
Queer in a Country Bar: The Intersection of Queer Femme Subjectivity and Heteronormative Structures

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Abstract

This paper follows the experience of a queer, femme woman through a traditionally homophobic space. Through a phenomenological account, hidden acts of femme queerness are traced, and the implications of queer misrecognition are unraveled. Narration is used as the piece is structured around a personal experience of enacting queerness in a country bar. Through the process of misrecognition, queer, femme bodies are automatically coded as heterosexual, creating a sense of invisibility and erasure for the queer actors. Informed by the work of Sara Ahmed, the theoretical structure of orientation is utilized to display how femme, queer bodies move towards structures of heteronormativity implicitly. The inability to escape the heteronormativity of contemporary Western culture enacts harm on the queer, femme body insofar that it produces the simultaneous unconscious, and yet the all too conscious pull to contort oneself to normative imaginaries of queer, femme subjectivity. Due to queer recognition being closely tied to the presence of an audience, the heteronormative space of the country bar produces queer, femme subjectivity—and queerness more generally—within parameters of the cisgender, heterosexual, male gaze, therefore dictating which presentations of queerness are acceptable. As such, the current paper considers to what extent queer, femme subjectivity can exist without serving heterosexual men.

Keywords

femme, recognition, phenomenology, heteronormativity, passing

The experience of a femme, queer woman is unique in comparison to other queer bodies. Through the process of passing, femme women can flow between the structures of heterosexuality and homosexuality in a way that other queer-coded bodies are unable to. The flowing between structures can be labelled as passing, which is defined as the ability to be perceived by others as a member of the dominant demographic. Passing can apply to race, socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, and many other identity-based structures which rely on categorical segregation (Silvermint 2018, 2). There are inherent benefits to passing, but along with these advantages come challenges. Later in this paper, the ideology of passing will be examined in relation to heteronormative structures. Heteronormativity influences the lives of all, and in this paper, I will specifically target the repercussions of this oppressive institution on the queer femme body. Some of these repercussions are misrecognition, performance, orientation, contortion, and more.

To situate queer femme subjectivity, I will recount a personal experience as a queer woman functioning in a stereotypically homophobic space. Due to the flexibility of the queer, femme body, we do not threaten heteropatriarchal institutions in the same way that other queer bodies do, which therefore enables societal leniency in enacting queerness in non-accepting areas. I am recognizing my privilege when it comes to this encounter. If my appearance were less femme, the event that I am going to be sharing with you could have had a significantly different outcome. While it has constraints, my ability to pass as heterosexual is a shield in homophobic places. I am not worried about my physical safety in the same way that other queer folks are. It is important to consider that passing is a privilege as well as a curse. Passing can enhance safety in traditionally homophobic spaces, but it also limits access to the queer community. By being labelled by others as heterosexual, the ability to be welcomed into queer spaces is restricted. In addition, passing as heterosexual creates the necessity to prove

queerness through performance. Femme women are never seen as queer enough and their displays of queerness are misrecognized as adhering to the male gaze which belittles femme women's experiences. Further elaboration on the performance of femme queerness for the male gaze will be considered later in this paper. While being able to enact queerness in traditionally homophobic places could be viewed as a form of empowerment or defiance against normative structures, in many cases the mutilation of queerness to fit the male gaze can be harmful to queer actors. When it comes to passing, there is no singular understanding of whether the phenomenon creates predominantly positive or negative cognitions for queer actors. This paper will revolve around the negative cognitive affect created by passing, as this is what occurred during my phenomenological experience within the bar. With this understanding, I am now going to share my experience of being queer in a country bar, and how specific events not only altered my own perception of my queerness, but how heteronormative structures impacted my subjectivity.

A country bar is often a place of underlying homophobia. The music being played, the patrons of the bar, every underlying theme of country is associated with Southern traditions of the United States. In these spaces, traditional Conservative or Republican political ideologies are common. It is no secret that Conservative political viewpoints do not privilege the existence of queer bodies, as many policies associated with these political parties contribute to the systemic oppression of queer people.

The people in the bar are almost all white and adhere to binary presentations of gender. Out of hundreds of people, there are only a handful of people of colour, the rest are masculine-presenting Caucasian men, wearing flannel shirts and baseball caps while the feminine-presenting women are in outfits comprised of blue jeans paired with a nice top.

The homogenous presentation of the bar patrons is purposeful, as it sets the boundaries of who is welcomed in the space. Now that the scene is set, here is where I come in.

