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Femininity in Transgender Studies

Reflections from an Interview Study in New York City

It's like ohh, so you want to be treated like a woman, I'll show the ugliness of how it is to be a woman, that's my personal feeling as to why trans feminine people are so discriminated against and then the hypersexualization against transgender women, we get the hardest of the feminine spectrum, because it's like oh you wanna be a woman, well I'll show you how, all of the hyper-patriarchy and anti-feminine actions are put on us and then we are fetishized at the same time; so it's like we're good for sexual rendezvous but people don't want to respect us in the daytime. (Elena)

THIS ARTICLE AIMS to present certain important findings regarding trans feminine position(s) and questions of trans-misogyny and femin negativity from an interview-based study (Chamberland 2015). The focus is particularly on fetishization and desexualization, street harassment, and differences between trans feminine and trans masculine experiences, analyzed through the lens of trans feminine peoples' experiences along intersectional lines in New York City.¹ Moreover, and perhaps more urgently, drawing on the insights from this study, and from the accounts of six trans feminine interviewees and a range of transfeminist voices, both academic and activist, this article aims to propose paths forward, connected to issues regarding trans femininity and "passing" as a concept equated with transgender success, and argues for the necessity of a greater amount of specific research on trans femininity and what I will call here trans femininity studies. This research figuration

is inspired by the work on trans femininity presented by, among others Viviane K. Namaste (2006), Sandy Stone (2006), and Julia Serano (2007), and it arises at the intersection of two vital burgeoning academic fields of studies, transgender studies and critical femininity studies.

As a distinct research field, what I call trans femininity studies can also be utilized for the purpose of creating strategic coalitions, to explore both specificity and difference, and to exchange shared experiences and solidarity. Arguing for the necessity of trans femininity studies does not mean I am turning my back on the growing transgender studies or the proposed and budding critical femininity studies (Dahl 2012). Rather, I wish to make a contribution to both of these fields, as well as argue for the need for creating a room of our own. To that end, trans femininity studies is a partial departure from the gender neutrality implied by the title transgender studies, in that it insists on a difference in the feminine position from the masculine one. It nourishes a close relationship to the proposed field of critical femininity studies (Dahl 2012)² in that it aims to analyze the relationship *between* femininities rather than to focus on binary and hierarchical gender relations and to move beyond the tendency to tie femininity to cis-gendered femaleness and womanhood.

Approaching femininity as a figuration, Ulrika Dahl (2012, 58–62) proposes that critical femininity studies examines what she calls “femmebodiment” – a (queerly) feminized form of embodiment – beyond the at times simplified story of femininity as always and only tied to subordination, sexualization, objectification, and superficial narcissism within feminist theory. In the coming pages, I will begin to outline some of the paths I imagine, in the hopes that I will make my proposed directions clear. But, first things first: a presentation of the concepts central to my research, namely trans-misogyny, oppositional sexism and traditional sexism, and femi-negativity.

Trans-Misogyny, Oppositional Sexism, and Traditional Sexism

With notable exceptions such as Namaste and Susan Stryker, it seems to me that within the academy, very little research has been conducted,

specifically on trans femininity through the particular oppressive lens that I wish to call trans-misogyny and femi-negativity. While this is a problem, to my mind, academics working within institutions do not hold a monopoly on valid and relevant knowledge production, especially when it comes to transgender experiences and research. Biologist and trans femme-inist activist Serano's book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) is an important work that theorizes trans-misogyny and negative attitudes towards femininity. According to Serano examples of trans-misogyny include:

When a trans person is ridiculed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity [...].
When the majority of jokes made at the expense of trans people center on "men wearing dresses" or "men who want their penises cut off" [...].
When the majority of violence and sexual assaults directed at trans people is directed at trans women [...]. When it's okay for women to wear "men's" clothing but when men who wear "women's" clothing can be diagnosed with the psychological disorder transvestic fetishism. (Serano 2007, 14-5)

Trans-misogyny thus specifically targets trans women and other gender variant-femininities, thereby separating it from transphobia, which targets all trans people, and misogyny, which targets women in general. This is tied to another one of Serano's important theoretical contributions, namely the categories of *oppositional sexism* and *traditional sexism*. Serano (2007, 13) defines oppositional sexism as the "belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and non-overlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires." Oppositional sexism punishes those who fall outside of gender or sexual norms. The other category of sexism, that Serano identifies, is *traditional sexism*, which defines the belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity. With these forms of sexism as a theoretical base, she theorizes around the specific form of oppression that trans femininities are subjected to. According to Serano, trans

people on the male to female (MTF)-spectrum are not only faced with ridicule because they transgress binary gender norms, but also because they embrace femaleness and femininity. Trans people on the female to male (FTM)-spectrum are clearly discriminated against for breaking gender norms, but their expressions of maleness or masculinity are not targeted and ridiculed in themselves (Serano 2007, 14).

