

question. Nevertheless, he seemed surprised when I replied that I would not be bothered one bit. And it's not that I would merely "tolerate" a relationship with a trans woman. On the contrary, I would consider it an honor. Truth be told, over the last three years, about half of the women who have piqued my interest, who I would consider approaching if I were actively dating, just so happened to be trans women.

Now, as soon as I mentioned this, my friend said, "Oh, I had no idea that you had a 'tranny fetish.'" So I sarcastically thanked him for insinuating that the only reason why a person might find someone like myself attractive is if they suffered from a sort of "sexual perversion." After reprimanding him, I went on to say that there are a number of personality traits that I find attractive in women: passion, creativity, sense of humor, and self-confidence. And it has been my experience that trans women tend to have these qualities in full force. While some male "admirers" of trans women tend to fetishize us for our femininity or our imagined sexual submissiveness, I find trans women hot because we are anything but docile or demure. In order to survive as a trans woman, you must be, by definition, impervious, unflinching, and tenacious. In a culture in which femaleness and femininity are on the receiving end of a seemingly endless smear campaign, there is no act more brave—especially for someone assigned a male sex at birth—than embracing one's femme self.

And unlike those male tranny-chasers who say that they like "T-girls" because we are supposedly "the best of both worlds," I am attracted to trans women because we are *all* woman! My femaleness is so intense that it has overpowered the trillions of lame-ass Y chromosomes that sheepishly hide inside the cells of my body.

And my femininity is so relentless that it has survived over thirty years of male socialization and twenty years of testosterone poisoning. Some kinky-identified thrill-seekers may envision trans women as androgyne fuck fantasies, but that's only because they are too self-absorbed to appreciate how completely fucking female we are.

At this point in the conversation, my friend tried to play what he probably thought was his trump card. He asked me, "Well, what if you found out that the trans woman you were attracted to still had a penis?"

I laughed and replied that I am attracted to people, not to disembodied body parts. And I would be a selfish, ignorant, and unsatisfying lover if I believed that my partner's genitals existed primarily for my pleasure rather than her own. All that you ever need to know about genitals is that they are made up of flesh, blood, and millions of tiny, restless nerve endings—anything else that you read into them is mere hallucination, a product of your own overactive imagination. To paraphrase that famous saying, the opposite of attraction is not repulsion, it's indifference. Therefore, any person who would freak out over their female lover's seemingly inconsistent genitals is probably a little more interested in penises than they'd ever care to admit. (And by the way, this also applies to those "womyn-born-womyn"-identified lesbians who seem to emulate stereotypical straight male attitudes when it comes to this particular issue.)

My friend, still seemingly perplexed, asked me, "So if it's not about genitals, what is it about trans women's bodies that you find most attractive?"

I paused for a second to consider the question. Then I replied that it is almost always their eyes. When I look into them, I see both

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endless strength and inconsolable sadness. I see someone who has overcome humiliation and abuses that would flatten the average person. I see a woman who was made to feel shame for her desires and yet had the courage to pursue them anyway. I see a woman who was forced against her will into boyhood, who held on to a dream that everybody in her life desperately tried to beat out of her, who refused to listen to the endless stream of people who told her that who she was and what she wanted was impossible.

When I look into trans women's eyes, I see a profound appreciation for how fucking empowering it can be to be female, an appreciation that seems lost on many cissexual women who sadly take their female identities and anatomies for granted, or who perpetually seek to cast themselves as victims rather than instigators. In trans women's eyes, I see a wisdom that can only come from having to fight for your right to be recognized as female, a raw strength that only comes from unabashedly asserting your right to be feminine in an inhospitable world. In a trans woman's eyes, I see someone who understands that, in a culture that's seemingly fueled on male homophobic hysteria, choosing to be female and openly expressing one's femininity is not a sign of frivolousness, weakness, or passivity, it is a fucking badge of courage. Everybody loves to say that drag queens are "fabulous," but nobody seems to get the fact that trans women are fucking badass!

It was at that point in the conversation that I realized that perhaps I find trans women attractive because I see a little bit of myself in them. In their eyes, I see a part of myself that nobody else ever seems to see, the part that those who haven't had a trans female experience never seem to understand. And perhaps it's narcissistic to be attracted to someone who reminds me a bit of myself. But after

Love Rant

spending most of my life feeling ashamed of who I was and what I desired, I'd like to think that maybe my attraction to trans women is a sign that I am finally beginning to learn to love myself.

Crossdressing: Demystifying Femininity and Rethinking "Male Privilege"

THE WORD "CROSSDRESSING," in its most generic sense, refers to wearing clothing associated with the other sex. Both female- and male-bodied people crossdress, and they may choose to do so for a variety of reasons: as part of a drag or theatrical performance, in a sexual context, to have others perceive them as the other sex, and/or as an expression of a deeply felt cross-gender identity. While crossdressing (the verb) is a general phenomenon, the word "crossdresser" (and its psychiatric synonym "transvestite") is often used specifically to refer to certain MTF spectrum people who channel their feminine expression into occasional (and typically private) spurts during which they immerse themselves in "women's" clothing and gender roles, sometimes even taking on an alter ego entirely separate from their male lives. In contrast, pre- and non-transitioning FTM spectrum folks more typically live openly and continuously as butch or masculine women (rather than as feminine women who occasionally dress fully as men).

MTF spectrum crossdressers (who will be referred to simply as “crossdressers” for rest of this essay) are relentlessly mischaracterized and disrespected by the public at large, as well as in specific fields such as psychiatry and gender studies, where their practices are coldly dissected and critiqued by those who are not crossdressers themselves. This lack of personal experience allows these clinicians and academics to naively and conveniently assign motives to crossdressers. Some of the more common of these assumptions are that crossdressing is a form of appropriating or objectifying womanhood; that it is an expression of latent homosexuality, exhibitionism, autogynephilia, or some other form of “sexually deviant” behavior; or that some males take refuge in femininity because they are unable or unwilling to live up to masculine ideals.

As someone who identified as a crossdresser for twelve years, and who has shared many intimate conversations with other crossdressers during that time, I offer this essay as a (hopefully) more enlightened and thoughtful perspective on the MTF crossdressing experience. The explanations I offer here stem directly from my personal experiences as a crossdresser—one who has since gone on to identify and live as a woman—so it is likely that what I have to say will not resonate with all crossdressers, particularly those who happily embrace that identity throughout their lives without transitioning. My purpose here is not to insinuate that all crossdressers are transsexuals-in-waiting, nor is it to project my individual experience onto other people’s very different gendered experiences. This should simply be seen as my personal take on this very complex and misunderstood identity.

Effemimania and Feminine Expression

If you ask crossdressers their opinions about why this is a predominantly “male” phenomenon, most will mention the gross disparity between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable cross-gender expression between the sexes. While a hundred years ago, much of society considered it deviant for women to wear pants or other traditionally “male” articles of clothing, today women can wear such items without anyone making a fuss. In fact, a female-bodied person pretty much has to be dressed in full male-specific attire to even be considered crossdressed, whereas a male-bodied person may be considered a crossdresser if they wear a single female-specific article of clothing (such as a dress or a skirt). Thus, the liberalization of dressing norms that women have experienced over the last century has not been reciprocated to nearly the same extent for men.

While all crossdressers are cognizant of this double standard, some mistakenly view it as a form of “reverse” sexism—i.e., that men are specifically denied a “right” regarding attire that women take for granted. I would argue instead that this double standard stems directly from traditional sexism. After all, these days it’s not so much a legal barrier that prevents most crossdressers from incorporating “women’s” clothes into their daily wardrobes as it is a class barrier. 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 act boyish 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. This is because, in a male-centered world, women who express

masculinity may be seen as breaking oppositional sexist norms, but they are not a perceived challenge to traditional sexism (i.e., their “wanting to be like men” is consistent with the idea that maleness is more valued than femaleness). In contrast, males who express femininity challenge both oppositional and traditional sexist norms (i.e., someone who is willing to give up maleness/masculinity for femaleness/femininity directly threatens the notion of male superiority as well as the idea that women and men should be “opposites”).

In my own experiences, I have found that this obsession and anxiety over male expressions of femininity (which I called *effemimania* in chapter 7, “Pathological Science”) extends far beyond critiquing men who wear “women’s” clothing. In the years just before my transition, when I was living as a male who was open and comfortable with my own feminine inclinations, I regularly experienced gender anxiety from other people over the most trivial things. On more than one occasion, I was questioned about the fact that I had a bright red umbrella (“Is it your girlfriend’s?” or “Are you just borrowing it?”). I was also interrogated regarding my tendency to color-coordinate my T-shirts and sneakers (“Is it just a coincidence or do you make them match on purpose?” or “Why would you do that?”). Another time, a friend asked me to hold her purse for a minute and then ostracized me for strapping it onto my shoulder (“I asked you to hold it, not to *wear* it!”). And I was regularly subjected to strange looks and comments for using words like “cute,” “adorable,” or “pretty” in a nonsarcastic way. I have hundreds of anecdotes like these—of people commenting, critiquing, and expressing concern over even the slightest manifestations of my femininity, given that I was male-bodied.

Unfortunately, I have found that many women fail to appreciate *effemimania* as a very real and pervasive form of traditional sexism, one that oppressively restricts and undermines feminine gender expression in male-bodied people. During a question and answer session at a gender-themed event I participated in, a trans woman brought up the intense ridicule a man can face for the simple act of wearing a pink tie. The audience, who was made up predominantly of people who were socialized female, laughed at this remark in what seemed to me to be a highly unsympathetic way, as though they believed that the hypothetical man in question suffered from some irrational form of male paranoia. This sort of thinking not only makes invisible the role that women often play in employing and propagating *effemimania* (in fact, all of the *effemimanic* remarks I described in the previous paragraph were made by women), but entirely dismisses the severity of this form of sexism. In my five years of living as a woman—one who very rarely wears makeup, who regularly dresses like a tomboy, who often goes long periods of time without shaving her legs or armpits, who sometimes curses like a sailor, who is sometimes very physically active, and who is unafraid to take on supposedly masculine tasks such as using tools, lifting heavy boxes, etc.—I have not experienced a single gender-anxious comment or critique regarding my masculine gender expression that has even come close to the level of intensity or condescension that I regularly received for my feminine expressions back when I was perceived as male.

