

A Deviant Bride to Be

“I just love ya, babe.” These words are often platonically exchanged between me and my closest friend, a cis-gendered femme queer woman. In an attempt to challenge capitalist mechanisms of hetero-normativity and gender performance, I decided to dress butch,¹ accompanied by my femme friend. The two of us pretended to be an engaged queer couple while I tried on wedding dresses; my friend was there to act as my girlfriend and fiancé, proclaiming her (perceived non-platonic) love to me throughout our adventure. By blurring gender presentations and publicly existing as an engaged queer couple in an expensive bridal shop, this act aimed to dissent against dominant gender presentations, hetero-sexism and hetero-normativity, and confront the use of capitalist exchange as a means of gendered social control.

I chose this act of gendered deviance for various reasons. First, I present and identify as a woman, although sometimes more androgynous. I was interested in exploring a more traditionally masculine and gender-queer expression of myself, to further queer my already non-normative self-perceptions and expressions by presenting as butch. The act of wearing a wedding dress also

seemed a challenge given my sometimes androgynous expression. Further, as a queer woman, I was interested in publicly displaying an expression of my sexual identity in the heterosexual space of a bridal shop I would never otherwise enter. Finally, I hold many qualms about the institution of marriage and its role within an oppressive capitalist system as a means of patriarchal and state control. I felt that this act would challenge me in its conformity to materialist expressions of femininity and beauty, manifested in a wedding dress, encouraging compliance with the institutional framework of marriage and weddings.

When my friend and I walked into the bridal shop, holding hands, we were asked politely if we had an appointment. We answered that we did not, and the woman who greeted us explained that she would check to see if it would be possible for us to be assisted without one. Her face was marked with a degree of concern or confusion. The co-worker she returned with began assisting us, starting with numerous questions. She first inquired about who was getting married, to which we replied that we were marrying each other. A look of surprise struck the employees' faces, as they responded with "Oh, vraitment? Très



bien!” Up until this point, the women were primarily addressing my ‘feminine’ friend, until I announced that we were there in search of a dress for me, and that my “fiancé” would be using her mother’s dress. Again, expressions of surprise emerged, and they ushered us into the store. As we began to examine the dresses, it took a few minutes for the employee to begin addressing me first, shifting her gaze and the direction of her words away from my feminine-presenting accomplice. Over the course of the visit, the woman assisting us referred to my friend and I as “friends,” and only once, after some stuttering and hesitation, did she use the word “fiancé.”

The responses to our deviance were subtle, and in large ways embedded within the capitalist environment the act took place in. The employees did not argue nor negate our presence as a lesbian couple in the store, yet were clearly surprised. In some ways they seemed excited; as if our presence validated their store and marriage itself as somehow “progressive” and “inclusive.” However, their surprise and excitement obviously reflects heterosexism and the normative assumptions embedded within the bridal shop. Lesbian presence is unexpected; while acceptable, it is perceived as somehow not ‘normal’ or unusual. Further, the initial cling to my ‘partner’ as the primary customer

reflects normative gender judgements, even within a queer relationship. To the employee, the ‘feminine’ partner conformed more to conventional standards of a bride-to-be. Even with a wedding dress on my body, the employee was suggesting dresses to my friend that she should try on, prioritizing her as a potential customer over me. I suggest that the subtleties of their reactions were due to the context. In a setting of the sale of expensive material goods, explicit limiting of non-normative behaviours or obvious disapproval is not usually socially acceptable. The employees quickly warmed to our unique story when they realized we were still potential customers, from whom they could make a monetary profit. The potential capital gain from our interaction limited the explicit nature of the social control mechanisms exercised on my friend and me during our deviance. My experience of this act and acknowledgement of the employees’ reactions is reminiscent of Julia Serano’s passage “Performance Piece.” In it, Serano discusses how understanding gender as only a performance is limited, that she “can perform gender...but [that] *performance* doesn’t explain why certain behaviours and ways of being come to [her] more naturally than others.”²² This act was very much a performance for me; I adopted an unusual personal style, and acted the role of fiancé to my best friend.

Serano contends, however, that “when we talk about...gender as though it were a performance, we let the audience – with all their expectations, prejudices, and presumptions – completely off the hook.”³ The subsequent analysis aims to understand the construction of the performance aspect of this act, as well as examine underlying influences shaping the responses to our deviance.

Two theoretical frameworks are of primary use in the analysis of this act. First, queer theory can be utilized to understand the gendered and sexual deviance embedded in my behaviour, as well as how the social institution of marriage intersects with this particular performance. Second, Marxist feminism provides an interesting perspective on the role of capitalism and material exchange in influencing the outcomes of the event.

