

A Community of Beloved Femmes: The Cultivation of Radical Self-Love in *Femme Shark Communiqué #1*

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In 2008, collaborators and close friends, Zuleikha Mahmood and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, declared “WE’RE A FUCKING MIRACLE” in their handmade, hand-circulated zine, *Femme Shark Communiqué #1: All Our Holes Are Hungry: Hungry for Justice and Fucking*¹ (8). The zine features the “Femme Shark Manifesto,” which had previously been posted and shared online, as well as an instruction manual for potential femme sharks, lists of historical and possible femme sharks and femme-shark-themed movies, DIY recipes for crafts and drinks, and hand-drawn sharks with eyelashes (Fig. 1). Within the pages of the zine, which was circulated in progressive and queer spaces in the San Francisco Bay area, Mahmood and Piepzna-Samarasinha reject the subjugation of queer femme women of color in the public sphere and mainstream feminist and queer communities. Instead, Mahmood and Piepzna-Samarasinha, two queer women of color, celebrate themselves and their community in an attempt to reclaim the femme identity through radical self-love. Although *Femme Shark Communiqué #1* is no longer distributed offline, it maintains a powerful influence in queer women activist communities through online references to, and reproductions of, the zine. Even today, numerous Twitter and Tumblr users identify as Femme Sharks in their profiles, signifying the lasting influence of the now defunct zine. The reason for the cultural impact of this briefly published local zine can be found within its pages: *Femme Shark Communiqué #1* delivers a call to queer women of color and their allies to define themselves on their own terms and to celebrate their bodies, experiential knowledge, and relationships with one another. In a world where women are often told they must subscribe to a specific ideal to earn praise or love—thin, white, blonde, passive, codependent—the Femme Shark rejection of outside validation and celebration of self-worth is indeed defiant. But radical self-love cultivated in the zine is not only about the individual; rather, the rhetorical crafting of radical self-love in *Femme Shark Communiqué #1* establishes a collective identity of resistance centered on praxis, wherein a radical self-love transforms individual outcasts into an empowered and active community.

In this essay, I argue that Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mahmood² call forth a new community through their rhetorical enactment of radical self-love. In this essay, I define radical self-love as the individual and communal practice

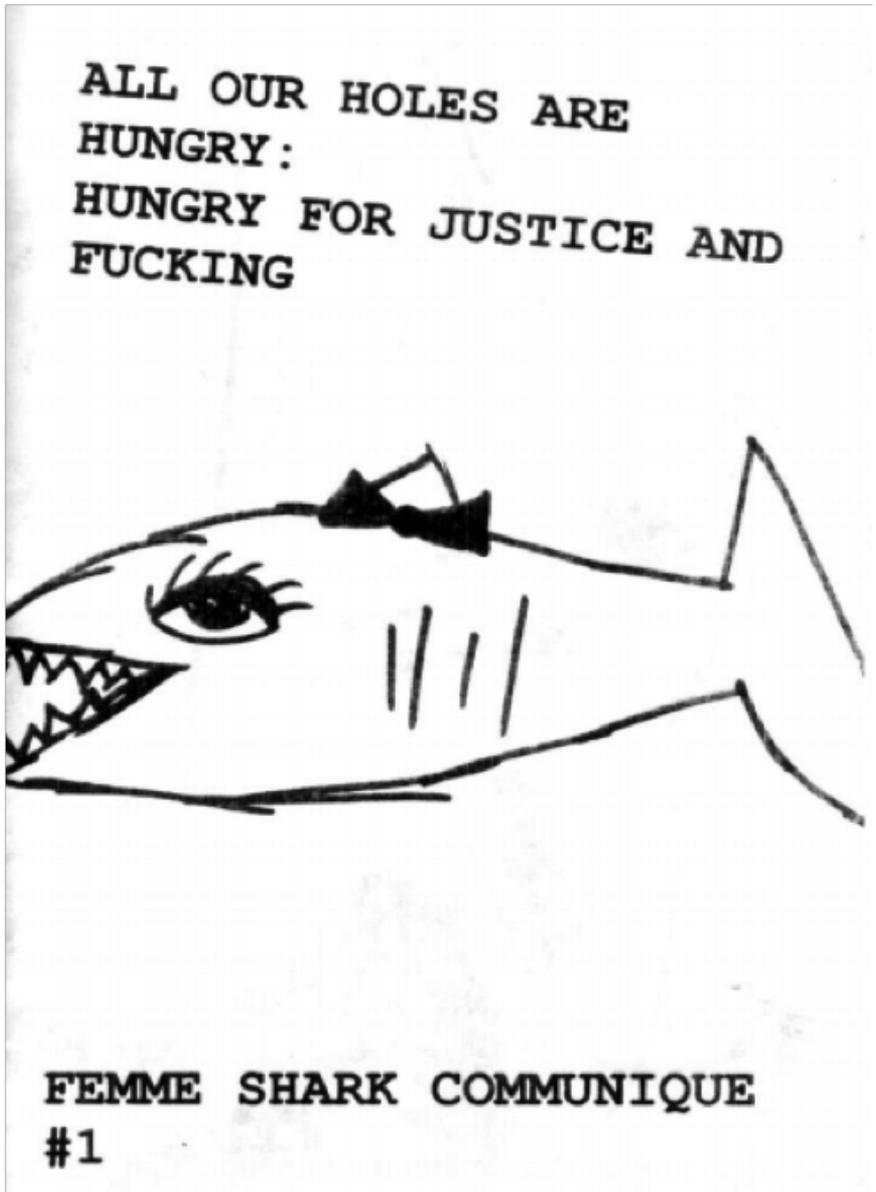


Figure 1: Cover of *Femme Shark Communique* #1.

