

Whatever's Left of Woman: Porn, Trans Identity, and Gender Expansivity

In this essay, I give an account of transfeminine identity and how it forms, focusing on how it involves working through the labels and language put upon these bodies by cisheteronormative society, with the (critical) viewing of “shemale” pornography consisting an important site in forming an understanding of one’s gender. From there, I discuss hypersexualization’s role in constituting transfeminine bodies, drawing on examples such as the Japanese porn archetype of the “futanari”, Blanchard’s transsexualism typology, and fantasy’s role in maintaining the gender binary in the classification of transgender and cisgender bodies. Following an exposition of why femininity is worth rescuing, I critique gender abolitionism in service of retaining the transformative power of gender exploration, proposing an alternative to this potentially non-affirming and transphobic degendering viewpoint for grounding future political action and conceptualization of gender, masculinity, and femininity: gender expansivity.

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Being a woman with a penis is a very un-dialectically-accounted-for experience.

Many people’s first experience knowingly witnessing a transgender person is through pornography. It’s not a simple discovering of the other on the part of cisgender people, it is also many trans people’s first experience, for plenty of reasons, such as a lack of the visibly queer in a rural community, the inability to socialize in the murky suburban bedroom abyss, the introversion of not-yet-recognized suffering, and so on; the internet has especially intensified this. In that way, witnessing a trans person is already a revolutionary act, to some degree, or at least it has the potential to be a transformative experience. Looking at the Other is the first step towards recognition through the Other. The point at which we can determine if this viewing is a revolutionary act, or just the simple consumption of porn, is by the turn towards witnessing the trans woman not as “shemale,” or “man who looks like a woman,” but as witnessing her on her terms, and on her concept. Being willing to be changed by a concept. As Hegel says, “action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both.”¹

Most mere witnessing, though, never reaches revolutionary act, because in this life, we witness essentially nothing as it is *alone*, but only in society, together, in the discourse, and the violence that

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Softcover, Galaxy Books (Oxford University Press, 1979), 112.

follows. Women of all origin, cis or trans, become themselves through interaction with artifice, violence, by being done to with material, and with media; not just women, but men, not just men and women, but all genders, and all identity. Identity is formed not through simple eternal, but through the social process, through labor of the concept, collectively. It is not ideas only that shape the world, but more so the world shaping ideas, which is why gender and sex change over time, why sexuality changes over time, and so on. Gender is as contradictory as any other category, or any other really transformative thing: it contains the possibility of real liberation, the apprehension of a truer version of yourself, a lessening of the repression, and the possibility of violence, death, destruction, oppression. There are plenty of news reports about “gender reveal” parties causing explosions and *literal* desert fires, and fittingly so: gender has within it the ignition of a desert wildfire and the ashes that follow it, but also the extinguishing of fire and the life of those who get to leave the building with their life, following a kiss with certain death.

Film, pornographic or not, when characterizing the woman, speaks about the cis woman, while professing to speak about the Woman.² “Shemale” porn, however, doesn’t wish to speak about woman. That old worn out slur, “shemale,” contains “male” in it, and as a consequence, functions entirely different from “woman,” which contains man. The “man” in woman is able to be a generalized man, a human. “Shemale” is male. The “male” in “female” is that same generalization of the masculine, and we can swallow it easier, it’s less painful. This is *not*, of course, the literal etymology of “female.” the word is not, strictly speaking, etymologically related to “male”; “female” was altered in Middle English to match the word “male,” and they’re otherwise not related. “Woman,” however, *is* actually etymologically related to “man.”

This is an unimportant distinction to quibble over. My emphasis, and in fact, the more sublime truth, is that people think of these words as though this were the case. When people use “male” and

² bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 115–32.

“female,” they often think they’re doing something different; they’re trying to speak about something concrete, biological, and essential. More eternal than it is mutable. They mean sex.

The shemale can never attain womanhood, or being “female”, nor could she attain being “man”. She’s still dominated by the man, which is, in part, the reason for the intense eroticization, and the absolute shame and disavowal that men have when they have an erotic desire to be penetrated by her. The potential for male and female to be transformed is made concrete in the literal reversal of the symbols of domination that happen in male on female sex. This is why, unlike other slurs, it retains a certain degree of irredeemability even among those who might reclaim it: it is a sharp knife. Other slurs maintain their various caveats.

