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“Those pictures are peaches”: Gender Play in a Feminist Visual Underground

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Abstract: Focusing on a set of photographs taken by Frances Benjamin Johnston in the late nineteenth century, this article argues for the value of identifying, exploring, and interrogating historical and current instances of a feminist visual underground (FVU). Defined as a hidden material-relational space within which private gender play evolves, an FVU, past and present, forms in response of visual compression, or pressures from the ambient dominant culture to conform to binary gender prescriptions; it flourishes in material-relational safe spaces; and it employs a communicative medium that, marked by visual codes, promotes the unity and sustainability of the private cohort. To demonstrate the value of addressing FVU, this article examined one instantiation of a feminist visual underground: that revolving around Johnston and her photographic studio in the late nineteenth century. The examination underscored the value of expanding the purview of feminist visual culture to include feminist visual undergrounds: first, it revealed hidden pockets of resistance to gender prohibitions; second, it offered perspectives from which to interrogate both dominant patriarch and feminist visual cultures as manifested in particular historical moments; and, finally, in an era of increasing restrictions on freedom of speech, it emphasized the importance of scaling feminist visual activism, encompassing the quiet invisibility of private expression as well as public visibility of conventional feminist advocacy.

Keywords: feminist visual underground, gender play, visual compression, safe spaces, visual codes, nineteenth-century photography

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A“My dear Miss Fanny

“Whew!-----!!!! Those pictures are peaches. It was the greatest pleasure to get them so soon and I wish you could had been here to enjoy opening them with me” (Thompson, 1896).

So writes fin de siècle artist-illustrator Mills Thompson to close friend Frances Benjamin Johnston, famed portrait photographer and groundbreaking photojournalist. Delighted to receive a group of prints featuring Thompson, Johnston, and an unidentified female collaborator all dressed in gender non-conforming apparel, the secretary to The Society of Washington Artists gleefully requests the nationally renowned photographer to send him an additional set of “good prints. . . as soon as you can.”

The cross-dressing photographs themselves as well as the letter testifying to the recipient’s pleasure reflect one instantiation of what I call a *feminist visual underground* (FVU). Defined as a covert material-relational space within which visual resistance, solidarity, and friendship flourish, a feminist visual underground enabled Thompson and Johnston—if only for the snap of the shutter—to undermine late nineteenth-century rigid gender binaries. The poses Thompson extolls, as well as the emotions and desires they embody, underscore the vital importance of grappling with implications of sub-rosa dissent flouting socially prescribed gender roles.

Sensitive to the ways in which “feminism and visual culture. . . deeply inform one another,” Euro-western feminists have identified and critiqued the means by which dominant visuality—or learned ways of seeing in

a culture—"is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture" (Jones, 2007, p. 1). Such valuable scholarship has exposed and countered asymmetrical gender power permeating visual cultures throughout the West. But equally important to feminist political and social agendas are the ways in which gender inscriptions are re-visualized surreptitiously in small, intimate cohorts, or FVUs. Disinterring and interrogating the myriad historical and current formations of these secret enclaves reveal the private face of feminist resistance to a dominant visual culture. This practice also reveals the ways secret insurgents challenge the public face of visual gender activism.

To illustrate the benefit of exploring FVUs, I examine one instance of a late nineteenth-century subterranean rebellion alluded to in Thompson's letter and embodied by Johnston's alt-gender photographs. At the same time, I also offer a mode of engaging with such hidden cohorts, identifying three mutually constitutive elements integral to their existence: visual compressions, or societal and legal visual pressures that delineate and police gender boundaries; safe spaces, or material-relational sites that, hidden from public view, foster the formation of a trusted cohort sympathetic to transgressing gender binaries; and a visual medium deployed in that safe space to collaboratively "signal[. . .] a Refusal" of hegemonic gender dictates (Hebdige, 1997, p. 3). Such an exploration yields two critical benefits: it provides insight into scales of feminist visual resistance, from the invisible to the visible, and into matrices within which adherents reimagine gender identities. Equally important, it offers alternative perspectives from which to cross-examine an era's dominant patriarchal and feminist visual cultures.

