

# NEURODIVERGENT, QUEER AND/OR TRANS, FEMME: CAN “NEUROFEMME” BE (MORE THAN) THEORY?

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on femme, neuroqueer, and neurotrans scholarship, as well as disability studies academic and disability justice activist literature, I explore political and subcultural possibilities that could be generated when queer and/or trans neurodivergent femmes—or “neurofemme”—positionality/positionalities are foregrounded as an epistemic, methodological, ethical, political, and sub/cultural necessity. Imbued with an anti-ableist, anti-sanist, anti-disablist, anti-caste, and anti-racist sense of equity—both structurally and in the everyday innermost spaces and realms—this article is a hopeful exercise in imagining the journey of “neurofemme” as a structural positionality as well as a political identity that can forge critical solidarities with variously oppressed femmes as well as historically excluded trans and/or queer people. “Neurofemme” recognizes that trans and/or queer femmes—whose homogeneity is actively sought by capitalist homonormative and transformative technologies of power—are also neurodivergent and that LGBT exceptionalism demands compulsory neurotypicality and relentless performance of neuronormativity. Neurofemme theory, by challenging sanist, ableist, and disablist demands placed on the bodyminds of variously marginalized neurofemmes, imagines equitable possibilities while wondering what political and sub/cultural effects and affects “neurofemme” could occasion and how neurofemme lives can be supported when the term is uttered with political and sub/cultural intentionality.

## KEYWORDS

Femme; Queer; Trans; Neurodivergent; Neurofemme.

## *NEURODIVERGENT, QUEER E/OU TRANS, FEMME: PODE “NEUROFEMME” SER (MAIS QUE) TEORIA?*

## RESUMO

Este artigo parte dos estudos de femme, neuroqueer e neurotrans, bem como estudos de deficiência acadêmicos e ativistas de justiça da deficiência, explorando as possibilidades políticas e de uma sub-cultura da deficiência geradas quando posicionalidades queer feminas, trans e neurodivergentes — que agrupo sobre a categoria “neurofemme” são uma demanda epistemológica, metodológica e ética, política e sub-cultural. É um exercício esperançoso para imaginar uma jornada “neurofemme” como posicionalidade estrutural, bem como enquanto identidade política que pode forjar solidariedades críticas com mulheres diversamente oprimidas, assim como pessoas trans e/ou queer historicamente excluídas. Está imbuído por um senso de equidade anti-capacitista, não neuronormativo, anti-classista e também anti-racista — que se expressa tanto estruturalmente como nos espaços mais íntimos do cotidiano. “Neurofemme” reconhece que mulheres trans e/ou queer — cuja homogeneidade é ativamente procurada pelas tecnologias capitalistas homonormativas e transformadoras do poder — também são neurodivergentes e que o excepcionalismo LGBT implica neurotipicidade obrigatória e um desempenho incansável da neuronormatividade. A teoria “Neurofemme”, ao desafiar às convenções de corponormativas e neurotípicas que marginalizam a feminilidade de forma interseccionada, imagina possibilidades equitativas. Ao mesmo tempo interroga os efeitos políticos e subculturais que afetam as

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“neurofemme” e como suas vidas podem ser apoiadas quando o termo é pronunciado com uma intencionalidade político-cultural.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

*Femme; Queer; Trans; Neurodivergente; Neurofemme.*

### *NEURODIVERGENT, QUEER ET/OU TRANS, FEMME : « NEUROFEMME » PEUT-ELLE ÊTRE (PLUS QUE) UNE THÉORIE?*

## RÉSUMÉ

En m'appuyant sur la bourse de femme, de neuroqueer et de neurotrans, ainsi que sur les études universitaires sur les handicaps et la littérature des activistes de la justice pour les handicapés, j'explore les possibilités politiques et subculturelles qui pourraient être générées lorsque la positionnalité ou les positionnalités des femmes queer et/ou trans neurodivergentes — ou « neurofemmes » — sont mises au premier plan comme une nécessité épistémologique, méthodologique, éthique, politique et sous-culturelle. Imprégné d'un sens de l'équité anti-capacitiste, artisaniste, antihandicapiste, anticaste et antiraciste — à la fois structurellement et dans les espaces et domaines les plus profonds de la vie quotidienne — cet article est un exercice chargé d'espoir pour imaginer le voyage de la “neurofemme” comme une positionnalité structurelle ainsi qu'une identité politique qui peut forger des solidarités critiques avec les femmes opprimées de diverses manières ainsi que les personnes trans et/ou queer historiquement exclues. “Neurofemme” reconnaît que les femmes trans et/ou queer — dont l'homogénéité est activement recherchée par les technologies capitalistes homonormatives et transformatrices du pouvoir — sont également neurodivergentes et que l'exceptionnalisme LGBT exige une neurotypicité obligatoire et une performance implacable de la neuronormativité. La théorie Neurofemme, en défiant les exigences saniste, capacitiste et handicapiste placées sur les représentations mentales de neurofemmes diversement marginalisés, imagine des possibilités équitables tout en se demandant quels sont les effets et affects politiques et sous-culturels que «neurofemme» pourrait provoquer et comment les vies de neurofemmes peuvent être soutenues lorsque le terme est prononcé avec une intentionnalité politique et subculturelle.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Femme; Queer; Trans; Neurodivergente; Neurofemme.*

### *NEURODIVERGENTE, QUEER Y/O TRANS, FEMME: ¿PUEDE “NEUROFEMME” SER (MÁS QUE) TEORÍA?*

## RESUMEN

Basándose en la investigación sobre la mujer, lo neuroqueer y lo neurotrans, así como en los estudios de la discapacidad y la literatura de activistas de la justicia de la discapacidad, exploro las posibilidades políticas y subculturales que se podrían generar cuando las posicionalidades/posiciones de las mujeres queer y/o trans neurodivergentes—o “neuromujer”—están anteceditas como una necesidad epistemológica, metodológico, ético, político y sub-cultural. Imbuido de un sentido de igualdad anti-ableista, anti-sanista, antidisablista, anticasta y anti-racista, tanto estructuralmente como en los espacios y reinos más interiores de la vida cotidiana, este artículo es un ejercicio esperanzador para imaginar el viaje de la “neuromujer” como una posicionalidad estructural, así como una identidad política que puede forjar solidaridades críticas con mujeres oprimidas de diversas maneras así como con personas transexuales y/o queer históricamente excluidas. “Neuromujer” reconoce que las mujeres transexuales y/o queer, cuya homogeneidad es buscada activamente por las tecnologías capitalistas homonormativas y transformadoras del poder, también son neurodivergentes y que el excepcionalismo LGBT exige una neurotipicidad obligatoria y un desempeño implacable de la neuronormatividad. La teoría Neuromujer, al desafiar las exigencias sanistas, ableistas y disablistas colocadas en los cuerpos-mentes de neuromujeres diversamente marginadas, imagina posibilidades equitativas mientras se pregunta qué efectos políticos y subculturales y que afectan a la “neuromujer” podrían ocasionar y cómo las

vidas la neuromujer pueden ser respaldadas cuando el término se pronuncia con intencionalidad política o subcultural.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

**Mujer; Queer; Trans; Neurodivergente; Neuromujer.**

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, femme scholar Rhea Ashley Hoskin published a critical essay in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* entitled, “Can femme be theory? Exploring the epistemological and methodological possibilities of femme” (HOSKIN, 2019; 2021). The article made me think about world-expanding neurodivergent potentiality of femme, what it could call forth, what it could provide femme theory and neuroqueer and neurotrans lifeworlds, activism, ethical commitments, as well as what epistemologies and methodologies could emanate from it. Femme was historically conceived of as a role or relationality—legible only by association—rather than a consolidated legitimized form of subcultural identification before the twentieth century. Faderman mentions “nontransvestite” to refer to women whose gender expression and presentation did not threaten normative gender norms and roles, by virtue of which they enjoyed “great latitude” in the affection they could show other women in the garb of homosociality (as long as discretion was exercised and caution was observed), whereas (to use the outdated and diminishing term which reflects the paucity of imagination and language at the time) “transvestite” women who dressed like and/or passed as men (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 17), were subjected to greater scrutiny (as far back as in the thirteenth century in Europe), and their relationships with women were always already rendered suspect (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 50). In contemporary imagination, “butch” and “femme” have subcultural endorsement that cannot be transhistorically applied to make sense of experiences of queerness and/or trans livabilities that precede these terms by many eventful centuries. “Nontransvestite” women—similar to contemporary “femmes” were not perceived as authentic “queer” subjects and were also not predominantly figured as the most deserving subject of overt vilification and punishment, and perhaps come closest to twentieth century conceptualizations of “femme”—if we are to borrow from Faderman. Ironically, it is the invisibilization of these women that facilitated the association of queerness with the subversion of gender norms and roles, even if they themselves were not widely credited with subverting both—as is true for contemporary “femme” identities and subcultural experiences (EVES, 2004, p. 494–495). Without placing disproportionate premium on visibility and invisibility, it is important to note that in/visibility can create lifeworlds with particular specificities, producing dangers and excesses by stabilizing the political category of the “normal”, and hence need to be attended to for the quotidian functions they have historically performed in queer and/or trans lives. When neurotypicality or neuronormativity came to be associated with gender and sexual conceptualization of the “normal” as also “heterosexual”, madness was associated with queerness (particularly, with a kind of queerness that could be rendered hypervisible). Chastity was associated with health,

