

Welcome to (Trans) Womanhood

Gynopessimism and the
Politics of Transfeminine Joy



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Introduction

This zine is intended to bring about conversation, not propose an ultimate solution to the issue of patriarchal domination. The polemics contained inside this work intend to challenge existing and propose new frameworks of what it means to live life as a woman. This text is also the product of a singular trans woman with a non-POC perspective, particular geographical origin, and financial background, who has housing security and access to consistent medical care. As such, I do not intend to speak to the experiences of all women, as this is an impossible standard to hold oneself to. Extrapolations of my own personal experience of transfemininity may not apply to you, the reader. Rather, I wish to encourage readers to engage with the idea of gynopessimism in the context of their own lived experience and community. I also view this piece as a work in progress and it may very well be thoroughly revised at a later date.

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Gynopessimism is an often subconsciously-held belief that the oppression of women is inevitable and irreconcilable with a derivation of joy from one's own lived female identity. Gynopessimistic understandings of gender encourage women to discount any potential for enjoyment of their lived experience in favor of a subdued, yet sustained, resentment for their sexed body and the ways it is perceived by those around them. Gynopessimism prevents us from moving through the sludge that is the philosophization and critical awareness of misogyny and patriarchy into a newfound lived politic of aspirational and raucously-joyful womanhood. The joyful experiences of trans women can further elucidate what this lived politics might look like.

We must all, cis and trans alike, forcefully reclaim a version of our womanhood that is rooted through a critical lens, yes, but is also full of optimism, and fervent appreciation. What phenomenon better illustrates the possibility of such a radical and liberatory reclamation than the very existence of trans women? On the topic of growing up as a boy, Julia Serano states in *Whipping Girl* that “nobody needed to tell me that I should hate myself for wanting to be what was so obviously the lesser sex.” (Serano, 204)¹ When we transition, we do so by finally gaining enough power to boldly reject, transcend, and subvert these conditioned presentations of gender politics. We admonish those around us who wish to paint our desires for womanhood as frivolous or merely the product of insanity. To live as a trans woman is to constantly sublimate the otherwise misogynistic understandings of itself. This sublation is, I argue, the very essence of a proud transfemininity.

Beneath the bitterness and disillusionment born out of constant news of transmisogynistic violence, social ostracization, and the waves of ever-looming anti-trans legislation, there exists a love for womanhood within us that can never be destroyed. Others can try to deny our womanhood and femaleness, but they can never take away the meaningful peace we derive from understanding ourselves as the women we are.

What Does Transfeminine Joy Look Like?

I often find myself having trouble falling asleep. Not because I have insomnia, but because of the unbridled joy and enthusiasm for femaleness and femininity that courses through me like electricity. I quietly name all of the elements of my social, relational, and physical manifestations of womanhood that bring me this joy.

The tenderness and softness of my arms, the chance to be loved as a woman by a woman, the curves of my body that I hold so dear, the freedom I have to express myself however I please, the female character model I now have that I can customize to my heart's content, the vulva I will cherish until the day I die, my existence in the minds of others as a sister and a daughter, the tattoos that grace my skin, the velvety, voluminous hair I lay upon, my emancipatory revelry over the reclamation of a female sexuality, the handcrafted feminine voice that has come to represent me, the permanence of all of these changes, the knowledge that I will wake up tomorrow in this same body. I am in utter disbelief that I get to live in a body I love so deeply. This is a dream I never want to wake up from. I am so proud to live my life as a woman.

In these moments, I am overcome with gratitude and an immense desire to appreciate every last detail of my female existence. My mind races to name more of these fragments of appreciation, working tirelessly to ensure I don't accidentally leave anything out. Eventually, once the list gets too long to keep track of, I am able to quiet my mind down long enough to fall asleep with a smile on my face. To a cis reader, it may seem that the above listed fragments of my life have little to do with womanhood or femaleness and instead are indicative of a generalized appreciation for corporeal life. This is not how it occurs to me though. My corporeal existence is contingent upon my womanhood; if that embodied womanhood is to be forcibly stripped away, there will not exist a conscious version of me to experience such a lack. In simpler terms, there is no life for me to appreciate if womanhood is not a foundational part of it.

