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Young women's negotiations of heterosexual conventions: theorizing sexuality in constructions of 'the feminist'

Dr Christina Scharff

Lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries

Email christina.scharff@kcl.ac.uk
Tel +44 (0)20 7848 1854
King's College London
Culture, Media and Creative Industries
King's College London
9D Chesham Building
Strand Campus
London
WC2R 2LS

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Abstract:
Even though the normativity of heterosexuality has come into question in recent years, heterosexual norms continue to figure as a structuring principle in contemporary social life. Drawing on 40 qualitative interviews with a diverse group of young German and British women, this article analyses empirical research on feminist disidentification to show that heteronormativity plays a central role in young women's negotiations of feminism. Numerous respondents established a link between feminism, unfemininity, man-hatred and lesbianism. By exploring constructions of "the feminist", and by reconceptualising the figure of "the feminist" as a constitutive outside of heterosexual norms that haunts the interviews, this article foregrounds the importance of examining the dimension of sexuality in analyses of contemporary social phenomena.

[A]n understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition [...] (Sedgwick, 1990: 1).

Sedgwick's call for an incorporation of the homo/hetero definition into analyses of modern Western culture provides a powerful entry point to this article which demonstrates that heterosexual norms figure as a structuring principle in young women's negotiation of feminism. Young women's disidentification with feminism has been widely documented in the British, German and international contexts (Gerhard, 1999; McRobbie, 2003, 2004, 2009; Aapola et al. 2005). McRobbie (2004) makes the compelling argument that there has been a shift in young women's relationship with feminism: while their disidentification with feminism was marked by politically constructive ambivalences in the early nineties, it is now increasingly characterised by forceful repudiations. This article explores young women's feminist disidentification by foregrounding the dimension of sexuality, and by focusing on the construction of feminists in particular. While it has been documented that feminists are portrayed as unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian (Sharpe, 2001; Hinds and Stacy, 2001), the article makes a twofold contribution to the literature: it traces *how* feminism becomes associated with unfemininity, hostility towards men as well as lesbianism, and draws on queer theory to examine *why* feminism is overwhelmingly imagined in these ways. A detailed exploration of constructions of the figure of 'the feminist' furthers our understanding of

repudiations of feminism and demonstrates the usefulness, and indeed importance, of exploring the dimension of sexuality in investigating contemporary social phenomena.

In seeking to account for young women's distancing from feminism, researchers have emphasised the widespread belief that gender equality has been achieved and have claimed that young women reject feminism as anachronistic (Jowett 2004; Sharpe 2001). Feminist academics and journalists have highlighted negative media representations and stereotypes of feminism to argue that hostile discourses render the movement unpopular (Bulbeck, 1997; Karsch, 2004). Various researchers have also claimed that some young women reject feminism because they regard it as exclusionary, representing the views of middle-class and white women (Aronson, 2003; Skeggs, 1997). Developing the concept of postfeminism, McRobbie (2004, 2009) and Gill (2007) have demonstrated that feminism is both taken into account and forcefully repudiated. Drawing equal attention to current socio-cultural trends, some researchers have also argued that neoliberal discourses and individualisation dissolve the appeal of joining collective political struggles (McRobbie, 2009; Rich, 2005). Frequently, generational differences between younger and older feminists are said to account for the distancing of the younger generation (Gerhard, 1999; Pilcher, 1998). The issue of feminist generations is also addressed by third wave feminism. Whilst a contested term (Gillis et al., 2007), third wave feminism seeks to develop a feminist position that interrogates the implications of recent economic, political and cultural changes for a revised feminist politics (Budgeon, 2010). Third wave feminism contributes to debates on young women's relationship with feminism by analysing the challenges involved in rendering feminism appealing to a younger generation.