and a flourishing sex life even within a heteronormative marriage was seen as having the potential to cause disease and debility to both men and women (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 159). Moreover, in the late nineteenth century in the United States, around 1896, the lesbian was codified as inherently masculine by a physician named Alan McLane. If such a description of the lesbian proved to be inadequate, her madness was substantiated by the assumption that she was living with a pelvic disorder, “with scanty menstruation”, and she was recast as “more or less hysterical or insane” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 155). The stench of abnormality and insanity has been associated with “lesbians” who have, at various times in history, been figured as sick, perverse, and afflicted with a “mental malady” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 195). Lesbians embodying “germs of inversion”—those who subverted not just sexual norms but also gendered codes of sexual-social-romantic conduct—when affiliated with the women’s movement in the nineteenth century, could also propagate “hereditary neurosis” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 242). The masculine woman, or the “abnormal” lesbian, it was assumed, has the “normal” woman in her sexual trap and the latter is in the need of being rescued (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 192). The feminine queer woman was consciously read as someone who needed to be saved by both heteronormativity and insanity to be honored with a redeemable sexual future. She was thought to have been born out of the “ills of feminism” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 247) and hence could not match the depravity of the “true invert” or masculine lesbians and queer women whose queerness was diagnosed to have been born out of mental as well as physical “abnormalities”. Even as the women’s movement was perversely credited with the unmitigated power to make lesbians out of heterosexual women, the “true invert”, or the authentic lesbian embodying depravity, could be identified through family history of “neurosis”, inversion, nervous disease, eccentricity, violence, and “transvestism” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 242). Such narratives of queerness as affliction were validated by the work of sexologists. They identified “retarded inversion” in 1898, determining that queer desire subverting heteronormative monogamy was quintessentially “neurotic”. Moreover, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, European popular literature, influenced largely by sexologists, was referring to queers as “thousands of unhappy beings” experiencing “the tragedy of inversion in their lives,” and living out passions which “end in madness or suicide”, and as such, in popular imagination of the time, love shared between women was connected with “disease, insanity, and tragedy” (FADERMAN, 1981, p. 252). To challenge the association of abnormality with lesbians or queer people (who could also have been trans), often assimilationist ableist and sanist routes were and have been taken by lesbians and lesbian movements—which inadvertently excluded disabled and neurodivergent women who could neither claim health nor sanity. Chastity and sanity were strategic necessities for upholding middle-class positionalities as well as whiteness, and therefore lesbians perceived to be “insane” for committing sexual subversion and gender

dissidence were often punished and executed for threatening intertwined class and racial privileges. Ironically, feminine queer women who were often not subjected to extraordinary violence, could be written off as inauthentic because being legitimately queer meant being subjected or suspectable to routinized and/or extraordinary violence. However, obscurity shrouding the lives of feminine or femme-inine (or femme-adjacent) queer women produced complexities in the past as well as in the twentieth century in North America when “femme” manifested, revealing not only cultural but also subcultural alienation and experiences of marginalization. It is widely known that femme emerged in the working-class lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. Black “femme queens”—who “fracture the racially homogenized category of transgender” (OMNI, 2023, p. 17)—initiated the ballroom scene in Harlem, embodied vogue femme-ininity, and are alive to this day but erased from dominant scholarship (OMNI, 2023, p. 17). Black trans femmes also significantly contributed to the solidification of femme in the 1960s through to the 80s in North America. However, remnants of the past seemed to linger in this era as the authenticity of femme queerness and transness was brought into question within both queer and drag spaces. Considering femme scholarship leans heavily towards cis femmes, femme lesbians have been far better represented than Black trans femme queens of Harlem whose time-honored claims to femme-ininity have not been similarly legitimized and Black trans femme elders are considered all but dead (OMNI, 2023). Acknowledging this limitation, I will try to trace a history that I recognize is perhaps insufficient.

When queer femmes became active in the lesbian bar scene, they were treated with misogynistic contempt while also being eroticized—which reflected the assertion of sexologists that “femininity” should be read as inherently weak and hysterically unstable (STAFFORD, 2010, p. 90), and perhaps even deserving of contempt. Femmes were also taken up as those not fully committed to counter-cultural life (STAFFORD, 2010, p. 86)—representing conformity rather than resistance. Enactment and validation of resistance was subcultural capital femmes were assumed to lack. However, despite not being credited with subversion, femmes were resisting classist and heterosexist conceptions of respectability in the 1950s in the United States, and were also developing a queer femme-inine working class consciousness at meaning-making sites that were lesbian bars. Soon after, however, as “femme” exceeded working-class identificatory realms, femme roles began to be rejected by middle-class lesbians who favored adopting “a mode of behaviour and dress acceptable to society” (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 185)—seeking acceptability through respectability politics. In the 1970s, during the second wave of the feminist movement in the US, “femme” remained wanting in subcultural legitimacy, particularly among middle-class lesbians who preferred an androgynous appearance, and both butches and femmes were subjected to the accusation that they were merely emulating heteronormative gender roles (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 185;

VANNEWKIRK, 2006). However, butch and femme roles—often understood in binary opposition—resurfaced in the 1980s and 1990s in the US primarily among young, urban, middle- and upper-class lesbians (SMITH; STILLMAN, 2002, p. 46). “Femme” was attributed to feminine-appearing queer women or lesbians, and when its dissident potential was recognized, “femme emerged from a desire to expand options for feminist action” (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 184). In the 80s when butch and femme came to be asserted despite the lesbian feminist movements’ demand for androgyny (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 185), the butch came to signify the “visible”, the “public” and the “political”, whereas the femme was associated with “weakness”, “passivity”, “complicity” when faced with oppression, and hence “invisible”, “private”, and “passing as both straight” and a “dyke” (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 187). The femme was a figure seen with much suspicion, perceived as embodying the potential to enact betrayal by having sex with men, and was predominantly considered a tourist lesbian on sapphic vacation from patriarchy (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 187). From the late 1980s and since the early 1990s, femme alienation started being brought to the fore, femmephobic assumptions began to be challenged (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 187), and a desire for femmes to have a prominent place within contemporary feminist politics (GALEWSKI, 2005, p. 189) was asserted. That femmes were thought to be only lovers to butches and seen as passive and receptive with regards to sexual behaviours (WALKER *et al.* 2012) gradually began to be resisted by femmes themselves. Myths around femmes being “bottoms” and butches being “top” were challenged in a study which noted that the “majority of women considered themselves “active” as opposed to “passive” regardless of their self-determined gender or subcultural identity (WALKER *et al.* 2012, p. 104).

Femme scholarship has stressed on the critical need to resist homogeneous and monolithic representation of femininities (WALKER, 2012) and identifies “femme” with the “risk of being misread as an imitation of heteronorms” (SHOEMAKER, 2007, p. 325). Stacy Wolf thinks of “femme” as an “identity, an identification, a performance, a practice or a description of a feminine lesbian. A single term that includes both gender and sexuality, ‘femme’ can be used as a noun or an adjective” (SHOEMAKER, 2007, p. 323). Femme studies has predominantly focused on white, non-disabled, neurotypical, cisgender, queer women and its many exclusions have been laid bare by femme scholars which will subsequently be discussed. “Femme” has primarily been conceived of through complexities of invisibility and galvanizing sub/cultural responses to being understood as unregulated and available for consumption by the heteropatriarchal gaze (SCOTT, 2021, p. 42) as well as gatekeeping of femme-ininity within queer spaces (SCOTT, 2021, p. 42). It has been understood as a “non-fixed performative gendered practice or (re)learned mode of relating to fe(me)mininity” (SCOTT, 2021, p. 43). Femme studies have recognized multiple modes of being femme which exceed cisgender, heteronormative queer femininities. While this article makes a discursive

distinction between femininities and femme-ininities to signal femme expressivity and lifemaking, my intention is to not make this distinction sharper in an oppositional way to make the latter more resistant than the former. I hope this article initiates necessary sub/cultural conversations on multiplicity of neurofemme affects and the worlds that are carved in response to such affective worlding(s).

