Acceptable femininity? Gay male misogyny and the policing of queer femininities

Sadie E Hale and Tomás Ojeda*

Abstract

While it represents a common form of gender-based violence, misogyny is an often-overlooked concept within academia and the queer community. Drawing on queer and feminist scholarship on gay male misogyny, we present a theoretical challenge to the myth that *the oppressed cannot oppress*, arguing that specific forms of gay male subjectivities can be proponents of misogyny in ways that are unrecognised because of their sexually-marginalised status. The authors' interest in the doing of misogyny, and its effects on specific bodies and subjectivities, leads us to discuss the extent to which white gay male misogyny can function to reinforce a particular gender and racial hierarchy that continually confines queer femininities to the status of the *abject other*, for *failing* to exhibit their *feminine credentials* and for making *gender trouble*. We also address how specific markers of femininity are depoliticised through the workings of this misogyny, exploring what femininity does when is conceptualised outside a heteronormative framework. To address these ideas, the authors firstly propose a theoretical account of misogyny in order to understand its analytical status as a cultural mechanism within the psychic economy of patriarchy. Secondly, they use queer approaches to effeminacy and subject formation for making the case for gay male misogyny and its connections to femininity within white gay cultures, asking how misogyny might become an essential component of the performance of hegemonic masculinity. The article concludes with a discussion of the ways in which gay male misogyny reinforces white male dominance over women and queer femininities specifically, advocating for resistance to the reproduction of such patriarchal arrangements.

Keywords

Effeminacy, gay male misogyny, hegemonic masculinity, queer femininity, queer theory, white gay culture

* **Corresponding author:**
Tomás Ojeda, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: t.i.ojeda@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

Despite being one of the most common forms of gender-based violence, misogyny remains largely under-theorised beyond its descriptive dimension as hatred against women. Broadly speaking, the specificity of this kind of hatred is not well discussed, and neither is its analytical distinction from other related concepts such as sexism (Frye, 1983; Manne, 2015; Serano, 2007). Its already *slippery* operation makes misogyny particularly worthy of scrutiny in spheres where the overall *sexual and gender minority* status of certain subjects provides a smokescreen, giving it additional cause to go unnoticed or complexifying criticism of it.

This article seeks to interrogate misogynistic hostility to femininity, especially as propagated by specific racially privileged gay male subjects, and to explore how these interactions with queer femininities in particular contribute to their being attributed inferior status. We will also show the extent to which traditional accounts of misogyny do not prove useful in their analytical functions when apparent hatred against women intersects with different axes of power and calls into question the very definition of men and women within a heteronormative framework.

This special issue's focus on *femininity* provides the opportunity to explore the entanglement of gay male misogyny and queer femininities. If femininity is, indeed, 'the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women' (Skeggs, 2001: 297 in Dahl, 2012: 59), then how are we to understand *queer* femininity in all its myriad expressions? Treated as a separate entity and complicated by being present in spheres where sex and gender are queered, how are feminine expressions and positionalities nonetheless impacted by misogyny? Queer femininities are commonly viewed as ironic and theatrical, therefore superficial (Dahl, 2012) or invisible (in the case of the femme), negating a conversation about their potential as serious tools for subverting patriarchal pressures and colonial sexual impositions (see the work of Hemmings [2007] and Rodríguez [2016] on bisexuality and queer politics). For that reason, it is part of our purpose to interrogate queer femininity as a concept, using it as a site for exploring what femininity does when it is conceptualised as something not necessarily inhabited by or attached to specific bodies (cisgender women) and identity markers (heterosexuality), discussing what femininity is about and to what extent it could be thought of differently.

Our contribution is intended as a theoretical reflection on scholarship around the question of misogyny within white-dominated gay male cultural formations – such as the ones commonly found in Western European and North American urban centres – and a critique of the ways femininity is understood when it is linked to gay male misogyny. We aim, therefore, to critically examine the structural undermining of *queer femininities* without reproducing the patriarchal violence that contributes to their erasure. It is precisely the centring of specific accounts of gay male cultures and subjectivities which leads to the dismissal of queer women and non-traditional femininities more broadly; our hope is to explore the origins and impacts of particular misogynistic hatred as it is directed at queer femininities, while also, to borrow from Dahl, figuring the subjectivity of queer femininity beyond 'a phallocentric order' (2012: 58). While the sex/gender distinction is helpful in freeing femininity from its heteronormative attachment to female bodies, we will explore the idea that it can also disturb the potential for it to be boldly claimed as an intrinsic tool of resistance. In the same vein, the dominance of heteronormative forms of masculinity in white gay male cultures represents a reductive adherence to a model of hegemonic masculinity as outlined by sociologist Raewyn Connell (1987) that forecloses the possibility of liberating masculinities from their restrictive normative conception, making opposition to femininity an essential component of belonging. We will thus make the case that the policing of queer

femininities in white gay male environments functions to reinforce a particular gender and racial hierarchy which depoliticises femininities as a result.

