contributors of knowledge on the topic, in this case racialized queer femme experiences.

Although my work is primarily concerned with representations of racialized queer femmes through analyses of corporate media productions, the interviews conducted and the themes I gathered from my narrators are at the heart of my analysis of corporate media. While questions pertaining to corporate media and invisibility were asked during the interview process, much of how I frame the analysis of the television series and characters explored in this thesis is informed by my narrators' responses to how they are impacted by representations. My project explores the ways that corporate media representations perpetuate and reproduce violent racist and femmephobic tropes and how this influences the realities of racialized queer femmes thus it was important for me to both turn to analyses of corporate media representations interviews.

The stories and experiences shared throughout the interviews conducted represent what is commonly known as "situated knowledge". Coined by Donna Harraway (1991) and furthered by

Sandra Harding (1991), situated knowledge refers to the knowledge persons possess as a result of their own positionality and experiences. Positionality is informed by a variety of factors such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, and so forth, and argues that marginalized persons have access to a nuanced understanding of oppression in comparison to dominant groups (Hesse-Biber, 2012). The positionality of the research participants informs the research process, and my own positionality influenced how I interacted with the participants. As Duncan (1996) notes, feminist and queer methodology acknowledges that there is no such thing as ‘objectivity’ within the research process, but rather that notions of objectivity cannot be separated from greater structural systems of oppression. More so, I approached this project keeping in mind the words of Jamie Heckert (2010): “[...] my experience of research, however, cannot be fitted neatly into separate boxes with borders between theory and data, storytelling and practice, it has been rhizomic, anarchic, queer” (p.42). I am a white Acadian settler, who also identifies as a non-binary queer femme. Although I have experienced violence as a result of my transness, queerness, and class location, I do acknowledge that I navigate the world with an immense privilege due to my whiteness. I have benefited from settler-colonialism, and continue to do so each day, and my position as a white person does have implications within my work. As an insider and outsider to my research project, my positionality creates further complexities as a result of interviewing persons who I do not share similar positionalities.

During the preliminary stages of my research, I had concerns about being a white scholar trying to interview racialized femmes. I questioned whether people would want to talk to me given the historical context by which white scholars have violently ‘studied’ racialized persons. There are several issues to unpack regarding researchers who occupy different positions than the narrators during the interview process. Often, researchers who are considered “insiders” to the

group they are interviewing share similar experiences and knowledge to their narrators (Ardendell, 1997) and may be more likely to obtain more in depth knowledge from their participants (Buford May, 2014). Outsider status relates to whether a narrator trusts the researcher, who is inevitably introducing a power dynamic between the interview and narrator, as well whether the actions of the interviewer/outsider leaves the participants feeling exploited. Within the context of my research, I situate myself as both an insider as a non-binary femme and as an outsider as a white settler. Although I occupy a nuanced position as both an insider and outsider, I acknowledge that my experiences of femmephobia and femme invisibility as a white non-binary femme are separate from those of racialized queer femmes. In no way am I asserting that I can fully understand the violence experienced by the narrators who participated in this study.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through several different methods. I initially intended to recruit participants using posters at various LGBTQ+ friendly businesses in Ottawa. However, this did not garner any responses. Alternatively, I posted a call for participants through social media, specifically, Facebook. I used my Facebook page to post my second call for participants, which was shared by friends on their personal Facebook page as well as shared by friends to LGBTQ+ Facebook pages based in Montreal. In addition, my long-term partner—who is a racialized queer femme—posted my call for participants on her Facebook page. This also bolstered my ‘legitimacy’ within racialized queer femme communities. My partner’s position as an insider allowed many of my participants who knew of me, and my research, to ‘trust’ me as a white person undertaking this project. Many potential participants declined being a part of this

research project because I am white, which I fully understood given the immense racial violence forwarded by white persons, especially white academics.

Participants for this study were selected based on the following criteria. First, the participants had to self-identify as a queer femme. No gender criteria was applied to the participants which allowed for a variety of femmes across the gender spectrum. Further participants had to identify as racialized persons 18 years old or older. Each narrator provided individual consent to be a part of the research study and were given a deadline of five months to withdraw from the study. All participants consented to having their interviews audio recorded. The participants selected for the study were live in two Canadian cities. Interviews were conducted in person when possible. One interview was conducted through Skype. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain anonymity unless the participants asked otherwise. Nine of the narrators utilized pseudonyms while one narrator, Mars, opted to use their name. All participants were given a small compensation of ten dollars to participate in the project. Participants received either a ten-dollar gift certificate at a popular local store or ten-dollar gift certificate as a local drugstore. One participant declined the gift certificate seeing as she was residing overseas at the time of the interview. I was directed to give the gift certificate to “someone in need” instead (Sarah, personal communication, September 12, 2016), which I did. I personally transcribed all the interviews to ensure participant confidentiality, while also listening for common themes that arose from the interviews. Every precaution was taken to minimize any harm to participants in this study. The participants were informed about project beforehand and a brief summary of what the interview questions would address and were also informed that they could withdraw from the study any time before January 2017. Narrators were contacted upon any delays to the research

project and given the option to read the final product. Participants were also informed how long the research data would be kept and when it would be destroyed.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework. Chapter one offers an overview of the relevant scholarship in queer, feminist, and critical race theory applied in the second and third chapter. It unpacks the tensions in femme theorizing, looking to second-wave feminists who have criticized femme subjectivity within their work. Building on this, the chapter explores authors and academics who have advocated for the liberation and reclamation of femininity and femme subjectivity. I will then discuss theory on passing as it relates to racialized queer femmes. For many racialized queer femmes, discussions of femme invisibility and femmephobia must account for analyses of race as this plays an important role in passing and visibility/invisibility. I also include a discussion on homonormativity and who ‘looks’ queer in this section. I then turn to research that explores how racialized persons have been systematically erased from institutions, leading to a discussion of cultural theory and the role that corporate media plays in upholding the erasure and the femmephobic, racist, and heterosexist violence faced by racialized queer femmes.

Chapter two includes an analysis of how representations of femmes in the corporate media are produced and reproduced by media images of ‘what a femme looks like’. The central aim of the second chapter is to explore how media representations of femmes, as well as media representations of racialized persons, depend on each other to reproduce racial and sexual hierarchies at the core of femme subjectivity. This chapter explores a multitude of television series that utilize racialized queer femme figures to forward femmephobic and racist colonial tropes. I also highlight various forms of resistance to these images. Specifically, I focus on web-

based series produced by and for racialized persons and racialized queer persons. I argue that web series serve as a venue for community formation and allows for respectful, anti-oppressive images of racialized queer femmes to exist within our cultural landscape.

What resulted from the interviews conducted with my ten narrators is a rich collection of stories and experience that I was privileged to hear. Their stories are the central topic of chapter three. I divided the data into six categories in order to help underline specific experiences. The first theme emerging from the interviews were descriptions of femmephobia that emphasized patriarchal understandings of femininity. In this section I discuss how participants spoke to the ways that misogyny informed how femininity is read on the bodies of racialized femmes. The second category encompasses descriptions of femmephobia as it relates to femme invisibility. This section outlines how femmes must navigate their subjectivities in different ways, often having to ‘prove’ their queerness to others. The third category explores the participants’ experiences consuming corporate media representations of racialized queer femmes. This section discusses how corporate media plays a role in upholding the erasure of racialized queer femmes. The fourth category explores how certain colonial tropes present in media representation informs invisibility for racialized queer femmes, and speaks to many racist stereotypes that present racialized persons as not liberal minded. The fifth category outlines how femmephobia and femme invisibility is always racialized for racialized queer femmes and how important it is to include discussions of race and racism within discussions of femme invisibility and femmephobia. The sixth category deals with how many of the narrators explained how identifying as femme is a political reclamation.

CHAPTER TWO: Situating Racialized Queer Femmes Within Theory

My aim is to destabilize the ways we understand femme as it relates to racialized queer femme subjectivities and experiences. An entry point to this discussion is unravelling an understanding of how femmephobia and femme invisibility are inherently racialized for queer femmes of colour. The epistemic violence¹ experienced as a result of femmephobia and femme visibility is informed by racist colonial legacies, heterosexism, and biphobia², all of which inform every day systems and discourses.

This chapter will offer an overview of the relevant scholarship in feminist, queer, and critical race theory that I will use in subsequent chapters to structure my analysis of the representation of queer³ femmes in popular culture. First, I unpack the tensions in femme theorizing, looking specifically to second-wave feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Bev Jo, whose works identify the conflicting nature of feminism and femininity. These discussions are useful in that they have led to a deeper understanding of patriarchal systems, but ultimately contribute to a devaluation of femininity and femme subjectivities. I draw on scholars such as Yael Mishali and Julia Serano, who oppose the femme-feminist dichotomy by advocating for the

¹ I use the term ‘epistemic violence’ following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998). Spivak uses the term as a way of marking the silencing and erasure of marginalized groups knowledge and experiences. This accounts for the erasure of knowledge through the privileging of white-centric Western epistemic practices, which eradicate the ability for marginalized groups to speak and be heard.

² I use the word biphobia here as described by the literature linking biphobia and femmephobia. This ought to be understood as queerphobia as a whole—the erasure of persons whose sexuality falls on the spectrum of gay and straight.

³ “Queer” has been defined and used in a variety of ways in academia but for the purpose of my project I will be following Haritaworn, Tauqir & Erdem (2008), who describe queer as an umbrella term to describe those who do not confirm to normative notions of sexual and gender identity. To me, using “queer” was a way to encompass the multiplicity of femme subjectivity—one that transcends the binaries of “gay” and “straight” and “man” and “woman” to include a more nuanced approach to exploring femme subjectivity.

liberation and reclamation of femininity and femme subjectivities. Second, I expand on Mishali and Serano's work by discussing foundational works in femme theorizing, specifically works by theorists Joan Nestle, Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, and Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri. These works are especially important as they advocate for femme subjectivity as radical and key to queer communities—centering femme voices and knowledge within their anthologies. Third, I examine questions of passing and femme invisibility using authors such as Lisa Walker and Jewelle Gomez scholars, who suggest that there is often a conflation between lesbian experiences and white lesbian experiences. To build on this, I utilize Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity to explore how queer racialized femmes are made invisible through racist colonial legacies that posit them as primitive and not progressive. Fourth, I turn my attention to works by Patricia Hills Collins and Barbara Christian, as these works explore the epistemological gatekeeping of knowledge that occurs within academia. This scholarship is a key component of my work, as it outlines how knowledge created by racialized queer femmes has been systematically erased from queer and femme theorizing. Christian's work will assist with discussions of popular culture and media productions as well, as she argues that stereotypical images of black women pervade popular culture, further oppressing black women through these representations. By considering these works in conversation, I hope to address the epistemic violence that queer racialized femmes are subjected to through media productions—arguing that discussions of femme invisibility and femmephobia are insufficient without an analysis of race and racism, as well as discussions of the pervasive role the media plays in upholding this invisibility and violence.

Tensions in Femme Theorizing

In further exploring racialized queer femme subjectivities, I offer an analysis of the theoretical tensions between femmes and lesbian feminists which have been informed through discourses representing femininity as anti-feminist. Conversations describing femininity as oppressive and oppositional to feminism emerged out of the Women's Liberation Movement during the second-wave of feminism. For many second-wave feminists, femininity contributed to women being colonized by patriarchy, which in turn implicated feminine women in their own oppression (Hollows, 2000). Radical second wave feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin (1987), identified choosing femininity as not only a submission to the patriarchal system but as an active cooperation with it. For other radical feminists, such as Kate Millett (1970), the socialization of masculine and feminine roles was:

[...]based on the needs and values of the dominant group [men] and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue", and ineffectuality in the female (p.26).

For these reasons, many second-wave feminists advocated for a rejection of femininity—insisting that this was crucial in producing a feminist identity and consciousness (Hollows, 2000). Lesbian feminists of the 1970s held these same views, calling for a "relinquishing of skirts, heels, makeup, and feminine corporal gestures—all of which were read exclusively as a submission to the patriarchal control over the female body" (Mishali, 2014, p.55). There was a push towards lesbians "looking like dykes", arguing that this "threatens patriarchy to its core" (Jo, 2005, p.141). Progressive politics became associated with androgynous gender appearances,

and lesbian feminists, such as Bev Jo (2005), targeted femmes for their heterosexual appearances. In her work, *Lesbian Community: From Sisterhood to Segregation*, Jo posits that:

When some lesbians instead push male-defined and male created femininity as being normal, and complain that they're not accepted as real Lesbians, they need to be aware that "femininity" oppresses females and especially Lesbians—it is the opposite of being female. (and with so many Lesbians having gone back to being heterosexual, it makes sense to be wary of someone who looks heterosexual) (p. 141).

Here, Jo criticizes femmes for 'complaining' that they are not accepted as 'real' lesbians—illustrating that, for lesbian feminists, the only way to be a lesbian was through adopting masculine or androgynous gender presentation. Many other feminists, such as Yael Mishali and Julia Serano, have since criticized lesbian feminists' attack of femininity and femmes. Mishali (2014) found the movement, established on the grounds of resisting women's oppression, to be problematic in:

[...] its exclusion of the femme reproduced some of the same mechanisms by which women, and particularly feminine women, are oppressed by society at large, leaving femmes to sustain much of the negative flack that women in general protested against in the early days of the women's liberation movement (p.57).

Mishali posits that the denial of femininity is grounded within a binary understanding of feminism and femininity, which only allows for masculinity and androgyny to be associated with feminism and lesbianism. Mishali argued that the arguments of lesbian feminists were hypocritical as they reinforced the same devaluation of femininity that patriarchy and misogyny reinforce. Similarly to Mishali, Julia Serano (2007) has criticized the dichotomy between feminism and femininity in her work. Serano's book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on*

Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity, is particularly useful as a template for new approaches to theorizing femme subjectivities as her work centers on challenging the gender codes implicit in binary thinking:

[...] the only realistic way to address this issue is to work towards empowering femininity itself [...] We must move beyond seeing femininity as helpless and dependent, or merely as masculinity's sidekick, and instead acknowledge that feminine expression consists of its own accord and brings its own rewards to those who naturally gravitate towards it (p.343).

The privileging of masculinity and androgyny within this context operates to dismiss femininity and femme presentation. The push towards masculinity and androgyny in queer spaces and community parallels the long-standing misogynistic tradition of privileging masculinity over femininity. Not only does placing femininity and masculinity as oppositional operate to erase the fluidity that exists within feminine and masculine presentation, but it also inevitably places femininity at the bottom of the hierarchy. Serano's (2007) work directly criticizes ideas upheld by second-wave radical feminists, arguing that:

When we feminists stoop to the level of policing gender and start inventing etiologies to explain why some women adopt "unnatural" feminine forms of expression, there's little to distinguish us from the sexist forces we claim to be fighting against in the first place (p.338).

Here, Serano explains that casting femininity and feminism as oppositional is counterproductive since it reinforces the sexism, misogyny, and femmephobia that feminists seek to disrupt. In the next section, I will offer additional scholarship that has opposed anti-femme discourses led by

lesbian feminists of the 1970s. These works demonstrate the power in femininity and femme subjectivity and have become essential readings in femme theorizing.

Foundational Texts in Femme Theorizing

Works such as Joan Nestle's (1992) *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader*, Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker's (1997) *Femme: Feminists Lesbians & Bad Girls*, and Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri's (2002) *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* are foundational works in queer femme theorizing as they explore the complexities of queer femininities in ways that shifts the landscape of queer scholarship. All of these works center femme knowledge and resistance—a direct call to action against second-wave feminists who deemed femmes submissive to patriarchal control.

Using poetry, short stories, interviews, and journal entries, Nestle's theoretical anthology was one of the first that centered femme subjectivity and perspectives, thereby establishing a historical record of butch-femme life and redressing the narrative (prevalent in the early 1990s) that understood femme-butch couples as a duplicate of heterosexuality. The problem with this narrative, as Nestle argues, is that it implies that femme subjectivity should be abolished in favour of androgyny. Nestle's anthology challenges this by advocating for a reshaping of queer butch-femme scholarship and history- one that centers, rather than erases, femme subjectivity.

Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker's anthology *Femme: Feminists Lesbians & Bad Girls* (1997) attempts to address similar problems that Nestle identified by offering histories written from perspectives that recognize and respect femmes, rather than devaluing and erasing femme identity. Including a multiplicity of femme perspectives was central to the editor's goals, as they argued that these voices reveal much about the intersections of feminist, lesbian, and queer identities which are often overlooked. This anthology advocates for femme queerness as a

chosen rather than assigned femininity. Understanding femme in this way is pivotal to the work of the anthology, as it allows for femme theorizing in terms of the “complexities of marked bodies” (p.5). Directly speaking to the attack on femininity and femme subjectivity led by second-wave lesbian feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, Harris and Crocker’s anthology challenged understandings of femme subjectivity, offering discussions of femme separate, rather than in relation to, butch subjectivities. The project “takes as its subject a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen” (p.3), arguing many femmes may not appear “conventionally feminine”, allowing for “variations of femininity across differences of class, race, age, body image, and communities” (p.3). Harris and Crocker argue that many queer theories that understand butch-femme as a dichotomy portray femme “as an aesthetic category rather than dealing with the ways that femme bodies are already marked by different intersections of identity” (p.1). For some of the authors in this anthology, femme can be both “a way to mark your own body, as well as a way to strategically pass across, translate between, connect, and complicate various boundaries of identity” (p.5). Thus, a femme understanding of queer “implodes the meaning of queer” (p.5) by challenging pervasive attitudes of femmes as subservient to the patriarchy in a way that addresses reclamations of femininity detailed by the contributors of the anthology. *Femme: Feminists Lesbians & Bad Girls* proposes a model of femme that is understood as a “sustained gender identity”, which is “not simply role-playing in which certain sets of clothes or behaviours are on a daily basis easily assumed or discarded” (p.5).