“Femme” entails the expectation that one must engage with, and “consciously negotiate their place within, interlocking systems of oppression” (SCOTT, 2021, p. 43). I am curious about neurofemme lives beyond negotiations that frequently take place on sanist, neuronormative, ableist and disablist terms, and hope to dream about through this paper, what happens when those terms of negotiations are derogated—giving way to what must erupt in its wake. In this article, led by curiosity, I explore how femme negotiations are articulated and received especially when femmes are discomfited by dominant sub/cultural assumptions, demands, and expectations associated with “femme”. This article is speculative, an exercise in thinking aloud, imagining the possibilities of femme that exceed designation and explores its catalyzing powers, and is invested in recognizing lifeworlds and worldmaking that femme-ininity constitutes, builds, nurtures, disrupts, and makes anew through every un/intentional act femmes materialize by moving through the world and resisting it. As Dahl notes, at a time when the “feminization of migration, labour, poverty, sexual trauma, and commodity culture” make everyday news, femininity needs to be understood in a way that does not reduce it to a subjugated positionality only relevant because of its cultural subservience to masculinity (DAHL, 2012, p. 62). To explore labyrinthine worlds in which our complex needs and audacious hopes are enmeshed is to remain curious about how we might move beyond what the injustice of subordination reveal when subordination is no longer viewed as the exclusive epistemic route through which femme-inine demands for quotidian equity and revolutionary care might be understood. There is more to our stories. This article initiates possibilities of such exploration with the acknowledgement that even though political praxes of femmes have barely been recognized as critical, revolutionary, imaginative and audacious, femmes have—and continue to—challenge through performance and anti-respectability politics settler colonialism, imperialism, assimilation, national liberal LGBT movements that comply with immigration laws, racism, and war (DAHL, 2014, p. 615–617). Femme theory also posits that femmes challenge the boundaries of proper womanhood, as femininity is (re)claimed variously by those who were, and still are, being excluded from normative femininity—including normative femme-ininity—such as women of colour, Black and indigenous women, fat women, trans women, disabled women. Femme scholars have attempted to expand “femme” to include forms of femininity that do not conform to a middle-class white ideal (BLAIR; HOSKIN, 2016; BRIGHTWELL; TAYLOR, 2021). Femme serves as the “site of contradiction” and seeks to be understood as queerly agential, despite its



indefinability (MCCANN, 2018, p. 115). Drawing on theorization of femme-ininities, femme theory, as also neuroqueer and neurotrans scholarship, disability studies and disability justice activist literature (put in conversation with one another) by neurodivergent and/or disabled femmes, primarily developed in North America and Europe, I ask if “neurofemme” can be (more than) theory. In various worlds where femininity is associated with hetero/homonormativity, neuronormativity, ablednormativity, cishnormativity, “femme” is often inconceivable without the trappings of normativity because femme affective and reproductive labour is expected to service neuronormative capitalism as well as homonormative domesticity in times of LGBTQ exceptionalism and inclusion in much of Europe and North America. “Compulsory heterosexuality” (RICH, 1980) has been replaced by not just “compulsory able-bodiedness” (MCRUER, 2006) but also compulsory neurotypicality/neuronormativity which invites punishable, marginalizing, alienating, stigmatizing femme failures, and it refuses to support “neurofemmes” in all their world-altering complexities. Femme scholars have placed emphasis on the need for feminine failures as a critical counterdiscourse which “creates space for alternate femininities and, consequently, challenges the normative, racialized, and ableist (re)production of patriarchal notions of femininity” (HOSKIN; TAYLOR, 2019, p. 284). Neurofemme similarly affirms equitable sub/cultural possibilities that femme-inine failures can generate while also recognizing dangers that failure of supports and critical resources can produce in the lives of neurofemmes whose existence can only be validated if they perform neuronormativity in a world that demands to perceive femmes as nothing but neurotypical and non-disabled, and forge relationalities with them on neuronormative, sanist, ableist terms which reinforce both sanism as well as disablism. The perception of femme-inine failure is a neurofemme accomplishment. By recognizing how the perception of feminine/femme-inine failure exposes limits of how femme-ininities can be received, neurofemmes’ “embodiminded” (ACEVEDO, 2020) difference enact multiple modes of becoming trans, queer, femme-inine, and neurodivergent, and is hence always brimming with “crip negative” (SMILGES, 2023) possibilities of inhabiting, and transforming, the once uninhabitable. “Femmes’ self-actualized ‘failed’ femininities promote feminine growth and unhinge the inner-workings of cultural sexual qualification” (HOSKIN; TAYLOR, 2019, p. 294), revealing how femmephobia renders femininities homogenous and coherent, towards the creation of a monolithic feminine ideology (HOSKIN, 2017, p. 101). To affirm the political and subcultural potential of failed femme-ininities—and to recognize the abjection of neurofemmes as a form of neuronormative injustice and inequity—commitment to intersectionality as an effort towards epistemic justice cannot but waver. I remain curious about how “neurofemme” exists in different contexts, even if it is not known by this identificatory term or the ones that it is derived from that are more pronounced in Euro-American contexts because of a longer

history of academic, subcultural, as well as activist recognition and legibility. I wonder if “neurofemme” can travel and form academic and activist alliances with “femme”, “neuroqueer”, and “neurotrans” academic, advocacy, and activist practices and imaginings beyond North American and European contexts, in various political and critical realms in the majority world. This article inaugurates a conversation instead of dictating its evolution or its cultural mores and political possibilities. Since intersecting modes of oppression proliferate in the form of racism, transphobia, fatphobia, colonialism, homophobia, ableism, and classism alongside femmephobia (HOSKIN, 2017, p. 105), to identify modes of anti-neurofemme abjection and injustice requires attention to how multiply marginalized trans, caste-oppressed Dalit, Bahujan, working class, Black, racialized, indigenous, disabled neurofemmes are made to feel unworthy of resources, attention, access, histories and legacies of resistance and striving and being, language, care, and material supports—structurally, institutionally, sub/culturally in the majority world as well as in Euro-American contexts. Pressures on femmes to be “confident and legendary, not awkward and skeptical” (VANNEWKIRK, 2006, p. 77) points towards the demand for femmes to “mask” or “pass” as both neurodivergent and non-disabled who—by hiding their stigmatized positionalities—can enable queer and trans communities to flourish and become model sexual “minorities” in times of LGBT inclusion when violence against trans/or queer lives constitutes the very foundation of modernity (STANLEY, 2021). “Neurofemme” refuses the easy identification of queerness by “resisting the technology of power” that is the gaydar (VANNEWKIRK, 2006, p. 81), and could offer new(er) directions to neurodivergent socio-economic-political demands. Neurofemmes, I argue, develop “differential consciousness” beyond subversion and resistance (VANNEWKIRK, 2006) on the one hand, and victimization and subordination on the other, and challenge capitalist, casteist, racist, xenophobic, ableist, sanist, fascist, authoritarian nationalist, and disablist machinations that seek to homogenize queer and trans people by prioritizing the needs of those with purchasing power and ability of heightened consumption—who can put back their pink money back into the capitalist machinery that promised to give it out to them. Neuroqueer as well as femme scholarship—even though marginalized within both Disability and Gender and Sexuality Studies—has still largely developed owing to greater institutionalization of both fields in Western Europe and North America in comparison to the majority world, particularly India. Even though I would like to see ethnographic investment towards uncovering what political and cultural possibilities of “neurofemme” can generate in varied Indian contexts in the future, if at all (because it is Indian queer and trans political landscapes that I am primarily interested in), this paper largely draws on existing scholarship mentioned before to begin an early exploration of neurofemme-ininities as also neurofemme theory. I foreground neurodivergent queer and trans femme lives as worthy and hope to begin the groundwork

necessary for future efforts that could be geared towards understanding the desires, everyday requirements, interpersonal needs, yearnings, ambitions, expectations, and visions, as also the spectrality of trans and queer neurodivergent femmes or neurofemmes in queer and trans worlds and worldmakings. Before I begin this exploration—partly prompted by my own experience of being a queer, neurodivergent, femme growing up at a time when anti-sanist language for neurodivergence did not reach me despite my dominant-caste, middle-class, urban, English speaking positionalities—I am interested in provoking questions which, I can only hope, will be taken up at different times, in different contexts, by communities of resistance who can participate in further opening up an imaginative archive that “neurofemme” can tap into and/or bring into existence. I also remain aware that familiarity with “femme” requires acquaintance with subcultural knowledge and vocabulary which many femme-inine queer and trans people might not have access to. Despite my own exposure to transnational queer subcultural knowledges, I did not have access to “femme” until my mid-20s while in India. Hence, I resist universalizing “femme” and begin a theoretical adventure with “neurofemme” so that neurodivergence’s interaction with multiple femme-ininities can be revealed contextually. In the next section of the article, before my own hopes for “neurofemme” are revealed, I explore how multiply marginalized femme-ininities that preceded it in academic literature have been challenging oppressive standards of “femme”, and how neurofemme can be read with, and exist alongside, articulation of differences flourishing within this scholarship.

