

Flags and Fashion: Expressions of Solidarity through Lesbian Clothing

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Abstract

The clothes worn by lesbians are rich in meaning. Sometimes, they can help us to understand lesbian history and the social, personal, political, and erotic context of lesbian lives in the past. As LGBTQ communities have grown and the connections between groups within it have become at once stronger and more complicated, the clothes that lesbians (and others) wear can function as narrators. Lesbian fashion can be a tool for solidarity, our ideals worn quite literally on our sleeves. This paper is an analysis of how clothing has been - and is being - used by lesbians to show support for other groups within LGBTQ communities, through a fashion history lens. The focus is on printed t-shirts as well as clothing in different Pride flag colours, which I propose can be understood as a kind of “flagging.” Flagging, here, is a way to understand the intentional choices made by lesbians and other LGBTQ+ people when signalling personal identities and intra-community solidarities through dress. When solidarity activism is placed directly onto the lesbian body, it is personal, and can craft specific messages. These messages, constructed from a language of identities, visual culture, and physical garments, are what this paper seeks to examine.

Keywords

Flagging; lesbian fashion; lesbian feminism; queer; transfeminism;

Introduction

Lesbians can use clothing to speak when our words cannot be heard. For centuries, lesbian clothing has been worn in specific, considered ways by its wearers, in order to present an identity or a difference, an affiliation with one community, or disaffiliation from another (Jennings, 2007; Klein, 2021; Whitbread, [1988] 2010). Most often the communities being reached out to were, and are, groups to which a lesbian desired, or desires, to belong. This has happened in various ways and contexts, from lesbian communities which thrived a hundred and more years ago (see Doan, 1998), to far more recent examples (see Hattrick, 2016). Sometimes clothing, accessories and general appearance functioned as a code, recognised only by someone deeply ingrained within a lesbian subculture; other times they were evident through a deviation from social norms, such as the many lesbians or possible-lesbians who stick out in the historical narrative for their masculine attire. Even in 1920s Europe when “boyish” fashions were popular among women in general, a tailored jacket, monocle, or short haircut known as an “Eton Crop” were especially favoured by lesbians, as examined by cultural historian Laura Doan (1998). Rings also had specific lesbian connotations, although subtle enough to go unnoticed by those not ‘in the know’. For example, in the inter-war period, pinky rings were rife – at least among working-class British lesbians. When fashion historian Katrina Rolley interviewed lesbians about the clothes they wore between 1918 and 1939, ‘pinky rings’ (worn on the little finger) were reported by two interviewees to be “a specific lesbian symbol, and both were wearing them when interviewed” (Rolley, 1995, p. 179). They appear in other, later lesbian testimonies and histories also, indicative of their existence as a legible lesbian signal for a prolonged period of time. Jill Gardiner’s (2003) interviewee Vito recalls “we had ways of finding each other. We wore pinkie rings, black onyx, usually, on the left small finger” (Gardiner, 2003, p. 68). Joan Nestle describes “the erotic signal of [a butch’s] hair at the nape of her neck, touching the shirt collar; how she held a cigarette; the symbolic pinky ring flashing as she waved her hand” (Nestle, 1981, p. 22).

Fashion more generally – whole outfits, rather than individual garments or accessories – has also been integral in the construction of specific lesbian communities. In these instances, personal and/or political motivations can be visually communicated through style choices, both within and outside of the

communities themselves. See, for example, Butch and Femme in the mid-century and beyond (Faderman, 1991; Genter, 2016; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1981) or the “Roots” lesbians of 1980s and ‘90s Britain. “Roots”, though the term was not widely used, referred to lesbians of colour who embraced their respective cultural identities by incorporating traditional clothing and accessories into their appearance, often within white-dominated lesbian spaces (Blackman and Perry, 1990; Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993). The use of specific garments or styles can signal identity, but they can also mean so much more. Lesbian fashion is a complex web of affiliations and references that can often only be understood by certain people and in certain contexts.