In porn, this phenomenon is crystal clear. The term “shemale” holds crucial status in pornography, and if one follows it at all, they can gain an apprehension of the constant distance that porn of the transfeminine has always had to be watched with; behind this consumption is the maintaining of a distance between fantasy and actuality, between dream and waking life. This distance is even more pronounced in the way that consumers of futanari, a genre of hentai, will never allow an invocation of the futanari body type to appear in the real world. The futanari has a penis, *sometimes* balls, *sometimes* a vagina, *always* breasts, and yet, she was born a woman, and this bodily makeup did not configure her womanhood in any way that would challenge her place in the gender binary.

No, she does not exist in the real world, as the bodies of intersex people, or as the bodies of trans women. And your average consumer of this pornography will scarcely realize it, but they are a Surrealist, in a certain sense: refusing to discern dream from waking life, they think all the people of these fantasies are beautiful, Venus-like women, with penises larger than men, fertile *and* virile, motherly, with supple breasts of the viewer’s most exact desires. There are no sharp jawlines here, no broad shoulders, no facial hair, and no years of voice training unhad. Women do not exist as this in actual reality, and this reality is what must be overrode in this incomplete Surrealism. The waking life

of this object of fantasy, the non-cisgender feminine, the trans woman, the trans feminine, is a complex, messy body, oppressed, with violence done against. She has political subjectivity. She is not, and never can be, exchangeable with the futanari. In fact, her femininity will hopefully, be merely broken and collapsed into the male—hopefully she will accept the reinscription of some essential maleness. Strict division is to be kept between the fantasy and image, between the reality and material. This is the political hope of the trans chaser.

But the state of trans people in porn has changed quite a lot in the past few years. There are now many more trans sex workers who record their own porn, publish in their own outlets, participate in their own communities, and thus can exert an editorial control, even within the confined space of a search results page. The page becomes a field of potential action. There, the trans woman might express in the most minimally altered way something closer to her sexual identity, through a change of terms: she can title videos as she pleases. It is a small change, but one that does have effect. Like the black female directors that bell hooks speaks of, there is, at minimal, the chance for a trans feminine director to name her concepts and choose her language.

There are of course moments where paying rent is more important than fighting for these scraps; maybe she'll have to misgender herself in one of those pointed ways that one will come to be numb to and use her slurs, too. Marlon Riggs says, in his documentary of Black gay life in the era of the AIDS crisis, *Tongues Untied*, “each joke levels us a little more, and we sit silently—sometimes join in on the laughter, as if deep down, we too, believe we are the lowest among the low. No one will redeem your manhood, but you. No one will save you, but you. Your silence is costing. Your silence is suicide.”³ The labor to uphold the dream state *above* the actuality, and to maintain a clear cut distinction between cis and trans, is murderous.

3 *Tongues Untied*, Documentary (Frameline, 1989), https://fod.infobase.com/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=57872.

What does it mean to be formed as a subject in such a discourse, where pornography provides an introduction to an identity and the only available interaction with it, rather than merely a recording of a sexual act? *It affects your sexuality*, and that concerns your gender, too. We are shaped not just by the role models we are exposed to, but also by the profane models. When exposed to hypersexualized transfemininity as a model, the development of a sexual identity that the subject can actually enthusiastically put themselves in gets stunted quite a bit. The hypersexualization of the transfeminine body is also the hyperstigmatization of that body's sexuality. If to be a trans woman is to also be sexualized in a certain way, and to navigate your own sexuality from within that framework, then it is to play within the dialectic of subjugation and resistance. The oppressors say our sexuality is fetishization of the Woman form, they claim "female appropriation."⁴ Shall we refute the premise and say no, we have a rightful claim to the form too? Or shall we accuse the cisgendered⁵ *themselves* of being fetishists?

One of the first people in psychology to focus on trans woman sexuality is sexologist Ray Blanchard. Most known for his work on paraphilias, he also created a "transsexual typology"—rejected in its formulation by most psychology these days. His account provides useful insight into what the trans female is to psychology, to society, within our symbols. Not in a flattering way. The typology posits this, and this is all we need to think with it: there are two types of transsexuals (and the transsexual is *only* the trans woman). There is the homosexual transsexual, and the autogynephile. The former has had a lifelong transsexuality, with an undying affection towards men, and men only. The latter, only a slightly more degenerate subject for this typology, who here, literally has a philia for seeing himself as a woman, and is attracted to cis women, and only cis women; his transsexuality

4 Steph Kretowicz, "Feminine Appropriation Was 2014's Biggest Electronic Music Trend," *The Fader*, December 31, 2014, Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201101081509/https://www.thefader.com/2014/12/31/feminine-appropriation-2014-electronic-music-trend>.