## MARGINALIZED FEMMES, INAUTHENTIC FEMME-ININITIES, MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES

Femme scholarship, as well as academic and activist literature by femmes, have demonstrated that “femme” cannot ethically aspire for homogenization and exclusivity—there are multiple femme-ininities that deserve recognition, understanding, care, as well as equitable supports in the everyday. Because femmes have historically been rendered invisible, inauthentic, and insufficiently queer and perversely feminine, multiple femme-ininities have emerged in resistance against stabilized conceptions of “femme” that preserve the white, thin, abled, neurotypical, upper/middle class, citizen positionalities. Femme scholarship addresses “how femininities may be guided by body type, geographic location, generation, sexual practice, social tradition, and so on, and observes that an individual’s adaptation of feminine style may shift according to context” (WALKER, 2012, p. 788). This article is a call to recognize, care for, and materially support multiple femme-ininities by centering the trans and/or queer, neurodivergent, femme or “neurofemme” through reparative, distributive, and intimate quotidian justice when neurofemmes are also caste-oppressed, Black, and indigenous. But before I give words to my own aspirations for, as well

as understanding of what “neurofemme” as a conceptual category could offer, register, and signify—and what sub/cultural possibilities can be generated by embracing “neurofemme” as a mode of identification and how it can create equitable livabilities for neurofemmes—I recognize the knowledges that have transpired from willful epistemic, phenomenological, and ontological dissidence of multiple femmes, and actively think with them to explore what their existence and subversion can provide “neurofemme” as a positionality, an epistemic and methodological investment, as well as a political identity.

## MULTIPLE FEMMES DESIRE/MULTIPLE FEMME DESIRES

Disabled femme scholarship attests to the inconceivability of disabled femme queerness and transness because being disabled continues to be equated with sexual nullification and perpetual crisis which homonormative relationalities cannot accommodate, and hence queerness and transness of disabled femmes run the exponential risk of being delegitimized. Disabled femme ethics can be critical to our understanding of the world and how that world must be remade if justice is to prevail beyond moments of circulation in the manner of an aberration. To Mia Mingus, “femme must include ending ableism, white supremacy, heterosexism, the gender binary, economic exploitation, sexual violence, population control, male supremacy, war and militarization, and ownership of children and land” (MINGUS, 2018, p. 137). Mingus further argues that ableism renders queer and trans people mentally disabled, creates conditions whereby the under- or uncompensated labor of racialized communities is normalized, ableism uses women's bodies to produce children on the terms of men, stabilizes the capitalist perception of disabled people as “disposable”, and normalizes the culture of exploitation by centering productivity, makes it possible for immigrants to be thought of as carriers of “disease” who must “cure” themselves of it before “weakening” the host country, and creates “violence, cycles of poverty, lack of resources and war to be used as systematic tools to construct disability in communities and entire countries” (MINGUS, 2018, p. 137). Mingus notes that as the intergenerational “effects of global capitalism, genocide, violence, oppression and trauma settle into our bodies”, new conceptions of bodies as well as gender that capture histories of resistance and resilience have to be developed. Such a revolutionary shift would bring us “closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb” and carve something new out of it which we could all claim, instead of it being the domain of a few (MINGUS, 2018, p. 140). Neurofemme holds forth and forges critical solidarity with disabled femmes and proffers recognition to the obscured fact that many trans and queer disabled, D/deaf, chronically and terminally ill femmes are also neurodivergent, living with mental disabilities, whose neurological queerness and mental disabilities inform their complex experience of embodying femme-

inities while navigating structural disablement. Because we are socially and structurally prone to hierarchization and penalization, the utterance of a disabled femme identity can only reveal a physical disability and hence care can only be extended (if at all) to “manage” and regulate it, while neurological queerness and its care, resource, access, equity, and intimate needs continue to be overlooked. While a physical disability is considered stigmatizing enough, a neurodivergent positionality along with it can worsen the perception of physical disabilities by rendering both “unmanageable”. For instance, if a chronically ill unpartnered femme also has ADHD, it becomes doubly hard for them to care for themselves, especially in the absence of anyone to “body double” as an act of intentional caring to mitigate the effects of “executive dysfunction”. If supports can only be offered during moments of significant “flare-ups”, there will be none when everyday tasks cannot be carried out according to heteronormative or homonormative, neurotypical time. The lack of supports and inaccessibility is rendered invisible, while the lack of output in terms of productivity is seen as a character flaw and figures neurodivergent femmes as particularly oafish, gauche, irresponsible, disorganized, and unrefined—unsuitable for bearing the relational burdens and occupational obligations that femmes in order to be seen as mature, competent, sincere, serious, and worthy of relational association must bear. As a neurofemme living with ADHD, I know my neurodivergence has affected my body without any acknowledgement of the fact that I was never my own undoing. “All of us have neurodivergent/ADHD traits” has often been the answer to my disclosure of ADHD within the natal familial realm, followed by the complete lack of supports I needed to function before and after I started parenting myself. Because ADHD is a strange and alien concept to a great majority of people, living with ADHD means being accused of not being able to embody femme-ininity the way it should be embodied and hence being held responsible for visiting upon yourself a dangerously precarious future in relation to your bodymind. This is further exacerbated if a physical disability is present—making it easier to craft and justify individualized doomsday narratives tailored specifically for disabled neurofemmes to deny us required supports to carry on living.

Neurofemmes, if we are to exist, must invite expansion, transformation, rebuilding, resignification, reshaping, regeneration, contextualization, and political and cultural collaboration. If I am perceived as a queer femme, will my care, access, affective, and relational needs be honored as “neurofemme”? How credible are neurofemme affects if the language of hysteria is what makes identifying and castigating—but not perceiving in the truest sense—neurofemmes possible? Do neurofemmes deserve softness and specific tailored supports when not laying bare histories of harm and humiliation as trauma porn? Could neurofemmes be perceived when relational joy becomes an investment on days rioting isn’t possible and when hope cannot fuel the energy neurofemmes need to march the

streets? Could neurofemmes only be made useful for imagining revolutions into being while being discarded when imagination of revolution has all but been exhausted? If being witnessed on neurofemme terms becomes a sub/cultural priority, could revolutions big, small, and quotidian just be in the offing? “Neurofemme” can help circulate these questions to disturb the peace and stasis that come with preserving neuronormativity. Neurofemme utterances become stronger when honoring disabled femme visions of the political that is always critically in the process of unfolding.