This long lineage of lesbian signalling through fashion sets a precedent for types of visual messaging that has in some ways grown in recent years, based in cultural meanings that are spread through mass media and often shared in online spaces. As LGBTQ communities have expanded, so have discussions and disagreements within it. Broadly, there are times when some lesbians have actively separated themselves from other LGBTQ communities, perhaps the most notable example being separatist lesbian feminists of the 1970s. There are also times when lesbians have sought to stand together with other groups, such as in the support that many lesbians provided to gay men throughout the AIDS crisis. (Faderman, [1991] 1992, p. 207; Brier, 2007). Opinions within the lesbian community vary as much as the clothes on and off our backs. It remains true, however, that clothing is repeatedly used to signal political and personal ideals and identifications (Hatrick, 2016, p, 183). There are contexts when clothing communicates separation, or an affiliation with a specific group, such as in the androgynous ‘uniforms’ worn by many lesbian feminists (Hillman, 2013, p. 162). There are also times when dress translates into expressions of solidarity, whether through slogan t-shirts or a carefully considered colour palette, like that of specific pride flags (the white, pink and blue of the trans flag being one example). Every time that this has happened in the past sets a precedent for the times that it happens now; fashion is a type of lesbian language, and it can be strung into a material manifesto.

This paper is an analysis of garments worn by lesbians in order to express solidarity with others within LGBTQ communities. In it, I seek to find inter-community solidarity reflected from the theoretical

world into material culture. The paper is split into three sections. In the first, ‘The Dykes & Their Friends’, I locate lesbian solidarity-as-fashion in the past few decades. I look at examples of lesbian and gay solidarity in the late twentieth century, including the Queer Nation Manifesto (1990) and Larry Mitchell’s recently republished *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977). I begin with solidarity between gay and lesbian communities because of their longstanding associations with each other. This is perhaps seen most obviously in the persevering use of the phrase “Gay and Lesbian” before the popularisation of “LGBT” and other acronyms. I seek to highlight how solidarity between lesbians and gay men has at times been difficult and at others championed, even though gay and lesbian identities today are often conflated, but considered somewhat separate from another group under the LGBT acronym – trans people. The second section, ‘Writing and wearing #LwiththeT’, focuses on lesbian activist t-shirts from various Prides and protests, including the movement #LwiththeT (L for Lesbian and T for Transgender), which emerged in response to the British anti-trans lesbian group GetTheLOut in 2018. Here, I also consider the theoretical writing that exists parallel to the #LwiththeT movement, including the edited collection *Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies* (Banerjee et al., 2019) and Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

The third section proposes a new use of “flagging” – a term often used to describe signalling for certain sexual activities within queer communities, such as the ‘hanky code’ popularised by gay men in 1970s North America (Cole, 2000, p. 112). Here, I adapt the use of the term “flagging” to describe how various pride flags are represented within fashion and material culture to show identity and community solidarity. To examine this, I conducted written interviews with two lesbians, Aster and Foxgluvv. Both, in different ways, have worn and/or made clothing in pride flag colour palettes in order to present specific meanings. I contacted them so that they could describe their perspective on, and their reasons for wearing/making these garments in greater detail than their existing social media posts about them allowed. Both interviewees consented to answer my questions and for their answers, identities, and work to be published. Aster, a fibre artist (an artist who works with materials such as yarn), describes a vest which they crocheted themselves in the colours of the trans pride flag. Foxgluvv, a lesbian musician,

explains her choice to wear a dress inspired by the progress pride flag design on the stage of Birmingham Pride. Though other cultural influences are drawn upon to set the context for this paper, particularly North American lesbian and gay history, my main focus is on lesbian fashion-as-solidarity within a British context. Throughout this paper, I hope to demonstrate an established history and an ongoing passion for solidarity within lesbian culture and wider LGBTQ communities, expressed carefully and consistently by clothed lesbian bodies.