Effemimania is not merely a phenomenon that affects adults, but rather one that begins early in childhood; this is highlighted by a recent study carried out by Emily Kane, who examined parental responses to gender nonconformity in their preschool children.¹

Kane found that the parents she studied often encouraged gender nonconformity in their female children and few offered negative responses when they engaged in stereotypically masculine activities. On the other hand, while the parents sometimes reacted positively when their male children engaged in certain stereotypically feminine activities—specifically those related to domestic skills, nurturing, and empathy—other activities related to what Kane called “icons of femininity,” such as wearing pink or girl-specific clothing, wanting to wear nail polish, and expressing interest in dance, ballet, or Barbie dolls, were generally greeted with negative reactions by both fathers and mothers, and in parents of varying race, economic class, and sexual orientation.

Many of the consequences of this society-wide effemimania are chronicled in Stephen J. Ducat’s book *The Wimp Factor: Gender Gaps, Holy Wars, and the Politics of Anxious Masculinity*. Ducat describes the ways in which male development and thought processes are shaped by effemimania and cites studies that show that feminine boys are viewed far more negatively, and brought in for psychotherapy far more often, than masculine girls.² As Ducat explains, “I don’t think that it underestimates the damage done to girls and women under the regime of patriarchal gender norms to say that males suffer certain constraints and conflicts from which females, with a few notable exceptions, are largely exempt. Specifically, boys from early on learn that cross-gender behavior is a taboo often enforced with predictable ferocity by family, peers, and the larger society. For example, unlike girls, boys who do play with toys of the other sex often try to hide it from others.”³

This very much resonates with my own experiences as a young boy. Some of my earliest childhood memories (around the ages

of five and six) are of censoring of my own thoughts, behaviors, and desires because I was worried that they would lead me to be perceived by others as feminine. I vividly remember anxiously describing anything having to do with girls as being “yucky” or “dumb,” not because of any actual strong negative feelings that I had, but because I was aware that I was expected to have such an attitude toward anything feminine. In first grade, when a female friend invited me to her birthday party, I hid the invitation because I was embarrassed to have been invited to a girl’s party.

This feeling, that a boy must hide female or feminine gender inclinations, helps explain why many MTF spectrum children and teenagers channel those inclinations into very specific and private occasions, unlike their FTM spectrum counterparts, who typically express their masculine interests and mannerisms in an open and regular way. In other words, effemimania drives many MTF spectrum children and teens to develop strict divisions between “boy-mode” (i.e., public) and “girl-mode” (i.e., private). Such distinctions often persist well into adulthood and are typically considered to be a hallmark of the crossdresser identity. However, it would be an oversimplification to claim that crossdressing is simply a form of hiding one’s feminine side or remaining closeted. After all, many crossdressers continue to maintain their split male/female personas long after they come out publicly as crossdressers. To fully understand the boy-mode/girl-mode dichotomy and the fascination surrounding women’s clothing that typifies the MTF crossdressing experience, we must first take into account how the marginalization of women in our society affects those who are raised male.

Enforced Ignorance and the Mystification of Femininity

When we talk about marginalization, we refer to the way that “those perceived as lacking desirable traits or deviating from the group norms tend to be excluded by wider society.”⁴ One of the most lucid descriptions of marginalization that I’ve read comes from bell hooks’s book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, in which she focuses on how most prominent feminists of the 1960s and 1970s tended to ignore the viewpoints and concerns of economically and racially marginalized women such as herself. This was because, being predominantly white and middle-class, these feminists existed in the center with regard to race and class, so they had little awareness or understanding of lives and perspectives on the margins. However, the reverse is not true: People at the margins must understand life at the center in order to survive. As hooks explains: “Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both.”⁵

While hooks is referring here to her experiences growing up as a person of color in white America, her observations about margins and centers can readily be applied to other class issues. For example, those who are marginalized for being lesbian tend to have a thorough understanding of the assumptions and experiences of the heterosexual center—after all, they grow up in a predominantly heterosexual world and constantly have to navigate other people’s heterosexual assumptions. In contrast, most heterosexuals understand very little about lesbians and lesbian culture, as such knowledge has been systematically shut out of dominant society. Similarly, while I understand cissexual culture (as I was raised as,

and generally assumed to be, cissexual), most cissexuals tend to have an extraordinarily limited understanding of transsexuality.

It is important to note that the lack of understanding that those at the center have of those at the margin is not solely due to their lack of exposure (such as the fact that they’ve never been to a lesbian bar or to a transsexual support group). Rather, ignorance about marginalized people is often *enforced* from within the center. For example, if a straight woman decided to go to a lesbian bar (where she might have the opportunity to learn more about lesbian people and perspectives), she risks having her straight friends and family members assume that she is lesbian. In other words, she risks being marginalized herself. Similarly, if a straight man were to buy a book on transsexuality (say, for example, this book), others might suspect that he is a closeted transsexual or a tranny-chaser. The constant threat of being ostracized, which is directed toward people who show even the slightest interest in marginalized cultures and perspectives, creates within the center an *enforced ignorance* regarding those at the margins.

It is safe to say that, despite the fact that we make up more than half of the population, women are marginalized in our male-centered society. This can be seen not only in women’s underrepresentation in political, economic, and media positions of power, but in the way that virtually anything associated with femaleness or femininity is typically relegated to a separate category. In the media, stories produced by men, and that feature male protagonists, are seen as universal, while those created by women and featuring female protagonists are often relegated to their own genre (women’s literature, chick flicks, etc.). When talking about sports, it’s a given that one is referring to male leagues unless the sport name is

preceded by the word "women's." Until very recently, most medical research that examined general health concerns had been conducted on men, and still today women's specific health issues are typically removed from general medicine and placed in their own category, such as ob-gyn or women's reproductive health.

Because our society centers on maleness, most men are able to get by in life without ever understanding or appreciating women's experiences or perspectives. In contrast, women need to be able to appreciate both female and male perspectives in order to successfully navigate society. In fact, in many ways, women in our culture are even *encouraged* to understand aspects of maleness better in order to fulfill the role they are often expected to play as family caregiver for male partners and children. One example of this is how women's magazines feature articles with titles like "The Sex He Craves," which offer advice about what men supposedly want, while most magazines geared toward men are entirely devoid of any information designed to shed light on women's perspectives or desires.

Because of enforced ignorance, those who are socialized male typically end up mystifying femaleness—meaning that they develop a sensationalized and taboo curiosity about womanhood that is similar to that which many heterosexuals develop toward homosexuality, or that cissexuals develop toward transsexuality. Girls and women suddenly become perplexing creatures who males are entirely unable to identify with or relate to. While one might be tempted to say that the reverse is also true (after all, both sexes complain about not being able to understand the other sex), it has been my experience that most women are able and willing to put themselves in men's shoes temporarily. For example, I have been struck by how women often wince when seeing images of men who

are kicked in the groin or upon hearing stories of men who sustain injuries to their genitals, despite not ever having had male genital surgery themselves. In contrast, I have never once seen a man have a similar reaction upon hearing about reciprocal accounts of women (like stories about female genital mutilation). Similarly, while most women seem to understand how men "get off" via their penises, men seem curiously unable to imagine what it might be like to be on the receiving end of female sexual stimulation. This is evident in comments I've heard men make: that if they had breasts or female genitals they would fondle themselves all the time, as though the only pleasure they could relate to was the sensation of touching female body parts from the outside.

The mystification of women focuses not only on female bodies, but on feminine gender expression as well. It's common for men to describe feminine women as being "enchanting" and "mysterious," and as having the ability to "cast a spell" over them. In other words, they relegate femininity to the realm of the supernatural—by definition, not natural and impossible to understand. Perhaps no aspect of femininity is more mystified than women's clothing, which often emphasizes women's sexuality, and which is designed in color, texture, and style to be vastly different from "men's" clothing (right down to the shirt and pants buttons, which are conveniently on the "opposite" side).

While enforced ignorance and the subsequent mystification of femaleness/femininity is a pervasive phenomenon, it clearly affects different individuals to different extents. Stephen Ducat makes a strong case that those boys who are most fiercely taught to disavow femininity within themselves are the ones who tend to have the most outwardly misogynistic attitudes overall.¹ This makes sense

when one considers the fact that enforced ignorance and mystification act to dehumanize those who are female and feminine, thus enabling certain men to sexually objectify, harass, and outright abuse members of those groups without experiencing any feelings of empathy or remorse. On the other hand, those boys who are given the freedom to express their full range of gendered expression, and/or who are encouraged to listen, respect, and relate to the women in their lives, may avoid the intense enforced ignorance that other males face. Additionally, like any form of childhood socialization, enforced ignorance may be overcome later in life as one gains a greater understanding of women or as one grows more comfortable with feminine expression both within oneself and in others.

Crossdresser Development

Now that we understand enforced ignorance and the mystification of femaleness/femininity in those who are socialized as male, we can ask what specific effect this has on crossdresser development. The first thing that needs to be said is that those who embrace the crossdresser identity are likely to be a heterogeneous group, encompassing a spectrum of individuals who have a feminine gender expression and/or a female subconscious sex, and who experience those inclinations at varying intensities. This would explain why some crossdressers never transition, while others eventually do, and why some view crossdressing as a way to express a feminine side of their personalities, while others see it as an opportunity to experience themselves as female as much as a male-bodied person possibly can. The idea that crossdressing is often driven by intrinsic inclinations (rather than simply being a phase, hobby, or kink that individuals stumble upon) is supported by the fact that virtually all

self-identified crossdressers report that their desire to dress and act feminine/female persists throughout their lives.

The fact that males are socialized to view femaleness and femininity as enigmatic and taboo helps explain the very different manifestations of gender expression of MTF and FTM spectrum people. It also offers an explanation as to why some MTF spectrum folks learn to channel their femininity/femaleness into crossdressing, while others openly express their femininity/femaleness from a very early age. As mentioned in previous chapters, most psychiatric explanations for this dichotomy in the MTF spectrum population have centered on presumed differences in sexual orientation and arousal. However, recognizing how effemimania, enforced ignorance, and mystification work together to shape MTF spectrum transgender identities offers a nonsexual explanation for this phenomenon, one based on *gender constancy*. While children typically learn to distinguish between females and males, and to describe themselves as either a girl or a boy around the age of two or three, they do not develop gender constancy—the understanding that one's sex is fixed and does not change over time and in different situations—until they're between the ages of four and seven.² Interestingly, most trans women who fall under the category of "primary" transsexuals report knowing that they were or wanted to be female as early as three or four years old (that is, before gender constancy set in). In contrast, most "secondary" MTF transsexuals and crossdressers report discovering their cross-gender inclinations at a later age, often during puberty (after they had developed gender constancy).

