

## **Butch/Femme and Drag**

Queerness in *Forbidden Love* and *Lip Gloss*

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Queer history projects have been undertaken by lesbian and gay academics and artists in the U.S. for the past decade, and more recently in Canada. The need to reclaim and recontextualize the homosexual experience within history is fuelled by its misrepresentations – specifically in and through Western science and psychiatry which have ultimately robbed lesbians and gay men of a history outside of homophobia and heterosexism. Within the taxonomy of sexology and traditional psychoanalysis, the term “homosexuality” is always contained in the discursive categories of deviancy, perversion, or mental illness. To read queer experiences within these discourses is to be confronted only with negative representations: “subjects” or “patients” defined by their “abnormal” desires and practices.

In response to this treatment, many queer history projects posit language as a site for the reclamation and rearticulation of so-called deviant social and sexual practices. Subversive language play reconfigures pejorative and hateful slurs to a politics of queer cultural identity – making these terms our own and thus forming queer frames of reference. Through this, the past experiences of lesbians and gay men and other non-heterosexuals who struggled for cultural identity and freedom are never forgotten.

Two recent Canadian films, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992) directed by Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie and Lois Siegel's *Lip Gloss* (1993), are prime examples of queer history projects which aim to rework, and thus reclaim, dominant representations of queerness. Among the first specifically Canadian examples of this practice, these films have received a fairly wide mainstream distribution outside of the queer film circuit.<sup>1</sup> *Forbidden Love* examines the butch/femme identities common among lesbians in the 1950s as well as being a reoccurring thematic structure in the lesbian pulp novels of the period. Stylistically heterogeneous, the film combines a fictional narrative with an observational style of documentary. Interviews with nine lesbians, the privileged



mode of address, are intercut with archival footage and press clippings to situate the experiences of these women in a less-than-tolerant Canadian society of the 1950s. The narrative, a campy filmic adaptation of the novelistic “formula” governing lesbian pulp, further contextualizes the oral histories of these women.

Lois Siegel’s *Lip Gloss* also relies on an observational documentary mode and oral testimony to reconstruct the drag scene in Montreal in the 1970s. The film also stresses the inherent difficulty of the historiographic enterprise by juxtaposing past and present. Interviews with female impersonators are intercut with shots of now-defunct drag bars in Montreal as well as archival footage and photographs of drag performances. We are guided through the Montreal community of drag by a female impersonator named Armand Monroe, who served as assistant director and production manager on the film. Monroe provides insight into drag practice by both acting as the primary interviewer as well as sharing his personal experiences as a drag queen and performer over the past thirty years.

Both *Forbidden Love* and *Lip Gloss* recontextualize and reconstruct Canadian histories through queer vernaculars. The testimonials of the lesbian and gay subjects lend insight into the conditions under which they practiced butch/femme and drag role playing. Although the two documentaries consider these practices in different periods – the fifties and sixties in *Forbidden Love* and a more contemporary time frame in *Lip Gloss* – together they provide Canadian queers with a cultural history of lesbian and gay strategies of subversion. This is essential to the formation of our cultural and political identities. By representing community practices that have been viewed as dominant pretexts for punishment and/or stigmatization, we not only reclaim our cultural history but actively challenge the oppressive heterosexist structures of sex and gender.

### Queer Cultural Identity

In “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall provides useful tools for defining identity not only through commonality but also through difference. Thus cultural identity can be delineated:

in terms of the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many others, more superficially or artificially imposed “selves” which people with a shared culture and ancestry hold in common. Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experience and shared cultural codes which provide us “one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning . . . as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference. Cultural identity is a matter of

becoming as well as of being. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.<sup>2</sup>