Attending to and analyzing instances of oppositional sexism and traditional sexism, as defined by Serano, can lead to a greater understanding of the complexities of power dynamics related to sex/gender in a Western context. It also explains the need for more research conducted along the border between critical femininity studies and transgender studies. While there is a tendency within transgender studies to focus mainly on oppositional sexism, critical femininity studies runs the risk of focusing more on traditional sexism. Inspired by Serano, I argue that trans femininity studies can be understood as work that seeks to understand and eventually contribute to ending trans femmefbodiment as located at the intersection of both forms of sexism.

Femi-Negativity

An understanding of the subordination of femininity in relation to masculinity is, I want to argue, as important in an analysis of patriarchy as an understanding of the subordination of women in relation to men, insofar as it offers a vital step away from an analysis rooted in a heteronormative gender binary. The question I will be focusing on here is how femi-negativity affects people who were assigned male at birth. Research on feminine gay men and drag queens is instructive here, even if we need to remain aware that these positions are not synonymous with trans femininities and that as “deviant” forms of femininity, these groups are often problematically lumped together by normative society. Still, there are connections and overlaps in experiences of oppression, since both have experiences of being feminine and of being assigned male at birth and both groups are targets of femi-negativity. Given the apparent lack of research on trans femininity it would be unwise to exclude this research.

In the book, *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* (2001) Tim Bergling investigates the discrimination against feminine gay men within the gay community through interviews. According to one of his informants:

Straight men hate effeminate men because they betray the masculine facade and perhaps represent what straight men hate about women; gay men think straight people think we're all sissies, so being a swishy fag brings out that visceral dislike. (Bergling 2001, 113)

Besides reflecting straight male sexism, this statement could also be said to portray an intricate combination of patriarchy and gay male fear of being stereotyped; since femininity in gay men is viewed as a negative stereotype to begin with, an idea which is rooted in the disdain for femininity, especially in the “wrong” body. Bergling (2001, 13) also conducted surveys and went through men-seeking-men contact ads in a number of newspapers around the country and found the following: masculine themed ads accounted for nearly 40% of the total, while feminine-themed ads barely registered at 1 or 2%. Through his research, Bergling (2001, 60) found a correlation between misogyny and negativity towards effeminate men, especially among gay men who identify as “straight-acting.”

Shinsuke Eguchi expands upon the subject in the article, “Negotiating Sissyphobia: A Critical/Interpretive Analysis of One ‘Femme’ Gay Asian Body in the Heteronormative World” (2011), which shows how within the gay community, femininity is deemed unattractive and undesirable. Equally importantly, Eguchi centrally shows how race and racism operates in ideologies of sissyphobia by centering on the specific feminization of gay Asian men. Femininity and sissy-labels are placed on many gay Asian men, playing a large role in the racial stigmatization of them (Eguchi 2011, 38). Bergling and Eguchi’s studies are important because they situate the oppression of “sissies,” not only as a question of (racialized) homophobia, but also as a question of femi-negativity (see also Dahl 2012, 57).

In *Whipping Girl*, Serano describes the difference between feminine and masculine gender transgression as follows:

Because femininity is seen as inferior to masculinity, any man who appears “effeminate” or feminized in any way will drastically lose status and respect in our society, much more so than those women who appear masculine or butch. But it’s not just that males who act feminine lose the advantages of male-privilege; rather, they come under far more public scrutiny and disdain. (Serano 2007, 286)

As an example, Serano (2007, 289) brings up that many MTF-spectrum children channel female or feminine inclinations into very private and specific occasions, while many FTM-spectrum counterparts express their masculine interests and mannerisms in a more open way.

In “The Association between Gay Men’s Stereotypic Beliefs about Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity,” CJ Bishop et al. (2014, 557) discuss how drag is more accepted on stage than off stage, and how drag queens feel celebrated as entertainers, while being subjugated, segregated, and alienated in the gay community at large. Some drag queens reported difficulties in finding a romantic partner, because they were viewed as promiscuous and overly feminine. These negative connotations seemed to stem from many gay men, not being able to distinguish between a drag queen on and off stage (Berkowitz et al. 2007, quoted in Bishop et al. 2014, 557). While a drag queen’s persona on stage is rarely synonymous with a trans feminine persons off stage, it is interesting that negative attitudes against drag queens have their base in seeing a drag queen’s stage persona as something that is done full time. Where does this leave assigned male at birth people who present as feminine all day, every day, one may ask? Against this theoretical background, next I will turn to offering some examples from my interview study among trans feminine identified folks in New York City.

Trans Feminine Voices

For my master's thesis in gender studies (Chamberland 2015) I interviewed six trans feminine activists in New York City. The quote that opened this paper is from someone I call Elena, a black trans woman in her mid-thirties from Kentucky, who at the time of our interview had lived in Brooklyn for one year. In addition, I spoke to people I will here call Val, Grace, Luanne, Kurt Sarah and Polly. Val is a white Jewish middle-class "trans feminine something," as she called herself, who is in her early twenties and has lived in New York City for five years. From New Jersey originally, Val now lives in Brooklyn. Grace is a trans woman in her early fifties and adopted from Korea, who grew up in the Midwest and moved to New York City in 1996. She now lives in Queens. Luanne is a black trans woman in her late forties, who has lived in New York City her whole life and now resides in Brooklyn. Kurt Sarah is white and in their early fifties, and identifies as transgender and prefers the pronouns "they"/"them" or "anything but he" as they put it. Kurt Sarah was born in Maryland and has lived in New York City since 1994, and is now residing in Manhattan. The sixth interviewee featured in this study is Polly, a white trans woman in her mid-twenties with her background in the South, who has lived in New York City since 2012 and now resides in Manhattan.