Taking this into consideration, I would argue that children assigned a male sex who recognize their own female or feminine

inclinations prior to gender constancy are more likely to see them as legitimate aspects of their person. Because they feel entitled to, and comfortable with, expressing and exploring their female/feminine inclinations, those identities never become mystified. This would explain why “primary” MTF transsexuals generally express a desire to be female and feminine throughout childhood, and generally transition early in life (during their teens or twenties).

On the other hand, those male children who become aware of their female or feminine inclinations after developing gender constancy have to somehow make sense of those feelings in the wake of having already mystified femaleness and femininity. Thus, they may gravitate toward crossdressing as a way to compartmentalize their female/feminine inclinations, both in response to effemimania and because they are unable (initially, at least) to view their own female/feminine tendencies as legitimate and coming from within themselves. In this context, crossdressing can be a way of exploring and potentially reclaiming gender expressions and identities that one has previously disavowed, that one does not feel entitled to. It is a practice that, over time, demystifies femaleness and femininity for those who have been socialized to believe that these qualities are unnatural and unknowable to them.

Demystifying Femininity and Unlearning Masculinity

The idea that crossdressing can be a continual process of demystification very much resonates with my personal experiences. I consciously recognized my own desire to be female when I was eleven. As much as I wanted to be female, I was taught to believe that this was not a realistic possibility for me. For this reason, I began to channel my female inclinations into fantasies or role-playing, in

which I’d imagine I’d turned into a girl somehow. The fact that these fantasies always began with me being a boy (rather than simply imagining myself as a girl from the start) is indicative of how illegitimate I felt my own desires to be female were. I was convinced that I could never attain actual femaleness; in my mind, the best that I could hope for was merely pretending to be female or being “turned into” a girl.

After a year or two of imagining myself becoming a girl (typically a rather tomboyish one who went off on adventures and such), I started experimenting with conventional femininity. This was due both to me wanting to explore my own feminine inclinations and to the fact that (like most people) I was taught to believe that femininity was an intrinsic part of being female. My growing fascination with femininity was also very much intertwined with my growing attraction to women. As a teenager who was dealing with sexual attraction for the first time, I found it hard not to conflate my desire to be female with my sexual attraction for women. And in this respect, feminine accoutrements—whether clothing, cosmetics, or other accessories—became highly symbolic of both.

In chapter 14, “Trans-Sexualization,” I explained that trans people who have not transitioned, and who therefore are unable to take their own physical sex for granted, often experience sexual arousal in association with their own cross-gendered thoughts and expressions. While this is true for virtually all trans people, there are a couple of factors specific to crossdressers that intensify this phenomenon. First, testosterone, which significantly boosts one’s sex drive across the board, undoubtedly plays some role in amplifying cross-gendered sexual arousal for those who are hormonally male. Second, we live in a culture in which women are frequently

viewed as sexual objects, and much of women's clothing emphasizes and exaggerates women's sexuality. For crossdressers, there is no way of getting around the cultural eroticism that surrounds "women's" clothing. Many crossdressers, particularly early in their crossdressing, become particularly interested in the most highly sexual articles of feminine clothing precisely because of the symbolism associated with them. Unfortunately, I have heard women criticize, even ridicule, this tendency among crossdressers, sometimes even suggesting that a crossdresser who covers *their own body* in hyperfeminine or hypersexual articles of clothing somehow sexualizes womanhood as a whole. Such criticism seems to purposefully ignore the fact that many teenage girls similarly tend to dress in sexually provocative or revealing ways when they hit puberty and begin to explore the cultural meanings associated with adult female sexuality. Both teenage girls and crossdressers are exposed to many of the same cultural messages about femininity and female sexuality (albeit from rather different vantage points) and thus both are drawn to experiment with hyperfeminine and hypersexual clothing as a way of literally "trying on" the symbolic meanings associated with adult female sexuality. And most crossdressers, like most cissexual women, eventually move beyond their "teenage girl phase" (as some crossdressers refer to it) and come to recognize sexually provocative clothing as but one of the many options available to them, but not necessarily one that they wish to indulge in every day.

I know that it's common for outsiders to focus on the more sexual aspects of MTF crossdressing (just as they focus on the more sexual aspects of femaleness in general). However, I personally found that, if anything, the social, emotional, and psychological

effects of being crossdressed were far more profound than the sexual ones. The truth is that gendered clothing is extraordinarily symbolic of the sex of the body that presumably lies underneath; this is why wearing the clothing associated with the other sex is an almost invariant feature of cross-gender expression and identity across cultures and throughout history. Prior to my transition, dressing up in "women's" clothing was the closest I ever got to actually being a woman, to having my body be aligned with how I imagined it. For me, the fact that "women's" clothing was symbolic of being female far outweighed any sexuality-related symbolism it may have had.

As with many MTF spectrum folks, my crossdressing passed through a series of stages. Each was a demystification process that I began by experimenting with some aspect of femaleness/femininity that seemed unknowable and fascinating to me. Over time, my exploration and experimentation of that aspect of femaleness/femininity led to it becoming demystified; what had previously seemed out of my reach eventually became something that I was capable of, that was within my realm of possibility. The main motivating force behind my exploration of crossdressing was to make sense of my ever-present desire to be female. While this may distinguish me from other crossdressers (e.g., those who are motivated by feminine rather than female inclinations), I believe that the stages I passed through (which are described below) are shared by many crossdressers.

The first stage of crossdressing I passed through was the "clothing phase." It began with trying on individual articles of clothing one at a time (this was after a several-year period where I made due with blankets, curtains, shoelaces, and such while "pretending" to be a girl). Sometimes I would put on a pair of heels, stockings, or

a dress, or dabble with cosmetics or shave my legs. Each was its own mini-transformation, where a part of my body would begin to resemble that of a woman in certain ways. After a while, I began to put it all together, to dress completely as a woman from head to toe. I looked rather ridiculous when I first began to do this, but over the course of many years, I slowly figured out what worked for me and what did not. Eventually, I reached the point where I could fairly consistently appear female to myself when I looked in mirror. This "mirror moment" was always the highlight of any crossdressing session for me, as I found it strangely comforting to be able to see my female reflection staring back at me.

As the name suggests, my clothing phase was primarily about becoming familiar with, and eventually demystifying, "women's" clothing. I eventually even stopped thinking about them as "women's" clothes; after all, they were all *my* clothes, as I was the one who purchased and wore them. Similarly, I also stopped thinking of myself as being "crossdressed," and instead began referring to myself as simply being "dressed." Toward the end of this stage, I was no longer very excited by the idea of wearing "women's" clothes just for the sake of it. However, while they had lost their mystified properties, I still understood them as having the transformative property of facilitating my appearance as female. It is this latter role that "women's" clothing played in the next stage of my crossdressing, when I began to venture out in public.

The "public phase" began with my earliest attempts to go out into the world as a woman. My very first experience involved walking around a shopping mall for about fifteen minutes, followed by purchasing a milkshake at a fast-food drive-through window. The fact that nobody seemed to give me a second glance, and that the

cashier said, "Thank you, ma'am," as she handed me my change, completely blew me away. Like the mirror moments, these experiences were profound and moving. Over time, I continued to go out dressed in public more and more, typically doing rather mundane things such as going to museums or shopping. I always made sure that there were lots of people around and that I could easily "get away" in the event that something bad happened. Admittedly, the early sense of excitement associated with being dressed as female in public was enhanced by the inherent sense of danger that unfortunately plagues any public crossdressing experience. The fear, of course, was not merely that I would be noticed or "read" as a crossdresser (which happened on countless occasions during the many years that I publicly crossdressed), but that I might be targeted for violence if I was ever "found out" by the wrong person.

It was during my public phase that I first began going to crossdresser support and social group meetings (this was in Kansas in 1994, before the word "transgender" came into vogue). They were my first opportunity to speak openly about my crossdressing and to meet others who shared that experience. It also provided me with the chance to learn some of the techniques that other crossdressers used to make their female appearance more convincing. I was fortunate enough to have an amazing crossdresser named Deborah take me under her wing. Among other things, she showed me how to use cosmetics to effectively cover my beard shadow, an invaluable skill for any crossdresser who wishes to be gendered by others as female. It's common for people to dismiss crossdressers for what is perceived to be their exaggerated use of makeup. However, the truth of the matter is that crossdressers (unlike cissexual women)

typically have beard shadows, which are perhaps the dominant visual cue we rely on when gendering people as male. While I would have preferred to have the privilege of forgoing makeup if I wished, my beard shadow made it virtually impossible for me to be regularly gendered as female without it.

Complaints about how crossdressers overuse cosmetics are often related to more general critiques that claim that crossdressers exaggerate stereotypically feminine dress and behaviors, thus turning themselves into caricatures of women. Often, these sentiments are rooted in the oppositional sexist assumption that cissexual women are entitled to express and explore femininity while those assigned male are not. Even those critiques that are not downright oppositional sexist are still cissexual-woman-centric, in that they view MTF crossdressing solely in terms of how it portrays cissexual women, rather than viewing it from an MTF spectrum perspective. Back when I crossdressed, I very much enjoyed dressing and acting in a highly feminine manner, but not because I thought that women really *were* or *should be* that way. If I indulged in an exaggerated form of femininity, it was only because I never really had the chance to explore that side of myself growing up as a boy. I spent virtually every day of my life wearing T-shirts, jeans, sneakers, and no makeup. So for me, crossdressing represented a rare opportunity to fully indulge my femininity.

The other factor at the time that motivated me to try to achieve stereotypical femininity was that I wanted others to gender me as female. Back when I was crossdressing—when I was still physically male—that never would have been possible had I gone out sans makeup or wearing unisex clothing. To a large extent, I purposely chose the clothing and cosmetics I wore when I crossdressed based

on their ability to hide or play down my male physique and facial features. In fact, the public stage of my crossdressing was really the one time in my life when I did go out of my way to emulate how some women looked, walked, talked, moved, and so on. I found that this increased the likelihood that I would be gendered female, which was my overall goal, and which also ensured my safety.