Queer theory suggests that gender and sexual identities are socially constructed as categorical dichotomies. An individual’s gender or sexual identity is constructed with large reference to these socially established categories. Identities are not fluid, and queer theory encourages the dismantling of such socially-prescribed categories, including ‘man,’ ‘woman,’ ‘heterosexual,’ and ‘gay,’ among others. Langer and Martin suggest

that “it is not the private experience of one’s gender (gender identity) or the public manifestation of it (gender role) that is necessarily socially constructed, but rather the conceptualizations of gender-appropriateness and gender-inappropriateness.”⁴ This understanding highlights the fluidity of acceptable limits to gendered behaviours.

There are various ways in which the deviant act under discussion can be analyzed through a queer theory perspective. Most obviously, our adoption of different gender presentations represents a blurring of gender expressions and categorical relevance. While I do sometimes present as androgynous, assuming a butch presentation was both a challenge to me and the traditional gender binary. As a cis-gendered woman, I have been socialized towards a more feminine physical representation. A less feminine presentation, demonstrated through my clothing, blurs conventional understandings of what a cis-gendered woman, and future bride, should look like. This blurring also challenged me to examine how much I rely on physical presentation to give cues to others and receive validation from them for my own identity. Kate Woolfe echoes these sentiments in her narrative description of her embrace of and acceptance into lesbian communities.⁵ Woolfe discusses how she



initially catered her image to fit stereotyped versions of lesbianism, with short hair and other de-feminizing features. Her piece discusses how she heavily relied on her appearance as a means to communicate her lesbian identity to others, and utilized her physical presentation to develop her community inclusion. While Woolfe later views this vanity through a critical lens, when I dressed as a butch I felt connected to her expressed links between identity expression, community recognition, and inclusion.

Further building on queer theory, the conjunction between our gendered presentations and our existence as a

queer “couple” in a heterosexual space embodies the struggle sought by queer theorists. Upon first glance, a butch and a femme couple may appear heterosexual, as their gender presentations in some ways conform to traditional ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories. The filling of these roles by two cis-gendered women, however, challenges normative assumptions about gender presentation in relation to sexual desire and relationships. Further, the passable presentation as a male/female relationship in the heterosexual space of a bridal shop can be seen as a subversive act to structures of hetero-normativity and gendered desire. As a queer ‘couple’ assuming presence in a straight space, we

were confusing conceptions of belonging and acceptance, as well as conventional gender presentations, especially within queer relationships.

of marriage. As well, the fact that the more ‘masculine’ presenting partner in this scenario (myself) was the primary customer confronts the rigid gender categories and acceptable limits of



Specifically relating to trying on wedding dresses, the gender roles embodied and acted out during this act also align with the goal of challenging normative categorizations of gender and desire. First, a non-heterosexual ‘couple’ searching for a wedding dress is in itself challenging to structures of hetero-sexism, and the privileged access of straight couples to the institution

behaviour within them. The store employees initially, and continually throughout the exchange, perceived my femme friend as the primary customer. Queer theory would suggest that this bias was due to her more feminine presentation and stricter conformity to established behaviours within the category of ‘woman’.

In addition, queer theory can help illuminate how marriage serves as an institution of social control, especially for queer communities. Marriage is a social contract between two individuals and the state in which they marry; the boundaries, expectations, and benefits of said relationships are legally outlined. Traditionally reserved for heterosexual partnerships, recent movements are struggling for the granting of marriage rights to non-straight couples. Gay marriage is legal in Canada, yet its inclusion within Canadian socio-legal discourse can be seen as perpetuating the limited dichotomized categories of gender and desire as discussed through

queer theory. The extension of the category of marriage to include gay couples normalizes gay or lesbian relationships which choose marriage, at the expense of couples including trans* individuals, non-monogamous partnerships, and other non-“normative” relationships. From a queer theory perspective, one could argue that gay marriage re-enforces the rigid polarizations of male/female and gay/straight, and thus undermines the struggle for categorical dismantling. Marriage serves as a mechanism of control, erecting normative boundaries of acceptable expressions of desire. Trying on wedding dresses is representative of this institutionalized control.



A wedding dress symbolizes the social norms embedded within marriage as well as the influence of capitalism over individual behaviours. Marxist feminism is relevant in examining the role of capitalism in shaping this deviant act, including an analysis of both the material and social interactions which occurred.

