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TAKING TURNS

Taking Turns is an open forum for brief and rapid assessments of changes emerging in the field and its discontents. In this series we invite Nordic as well as non-Nordic scholars to present their take on contemporary challenges for feminist scholarship and gender research. In this issue, we are handing the relay over to Ulrika Dahl, Assistant Professor of Gender Studies with a concentration in Anthropology at Södertörn University, Sweden. She is author (with Del LaGrace Volcano) of Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities as well as a number of articles on femininity in, among other things, Tidskrift För Genusvetenskap, Lambda Nordica, and Journal for Queer Studies in Finland. In the fall of 2011 she was the Fulbright Hildeman fellow in Scandinavian Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, and she is currently completing a book with Ulla Manns and Marianne Liljeström entitled Feminism Translated: The (re)making of Nordic Women’s/Gender Studies 1975–2005.

Turning like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies

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A deceptively simple question has preoccupied me through my coming of (middle) age years in (Nordic) gender/feminist/women’s studies: why, when we embrace (or at least engage with) critical masculinity studies as a crucial part of our knowledge formation, do we so rarely imagine the possibility of critical femininity studies? The posing of such a question, I hasten to stress, neither reflects ignorance of feminist theory’s varied approaches to the subject or of the centrality of femininity in feminist politics, nor a form of intellectual penis envy or wish to repudiate masculinity as a proper object of feminist inquiry. And no, I have not suddenly gone native in the liberal and complimentary logics of fairness that underpin a heteronormative discourse of gender
in the Nordic countries which insist that if we have one, then we must have the other, equally funded and distributed—or even that masculinity and femininity as subfields are or could ever be comparable or necessarily distinguishable. I am simply noting that, while the question “what is femininity?” is as old as the second sex, femininity is seemingly still defined by lack—we need more conferences, journals, readers, and even courses dedicated to rigorous and creative inquiry on this subject.

In this brief and inevitably broadly schematic meditation, I consider some key ways in which femininity has figured in feminist studies with the aim of extending legacies that can orient us in the endeavour of critical femininity studies. I do so not as a stake-claiming academic-capitalist arguing for a discovery, a “timely” or “new” field, or to propose a new “metatheory” or highway-like direction for “all” of us—quite the opposite. I do it simply as a theorist whose “situation” is (queerly) feminine, and whose own body of flesh and knowledge (Sullivan 2006) is oriented towards femininities, and as someone who remains humbly unable fully to determine what femininity “is”, where it is located, and what it does in the world and in our field. I want to encourage dialogue as I continue to ponder how to theorize the queerness of (all) femininity as well as relations between femininities, and frankly, I and the subjects of my work have little (intellectual) interest in masculinity or men and would rather turn our attention to commodities among ourselves, to paraphrase Irigaray (1985). I do it because I still want to consider the possibility—even in an age of institutionalization that insists on research use-value and professionalization on the one hand, and continuously attacks our knowledge formations, on the other—of imagining écritures and études femme-inine, a science of femme-ininity and feminine elsewheres. Above all, I am thinking with and through the multi-sited and (virtually) interconnected femme figuration that continues to guide my journeys across the dark continent and whose multiple genres of femininity remind me of the complexities of femmebodiment (Dahl 2010) and gives me hope that we can rethink (feminine and feminist) subjectivity beyond a phallocentric order.

**Figuring femininity in feminist theory**

For those of us engaged in research, teaching, and action committed to challenging the historically emergent, hegemonic, power-laden relations of gender that continue to subordinate the feminine, femininity is such an obvious and central question that we often forget that we never agreed on what we mean by femininity. While “woman” has been rightfully discarded as the unified and universal subject of our stories and movements and has productively evolved and split into multiple subjects and objects, and while our understandings of both “sex” and “gender” are vastly differentiated and remain contested, I wonder if we are afraid of mapping out cartographies of academic and activist struggles around the question of femininity. I’d like to think that the reason is that when our lips speak together in femininity theory we are already irreducibly multiple and without a centre or a unified voice, and that this in turn is a form of feminine counter-insurgency. Perhaps, in seeking to go against the alleged nature of femininity as competitive and hierarchical, we have simply opted against even comparing notes on feminine matters in a sustained way because our (feminine and academic) use-value is caught up in it. Searching our formations,
however, it seems more the case that we have simply replaced woman (sex) with femininity (gender) and keep repeating many of the same stories and arguments. Perhaps we need the negative attachments to femininity to fuel feminist projects based on claims of subordination?