Overall, in this article we wish to present a novel theoretical account of gay male misogyny and queer femininity that builds on previous scholarship around subject formation, critical masculinity and transgender studies, and feminist and queer theory. While facing the challenges of working with categories – such as woman, masculinity and gay culture – that tend to be conflated and theorised without addressing their internal differences and historical specificities, we also deal with the risks of reproducing the same epistemic violence that we are criticising in our attempts *to queer* what we understand by woman[1] and femininity when discussing gay male misogyny. Yet when *queer* is attached to both terms, we are not just interrupting specific cultural practices that render bodies and identities legible as a homogeneous *Other* within heteronormativity, but rather focusing on particular types of bodies, subject positions and identifications – such as trans women, lesbians, bisexual individuals, effeminate gay men, gender-variant and queer subjects – that interrogate normative understandings of femininity and 'the continuum of sex, gender, and sexuality' (Richardson, 2003: 429). We hope this article will contribute to elevating a critical discussion of misogyny within the confines of an already-marginalised group of society – namely, gay men – dispensing with the myth that the oppressed cannot oppress, and dismantling the apparatus of heterosexuality and patriarchy which underpins some aspects of white gay male cultures and ensures the survival of misogynistic ideas.

Conceptualising misogyny

It is important to first understand the politics of the term misogyny and its uses within scholarship on gay and lesbian studies, feminist theory, and queer and transgender studies. In some of her recent articles, philosopher and writer Kate Manne (2015) proposes a definition of the term that goes beyond its descriptive account, establishing a conceptual distinction between what she calls a *naïve conception* and a *feminist account* of misogyny. The former refers mainly to individual agents – typically, but not necessarily, men – 'who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions towards any and every woman, or at least women generally, *simply because they are women*' (2015: 1, emphasis in original). Alternatively, a feminist account of misogyny 'ought to be understood as the system which operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination, and to uphold men's dominance' (p. 2). Instead of looking at the individual, this definition emphasises the role of a particular social structure in the production of misogynistic attitudes that serve a patriarchal ideology. That is the reason why misogynistic hostilities target certain types of women, the ones who challenge men's standards of living or otherwise *fail* to exhibit their credentials as a subordinated species.

Turning to the differences and similarities between sexism and misogyny, Manne (2015) offers a theoretical distinction based on their ideological functions within the context of patriarchy. In short, she defines sexism as 'a species of patriarchal ideology that frequently involves naturalizing sex difference' (p. 12). In doing so, sexism contributes to the building of a patriarchal order which draws its power from beliefs, theories and cultural narratives that depict men and women as radically different by nature, in ways that if established as part of people's common sense, could make them more likely to support and participate in patriarchal social tenets. On the contrary, misogyny works by enforcing 'a patriarchal social order in practice, without going via the intermediary of people's assumptions, beliefs, theories, values, etc.' (p. 12), tightening the grip of patriarchal social relations in ways that are more or less direct and coercive.

A further approach to both terms is the one developed by writer and activist Julia Serano (2007) in her work on trans-misogyny (see also Chamberland, 2016). Building on the experiences of violence faced by gender-variant individuals on the trans feminine/ female spectrum, she contends that trans-misogyny is 'steeped in the assumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to, and exist primarily for the benefit of, maleness and masculinity' (Serano, 2012: para. 2), and relies upon an *oppositional sexism* that insists that the categories of male and female are rigid and fundamentally different (Serano, 2007). This dimorphic interpretation allows *feminine* traits to be looked upon as weak and inferior to *male* characteristics, which announce dominance (when displayed by a man), while every assertion of difference between males and females fortifies the notion that they are thus worthy of different treatment. Therefore, this combination of a system of oppositional sexism that creates a false dichotomy between males and females, and asymmetric derision and violence targeting trans feminine individuals, exposes the misogyny at work by revealing the hatred of those *behaviours* and *expressions* associated with the inferior female class. This echoes earlier arguments made by feminist theorist Marilyn Frye (1983), who drew the important link between oppositional sexism and the male domination/female subordination paradigm. She points out that women face a double bind, in that they are socially (and potentially physically) sanctioned *regardless* of whether they behave or dress in a traditionally feminine or masculine way; in the former, they may be contributing to their own subordination, while in the latter, they are perceived as aggressive or unwomanly. Crucially, while behaving in a feminine way will likely lead to social ostracisation or violence for men, behaving in a masculine way will not – adding a layer of explanation as to why gay men may take shelter in this socially approved way of behaving.