5 I am using the "-ed" suffix that is otherwise considered poor form (as in "transgendered") to emphasize the constructedness of cisgender as well (and to be provocative).

appeared later in life.⁶ The misgendering of the trans woman in question is not a poetic flourish of mine; it is the view Blanchard takes up. The trans woman is only male in this typology. To Blanchard, “real” women do not experience themselves, embodied and gendered, in a sexual way.

At this point in our project, I have been able to soberly reevaluate what this typology actually is: how it has spread from the smallest corners of transgender discourse that I experienced online growing up, to unfortunately, but not surprisingly, inform a great deal of the discourse around trans woman sexuality, and how it has provided great ammo for those who want people like me dead. In the darkest corners of my time in the closet, this theory saw me clawing for the ability to express my sexuality and my gender, in a way that would affirm myself as woman in a situation in which I had *no material ability* to actually realize myself through womanhood, to transition, and thus to make my *silence* no longer be *suicide*. It stigmatized and dehumanized me, my identity, and every other trans woman’s. I have engaged in debate after debate with well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning people, cisgender and transgender, about this typology over the past decade, and I can now say something new I could not have all those years ago.

The truth content of the Blanchard typology, is that in the positing the autogynephile, it has said what most psychology isn’t bold enough to let slip: female sexuality, the subjectivity and experience of it, and not identifying with the masculine, is a neurosis; that it could be thought so easily as a paraphilia by cisgender male psychologists only makes this clearer. The truth content of the autogynephile is that it reveals that, under patriarchal, male-female binary opposition, *we are all fetishists of the female form*. The male gaze has looked at everyone, but only now do we recognize it in the trans female subjects, hated as they already are, who have chosen this stigmatized sexual expression over the other. Blanchard and his peers are doing what, in hooks terms, is a “[reinscribing] of the [oppressed] body into a

6 Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 131.

narrative ... where the only relevant opposition is male/female, and the only location for the female,” the cis woman, and the eternal Woman, “is as a victim.”⁷

This typology commits the most destructive devaluing of the transsexual subject imaginable. Dream and reality are related in such a way that the dream of the actual transsexual subject, the dream to one day be considered as and valued *as who she is*, is explained and reexplained with priority given to her waking life: no one sees her as a woman, and no one wants to. The typology is, actually, just an explanation of reality, and it correctly describes a reality that relies on a fantasy of its own, the fantasy of the pure, untouched, eternal womanhood, the fantasy that there is *nothing* between male and female binary oppositions. The so-called “analysis” done here by Blanchard and his defenders is further grounds for the continued oppression of, and violence done to, actual trans woman, actual trans woman sexuality, actual trans woman identity.

Perhaps, the creators and defenders of this typology are the first actual fetishists of femininity, having created a new, scientifically justified Venus. As Benjamin said, “cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to the last entrenchment: the human countenance.”⁸

The femininity that is not afraid to know of its being-formed, that recognizes a liberatory, fanatical, and intoxicating element amidst the construction of itself and the oppression of itself, has a much more sober and profane understanding of its sexuality. Actively choosing to engage in those moments of “gender euphoria,” these moments that affirm and give us joy in how they match with, or make apparent the *excellence* of our gender, being able to willfully and knowingly pick certain sexual roles, certain femininities in the relation, is a sign of a femininity that understands itself more. This “descent” into a *willfully* sensory experience of femininity is a state which often is relegated to the realm of horror, for disordered femininity in a male is paired with loss of control, loss of the male’s

7 hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” 123.

8 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, First paperback edition, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 108.

*grip on reality*⁹. Here, hopefully, it can become apparent what the rehabilitation of femininity will do as a service to the rehabilitation of masculinity.

Masculinity and femininity were once seen as concepts with eternal character, an aura. That is to say, they had that certain uniqueness that exists around an original work of art; a uniqueness that seems lost, in reproductions.¹⁰ They were unable to be reproduced through technology, because gender was from nature, and gender was from god. Now, after the advent of “medical transition” and the science thereof, masculinity and femininity as fixed eternal concepts are more concretely pulled down to earth, because the cisgendered thought they could tell reproduction from original, but they can’t, and they never really could.