The Dykes & Their Friends

Lesbians and gay men have a long history of standing in solidarity, even if sometimes that solidarity has been fragmented or strained by different experiences and privileges. Still, while gay men and lesbians are not always friends, connections between the groups persevere. Recently, this has taken the form of the phrase “MLM WLW solidarity” (men loving men and women loving women solidarity), a popular trope in online space (Goodreads, n.d.). This phrase has roots that lead us back half a century, to the 1977 publication of Larry Mitchell’s utopian text *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions*. The book, though focusing on queer male community, is dotted with mentions of lesbians, or “women who love women”. These women who love women exist in continual, independent solidarity with the “faggots”. This begins with Mitchell’s imagined origin story, where “[the faggots] adored the women who loved women and the women who loved women adored the faggots”. Throughout the book, the solidarity that exists between the “women who loved women” and “faggots” moves from its initial mythological setting into a more recognisable picture of an unnamed city and the communities within:

Since the women who love women look something like men sometimes and since the faggots look something like men sometimes
and since the women who love women and the faggots were friends the men lost the women who love women among the faggots (Mitchell, [1977] 2019, p. 101).

Real-life cities, like that imagined in Mitchell’s text, have often been places where gay and lesbian solidarity has thrived or frayed, most notably in the context of protests or Prides. A Pride march or a protest (or a combination of the two, as many marches are and have been) is often a time where different

communities within wider LGBTQ communities come together, despite their differences. For example, the 1994 Alternative Pride March in New York City, which queer historians Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown described as an event where “for one afternoon [...] everyone seemed content coming together” (Riemer and Brown, 2019, p. 215). Events like these exist as a message of solidarity, and it is no coincidence that they are also one of the most common stomping grounds for lesbian slogan t-shirts.

The t-shirt, in queer culture, can be used as a billboard – one graffitied over with angry demands and identity tags, rude messages and coded symbols. They have been called “exhibition screens” (Penney, 2013, p. 290) and “embodied political participation” (Clarke, 2019, p. 691–692). These queer t-shirts can be affirmative garments for the wearer, and/or a subtle nod to others within the community. Other times, they are loud and unavoidable, and it is these instances that are more usual at protests and Pride marches, where being loud (and proud) is the goal. Shehnaz Suterwalla (2013) explores this phenomenon. “The slogan t-shirt,” she writes, “gives strength to marginalised voices through their means of expression. [...] As an object worn on the body it acts as an embodied articulation of an individual’s voice and practice of their gendered realities” (Suterwalla, 2013, p. 34). I’d like to suggest that t-shirts can articulate another important aspect of selfhood: the solidarities that we hold dear.

An undated t-shirt held in the Gerber/Hart library and archives in Chicago, Illinois, shouts the words “DYKE FAG SPACE” in bold, black printed text. Above these words in a smaller font is the phrase “communities coming out, taking pride in ourselves.” Below it, even smaller, explains the larger messages in more detail:

We, as members of sexually marginalized communities, understand that race, gender, class, age, religion, geographic origin, physical/mental/emotional ability, HIV/AIDS status, and affectional orientation are constructed by dominant culture to maintain power and privilege. In reappropriating the notions of dyke/fag and reclaiming our space, we empower ourselves, create positive identity politics (the foundation of coalition building) and resist/challenge/oppose dominant culture (Anon, 1990, para. 1).

We may not know exactly who wore this t-shirt, or when, or where. It exists in the archive, untethered to

any expositional information. We can, however, guess what they aimed to achieve. The words remain printed on the t-shirt, safely stored in the archive and captured in the material world until the ink fades and the fabric degrades. It was a call for solidarity (or “coalition building”) as a means to empower and resist. It captures the identity of the dyke as well as the fag, and combines their marginalisation to present a united front. A t-shirt is seen when it is worn on the body, and it was a body that once carried this message, reaching the eyes of anyone whose attention the words “DYKE FAG SPACE” grabbed. For those who saw it who may have used the slurs “dyke” and “fag” in their speech, the t-shirt was a rebuttal and a reclamation. For those who identified in the realms of “dyke” or “fag,” it was an extended hand. Like the shirt says, it was a welcoming “space.” That it was worn on the body, constantly visible, means that this space was always occupied and implies that the gay/lesbian collective *group* was always filling it, not only the wearer of the t-shirt. The LGBTQ activist t-shirt wearer is potentially always participating in something larger than themselves, their community solidarity worn like armour.