This article adds to existing perspectives on feminist disidentification by theorizing the complex workings of heterosexual conventions in young women's talk about feminism. The analysis presented here draws on qualitative interviews with a diverse group of young German and British women and is informed by a queer theory perspective that seeks to make sexuality a central category for social analysis. Constituting a 'rather amorphous body of work' (Roseneil, 2000,

paragraph 2.1), queer theory challenges the opposition between heterosexual and homosexual identities so that '[…] homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology' (De Lauretis, 1991: iii). Queer theory critically interrogates the assumption of 'a priori relationships among sex, gender and sexuality' (Hemmings, 2002: 110) which usefully applies to my analysis of the respondents' constructions of equivalences between unfemininity, man-hating and lesbianism. A queer theory framework with its emphasis on sexuality as a structuring principle enables us to understand the processes through which feminists are constructed as unfeminine, anti-men and lesbian. I will investigate how the figure of the feminist is produced, thereby revealing the homophobic workings of this construction. Paradoxically, my analysis of the interviewees' accounts means that I will reiterate the links between feminism, unfemininity, man-hating and lesbianism. I hope to address these concerns by deconstructing these associations and by exposing their exclusionary effects.

After a discussion of the research methodology and findings of the broader study, the first section of this article demonstrates that feminists were overwhelmingly depicted as unfeminine. Furthermore, feminists were regarded as man-like and, as the second section of this article illustrates, as man-hating. This section develops my argument about the structuring role of heteronormativity in negotiations of feminism by foregrounding the heterosexist 'chain of equivalence that is sex/gender/desire' (Chambers, 2007: 669). Section three continues the detailed investigation of how the figure of the feminist is produced by focusing on the portrayal of feminists as lesbians. Finally, section four reconceptualises the trope of the unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian feminist. It suggests that we regard the figure of 'the feminist' as a constitutive outside of the heteronormative order which nevertheless haunts the research participants' accounts. The figure is frequently evoked but repeatedly escapes the grasp of reality. Drawing on psychoanalytic insights, and also on Ahmed's (2004) notion of the 'sticky sign' which describes how affects align themselves with words, I aim to provide an explanation for the spectre of the feminist that haunted

numerous interviews, but for which no specific examples could be given by the research participants. In advancing the more general argument that constructions of the feminist should be located in the heterosexual matrix, this article makes a broader epistemological point by demonstrating how the young women's knowledges of feminism were mediated by heterosexual conventions. This mode of knowledge formation about feminism takes us back to Sedgwick's work and her claim (1990: 3) 'that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know'.

Researching constructions of the feminist

The data presented here emerged from a cross-cultural study on young women's negotiations of feminism. Based on 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews with German and British women aged 18 – 35, the research explored how young women think, talk and feel about feminism. Interviews were conducted in Berlin, London and Birmingham between 2006 and 2007 and lasted between one to one and a half hours. The research was designed to hear the voices of a diverse group of respondents who were recruited through snowballing. In Germany, eleven interviewees were raised in former West Germany, eight were born in the German Democratic Republic and one respondent grew up in West Africa. Fourteen research participants identified as heterosexual, two as bisexual and four as lesbian. I talked to seven women from a working-class background and to thirteen women with a middle-class upbringing. Three respondents identified as both German and Turkish, one as German and Korean, twelve as white, two as black and two as mixed-race. In Britain, I conducted fifteen interviews in London and five in Birmingham. Three research participants identified as lesbian, fourteen as heterosexual and three as bisexual. I talked to two women who described themselves as black, three as mixed-race, three as Asian and twelve as white. Fifteen respondents were from a middle-class background and five had a working-class upbringing. Acknowledging differences not only in relation to the research design, but also with regard to the temporal and spatial contingency of the term "feminism", the study conceptualised feminism as a

discursive category to signify various understandings of the term and to avoid exclusionary definitions (Butler, 1992). The interviews addressed a range of questions, including understandings of and associations with feminism, the research participants' experiences with, and stances on feminism, as well their views on gender roles and gender (in)equality. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed by using discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and performativity theory (Butler, 1993; 1999).

