

*Abstract* This article takes femme/FTM sexual relationships as a point of departure to consider gender itself as a form of labor, or to illustrate how gender subjectivities are constituted by various labors required of, and provided by, intimate others. Analysis focuses on the work that women do in relationships with transgendered men, specifically the work that they do to validate and celebrate their partners' masculinity. 'Gender labor' extends beyond the work people do to achieve our own gender coherence; it also describes emotional, physical, and sexual care-taking efforts aimed at suspending self-focus and helping others achieve the varied forms of gender recognition they long for. Though gender labor is both given and received by all people, the author argues that it weighs down most heavily on feminine subjects, the people for whom caring, sex and other 'labors of love' are naturalized, expected or forced.

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## Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression

In 2004, I took a newly out bisexual woman friend of mine to a queer bar in Los Angeles. She had little experience with queer subculture, but that night at the bar she met a trans-identified guy, an FTM, and went home with him to have sex. As for myself, like many queer femmes who witnessed and supported the explosion of transgender identification among dykes in the early 2000s, I had become fairly conversant in the politics and erotics of transgender alliance. In fact, in the eyes of my neophyte friend, my two brief relationships with FTMs made me an expert, and her mentor in all things genderqueer. The next day, as planned, she called to tell me about the previous night's events. But to my surprise, she sounded ashamed and disappointed as she reported that everything had gone well until the moment when she had naively referred to her lover's cock using the word 'plastic'. His instantly cold response

made her feel rejected and under-skilled. After recounting all of the details, she said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me about this? Why didn’t you tell me that I was supposed to treat the dildo like a *real* body part? Why didn’t you teach me about transgender cock?’ Regrettably, having forgotten my own queer training, I responded, ‘Wasn’t it *obvious*?’

Yet by the end of our conversation we had clarified what we both already knew. Of course it is not obvious how to interact with queer bodies and genders, just as we do not naturally or automatically know how to engage normative genders and their accoutrement. Successfully recognizing and affirming the gender of the other – whether the normative or transgressive other – involves a significant amount of training, study, and practice – which, like all forms of work, can be very pleasurable, theatrical, and dynamic, or it can be tedious, failure-ridden, and compulsory.

This project takes femme/FTM sexual relationships as a point of departure to consider gender itself as a form of labor, or to illustrate how gender subjectivities are constituted by various labors required of, and provided by, intimate others. My analysis focuses on examples of work that women do in relationships with transgendered men, specifically the work that they do to validate and celebrate their partners’ masculinity and to suppress the complexity of their own gender and sexual subjectivity in the service of this goal. Though numerous theorists have accounted for the ways in which gender is constructed, performed, and disciplined, such approaches have yet to theorize fully the relational and feminized labors that reproduce gender and nurture new genders (or new gender formations) into public and private being. These collective labors are distinct from the repetitive and involuntary acts that constitute the subject, or that take form as unwilling labors of the *self* (Butler, 1990, 1997). In contrast, I use the term gender labor to describe the affective and bodily efforts invested in *giving gender* to others, or actively suspending self-focus in the service of helping others achieve the varied forms of gender recognition they long for. Gender labor is the work of bolstering someone’s gender authenticity, but it is also the work of co-producing someone’s gender irony, transgression, or exceptionality.

## The Collective Work of Queer Transgression

The wave of transgender identification among dykes that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s exemplifies a new gender formation made possible in part by collective efforts to nurture, witness, and celebrate those occupying an emergent and threatened gender category. In 2003, the lesbian magazine *Curve* described this mass emergence of FTM genders and its relational effects for femme-identified lesbians and their ‘sense of self’:

Dykes are coming out in droves as transgendered, whether as ‘TG butches’, ‘bigendered’, ‘FTMs’, or everything in between. There is a lot of support for female born boys, but as the community is learning, partners of people in transition – particularly femme-identified lesbians – often get left in the dust when it comes to dealing with their own gender and sense of self. (Szymanski, 2003)

Drawing on tensions between an exceptionalized gender and one ‘left in the dust’, this article explores gender as a relation between people, one characterized not only by countless gestures that are interactively accomplished (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and performatively reiterated (Butler, 1990), but also by tedious acts of emotional, physical and sexual ‘support’ that are undertaken to co-produce the gender coherence and/or transgression of others.

