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## Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress

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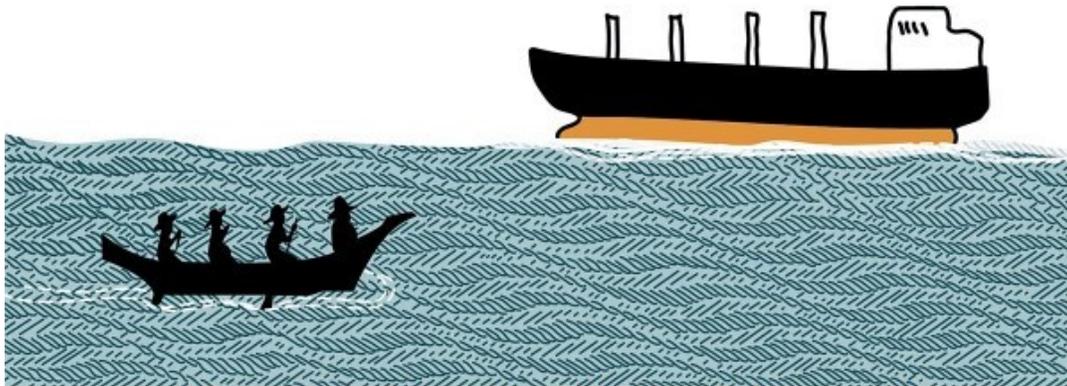
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# The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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## **Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress**

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<sup>1</sup> Image from *Blood Sisters*, 2009. Dir. Michelle Handelman. San Francisco: Michelle Handelman Studios. 63 minutes.

How do I see--what are the modes, constraints, and possibilities of my seeing, the terms of vision for me? How am I seen--what are the ways in which I'm seen or can be seen, the conditions of visibility? ... For the question is, To see or not to see, to be seen (and how) or not to be seen (at all?): subjective vision and social visibility, being and passing, representation and spectatorship--the conditions of the visible, what can be seen, and eroticized, and on what scene.<sup>2</sup>

Once, while at the Northeast Women's Herbalism Conference, a middle aged leather dyke told me that the small sliver of turquoise and silver adorning my left hand used to serve as a signal of queerness to other dykes. I was immediately struck by this delicious fact, that there was a whole lexicon of queer signaling that I, a queer fashion obsessive, was unacclimated to. My imagination ran wild, considering all the ways that desire was coded in the not so distant past, and a hazy nostalgia overtook me, replete with secret liaisons and semiotic codes. Most often I'd considered my visibility as a queer person as a weapon; arming me against the vicious patriarchy, against normalcy, precluding me from the shackles of progeny I so detested of my comfortable upper middle class upbringing. Recently, I've been interested in the ways that Fashion and Style are subsumed by queerness and sexual deviancy, using traditional or sometimes more subverted visual clues; short hair, copious piercings, androgynous clothing. This co-option appears, disappears, reappears at various intervals, and like most things, seems to be a reaction to the topical political concerns of the time. Consistently, we see this sexually ambiguous trend rear its head in times of political conservatism, see: Lesbian Chic in the early 90's America in the Bush Sr. era. This is how the Fashion System works, as Barthes and modern scholars might have us believe, the cycles of fashion call up certain trends, which fall out of favor and cycle back in again. Currently, we are certainly living in a time of queer trendy resurgence or what I might call Mass Queer (an ode to Mass Indie, as coined by the fashion thinktank K-Hole). With DOMA's overturning in 2016, and a cacophony of celebrities declaring pan sexual or queer identities, it's no surprise that Corporate America has joined in with cringeworthy Love is Love rainbow cluttered ads every year for Pride Month. This overload of visibility belies the bleak political landscape in a country where transphobic bathroom bills are being pushed in more states than ever, more POC trans-women are murdered each year and the uptick of hate crimes is met with little public ire. If queer liberation is understood to be the ability to live freely (and to simply live) outside of society's patriarchal dogma, how do we make sense of the ways that visibility does not produce or manifest liberation for queers?