Being disabled often also means being de-feminized because femininity is culturally thought to be the domain of abled women as the performance of desirable femininity requires excruciating labour and material investment which disabled and/or neurodivergent femmes cannot consistently indulge in. De-feminization leads to undesirability and the loss of respectability since the latter is rooted in the desire for femmes. If femme-inine presentation requires maintenance of hygiene, propriety, sophistication—and must signal both well-healed and well-heeled positionalities—as well as physical attributes, codes of presentation that enhance conventional norms of beauty, disabled and/or neurodivergent femmes who cannot conform are subculturally rendered undesirable and culturally rendered disposable—who cannot be included in varied realms of intimacy because desirability is a major form of subcultural sexual capital that has the power to grant superficial inclusion. Desirability not only allows romantic-sexual access but also relational access beyond romance, flirtation, and sex. Oppressive structures let disabled neurofemmes know that the pursuit of beauty is inescapable while making beauty unattainable (SCOTT, 2022, p. 39). This is not to say that beauty cannot inspire neurofemmes to live another day but its pursuit is exclusionary for many neurofemmes whose beauty is considered a mockery of beauty itself because denouncing their beauty secures normative power of the predominantly “beautiful”. As Mingus rightly notes, “I don’t think we can reclaim beauty” (MINGUS, 2018, p. 141) because it is another name for yet another “exclusion club” (MINGUS, 2018, p. 141). A disabled femme expands on what a femme exclusion club represents, “...on days I am experiencing a chronic illness flare-up, being physically constrained within form-fitting feminine clothing, putting on makeup, and maneuvering the campus in heels may simply be too taxing. I am left feeling vulnerable, without the powerful authority of preferred forms of femininity, and (seemingly) paradoxically spotlighted through their absence, angry red marks surging forth undeterred on my skin, my short, vulnerable body on full display” (SCOTT, 2022, p. 38). Performance and embodiment of classed markers of beauty is thought to be central to “femme” and hence giving up the need for beauty is seen as an abandonment of “femme” itself. When disabled neurofemmes experience alienation, marginalization, and isolation, it is because we are subculturally uncomfortable with the idea of femme-ininity being constituted by positionalities other than comfortably upper/middle class, cisgender,

dominant-caste, white, abled, neurotypical, citizen identities that inform dominant perceptions of beauty and desirability. Such qualification is reinforced by the fact that beautiful and desirable are those who do not have any care needs but are adept at providing care labour on terms externally stabilized. Disabled femmes have been doing the work of highlighting myriad possibilities that capitalist functions of “femme” constrain. To be femme is to either be beautiful or not be perceived at all or it is to be glanced at with dismissive neglect. The burden to be beautiful is an enormous burden to bear for disabled and/or neurodivergent femmes in the absence of care ensuring normativity with regards to appearance and sartorial immaculateness, and in the presence of neurodivergent (as well as intergenerational, caste, race, poverty, cissexist) trauma written all over the bodies of trans and queer neurofemmes who often do not have the necessary (caste, class, racial) privileges required to maintain the oppressive norms associated with “beauty” to keep up appearances and be figured as worthy. As disabled femme experience narrated by Munson (2009) demonstrates—Munson lives with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) and Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS)—being disabled femme often means experiencing existence as a “fringe outlaw”. Munson takes a disidentificatory approach towards queer femininities (ATHELSTAN, 2015, p. 99–100), writes about “extreme social “disenfranchisement”, loneliness, and exclusion”, and the imminent perils of femmes not being educated on the role they play in significantly contributing to the causes as well as effects of MCS—which includes quotidian exclusions reinforced by everyday choices such as the use of toxic products that cause chronically ill femmes significant harm (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 100) and are yet used in abundance all around. Munson’s disabled femme anger, Athelstan writes, is “disidentificatory” in nature, and is directed at femmes who centralize “toxic capitalist consumption”, do not use fragrance-free products, and hence do not do justice to disability inclusion, which makes Munson feel “at war with the concept of femme as a disabled femme” while being excluded by inaccessible relationalities that femmes sustain. Munson demands a “bigger container” of what being femme involves (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 101), asserts the need for “fragrance-free access” (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 102) beyond capitalist and consumerist model of femme (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 102) and its many harms, marginalizations, and exclusions. Femme solidarity built on not oppressing and excluding each other (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 103) is the cornerstone of disabled femme-ininity through which intersectional communities as well as solidarities across differences and similarities can be built (MUNSON, 2009, p. 34; ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 103). “Situated disidentificatory queer femme anger” and the figure of the “femme affect alien” who is the product of internal as well as external marginalization (ATHELSTAN, 2019, p. 103) is critical to understanding alienation caused by homonormative, transnormative, and cisnormative, as well as racist and casteist, disablist, ableist and sanist, expectations of “femme”. Such anger

also reveals why it is necessary to recognize exclusions beyond masculine domination and femme-inine subordination. Lateral harm, acknowledged, and recognized, can lead to more redeemable and equitable actions as well as more anti-normative possibilities that the state and its institutions as well as community actors can develop when they are committed to perceiving beyond moments of intentional neurofemme presence where disclosures always prevail. Neurofemme demands disabled or crip femme lived realities of exclusion to be seen as historical wrongs for which the best apology is access and necessary, evolving supports as equity.

A disabled femme talks about the “fetishization of mobility in the queer community”, rightly pointing out that the “huge primacy placed on mobility” (DRUMMOND; BROTMAN, 2014, p. 541) disadvantages disabled people. Because queer people with disposable income and intergenerational wealth can afford to move around, travel, relocate, form queer relationalities and find kinship networks, moving offers cultural currency and capital which multiply marginalized disabled femmes lack. Moreover, ability to move around for some might provide them escape from relational harm, while for others it is a non-choice. For disabled and/or neurodivergent femmes who have been structurally denied employment, do not have disposable income, have not been able to participate in the accumulation of wealth which demands neuronormativity, moving around may not be possible, and if attempted, might come with unique challenges related to security, secure, safe, and stable housing, finding supportive queer and trans networks, and could also present complexities that being single and femme pose (especially when the threat of violence is particularly high). For disabled women who are pushed into poverty owing to unemployment or lack of socio-economic networks of supports, physical and mental disabilities can be exacerbated, and can lead to higher rates of morbidity owing to inaccessibility in various forms, including the lack of medical and healthcare access (EGNER, 2019, p. 534).

Trans femmes are routinely subjected to violence, murder, harassment, voyeuristic curiosities about their bodies that lead to gratuitous violence and/or significant harm, and their femme-ininity is rendered suspect and monstrous—figured as that which is set to deceive and always inadequate. Even if trans femme death is not the dominant desire, trans femme suffering surely is (so that cissexist norms and values can continue to be reproduced and reinforced). When disabled and/or neurodivergent, if trans femmes cannot secure medical supports or are not able to care for themselves (which is the expectation since the state must not be bothered), or are incarcerated in psychiatric units, or if their carers and institutions that promise to deliver support visit cissexist harms on their bodies by defeminizing them, or conflate their transness with insanity, dysphoria is inflicted on trans neurofemmes by design—leading many to avoid seeking healthcare services. Health-seeking



behaviour can only be cultivated if identity affirming practices become commonplace so that trans and queer neurofemmes do not have to remain at the mercy of healthcare provider's spectacular generosity for survival. Piepzna-Samarasinha imagines "infinite crip crazy future" (KAFFER, 2020, p. 103), beyond "authorizing power of diagnosis" (KAFFER, 2020, p. 103) and "commodification of health care, available only to those with the proper papers and disposable income" (KAFFER, 2020, p. 103). In an "infinite crip crazy" future, neurofemmes can have free access to healthcare, quotidian care, medication and therapy when they require it, and do not have to disclose their identities to acquire affirming care not laced with disgust and hostility, and not driven by the medical industrial complex. Jina Kim's conceptualization of "radical imaginaries" (KIM, 2017; KAFFER, 2020, p. 103) can help us trace radical as well as gentle neurofemme imaginaries to "disrupt epistemological ignorance" (OSWALD; AVORY; FINE, 2022, p. 1131) which perpetuates ableism, sanism, disablism, and their accompanying oppressions. Because neurofemmes' care needs will not be articulated otherwise, disrupting ignorance entails thinking with communities we can learn from—and fight with and for—to ensure we do not end up becoming each other's oppressors in the everyday while seeking care, knowledge, and supports, and trying to understand what justice means to us and those we care for and about, given our specific histories, intergenerational traumas, and relational sensibilities.

Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that femmes experience abject femininity with age (WALKER, 2012, p. 798), and disability, neurodivergence, and age can function to intensify alienation sub/culturally and socio-economically. Sick and disabled queer of color femme bodies are not seen as bodies of knowledge but they very much are and are also "sites of knowledge's manifestations" (KHANMALEK; RHODES, 2020, p. 36). Sick and disabled, ageing neurofemmes of colour can indulge in "dreamwork" to "reconfigure what it is to know, turning past, present, and future, the grip of settler colonial and capitalist temporality, in and over upon itself, tearing its fabric" (KHANMALEK; RHODES, 2020, p. 43). Because neo-eugenic programming orients us towards symbolic and material profit (KHANMALEK; RHODES, 2020, p. 52), it is important to rescue rest from its grips with the refusal to allow the economy to get hold of the body to "bear capital's legacy—of total depletion, toxicity, and annihilative violence" (KHANMALEK; RHODES, 2020, p. 52). Neurofemme is against capitalism mandated routine productivity that denies us the ability to fully comprehend and honor our bodyminds and compels us to annihilate ourselves. Neurofemme learns from disabled, trans, ageing, Black, indigeneous, caste-oppressed, queer of colour femmes and joins them in demanding a world where violent, dangerous, and harmful, as also seemingly unremarkable racist-casteist-capitalist neuronorms do not determine the rules of being with ourselves, being with our kin, and being with those who will never be considered kin or kin-like.