Interestingly, the interviews did not bring to the fore significant differences in how feminism was discussed in Germany and Britain. Feminism was unpopular in both countries, with thirty respondents stating that they would not call themselves a feminist. While these findings do not highlight cultural differences in negotiations of feminism, the research provides insights into how young women's positionings in relation to multiple axes of differentiation mediate their responses to feminism. Using a performative approach, the broader study provided a detailed account of how sexuality, race and class matter, and come to matter, in negotiations of feminism (Scharff, 2011). Thirty-one respondents described feminists variously as having an unfeminine appearance; being against femininity; being manly; lesbian; and anti-men. Several research participants, for example, rejected feminism as unfeminine. Drawing on Butler's performativity theory, I interpreted these repudiations of feminism as performative citations of femininity and, in some cases, heterosexuality. The association of feminism with transgressive femininities posed particular challenges to white working-class and black women whose femininities have long been conceptualised as deviant from the white, middle-class norm (Gilman, 1992; Skeggs, 1997).While it is beyond the scope of this article to detail how young women's positionings intersect with feminist disidentification, the broader study explored how sexuality, race and class mediate relationships with feminism. Finally, the study contextualised the interviewees' accounts by putting them into dialogue with broader social trends, such as postfeminism, neoliberalism and individualisation. For example, almost all research participants were aware of gender inequalities, but frequently presented themselves as self-responsible managers of their lives who find individual solutions for

dealing with structural inequalities. Overall, the research demonstrates that feminism constitutes a contested and fraught territory in the current neoliberal, postfeminist climate that continues to be characterised by structural inequalities along the lines of gender, sexuality, race and class.

Feminists as unfeminine

Research participants frequently portrayed feminism and femininity as mutually exclusive which resonates with wider media representations (Hinds and Stacy, 2001; Karsch, 2004), empirical findings (Sharpe, 2001; Rich, 2005), and historical accounts (Hesford, 2005; Pugh, 2000). Carla[i] and Carrie draw on cultural understandings of feminism and femininity as mutually exclusive. Carla (lesbian, middle-class, mixed-race, French living in London) claimed that 'feminists see it [femininity] as a negative thing, I don't really understand why, but that's the way they see it, because they don't want to be that'. Equally, Carrie (heterosexual, working-class, white, British) asserted that 'the burning of the bras … was all against femininity really, wasn't it-that was the thing. "We are strong women - we are not feminine!" was the kind of message they were putting across'. Interestingly, femininity, and unfemininity were overwhelmingly described in terms of physical appearance (Gill, 2007). When I asked Christine (heterosexual, middle-class, white, British) to explain what she meant by 'typically feminine', she replied: 'I suppose the main way is visually, you know, in appearance, so, er, in the make-up maybe, er, hair, you know'. Christine only refers to physical characteristics in her description of femininity; her statement does not contain any references to conduct. Relatedly, Carolina (heterosexual, middle-class, white, German) depicted feminists as unfeminine by only listing bodily characteristics. She had the feeling that 'feminists tend to hide their femininity, or so – especially to put on make-up and to somehow dress nicely'[ii]. The feminist is constructed as unfeminine and it is primarily her appearance which expresses her lack of femininity.

What counted as a feminine appearance was narrowly defined, and frequently involved slimness, having long hair, and being attractive to men. In Germany, these views on femininity

became particularly apparent in the respondents' discussion of Angela Merkel as the first female chancellor. Merkel was depicted as an untypical woman several times, mostly because she was portrayed as not looking conventionally feminine. Vivianne (heterosexual, middle-class, black, German) stated she liked Merkel, 'even though she was a bit chubby' and Viola claimed that Merkel was not 'amazingly beautiful'. According to Viola (bisexual, middle-class, mixed-race, German), Merkel was not a woman who came to meetings, making men think: 'wow, great'. Paraphrasing these statements, a conventionally feminine woman must be skinny, beautiful and, importantly, must impress men. Viola's statement about men's reaction to a good looking female politician lays bare heterosexist assumptions by implying that sexual attractiveness and desire primarily exist between men and women. As Richardson (1996: 5-6) points out, '[t]ypically, desire is conceptualised in terms of attraction to difference, where gender is the key marker of difference'.

Feminists were not only depicted as unfeminine women but also portrayed as man-like. An expression frequently used in the German context was 'Mannsweib', which is a derogative German term that translates to 'man-woman'. Charlotte (heterosexual, middle-class, mixed-race, British) for instance described feminists as 'women who are just trying to be men and take over everything'. Charlotte's statement implies a close link between masculinity and power; feminists who seek to gain control are like men who 'take over everything'. The association of feminism with masculinity appears to arise from strict gender polarities where there is no space for women to be unfeminine, but not manly. It seems that women who engage in masculine pursuits of seeking power transgress gender norms, thereby becoming masculinised. In this statement, gender binarisms are re-stabilised and conventional gender polarities re-established. Untypical feminine behaviour is connected to feminism, unfemininity and masculinity, leaving femininity untainted and intact.