In the past year or so, I've noticed that I've gravitated away from overtly public displays of queerness. I'm more Femme presenting than I've been in almost a decade, wearing makeup, sporting a relatively normie bob haircut and accessorizing with what can only be described as punk light jewelry. Although I'm deeply invested in the theorizing around how and why we choose to navigate the social and political quagmire of getting dressed, I've had a difficult time parsing through my personal style evolution. I often come back to Halberstam's notion of queer refusal, "[we] refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear

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<sup>2</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 85.

down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls”.<sup>3</sup> I wonder if in the hyper saturated world of queer visibility, my choices to subdue my sexual identity come a deep seated desire to fuck with the notion that queerness fits within a certain subset of visual signifiers; alternative lifestyle haircut, a smart oxford buttoned to the top, etc. etc.<sup>4</sup> Of course, I understand that my more subtle physical appearance is as much of a declaration and choice as my (also gay) brother’s donning of a “Sun’s Out I’m Out!!” T-shirt, but I wonder what wild possibilities exist between or outside of this binary of disclosure versus concealment.

Historically, the burden of disclosure around gender and or sexuality is placed on those who are anything other than straight or cis. Disclosure, or lack thereof, has and continues to be a matter of life or death for many queers, with Brandon Teena being a particularly fitting example. Disclosure as a practice has a fraught history within a queer context. Disclosure can mean outing, coming out or disclosing a status to the public, an admission that instantly others, generating difference and smoothly integrating into a very succinct and Western narrative of queer identity (see: every ‘coming out’ story in every gay movie ever). If, as queers, we are constantly attempting to re imagine what life outside of heteronormative culture looks like, why do we continue to rely on the dressed body, the socialized body, the body in space, to understand who constitutes our community as a whole? Perhaps it is because the body, itself a kind of archive, it is a site of cultural memory, where we can reference our histories, while attempting to imagine what other futures we might find.

I’ve been out for almost a decade, and still worry sometimes that “I don’t look gay enough”, a refrain I have heard echoed in many conversations with other queers. I am wont to think of the act of passing and my interest in the playing with desire signaling and dress, stems not from some idealistic longing or internalized homophobia, but rather erupts from the subversive capacity of secret languages, dialogues of subtext, and the sumptuous nature of illegibility. Can there be a kind of passing as complicit in the power structures of oppression? Have we crossed a threshold where the ability to dress outside of needing to signal some kind of sexual desire, or declare an identity, has become more radical than out, loud and proud disclosure?

Arriving at whatever moment we are in, it may be easy to fall privy to the kind of ahistorical Po-Mo babble that is common in queer theory. I’m interested in grounding this discussion in bodies, to understand how dress might help us display desire that can’t so easily be co-opted. Perhaps, as the fashion industry continues to commodify identities at a sickening rate, and we are sold landscapes of liberation through the accumulation of a very curated (and yet very homogenous) set of goods, we can learn from these tactics of subversion, exploring nuance, and imagining new ways of outfitting.

The slippery and tenuous premise of this work is multivalent, as there are very few archives, and incredibly scarce resources to draw from. The dearth of archives is indicative of various circumstances, one being that until 2003, homosexual acts such as sodomy were still considered crimes in certain parts of the United States, affecting the relationship of gay life to academia, and

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<sup>3</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

forcing much of the culture surrounding it's practice to be hidden and systematically erased. Additionally, fashion history has only recently been lauded as academic discourse deserving of its own discipline in the late 20th century. Fashion Studies' noticeably absent interest in queer aspects of fashion (until recent years, see 2013's A Queer History of Fashion exhibition at FIT), speaks to the danger of disclosure. History is replete with examples of how demarcation of queerness has been used to subjugate and eliminate queer bodies, such as the Nazi Die Rosenwinkle, the Pink Triangle patch worn by queers in concentration camps.

Have the bevy of discursive practices of queer embodiment through dress helped them escape the archive because their instability makes them so difficult to categorize? How does one archive something that is such a fraught practice in the first place? Also, does the practice of archiving, cataloging, collecting carry with it colonialist inklings of containment and capture? Does the archive liberate or capture? Perhaps these practices evade cataloging as the creators, users, and wearers of these practices saw them as something to be protected, to be held close, not to be shared with others.

Nevertheless, queers still search for historical examples of desire, parsing through time to make sense of our current selves in some historical moment, scratching at any hint of subtext. The discovery of other(s) and older queers seems to affirm that queer desires are not singular, not abnormal, and imbues a sense of 'natural' to them that disrupts the biological imperative narrative of procreation and survival of the fittest logic. In this sense, visibility seems to serve benevolent ends. Simultaneously, these ends may limit or condition expressions of queerness. One only has to step into one of the three Lesbian bars in New York City to see this played out with boring regularity; dapper butches in snapback hats, femmes in red lipstick. This idea, of modeling off a historical precedent, is closely linked to the idea of copying the masters in order to create (or be) oneself. It fits neatly within a part of the modern canon of pedagogy, from the Bauhaus school to the queer scene, continuous employed and regulated. The archive of course, perpetuates this modeling, relying on process of linearity and copying of form.