The queer demand for gender labor is both intensified and masked by the value assigned to individual transgression within queer subculture. It is not only queer history’s emphasis on the individual that has obscured the collective efforts that produce queer subjectivities (Halberstam, 2005). Queer dependencies have also been rendered largely irrelevant in light of the Foucauldian-inspired premise that queer subjects are those who refuse the disciplinary forces of domesticity, attachment, and sentimentality (Martin, 1996). For instance, in the mid-1990s, trans activists and theorists described themselves as ‘gender outlaws’ (Bornstein, 1994) and ‘gender warriors’ (Feinberg, 1997), or rebels for whom genderqueerness came into being in spite of, rather than in relation to, the actions of more normatively gendered others. Currently, much of queer studies continues to emphasize the project of defiant self-making. Queer subjects reproduce themselves through refusal of normative consumer and reproductive practices (Duggan, 2003), disidentificatory engagements with popular culture (Munoz, 1999), subcultural production and identification (Halberstam, 2005), and tragic interiorities (Love, 2007). Queer theorists explain that these actions and states of being are called into existence by the structural and cultural forces that forcefully align queer subjects with failure, loss or death (Edelman, 2004; Love, 2007), yet few describe how queerness takes form in and through the more micro-sphere of relationality – particularly the feminized realms of caring and witnessing which literally nurture gender subjectivities into possibility, and through the channels of loss and suffering.

## **Gender as Labor**

My first aim here is to consider the relational, intimate, and sexual labor that has produced transgender subjectivity and to show how this labor is undertaken by people who fall both within and outside of the boundaries of transgenderism. Touching on the significance of trans relationality,

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Judith Halberstam contends, 'Before we dismiss [transgenderism] as faddish, we should know what kind of work it does, whom it describes, and whom it validates . . . Transgender may indeed be a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity, but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds' (2005: 49). Yet there has been very limited analysis of transgender relationality, and that which has been written has described partners of trans people (who are not themselves trans-identified) in romantic terms, as people with 'compassion and decency' who, in the case of partnership with FTMs, 'find it within their hearts to acknowledge [transmen] as men and go on' (Devor, 1997: 445–6). Notably, Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle's (2006) 720-page anthology, *The Transgender Studies Reader* gives virtually no attention to the intimate relations of transgender world/home-making or the 'wifely' and/or maternal care that often keeps genders, and masculinity in particular, in motion. Here I place labor at the center of my analysis of femme/FTM relationships in order to focus attention not only on the affective labors that constitute these relations (e.g. compassion, nurturing, witnessing), but also the physical and feminized labors that contribute to the production of queer (and normative) genders (e.g. cooking, sexual services, nursing care, administering gender technology/hormones, chest-binding).

My second aim is to reveal the applications of linking gender and labor not only for queer analyses, but also for understanding the collective work that produces masculinities and femininities in all of their various iterations. Indeed, examples of gender labor abound. Women friends, across the lines of race and class, rehearse for one another the self-effacing scripts associated with female validation ('I wish I had your body', or 'no, you don't look fat, but I do'). Women of color come home from work and care for men of color, helping to ease their partners' presumably greater racial burden.<sup>1</sup> Femme dykes labor to treat butches and FTMs like men; and butches and FTMs labor to treat femmes (and sometimes all women) like queens. That these efforts are often 'labors of love' enacted for and by people who are denied gender validation within mainstream culture (women, men of color, queers) must not elide the ways in which gender is reproduced through routinized forms of care work. As I will show, these routine efforts – akin to the emotional labor enacted by service workers and described by Arlie Hochschild (2003 [1983]) – often result in the recurring misrecognition or diminishment of the laborer. As I will demonstrate, all genders demand work, and therefore all people both give and require gender labor. However, some genders, principally those that are masculine and especially those that intersect with other forms of power (such as wealth and whiteness), make their demands less visible and more legitimate, or deliver them with more coercive force.