Growing up, I was often wrought with immense jealousy of those who were lucky enough to be born female. I felt as though I had lost the most important pre-mortal coin flip of all. I had been cursed by the universe to endure a life that deprived me of something I craved so fervently. And now? Depending on who you ask, I've made it. I

am no longer jealous, grieving, or dejected and I am now a peer to all of the women I looked up to and once wished I could be. I get to carve out and cultivate my own unique female life every single day. This is not to say that my life is perfect, of course, but that the challenges my life brings are far more rewarding to face when I can do so in a body I love and hold so dearly. Truthfully, I feel far more capable now than I ever felt before I came out.

Passing as Assimilation and the Misconstrued Allyship of Its Opposition

The separation of sex and gender has had unfortunate repercussions when it comes to cisgender understandings of trans bodies. Like it or not, the ultimate reality is that, yes, human sex is malleable, just as it is for countless other animal species. Yet cis allies will frequently insist upon solidifying a distinction between the two while implicitly refusing to engage with the notion of changing one's sex. This leads to many people understanding trans women as women, but not as female, although this is a can of worms to be opened another time.

What is an essay about transfeminine transition without a discussion of passing? (I say this mostly in jest, but I do feel the topic is somewhat relevant to this zine.) Indeed, amongst cis and trans people alike, passing is often conflated with a desire for assimilation. This, to me, is a very disingenuous way of understanding the position trans people, and transsexual people particularly, occupy in society. Notwithstanding the deliberate ignorance of the safety that passing provides, proponents of this view often reflexively disengage if a trans person pushes back on this. While I have no serious qualms with the distinction at face value, I posit that the delineation between “radical” and “assimilationist” trans people ought not be drawn along the lines of whether one appreciates passing.

I would guess that many of those who paint the enjoyment of passing as counterrevolutionary or knowing act of further patriarchal entrenchment are assuming, consciously or otherwise, that transfeminine womanhood surely must only be appreciated on a surface level by shallow, misogynistic men (or trans-identified males as the TERFs love to call us). That is to say, they assume we appreciate womanhood strictly along the boundaries of classical markers of femininity like dresses, lipstick, high heels, etc. What folks of this perspective fail to recognize is that many trans women find intrinsic value in being known and understood as women. For many of us, there exists an existential love for womanhood that goes far beyond dresses and high heels. There was once a time where I sobbed to my mother and begged her to understand me as her daughter and thus recognize my humanity and womanhood; I was not begging her to buy me dresses or let me use her lipstick—though, let me be clear: there would be nothing wrong with begging for such things even if I was.

Passing, when viewed neutrally, can largely be boiled down to the passive act of being perceived in a way that is congruent with one's own interpretation of their gender—insofar as said perception is correct. (One can of course downplay their transness and “pass” as a cisgender person in a way that does not match their preferred perception.) Passing is something that is imposed onto you by the audience of those around you, hence why I have described it here as a “passive act.”

In my daily life, one of the most comforting aspects of “passing”, aside from the security it provides, is the knowledge that every stranger around me perceives me as a woman. It is not the presumption of cisness that brings me joy—in some cases, it feels rather alienating—but rather the presumption of femaleness that it is correlated with. Every miss or ma'am is tacit recognition that my sex has in fact been changed. It is not the assimilation into normative cis culture that passing can conditionally grant that brings meaning to the phenomenon, but rather the lack of investigative stares. For trans women: to be known as a woman is to be seen. If passing facilitates being known as a woman, perhaps this is why people pursue it; people like to feel seen—shocker.

But you see, dear reader: you are supposed to feel forever burdened by the unrelenting weight of societal transmisogyny, such that any display of contentedness about one's place in society or state of transition is conflated with a tacit enjoyment and endorsement of misogynistic domination. Why must it be contradictory to enjoy one's daily lived experience of trans womanhood, yet aspire for that positionality to be deconstructed and rebuilt nonetheless? Why must one claim a non-binary identity in order to reject the domination—in the anarchist sense of the term²—that the gender binary imposes on us all? I argue that the very distinction between binary and non-binary trans people supposes that us “binary trans people” are thoroughly invested in its continuation. I object to this delineation outright. I am sure that that is true for some out there. However, those of us with more radical understandings of queerness and gender are in full acknowledgment that the binary system is fundamentally oppressive to us all. Despite the fact that trans people are frequently at the cutting edge of radical gender discourse, we are also generally the first class of people onto which critiques of gender are applied.

