

FEMININITY: THE MISSING TERM, THE UNCRITICAL CRISIS

Judith Kegan Gardiner
University of Illinois at Chicago

ABSTRACT

To explore the uses and limitations of “femininity” in U.S. feminist theory, I trace the concept through four influential books by Betty Friedan, Susan Brownmiller, Sandra Bartky and Biddy Martin from the 1960s to the present: the changing scope of feminist theorizing about femininity illustrates its contexts in the changing U.S. women’s movement. I argue for the necessity of historicizing and localizing theory, suggest potentially fruitful new feminist uses of “femininity” and outline three maxims for future theorizing.

KEY WORDS: Femininity, U.S. feminist theory, Friedan, Brownmiller, Bartky, Martin.

RESUMEN

Para explorar el uso y las limitaciones del concepto de “femineidad” en la teoría feminista norteamericana, yo analizo dicho concepto a través de cuatro libros influyentes escritos por Betty Friedan, Susan Brownmiller, Sandra Bartky y Biddy Martin desde la década de 1960 hasta el presente: los cambios en las teorizaciones feministas sobre la femineidad ilustran sus contextos en el cambiante movimiento de mujeres en los Estados Unidos. Yo reclamo la necesidad de localizar históricamente la teoría, sugiero nuevos usos feministas, potencialmente fructíferos, del concepto de “femineidad” y articulo tres máximas para teorizaciones futuras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: femineidad, teoría feminista norteamericana, Friedan, Brownmiller, Bartky, Martin.

Although feminist theory has grown increasingly more sophisticated in recent decades, especially in its analyses of differences among women and of the construction of masculinities, the category of “femininity” has remained less explored. Masculinity is seen both within contemporary feminist theories and within academic masculinity studies as compensatory, defensive, and needing explanation and modification, while femininity is apparently assumed to result uneventfully from daughters’ identifications with their mothers, women’s adaptations to male dominance, and media influences. In contrast to the enormous popular emphasis



on a “crisis of masculinity,” femininity is not considered a social problem in the U.S. now. Women are widely accepted in the workplace and in some political roles—so long as they preserve certain conventions of appearance and continue to nurture children, men, and other women. On the other hand, the desire within the mainstream culture, much of academic masculinity studies, and even queer theory to hold on to men’s masculinity as a positive grounding of identity is correlated with the insistence that men not become “feminized.” In contrast to the investments that men, including masculinity scholars, appear to have in preserving masculinity as some intelligible and coherent grounding of identity, feminist theorists often show skepticism and distance toward the category of femininity or ignore it altogether. I suggest, however, that it may be time to return to theorizing femininity. We need to see whether or not, and how, this concept can now be of use. The very absence of a “crisis of femininity” in contemporary U.S. culture, compared to the anxiety, excitement, and increasing scholarship around “masculinity,” may indicate some of the limits of “gender” as the catch-all category for feminist theory, scholarship, and political mobilization.

My own interest in the category of “femininity” came indirectly through researches in masculinity studies that repeatedly turned up warnings of a “crisis of masculinity.” I edited a collection of essays under the title *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theories: New Directions*, in which the central terms were “masculinity” and “feminism.” “What has masculinity to do with feminism?” I asked; “Why is there so much talk of a ‘crisis’ of masculinity?... Why is masculinity’s supposed complement, femininity, so rarely mentioned?” (*Masculinity* 1). Why was masculinity so fraught, I wondered, and why was so little said about the apparently necessary correlative, the complement to masculinity, that is, femininity? Many books have recently appeared on masculinity, far fewer on femininity, and several of these focus on analyses of popular culture (Macdonald, Peril). In self-help sections of bookstores and on the internet, texts devoted to femininity tend to have titles like “femininity and power” and to be statements of explicitly Christian female apologists or of angry conservative males telling women how to behave, or, on the other hand, to be documents of gay independence (Angelfire, Flanagan, Graman and Walsh). For example, Michelle McKinney Hammond lectures women on returning to God’s plan in *The Power of Femininity: Rediscovering the Art of Being a Woman*, while Denaë Doyle advertises she will coach “Transsexuals and Serious Crossdressers” how to pass as feminine women (McKinney, Doyle). In several current Women’s Studies texts, I found ample reference to masculinity but few indexed references to femininity (Andersen and Collins; McCann and Kim).