One question that many queer-identified friends asked me back when I was crossdressing was why it was so important for me to "pass" as a woman. Their concern seemed to stem from the common use of the term "pass" in lesbian and gay communities as a synonym for "hide" (i.e., a gay male who "passes" for straight is typically assumed to be hiding or playing down his queerness). This use of the word "pass" is completely different from its use in the transgender community, where it typically refers to whether one is appropriately gendered as the sex one identifies or presents oneself as. From my perspective as a crossdresser, what gay people call "passing" (i.e., hiding) was what I did every day when I lived as male. In contrast, when I dressed and "passed" (in the transgender sense) as a woman, it was a rare moment of being "out" for me, of having others see and acknowledge a part of me that I normally kept hidden.

Eventually, having other people gender me as female became demystified. While I still enjoyed it (as I did with the mirror moments), it was no longer enough in and of itself to ease the gender dissonance that I felt. It was at this point that I moved into the "interactive stage," when I began to go out with other people while I was crossdressed. While I had come out to a number of friends as a crossdresser during my public stage, I now began cultivating relationships with people who primarily or solely knew me when I was

in girl-mode. More often than not, these were people who I met via personal ads and who were aware that I was a crossdresser from the start. Over an extremely intense two-year period of my life, I sort of lived a dual life, where I was in boy-mode most of the time, but about one or two times per week I would go out and interact with others (often on dates) as a woman.

Some of the people I saw during this period were men who might be described as admirers of MTF spectrum people. With them, I primarily engaged in role-playing relationships in which we would create sexually charged scenarios based on exaggerations of gender stereotypes. While many people assume that male "tranny-chasers" are closeted homosexuals who are turned on by the "guy" (or the "penis") under the dress, all of the men who I role-played with were primarily attracted to women and, in particular, to femininity. In conversations I had with them, each said that what attracted them to MTF spectrum people was the extreme femininity that many of us (including myself at the time) sometimes displayed. For me, these role-playing experiences were important in helping me demystify the connection between femininity and sexuality. As with previous phases of my crossdressing, acting out my submissive feminine fantasies felt exciting and empowering early on. But over time, once they had become demystified, I found that they began to lose both their erotic and experiential potential.

What played an even greater role in demystifying femaleness and femininity for me were the relationships I cultivated with women around this same time. Most of these women were bisexual or bi-curious, and our relationships involved me being in girl-mode some or most of the times we got together. While I was quite feminine when I was with them and crossdressed, I did not engage in

the exaggerated femininity that I had during my role-playing experiences with men. In retrospect, what was most important for me about these experiences with women was that they allowed me to begin to integrate my personality (i.e., the person I was when in boy-mode) with my femme self. In a sense, this represented a mending of boy-mode and girl-mode for me, a sort of mending of the fracture in my psyche that had developed in response to the effemina and enforced ignorance I'd experienced as a child.

After about two years of being in the interactive phase, of being in relationships with other people while I was in girl-mode, something unexpected happened: I lost interest in crossdressing. This was extraordinarily disconcerting to me at first, as being a crossdresser was such a huge part of my identity at the time. I remember lying in bed one morning and thinking, *I wonder where I should take my crossdressing next?* as if I simply needed to find some new aspect of femaleness or femininity to experiment with, some new crossdressing stage to pioneer, in order to regain interest in it. However, by this point, I had explored femininity and female gender roles as much as possible within the context of being a crossdresser. Fortunately for me, this was when Dani (who was my girlfriend at the time) introduced me to Kate Bornstein's and Leslie Feinberg's writings. Their books allowed me to start viewing myself as bigendered rather than as a crossdresser. I began to see my expressions of femaleness and femininity not merely as something that existed outside of myself that I could emulate or imagine but never truly experience, but rather as an intrinsic and legitimate part of my person, as something that came from within me.

Thinking of myself as bigendered also helped me make sense of another new development in my life: that people were beginning to

pick up on my femininity even when I was in boy-mode. Strangers began to assume that I was gay, and on rare occasions even gendered me as female. These changes, which occurred despite the fact that I was dressing the same and had not consciously altered my behavior, took me by surprise. I eventually realized that over those many years of crossdressing I must have unlearned many of the rote masculine mannerisms that I'd acquired during my adolescence and early adulthood—behaviors that had served as a self-defense mechanism that allowed me to escape effemimanic derision. In other words, during the years that I crossdressed, it wasn't so much that I learned how to be female (as I was no longer employing any of the contrived and stereotyped feminine mannerisms I practiced back when I was crossdressing), but that I had in effect unlearned maleness.

If it were not for my years as a crossdresser, I doubt that I would have been able to demystify femaleness and unlearn maleness to the point that I could live for several years as a feminine bigendered boy—an identity that preceded my decision to transition. While I certainly do not believe that crossdressing is merely a phase that eventually leads to becoming a transsexual woman, I do believe that many crossdressers experience similar phases of demystifying femaleness/femininity and unlearning maleness/masculinity over the course of their lives. While crossdressing may seem highly contrived to many outsiders, from an MTF perspective, it is an invaluable way to reconcile our female/feminine inclinations with our male/masculine bodies and socialization. It provides a way to allow parts of ourselves that we have been made to feel shame about, that we have learned to hide or repress, to show through and become integrated with the rest of our personalities.

Rethinking "Male Privilege"

I think it's appropriate to end this chapter with a discussion of "male privilege" with respect to MTF spectrum folks. I have decided to frame "male privilege" in quotation marks here not to suggest that it doesn't exist or to claim that MTF spectrum folks don't experience it to some extent, but to challenge the way in which it is often put forward in dialogues and debates—as though it were the "one and only" gender privilege.⁸ The concept of "male privilege" emerged out of the incorrect assumption that sexism functions as a unilateral form of oppression. According to this model, men unilaterally oppress women, and thus they reap *all* of the benefits, while women bear *all* of the hardships. This, however, is a gross oversimplification of sexism for numerous reasons. First, the concept of unilateral sexism denies other important factors, such as racism, classism, ableism, etc., that contribute to discrimination. After all, it's difficult to make the case that a rich white woman is more oppressed than a poor black man in our culture. Second, it ignores oppositional sexism, which favors those with typical gender inclinations over those with exceptional ones, regardless of sex. For example, if you happen to be attracted to men, then your life will certainly be easier in many respects if you happen to be female rather than male. And if you happen to be feminine, you will surely be less marginalized for your gender expressions if you are a woman rather than a man.

While some cissexual women assume that men have a monopoly on gender privilege, this is not the case. Many trans men have written at length about both the male privileges they gained post-transition, as well as the numerous ways their lives became more difficult, complex, or even dangerous once they were

regularly perceived as male.⁹ Their comments have been echoed by Norah Vincent, a cissexual woman who spent over a year and a half socially "passing" as a man as a part of an investigative journalism project.¹⁰ These perspectives, which all come from people who were born and socialized female, help demonstrate how oppositional sexism ensures that both maleness and femaleness come with their own very different sets of privileges, restrictions, expectations, and assumptions.

The concept of "male privilege" not only ignores oppositional sexism; it assumes that women are the sole targets of traditional sexism. While those who live full-time as women surely bear the brunt of traditional sexism, female- and feminine-inclined male-bodied people are also clearly targeted by this form of sexism, as is evident in our culture's rampant effemimania.

As a trans woman, I have, on many occasions, had cissexual women claim that I shouldn't be given the same rights as them to label myself a "woman" or to enter women-only spaces because I have experienced "male privilege" in the past. This claim always strikes me as odd. After all, unlike them, I have actually experienced having others treat me as both male and female at different points in my life. One could easily make the case that transsexuals are uniquely positioned to give firsthand accounts of what exactly "male privilege" is or isn't. As I have discussed at various points throughout this book, there are many male privileges that I received prior to my transition: I was generally taken more seriously, given more space, and harassed far less. Perhaps there are additional male privileges that exist but which were regularly denied to me because I was a rather unmasculine (and at times, downright feminine) guy. In any case, as a female- and feminine-identified person, I find that

the male privileges I have lost since transitioning, while significant, do not compare to the privileges that I have gained from finally having my subconscious and physical sexes aligned and from being able to live openly as female.

It infuriates me when cissexual women use "male privilege" as an excuse to dismiss MTF spectrum folks, as it belies their reluctance to examine their own birth privilege (having been born into a physical sex that matches their subconscious sex), their socialization privilege (being socialized into a gender consistent with their subconscious sex), and their cissexual privilege (having others consider their femaleness legitimate and unquestionable). Some women bristle when I suggest that they may have experienced socialization privilege, as they assume that I am negating the many ways in which childhood socialization can be restrictive and disempowering for cissexual female children and adolescents. My intention in bringing up the notion of socialization privilege is not to dismiss the obstacles faced by cissexual girls, but to highlight the very different, yet significant, gender disadvantages faced by MTF spectrum children. For example, when I ask my cissexual female friends if they would have preferred it if their parents had decided to raise them male rather than female, most of them immediately answer "no." Posing the question in this way allows them to recognize that the potential male privileges they might have gained if raised male would not be worth the price of having to deny or repress their femaleness and femininity. Male privileges, while very real, are little consolation when you feel like you have to hide your femaleness/femininity from your family and friends; when you've endured being the only female/feminine-inclined person in often-misogynistic male-only spaces such as men's locker rooms; when you cannot safely share

your femaleness/femininity with others, but instead must clandestinely explore it on your own in isolation; when you are unable to simply *be* female/feminine without having others accuse you of “emulating” women or of merely being “effeminate.”

I am not trying to make the case here that MTF spectrum folks are “more oppressed” than cissexual women, as playing the more-oppressed-than-thou card serves no purpose other than narcissism. But I do hope to encourage cissexual women to take a moment to put themselves in our shoes, to consider how patronizing and condescending dismissive quips about “male privilege” would sound to you if you had been forced against your will into boyhood. As someone who spent my childhood desperately wishing that I could be a girl rather than boy, and who as an adult considers it a privilege to finally have the opportunity to live in the world as a woman rather than a man, I find those attempts to undermine trans women’s femaleness by decrying “male privilege” hollow and crass.