The Anxiety of Euphoria and the Disingenuous Lens

Earlier in my transition, I often used to feel far more anxious when discussing aspects of my transition that I felt positively about, as this felt unnecessarily risky compared to discussions about the negative aspects amongst cis people.

I have a few theories for why this is the case.

Rationale 1 — to the cis mind, a trans woman must unsurprisingly be tormented by her apparent and definitional separation from cisness and femaleness; thus, grievance

on the part of the trans woman and the subsequent pity that follows from the cis listener is expected.

Rationale 2 — this anxiety is rooted in fear of having one's positive feelings about womanhood and female sex characteristics understood by cis people as being a symptom of perversion, illness, predation, or some combination of the three. While expressions of contentedness with one's (cis) femininity and (cis) female body are to an extent encouraged by patriarchal society, usually coercively, trans women instead face a double bind: if you express too much joy and excitement about your body's feminization, this is caused by, at best, naivety or, at worst, perversion. However, if you fail to express the perfectly right amount of femininity and meek passivity, as determined by a subjective judge, this constitutes evidence of your true, masculine nature.

On Pathologization

To better understand Rationale 2 as laid out above, consider Blanchard's dichotomous classification of the transsexual woman³ that is still widely propped up by many of the most rapid, chronically-online transphobes:

A straight trans woman is redefined and pathologized as a male suffering from “(Androphilic) Homosexual Transsexuality”

This classification, according to Blanchard, theorizes that some men are so lacking in and desperate for male attention that they delude themselves into believing that wooing men with pseudo-feminine wiles by emulating womanhood would lead to more sexual and romantic success with straight men.

A lesbian trans woman is redefined and pathologized as a male suffering from “Autogynephilia”

This classification, according to Blanchard, theorizes that some men are so overcome by erotic fascination with the fantasy of inhabiting a female body that they attempt to fulfill this perversion by transitioning to reach the nirvana of a constant orgasmic bliss.

I will not waste any energy discussing the arrogant absurdity of Blanchard's propositions, as I believe his disingenuity and chauvinism are self-evident to anyone with the slightest degree of consideration and charitability for the internal lives of transfeminine people; if you would like to read responses to Blanchard's classifications, you can start with sources [4](#), [5](#), and [6](#). What I will briefly say is this: to believe there are

motivations for a feminizing transition that are more complex or devious than the simple pursuit of increased enjoyment of one's body and life is to believe that deriving greater joy from femaleness/womanhood than maleness/manhood is nonsensical.

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There is an apparent implicit bias in many medical settings, particularly gender clinics, and indeed in broader society, that assumes any desire to de-masculinize and feminize one's body instead is the product of delusion. Most HRT-prescribing endocrinologists I have encountered, for instance, do not begin from the assumption that you, the transfeminine patient, seriously wish to become a woman. This, I submit, is why, in the first handful of appointments post-prescription especially, providers at gender clinics—even the informed consent oriented and well meaning ones—insist that you methodically list out all of the bodily changes you have undergone since your last checkup. *“And what about breast growth? Have you experienced any of that? How do you feel about that? Do you want it to continue?”* (No shit my boobs are growing... Why am I expected to verbally confirm this? This is what I signed up for after all... I filled the estrogen prescription because I was expecting this and wanted this.) *“Have you noticed your skin softening yet? Any noticeable loss of muscle mass? Has your libido changed at all and if so how? Have you noticed any penile atrophy?”* There is a silent assessment that takes place in these moments where a transfeminine patient's excitement for her potential or ongoing feminization is treated as a matter of pathologized medical concern. As such, it must be tracked and notated rigorously. It may prove easier to describe this phenomenon as medicalized effemimania and move on.⁶

(Of note: masc and butch trans women do in fact exist. These required assessments also presuppose the trans woman's interest in the feminine elements of her body. There is infinite variability of expressions of womanhood, in both cis and trans women alike. Yet, the transfeminine-aligned people who wish to take estrogen while retaining a masculine appearance are all the more perplexing to the effemimanic medical paradigm they find themselves subject to.)