**FEMME SHARKS AREN'T JUST DIMEPIECES AND TROPHY
WIVES
FUCK THAT!
WE MIGHT BE YOUR GIRL,
BUT WE'RE OUR OWN FEMMES.
WE RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE LEADERS OF OUR
COMMUNITIES.
WE HOLD IT DOWN, CALM YOUR TEARS, ORGANIZE THE
RALLY, VISIT YOU IN JAIL, GET CHILDCARE HOOKED UP,
LOAN YOU TWENTY DOLLARS.
FEMMES ARE WELDERS, AFTERSCHOOL TEACHERS,
ABORTION CLINIC WORKERS, STRIPPERS, WRITERS,
FACTORY WORKERS, MOMS, REVOLUTIONARIES
DEDICATED TO TAKING THE SYSTEM THE HELL DOWN
SO WE CAN BE FREE!**

Figure 2: An excerpt of "The Femme Shark Manifesto" as published in *Femme Shark Communique #1*

of reclaiming marginalized identities as worthy of love, care, and celebration. By addressing both self-identified and potential Femme Sharks, Piepzn-Samarasinha and Mahmood fulfill their stated objective to create "sleeping cells of Femme Sharks spreading the fierceness everywhere" (12). To make this claim, I focus on several short written pieces, including "Femme Shark Manifesto" and "How to Be a Shark," which are all published in their first zine, *Femme Shark Communique #1: All Our Holes Are Hungry: Hungry for Justice and Fucking*. Then, I outline five rhetorical moves that foster radical self-love within the zine. These moves are not to be mistaken as a linear process, for they are recursive, often overlapping and building upon each other to construct a rhetoric of radical self-love.

First, radical self-love cultivates exigence: the Femme Sharks describe the catalyst that prompts their invention—hateful rhetoric and violence against queer women of color—and articulate the urgent need for self-love as a remedy. Second, radical self-love self-defines: the Femme Sharks respond by defining themselves as empowered agents worthy of love. Third, radical self-love breaks the rules: Femme Sharks counter the narrative of internalized hatred by rebelling against normative/appropriate language, sexuality, and emotional expression. Fourth, radical self-love unites: the rhetorical performance of radical self-love is constitutive, constructing a new community that is united through the shared experience of radical self-love. Fifth, radical self-love mobilizes: the Femme Shark community is moved to community engagement by the collective practice of radical self-love. These moves are critical in defining a shared ethos of self-empowerment and self-love in the face of hate, violence, and marginalization. By studying texts like the *Femme Shark Communique #1* and other collaboratively crafted activist texts, feminist rhetorical scholars can observe the rhetorical strategies counterpublics use to resist, unite, organize, and love, prompting new definitions and new approaches to the question of how groups manifest rhetorical power. Before analyzing the Femme Sharks in this way, I first situate my research within feminist rhetorical scholarship;

specifically, I locate the Femme Sharks within a tradition of feminist and queer activism and rhetoric that celebrates the love ethic and actively pushes against submission and silence through outlaw emotions.

The Practice and Rhetoric of Radical Self-love

Very little work on radical self-love exists within the academy; thus, I sketch a framework for thinking about radical self-love by incorporating theories of self-love from Erich Fromm and revolutionary love from bell hooks before turning to the richest source of writing on radical self-love: grassroots activists. Erich Fromm provides an overview of the practice of love in his influential book, *The Art of Loving*, in which he offers a theory of the value of self-love. Fromm defends the practice and art of self-love by distinguishing loving oneself from narcissism. For Fromm, the ability to love others stems from the ability to love oneself: “an attitude of love toward themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others” (59). He defines love as “care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge,” and one who can project those qualities onto themselves can project outwards to other individuals, their community, and humanity at large (59-60). Fromm thus provides a broad definition of both love and self-love by outlining the behaviors and actions that manifest from love. While Fromm’s work is critical in tracing a theory of self-love, he does not address the political potential of *radical self-love*.

Exhibiting love for oneself can be a radical act, especially for marginalized peoples who told they are not worthy of care or respect through state violence, exclusions from school curriculums, disparaging dominant narratives in popular culture, and other manifestations of racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia. For this reason, love has been a core concept in many womanist, black feminist, and disability rights writing and activism. Perhaps the most prolific feminist writers on love is bell hooks, who often demonstrates the connection between love and justice in her theoretical and critical works. In *All About Love*, she writes, “when I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic” (xix). In a later essay, hooks attributes Martin Luther King’s rhetorical effectiveness to his commitment to a love ethic: “King’s insistence on love had provided folk an enduring message of hope” (*Writing Beyond Race* 96). She notes, however, that King never had the opportunity to deepen his approach to love ethics to include the power of self-love (96). While hooks discusses radical love and Fromm discusses self-love, neither thoroughly address radical self-love. For the most pointed and poignant writing on radical self-love as a transformational and resistant act, I move to activist spaces outside of the academy.

Abundant online writing about radical self-love has led to community organizing both offline and online. In addition to the *Femme Sharks*, the website *The Body Is Not an Apology*, founded by spoken word poet Sonya Renee Taylor, facilitates community identity formation and organizing through self-love. In 2011, Taylor digitally shared a picture of herself, a plus sized black woman in a corset, and quickly realized the significance of this seemingly simple act: "I was clear that my big brown body was not supposed to be seen or sexy but I posted it anyway. This terribly frightening act was birthed from the outlandishly simple idea that I and no other humans should be ashamed of their bodies" (Taylor n. pag.). Motivated by the response she received from the picture, both overwhelmingly positive and negative, she then started an online community that connects people and "fosters global, radical, unapologetic self love which translates to radical human action in service toward a more just and compassionate world." Within two months, the project raised over \$40,000 from more than 700 supporters ("WhenWeSayYes"). The extent of grassroots support for this one project demonstrates the appreciation of radical self-love in activist communities.