These six interviewees were found through a range of activist networks that were in turn selected because they have an anti-racist and anti-capitalist agenda. In order to get a range of different voices, I specifically aimed to select research participants from different activist spaces, with different backgrounds and experiences based on race/ethnicity, class, age, etcetera. To that end, it is worth noting that these activists lived, and were active, in three of the five New York City boroughs – Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn. Three of the six participants identified as being of color. The age span was between 22 and 54 years, with two being in their twenties, one in their thirties and three being in their late forties/early fifties. Some were active in the downtown New York underground performance scene, which has a tradition of bringing up many leftist, feminist, and queer topics, others in trans and LGBTQ-organizations and networks in different boroughs in the city, while others were involved in

the Bushwick queer art and nightlife scene – and several were partially active in many of these spaces. Because I wanted the participants to feel as free as possible to speak their minds without having to take into consideration that they would have their statements glued to their names later and therefore perhaps refrain from saying things that could be perceived as controversial, all participants appear under different names here.

Despite rendering these voices “anonymous,” my epistemological starting point is that these are not simply “informants,” who provide a blank-slated academic with a set of *experiences* to theorize from or about. Rather, as I hope will be evident below, I understand them to be co-producers of knowledge about trans feminine experience and thus as theorists in their own right (Volcano and Dahl 2008; Dahl 2011). As a trans femme conducting research, I have many experiences of my own and thus the interviews were themselves instances of joint theorizing and conversation. While I found the interviewees themselves to be perfectly capable of analyzing their own experiences, I am clearly the author of this particular paper and here I draw on both direct quotes from interviews and reworkings of parts of their stories in order to weave them into my own analysis and discussion. I am primarily a trans feminine performer, writer, and activist, who understand “theory” as a collaborative effort that also emerges in a range of sites. As Donna Haraway (2004) reminds us, all knowledge is situated and it always presents partial perspectives. In this case, I am the person who pulls certain themes from incredibly rich narratives for particular purposes in this particular paper. That is to say, neither the questions asked, nor the answers given provide objective truths on the subject matter at hand.

In other words, this paper offers situated knowledge and analysis produced through personal knowledge, perspectives, experiences, and other trans feminine related materials together with the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of these six trans feminine activist interviewees from various different backgrounds. Yet, this can hardly be presented as a reflection of any sort of universal trans feminine experience. That said, as Haraway (2004, 89) points out, arguing for the situated and partial nature of knowledge is not the same as arguing for relativism, rather,

Haraway considers both relativism and totalization to be “god-tricks” in that they promise vision from both everywhere and nowhere. The perspectives and knowledges presented in this article are partial and situated, produced somewhere in time and space.

With this brief presentation of participants and research approach, let us move to the core questions of this paper; although I must admit that my participants’ presentations could themselves arguably be understood as an essential part of that very core. However, as we shall see here, if there is a core, it is not one and the same, not solid but fluid. As Luce Irigaray so beautifully writes:

These streams don’t flow into one, definitive sea, these rivers have no permanent banks; this body no fixed borders. This mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. For all this seems so strange for those who claim “solidity” as their foundation.
(Irigaray 1980, 76–7)

In the company of my research participants/fellow theorists of trans feminine experience, we shall now travel onwards and forwards by honing in on three themes from my thesis that are focused specifically on trans femininity related to trans-misogyny and femi-negativity: fetishization and desexualization, street harassment, which for many of the interviewees also tied into a discussion on the concept of “passing,” as well as differences and similarities between trans femininity and trans masculinity. I will begin with the subjects of fetishization and desexualization, which I call the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox.

The Hypersexualization/Desexualization-Paradox

In my master’s thesis, I proposed the term the “hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox” to describe an experience that several interviewees brought up, namely that of being hypersexualized by certain men, often dubbed “tranny-chasers,” while simultaneously being desexualized by queer and gay men more broadly. As Grace put it, with regards to the issue of hypersexualization:

I'm sure that you know, many of us trans women end up being objectified, fetishized and the whole tranny chaser-phenomenon. That's one of my biggest frustrations, cuz the thing is, many men are attracted to me, but most of them, if they know I'm transgender will not, they're not out about their own interest, so they end up being, if you will, closeted tranny chasers for lack of a better term.

Describing an experience that many trans feminine people have, that of being paradoxically objectified and desired, Grace continues to talk about how she and many of her trans feminine friends become pigeonholed as a thing on the side, rather than a person to have a serious relationship with. Luanne in a similar vein speaks of trans women being seen by men as dirty dark secrets, as people who are outside of the outsiders. Elena describes it as a hypersexualization, where trans women are fetishized and seen as good for sexual rendezvous, but not as people to respect in the daytime. These accounts paint a picture of a clear positioning of trans femininity as operating outside of the realms of *respectable femininity* – alongside and echoing the figure of *the whore*, the kind of girl you do not take home to mama.