Having said all that, I will be the first to admit that many MTF spectrum folks seem to be rather oblivious to the impact that traditional sexism has on their lives—both with respect to the male privileges they gain because of it as well as the special social stigma they receive for their feminine transgender expression and/or for choosing to transition to female. Personally, it was only after I began living full-time as a woman, experiencing firsthand all of the inferior and negative assumptions that others projected onto me because of my femaleness, that I began to make a connection between traditional sexism and the discrimination that I faced because of the specific direction of my transition and transgender expression. Only then did I realize how inadequate the transgender movement’s mantra—that we are discriminated against for “transgressing

binary gender norms”—is for those of us on the MTF spectrum who primarily grapple with effemimania and trans-misogyny.

MTF spectrum folks need feminism in order to make sense out of our lives and to work toward ending our continuing marginalization. Unfortunately, many cissexual feminists seem to fear that MTF spectrum inclusion within feminism might dilute, distract, or undercut a movement that has historically centered itself on the struggles and issues of cissexual women. Typically, such fears arise from the assumption that we cannot work together because we supposedly have different goals, or that we are unable to relate to one another’s experiences. I believe that is a red herring. After all, many lesbian women, who typically do not have to deal with the issue of unwanted pregnancy, work hard for and are committed to protecting the availability of birth control and a woman’s right to choose. Similarly, a woman doesn’t necessarily have to be a survivor of sexual or physical assault herself to do crucial work in a domestic violence shelter or a rape crisis center. What truly unites feminists is not a shared history (as we each bring a unique set of life experiences to the table), but our shared commitment to fighting against the devaluation of femaleness and femininity in our society and the double standards that are placed onto both sexes. In this respect, cissexual female and MTF spectrum feminists do have a lot in common.

It’s not just that MTF spectrum folks need feminism, but that feminism needs to embrace MTF experiences and perspectives. The fact that the lion’s share of the anti-trans sentiment specifically targets those of us on the MTF spectrum indicates that we are marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms per se but because we “choose” to be female and/or feminine. For feminism to ignore the

society-wide effemimania and trans-misogyny we face is to allow one of the most pervasive forms of traditional sexism to go unchecked. Indeed, for feminists to continue to dismiss effemimania solely because it targets those who are male-bodied is particularly shortsighted. After all, as previously mentioned, much of the sexist behavior exhibited by cissexual men arises directly out of their being forced to disavow and mystify femininity from an early age. In this respect, MTF spectrum folks can provide feminism with crucial insight into the workings of effemimania and offer strategies to potentially challenge it. Additionally, those of us who transition to female can provide firsthand accounts of the very different ways that women and men are treated in the world—a perspective that is especially relevant today given how common it is for people to naively claim that we as a society have transcended sexism and moved into a “postfeminist” era.

But perhaps most of all, what MTF spectrum trans people can offer feminism is a very different and far more empowering perspective on femininity. Over the years, many feminists have argued that femininity undermines women, or that it’s purposefully designed to subordinate women to men. Such a view no doubt stems from the experiences of those women who have felt that the expectation of femininity has been forced upon them against their will. But those of us on the MTF spectrum who have had the reciprocal experience—of inexplicably being inclined or compelled to express femininity that we were taught to avoid or repress—cannot so easily dismiss femininity as an artifice whose sole purpose is to devalue and disempower women. Because we come to embrace our own femininity *for ourselves* rather than to appease others, we are able to appreciate the many ways in which femininity can be freeing

and empowering for those who gravitate toward it on their own. Many of us reject all of the inferior meanings and connotations that others project onto femininity—that it is weak, artificial, frivolous, demure, and passive—because for us, there has been no act more bold and daring than embracing our own femininity. In a world that is awash in antifeminine sentiment, we understand that embracing and empowering femininity can potentially be one of the most transformative and revolutionary acts imaginable.

Barrette Manifesto

HEY GIRLS, DID YOU HEAR the news? It's just been scientifically proven that barrettes are dangerous! So are bracelets and bric-a-brac. It's a fact. And don't be fooled by thick-necked macho men who pretend that "girl stuff" is boring or frivolous, because that's just an act. Because as soon as you ask that guy to hold your purse for a minute, he will start to squirm, as if your handbag were full of worms, as he holds it as far away from his rugged body as possible. Because "girl stuff" is made with the gender equivalent of Kryptonite!

That's right, just watch fathers in Sanrio stores standing like petrified trees, like deer caught in Hello Kitty's headlights. Or teenage boys buying their girlfriends flowers, acting as disinterested as possible as they ask the florist for a dozen "whatever"s. That's why they always buy roses, that's why engagement rings are always diamonds. These things are not romantic, they are just clichés—the only types of flowers and jewelry that most men will admit to knowing the names of. And god forbid you were to ask your husband to pick you up a box of tampons. (And men, it's true, the cashier really does think you're buying them for yourselves.)

WHIPPING GIRL

"Girl stuff" is dangerous, and I should know because I'm a secret double agent. See, I lived as a boy for most of my life and I have insider information straight out of men's locker rooms and college dorms. Hell, I even went to a bachelor party once, so I know this stuff firsthand. And I have a battle plan for absolute sexual equality, but you have to trust me on this. See, feminists have made it okay for girls to explore what used to be an exclusively boy world. But true equality won't come until boys learn to embrace girl stuff as well.

So here's the deal: If you want your boyfriend to treat you with respect, then tell him that you won't sleep with him until he starts putting barrettes in his hair. And I'm not talking about secret bedroom kinky shit. Make him wear them to work! The next time he buys a pair of shoes, make sure they're Mary Janes (and don't forget the white lacy anklets to go with them). Because as soon as he realizes the pure bliss of wearing a frilly, pink, poofy party dress, maybe he'll finally relax a bit and loosen up that uptight male swagger. And maybe once he lets his guard down, he'll look around and realize that the world doesn't revolve around him.

You may think this is funny, but it's no joke. "Girl stuff" is dangerous, so let's use it to our advantage. We truly can change the world! Because if construction workers were man enough to wear skirts and heels, they wouldn't whistle at women who walk by. And if misogynistic rockers and rappers were man enough to cry while watching tearjerkers, they wouldn't need to masturbate all over the mic. And if presidents and generals were man enough to wear lip gloss and mascara, they wouldn't have to prove their penis size by going to war all the time. Because male pride is not

Barrette Manifesto

really about pride. It's about fear—the fear of being seen as feminine. And that's why "girl stuff" is so dangerous. And as long as most men remain deathly afraid of it, they'll continue to take it out on the rest of us.

Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism

I REMEMBER BACK IN COLLEGE—when I was admittedly rather naive with regard to gender politics—someone asked a friend of mine whether she considered herself a feminist. I was surprised to hear her answer “No.” After all, she certainly seemed like a feminist to me. She was independent, intelligent, career-minded, pro-women’s reproductive rights. She regularly stood up for herself and was keenly aware of the disparity between how certain professors treated her and how they treated her male counterparts. When she was asked why she didn’t identify as a feminist, her reply was, “I like being a girl.” She went on to explain that she enjoyed, and even felt empowered by, being feminine. And in her experience, those who openly embraced the label “feminist” often displayed a condescending attitude toward her femininity.

Granted, this idea—that feminism and femininity are in opposition to one another—has often been fostered by those who wish to undermine feminism. For several decades now, feminism’s opponents have attempted to dissuade women from the movement by repeating two (seemingly contradictory) ideas: that feminists are

“man-haters” (read: “homosexual”) while simultaneously “wanting to be men” (read: “masculine”). While one cannot underestimate the negative effect that this antifeminist propaganda has had in turning feminine and heterosexual women away from feminism, we would be doing ourselves a great disservice if we didn’t also acknowledge the fact that many feminists themselves have forwarded the idea that femininity is artificial and incompatible with feminism.¹ This anti-femininity tendency may represent the feminist movement’s single greatest tactical error. It’s high time we rectify this mistake by purposefully putting the feminine back into feminism.

Origins of Femininity

Before we can engage in an in-depth discussion about femininity, we must first accurately define the word. In its broadest sense, femininity refers to the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are typically associated with those who are female. Thus, the first thing we must acknowledge is that femininity is a collection of heterogeneous traits. This is an important point to make, as femininity is often assumed to be a monolithic entity—i.e., a “package deal” of gender expressions, traits, and qualities that are inevitably bundled together. The fact that individual feminine traits are separable is evident in the fact that some women are verbally effusive and emotive (qualities that are commonly considered feminine), but not particularly feminine in their manner of dress. Reciprocally, some women who dress very femininely are not very effusive or emotive. Still other women exhibit both or neither of these qualities. It must also be mentioned that these and other feminine traits are not unique to women, as individual men can (and often do) exhibit them.

The fact that feminine traits are not female-specific, and that they are separable from one another, is far too often brushed aside when people try to answer the question that unfortunately drives most discussions about femininity: namely, what produces feminine expressions in people? Those who wish to naturalize femininity will often describe feminine traits as though they were bundled in a single biological program that is initiated only in genetic females. Such claims gloss over the many people who have exceptional gender expressions (i.e., feminine traits in males and masculine traits in females) in order to fully subsume femininity within femaleness. On the other hand, those who wish to *artificialize* femininity often characterize it as though it were a unified social program designed to shape women’s personalities and sexualities via a combination of social norms, constructs, and conditioning. The assumption that femininity is one entity makes it easier for those who favor such social explanations to “prove” that femininity is artificial. After all, one needs only to make the case that certain specific aspects of femininity are clearly “man-made” and vary from culture to culture in order to extrapolate that *all* aspects of femininity are social in origin. Similarly, by showing that certain aspects of femininity are socially imposed on girls and women, one can claim that femininity *as a whole* is unnatural, or it would not have to be enforced at all. What should be clear by now is that the presumption that femininity is a singular program tends to foster an overly simplistic, all-or-none dichotomy between biological and social explanations for gender differences.

