

The “Gal Pal Epidemic”

Recent Hollywood media has been preoccupied with reporting on “BFFs” (best friends forever) and “gal pals”, where demonstrations of affection between female celebrities are frequently discussed in all manner of print, televisual, and online media. *People* magazine, reporting on the 2015 Oscars, even invented a new award category in crowning Jennifer Aniston and Emma Stone the ‘Breakout BFFs of the Oscars’ (Bender 2015). This emergent language for describing same-sex female pairs might seem to follow on from the “bromance” phenomenon – despite the neologism “womance” (Winch 2013) not quite acquiring the same cultural prevalence, the terms “gal pal” and “BFF” have become ubiquitous. While on the one hand this evidences a heightened Hollywood celebration (and policing) of female friendship, on the other it is more than noteworthy that gal pal and BFF are frequently used to describe relationships that are either suspected or confirmed as romantic or sexual in nature. More than a means to refer to same-sex female friendship, the BFF or gal pal designation has routinely been used to describe pairs who are physically affectionate in public, romantic on social media, or have confirmed their relationship status – including Michelle Rodriguez and Cara Delevingne, Alicia Cargile and Kristen Stewart, and Angel Haze and Ireland Baldwin.¹

In other words, the use of the BFF or gal pal label appears to indicate a resistance to reading the (confirmed or likely) sexual nature of these pairings, masking the lesbian possibility with euphemisms of friendship. Haze has spoken out about this

¹ Since the demise of Haze and Baldwin’s relationship, Haze has declared that “they/their” are their preferred pronouns, which are used throughout this article. In referring to Haze and Baldwin as women in a relationship, I use the terms that Haze used in 2014 to describe themselves.

phenomenon, explaining (in reference to their relationship with Baldwin) that the media 'just calls us best friends, best friends for life, like we're just friends hanging out', but 'we fuck and friends don't fuck' (Alexander 2014). The BFF label, in these instances, seemingly infantilizes sexual relationships between women, comparing them to adolescent intensities – temporary placeholders for future heterosexual couplings. This is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in the *Vogue* interview that proclaimed Delevingne's bisexuality a likely 'phase' (Haskell 2015). As Adrienne Rich so famously argues, 'compulsory heterosexuality', or the institutionalization of heterosexuality as "natural", requires the erasure of the possibility of same-sex female relationships (1980, p. 135).

It is significant that the so-called gal pal epidemic is occurring at a time when lesbians and bisexuals are represented on television more than ever before and when celebrity lesbians and bisexuals are increasing in numbers seemingly daily. Or, in other words, we might consider this a moment in which it seems untenably dated to refer to same-sex female relationships euphemistically. However, it is also notable that many of the female stars referred to as gal pals resist representing their sexuality in the language of identity – refusing specifically the language of lesbianism as much as the media that reports on them. For instance, while an out lesbian such as Ellen DeGeneres is in no danger of being described as Portia de Rossi's gal pal, the same cannot be said of Stewart, who has resisted any sexual identity label and outright stated that coming out does not resonate with her (Wappler 2015). Here then, the gal pal label seems to be applied in situations of non-identification, as with Stewart, or of bisexuality, as is the case with Delevingne.

Unsurprisingly, these erasures have resulted in a fair amount of backlash, especially on social media. Eleanor Margolis, columnist for the *New Statesman*, has called for ‘no more “gal pals”’ (2015) and *Autostraddle*, a popular American website for lesbian and bisexual women, has gone so far as to label this a ‘gal pal epidemic’, where the incessant misnaming of couples as friends is ‘one of the linguistic crises of our time’ (Yates 2015). Yet, if this phenomenon is in part “of our time” it is also connected to a much longer history. Canonical theorizing in lesbian theory has argued that the ‘spectral lesbian subject’ has persistently haunted patriarchal culture as that which ghosts its categories of legibility (Castle 1993, p. 48). For Terry Castle, lesbianism is ‘the “repressed idea” at the heart of patriarchal culture’, who can only be represented through a process of negation (1993, pp. 61-2). Similarly, Valerie Rohy argues that the lesbian is incessantly defined through her erasure – so that ‘rather than suppressing the idea of lesbian desire, the homophobic discourse of impossibility promotes and structures its articulation’ (2000, p. 1). Negation is so central to lesbian representation that Rohy suggests the lesbian ‘comes into existence through the agency of the definition that names it as nonexistent’ (2000, p. 2). Read through this theoretical lens, the contemporary usage of BFF or gal pal labels might be explored as part of a longer history of the erasure of the possibility of same-sex female desire. Yet, this would also involve considering how the gal pal epidemic, precisely through disavowing same-sex female desire, might paradoxically condition its articulation – albeit through a process of negation.

Even as the gal pal or BFF label seems to linguistically negate the sexual nature of same-sex female pairs, what is notable in the reporting is the way a sexual or romantic aspect is undeniably present. Echoing work such as Castle’s and Rohy’s, it is possible to argue

that same-sex desire is legible in the very refusal to name it as such – a haunting that does not quite come into shape but which is nevertheless there as a presence. Headlines such as ‘Kristen Stewart Holds Hands with Gal Pal Alicia Cargile’ (Reda 2015) or ‘Kristen Stewart gets touchy-feely with her live-in gal pal Alicia Cargile’ (MailOnline Reporter 2015) cannot easily be said to erase the sexual or romantic possibility. Despite repeating the language of friendship – Cargile as Stewart’s ‘live-in gal pal’ – the *Daily Mail* article obsesses over the pair’s ‘tomboy’ fashion, inseparability, matching tattoos, public kissing, and quotes a friend of Stewart who describes the pair as ‘getting very serious’. This reporting does not erase the handholding, the living together, or even the seriousness of the pair – it admits to all of it. Similarly, in a *Daily Mail* article reporting on an airport reunion between Haze and Baldwin, the piece notes that Baldwin received a ‘warm welcome from BFF Angel Haze at LAX’ (Daily Mail Reporter 2014). The article goes on to describe Haze as Baldwin’s ‘good friend’, Baldwin as Haze’s ‘pal’, and refers to the pair’s ‘close friendship’. Yet, the piece takes pains to repeatedly refer to the pair having been spotted kissing and to note that Baldwin had recently split with her boyfriend.

The outcry against the gal pal epidemic rests on accusations that it erases or closets same-sex female desire. Of course it is politically necessary to argue that media reporting should take these relationships seriously and use language that might recognize desire, sexuality, and identities that are not heterosexual. Yet, it might also be necessary to connect this contemporary epidemic to a history of thinking about representing same-sex female desire. This history enables us to explore how the gal pal epidemic might not so simply erase same-sex female desire, but rather, through the very process of erasure or negation, bring it into representation, into discourse.

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