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EXCESS:
MAD, QUEER, FEMME ABUNDANCE

Edited by Andi Schwartz and Shayda Kafai



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Excess: A Mad, Messy Femme Lineage of Creation

Andi Schwartz and Shayda Kafai

You are not too sick, too disabled, too sad, too crazy, too ugly, too fat, or too weird. We live in a white supremacist, patriarchal, ableist culture that values oppressive standards for the sake of centralizing power and making profit. Our ostracism is a result of this system that demonizes difference and not a reflection of your worth, value, ability to be loved, etc. You are not the problem. You are perfect. — Access Centered Movement

“Excess” is the grammar of camp style; the signifier of capitalism; the name of inequality; and a warning of environmental collapse. “Excess” is the abject and the affective—those feelings, affects and embodiments that “spill over,” which exceed white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, ableist, sanist, and cissexist frameworks of recognition or normative logics of acceptability. As an ethos of accumulation and dispossession, “excess” produces and organizes scarcity along gendered, racialized, heterosexist, and ableist lines of existence. adrienne maree brown, in *Pleasure Activism*, writes that “excess” undermines sustainable relationships to pleasure, where, “on a broad level, white people and men have been the primary recipients of this delusion, the belief that they deserve to have excess, while the majority of others don’t have enough” (2019, 15). At the same time, excess has been mobilized by marginalized communities as strategies of resistance, survival, and celebration. Excess becomes the cultivation of what we have yet to imagine: excess “disrupts already articulated forms of thought by revealing what cannot begin to be conceived,” opening up the possibilities of queer (femme) futurities, pleasures, and possibilities (Musser 2019, 9). “Excess” has also become our point of connection: the meeting place between femme theory, critical femininities, critical disability, and Mad studies; indeed, the meeting place between us.

Our journeys toward excess began first in places of nonconsensual naming. As educators and femmes who were taught to ingest and participate in the sterile, neoliberal university, we learned that academia had no place for our affective leaks, for our softness, for all the things that were named as antithetical to rigor. Our writing, too, could not be a place of affective play, a place that embraced first person “I.” Despite learning these colonial, heterosexist, and ableist norms, led by a robust community of fellow Mad, disabled, and queer femmes of color, we began the femme practice of unlearning. In this special double issue, we re-name excess as a generative pathway, a compost bin, and as a place of liberatory potential. Excess and its abundant mess create an imperfect place of growth where we build coalitions and expansive lineages of self-naming. Holding this intersectional space, each author and art-maker in our two guest-edited special issues engages in critical inquiries of excess as collective healing, as the rebel yell, as an embodied and spirited memory practice.

Andi Schwartz and Sarah Redikopp first conceptualized “excess” as a conference theme representing a major link between both their emerging bodies of work and their embodiments as Mad, as queer, and as femme. Queer and racialized sexualities, bodies, knowledges, and affects are read as “too much”—hypersexualized, objectified, and pathologized (Albrecht-Samarasinha 1997; Collins 2005; Musser 2018; Nestle 1992); white bodies are marked as Other—become raced, excessive—when they gain weight, have queer sex, or act



without middle-class decorum (Brown 2005; Dominguez 2015; Walker 2001). Insofar as femininity, and femme, are excessively embodied, excessively artificial, and excessively emotional, “excess” is the charge against femininity—and charged against some femininities more than others. In all its excess, passivity, and artificiality, femmes have understood femininity as a mode for sexual healing, wholeness, and other pleasures (Albrecht-Samarasinha 1997; Cvetkovich 2003; McCann 2018; Nestle 1992); a method to queer and subvert gender (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002; Duggan and McHugh 1996; Hollibaugh 2000; Hoskin and Taylor 2019); a catalyst for community formation (Connell 2012; Nicholson 2014; Schwartz 2016, 2020; Volcano and Dahl 2009); and a site of politics and theory (Brightwell 2018; Brightwell and Taylor 2021; Dahl 2012, 2014; Dawson 2018; Hoskin 2017, 2021; Scott 2021; Schwartz 2018b, 2020). Simultaneously, “excess” is weaponized as pathology and immorality against historically marginalized groups, including women, queers, the disabled, Mad, and racialized people (Musser 2018; Russo 1995; Skelly 2014). Jane Skelly writes that “like decadence, the term ‘excess’ has often been used to shame and/or control that which threatens the social order” (2018, 4): the excessively embodied, excessively emotional, and excessively abject—those traits so closely consistently reified as feminine and Mad—only exist in relation to the norms they transgress (Russo 1995; Skelly 2014, 2018). Meeting at this intersection of femmeness and Madness, Schwartz and Redikopp organized the Excess conference in 2021—the first annual Critical Femininities Conference at York University’s Centre for Feminist Research—and invited more bodies to join the exploration of these and other excessive convergences.