Once we let go of the concept of monolithic femininity—and with it, the either/or ideology that plagues nature-versus-nurture debates about gender—it becomes rat

feminine traits arise from different combinations of biology and socialization. For instance, during my transition, when I first began to be perceived as female on a regular basis, I was surprised by how often male strangers told me to smile—"Cheer up, things can't be all that bad," they'd say. Needless to say, I found these remarks condescending, as nobody dared to tell me that I should smile for them back when I was perceived as male. However, despite my determination not to conform to the suggestions of patronizing strangers, I nevertheless found that, over time, I stopped hearing such comments. Obviously, something had changed. Maybe on an unconscious level, I learned to smile more without realizing it. Or maybe it had to do with another defense mechanism that I've learned since living as a woman: making eye contact with strangers less often than I did when I was male, which significantly reduced occurrences of strange men harassing me. These behaviors, which are often considered feminine because women primarily exhibit them, seem to originate as an unconscious response to negotiating one's way through the world as a woman. In other words, they appear to be primarily or exclusively social in origin.

Other aspects of femininity that are clearly social in origin include what I call "feminine fashions"—i.e., qualities that have only recently become associated with, or symbolic of, femininity. For example, these days it's common for people to view being thin as a feminine trait. While femininity and thinness have become almost synonymous in contemporary Western culture, women who were more full-figured were considered the feminine ideal in past eras. Similarly, today most of us grow up believing that pink is undoubtedly the most feminine of colors. In the early 1900s,

however, it was more common for people to associate pink with boys and blue with girls.²

While some feminine traits are predominantly social in origin, others appear to be greatly influenced by biology. One feminine trait is being in tune with one's emotions. Virtually all transsexuals transitioning in the MTF direction report an increased intensity in the way that they experience emotions once they begin taking estrogen; those in the FTM direction report the reverse effect upon taking testosterone. Thus, emotional intensity definitely has a biological basis, as it is greatly influenced by adult hormone levels.

Of course, feminine traits that arise from our adult hormonal makeup are relatively easy to categorize as biological, as one can experience the corresponding changes firsthand via hormone therapy. In contrast, other feminine traits that have biological inputs—such as those that may be hardwired into our brains from birth—are more difficult to discern. Two possible examples of this include feminine aesthetic preferences and ways of expressing oneself. Evidence that these tendencies may be hardwired comes from the fact that they typically appear very early in childhood and often in contradiction to one's socialization (both for children whose parents attempt to raise them in a unisex or gender-neutral fashion, and for boys whose families actively and aggressively steer them away from feminine expression). This indicates that some aspects of feminine verbal and aesthetic expression precede and/or supersede gender socialization. Further, the fact that some feminine male children will often continue to express these exceptional traits well into adulthood despite a lifetime of social conditioning to the contrary shows that these traits cannot be adequately explained by social mechanisms. While feminine verbal and aesthetic expression

can surely be influenced or exaggerated by social forces, I would argue that these traits are also driven by intrinsic and deep-seated inclinations that are likely to be the result of biology.

Given the way that gender essentialists have distorted biology to justify sexist behaviors and norms, I can understand why some feminists would be hesitant to admit that biology has any role in producing or contributing to behavioral gender differences. However, the idea that gender differences arise solely from socialization and social norms is highly problematic, in that it assumes that our minds are blank slates with absolutely no intrinsic or instinctual gendered or sexual tendencies. This harkens back to views forwarded by extreme behaviorists like B. F. Skinner, who argued that human beings are merely products of their social conditioning. Such views have since been thoroughly refuted by other work in the fields of psychology and biology. Such behaviorist models are unable to explain how any gender system comes into being in the first place, and how (once it is established) anyone can come to transcend or challenge it. As with those models that assume that gender arises directly and expediently from sex chromosomes or hormones, behaviorist models of gender fail to accurately account for the vast gender and sexual diversity in the world.

While I believe that certain aspects of femininity have biological inputs, it would be foolish for any person to presume that they can fully tease apart the social from the biological: to assume that they can know precisely what biological pathways lie at the root of feminine and masculine behaviors, or to claim to know why or how they evolved. Given the overwhelming number of social variables involved, any researcher who claims to approach human gender expression from a purely biological perspective practices

speculation rather than science. Furthermore, I reject the sophomoric biological models of gender that are often proposed in pop psychology and pop science, which often naively portray genes, hormones, and neurons as though they were switches that are simply turned "on" in one gender and "off" in the other. In reality, these aspects of biology are complexly regulated and greatly influenced by an individual's unique genetic and environmental background. This is particularly true of the brain, where neural structure, connections, and activity are constantly being altered and modified in response to new experiences. Biology inevitably produces a broad spectrum of potential combinations of behavioral tendencies in people, making that spectrum compatible with the vast natural diversity we see in human gender expression.

Sexist Interpretations of Femininity

Throughout the rest of this chapter, when I refer to "femininity" or "feminine traits," it should be understood that I'm talking about a heterogeneous, non-female-specific collection of traits that each have a unique biological and/or social origin. In fact, the only quality that all feminine traits share is that they all tend to be associated with women (albeit not exclusive to them). This point becomes highly relevant once we begin to consider how people interpret feminine traits. Indeed, the ongoing and hotly contested debates over whether femininity and masculinity are biological or social in origin have, in my view, served primarily as a distraction from a far more pertinent issue—namely, what meanings, symbolism, and connotations do we assign to different gender expressions? While I disagree with the notion that gender expression itself is entirely social in origin, I do believe that the way we interpret and assign values to

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feminine and masculine behaviors is primarily, if not exclusively, a social affair. In our male-centered culture, two forces most often shape our interpretations of femininity (as well as masculinity): oppositional and traditional sexism.

Oppositional sexism functions to legitimize feminine expressions in women and to delegitimize feminine expressions in men (and vice versa for masculinity). So while all people are capable of expressing feminine traits, oppositional sexism ensures that such expressions will appear natural when produced by women and unnatural when produced by men. In addition to creating the perception that female femininity is "real" and "right" while male femininity is "fake" and "wrong," oppositional sexism may also influence the "doing" of gender expression. Exceptional gender expressions are regularly dismissed, even stigmatized, in our culture, which may lead some people to hide or curb their own gender-variant behavior, further exaggerating the assumed, apparent differences between the two sexes. In these ways, oppositional sexism creates the assumption that feminine traits—which occur in members of both sexes—are inexorably linked to female biology, and therefore, to one another.

Traditional sexism functions to make femaleness and femininity appear subordinate to maleness and masculinity. This is accomplished in a number of ways. For example, female and feminine attributes are regularly assigned negative connotations and meanings in our society. An example of this is the way that being in touch with and expressing one's emotions is regularly derided in our society. While this trait has virtually nothing to do with one's ability to reason or to think logically, in the public mind, being "emotional" has become synonymous with being "irrational." Another

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example is that certain pursuits and interests that are considered feminine, such as gossiping or decorating, are often characterized as "frivolous," while masculine preoccupations—even those that serve solely recreational functions, such as sports—generally escape such trivialization.

In addition to placing inferior meanings on feminine traits, traditional sexism also creates the impression that certain aspects of femininity exist for the pleasure or benefit of men. Take, for example, the concern for, or desire to help, others. While those who have this quality of empathy or altruism often express it toward all types of beings (i.e., children and adults, strangers and friends, animals and humans), it's often recast in women as a maternal, "nurturing" quality that is meant to be directed primarily toward one's family. Thus, this thoroughly human trait has been twisted into the expectation that it's women's "natural" duty to take care of their male partners and children, and to carry out the bulk of family and domestic chores.

Another example of this phenomenon is the way that feminine self-presentation is often framed as though it solely exists to entice or attract men. This assumption denies any possibility that those who are feminine might wish to adorn themselves for their own benefit or pleasure. After all, feminine self-presentation tends to highly correlate with a more general desire to surround oneself with beautiful or aesthetically pleasing objects and materials—whether in decorating one's home or adorning one's body. The idea that this trait exists primarily to pique men's interest seems unlikely to me, as most straight men I know seem rather disinterested in the way their homes are decorated, and often are completely oblivious when their female partners don new outfits or hairstyles. It's safe to

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say that most heterosexual men are far more interested in women's physical bodies than they are in the clothing and accessories that cover them. The idea that feminine self-presentation exists primarily to attract heterosexual men is further undermined by the fact that femme dykes dress in a feminine manner despite their disinterest in attracting men. And some gay men also dress very femininely despite the fact that the gay male community has a history of idolizing and fetishizing hypermasculine images and bodies rather than feminine ones. As someone who's not interested in attracting men, I often enjoy dressing femininely; I simply feel more alive and self-empowered when I do. Whenever people (male or otherwise) assume that women who dress in a feminine manner do so in order to elicit male attention, it always sounds like a slightly toned-down version of that arrogant claim that women who dress provocatively are somehow asking to be raped. Clearly, it's the idea that feminine self-presentation exists for men's benefit that is oppressive to women, not the acts of self-presentation themselves.

The issue of feminine self-presentation also brings up another way in which feminine traits are undermined: They are often cast as being dependent on masculinity and maleness. This sentiment seems to be projected onto virtually all aspects of femaleness and femininity. It can be seen in the way men are often cast as the "protectors" of women, either because they are typically physically stronger or because women are seen as being "emotionally frail." The stereotypic and mythic image of the damsel in distress who requires a masculine man to save her seems to impart an air of helplessness, fragility, and passivity onto virtually all aspects of femininity and female sexuality. Such connotations seem to heavily inform both the materiality and symbolism of certain feminine

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fashions. They also help foster a predator/prey mentality regarding sexuality, where femininity becomes conflated with being sexually receptive and passive, while masculinity is synonymous with penetration and sexual aggressiveness. This, of course, denies the reality that women are often sexual initiators and that both parties are invariably active during the act of sex.

Indeed, the fact that helplessness, fragility, and passivity are merely meanings projected onto female bodies and feminine expressions (rather than qualities that are "built into" femaleness and femininity) becomes obvious when we imagine what would happen if, instead of centering our beliefs about heterosexual sex around the idea that the man "penetrates" the woman, we were to say that the woman's vagina "consumes" the man's penis. This would create a very different set of connotations, as the woman would become the active initiator and the man would be the passive and receptive party. One can easily see how this could lead to men and masculinity being seen as dependent on, and existing for the benefit of, femaleness and femininity. Similarly, if we thought about the feminine traits of being verbally effusive and emotive not as signs of insecurity or dependence, but as bold acts of self-expression, then the masculine ideal of the "strong and silent type" might suddenly seem timid and insecure by comparison.