Hall's distinctions provide useful strategies for considering the formulation of queerness as both plural and unified. However, caution must be exercised in applying these ideas to the experiences of lesbians and gay men in Western society, as Hall is specifically describing post-colonial Afro-Caribbean cultural identities. To equate experiences of racism with those of homophobia and heterosexism is highly problematic. As well, it is dangerous to assume a collective queer cultural identity without acknowledging the conditions of gender subordination under which lesbians, as women in a patriarchal society, live. However, with the recognition of these "critical points of deep and significant difference," lesbians and gay men (as well as other non-heterosexuals – bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals) can form a political alliance under the name 'queer' to oppose hegemonic forces. As Lisa Duggan has summarized: "The work of queer politics and theory is open to possibilities for coalitions across barriers of class, race and gender and to somehow satisfy the paradoxical necessity of recognizing differences, while producing (provisional) unity."<sup>3</sup>

Both *Forbidden Love* and *Lip Gloss* construct instances of collective queer solidarity, a political solidarity grounded in history, in the need for "provisional" unity. Demonstrating the segregation of lesbian and gay communities of the past, the films reference police harassment on the streets as well as the raiding of well-known gay and lesbian bars. An interview with a fifty-eight-year-old drag queen named Armand Emond in *Lip Gloss* reveals the difficulties involved in organizing gay functions in the late sixties. As Emond explains, without proper permits a "masquerade party" with only male attendance was a target for the police:

One time I decided to go to Europe for three months and half, and I tell another guy, my friend, to take over. And what happened was he did not have the right permit and he was raided. So all the cops arrested all those gay boys dressed up any way you want, and they really got it.

Carole Ritchie-MacIntosh, interviewed in *Forbidden Love*, recounts similar dangers; since it was illegal to throw a party exclusively for men, she explains that lesbians would attend, because if they did not, "the police would raid it, they would absolutely level it." Many of the lesbians interviewed in *Forbidden Love* speak at length about harassment and police brutality. Stephanie Ozard explains a particularly hostile officer in Vancouver who, "because his wife has run off with another woman, was mad at all [lesbians in the city] and he didn't care who [they] were":

He would harass and follow us into the street, he would come up to us and say, "I want your name and address, and I'm keeping it my book," and he had it in his book, he had all our

names in his book. He would say, "I don't care if you're jay-walking or what you're doing, I'm going to nail you if I catch you."

Ritchie-MacIntosh echoes Ozard's comments, demonstrating that this kind of brutality occurred regularly in Toronto as well:

It was absolutely well known that the Toronto police got their kicks from picking up women and taking them out to Cherry beach. Some of them were raped, some of them badly beaten up and they got away with it because the women were gay, and who cared about gay women?

These examples show the common oppression that lesbians and gays faced in Canada through the 1960s as well as how they often supported one another, to create a stronger force against their common enemy. However, as demonstrated in *Lip Gloss*, the two communities were most often very separate. Armand Monroe explains that many gay bars in Montreal in the late sixties and seventies were not welcoming to women, not even to lesbians. While to some degree this segregation still exists, a much stronger collectivity has arisen from our community struggles around AIDS.

### What We Call Ourselves

The opening sequences of *Forbidden Love* and *Lip Gloss* function in similar ways to present the terms of butch/femme and drag in a manner that parodies and thus discredits dominant conceptions of these practices. Appropriately, the films use camp to expose and to transfigure the stereotypes of lesbians and gay men as disturbed identities that ultimately wish to be either male or female.

*Forbidden Love* opens with a warning text that scrolls up a black screen: "Unless otherwise stated, the people in this film should not be presumed to be homosexual . . . or heterosexual." Parodying disclaimers such as, "the events you are about to witness are true," as well as the common (paternalistic) documentary practice of providing contextual information before a film begins, these words set an ironic tone for the opening scene. Mimicking the high melodrama of the 1950' lesbian pulp novel (with its obligatory love triangle), the "story" begins with a young man and woman traveling down a prairie road in a pick-up truck. A love song – "Laura" – comes on the radio and Bill looks toward Meg with a strange expression before abruptly changing the station. The song's significance is clinched when they arrive at a train station. Here we encounter the heroine of our story, a pretty young lesbian named Laura, who stands with a suitcase, alone on the platform. Meg gets out of the truck, walks over to her, and Laura says with a hopeful but sad tone, "Oh, Meg, I thought you might be coming with me!" Meg does not reply;