Building on Nestle and Harris and Crocker’s foundational works, more recent works have aimed to explore femme subjectivities. *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002), edited by Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, was instrumental in proposing the radical nature of

femme subjectivity through its reclamation of queer femininity, while also offering an intersectional analysis of femme subjectivities. The chapters in this volume destabilize the interpretation of femmes as docile bodies that conform to patriarchal norms of femininity. *Brazen Femme* centers femme as transcending gender, thus accounting for experiences of femme subjectivities outside of a cisgender lesbian framework. By incorporating the voices of a multitude of queer self-identified femmes through poetry, short stories, interviews, and other alternate epistemological methods (“non-traditional”⁴ ways of engaging with theory), it advocates for queer and femme theorizing outside of academic institutions, proposing a diversity of storytelling techniques as a way of queering institutions and femme theorizing. Further, the text extends the work of other femme theorists by making way for racialized queer femme theorizing, recognizing that racialized queer femmes have been, and continue to be, systematically erased and excluded from both course materials and the academy. Brushwood and Camilleri’s work argues for queer femmes to have agency over their own self-definitions, incorporating queer femme voices that transcend the white, cisgender, lesbian prototype that we often see in discussions of femme subjectivities throughout gay and lesbian studies.

Questions of Passing

Acts and narratives of passing are often characterized as primarily concerned with boundaries—particularly boundaries that maintain categories of identity. Passing calls into question the ways that, socially and culturally, categories of identity are perceived as stable, unquestionable, and definable. Moreover, passing disputes the uncontested truism that categories of identity can be read at the bodily level (Irving, 2009). The social categorization of identities

⁴ I use “non-traditional” here to signify theorizing outside of Western ways of knowing and learning. Moreover, I use “non-traditional” in quotation marks to illustrate how the association of “traditional” with Western academia and “non-traditional” with all other forms of knowing and learning is inherently problematic as it centers (white) Western scholarship.

based on race, gender, ability, and sexuality are all sites where acts and narratives of passing operate. Much of the literature discussing racial passing acts is historically linked to the legacy of slavery, miscegenation, and the Jim Crow laws. In Canada, forced assimilation and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples was a project of racial passing, as seen through the racist, assimilatory slogan of residential schools: “kill the Indian save the child/man” (Irving, 2009). Passing assumes different meanings in a variety of contexts. For examples, the disability movement brought about a distinction between visible and invisible disabilities (Samuels, 2003; Brune & Wilson, 2013), queer theory scholars have discussed visibility in regards to “the closet” or “coming out” (Sedgwick, 1990), and there have been many discussions of passing acts emerging from trans theory as well (Bernstein Sycamore, 2006; Nicolazzo, 2016). Among these varying contexts, visibility and invisibility are highlighted, which is fundamentally linked to identity. This visibility/invisibility is often seen as a rigid boundary, but as Grace Irving (2009) argues, invisibility and visibility are not simply an opposing dichotomy, but rather ought to be understood as fluid.

Passing is an act of crossing the boundaries established by identity categories (Ginsburg, 1996). This could take many forms, such as a light-skinned racialized person passing as white, or a queer person passing as straight. Passing ruptures the ways we are taught to equate visibility with certainty, and thus becomes a “highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation” (Schlossberg, 2001, p.1). Irving (2009) presents a theory of passing “which takes into account the social, cultural, and political dynamics that define acts and narratives of passing as such” (p.4). This shift from an individual understanding of passing narratives to a social understanding allows for passing acts to be viewed as not only reflecting, but also creating meaning and knowledge.

Gloria Anzaldua's work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a key reading in queer theory, discusses passing narratives, focusing especially on visibility and invisibility, while queering the very communities the text discusses by refusing to represent identity/identities, including the ones she takes on. Anzaldua describes borderlands as a place of liminality that is subject to fluidity and interpretation, while at the same time subject to strict regulation:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* lives here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal" (p.25).

Following Irving's argument, it is "amongst these contradictions that acts and narratives or passing occur" (p.52). Femme subjectivity can thus be conceptualized as representing Anzaldua's borderlands: occupying a liminal space and asking us to push against binaries. Femme subjectivity is inherently queer, advocating for a "[...] refusal to grant legitimacy to borders, whether those of class, nations or sexualities, but also as a way of becoming, of learning to experience the unreality of the borders, to know profoundly that they have no independent existence" (Heckert, 2010, p. 42). Utilizing Anzaldua's work in conversation with Serano and Mishali's work, we can begin to understand how femme subjectivity transcends binary understandings of femininity and masculinity, which ruptures the claims made by lesbian feminists of the 1970s that femme subjectivity is oppositional to feminism and queerness.

Often in discussions about visibility and invisibility, much of the conversation centers epistemic violence associated with invisibility and erasure, especially when discussing femmes who have often been erased from conversations of queer subjectivities. Comparatively, it is also important to note visibility, and by default being visible, does not make a person exempt from violence. The complexities of passing narratives are important here, as both ‘failing’ to pass and ‘passing’ are examples of violence. Failing to pass can result in deeply traumatizing violence, and even death, while passing ought to be read as a site of epistemic violence as well as invisibility. Gender non-conforming writer, entertainer, and performance artist, Alok Vaid-Menon (2017), discusses these complexities within their work. In collaboration with other gender non-conforming Black and Brown racialized persons from South Africa and the United States, the *Femme in Public South Africa* photo and video project celebrates transfemininity⁵ in public. The short video explores visibility and street violence as it intersects with race and femme subjectivity:

For us, there’s a space to be feminine in our own homes and to be feminine on stage. The only way our femininity is understood is as performative and artificial, not as real, and so we started to ask what would it look like to unapologetically celebrate being transfeminine in public. When we walk alone—femme in public—we are deeply traumatized by all the violence we experience but when we’re actually together we feel much more imputed by it.

Passing narratives invoke discussions of what it means ‘not to pass’, or to fail. For some, failing to pass often comes with a violent price; Vaid-Menon mentions being traumatized by this

⁵ I use “transfemininity” here as this is how the artists’ describe the project. Transfeminine is simply one of the many ways of understanding femme subjectivity. The artists in this project’s descriptions of their subjectivities vary—transfeminine, trans femme, gender non-conforming femme, or just femme—being some of the ways they express this.

violence, but this also speaks to the numerous murders of trans women and femmes, specifically Black trans women, throughout the United States. From 2010 to 2016, at least 111 transgender and gender-nonconforming Americans were murdered because of their gender identity, 72% of them being Black trans women and gender non-conforming femmes (Talusán, 2016). These statistics place transgender persons as the LGBTQ+ group that experiences the most violence and serves not only as a chilling reminder of transphobia, but of how visibility, for some, can represent danger.

Another important aspect of passing narratives are questions of so-called authenticity, since trans women and trans femmes often have their authenticity directly, and violently, challenged by heteropatriarchal structures that deem them ‘imposters’. Thus, their ‘authenticity’ plays a major role in passing, regardless of an individual’s attempt to ‘pass’ or not. As Vaid-Menon (2015) argues:

I think that there is this hierarchy that gets drawn between, sort of, flamboyant faggotry or like queer femininities or like trans femininity as being somehow inferior or less legitimate than “womanhood” because we are always seen as, sort of imposter to be women [...] I think they see me and they see me as a failure [...] and I think that’s because when women see me, they’re trying to protect this category that they belong to and I think that so much of the ways that we talk about patriarchy is that it’s just men doing it and I think actually that women do patriarchy every day.

This passage, taken from the video project *Style Like U* (2015), speaks to the nuances that accompany themes of authenticity. Transfeminine persons are so often seen as ‘imposter to be women’, while queer cisgender femmes are perceived as ‘imposter’ as lesbians. In the 1970s, many narratives surrounding femme subjectivities, led by radical lesbian feminists, accused

femmes of *purposely* passing as straight. In this case, femmes passing for straight were perceived as a means of accessing hetero privileges prompting disapproval in radical lesbian communities. There was a clear emphasis on what a lesbian *should* look like in the 1970s and 1980s⁶, referring to short haired dykes that refused to wear makeup and high heels due to their belief that these were tools of the patriarchy used to oppress women (Nestle, 1993). Consequently, femmes were exiled from these so-called progressive lesbian feminist movements.

By exploring narratives of passing, specifically in the context of femme lesbians⁷, scholars Lisa Walker, Ekua Omosupe, and Jewelle Gomez have centralized femme visibility/invisibility in their work. The representation of the butch as the ‘authentic’ and visible lesbian has a long tradition, characterized by sexology literature that was then catapulted into the mainstream through the classic representation of lesbianism in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The glorification of the butch as the authentic lesbian is based on her visible representation of gender deviance, and therefore sexual deviance, while the femme’s femininity is constructed as evidence of her desire to pass as straight and not her desire for other women.

In *Looking Like What You Are*, Lisa Walker (2001) asks “what it means to look like a lesbian and what it means to be a lesbian and not look like one” (p.10). Walker argues that theoretical examinations of passing for femmes must always incorporate an explicit analysis of race. To theorize racialized queer femme subjectivities, it is important to understand the complexity in the assumption that all femmes pass as straight. For racialized queer femmes, they are at once made invisible as queer persons, while being visible as racialized persons thus their subjectivity simultaneously becomes a complex site of passing and failing to pass. This creates a

⁶Arguably, these standards still exist in North American queer communities.

⁷ “Femme lesbian” is used specifically in the context of lesbian feminist movements. These femmes identified as lesbians. I use queer femme otherwise as an umbrella term for the multiplicity of sexualities that a femme may identify as/with.

problem where, because racialized queer femmes are presumed to be straight, lesbianism is presumed to be a mainly white identity.

Many scholars have discussed this presumption of lesbianism embodied as white. As Ekoa Omosupe (1991) writes, there is an assumption of “a position of authority or privilege to universalize lesbian experiences as white lesbian experiences” (p.105). Jewelle Gomez (1983) also discusses the difficulty that white critics have in maintaining a simultaneous discussion of race and lesbianism because there is always an assumption that race, not sex or gender, is the predominant feature in discussions of work by women of color. Both these racialized assumptions contribute to the double invisibility of racialized lesbians within (white) lesbian communities. Further, the racialized woman who identifies as femme may be doubly erased. As Walker puts it, “A femme of color, on the other hand, will probably not be recognized as a lesbian, first, because she is not white and then because she is not butch” (p.207). While a racialized butch woman might not be signaled as lesbian because she is a racialized person, she might be perceived as a lesbian because her presentation is considered ‘blatant’ (Walker, 2001).

Audre Lorde (1982) also speaks to the erasure of the femme when she recalls her experience in the 1950s bar scene as oppressive. Lorde outlines that black femme women have very little chance of being approached by prospective partners because the idea of a gorgeous femme was defined by white Western racialized distortions of beauty. These accounts illustrate the ways in which experiences of racism complicate the perception of femme subjectivity for racialized women, a feature that is often excluded from femme theorizing.

To further illustrate ways experiences of racism complicate the perception of femme subjectivity for racialized queers, I draw on JeeYeun Lee’s (1996) article, “Why Suzie Wong is not a lesbian: Asian and Asian American lesbian and bisexual women and femme/butch/gender

identities”. Lee illustrates that while it is true that some queer women in North America describe their butch/femme subjectivities as performance, this performativity is complicated when racialized. Racialized women who play with feminine and masculine expression and presentation experience these relationships as layered with by racial and cultural differences, both of which affect how they are perceived by others as well as how they shape and understand their own subjectivities (p.115). Lee explores how Asian and Asian American queer women are faced with multiple factors that affect their butch and femme subjectivities, including ‘Oriental’ discourses within North America. Discourses such as the lotus blossom stereotype, posit Asian women of various ethnicities—specifically East and Southeast Asian women—as hyperfeminine, exotic, docile, and passive objects of white heterosexual male desire. Asian and Asian American women are constantly confronted with such expectations, rendering their gender presentation or expression not neutral.

The prevailing image within lesbian communities of what a lesbian looks like is an image that is mainly constructed both as butch and as white. For queer femme Asian women, there exists a racialized discourse of gender that constructs them as both heterosexual and feminine which serves to make them invisible. Within the notion of the white butch as the ‘authentic’ lesbian, homonormativity operates to represent ‘the right kind of queer’, erasing and further marginalizing racialized queer femmes. In the following section, I will further explore the social and cultural forces that act upon and contribute to the construction of who is visible and invisible, who indeed passes and who does not.

‘People of Colour Can’t Be Queer’: Passing and Homonormativity

Invisibility for racialized queer femmes must not only be understood as femme invisibility alone, but as a complex interaction between femme invisibility and racist discourses.

Important within this analysis are the ways in which colonial ideologies and theories of homonormativity uphold the invisibility and erasure of racialized queer femmes. Lisa Duggan coined the term homonormativity (2002), defined as a mainstream gay discourse that attempts to expand rather than dismantle heteronormativity by pushing normativity within LGBT identities. According to Duggan, ‘mainstream’ gay discourse challenges neither the exclusion of those who do not fit within these systems of normativity nor the system whose very existence depends on exclusion. This homonormativity constructs ‘gay’ as a wealthy, white gay man, as Fatima El-Tayeb (2012) argues. Furthering this conversation, Tammie Kennedy (2014) argues that homonormativity creates a “media friendly version of sexual minority inclusion” that is predicated on an erasure of feminist and queer critiques of gender normativity (p.119). Thus, “gaining acceptance and membership into the heteronormative society often depends on diluting any kind of queer sensibility that might challenge the centrality of neoliberal, middle-class values that also squelch racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and gender diversity” (p.119). Consequently, homonormativity operates in the depiction of gay and lesbian ‘normativity’ as white, which is reinforced within language, attitudes, and media productions. As Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir and Esra Erdem (2006) argue, “this highlights the problem of a single politic of representation, which equates ‘gay’ with white and ‘ethnic minority’ with heterosexual” (p.10).

A function of the imperialist colonial gaze has always (hetero)sexualized racialized persons, specifically racialized women (Nair, 2008), which impacts how racialized queer femmes are perceived and represented. Racist assumptions paint racialized cultures as fundamentally sexist and homophobic⁸. As a result, many racialized queer persons must contend with the

⁸ Although I did not interview any Indigenous queer femmes, nor do I focus on television series that have Indigenous queer femme characters, I do acknowledge that gender is a colonial project and that I am a settler engaging with this work. Many scholars have discussed how gender was

problem of being presumed straight (Nair, 2008). Within her work, “Gays Who Cannot Properly Be Gay”: Queer Muslims in The Neoliberal European City”, Fatima El-Tayeb (2012) discusses these complexities arguing that, especially for European queer Muslims:

[...] they are perceived as being too oppressed and alienated from their own needs to speak up as long as they still identify with Islam. It is only when they can make the step into western modernity—a step that necessarily requires the break with, the coming out of the Muslim community—that they can claim an individualized identity as feminist or queer, usually by expressing gratitude for being saved by their “host society” (p.80).

The author credits this to a long-standing Orientalist tradition (Said, 1979), in which “Muslims appear as lacking individuality and agency, their collective actions determined by an archaic religion/culture dictating their every move” (p.83):

Within this binary discursive formation, the (West) European LGBT community plays the part of civilizer, while queer Muslims have nothing to offer, as they, like all Muslims, are cast as products of a culture that is fundamentally inferior to the secular West (p.86).

This creates tensions amongst queer Muslims in Europe, as the European Muslim community becomes judged to present the ‘wrong’ type of heterosexuality (re: homophobic and misogynistic), queer Muslims are confronted “with the demand to take sides in the imaginary clash of cultures in which ‘the West’ stands for liberal and progressive cosmopolitanism” (p.86).

By representing the colonized and their respective cultures as ‘Other’, as ‘primitive’, and as ‘backwards’, there becomes an underlying association between queerness and whiteness, or as

not an organizing principle in societies pre-colonization, such as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí’s (1977) work on Yorùbá society prior to colonialism and Paula Gunn Allen’s (1986) work on Indigenous American Tribes prior to colonialism. As Indigenous scholar Scott Lauria Morgensen (2011) argues, “gender and sexuality are intrinsic to the colonization of Indigenous peoples and the promulgation of European modernity by settlers” (p.3).

El-Tayeb puts it, “the (implicitly white) gay community” and “the (implicitly straight) Muslim community” (p.80). This racist assumption of ‘Eastern cultures’ as homophobic, argues Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem (2006), is a tool that allows for the “official control and of re-colonisation by the ‘liberated West’” (p.11). This also acts to create a narrative that constructs “Europe” or “the West” as a “safe haven for Muslim women and gays” (p.21). As articulated by Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem (2006):

Individual Muslim women and Muslim gays are described as having emancipated or liberated themselves from their repressive culture, by embracing the gender progressive culture of the “liberal West.” Not only do they thereby confirm the exceptionality of the West, they also emerge as exceptions to the rule that most women and gays “from this culture” are in fact repressed (p.21).

Violent dichotomies upholding the primitive Other as oppositional to modernity and progressive enables the erasure of racialized queer persons. Consequently, if queer is said to be modern, and racialized bodies are always read as primitive, this leads to an incongruence between the two identities, which leads to the underlying assumption of queer as always read as white.

Invisibility, for racialized queer femmes, thus becomes a complex interplay of femme invisibility and invisibility of racialized queer persons⁹.

Forms of Knowing and Learning

Femmes (particularly racialized femmes) have been systematically excluded and erased from academia and thus have long been defined by the hegemonic norm. Patricia Hills Collins

⁹ To fully explore the complexities of femme subjectivities and femme invisibility, we must include analyses of race and racism. Without intersectional analyses, scholars reproduce colonial legacies by reducing femme subjectivities to white femme subjectivities. It is by way of incorporating theories that interrogate the intersection of femme invisibility and colonialism that we can begin to understand and deconstruct this invisibility and erasure.

(1986; 2000) and Barbara Christian (1987) present similar arguments in their works on academic gatekeeping and the systemic exclusion of black women. The result is similar: rather than black women and racialized femmes being able to define their own subjectivities and contribute meaningfully to the discourse about their identities, they are reduced to harmful stereotypes.

Both authors discuss the epistemological gatekeeping of ‘legitimate’ knowledge in their work. Patricia Hills Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* (1986; 2000) is useful in complicating typical understandings of femme subjectivity. By making use of ‘non-traditional’ forms of learning and knowing, and regarding anyone who reflects on their own experiences as an intellectual creator of knowledge, she analyzes how black women’s standpoint offers a distinctive basis for developing knowledge. She expands on the ways that, through larger systems of oppression, black women’s knowledge has been excluded, systematically invalidated, and subjected to epistemological gatekeeping as a means of suppressing the ideas and works of black women, thus protecting elite white male (and white women’s) interests and worldviews.

(p.5) Christian’s (1987) work highlights Hills Collin’s arguments, arguing that:

People of colour have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (p.52)

Here, Christian argues that theorizing is an integral part of resistance to the physical and epistemic violence that racialized persons are subjected to, whether it has been coded as such by Western and white-centric ways of conceptualizing what consists of ‘theory’. Christian posits

that theory ought to have a relationship to practice, discussing how without practice, theory upholds systemic barriers:

[...] I consider it presumptuous of me to invent a theory of how we *ought* to read. Instead, I think we need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature (p.53).

