

Including and Exceeding ‘Women’: Studying Femininities in LGBTQIA+ Sydney

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Abstract

It is important to include and exceed the category ‘woman’ in femininities research if we are to capture the multiplicity of gendered expressions and experiences that can be understood as feminine. In this paper I draw on 12 months of ethnographic research with LGBTQIA+ Sydney residents who self-identify as any gender other than ‘male’ and who enact forms of femininities. I consider the possibilities and limitations of the category ‘woman’ for empirical research into articulations and enactments of femininity and suggest that ethnography can be a queer methodology that is useful for taking up the task of studying femininities beyond, but not without, ‘women’.

Keywords femininity; woman; feminism; queer; ethnography

“And what are your pronouns?”

It is close to 1am and we are sitting outside a warehouse in Marrickville, a suburb in Sydney’s inner west. Cigarette smoke is mingling with the humid summer breeze while the music from inside thrums faintly around us. Tina has just introduced me to her friend Lisa, who after supplying their own name and gender pronouns (they/them), asks for mine in return. I notice that they scan my body for one of the neon stickers that this party supplies upon entry. If I’d wanted to, I could have taken a sharpie and written my identity labels on the sticker, letting other people know if I identified as, among other things, ‘GNC’ (gender non-conforming), ‘T’ (Trans), ‘NB’ (Non-Binary) ‘~’ (fluid), ‘Ma’ (Masc.) or ‘Fe’ (Femme). Not everyone uses the labels, and not everyone follows the key, which is hand written on a piece of pink cardboard next to the coat check. Some partygoers write their own labels like ‘Futch’ (an amalgamation of femme and butch), ‘Gender Queer Lipstick Lesbian Realness’ or ‘Bisexual Vampire Queen’. Lisa has used their label to indicate that they are ‘T’ for Trans and ‘Fe’ for Femme. They have long, purple hair and wear fluffy nipple pasties, lacy knickers and a great deal of body glitter. This party is one of a handful in Sydney where it is unremarkable that someone who appears so feminine uses they/them pronouns.

When we return to the dance floor the heat inside has increased, in defiance of the warehouse's much discussed and recently installed air conditioner. The party-goers are now even more naked than when I arrived. The room is full of people in glittery nipple pasties, leather harnesses, sheer leotards and fishnet bodysuits. Those who aren't locking lips are dancing gently around each other. It is crowded, but not impossible to move around. I see Liam standing against the wall, watching the crowd and clutching a vodka soda that has been watered down by melted ice. They have just arrived and not yet visited the label station. Tonight, their shimmery eye makeup matches their recently dyed pastel pink hair. In a choice likely motivated by style more so than the heat, they have unbuttoned their long black shirt almost to their navel, exposing their chest and stomach. Liam is often mistaken for a man by people outside of their queer social circle and spends a lot of time telling their friends that it is not worth the effort of explaining to their colleagues at work that they are non-binary. Tonight is something of a reprieve from those pressures, this party is one where Liam's way of being feminine can be interpreted based on whatever they decide to write on their label, rather than the assumptions of strangers.

At 3am the music fades to silence and is replaced by groans of disappointment from the crowd, along with excited chatter about where to head to next. The concrete floor is littered with a few of the neon label stickers, but most people wear their labels home.

Parties like the one I describe here are an important part of social and community life for certain members of Sydney's LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more) populations. It is these social scenes that make up the field in which I conduct my PhD research. Specifically, I study the ways in which femininities are enacted and experienced by LGBTQIA+ Sydney siders who self-identify as any gender other than 'male'. The party scene that opens this paper begins to show the variety of gender identities and practices that are acknowledged and inhabited, both seriously and playfully, by LGBTQIA+ and feminine Sydney residents. In contrast, most empirical studies into enactments of femininity take up the category 'women' as the subject of research. In this paper I draw on 12 months of ethnographic research to interrogate the limits of the term 'woman' for capturing lived experiences of femininity amongst the Sydney-siders in my study.