Our patriarchal culture's understandings of gender are such that women who desire maleness and masculine traits are considered logical, for this is indicative of a desire for power and strength. Yet the mere suggestion that there exist men who desire femaleness and feminine traits is usually met with confusion, hostility, or derision.

Most people can't even talk about transsexual women or SRS without centering the discussion on the penis. But my desire to have SRS has virtually nothing to do with my penis. This is about my wanting to have a clitoris and vagina. But we don't even have the language to describe this desire. It's the ultimate Freudian slip: We naturally assume that all young girls suffer from penis envy, but we can't

imagine that any boy could possibly have its polar opposite. So it's no wonder that most people assume that I must be mentally ill, because in this culture, wanting to be a woman is something most people find literally unimaginable. And when I do have SRS, my surgically deconstructed genitals will no doubt be seen by some to be an abomination or a blasphemy. Because my cunt will be the ultimate question mark, asking, How powerful can the penis really be if a sane and smart person like me decides she can do without it? And if the world supposedly revolves around the penis, then my SRS will knock it off its axis. (Serano 128)¹

When you first come out as a trans woman, many people will want to ask why you are willing, unafraid, and potentially excited to lose your supposed male privilege. This question, usually posed by cis women, exposes an unnamed, internal devaluation of womanhood. Why is this the case? I argue that this question implicitly supposes that the trans woman must simply be unaware of the marginalization of women to the point that she is hasty enough to relinquish the power she doesn't even appreciate having. I posit two different ways of asking this same question: "Why do you want to voluntarily become a woman if womanhood is inextricable from suffering and disempowerment?" or more simply: "Why would you go out of your way to make your life harder?"

The answer is simple, really. I don't believe my womanhood necessitates *internal* disempowerment (structural disempowerment, currently, is a different story). There is immense joy to be had in the relationship I have with my womanhood and the way I watch my eyes light up when I look in the mirror, in spite of all of the (trans)misogynistic bullshit that pervades this life. The "loss of male privilege" is utterly meaningless to me because this is a joy that is not worth giving up; it is inarguably the right choice in my life. Nor should this joy be valued less because it may carry the unfortunate side effect of bringing about increased economic, medical, and social domination. I would sooner go down with the ship and succumb to the throes of (trans)misogynistic oppression than completely forfeit my chance to be the person I have always dreamed of being out of fear.

Further, I do not fear the patriarchy I have transitioned under. Quite the contrary: the patriarchy fears our voluntary disavowal of maleness. I believe the fear that male supremacy may some day come crashing down is rational and believe our aim should be to make this panic spread. And, what's more, transfeminine joy, or the joys of womanhood more generally, is an experience that is worth fighting tooth and nail for and chasing until the bitter end—especially when that joy comes with the added bonus of striking fear in the hearts of insecure men.

Welcome to (Trans) Womanhood

But what are women supposed to do about being hated? The options that the misogyny diagnosis presents repeat the traps of fairytales: be the witch who draws power from her outcast position or the passive princess dreaming of love. Poison men or win them over. Mirroring the compressed possibilities of the world it claims to critique, the misogyny diagnosis compels us to accept a world of false choices. In so doing, it avoids the perplexing dilemma of how women are to wage a struggle against an aversion by side-stepping politics altogether.

In fact, the point seems to be that we can't do anything about being hated. Misogyny supplies an account of the world well-suited for the circulation of rage as a commodity. One gets a bit of a charge, a flash of indignation, while remaining free of any obligation to act. The situation women face is moral, perhaps even ontological. Political struggle can't improve women's lives when the deepest problem we face is misogyny. No wonder liberal feminists find misogyny a compelling lens for understanding the contemporary world. It reflects it back to them while getting them off the hook for failing to fight to change it.⁷

The "welcome to womanhood" refrain is often cynically deployed against trans women. While the message may come from a good place and is intended to be an expression of bemoaned solidarity, it also reveals something under the surface. The deployment of this phrase supposes that expressing discomfort, grief, or anger about misogyny or the weight of patriarchal oppression and beauty standards is not worth wasting breath over. It is a thought terminating cliché with its ultimate function being to render further frustration invisible. Expressing discontentment about the position you occupy in society or about a manifestation of transmisogyny that personally affected you is something to keep to yourself going forward. The deployment of the phrase also has a way of foreclosing critical and nuanced discussions about transmisogyny and how best to fight against it. This further stifles the possibility that two women might build any kind of real solidarity due to their shared struggle by crushing it into a halfhearted and restrained truism.