Crucially, not all research participants believed that feminism and femininity were incompatible. Karuna (heterosexual, middle-class, Asian, British) did not think there was a tension between feminism and femininity because 'I see one as a cultural stereotype [femininity] and one as being a fact [feminism]'. Equally, Vicky (heterosexual, middle-class, Asian, British) talked about a

friend of hers who identified as feminist and said: 'I would say she is a feminist but she's really pretty and girlie […] anyone can be a feminist I think. It doesn't, you can't stereotype them and say they tend to be feminine or they tend to be more butch'. By drawing on her own experience of having a 'really pretty and girlie' feminist friend, Vicky contests stereotypical perceptions of feminists. In making this claim, she uses the term 'but' which juxtaposes being feminist and pretty. This juxtaposition indicates Vicky's awareness of commonly held opinions that regard feminists as non-girlie. Vicky orients to, but simultaneously distances herself from common perceptions of feminists as unfeminine.

Feminists as man-haters

Charlotte's immediate association with feminism did not relate to unfeminine women, but to man-haters. She stated that 'when you think feminist you tend to think of the man-hating women'. On the whole, just under half of the respondents mentioned man-hating in conjunction with feminism. The extent to which feminist politics were linked to a negative stance towards men raises the question of why feminism is repeatedly related to man-hating. I suggest that sexuality, and more specifically heteronormativity figure prominently in the association of feminists with man-haters. Several research participants argued that feminists did not like men because they liked women[iii]. Heather (heterosexual, middle-class, white, British) believed that 'if you are a feminist you….that you only like women…you know what I mean? That you are so anti-men and that you won't listen to them so I think there is an element of cutting men off from the equation because you are so angry with them'. Heather's statement establishes a connection between feminism, a preference for women and a dislike for men. Relatedly, Carrie claimed that 'a lot of' feminists 'do hate men and that's why they don't become feminine'. Consequently, feminism was not only related to man-hating, but man-hating was connected to liking women and to being unfeminine. Lastly, feminists' supposed unfemininity and man-hating were associated with lesbianism, as Ines' and Vicky's statements demonstrate. Ines (heterosexual, middle-class, mixed-race, German) claimed that feminists are regarded to 'be like men and then it probably somehow came about that they are

associated with lesbians' and Vicky argued that 'you must be a lesbian because you think women, you know, are better than men'. Consequently, there is a chain of associations linking feminism, man-hating, unfemininity and lesbianism.

I propose that these associations with feminism are embedded in, and reproductive of conventional heterosexist binaries. The connection between feminism and man-hating, unfemininity and lesbianism parallels heteronormative assumptions. Chambers (2007: 667) understands heteronormativity as '[…] the assemblage of regulatory practices, which produces intelligible genders within a heterosexual matrix that insists upon the coherence of sex/gender/desire […]'. As the term 'heterosexual matrix' indicates, Chambers draws on Butler's (1993; 1999) work and her argument that the internal coherence of gender requires an oppositional heterosexuality. Butler claims that

> gender can denote a *unity* of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender – where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self – and desire – where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires (1999: 30, emphasis in original).

She highlights that the conception of gender presupposes a causal relation among sex, gender and desire but also suggests that '[…] desire reflects or expresses gender […]', and vice-versa (ibid.). To paraphrase Butler, and quote Dennis (2004: 383), '[t]he term *man* is meaningless unless it includes "desiring women", and *women* is meaningless unless it includes "desiring men"'.