I enter the bar with a group of my friends. There are six of us in total; two are queer women while the others identify as heterosexual women. Both my queer friend and I are femme-presenting with no obvious signifiers of queerness on our bodies at the time. Regardless of sexual orientation, all six of us have a somewhat universal experience when walking into the bar. Eyes, specifically the eyes of heterosexual men, drill into us. We are aware of eyes on us in a predatory sense, of the feeling of stares and eyes burning holes into our backs. It is not a feeling of comfort.

Being watched in this sense is being aware that you are potentially in danger. Regardless of our sexual orientation, all of us were now viewed as a conquest by the white men in this bar, something to be wooed and won through their sexual prowess.

Multiple men throughout the night come up to us, offering to buy us drinks or trying to dance. It is important to note that for this specific night, we are not accepting these advances. We had decided this night is to be spent dancing away with friends, not random men at the bar.

With the country music blasting, and the sweaty bodies pushed together on the dance floor, one of my heterosexual friends approaches me and kisses me straight on the mouth. Questions are rattling in my mind. First off, why is my friend kissing me? Other than offering innocuous compliments towards women, she has not previously shown any sexual or romantic interest in people of the same gender. Secondly, is my friend queer?

For some context, it is not uncommon for self-defined heterosexual women to pursue me

romantically; I seem to be a magnet for “straight” women who are unsure of what they want out of the interaction. Personally, I attribute this to my femme presentation; queer acts that occur with me do not seem as queer as they would with someone who more obviously signifies that they are part of the queer community. My appearance allows people to play pretend, slowly inching their way into the realm of queerness while maintaining their ability to run back to the comfort of heterosexuality when the reality of the situation becomes too overwhelming.

My friend stops kissing me, but for the rest of the night my so-called heterosexual friend continues to try to dance and kiss me whenever the opportunity arises.

In the mind of my friend, this was her having harmless fun and performing desirable queerness for the men around her. I know this because she told me so. The male gaze played a large part in her performance. Even though she was enacting queerness, her actions were firmly planted within the confines of heterosexuality, as every performance was intended for male attention rather than personal sexual exploration. Two femme-presenting women, regardless of their sexual orientation, performing acts of queerness is seen as non-threatening to the heteropatriarchy (Hightower 2015, 21). Femme queerness is seen as desirable if the actors look a certain way. Queerness is then dismissed as a purposeful performance for the male gaze rather than an act of defiance against heterosexual rules.

After we leave the bar, things continue as normal. We both move in the world with ease because of the way we look. What stays with me however is the moral repercussions of the event and how this relates to my identity. Does the event in the country club mean I am less queer? Do the heteropatriarchal institutions surrounding me mean that my queerness will always benefit cisgender and heterosexual men? Is part of my identity performative, even if it is unintentional? When I am kissing a woman, do people perceive me as being part of the queer community, or just

performing desirable queerness because of the way that I look? The event I have described is a common one, but has different consequences for the people who were a part of it. Hidden events of queerness in homophobic spaces are common and not always seen as subversive, but rather adherent to heteronormative structures.

When reflecting on this event, concepts of recognition and misrecognition became clear. This particular issue is one that has connections to coding and the assumed naturalness of heterosexuality. When a queer woman is presenting as femme, she is automatically perceived or coded by others as heterosexual. When recognition is at play, there is always a perceived audience involved. Butler (2002) coined the term “gender performativity” to describe how gender itself is a series of recognizable actions displayed for the perceived audience (177). In this case, gender is an insidious performance, solely existing for the audience. Complicating the performance, it is clear that gender is not solely for the other, as there are connotations for the self in regard to identity formation. Gender is a facet of the self, with the specifics of presentation fortifying one’s connection with their own autonomy.

Reflecting on my experience in the country club, the audience surrounding me was primarily cisgender and heterosexual men. Whether this is a fact or a preconceived judgment is unclear; I did not ask these men what their sexual orientation was, rather I made assumptions based on their behaviour and my internal heteronormative biases. Regardless, in that moment my lived experience was impacted by my internal dialogue, which was spurred by these cognitions, therefore causing them to be a valid component of the encounter. Atwood (2009), while problematic for numerous reasons, wrote a segment in one of her novels that encompassed the way I was feeling in the moment. The inability to escape the audience, specifically the male audience is one that, as a queer femme woman, I feel constantly. She wrote,

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or

down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (Atwood 2009, 49)

A profound realization is that regardless of my identity, my existence may always privilege cisgender and heterosexual men. I cannot control the way I am perceived by others, especially if my existence as a queer woman is belittled by heteronormative institutions.