In order to understand the uses and limitations of “femininity” in U.S. feminist theory, in this essay I trace some ways in which the concept has appeared in four influential books from the 1960s to the present. The changing scope of feminist theorizing about femininity illustrates its contexts in the changing U.S. women’s movement and argues for the necessity of historicizing and localizing theory. As preliminary suggestions for potentially fruitful feminist uses of “femininity,” I suggest the oxymoronic categories of feminist femininity and butch femininity and outline three maxims for future theorizing.



One of the earliest texts of contemporary U.S. feminism is Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* of 1963. Friedan popularized "the problem that has no name" as the frustration of the white, middle-class, college-educated suburban housewife in the United States who had achieved the culturally-approved goals of husband, children, home, material abundance, and leisure but who was still not satisfied. Freudian therapists and popular magazines told such women that they suffered from a "masculinity complex," that they were deficient in femininity, that they were neurotic. Friedan, in contrast, claimed that femininity, not its absence, was the women's problem. The ideology she called the "feminine mystique" said that the "highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity," which consisted of "accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (37). According to Friedan, women who followed this path would become infantilized, socially conforming, passive, and indecisive. Although she focused only on privileged women, she did place their problems in a specific historical context, that of the United States after World War II, when women were enjoined to leave the waged labor force and devote themselves instead to their men and children. That group of highly educated American girls who grew up "feeling free and equal to boys," she said, were now both thwarted and frightened (68). They were faced with the "terror of freedom," the "terror of growing up," but she found this existentialist terror healthier than the adjustment to feminine constraints recommended by the psychologists who defined full humanity as exclusively male and considered "human growth... antagonistic to femininity, to fulfillment as a woman, to woman's sexuality" (68, 305).

For Friedan, femininity is not merely a mistaken psychological formulation but part of an ideological campaign that serves a specific politics: "Powerful forces in this nation must be served by those pretty domestic pictures that stare at us everywhere, forbidding a woman to use her own abilities in the world ... When one begins to think about it, America depends rather heavily on women's passive dependence, their femininity" (196). Friedan, herself a housewife and mother with an unacknowledged leftist political past, drew her conclusions from interviews with the alumnae of her own elite college and from analyses of popular U.S. women's magazines and advice books (Horowitz). She analyzed "the feminine mystique," not as a timeless attribute of women but as the overdetermined product of postwar economic conditions in the mid-twentieth-century and of the ideological sway of popular Freudianism over a particular social class.

The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States picked up the goals of personal development and striving for equality advocated by Friedan, who was one of the founders of the liberal feminist National Organization for Women or NOW. Other feminists radicalized her critique of femininity and also generalized it beyond a specific place, time, and social purpose. The reason for the division of biological males and females into masculine and feminine people, radical feminists claimed, was the subordination of women to men. Susan Brownmiller, who also wrote a book on rape, published a book simply entitled *Femininity* in 1984, as earlier feminist activism and legal successes





were being attacked by a conservative backlash. The book universalizes Friedan's critique of a certain restrictive form of femininity to encompass all women at all times. "My aim is not to propose a new definition of femininity," Brownmiller claims, "...but to invite examination of a compelling aesthetic that evolved over thousands of years—to explore its origins and the reasons for its perseverance, in the effort to illuminate the restrictions on free choice" (*Femininity* 235). From this viewpoint, such practices as footbinding among the premodern Chinese and tight corsets in the European past illustrate the same sexist principles of female bodily deformation as dieting in 20th-century North America. Brownmiller's book sees all women as indeed sisters in subordination. It appeals to this universal female victimization even as it promises its readers a fulfilling bonding with other women in a mutual struggle for liberation that will also bring individual self-actualization.

Brownmiller defines femininity as a necessary prop to men's masculinity and as requiring maximum visible differentiation from men. In contrast to Friedan, she does not see careers for women as restricted to housewife and mother, though she claims that ambivalence and contradiction will haunt the woman who tries to have both a career and a family. Rather than focusing on women's domestic roles and economic status, however, she defines femininity as "a rigid code of appearance and behavior" (*Femininity* 14). This code also has emotional components: "Femininity in essence, is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations" that seeks to mystify "functional aspects of a woman's mind and body that are indistinguishable from a man's" (*Femininity* 14, 84). Yet despite its superficiality and artifice, femininity is genuinely part of women's core identity. To gain small advantages over other women in seeking those "two scarce resources—men and jobs," women will sacrifice striving for equality (*Femininity* 17). Brownmiller thus agrees with sexist evaluations that women make such choices because they "share a universal need for connections," that is, a need for love, especially from men (*Femininity* 17).