The Queer Nation Manifesto was handed out at New York City Pride in 1990, donning the deliberately-provocative phrase “I HATE STRAIGHTS” on its cover. The manifesto was a physical object and, like t-shirts, a translation of queer activism into material culture. The word “queer” was used intentionally, just as “dyke” and “fag” in the t-shirt discussed above. It was a reclamation and an accusation, but also – as Ian Lucas writes in his history of the British LGBT activist group *Outrage!* – “a call to queer nationalism – a community that confronted homophobia and had a collective responsibility for dismantling the power of the closet” (Lucas, 1998, p. 14). Here, “queer” refers to lesbians and gay men, with the Queer Nation Manifesto declaring “Let’s make every space a lesbian and gay space” (Queer Nation, 1990, para. 9). The act of “mak[ing] space” was done with the help of insistent, visible, physical objects: the pamphlets, infamous three decades later, but also the t-shirts that undoubtedly surrounded them, worn on the bodies of the people in the crowd at New York City Pride. The solidarity between lesbians and gay men and among the “Queer Nation” is a long-standing and important one. In the thirty years since the Queer Nation Manifesto’s birth, however, other bonds and rifts have formed.

Writing and wearing #LwiththeT

As LGBTQ rights have progressed, solidarity between lesbians and gay men has seemingly become more secure and less in need of attention, with the phrase “gay and lesbian” frequently still in use to pair the communities together (Gold, 2018; Maheshwari-Aplin, 2023). Though experiences can differ drastically between lesbians and gay men (and each individual within those communities), their experiences are linked in the public eye by the simple act of only loving the ‘same sex’. In more recent years, the relationship between the lesbian and trans community has been in the spotlight, whether through the lens of news articles, social media, or activist campaigns (O’Sullivan, 2022). #LwiththeT is a campaign that emerged in direct response to lesbian group GetTheLOut. The latter joined the front of the parade at Pride in London 2018 as an unregistered group, and carried anti-trans banners, gave out anti-trans leaflets and wore anti-trans t-shirts (Southwell, 2018, para. 1). Later that summer and the following year, marchers holding signs reading “#LWithTheT” and “NOT A DEBATE” led Pride marches in cities across the United Kingdom (Ashenden and Duffy, 2019, para. 2). These events and their significance for lesbian and trans solidarities have been rigorously debated in the years since they occurred, including by Alyosxa Tudor (2019) and Elena Gambino (2021). The 2018 Pride in London incident is reflective of a much broader transphobic movement happening in and outside of the lesbian community at present. However, I would argue that #LwiththeT could be considered a more accurate representation of general lesbian feeling, as evidenced by the theoretical writing and deliberate clothing choices discussed in the rest of this paper.

As described above, at Pride in London in 2019, lesbians took a stand against the actions of GetTheLOut the year before. They did this with their physical bodies and the garments that clothed them, as well as the placards gripped tightly in their hands. Writer Amelia Abraham captured the event for the online magazine *Dazed*:

This year it felt important to let trans people know that they are welcome at Pride in London – which is why the event was awash with lesbians and cis women wearing T-shirts and carrying signs with slogans such as, “I learned what I know about true feminism from the trans women in my life,” and “Not gay as in happy, queer as in fuck TERFS” (Abraham, 2019, para. 1).