Negative responses to Taylor's self-love for her "big brown body" illustrates the taboo nature of radical self-love for marginalized peoples and bodies. Transgressive feelings that reject dominant narratives of shame and self-hatred have a long tradition within feminist and queer writings. Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Nomy Lamm, and bell hooks have long embraced and channeled what Alison Jaggar calls outlaw emotions as a source of strength and power. Jaggar defines outlaw emotions as "conventionally unacceptable" emotions which are most often experienced by "subordinated individuals who pay a disproportionately high price for maintaining the status quo" (160). Jaggar reflects that "conventionally inexplicable emotions, particularly, though not exclusively, experienced by women, may lead us to make subversive observations that challenge dominant conceptions of the status quo" (161). Because of their oppositional power, outlaw emotions are often policed through various means, such as emotional literacy education in school (Stenberg 353), threats of physical violence, and the public demonstration of hatred—as seen by the negative responses to Taylor's celebratory tribute to her body. By expressing outlaw emotions, women and queer rhetors subject themselves to criticism, silencing, and even violence. And yet, it is the risks, the danger of outlaw emotions that give emotions like radical self-love such transformational power. As Jaggar notes, tapping into outlaw emotions in the face of oppression can be a source for invention for women, a strategy to discover the causes and costs of injustice (161).

To theorize radical self-love, I have pulled from theoretical work on love, activist writing on radical self-love, and the feminist tradition of embracing

outlaw emotions. Now, I turn to analyzing the rhetorical moves marginalized communities can deploy to celebrate and cultivate a culture of care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge for themselves as individuals and as a community. Through the five rhetorical moves of radical self-love, the Femme Sharks leverage radical self-love to speak out against oppression based on sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism.

Move 1: Radical Self-Love Cultivates Exigence

Throughout the zine, the Femme Sharks describe the rhetorical situation that prompts their intervention and demonstrate the urgent need for radical self-love as a rhetorical, activist, and therapeutic practice. As queer women of color, the Femme Sharks are subjected to both the hateful rhetoric toward queer communities and the hateful rhetoric toward women of color. Hatred teaches marginalized communities to stay quiet, stay submissive, and stay humble, and this crushing hatred is perpetuated both explicitly and implicitly. One example is the infamous hate rhetoric from the Westboro Baptist Church, known for disturbing military funerals with signs that declare “GOD HATES FAGS.” The Westboro Baptist Church taps into religious authority to demonstrate hatred as the normative emotional response to queer people. In an analysis of the rhetoric of religious hate, Michael Cobb explains that “it is important to realize that this expression of God’s hate, this expression of rancor toward those participating in unlawful sexual practices, comes not only from the fringe.... This hatred is mainstream” (3). This mainstream hatred is instructional, a strategy to teach LGBT individuals how to feel about themselves, and furthermore, how to continually deny their identities for their own emotional and physical safety. As not simply queer but also women of color, the women of the Femme Sharks have historically been targeted by varied and intersecting public demonstrations of hate. Thus, the Femme Sharks present remembrance and resistance informed by self-love as a conscious and powerful response to hateful acts and rhetoric.

The Femme Sharks candidly depict the rhetorical situation that prompted the zine’s intervention: hate crimes and hateful microaggressions. Throughout the text, Femme Sharks remind their audience that the stakes are high:

WE REMEMBER OUR DEAD- SAKIA GUNN, GWEN ARAJUO, AND MANY OTHER QUEER AND TRANS POC WHO DIED BECAUSE OF RACIST, HOMO/TRANSPHOBIC VIOLENCE/NOT AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT/ BUT AS WOMEN WE LOVED IN REAL LIFE/WOMEN WHO COULDN’T BEEN US OR OUR LOVES. (7)

Here, the Femme Sharks name victims of hate crimes, which are recognized by legislation and the courts as violent crimes that are motivated by bias

against a protected class (“Hate Crime—Overview”). In the 1993 Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Mitchell*, Chief Justice William Rehnquist justified the harsher prosecution of hate crimes because they “are more likely to provoke retaliatory crimes, inflict distinct emotional harms on their victims, and incite community unrest.” In other words, hate crimes are intended to both physically and emotionally harm the victim and the community to which the victim belongs. A hate crime is a rhetorical act, a violent argument that a specific community should be silenced, removed, and reviled by society. The Femme Sharks respond to hate crimes by refusing to forget the victims and survivors, and further, by articulating their worthiness of self-love in the face of overwhelming hate. Through this remembrance and celebration, the Femme Sharks resist the argument conveyed through hate crimes; rather than remaining silent and submissive, they draw attention to the injustice of hate crimes and name self-love as an internal remedy. This move displays both knowledge of and responsibility for their community, practices central to Fromm’s framework of self-love.

When the Femme Sharks remember victims of hate crimes, they identify with brutalized queer women of color, both as possible victims themselves and as imaginary lovers. This articulation of grievances highlights the exigence of the text itself and its response of radical self-love: as Lloyd Bitzer makes clear, “any exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6). In the case of the Femme Sharks, the exigence, the “thing which is other than it should be,” is the systematic hatred and abuse of queer women of color—not a singular event but a pattern of events over time. The tone is urgent because the situation is; they are not talking about just one murdered queer woman of color but many. The hate crimes perpetrated toward LGBT women Gwen Araujo and Sakia Gunn³ could also be perpetrated toward any of the Femme Sharks, a vivid reminder that any queer woman of color could be next. The normativity of hatred means life or death for the Femme Sharks, making their public demonstration of radical self-love a matter of survival.