The doing of misogyny

In explaining how misogyny works, we follow Gayle Rubin's (1975) exegesis of Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship, which allows us to focus our attention not just on the oppressive nature of the relations between men and women, but also the associations *between men* and the emotional bonds that keep them together as the beneficiaries of a form of exchange that needs to be critically interrogated.

Generally speaking, kinship theories show the extent to which human sexuality is organised around different institutions that contribute to the oppression of women, such as the incest taboo, obligatory heterosexuality and an asymmetric division of the sexes (Rubin, 1975). Rubin (1975) also suggests that patriarchal heterosexuality can be thought of in terms of one form of the traffic in women, which according to Sedgwick's reading of it translates as 'the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men' (1985: 25–26). Therefore, if women are being transacted, then relationships of exchange are not necessarily established between a man and a woman: it is the men who offer and receive them who are linked, and women circulate as mere objects in the exchange, not partners (Rubin, 1975). As Sedgwick (1985) summed up accurately in reference to Rubin's work, 'Lévi-Strauss's normative man uses a woman as a "conduit of a relationship" in which the true *partner* is a man' (p. 26, emphasis in original). And within this form of organisation, the subordination of women can be seen not just as a consequence of patriarchy, but also as a product of the relationships of exchange that impact on how sex and gender are organised and produced (Rubin, 1975).

If men are the intended partners in the trafficking of women, there is something in the relation between men – as well as the role of women as *conduits*, and their function in mediating men's sexual desire – that needs to be questioned. Some definitions of patriarchy that emphasise its meaning in terms of relationships between men (Beechey, 1979) place asymmetries of power between men and women as dependent on the power relations between

men and men. This power displacement locates the structure of the social as mirroring the male–male–female erotic triangle that serves as the basis for the theorisation of the concept of *homosocial desire* developed by Eve Sedgwick (1985) and revisited by Stephen Maddison (2000). Following Sedgwick, even though the word *homosocial* is used for describing social bonds between individuals of the same sex, it is also used to distinguish from homosexual. Attaching the word *desire* to homosocial allows us to explore Sedgwick's hypothesis about the 'potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted' (1985: 2): that is, 'a continuum with men loving men at one end and men promoting the interests of men at the other' (Maddison, 2000: 72).

What disrupts this formula is the possibility of homosexual desire between men. Thus, for the purposes of avoiding that transgression, male patriarchal *safeguards* such as obligatory heterosexuality and homophobia need to be strongly reinforced and produced (Sedgwick, 1985). This seems to be already settled, not just due to the *universal* character of patriarchy, but also because homophobia – understood here as the suppression of the homosexual component of sexuality – appears as a necessary consequence of that system, whose principles and norms are committed to oppressing women (Rubin, 1975). In this regard, homophobia does not have an exclusively regulatory effect on homosexual desires among men, but impacts the whole range of male bonds and produces homophobic anxieties that end up binding them into social structures of patriarchal authority (Maddison, 2000).

Overall, masculine homosociality works as a coercive mechanism which retains power within the structure 'by securing bonds of common interest between men' (Maddison, 2000: 74). Any threat to this structure is managed through the production of misogyny, and the requirement of constant displays of the credentials that confirm men's power and loyalty to their gender interests. Given that logic, men's masculine credentials are constantly policed by their peers and even by women. Thus, if power over women is not continuously displayed, men risk losing their credentials, and being read as homosexuals. In the case of some gay men, Maddison succeeds in suggesting that the vicissitudes of *the closet*, together with the coercive power of homosociality, 'conspire to make many homosexual men behave in ways that attempt to display *their* dominance over women' (p. 74, emphasis in original). Away from the abjection of visibility, some gay men aspire to give an account of their authority and the power of homosociality reinforcing misogyny through its reiteration in every social interaction, even in cases of friendship and alliances with women, and especially when they are expected to perform their femininity within the limits stated by homosociality (Maddison, 2000). As a consequence, lesbians, feminine gay male subjects, queer and trans women who challenge patriarchal arrangements fall under fierce attack from misogynistic attitudes, which can take on different forms and strategies.

Gay male misogyny: the connection with femininity

It is important to point out that the transactional nature of gay men's relationships with women can go hand in hand with a general hostility to femininity. Niall Richardson (2009) documents the many suggestions by scholars as to why gay men might have a problem with effeminacy – and crucially, therefore, femininity – within their own ranks: whether as a way of rejecting what is perceived to be anachronistic campness, or as a means of distancing themselves from what they were bullied for as schoolboys (Sedgwick, 2005). Richardson further suggests that feminine boys and men are 'a considerable source of anxiety' for society and are punished for 'moving down the gender ladder' and 'renouncing [their] masculine privilege by "doing" femininity' (2009: 529).