This gatekeeping has often benefited white scholars while working against racialized persons within institutions and academia, further contributing to their erasure within these spaces. As Christian argues, “I see the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene” (p.53). Works such as Hills Collins’ and Christian’s allow for a fluid understanding of knowledge production and consumption—destabilizing the existing hierarchy of knowledge and knowledge production within academia.

Moreover, this suppression of Black women’s work means that stereotypical images of black women permeate popular culture and public policy (p.5), and that ideologies and stereotypes associated with black women play a role in this oppression and suppression of intellectual work:

Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interest of a group of people. Within US culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to which a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mummies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima’s on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present

welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression (Hills Collins, p.5).

For Hills Collins, black women's self-definitions "were designed to resist the negative controlling images of black womanhood advanced by whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported" (p.9). Stereotypes play an important role in the oppression and suppression of black women's intellectual work and knowledge.

Racialized queer femmes have not only been systematically erased from queer discourses and theorizing as femmes, but their knowledge production and theorizing has been erased as racialized persons. This produces a particular erasure and invisibility surrounding racialized femme subjectivities, one in which is often left out of literature on femme subjectivities and femme invisibility and is informed and reinforced by the violent stereotypical images of racialized queer femmes that are pervasive within our cultural landscape.

Cultural Theory

Cultural productions are an important consideration within an analysis of racialized queer femme subjectivities as it informs the pervasive ways that media reproduces, and is informed by, violent racist stereotypes. The epistemic violence that these representations create upholds the invisibility and erasure of racialized persons within femme theorizing, as it creates barriers and hierarchies of who is considered producers of 'legitimate' knowledge and theory.

To explore the complexities of erasure and invisibility of racialized queer femmes, it is essential to turn to cultural productions and 'mainstream' media to explore how they inform and reinforce this marginalization. Mainstream media is defined in contrast to 'alternative' media. Alternative media does not have a fixed definition, but it has come to be defined most popularly

as “a heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups and organizations, in specific and different contexts, and employing a great variety of media” (Harcup, p.361). Mainstream media, on the other hand, is a term used to reflect mass media outlets and is popularly known as the media that is ever present in our society such as news outlets and cable television channels. Large news conglomerates often control much of what is produced by mainstream media, with six companies controlling most media outlets in North America (Lutz, 2012). This is of particular importance because entertainment media, as well as news outlets, shape society by reproducing images used to further marginalize vulnerable identity groups (Larson, 2006). As Stephanie Larson (2006) writes in *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*, “the media does not create these representations out of thin air” (p.15). As an industry, mainstream media focuses on profit margins dependent on mass consumption, and as a result they tend to centralize on the use of stereotypes, and uphold violent tropes that often have deep-rooted historical significances.

For these reasons, there has been a push against naming mass media productions as ‘mainstream’ because these productions are so heavily corporatized. Kim Katrin Milan (2016), a Black queer femme activist, educator, and writer, offers alternative ways of speaking to what we have come to understand as ‘mainstream’ or ‘popular’ culture:

Another really primary part of the work that I do online has been about shifting this idea of “mainstream” culture. I’ve always felt really uncomfortable with that idea because just because something is corporately funded and dominates a particular kind of media does not mean that it is my mainstream. If I don’t subscribe to it that’s not my culture and the culture that I am practicing is not subculture or counterculture—it is my culture. I am not doing this in response to someone else but rather this is the community and the spaces

that I've been raised in and the arc of media that I like to engage in and so I think that is one of the other amazing things that can happen online is that we can start to see the shift from this idea of just calling 'mainstream' culture a mainstream media and naming it more as corporate media, naming it as social media and I think that that is really necessary in a lot of different ways.

Milan's emphasis is on critiquing the assumed universality of the so-called 'mainstream' which wrongly assumes all persons want to engage with corporate media or desire to see themselves reflected in corporate media productions. Her analysis of 'mainstream' is especially useful, as it underlines the reasons why I will be using the term corporate media throughout my analysis rather than mainstream media. My use of corporate media throughout this chapter is meant to illuminate the ways so-called popular culture is informed by, and informs, many violent stereotypes and tropes and how these stereotypes and tropes affect the lives of racialized queer femmes. As outlined in the *Camera Obscura Collective's*, "Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches", the analysis of cultural productions involves "a process of investigation and theoretical reflection on the mechanisms by which meaning is produced in film" (p.268). Semiology, within feminist analyses of films, treats films as discourse: "a text which is structured by various signifying systems" (p.270). Semiology reminds us that an image is a construction, that an image "has signification only according to the socially conventionalized possibilities of its being read or understood" (p.270). The image and the way it is read are culturally determined, and semiology attempts to deconstruct the naturalized components of these images. This deconstruction understands that ideology is inscribed in representation and the images we perceive as 'natural' (re: stereotypical) are culturally determined. The study of ideals is intimately connected to the study of media, as media plays a major role in producing

and reproducing ideologies (Humez & Dines, 2015). Stephanie Larson (2012) argues that Hollywood films, and other corporate media productions, play a role in cultural socialization, and that viewing them as inconsequential perpetuates colonial violence:

We learn about other people, other cultures, ourselves by watching Hollywood films over and over again—all too often without questioning what we see. Hence, we do not escape reality when watching cinema uncritically; we perpetuate real ideologies when we think of cinema as “only the movies” (p.15).

In a white racist framework, sexual ‘deviance’ of any kind, including lesbianism, savagery, and violence have historically been projected onto racialized women, particularly black women (Caputi & Sagle, 2004). Through this association, queer also represents a form of Othering. This is of particular importance when analyzing racialized queer femme representations, as queerness and sexual ‘divergence’ has a specific colonial legacy for racialized women. In Laura Mulvey’s (1975) work, “Visual Pleasure and The Narrative Cinema”, she demonstrates how the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film and cinema. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is constructed for a male gaze, which she describes as catering to male fantasies and pleasures:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (p.60).

The male gaze naturalizes these images, representing women as passive and subservient to men. As outlined by Sander L. Gilman (1985) in her work, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an

Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature”, “the ideologically charged iconography nature of the representation dominates.” (p.166) Gilman argues that this representation dominates in a very specific manner, “[...] for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong” (p.166). However, this produces a perception of uniformity of the group into a “convincingly homogenous image” (p.166). Myths associated with said group are, to an extent, “composed of fragments of the real world, perceived through the ideological bias of the observer” (p.166). Throughout his work, Gilman uses the Hottentot Venus¹⁰ to illustrate this, arguing that:

The roots of this image of the sexualized female are to be found in male observers, the progenitors of the vocabulary of images through which they believed themselves able to capture the essence of the Other (p.177).

In addition to the male gaze as articulated by Mulvey and Gilman, another central contribution in cultural theory is the introduction of the imperial gaze. Similarly, in her book *Looking for The Other: Feminism, Film, and The Imperial Gaze*, Ann Kaplan (1997) defines the imperial gaze as:

[...] a gaze structure which fails to understand that, as Edward Said phrases it, non-American peoples have integral cultures and lives that work according to their own, albeit, different logic. The imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male (p.78).

¹⁰ See Henderson, C. E. (2014). AKA: Sarah Baartman, the hottentot venus, and black women’s identity. *Women’s Studies*, 43(7), 946-959.

Further, she notes that white subjects, similar to male subjects, confront—gaze at—something Other to itself, and that this confrontation causes “dis-ease” (p.62). This dis-ease is present because both the male and the white subject need to be in control:

They assume power lies with them, in their gaze and are uneasy when there is an entity that seems to elude their control, to look and perhaps be different. Their discomfort leads to their construction of the primitive/civilized binary categorization so as to defend against difference (p.62).

The male gaze and the imperial gaze have become engrained within media productions, forwarding a racist binary between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilized’ within corporate media productions. By depicting racialized bodies as ‘primitive’, corporate media reproduces and naturalizes colonial violence. Racist and stereotypical discourses govern and constrict knowledge and exercises power over the Other. These harmful narratives are not inconsequential; whenever the colonizer perpetuates beliefs that the colonized are backward immoral persons with evil and sadistic instincts, they justify the domination of the colonized (Memmi, 2006). The colonizers’ sense of superiority—their sense of mission as the world’s civilizers—all depends on depicting the ‘Other’ as barbaric and primitive (Kelly, 1972), and this becomes especially important when analyzing corporate media representations. The colonized depersonalization happens in what is called the “mark of the plural”, wherein the colonized is never characterized individually (Memmi, 1991). The colonized begin to be viewed collectively, as a *they* rather than as separate individual persons. This is perpetuated in corporate media through use of harmful stereotypes and tropes. Thus persons who consume this media in the West tend to fixate on stereotypes at the expense of marginalized individuals (Bhabha, 1996). The colonial encounter requires what French literature scholar and poet, Aimé Césaire, calls ‘thingification’ (Kelly, 1972), or the

naming of Others as inferior, as subhuman, savage, or uncivilized. Media reinforces this discourse reifying the Other as ‘naturally’ inferior through stereotypes that ridicule, subordinate, and demonize racialized persons (Larson, 2012). A tenant of this reinforcing practice is exaggerating the potency and malevolence of the Other, instigating fear (Hamblet, 2008). Corporate media uses racialized ideals and stereotypes in a pervasive and persuasive way, giving power to this form of exclusion and marginalization so that “entertainment does not just tell us stories; it tells particular stories in a way that privileges some” (Larson, 2012, p.15).

These colonial legacies have implications in corporate media representations of Indigenous persons, particularly within the American horror genre. Within the horror genre, depictions of Indigenous Others create the sense of horror by playing on fears of the white Western protagonists being dominated, subjugated, and effectively colonized by the evil, sadistic and backwards Indigenous ‘tribes.’ Films such as *The Green Inferno* (Roth, et al., 2015), inspired by 1980 horror films *Cannibal Holocaust* (Di Nunzio, Palaggi, & Deodato, 1980) and *Cannibal Ferox* (Loy, Martino, & Lenzi, 1981), exemplify how Amazonian Indigenous Others have been, and continue to be, used to evoke horror to Western audiences. Depicting Indigenous peoples as backwards, cannibalistic, sadistic and evil, or as preying on non-Indigenous persons to torture, eat alive, and use for “tribal rituals”¹¹ all serve to forward these colonial values and ideals and ultimately justify violence against Indigenous persons.

Many violent colonial legacies are perpetuated in corporate media such as the stereotype of the (hyper)aggressive, violent, and criminal Black man which stems from racist ideologies of black men as beasts and savages (Hamblet, 2008). Films such as *Training Day* (Newmyer, Silver, & Fuqua, 2001), wherein antagonist Detective Alonzo Harris, played by Denzel

¹¹ The “tribal rituals” depicted in these films often are presented in a very erotic and sexualized way, adding to the Indigenous peoples’ representation as sexually sadistic.

Washington, heads an aggressive narcotics unit known for its radical methods, exemplify this trope. Detective Harris is portrayed as ruthless, selfish, immoral—lacking empathy and stopping at nothing, including murder, to take down major drug traffickers. (Hyper)aggressivity, violence and crime is often associated with Latinx¹² men as well, depicting them as drug or gang affiliated, as seen in movies such as *Scarface* (Bregman, & De Palma, 1983) and *West Side Story* (Wise & Robbins, 1961). A contemporary example that illustrates this stereotype is *Snatched* (Chernin, Topping, Feig, Henderson, & Levine, 2017), released May 2017, and starring Amy Schumer and Goldie Hawn. The movie follows a mother and daughter as they vacation to South America and are kidnapped by aggressive, violent Latinx men. The gangster stereotype aimed at Latinx men is particularly harmful, as it gives the public the idea that they are not law-abiding citizens and that they should be feared (Nittle, 2017). Similarly, Middle-Eastern men in television and film are depicted as villains and terrorists, often showing them as barbaric. Examples include films such as *True Lies* (Cameron, Austin, & Cameron, 1994), where Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the role of a spy that is tracking down nuclear missiles in the possession of Islamic Jihadist Aziz. Disney children's 'classic', *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992), also serves as an example of this wherein the original theme song of the film declares that Aladdin hails “from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam” and where “they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home” (Nittle, 2017).¹³

Racialized women are often portrayed as either subservient or hypersexualized within corporate media productions. Black and Latinx women are portrayed as caregivers and nannies,

¹² I use this formulation here as a gender-neutral alternative to latino or latina.

¹³ Disney has since changed the lyrics of the opening song of *Aladdin* after Arab American groups criticized the original lyrics for being stereotypical and violent.

in films such as *The Help*¹⁴ (Columbus, Barnathan, Green, & Taylor, 2011) and *Maid in Manhattan*¹⁵ (Goldsmith-Thomas, Schiff, Schindler, & Wang, 2002). Black and Latinx women are often also (hyper)sexualized in corporate media. For Black women, the jezebel stereotype characterizes them as overly sexualized, aggressive, sexually promiscuous, uncaring, and willing to use sexuality to manipulate and deceive men (Lack, 2015). Latinx women are similarly characterized, with their desirability coming from being unknowable and/or having an exotic mystique. Latinx women's roles in corporate media are often limited to the mysterious attractive woman. Much of the time their characters remain undeveloped since they often serve as nothing more than the main character's love interest (Larson, 2012). Overly sexualized and promiscuous depictions of Latinx women are also prevalent. Consider characters played by Eva Longoria in *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry, 2004) or by Sofia Vergara in *Modern Family* (Levitan & Lloyd, 2009); these roles serve to utilize latinx women as objects of the white male gaze.

Middle-Eastern women are often presented as one-dimensional characters limited to scantily clad belly dancers or silent veiled women. While these stereotypes may at first seem to offer some diversity, they both serve to exoticize Arab and Middle-Eastern women. Belly dancers code Arab cultures as exotic and sexually available, and diminish Arab women by reducing them to sexualized objects. Similarly, the veil has been used to signify a site of intrigue or used as the ultimate sign of oppression, furthering the association of Middle-Eastern men as barbaric and pre-modern (Nittle, 2017). *Arabian Nights* (Wanger & Rawlins, 1942) and *Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves* (Malvern & Lubin, 1944) are just a few examples of films that perpetuate

¹⁴ Viola Davis plays Aibileen Clark, a 1960s nanny and servant to a white family in Jackson, Mississippi.

¹⁵ Wherein Jennifer Lopez plays the character of Marisa Ventura, a single mother born and raised in New York City that falls in love with a wealthy white man after being mistaken for a guest at the first-class Manhattan hotel she works at as a maid.

these stereotypes and tropes through their depictions of Arab and Middle-Eastern women as subservient exotic ‘slave-girls’ who are sexually available and promiscuous.

Similarly to the sexual objectification in the case of the belly dancer trope for Middle-Eastern women and the jezebel trope for black women, Asian women, especially East Asian women, are also overly sexualized in corporate media. Tropes such as the China doll and the dragon lady both operate to exoticize and sexualize Asian women. While the China doll stereotype rendered Asian women docile, submissive, and needing white men’s protection and attention, the dragon lady stereotype portrays Asian women as diabolical, inherently scheming, untrustworthy and backstabbing (Larson, 2012). *Memoirs of A Geisha* (Fisher, Spielberg, Wick, & Marshal, 2005) and Brenda Song’s character, Christy Lee, in *The Social Network* (Rudin, Brunetti, De Luca, Chaffin, & Funcher, 2010), illustrate contemporary representations of the China doll stereotype. Archie Panjabi’s character in the television series *The Good Wife* (Scott et al., 2009) and characters throughout the films *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Kong, Li-Kong, & Lee, 2000), *House of Flying Daggers* (Kong & Yimou, 2004) all illustrate the dragon lady stereotype, depicting Asian women in these television series and films as untrustworthy and diabolical.

Through these various examples, we see that representations do not occur absent of a racist context, and that these images and roles have historical ties and legacies. They are not inconsequential. To analyze representations of racialized queer femmes in corporate media, it is crucial to understand these representations as a complex interplay of stereotypes associated with racialized persons, queer persons, and femmes, and further that racial violence is implicit to the way these representations are constructed.

Racialized queer femmes who do not identify strictly as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, are subjected to the violence forwarded through representations of bisexual women in corporate media. This violence operates to dismiss bisexuality—which resonates with early sexology literature describing bisexuality as a transition to which ‘healthy’ heterosexuality or ‘unhealthy’ homosexuality emerges (Eisner, 2013). According to Freud, there is only one gender preference, meaning that one can only be either gay or straight, and therefore bisexuality ought to be considered ‘excess’. This notion of ‘excess’ has many implications in the ways that bisexual persons are represented and understood in corporate media, often dubbing them as slutty, promiscuous, and unfaithful (Eisner, 2013). *Orange is The New Black* (Kohan, Friedman, Hess, & Herrmann, 2013), *Blue is The Warmest Color* (Chioua, Maraval, & Kechiche, 2013), and *The Kids are Alright* (Gilbert, et al., 2010) are all examples of corporate media which portray bisexual characters leaving their lesbian lovers for men.

Sexology literature of this period also conflated femme subjectivity and bisexuality. The femme was pathologized as bisexual and therefore more ‘apt’ to respond favourably to conversion treatment (Nestle, 1992). Since femmes were not seen as ‘true’ sexual inverts, and bisexuality was described as a transition point between either homosexuality or heterosexuality, a sense of illegitimacy surrounded femmes and bisexual persons. The illegitimacy of femme and bisexual persons remains an ever-present discourse reinforced by their portrayal in television and film. Television series, such as MTV’s *Faking It* and MTV’s *A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila*, strengthen these associations, portraying bisexual characters as having to choose between heterosexuality and homosexuality, thus erasing the sexual fluidity that these characters demonstrate and articulate. MTV’s *Faking It* (Covington, 2014) explores the lives of Karma Ashcroft and her best friend Amy Raudenfeld who ‘fake’ being a lesbian couple to gain

popularity at their high school. While Karma falls for the popular and handsome Liam, Amy soon realizes that she is in love with her best friend Karma and grapples with her queerness. Throughout the series, Amy finds herself attracted to both men and women, but feels as though she needs to ‘choose a side’ and is pressured to do so by her peers, as well as the women she dates throughout the series.