In the fieldwork research that forms the basis of my PhD project, I utilised a participant observation methodology that required me to live as closely as possible with participants in

their day to day lives. The intended result of this way of studying a group of people is to understand the intangible stuff of everyday life from the perspective of those participating in the study (Malinowski 1922). Over the 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted, I worked with 50 participants who were aged from 25-70. Participants largely lived and socialised in Sydney's inner western suburbs and approximately 85% talk about themselves as being racialised White. I was given intimate access to the lives of most participants and joined them in their everyday routines at work and home as well as social occasions, parties, doctors' appointments, bush walks, burlesque performances and more. I concluded the study by conducting unstructured, in depth interviews with 30 key participants. The readiness with which most participants accepted me into their lives must be contextualised by my own position as a member of the group that I study. That is, I am a Sydney resident who self-identifies as a queer femme. For this reason, the study could be considered an 'ethnography at home' (Dahl 2011, Narayan 1993, Voloder 2008).

In this paper, I argue that it is important to include and exceed 'women' as a category in empirical femininities research if we are to grasp the variety of gendered expressions and lived experiences that can be understood as 'feminine'. I begin by considering feminist critiques of the 'woman' as a socially constructed category. I then turn to empirical studies of femininities within the feminist tradition and suggest that such research invariably, albeit unintentionally, fix 'woman' as a category. I explore feminist and queer critiques of 'women' as the subject of gender research and suggest that when empirical research takes 'women' as the subject of femininities studies, our ability to conceive of gender expressions beyond a binary is limited. Finally, I discuss some early findings from my own study of LGBTQIA+ Sydney - sider's enactments of femininities to suggest that ethnography can be a queer methodology that is useful for taking up the task of studying femininities beyond, but not without, 'women'.

Feminism and 'Women'

Feminist thought provides a foundational critique of 'woman' as an innate, and inherently inferior, category. Ground breaking works such as those by de Beauvoir (1953) and Friedan (1963) informed and inspired the social and academic feminist movements of the 1970s onwards by questioning prevailing understandings of 'women' as naturally subordinate to 'men' (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000). Indeed, de Beauvoir highlights the importance of asking the question "what is a woman?" (p. 13) at the initiation of any feminist theorising. She goes

on to explain that the very need to ask this question, to see 'woman' as a marked category that requires an explanation, goes some way towards suggesting an answer. At the time of de Beauvoir's writing, the category 'man' would never have been subject to the question 'what is a man?' because maleness had been situated as neutral in science, literature, art, religion, and popular culture. In contrast, de Beauvoir elucidates the ways in which 'women' have been socially produced as a negative 'other' in relation to 'men'. The feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s developed the ideas of de Beauvoir and other pioneering feminists into a sustained critique of the social processes and power dynamics that constituted 'women' as different from, and lesser than, 'men'.

In arguing that womanhood, and 'women's' inequality, is socially created, feminist thinkers laid the groundwork for a social constructivist theory of gender. Central to the development of feminist social constructivism was the analytical separation of sex and gender. A number of the earliest and most important works in what is now seen as gender studies literature, argue that 'woman' is a social category of gender derived from, but separate to a biological embodied sex (Reiter 1975, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, Vance 2007). Rubin (1975) exemplifies this way of thinking when she uses the term 'sex/gender system' to describe the cultural means through which bodily sex is invested with social and cultural meanings of gender and sexuality. The relationship between gender and sex has been the subject of much debate amongst constructivists who disagree over the extent to which womanhood is socially constructed and how closely culturally produced gender is linked with biological sex. For instance, Ortner (1974) draws on cross cultural examples to argue that there is a common but arbitrary connection made between 'women's' bodily functions, namely menstruation, and nature. She goes on to claim that this connection between 'women' and nature provides a cultural justification for 'women's' subordination and control in the service of culture, a domain of society Ortner sees as primarily controlled by men. Such feminist analyses thus unpack the ways that social and cultural meanings attached to biological sex produce 'woman' as a gendered category.