A Feminist Visual Underground

One of the "peaches" Thompson (1896) receives from Johnston ostensibly features a photograph of a prosperous matron with two male scions hovering around her (see Fig. 1). Evoking the middle-class gendered mantra that celebrates ideal families, the image replicates the style of portraiture featured in family photo albums wildly popular in the final decades of the nineteenth century. [Place fig. 1 here.]

Johnston, F. B. (c 1896). Untitled 1: A Seated Mills Thompson in Victorian Dress with Frances Benjamin Johnston and Unidentified Woman in Male Apparel. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.04879/

However, rather than reinforcing dominant gender conventions, the photograph upends them. For the mother-figure arrayed in a rich, Victorian fashion is Thompson, and the mustached son leaning against his "mother" is Johnston. What results from this gender reversal is an image deliberately abrogating entrenched gender norms. An incarnation of resistance to status quo familial roles based on binary genders, *Untitled 1* testifies to the value of exploring FVUs as they offer glimpses into intimate visual dissent, thereby enriching scholarship focused on the public face of feminist activism. Simultaneously, inquiry into FVUs also provides vantage points from which to interrogate both dominant patriarchal visual culture *and* an ambient feminist visual culture.

First, attending to private subterranean visual resistance enriches work in subcultures as sites of underground rebellion, feminist or otherwise. Reflecting the 1970s emergent interest in cultural dissent, Hebdige (1997) theorizes and asserts the importance of the "expressive forms and rituals of. . . subordinate groups" (p. 2) that consciously deviate from the social dictates of the empowered group (p. 3). Complementing efforts to effect "a breakdown of consensus" in cultural realities (p. 17), Hebdige details the ways in which "spectacular subcultures" (p. 18) challenge perceived hegemony through the "level of appearances" (p. 17), employing visual strategies that upend "the process of normalization" (p. 18). Resistance, then, combines with visual style to undermine the dominant culture's overarching "principle of unity and cohesion" (p. 18). Similarly, marked by dissent, particularly transgressions of gender prohibitions, FVUs likewise engage in opposing "normalization." But, in contrast to subcultures, FVUs act in extreme privacy, finding in invisibility and protective enclosures invitations to—and protections for—nonconforming gender play. Addressing FVUs, then, potentially reveals new visual strategies for collaborative dissent that unfold through everyday actions among an

emotionally supportive cohort.

Second, in addition to enrichment, the study of FVUs promotes interrogation by providing perspectives from which to critique the dominant male-marked visual culture and the feminist visual culture itself. Johnston offers a case in point, especially as her enclave's gender play complemented and contested the visual turn in nineteenth-century women's activism. The public deployment of myriad forms of visual culture constituted a remarkable innovation in suffragists' efforts to secure rights for women, signaling the emergence of a feminist visual culture. Focusing on England's suffragettes, Cherry (2000) points to the women's embrace of spectacle activism—parades, banners, postcards, and protest art—all performances linked through "the importance which they gave to visuality and visibility" (p. 1). A similar canny innovation of feminist visual culture colors the advocacy efforts of U. S. suffragists from the campaign for bloomers in the 1850s to the use of photographs to woo members to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) (Flexner, 1975, p. 230). While Johnston's FVU—self-named The Push—likewise embraced the explosion of visual technologies that characterized the nineteenth-century mediasphere, it did so in ways that implicitly interrogated late nineteenth-century feminist visual culture.

To illustrate, suffrage activism and Johnston's FVU differed significantly in terms of their visualizations of gender identities. On the one hand, NAWSA suffragists harnessed the tools of visual culture in ways that normalized rather than resisted white gender norms: "suffragists coordinated visual campaigns that painted white female citizens as virtuous mothers and wives" capable of balancing "domesticity with political participation and professional goals" (Lange, 2020, p. 2). On the other hand, freed by their invisibility, Johnston's circle of covert rebels contravened visually—if only privately—gender boundaries in ways ostracized, even criminalized, by the larger culture, including feminist culture. As reflected in *Untitled 1*, the messaging of The Push fundamentally re-imagined white, middle-class gender binaries on which suffrage visual activism predominantly relied.

