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Slut shaming and the politics of tight clothes

BY GUEST WRITER | FEBRUARY 16, 2009

There is no shortage of slut bashing in this world.

I remember one of the first times my mother told me that what I wanted to wear was inappropriate. I was about 8, and loved wearing bright colors and crazy patterns (clearly, not much has changed!). I had this gorgeous white ruffled tank top that I inherited from an older friend, and that I thought looked fantastic on me. My mom saw me in it and told me that I couldn't wear sleeveless shirts because my arms were too fat.

When I was 12, I had bought my first black miniskirt, and remember walking home from the bus while the mean boys in my neighborhood shouted insults at me, taunting me. "Do you have a boyfriend? Tell us his name!" they sneered. Later that year, the popular girls in school talked loudly and pointedly behind me about how *some girls* had legs that were too fat to wear knee socks like the ones I happened to be wearing.

A few years after that, a rumor circulated around my high school that I would sleep with any boy who would date me. Yet, I had never even kissed anyone at my school, let alone slept with them. It had everything to do with the fact that I was a punky girl who wore tight pleather pants, red patent stilettos, and had pink hair and her eyebrow pierced.

After college, I had a job at a health food store where my standard work outfit was a pair of pants and a form-fitting shirt. One day, I was crouched down to rearrange some cans when the owner of the store walked behind me. She bent down and without asking, tugged down the bottom hem of my shirt. "Too much skin was showing," she explained, referring to the 2 inch span of lower back that you could see when I was bent over.

I also remember my first femme idol. I remember how I saw her out at a queer event, and how long and how hard I stared at her. She had had the audacity to wear a corset that prominently displayed her extremely generous cleavage. And a short skirt. And heels. *And* she was fat. I remember the simultaneous feeling of discomfort and envy. I wanted to be that, to look like her. I wanted to be a larger than life sexpot who everyone in the room turned their heads to. But I also couldn't imagine willingly showing off my body like that. I didn't wear my clothes baggy, but I also didn't dare put it on display like she did.

Pretty soon after that, she became my friend. And I started exploring what it meant to be femme. My friend wore delicious curve-hugging clothes that highlighted the shape of her body. I was fat too, and had only ever learned that fat was meant to be tucked in and molded. My friend paid no attention to any of the old rules I had come to live by, and I found myself constantly challenged and in awe of her bravery. Even though we were friends, I still remember that simultaneous feeling of discomfort and envy when I watched her take fashion

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Two Whole Cakes is a blog written by Lesley Kinzel, a mouthy fat broad who deals in body politics, social justice activism, and pop-cultural criticism, usually from a feminist-flavored perspective.

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risks that I couldn't even imagine daring to try. I had been taught to be my own body police.

Over the years, as I've built up an incredible community of queer fat femmes in my life, I've also seen the slow and steady evolution of the comfort I have with my own body. In these years, I've had many firsts. Wearing my first mini-dress in public. The first time I wore a dress so tight I couldn't sit down very well in it. My first bikini. My first bikini on a public beach.

In the queer fat femme context from which I operate, blatant displays of the body can be sources of power and strength. We wear our sexualities like rhinestone-covered girl scout badges, showing off for ourselves and each other as much as we do for others. No, you don't *have* to wear something short or tight or sparkly or see through to be seen as sexy in my community, but those things also aren't judged as "too much." In my world, "too much" is not just accepted, but welcomed. I see my gender as a simulacrum of womanhood; a copy of a copy of a copy that I've remixed, revamped, re-imagined, and reclaimed.

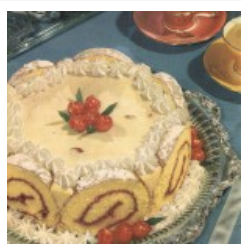
And this is also why, when someone tells me that my clothes are "too tight" and that "you don't have to wear tight clothes to be sexy," I feel rage. I wonder if they know how hard I had to work just to feel like I was even *allowed* to wear those clothes, much less feel confident and beautiful in them. I wonder if they've ever been slut bashed, and wonder if they're policing my fashion because they've been slut bashed. But I especially don't understand it when those criticisms come from other supposedly fat-positive people, because in my world, letting the outline of your belly show in a dress, or wearing something sleeveless that doesn't hide your arm fat isn't just ok, it's appreciated. Tight clothes on fat bodies are inherently political, and I would even say moreso when those tight clothes look damn good and are worn with pride.

I don't need everyone to like the clothes that I wear, but I am also attuned to the undercurrent of slut shaming that is so often levied against people who wear revealing clothes. I would ask those people who feel discomfort and/or disgust to think about what it is that's behind those feelings. It took me years to unlearn all that crap that I had been fed about the appropriate way to wear my fat, and I still have days where I cringe at the sight of my belly poking out in a dress. But then I also remember that embracing my fat and being body positive isn't just about loving the "acceptably fat" parts of me (i.e. tits and ass and hips). My belly deserves to be honored too. And, like a wise friend of mine once said, "Back fat is the new cleavage."

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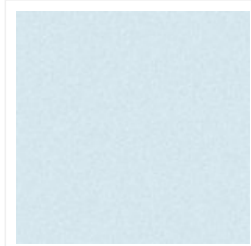
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