Without questioning the existence of "biological gender," Brownmiller seeks to prevent it from harming the potential "collective and individual aspirations of women": her goal, she says, is that "the feminine ideal will no longer be used to perpetuate inequality between the sexes, and that exaggeration will not be required to rest secure in biological gender" (*Femininity* 19). She concludes optimistically in the rhetoric of North American liberal feminism, which emphasizes individual choice and believes in a unique core of identity for each person: because of substantial progress for women initiated by the Women's Liberation Movement, she claims, women "are in their awareness if not yet in their freedom to choose, a little closer to being themselves" (*Femininity* 237).

Only a few years later, the book *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, published in 1990 by philosopher Sandra Bartky, shows considerably more theoretical sophistication than Brownmiller's popular polemic. Working through the frameworks of Marx, Foucault, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and radical and materialist feminisms, Bartky follows Brownmiller and other radical feminists in defining femininity through the subservience imposed on women

that perpetuates male dominance yet also wins women's allegiance. "I have been interested from the first in the nature of that 'femininity' that disempowers us even while it seduces us," she says (*Femininity* 2). She takes as her topic "an examination of the embodied consciousness of a feminine subject" who is shaped through "oppressive intersubjective relationships" (*Femininity* 1, 2). The resulting feminine modes of consciousness are all harmful to women: they follow the negative Freudian assessment of femininity as characterized by narcissism, masochism, "female shame; sexual self-objectification; loss of self in the sense of merger with another" and also fragility, lack of strength, immaturity, "restricted motility... tension and constriction" (*Femininity* 2, 73). These negative traits result from "the internalization of pervasive intimations of inferiority" (*Femininity* 7). Female narcissism, then, is not simple vanity or healthful self-esteem but rather "*infatuation with an inferiorized body*" (emphasis original, *Femininity* 40).

Concurring with Judith Butler, whose enormously influential book *Gender Trouble* was published the same year as *Femininity and Domination*, Bartky strives to counter conservative views that the observed differences between the sexes are natural and biological: "femininity is an artifice, an achievement," rather than the outgrowth of female nature (*Femininity* 65). She argues cogently that "Normative femininity is coming more and more to be centered on woman's body—not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance" (*Femininity* 80). She also perceptively analyzes women's acceptance of the sexist *status quo*. For example, she speculates that many women develop a false sense of their power and of men's powerlessness because their husbands confide their vulnerabilities to them. Such confidences bolster the women's self-esteem but mystify their understanding of the real power dynamics between the sexes.

Bartky's analyses of women's subjective responses to sexist environments omit the positive, nurturing aspects of traditional femininity as well as the effects of the occupational restrictions central to Friedan. Paradoxically, the very narrowing of cultural prescriptions for femininity that Bartky describes may indicate positive changes wrought by the women's movement since Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. If U.S. women's appearance is subject to intensifying scrutiny, their freedoms have expanded in other areas: decisions concerning whether or not to bear children, for example, and whether or not to work for wages no longer impugn a woman's femininity. On the other hand, changing technologies and a changing economy may pressure women's choices about work and family in new ways. Moreover, like Friedan's and Brownmiller's, Bartky's descriptions of femininity remain centered on heterosexual white middle-class U.S. women, with African American women mentioned as a variant. "We cannot be autonomous, as men are thought to be autonomous, without in some sense ceasing to be women," Bartky says, with the exception of African American women, whom she praises for their "female self-assertion and a refusal to submit to domestic tyranny" (*Femininity* 24, 104).

Bartky's depiction in *Femininity and Domination* of femininity starkly contrasted with dominant masculinity no longer rings as true as when the book was



published.¹ Fortunately, American women who don't wear cosmetics face fewer sanctions now, and there is more admiration for muscular women than she describes. That is, the standards for female appearance have become in some respects more flexible in recent years, while in other respects—the obligation to look thin and youthful, for instance—they appear more rigorous. The ironies of this ambivalent progress are pointed. Bartky claims, for example, that insofar as the “disciplinary practices of femininity produce... an inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers” (*Femininity* 75). American women are still expected to be nurturant, though the culturally attractive woman is not necessarily “docile and compliant” any longer, and the disciplinary practices of the U.S. Army, which is implicitly all male in the passage above, now apply to both men and women.