Ubiquitous *no fems* attitudes among gay men, well documented by scholars such as Bergling (2006) and Baker (2003) across decades and mediums, from personal ads in the

back pages of newspapers to contemporary *hookup apps* like Grindr, reflect this hostility to femininity and also spring from the aspirational quality attributed to the *straight-acting* gay man who embodies a hegemonic form of masculinity according to Connell's (1987) influential framework – namely physically fit, high-earning, sexually assertive, usually white, and usually dismissive of women. This dual desire in popular gay male discourse to be *masculine* and to have *masc credentials* has the effect of reproducing a widespread denigration of femininity in other gay men, and has at its centre a fundamental hostility to, disinterest in and degradation of women – including queer and trans women, whose femininity is called into question because their gender expression can be read as masculine, and therefore insulting to the traditional gender order (Chamberland, 2016). Indeed, relations between gay men and queer women, rather than being streamlined and solidified by their shared oppression, are in fact complicated by each party's relationship to hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy and power (Bersani, 1995).

On a more abstract level, however, gender and queer scholars have proposed critically analysing the links between the development of gender identity and homophobia (Scharff, 2009), enabling a way of looking at the doing of misogyny within the psychic constitution of the gay male subject. Drawing on Butler's (1997) melancholy gender, gay misogyny could be thought of as a violent response towards queer subjectivities that threaten heterosexualised gender identities. Butler calls our attention to the psychic work involved in becoming a gay male subject by refusing specific gender identifications. Rather than just locating this work in the psyche, Butler highlights the doing of a prior cultural prohibition against homosexuality committed to keeping sexuality, gender and desire strictly aligned. According to this logic, masculinity and femininity are produced through melancholic identifications, that is, by means of prohibitions 'that *demand the loss* of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that those losses *not* be avowed, and *not* be grieved' (p. 135, emphasis in original).

Following Leo Bersani (1995), the script for gay men involves both learning to desire particular subjects and not to desire others, which echoes the Butlerian (1997) theory of the psychosocial acquirement of gender identity, which states that normative masculinity 'is formed by the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love … an exclusion never grieved, but "preserved" through heightened [masculine] identification' (p. 146). Gay men's investment in hegemonic masculinity (Bersani, 1995), in addition to anxieties around effeminacy within most contemporary Western gay cultures (Sedgwick, 2005), are both connected to the ways gay male subjectivities try to mourn their ambivalent attachments to femininity. Paraphrasing Richardson (2003), queer women and effeminate gay men could work as *abject sponges*, as sites 'of convenient transcription for everything that the gay male subjectivity… cannot accept about itself' (p. 428), especially when they 'make *Gender Trouble*' (p. 431, emphasis in original).

Gay misogyny and queer femininities: Discussing the connections

While this sphere of enquiry lacks detailed academic investigation, work explicitly addressing the question of gay male misogyny does exist, particularly in more recent publications (see Bergling, 2006; Chamberland, 2016; Dyer, 2002; Halperin, 2012; Richardson, 2003, 2009). Using David Halperin's *How to be Gay* (2012) as an illustrative example, we will reflect upon some of the misunderstandings and difficulties of theorising gay male misogyny. In one excerpt of his book, Halperin takes the view that the source of the widely acknowledged, persistent denigration of femininity cannot be located within gay cultural norms themselves:

> Gay male culture's strategic, ironic reappropriation of a devalorized *femininity* neither implies nor produces a continued insult to *women*. For gay femininity, though it necessarily *refers to* women, is not necessarily *about* women … Just as gay femininity often consists in cultural practices (diva-worship or architectural restoration) that are socially marked as feminine but have nothing to do with femininity as it is embodied by women themselves, so gay male culture's delight in grotesque versions of femininity does not imply a contempt for or a hostility to actual women. Many gay male cultural practices that feature female figures, that refer to women or that mobilize aspects of femininity, have in fact *nothing at all to do with women*. (2012: 381, emphasis in original.)