Schwartz and Redikopp also invited Shayda Kafai to give the keynote address at the Excess conference. In her talk titled, “Queer Interventions: Mad Femme Excess in Parts,” Kafai spoke eloquently about the “mess” in which femmeness meets Madness, about the refusal to leave ourselves, our bodymindspirits, at the door of academia as we theorize this intersection. Life writing is a cornerstone of femme theory, evident through the generations of femme-moires that continuously breathe new life into our connections (Brightwell and Taylor 2021). Joan Nestle (1987), Minnie Bruce Pratt (2005), Jewelle Gomez (1993), Dorothy Alison (1996), Amber Hollibaugh (2000), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2015), Kai Cheng Thom (2016), Zena Sharman (2020, 2021a), Raechel Anne Jolie (2020), Lilac Vyllette Maldonado (HarvardBookStore 2022), Vannessa Durand (2018), and so many others have told us what it means to be femme through the stories they put to paper or post online. Femme methods remind us that high art, poetry, and prose are crucial tools with which we often make meaning, and so too are these other forms of cultural production, like life-writing or content-creating, that are not often elevated to the same status (Schwartz 2018b). Kafai’s keynote moved with this lineage, weaving together personal narrative, poetry, and theory, and inviting participants to journal, rest, and process—to make meaning of their own—throughout the time spent together. It is in this spirit—in the lineage of Mad, messy, femme, narrative creation—that we, Schwartz and Kafai, have grown this collaboration, dreaming and guiding this special issue into being.

The Mad and femme works that we first encountered and those whose resonances reverberate the most, were those that embodied a model of creation that weaves narrative, theory, politics, and art together. This model remains vital to our vision for building Mad, femme theory. We insist that Mad, disabled, and femme knowledge and ways of knowing are vital to include within traditional spaces of knowledge production like academia; indeed, much of our work as feminist scholars and educators involves re-imagining and rebuilding syllabi and bibliographies to reflect this inclusion. At the same time, we insist that Mad, disabled, and



femme knowledge and ways of knowing are necessary to *transform* these traditional spaces and practices of knowledge production. While we insist on the value of the inclusion of Mad, disabled, and femme knowledge, we simultaneously resist the co-optation and sanitization that too often accompanies institutionalization. Finding a home for this special issue at *Feral Feminisms*, an open access, intermedia, intersectional feminist journal, has enabled this insistence/resistance. This special issue invited prose, poetry, art, and theory and grew to span two volumes, with which we endeavour to keep critical femininity studies queer and Mad studies unruly.

Excess in Theory and Practice

Excess was imagined as the meeting point between our experiences of femmeness and Madness, and between our scholarship in critical femininity studies, Mad studies, and critical disability studies: a collision, a caress, a coalition. We contend that a critical femininities framework—which moves beyond accounts of (heterosexual) femininity as a site of patriarchal control to unhinge femininity from “woman” and “female” and understand the feminine as a site and form of knowledge (Dahl 2012)—foregrounds the ways that “excess” and practices of exceeding are mobilized by marginalized communities as strategies of resistance, survival, and celebration, including “brown jouissance” (Musser 2018) and “queer of color camp” (Dominguez 2015). Critical femininities frameworks can be mobilized to frame the politics of excess as potentially emancipatory, opening up the possibilities of queer (femme) futurities, pleasures, protests, and practices of care (Brushwood Rose and Camillieri 2002; Dawson 2018; Hollibaugh 2000; McCann 2018; Nestle 1992; Schwartz 2016, 2018a, 2020; Volcano and Dahl 2008).

Just as critical femininity studies seeks to trouble language as a modality of resistance, Mad studies and critical disability studies similarly invite us to engage in knowledge-productions that challenge the normative narratives so frequently ascribed to disabled, Mad, neurodiverse, and chronically ill bodyminds. Both disciplines provoke and unsettle, bringing together identities painfully excluded from what is reified as “normal.” In these disciplinary homes, we are invited to radically reframe Mad and disabled as politicized identity terms of empowerment that resist the pathologization of normativity, particularly as they intersect with race, gender, sexuality, and embodiment (Bell 2010; Bruce 2021; Erevelles and Minear 2010; Garland-Thomson 1997; Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006; Pickens 2019; Schalk 2022). The converging frameworks of critical femininities, Mad studies, and disability studies generate a lens through which we can unsettle bodyminds marked as deviant and stigmatic, and herein lies the generative, glitter, joy, and mess of excess: we have the potential to center the wisdom-making that steadily resists the normative goals of inclusion and reform; excess becomes the key, the balm.

As we dream new forms of care into being, may we do so with a spirit of resistance, creativity, and mutual aid, from a place of courage and boundless possibilities (Sharman 2021b, 157).