Rather than disclose, perpetuate or archive, I'm interested in how queers have used fashion to both conceal and reveal identity and proclivity, and what these practices say about queerness as a "category". In this process, every bit of information that might be added to some kind of cannon will show just how much can slip through the grasp of understanding. My hope is that these practices of queer fashion will stay active, continue to be messed with, infinitely explored and expanded upon. My hope for this project is not to make visible that which is invisible but to show the ways in which queer fashion has historically and hopefully will continue to dismantle and erode the very worlds it bridges; queer theory, fashion and identity politics to name a few. In doing so, I will haphazardly resist conclusiveness, coherent cataloguing and delve deep into calamity and confusion.

## **YOU GAY BRO?**

"Although queer theorists themselves have not for the most part pursued such a rethinking of history, tending to concentrate instead on modern (and most often, nineteenth- and twentieth-century) social and psychic formations, their work points toward the necessity of calling into question straight (teleological) narration, causal explanations and schemes of periodization. If, as queer theoretical thinking would

suggest, effects are often constructed after the fact as essences, origins, causes--with the human subject itself, for instance, being an effect of a psychic process that is retrospectively misrecognized as the cause of interiority--might the apparently stable essences of historical thinking (primitivity, modernity, the medieval) need to be reconceived not as stable entities but as stabilized effects of retrospection?"<sup>5</sup>

To understand the relationship between queer bodies and dress, it is important to situate when and how gay identity, specifically in its modern formulations, came to be understood. These narratives around gay bodies; how, when and why they show up in history, may help to understand how and when queerness became perceived as a different or 'transgressive' identity, and how this distinction was understood on or through the body and its clothed expression. As such, understanding its genesis helps us find when queers decided to mark themselves, taking forays into fashion in order to be understood or flag to others their sexual proclivities. This also presents the issue of categorization and how it affects expression and its generative mechanisms; can something exist before it is conceptualized?

Although there have been several books dedicated to the history of gay culture, which feature various excerpts, images and poems that depict and describe gay sexual acts, same sex partnerships, androgyny, and trans folks, they often seem to fall victim to generating a linear passage through time. With careful (and clumsy) consideration, the histories of gay and queer culture seems to call into question this linear trajectory of progress that favors the neat narrative of neo-liberal positivity. The invention of the category Gay, seems to be formed in the abject, against the backdrop of the creation of a truly 'modern' institution, psychiatry. Gay was understood by psychology to be antithetical to straight and was linked to gender identity. As the discipline of psychiatry evolved and became increasingly complex, the niche subworld of Sexology formed, which sought to understand and pathologize what it perceived to be the connection between sexual behaviors and psychological disorders. These concurrent disciplines help to solidify "gay" people as distinct and separate, a subset of the population and would continue to influence how gay aesthetics play out on dressed bodies.

Some of the earliest (Western) gay rights activists also used the tactic of separation to argue their case, against the criminalization of gay behavior. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a groundbreaking gay activist, gave one the first recorded public appeals for rights for non-straight people, "on the 29th of August, 1867... he plead with the Congress of German Jurists, urging them to repeal anti-homosexual laws."<sup>6</sup> Although his term for queerness, Urings, never quite caught on, its core fundamental idea, that gay traits come from gender confusion, continued to be relevant. Ulrichs "concept of gays as a separate people helped build the sense that gays were a minority group rather than a collection of individuals. This notion, picked up on by later activists, became the foundation of the gay liberation movement."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), XII.

<sup>6</sup> "Karl Heinrich Ulrichs," Making Queer History, March 13, 2018, , accessed July 30, 2018, <https://www.makingqueerhistory.com/articles/2018/3/13/karl-hinreich-ulrichs>.

<sup>7</sup> K. Jennings, *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students* (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1994), 115.