My criticism of this phrase is not to suggest that trans women are never understandably jaded or cynical about their own social status—in fact, this is quite common. However, there is something about womanhood at its core that is often intrinsically valuable for us, else what would the motivation be to transition? For many trans women, the enjoyment derived from the womanhood they are transitioning towards is stronger than the hatred they have for their assigned gender. (This is true for many trans men as well, though TERFs will have you believe otherwise.) However, when this complexity of trans womanhood is brushed aside because the listener implicitly believes that solidarity means nothing more than suffering the same fate together, it can

leave the trans woman believing that the only acceptable feeling to hold and subsequently express towards womanhood is one of similar negativity and futility.

As an aside: TERFs seem to be the most cynical of the bunch when it comes to womanhood. They tacitly believe that there exist many reasons for distancing oneself from womanhood, but never motivations to intentionally move towards it. Thus, they argue, the impetus for a trans woman's desire to transition must be rooted in perversion, fetishization, or insanity. Meanwhile, they paint trans men out to be innocent girls who have been led astray by a desire to transcend gendered oppression. This, to me, is a very depressing outlook on sex and gender to insist upon.

I digress. Trans reflections on the topic of embracing womanhood can remind cis women of the enjoyable aspects of womanhood that they often reflexively discount, discard, or suppress. This phenomenon is not dissimilar to a friend visiting your hometown for the first time and pointing out all of the elements of your city they appreciate that you otherwise take for granted. Despite the countless times I have heard "welcome to womanhood," many cis women in my life have also expressed pleasant surprise upon learning that many trans women, including myself, tacitly enjoy, cherish, and pursue the same womanhood that they have, in contrast, learned to view as a detriment.

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 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.¹ (Serano 209)

Overcoming Gynopessimistic Understandings of Gendered Politics

Overcoming gynopessimism requires more than simply healing from internalized misogyny—which is an active and lifelong practice in its own right. It requires an active and stubborn rejection of the notion that femaleness cannot be decoupled from suffering, both innate to the sexed body and that which is imposed by external, patriarchal forces. This is a pursuit that involves dreaming of a world where the meaning of womanhood is defined exclusively by those who value it.

We will never overcome the domination of patriarchy if we refuse to insist on redefining and repurposing womanhood for our own sake. We must not continue to view womanhood, at its very core, as wholly commensurate with the subjugation assigned to it by the men of history and present. We also cannot let this pursuit of redefinition preclude us from continuing to be critical of the current structural processes in play. A reclamatory redefinition alone will not dismantle the patriarchy. I am not foolish enough to believe that rejecting gynopessimism is a simple solution to (trans)misogyny, but I will wholeheartedly defend it as a necessary element of the broader struggle that wages on.

For if gynopessimism goes unexamined, we risk being complicit in the reproduction of the structures that create the feeling in the first place. If the patriarchy-endorsing cop of gynopessimism in your head demands your adherence to a fatalistic perspective on women's liberation and you remorsefully oblige, you are accepting your fate and trying to become comfortable in your handcuffs. Critiquing gynopessimism is not to suggest that we ought to glamorize or trivialize said handcuffs (though it would not surprise me if a reactionary co-opts the word for these ends); in fact, quite the opposite. This rejection encourages us to hold true to a staunch belief that there is a world of freedom to pursue. Rejecting gynopessimism is a form of prefiguration for the downfall of patriarchy in this sense. We must let go of the feeling that the political struggles of women, and therefore ourselves as individuals, are doomed to fail.

Do not let those with a vested interest in the patriarchy's continuation convince you to tamp down the enjoyment you derive from the elements of womanhood you value. You must refuse to allow our culture's obsessive misogynistic conditioning paint over the beautiful, colorful tapestry that is the totality and complexity of your lived womanhood with broad strokes of grey. Add color back to your faded canvas when you need to and, if you have the energy and paint to spare, lend a helping hand to the women around you. And finally: never lose sight of the fact that a joyful womanhood is one worth fighting for.

Sources

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