Many of my interviewees brought up experiences of desexualization from men in the gay and queer community. “It’s the reverse end of the spectrum,” said Elena, who went on to speak about how her queer ex-boyfriend was both comfortable and confused about having sex with her. Kurt Sarah talked about how they used to get pissed off because people, mainly queer men, would flirt with them and other queer/trans femmes as a fun game, without taking their feelings into account. Val relayed that she sometimes “mascs up,” meaning she tones down her femininity, in order to be more attractive to the gay male gaze:

My grindr picture is a photo of me with no make up on and some facial hair, and it was at a point when I really needed to tweeze my brows, so they looked fuller, so that’s what you have to achieve, yeah, I do it, it ultimately isn’t worth it.

These experiences with gay/queer men are, unfortunately, hardly surprising. The 1970s saw the rise of “clone culture” within gay male culture, where the idea was to look masculine and be attracted to other masculine gay men (Levine 1998) and this, it seems, has become the norm within large portions of gay culture.

Elena spoke of her experiences within the radical faeries,³ a movement where she feels comfortable in many ways, but also a movement where she explains that she has felt “mammified” as a desexualized, racialized, caregiver and nurturer. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (quoted in Weir 2010, 115) explains, the term “mammy” has its historical roots in the USA from the era of slavery as a description of an African American woman who served as a nurse and caretaker of white children. While all trans feminine people may experience this paradox of hypersexualization/desexualization, racism and racist stereotypes of both gay men and femininity affects in which ways and to which extent the paradox plays out.

My interviewees utilized very many different strategies of handling the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox. Luanne prefers having long term relationships where she takes a while before sleeping with a guy, so that she knows that it is not just about physical attraction, but attraction of spirit, mind, and body – something that she says trans feminine people usually do not get in society. Elena says that she almost exclusively dates queer men because she cannot deal with people looking at her with sexual desire without seeing her as an individual with thoughts and feelings. This resonated with my own experiences and during the interview, Elena and I shared our frustrations of mainly being sexualized by straight men and not queer men. Kurt Sarah’s approach to fetishization is slightly different:

I’m always, like, bring it on. I don’t mind being sexually objectified, I wish it happened more, haha, I know that’s not a lot of people’s experience but I really don’t care cause I can handle it, like I’m not gonna be overwhelmed by someone objectifying me sexually. I think that in my experience then the power is in my court, I have the power, you’re at least being found to be attractive, you know, and I prefer that to, you know, not.

Rather than speculate as to what the explanations for these divergent takes on this paradox may be, let me offer my thoughts on what we might need to do to change this, developed as they are in dialogue with my interviewees. First of all, while these strategies work as ways to navigate the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox, the people who are doing the hypersexualization are the “tranny chasers” and the people doing the desexualization are gay/queer cis-men and lesbian cis-women. Thus, it seems to me that for the paradox to change, those, in this particular setting, relatively privileged groups are the ones who need to change their behavior. Another possible strategy would be for trans feminine people to desire each other, but according to Val, in her experience this is extremely rare. Polly on the other hand noted that it is common for drag queens to date other drag queens and bisexual/lesbian trans women to date other trans women, although she also stresses that this is often linked to these groups experiences of desexualization within the queer, gay, and lesbian communities.

If we look at prior research, the desexualization of femininity within gay/queer male spaces seems to be something that prevails for everyone from feminine men to MTF-transsexuals. In *Sissyphobia*, Bergling (2001) quotes a gay male informant who says: “If you want to have a man, you should act like a man. If I wanted a pussy, I’d just ball a chick. I wouldn’t even hang with a femme dude” (Bergling 2001, 38) – a statement which shows not only an unwillingness to sexualize feminine men, but also a disaffection towards spending time with them, which hints towards femi-negativity as a question that goes beyond that of sexual desire. In the article, “The Interaction of Drag Queens and Gay Men in Public and Private Spaces” (Berkowitz et al. 2007), several drag queens reported problems finding gay male romantic partners. Often times gay men would be interested in them out of drag, and become disinterested upon discovering that they do drag (Berkowitz et al. 2007, 27–8). These findings are echoed in my interviewee Polly’s experiences related to her trans womanhood within the lesbian community in New York. She points out that it has happened to her a number of times that lesbians have started flirting with her and then slowly backed away when they

understood that she is trans. She explains that trans men, especially white trans men, rather become King Bee's of the queer scene. In the article, "Enough with 'I date women and trans men'" on the website *feministing.com*, the writer Jos Truitt (2012), relays the notion of the desexualization of trans women within lesbian spaces; describing "I date cis-women and trans men" as a dominating concept in lesbian spaces, while also pointing out that this at times bares with it the problem of lesbians not recognizing trans men as men.

It seems as though trans feminine people are desexualized within both the lesbian and the gay communities, and at the same time fetishized by heterosexually identified so-called tranny chasers. I argue that this issue should be analyzed as a systemic question of patriarchal trans-misogyny and femi-negativity. There is a vast need for more specific research within this issue on subjects such as: What ideas of trans femininity and sexuality are fetishized by "tranny chasers"? What plays into gay men's desexualization of femininity? In which ways do the politics and hierarchies of desirability affect trans masculinities and trans femininities differently within gay, lesbian, and queer spaces? After this brief discussion of what I consider to be a central paradox of trans feminine femmefodiment in the stories told by my interviewees, I now turn to highlighting another trans feminine specific theme, by contrasting it with masculinity.

