



Queer Histories of Style in the Midwest from the 1970s to the Present: Entangled Epistemologies of Images, Memories, and Artifacts

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Queerness or queer identities have intersected in numerous ways with the fashioned body, informing ideologies of what constitutes being queer and its relationship to queer style. In past studies, scholars have highlighted the many ways lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) women have fashioned their bodies. Geczy and Karaminas (2013) explored the butch and femme roles that permeated styles beginning in the mid 20th century, and Wilson (2013) explored different lesbian styles dating back to the eighteenth century. Wilson argued that twenty-first century lesbian women have a myriad of ways in which they negotiate their queer identity through fashion. These opportunities expand beyond the binary of butch and femme aesthetics that were largely adopted in the twentieth century. In these and other studies, the authors focused on urban women. With this study, we will add to the scholarship on queer styles and the variety of ways LGBTQ+ women fashion their bodies by emphasizing an important, yet understudied time and space: The Midwest area of the United States over the past 50 years.

Growing up and living in the Midwest provides unique experiences as related to appearance, as individuals are removed from major cities of cultural capital with greater freedom and access to sensibilities of the “fashion—style—dress” framework (Tulloch, 2010, p. 275). In this study, we investigated how Midwestern LGBTQ+ women fashioned their bodies, which may bear little resemblance to the styles of the time period or may also offer other unique interpretations in the stylization of the body.

The authors interviewed 12 self-identified women (age 30 to 50) who lived and spent time largely in the Midwest region of the United States in mostly rural (less than 2,500 people) or urban cluster areas (2,500 to 50,000 people). Prior to each interview, the women found images of themselves from throughout their lives (some shared up to 50 images), and additionally, interviews took place near their closets in their homes so that both their photographs and objects found in their closets served as elicitation tools of their various “fashion—style—dress” from throughout their lives. The interviews focused on the history and evolving nature of their personal styles, how they related to dominant ideologies of their perceptions of LGBTQ+ women’s appearances, and how they have actively negotiated their queer identities in the world (Kaiser, 2012).

We utilized McCullough and Kaiser’s (2010) (k)notty model, to examine these 12 queer women’s appearances through a less evolutionary and oppositional fashion, in order to explore the “entanglements” (versus absolutes) of identity and how conflicting meanings surfaced as these women fashioned their bodies in this particular time and space of the 1970s to the present, Midwest America. We examined from the viewpoint of how these women defined and redefined themselves as to who they were and who they “were not,” through analysis of their clothing, images, and memories. In this sense, the paper will be “neither linear nor circular, but instead

follow the circuits of knotty entanglements” (p. 363). This metaphor provides a “space to consider connections and disconnections” (p. 363) and allows for a fluid interpretation of the overlapping and emerging ideas, experiences, and formation of constantly shifting and evolving identities. These emerging ideas highlight the multiple, shifting, and alternative fashion histories present in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in contrast to some of the hegemonic ideologies (ex. Butch versus femme) provided in current histories.

An overarching experience of *ambivalence* cut across multiple stories as the women discussed the history of their styles. In many of their early memories, as shown through images or garments, they related to some of the binary, dominant ideologies such as butch or femme. For example, Cyndi (43 years old, lesbian) explained, “I was wearing dress pants with Birkenstocks and I had a thumb ring on.” Then, she remembered someone saying to her, “oh man, you’re an old school dyke.” She continued with, “No I’m not, I don’t have ill-fitting pants, and I don’t have short spikey hair, I have short hair... having someone refer to me as an old school dyke because I had Birkenstocks and a thumb ring was really interesting to hear, because I didn’t think about that.” Dyke was often used as an alternative descriptor for butch, or a queer woman who presented in a more masculine aesthetic. Yet, throughout the remaining of Cyndi’s interview she related much contradiction in her style and the evolution of her style over time. She viewed images of herself describing them as “butch,” “baby-butch,” or “soft-butch.” While these stereotypical looks of “butch” are often associated with lesbians or queer women, Cyndi brought up important ideas related to the entanglements of “what is a queer style?” versus “not a queer style” when she said pointing to a picture, “oh no, I look like a lesbian now [because she has short hair], and then I’m like wait, maybe I look like a lesbian all the time [even with long hair, See Figure 1]?” Similar to Cyndi, each woman will be presented in relation to the history of their style narratives while highlighting entanglements and overlapping ideas in relation to dominant ideologies of queer style.



Figure 1. Cyndi pictured on right with long hair, stockings, and other feminine stylings. c. 1990. Photo courtesy of Cyndi.

In sum, investigating the style and appearance history of these 12 women highlights the cultural ambivalence surrounding the phenomena of queer style. The real or imagined notions of everyday queer style within a geographic space such as the Midwest served as a space to enact tensions between communities, styles, and aesthetics – both queer and straight. We argue, then, that all style is a “shifting queer style” when enacted through embodied practices of queer folks, even if those styles were thought to be straight. Through the analysis of images, memories, and artifacts, we disentangled what it means to be and look queer from a historical lens and that these styles all engage in the process of being/becoming (Kaiser, 2012) temporarily queer on queer bodies.

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