Irreverence: The Third Annual Critical Femininities Conference

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To be irreverent is to show disrespect where respect is demanded, to be flippant in the face of serious situations, and to satirize what others hold sacred. In western culture, the mother, the virgin, and the queen are figures of femininity that are often held sacred, exemplifying the entrenchment of idealized feminine characteristics, such as domesticity, piety, and (hetero)sexual or moral purity. But for decades, irreverence has been woven into camp and poststructuralist approaches to femme theory, which insist that femme is an intentionally ironic performance of this idealized white, cis-heterosexual femininity (Albrecht-Samarasinha 1997; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002; Case 1988; Duggan and McHugh 1996).

Critical femininities is a growing critical field that considers femininity to be a site full of ir/reverent possibilities in all its varied forms beyond a patriarchal and essentialist imposition. A critical orientation toward femininity opens space to rethink what feminine expression, relationships, bodies, and epistemologies can offer beyond heteronormative relations (Dahl 2012; Nash 2018; Schwartz 2022; Spurgas 2021; Stardust 2015; Streeter 2021). This work involves centring a praxis of care, community, and, sometimes, the serious work of being *un*serious about femininity. Irreverent attitudes toward femininity—especially white, heterosexual, and colonial femininities—are also integral to other queer cultures and modes of critique: in recent years, hypersexual and outrageous impersonations of the sacred feminine figures, the Virgin Mary and Queen Elizabeth (I and II) have been presented on the mainstage of TV's *Rupaul's Drag Race.* Such examples signal how irreverence has wrought countercultural styles of femininities that relate to punk, drag, sex work, working-class, Indigenous, and racialized sensibilities (Bailey 2014; Chepp 2015; McCann 2016; Padan 2023).

As the mainstreaming of femme has converged with postfeminist culture, the exaggerated feminine aesthetics associated with femme and other feminine subcultures are increasingly normalized and celebrated, leading to phenomena like the success of reality TV stars and social media influencers, the rise of bimbo theory, and the resurgence of Barbie. While such phenomena are often scrutinized as anti-feminist and frivolous, they also create space for queer and femme joy, and potentiate both the conceptualization of gender affirmation and the extension of critical femininity discourse beyond LGBTQ+ contexts. At the same time, these phenomena raise questions about many things, including the appropriation of Black cultures and sex worker aesthetics without recognition or political solidarity; the sexism, racism, and fatphobia embedded in western beauty culture; and postfeminism's undermining of feminist politics (Banet-Weiser 2018). Roxane Gay's (2014) "bad feminist" framework offers one way to navigate such contradictions, acknowledging that we may, occasionally, break with feminist dogma in

recognition of our flawed humanity and the pursuit of personal joy.

Importantly, Sara Ahmed's (2010) figures of the "feminist killjoy" and "affect alien" demonstrate that irreverence is not always gleeful or flippant. On the contrary, it can render serious political critique. As Aimee Cox (2009) reminds us, even small moments of rupture that can be "viewed as relatively small and accomplished within the strict parameters of historical conventions and predetermined scripts, they nonetheless provide a view into what might be possible in the contexts of seemingly untenable situations" (122). An irreverent embrace, or remix, of femininity can resist femmephobia and anti-feminine sentiment (Serano 2008). Critiques of anti-Black racism, settler colonization, imperial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy have become a part of mainstream political discourse and are embedded within cultural and artistic institutions. The ways irreverence has historically sustained queer of colour critique, art, fashion, and literature have become more visible, drawing greater attention to how irreverence encourages both the critique of white, western, cishet femininity, and a focus on femininities that exist outside of this normative ideal.

The works included in this collection were all originally presented at Irreverence: The Third Annual Critical Femininities Conference at York University in the summer of 2023. The conference spanned many iterations of ir/reverent femininities, including wayward femininities, irreverent inter*femme*tions, and femme caricatures. We gathered to share scholarship and art and make memes together. The papers in these proceedings respond to multiple notions of ir/reverence: Justine Wallace presents an analysis of Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* as a way to challenge queer Caribbean migrants' expected reverence for the global north as a queer utopia; Steff(ania) Juniper offers a creative rumination on lesbian relationships that draws on images of rituals and symbols of romantic reverence; Anoosha Hasan details findings from a study of women's activism in a post-flood Pakistan that challenged cultural taboos around menstruation; Emilie Collyer exemplifies irreverence as a form of feminist resistance, using absurdist and surrealist poetic forms to explore the affective expectations placed on feminine subjects; and, finally, Thea Jones explores how certain "breastless parents" challenge discourses of normative motherhood—a pillar that upholds the ideal of femininity.

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