Differences and Similarities between Trans Masculinity and Trans Femininity

That pattern of acceptance is basically there from the point you identified as male, you were kind of not as ostracized as becoming a trans (woman). It's no comparison and we're kind of led to believe by the trans men, oh yeah, let's just, NO, NO, it's nowhere close to our fight, NO WHERE close, we don't have that umbrella that y'all are walking under.

Luanne's above comments reveal a view that trans women face greater structural oppression than trans men do. All of my interviewees expressed trouble with oppressive/sexist masculinity amongst, at least some, trans guys, and a majority of them expressed major problems.

Several spoke of differences in how trans masculine people and trans feminine people are treated both within and outside of queer spaces. As Serano argues in *Whipping Girl*:

Despite the fact that the mainstream public tends to be more concerned and disturbed by MTF spectrum trans people than their FTM spectrum counterparts, subversivism creates the impression that trans masculinities are inherently “subversive” and “transgressive,” while their trans feminine counterparts are “lame” and “conservative” in comparison. (Serano 2007, 348)

This, I would argue, also mirrors traditional views of masculinity as active and femininity as passive, which might be one reason why it is the masculine crossing of gender borders that is deemed by some as more subversive. Polly describes trans masculinity as “the appealing kind of trans,” and in the interview pointed to a list of different areas where trans men are privileged: non-profits, who often hire white, middle class trans men while trans women are seen as the victims; academia, where trans men are part of the queer theory paradigm and are often the academics, while trans women are the objects of study; and advertisement campaigns, which usually feature white trans men and mostly feature trans women if they are celebrities. Polly’s analysis is here in line with Serano’s (2007) argument about how the mainstream public is more concerned with, and disturbed by, trans people on the MTF spectrum than with their FTM spectrum counterparts.

Indeed, several of my interviewees brought up problems concerning the relationship between trans masculinities and trans femininities. Elena, for instance, explained that she has seen a lot of trans masculine patriarchal behavior. In her experience, many trans men, and especially white trans men, tend to pass and take on patriarchy. She is critical of divisiveness and explains that she has some great trans male friends, but at the same time, she feels that it is important to talk about sexism amongst many trans men, and she states that she does not buy it when some trans guys blame it on taking testosterone. Val explained that

she believes that trans feminine people deserve more space in the trans movement than trans masculine people, because statistically speaking they are in positions of higher vulnerability, and she points out that while half of the trans men she knows try to usurp the limelight, the other half of them are great and very involved in transfeminist activism. Polly speaks about many trans masculine people treating trans women badly and she knows of very few trans male organizations that have not had instances of mean spiritedness toward trans women.

While trans masculine and trans feminine people are both affected by oppositional sexism and transphobia, that targets all forms of gender transgression, traditional sexism, in the form of misogyny, transmisogyny and femi-negativity, mainly affects trans women and other trans feminine people. To attack the maleness or masculinity of trans masculine people would, I argue, imply or even require a critique of maleness and masculinity in itself. Critiquing the femininity of trans feminine people, however, is instead a direct result of femi-negativity. That said, the question is not necessarily black-and-white. When speaking of hiring policies within for example non-profits and academia, it is not only a question of privileging trans masculinity over trans femininity, but also importantly a question of the politics of race and class. Astutely aware of this, Polly stressed the need for an intersectional analysis and argued that for example feminine trans guys get hassled more than masculine trans guys, because, as she noted, people in general usually do not even know that the masculine trans guys are trans. She states: “Feminine trans guys in Virginia are gonna get shit, though not as bad as trans women,” and she also pointed out that trans masculine non-binary people of color (not trans men of color) are murdered at a higher rate in the USA than white trans women are.

In other words, we must remember that *trans feminine* and *trans masculine* are not universal, uniform, and homogenous categories. Bearing in mind that identities are intersectionally constituted, we must also remember that not all trans men are masculine and not all trans women are feminine and this can affect our experiences in various different ways. Indeed, as Grace noted, she feels as much community with trans

men as she does with trans women, and indeed she has met both trans men and trans women with sexist/macho tendencies. Grace notes that she hopes to see more focus on similarities between trans masculine and trans feminine people, than on differences. One commonality she discussed was the question of disclosure of genitalia when dating someone new. With due respect to Grace's observations, I am still left wondering if the experiences, beyond the issue of physicality, surrounding this issue really are that similar? We might for instance ask how many gay men or straight women would beat up or murder a trans man if they found out he was not a cis-man – something that is often a risk for trans women dating straight men.

It seems to me that it should be possible to be both critical of divisiveness and stress the importance of coalition, while simultaneously discussing differences and hierarchies. Here the diverse approaches and comments presented by the persons interviewed in this study show several differences in experiences and positions between trans femininities and trans masculinities, which I would argue points to the need for not only transfem(me)inist politics but also for a specific field of research on (intersectional) trans femininity committed to analyzing trans-misogyny and femi-negativity.

