

The Woman Who Could Never Be: Experiences of Femininity and Womanhood as a Nonbinary Woman of Colour

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Abstract

As a brown person who was assigned female at birth, I grew up entirely unaware that my representation of femininity would never be enough to fit the category of women that society curates and aims to uphold. For much of my life I blamed the size of my body and excess body hair as the detriment to my status as a woman. It wasn't until years later when I took an "Introduction to Gender Studies" course at Carleton University which I realized that my status as a woman was not only affected by my fatness or my more masculine characteristics, rather it is directly correlated to my identity as a person of colour. As a result, I now use this reflection as a foundation for which I base this paper on. It is through this experience that I aim to write about brown womanhood as separate from identifying as a woman. We exist in a liminal space that is neither here nor there, neither entirely seen nor fully invisible. In turn, I use my experience as a nonbinary person to express the intricacy of brown womanhood as separate from my gender identity and how a person such as I can identify as a nonbinary woman of colour without it contradicting one another. It is through anti-racist and anti-colonial innovations of femininity that I, as a femme presenting nonbinary person of colour, can claim such an identity without having to leave my brown womanhood behind.

Keywords

gender identity, racialized womanhood, women of colour, nonbinary, autoethnography

There is a privilege in being surrounded by people who show up as their raw, authentic selves. In the past year, while completing my Master's degree at Western University, I had the pleasure of meeting some of the most intelligent, free-spirited, and hilarious beings that this world will ever know. The Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies program allowed me the opportunity to advance myself academically, but it also granted me a sense of safety that allowed me to explore questions that I had surrounding my identity. It was upon leaving this utopia—the comfort of these people and the environment we created—that I had to deal with the consequences that come with questioning your gender and gender expression while existing in the “real world.”

There is a memory that comes to the forefront of my mind when I think about my femininity. I was in grade seven and idolized Nicki Minaj. As a young Latinx teen living in the suburbs of Vaughan, Ontario, many of my classmates were white and very few of them were Black, Indigenous, or people of colour (BIPOC). Many of my non-white classmates were white-passing. You might be wondering what Nicki Minaj has to do with all of this. Well, the fact of the matter is that in 2014, the representation of BIPOC women and girls in mass media was limited. I spent most of my childhood being called “Dora the Explorer” and while I appreciate the sentiment, I wasn't satisfied with the constant comparison to the Latina cartoon character that I shared no resemblance with other than our cultural identity.

At that young age, the one person who constantly appeared across my screen that I could somewhat identify with was Nicki. At my young age, I used to think to myself, “her and I, we are the same,” based solely on the fact that our complexions matched. It would later become very clear to me that we were, in fact, not the same at all. However, Nicki's hyperfemininity and sexualization had already imprinted in me a standard of feminine embodiment that I believed I had to perform. This kind of femininity would haunt me throughout the next decade of my life. It wasn't until I came out as pansexual in 2019

that I started to question my performance of femininity. I realized that the version of femininity I embodied was not authentic to me but was rather a culmination of all things I knew to be feminine that I put together for others to perceive.

When I first came out, I wanted to change my physical appearance to better embody the newfound queer identity I was experiencing internally and in my personal life. I truly believed that coming out could liberate me from the femininity I had known most of my life. Most of the representations I saw of queer women of colour were masculine butch lesbians. As much as I wanted to be one of them, it took just one good, hard look in the mirror and some self-awareness to know that wasn't me either. However, with so much confusion around my sexuality's impact on my physical appearance, I did not realize that it was more closely linked to a discomfort with my femininity. While countless sessions of group therapy affirmed that I was already queer enough as a femme-presenting person, the discomfort I felt with being feminine and regarded as female in the way society has socially constructed it has not eased.

As time has gone by, I have continued to struggle with my gender identity more than ever. My dreams tell me a story about a girl who wants more than to just be a girl. In my dreams I honour this part of who I am. My dreams are one thing. My reality is another. Most days I walk around feeling uncomfortable in my body. Not because of what my body looks like. On the contrary—I quite like the skin suit I was born into. The feeling of discomfort tends to stem from the perception of those who see my body and immediately label it as “woman,” “female,” or “girl.” It is the assumptions made about my body and my identity that do not sit well with me. What tends to accompany these assumptions is the judgement about the kind of “woman,” “female,” or “girl” that I am.

Being brown, there is an immediate irregularity in my womanhood and femininity that differentiates me from the ideal woman or the ideal femininity that the world would like to see.