In addition to hate crimes, the Femme Sharks are also responding to daily microaggressions in their pursuit of a rhetoric of radical self-love. Microaggressions that target the intersecting identities of the Femme Sharks attempt to push Femme Sharks away from self-love and toward self-doubt. Derald Sue defines microaggressions as

brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. (5)

Previously referred to as “racial microaggression,” Sue updates the term to reflect intersectionality, expanding the definition to include a variety of biases. As queer women of color, the Femme Sharks experience bias intersectionally: in other words, their queer, gendered, and raced bodies are subjected to a myriad of microaggressions. To counter both hate crimes and microaggressions, Femme Sharks argue for stance of self-defense against physical, verbal, and imperialist attacks:

WE BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE A RIGHT TO DEFEND/ OURSELVES
AND OUR COMMUNITIES/ AGAINST ANY KIND OF ATTACK-/FROM
ASSHOLES ON THE STREET/TO RACIST WHITE CLUB OWNERS WHO
WANT THREE/ PIECES OF ID/ TO FOLKS WHO INSIST THAT WE'RE
STRAIGHT/TO PEOPLE WHO TAKE OUR LAND. (7)

In this passage, the Femme Sharks perform the first move of a rhetoric of radical self-love by unapologetically naming examples of attacks based on gender, race, sexuality, and nationality.

Highlighting the role of difference in systematic oppression echoes many feminist writers of the past, including Audre Lorde, who describes her own position and persecution based on several overlapping identities: “As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong” (114). Similar to Lorde, as queer women of color, the Femme Sharks’ are marked in multiple ways. However, the Femme Sharks resist intersectional oppression and the public demonstration of hatred by calling for self-defense as an appropriate response. In advocating for self-defense, the Femme Sharks acknowledge that they are not deserving of the treatment white supremacist patriarchy claims they are. Fromm writes, “love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love” (26). By resisting the hateful rhetoric of hate crimes and vowing to defend themselves and their communities, the Femme Sharks are demonstrating concern for their lives and wellbeing, a refusal to give into the forces that want to extinguish their light.

Move 2: Radical Self-Love Self-Defines

In a world where multiple aspects of their embodied selves are hated, the Femme Sharks employ radical self-love as a strategy to define themselves on their own terms. After all, self-definition is a rhetorical act; by naming oneself, a rhetor “finds the means to represent themselves rather than to be represented by others” (Ritchie and Ronald xxv).⁴ Indeed, the Femme Sharks similarly employ politicized self-definitions that directly speak back to the disempowering, silencing, dominant definitions of queer women of color and provide

alternative means of identifying and embodying subjectivity for queer women of color. Furthermore, by defining themselves as a people to love and to be loved, the Femme Sharks reverse the mainstream hate projected onto queer women of color.

The Femme Sharks express exhaustion and frustration toward inaccurate and harmful stereotypes from both mainstream society and queer communities. In the prologue of *Femme Shark Communiqué #1*, the Femme Sharks describe their invention: “it [Femme Sharks] was everything I’d felt about femme not just being about blonde girls wearing pink, but about the big deal about being fierce women of color or down white girls who are hot strong girls who are political who see the connection between everything in our lives” (4). The Femme Sharks are rebelling against stereotypes of femme being weak, passive, and white. For them, femme is more than appearance or dress; they draw power from their identities as femme, enhancing their ability to analyze difference, oppression, and politics in their daily lives.

In the manifesto, the Femme Sharks explain that the narrow expectations of femme identity come from within the white-centered, masculinist queer communities:

WE’RE OVER WHITE FEMMES AND BUTCHES WHO THINK/THAT FEMME ONLY COMES IN THE COLOR OF BARBIE./ WE’RE OVER BUTCHES AND BOYS AND OTHER FEMMES/TELLING US WHAT WE NEED TO DO, WEAR OR BE IN/ORDER TO BE ‘REALLY FEMME.’ (6)

Even within queer communities, the Femme Sharks are told what they are, and this definition attempts to coerce them into certain behaviors and appearance. Furthermore, by denying that the Femme Sharks are indeed femme, white butch (masculine) and femme (feminine) queer folks are denying the Femme Sharks the agency to define themselves. Indeed, the Femme Sharks are aware of the power of definition, and early in the zine declare self-definition as their mission: “FEMME SHARKS WILL RECLAIM THE POWER AND/DIGNITY OF FEMALENESS BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY./ WE’RE GIRLS BLOWN UP, TURNED INSIDE OUT AND/REMIXED” (5). Although “femaleness” typically refers to biological sex, the frequent invitation of transgender women into the Femme Shark community reveals a more inclusive concept of femaleness. Part of their reclamation is redefining “femaleness” and “femme” as a political identity, one available to cisgender women (women who are assigned the female sex at birth) and transgender women. Femaleness is not about biological sex, but about the consciousness and embodiment of a politicized gender.

The authority to name and define oneself is a basic human dignity, and one that is often denied to marginalized groups. Thus, self-definition is at the core of the rhetoric of radical self-love. Furthermore, as knowledge is

key to Fromm's conception of self-love, someone must know herself before she can love herself: he writes, "Only if I know a human being objectively, can I know him in his ultimate essence, in the act of love" (31). Through the act of naming and defining, the Femme Sharks illustrate their knowledge of themselves, and thus, their ability to love themselves fully. The directives and definitions stemming from the zine embody self-love and a refusal to sit on the periphery. But knowing oneself can be a challenge when negative stereotypes circulate in the public sphere. In the zine's ten-step instruction manual titled "How to Be a Shark," the Femme Shark ethos and subjectivity is defined clearly; in the eighth step, the Femme Sharks instruct readers to "CENTER WOMEN OF COLOR, DISABLED WOMEN, WOMEN WITH NO MONEY, TRANS AND INTERSEX FOLKS, ETC. WE ARE NOT THE GODDAMN MINORITY REPORT, WE ARE A CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE" (14). The last sentence simultaneously rejects a commonly held perception of Femme Sharks and embraces a new definition. The Femme Sharks are more than tokens or a collection of statistics; rather than existing only on the periphery, they are, in fact, "a center of the universe." In this passage, the Femme Sharks redefine themselves in contrast to dominant perceptions of "minority women," perceptions that exist both in the larger public sphere and mainstream feminist and queer movements.