Like disabled and ageing femmes, “queer fat femme” has also been recognized as an emergent critical and dissident identity in contemporary Western (sub)cultures, which offers fat and femme queers unique opportunities for articulating “resistant subjectivities, creating communities, and challenging heteronormativity, misogyny, and fatphobia, among other intersecting oppressions” (TAYLOR, 2018, p. 462). Fat femmes, figured as undesirable and unattractive, emphasize the importance of avoiding a universal femme positionality which can only recognize white, upper-/middle-class, cisgender and abled femme-ininity, and recognize that fatness makes queer femmes’ transgression of normative femininity more visible and complicates the reading of their femme subjectivities as properly fem(me)inine (TAYLOR, 2018; 2022). Fatness, femininity, and queerness appear to be mutually exclusive on dating platforms (CONTE, 2018, p. 27). As Harrop and Kattari observe, fatness has always shared a complicated relationship to disability, as fat people are bi-directionally blamed for inviting disability and illness and are also seen as their result (HARROP; KATTARI, 2012; 2022). Neurofemme theory recognizes that fat femmes can also be neurodivergent and are in need of material supports, a life without constant blame and fear-mongering about health, and that fatphobia and sanism, ableism, disablism are inextricably linked. Fatness is seen as a symptom of madness or loss of control over oneself because being thin signifies “self-control” and necessary indulgence in capitalist norms of “self-care”. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that in the absence of necessary supports, fat neurofemmes have to bear the burden of their fatness and neurodivergence unsupported, while being blamed and punished for both.

Black queer femmes also write about being hypervisible in both queer and non-queer spaces, a concern that neurofemme theory shares. As Story notes, “It has been the combination of my racialized difference and my performance of intentional femininity through my chosen Black femme identity that seems to deem who I truly am, invisible” and attributes such invisibility to racial and gendered erasure (STORY, 2017, p. 408), while also reminding us that invisibility ironically accompanies hypervisibility while living as a Black femme (STORY, 2017, p. 409). Femme identities of colour are not seen as powerful, radical or revolutionary (STORY, 2017, p. 412) Moreover, racialized femmes also reveal how improper performance or misperformance of transnational Asian queer femme-ness, makes Asian queer femmes not “competitive, valuable, and/or marketable in a (white) gay sexual marketplace” (EGUCHI; LONG, 2019, p. 1600). Trans femmes of colour, “particularly those who cannot or do not, desire nor aspire to, white hetero femininities, or those who cannot or will not advance the U.S. empire through military service, were/are racialized as unintelligible, monstrous – threats to nation stability” (LEMASTER; TRISTANIO, 2023, p. 6). And yet, trans femmes of colour deliberately foreground relational “survival against racist and phobic publics” (LEMASTER; TRISTANIO, 2023, p. 13). Trans femmes critically represent

various underrepresented conceptions of gender which can only be made possible by resolutely centering trans\*femme individuals and their gender inventiveness not tied to biology and/or social normativity (SHELTON, 2018, p. 27). Shelton further observes that femmes preserve agency over their embodied gendered experiences so that the “boundaries” of gender can always remain fluid and proliferating—inclusive of a variety of femme-ininities—exceeding the limitations of, and subverting, the cis-masc/cis-fem binary, “existing as a robust spectrum on which even liberated cis-gender bodies can locate themselves” (SHELTON, 2018, p. 27). Sex workers, who are also rejected by respectable and desirable “femme” embodiment politics, note that being “too feminine” and being a sex worker subjects them to heightened “scrutiny, pity, fetishization, as well as emotional and verbal abuse” (BLEWETT; LAW, 2018, p. 58). Femme, bi, and whorephobia constitute the violent perception of sex work and sex workers (BLEWETT; LAW, 2018, p. 59), and perpetuates sex-negativity which marginalizes and oppresses sex workers further. Feminism working towards rescue and rehabilitation of sex workers have historically seen sex workers as victims in the need of being rescued. Queer femme sex workers in queer communities are perceived as “too gender-conforming” and “too straight”, and hence conventionally feminine, so much so that their “queerness as bisexuals, femmes, and, we contend, as sex workers is erased”, pushing them towards risky disclosures time and again to justify their queerness (BLEWETT; LAW, 2018, p. 61). Trans femme sex workers are exposed to violence which is normalized and does not invite spectacular forms of support which we happen to see when crisis affect the usually unaffected and otherwise privileged.

Black, disabled, trans, sex working, racialized, fat femmes have demonstrated profound disenchantment towards oppressive conceptualization and expectations of “femme” which do not correspond to the lived realities of variously excluded femmes whose embodiment of “femme-ininity” questions sub/cultural norms associated with who femmes can be, become, or what femmes can represent. Many sex working, precariously employed, unhoused and housing insecure, disabled, caste-oppressed, trans, queer, working class, Black, racialized, indigenous, and historically oppressed femmes are also neurodivergent. Neurofemme exists in solidarity with them and envisions a future when none of us are left behind in our imaginings of “liberation”. “Neurofemme” values the epistemic and embodied resistances generated by multiply marginalized, ostracized, historically excluded and oppressed femmes and demands that neurological queerness of queer and trans neurofemmes be valued to create worlds hereafter that can support neurodivergent bodyminds (and lead to secure living conditions for all) with shorter work days and work weeks, living wage taking into account neurodivergent tax regardless of the value of perceived skillset, hiring more people in places where one person is made to work eight or more hours a day for profit, and intentionally creating subcultural relationalities that do not

impinge on femme-inine desirability so that neurofemmes who do not pass conventional standards of desirability can also have necessary supports. Neurofemme demands caring practices in the everyday without attention to relational longevity and emphasizes the need to create a vocabulary that enables neurofemmes to be communicated with on terms that acknowledge our traumas and neurodivergent and femme-specific desires and understandings of the world. Because the harms that neurofemmes experience are rarely articulated alongside utterances that affirm the need to recognize marginalized femme-ininities, it is necessary to make claims for legibility that lead to equity and hope for a time when legibility or disclosure will no longer be the basis for acquiring essential, quotidian, interpersonal, need-specific, critical supports.

## FROM “FEMME” TO “NEUROFEMME”

The neologism “*neuroqueer*” was cultivated and nurtured in autistic circles to understand “neurodivergence as a form of queerness”, aimed at naming lived and embodied experiences of being both neurodivergent and queer (WALKER, 2021) and is a “crip project of disidentification” (MUNOZ, 1999; EGNER, 2019, p. 123). Disidentification sought by neuroqueerness problematizes identity categories and refuses the “interpellations of neuronormativity, ableism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity” (GRIFFIN, 2022, p. 89). More recently, Smilges coined the term “*neurotrans*” to be understood and explored as “an identity, an analytic, a politics” (SMILGES, 2023, p. 635). “As an identity”, Smilges writes, “neurotrans is for us folks who are both neurodivergent and trans or for those whose neurodivergence makes cisnormative gender impossible or undesirable” (SMILGES, 2023, p. 635), as “an analytic illuminates how cissexism and ableism are not only interwoven but coconstitutive, working to “correct”, cure, or otherwise eradicate forms of bodymind nonconformance” (SMILGES, 2023, p. 636), and as a politics, “neurotrans is anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist as much as it is anti-cissexist and anti-ableist” (SMILGES, 2023, p. 638). Drawing on the analytical value of both “neuroqueer” and “neurotrans”, I extend recognition to “neurofemme” as a theoretical tool and structural position to understand entangled worlds of queer and trans femme-ininities and neurodivergence as well as mental disabilities that develop later in life. Neurofemme’s epistemological value resides in making possible the recognition and understanding of both neurodiversity and femininity “within a world (and sub-culture) that privileges and prizes masculinity” (HOSKIN, 2019, p. 5; SMILGES, 2021) and also values, celebrates, honors neurotypicality/neuronormativity while castigating, stigmatizing, discriminating, devaluing, and debilitating neurodivergence and mental disabilities. Neurofemme theory, I argue, lets us affirm the femme-ininity of neurofemmes as inextricably linked with our

