

By Laura Dunn

Lesbians With *Feminine Charm*

It was a Wednesday night. Drinks were cheap and the Gaga was loud at Propaganda, our gay haunt of choice. Needing a break from dancing, two friends and I headed to the entrance where we saw the bouncer turning away a gaggle of young women. They were refused entry on the grounds that the bar was “members only,” but as this was the first we’d heard of this policy, we suspected the real reason was more to do with their high heels, straightened hair and copious lipstick: they didn’t look ‘gay’.

Displaying all of our typical concern for others, we immediately thought about what the question of “looking gay” meant for us. As it happened, pretty much all the women in our group were very femme. This meant that we only got into the bar every week because we had been there the week before, and the week before that -- no one would read us as queer women unless they already knew us.

And this brings me to what has been on my mind ever since: femme invisibility.

Invisibility is often overlooked as a problem for queer individuals because sometimes we have to embrace it to avoid comments, stares, or violence. When the assumption of ‘straightness’ happens even in a specifically gay space, it grates. In my experience, this is a problem that mainly affects feminine-looking women; in the absence of overwhelming plaid button-down or an “alternative lifestyle” haircut, a queer femme’s identity is almost never acknowledged. This is a problem of the community.

The process of identifying as queer can be an isolating process – faced with families that may cut us off and a mainstream society that often ignores or actively works against us, the LGBTQ community becomes essential for many people. When you are excluded from this, however unintentionally, it matters.

It matters because we are deliberately defining ourselves apart from straight society. Who’s in and who’s out of this space is vital for group and personal identity, and people on both sides work to keep it exclusive. This means that anyone who doesn’t “look gay” constantly has to come out - to both straight and LGBTQ worlds.

This can be in situations as basic as getting appropriate health care (yes, I am sexually active, but no, I don’t need to hear about how to prevent pregnancy) and receiving welfare (a friend once resorted to screaming “I’M A LESBLIAN!” in a council office, after they repeatedly refused to believe that she and her male housemate were not a couple). And of course, it also happens in designated queer spaces: in bars and in clubs. And it’s there that it hurts the most, because out of everyone, these people should get it.

These people should be in my corner.

That Wednesday in the bar, my friend ended up stealing the “Members Only” sign and displayed it proudly on her wall ever after as a small symbol of resistance. If we want to break down stereotypes, we need to start with ourselves.