Here, lesbians – often not trans themselves – were expressing solidarity through their clothing so that it could be seen and known. Partly due to GetTheLOut’s actions, the image of a lesbian identity is in some circumstances correlated with anti-trans ideology. This is particularly evident online, where the turnaround of ideas is quick and opinions can be strongly expressed. As explained by Sadhbh O’Sullivan (2022) in an article titled ‘Stop Using Lesbians Like Me To Justify Your Transphobia’, “the headline claim” is that lesbians “are being ‘erased’ by trans people” (O’Sullivan, 2022, para. 2). At Pride in London 2019, lesbian allies of the trans community took to the streets to shift their image back – or, maybe, forward. Signs, banners and placards are so often used in protests and Pride marches, but a t-shirt may continue to be worn after a sign has been put down, though both may continue their existence in archives and images. A t-shirt, like those described by Abraham (2019), places lesbian-trans solidarity into the personal realm of the body. Abraham’s article is illustrated with snapshots by photographer Asafe Ghalib, with one photograph featuring Kat Hudson, a lesbian dressed in a t-shirt which she customised herself with Sharpie pens and safety pins: “LESBIANS FOR TRANS RIGHTS!” it shouts. “Our trans family mean the world to us and our trans lovers don’t make us any less gay” (Abraham, 2019, para. 4). This is solidarity that purposefully uses clothing and craft to exist and be seen. Rather than wearing her heart on her sleeve, Hudson wore her ideals scrawled across her ribcage.

#LwiththeT and all that surrounds it echoes ideas that are being voiced in writing and theory. In a 2016 article, for example, Kath Browne, Marta Olasik, and Julie Podmore discussed the relevance of lesbian feminism within a contemporary queer landscape. Podmore offered the following analysis: “Rather than being placed in opposition to each other, we need to explore the potential alliances between trans populations, queer women and lesbians” (Browne et al., 2016, p. 117). Alliances are, perhaps, solidarity in action. They are a way that we reach out and form a stronger, united front while still existing as specific communities and identities with our own goals and desires. This is a thread that picks up in Sara Ahmed’s *Living A Feminist Life* (2017). The final chapter of the book, titled ‘Lesbian Feminism’ is written with the “conviction: in order to survive what we come up against, in order to build worlds from the shattered pieces, we need a revival of lesbian feminism” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 213). If lesbianism’s

reputation has shifted into something exclusionary, then this is even more true of lesbian feminism. Lesbian feminism is associated through its “share[d] borders” (Rudy, 2001, p. 192) with radical feminism, and consequently in more recent years with trans-exclusionary radical feminism – the origin of the acronym ‘TERF’, used today to describe transphobic activists. However, as Ahmed and other scholars have pointed out, lesbian feminism’s importance and potential has not gone away. Elena Gambino, reflecting in 2021 about the lesbian feminist writing published in the Journal *Sinister Wisdom* (1976–), considers how “insisting on a more complex historical relationship between lesbian and queer practices reveals most fully how egregiously groups like Get the L Out have mischaracterized the very lesbian feminist erasures that they purport to defend” (Gambino, 2021, p. 542). In other words, for a true lesbian feminism to exist in the context of the 2020s, solidarity with other queer communities is indispensable.

Lesbians continue to have all the more potential to be threatening when standing together than when divided. In Ahmed’s chapter she turns the threatening, disruptive potential of lesbian feminism over in her hands like a stone before passing it to her metaphorical trans sisters to further shape and finesse. “When you aim not to reproduce a world that directs attention to men,” she writes:

‘you are threatening. When your being threatens life, you have to wrap life around being. [...] I would suggest that it is transfeminism today that most recalls the militant spirit of lesbian feminism in part because of the insistence that crafting a life is political work’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 227).

Crafting a life is political work. It takes shape through physical craft, painted t-shirts, drafted and re-drafted essays, tweets and protest chants. Lesbian and trans communities consistently and repeatedly overlap and intertwine, whether in theoretical writing, the historical record, or fashion cultures. It is perhaps in the visual and material world when this becomes most evident, like a flag speared into the earth, signalling that solidarity exists here.

Flagging

Pride flags have become almost synonymous with LGBTQ identities in recent years, and capitalism has played no small part in this. This is especially true when we imagine the six-stripe rainbow flag, originally

an eight-stripe version designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978, which is splashed across chain clothing stores and incorporated into every corporation's *Twitter* icon each Pride Month, or June. Andy Campbell (2019) writes that "Baker's flag is now ubiquitous; it hangs in LGBTQ community spaces and appears in popular culture alike" (Campbell, 2019, p. 83). Sometimes, it represents an extended hand or welcoming space. Other times, it is only a token, a sinister nod to solidarity that is far from the real thing.