Both complementing and critiquing, FVUs offer vital insights into the "'oppositional technologics'—'the political praxis of resistance being woven into low-tech, amateur, hybrid, alternative subcultural feminist networks that register below the mainstream'" (Garrison qtd. in Piano, 2003, p. 254). Those insights ensue from the nature and operation of FVUs, shaped by visual compression, flourishing in safe spaces, and reliant on a particular visual medium for dissent.

Visual Compression

FVU's birth pains ensue from the dominant culture's visual compression, or the multi-level socio-legal pressures that mark and punish any deviation from rigid gender prescriptions. Thompson's jubilant tone in his December 10 letter and his pleasure in *Untitled 1* implicitly acknowledge both the need for dissent and for its private expression, especially for those dependent for survival on middle-class respectability. That threat of visual compression propels FVUS and their subterranean dissent into existence. For The Push, visual compression operated across popular and legislative spheres through fashion, a tyranny *Untitled 1* mocks.

Fashion constitutes an overt tool of conservative values, especially in the nineteenth century, following

the explosive embrace of photography. Severa (1995) argues that photography elicited a cultural shift in identities, which were, "in a very large part based on appearances" (p. xv). Among the white middle-class, a "powerful drive toward a 'proper' façade" emerged, one that carried along with it a moral imperative (p. xv). Writing about the post-bellum U. S. scene, Mattingly (2002) extends Severa's insight to gender, noting that gender for women was "constructed largely in the visual impact created by their clothing and appearance," placing tremendous emphasis on visible surfaces (p. 1). Nowhere was that equation between proper dress and virtuous character more prevalent than in the 1890s, a moment of turbulent gender unrest particularly among bourgeois white men and women (MacIntosh & Norcliffe, 2016, p. 155). The pressure to conceive of and conform to binary gender dictates in dress and behavior stemmed from two intersecting sources: popular culture and local law enforcement.

Carrying the flag for visual compression in popular culture, *Godey's Lady's Book*, a leading women's periodical for more than 30 years, expressed horror at the idea of women appropriating male attire: "Will she be a hybrid sort of creature like one of the fabled monsters and in her raiment suggest both sexes?" (qtd. in Severa, 1995, p. 454). The equally popular *Ladies' Home Journal* goes even further: it narrates strategies for "curing" a monstrous "case of 'Mannishness" ("College girls' larks and pranks," 1900, p. 8). Excoriating as a "Freak" one young woman who sported bloomers, cut her hair short, and "doffed her fore-and-aft cap like a man," the class president and her court devise a cruel intervention: dressing as men and terrorizing the "Freak" as she returns home in the dark (p. 8). Chortling over the "Freak's" panicked responses, the students later congratulate themselves for the success of their brutal "cure" (p. 8). Those visual pressures joined legislation to increase the threat level when municipalities across the country passed "indecency" laws criminalizing behavior perceived as destabilizing gender roles. Notably, these codes banned *visual* infractions. Anyone who appeared in "'a dress not belonging to his or her sex'" was vulnerable to arrest and possible incarceration (qtd. in Sears, 2015, p. 2). As Sears (2015) details, "cross-dressing laws were not idiosyncratic or archaic regulations but foundational city codes . . . with remarkably long lives" (p. 3).

Social ostracism in conjunction with criminalization visually compressed the range of gender expressions, a strategy that, instead of eradicating resistance, drove it underground. Here in private FVUs, the disaffected made common cause, creating invisible cells of gender resistance in supportive environments. However, for separate individuals to coalesce as a congregation of dissenters, they require a safe space. Johnston offered one such refuge at the century's end.

Safe Space

While visual compression drives gender resistance underground, that factor alone is insufficient for the evolution of FVUs. Gender resistance requires a safe space in which to enact transgression without fear of reprisal. Feminist and queer scholarship on safe spaces underscores its necessary—and problematic—function. As the Roestone Collective (2014) explains, a safe space not only keeps "marginalized groups free from violence and harassment" (p. 1346), but it also invites participants to "'speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance'" (Kenny qtd. in Roestone Collective, p.1346). While no single "recipe" for crafting a safe space exists, two inextricably intertwined ingredients are necessary: a material site

for gathering and a commitment to "relational work," or the affective interactions which produce and sustain protected places (p. 1347). Johnston provided The Push with that combination.