During Ulrichs lifetime “the term homosexual was invented by the Hungarian psychiatrist Benkert in 1869, and terms like pervert and invert [also] came into use.”<sup>8</sup> Although Ulrichs himself balked at the suffix of -sexual, and detested the clumsy paring of Greek and Latin within the word, it was the description that still sticks. Ulrich sought to humanize, explaining via gender confusion the spectrum of Urings; ranging from tender and sentimental towards members of the same sex, to sensual attraction, and a hybrid of these two. His aim was to humanize “the germ” which produced gay tendencies, his was an tactic appeal to empathy to sway changes in legislation. Despite his pleadings, the notion that homosexual tendencies exist under the category of sexual defects became widespread, and it was not removed from the DSM-II (the American classification of mental disorders) until 1987, more than 100 years after his public appeal.

This forming in the face of difference, or relation to the abject ushers in “the emergence of the modern gay and lesbian liberation movement [which] is rooted in the dramatic changes that swept Western society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While some historians say that gays began to develop a “group consciousness” as early as the Renaissance, it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that we begin to see gays organizing political groups.”<sup>9</sup>

As the congealment of queer identity continues through the 19th and 20th century, visibility and the body play largely into political organizing and group formation. An interesting site where visibility (and a desire for invisibility) play out is the Mattachine Society, the first gay rights groups in the United States, who took their name “from an obscure medieval fraternity of musicians who wore masks to conceal their identities when performing in public. The founders were eager to build a mass movement of homosexuals capable of militant, collective action.”<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, the group’s popularity grew around their visible activism against police entrapment of gays, a common practice of the time which involved undercover agents often soliciting gay sex acts from men they assumed to be gay, often arresting them after the sex act had taken place. This practice no doubt relied upon the dressed bodies of those involved. It would be a bend towards assimilation and respectability politics that would dismantle the group in later years, “it sponsored blood drives and other charitable activities intended to show that homosexuals were solid, patriotic citizens...This shift in priorities was costly. Membership declined precipitously, even as new chapters formed in other cities. In 1961 the society was forced to dissolve the national structure.”<sup>11</sup>

Since then, the gay rights movement has been rocked by a myriad of different approaches, paradigm shifts and challenges from the Stonewall uprisings lead by transwomen of Color and trailblazers Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who rioted against police oppression, to the tragedy of the AIDS crisis of the late 70’s. Visibility was and is one of the main tactics of both gay liberation and assimilation politics. For more radical liberatory practices, visibility can take the form of bodies in the streets, or massive social media outcry and can be seen in the most recent push back against the FOFSTA and SESTA policies that harm the safety and livelihood of sex workers, many of whom identify as queer and/or trans. For assimilationist gays (the homonormative approach) visibility takes the form of representation, in the Entertainment

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>10</sup> George E. Haggerty, *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 573.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 575.

Industry, Popular Culture and Politics, this looks like the lauding and accolades around movies such as Call Me By Your Name, a movie about coming out and coming of age which features two straight white male actors.

Looking forward to new queer horizons, how will the identities, conditions and movements of the past inform our search for liberation? Which stories, which subjectivities will we make visible? What will we remember, what will we willingly forget? As the great Lesbian poet Sappho said, "You may forget but let me tell you this: someone in some future time will think of us."

How do we make sense of the "cognitive binding of the subject to the world of its representations?" Can queer histories be wrenched from the limitations; that of gender configuration, the dialectical opposition to straightness, and its reliance on visibility? What happens if we invert the inversion in our histories?

### **DRESSING THE PART**

"There is nothing about gay people's physiognomy that declares them gay. There are, on the other hand, "signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expression, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness." Dyer describes these signs as "cultural forms [of representation] designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay."<sup>12</sup>

Identity as such is bound up in visual representation, which often takes the shape through fashion. Queers have turned to the clothed body as it presents a myriad of different devices which have been used to signal safety, build affinity and convey desire.

Using clothing to convey desire has taken many shapes, one of the most popular being appropriating the dress of the other gender, as is the case with effeminate European Marconis of the 18th century, "whose foppishness called into question contemporary ideas of masculinity."<sup>13</sup> This group of males were infamous for their effete style and were featured in many cartoons during the 1760s and 1770s, the pasta allusion was a nod to the "stereotype of sodomy in Italy". A cartoon of the time describes the sexually ambiguity in explicit terms, "Is it a man? 'Tis hard to say - / A woman then? - A moment pray ... Unknown as yet by sex or feature, / It moves - a mere amphibious creature."<sup>14</sup>

Additionally the clothed body has signaled safety through codes such as the pinky ring. Identifying with the visual signifier of another queer body proves that you are not alone, imbuing a sense of safety through the safety in numbers paradigm. Travelling across the country, visiting small towns full of American Flags and Republican bumper stickers, I myself have found solace in the upside down pink triangle affixed to the jean vest of a stranger, an ode to the iconic

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa Walker, *Looking like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001) 9.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New York City: Museum at FIT, 2013), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Silence=Death logo created by the queer activist group ACT UP in NYC in the 1980's, drawing public attention to the AIDS crisis that was beginning to spread through Urban Centers throughout the world.