Disciplinary practices against male bodies, too, have tightened (Bordo). In expectations for appearance and subjection to surveillance, it is no longer true that “men get off scot-free” as Bartky wrote (*Femininity* 80). The increasing objectification of male bodies in North American advertising and popular culture is not obviously a gain for women, either. The changing context of recent history is evident, too, in Bartky's longings for the future, for instance when she calls for a rebellion against tyrannical female bodily representations bolstered by “a new witness, a collective significant Other, integrated into the self but nourished and strengthened from without, from a revolutionary feminist community” (*Femininity* 43). Although a dispersed women's movement still exists in the United States, chiefly in non-governmental organizations and in academic settings, few women today expect to find a “revolutionary feminist community.” Thus the historical grounding of *Femininity and Domination* is more clearly visible now than when the book was published in 1990.

Cultural theorist Biddy Martin, like Bartky, uses Foucault to redress Marxist and feminist oversimplifications. However, whereas Bartky assumes a virtually compulsory heterosexuality, Martin writes from contexts of queer theory and lesbian activism. The three earlier feminist texts discussed here agree in their hostility to “femininity” as a concept harmful to women. They assume that their readers are primarily well-educated North American white heterosexual women who will identify with the authors' accounts of the cultural constraints that limit them. In contrast, in her 1996 book, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian*, Martin stresses the theoretical importance of the lesbian femme, who looks and acts like the conventionally feminine woman but whose erotic femininity is directed toward other women rather than toward patriarchal men. “The very fact

¹ For Bartky's more recent views, see *Sympathy and Solidarity*, which also envisions a utopian lesbian future for elderly women and scrutinizes U.S. racial relations.

that the femme may pass implies the possibility of denaturalizing heterosexuality by emphasizing the permeabilities of gay/straight boundaries,” she claims, and the intrinsic indeterminacy of both heterosexual and homosexual relations (*Femininity* 83). Thus Martin, like Bartky, continues the necessary theoretical work of denaturalizing the categories of gender and sexuality. However, unlike the other theorists, she seeks to elevate rather than abolish the abjected category of the feminine.

U.S. radical feminists like Brownmiller define femininity as the opposite of a socially valorized masculinity or even as a complete absence. Thus Catharine MacKinnon asserts that femininity is created entirely by male dominance: “All the ways in which women are suppressed and subjected —restricted, intruded on, violated, objectified— are recognized as what sex is for women and as the meaning and content of femininity” (6). This view of femininity as the projection of masculine desire also parallels the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition favored by some U.S. feminist theorists. While alluding to this tradition, however, Martin frames her discussions of femininity with specific reference to the U.S. Gay Liberation Movement and the development of queer theory.

This national and historical context includes the successes of the movement for gay and lesbian rights in the United States, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, to achieve inclusion within a liberal political agenda. While homophobia and hate crimes indicate a backlash resistance against gay rights, queer theory is now well established in academic departments of literature and cultural studies. Within academic feminism, the woman-identified lesbian feminism of the 1970s, characterized through such cultural forms as music festivals, women’s publishing, and vegetarian communes, has come to seem old-fashioned and theoretically naïve to younger women. It is to these theoretically sophisticated academic feminists that Martin principally speaks as she defends “Femininity Played Straight” against new feminist orthodoxies. She argues against those poststructuralist theorists who uphold queerness as inherently progressive. They define queerness through a mobile, perverse, and heterogeneous sexuality in contrast to the stasis they find in both traditional femininity and in feminism. From their perspective, the femme lesbian with her high heels and lipstick supposedly disappears into the morass of conventional femininity; feminism seems theoretically simple-minded; and their preferred ways to “escape from gender” employ strategies of “disembodiment” and “gender crossings” rather than the political actions of earlier feminisms (73). Martin attacks the implied misogyny of such positions, which devalue the maternal, the feminine, and the feminist. Although a significant theoretical accomplishment of recent years has been the disarticulation of sexuality from gender, Martin disputes that sexuality, even perverse or non-normative sexuality, is intrinsically progressive and that “(feminine) gender” is a “mere masquerade” or a “constraint to be escaped, overridden, or left aside as the more radical work of queering the world proceeds” (45).