neurodivergence—our femme embodiment, assertion, expression, politics, protest, play, care, desire can only be recognized along with our neurological queerness and not outside of it. Neurofemmes experience the violence of sanism, disablism, and ableism in a world that stigmatizes our disabilities and neurodivergence. It demands desirability, ability, neuronormativity, and productivity from femmes because anything less figures us as vain, incompetent, lazy, awkward, inefficient, inadequate, juvenile, dirty, and useless. Neurofemmes have to resist both invisibility and hypervisibility and often find ourselves surviving the cruelty that the latter visits on our bodyminds as well as the precarity, relational harm, care crises, and access exclusion that the former has the power of normalizing in our lives. Neurofemme is in alignment with neuroqueer feminism which renders visible neurodiversity among women of all minoritized genders and actively seeks to destigmatize gendered experiences of neurodivergence, placing needed emphasis on “valuing the expertise of neurodivergent people on the psychiatric categories they inhabit, exceed, and critique” (JOHNSON, 2021, p. 635). That neurodivergence contributes to inequality and intersectional invisibility has been recognized to make imagination of “mad subjects, movements, and discourses, and futures” possible (JOHNSON, 2021, p. 637). And towards that end, “Neuroqueer feminism turns with tenderness toward those who are—or have histories of—unraveling” (JOHNSON, 2021, p. 637). Neurofemme theory honors unraveling and dysregulation, does not discriminate based on “regulation skills”, recognizes the harms and violence that the inability to perform neuronormativity can cause, pays attention to how “access thievery” (SMILGES, 2023) or stealing possibilities of access can give neurofemmes back the time and labour that was stolen from us by capitalism, affirms the need to create a life beyond “labour normativity” (SMILGES, 2023) which structures our quotidian lives and makes us, our bodyminds, and our communities fall apart slowly but surely, and dreams of a present where neurofemme-ininities can thrive with all its complexities. It also refuses the inclusion of certain forms of neurodivergent positionalities over more stigmatized others such as Bipolar “Disorder”, Borderline Personality “Disorder”, Schizophrenia, Antisocial Personality “Disorder” (ASPD) etc. who can be caused resource deprivation and denied adequate supports because of heightened stigmatization. Neurofemme theory also refuses parsimonious support which can be delivered for optics to some and denied to many because the latter requires ethical organization, political willingness, and anti-sanist intent.

Writing about autism as neurological queerness, Yergeau notes “neuroqueer narratives are never the whole story. Context is everything and everywhere, and neuroqueer rhetors are rhetorically and infinitely halved, unable (or unwilling) to tell or perform what allistic audiences most privilege. Following this logic, a claim to autism is read as partial or incomplete and in need of nonautistic correction, clarification, or rehabilitation” (YERGEAU, 2017, p. 139). If neurofemmes are also unreliable narrators and rhetors by virtue of

neurodivergence and femme-ininity hardly ever been considered reliable, an autistic neurofemme is figured as dangerously unreliable. If sub/cultural unreliability must squarely fall on neurofemmes—who might also be trans, Black, caste-oppressed Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi, indigenous, racialized, working class, disabled, non-citizens—we must question what norms constitute sub/cultural parameters of reliability and the required figure onto whom oppressive notions of reliability can be superimposed. With unreliability being rendered the neurofemme “normal”, neurofemmes’ access needs, needs for care, support, equity, kinship, relational justice can be ignored. Mere inclusion is not justice. The opposite of exclusion is not inclusion but neurofemme-affirming supports, which are necessary to ensure a life worth living, and go beyond temporary measures to ensure survival. This includes a sub/cultural rethinking of what neurofemmes must do (for instance, provide care labour that might not be reciprocated, hide traumas to make people comfortable, perform compulsory emotional regulation, decenter the self to “mask” for neurotypical as well as intra- and inter-community comfort, sacrifice access needs for tokenistic inclusion, perform intimacy on sanist terms, to name only a few neurofemme obligations). Because femmes are always only one meltdown away from being termed hysterical and irredeemably “insane”—a historical inheritance and legacy we never asked for—“neurofemmes” are under the compulsion to adult in a way so as to not be stigmatized by sanist verdicts that are so easily be passed on our bodyminds. Neurofemmes are rendered responsible for managing our neurodivergence even if we were never made aware of it. As a neurofemme, traumatic childhood and adolescent memories of growing up when stigmatized “madness” was the only sanist framework available to us to make sense of neurofemme existence, I believe that certain traumas will always reside in my bodymind. Neurofemme depression, anxious and depressive affects, executive “dysfunction”, need for isolation and non-violent communication, lack of motivation, disordered eating, emotional dysregulation, “impulsive behaviour”, and dopamine-inducing activities read as inherently “risky”, among others, make neurofemmes intimately familiar with how quotidian harm is experienced by the bodymind. Since queer femme-ininity marks us as always already perverse—because being queer while feminine is culturally read as a “choice”, a choice which should not have been made at all—neurodivergence can be thought to be the result of that perversion as well as a cause of it. Because trans femmes are also seen as a product of gender manipulation which they could have resisted instead of contributing to it, trans neurofemmes are seen as perilously insane and a threat to society, and hence undeserving of support and deserving of the violence of inequity. Neurofemmes’ queerness and/or transness as well as their disabilities and historically oppressed positionalities are all marked by sanism because ordinariness entails ability, cisnormativity, and neuronormativity. Mad Studies helps elucidate the impact of sanist structural violence.

Pilling (2022) writes that institutional violence and institutional ideology reinforce colonialism, cisheteronormativity, and white supremacy. As a result it is difficult for BIPOC trans and queer people to access mental healthcare. Psychiatric violence is ableist and racist and includes forced institutionalization, drugging, involuntary, solitary confinement, application of mechanical and chemical restraint and electroconvulsive therapy. Moreover, the crisis of care inherent in the mental healthcare system and its ableist and sanist modes of operation have also been critiqued and attributed to growing mental health challenges experienced by queer and trans people who have not received identity-affirming care and treatment because of widespread systemic and structural failings. However, Mad Studies resists the individualization of madness, and seeks to identify the exploitative and oppressive structures that render certain communities more vulnerable to distress than others. This includes identifying and uncovering psychiatric violence, dangers of the dominance of stigmatizing and oppressive psychiatric knowledge production and dissemination, and the problems inherent in the capitalist and ableist mental health system. Mad Studies is interested in depathologizing distress broadly and not just depathologizing the identities embodied by people experiencing distress. Pilling's work argues for anti-ableist and anti-sanist, non-carceral, non-state interventionist approaches, while placing emphasis on the need for an ever evolving anti-ableist, anti-sanist, anti-racist work rooted in decolonization. Neurofemme honors Mad knowledges, its epistemic commitments, and also views anti-ableist, anti-sanist, anti-racist, and anti-carceral interventions as joint endeavours to achieve neurofemme equity. Neurofemmes who lack access to diagnosis, as well as vocabulary that might lead to such diagnosis, cannot be gatekept. This includes relational, quotidian, as well as institutional gatekeeping. Creating a culture where we meet neurofemme demands for access and care even without diagnosis and within the realm of intimate and community-centric relationalities is an effort towards creating a culture that is sustainable for many and not just a (diagnosed and hence seen) few.

Because queer and trans bodies, including that of trans and queer femmes, are policed, regulated, and marked both within and outside the Medical Industrial Complex and Mental Health Industrial Complex, and since femmes continue to “craft coalitional resistance to the everyday enactments of ableism/sanism in the Medical Industrial Complex” (JOHNK; KHAN 2019, p. 27), neurofemme positionalities even in the absence of its overt articulation signal anti-ableist and anti-sanist collaboration to evidence resistance against ableism/sanism as well as the Medical Industrial Complex and Psychiatric Industrial Complex. As *Sins Invalid*—the performance project by trans and queer racialized disabled and/or neurodivergent people in the US (KAFAI, 2021)—has demonstrated, queer and trans femmes effectively organize to center the voices of multiply and historically oppressed neurodivergent and/or disabled trans and queer people and communities and make possible—among other