The label of femme queerness, specifically lesbianism, has historically been invisible or even considered to be impossible from the hegemonic perspective due to the perceived impossibility of sex without phallic penetration. Feminine desire was labelled as non-existent without male instigation (Marcus 2007, 44), which has contributed to the modern-day biases against femme queer relationships. Even though I am unable to control specifically how I am perceived, there is the question of who I want my primary audience to be. Brennan and Behrens (2016) wrote, “Who is it I want to be recognized by? The question of audience is an important one. There is a difference between being visible to my peers, to my community than there is being visible to the general public” (197). In my mind, this is the existential crisis I am experiencing. Of course, I would love to be recognized as I wish by the dominant demographic around me, but I am aware that this might be impossible because of how insidious heteronormativity is within institutions. It is more important to my wellbeing that I am recognizable by my community; this is more likely to be a reality than forcing cisgender and heterosexual men to accept that their existence is not a priority in my mind.

People within queer communities already subvert hegemonic ideals, which gives them the opportunity to function outside the automatic

assumption of heteronormativity. This disruption of normative thinking has the capacity to provide proper recognition for queer folks who present in adherence to the gender binary. Even though the logical part of my brain knows that recognition by those who prioritize my existence is what I am craving, it is difficult to disentangle myself from the grasp of hegemonic acceptance. I want to be validated by those around me, especially those in a position of perceived power, because of how we are conditioned to only love ourselves once we are given permission to. A part of my existence craves acceptance from cisgender/heterosexual men around me. A part of this may be connected to concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and the need for male approval (Rich 1986, 23) but through further analysis I have deduced that, as humans, we crave being recognized by others because those around us function as mirrors to the self; I am able to recognize myself because I see pieces of myself in those around me. A theory that explains this abstract concept beautifully is the ideology of “being hinged,” which I will discuss further.

In consideration of why recognition is such an essential part of being human, we can rely on discussions by Guenther (2013) on “being hinged” (xiii). As human beings, the reciprocal nature of social interaction is necessary. We pride ourselves on how recognition is reciprocal. We see ourselves in those around us which allows for the humane treatment of peers. We orient our bodies to those we recognize (Ahmed 2006a, 563), which in turn gives us the ability to recognize ourselves. This “hingedness” is a part of being human. But what happens when we are unable to hinge ourselves in the world because of societal mistreatment? Once someone is unhinged from those around them, the reciprocal nature of human interaction is destroyed. They are living in the night (Guenther 2013, 172). It can be argued that people who are misrecognized on a daily basis are existing as unhinged agents, being unable to engage in equitable or reciprocal social interaction due to the oppression they face. This is a version of experiencing social death, as these marginalized folks are pushed to the margins of society until their lives bear no social

meaning (Guenther 2013, xx). This is why the concept of recognition is so powerful. It is not just a harmless action, but rather misrecognition is an act of violence, effectively unhinging one from connection with their peers.

To return to discussions of recognition that occurred during my experience in the country bar, gendered performance played a role in my lived experience of being a queer femme woman. Discussions by Ahmed (2006a, 2006b, 2013), resonated with me when reflecting on my experience. The institution of heterosexuality contributed to the behaviour and emotion of every single person in the country bar. Whether it be implicitly or explicitly, people are functioning in a way that adheres to heteronormative parameters. Ahmed (2013), in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, wrote, “sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orientating the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces” (145). Orientation is a large part of living as we orient ourselves towards those we recognize. Most often those we recognize fit into heteronormative ideals of what it means to be a proper person (Ahmed 2006a, 563). Related to recognition, this construct breeds subjectivity, or moulds the restrictions for what potential subjectivities can form within oneself. If we are misrecognized by those around us, it impacts our sense of self without our consent. Misrecognition, whether it be purposeful or unintentional, can be perceived as an act of violence.

To connect concepts of orientation and recognition to the country bar, even when femme queer women display acts of queerness, it is recognized as performative for the male gaze which belittles their validity. This functions in conjunction with historical biases against queer women to create an aura of invisibility (Marcus 2007, 44). These types of queer women can enter homophobic spaces under the guise of invisibility because of the way their bodies orient towards structures and actors of heteronormativity. The femme body is unthreatening because of the way it is recognized, and by extension the way it orients to those around them. The cisgender and

heterosexual men in the bar did not recognize that something legitimately queer was occurring. Not only because of the way the actors, including myself, looked, but also because of the physical space they occupied. They oriented their bodies toward each other, which reinforces the familiar world that Ahmed (2006a, 546) describes. The familiar world is one entrenched in heterosexuality, so the possibility of the act of queerness being legitimate rather than a performance is out of the realm of possibility.