By using a lesbian viewpoint to analyze femininity, Martin can avoid the presumption that it inevitably reinforces male domination and female submission. The butch-femme lesbian gender system, its proponents assert, is not a simple imitation of the heterosexual system but rather exposes the complex vulnerabilities of the butch and the agency of the femme. Martin questions lesbian as well as

heterosexual feminist theorizing, for example, the association of “masculinity and butchness” with defensive mental structures and femininity with “the ground of victimization and limit” (41). She argues that “In a femme, whether gay or straight, femininity deflects and masks deeper levels of psychological processes,” and that femmes’ feigned dependence “masks not only their own aggressions, desires, and autonomies but also the butch’s or man’s dependence and limitation, facilitating a form of attachment based on a conventional distribution of gendered qualities” but not identical with these conventions (41). She objects to queer theory for reinforcing “stereotypes of femininity and emotional bonds between women as quasi-natural, undifferentiated enmeshments” to be remedied through identifications with gay men (46). This “phallic” figuring of lesbian desire is used “to distinguish it from what then appears to be the fixed ground or maternal swamp of women-identification,” a theory she fears collaborates with traditional misogyny (46). However, she also faults many feminists for a hostility to queer theory based on their belief that it is “disruptive of the potential solidarities and shared interests among women” (47). Martin’s aim, ultimately, is not the discrediting of gender roles but an “integration of the disowned parts” of the psyche that transcends stereotypical gender binaries even as it works through them (42).

In critiquing the trendy certitudes of some queer theory, Martin conflates feminism and femininity, which are otherwise usually opposed. She describes queer theory as though it were like a young woman of the 1990s rebelling against a maternal lesbian feminist who is woman-identified and presumed to be puritanical, politically correct, and anti-sexual. Martin fears that queer and feminist theorists as well as heterosexists may risk “replicating a kind of gender totalitarianism” that overestimates the reach of gender within the psyche and society. “Gender is both more and less than we make it. It is more than a fixed ground that can be easily overridden by what we call ‘sexuality’” but also “less than that which structures everything, the deconstruction of which would take apart personhood itself” (94). Thus her analysis of femininity from a lesbian perspective resists prior feminist devaluations of the category, and it is sensitive, too, to temporal differences and varying political uses in theorizing. Her goal, she claims, is that “gender—and ‘femininity,’ in particular— becomes a piece of what feminist and queer theories together complicate and put into motion” (94). Refreshingly free of prior dismissals of femininity, Martin’s formulations are themselves structured by some of the postmodernist assumptions of queer theory. Complication and motion, after all, are not necessarily liberatory, as is evident in deeply reactionary as well as progressive responses to changing norms of gender and sexuality in the contemporary United States.

While theories of femininity always arise in specific historical and cultural contexts, the passage of forty years since the beginnings of the North American Women’s Liberation Movement clarifies some of the intervening changes affecting gender: changes in education, occupations, and the institution of marriage; growing globalization; the development of the media-dominated marketplace; and movements in the name of gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual rights and queer theory. Radical feminist polarizations of masculinity and femininity that render femininity



solely in terms of oppression, repression, or absence are inadequate to address these changes. U.S. feminist theory has consistently attacked male domination and its constraints on women's occupational and sexual freedom. However, feminist theory's totalizing rejection of femininity as both product and reproducer of domination may have oversimplified our understanding of the construction of gender. Much North American feminist theorizing has recently focused on overcoming white and middle-class privilege. Much current feminist theory seeks the denaturalization of gender and the de-linking of gender and sexuality. These, I argue, are necessary but not sufficient goals for feminist theory. Theory has changed because of changing material conditions and because of related intellectual and political movements within feminism. Understanding these developments not only helps historicize and localize past theories but may also guide theories useful toward future progressive social changes.