Street Harassment and “Passing”

Several of the participants described occurrences of street harassment both when being read as gender variant and as cis-women. Kurt Sarah shared a story of experiencing both of these harassments while walking down one block:

I was walking down the street in San Francisco one day and I was wearing a skirt and, you know, combat boots and my hair was down and I was in my twenties and I looked good and felt good and I was walking down Market Street and some guy was like, “FAGGOT,” called me a faggot, and then I turned the corner and some guy was like “Hey, baby,” he wanted to get with me and I just ignored him and then I got called a fucking bitch.

In this quote, Kurt Sarah offers a clear example of the intersection between homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny that many trans feminine people face in public space. Indeed, as trans feminine theorist Namaste argues in an article about gender-based street violence entitled, “Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space” (2006, 588), instances of queer bashing often entail that the bashers mark femininity on a body that they deem should not be feminine. Namaste, like Kurt Sarah in their story, shows that a hatred that leads to bashings arises precisely at the intersection between femininity and the crossing of gender borders.

Trans-misogyny entails that while a trans woman who passes as a cis-woman walking down the streets may not be subject to overt transphobia, misogyny is still present. This point is supported by a range of my interviewees stories about being harassed both when being read as trans and as cis-women.

How, we might ask, do these harassments differ from each other? Grace states that she thinks she would get harassed more if she was further from “passing” and exemplifies this by describing the question of trans women getting facial feminization surgery: “I have one friend who had that done, who had a very masculine face and she said that the amount of street harassment went down 80% overnight.” Polly said that in New York today, she is mainly read as a cis-woman and that she gets sexually harassed and objectified. When she had just started taking hormones there were a few times when she got condescending remarks and were laughed at, but she also stressed that none of those harassments were anywhere near the violence she faced when being read as trans in Virginia, where she grew up. These examples can seemingly be attributed both to the difference between the urban space of New York City and the southern space of Virginia, and to the difference between being read as trans feminine or as a cis-woman. Polly also explained that the experiences she has are those of a white woman, which are different from those of trans women of color.

In an article in *The Advocate*, actress and trans activist Laverne Cox (2013) writes of her experiences of intersections of racism, femi-negativity, and trans-misogyny on the streets of New York City:

A year before I started medical transition, I had been presenting in a very feminine way 24-7 but hadn't yet changed my name or started hormones. I wasn't passing for female at all, but I also wasn't passing as the construct of black masculinity that the white supremacy has told us to be threatened by. That year I went to visit my brother in San Francisco, had an emotional breakdown and shaved my head. I was just exhausted – I think the stress of being harassed and threatened on a daily basis for years on the streets of New York City because of my gender nonconformity, and acting like it didn't bother me, had worn me down. (Cox 2013)

Cox, known to an international audience through her role in the award-winning Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, then continues to describe how presenting in masculine male drag made her go from being a target for harassment, to being viewed as a threat to public safety. One year later Cox started taking hormones and transitioning medically. Another interesting perspective that she brings up is that many of the black men that harassed her for being gender variant and feminine often ignored white trans and gender non-conforming people in the same spaces. Cox' analysis of this is that it is an effect of internalized white supremacy, that makes black people police and monitor other black bodies.

Many of the interviewees problematized “passing,” while understanding its possible importance as a safety measure. Though “passing” may lead to a safer situation on the streets, race may be just as important a factor, especially given that a vast majority of the trans women murdered are trans women of color (Lamble 2013). In *Whipping Girl* Serano (2007) speaks of “passing” in the transsexual context as the opposite of the term “passing” in gay and lesbian contexts. In gay and lesbian contexts, the term denotes “hiding” and in the transsexual context, the term denotes being correctly gendered (Serano 2007, 303). While Serano certainly has a point and her words may ring true for many trans people, my interlocutors' comments around the concept of “passing” complicate the matter.

Luanne, for instance, reacted to the concept of “passing” with anger. For her passing means paying a bill and getting up for work, while she

regards “passing” for vanity as “disgusting.” She proclaims and embraces that while she is different, she is passing through. Polly, who feels that she usually passes, said that trans women like her need to acknowledge that passing privilege exists, which may slightly differ from Serano’s (2007, 176–80) preference of the term *conditional cis-sexual privilege* to that of *passing privilege*. Serano sees the privilege as conditional since a trans woman who passes can have her trans history outed at anytime. However, the question is if, even when being outed or open as trans, one is given certain privileges in society if one passes? If “passing” is deemed the most important thing for a trans person to do, to speak with Stone (2006, 231), perhaps trans people who “pass” are seen as successes, while those who do not “pass” are seen as failures, and viewed as more uncomfortable for society to handle – and therefore we must talk of passing as a privilege beyond only the conditional.

Along those lines, Polly noted that she is aware that passing is an important survival mechanism for many, in the same way that working for McDonalds is an important survival mechanism for many, but that does not mean one has to like it. Here we can see how one can acknowledge the pragmatic necessity of surviving on the streets, and also critiquing a system that requires passing as one of the two binary genders.