However, even when viewed through a constructivist lens, the category 'woman' is often too narrow to encompass a variety of lived experiences of gender. Critiques of feminism's inadequate attention to the role of race in the production of the category 'woman' exemplify how the term can elide many people's lived experiences of gender. Critical race theorists and postcolonial feminist scholars and activists argue that mainstream feminism universalises the category 'woman' thereby erasing the differences that racism and colonialisation have created

between women. Leading post-colonial feminist scholars like Spivak (1988) argue that in contexts of colonial ideologies of race, ethnicity and gender, “the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow” (p. 44) than either non-White, non-Anglo ‘men’ or White, Anglo ‘women’. Between patriarchy and imperialism, these women disappear into the allegory of the ‘third world woman’ who is seen by non-subalterns to be stuck between tradition and modernity. Similarly, Mohanty (1984) critiques Western feminist works for applying concepts like ‘patriarchy’ cross-culturally and for homogenising ‘third world women’ as a lower valued category. She argues that Western feminist theory produces an idea of Western women as educated, free and modern which relies on an understanding of third world ‘women’ as ignorant, tradition-bound and uneducated. The critiques of Spivak and Mohanty are two among many that highlight the ways in which the category ‘woman’, even when viewed under a constructivist lens, can erase the experiences of third world ‘women’ and non-White women. The important work of feminist post-colonial and critical race scholars can be taken up to produce a more expansive conceptualisation of the category ‘woman’ within feminist theory.

Other significant developments in feminism’s analysis of the category ‘woman’ have arisen from critiques of constructivism’s use of biological sex as the basis upon which to ‘woman’ is constructed as a gendered category. Some of the most important work in this area has come from transgender studies theorists (Stryker and Whittle 2006) as well as Butler’s (1990) important interventions in feminist theory. Stryker (2006) considers the field of transgender studies to be concerned with disrupting the assumed linkages between the biological specificity of sexed bodies and social configurations of gendered personhood. She suggests that what she calls transgender phenomena poses a challenge to feminists to reconsider the unifying potential of the category ‘woman’ (p.7). Specifically, Stryker highlights how trans people’s bodies and identities call into question the stability of bodily sex as a referent for gender and argues that sex is itself a social category. To do this, she draws on Butler’s (1990) understanding of performativity. Butler argues that gender, sex and other forms of embodied identification are fictions produced by constant everyday enactments that take place within regulatory regimes established over time in particular places. In thinking about gender as performative, Butler draws on Austin’s speech act theory which posits that utterances have the ability to perform actions in the social world. For Butler, gender is performative insofar as it is a non-necessary effect of constantly reiterated acts. It is the repetition of these bodily and discursive acts that give gender its appearance of substantive reality, rather than any innate, essential maleness or femaleness. Butler argues that gender is the discursive means through which sex is constantly

produced through ongoing social practices. Sex is, in other words, a gendered category reproduced in social practice, and thus not a stable referent for the category 'woman'. While not all feminist thinkers utilise the denaturalisation of sex that the likes of Stryker and Butler postulate (Mackinnon 1989, Raymond 1979), their work has made it possible to think about the category 'woman' beyond a tie to sex.

Feminist Studies of Femininities

An emerging body of research into femininities, and specifically queer femininities, can be said to "investigate femininity beyond its ties to femaleness" (Dahl 2012, p. 62) in so far as it aims to encompass a variety of gender expressions beyond a male/female binary. However, much of this work is conceptual (Hollibaugh 2000, Hoskin 2017, Nestle 1992, Newman 1995, Rose and Camilleri 2002) with, of course, notable exceptions (see for example McCann 2018). Empirically grounded research into the ways in which different groups of people enact and articulate forms of femininity are largely studies of 'women' or same sex attracted 'men' (see for example Boellstorff 2005, Kulick 1998, Newton 1972).