instead, she places a heart-shaped pendant in Laura's hand before running into the safe arms of her beau. The scene ends with a freeze-frame of Laura alone at the train station. The image then dissolves into the book cover of a novel aptly entitled *Forbidden Love*. Other covers follow with such titles as: *Queer Patterns*, *Women's Barracks*, *Girls' Dormitory* as well as less subtle titles like *Man-bater* (with the jacket description, "She hated men and turned to a *lesbian* for comfort"). This opening scene, along with the book covers which punctuate it, reveals much about the ways in which lesbianism was constructed during the period. Laura is depicted as wanting and needing Meg in the same way Bill does. The popular novels further exemplify the oddness or 'queerness' of lesbian sexuality, as a somehow perverse, troubled way to exist in the world. Laura is abandoned in this scene – left by Meg, the "real" or untroubled woman who knows her place within heterosexism. Conversely, Laura is left alone in the "abnormal" space of homosexuality (all dressed up with nowhere to go).

*Lip Gloss* begins in an equally campy fashion. The film opens with a series of extreme close-ups on men applying lipstick; these are intercut with shots of drag performances and gay men dancing in what appears to be a 1970s disco. The tight framing on the bottom half of the men's faces accentuates their maleness – every facial stubble is visible. The application of lipstick to unmistakably male lips invokes the stereotype of the gay man, especially the drag queen, who would "ultimately prefer to be a woman." The dominant conception of drag practice as mere gender confusion is turned on its head through the campiness of these shots and the dated music – the excess of disco – that accompanies them. (This opening sequence is also reminiscent of Tim Curry's famous lipsticked mouth in *Rocky Horror Picture Show* – a queer favourite with its brilliantly campy representation of transvestism.)

Armand Monroe, the main voice throughout *Lip Gloss*, sketches the complex relations involved in drag culture:

There's the professional female impersonator, there's the transvestite, which is a name commonly used for the female impersonator, but a transvestite is one that dresses for the pleasure of dressing and not for show. Then you have hookers who dress in drag for prostitution reasons, and then there are those that dress up for one night a year; some spend the whole year preparing for that one night out.

Derrick McKinnon, another female impersonator, extends this explanation, emphasizing drag's ability to destabilize gender categories:

You more or less emphasize the female, what a woman *should* look like, and should be like. And that's what the glitter and the glamour, the make-up, is all about. These guys want a little



fantasy in their lives and that's what we personify.

McKinnon's words touch upon what Judith Butler describes as the function of drag to "effectively mock both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity." The drag "fantasy":

plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman," it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of the gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.<sup>4</sup>

The drag queen, through an imitation or parody of femininity challenges the ontology of sex and gender, threatening to expose them as historical rather than biological. Drag practice subverts, or rather inverts, heterosexualized notions of gender; the "reality" of heterosexual identities posited as natural or original is interrogated through mimesis. Viewed in this way, drag can be seen not only as an empowering queer practice, but also as a political challenge to the "regulatory fiction."

As noted above, the lesbians interviewed in *Forbidden Love* provide much description of butch/femme stylizations in the 1950s and 1960s. Reva Hutkin describes the "formula books" that proliferated during this time: "butch meets straight little femme and it rarely worked out to anybody's joy." Ann Bannon, a writer of lesbian pulp of the period explains:

There was some kind of retribution at the end so you could let them have a little fun in the meantime...but it was not to go unpunished. At the end, one of the women or both had to die, or essentially be shipped out of the country, or undergo some calamity that would break her heart, or break her spirit, or end her life.

The tragic nature of these books says much about the societal anxieties surrounding lesbianism. Despite this, lesbians actively and courageously participated in butch/femme role playing. Stephanie Ozard claims she was attracted to the lifestyle as a twenty-one-year-old rebel because of its "forbiddance" and the idea of doing something "slightly illicit." These "illicit" butch and femme roles are described in detail by all nine lesbians interviewed in the film. The complex coding of these two terms is explained best through their words. Butches dressed and behaved in ways that rejected "femininity." As Lois Stuart recounts: "I dressed in black pants, a black cowboy shirt, sometimes cowboy boots, and a big thick belt around my waist with a knife on it." Ozard reminisces about her partner, Dawn:

She was pretty incredible, she was real butch, you had to look twice to know she was a woman because she was really skinny, no tits, just flanks and a T-shirt and men's shoes, slicked-back black hair and tattoos from wrists to her elbows.