The heteronormative imperative that one must desire a different gender from that with which one identifies, provides a foil for analysing the chain of associations between being feminist, anti-man, unfeminine and lesbian. As Heather's statement about feminists' preference for women demonstrates, feminists are depicted as man-haters because they like women. Following a binaristic, heterosexist logic, there is no space for liking both women and men. It seems that 'liking' signifies 'desiring' in this context, suggesting an analogy between the verbs 'to like' and 'to desire'. Carrie's claim that feminists do hate men 'and that that's why they don't become feminine' illustrates the role of heterosexuality in regulating gender as a binary relation: women who do not like men are unfeminine. In this specific instance, sexuality is constitutive of gender. Ines'

statement that feminists are man-like and her subsequent conclusion that this is why they are associated with lesbians further reveal the role of sexuality and desire as a structuring principle. Women who are like men must desire like men and, following a heterosexual logic, therefore be attracted to women. Feminists are lesbians for the reason that 'you must be a lesbian because you think women, you know, are better than men' (Vicky). The construction of the feminist as unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian cites a heteronormative logic and resonates with Chamber's view of heteronormativity as insisting on a coherence between sex, gender and desire.

Given the structuring role of sexuality and heteronormativity in the portrayal of feminists as man-haters, several research participants tried to distance themselves from man-hating when negotiating feminism. The heteronormative requirement for women to desire men renders feminist identification problematic as a stance that is commonly regarded as involving hostility towards men. Nanda (heterosexual, middle-class, Asian, British) claimed that she would not mind being called a feminist 'as long as people don't see me as a man-hater'. Nanda's response to feminism and its alleged hostility towards men is structured by heterosexual conventions. Identifying as female and being positioned within a heterosexual matrix potentially explains why she feels the need to assert she is not against men. The respondents' emphasis on having a positive attitude towards men resonates with recent studies on young women's negotiations of gender and sexuality. Hamilton (2007), for example, found that her heterosexual research participants engaged in various strategies to garner men's approval. Her ethnographic study on a university campus in the US explored how dominant groups maintain environments in which they are privileged. The research demonstrates that heterosexual women 'may exhibit homophobia to maintain the believability of their traditionally feminine identities' which forms part of a broader attempt to be valued by men (2007: 146). Hamilton's research and my study illustrate how the politics of gender and sexuality are lived out for young women, shedding light on how sexuality and gender relate to each other in these specific contexts.

Feminists as Lesbians

Having demonstrated how feminists are portrayed as unfeminine and man-hating, and having argued that these accounts emerge from the heterosexual matrix, it is perhaps not surprising that half of the research participants explicitly connected feminism to lesbianism. Asking Louisa (heterosexual, middle-class, Asian, German) what she knew about the women's movement, she stated: 'Not much. No, it always makes me think of les, of lesbians'. Discussing stereotypes of feminists, Elspeth (lesbian, middle-class, white, British) recounted that: 'feminists were supposed to be fat, ugly, can't get men, lesbians, wear sensible shoes, you know, rugby shirts, it is still out there'. She continued by arguing that there are 'a lot of stereotypes out there, and I think feminism and lesbianism are very very intertwined and I think there is still that image if you stand up for yourself you have to be gay'. There were only a few research participants who actively challenged the established link between feminism with lesbianism. For instance, Carla stated: 'I know that there are stereotypes that dykes or gay women will be more feminist than anyone […] it's not true you know, it's not because you are a lesbian that you, you are very prone to feminism'. In referring to the stereotype that gay women are more feminist than anyone, and subsequently distancing herself from it by arguing that 'it's not true', Carla critiques the assumption that lesbians are feminists.

Reflecting the heterosexist logic that I identified in the construction of feminists as unfeminine and 'manly', lesbians were depicted in parallel ways. Louisa talked about a lesbian friend of hers who went dating. According to Louisa, the lesbians she met were 'these hardcore women who either look like men, or, yeah, they all looked like men, I think, or these man-women, I don't know how I should describe that'. Louisa's use of the construction 'either/or' implies that she intended to list several traits of lesbians. However, Louisa refers to lesbians' supposed masculinity three times in her statement: lesbians 'either look like men', or 'looked like men', or are 'man-women'. The portrayal of lesbians as manly evokes the myth of the 'mannish lesbian' (Newton, 1984) which represents 'the most enduring characteristic' ascribed to lesbians (Blackman and Perry, 1990: 74; Richardson, 1996). Louisa's statement also resonates with Esterberg's (1996) research on