In the setting of the country bar, the institution of heterosexuality informed people's actions and orientations to each other, perpetuating ideals of queer invisibility. Heteronormativity functioned in a way that bred misrecognition, which detached marginalized folks' connections to their communities around them. Resistance to hegemonic norms such as compulsory heterosexuality is possible, but in a setting that is deeply ingrained with homophobic ideals, any form of resistance is either perceived as non-threatening or could be a marker of danger for specific actors. Resistance could be a red flag being woven, screaming at the crowd that one does not belong. The reality of misfitting within hegemonic spaces can create physically and emotionally unsafe areas for queer folks. The language of twisting and straightening that Ahmed (2006a, 565), uses is powerful in understanding how institutions have the power to insidiously force non-normative bodies to conform. Imagery involving the twisting of bodies to fit into a specific space allows us to understand how heteronormativity forces people to change their shape or their expression to fit in social spaces safely and comfortably.

To return to discussions of passing, it is important to address all sorts of nuance that this experience represents. Passing as an action has a multitude of benefits for the actor, while simultaneously crushing the soul of the person who is being forced to pass if they do not wish to do so. Some queer folks want to pass, as passing can be affirming. Being recognized by the world in the way you wish and the way you exist is powerful. It strengthens your own connection

with your sense of subjectivity. Passing can also function as a safety mechanism. With being recognized as a member of the privileged demographic, the chance of being a victim of bodily harm decreases. Passing can allow certain bodies to enter diverse spaces with limited risks, which prioritizes binary gendered presentation over gender ambiguity.

While passing can be considered a positive phenomenon, there is discourse surrounding passing as deceit, especially for trans individuals (Bettcher 2007). One example of this discourse can be seen on the reality television show *Survivor* (2000-present). In 2017, a transgender contestant on the show named Zeke was outed by their tribemate, with the excuse that Zeke was maintaining a lie throughout his entire experience on the show. The person who disclosed Zeke's personal information on a reality television claimed that this information was necessary to share, as it demonstrates Zeke's ability to deceive the entire tribe. This discourse is a common one which relies on the foundation of transphobia to spur the belief.

Beyond this specific case, a study conducted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that 96 percent of trans folks have experienced everyday transphobia, which is described as being told that trans folks are not normal and being emotionally harassed for existing. In a different study, 67 percent of trans folks communicated that they had fears that they would not live a long life due to the violence they have experienced (McInnes 2014). These numbers present the reality that trans individuals fear violence, and statistics show that these fears are not unwarranted.

To return to the conversation of passing, Bettcher (2007) argues against the hegemonic belief of deception, saying that passing is a form of self-defense for trans folks (54). Passing can limit the chance of emotional and bodily harm in spaces where queerphobia and transphobia runs rampant. If we were to extend the conversation of passing beyond the realm of trans lives, we can connect this concept to the specific event I have used as a case study in this paper. Because I

passed as heterosexual in this specific moment, I was afforded physical safety in a traditionally homophobic space. Silvermint (2018) writes, “since passing allows victims to escape certain oppressive burdens, in many cases it will be permissible, and may even appear to be the right way to go” (4). My passing in this particular moment afforded me safety; I just wish I had more agency within the action.

While considering some of the positive aspects of the phenomenon, passing also has a variety of negative components, some of which can be connected to the ideology of twisting and contorting as discussed by Ahmed (2006b). As mentioned earlier in this paper, Ahmed (2006a, 565) describes the space that a queer body takes up and how in some cases, a twisting of the body is necessary to exist in spaces that wish to stifle individual subjectivity. Heteronormativity shapes the bodies and lives of those who inhabit heterosexual spaces, which we can argue are the majority of the spaces in our world. Over time, these bodies take on the shape of norms that are repeated forcefully, like a chair taking on the impression of a body (Ahmed 2013, 152). Heteronormative structures push down on queer bodies and force them to contort to fit ideals of what it means to be a proper functioning human. Over time, institutions are shaped by bodies just as bodies are impacted by institutions; the chair is not untouched by the body that impresses it which perpetuates cycles of hegemony (Ahmed 2013, 152). The concept of passing is a contorting of the body, as it is the mutilation of one’s presentation to reinforce systems of reality. The impression that Ahmed (2006b) discusses forces queer bodies to contort into the existing mould of the chair, which is the heterosexual body.