On a similar note, *A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila* (Salsano, 2007) is an MTV reality television series, similar to *The Bachelor* (Fleiss & Levenson, 2002), wherein Tila Tequila, a bisexual woman, embarks on a quest to find love with one of the sixteen heterosexual men and sixteen lesbian-identified women inhabiting a house together, competing for alone time with Tequila. Rather than the series simply being about Tila finding love with one of the contestants, the series is framed as Tila grappling with which gender she ‘prefers’ more.

In the following chapter, I will situate the theory presented within an analysis of popular culture, media, and discourses. This chapter will frame how corporate media productions, such as films and television series, reinforce and reproduce homophobic, biphobic, and colonial tropes associated with racialized queer femmes, providing several examples of corporate media television series that illustrate these tropes and stereotypes. Moreover, the following chapter will discuss resistance to these problematic images through web series produced by and for racialized queer persons. Though the presence of racialized queer femmes in corporate media disrupt racist and femmephobic ideas of ‘what queer looks like’, the following chapter aims to criticize the role these characters play within their respective series and how representation in corporate media does not always serve to break stereotypes and tropes, but rather to advance them.

CHAPTER THREE: Representations of Queer Racialized Femmes in Contemporary Media

We all deserve to be visible. We all deserve to be seen in the ways that we want to be.

—Kim Katrin Milan, *#Selfies, Shame & Self-Love*

In the July 1993 edition of *Vogue*, an article titled “Goodbye to the Last Taboo” claimed: “Not long ago, you couldn’t say the word *lesbian* on television. Now everybody’s gay-girl crazy”. The emergence of lesbian chic in 1993 shifted the ways lesbians were represented in the media. That same year, *New York* magazine featured K.D. Lang on its cover with the caption: “lesbian chic: the bold, brave new world of gay women”. In June, *Newsweek* had two lesbians hugging and smiling at the camera on its cover, and a now famous *Vanity Fair* cover presented Cindy Crawford ‘shaving’ K.D. Lang’s face in August 1993 (See appendix B). Lesbians seemingly began to occupy a space within our cultural landscape, specifically white femme lesbians. Suddenly, mainstream audiences accepted television series featuring queer main characters. Shows with mildly offensive queer characters like *Friends* paved the way for series like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *The Wire* that feature lesbian couples as regular characters in the early 2000s, which in turn paved the way for more recent television series such as *The L Word*, *Orange is The New Black*, and *Glee*. Since the 1990s there has been an influx of queer and lesbian representation in many media outlets. While many of these representations have been praised for providing depictions of queer women that otherwise have been absent from our cultural landscape, white wealthy lesbians dominated these images, and continue to do so in more recent representations. Although images of queer persons are now commonly found in North American media, it remains important to be critical of these representations as many of them reproduce homophobic, biphobic, and colonial tropes. Consequently, representing femmes

as white, wealthy, and cisgender in corporate media furthers the invisibility of all queer persons who do not fit into this mould.

This chapter will explore racialized queer femme representation and discourses in corporate media productions. First, I problematize depictions of femme subjectivities in several popular television shows, including: *How to Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife*, *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *True Blood*, *Person of Interest*, and *Imposters*. I argue that while the representations of racialized queer femmes in these series play a role in fighting against a totalizing erasure, they continue to rely on stereotypes and tropes associated with racialized women and bisexual women. Next, I unpack examples of resistance to these images through web series produced mainly by and for racialized queer women, such as *Brown Girls*, *The Peculiar Kind*, and *Easy*. Finally, I use these discussions to lay a foundation for my data chapter, where I show that cultural depictions impact the lives of racialized queer femmes.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that femmephobic, biphobic, and racist colonial legacies uphold the invisibility of racialized queer femmes. My central aim is to explore how the pervasive corporate media representations of femmes, as well as representations of racialized persons in relation to oppressive tropes, ideals, and values, depend on each other to reproduce racial and sexual hierarchies at the core of femme subjectivities.¹

¹ While this chapter consists mostly of literature pertaining to cisgender, bisexual, and lesbian femme experiences and representations—with some analyses of racialized queer femme men representations—I do acknowledge that femme transcends traditional Western binary frameworks of gender and allows for persons with differing gender expression and gender identities to adopt femme subjectivity. Due to the invisibility and erasure of queer trans women and racialized non-binary femmes in corporate media, this analysis will be limited to, primarily, an analysis of queer cisgender femme.

Corporate Media and Embodying Racialized Queer Femmes

The overwhelming lack of representation of racialized queer femmes in corporate media productions seems to be shifting with the arrival of some noteworthy characters within recent years. The following section focuses on the following series: *How to Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife*, *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *True Blood*, *Person of Interest*, and *Imposters*. I will analyze representations of the racialized queer femme characters within these respective series, and argue that while they do provide a platform for queer racialized femme characters, many of these representations rely on colonial, biphobic, and femmephobic tropes projected onto the bodies of racialized femme characters. The series were chosen because they occupy some of television's most popular networks: ABC, CBS, HBO, and Bravo. CBS was the most watched television network of 2016, with 8,814,000 viewers, while ABC secured its spot as the third most watched network of 2016 with 6,325,000 viewers (Schneider, 2016). In 2016, Bravo was the 26th most watched network with 908,000 viewers (Schneider, 2016). In contrast to these networks, viewers must pay to subscribe to HBO but this does not seem to alter viewership. Housing popular series like *Game of Thrones*, which garnered 16.1 million total viewers for its season seven premiere, breaking records for the network, HBO has secured itself as one of the most watched networks (Otterson, 2017).

How to Get Away With Murder, *The Good Wife*, *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *True Blood*, *Person of Interest*, and *Imposters* all utilize black and brown bodies as main characters—a seemingly unprecedented move—but use these bodies to reinforce white prescriptions of acceptable lesbian or bisexual sexuality by continuing to use the male heterosexual gaze as the dominant frame. Whereas the prevalence of lesbian chic images allowed for femmes to be represented in some capacity, these images served only to make visible white, wealthy, thin

femmes (Ciasullo, 2001). Moreover, the femmes represented in corporate media are often 'straightened out' via the femme body to appeal to and serve as an object of desire for heterosexual audiences (Ciasullo, 2001). Representing the lesbian as embodying hegemonic femininity and thus presenting them as 'looking like' conventionally attractive (straight) women, the femme body is at once sexualized and de-homosexualized (Ciasullo, 2001).

How to Get Away With Murder (Rhimes, Beers, D'Elia, Nowalk, 2014) is an American drama series that centers on law and politics which first aired in September 2014 on ABC. Produced by Shonda Rhimes, an American television producer, screenwriter, and author best known for her work on the television medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* and the political thriller *Scandal*, Rhimes has established herself as one of the most successful people in the industry. The first season of the series was well received by audiences for its intricate plot twists and seemingly inclusive cast, racking up 14.12 million viewers throughout its first season (Kondolojy, 2014). In the series, Annalise Keating, played by Emmy award winner Viola Davis, is a prominent criminal defense lawyer and law professor in Philadelphia. Throughout the academic semester, Annalise selects five of the best students to work at her firm. This is considered a prestigious opportunity, heightening the atmosphere of competition. The first season explores multiple cases but focuses mostly on two murders, in which information is delivered through a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards, all of which eventually line up in the season finale. The first murder of season one centers on a student at Middleton University, the fictional school where Annalise teaches, but also includes a second murder, of Annalise's husband Sam. Through various flashbacks we quickly discover that Sam was murdered by Annalise's students after a fight broke out between them. Annalise realizes what happened and devises a plan, using her knowledge as a criminal defense lawyer to cover up Sam's murder to

protect her students. During the flashbacks of the night of the murder, the viewers see the emotional turmoil the students are in while disposing the body and following Annalise's plan. Annalise, on the other hand, is portrayed as without feeling, or little to speak of, suggesting a cover up of her husband's murder. Her indifference is meant to reveal her immorality and manipulation. On many occasions Annalise is depicted as immoral, even stating she does not care if her clients are guilty or innocent, a theme consistent throughout the series as she wins cases for clients who she knows are guilty and have confessed to their crimes.

In the second season of the series, *How to Get Away With Murder* returns with a bisexual twist, revealing Annalise's past with a former colleague from law school. In this season, viewers' understanding of Annalise's character is complicated. The revelation that she has a predilection towards bisexuality as her college romance 'rekindles' is part of the larger trope of suggesting something intrinsically deviant about her. Throughout the season, Annalise manipulates her old girlfriend, Eve Rothlo, to save her current boyfriend, Nate Lahey. When Annalise's relationship with Eve ends, viewers are meant to feel empathetic towards Eve—as she is the nice white lesbian who has been hurt by the 'sociopathic' bisexual black women. We are supposed to assume Annalise's relationship with Eve is one of the few times she displayed love and feelings. Here, Annalise's character reinforces many violent tropes about bisexual persons and black women. She is presented as immoral, manipulative, and sometimes evil, which are traits that have been used to dehumanize and further marginalize black women, often being used to 'justify' colonial violence (Kelly 1972; Memmi, 2006).

Following a similar genre style as *How to Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife* (Scott et al., 2009) is an American legal and political drama television series that first aired in

September 2009 on CBS. Winning numerous Emmy Awards and Golden Globe Awards², *The Good Wife* established itself as one of the television series with the most accolades on primetime television. The series centers Alicia Florrick, the wife of Peter North, Cook County's State Attorney, as she returns to her career in law after a highly public sex and political scandal involving her husband. Unlike *How To Get Away With Murder*, which follows one plotline throughout the entire season, *The Good Wife* is based on a different case every episode. The first episode introduces bisexual character Kalinda Sharma, played by actor Archie Panjabi, as one of Alicia's colleagues. Kalinda is fiercely private, occasionally physically violent, and manipulative. Throughout the series Kalinda has various relationships with both women and men, and is characterized as using and manipulating these partners for personal gain, often because they can help her with a case. She is represented as very mysterious, often dodging people's questions about who she is and why she wants to know certain information, playing into corporate media's dragon lady stereotype of Asian women (Larson, 2012). In the series' first season, when asking to see evidence pertaining to a case, the person leading her to the school locker which possibly contains evidence asked, "if you're not a cop and you're not campus security then who are you?" to which she responds, "Kalinda", alluding to her mysterious and dangerous air. She often is assigned to follow people, hoping to take compromising pictures that will prove their guilt, a practice the viewer is supposed to associate with her untrustworthiness and being a supposedly sneaky character. The audience is asked to see this sneakiness as yet another aspect that underlies her sexual deviance as a racialized bisexual woman. In other words, it comes easy to her. Kalinda plays into the mysterious femme fatale trope, as she literally

² This show has won other awards such as the Emmy for Outstanding Lead actress in a Drama Series in 2011 and 2014 and the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Television Series-Drama in 2009.

transforms into a spy to get ahead, often flirting with people to gain knowledge. The series progresses as the lawyers at the firm use Kalinda to do their ‘dirty work’, so to speak, while giving her little to no credit for the work she does. On many occasions, the information she obtains, often using questionable tactics, allows her colleagues to win their cases. While considered indispensable to the fictional legal firm, Kalinda is nevertheless hidden, unknowable, and seen as dangerous and tantalizing. Her bisexuality is part of the titillation central to her portrayal as the person with the loose moral code.

Aired on the same network as *The Good Wife*, CBS, *Person of Interest* (Nolan et al., 2011) is an American crime drama that centers a mysterious billionaire computer programmer by the name of Harold Finch who develops a computer system for the U.S. government after September 11th, 2001. The series premiere amassed 13.33 million viewers in 2011, raising to 14.28 million viewers for its season two premiere in 2012 (Seidman, 2011; Kondoljy, 2012), showing the growing success of the series. The system Harold created is specifically designed to obtain all sources of information to predict and identify people planning terrorist attacks, thus making it of importance to the U.S. government following the 9/11 attacks. Eventually, the system, known as ‘The Machine’, develops into a highly adaptable artificial intelligence, leaving Harold to confront moral and ethical questions regarding the system he created. In the second season of the series, we are introduced to Sameen Shaw, played by Sarah Shahi. Sameen Shaw becomes a main character in seasons three through five. She is an *Intelligence Support Activity* assassin on the run after being betrayed by her employers. Sameen joins Finch’s team at the end of the second season once she learns about ‘The Machine’. Sameen describes herself as having a personality disorder making her unable to feel or express common emotions such as fear or sadness. Sameen had previously finished medical school, but left after being scrutinized for her

lack of emotionality during her residency. She displayed a lack of concern for whether her patients lived or died and was deemed unfit to be a doctor. Her character is portrayed as very unstable and tortured and though there is a mention of her past physical relationships with men to fulfill her physical needs, her relationship with Root, a computer hacker and former contract killer, is the only relationship revealed to the audience in the series. In the fifth season of the series, Shaw kills an ex con guilty of killing her lover Root. In this scene, the man tells Shaw that “it was a job. Nothing personal” to which Shaw responds “I had a few jobs like that myself. In fact, a few years ago I would have just killed you without even a second thought but then I met some people—some good people—and they taught me the value of life.” The man pleads, saying that “those people would not want you to kill me”, to which Shaw agrees, following with “but they’re all dead,” before shooting the man dead (Semel, Nolan, & Thé, 2016). In this particular scene, Shaw is depicted as immoral—knowing ‘right’ from ‘wrong’ despite still choosing to shoot the man. This scene also plays into the trope of the ‘murderous’ lesbian, which depicts queer women as unstable and evil, villainizing their love for another woman.

In this series, the queer femmes are either represented as unstable or as criminals. Similar to Kalinda’s character in *The Good Wife* and Annalise’s character in *How To Get Away With Murder*, Sameen is portrayed as manipulative, immoral, and lacking emotional depth; doing whatever it takes to get what she wants, which is deeply rooted in colonial ideas of racialized persons, especially racialized women (Kelly, 1972; Memmi, 2006). Although these three aforementioned characters are presented as immoral and manipulative, their characters are also exploited for their knowledge and work to forward the protagonists’ storyline. The exploitation of racialized women’s knowledge has been produced through the gatekeeping of ‘legitimate’ knowledge, which has always been afforded to Western white-centric ways of knowing (Hills

Collins, 1986). Due to associations between what is considered ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ knowledge, this produces the exploitation of racialized women’s work, often leading them to not get ‘credit’ for the work they have done.

Imposters (Brooks & Adelstein, 2017), a ‘dark’ comedy, first airing in February 2017 on the Bravo cable network follows con artist Maddie, portrayed by Inbar Lavi, who, with the help of her teammates, gets involved in a series of relationships with both men and women before stealing all their money and essentially robbing them of everything they have. Following in the footsteps of critically acclaimed television series such as *Jane the Virgin*, *Master of None*, and *Insecure*—*Imposters* earned the coveted 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes for its first season. Within the series, Maddie’s character is portrayed as unfaithful, promiscuous, manipulative, and evil. The plot advances as her next victim threatens her work because Maddie finds herself becoming genuinely attracted to this man. To complicate this, the first season of the series centers three of her past relationships with Ezra, Richard, and Jules respectively. Eventually, all three realize they have been victims of a scam artist. The series follows their attempts to track her down. The idea of Maddie being an imposter is principally based on her status as a con artist but is also repeated by the character’s bisexuality. The association of bisexual persons duplicitousness is prominent in mainstream media representations, which only intensifies their vilification (Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, these women are presented as promiscuous, unfaithful, traitorous, and sometime murderous.

Writer and activist Shiri Eisner refers to the negative portrayal of bisexual women in the media as a case of the “bisexual femme fatale” (Johnson, p.154), which she states reflects a willingness to use female bisexual characters as “vehicles for themes and to employ bisexual tropes to create a convincing characterization of recklessness and evil” (Johnson, p.383). As Jane

Caputi and Lauri Sagle (2004) argue “much of the standard imagery associated with the white femme fatale is actually rooted in colonialist and racist projections about the women of color” (p.90). They are represented as lacking morality, which can be associated with many colonial ideologies that posit racialized persons as primitive, backwards, and subhuman (Kelly, 1972; Memmi, 2006). According to Caputi and Sagle, the very characteristics that make white women bad or *noir* in these femme fatale roles are similar characteristics that posit racialized femmes as primitive, emotional, lustful, violent, sexuality aggressive, having lesbian tendencies, and corrupt (2004). Using *How to Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife*, *Imposters*, and *Person of Interest* as examples of representations of racialized queer femmes, specifically racialized bisexual femmes, we can see how characteristics of the femme fatale are being projected onto them and how problematic these representations can be.

When Racialized Queer Femmes are *Really* Bad

In contrast to the characters in *How to Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife* and *Person of Interest*, Shana’s character within the series *Pretty Little Liars* is purely an antagonist. *Pretty Little Liars* (King et al., 2010) is an American mystery teen drama that premiered on ABC Family in June 2010. Winning numerous Teen Choice Awards from 2010 until 2017 when the series finale aired, *Pretty Little Liars* is proven to be a longstanding favourite television drama amongst teenagers and young adults. The show centers four girls: Spencer Hastings, Aria Montgomery, Hanna Marin, and Emily Fields, whose friend group crumbles after the alleged murder of their fifth best friend, Alison DiLaurentis. The storyline thickens as, on the anniversary of the alleged murder, a mysterious antagonist named ‘A’ begins text messaging the girls, threatening and torturing them for the mistakes they have made in the past. One of the

series' main characters, Emily Fields, 'comes out' (King et al., 2011)³ as a lesbian early on in the first season⁴ and her character's storyline throughout the first few seasons centers her rocky relationship with her conservative family. Originally introduced as the jock girl of her group, Emily has long dark hair and adopts a simple, sometimes sporty, style. Throughout the series she acts as the kind and loyal 'girl next door'. Emily dates a few secondary characters, two of whom are killed off as plot devices. One of Emily's love interests throughout the series is Shana Fring, played by actress Aeriell Miranda. Shana, whose character first appears in the second season comes to be one of the series' main antagonists. While pursuing a relationship with Emily, we come to know that Shana is a member of the 'B team',⁵ masquerading as the series' main antagonist, 'A'. The reasoning behind Shana's manipulation is her love for fellow 'B team' member, Jenna. The love Shana has for Jenna fuels her hatred of the four main characters in an attempt to seek justice for the main characters' wrongdoings to Jenna. Shana's character is portrayed as manipulative, cold, murderous and stopping at nothing to seek revenge on the main characters—reflecting corporate media's use of racialized queer characters as a vehicle for evil (Johnston, 2016). In her last scenes in the series, Shana shoots Aria's love interest and locks the four main characters in a lodge before setting fire to it to kill them. Shortly after, Shana is killed off the show by one of the four main characters, Aria (King et al., 2014). Instead of being depicted as manipulative for personal and career oriented gain, she is simply presented as evil with murderous and sadistic intent. Here we see many racist colonial tropes about black persons resonated in Shana's character, such as her sadistic evil intent. This theme repeats a long legacy

³ I use quotation marks here and elsewhere while referring to characters' "coming out" storyline to signify the complexities of "coming out" and to illustrate that this is not a binary of being out or in "the closet".