I am not hairless; in fact, I am hairier than my father—something I personally see as an accomplishment. I am fat, I have tattoos and piercings, and I tend to walk around with a sexy transmasculine partner on my arm. While all those things make me the wrong type of “woman,” “female,” or “girl,” there are lengths to which I can, and have, gone to in order to hide some of these aspects of my identity. The one that simply cannot be erased, changed, or ignored is the colour of my skin. I wish I could simply claim the nonbinary identity and they/them pronouns; however, my race has left me in a position of difficulty. I have to think about what I would need to leave behind if I did.

It is not news that the white woman has been used as a benchmark of ideal femininity. Because of this, BIPOC women or femme-presenting individuals are always already regarded as less feminine. From the beginning, my embodiment of femininity was set up to fail because of the colour of my skin. You would think that this failure would present an opportunity to reject femininity altogether and become liberated from the shackles of white femininity, but the truth is much more complicated. I fear that if I claim the nonbinary identity, I will have to reject my womanhood as a whole and, along with it, my identity as a woman of colour.

As a Mexican-Canadian, the women in my family are the foundation upon which my culture rests. It is the women in my family who made the first move to come to so-called Canada. It is the women in my family who persisted on this new land. It is the women in my family who are caretakers, teachers, hunters, gatherers, and everything in between. During my early 20s, I was ready and willing to reject both the hardships and beauty that come with womanhood because of a poor relationship with my mother. But as our relationship grew, I started to understand and see the true power in the woman that she was and the generations of women that came before her. As I saw the importance of these women, I started to question if this complete detachment from womanhood is what I wanted after all.

As I work through my understanding of how I can be both nonbinary and a woman of colour, a

handful of questions come to mind: 1) How can I claim a nonbinary identity without letting go of my womanhood and the important role it plays in shaping my overall identity? 2) How does my physical femininity impact my ability to claim being both nonbinary and a woman of colour? 3) Does internalized and cultural transphobia play a role in the process of coming to claim this identity? 4) How does the current discourse surrounding femininity and womanhood affect the way I perceive myself as a woman of colour? 5) How can understanding the function of whiteness and white supremacy create an opportunity for BIPOC to liberate themselves from the gender binary? 6) Does my womanhood/gender identity resist white supremacy? And 7) Why can't my race and gender be separated? (This question from a place of frustration rather than one I need an answer to.)

These questions lay a foundation for the theoretical investigations for which I aim to explore in this paper. As I moved through the preliminary work of this paper, I struggled to decide whether to use autoethnography as a methodology because I feel that this approach can make my work feel more like journal entry and, therefore, less acceptable to the academic institutions I work within. Jocelyne Bartram Scott (2022) has eloquently described autoethnography as a method in which one can restore their relationship with reality. The value of autoethnography is something I have been struggling to articulate myself. Put simply, it is a way to reconnect with my own feelings and understandings of my relationship with womanhood, but it is also an opportunity to begin a conversation with others who share similar experiences of reconciling nonbinary and women of colour identities.

While I do not have nearly as many of the answers as I would like to, I look to my lived experience as a valid epistemology. Reflecting on my time in graduate school, I believe I owe it to myself and to that experience to start trying to carve out more spaces within universities where people can ask themselves difficult questions, like the one I ask myself daily: “am I woman enough?”

As I work through the questions I have posed in this paper, it is the following poem that has acted as light throughout the darkness. I would like to leave you with the brilliant words of Alok Vaid-Menon:

The reason people defend the gender binary so ferociously attempt to ban books about gender literacy, disappear gender non-conforming people from public life is because they don't want to confront their lovelessness. That awareness that they've never been allowed to be free. It's easier to romanticize the unfreedom. Decorate and accessorize it. Mistake disassociation as an identity and a virtue. Wear it like a badge or a family heirloom. So many would rather die than give it up. And all this pain it shows up as resentment and retribution against gender-non-conforming people. How dare you make freedom real? How dare you make heaven on earth? I thought we had to wait for joy I thought that wasn't possible. People are made to destroy their own creativity their own simultaneity, their own gender nonconformity in order to receive love from their families and societies. If they don't see gender non-conforming people, then they don't have to see the parts of themselves they had to cut out in order to be loved. If they don't see us, they don't have to see their own pain. Grief is so calcified it takes the form of anger. (@alokvmenon, August 26, 2022)

References

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