The rainbow is, of course, not the only Pride flag, but rather a multitude of flags representing gender and sexual identities, that occasionally intersect with or split off from one another. Some are more widely recognised than others, particularly those within the main "LGBT" acronym. The trans flag is made up of five stripes in light blue, light pink and white; the bisexual flag is a purple stripe sandwiched between bright pink and bright blue, inspired by the 1980s 'Bi Angles,' two intersecting triangles in pink and blue with purple where they overlapped (Madison, 2017, p. 150). Gay male identity is usually represented only by the rainbow, though attempts at popularising other flag designs have been made. Recently, there have also been additions to the six-striped rainbow to create the "progress pride" flag, which incorporates the colours of the trans flag, along with black and brown to represent racial diversity and, increasingly, a purple circle on a yellow background to be inclusive of intersex people. The lesbian flag has a complicated history and many variations, but the current most popular version – the "sunset flag" – has stripes of dark orange, dark pink, and white; I will revisit its evolution later on. Flags have become a kind of queer communication unlike any other. They are a language that is visual, like clothing. They are a language which is adaptable, which can be displayed and combined to present specific meanings – like clothing. Often, they *are* clothing, with the queer desire to communicate resulting in jackets weighed down by Pride flag pins, or crocheted vests in the colours of a trans rainbow.

I conducted a written interview with Aster about the aforementioned trans flag-patterned vest in 2022. On Trans Day of Visibility 2022 (31st March) they posted various photographs on their Instagram account (@mercurialstitches) of a hand-crocheted vest in the trans flag colours – or as they put it "a recognisable variation on the trans pride palette, in darker muted colours that I actually liked" (Aster, 2022). When I asked Aster about their thoughts on various Pride flags, they said:

‘Distinct terms that describe me are lesbian, trans, intersex, agender, and genderfluid, and each of these has its own pride flag – which I imagine is great and affirming for people who claim any of those as a “primary” identity – but to me, in terms of how I exist in the world, it’s all one thing. It’s just that “lesbian” is so often equated with “cis lesbian who identifies as a Woman™”, “trans” with “binary-identified and not intersex”, and so on; so I have to stack terms, and flags, to fully articulate myself’ (Aster).

This concept of ‘stacking’ comes across in the photographs of Aster’s trans flag vest. Aside from the vest itself, Aster wears a necklace with the word “DYKE” spelled out with four letter-shaped charms, and another necklace beneath it with a dangling mercury symbol – used to represent intersex, genderfluid and gender-nonconforming individuals. The social media snapshot is a lesson in semiotics as queer language: Aster makes themselves legible to others in the know, or to people who understand the various symbols, by adorning their body with them. It is the “cultural meaning” of the symbols, as described by Roland Barthes in *The Semiotic Challenge* (1985), that gives them weight, but one must be familiar with the specifics of the culture (in this case, a particular kind of queer culture) for their meaning to be apparent (Barthes, [1985] 1994, p. 180). In this context, intersecting identity markers enable expression of a multilayered self, but also a close, personal solidarity between the trans, lesbian and intersex identities that are flagged by the outfit. The messages that can be read through it are numerous, indicated by each symbol and the ways that they are worn – on a chain, in yarn, hand-crafted, layered. “This vest carries hundreds or thousands of words of my thoughts about the joys and frustrations of being trans in the fibre community,” writes Aster. How can this crocheted trans flag vest be considered a marker of lesbian and trans solidarity? When I interviewed Aster, they answered this question without me having to ask it. They wrote:

‘I think of handmade pride things as a way of creating material evidence of our social bonds with each other (and, I hope, leaving something for another generation of dykes to wear or otherwise enjoy someday). This to me seems like the truest way I can express pride in the sense that I really experience it: not just as an individual identity that I claim for myself, but something I experience

in relation to other people like me' (Aster).