There are several points to discuss here. By implicitly invoking Rubin's sex/gender system and Butler's (1990) work on the performativity of gender, Halperin attempts to separate femininity from women and thus from misogyny. While there is much merit to be found in this distinction, it is nevertheless complicated by the social privilege of *maleness* carried by gay men which does not account for how commonplace practices in gay culture like *performances* of femininity (such as drag), use of pejoratives associated with women (such as *bitch, cunt* and *queen*), and the veneration of hyperfemininity (such as diva-worship) impact upon the women and effeminate gay males that these practices necessarily reference. Secondly, while irony features significantly in gay popular culture, we agree with Richardson that some of the most degrading, offensive texts and practices in both straight and gay society at large deflect criticism by 'claiming a veil of irony' (2009: 535), and are worthy of interrogation.

Further, Halperin's claim that the aspects of femininity invoked in gay male cultural practices have '*nothing at all to do with women*' seems something of a stretch. Not only does this statement discount the social, emotional and psychological burdens women must carry as the designated bearers of femininity, but due to its performative nature Halperin's assertion makes hostility to women possible, even permissible. This becomes a particular problem for queer women, who often share meeting spaces with gay men, such as clubs and bars. The fact that many LGBTQ spaces are primarily aimed at (and attract) a white gay male clientele means that the performance of queer femininity is located in already gender – and racially – asymmetrical arenas.[2]

Who is the 'we'? Gay culture(s) and its excluding imaginaries

Most theoretical approaches to gay male misogyny tend to associate misogynistic hostilities with specific cultural practices, which simultaneously mobilise taken for granted notions of the cultural aspect attached to gay identities and the *fem* involved in it. Halperin's *How to be Gay* (2012) is devoted to the project of analysing the conditions under which a sense of a '*we*' is developed in the process of becoming a gay male subject, which continues the work of previous reflections made mainly by North American and Western European male scholars. Although Halperin (2012) seems ambivalent about the theoretical scopes of using *gay male culture* as a universal and self-evident cultural formation, he offers interesting features for thinking about the imaginaries and boundaries embedded in the term *gay culture* in its descriptive account. For him, part of the challenge facing every gay man is being initiated by other gay male peers into a teaching path that he defines as 'gay counter-acculturation', which entails a process of cultural transmission in the *how* of transforming a 'number of heterosexual cultural objects and discourses into vehicles of gay meaning' (2012: 7). For Halperin, it is possible to account for a 'trendy way of thinking' on this matter, which acknowledges that being gay entails both 'a set of specific sexual practices' and a '*cultural*

orientation' to the world (p. 10, emphasis in original). Overall, this implies 'a heightened aesthetic sense, a particular sensitivity to style and fashion, a non-standard relation to mainstream cultural objects … [and] a critical perspective on the straight world' (p. 10).

To trouble that, Ken Plummer (2003) offers a different reading of the history of gay cultures based on their developments in Britain, arguing that the mere idea of a gay male cultural life has historically been shaped by four boundaries, namely taboo, gender, desire and identity. These dimensions enable a critique of the risks of using the term *gay culture* without specifying *who* is the subject implicit in its definition, and *who* defines the terms under which a specific *culture* is decoded and embraced as part of one's sense of belonging – especially when we seriously consider Plummer's assertion that cultures themselves produce their own borders and exclusions.

For Plummer (2003), the term *gay male culture* should not be understood as a stable and coherent entity, but as inhabiting ambiguity and contradiction. *Gay male cultures* are also composed of multiple social contexts, which are likewise embedded in structures of inequalities informed by the intersections of different axes of power such as class, gender and race. When the term *gay culture* is used for contextualising specific practices – in this case, misogynistic attitudes towards lesbians, effeminate gay men, queer and trans women – it is also saying something about the social, gender and racial order in which those practices are performed. The problem is when scholarship on the subject uses the term without questioning these markers, leaving the presumed white, young and middleclass gay male subject unchallenged. Plummer (2003) goes further and suggests that class, gender and race work by structuring divides within gay male cultures, affecting specifically lesbians, trans individuals, queer people of colour and working-class gay men who differ sharply in many aspects, ranging from patterns of consumption to the possibilities of being *out* and able to politicise their identities.

If 'the connection between culture and queerness [is] spatial', then 'culture seem[s] to be a place where you [are] allowed to be queer' and feel at home (Dyer, 2002: 19). Furthermore, if gender norms, class and race designate borders within gay male cultures, we cannot avoid questioning which bodies and subjectivities feel *allowed* and *at home* in these spaces, especially when we take seriously the political consequences of our argument around the misogyny of white gay men and the policing of queer femininities. If what keeps gay males as being read as men is acting masculine and promoting men's privileges (Maddison, 2000), then the script that follows is that in order to be part of the we, gay men need to give up any visible signs that put them close to women and femininity. This can prompt a 'loving identification with gay man's enemies' and a subsequent channelling of 'heterosexual male misogyny' (Bersani, 1995: 117) as a way of achieving this distance. Acting masculine becomes the norm, the enactment of a series of regulatory practices that – paraphrasing Sara Ahmed – 'shapes what it is possible for bodies to do', which is 'secured as ideal through the fantasy' (2014: 145) of gender as fixed and aligned with sexuality. This is also how heteronormativity works, which reinforces our claim that straight-acting masculinities within white gay male cultures are complicit in misogynistic attitudes and patriarchal arrangements. Using Ahmed's (2014) theory of affects, we can discuss the extent to which this particular orientation to the world becomes a new normative regime central to white gay cultures, which depends on the figures of the effeminate gay man, the queer and trans woman for securing its ruling power over any attempt at dismantling dominant gender hierarchies.