From a materialist perspective, Marxist feminism suggests that material production and the goal of profit is foundational in an understanding of patriarchy. The capitalist mode of production and exchange drives all social interactions and systems, and is fundamental in the oppression of women, and the power of men over women more generally. In many ways, this theory is consistent with the events as they unfolded in the bridal shop. First, the necessity of an appointment to visit the store serves as a screening process, restricting access to the products only to a self-selecting group of clientele. Further, the excessive price of the dresses themselves represents the pervasiveness of capitalism in achieving the socially normalized and mandated ends of marriage. The least expensive dress in the store was \$2000; this price embodies a female slavery to, and need for money as a means to attain the feminine dream of being a bride. Marxist feminists might claim that this reflects the power of

money and materialism over women's actions. Further, the dresses on the floor shop were all one 'standard' size; they were designed to fit a 5'11" woman, who had a small waist and bigger bust. The employees contended that this was the case because most women had their dresses tailor-made to their bodies. However, offering one size, one which conforms to socially-prescribed ideals of female bodies, sells a certain body shape to customers. While women are able to have a dress tailor-made, not fitting into a dress in the store is likely to be a disappointing experience for potential customers, one which could highlight potentially already existing insecurities. Here, we can see how capitalist materialism sells certain bodies and more financially privileged lifestyles as expectations of femininity.

Drawing from Marxist feminism, I suspect that the subtleties of control manifested during the discussed interaction were in large part muted by the drive for profit. As already mentioned, the products being shopped for were extremely expensive, and it is possible the employees worked with commission benefits. While the women were obviously surprised by our presence and requests in the store, they were conscious of muting their shock, so as to not scare away or offend potential high-paying customers. From a Marxist

perspective, the goal of profit on behalf of the employees, as well as the conventions of customer service as established for situations involving material exchange, can be seen as limiting the behaviours of the female employees and setting the tone for the entire interaction. Capitalism and material exchange strongly influenced the employee's reactions, and encouraged the utilization of subtle mechanisms of social control over more explicit repressions.

Committing this gendered deviant act was particularly challenging for me. The most difficult part was the reflection experienced as a result of the linkages between my dress and gender presentation. As already discussed, dressing butch was an exaggeration of a style of appearance I already sometimes embrace. Adopting such a style prompted me to think further about the relationship between my dress and identity. More taxing, however, was trying on the wedding dresses themselves. I have never envisioned myself in a wedding dress, or having my own wedding, and seeing myself in an extravagant, expensive gown was extremely uncomfortable emotionally. I felt as if I was drowning in white fabric, consumed by lace and excess material. The white colour made me feel dishonestly 'pure;' the dress' corset made me feel trapped in a vision of femininity I do not identify with. Again, this parallels

Woolfe's expressions as a queer woman. "The Lesbian Look...has less to do with one's sexual preference and more to do with a rejection of our culture's values about women. The Look frees us up to be more than decorative."⁶ In a wedding dress, I felt exactly that, *decorative*, and limited by social values of women's beauty. Seeing myself in a wedding dress re-affirmed to me my act of embracing non-normative and androgynous aesthetics. Further, my presence in the bridal shop was extremely uncomfortable for me. I felt out of place and personally deviant in my mere presence in such an expensive and culturally select store. My discomfort with the environment and the dresses in fact limited my playing the part I assumed in the act, that of an engaged queer woman. I was less inclined towards physical or verbal displays of affection to my 'partner' because of this uneasiness. My deviance itself was limited by the extravagance of capitalism and materialism as it manifest in the store, and by the standards of beauty and femininity set by the environment.

Finally, this act questioned my identity and expression as a queer woman. While challenging manifestations of heterosexism and social gender expectations, I was prompted to examine my own relationship to institutions such as marriage, as well as how my queerness

affects social interactions outside of queer-welcoming communities. Queer theory's encouragement of dismantling categories of gender and sexual identity is an admirable goal, and personally experiencing this struggle in a capitalist setting was particularly interesting. Deviance, as well as mechanisms of control to limit dissenting behaviours, is often subtle, and strengthening the ability to behave defiantly, with confidence, is of crucial importance to dismantling oppressive systems.

An extended and different version of this project, from where the included photos were taken, can be found at:

<http://youngist.org/post/54548700371/my-body-my-marriage-photo-essay-by-lily-hoffman>

Photographs

Photographer: Nicolas Quiazua

Model: Lily Hoffman

1 Butch and femme are slang terms used to signify the conscious performance of (exaggerated) stereotypical masculine and feminine (respectively) gender roles, most typically by queer individuals

2 Julia Serano, "Performance Piece" from *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, edited Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman (Seal Press, 2010), page 85

3 Ibid, page 86

4 Susan Langer and James Martin (February 2004). How Dresses Can Make You Mentally Ill: Examining Gender Identity Disorder in Children. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 21:1

5 Kate Woolfe, "It's Not What You Wear: Fashioning A Queer Identity" from *Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Communities*, edited Dawn Atkins (Harrington Park: 1998)

6 Ibid, page 504