"It's a daisy," Thompson (1896) writes to Johnston, employing a popular slang for "perfection" to extoll the $7000 extension to Johnston's family home. This two-story addition featuring a photography studio with a floor-to-ceiling window, reception area, dressing room, darkroom, and office in Johnston's hands became The Push's safe space. Here, Johnston and her circle of close friends challenged visual compressions through such transgressive photographs as *Untitled 1* and others. Essential to their "praxis of resistance" was the dual-level nature of the space: material design and relational energy.

Safe spaces are physical sites, and Johnston designed her photographic studio in ways that blurred gender-marked spheres. By confusing the boundary separating (male-marked) professional-public spaces from (female-marked) private-domestic spaces in layout and decor, Johnston crafted an aesthetic of gender fluidity, a generative venue within which adherents could experiment with gender nonconformity. To illustrate, Johnston (1897) presents her studio in a *Ladies' Home Journal* article as the quintessential professional—and a public—site. Built and decorated to her specifications, the impressive structure reinforced Johnston's reputation as a "truly professional photographer" (Asherman, 2009, p. 29) and provided the "perfect place for her work in portraiture" (p. 10). A photograph of the studio appeared in Johnston's 1897 article, situated to the immediate right of the headline, a position of visual prominence. Its inclusion provided concrete evidence of Johnston's public-professional success and thus evidence of a female gaining national success in a male-dominated arena. However, the interior appearance of the studio—its visual presence—also casts it as a private, female-marked space.

With a mantled fireplace and cushioned window seat, the studio embodied "a typical Bohemian residence of the Nineties. . . complete with tiger rugs, paisley throws, Indian basketry, a plaster Venus de Milo, Parisian posters and oriental bric-a-brac" (Kirsten, 1966, p. 53), indicative of Johnston's combination of domestic with professional. Even as public media celebrated the studio as the professional space, the reception and sitting area exemplified the warmth—the domesticity—of home. Through these design choices, then, Johnston obscured the lines between male- and female-marked. She reinforces this obfuscation by claiming the blurring as a professional virtue. Johnston (1897) explains, "[I] tried to make my skylight room as artistic, as cheerful and as inviting as would be the studio of an artist" as a means of ameliorating clients' fear of the camera (p. 7), consequently providing a gender-fluid safe space for The Push. However, an FVU requires more than physical space: it requires an emotional support structure.

As the Roestone Collective underscores, any safe space needs affective labor to create and sustain it, and The Push's members displayed evidence of trust and affection. From its opening, Johnston's gender-anomalous studio served as a favored spot for social gatherings involving these covert rebels. As Berch (2000) points out, it was "as suitable for entertaining as it was for work" (p. 26), an environment aimed at nurturing and sustaining affinities. Thompson (1896) alludes to the tight connections among friends, closing his letter to Johnston with the wistful "remember me to my friends." The gender-fluid materiality of Johnston's studio ameliorated not only the fears of her clients but also the fears of The Push, such as that embodied in what

Berch calls a "female culture" revolving around Johnston. One example—the nude photographs of Alice Berry—illustrates the depth and scope of the clandestine group's trust. A young and attractive D. C. socialite with a penchant for mischief, Berry requested Johnston to photograph her in various stages of dishabille. Johnston agreed, promising to keep the plates away from "'prying male eyes'" (qtd. in Berch, 2000, p. 30). Thrilled with the nude photographs, however, Berry happily shared selected poses with women in the Berry-Johnston circle. Both photographs and their viewing testify to the existence of close friends who felt safe disrobing for and taking pleasure in images of "attractive nude women" (p. 31).

Produced and circulated within Johnston's gender-fluid studio, *Untitled 1* and the Berry nudes highlight the material-relational integrity of Johnston's studio, where members of her intimate circle engaged in shared gender play banned in public. The photographs also underscore a third crucial element of a feminist visual underground: the medium of visual expression.