Similarly, some queer scholars suggest that current discussions around modern gay male cultures seem to avoid links with effeminophobia and normative femininity more broadly (see Maddison, 2000; Richardson, 2009; Sedgwick, 2005). Sedgwick (2005) makes a very good point here when showing that *fem* expressions in adult gay men are something to be carefully policed and rejected, mainly because they expose the psychic work involved both

in constructing their identities as distinct from women and femininity, and holding sexuality and gender aligned. Returning to Halperin's ideas on gay culture as a process of acculturation and transmission, we can agree with Butler (1997) that what mediates gay men's participation in cultural formations are, on the one hand, a silent agreement upon the fictional character of their masculine identities as men, and, on the other, a shared history of erasures and disavowing connected to the psychosocial process of becoming a gay male subject. We might ask, therefore, to what extent misogyny becomes a performative act of predominantly white (normative) masculinity for gay men that reproduces heteronormative arrangements; and, similarly, how much gay male misogyny could be thought of as an acting out of what becomes ungrievable in the process of becoming a white gay (masculine) subject (for further development on this point, see the work of Eng and Han [2000] on racial melancholia).

Gay men and queer women: A fraught partnership

We have explored so far how some of these tensions affect specific bodies and identities, whose queerness and *authenticity* as gendered subjects are unequally judged through certain physical markers and ways of inhabiting spaces. Furthermore, as misogyny is located across the various social registers of age, class, disability, race, etc., any attempts to relate to these markers of difference need to be seriously addressed. Yet, the workings of misogyny mean that gay men, trans individuals and others who might be in close proximity to normative accounts of femininity and non-conformity can nonetheless still propagate it. As Halperin (2012) points out, cultural norms and practices between gay men such as drag and use of pejoratives relating to women can be viewed as a tactic for subverting a heterosexist, homophobic society; yet the continuous reiteration and the performances of citational practices required to achieve *convincing* femininity (Butler, 1990) disrupts this straightforward reading. Additionally, the objectifying and sensationalising of individuals on the trans feminine spectrum in particular, and especially the obsessive focus on their *convincingness* as outlined by Serano (2007), demonstrate the particular difficulties that they face in navigating femininity. As with masculinity, one can see that attaining *acceptable femininity* requires constant attention and affirmation. With every performance, gender is asserted, interpreted and marked according to its subject and context.

The gay male collective desire for, and to be, *straight-acting* constitutes a way of conforming to the pressure to perform that most socially lucrative form of masculinity, with undeniable effects on the femininity it necessarily rejects. The reverence of hyper-femininity may be culturally and socially valuable in other ways, yet given the privileging of male-to-male bonding through homosociality, this particular practice can be seen to contain an inherent dismissal of queer femininities. Similarly, performances of femininity such as those referenced through camp affectations and drag, while in some ways denoting a manifestation of gay male ambivalence towards femininity, come close to belittling it. Therefore, in focusing on the subversive irony present in much drag, camp and other feminine gay cultural practices, Halperin (2012) misses the contribution that these practices inevitably make to the society-wide denigration of femininity and womanhood.

Diva-worship practices can tell us more about the role of femininity. In a short chapter entitled 'Gay misogyny', Richard Dyer (2002) contends that 'paradoxically, the most problematic aspect of gay misogyny' is that '*adoration* of women' (p. 47, emphasis in original), concluding that gay men's enthusiasms 'may reveal that for all our interest in femininity, we're often not really interested in women' (p. 48). Femininity's – or femininities' – vulnerability to attack may be explained in part by its persistent appropriation. Halperin suggests that appropriations of femininity represent another form of 'masculine cultural imperialism', identifying 'the male insistence on claiming the status of the universal subject' (2012: 385), for example, by using female pronouns or dressing in drag, as an act of

social erasure. This insistence affords the male performer 'the status of one to whom no experience, and no social role, is ever definitively closed' (2012: 385), maintaining his access to what Connell (1987) calls the *patriarchal dividend* while many opportunities and social privileges remain shut off to women and trans individuals. The result is that femininity is no longer contingent on womanhood, helpfully exposing gender expression as just that, and refuting the idea of *innate* qualities for each gender; nonetheless, when freed entirely from the condition of femaleness, femininity is somewhat undermined as an embodied strategy of resistance. Its various expressions are ordered hierarchically, afforded greater value when performed by a white man for the entertainment of other men, and stripped from queer and trans women as one of their main strategies of resistance to patriarchy – namely, redefining what it means to be *feminine*, refusing conformity and 'empower[ing] femininity itself' (Serano, 2007: 11).

Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz might offer a way of negotiating this difficulty, by highlighting the importance of 'the hybrid self' in 'contest[ing] the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere' (1999: 1) in his work *Disidentifications*. For our part, we critique the implication that the advancement of gay white men, who are the most heard and visible subjects in the dominant public sphere of queerness, must come at the expense of queer women, including women of colour, those on the trans spectrum, and others with feminine identification(s). Like Muñoz (1999), the optic we mean to apply is one of hope for solidarity across splintered identity markers, advocating a critical analysis that neither embraces nor directly opposes dominant ideology (e.g. heteronormative gender relations) but rather reconstitutes it, hopefully leading to alliances between all queer subjects across shared meeting spaces and an embracing of hybridised *disidentification* as opposed to a retreat into carefully guarded special interest groups.

Policing female bodies: sanctioning femininity

Against the generalisation that all self-identified LGBTQ subjects suffer under the same oppressive conditions, gay men who are privileged through race, location, social class or access to public services have an especially complex affiliation with, and may benefit from, dominant forces in society. This problematic positionality led some gay liberationera feminists to deny that there is any common ground between gay men and lesbians at all, revealing a deeply-held suspicion of patriarchal structures which advantage *all* men (including gay men), and making a separatist appeal to lesbians (and by extension, perhaps, to queer women) who will never be able to form a true alliance with those who contribute to upholding patriarchy (Edwards, 1994).

It is possible to see how such distrust has spawned defensiveness from some gay male authors, to the extent that lesbians, queer and trans women are left out of the picture altogether. Halperin's (2012) large book is far from being the only text which pays little attention to how anti-effeminacy and objectification of women by gay men might impact upon the queer women with whom they often share their meeting places – in fact, the recent literature on white gay cultures and anti-effeminacy (overwhelmingly authored by gay men themselves) tends to focus predominantly on heterosexual women and the phenomenon of the queasily-termed *fag hag* (Bergling, 2006; Maddison, 2000). This negativity towards and omission of women are important because, ultimately, the social and sexual experiences of being a gay man are defined precisely by the *absence* of, or disinterest in women – inevitably impacting the sense of solidarity between gay men and queer women in their communal territory. Again, Muñoz (1999) is useful here, offering *disidentification* as a 'maneuver' that allows people with intersectional experiences of marginalisation to interrogate aspects of an argument or practice that they find problematic – while excavating the '*still* valuable' aspects of that 'mediated identification' and rejecting an 'unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog

criticism' (p. 9, emphasis in original). Thought of in this way, queer and trans women could embrace some of the social critiques put forth by gay white men, while simultaneously interrogating phallocentrism and developing their own hybridised strategies of resistance through *disidentification* with such critiques.[3]

Yet the place of queer women and queer femininities in the expanse of dominant white gay male cultures is worthy of further assessment. Such individuals face an important double-bind in negotiating their relationship to men and patriarchy: that of resisting inter-gender dominance while also asserting themselves as *authentic* queer subjects. Inevitably, what is perceived as the more *fluid* nature of female sexual desire and identification means that women are more subject to suspicion (Diamond, 2009). This presumption of fluidity can also place women in a position of having to go along with behaviours they find troublesome, since their support is tacitly expected by the dominant demographic of gay males, and their participation often contingent on fulfilling certain requirements of femininity (e.g. playing the role of *fag hag* and/or providing emotional support). Even if a queer woman does get the *stamp of approval*, the focus on her physical appearance feels uncomfortably similar to the ways in which patriarchy and the male gaze apply narrow scrutiny to female bodies (Mulvey, 1975), and echoes the superficial, image-based elements of dominant white gay cultures which cast similarly harsh judgement on gay men who do not offer up an *acceptable* aesthetic. The femininities that *do not fit*, therefore, are figured as hybrid, *Other* or at worst worthy of scorn in the context of the preferred aesthetics that broader gay male cultures demand.