As the visible cohesion of identity is often how a group or category is understood, it helps individuals to form a sense of belonging. An notable example could be a ring of keys worn on the waistband for queer women. Originally used by working class men as a matter of convenience, it is now somewhat solidified in queer fashion Lexicon as a signal for queer woman and particularly butches. Most recently, this example was the main refrain in a number from the musical 2015 Tony winning play *Fun Home*, which based on the coming of age graphic novel by lesbian comic extraordinaire Alison Bechdel. The lyrics detail an encounter where a young Alison sees a old school Butch, and instantly feels affinity; “Your swagger and your bearing / And the just right clothes you're wearing / Your short hair and your dungarees / And your lace up boots / And your keys, oh / Your ring of keys.” It is the clothed body that imbues Alison with a sense of awe and belonging, she sings “I think we're alike in a certain way... I know you / I know you.”<sup>15</sup> This moment, of seeing an elder reflect an identity through dress, and the surge of reassurance is a cornerstone of the queer youth narrative in Western culture. It's been a topic of conversation in my circles, and I have a crystal clear memory of one of my Mom's coworkers Sharon, whose “swagger” in her suits, cropped haircut and artsy glasses as on of my first moments of recognition of butch queer realness. That visibility and the dressed body would be a cataclysmic moment for young queers speaks to the affective power of fashion, to demonstrative possibilities outside of societal expectations of normative expressions of dress. In a culture so strongly situated in visual representation, recognition comes in the form of the image, a potentiality expressed through lived experience. Perhaps, in another form of queer futurity which can have a different kind of discursive politics and fashion, one without shame and disappointment, but also understanding moments as this as having value and importance in their time and place.

In these ways, among many others, queer fashion challenges as well as reaffirms practices of identity construction, as well as identity politics as they are understood through performances of power in fashion. Small gestures, such a pinky ring, show how minute changes in dress and discretion can function as an aversion of danger.

In this way, the body functions as a site (a la Gloria Anzaldua), a site where queerness is both acknowledged or concealed, as well as a site onto which queer desire is both reflected, transmitted and absorbed. Within this body as site configuration, we can elucidate the ways that power is imbued in what we make visible and what we choose to keep invisible. When something is made visible, such as sexual proclivities, it is always about reception of the public, a revealing of some inner ‘truth’, a disclosure seeking legibility. Fashioning can exist on multiple levels of “visibility” or knowing, an archive that is both visceral and topical but also just below the surface. If our fashion choices are assumed to reveal deep inner truths, then the practice of fashioning self reveals the archives ability to represent that which you cannot speak. This relates to this process of identity translation and the process of making it physically known on the body.

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Hetrick, "Why 'Ring of Keys' Was the One Song *Fun Home*'s Creator Didn't Want to Write," Playbill, January 25, 2016, , accessed July 29, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/why-ring-of-keys-was-the-one-song-fun-homes-creator-didnt-want-to-write>.

Conversely, with the invisible, or the undisclosed, there is a refusal to translate. Here is the distinction between public and private, the self and the other. Within this refusal is an element of discretion, which might be understood here a “power that masquerades as politeness.”<sup>16</sup>

As fashion is a vehicle through which the power of discretion is yielded, we might consider its linkages to the creation of the concept of individuality and indeed the project of modernity itself. Of course, bound up in this is the advent of capitalism, and its extreme form of individuation would help to produce current conceptions of ‘the individual’ from its onset.<sup>17</sup> “Trilling and Elias independently designate the 16th century as the origins of the modern conceptualization of the self...the emergence of the psychologistic individual designates the hallmark of modernity. This type of individual appears when the playing out of roles and the donning of social masks has come to be considered the best way of both engaging others and satisfying one’s private desires.”<sup>18</sup>

If the self is invented, if it has been made, is it always made in series of fragments, bits from the archive? Is this archive less of a reliquary, more of a collage of bits of identities and constructions of selves, constantly being expanded and cleaned out, a bit like a closet?