From the beginning of this process, we were guided by the wisdoms of our Mad, disabled, femme bodyminds and a praxis supportive of the bodymind needs of our writers. As we began, a question lingered for us: what might it mean to center femme care and crip time in



our process (Kafer 2021; Kupperts 2014; Samuels 2017)? How could we be excessively “care-full” in our feedback and our construction (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018)? To craft our special issue while centering need meant acknowledging that our capacities and bodyminds mattered. It meant that we could push against the capitalist, ableist, and sanist mandates of productivity, and most critically, we had the reciprocal support and feminist care politic of our managing editor, Ela Przybyło. Informed by a framework of excess, by our Mad, disabled, femme communities, softness opened space for all of us to share how our lives were impacting our writing, our revisions, and our deadlines. Our contributors tenderly shared their needs for extensions and together, we held space for chronic pain and fatigue, for grief and loss, for illness and family caretaking responsibilities. Others shared the most accessible (and most inaccessible) ways to receive feedback, and, in the spirit of interdependence and care, we co-created pathways. Our contributors' vulnerability similarly crafted space for our own: as disabled, Mad femmes, we felt safe enough to ask for more editing turnaround time when our fatigue, illness, and depression made it harder for us to process while we read or simply when we needed rest.

Moving forward in disabled, Mad femme community meant that care was the foundational practice for these special issues. We share with you, dear reader, that we worked from our femme bed cave of care, love, and crip work (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). From two different time zones, we held each contributor's work in a suspension of playful curiosity, and we engaged with excess as love practice, as an invitation, to push against the rigid boundaries that might limit our affective and embodied needs as writers and editors.

An Excess of Excess: About the Works

When we first sent the call for papers for *Excess: The Intersection of Critical Femininities, Mad Studies, and Critical Disabilities* out into the world, we had not anticipated that we would receive a bountiful excess of close to 65 abstracts—an excess of excess. *Feral Feminisms* supported us in expanding the issue into two volumes, though even these cannot contain the excessive brilliance our call generated. We have organized the volumes around two primary themes that emerged from the collection of art and writing that we received, which amplify two intersecting locations: (1) the meeting point(s) between critical femininities, critical disability studies, and Mad studies, and (2) narratives of embodiment and affect that animate critical theorizations of body politics. We were grateful for the opportunity to create not one but two volumes of this special issue, embracing the complications, resonances, and communal craftings of excess.

Thematically, Issue 14, Number 1, “Excess: Mad, Queer, Femme Abundance,” examines excess as productive and utilizes a range of forms, including self-portraiture, painting, dance, sculpture, poetry, and prayer. Some contributors engage with their Mad, queer, femme subjectivities in order to challenge reified framings of crip un/desirability, or the hyper-feminization of romantic love in queer male sexual cultures. In these moments, excess is critically interrogated and disabled, Mad, queer femme identities become the lens through which identities that have been pathologized and viewed as “too much” are rearticulated with activist love. Other contributors rewrite the socio-cultural harms of being marked as “too dramatic,” while others, still, begin in a place of embrace, reclaiming excess as a formative practice. Here, Jewish blessings and somatic art-making becomes ritual; crip care cards become a radical form of community-tenderness and connectivity; BDSM becomes medicinal care work



for chronic pain; and queer femme Mad art-making becomes a robustly productive way of living in excess.

Issue 14, Number 2, “Excess: Defiant Bodymind Storytelling,” centers embodiments of excess, both the liberatory practices that emerge from our somatic experiences, as well as the rage rooted in our muscles and bones. Many of these pieces take an autotheoretical approach to narrate stories of bodies in excess, while others consider the possibilities that arise from rethinking the representation and visibility of queer and racialized embodiments. Here, as ever, writing the body also generates explorations of affect; feelings of anger, (be)longing, and desire are woven throughout these works. The issue begins at the intersection of Fat Studies and a queer, Mad, femme examination of excess: reconfigurations of the word “epidemic” as it relates to Fat embodiment, and existing boldly wild as a brown, Fat, queer child. Some contributors emphasize the corporeal search for belonging led by anti-patriarchal feminist counternarratives; a reclamatory journey of queer femme reproduction and parenting; and the affective reframe of Orientalism as it relates to Asian diasporic femininities. Aligned with intentional and excessive space making, the issue concludes with dual imaginings of performative queer femme legibility and the agentic personhood of sex workers.

As guest editors, we extend profound gratitude and Mad queer femme tenderness to the many writers who embraced vulnerability and risk and shared their stories with us. We are honoured to have read your words. We would like to thank the team at *Feral Feminisms*, especially our managing editor Ela Przybyło, for embracing excess with us. Thank you for your support as we navigated the sometimes unwieldy process of articulating all of our excess, which can never be contained—even within these incredible volumes. Here’s to all of our messiness, all of our radiant slips, and to all our expansiveness.

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