a group of lesbian and bisexual women who she interviewed in the United States during the second half of the 1980s and first half of the 90s. She found that 'the coding of lesbians as not feminine *and therefore in some way masculine* predominated' (1996: 276, emphasis in original). Paralleling my analysis of Carrie's statement that feminists are unfeminine because they do not like men, sexuality seems to be constitutive of gender in these instances. This is not to privilege sexuality over gender, or to suggest that sexuality and gender always relate to each other in these ways. As Richardson (2007: 465) argues, we should regard the interimplication of sexuality and gender as 'the product of particular social and historical contexts'. Equally, Jackson (2006) reminds us that gender and (hetero) sexuality intersect differently in different dimensions of the social, such as the structural and the everyday. My analysis, therefore, only explores the connections between sexuality and gender in the specific context of the research participants' discussions of feminism.

In addition to being associated with manliness, the lesbian frequently acquired abject-status in the talk of the research participants. According to Butler (1993), subjects are formed through processes of abjection and the abject acts as the constitutive outside of the self. For example, heterosexuality configures itself through the abjection of homosexuality; the homosexual as abject figures as the other, '*un*symbolisable, unspeakable, illegible' (1993: 190, emphasis in original). Talking about a teacher who said that feminists were 'all vegan lesbians', Heather continued by claiming that they 'are not looked upon as people. Not that it is negative to call them what my geography teacher called them but that is, it's not taken, it's not looked upon as serious'. Heather alludes to a perception of lesbians as somewhat non-human by arguing that 'they are not looked upon as people'. The abjection of homosexuality also finds expression in her statement through the avoidance of the term 'lesbian'. Heather uses pronouns ('they' and 'them') when talking about lesbians, but does not mention the term. I suggest that the abject position of the 'lesbian' transpires through the absence of the signifier.

The abjection of female homosexuality was also hinted at in Undine's (lesbian, middle-class, white, German) description of 'Kampflesbe'[iv] as saying: 'I am here, the Kampflesbe and er, I

don't know and you can all kiss my a – and I am so absolutely cool and I am not a human being, but I am somehow, I represent a position'. Is it a coincidence that Undine portrays the Kampflesbe as not being a human being? Or is it indicative of the abject status of the Kampflesbe within heteronormative constellations? Seidman (2005: 52) outlines the triple threat that lesbians pose to the heteronormative patriarchal order: '[a]s a perceived threat to men's dominance, to a conventional dichotomous gender order, and to a norm of the heterosexual family that has relied on the domestic labour of women, the lesbian is a truly menacing figure'. Crucially, female homosexuality did not *always* seem to signify abjection. Resonating with Roseneil's (2000) identification of queer tendencies in the wider social and cultural spheres, Elspeth claimed that 'it's a great time to be a gay woman'. In a slightly different context, Rhiannon (bisexual, middle-class, white, British) stated that her friends regarded her bisexuality as 'really normal'. Frequently however, the figure of the lesbian was configured as abject. This was expressed in Lara's (bisexual, middle-class, white, British) claim about her realisation that she also liked women. She thought that a sexual desire for women 'cannot be part of me at all'. Lara experienced homosexuality as something that had to be split from her self. It is other and unrepresentable, as Julia's (lesbian, middle-class, white, German) account of having difficulties in 'finding a language' for her lesbianism demonstrates.

The figure of 'the feminist': of haunting and sticky signs
The abject-status of lesbianism, and the research participants' association of feminism with lesbianism arguably give some support to McRobbie's (2003) claim that feminism is abjected in the contemporary postfeminist climate. The figure of the feminist as abject found expression in respondents' inability to provide examples for the "feminist as unfeminine, man-hating, and lesbian" stereotype. Christine did not know where her views of feminists came from: 'people talking about, people's stories you hear maybe, I think it is a very subconscious, kind of unconscious process, I don't know where they come from really, a bit worrying'. Christine's use of the words 'subconscious' and 'unconscious' raise the question of whether they point to the

phantasmatic nature of the figure of the feminist. Equally, Ella (heterosexual, middle-class, black, British) stated that 'strong feminists tend to look down on men' but told me: 'I can't think of any to be honest'. The figure of the feminist as a man-hater figures in Ella's perception of feminists, but escapes her mind when she is asked to apply her statement to her experiences. The trope of the feminist, connected to unfemininity, man-hating, and lesbianism, figures prominently in the research participants' accounts but continually disappears from sight when related to actual experiences.