Medium of Visual Expression

In conjunction with visual compression and safe space, the medium of communication constitutes an integral requirement for FVUs. As Hebdige (1997) makes clear, medium fosters both the formation and sustainability of any underground group. Whether it is "dress, dance, argot, music, etc.," medium enables a subculture to "make sense to its members"–thus unifying them through a joint agenda–and to "signify disorder" (p. 101)–thus mobilizing them in rebellion. FVUs likewise depend on a medium of visual communication to solidify group membership and challenge entrenched gender binary roles, and photography served as the medium of choice for The Push. Two photographs—one of Thompson and one of Johnston, both taken in Johnston's studio, each employing different codes, and each imagining gender differently—highlight the power of a medium's visual to unify through resistance to gender normalization. Thompson's response to his gender-bending photographs—especially *Untitled 2*, which featured the youthful artist-illustrator in his self-named "Ethel" persona (see Fig. 2)—highlights the dual power of visual codes.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 2: Seated Mills Thompson in Woman's Fur Cape and Feathered-Flowered Hat [Photograph]. Library of Congress. https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/ppmsc/04800

As Thompson (1896) enthuses, the "'Ethel' photograph is great," underscoring *great* to communicate pleasure in his masquerade as a society matron. Arrayed in a fitted, luxurious fur cape and crowned with an elaborately feathered and flowered hat, Thompson smiles puckishly at the camera, inviting the viewer into his play. With his face nestled in the cloak's high fur collar and a curled right hand tucked under his chin, Thompson pokes fun at himself and at gender dominant prohibitions. His photograph manifests what Hebdige (1997) describes as "intentional communication," or "a visible construction" constituting "a loaded choice" that directs attention to itself (p. 101). Such communications "display their own codes," that is, codes chosen for the initiates of a particular underground community (p. 102). These codes are the vehicle of communal coherence and gender transgression. For *Untitled 2*, the most evident coded "intentional communication" ties to Thompson's (1896) personal title for his portrait: "Ethel" from "Ethelville."

Beyond Thompson needling gender conservatives—and municipal laws—by depicting himself as a society doyenne, he deploys the name "Ethel" and specific choices in his attire to provide The Push with an insider joke that simultaneously "give[s] new and covertly oppositional readings" to gender (Hebdige, 1997, p. 102). First, as a highly popular name for women during the Victorian period, *Ethel* as a visual code unifies, evoking for The Push a long history of nobility and wealth. It endows Thompson's Ethel with a haughty respectability dedicated to upholding gender traditions. The association of Ethel with Ethelville—Thompson's (1896) pet name for Boston, a city perceived by the artistic community as steeped in social and artistic conservatism with little tolerance for bohemian sensibilities—buttressed that satirical double meaning. It unifies by with The Push sharing humor and delighting in the transgression. Thus, the terms that Thompson playfully associates with the portrait already serve as a frame for that portrait's community uptake. At the same

time, the visual code serves dissent: it remakes gender by rendering the female-male binary as tantalizingly conditional, a role assumed and discarded with a change of apparel. Thompson's body and choice of attire carry that.

For Thompson and The Push, the oppositional value of *Untitled 2* emerges from the explicit visual contradictions underlying the artist-illustrator's masquerade, a contradiction alluded to in the name Ethel, which, derived from the medieval *Ethelred*, was assigned to both male and female children. That gender uncertainty is reinforced by the photograph wherein an invisible male body, in conjunction with the visible female identity, dismantles both body and identity, both the unseen and seen. The deliberate collision renders gender less a rigid binary and more a contingent choice, undermining cultural insistence on gender clarity. In addition, the source of Thompson's attire reinforces the construal of gender uncertainty: The clothing Thompson sports derives from Johnston's personal wardrobe. In fact, Johnston wears this exact ensemble—in a similar pose—for her own self-portrait as a wealthy and respectable socialite (see Fig. 3). This deliberate mimicry in the two portraits—a combination of codes accessible to members of the Push—subverts static male and female identities to reimagine gender as mutable, a vision that articulates dissent even as it unifies. A similar dynamic, but with a different code and vision, unfolds in *Untitled 4*.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 3: Seated Self-Portrait in Fur Cape and Feathered-Flowered Hat. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006689793/