The practice of encoding meaning (or identity) onto or into bodies is itself the process of fashion. With fashion, all trends repeat, and there is no ‘new,’ every item of clothing references a style, a period, another item of clothing. In this way, fashion functions as a self selected historiography, we wear histories when we wear clothes, and are actively engaged in the process of making and building our own histories through this storytelling. In this process, we make choices, deciding what parts of ourselves, and our identities we choose to disclose and conceal. This telling of history through the act of getting dressed, each item a compounding of all other garments that have come before, works as the archive does, in the temporal, ordering our sense of self and world. Fashion might be understood as the archive that speaks for us. Simultaneously, this archive also speaks to a particular conundrum of fashion, where the illusion of individual choice often upholds societal norms, or is very quickly subsumed into the fold.

Just as attempts at the historiography of “gay” fail neat categorization, it is similarly problematic to try and typify the relationship between dress and sexuality. In spite of this, queer expression of dress continues to manifest itself in the public imaginary, “although the sheer diversity of gender and sex variant people over time makes it hazardous to assert any single queer style at a given moment, there have been a number of identifiably queer fashion trends.”<sup>19</sup> Often times, looking back, historians and queer scholars who desire ancient forms of queerness might also generate narratives that look like our current conception of gay identity. This, in effect, flattens even erasing the bevy of expressions, types of gender variance and sexual proclivities that existed before Foucault said we did. In our desirous gaze, we might create space for new narratives to emerge out of the space between the historical structures, hopefully dismantling our current concepts of identity as it relates to sexual preference and “deviance”. Queer historiography might

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<sup>16</sup> L. Cohen, "VELVET IS VERY IMPORTANT": Madge Garland and the Work of Fashion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 3 (2005): 352, doi:10.1215/10642684-11-3-371.

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Somerset: Wiley, 2013), 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Haggerty, *Gay Histories and Cultures*, 379.

“aim to show how history is constructed according to present-day concerns as much as past ones; ... looking at the evidence behind different perspectives in lesbian history and think[ing] about the theoretical and political standpoints on which our history is based.”<sup>20</sup> Even the mention of “our history” is assumptive first of a singular, shared history. These issues continue to plague the queer communities that exist today. One could argue that amidst the assimilationist backdrop of mainstream Gay culture, “our history” often gets used to frame and center white cis Gay male voices, such as 2018’s controversy over the addition of brown and black stripes to the Pride flag, representing the role people of color have played in the struggle for queer liberation by Philadelphia based artist Amber Hikes. The redesign of the flag was met with the egregious and racist uproar, such as the suggestion that it was racist to not include a white stripe. When counternarratives appear to challenge the hegemony of history there is often backlash from those who benefit from the visibility of the dominant paradigm.

It is my hope that “queer historiography [should be] less a reintroduction of “queers” into the subject of history than an interrogation of the historical project itself, whereby the linearity of those master narratives producing the ominously intelligible discourse of power is replaced by the historical performance of the unstable, the approximate, the discontinuous, the fractured.”<sup>21</sup> If modernity creates the identity of queerness, what happens when modernity’s supposed stability is questioned?

“One’s sexual style mobilizes the pleasure and the fear of non-sovereignty without dissipating, being out of control, or resolving it into a satisfying form. Sexual style involves practices that entrain, that pull oneself along, run across rhythm and form. If it seeks solution, the resolution in form also involves solution’s other sense, the loosening of the bonds of matter.”<sup>22</sup>

In this new terrain of Queer historiography, perhaps fashion, which has been thought of by many as a tool of oppression, might be galvanized as a tool for liberation in a truly incredible reversal.

### **No end and no beginning**

It remains as important as ever to question modes of visibility and what their effects will be in the future. As we know, “the fashion and style industry's courting of queer consumers should not be construed as evidence of the widespread acceptance of queerness: queer dollars are sought while queer lives, demands, and politics routinely go unacknowledged.”<sup>23</sup> The struggle for liberation continues to be wrapped up in the perception and aesthetics of bodies, as exemplified in the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, which demanded the following: “an end to discrimination and violent oppression based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, identification, race, religion, identity, sex and gender expression, disability, age, class, AIDS/HIV infection.”<sup>24</sup> This puts the question of liberation directly onto the body further marking it as the primary site where one can perceive or understand various aspects of what might be called a queer experience; sexual desire, diseased or healthy bodies,

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<sup>20</sup> Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook Love and Sex Between Women in Britain from 1780-1970* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Burger and Kruger, *Queering the Middle Ages*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Lauren Gail Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Haggerty, *Gay Histories and Cultures*, 375.