experiences demonstrating our vitality—cross movement solidarity. Neurofemme theory recognizes that neurodivergence and femme-ininity embodied by trans and/or queer neurodivergent femmes enable the assertion of both differently, deviating significantly from norms associated with neurotypicality/neuronormativity, cishetero femininity, as also subcultural norms associated with femme-ininity. “Femme” was never meant to be a stable category. How I embody my femme-ininity as a dominant-caste, middle-class, neurodivergent, queer, racialized (in the North American context) migrant femme with cultural capital is very different from how a Black, working class, trans, displaced, undocumented, migrant neurodivergent femme embodies theirs. How our neurodivergent femme-ininities are received and read have always been complicated by caste, race, class, and citizenship status (or its lack thereof). Racial capitalism, migration, citizenship status further complicate neurofemme-ininities. When embodied by trans and queer, Black, indigenous, racialized, caste-oppressed femmes, femininity can also exceed “femme”, or refuse to be centered in critical moments. Neurofemme recognizes the critical value of such decentering and is not meant to replace but align with resistances that those acts and practices of decentering generate. To be neurofemme is to be maladjusted and, hence, I do not develop this term as identificatory but rather, as an epistemic necessity and structural positionality to understand the imbrication of neurodivergence and femme-ininity in living out a maladjusted life brimming with transformative social, subcultural, socio-economic, and political possibilities. Awkward-Rich notes that maladjustment “is used to rationalize intervention into or elimination/abandonment of racialized, feminized, gender nonconfirming, mad, neurodivergent, or disabled people who trouble and are troubled by the requirements for officially sanctioned social life” (AWKWARD-RICH, 2022, p. 6). Since femme-ininity seems inconceivable without the embodiment of sexual desirability, respectability, and neurodivergence is quintessentially marked as undesirable in a sanist world—and sanism requires neurofemmes to resort to quotidian masking and performing neurotypicality/neuronormativity to survive and access opportunities to thrive—neurofemmes’ experience of femme-ininity is informed by experiences of not only “structural, pious, overt femmephobia and femme mystification” (HOSKIN, 2013; BLAIR; HOSKIN, 2015) but also, vitally, sanism. Femmes with “mad border bodies” inhabiting and remaining within the borders of both neurodivergence and its un/successful masking have to oscillate between the two consistently (KAFAI, 2012; 2021). If queer femmes are not seen as authentically queer for not being masculine (HOSKIN, 2019; KAFAI, 2021), and not authentically trans for not undergoing surgeries, we are also not seen as authentically femme for not being neurotypical. I know my bodymind is valued when I am working, caring, participating in queer homemaking, being “useful”, seen as competent, performing desirability, embodying refinement, and acquiring subcultural/relational currency by not



mentioning my care and access needs as long as I possibly can. But the moment I “fail” and articulate needs associated with my embodied complexity, cannot function on the daily in all the neurotypical/neuronormative and respectable ways I am expected to, cannot, or refuse to, perform emotional, embodied, and material care labour expected of femmes, I am abandoned and rendered disposable. Neurofemme failure is intolerable. Neurofemmes are here to forgive everyone else’s failures while being rendered unforgivable ourselves. Neurofemme is relational as well as structural and institutional resistance, and resistance against sanist sub/cultural expectations, assumptions and presumptions, dictatorial commands, and enacts resistance against medical and political establishments that seek to render not just neurofemme lives unlivable but also the lives of multiply and historically oppressed trans and queer disabled and/or neurodivergent people working towards abolitionist present and futures. Black, (and caste-oppressed), racialized, working class, disabled and/or neurodivergent people, including femmes, have never been materially compensated for their care labour (PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA, 2018, p. 35)—their labour has been normalized to the point of invisibilization despite the fact that it is the embodied labour of multiply oppressed peoples that have kept societies and communities alive despite being “both abandoned and policed by the state, and in the face of medical experimentation and denial of health insurance” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 37). And yet, while the contemporary Euro-American trans-exclusionary lesbian organizing claims to advocate for, and aims to resist the cultural death of “lesbians”, it has not explored its own cis femme-exclusionary history that made many femmes (both cis and genderqueer) feel “excluded, ignored, belittled in the larger lesbian community” (SAMUELS, 2003, p. 248). Trans-exclusionary lesbian politics has never been inclusive of all cis lesbians despite tall claims to the contrary. Femmes have been rendered invisible both subculturally as well in the dominant culture (SAMUELS, 2003, p. 244), so it is hardly surprising that concerns of neurodivergent trans and queer femmes have not been granted the kind of subcultural legitimacy that homogenized, solidified lesbian identity has managed to acquire. Through studied silence on neurodivergence and disability—which continues to authenticate a non-disabled, neurotypical conceptualization of lesbian, queer and trans identities—the authentic queer and trans subject is brought into being so that “the LGBT” community can only ever be read as non-disabled and neurotypical.

However, neurodivergent femme-ininity or “neurofemme” is embodied assertion of neurodivergent and trans and queer femme agency and resistance against sanism, ableism and disablism, transmisogynoir and transmisogyny, femmephobia, casteism, anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, capitalism, xenophobia, fatphobia, and classism. It actively imagines a disabled (and neurodivergent) future (PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA, 2022) when future-making and present-building by queer and trans femmes is threatened and

effectively obscured despite revolutionary femme activist praxis. Marsha P. Johnson, Black, trans, femme, neurodivergent organizer and artist, co-created, among other things, the STAR House—"a safe house created by and for houseless trans people" sustained by the "brilliance and labor of Black and brown street sex working trans women" (PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA, 2019, p. 58). Johnson resisted sanism alongside transmisogynoir, psychiatric isolation and violence, hospitalization (PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA, 2019, p. 58–59) and yet her living with, and resistance against, sanism has rarely been accorded narrative privilege. Moreover, the fact that Kayla Moore, a Black neurodivergent trans woman was murdered by the police in Berkeley in 2013 (PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA, 2019, p. 61), and there are many Black, trans, neurodivergent femmes who are also unhoused/housing insecure are also rarely allowed to be articulated in relatively dominant subcultural spaces and places. Caste-oppressed queer people, including Dalit femmes, have noted that being Dalit and femme means rendered "the most undesirable to whom things could only be done to", disrespected, and whose boundaries can be violated without consequence during sex (PONNIAH; TAMALAPAKULA, 2020, p. 7). Moreover, as Soundararajan notes, "caste-oppressed communities gave some of the worst health outcomes in South Asia" and "combined conditions of violence, poverty, and malnutrition are contributors to high blood pressure, diabetes, and other long-term lifetime conditions" along with depression and suicidality owing to caste stress (SOUNDARARAJAN, 2022, p. 70). Caste-oppressed neurodivergent queer and trans feminine people's experiences of casteism, sanism, as well as transphobia and misogyny have been kept out of the most popular, legitimate, and visible queer activist discourses in India where dominant-caste gatekeeping prevails and where caste-oppressed people are marked as "mad" at the mere mention of caste (CHATTERJEE, 2022, p. 60). While "femme" as an identificatory term may not be embraced by historically-oppressed and multiply marginalized communities in India, trans and queer feminine people who are also neurodivergent and disabled come up against (and indeed, agentially resist) casteism and caste-based violence, inequity, along with the violence and marginalization wrought by the devaluation and stigmatization of neurodivergent femininity. "Neurofemme", hence, does not claim to subsume experiences of oppression, care, resistance, and marginalization within the intertwined realms of neurodivergence and femme-ininity but recognizes that neurodivergence and femme-ininity contribute additional layers of violence to oppression experienced on the basis of caste, race, class, and gender, and hence neurofemme theory advocates for a politics of equity and justice that pays attention to these intersections. This article recognizes that when intelligible and respectable "normal" LGB identities were being constructed and consolidated, it was happening through the negation of, and structural opposition to, neurodiversity and disability, ironically also making possible trans-queer-crip-neurodivergent disidentification with homonormative LGB movements. To invite a politics of

disidentification in the context of neurofemme aspirations is to cultivate a sub/cultural ethic embedded in neurofemme justice that does not prioritize homonormativity over neurofemme care, does not demand association with sanist modes of functioning to “normalize” LGB relationships and marriages, does not give in to neuronormative dialogic expectations and actions, and makes possible anti-sanist worlds by demanding resources from the state and key players that are funded by it including non-governmental organizations. Demands are to be raised for neurofemme care along with neurofemmes, instead of prioritizing political aims and goals that can only benefit neuronorms and sustain abled supremacy, which run the risk of rendering neurofemmes merely spectral and instrumental figures necessary only for virtue-signaling and evidencing queer movements’ evolving political consciousness. Future research can travel with “neurofemme” and explore anti-sanist, anti-casteist, anti-classist, anti-capitalist, anti-ableist, anti-disablist, anti-racist possibilities that can be generated when neurofemme moves across countries and continents, not as a revolutionary identity but an identity that threatens sanism, ableism, and disablism along with historically oppressive structures. I would also be curious to see how communities transform and rebuild themselves when neurofemmes are not rendered disposable but meeting their security needs enables imagining the security of those who also remain oppressed and marginalized in the present moment. I imagine “neurofemme” being a political and ethical commitment and a subcultural aspiration for change that would make us want to remain invested in each other’s happiness, healing, and being.

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