The mistaken belief that femininity is inherently helpless, fragile, dependent, irrational, frivolous, and so on, gives rise to the commonplace assumption that those who express femininity are not to be taken seriously and cannot be seen as legitimate authority figures. While such assumptions regularly undermine feminine people of both sexes, they often have a greater net effect on women, because traditional sexism targets female bodies as well as feminine

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expression, and because traditional and oppositional sexism act together to put women in a double bind: If a woman acts feminine, she will be delegitimized by traditional sexism, and if she acts masculine, she will be delegitimized by oppositional sexism.

Feminist Interpretations of Femininity

Now, I will address different ways in which contemporary feminists have reacted to the sexist devaluing of femininity in society. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on two broad trends in feminism, which I call *unilateral feminism* and *deconstructive feminism*. By focusing on only these two general trends, it is not my intention to erase the significant differences that distinguished the individual branches of feminism that together gave rise to these trends, nor is it to ignore other branches of feminism that fall outside of these trends. Rather, my main purpose for this categorization scheme is to illustrate two major tendencies in feminist perspectives on femininity.

Several of the most influential branches of feminism that arose during the 1960s and 1970s may be described as falling under the umbrella of *unilateral feminism*, in that they viewed sexism as a straightforward matter of women being oppressed at the hands of men. One of the canonical writings of unilateral feminism is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which focuses on the malaise that affected many middle-class women during the 1950s and 1960s as they gave up careers to become housewives and to raise families.³ Friedan co-opts Sigmund Freud's phrase "feminine mystique" to describe the popular belief at the time that women could only be happy if they fully immersed themselves in femininity. Friedan discusses femininity in relation to what she calls

the "housewife trap"—the expectation that middle-class women should become full-time homemakers, a role she believed stifled women's emotional and intellectual growth. To make her case that femininity is a trap (rather than something many women naturally gravitate toward), Friedan spends much of the book discussing the ways in which companies, advertisers, the media, psychiatry, and others actively manipulate women into buying into feminine trappings. *The Feminine Mystique* was a rather narrowly focused book, in that it only dealt with issues that affected middle-class American women, and with those aspects of femininity that are associated with the "housewife trap." But it helped reinforce a notion that would appear repeatedly throughout unilateral feminism—that femininity (or at least certain aspects of it) is an artificial, man-made ploy designed to hold women back from reaching their full potential.

Looking back at unilateral feminist writings, one finds that sexism is often described as arising from a patriarchal system that kept women oppressed via two interrelated tactics: (1) placing belittling meanings and assumptions onto women's bodies, and (2) coercing women into femininity, a program that was seen as inherently stifling and which fostered (or was the product of) women's subservience and subjugation to men. Thus, unilateral feminists viewed the oppositional sexism faced by women as part of traditional sexism. Because masculinity was viewed primarily as a position of privilege, oppositional sexism against male-bodied people remained obscured. Indeed, the very idea that a man might find masculine expectations restrictive seemed as nonsensical to many unilateral feminists as a rich person complaining about being oppressed by their own wealth.

The unilateral feminist notion that women were coerced into femininity was further facilitated by the growing use of the sex/gender distinction, which differentiated between one's sex (which arose from biology) and gender (which arose from one's environment, socialization, and psychology).⁴ This gave unilateral feminists the theoretical means to challenge the traditionally sexist messages projected onto women's biology and bodies while ignoring or disavowing the negative messages associated with femininity. In fact, it's clear that many influential unilateral feminists believed that qualities such as helplessness, deference, and passivity were essentially "built into" feminine expressions and practices.⁵ In other words, these feminists not only failed to challenge sexist interpretations of femininity, but often accepted those interpretations at face value.

While unilateral feminists almost universally agreed that some or all aspects of femininity enabled sexism, they differed in the proposed solutions for countering it. For example, liberal feminists (such as Friedan) worked within the existing system to try to gain equal access to previously male-dominated areas (particularly professional and leadership positions), often promoting a "women can do anything men can do" philosophy. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that certain masculine-associated qualities and interests were natural and desirable for women to strive for, whereas the reciprocal feminine qualities were not. Radical feminists argued that women's oppression would only end by entirely rejecting both masculine and feminine gender roles—which were seen as being inexorably tied to men's "oppressor" and women's "oppressed" statuses—and instead adopting a more "natural" androgynous disposition. Cultural feminists took a more essentialist

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position, arguing that men and women were inherently different, and had distinctive innate traits; for example, men were inherently destructive and oppressive, while women were creative and nurturing. While cultural feminists certainly embraced some feminine traits—even characterizing them as superior to their masculine counterparts' traits—they were careful to portray such traits as arising from a woman's "natural" womanliness rather than from "artificial, man-made femininity."⁶

The notion that sexism can only be overcome if women work to become more masculine, more androgynous, or more "naturally womanly" all artificialize femininity by assuming that one's gender expression is easily malleable, and can be reshaped according to one's politics. Such one-size-fits-all approaches falsely presume that femininity is monolithic, ignoring how significant differences in class, culture, and biological predisposition give rise to a vast diversity of feminine expressions and perspectives.⁷ Because many unilateral feminists refused to accept this diversity in female gender expression, they often developed rather belittling views of women who were unabashedly feminine, characterizing them as having their minds colonized, being "ego repressed," and not being a "whole person."⁸ Some unilateral feminists called femininity a "slave status," equating it with masochism, comparing it with Stockholm syndrome, and believing that it existed only to "communicate a woman's acceptance of her subordinate status."⁹ Women who engaged in feminine beauty practices were perhaps the biggest target of such criticism, as they were accused of donating "symbols of oppression," being manipulated by "thought control," alienating themselves from their own bodies, and taking part in "self-imposed passivity."¹⁰

Of course, one of the biggest caveats in the unilateral feminist argument that femininity is artificial and only exists to oppress women is the fact that some people who are assigned and socialized male also express femininity. Perhaps sensing that feminine gay men and MTF spectrum trans people brought unilateral feminists' anti-femininity theses into question, many unilateral feminists developed vehemently disdainful attitudes toward these groups. Interestingly (and not coincidentally), the unilateral feminists who have been most outspoken in deriding feminine gay men and trans women also tend to have the most openly hostile attitudes toward femininity in general. For example, Mary Daly, who referred to feminine women as "painted birds" and portrayed feminist women such as herself as being "attacked by the mutants of her own kind, the man-made women," was similarly resentful of transsexual women (whom she called "Frankenstein's Monsters") and drag queens (whom she compared to whites playing "blackface").¹¹ Germaine Greer, who has referred to conventionally feminine women as "feminine parasites," has written multiple trans-misogynistic screeds, one of which assails trans woman Jan Morris for her "obsession with femininity."¹² And Sheila Jeffreys, who believes that femininity "is the behavior required of the subordinate class of women in order to show their deference to the ruling class of men," has argued that MTF transsexuality and gay male femininity arise exclusively from sexual masochism.¹³ Thus, the anti-gay-male, anti-trans-woman sentiment that persists today among many unilateral feminists has its roots in their traditionally sexist views of femininity.

Many of the unilateral feminist positions that I've discussed so far have been challenged with the rise of *deconstructive feminism* in the 1980s and 1990s. Deconstructive feminists, while varied in

their backgrounds and approaches, share the belief that the category "woman" is socially constructed and therefore doesn't exist independent of the societal norms and discourses that bring it into being. Therefore, instead of working to end sexism by highlighting the ways that women are "oppressed" by men (as unilateral feminists had), deconstructive feminists set out to deconstruct our very notions of "woman" and "man," exposing the assumptions and expectations that enable sexism. They describe "man" and "woman" as being situated within a binary gender system that permeates every nook and cranny of our society, infusing itself into our language, traditions, behaviors, and the very way we think about ourselves and others. This binary gender system assumes that men are masculine and aggressive and attracted to women, who are feminine and passive. If one fails to adhere to these assumptions in any way—for instance, if you are an aggressive woman or a feminine man—then you automatically become unintelligible within this system and are therefore marginalized.

Deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in a number of important ways. First, unlike unilateral feminism, which focuses almost exclusively on traditional sexism, deconstructive feminism focuses primarily on oppositional sexism. In a sense, deconstructive feminism subsumes traditional sexism into oppositional sexism, as it typically depicts the "othering" of "woman" as an inevitable by-product of that identity being binary-paired to "man." Because this relationship privileges oppositional sexism over traditional sexism, deconstructive feminists have been influential in both feminist and queer theory. Deconstructive feminists also differ from unilateral feminists in that they do not subscribe to the sex/gender distinction, but

instead argue that our notions about "sex" are just as socially constructed as our notions of "gender."

While deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in many ways, it shares its predecessor's tendency to artificialize gender expression. This is often accomplished via *gender performativity*, a concept developed by Judith Butler to describe the way in which built-in expectations about maleness and femaleness, straightness and queerness, are constantly imposed on all of us. Butler uses the term "performativity" to highlight how feminine and masculine norms must constantly be cited. She uses the example of the child who becomes "girlled" by others at birth: She is given a female name, referred to with female pronouns, given girl toys, and will, throughout her life, have her "girlness" cited by others in society.¹⁴ Butler argues that this sort of reiteration "produces" gender, making it appear "natural." However, many other deconstructive feminists have interpreted Butler's writings to mean that one's gender is merely a "performance." According to this latter view, if gender itself is merely a "performance," then one can challenge sexism by simply "performing" one's gender in ways that call the binary gender system into question; the most often cited example of this is a drag queen whose "performance" supposedly reveals the way in which femaleness and femininity are merely a "performance."¹⁵

While unilateral feminists typically view femininity in exclusively negative terms, deconstructive feminists believe that femininity is context-dependent: It can be "good" (when it is used to subvert the binary gender system) or "bad" (when used to naturalize that system).¹⁶ In other words, deconstructive feminism only empowers and embraces queer expressions of femininity, while

straight expressions of femininity are typically portrayed as reinforcing a sexist binary gender system. Thus, both deconstructive and unilateral feminism share the belief that (1) femininity is not a natural form of expression, but rather one that is socially imposed; (2) most women are "duped" into believing that their femininity arises intrinsically rather than due to extrinsic forces such as socialization or social constructs; (3) people who are "in the know" recognize that gender expression is artificial and easily malleable, and thus they can purposefully adopt a more radical, antisexist gender expression (e.g., androgyny, drag, etc.); and (4) because feminine women choose not to adopt these supposedly radical, antisexist gender expressions, they may be seen as enabling sexism and thus collaborating in their own oppression.