Within the power of self-definition, we see the relationship between knowledge and emotion. When the Femme Sharks define themselves on their own terms, they cultivate a sense of radical self-love. Through that rhetorical enactment, they know themselves as integral, valuable, and powerful. Jaggar notes the cyclical relationship between knowledge and emotion, asserting that

The new emotions evoked by feminist insights are likely in turn to stimulate further feminist observations and insights, and these may generate new directions in both theory and political practice. The feedback loop between our emotional constitution and our theorizing is continuous; each modifies the other, in principle inseparable from it. (163)

The knowledge of themselves as more than tokens on the periphery enables the Femme Sharks to rhetorically construct radical self-love, and this performance of rhetorical self-love perpetuates a new, empowering self-definition that defies pejorative or dismissive notions of queer women of color. The power of this knowledge and definition is clear by the public response to the zine after publication. In a series of interviews with femme-identified women on the *SF Weekly* blog, the final question is "If you could make up your own category to describe your appearance/gender presentation, it would be: ___ and why?"

A woman named July responds, "I'm a femmeshark! I don't have to make up a category, because I am fortunate enough to have read and embody the Femme Shark Manifesto" (Pulley). This interview was printed in 2012, four years after the creation and publication of the zine, illustrating the power and sustainability of the Femme Sharks project of self-definition.

Move 3: Radical Self-Love Breaks the Rules

Radical self-love is rooted in defiance, and throughout the text, the Femme Sharks find power in their transgression against cultural norms. Here, the genre of the zine helps the Femme Sharks to demonstrate the outlaw nature of radical self-love. Not beholden to copy-editors or peer-reviewers, the Femme Sharks, as creators, publishers, and distributors, demonstrate their radical self-love with aggression, desperation, and pride. Language that would not be permitted or condoned within corporate magazines or mainstream queer publications is used to emphasize the radical nature of their self-love: "FEMME SHARKS AREN'T JUST DIMEPIECES AND TROPHY WIVES/FUCK THAT! WE MIGHT BE YOUR GIRL,/BUT WE'RE OUR OWN FEMMES" (6). In this passage, radical self-love is enacted by the rejection of pejorative tropes with "fuck that!" followed by a pronouncement of self-ownership. Furthermore, the assertiveness of the claim and its language conveys the respect they have for themselves and their cause; self-respect, and thus self-love, are prioritized over social decorum. The aggression of the "fuck that" is intensified by the use of capital letters in the manifesto portion of the zine, which defies stylistic norms and demands the attention of the reader (Fig. 2). The capital letters refuse to be ignored or silenced; they visually demand attention at the same time they convey the urgency of the Femme Sharks' tone.

Just as radical self-love is an outlaw emotion, "fuck" is certainly an outlaw word, regulated through both policy and social norms. Context matters, though, so the power and appropriateness of the word "fuck" depends on the writer, the audience, and the purpose. The use of such language is risky: some audiences may have an affective response to the deployment of outlaw language and dismiss the argument entirely, but others may respond to the authenticity of unfiltered, uncensored language—especially used by marginalized rhetors fueled by justified anger. Jaggar asserts that oppressed people are better able to see injustices and thus better able to imagine a just world. She asserts, "for this reason, the emotional responses of oppressed people in general, and often of women in particular, are more likely to be appropriate than the emotional responses of the dominant class" (162). Thus, the frequent use of aggressive language to combat demeaning tropes should not be dismissed but understood as an authentic response to oppression and marginalization. By rejecting negative images of their community through outlaw language, the

Femme Sharks draw attention to the radical nature of their self-love, demonstrating how the very pronouncement of inherent worth and value is a transgression against cultural norms.

Another rule breaking tactic of the Femme Sharks is what Adela Licona calls “reverso.” Licona coins the term *reverso* to illustrate how zinesters of color reconfigure, reframe, and redefine the body in resistance to patriarchy, racism, and homophobia: “zines are taking on the politics of the body, to include desire and pleasure, through conscious practices of a reversed critical gaze” (71). Similar to Jaggar’s outlaw emotions, *reverso* flips the expectations of the dominant class by exercising rhetorical resistance. The Femme Sharks deploy *reverso* as a rhetorical tool to describe queer sex as a source of empowerment, and thus, self-love. Queer sex acts are described candidly and reframed: “WHEN WE TAKE OUR LOVERS FIST ALL THE WAY INSIDE/ASK FOR WHAT WE WANT/BE THE BEST DIRTY GIRL/OR MAKE OUR LOVERS FLIP/ WE’RE A FUCKING MIRACLE” (8). In this passage, a queer sex act is used to queer concepts of passivity in a way that disrupts heteronormative ideas of penetration. Within a patriarchal, heteronormative society, to penetrate is seen as active—the “top” of a sexual act—and to be penetrated is passive—the “bottom.” Women’s traditional association with penetration has been perceived as “natural receptivity,” and thus, used to justify sexual violence against women (Sullivan 129). However, the Femme Sharks subvert the active/passive dichotomy. “We” is the subject of the sentence, and rather than fisting being something done to them, fisting is something they *do*: “when we take our lovers fist all the way inside.” To be fisted is an active act, and this expression and practice of queer sexuality is linked to the public declaration of radical self-love and confidence: after the listing of various queer sex acts, the Femme Sharks conclude with “We’re a fucking miracle.” In this act of *reverso*, formerly passive sexual acts are reframed as queer femme practices of power, desire, and pleasure. Thus, queer sexuality and penetration are not sources of shame, but rather, radical self-love.