At this spatio-temporal juncture, few feminists contend that femininity is a property or an essence, or the visual expression of an authentic inner core—even if many see it as an external imposition and form of oppression. Canonical scholarly traditions, especially in the Nordic region, are epistemologically and politically invested in the idea that gender emerges relationally and processually in/between bodies and through time because, indeed, history has taught us that all other arguments are dangerous and reductive. In most cases, however, “constructivism” in effect means an understanding of femininity as “the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women” (Skeggs 2001: 297, emphasis added), with “process” drawing our attention to both psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches and “woman” remaining the key subject. Skeggs’ (social scientific) femininity theory has inspired much important empirical work in femininity studies, and her accounts of the classed politics of feminine respectability and the ways in which femininity can both be a resource and a source of subordination and limitation are also reflected in international feminist cultural studies, not to mention girlhood studies, in very productive ways. Yet, in Scandinavia, more has been invested in the politics of (reproductive) labour than in the labour and technologies of femininity. With a largely heteronormative dualistic paradigm of gender, variations of the radical feminist idea—best summarized by MacKinnon as “socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms. What defines woman is what turns men on” (quoted in Halley 2006: 193)—have provided the implicit foundation for much feminist critique and a significant degree of “ick”, not to mention conflict, especially with regards to the politics of sex(iness).

While the Gender Trouble that quickly made Butler (1990) the most cited feminist theorist in the Nordic region was a critique of such models, in the social constructivist and largely Marxist-influenced theoretical tradition that dominates much of Nordic gender/women’s studies, the continuously contested shift from “sex” to “gender” has not resulted in new ways of theorizing femininity on a comprehensive level. In some (queer) contexts, Butler’s notion of gender performativity has resulted in hopeful but somewhat misguided arguments about agency (Dahl 2010), but, as Biddy Martin has noted, both conceptually and politically, femininity often “becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other positions become figural and mobile” (1994: 119). Furthermore, queer femininities often get placed in the camp of the ironic and theatrical and thus remain in the superstructure of the superficial.

If drag queens and transwomen appear more “successful” in temporary or prolonged processes of becoming women, this has more frequently been taken as evidence either of the impossibility of women living up to an ideal or of the inherent “superficiality” or arbitrariness of femininity (it is surface and dress), not as an indication that becoming feminine is a complex process of materialization that exceeds our current epistemologies. The femininity embodied by “sissies” is largely addressed in terms of homophobia, as a fear of the feminine “out of place”, and not in
terms of femmebodied genres of femininity. Defining femininity as “the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are typically associated with those who are female” (2007: 320, my emphasis), biologist and transtheorist Julia Serrano slightly but significantly shifts our understandings and opens up the possibility of considering femininity and its historical legacies while maintaining the political dimension of gendered power regimes. In the end, even if queer theory’s greatest contribution is the concept of “heteronormativity”, and its frequent use is an index of success, it remains clear that, for research to be considered “relevant” on a societal level, it must concern some dimension of the effects of heterosexual reproduction and the power relations and division of labour it generates on micro and macro levels.

In an unmarked white (Nordic) region where the commercial dimensions of feminine sexuality remain highly contested, not to mention unlawful, it is the often unexamined but allegedly subordinated femininity of the (racialized) “other woman” that remains the sore point both for feminist sisterhood and the possibilities of modern belonging. The femininity of “the other”, whether tied to the “replacement” of the emancipated white woman who has failed to bring her man along in projects of equality, or as embodied by she who is in need of saving from both white and brown men through the efforts of contemporary equality policy, is more under siege than study. Discussions of global care chains (in which sexual labour and love migration can certainly be included) and their implications in contemporary European imaginaries and politics offer crucial insights on this dimension of femininity. Drawing on the work of many critical race theorists and post-colonial feminists who have contended that the very femininity that white feminists have subjected to critique is contingent upon clear demarcations from racialized and sexualized others, Gail Lewis (2006) has made a case for what she calls “an additional dimension” of gender relations, one that goes beyond the sexual difference of man/woman or masculine/feminine. Lewis insists that we need to “conceptualize the relations between women inhabiting different femininities and differentiated by ethnicity and class as themselves gender relations” (2006: 93). As Lewis rightly argues, histories of racism and imperialism have accorded femininity only to some (women), and criticality involves deconstructing such dynamics, something that post-colonial historians in particular have attended to. However, even as Lewis presents femininity as constituted by “a practice of relations”, she contends that it is “inhabited by women”. Furthermore, by arguing that femininity is inhabited, it becomes a kind of residence; an occupation of a place where someone, generally a subject called woman, dwells. This leaves us needing to either further theorize femininity as inhabitable not only by women but by a wide range of subjects and, more importantly, how exactly femininity is inhabited—but it does not get us out of the sex/gender distinction and symmetry.