Talking about her mental picture of feminists as unfeminine and man-hating, Caroline stated: 'I don't know how these images come about, I am thinking [pause]. I don't know, and actually, I really can't think of a concrete, relatively well-known feminist who corresponds to that. But I would still always say it'. Carolina does not know where her image of feminists comes from, but nevertheless holds on to its mythical construction. The figure seems to haunt the interviews – it is strongly felt to be there, but does not materialise when the respondents are asked to provide specific examples. The construction of the feminist as unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian gives rise to feelings of discomfort because it destabilises the heteronormative order. As a figure that is perceived to be transgressive, the feminist has to be repudiated and kept at a safe distance. Recalling Butler's psychoanalytic considerations on abjection and on processes of subject-formation more broadly, the figure of the feminist acts as a constitutive outside of the heteronormative order. It haunts the interviews because it is always-already there; as a constitutive outside it is also inside and therefore cannot be discarded. As Fuss (1991: 3) argues, '[h]eterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychical proximity of its terrifying (homo)sexual other, any more than homosexuality can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressures of (hetero)sexual conformity. Each is *haunted* by the other […]' (emphasis added). Butler (1993: 125) equally argues that '[…] heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, that its effort to become its own idealisations can never be finally or fully achieved, and that it is consistently *haunted* by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualised

gender to produce itself' (emphasis added). Paralleling Fuss' and Butler's psychoanalytic accounts of homosexuality as the constitutive outside of heterosexuality, which haunts the heteronormative order, I propose to view the spectral existence of the feminist as unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian as that which has to be forcefully repudiated in the accounts of the research participants, but which nevertheless haunts them.

Even when the respondents realised that there was a discrepancy between their feelings about and knowledges of feminism, they were reluctant to reconsider their views. On the contrary, the myth of the feminist was instead reinstalled. Stella (heterosexual, middle-class, white, German), for example, portrayed feminism as a movement that leaves out men, but then stated 'okay, I mean I actually can't give you a concrete example now, because, again, it is only that which I believe to know, erm, that, erm [laughter] it's getting complicated, yes, that there are areas that men aren't granted access to'. Stella is aware that she only believes to know something; however, she subsequently reconfigured her belief as a truth claim by describing feminists as having 'hobbies or like simply men-free zones or something like that, which I just find a bit ridiculous'. Without being able to mention any specific instances of feminists advocating men-free zones, Stella refers to feminists' supposed exclusionary practices towards men as 'ridiculous'. While Stella acknowledges her lack of 'concrete examples', the feminist-as-man-hating is evoked in her account. Stella's affirmation of mythical constructions of the feminist could be interpreted as an attempt to preserve the spectre of the unfeminine man-hater as the constitutive outside of heterosexual femininity.

In support of my argument about the constitutive role of the figure of the feminist which haunts heteronormative constellations, the construction and preservation of the feminist as transgressing heterosexual norms is also a feature of how second-wave feminism is often remembered in academic feminism (Hesford, 2005). Hesford argues that the sign of the 'feminist-as-lesbian' first appeared at the turn of the nineteenth century and then re-appeared in the 1970s. The sign, argues Hesford, is also prevalent today:

> As a metacultural sign, a sign that transgresses ostensibly discrete discursive realms (such as popular culture, mass media, subcultural feminist zines, academic cultural memory manifested in concepts and terms like 'essentialism', for example), the figure of the feminist-as-lesbian is evidence, I argue, of a kind of

> remembering – a collective cultural remembering of the second wave movement – that is also a haunting (2005: 228).

Crucially in relation to my argument, Hesford claims that the 'feminist-as-lesbian' haunts academic feminism today. Drawing on Derrida, she argues that that haunting is '[…] intrinsic to every dominant social and political order because it is a sign of that which has been forcibly expunged or evacuated from that order […]' (2005: 229). In understanding the figure of the 'feminist-as-lesbian' as haunting academic feminism, Hesford (2005: 238) refers to the challenges that second wave feminism made to the '[…] socio-cultural institution of heterosexuality – challenges that are not yet over'. Extrapolating from Hesford's insightful analysis, I argue that the configuration of the 'lesbian-as-feminist' as haunting and threatening works in similar ways in the respondents' accounts. The myth of feminists as unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian haunts these accounts precisely because it still challenges conventional constructions of femininity and heterosexuality.