Despite the expansive and inclusive potential of the category 'woman' in feminist scholarship, many feminist empirical studies of femininity inadvertently reinscribe 'woman' as a static and narrow category. For instance, Gremillion (2003) does the important work of historicising Western ideals of femininity in her account of an anorexia treatment centre in the USA. She argues that the prevailing medical discourses around anorexia at the time left race and class unscrutinised as seemingly 'natural' features of anorexia (see also Gremillion 2016). However, Gremillion does not apply this same genealogical or critical scrutiny to the terms 'girl' and 'women', instead using these terms to demarcate the gendered subjects of her research. Similarly, in her study of White, middle class girls in Long Island, USA, Kenny (2000) explores the ways in which girlhood can be produced by racialisation and class based social processes. In taking 'girls' and young 'women' as the subjects of her study, Kenny inadvertently stabilises 'girl' and 'woman' as the basis of her interrogation of the role of Whiteness and middle classness in the production of gender. The work of both Pini (2005) and Rolston (2010) highlights the ways that 'women' must adapt their gender presentations and enactments in the context of male-dominated workplaces. They explain how the participants in their research consciously perform a personality that is neither too feminine nor too masculine, in order to be taken seriously at work. Both discuss how the participants in their

respective studies actively work on their gender expressions and enactments and how these are different in their social lives compared to at work. Yet in both studies, 'women' are taken as the subjects of research, and the category itself is (re)stabilised.

As McCann (2016) points out, even when feminist researchers do make clear their commitments to an expansive and dynamic view of the category 'woman', taking 'women' as the subject of empirical research often requires that the category is unintentionally stabilised. In her study of 'women' in a Northern English town, Skeggs (1997) argues that the category 'woman' is always produced through process that include class-based classifications. Through this approach Skeggs indicates that she takes the category 'woman' as something unfixed and produced through specific experiences and social contexts. Yet this approach is held in tension with her account of femininity as the "process through which women are gendered to become specific sorts of women" (p. 98). Despite their feminist orientations, Skeggs, Gremillion (2003), Kenny (2000), Pini (2005) and Rolston (2010), must at least partially (re)fix the category 'woman' in order to distinguish the subjects of their empirical studies into femininities.

There is a long tradition in feminism of questioning the stability and coherence of the category 'woman' as the subject of feminism (Jagose 1993). Jagose (1993) argues that while gender researchers often consider queer theory to be the home of critiques of normative identity categories, feminism's engagement in radically anti essentialist critiques of the category 'woman' make the two traditions fundamentally interconnected. Butler's (1990) work is exemplary of this. In what is now taken as a founding text in queer theory, Butler turns a Foucauldian genealogical lens to feminism's use of the category 'woman'. She argues that 'woman' is best thought of as a discursive effect of feminism itself, rather than its subject, and goes on to question taken for granted notions of an active subject more broadly. Both McCann (2016) and Jagose (2009) highlight the work of Riley (1988) whose work resonates with Butler's, insofar as she sees feminism as the proper site of an interrogation of the category 'woman'. In her historical account of the category 'woman', Riley argues that being a 'woman' is a temporary movement into a socially prefigured category, that "'women' are only sometimes 'women'" (p. 96). Riley conceives of 'woman' as a category that 'woman' move in and out of over time, acknowledging that it is impossible to constantly live with a sense of oneself as gendered. Riley's conceptualisation of women's lived experience of womanhood as something fluid, and her argument that this view of 'woman' is central to the political project

of feminism, has potentially powerful implications for feminist studies of gender beyond stable subject categories.

Yet, while the 'woman' can be taken a dynamic and contextually constituted category in feminist research, empirical studies into femininity have largely (re)stabilised 'women' in order to study a distinguishable gender group (McCann 2016). When this occurs, the link between womanhood and femininity is reinforced such that the two terms have been, and in some case continue to be, used virtually synonymously (McCann 2018). As a result, the category 'woman' can become narrowed by erasing, for instance, female masculinities (Halberstam 1998) from the spectrum of experiences that can make up womanhood. Significantly for my study of what it is to be feminine and enact femininities in LGBTQIA+ Sydney, a conflation of 'women' with femininity erases the many people in the study who experience and express femininity via bodies and identities that do not fit into the category 'woman', nor the category 'man'.