And finally, Carole Ritchie-MacIntosh provides an example in which a butch friend got

into a “slight altercation”: “And one day she drove her motorcycle straight into the back door of the Continental and straight up to the table. It was lovely!” In contrast, femmes adhered to codes of behaviour that emphasized the feminine. As Ruth Christine, a self-defined femme, explains: “Femmes were supposed to act like femme fatales. You never opened your doors, you never had to light your own cigarettes or buy your own drinks.” The interactions between butches and femmes in bars were also steeped in coding, and often resulted in conflicts between butches over their “territory,” or in other words, their femmes. The physical conflicts that resulted added to the excitement and subversiveness of what Lois Stuart calls the “double life”:

There were fights all the time, it was most exciting. But you see, if you’re leading a double life, what is the point of going to a nice, friendly little tea party when you’re not teaching or whatever you do in your daily life? Why not do something? *Really* lead a double life!

The idea of a double life, a life full of subversion and illicitness, seems crucial to the practice of butch/femme. The common critique of this practice, that it merely imitates heterosexual norms, ignores its subversive potential. As Butler argues, by deploying heterosexual constructs, butch/femme role playing can be seen to “disempower and denaturalize” those very constructs.<sup>5</sup> Within this economy, butch/femme practices become powerful contestations – identities that destabilize dominant sexual norms.

163

### **From Reclamation to Rearticulation**

Realigning the terms “butch/femme” and “drag queen” to a politics of queer cultural identity can be seen to be part of a larger project of appropriation and rearticulation. “Queer,” of course, has a long history of usage within dominant discourses. In *Forbidden Love*, Ruth Christine recounts an experience in the early sixties: “I asked an older woman sitting beside me, ‘well, how long have you been queer?’ She looked at me and said, ‘it’s not queer, it’s gay.’” Recently however, this term has been appropriated by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals as “a proud declaration of nonconformist sexualities.”<sup>6</sup> Queerness has been articulated (or rearticulated) as part of a liberation movement. Denis Denisoff explains: “Queerness now consciously proclaims political activism with regard to the assumption that a sexual normativity can be defined and maintained.”<sup>7</sup> This self-proclamation, “queer,” which has come to signify the strength and solidarity of a political movement, has drained the word of its traditionally shaming connotations, rendering it ineffectual for homophobes. At the same time, the word serves as a reminder of a history of homophobia and violence.

The playful banter within exclusively queer or gay-positive "mixed company" punctuated with expressions like "fag," "dyke," "bitch," "girlfriend" or "queen" (to name but a few) can be seen as other instances of this political rearticulation. In this way, language becomes a site within which to both actively resist dominant conceptions of homosexuality and through which to build new discursive identities.

### Notes

1. For example, *Lip Gloss* played at the mainstream Cinéma de Paris (17-24 September 1993) and *Forbidden Love* has been distributed widely through the National Film Board's vast distribution channels. Moreover, it was aired on CBC's *Cinema Canada* series which greatly pleased co-director Lynne Fernie: "We wanted this film to be on television. This part of Canadian history has been so silenced that we should be able to hear all our divergent stories, and we should be able to see them on CBC." (*The Gazette*, 13 October 1993:B9)
2. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Frameworks* 36 (1989): 69.
3. Lisa Duggan, "Making it perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review*, 2, no.1 (1992): 26.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137-38.
5. *Ibid.*, 123.
6. Lisa Henderson, "Justify Our Love: Madonna and the Politics of Queer Sex," in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities and Cultural Theory*, ed. C. Schwichtenberg (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 113.
7. Dennis Denisoff, "The Fruits of Queeriosity," in *Queeries: an Anthology of Gay Male Prose* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), 3.