Queer femme bodies endure this forceful twisting, as their assumed straightness contorts their bodies to fit into the chair of heterosexuality. In this sense, passing is not a choice but rather a misrecognition that confines queer femme bodies into certain positionalities. This forceful straightening is a form of structural violence that queer people endure (Ahmed 2006b, 92). Many places in the world have taken the shape of heterosexuality. When the queer body contorts to

fit the established shape, society itself is allotted an amount of comfort, which, at times, extends to the queer actor as well. This comfort is one of the reasons why it may take years for femme queer women to find comfort in their sexuality. The habituation to the position makes it harder to unravel and resist falling into the impression already pressed into the world.

In regard to the queer femme body, passing is non-consensual. As written by Brennen and Behrensen (2016) in a chapter in *Passing/Out: Sexual Identity Veiled and Revealed*, “bisexual and queer femmes of all persuasions know what it is like to be misheard, misread, mis-seen and invisibility takes its toll, especially in the face of political cries for greater visibility. You can feel that not only are you not recognized by your community, but also that you are failing to live up to your political obligations” (196). The twisting that my body endures is not a choice, but rather is connected to ideals of misrecognition due to the powerful socialization of heteronormative values.

Regardless of the potential comfort habituation offers, misrecognition can be soul-crushing. Silvermint (2018) writes, “and passing, it is argued, can also do moral damage to the self, since victims are opting out of a shared struggle and benefiting from their participation in an oppressive system” (4). This guilt can be related to survivor’s guilt. I often question why I am the queer person who gets to travel between worlds (Lugones 1987, 97), with ease. Why do I deserve this comfort over others? In my performance of public queerness, it could be considered that I participated in the infantilization of feminine bodies and overt sexualization of the “right type of lesbian.” If this is true, then my actions have political implications, effectively dismantling progress made by those before me. This reality connects to the system of heteronormativity and is inherently oppressive. Passively passing (Silvermint 2018, 3), is something I do not have control over. It functions to keep me safe while simultaneously forcing me to question my identity and feel invisible in public spaces.

As it is clear, passing is a complicated phenomenon that encompasses many different qualities which simultaneously work to stifle or

emancipate an actor. Passing can be a double bind. Coined by Frye (1983), the double bind encapsulates being stuck between two horrible choices (2). “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t” is an idiom that many people have encountered; this saying refers to situations when regardless of the choice that one makes, there will be negative repercussions. Whether or not one attempts to pass as a member of the dominant demographic, there will be consequences.

Silvermint (2018) writes, “but if Bettcher is right that trans folks are treated as deceivers if they pass and pretenders if they don’t, then outing oneself won’t always secure the goods of authenticity, or avert the impaired relationships predicted by the ‘deception’ objection” (17). This discussion encompasses how passing embodies a multitude of positive and negative repercussions for the actor. Passing can be affirming as well as create an increasingly secure environment, but on the other hand it could also be used as a scapegoat to prove deception on behalf of the person who is passing. Passing is not always a choice, but rather a reality pushed upon a person in this world.

Regardless, passing has implications for the lived reality of queer folks. Passing impacted my movement within the country bar which caused me to consider the implications of the phenomenon through an academic and phenomenological lens. Without my experience in the country bar and my theoretical knowledge of compulsory heteronormativity and the way it interacts with being perceived, I am not sure I would have been able to pinpoint the tumultuous feeling within me. I am grateful for the opportunity to explore my identity and to share my journey with others.

Concluding our discussion, I want to address the intersection between queer, femme bodies and heteronormative structures. One of the conclusions I have made is that no matter the body, the institution of heteronormativity has an influence over lived experiences. The eyes are something I feel at all moments. Do we need to give these eyes power? Is there something so powerful about the need to be recognized that every time I have a queer experience, I am

wondering whether my existence is here to please another? Some of these questions I am unable to answer. Regardless, this is a pertinent issue in queer communities, and the complexity of passing and its relation to (mis)recognition needs to be addressed. I am going to leave you all with my final thoughts on the matter: no one should feel as if they have to prove their queerness, but structures of heteronormativity force bodies to feel as if they must. Are there ways to perform queerness in a style that excludes cisgender-heterosexual men? Perhaps not, but we have the power to shape institutions as they shape us. One day, I hope the moral turmoil I experienced in the country bar will not be the reality for other queer women.

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