When the category 'woman' is reified in femininities research, the conflation of femininity and womanhood can reproduce a binary view of gender that would erase a variety of gender expressions and experiences. In their important ethnomethodological study of how American people decide to label a person's gender, Kessler and McKenna (1978) argue that the way most people understand gender is grounded in the presumption of a gender binary, as illustrated by the everyday processes that they refer to as gender attribution. This term describes the ways in which individuals classify the gender of others around them. Gender attributions are typically not based on knowledge of those people's gender as assigned at birth nor that person's internally felt gender identity. Rather, the attribution process is based on a number of culturally and temporally specific criteria that influence how a person is externally perceived. Kessler and McKenna found that it was not physical or social differences that lead their research participants to see two genders. Rather, they concluded that it was a pre-disposition towards seeing two genders that lead to participants marking social and physical differences between people as gendered. They explain that asking someone if they are a 'man' or a 'woman' presupposes that the respondent will be one or the other and that there are no alternative responses. In doing so, Kessler and McKenna indicate that the use of categories like 'man' and 'woman' limit our ability to perceive gender expressions and identities beyond a binary. Similarly, Butler (1990) suggests that even when gender itself is thought of as socially constituted, if only two genders are thought about then sex must be the thing that either enables or restrains a person's gender expression and identity. Butler argues that if we think about both sex and gender as social products created through repeated acts, we could theorise sexed bodies

as the sites of a variety of different genders. Butler thus incites feminist researchers to think beyond gender binarism.

In contrast, many empirical studies of femininity are unclear about if and how non-binary, and trans people fit into existing studies. If externally perceived or attributed gender is the basis upon which 'women's' femininities are researched, it is likely that many non-binary people are erased in the current literature that would be see them as simply 'women' (Kessler and McKenna 1978). Conversely, many trans women may not meet the social requirements for being seen as 'women' and therefore excluded from studies about 'women's' femininities, despite self-identifying their gender as female (Kessler and McKenna 1978). The still emerging academic and social recognition of people in Western societies whose gender identities fall outside of the male/female binary means that most studies focusing on these groups address non-binary and gender-queer people's identities and experiences rather than their experiences and expressions of femininity specifically (Stachowiak 2017). Thus, while the category 'woman' has the potential to encompass some gender fluidity, its use in empirical studies has limits for capturing the variety of gender identities and experiences that can be understood as feminine.

I open this paper with an account of a typical Friday night for many of the LGBTQIA+ and feminine Sydney residents who I worked alongside over 12 months of fieldwork. However, it is an account that would have been impossible to produce if I had taken 'women' as the subject of the study. The party that I depict happens once a month and is a favourite of participants under 35, largely because it is, in one person's words "a deeply femme space". Here femme is used by participants indicate a queer way of being feminine. This particular party is highlighted as a space where feminine expressions are more prevalent than masculine gender expressions, which from the perspective of participants, tend to dominate in more 'mainstream' LGBTQIA+ parties and club nights. It is also a space in which trans and non-binary people are encouraged to feel safe and welcome, in contrast to many - although not all - of the 'women's' and 'lesbian' parties and club nights that were present on the Sydney scene in the 2000s. Lisa and Liam are two among many in Sydney's LGBTQIA+ social scene whose gender expressions, experiences and identities are firmly located within femininity, while potentially falling outside of easy categorisation as either 'male' or 'female'. The party's label station enables partygoers like Liam and Lisa to make explicit how they would like their genders to be understood by others, including me, the participant observer researcher they have allowed into their lives. It is to my

ethnographic methodology, and its utility for capturing a multiplicity of feminine gender expressions, that I now turn.

Including and Exceeding 'Women'

My research into enactments of femininities in LGBTQIA+ Sydney focuses on people who self-identify their gender as anything other than 'male'. This means that participants who do not identify as – among other things – non-binary, gender fluid or trans women, self-identify as 'women'. However, while people who use terms like non-binary to label their gender identities make up a proportional minority of the groups that I work in, the practices of most of the 'women' who participated in the study were informed by the presence or potential presence of both trans and non-binary people in their communities. Lisa's casual question, "and what are your pronouns?" is an increasingly common one posed in Sydney's LGBTQIA+ social scenes. The practice of announcing one's own pronouns and asking for other people's serves a number of purposes in different parts of the social scenes that I worked in. Primarily, it gives some indication of a person's gender identity. Mis-gendering someone is considered a serious social faux pas that, if committed enough, can lead to subtle but significant social ostracisation. Pronoun practices are especially important to the trans, non-binary and gender fluid people in the study for whom being misgendered – called by the wrong pronoun or name – can be anything from a daily annoyance to profoundly traumatic and alienating. An awareness of the impacts of using the wrong pronouns for someone informs non-trans participants' practices of announcing their own pronouns upon meeting someone new, even when they are themselves typically gendered correctly by others. Indeed, many in the scene will automatically use gender neutral pronouns (they/them) to talk about people whose pronouns they do not know.