<sup>24</sup> Jennings, *Becoming Visible*, 155.

gendered bodies and also adds to these the identifications race, age and class, which intersect constantly with queerness.

Dress plays a crucial role as it is the mechanism by which many of these factors, most specifically; sexual desire, gender and class are to be understood. The rising rate of murders of Black and POC Trans women attests to the dangers of upsetting societal norms of gender presentation as they pertain to dress, especially when paired with the violent combination of transphobia, misogyny and racism. A recent study by Policy Mic showed that rate of murder for Black Trans Women is 1 in 2,600 while the rate of murder for the rest of America is 1 in 19,000.<sup>25</sup> “The potentially dire, even life-threatening, consequences of such transgressions mean that the myriad stylizations composing queer fashionability have often represented perilous and profound political acts. Queers have used clothing and other elements of personal style to communicate sexual tastes and gender styles; to reform, augment, or minimize various parts of the body; to produce or heighten sexual desirability; and to visualize potentially invisible (and hide potentially visible) sexual and gender identities.”<sup>26</sup> Transgressions of bodily presentation by queers inherently question the stability of history that affirms certain truths to be self-evident; straightness as natural, gender and sex as bound together, etc. These dichotomies; between visible and invisible and modern and pre-modern, mirror each other in that each one is always determined in its negation.

Fashion, as a system, relies on spectatorship, participation and adherence as much as it does on concealing, codes and transgression. It is, if nothing else a constant dance of and around visibility. As such, it's a practice of how visibility relies on assimilation, even violence, for understanding. Is aesthetics the place where power is consolidated? Can it also be the place of powers fracturing?

I glance down at my small pinky ring, realizing it's been clanking away as I type question after question after question. I consider again my interaction with the leather dyke, my interest queer fashion and as always, am left with wondering what comes next, or what to do now. I think of my friends, my queer family, the vibrant mix of discursive bodies and wild undiscovered identities that strut through this city everyday. What once was a quiet symbol of liberation, a small piece of jewelry demarcating possible safety and illegal desire, was co opted, commodified, contained in a neat narrative, flattened into a trend only to be shuffled away by the vicious superficiality of late stage capitalism. How do we, as young queers trying to disrupt these systems, dismantle the idea that liberation comes from visibility? I think we have already started. We've started by wearing what we want, when we want, and telling the public, not asking, that they can make no assumptions about us from our dressed bodies. We've taken the logic of consent culture, that you need to ask before touching, doing or assuming anything, and applied it to the way society attempts to control, condition and make sense of us. There are countless stories of how we have come to understand liberatory movements through dress; our mom's burned their bras, our grandmothers wore work suits during the World War II, but perhaps we are shifting this tired narrative of progress. We are looking not be seen as one thing, but instead to seen as a million things. We are trying to fracture the architecture of assumptions that links

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<sup>25</sup> Mic, "Unerased: Mic's Database of Trans Lives Lost to Homicide in the US," Mic, December 07, 2016, , accessed July 29, 2018, <https://mic.com/unerased>.

<sup>26</sup> Haggerty, *Gay Histories and Cultures*, 375.

our private lives with our public bodies. The Slut Walk, a public event asks people to come out, dressed however they like, to reclaim public space and reclaim the word slut from its gendered and negative connotation is just one joyous example of this. Yes, it's visible, yes it's about bodies being clothed or not, but it's also a dismissal of respectability politics and a reclamation of our bodies as ours, and our narratives as ours to write, a radical break with the subject from its world of representations:

As Lauren Berlant discusses in *Sex or the Unbearable*;

“Managing affective intensities by recognizing their status as part of the ordinary puts the emphasis on a cognitive binding of the subject to the world of its representations--the very binding under pressure of undoing in the encounters to which i refer...At the same time obviating the subject's experience of threat, it displaces the threat of undoing onto the subject of dramatized “seeing,” a subject still defensively invested in the continuity of its representations precisely insofar as its incoherence is stabilized by being seen as ordinary—a stabilization whose reassurance can look like what social norms afford.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 65.

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