⁴ Emily then realizes she is bisexual later in the series.

⁵ The "B Team" or "The Alliance" is a group with a goal of hurting the four main characters, otherwise known as "The Liars".

of linking black women as primitive to further justify the colonial project (Kelly, 1972; Memmi, 2006). Similar to the femme fatale, Shana is portrayed as backwards and lacking morality as she will stop at nothing to kill the four main characters, presenting Shana's lesbian love as obsessive within the series and fueling her murderous rage.

Comparatively, another trope utilized within this series is implicit within the portrayal of Emily's parents as conservative and not accepting of her coming out as a lesbian. Emily's parents, who are some of the few racialized persons within the series, are the only parents who are not accepting of Emily. In contrast, Emily's three best friends, and their (white) parents, are all represented as very accepting of Emily. Here, a contemporary imperialist racist gaze is put on Emily's parents in which 'Othered' cultures are seen as "less progressive" or "more homophobic" than (white) cultures (Haritaworn, Tauqir, & Erdem, 2006; Nair, 2008; El-Tayeb, 2012).

Gay Best Friends and Sassy Black Girls: Racialized Queer Femmes as Sidekicks

The theme of racialized queer femme antagonist is also perpetuated in *Glee* (Murphy, 2009), an American musical drama that premiered on the Fox Network in May 2009. Ending its sixth and final season in May 2015, the series has been critically acclaimed and won numerous awards including Golden Globes awards in 2010 and 2011. Ratings for *Glee* have been impressive for Fox Network, with the series' premiere average, garnering 9.6 million viewers (Seidman, 2009) and rising to 13.6 million viewers in April 2010 when the series resumed (Gorman, 2010). The series revolves around William McKinley High School's competitive glee club, New Directions. With varying storylines touching on topics of bullying, sexuality, the recession and poverty, and race, *Glee* was well received by audiences for its honest portrayal of contemporary social issues. The series challenges the archetypal high school drama, blurring the

lines between categories of difference in high school cliques by incorporating members of various cliques within the glee club. Composed of talented misfits working alongside more socially popular characters who are coerced into joining to round out the club's numbers and vocal sections, the club offers a space for these students to interact. In the second season of the series, Santana Lopez, played by actress Naya Rivera, is added as a primary character, as she is best friends with one of the main characters of the series, Quin Fabray. Santana is a cheerleader at McKinley High who struggles with, and eventually comes to terms, with her queerness. Her character fits into many cheerleading stereotypes pervasive in high school drama series or films, wherein cheerleaders are often portrayed as the 'mean girl,' the 'slut' and as 'an expression of popularity, desirability and ditziness', acting as reminders of the social order of high school hierarchies (Duca, 2015). Santana is beautiful and popular; she is portrayed as someone who is quick to pass judgement, sassy, short tempered, and a bully. Similar to the cheerleader archetype, Santana is known to flaunt her spot on the social ladder, often using promiscuity to secure her place in the high school's social scene. She has several romantic relationships throughout the series, briefly dating two high school jocks, Puck and Finn. In addition to these love interests, Santana also maintains a friends-with-benefits situation with Brittany, a fellow cheerleader. As the storyline develops, Santana comes out as a lesbian in the third season of the series, which concludes with Santana and Brittany's wedding.

True Blood (Ball et al., 2008) is an American dark fantasy horror television series that premiered in September 2008. The series centers Sookie Stackhouse, played by Anna Paquin, a telepathic waitress living in Louisiana two years after the invention of a synthetic blood has allowed vampires to essentially 'come out' allowing them to engage openly in society. Sookie's lifelong friend and coworker, Tara, played by Rutina Wesley, is also one of the main

protagonists of the series. Acclaimed for its political commentary through portraying vampires as a marginalized group discriminated against by non-vampires, *True Blood*'s seven seasons is a testament to its popularity amongst the series' long list of awards such as two Emmy Awards in 2009 and a Golden Globe award in 2008. Similar to Annalise's character in *How to Get Away With Murder* and Kalinda's characters in *The Good Wife*, Tara is portrayed throughout the series as extremely blunt and confrontational, while also being portrayed as a skilled fighter.

Throughout the series, Tara's character has relationships with both men and women before she is killed off in the seventh season of the series. Her character is depicted as cynical and protective, often hating those who cause her friends harm. There have been many discussions surrounding Tara's death, with audiences exacerbated with the series' perpetuation of what GLAAD calls the 'bury your gays' trope (Ray-Ramos, 2017). This trope illustrates that although there has been an increase in lesbian representation in television, there has also been an increase in the number of characters that are killed off their respective series, Tara falling within this category (Hogan, 2016). In the past two years, 62 gay and bi women characters were killed off in North American television series (Ray-Ramos, 2017).⁶ The death of these characters usually occurs following a moment of happiness or the consummation of a same-sex relationship (Dibdin, 2017) with most deaths not serving any purpose beyond advancing storylines of a usually cisgender, straight main character (Shakeri, 2017). This trope reinforces the notion that gay and bisexual characters are not allowed happy endings and that their characters do not need to be whole and complex.

⁶ Although I am focusing my analysis here on the characters killed in the last two years, this trope has a long history in corporate media productions. Pulp lesbian novels in the 1940s and 1950s exhibited these same tropes, often following the storyline of the woman who falls in love with another woman with no possibility of a happy ending. The most common ways for a relationship to end in many of these novels was for one of the women to die, for one of them to return to a straight relationship, or for one of the women to go insane (Yates, 2011; McConnaughy, 2016).

Similar to Tara's death on *True Blood*, two of Emily's love interests in *Pretty Little Liars*, including Shana, are also killed off the series.

Tara's cousin, Lafayette, played by Nelsan Ellis, is also a primary black queer femme character in *True Blood*. Lafayette's character is charismatic, flamboyant, and often used throughout the series as comic relief for viewers. He is portrayed as a likable person who has experienced hardships such as being ousted from his mother's home for being gay. Lafayette is a cook at the restaurant where Sookie and Tara work, though he does partake in various illegal activities such as dealing various drugs, particularly V, which is highly addictive vampire blood. Throughout the series, we learn that V is an intense drug that gives vampires super strength abilities and is a vampire's life essence. Consequently, this puts Lafayette at risk due to the vampires he encounters while selling the drug. Lafayette is the only black male main character throughout the series, thus there are racialized implications that he is a drug dealer. Although Lafayette's character subverts the (hyper)masculine elements of this stereotype with his flamboyant femininity, media representations such as Lafayette's character reinforces these violent racist stereotypes equating black men with crime, gangs, and drugs, which further contributes to black men being boxed into these roles within corporate media.

In "Should The 'Sassy Black Friend' Have This Place in Hollywood", Afropunk highlights the trope representing Black women (and femmes) as sidekicks and 'best friends' to the white main character (Candy, 2012). Appearing in numerous films and television series in the 1990s, this stereotypical representation known simply as 'The Black Best Friend' trope is repeated in films such as *Clueless* (Berg, Lawrence, Rudin, Schroeder, & Heckerling, 1995), *Save The Last Dance* (Cort, Madden, & Carter, 2001), *Eat Pray Love* (Pitt et al., 2010), *The Devil Wears Prada* (Finerman & Frankel, 2006) and in television series such as *True Blood* (Ball

et al., 2008), *Glee* (Murphy et al., 2009), and *The Vampire Diaries* (Williamson et al., 2009). The Black best friends mentioned in those titles often play the same role: the white main character's best friend, often sassy, outspoken, and aggressive. Along with the 'sassy black friend' stereotype, Lafayette is also subjected to the 'gay best friend' stereotype—a stereotype pervasive in corporate media representations of gay men. The gay best friend has specific implications for femme gay men. While masculine gay men often have leading roles in television and film, such as in *Brokeback Mountain* (Ossana, Schamus, & Lee, 2005) and *Fourth Man Out* (Avinoam, Hogarth, Mellick, & Nackman, 2015), femme gay men are often seen in supporting roles reinforcing the sidekick motif. Examples of this role can be seen in films such as *Clueless* (Berg, Lawrence, Rudin, Schroeder, & Heckerling, 1995), *Mean Girls* (Michaels & Walters, 2004), *Easy A* (Devine & Gluck, 2010) and *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Halfon, Smith, Malkovich, & Chbosky, 2012) and in television such as *Chewing Gum* (Rolph & Hughes, 2015), *Sex and The City* (Parker, King, Star, & Melfi, 1998), and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Fey, Carlock, Richmond, Burditt, & Miner, 2015). Similar to the sassy black friend stereotype, the gay (femme) best friend often acts as comic relief and serves as the main character's spiritual guide, adding a dose of 'snappy humour' and 'witty insights' (Scheffler, 2015). This stereotype more so depicts the gay best friend as an accessory and not so much as a person but rather an object to be possessed (Scheffler, 2015). Lafayette's character exists at the intersections of these two persuasive corporate media stereotypes.

In *Glee*, Santana was also introduced as one of the white main character's best friend. Similarly, the Tara and Lafayette characters in *True Blood* fit the sassy Black best friend trope. This representation of racialized persons as sidekicks to the white main character illustrates various colonial tropes. An example of this association is the *The Lone Ranger* franchise.

Originally a television series named *The Lone Ranger* airing on *ABC Television* in 1949, *The Lone Ranger* and its storyline has been recreated in numerous films such as *The Lone Ranger* (Wrather & Heisler, 1956), *The Lone Ranger and The Lost City of Gold* (Harris & Selander, 1958), and most recently Disney's 2013 remake of *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer & Verbinski, 2013). The lone ranger has become a prominent fictional 'hero'; the story of a white man who 'tames' the Wild West with his 'trusty' Indigenous guide, Tonto. Not only does the *The Lone Ranger* franchise rely on various detrimental stereotypes of the homogeneous and imaginary Indian, but it also informed the pervasive stereotype of racialized persons as the sidekick to the white protagonist in corporate media productions (Fitzgerald, 2013). We are never told what nation Tonto is part of throughout the movie, perpetuating the violent stereotype that all Indigenous peoples are homogenous solidifying the purposeful erasure of Tonto's heritage. First published in 1992, *The Imaginary Indian* illustrates the history of the image of the 'Indian' in popular Canadian culture. Within his book, historian Danial Francis illustrates how General Motor's use of the name Pontiac for a car reinforces this notion of the Imaginary Indian, which can also be applied to Tonto's character *within The Lone Ranger* franchise:

Pontiac is not an isolated example. He represents, in fact, a final stage in the creation of the Imaginary Indian. Not only are Indians used to represent what non-Natives think about Indians, they are appropriated by non-Natives as meaningful symbols of their own culture (p.172).

Francis explains how Pontiac, like many of the images of Indians which appeared in advertisements were intended to be 'positive'—like Tonto's representation as the white main character's 'trusty' guide—and how these representations "reinforced the belief that the best Indian was the historical Indian":

They reveal a widespread admiration for certain qualities which the public associated with “Indianness”: Bravery, physical prowess, natural virtue. Of course, these were qualities Indians were thought to have possessed in the distant past, before contact with the White man. Advertisements did not feature Indians in suits or dresses; they did not highlight life on the reserve or on the other side of the tracks. Instead they showed the classic Indian head in feathers and headdresses or the Indian princess in beaded doeskin (p.176).

Francis points to advertising’s use of stereotypes to reinforce various images of Indigenous people. While imaginary Indians became one of the icons of consumer society in Canada, the result was “a reduction of aboriginal cultures to a series of slogans, a set of simplistic and patronizing attitudes” (p.175).

Although there are clear links between how the characters are represented and colonial and biphobia legacies, when analyzing corporate media productions we must also account for the nuances of racialized femme representations. These characters do rely on the aforementioned tropes and stereotypes and their presence within our cultural landscape prevents a totalizing erasure of racialized queer femme subjectivities, shifting who gets to be visible even within these problematic roles. Many, such as Viola Davis, have discussed these complexities, celebrating their presence within media productions. Davis, referencing her role in *How to Get Away With Murder* in her acceptance speech at the 2015 SAG awards asserting that “the sexualized, messy, mysterious woman could be a 49 year old, dark skinned, African-American woman who looks like me” (TNT, 2015). It is not enough for us to comment on the epistemic violence these representations of racialized queer femmes produce without understanding the complexities and benefits of having racialized queer femmes in these roles to begin with.

Resisting The Tide: Challenging Racialized Queer Femme Stereotypes

The explosion in popularity of web series at the turn of the 21st century, with shows centering the experiences and lives of racialized persons, especially racialized queer persons, has aided in producing content accounting for the intersections of their subjectivities. In the last decade, these web-based series challenged the ubiquitous stereotypes of racialized queer femmes discussed above and depicted in corporate media. In this next section, I address some web series that resist stereotypes sustained by corporate media's idea of what it means to be a racialized queer person, such as in shows like *Brown Girls*, *The Peculiar Kind*, and *Easy*.

Brown Girls (2017), written by Fatimah Asghar, directed and produced by Sam Bailey, and presented by OpenTV, explores the lives of two young racialized women. The series centers Leila, a South Asian-American writer coming into her queerness, and Patricia, a Black-American musician struggling to commit to a job, her art, and relationships. Released in February 2017, *Brown Girls* was well received by audiences for its portrayal of friendship, love, and the messiness of navigating young adulthood. Discussed in well-known media platforms such as *Elle*, *Deadline*, *Jezebel*, *Fader*, *BET*, *TIME* and *Huffington Post*, the web series garnered much attention; so much that it has been picked up for an HBO series of its own, following in the footsteps of other high-profile web series that caught HBO's eye such as Issa Rae's *Insecure* and Katja Blichfeld and Ben Sinclair's *High Maintenance* (Tiffany, 2017).

The first episode of *Brown Girls* opens with Leila, played by Nabila Hossain, who is having an intense conversation with her aunt on the phone in which her aunt urges her to go to the mosque. As she hangs up, the camera pans to a naked woman lying in Leila's bed (Asghar & Bailey, 2017). The writer of the show elaborates on how she had never seen a character like that on television before and why it is important, stating in an interview with *Time* magazine that "A

lot of people come from intersections that get erased on media platforms”. She follows: “If we can shed light that these people exist and are real, and have many different personalities, it will expand the definition of what some of these identities mean” (Gajanan, 2017, para. 4). Fatimah also adds that Muslim characters have long been underrepresented in media, as they are constantly “confined to roles like terrorists and gas station owner” (Gajanan, 2017, para. 5). Speaking to media representation, she states, “If I was 15, 16, whatever and got to see these versions of myself on TV, I would have felt a lot less lonelier. It’s more important now because you see different people of colour coming together” (Gajanan, 2017, para. 13). In an interview with Jezebel, Asghar explains that she began working on the script in 2015 to “create a world that was absent from her childhood and adolescence”, feeling like she had never seen a TV show or movie that accurately represented her friendships or communities (Ramgopal, 2017, para. 3). It was Ashar’s goal to create a series that felt honest, “that represented characters of colour as full people, that allowed them to make mistakes and laugh and love each other” (Ramgopal, 2017, para. 3), adding “what I was trying to do is be like, wait a minute, the majority of my friendships are with people of colour, with queer people of colour. That’s where a lot of my communities have been built, and this is what a lot of my world feels like. And I don’t ever get to see that” (Ramgopal, 2017, para. 7). Throughout the Jezebel interview, Bailey, the web series’ producer, discusses that she wanted to show that vulnerability that “you rarely see brown and black women have,” adding that “especially black women. They never get to be vulnerable or messy” (Ramgopal, 2017, para. 5). Web series thus become an important tool for racialized queer femmes to criticize existing structures while creating and engaging with these discourses and dialogues within their own work.

Another web series that subverts many corporate media stereotypes and tropes of racialized queer persons is *The Peculiar Kind* (Casson & Layne, 2012), a web series turned documentary, airing from 2012 to 2014. The series explores everyday issues through the lens of racialized queer women in Brooklyn and is produced by and for racialized queer women. The aim of the web series, per the filmmakers, is to address topics that are not usually seen on television; topics such as sex toys, safe sex, community, religion and spirituality, family and more as it pertains to racialized queer women (Loren, 2012). The filmmakers, Alexis Casson and Mursi Layne, are Black lesbians aiming to create a space for racialized queer women in the media. During an interview with *Ebony.com*, the duo noted that “There is such a narrow portrayal of queer women of colour that we felt the need to document the conversations, thoughts and opinions of our community” (2012, para. 3). The documentary derived from the web series explores race, education, gender performance, and queer persons in the media; a narrative often absent from many corporate media productions.

The presence or absence of representations of gender, race, and sexuality in the media (all its formats) are not inconsequential. The impact of these media representations was made especially evident during my interviews outlined in chapter three. When web series are created as a means of representing the lives of persons who are not given that platform in corporate media it has the power to build community. In an interview with *Colorlines*, Asghar, the producer of *Brown Girls*, stated “I want people to see the joy of being a person of colour, the joy of these communities, the joy of this friendship”, explaining that often “[...] we see women of colour just as a sidekick, but not really a full, three-dimensional character, or they’re only with other people of their own race. I think there’s a thing that gets lost in terms of what happens in friendship between cultural boundaries. Displaying them is really important to me” (Adams,

2017, para. 16). Web series are a way for marginalized persons to portray the community that they are a part of—not as a way to essentialize these communities, but to offer a portrayal other than what is offered in corporate media. In these shows, we encounter characters that are complex, allowing viewers to feel a sense of solidarity and community with the characters, producers, writers, and viewers.