The Ramifications of Artificializing Femininity

So why has the artificializing of femininity become a preoccupation for many feminists over the last several decades? I believe that it has to do with the fact that many of the women who have most strongly gravitated toward feminism are those who have found traditional feminine gender roles constraining or unnatural. In many cases, this is due to their own inclinations toward exceptional forms of gender expression. Because their personal experiences with femininity felt uncomfortable and contrived in comparison with their experiences with androgyny, masculinity, or other gender expressions (which they found more liberating and empowering), they mistakenly projected their own experience and perspective onto all other women. While not necessarily done maliciously, this extrapolation was nevertheless an act of gender entitlement, one that denied that any diversity in gender expression might exist among

women arising out of their very different class, cultural, or biological backgrounds and predispositions. By arrogantly assuming that no woman could be legitimately drawn toward feminine expression, these feminists permanently relegated femininity to the status of "false consciousness."

The feminist assumption that "femininity is artificial" is narcissistic, as it invariably casts nonfeminine women as having "superior knowledge" while dismissing feminine women as either "dupes" (who are too ignorant to recognize they have been conned) or "fakes" (who purposely engage in "unnatural" behaviors in order to uphold sexist societal norms). This tendency to dismiss feminine women is eerily similar to the behavior of some lesbian-feminists in the 1970s who arrogantly claimed that they were more righteous feminists than heterosexual women because the latter group was "fucking with the oppressor."¹⁷ It is an extraordinarily convenient tactic to artificialize, and even demean, an inclination (such as femininity or heterosexuality) when you personally are not inclined toward it. Indeed, this is exactly what straight bigots do when they dismiss queer forms of gender and sexual expression as "unnatural." When we feminists stoop to the level of policing gender and start inventing etiologies to explain why some women adopt "unnatural" feminine forms of expression, there's little to distinguish us from the sexist forces we claim to be fighting against in the first place.

While femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped, and enforced by society, to say that it is entirely "artificial" or merely a "performance" is patronizing toward those for whom femininity simply *feels right*. Indeed, one would have to have a rather grim view of the female population to believe that a majority of us

could so easily be "brainwashed" or "coerced" into enthusiastically adopting an entirely contrived or wholly artificial set of gender expressions. In fact, it seems incomprehensible that so many women could so actively gravitate toward femininity unless there was something about it that resonated with them on a profound level. This becomes even more obvious when considering feminine folks who exhibit no desire whatsoever to fit into straight society, such as femme dykes (who proudly express their femininity despite being historically marginalized within the lesbian movement because of it) and "nelly queens" (who remain fiercely feminine despite the gay male obsession with praising butchness and deriding "effeminacy").¹⁸

The idea that "femininity is artificial" is also blatantly misogynistic. While a handful of theorists in the field of gender studies have more recently begun to focus on how masculinity is constructed, the lion's share of feminist attention, deconstruction, and denigration has been directed squarely at femininity. There is an obvious reason for this. Just as woman is man's "other," so too is femininity masculinity's "other." Under such circumstances, negative connotations like "artificial," "contrived," and "frivolous" become built into our understanding of femininity—indeed, this is precisely what allows masculinity to always come off as "natural," "practical," and "uncomplicated." Those feminists who single out women's dress shoes, clothing, and hairstyles to artificialize necessarily leave unchallenged the notion that their masculine counterparts are "natural" and "practical." This is the same male-centered approach that allows the appearances and behaviors of men who wish to charm or impress others to seem "authentic" while the reciprocal traits expressed by women are dismissed as "feminine

wiles." Femininity is portrayed as a trick or ruse so that masculinity invariably seems sincere by comparison. For this reason, there are few intellectual tasks easier than artificializing feminine gender expression, because male-centrism purposefully sets up femininity as masculinity's "straw man" or its scapegoat.

As feminists, it's time for us to acknowledge that this scapegoating of femininity has become the Achilles' heel of the feminist movement. While past feminists have gone to great lengths to empower femaleness and to tear away all of the negative connotations that have plagued women's bodies and biology, they have allowed the negative connotations associated with femininity to persist relatively unabated. Nothing illustrates this better than the fact that, while most reasonable people see women and men as equals, few (if any) dare to claim that femininity is masculinity's equal. Indeed, much of what has historically been called misogyny—a hatred of women—has clearly gone underground, disguising itself as the less reprehensible derision of femininity. This new version of misogyny, which focuses more on maligning femininity than femaleness, can be found everywhere. It can be seen in our political discourse, where advocates for the environment, gun control, and welfare are undermined via "guilt by association" with feminine imagery as seen in phrases such as "tree huggers," "soft on crime," and pro-"dependency"—where male politicians who exhibit anything other than a two-dimensional facade of hypermasculinity are invariably dismissed by political cartoonists who depict them donning dresses.¹⁹

This new misogyny still very much undermines women, and it accomplishes this in several ways. First, the majority of feminine people are women, so by default they make up the largest class of those who are targeted by antifeminine sentiment. Second, our

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concept of femininity doesn't merely affect how we "do" our own gender expression—it is also an expectation or assumption that we project onto other people's bodies and behaviors. Therefore, while an individual woman may purposefully eschew femininity in her appearance and actions, she cannot escape the fact that other people will project feminine assumptions and expectations upon her simply because they associate femininity with femaleness. In her book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, Virginia Valian makes a strong case that what has come to be known as the "glass ceiling"—the fact that women, regardless of their skills and merits, tend not to advance as far in their careers as similarly qualified men—is best explained by the fact that all people project feminine assumptions and expectations onto women and masculine ones onto men.²⁰ This, of course, favors men, since masculinity is by default seen as "strong," "natural," and "aggressive" while femininity is seen as "weak," "contrived," and "passive." Therefore, until feminists work to empower femininity and pry it away from the insipid, inferior meanings that plague it—weakness, helplessness, fragility, passivity, frivolity, and artificiality—those meanings will continue to haunt every person who is female and/or feminine.

Feminists' past privileging of femaleness over femininity has also enabled misogynistic acts that target men who have feminine traits to remain unnoticed and unarticulated. For example, when a gay man ridicules another gay man who has feminine traits or "effeminate," he may be accused of harboring "internalized homophobia"—a nonsensical turn of phrase to describe someone who is openly gay and has no problems with masculine gay men. Isn't this form of antifeminine discrimination better described as misogyny? Similarly, straight women who regularly pair up with macho guys

who treat them poorly, yet won't consider dating a "nice guy," might be described as harboring "internalized misogyny." Again, isn't this better described as a form of externalized misogyny directed at men who display qualities that are considered feminine?

Some feminists (particularly unilateral feminists) will no doubt have a negative knee-jerk reaction to my suggestion that we extend our understanding of misogyny to encompass effemimania—our societal obsession with critiquing and belittling feminine traits in males. However, as I have argued in past chapters, effemimania affects everybody, including women. Effemimania encourages those who are socialized male to mystify femininity and to dehumanize those who are considered feminine, and thus forms the foundation of virtually all male expressions of misogyny. Effemimania also ensures that any male's manhood or masculinity can be brought into question at any moment for even the slightest perceived expression of, or association with, femininity. I would argue that today, the biggest bottleneck in the movement toward gender equity is not so much women's lack of access to what has been traditionally considered the "masculine realm," but rather men's insistence on defining themselves in opposition to women (i.e., their unwillingness to venture into the "feminine realm").

Until now, the typical feminist response to men who fear being associated with the "feminine realm" can be paraphrased as "*Get over it!*" Such an attitude is ignorant, as it fails to take into account the fact that male femininity is perceived very differently from female femininity. If femininity in women is already seen as "artificial" and "contrived," then oppositional sexism ensures that femininity in men appears exponentially "artificial" and "contrived." While a handful of feminists have recognized this fact—that male feminine

expression tends to evoke levels of contempt and disgust that far exceed that which is normally reserved for female masculinity or femininity—most have unfortunately chosen to ignore or dismiss misogyny when it targets those who are male-bodied.²¹ By doing so, these feminists have become enablers for one of the most prevalent and malignant forms of traditional sexism.

The greatest barrier preventing us from fully challenging sexism is the pervasive antifeminine sentiment that runs wild in both the straight and queer communities, targeting people of all genders and sexualities. The only realistic way to address this issue is to work toward empowering femininity itself. We must rightly recognize that feminine expression is strong, daring, and brave—that it is powerful—and not in an enchanting, enticing, or supernatural sort of way, but in a tangible, practical way that facilitates openness, creativity, and honest expression. We must move beyond seeing femininity as helpless and dependent, or merely as masculinity's sidekick, and instead acknowledge that feminine expression exists of its own accord and brings its own rewards to those who naturally gravitate toward it. By embracing femininity, feminism will finally be able to reach out to the vast majority of feminine women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past. The movement would also be able to reach those who are not female or trans-misogyny, but who have not been able to seek refuge or have a voice in the feminist movements of the past. Indeed, a feminist movement that encompasses both those who are female and those who are feminine has the potential to become a majority, one with the strength in numbers to finally challenge and overturn both traditional and oppositional sexism.

The Future of Queer/Trans Activism

THE MAJORITY OF MY EXPERIENCES as a trans activist and spoken word artist have taken place in what is increasingly becoming known as the "queer/trans" community. It is a subgroup within the greater LGBTIQ community that is composed mostly of folks in their twenties and thirties who are more likely to refer to themselves as "dykes," "queer," and/or "trans" than "lesbian" or "gay." While diverse in a number of ways, this subpopulation tends to predominantly inhabit urban and academic settings, and is skewed toward those who are white and/or from middle-class backgrounds. In many ways, the queer/trans community is best described as a sort of marriage of the transgender movement's call to "shatter the gender binary" and the lesbian community's pro-sex, pro-kink backlash to 1980s-era Andrea Dworkinism. Its politics are generally anti-assimilationist, particularly with regard to gender and sexual expression. This apparent limitlessness and lack of boundaries lead many to believe that "queer/trans" represents the vanguard of today's gender and sexual revolution. However, over the last four years in which I've been a part of this community, I've become increasingly