Friedan attacked the prosperous sexism of North American white suburbia and its belief in a popularized Freudianism. Since *The Feminine Mystique*, material conditions, income distributions, occupational opportunities, laws, family structures, and individual personality characteristics have all altered. The basic premise of the industrial era on which Freudian psychology is based, that a bourgeois couple consists of an active, wage-earning husband and a passive, dependent wife and mother, is now sufficiently eroded that other other psychologies have emerged. Gender inequalities remain, but these inequalities are not polarized binaries. Throughout U.S. society, women in substantial numbers have entered occupations that were previously almost all male. The income of U.S. women working full time for wages is now about three-fourths that of men rather than just over half, as it was when Friedan wrote. Marriage has become more fragile, less compulsory, and less enduring. Social sanctions against unmarried cohabiting have decreased. The divorce rate has soared, with declining support for ex-wives and non-custodial children from ex-husbands (Coontz). Fathers increasingly claim they want more time with their children, while working mothers necessarily spend less. U.S. men and women continue in large numbers to want lifelong marriages and well-paid, lifelong careers. Yet unemployment is high, and most people cannot fulfill these ambitions. Little public help is offered to the unemployed, much less the lonely. As the casualization of labor has increased and traditional male manufacturing jobs have been exported outside the U.S., both opportunities and vulnerabilities in the labor market are less sharply divided by gender than in prior decades, though racialized and social class divisions remain deep. While men still desire female nurturance, sexual fidelity from women, and sexual variety for themselves, women increasingly expect nurturance and sexual satisfaction from men. Consistent as is the liberal feminist demand for equality, there are few theoretical models of what equality should look like, especially with respect to interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, advances in legislation and media representations convince many people that gender equality has actually been achieved. The changes in women's expectations and in the economy are both credited with producing a "masculinity crisis" in North American men who feel victimized or "stiffed," and such vulnerabilities, now including vulnerability to international terrorism, may well have sparked en-

thusiasm for crude international imperialism and a masculinist identification with U.S. military power (Faludi, Gardiner *Masculinity*).

In the 1970s and 1980s one political goal of U.S. feminism was encapsulated in the phrase, “sisterhood is global” (Morgan). The meaning of the global seems considerably more complex today, and there has been a strong reaction in feminist theory against universalized appeals like Brownmiller’s. However, radical feminist generalizations about women may now be seen as early responses to globalization, ones that did attempt to include the world’s “Other” women, albeit from an ethnocentric white U.S. perspective. The marketplace for both products and labor is now clearly global rather than restricted to any nation. This galloping globalization of advanced capitalism has multiple effects on the U.S. gender system. Old-fashioned femininity is now frequently figured, not as that of the suburban white housewife, but as that of a conservative ethnic minority, while the new global citizen appears as an attractive but self-assertive young woman. Thus the heroines of the American movies *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Real Women Have Curves* and the popular-in-the-U.S. British film *Bend It Like Beckham* become icons of a new femininity as they win sexual autonomy with well-off white men; fulfill individual ambitions for educational, professional, and athletic success; and oppose backward parents who struggle to enforce ethnic identities and traditional gender roles. If the model U.S. citizen, however, is often represented as an assimilated immigrant, descriptions of foreign misogyny now serve U.S. imperialism, so that images of veiled Islamic women accompany justifications to invade their countries and liberate them into capitalist “democracy.” Propaganda extolling the freedoms of U.S. women in comparison to women elsewhere in the world clashes with other political forces that seek to reverse U.S. women’s current reproductive rights, sexual freedoms, and occupational choices. Globalizing perspectives thus may take ambivalent forms. They may reinforce ethnocentric feminisms that champion U.S. women as autonomous, free, self-actualized, and economically independent in contrast to women elsewhere, or they may encourage genuinely divergent feminisms and kinds of femininity not confined to the beauty esthetics described by Brownmiller (Bulbeck).

Another force splintering, altering, and reinforcing U.S. femininities and masculinities is the pervasive media and its relentless marketing, to which Bartky’s analyses of women’s bodily objectification responds. Bartky is right in saying that the tyranny of some aspects of femininity has increased—but now they have been transferred to men as well: every North American of every age and occupation is under lifelong social pressure to be thin, fit, and sexually attractive (Gardiner, “Bly’s Boys”). Male bodies have become more sexually objectified, more available to the public gaze, and more subject to campaigns to perfume them, repair their weak physiques and receding hairlines, and render them sexually functional in perpetuity. On the other hand, contemporary North American culture also codes the supposedly feminine qualities of empathy and nurturance, especially to children, positively in both men and women, and distinguishes these “feminine” qualities from effeminacy or weakness in men. At the same time, popular entertainment displays increasing numbers of girl heroes and warrior women, all conventionally attractive



yet often aggressive. The majority of U.S. women “don’t view femininity as being in conflict with equal rights for women, and many combine attitudes characteristic of feminism with habits and hobbies considered traditionally feminine,” according to an article in *Marketing to Women*, which provides industry with information likely to increase sales and market share. Youth culture, too, has become more prominent in U.S. society, and it has become more sexually assertive, tolerant, and less polarized about gender, for example in the fashion for such unisex body modifications as tattoos and piercings.