Thus, our analysis of the internal workings of white gay male masculinities – and the particular dynamics they create – brings into sharp relief the privileging of certain physical markers of maleness and corresponding dismissal of femininity not only on an intragender basis, but also inter-gender male dominance over women. This creates the conditions whereby queer femininities, as manifested by lesbians, queer and trans women, and feminine-expressing bodies, are held accountable to standards of (hetero) normative femininity, and denied the space to use such expression as a tool for creating radical responses to patriarchy and traditional gender norms.

Conclusion

Our intervention has been to first reveal the workings of transactional homosociality which place women in a transitory, objectified position, and second to explore white gay men's complex investment in patriarchy which may magnify a continuous adoration of *straight-acting* masculinities, and sustain the persistent denigration of *fems*. We have interrogated patriarchy's dependence on the bonds of power between men to exert dominance over women, and have sought to unearth how women and queer femininities are impacted by this relationship that very often *demands* their transactional participation, yet denies their full inclusion as equals. We have also shown how white hegemonic masculinity can stabilise and reconstitute patriarchal norms in conditions where they might otherwise be challenged or queered. Finally, we have sought to identify the undeniable impact that such consistent devaluing of femininity, femaleness and womanhood has upon the place of queer feminine expressions in social spaces dominated by and aimed at white gay men.

To revisit our introductory remarks, femininity as a concept and as a category is vulnerable, coming under attack from all sides. Although masculinity is perhaps more *fragile*, needing to be constantly defended, reinforced or displayed, these attacks come mostly from *within* the intra-gender hierarchy as regulated by the demands of hegemonic masculinity, freeing it to maintain its position of inter-gender social and conceptual dominance over femininity, and creating the conditions whereby the dominant characteristics are

unchallenged and self-reinforcing. Scholarly preoccupations with the hierarchy *within* the structures of white gay masculinities, while very important, often miss its connection with femi-negativity towards effeminate men, queer and trans women (Chamberland, 2016), and it is this we have sought to expose. The 'society-wide privileging' of those attributes perceived to be male over those associated with being female (Serano, 2007: 239) render feminine expressions less valuable, whether embodied by queer women, men or trans individuals. Further, we would argue that it is the perceived *universality* of the white male that consistently secures this particular demographic's access to Connell's (1987) patriarchal dividend while naturalising the dismissal of femininity and female experiences.

The role of gay male misogyny, through its reappropriation and reinforcement of gender hierarchies, is to keep femininity unquestioned and non-problematised, by policing women who do not submit proof of their feminine credentials. For a variety of reasons, it is the white, muscular, high-earning, straight-acting man who not only accumulates the most sexual and social capital, but also embodies the most aspirational qualities: a large number of gay men report that they wish they were dating someone more masculine, or that they acted more masculine themselves (Baker, 2003). This is precisely why it is important that unconventional, hybridised forms of femininity, such as trans femininities and female masculinities, have the space to resist conformity to the depoliticised, unthreatening version of femininity so preferred by the patriarchal structures of hegemonic masculinity. Yet positive lessons can be learned from the woman-centredness of queer female desire and social life: 'it is through relationships with lesbians that gay men really have the opportunity to challenge their own gender power' (Maddison, 2000: 195), especially when misogynistic hatred against queer women calls out the gay male subject in his own ambivalent relations to femininity.

Queer, in our view, means a return to more radical roots, dissent and a resistance to assimilationist politics which ignore ongoing interconnected struggles, and forget that patriarchy's oppressive forces operate in clandestine ways. As subjects with a complex relationship to masculinity, fraternity and desire, 'who often ventriloquise patriarchal values' (Maddison, 2000: 197), white gay men are especially well-placed to fall for the lure of hegemonic masculinity and casual misogyny – but also to resist it.

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Notes

1. As outlined by Scharff (2009), *woman* is not a homogenous category and is constructed, understood and embodied through racialised, gendered, classed and ethnic variables, which must be acknowledged to avoid 1) rendering all *non-men* a singular

Other, and 2) assuming that *all women* are the target of misogynistic violence in the same way.

2. Activists and queer women have recently begun to expose underlying misogyny via their experiences of LGBTQ nightlife in certain media such as NewNowNext, VICE, the Huffington Post, BuzzFeed UK and Dazed Digital, to name but a few. Similarly, projects like 'Strategic Misogyny' at Goldsmiths University have succeeded in scrutinising the mechanisms by which misogyny is at work, calling attention to the ways in which it hides and can therefore thrive in spaces designated for the very criticism of such functions.
3. There is a body of queer critical theory (see Muñoz, 1999; also Ferguson, 2003; Stockton, 2006) which makes different arguments about the subversive potential of hybridised femininity as a strategy of resistance from a queer of colour perspective.

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