Luanne also stressed the importance of conduct as a survival mechanism on the streets. She was critical of bash back-narratives, often used within queer movements, that stress the importance of bashing back against street harassers, and saw the assessment of one’s surroundings and choosing ones poisons carefully as vital in situations of street harassment, since a sharp tongue in an unsafe situation can get you killed.

The question of “passing” is, in other words, complex. All of my interviewees were skeptical to the concept, some were disinterested in passing, some felt that they passed, some felt that they passed sometimes, and some felt they did not pass. Many brought up “passing” as interesting mainly from the perspective of trans feminine people’s safety from violence on the streets. The trans feminine spectrum is broad and different positions within this spectrum lead to different forms of privileges

and oppressions. Grace is a trans woman who has chosen to not take hormones, and feels that if her body were more masculine she would probably get harassed more. She relays:

I think what we have to do is instead of focusing on ourselves and what we perceive to be our imperfections in relation to non-transgendered women or men we need to focus on changing society so that no one who is perceived to be gender different is harassed or assaulted or attacked. That's what I think is important and I think we have to stop constantly comparing ourselves to the cis whatever women or men around us because we are not them, we are not better or worse.

Cox (2013), cited above, also importantly brings up race as an important factor regarding harassment. Taking hormones may mean that a trans woman comes closer to “passing,” but does it lead to more privileges in comparison to trans women who do not take hormones? Perhaps the answer is in some ways yes, and in some ways the very opposite. Comparing may not be as relevant as developing an understanding of the specific different positions. Clear from my study is that trans feminine people, whether or not they take hormones or “pass,” do get harassed on a regular basis on the streets in different ways, whether or not they are perceived as trans or cis, and moreover that this has its roots in intersections of homophobia, transphobia, femi-negativity, and misogyny as well as in racism – the different categories to different extents for different people along the trans feminine spectrum.

Paths Forward

The last few years we have seen increased trans visibility. In the USA there are now several openly transgender celebrities: Janet Mock, Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner among others. But is there always a direct correlation between visibility and equality? Luanne answer was an unequivocal, “No.” Polly sharply stated:

There aren't organizations to get trans people jobs, there just aren't, why aren't there when that's the one thing that like every trans woman will list in terms of what trans women need, JOBS.

Indeed, as the *Huffington Post* has reported, 2015 was a record year for homicides of LGBT-people in the USA (Shapiro 2015), and a majority of these were trans women of color.

In an interview conducted by Namaste (2005), the longtime activist, sex worker, and performance artist Mirha-Soleil Ross notes that most murders of trans people are not simply due to transphobia, but to a variety of other issues as well, such as hatred of sex workers, poverty, racism, and misogyny. She points to the limits of organizing solely based on the category of transgender, while also placing violence against trans people into the framework of gendered violence as mainly an issue of violence against transsexual women and male-to-female transvestites, many of whom are sex workers (Namaste 2005, 90–3).

The field of trans femininity studies must, as this paper has shown, be based on intersectional analysis, something which is already evident in for example trans activism against the prison industrial complex (Spade, Bassichis and Lee 2011), applauded by Angela Davis (2013) as “some of the most interesting work on prison abolition.” According to the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 41% of African American trans women in the USA have been arrested solely because of profiling (Grant et al. 2011). We also have a situation today where a rich white trans woman celebrity gets a hashtag that spreads like wildfire when she comes out, while working class trans women of color only get a hashtag when they get murdered. Thus, while I certainly commend Caitlyn Jenner for the bravery of coming out as trans (Bissinger 2015), for indeed this is unfortunately still an act of bravery regardless of her other privileges, I am worried about a transgender narrative focusing on the bravery of coming out, instead of the struggle to survive despite the constant discrimination and harassment constituting the every day life of most trans feminine people, such as those featured here.

While visibility leads to a heightened awareness of the existence of trans femininity, it does not in itself provide trans feminine people with employment, housing, livable wages, and freedom from violence and harassment. Heightened visibility, in nuanced forms beyond being the butt of jokes in comedies, can perhaps be helpful for these struggles, but we also need to ask new questions, related to for example “passing,” lookism⁴ and beauty standards, without resorting to shaming of femininity. Just like it is important to have a feminist analysis of *which* women are portrayed in the media and *how*, we must also have a trans-feminist analysis of *how and which* trans women and other trans feminine people are portrayed in the media. If, to speak with Stone (2006), “passing” is still presented as the ticket for transgender acceptance, the question is how far we have come and in which ways our rights are connected to the condition of assimilation? In an article in *Vice Magazine* published in the wake of Jenner’s *Vanity Fair*-cover and Cox’ *Time Magazine*-cover Simona Kapitolina (2015) writes:

From desirability to public safety, to pass is to receive certain privileges. And since I transitioned, these opposing sides of visibility – to be openly trans and covertly pass – have stuck with me.

In my first month of transition, I was holidaying in Las Vegas. One evening I walked the strip and was laughed at the whole way. Everybody was on vacation, and I was just part of the show. Passing a 50-meter animated billboard opposite Caesars Palace, I looked up to see a beautiful female cabaret performer. The image was captioned “You won’t believe... she’s actually a man!” I was crushed.