Although web series have been successful at producing content by and for racialized queer women, there has also been noteworthy corporate media representations of racialized queer femmes recently. In September 2016, *Easy*, a comedy-drama anthology series written, directed, edited, and produced by Joe Swanberg was released on Netflix. The series explored different characters throughout each episode, intertwining the lives of the characters as the series progresses. The second episode of the first season, entitled “Vegan Cinderella”, (Swanberg, 2016) examined the lives of Chase, played by Kiersey Clemons, and Jo, played by Jacqueline Toboni. The episode opens with Chase locking eyes with Jo while in a crowd at a music venue then quickly forwards to the two of them passionately kissing in Jo’s apartment. The opening scene, as well as the rest of the episode of *Easy*, is refreshing because it subverts many tropes of queer women in television and films as it bypasses the coming out or questioning phase characters often go through. *Easy* depicts a love story between two women who already know they are queer, leaving room for the plot to focus on their relationship rather than depictions of the ‘torment and angst of coming out’ often seen in corporate media productions. In films such as *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld, Zions, & Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), *A Perfect Ending* (Eagle & Conn, 2012), and *Elena Undone* (Clark, Disalvatore, & Conn, 2010), each plot revolves around the emotional turmoil a ‘heterosexual’ character goes through upon meeting a

woman she falls in love with. *Easy* is unlike these films, offering a more realistic depiction of queer love between women.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored racialized queer femme representations in corporate media, specifically within the series *How To Get Away With Murder*, *The Good Wife*, *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *True Blood*, *Person of Interest*, and *Imposters*. While those series do deploy black and brown bodies as representations of queer femmes—disrupting the prevalent representation of white, wealthy, queer femmes in corporate media—these series reinforce numerous violent tropes of racialized persons and bisexual persons. The racialized queer femme characters are depicted primarily as manipulative, evil, and immoral—reinforcing many violent colonial and heterosexist legacies. I have also offered examples of web series that resist the problematic depictions found within many corporate media productions. Web series such as *Brown Girls*, *The Peculiar Kind*, and *Easy*, are all examples of media productions made primarily by and for racialized persons and racialized queer persons that offer representations of racialized queer femmes that do not rely on violent, racist, and biphobic stereotypes and tropes. A lack of accurate representations in popular culture creates a sense of invisibility and erasure. It is not enough to simply represent racialized queer femme characters in media, but to accurately represent the complexities of their lives without relying on tropes and stereotypes to do so.

In the following chapter, I will discuss a collection of experiences and stories recounted to me by racialized queer femmes. The chapter explores the narrators' understandings and descriptions of femme subjectivity; descriptions of racialized femmephobia; questions concerning community involvement and violent experiences in (white) queer spaces; questions regarding cultural representations and corporate media; as well as participants' ways of coping and caring for oneself. Their stories permeate this thesis, and serve to illustrate the manner in

which understandings of femme subjectivity must account for an analysis of racialization and racism. Femme subjectivity and experiences of femmephobia are not experienced through a singular (white) lens and is further complicated by a multitude of factors, including corporate media representations of what a queer femme 'looks like.'

CHAPTER FOUR: Femmephobia, Femme Invisibility, and Experiences of Racialized Queer Femmes

Do not tell us we are invisible; if you can't see us, you aren't looking.

—Shanay Venicia,

Rethinking Ideas Around Femininity: A Queer Femme of Color's Perspective

This chapter highlights ten racialized queer femmes' stories and experiences pertaining to femmephobia and femme invisibility. I consider how corporate media representations, the epistemic violence that comes with misrepresentations, and the lack of representation inform queer racialized femmes' subjectivities. Racialized queer femmes experience femmephobia in conjunction with their experiences of systemic racism. I examine how their invisibility as femmes is always informed by their invisibility as racialized queer persons as well—complicating the narrative that there is only one essentialized way to experience femmephobia and femme invisibility.

Two major themes emerged out of all my interviews, the first being discussions of invisibility and epistemic violence. Participants' responses varied but for clarity I have subdivided each theme into categories. The first category focuses on descriptions of femmephobia that emphasize patriarchal understandings of femininity and a devaluation of femininity. Here, participants spoke to the ways misogyny informs how femininity is read and interpreted onto femmes both within and outside of queer communities and spaces. The second category encompasses descriptions of femmephobia as it relates to femme invisibility. This section illustrates how femmes, who often pass as straight, must navigate their subjectivities in different ways, many of them outlining their feelings of having to 'prove' their queerness to others. The third category explores narrators' experiences with corporate media representations

of queer racialized femmes. This section outlines the ways that, for many racialized femmes, corporate media representation strengthens their invisibility, informing much of how they navigate the world. The fourth category builds off the third, showcasing narrators' discussions of how certain colonial tropes inform their invisibility. Here, many participants discussed the pervasive racist stereotype that racialized persons are not liberal-minded, at length. The fifth category is meant to encompass the previous four—illustrating that for the narrators, femmephobia is always racialized as it is informed by the femmephobic and colonial tropes that cannot be separated from one another. It is important to note that although I have categorized responses for clarity, I understand these experiences do not occur separate from one another and that instances of femmephobia and invisibility for racialized queer femmes incur racialized implications. The second overarching theme emerging out of the interviews were descriptions and understandings of the narrators' femme subjectivities. Faced with the epistemic violence surrounding their subjectivity, many of the narrators claimed their femme status as a political reclamation.

“We’re Just So Afraid of People Showing Their Femininity”¹: Negotiating Femmephobia as Racialized Queer Femmes

Serano (2007) uses the concept effemimania to explain how transmisogyny is informed by sexism. She thus defines effemimania as the stigma and violence associated with male expressions of femininity. In this vein, many scholars have discussed the concept of ‘feminativity’, which has been identified as the devaluation of femininity within queer male communities and spaces (Bailey, 1996; Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, & Specht, 2014). Much of the literature discussing the devaluation of femininity outlines the implications on feminine men, trans women, and transfeminine persons. Few works have explored the devaluation of

¹ Beatrice, personal communication, September 9, 2016.

femininity within queer femme women and queer femme non-binary communities. Femmes have been subjected to epistemological gatekeeping within queer and femme theorizing which lead to the systemic erasure of their works and voices. This contributed to the silencing of femme individuals, specifically racialized femme individuals, which led to the erasure of femme figures as radical creators of knowledge and resistance within queer communities and spaces (Hills Collins, 1986; Christian, 1987).

Many of the participants described their experiences of femmephobia as informed both by a devaluation of femininity as well as a lack of visibility. Mika mentions this experience in her interview stating that, “femmephobia is definitely real with both men and women alike there’s still the whole ‘you need to not to be girly’ expectation” (personal communication, September 2, 2016). Beatrice gave a similar response when asked to describe femmephobia: “I think it goes both ways with men and women because we’re just so afraid of people showing their femininity and I think it’s sad” (personal communication, September 5, 2016). The narrators’ responses exemplified that femmephobia, and a devaluation of femininity, transcends gender binaries—describing it as something that exists for both men and women. Sarah related femmephobia to misogyny and sexism:

I have to admit, like a lot of it is probably tied to notions of misogyny like I know that being a woman is not the same as being femme but there’s a lot of underlying sort of assumptions that are quite tied (personal communication, September 12, 2016).

Others spoke specifically to their own experiences within their respective cultures. For example, Mars spoke to their experiences growing up femme in hypermasculine surroundings,

Femmephobia I guess the way I see it for myself is just being ashamed of like calling myself feminine or embracing like any sort of femininity in myself. I guess the way that

that sort of manifests, like, I grew up around a lot of hypermasculinity and in Trinidadian culture that's like a huge thing as well. I guess in most cultures it's like men are the breadwinners, they're strong, they're the most dominant, the most vocal [...] I always kinda wanted to be treated in that sort of way too and so I kind of was scared to be associated with any sort of femininity (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Many narrators echoed Mars' conceptualization of femmephobia as 'being ashamed' of calling oneself feminine or embracing femininity—alluding to a hierarchy of masculinity and femininity. Natasha stated that: "I would say it's like seeing things as like traditionally feminine as inferior or weaker or frivolous" (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Others, such as Afiakyeeah, spoke to how we are socialized to believe that femininity is "wrong" and "not normal" and how this construction of femininity informs femmephobia:

So, femmephobia, for me, is def the idea that anyone who is feminine or anything associated with femininity is inherently wrong or against the normal, which is obviously like masculinity [...] anything that is like the opposite of what feminine is and so because all of the good things are associated with like masculineness and men and roughness [...] femmephobia is basically this idea that like everything that's like femme is bad and must be avoided and scary and not understood so I think that's what femmephobia is (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Many of the narrators' definitions of femmephobia echoed Serano's (2007) concept of effemimania. This devaluation of femininity also informs how femmes are perceived in queer and feminist spaces through discourses that assert femmes, and femininity, as "submission to the patriarchal control over the female body" (Mishali, 2014). Natasha accounted for this experience suggesting that: "It's just feminine is treated as weaker and it's really pervasive, even within

feminist groups” (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Early women’s liberation and feminist spaces were grounded in binary understanding of feminism and femininity, allowing only masculinity and androgyny to be associated with feminism and queerness (Millet, 1997; Rowbotham 1973; Dworkin, 1987). For the narrators I interviewed, discourses that pressures femmes to reject femininity and embrace androgyny to be accepted play a significant role in queer spaces, and this is further reinforced by media representations of ‘what a queer person looks like’. For the narrators, and building off arguments forwarded by Serano (2007) and Mishali (2014), casting femininity as bad, as something that must be avoided and as something scary operates to produce a hierarchy between femininity and masculinity wherein femininity is lesser than masculinity—this also serves to erase the fluidity that exists within these subjectivities. Although femme subjectivity is not informed by womanhood, many of the narrators alluded to misogyny as a foundation on which femmephobia is built and reproduced.

In the following section, I outline how, for racialized queer femmes, experiences of invisibility and erasure are also used to describe femmephobic experiences. Femmephobia ought not to be understood simply as misogyny or as a devaluation of femininity, but as a complex interplay between patriarchal understandings of femininity and notions of invisibility, passing, and who gets to be identified and read as queer.

“Oh but You’ve Never Been with a Woman, How Do You Know You’d Like it?”²: Faking Femme Subjectivity

Many narrators framed their experiences of femmephobia as feeling invisible as queer persons and having a sense of constantly being questioned about their queerness and presentation. Experiences of ‘not being taken seriously’ as racialized queer femmes were mentioned by several narrators, such as Anna, who recalls being asked “are you [suuuure]”

² Zoey, personal communication, September 2, 2016.

(personal communication, September 21, 2016). Other narrators addressed invisibility when asked to describe their experiences of femmephobia. Zoey uses the concept of ‘pillow queen’ to help explain her feelings of invisibility and the link to being a fake:

I know when I was dating women or starting to date women, whenever I would go up to them because I tend to look invisible, you know, peoples’ gaydars don’t just ping when I walk by so I have to present myself as, you know, I am queer, but when they find that out they don’t take me seriously because they have this idea of like a pillow queen where it’s like ‘oh you can’t be that gay’ because there’s no way you face discrimination there’s no way you could have understood how it feels to be one of us when it’s very much not the case (personal communication, September 2, 2016).

The term ‘pillow queen’ has historically been used to define femmes as ‘only’ being on the receiving end of sex and pleasure, while casting butches as the ones who ‘give’. This association of femmes as pillow queens reproduces understandings of femme as docile and passive, while representing butches as the ones who were ‘in control’ and ‘dominant’. Due to representations of the butch as the ‘authentic’ lesbian, this narrative resonates with early sexology writings categorizing the feminine lesbian as “somewhat narcissistic” (Nestle, 1992 p.143).

Femmes are constantly seen as faking it, or are not taken seriously within queer spaces. This experience is part of seeing femmes as imposters as ‘something they are not’, stemming from sexology literature categorizing both femmes and bisexual persons as ‘illegitimate’ identities (Nestle, 1993; Eisner, 2013). Femmes as imposter is then catapulted into corporate media with the emergence of the lesbian chic aesthetic (Koller, 2008). Both early sexology writings regarding femme subjectivity, and corporate media representations of chic lesbians, operate to erase femme subjectivity by insinuating that femmes are ‘heterosexual’ women having

superficial fun (Koller, 2008) and that the femme is “a little fool without any realizations of the warped sexuality which is prompting her actions” (Nestle, 1992, p.143). Consequently, cisgender femmes are constantly told they are imposter as queer women or ‘faking it’. This notion of imposter brings about assumptions that femmes are not *truly* queer—erasing their autonomy as queer persons and making it so that they constantly have to prove themselves. Throughout the interviews, many narrators described this feeling of having to prove or authenticate their queerness. For example, Zoey described her experience of this need to prove herself and struggling with feelings of worthiness: “Whenever I’m dating a male, people don’t see me as gay enough but then if I’m dating someone who identifies as femme, then I am deemed worthy because they think with being bi or pan that you get this hetero privilege” (personal communication, September 2, 2016). She followed with instances where she has felt as though she needed to “butch it up” when dating guys to remain accepted in queer spaces: “just so that I can kind of reassure people that I am still queer. This is still my identity and I appear a bit more feminine it does not take away from the fact that my sexuality still plays a role in that” (personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Here, Zoey asserts that even when she is presenting as femme that her “sexuality still plays a role in that” (personal communication, September 2, 2016), offering an understanding of femme that is inherently tied to her queerness. Many narrators outlined instances of femme invisibility as violent experiences they have had specifically in queer spaces and communities, such as Beatrice: “I always get comments from people saying ‘you’re so girly, how come? Did you just discover it?’ As if it was this weird phenomenon” (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Beatrice also expressed that she once had her lesbian friends tell her “oh well you’re not a real lesbian because you’re feminine” (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Sarah

also outlined instances of invisibility as a queer racialized femme within queer spaces: “I’ll be at a bar or something like that and I’ll have people ask me if I’m ‘actually really queer’ or like just hanging out at the queer bar for no reason” (personal communication, September 12, 2016).

Historically, femmephobia and femme invisibility has been forwarded and perpetuated by other queer persons, which can be seen through 1970s lesbian feminists’ attack on femininity and femmes, and the existence of this violence in current queer communities and organizing reflects this history.

A few narrators, like Natasha and Zoey, spoke to the ways in which bisexuality and pansexuality played into their invisibility as femmes:

I know I’ve felt questioned and kind of made to feel like I don’t, like I shouldn’t be identifying as queer [...] I’ve found that now I’m more comfortable asserting that I’m queer and so people kind of like backup but before they would be like ‘oh but you’ve never been with a woman, how do you know you’d like it’ and that sort of thing (Natasha, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

I went to the [gay] village cause that’s where they were holding pride and I was looking for a queer flag and when I was buying one a woman stopped me and she was like ‘oh so you’re gay’ and I was like ‘oh that’s not the label I would go for but uh, I am queer’ and she said ‘well if you’re queer then how are you not gay?’ and I was like yeah that would make me bi or pan and then she had this sour look on her face (Zoey, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Here, Natasha and Zoey’s responses are reflections of the historical legacy of biphobia both within queer spaces and communities and outside of them. The conflation of femme subjectivity and bisexuality has long legacies within medical and queer discourses (Eisner, 2013). For

femmes, bisexual persons, and bisexual femmes, a sense of credibility surrounds their subjectivities. Femmes have always been pathologized as bisexual within medical discourses and therefore are more ‘apt’ to conversion therapy in contrast to the ‘authentic’ and visible butch lesbians (Nestle, 1992). Many femmes, whether they identify as bisexual or pansexual or on the spectrum, are dubbed as slutty, promiscuous, and unfaithful based on this association between femmes and bisexuality (Eisner, 2013). This is in conversation with the representation of bisexual femmes as “femme fatales”, where bisexual characters are used to forward associations between bisexuality and immorality and evil (Johnston, 2016). As outlined by Zoey, “If they are femme then the common story line is femme character goes through a bad girl phase and starts experimenting” (personal communication, September 2, 2016). By frequently depicting bisexual femmes as vehicles for heterosexual pornographic fantasies (Caputi & Sagle, 2004), or as a means to vilify a bisexual character (Johnson, 2016), bisexual femme subjectivity gets erased.

Adding to racialized femme invisibility is the pervasive role corporate media plays in upholding and reinforcing the erasure of femme subjectivities. The impact of lesbian chic imagery made queer femmes visible, while rendering them invisible through these same images by depicting femmes as only having superficial lesbian experiences at parties (Koller, 2008). Although femmes gained (hyper)visibility through the ‘hot bi girl’ stereotype, this also contributes to erase bisexual femmes as authentic and autonomous. A few participants discussed representations of bisexual femmes in media, emphasizing how sexual fantasies are often connected to their representation, such as Afiakyeah:

I think it has a lot to do with like, who they see, even on TV as bisexual and it’s always a femme. You never see masculine women who are bisexual on purpose and it has to do with this whole sexual exoticness or this idea that like, we are like, bisexual women are

like these sexual fiends, confused, are only here to confuse you, or for like a threesome, so we're your gateway to a fantasy. I don't identify as bisexual for many reasons so yeah that's what it is. It's interesting (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Due to the ways that femmes, especially bisexual femmes, have been hypersexualized in corporate media productions (Ciasullo, 2001)—often acting as a “gateway to a fantasy”, (Afiakyeeah, personal communication, date)—Afiakyeeah notes within her response that masculine bisexual characters are never represented in our cultural landscape. Natasha echoed these same sentiments, commenting on the hot bi girl stereotype that is pervasive across representations of bisexual femmes, specifically discussing the nuances of the Kalinda character in *The Good Wife*,

The way they've presented her is that she's kind of a liar and she's mysterious and to me they've kind of made her fulfill that 'hot bi girl' stereotype but for me the fact that she was brown was a little more representation like at least you're showing that the “hot bi girl” can be brown I guess (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Here Natasha speaks to how representation is important, even if Kalinda plays into stereotypical depictions of bisexual femmes. While representations such as Kalinda mitigate against a totalizing erasure of racialized queer femmes in corporate media, the character reinforces colonial tropes associated with racialized women. Natasha's sentiments here signify that some representation, albeit problematic, is better than no representation at all.

The following section examines more deeply narrators' responses to questions pertaining to corporate media representations. This section is meant to exemplify how media representations play an important role in how racialized queer femmes understand their subjectivity as femmes and how they experience femme invisibility.

“Only White People are Queer and Only White People are Trans”³: Erasing Queer Racialized Subjectivities

The lesbian chic aesthetic catered specifically to femmes who embodied hegemonic standards of beauty (re: white femininity) (Ciasullo, 2001). Rose included a discussion of queer standards of beauty and media representations while identifying femme erasure and invisibility:

I think that it probably comes down to media representations of queer people generally, you know, they’re always thin white androgynous looking people [...] I guess that like wanting to make out with girls and being a girl does not mean that I want to look androgynous and because I don’t look androgynous I got a lot of flack comparatively to the one other queer person in my high school that was out that was a thin white woman who did play around with androgyny. She was taken more seriously as being queer than I was (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

In her response, Rose shared the ways that media representations of queer persons as “thin white androgynous looking people” (personal communication, September 16, 2016) has affected the ways that she has been perceived by other, suggesting that she got a lot of “flack” at her high school for not fitting into this mould. Similarly to Rose, many narrators spoke to how feelings of invisibility as racialized queer femmes is also reinforced through corporate media productions. When asked if they had ever seen themselves represented in ‘mainstream media’, all participants laughed and responded that they did not. When asked to elaborate on this answer, Anna responded, “I just—there’s not much to elaborate on” (personal communication, September 21, 2016), speaking to how extreme this lack of representation is.