“Solidarity” does not just mean “I support you”. It means to have struggles that might be solved more easily together; to have joys that can be shared with one another; to stand arm-in-arm and know that it makes us stronger. It means to hope for a future that is better. An important feature of clothing is that it can be reworn and mended, it can live and be loved again. When we express solidarity with clothing it is expressed repeatedly, but to be reworn relies on a continuation of visual language. “Flagging” is usually understood within LGBTQ communities and history as a ‘hanky code’ that correlates to a desire for “different sexual practices” and “the wearer’s preference for active or passive roles” (Cole, 2000, p. 112), but I want to propose a different meaning. In this context, “flagging” is the use of literal, physical Pride flags worn on the body to show ideals and identities, particularly to other queer people. When I talked to Aster, they mused that “For a while now I’ve been conceptualising pride flags as a kind of modern version of heraldry” (Aster). This phrase strikes a chord: flagging could be considered the material manifestation of the ‘Queer Nation,’ each identity part of a larger, nation-like entity. The more specific, intra-community flags are sources of pride and kinship, but they all exist under the ubiquitous rainbow, the so-called mother country.

Of course, the Queer Nation is not always a peaceful one, no matter the utopian hopes of Larry Mitchell in his *The Faggots & Their Friends*. The lesbian flag in particular has lived many lives, each laden with meaning. The first lesbian flag was designed in 1999 by a gay man, Sean Campbell, who overlaid the symbol of the black triangle with a labrys (double-headed axe) on a rich purple background. The colour and the symbols had all been central in lesbian semiotics for decades, used in mediums such as activist banners and pamphlets. Though Campbell’s flag perhaps never gained much traction, it had built-in lesbian historical and cultural significance (Anon, 2019, para. 4). However, it was eclipsed by the “lipstick” lesbian flag in the early 2010s – a flag made up of shades of pink and red, with a central white stripe. This flag initially included a lipstick mark in the corner, which was removed over time. In 2018, in response to allegations that the designer of the “lipstick” flag had posted transphobic content online, new attempts at designing a lesbian flag were made. This led to the “sunset” lesbian flag, originally designed

by *Tumblr* user Emily Gwen to explicitly include “gender non-conformity” and “unique relationships to womanhood” (Gwen, n.d.). This brief history is important: it is one based in symbolism, fragmentation and solidarity. When lesbians deliberately choose to use the sunset flag today, they may often be aware of this history and doing so with solidarity in mind. To those within LGBTQ communities who know the winding saga of lesbian flag designs, or their specific “cultural meanings”, the sunset flag implies a lesbian identity that celebrates and includes trans individuals (Barthes, 1994, p. 180).

Flagging is arguably a language far more complex than a dictionary of coloured stripes, and continually makes its way into clothing culture. In 2018, I conducted research about lesbians and queer people wearing pink. One respondent described how her style of dressing made her a “walking lesbian flag” (Lison, 2018). She was communicating her identity with her body and the clothes that adorned it, on the street and in online space. She was referring to the pink-toned “lipstick” lesbian flag, the most widely used symbol of lesbianism at the time. In the few years since this interview, lesbian flag usage has almost entirely shifted to the sunset flag, and a pink-only outfit would no longer necessarily be a “walking lesbian flag”. It is not a coincidence that this shift has coincided with movements like #LwiththeT and with the increase of trans-inclusive lesbian feminism being theorised in academia and beyond, with books, articles, and online conversations creating space that is both lesbian-specific and celebratory of trans identities and activism. To be effective, solidarity has to be shown and it has to be known. Some do this with writing, some with flag designs, and some with the clothes they wear.