In their celebration of their bodies and sexuality, the Femme Sharks are also rebelling against a common rhetorical trope subscribed to women: humility *topos*. The valorization of feminine modesty is alive and well today. British boy band One Direction’s song “What Makes You Beautiful” has sold over five million copies, with the repeating chorus declaring “you don’t know you’re beautiful/ that’s what makes you beautiful.” A rhetoric of radical self-love rejects feminine humility and modesty, replacing it with a loud, confrontational celebration of the self. Rather than quiet submission, the Femme Sharks instruct potential femme sharks to “BE A LOUD AND VISIBLE PRESENCE: at demos, at the club, on the street. This can be done by rocking ridiculously slutty outfits and hot pink satin fins, chanting loudly, travelling in a pack” (13).

Femme Sharks advocate for a loud, assertive, flamboyant, and confident ethos, one communicated by revealing clothing, raucous interruptions, and collective movement. The Femme Sharks do not ask permission to speak in public spaces, and when they speak, they do not apologize or hide their bodies in shame. Their rhetorical power comes from the rejection of humility and modesty in favor of a public declaration of disruption and confidence—a rhetoric of radical self-love.

Move 4: Radical Self-Love Unites

A feeling of radical self-love can transform the individual by encouraging her to reject racist and sexist norms of beauty and worth, redefining herself on her own terms, and discovering unlikely sources of empowerment. But a rhetoric of radical self-love can also go beyond shaping the individual; it can move individuals to gather and constitute a new community based on the shared experience of emotion. In her work on the rhetoric of emotions, Laura Micciche highlights the social aspect of emotions, writing that they emerge “relationally, in encounters between people, so that emotion takes form *between* bodies rather than residing *in* them” [emphasis in original] (13). Through the shared experience of emotion, people make meaning together, and further, this process provides an opportunity for unity. Martha C. Nussbaum observes community is often situationally created by the shared experience of grief or laughter prompted by art and symbol: “Poetry, music, and art are great unifiers: they take people out of themselves and forge a shared community” (388). These situations are often mediated through discourse, a rhetorical situation that prompts the shared emotional experience and the momentary solidarity among patrons and performers of art.

The Femme Sharks are interested in more than a temporary shared experience. Rather, they envision a community sustained by radical self-love through declarations of the group’s worthiness of love and self-celebration. The Femme Sharks state that their intention is to construct an imagined community; they do so through a rhetoric of radical self-love. In the prologue of their instruction manual, the Femme Sharks outline their vision for a femme shark community: “We’re all about the people rising up autonomously, and we were like, huh, how can we have it be like The Women’s Army in Born In Flames? Underground cells, sleeper cells of Femme Sharks spreading the fierceness everywhere” (12). They envision their zine as a constitutive rhetoric, one that creates a community through discourse and the shared experience of love. This move has a rich tradition in protest rhetoric. In Richard B. Gregg’s work on the ego-function, he notes that protest rhetoric helps protestors identify and nourish self-hood in opposition to an adversary. He observes how black power groups enumerated an ethos of self-pride and self-love through

the “Black is beautiful” theme, and this sense of group unity and love became “easily transposed to a feeling of individual ego-satisfaction” (84). Similarly, the Femme Sharks are a radical community that celebrates group identity in the face of oppression, and their group self-hood also transforms into “individual ego-satisfaction”—or radical self-love.

The Femme Sharks enact a sense of group self-hood through the frequent use of “we” and the declaration of communal values in *Femme Shark Communiqué #1*. The manifesto portion speaks in the third person plural, a resounding “we” beginning almost every stanza. The continual usage of “we” heightens the collective voice of the zine and of the femme shark movement, and further, invites readers to identify as Femme Sharks. Brenda Helmbrecht and Meredith A. Love analyze ethos in popular, printed feminist zines, *Bitch* and *Bust*, writing that “the zines develop several different types of ethos, or ethe, which not only define them as feminist rhetorical texts but also define readers as either participants or outsiders to this newer manifestation of feminism” (152). Similar to *Bitch* and *Bust*, *Femme Shark Communiqué #1* demarcates the us/them line through the collective ethos conveyed through “we.” The first-person plural allows the readers to feel as Femme Sharks feel, to experience the shared emotions of the community. Further, it invites the reader to participate in the declaration of femme shark ethos; any reader reading the manifesto aloud automatically positions themselves as a part of the femme shark community. However, readers who do not identify with the Femme Sharks ethos may feel attacked by the “we,” noting their outsider status from the Femme Sharks community. But perhaps this isn’t a concern for the Femme Sharks. This zine, written, published, and circulated by two queer women of color to other queer women of color and their allies, is written for the “we.” The stated objective of the instruction manual is to create “sleeper cells” of Femme Sharks; hence, the intended audience is women who already identify as femme sharks or could identify as femme sharks.

The Femme Sharks aim to build an imagined community, one based less on physical proximity and more on a shared social identity (Anderson). Furthermore, their imagined community rallies not just in reaction to violence or discrimination, but also in celebration of their identities through the expression of radical self-love. Their imagined community defies hierarchies and boundaries, inviting all who see themselves as a femme shark to identify and participate as a femme shark. In “Potential Sharks,” the Femme Sharks list historical and familiar names: Gloria Anzaldúa, Michelle Obama, Sylvia Rivera, and Assatta Shakur are mentioned alongside “your mom, Theory, your best friend/you” (16). By listing “you” and “your mom,” the Femme Sharks elevate the reader and her family and friends to the status of well-known, celebrated women who defy gender stereotypes, and thus, potential hierarchies within

the community are prevented from the beginning. Furthermore, “you,” the reader, is invited to identify with the “we” ethos throughout the zine. Through discourse, the Femme Sharks evoke a community without hierarchies or borders, and readers are initiated into the community through reading, identifying, and embodying the values of the Femme Shark ethos.