Suggesting that femininity is inhabitable, a dwelling place, rests on an idea of a boundary between interior and exterior that has very specific consequences for theories of (feminine) subjectivity. For instance, when femininity theorist Iris Marion Young argues that “disciplines of the feminine … [aim] to mask or subordinate the raw facts of embodiment, to make the body ‘pretty’ by constraining fluid flesh, masking its organic smells with perfumes, painting skin, lips, eyes, and hair that have lost their nubile luster” (2005: 5–6), she too makes a distinction between raw flesh
and artificial surface. Young’s extensive meditations on the importance of space and movement for understanding the materiality and phenomenology of femininity have provided crucial contributions to understanding embodiment as an effect of disciplinization, but proposing that femininity is “a set of normatively disciplined expectations imposed on female bodies by male-dominated society” and moreover that “normative femininity detaches persons who fall under its disciplines from expressions or enactments of power and authority” (2005: 5) seems somewhat reductive. Here the orientation is to male-dominated society, and relations between (normative and queer) femininities become secondary or themselves an effect of the said imposition.

Susan Brownmiller once argued in her best-selling book femininity that “to care about feminine fashion, and do it well, is to be obsessively involved in inconsequential details on a serious basis” (1984: 81, my emphasis). When seen as a surface to adorn, femininity is largely understood as an obstacle to subjecthood, as superficial and problematic, as that which makes us vulnerable (Ahmed 2004; Dahl 2010) or as what takes us away from “serious” matters, thus rendering even the very interest in femininity politically suspect. Even if an entire field of fashion studies has demonstrated that the political economy of garments and the fashioning of bodies get us to the centre of a wide range of complex societal, corporeal, and epistemological issues, Sandra Bartky’s observation that feminists “are also seen as enemies of the stiletto heel and the beauty parlor—in a word, as enemies of glamour” (1990: 41) still weighs on feminist activism and research. Like Brownmiller, Bartky struggled with the fact that “however unwilling feminists may be to admit it, many women appear to embrace with enthusiasm what seem to be the most alienated aspects of feminine existence” (1990: 36) and offered us insights into the workings of alienation. The affective dimensions of the pleasures and pains of femininity, including in feminism, still need to be figured into this work, and here the work of femme theorists offer insights that have not been sufficiently attended to (Dahl 2010, 2011).

**Figuring critical femininity studies**

Taking my turn, I turn like a femme in asking: how might we (re)figure critical femininity studies as centred on that which has always seemingly been the abject antithesis of our very intellectual existence, the speculum of (queer) femininity beyond a simple story of subordination, sexualization, objectification, and superficial narcissism? If femininity is a sex which is not one in multiple senses, and if what queers femininity, as I am often told, is anything and everything that does not equate it with the reproductive, white, respectable, heterosexual approximation to womanhood that nobody embodies, and if femininity is nothing but an idealized form that bodies of flesh and knowledge migrate towards and from, then critical femininity studies is a queer and open-ended science that concerns femininity as a genre (Berlant 2008) in all its variations, representations, and materializations. Given that we are facing a future where those who have histories in, attachments to, and are constituted through femininity are dominating university studies worldwide and a time when it is the feminization of migration, labour, poverty, sexual trauma, and commodity culture that dominates our news, we certainly need feminist narratives of femininity and future
visions thereof that exceed those which repeatedly insist that femininity is an effect of masculinity and first and foremost distinguishable from and subordinated to it.