For many of the participants, their responses addressed the lack of representation of racialized queer persons in film and television, with an emphasis on the erasure of racialized

³ Rose, personal communication, September 16, 2016.

queer femmes. Rose offered the ways in which this invisibility upholds ideas that “only white people are queer and only white people are trans”, explaining that:

Only white people have the gender fluidity that comes with having a slight small body and even that's not all white people but only those white people are the ones and then it keeps up that same perception to those white people, right? [White people] are the ones that are already dominating society so obviously they're also dominating queer spaces because they're dominating all spaces so I feel like the lack of representation allows them to not hold themselves accountable to communities of colour (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

Rose's quote exemplifies how homonormativity constructs 'gay' as white (Duggan, 2002; El-Tayeb, 2012; Kennedy, 2014) and how the lack of representation of racialized queer femmes influences the ways (white) others categorize who is queer and who is not. Corporate media representations have implications for those who do not see themselves represented time and time again. As Stephanie Larson (2006) writes, “entertainment does not just tell us stories; it tells particular stories in ways that privileges some” (p.15). In her response, Rose spoke to this privilege when addressing how “lack of representation allows [white people] to not hold themselves accountable to communities of colour” (personal communication, September 16, 2016). Rose's quote here exemplifies Larson's argument that “[...] we do not escape reality when watching cinema uncritically; we perpetuate real ideologies when we think of cinema as ‘only the movies’” (p.15). When white viewers do not look at these images critically, as Rose mentions, they do not hold themselves accountable to communities of colour or to the violence these representations perpetuate.

Beatrice also spoke to the invisibility and erasure she has felt while consuming media productions, expressing how she feels the lack of representations of racialized queer persons perpetuates epistemic violence,

People don't know we're out here. We mostly go invisible because we just blend with like the straight people so that's why people are always so surprised when I tell them because like they're 'oh well I wouldn't have expected that of you.' You know, we exist and like a lot of people are femme queers of colour and people just don't know because maybe they're not portrayed in, you know, tv shows (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Similarly to Beatrice's response, Sarah spoke to how she feels that corporate media productions play a direct role in why she does not get read as queer:

What I'm left with is no idea of what a queer Korean woman or femme is supposed to look like or how they're supposed to act and I suspect that if I have no idea then I don't think any other people have any idea of what they're like which is probably why people don't know what to make of me. That's probably why they get my identity wrong all of the time (personal communication, September 12, 2016).

Both Beatrice and Sarah's responses exemplified how corporate media productions directly inform their experiences navigating the world as queer racialized femmes and how it creates a sense of people 'not knowing' what to make of them. Patricia also expressed many of Beatrice's and Sarah's sentiments, outlining how happy they get when they see East Asian models represented in media (even if they are represented in a questionable manner) but noting how rare it is to see these representations to begin with making reference to the notion of accepting whatever 'scraps' one offers:

The ones I see they've all got the long hair like the long straight black hair and their skin is always like a pale white which not a lot of, I feel like it's a very specific portion of east Asians who are like that like I think I'm— I feel like most of us don't have that pale skin and like it's just like there's so few of us who are being represented and then the ones who are just these tiny little specks of all of us. But even then, it's still exciting to see them because there's so few of them. It's like begging for scraps from the table of whiteness, but you appreciate every scrap you get, you know (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Others, such as Zoey, expressed how these representations could have helped her understand her own identities, as well as provide representation for those around her to better understand the intersections of her queerness and race:

Um, for me it made it harder, not even to come out to others, but just to come out to myself. To understand that I can be queer, Arab, and femme. It just made it harder for me to understand that people like me existed. It would have made it a lot easier to explain it to my friends who didn't understand what I was going through. I could have been like well have you seen this show? Have you seen this character? I'm like her! Just having a physical representation I could reference would have made such a huge impact. It would have made the whole process a lot easier (personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Here, Zoey illustrates how for racialized queer femmes, media representation plays a role in how their subjectivity is shaped. While corporate media and popular culture are sometimes considered as frivolous and 'just the movies', these representations extend beyond the television screen and have consequences in people's perceptions of themselves (Larson, 2006; Hills Collins, 1986). In Zoey's last response of the interview, she responded with:

They're trying to, they're trying to reach that quota of, you know, people of colour and people who are queer but they tend to be two different things. They don't tend to be queer people of colour who are also femme, it's very rare for that to happen (personal communication, September 2, 2016).

In this quote, Zoey alludes to the importance of seeing yourself represented in media at an early age. Cultural representations reflect back to young queer persons that others like them exist reinforcing the importance of having characters that are not simply used as a vehicle for racist, biphobic, and femmephobic tropes but rather offering characters that create a more nuanced understanding of these intersecting identities. Queer racialized characters matter in media productions but, as Zoey points out, most queer characters are white, upholding the invisibility of racialized queer persons—adding to the narrative that only white people can be queer (Haritaworn, Tauqir, & Erdem, 2006).

Narrators discussed how not all media representations are good representations and how even though representations of racialized queer persons fight against a totalizing erasure, these images ought to be problematized. Mars discussed cultural (mis)representations and highlighted the complexities of representation and change,

I feel like representation could lead to some sort of change. It depends on how it is portrayed in the media. I mean, the media is not always the greatest way to portray racialized or queer identities because most of the time when it's in a TV show or when it's in movies or when it's in any sort of marketing thing, usually the people behind it are straight or cis or white in the broadest scale (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Mars expressed that as long as the people behind the series (i.e. writers and producers) and movies are white or straight or cis, change is less likely to happen. Accordingly, the web series *Brown Girls*, written and produced by two racialized women, presents an opportunity for change by representing racialized persons and racialized queer persons overlooked by corporate media (Gajanan, 2017; Ramgopal, 2017). The web series offers proper, respectful representations while illustrating that racialized queer persons exist and are real and have many different personalities, (Gajanan, 2017) Web series produced by and for racialized persons and racialized queer persons, like *Brown Girls*, offer a way for racialized persons to feel seen and represented—acting as community formation. The narrators’ responses illustrate that we are in need of more nuanced and complete representations of racialized queer persons and that these representations have the power to create substantial change.

In the following section, narrators express the ways that colonial ideas of modernity and progress also play into their experiences of femme invisibility. This section explores the pervasive stereotype that racialized persons are not liberal-minded or ‘progressive’ and how this informs how racialized queer persons navigate the world.

“A Lot of These Prejudices We Didn’t Have and Were Handed Down to Us”⁴: Colonialism and the Discourse of Modernity

Narrators described how their feelings of invisibility are informed by racialized assumptions of what a queer person looks like, which media productions play a large role in upholding. Corporate media representations of racialized persons as ‘primitive’, ‘barbaric’, and ‘regressive’ reinforces associations between whiteness and ‘progress’ and whiteness and ‘modernity’ (Larson, 2006). Colonizers’ mission as the world’s civilizers depend on depictions of Others as barbaric and primitive which are used to ‘justify’ violence and genocide (Kelly,

⁴ Natasha, personal communication, September 9, 2016.

1972; Memmi, 2006). The core of the colonizing project is sexual assault, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, framed by heteropatriarchal and heteronormative logic (Driskill, 2011).

Colonial settlers interpreted gender and sexual ‘divergence’ as signs of pre-modernity amongst Indigenous peoples and attempted to regulate Indigenous bodies into sexual modernity by imposing gender and sexual hierarchies mimicking colonizer’s cultures (Driskill, 2011; Morgensen, 2011). Wherein sexual and gender divergence was used to justify violence because it was seen as uncivilized and regressive in early colonial encounters, contemporarily there has been a shift in what is understood as progressive and modern in North America to include sexual and gender diversity. Reinforcing notions of “Eastern cultures” as homophobic and sexist can be understood as a process of “re-colonisation by the ‘liberated West’” (Haritaworn, Tauqir & Erdem, 2006, p.11). Furthermore, these associations of “women’s equality” and “gay rights” as something that only exists in Western contexts acts as “symbols of [the West’s] superior ‘modernity’ and ‘civilization’” (Haritaworn, Tauqir, & Erdem, 2006, p.17).

Many narrators discussed the association of whiteness and modernity, alluding to the colonial legacies that inform these discourses, “in a lot of African spaces, homophobia is a result of colonialism and like the religions that we were introduced to” (personal communication, September 10, 2016). Rose also mentioned the role colonialism had in introducing and upholding heterosexism in Trinidad,

Homophobia is so real in the colonies [laughs]. Trinidad was emancipated within my father’s lifetime. Colonization is just too real and with colonization comes religion, comes homophobia, comes rampant hegemonic masculinities and patriarchal structures that say that being gay is not okay and it is like the white people thing (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

This notion of ‘being introduced’ to homophobia and patriarchy, as articulated by Afiakyeeah and Rose, resonates with analysis offered by Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) and Paula Gunn Allen (1986). Oyěwùmí shows us, through her work on Yoruba society, that oppressive gender systems were imposed by colonizers as gender hierarchies did not exist in Yoruba society prior to colonization. Gunn Allen makes similar claims, articulating that many North American Indigenous tribes were matriarchal, recognized more than two genders, and accepted homosexuality prior to colonization as well. Although colonizers distance white cultures from homosexuality by depicting the ‘prevalence’ of lesbianism in ‘primitive’ non-Western cultures, ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’ in a Western context is now informed by an ‘acceptance’ of various sexualities and genders. Many participants spoke to the racist assumptions that paint racialized cultures as ‘fundamentally’ sexist and homophobic, creating an imaginary clash of cultures where ‘the West’ stands for liberal and progressive cosmopolitanism (El-Tayeb, 2012, p.86).

In her interview, Mika stated that much of the invisibility surrounding queer racialized persons is informed by these assumptions: “I think it’s just the general discourse that people of colour aren’t liberal minded, you know what I mean?” (personal communication, September 2, 2016) Zoey echoed these sentiments, adding, “I think it’s because [white people] have this idea that all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are homophobic and that’s not the case. I’m not Muslim but my family is and I know plenty of my cousins who fully support me” (personal communication, September 2, 2016). Natasha also spoke to racist legacies informing the invisibility of racialized queer persons: “But I think that that could also be a part of why I pass as straight like there’s this assumption that queerness exists less in non-white people I guess, like it’s less of a phenomenon I guess” (personal communication, September 2, 2016), which resonates with Nair’s (2008) claims that racialized persons must contend with the problem of

being presumed straight. Patricia spoke to this as well, recalling an experience she had with a friend:

[...] he had this weird obsession with particular cultures like it was something along the lines of like uh I forget which particular culture but it was like ‘this particular culture tends to be more open minded than this other culture’ and I was like how can you say this when you’ve talked to two people from each culture and that’s the impression that I get from a lot of people too (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

The discourse of racialized persons being conservative, less open-minded or less liberal was discussed at length by many narrators: “it’s also fucking annoying and kind of insulting when people assume my lovely parents are bigots because Chinese people are conservative” (Patricia, personal communication, September 9, 2016). Natasha expressed similar sentiments: “I kind of feel insulted about like the idea that the culture and group that I was raised with are less progressive or less socially sophisticated when it comes to these things and that I think has a lot to do with whiteness and colonialism” (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Natasha also spoke to how colonialism has played a role in imposing and maintaining this idea of racialized persons as primitive ‘Others’,

I think also that like in terms of in the West like organized religion often plays a role in anti queer or transphobia or homophobia but in India it has a lot to do with a lot of colonial ideas like even the laws—we have a lot of archaic laws that even the British don’t have [...] these are prejudices that were handed down to us like we didn’t have that it was handed down to us and now we’re struggling to be more socially progressive while the west is being super progressive and having all these movements and parades and all of that while we’re stuck behind and then we’re called conservative and behind the time

and archaic. A lot of these prejudices we didn't have and were handed down to us (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Here, Natasha alludes to how many anti-queer laws in India have been directly influenced by colonial power. This narrator explains how racialized bodies are caught in a trap so that laws imposed by colonizers are now used to show the backwardness of the colonized (Haritaworn, Tauqir & Erdem, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2012).

Systemic racism informed much of the narrators' hesitancy of joining and participating in queer spaces primarily comprised of white folks. Rose shared some racist experiences she had at while at university, discussing how she felt othered:

That was maybe the first time that I was being introduced to queer communities and I just like ran away. I just didn't feel like it was for me. It was just a bunch of weird looking white people and when I was in first year it was just a lot of weird looking white people with henna which to me said that it was just not a space for me so I actually didn't engage in queer communities because I just did not feel safe or welcomed (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

Mars expressed the violence they were subjected to while organizing in a large city,

There was a group of individuals that was trying to start up a LGBTQ rally against racism to show that some people wanted to acknowledge that racism is still alive and well [...] So there was a group of people that wanted to acknowledge that except the group of people were mostly white cis gay men and it was very problematic because they didn't want to take into account any suggestions from the First Nations community which if you're gonna talk about racism in a Canadian context, that's very important to note (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Mars further explained that these people were “very silencing to racialized individuals in itself” which led them to suggest that “even when a lot of folks that are especially white and cis want to do good, they don’t listen and don’t take those things into account” (personal communication, September 7, 2016). They also offered a story of other violent experiences they have had within queer spaces, such as being silenced whenever they bring up race: “I talk about race a lot and people are always like ‘why do you have to talk about that so much’ and I’m like well I’m hyper aware of it” (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

When racialized queer femmes get silenced in queer spaces, this reasserts that ‘only white people are queer’, further contributing to the erasure of racialized queer femme subjectivities and their knowledge within community settings. This erasure facilitates a discourse that “constructs LGBTQ communities as white and privileged” (Logie and Rwigema 2014). The racist violence outlined by the narrators above leads to an erasure of racialized queer persons but it also leads to the tokenization and unpaid labour of racialized queer persons and femmes. As mentioned by Afiakyeah, black femmes specifically get erased within queer communities, which echoes both Christian’s (1987) and Hills Collins’ (1986; 2000) work on the epistemological gatekeeping of knowledge:

The same thing happens with the queer community whereas like if you are too aggressive, you’re being too demanding, you’re taking up too much space like how dare you come into our space and ask these things. Queer Black femmes in my opinion are the creators of queer culture, um, we are the creators of our pride weeks, our pride events, etc. Where femmephobia intersects with like racial injustice is that we are not given the spaces to be celebrated. We’re also erased like entirely. Our experiences are erased. You’re never going to hear of people like, acknowledging black queer femmes, in my

particular case, as being important people in like sustaining our communities. A lot of labour we put into the communities are discredited. We don't receive awards or the capital for that labour (Afiakyeeah, personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Afiakyeeah followed by speaking to the tokenization she has seen and experiences within queer organizing in the city where she lives:

So, for example, when there's a panel discussion on transness or on femmephobia then they know of the one black queer femme person that they know of and that person is like, oh I have a friend, you see where we're constantly asked to perform and or to do the labour because we're tokenized and it happens even in queer communities. With the tokenization comes with the idea that like the one, the only one. But then when 10 of us show up it's like ouf. Yeah. I think that's what ends up happening (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Afiakyeeah speaks to how queer black femmes have always been at the center of queer organizing yet due to systemic racism are often excluded from receiving praise and acknowledgements for being key contributors of knowledge and community building. She notes that this systemic erasure also informs the tokenization that occurs in queer communities and how queer black femmes are exploited and constantly expected to perform and offer their unpaid labour within the same communities that erases them.

The following section discusses the inseparability of femmephobia and racism for racialized queer femmes—outlining the importance of adding analyses of race and racism to literature addressing femme invisibility and femmephobia. For racialized queer femmes, femmephobia and femme invisibility is racialized. Failure to discuss femme invisibility without racializing it perpetuates and reaffirms associations between queerness and whiteness.

“Like It’s Gonna Happen Together If It’s Gonna Happen”⁵: The Inseparability of Femmephobia and Racism

All participants spoke to the ways in which femmephobia and racism cannot be separated. Jewelle Gomez (1983) asserts that there is an assumption that race, not sex nor gender, is the predominant feature in discussions of work by racialized women. In turn, queer theory has neglected the knowledge of racialized queer femmes by creating “a position of authority or privilege to universalize lesbian experiences as white lesbian experiences” (Omosupe 1991, p.105). Consequently, scholarship on femme invisibility and femme subjectivity has always been framed without a critical examination of race—taking white queer femmes as ‘neutral’ and ‘unmarked’ queer bodies.

Researchers have discussed the ways racialized queer persons experience sexualized racism in queer communities and spaces through discourses which sexually objectifies them, masculinize them, feminize them, and/or characterizes them as undesirable by white queer persons (Greene, 2000; Han, 2007; Teunis, 2007; Logie & Rwigema, 2014). Rose described this sexualized racism, explaining how femmephobia and racism are intersecting experiences:

For me [femmephobia and racism] are definitely together. I appreciate that white people go through femmephobia but I don’t really know—have no idea what it looks like other than ‘oh people don’t think I’m gay because I wear lipstick and I’m conventionally pretty’ I’m like alright, true, that sucks and I’m sorry [laughs]. It just feels so much more complicated and they’re one in my mind. I don’t know how to separate them. I don’t know where I would begin to separate them. There is no distinction between femmephobia and racism for me, they’re just, they’re deeply connected for sure (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

⁵ Beatrice, personal communication, September 9, 2016.