We can further understand the pervasiveness of the myth of the 'feminist-as-lesbian' if we draw on Ahmed's (2004) work on the economy of affects more broadly and the attribution of certain feelings to objects more specifically. Arguing that feelings are produced as effects of circulation and do not reside in objects, Ahmed uses the insights of performativity theory to demonstrate how affects align themselves with objects by sticking to bodies. Through repetition, unfemininity, man-hating, and lesbianism are attached to feminism: feminism becomes a 'sticky sign' that therefore evokes a chain of associations which have become intrinsic to the sign through reiteration. The stereotype of the ugly, man-bashing, lesbian feminist comes into existence through repeated reiterations and produces that which it seeks to designate every time it is named. My interviews represent sites where the sign of the feminist is evoked as sticky and where the stickiness of the sign is augmented. However, my analysis of the links between feminism, unfemininity, man-hating and lesbianism also seeks to render these associations less sticky by – quite literally - disentangling them.

Ahmed's performative approach to the binding effects of values as they become associated with specific signs explains why the stereotype of the feminist is not just a stereotype. The negative

affect which sticks to feminism is that which turns numerous research participants away from it. Yvonne (heterosexual, working-class, black, British) argued that she would be 'scared to be around [feminism]' which reveals the affective dimension of negotiations of feminism as something that challenges heterosexual conventions. The emotion of fear becomes attached to the sign of feminism and subsequently makes Yvonne turn away from it. Heather also told me that 'the view of feminists, the stereotype of them would stop me from calling myself one'. Similarly, Christine said she would not label herself a feminist because 'there are still some negative associations attached to feminism'.

The figure of the feminist provokes discomfort and gives rise to repudiations because of the negative affects sticking to it. In line with Ahmed's argument, stereotypes are not simply stereotypes. Emotions stick to stereotypes, align themselves with the figure of the feminist, and performatively bring it into existence through reiteration. As signifying that which challenges heterosexual conventions – unfemininity, hostility towards men and women's desire for women - the feminist constitutes a threat to heterosexual norms and for some has to be kept at a distance. By representing something that has to be repudiated under a regime of heterosexuality, the feminist acts as a constitutive outside of the heterosexual matrix. Due to its status as outside, but also inside (Fuss, 1991), the 'feminist-as-lesbian' haunts the young women's accounts because it cannot be entirely expunged. A re-conceptualisation of the figure of the feminist as a haunting, constitutive outside, but also as a 'sticky sign' which transports emotions sheds light on the affective dimensions of rejections of feminism which take place under a regime of heterosexuality.

Conclusion
This article has demonstrated how a theorisation of sexuality can enhance our understanding of a widely documented social phenomenon, namely feminist disidentification. Showing that feminists were frequently portrayed as unfeminine, man-hating, and lesbian, I employed the insights of queer theory to argue that heterosexual conventions structure constructions of the feminist. The re-conceptualisation of the trope of the feminist as a constitutive outside of heterosexual norms, but

also as a 'sticky sign', sheds light on the processes involved in repudiations of feminism. Thus, the analysis presented here contributes to our understanding of how sexuality structures knowledges about, and negotiations of feminism. While my analysis is limited to the interviews I conducted, I would like to draw attention to its potential broader implications. As I stated above, associations of feminism with unfeminity, man-hating and lesbianism have emerged from historical accounts, media representations, and academic engagements with second-wave feminism. This observation points to the need to analyse the workings of heterosexual norms beyond the research participants' accounts and to ask whether similar, or different, processes are at play when feminism is negotiated in other spheres.

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[i] All names have been changed.

[ii] All translations from German into English are mine.

[iii] As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, it is interesting that the young women are able only to locate man-hating as a 'lesbian' response. While the majority of research participants were aware of gender inequalities, there were no prolonged discussions of patriarchy in the interviews.

[iv] Kampflesbe is derogative and translates to 'fighting lesbian'.