Critical femininity studies, it should be clear by now, is not women’s studies as studies of women. Even if it might concern women, it springs from a continued need to theorize relationality and materiality beyond heteronormative and expressive models. In kinship with Jack Halberstam’s queer feminist call for “masculinity studies without men”, where masculinity “cannot be reduced to the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness” (Halberstam 1998: 1), critical femininity studies might take cue from transfeminist Serrano’s contention that femininity is “a heterogeneous, non-female specific collection of traits that each have a unique biological and/or social origin” (Serrano 2007: 325), and also investigate femininity beyond its ties to femaleness or women because indeed, femininity exceeds the (fe) “male body and its effects” (ibid.) and femmebodiment goes beyond surface adornment. We need to ask how our models of femininity and relations between femininities shape gender relations and politics and how they figure in our understandings of “intersectionality”, and thus critical femininity studies might be concerned with what Lewis calls relations on “one side of the binary” (2006: 93)—even as we leave the location of such a boundary open to investigation. We need to attend to how critiques of femininity are tied to the (historical) white supremacy of feminist theory and the tendency for white-dominated academia to discount the interventions of critical race theory, post-colonial theory, and third-world feminist frameworks, and the models for solidarity and differential consciousness that they offer. We need to attend to how assumptions about “authenticity” and “superficiality” shape the political ecology of knowledge production and kinship, how femininity figures in the reproduction of both ideas and subjects, and the caring work we do.

To that end, emphasizing the “critical” dimension of critical femininity studies thus concerns more than a critique of femininity as impossible expectations imposed on “women” or as a source of oppression and instead focuses on differentiated relations of power between femininities in all their forms and features. Turn-taker Sasha Roseneil argued for the future-oriented promise of critical theory and “criticality’s emphasis on the potentiality of the present” (2011: 127), and critical femininity studies encompasses both the possibilities of social, empirical research around femininities and, I would argue, the political fictions of feminine figurations. Roseneil’s call for criticality in social research, following Eve Sedgwick, argues against paranoia and predictability, and, similarly, critical femininity studies investigates femininity and relations between femininities as being more complex than feminist theory has sometimes allowed for and more hopeful than feminist activism has dared to imagine.

In an affirmative spirit, I thus contend that critical femininity studies might offer orientations to objects, others, and orients (Ahmed 2006) that inherit, emerge from, and extend feminist legacies and where femininities involve orientations towards some (queer) objects and subjects and not others. Here, femininity is not reducible to reproductive futurity nor does it require that we kill either mothers or the maternal; indeed, we have room for both Medusa’s laughter, historical and contemporary drag, and the colonial roots of all feminine matters. Calling claims about the superficiality of femininity and the trappings thereof into question, we might follow a Harawayian thread and argue that technology is intrinsic to, not distinguishable
from, the materialization of all gender formations. I suggest that we should consider the somatechnics of feminine subjectivity (Sullivan & Murray 2009). That is, rather than being the expressive and visible resources of an autonomous and rational human subject who at best aspires towards better tool-use or make-up, femininity, and thus feminine subjectivity is irreducibly co-constituted through soma and techne, as a body of flesh and knowledge. Extending the insights from feminist phenomenology and sexual difference theory we might stress feminine specificity and call the “emancipatory” qualities of gender neutrality into question, but without insisting on proper feminine objects or bodily processes as the foundations for our object(ion)s. Building on Marxist feminist labour as well as Foucaultian understandings of biopower and epistemic disciplining, we might critically interrogate the femininity of consumption and the consumption of femininities, the labour of femininity and the feminization of labour, and, with psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theory, we might investigate both the politics of feminine reproduction and the work of kinship in forming femininity.

What I am suggesting is neither a brave new world nor a (feminine) subject without history; but rather that critical femininity studies might be a hopeful figuration constituted in and through bodies of flesh and knowledge. Equipped with differential consciousness and attending to both pleasure and pain, we might lose the (academic) masculinity complex and use our speculums beyond narcissism and alienation and instead revisit, reinhabit and renarrate the dark continent of femininity (Dahl 2010) as neither a “white patch” on the map, a compulsory straight jacket or a dangerous sexualized jungle. In so doing, critical femininity extends feminist legacies, imagines (queer) feminine elsewhere and (re)figures the gendered politics of research.

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Note

1 For the purposes of this piece, feminist studies encompasses women’s, gender, and feminist studies.

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