Beatrice spoke to this inseparability as well,

I am both queer and Black. It's always been together for me. Not only am I living with being a minority because of my race but I'm also a minority because I'm a queer person so there's no separating those like it's gonna happen together if it's gonna happen (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Afiakyeeah echoed these sentiments speaking to the ways gender and race interact in a very specific way which impacts the ways black femme women are perceived:

It intersects because all of these assumptions of how Black women are and so no matter, one of the stereotypes is even no matter how femme a Black woman presents, she is automatically rendered as someone who is aggressive (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Some participants discussed the ways their femininity is read and fetishized as racialized persons. For example, Patricia described the experience of being fetishized based on race:

The times I've been on the streets when I've presented as more femme than I usually do I get catcalled way more. East Asians, it's almost intensified because like I'm already fetishized from being Asian (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Mars spoke to this hypersexualization as well,

In terms of race I feel like I'm very much fetishized, especially when I am feminine and I feel like that was another reason why I wanted to stray away from being feminine because I was seen as this exotic woman and I didn't like that and I still am seen that way and that's still something I struggle with because I want people to just- my race is one thing and I want to acknowledge it but I don't want you to be like 'oh your skin is so luscious and amazing' because then it just shows me that you're fetishizing me. I want to

be more than just my race to people. I want my race to be respected, along with my femmeness, but being constantly fetishized seems to be the reality of my existence (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Afiakyeeah discussed this hypersexualization in terms of touching, mentioning how these microaggressions were part of a politics of spectacle:

There's still these microaggressions that exist and most of the people who used my dancing with other Black femmes as spectacles or as access to my body are white people, so, that's where it all intersects. And the fact that we're femme, it gives people like the extra demand to want to touch our bodies [...] and that has a lot to do with performance and expectations and so it's always the femmes that are taught to 'oh we can touch this' or 'you're sassy' and all of these things (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Afiakyeeah offered an incident to help describe her experience, especially in the context of [queer] parties,

Like a lot of white queer people, um, see black queer femmes dancing or queer people in general that are Black and feel like it's a spectacle and so the negative things that we've gotten are people who feel like, because of our dancing together had been rendered a spectacle, that they're invited to join in or consume it through watching (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

In the following quote, Afiakyeeah spoke directly to the issue of access and her body, pointing to how violence works for racialized queer femmes in so-called 'safe-spaces':

[...] there were people who felt as though they had access to my body, whether it be touching it—I've had someone who has grabbed my ass before and someone demand to touch my hair. I had really long braids, like they were awesome, but like it's something

like this exotic idea that our hair is worth touching just so you can get an idea of what it's like (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

For the narrator, experiencing femmephobia—such as persons thinking they have access to your body—does not occur in a vacuum: it is a complex interplay of both femininity and race. Due to how white privilege operates within a North American context, white persons constantly feel as though they have access to black and brown bodies—to touch them and their hair, to view them as spectacles, to call them fabulous, to insert themselves within their dance circle—and this informs how femmephobia and misogyny are racialized in specific ways for the narrators.

In the next section, I explore narrators' responses to questions surrounding how they understand their femme subjectivity. Many narrators alluded to utilizing femme as a political reclamation, that is, to reclaim femme within queer spaces and to reclaim their femininity amidst racist standards of beauty.

“We’re Here⁶”: Femme as a Political Reclamation

The second overarching theme that emerged out of the interviews conducted was a notion of utilizing femme subjectivity as a political reclamation of femininity. Many scholars have written of femme subjectivity as being a reclamation or a queering of femininity.⁷ The movement amongst community activists and academics to queer femininity, rather than positioning it as a subservient and passive subjectivity has initiated significant debates on the femme politics. This approach means to place femme subjectivity as inherently queer; “as bent, unfixed, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated” (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, p.12). and “transgressive” (p.5).

⁶ Afiakyeah, personal communication, September 10, 2016.

⁷ Scholars such as Patrick Califia differ in their account, describing femmes as “straight girls taking a sapphic vacation from serving the patriarchy” (Nestle, 1992, p.10).

In combination with this devaluation of femininity, racialized feminists have long demonstrated that racialized women are dehumanized through discourses of Otherness tied to hegemonic standards of femininity and beauty (Hill Collins, 2004). Wallace (1999) suggests that racialized women are masculinized and deprived of being seen as feminine due to these constructions. According to Shanay Venicia, “[t]he very act of reclaiming femininity is a queer act [...] femme identity is a purposeful reclamation of femininity from the white supremacist, classist, heteronormative cis-patriarchy. Indeed, it is a form of resistance” (2011). Zoey spoke to how she always felt empowered by the word femme:

I come from an Arab background and my parents have always made being femme a difficult experience. I’ve never been able to do certain things just because of my femme nature and I decided to embrace it and let it empower me rather than hold me back (personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Patricia, expressed similar thoughts, discussing the ways she once avoided femininity,

When I was like 5 I was like oh no I don’t like pink, my favourite colour is purple because purple is still a girl colour but it’s not the girliest colour and like when I was older I made a conscious decision to not associate with traditionally feminine things but especially in the last couple of years I love pink. Before too I would kind of give shifty eyes to people who would like, especially girls who would put on lots of makeup and dress really fancy and do their hair and everything and now I’m like hey, it’s cool (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Afiakyeah, spoke to her femme subjectivity as having specific political implications. As Afiakyeah puts it, “I use femme because I think that there is a lot of political implications in identifying as that”, adding that,

Being femme and like starting to love other femme people is political because again, I think for a lot of queer people we're taught that there's only a certain way to be gay and so for me to challenge that that is put on queer people is political, it's a statement (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Mars' response underscores this feeling of invisibility as well as how their own femme subjectivity acts as visibility for other racialized queer femmes,

In [city], I've actually thought about it a lot because [city] is very white and I see it as two things that are never put together. I feel like being brown and being femme and being queer have always been things that people don't actually think are possible and I'm here to kind of be like hey no it is (personal communication, September 7, 2016).

Afiakyeeah expressed similar sentiments, discussing the complexities of being a feminine black woman:

Being femme means that I can dress a particular way that for Black women is pretty much the idea of like 'we're here'. Femininity for Black women is a very political thing cause day to day our femininity is almost reduced to, reduced as something that is non-existent. You're gonna hear it and you're gonna hear a lot amongst Black feminists and womanists that like femininity, like Black women look like men therefore we are treated differently because of it. That's why we're not afforded the same privileges as like white women and so to identify as femme and to identify as feminine and to be feminine is political (personal communication, September 10, 2016).

Rose, echoed many of these ideas, speaking to the ways in which (white) femininity is constructed and how many femmes are often left out of these images,

When we think of femininity contemporarily and the status quo, it's about white womanship and like getting these particular ideals of whiteness or ideals or synthesized POC attributes made white and being small and thin and those are just not things I can embody (personal communication, September 16, 2017).

She later adds: "It just felt like a game, and still does, in which I can't fulfill ideas of femininity. I'm never going to get the rewards of fulfilling femininity" (personal communication, September 16, 2016). Other narrators, such as Mika and Patricia discussed cultural representations as informing this invisibility and how, for them, visibility is resistance:

I don't see East Asians who are queer or trans or who deviate from heteronormativity so you feel boxed in and I guess by nature I'm kind of more on the rebellious side so the more they try to box me up the more I try to push out of it I guess. (Patricia, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

To me, it's just being able to really express myself how I like. I feel like specifically for a lot of Asian women they're perceived as subservient especially the typical Western media will depict East Asian women as very simplistic, not wearing makeup, not being loud, that kind of thing. So to me, just being that person and being able to exhibit those traits and being able to be myself (Mika, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

These narrators understood their femme subjectivity as resistance to the racist and femmephobic violence they have experienced and that other racialized queer femmes experience—making femme political. The stories that permeate this chapter illustrate the power of representation and the power of political reclamations of femme and femininity. When taken in conversation, these interviews allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of femme subjectivity—one that

allows for a multiplicity of femme voices. The narrators embraced their femininity and femme subjectivity, adding that their presence and existence served as an act of empowerment, visibility, and resistance. Building on this political consciousness, the narrators attributed community formation as essential to their resistance and healing as racialized queer femmes. The concluding chapter discusses the shape and impact of that community and the politics of resistance it engenders.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

One of the most important outcomes from this project is that community building acts as a way to celebrate racialized queer femininity and combat erasure and invisibility. Through a series of questions addressing self-care and coping, the narrators responded emphatically that surrounding oneself with other racialized queer and trans persons was paramount to self-care and coping with the onslaught of negative representation of femme and racialized queer femmes. Mars spoke to community as a way to cope and heal from the trauma they experience as a racialized queer femme navigating this world and how having other persons to sit with you in those feelings and relate to that violence, helps them (personal communication, September 7, 2016). For Patricia, finding community with others like them is a way for them to feel safe (personal communication, September 9, 2016). Natasha also commented on the importance of community building, “I feel as though I’m just finding more people who are like me like it’s nice to have a community of people who are queer and know about the experiences of identifying with that and the internal and external struggle” (personal communication, September 9, 2016).

Rose underscored the ways in which community building and acts of resistance through PoC (People of Colour) collectives has particularly been “life changing”, expressing that “it means that together we go to those shows and we go to those queer communities. We help create those workshops. We do the things that at least subvert the messaging that says that I don’t exist because I do” (personal communication, September 16, 2016). Rose spoke to how PoC collectives have actively played a role in shaping the music community in some cities, particularly pertaining to the presence of racialized persons at live music shows. Significantly, the question of critical mass, especially in terms of racialized presentation, was particularly significant for Rose:

Like if there was any kind of representation of a queer femme POC, even if it's just one, people get to say that it's an outlier but the moment there's more of you- it's a stupid saying but there is power in numbers. You can only deny me for so long by saying that I don't exist because you don't see me but maybe I can make you understand that you're choosing not to see me but if I show up and make noise and I do that with other people who don't fit your norm then maybe you have to see me or at least can't use your shitty ass excuse that I'm not there (personal communication, September 16, 2016).

When asked whether she thinks that this kind of representation could lead to substantial changes in her community, she responded with "I've seen it happen", insisting that the impact is comparable to experiences she has had in the Toronto music scene (personal communication, September 16, 2016). The interview participants for this project all felt that community building was an essential component of caring for oneself and others in the face of racialized violence, femmephobic violence, heterosexist violence, and transphobic violence.

This thesis began by situating racialized queer femmes within theory. This project applies relevant scholarship in queer, feminist, and critical race theory, exploring tensions in femme theorizing, questions of passing, theories of homonormativity, and cultural theory. When taken together, this multi-theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the violence and discrimination experienced by racialized queer femmes. It allows for an exploration of the pervasive ways that homonormativity, and ideas of what queer persons 'look like', exists in our cultural landscape and presented a way of thinking critically about the intersections of femmephobia and invisibility. Specifically, through the interviews conducted with my ten narrators, and the analysis of visual culture I have offered, we can see that explorations of race and racism are crucial to analyses of femmephobia and femme invisibility. I argue that

discussions of femmephobia and femme invisibility that do not account for race and racism furthers the erasure of racialized queer femmes and contribute to racial violence within queer literature and communities. This project has critiqued and deconstructed what is understood as femme invisibility and femmephobia by way of exploring racist homonormative ideas of what it means to ‘look’ queer. I have offered discussions of corporate media representations of racialized queer femmes, arguing that these representations are not inconsequential. The interviews conducted with the ten narrators demonstrates how existing corporate media representations of racialized queer femmes forward and reproduce femmephobic, biphobic, and racist myths, all of which inform how racialized queer femmes navigate the world around them. The interviews conducted have also explored how respectful media representation, and community building, have and can lead to substantial changes—disrupting the violence perpetuated by corporate media representations. It is by way of prioritizing the voices of queer and trans racialized femmes within our work and our communities that the decolonization of these spaces and literature will occur.

The stories as told by the narrators included in this work serve as foundations to build upon and show the multiplicity of ways that racialized queer femmes understand their subjectivity. Further work could include in-depth interviews with a much greater number of racialized femmes, or even a public callout for works and stories by racialized queer femmes—prioritizing their stories and experiences as femme resistance and knowledge production.

Future Research and Limitations to This Study

There are some limitations to the scope this research that I would like to address. First and foremost, there are some limitations in terms of my use of qualitative interviews to explore this topic. Moreover, an examination of trans and non-binary femme subjectivity continues to

present as a significant gap in this work. Although two of the narrators interviewed are non-binary femmes, and identify as such, the interview questions were not tailored to address the intersections of femme subjectivity and trans subjectivity amongst these two narrators.

Another limitation lies in my analysis of visual culture and corporate media of queer trans and non-binary femmes. Due to the lack of representation of queer trans and non-binary femmes, especially the erasure of non-binary femmes in corporate media, my analysis focused on cisgender queer and lesbian femme representations. Further work on trans femme subjectivity and femmephobia is needed as well, but it is my aim that my work will serve as a building block to further research on the topic.

Other existing limitations of this study include my coding of the queer women in the television series that I have analyzed as femmes. While their appearances align with conventional feminine presentation, none of these television series, or the characters themselves, directly name these characters as femme. This might be due to the inaccessibility of this term for viewers, or a way to heterosexualize these women. In either case, my interpretation of these characters as femmes could still be contested.

Finally, this study does not claim to be an ethnography of racialized queer femmes. First, my interview sample is too small to secure any significant findings or conclusion, however, my aim was rather to offer more on perspectives and experiences on which to launch further themes to engage with and analyze. Next, all narrators that took part in this work are past or current students, and this could be read as a significant limitation to this research project. It would be productive to gain the insight of racialized queer femmes that do not have this level of education, or even racialized queer femmes from varying generations in order to paint a more complete picture of the diversity of lives of racialized queer femmes. It should also be remembered that

this project is limited to two Canadian cities. Further research would benefit from exploring other Canadian cities, or extending to a larger sample across North American cities.

Final Thoughts

Shout out to all the women and femmes who are out here speaking truth to power and claiming space and being called ungrateful because of it! Your rage is beautiful, necessary, immediate, and transformative. Your rage is ancestral, healing, and a site of profound knowledge. Your rage is what has and continues to propel any actual movement for social justice. Thank you.

—Alok Vaid-Manon, *Affirm Femme Rage*

Appendix A: Certification of Institutional Ethics Approval



Research Compliance Office
511 Tory | 1125 Colonel By Drive
| Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6
613-520-2600 Ext: 2517
ethics@carleton.ca

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval for the following research has been cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (CUREB-A) at Carleton University. CUREB-A is constituted and operates in compliance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2).

Ethics ID: Project # 104772

Principal Investigator: Céline Donelle

Co-Investigator(s): **Patrizia Gentile (Primary Investigator)**
Céline Donelle (Student Research: Master's Student)

Study Title: **Exploring Femme Subjectivities: A Critical Reading of Femme Through Racialization [Celine Donelle]**

Effective: **August 05, 2016**

Expires: **August 31, 2017.**

Restrictions:

This certification is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modification to the approved research must be submitted to CUREB-A. All changes must be approved prior to the continuance of the research.
3. An Annual Application for the renewal of ethics clearance must be submitted and approved by the above date. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the closure of the file. If funding is associated, funds will be frozen.
4. A closure request must be sent to CUREB-A when the research is complete or terminated.
5. Should any participant suffer adversely from their participation in the project you are required to report the matter to CUREB-A.

6. Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2nd edition* and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.

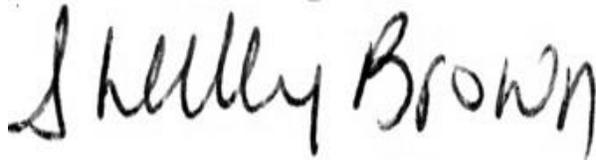
Please email the Ethics Coordinators at ethics@carleton.ca if you have any questions.

APPROVED BY:

Date: August 05, 2016

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AA', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Andy Adler, PhD, Chair, CUREB-A

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Shelley Brown' in a cursive style.

Shelley Brown, PhD, Vice Chair, CUREB-A

Appendix B: Certification of Institutional Ethics Clearance



Office of Research Ethics and Compliance
5110 Human Computer Interaction Bldg | 1125 Colonel By Drive
| Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6
613-520-2600 Ext: 2517
ethics@carleton.ca

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS CLEARANCE

The Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (CUREB-A) at Carleton University has renewed ethics approval for the research project detailed below. CUREB-A is constituted and operates in compliance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2).

Title: Exploring Femme Subjectivities: A Critical Reading of Femme Through Racialization [Celine Donelle]

Protocol #: 104772

Project Team Members: **Patrizia Gentile (Primary Investigator)**
Celine Donelle (Student Research: Master's Student)

Department and Institution: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences/Womens and Gender Studies (Pauline Jewett Institute of), Carleton University

Funding Source (If applicable):

Effective: **July 31, 2017**

Expires: **July 31, 2018.**

Restrictions:

This certification is subject to the following conditions:

1. Clearance is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modification to the approved research must be submitted to CUREB-A. All changes must be approved prior to the continuance of the research.
3. An Annual Application for the renewal of ethics clearance must be submitted and cleared by the above date. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the closure of the file. If funding is associated, funds will be frozen.
4. A closure request must be sent to CUREB-A when the research is complete or terminated.
5. Should any participant suffer adversely from their participation in the project you are required to report the matter to CUREB-A.

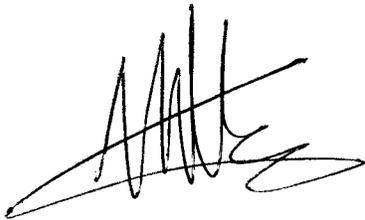
6. It is the responsibility of the student to notify their supervisor of any adverse events, changes to their application, or requests to renew/close the protocol.

7. Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2nd edition* and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.

Please email the Research Compliance Coordinators at ethics@carleton.ca if you have any questions or if you require a clearance certificate with a signature.

CLEARED BY:

Date: July 31, 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AA', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Andy Adler, PhD, Chair, CUREB-A

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernadette Campbell', written in a cursive style.

Bernadette Campbell, PhD, Vice-Chair, CUREB-A

Appendix C: Interview Questions Guide

1. Can you speak to how you identify and what your pronouns are to start off?
2. How long have you been in [city]?
3. What does being a femme mean to you?
4. Why do you choose to identify as such?
5. How do you feel your racial identity intersects with your femme identity?
6. Are you involved in any queer organizations or communities? Femme organizations of communities?
7. Have you ever had any negative experiences in these groups? Have you ever felt unwelcomed?
8. How would you describe femmephobia in your own experiences? Would you care to share any examples?
9. Have you ever felt questioned by others because you're a queer femme of colour? Have you ever had to prove your authenticity?
10. Have you ever experienced racialized femmephobia? Would you care to share any experiences?
11. Have you ever felt invisible as a queer femme of colour?
12. How do you react to those sorts of things? Do you have any coping strategies/self-care strategies?
13. Do you/have you ever felt represented in "mainstream" media/popular culture?
14. What impact do you think this lack of representation has on how people view queer femmes of colour?
15. Do you feel as though representation could lead to some concrete change?

16. What impact has this lack of representation had on you specifically?

Appendix B: August 1993 *Vanity Fair* Cover



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