The membership of the Femme Shark community reaches beyond just the reader and transcends spatial and temporal borders. By tracing a lineage beyond space and time, the Femme Sharks constitute a genealogy of other politically subversive femme women. A source of their radical self-love is then, perhaps, strengthened by a sense of pride and connection with queer women of color and poor queer women the past—and not just famous queer women, but women whose queerness existed in the shadows. In the manifesto portion of the zine, the Femme Sharks write,

FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE WHEN FRIDA KAHLO/ HOOKED UP WITH
HER GIRLFRIENDS/ WHEN JOAN NESTLE, CHYRSTOS, JEWELLE GOMEZ,/
ALEXIS DE VEUX, SYLVIA RIVERA, DOROTHY ALLISON,/ MINNIE BRUCE
PRATT AND AMBER HOLLIBAUGH/ MADE QUEER FEMME HISTORY/
WHEN ZAPATISTA WOMEN HOOKED UP /WHEN OUR COUSINS WERE
MAKING OUT IN THE WOMEN'S SECTION OF THE MASJID/ WHEN OUR
GRANDMAS AND QUEER AUNTIES SNUCK OUT/ AT NIGHT/ DIDN'T
GET MARRIED TIL LATE-OR AT ALL/ HAS A BEST FRIEND/ AND STOOD
UP FOR HER/ FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE. (9)

The Femme Sharks articulate their ancestry and express solidarity with Femme Sharks of the past. This list serves a definitional purpose, demonstrating the vast diversity of the Femme Sharks throughout space and time, once again providing many points of entry for readers interested in identifying in Femme Sharks.

Closeted spinsters are celebrated in the same stanza as Frida Kahlo and Dorothy Allison, and queer history is expanded past the Eurocentric narratives of queer liberation in the United States to include indigenous and Muslim women. Indeed, by constituting a community across space and time, a united front among queer women as famous as Frida Kahlo, as fierce as Zapatista militants, and as ordinary as grandmothers and aunties, the Femme Sharks “demarcate and identify its own terrain to establish a presence where one has not existed” (Ritchie & Ronald xviii). From absence and isolation, the Femme Sharks resurrect a community that is alive and connected. In addition to presenting the diversity of the community, the list carves out a historical narrative for the Femme Sharks, a legacy of empowered, strong women. By naming Femme Sharks erased from mainstream histories, they fight against the “absence [that] only reproduces invisibility, silence, and misrepresentation” (Ritchie & Ronald xix). This solidarity with and celebration of femme sharks

from the past provides the opportunity for current-day femme sharks to see themselves in a previously unseen history. This historical source of empowerment can lead to a fostering of radical self-love; a deeper appreciation of the self can emerge from a sense of belonging to community with roots that transcend space and time.

Move 5: Radical Self-Love Mobilizes

The “we” of the zine offers more than a collective identity; the “we” of the Femme Sharks moves the community to direct action inspired by shared experience and emotion. To mobilize one’s community against oppression and toward liberation is a powerful manifestation of self-care. Gregg notes how the end game of the ego-function in protest rhetoric is always pragmatic; one method of realizing positive identities, he offers, is “to locate what one perceives as the persons, behaviors, actions, or conditions which cause or contribute to feelings of inadequacy, then to take a positive stand against them” (81). In other words, moving from self-hate to self-love can and should move activists to mobilize against the people and ideologies that construct hate as the norm. For the Femme Sharks, embracing positive identities for the self and the collective motivates community mobilization. In the final step in “Ten Things You Can Do To Be a Shark,” the Femme Sharks instruct their readers to

FUCK AND FIGHT AGAINST THE POWER, WHETHER ITS HRC,⁵ YOU [sic] MOM, YOUR FUCKED-UP UNCLE, THE NON PROFIT, PRISON OR MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, ETC. RECLAIM THE POWER AND DIGNITY OF FEMALENESS—ESPECIALLY WOMEN OF COLOR, BROKE-ASS, DISABLED, OLD FAT AND OTHERWISE REVILED FORMS OF GIRLNESS. (14)

In this final instruction, the Femme Sharks connect direct action—“fuck and fight against the power”—with radical self-love and self-definition—“reclaim the power and dignity of femaleness.” Further, they link oppressive institutions to hatred, connecting “the power’s” attacks against their community to the source—“reviled forms of girlness.” Thus, the Femme Sharks enact a crucial step of radical self-love: locating an adversary and resisting its dominance through action, specifically, fucking and fighting against the power.

The move towards action and resistance in the face of hate and oppression depicts the radical nature of Femme Shark self-love. Radical self-love pushes the Femme Sharks to action, just as action can lead the Femme Sharks to radical self-love. Toward the end of the manifesto portion, a femme shark is defined as “ANY GIRL/WHO IS TOUGH, HUNGRY, FIGHTS FOR HERSELF AND HER FAMILY/AND IS WORKING ON BECOMING THE KIND OF GIRL/WHO FINDS GOD IN HERSELF/AND LOVES HER FIERCELY” (10). Here we see the connection

between self-love and action; fighting for oneself and one's loved ones is part of the process of discovering one's inner value and self-worth. Note the word choice and verb tense: the femme shark is *working on becoming*—a state of progressing, of being, and of becoming. Radical self-love is an ongoing journey, and no finalized state of self-love will be upheld as the ideal for the Femme Sharks. For simply the effort of moving towards a self-love is a radical act in itself. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the fighting of a Femme Shark is linked to radical self-love; through individual and communal resilience and survival, a Femme Shark discovers god within and learns to love herself.

The Femme Sharks did indeed move readers to identify and love as Femme Sharks, and furthermore, to gather and mobilize in their communities. At the 2008 Gay Pride parade in San Francisco, a group of Femme Sharks marched to chants: "FEMME SHARKS WANT JUSTICE—AND WE WANNA GET BANGED!" (de Vries). The next year, a Femme Shark contingent showed up dressed in pink and shark fins to an anti-abortion Walk for Life rally in San Francisco. In an email to Femme Sharks and Femme Shark supporters (named Ally Sea Creatures), Zuleikha Mahmood describes their strategies to disrupt the pro-life event, including as much public nudity and sexual activity as legally allowed, because "even though most of us can't get our partners pregnant (certainly not due to lack of trying), somehow the christian right still hates it when we have sex" (LaMacha). The protest uses bodies as rhetorical texts to demonstrate self and group love—through nudity and sexual acts without shame—and combat the hate of their adversaries. Radical self-love is woven into the fabric of Femme Sharks' rhetoric and action, illustrating the critical importance of self-love to their identity and mobilization.