Another example of “flagging” is the lesbian musician and self-acclaimed “dyke pop princess” Foxgluvv, and the outfit that she wore on stage for Birmingham Pride 2021. Her dress was custom made by the brand *Delta of Phoenix* from layers of rainbow organza, pieced together to represent the “progress pride” flag. This dress was “flagging” to the extreme, a purposeful message to a literal audience. When asked about the dress, Foxgluvv said:

‘I really wanted my on-stage outfit for Birmingham pride to be a reflection of how far I’ve come personally. Birmingham pride was the first pride event I ever attended pre coming out, so I emphasised this to Fran (who owns Delta of Phoenix [clothing brand]). We ultimately decided

that creating a dress that incorporated the inclusive pride progress flag was a great way to not only celebrate myself and my own journey, but the community that I grew up in!’ (Foxgluvv). Foxgluvv could, perhaps, have chosen to wear a dress in the colours of the lesbian pride flag. However, on stage at a Pride event she was not only representing herself, but her community. The dress was a celebration of the LGBTQ+ community as a *whole*, and her place within it. It represented a lesbian musician flagging that L stands with the T, the G, the B, and every other letter of the extended LGBTQ+ acronym. To quote Francesca Newman, the designer of Foxgluvv’s dress, “we wanted to create an unapologetic, can’t-look-away moment of support” (Newman, 2022). Like Aster’s vest, Foxgluvv’s dress carries meaning in its uniqueness; time, effort and thought was put into its creation, unlike in the wearing of a fast-fashion Pride t-shirt sold by brands like *Primark* or *Boohoo*. Each colour was a choice, a decision to wear a trans flag on a lesbian body and insist that the two things are not separate entities. Gender studies scholar Alyosxa Tudor writes that “many of ‘us’ queer feminists, lesbian feminists and trans feminists know from our own struggles, positionalities and politics that lesbian/dyke/femme/butch/trans/non-binary can be seen as overlapping, interconnected and in complex interaction with one another” (2019, p. 362). This is what dress-as-solidarity potentially encourages us to be – in motion; communicating; embodied.

Conclusion

The lesbian language of fashion is filled with sprawling signals and symbols, colours and textures. Sometimes, its various parts come together to create a specific message. Lesbian fashion can express solidarity in numerous ways – t-shirts with clear phrases, affiliations and demands can tell the world at large that the space that a body inhabits is, for example, a “DYKE FAG SPACE”. They can be hand-customised with Sharpie pens or spray-paint for an individual to don their exact personal feelings, like Kat Hudson who in 2019 proudly wrote and wore the words “LESBIANS FOR TRANS RIGHTS!” These messages are clear, legible to an audience who might be outside of the LGBTQ community. Other messages are more subtle, understood by only those who know each particular meaning and nuance. A

trans flag is more widely recognised than it ever has been, but there are many people who might see a particular configuration of light blue-white-light pink and not grasp its meaning. In these instances, lesbian clothing is a message with a recipient: those in the trans and wider LGBTQ communities, to whom our solidarity means the most.

In this paper I have highlighted the importance of fashion within lesbian – and more broadly queer – activism. I have argued that clothes could be considered as activism for the everyday. I wanted, firstly, to shine a light on lesbian activism that is explicitly trans-inclusionary – rather than trans-exclusionary – expressed through visual culture and fashion. I aimed to locate this activism within a historical precedent of lesbian solidarity with other communities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Visual culture, often in the form of clothing, has been an important device with which this solidarity has been publicly expressed as exemplified in the “DYKE FAG SPACE” t-shirt, and those worn at Pride in London 2019. My second goal for this paper was to propose the concept of “flagging”, or the wearing of Pride flag colour palettes and imagery in order to communicate specific solidarities. I discussed what this means not only for the ever-growing Pride flag dictionary, but also in the use of these flags in the physical, material and visual world.

Flags and words can both divide us, separating us into micro-identities and warring factions. They can also, however, be a chance to speak, to articulate ourselves and hold each other close, to be seen and understood. If lesbian fashion is considered as a toolkit for solidarity, then the language of flags, words and symbols are the tools that nestle within it. It physically exists, unconstrained by the bounds of academia, books and online articles. Lesbian fashion takes to the streets, to social media, to the stage of roaring Pride events. What we do with it out there is up to us.

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