I want to be careful to say that medical transition is not what does the work to make explicit the material nature of masculinity and femininity. I do not wish to belabor a point which is only ever argued for by transphobes, that being that “they can always tell.” Every possible feature that functions as a “tell,” that betrays someone's body to be a trans body rather than a cis body, can be found in a cisgender person as well as a transgender person. Social transition, any change in clothing, makeup, mannerisms, voice, whatever, does this all the same. “Medical transition” as a formalized list of changes, as a medicalized technology, has only come about in the last century. It has only decentralized the technology of gender transition. And the power of this decentralization, is why the entire right-wing here, is now dead set on doing to hormone therapy, what has been done to the right to an abortion.¹¹

All backlash against “gender ideology,” steeped in its own blind dogmatism, can be reframed as no more than sorrow felt at the abolition of cis gender’s aura. Scared, and clinging to their eternals, they will claim we live in a time of confusion about gender, but this is not so: at this moment in time,

9 Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 256.

10 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.”

11 “President Trump’s Plan to Protect Children from Left-Wing Gender Insanity” (Donald J. Trump For President 2024, January 23, 2023), <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/news/0ab801d4-7664-472e-b636-1aed9e0855d8>.

what gender actually is has never been any clearer. The reality of gender is that, if it is produced by our labor, it can be made liberatory for *everyone*, with our labor.

The debate and questions of who is accepted into an identity is the constant discourse that constitutes and reconstitutes that identity. hooks of course sees this in the conception of Whiteness, and in the context of Hollywood cinema, she explains how it deals in Womanhood: Womanhood on the screen is white womanhood. It turns out Womanhood has a similar discourse of inclusion to Whiteness, and what is going on here is a decision of *who can reproduce the aura*, and reproduce it in such a way that they are *exchangeable with the original*, the reclining lady in Renaissance-era paintings. Those who reproduce an identity in such a way that their contradictions of it can be put aside, an unfolding with moments of assimilation and refusal, are given license to republish. Original, reproduction, exchangeable.

If the end of whiteness is the end of white supremacy, or they require each other and entail each other... does the end of the gender binary, or more specifically the oppression of the gender binary, thus entail the end of womanhood, the end of femininity and masculinity? Here I will hesitate. I do admit that I wish to hang on to my own identity, my binary femininity that I struggled for, and I will not concede that my struggle towards actualizing it and my womanhood was in vain. I think we must be more sensitive to problems of identity. I wish to mount a critique of gender abolitionism, and how it relates to what I view as the more actually progressive and liberatory option: gender expansivity.

Gender abolition is too able to become mere reproduction of oppression. When the TERF, and unfortunately often, the utopian who feels they have the final hot take on gender, believes that gender should be abolished, they do not say this from a place of liberatory desire. It comes from a place of reinscription. Trans women especially, draw the ire of TERFs because there is no position under the binary opposition but for Woman to be the victim. The TERF says “gender is over”—but all they leave

us with is sex; gender is over, sex is all there ever was, all there ever needed to be. Our naive abolitionist rescues the world from its confusion, to complete regression.

A more developed gender abolition is still too, flawed, but it provides a better minimal goal: gender shall no longer be an essential category. However, an understanding of gender that sees it as simply an essentializing force still has a problem. It is not as if, now that gender has ceased to be applied, that all the history before its abolition, has ceased to impress upon the present. There is now instead, “a night in which all cows are black,” a million expressions and connections without a unifying structure and language. Yet, they’ve reached for the same goal that I see in gender expansivity: the evisceration and transcending of the gender binary’s oppressive qualities. But because they dismiss and destroy gender-based labels and identification, it is not a goal that can resolve the contradictions inherent to the upholding of the gender binary. They do not see the liberatory potential of gender.

The liberatory potential of gender expansivity, is that, in conceptualizing and reconceptualizing gender, it can now become an infinite field of infinite possibilities. Gender, freed to the extent that it has become hyper-specific, approaches simply being a symbolic space. My desire to keep my femininity is not a desire to keep binary femininity. It is instead, a desire to preserve the liberatory potential of *choosing* to identify with the feminine, or of *choosing* to identify with the masculine.

These designations, masculine and feminine, constituting and reconstituting each other, are also feminine and masculine. They’re tethered to each other, without one oppressing the other, without all in the symbolic space who may accept or reject these terms, also losing their self-concepts. Even within the male/female binary system, the words are ultimately just referents for a cluster of attributes. The man who examines what “man” he is does not exit that process the same “man” who entered it, though he may very well use the same word, and the same label. There are people out in the world who identify as non-binary men and non-binary women for this very reason. There are some concepts we wish to sit with longer because we see in them, a different sort of redemption for our history. If all of

gender was thought this way, having begun to truly fulfill its liberatory potential, it would become unrecognizable to us in this moment, as having ever been the strict category it is now.

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