Replete with mustache and bedecked in knickerbockers with a tam o'shanter topper, Johnston casually stands gripping the handles of a high-wheeler (see Fig. 4). In her self-portrait, this rebel in the shadows marshals her own array of codes in ways that invite The Push to share in a vision of gender as neither male nor female but a transmutation of (2009) points to Johnston's gender-transmutation as a professional artist, contending that Johnston "consciously broke from the confines of traditionally masculine and feminine aspects of photography" (p. 10). With hidden messages, *Untitled 4* denies neither female nor male qualities; instead, it embodies a sinuous composite more than the sum of its parts. Central to that transmutation is Johnston's

deployment of a mundane object in a mundane space as visual code.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 4: Frances Benjamin Johnston in Male Attire with High-Wheeler. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.04884/

Hebdige (1997) notes that "the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups" can manifest in assigning mundane objects a double meaning (p. 2). Two mundanities Johnston doubles consist of high-wheeler and studio, both familiar to her cohort, both common alone but transformative together. By choosing the high-wheeler, situating it in her studio, and asserting her mastery of both, Johnston challenges the exclusive male-marked ownership of the bicycle as a pursuit and photography as a field. Barring women racers, whom society labeled promiscuous, the high-wheeler operated as an "overt expression of 'cavalier masculinity'" (MacIntosh & Norcliffe, 2016, pp. 153-54). Similarly, photography in the nineteenth century constituted a male-dominated, even misogynistic, field, with women denigrated as purveyors of baby pictures (Grover, 1988). However, the high-wheeler positioned *in* Johnston's studio disrupts the exclusive male-gendering of the bicycle and the profession the photographer regarded as her own. In addition, the bicycle *in* the studio underscores Johnston's professional flourishing as neither a man nor a woman but alt-gender. By 1896, less than a decade after publishing her first photographically illustrated article, Johnston had already established her reputation as the nation's "court photographer" with a substantial portfolio of political figures from Presidents to cabinet members. She was also one of the first female photojournalists to work as a stringer for the Bain News Service, and the first female member of the Capital Photography Club, all occurring *without* Johnstone disavowing her bread-and-butter portraits of babies, brides, and society matrons. Her success derived from neither male nor female attributes but from an alchemy—a transmutation—of both, presenting this reimagined gender as a viable option for members of her FVU.

As Thompson smiles mischievously from beneath a frivolous hat and Johnston commands her high-wheeler against the backdrop of her studio, both covert insurgents craft visual codes that unify and transgress gender's visual compression. Both demonstrate the ways that gender can be pictured anew through the lens of a camera, uncapped in a safe space and protected by a group of intimates.

The Rewards of Exploring FVUs

We live in a historical moment when pressure mounts to resurrect and impose nineteenth-century gender binaries in our twenty-first-century culture. We live, too, in a moment when "more than ever, the political sphere has become spectacle dictated by the rules of visual culture" (Griffiths, 2017, p. 12). Thus, as feminists, we are all called to expand and deepen our understanding of resistance in its myriad forms. FVUs offer one fruitful avenue.

While women throughout Euro-western history have asserted their right to visibility—to being seen and seeing as agents—important to that struggle is also the right of invisibility, the need to eschew the spotlight and experiment in private enclaves with radical opposition to dominant gender strictures. This snapshot of one such clandestine congregation—Johnston's fin de siècle FVU—offers five provocations for feminist visual cultural work. First, it encourages a deliberate search for the "in visible": pockets of feminist resistance coalescing around participants' shared visual—and lived—transgressions of fixed gender boundaries (Galvan, 2023, p. 1). Second, it illuminates the existence of covert feminist visual activism that operates, by necessity, in the shadows cast by an overweening visual "respectability," however defined. Third, it underscores the importance of such private visual havens where veiled aspirational desires serve as inspiration for overt political and socio-cultural advocacy. Fourth, it provides a proto-analytic for engaging in such an exploration: identifying visual compression, describing safe spaces, and analyzing a communicative medium's visual codes. Finally, it offers alternative perspectives for interrogating a dominant feminist visual culture.

We can find riches in the shadows of feminist visual culture.

Biography

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