An ideological commitment to correctly gendering fellow community members is borne out by participants who run parties, businesses or community groups. These participants, usually 'women', go to great lengths to make their spaces inclusive or 'safe' for trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people. One such measure is the implementation of a label systems like the one at the party which I describe at the beginning of this paper. Other practices include making announcements at the beginning of an event or on the event's website that disrespecting pronouns or transphobia will not be tolerated or working with a venue to make the bathrooms gender neutral. In the case of a small business run by two 'women', these participants asked

for community input via Facebook on the development of a safer space and pronoun policy for employees and customers. Feminine and LGBTQIA+ Sydney residents' attempts to affirm each other's self-determined genders reflects an understanding of gender as something relatively fluid and largely untethered to sex and a male/female binary. It is apparent that this way of thinking about gender is central to the ways that those I worked with in my study understand themselves and the ways that they relate to each other. These early findings from my ethnographic study indicate the importance of including and exceeding the category 'woman' when reaching enactments of femininities.

Ethnography can be a queer method that is useful for taking up the challenge of researching enactments of femininities that exceed but do not exclude the category 'women'. A queer approach to gender entails a critical orientation towards the knowledges and practices that organise certain bodies, identities, relationships and social institutions as obvious or normal (Graham 2014). Indeed, many queer theorists tend to avoid fixed definitions of the term 'queer' except to situate it as oriented against whatever constitutes 'normal' in terms of dominant forms of gender and sexuality in society (Berlant and Warner 1998, Halperin 2012). Wiegman and Wilson (2015) suggest that queer theory has, not unproblematically, come to be generally defined as a critique of particular, usually mainstream, norms and normativity. Queer theory's imperative to interrogate taken for granted categories finds parallels with ethnography's demand for reflexivity (Lewin 2016). The postmodern (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fischer 1986) and feminist (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, Reiter 1975) turns in Anthropology established reflexive critique of taken for granted categories, especially on the part of the researcher, as fundamental tenants of ethnographic participant observation methodologies. For instance, Elliston (1995) argues that historical male initiation rituals in Melanesia are better thought about as semen practices, rather than ritualised homosexuality, as homosexuality carries meanings from Western society that do not apply to Melanesian people. Similarly, Boellstorff (2005) italicises the term *gay* in his ethnographic study of *gay* 'men' in Indonesia in order to mark it as a specifically Indonesian term that has different local meanings and origins to the English term 'gay'. In this way, ethnographic methodologies can function like the label station at the party that I describe in the opening of this paper, they enable us to attempt to understand people on their own terms. In my research with LGBTQIA+ Sydney residents, this has meant that I have been able to capture a variety of gender expressions and experiences that may be understood as feminine, as well as a sense of the importance of gender

fluidity and non-binarism for all participants' understandings of themselves and their communities.

In this paper, I have drawn on my ethnographic study of LGBTQIA+ Sydney residents to consider the limitations of the term category 'women' for femininities research. I have drawn on feminist critiques of the category 'woman' as well as queer and feminist interrogations into the role of 'women' as a subject for the study of gender. While feminist and queer analyses of 'women' have great potential for employing the category as expansive and dynamic, empirical studies of femininities largely (re)stabilise the category by taking 'women' as the subject of study. I have suggested that the effect of this can be to limit our ability to see beyond a male/female binary. Considering some early findings from my own field study, I suggest that ethnography can be a queer method that is useful for capturing the multiplicity of gender expressions and experiences that can be considered feminine. I have thus sought to highlight the importance of conducting femininities research that includes, but simultaneously exceeds, the category 'woman'.

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