Conclusion

Although their activity has slowed down as of late, most likely due to Piepzna-Samarasinha's building fame as a poet and activist, the Femme Sharks Facebook group boasts of 536 members from across the United States, who continue to post images, stories, and quotations of affirmation for queer women of color. The Femme Sharks are not the only group that promotes radical self-love in their writing and protests. Celebrations of radical self-love can be found throughout online activist communities. For example, throughout 2014, women of color and women with disabilities rejected constricting definitions of beauty and self-love by posting smiling pictures of themselves on Twitter under the hashtag #FeministSelfies. *Time Magazine* describes this trend as young women "turning symbols of narcissism into a new kind of empowerment" (Bennett). In addition to practicing self-love, women online are theorizing its power. In a widely circulated blog post by Mehreen Kasana, Kasana articulates the radical nature of self-love:

A woman of color's self-love is political and radical, and it is unsettling for the status quo because she is choosing bravely to dismantle the narratives of racist aesthetics against her... A non-white girl's self-love is revolutionary and anyone trying to water it down needs to back right off.

Here, Kasana powerfully and succinctly encapsulates my main claim throughout this article: that radical self-love moves marginalized women to reject dominant narratives, and thus threatens the status quo. The Femme Sharks and Mehreen Kasana join with voices from all corners of womanhood, women of color, queer women, disabled women, fat women, to declare a new world order, one that celebrates the worth and value of all women.

Marginalized communities, both on the streets and on modems, are constructing a grammar of outlaw emotions to argue for their self-worth and liberation. By dissecting the ways the Femme Sharks and other radical grassroots groups articulate outlaw emotions, rhetorical scholars can learn how marginalized groups respond to violence and oppression, how rhetors construct community through discourse and shared emotions, and how emotions move communities to action. The rhetoric of outlaw emotions is transformational; in the *Femme Shark Communiqué #1*, radical self-love transforms individuals from victims of systematic abuse into a community of survivors, fighters, and lovers. The Femme Sharks and countless other subversive communities tap into, leverage, and perform emotions such as self-love, joy, and queer desire. They can teach us how love, for ourselves and for our communities, can move counterpublics toward collective healing and action, and thus, toward embodied ways of knowing that inspire movement toward a more loving world.

Notes

- 1 The prologue of the *Femme Shark Communiqué #1* presents the origin story for the Femme Sharks. After confronting racist microaggressions in her workplace, Mahmood began to deal with her frustration through aqua-aerobics. Her best friend, poet and community organizer, Piepzna-Samarasinha joked, "What are you, some kind of femme shark?" (3). This imagery launched a digital manifesto penned by Piepzna-Samarasinha and posted on her *LiveJournal*, which was quickly circulated among queer women of color groups in the East Bay. As momentum grew, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mahmood organized Femme Shark gatherings in the San Francisco Bay Area. Later that year, Piepzna-Samarasinha—an experienced zinester—and Mahmood collaborated to craft the handmade, hand-circulated zine, *Femme Sharks Communiqué #1*. Although the zine is no longer in circulation, a digital copy is hosted on the Queer Zine Archive Project.

- 2 Although Zuleikha Mahmood and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha are named in the prologue and epilogue as the authors, individual pieces are not credited to a specific writer. *Femme Sharks Communiqué #1* appears as a collectively written text that speaks on behalf of an entire community. Therefore, from this point on, I shall refer to the authors of the zine as the Femme Sharks.
- 3 In 2002, seventeen year old Gwen Araujo was murdered after four men discovered she was a transgender woman. Her brutal murder drew national attention to the violence transgender people face. Although her attackers were sentenced to prison for second-degree murder and manslaughter, they were not charged with enhanced penalties for perpetrating a hate crime, largely due to the “panic defense.” Their lawyers argued that “the discovery of Araujo’s birth gender had threatened their sexualities and self-images,” a move that places the blame on the victim of the crime. In 2006, California passed the “Gwen Araujo Justice for Victims Act,” which prohibited jurors from considering their own anti-LGBT bias and defendants from employing the panic defense (Hemmelgarn and Laird). In 2003, fifteen year old Sakia Gunn was murdered at a bus stop in Newark, New Jersey; after two men made sexual advances, she responded she was a lesbian. Gunn was stabbed to death while her murderer yelled homophobic comments; he was eventually indicted for bias-related murder (Meenan). Gunn’s story was not nationally publicized. Although the criminalization of hate crimes is a contested topic within racial justice and queer communities, the detrimental effects of targeted violence is widely recognized as a core problem within queer communities of color.
- 4 For more information about the significance of self-definition for women of color, see Jessica Enoch’s “‘Para la Mujer’: Defining a Chicana Feminist Rhetoric at the Turn of the Century” in *College English* 67.1.
- 5 HRC refers to the Human Rights Campaign, which is a major LGBT advocacy non-profit organization. In 2007, the HRC supported a version of the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) that did not include protections for transgender individuals, which prompted outrage from many queer communities (“HRC Finally Ready to Back Trans-Inclusive ENDA”). In *Femme Sharks Communiqué #1*, the Femme Sharks advertise a Femme Shark protest against HRC: “The Femme Sharks Say: HRC is BULLSHIT!.... An ENDA that leaves out trans and gender variant folks is bullshit, and so is a group of high-powered elite queers who don’t really give a damn about the rest of us as long as they can get married and get stock options” (11).

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