A major influence on fashions in clothing, music, and popular culture is the rise of a gay sensibility and an openly gay customer base. The movement for gay rights and the rise of queer theory that provide the context for Martin’s writings are both cause and result of changes in the U.S. gender system. The increased social visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people has led to growing acceptance of their rights as individuals in a liberal democracy, while increasingly sophisticated sex-reassignment surgery has fostered queer theory’s goal of blurring the boundaries between gay and straight and between sexuality and gender. Recent debates on the biology and genetics of sexual orientation also complicate a simple heterosexual/ homosexual binary and its attributions of femininity and masculinity, and these debates put the primacy of psychoanalytic explanations of sexuality in question. Numerous sports and entertainment celebrities are revealed as homosexual, while popular movies feature frequently gay-straight attractions and humorous confusions. Media enthusiasm for sexual talk and celebrity display publicizes experts like gay advice columnist Dan Savage, who encourages non-normative sexual practices. Meanwhile, scandals about pederastic priests in the Roman Catholic hierarchy have eroded the authority of traditional injunctions to either abstinence or heterosexual marriage. Current norms for U.S. gay men tend toward muscularly masculine appearance, while femininity is exaggerated and performed as campy excess both by male celebrities like RuPaul and by female celebrities like Madonna, so that the relationship between femininity and women seems ever more arbitrary and tenuous. Celebrity lesbians, in contrast, often exhibit what might be called “butch femininity,” a combination of athletic fitness, personal assertiveness, sexual openness, chiseled facial features, and panache that appeals to both men and women.

As determinants of gender change in the contemporary United States, one new analytical resource is academic masculinity studies, the intellectual arena through which I began this inquiry. Within masculinity studies, there is no longer a single version of masculinity (Connell, Kimmel). Instead, the concept of dominant or hegemonic masculinity is contrasted with less valorized alternative masculinities as well as femininity in both women and men. Furthermore, masculinity studies has described the institutionalization of gender more fully than have studies of femininity. In comparison with masculinity studies, variations in femininity have been less carefully articulated, while U.S. femininity remains even more tightly tied to whiteness and middle classness than does hegemonic masculinity. Many U.S. feminist texts describe African American women, Latinas, and Asian American women as stereotypically deficient or excessive in femininity rather than as creating alternative femininities. The new femininities that have emerged, like that of Hollywood



female action heroes, contain both conservative and progressive elements. I venture that there is even a feminist femininity at present, that of the gracefully aging, beautifully coifed, vigorous spokeswoman like Gloria Steinem of *Ms* magazine. As I have tried to show, these new North American femininities exist in complex relationships to a changing economy and a changing global environment, and they deserve more attention from feminist theory.

I conclude with three maxims toward a feminist theory of femininity.

1. *Femininity here does not equal femininity there.* National conditions and linguistic and intellectual traditions vary between feminist communities, and neither feminism nor femininity is stable across these divides.
2. *Femininity now does not equal femininity then.* Relationships between gender and sexuality, too, have varied over time, as have the political uses of these concepts. Theory must not only take history into account but also historicize its self examinations. We continue to need histories of theory that do not reproduce triumphant narratives of the correction of error.
3. *Concepts of femininity have no set relationship to concepts of masculinity.* Although femininity is always defined in some relationship to masculinity, it is not necessarily its opposite, complement, or absence. Race, class, nationality, and other social hierarchies inflect masculinity and femininity unevenly, and femininity and masculinity are not commensurate in their occupational effects, bodily constraints, or institutionalizations.

Femininity remains an ambiguous category in many feminist accounts. When it is described as the completely negative product of masculine domination, its disappearance becomes a goal, and its apparently positive attributes like nurturance and empathy devolve to strategies through which the powerless curry favor with their masters. However, such polarized conceptions now seem far too limiting. Femininity and masculinity are not equal halves of any whole, nor are they simply complements to one another. They are also neither independent variables nor coherent entities. The differing, elusive, non-commensurate shapes I've traced through four books of U.S. feminist theory about femininity written over the past forty years provide some insights into the history of gender in its specific contexts, while the emphasis within current U.S. feminist theory on "gender" as an undifferentiated master category tends to obscure the continuing local functions of the category of "femininity" and the functions of its effacement.

Femininity is neither an adequate concept nor a dispensable one, while more global understandings will help to decenter and contextualize North American femininities and feminist theorizing.



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