It was the point at which cis-gender people’s fascination with the physical transformation of transgender lives became totally evident to me. Society simultaneously places an importance on trans women who pass and ridicules those who don’t.

Kapitolina here views the recent heightened trans-visibility as edited, and with a lot of weight being placed on “passing.” She argues for a space in public consciousness to be made for all identities of trans individuals,

as well as a narrative where there can be pride in being publicly read as trans. Also, in the wake of Jenner's *Vanity Fair*-cover an Internet initiative spread where trans feminine people presented their own *Vanity Fair* covers (Gorton 2015), which became a presentation of the vast range of different trans femininities we embody. Indeed, as Emi Koyama (2006) argues in the article "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?: The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate," many trans women in the USA can not economically afford to access surgeries that make them more "passable." If we continue to have a transgender narrative that equates "passing" with success we will be rewarding mainly those who are at the top of the hierarchy of capital(ism), especially in the US context.

Pointing this out is not meant as a problematization of individual trans feminine people who, for a variety of different reasons, strive to pass as cis-women. Rather, it suggests that there must be room for many different trans feminine narratives, and neither "passing" nor "not passing" should be shamed, or treated as each other's dichotomies. And, to once again speak with Stone (2006, 232), we must find, crave, and demand recognition for the power and beauty in the various spaces in between that many of us trans femininities inhabit (or perhaps just do away with beauty altogether?). It is about a traditional feminist critique of the necessity for femininities to conform to conventional beauty standards and about a transfeminist insistence on the gorgeousness of being gender different.

Through looking at these issues and the aforementioned issues of the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox, street harassment, trans masculinity and trans femininity, it becomes clear that trans feminine position(s) are both distinct from and similar to cis-feminine position(s) and trans masculine position(s). This is why trans femininity studies needs a room of its own, in the house of gender studies, inhabited by transgender studies, critical masculinity studies, and critical femininity studies among others with many interesting discussions and collaborations over lunch, tea breaks, and after work drinks out on the patio.

In the spirit of Irigaray's meditations on femininity as style and corporeality, and consciously invoking a theorist whose work has been un-

derstood as non-inclusive of trans perspectives, let me end this paper by saying that this is the place where our journey together shall continue, whether holding hands or not, nevertheless never fully together, never fully alone. Oh, life. Let it not let us down, let the air between us become tangible, let it strengthen us as much as, if not more than, solidity, let articles be written in the spaces between the lines, let questions be valued as highly as answers, let coalitions allow collisions, let progression expand beyond progress, let the writer of this paper get back to the point(s), let us understand that she is a feral cat who never strayed to begin with...

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank the participants in my study in New York City, without whom this article, and the theories within it, needless to say, would not have been possible to create. I also thank the two anonymous peer reviewers as well and the editors of *lambda nordica* for their feedback on earlier drafts and special thanks to Ulrika Dahl who also supervised my master's thesis, and is always an inspiration in fem(me)inine theorizing.
2. While critical masculinity studies has long been a central part of gender studies, to my knowledge, critical femininity studies is only beginning to emerge at the moment of this writing. For instance, Ulrika Dahl and Jenny Sundén are currently working on a forthcoming special issue of *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2017) dedicated to developing this field.
3. "Radfae.org – A website for radical faeries" (<http://www.radfae.org/about>), describes the radical faeries movement as following: "Generally, we tend to be gay men who

- look for a spiritual dimension to our sexuality; many of us are healers of one kind or another. Our shared values include feminism, respect for the Earth, and individual responsibility rather than hierarchy. Many of us are Pagan (nature-based religion).”
4. Lookism is defined by John Ayto (1999, 485) as “prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of appearance.”

SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln undersöker transfemininitet i relation till *transgender studies* (transstudier) och *critical femininity studies* (kritiska femininitetsstudier), med stöd i författarinnans studie kring transfeminina erfarenheter av systemskap, motstånd, konflikter, förtryck, trans-misogyni, femininitetsförakt, rasism och klassism i New York. Forskningen genomfördes genom kvalitativa, semi-strukturerade djupintervjuer med transfeminina aktivister som bodde i olika delar av staden och hade olika bakgrunder gällande exempelvis ålder, klass och ”ras”/etnicitet. Informanterna beskrev grova erfarenheter av trakasserier på gatan, en underordning av transfemininitet i förhållande till transmaskulinitet, samt en avsexualisering från homosexuella/queera män och hypersexualisering från så kallade *tranny chasers*. Med anledning av bristen på tidigare forskning kring transfemininitet, trans-misogyni och femininitetsförakt har artikeln ett brett perspektiv och följer i Julia Seranos (2007) fotspår genom att argumentera för en analys av transkvinnors och andra transfemininas positioner som går bortom den könsneutrala transkategorin, och erkänner behovet av specifika transfemininitetsstudier baserade i intersektionalitet, ekonomisk rättvisa och ett kritiskt undersökande av skönhetsideal och ”passerande”.

Keywords: transgender studies, femininity, trans femininity, femi-negativity, critical femininity studies, trans-misogyny, trans-feminine, New York City, trans women, intersectionality