Gender labor, like other forms of caring, weighs down most heavily on feminine subjects, the people for whom labors of love are naturalized, expected or forced (Nakano Glenn, 2004).

## Giving Gender

A growing body of feminist research has examined the relationship between labor, intimacy, and gender – particularly in the context of sex work, domestic work, and care work. Intimate labors, whether paid or unpaid, are those that increase the use-value of the person who performs them, but they are also marked by elements of trust, privacy, secret knowledge, special access, or shared memories (Zelizer, 2007). As Viviana Zelizer has explained, intimate labor frequently involves the work of providing support in the face of denials of dignity or compensating for someone's shortcomings – shortcomings that may be emotional, interpersonal, physiological, or otherwise material in nature. Intimate labor, most commonly done by women, also includes offering temporary connection and authenticity (Bernstein, 2007), which can involve 'faking' or giving someone what they want, even when the lack of 'realness' is implicitly recognized by both participants (Augustin, 2007). Though these feminized labors are integral components of social life and subject to increasing demand, they are also regularly denied the status of work due to 'social expectations about what women should undertake out of love, kinship, or obligation' (Boris and Parreñas, 2007).

To the extent that gender is always a shortcoming or never-achieved ideal, I want to suggest that gender is always already bound up with the search for people and things that will offer relief, compensate for failure, enhance dignity, and create moments of realness. In this sense, gender labor is the act of giving gender to others in an attempt to fulfill these needs. Though these acts of giving, like care work in general, are performed by people across the spectrum of feminine and masculine genders, feminine subjects (straight women, femme lesbians, transwomen, feminine gay men, faggy boys/bois, and so on) are held particularly responsible for the work of gendering. This is because the duties that comprise gender labor – witnessing, nurturing, validating, fulfilling, authenticating, special knowing, and secret-keeping – have long been relegated to the sphere of female work (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]).

Several feminists have explored the intersections of gender, sex acts, and labor by investigating the range of contexts (marriage, dating, the workplace) in which sex is exchanged for financial resources and other forms of capital (e.g. Levy, 2005). In this vein, it is useful to consider the ways in which sexualized forms of gender labor can be conceptualized as sex work, or as the output of sexual energy in the service of production. Like

other forms of intimate labor, the output of sex as a means of recreating subjects, culture, and nations has a feminized history and meaning (Faier, 2009). Laboring subjects, most often women, accept and perform sex acts that offer new value or meaning to others; assist in remaking sexual pasts; and recreate their own sexual desires, sexual vocabulary, and erotic identity in relation to external demands. Such examples demonstrate the complex interaction between sex work and gender work.

That both normative and transgressive genders are made possible by feminized labor has important implications for queer theory, in particular, which has often aligned the feminine with the non-queer, or the homonormative. Queer studies has embraced those utopic ways of life made most possible or necessary for masculine subjects – mobility, independence, extended identification with youth culture, grungy/alternative modes of consumption, risk-taking – and disavowed those ways of life made most possible or necessary for feminine subjects – reproductivity, caretaking, shopping, home-making, and safety-making (see Halberstam, 2005: 1–2). In contrast, to investigate gender labor is to reconnect these two seemingly distinct cultural and productive spheres; it is to see the ways that the construction of the former (the queer) has depended upon the latter (the feminine) – even, and especially, for assistance in enhancing its capacity to reject the feminine upon which it depends.

## Femme Labor

### *Introducing the Study*

This project began in 2004 as an interview-based study of FTMs' relationships with queer women, primarily women who identify as femme. In the course of these interviews, several FTMs spoke about having a hope or expectation that their partners would have sex, speak, dress, and think about gender and gender politics in ways that would bolster their masculinity. Conversely, femme interview participants described their relationships with FTMs as sites of frequent confusion, resentment, and hard work. It was during these interviews that I first began to think about gender labor, but I was dissatisfied with interviews as my only source for understanding these dynamics and I expanded the project to include related forms of cultural production. Consequently, the current project is based on transdisciplinary analysis of four sources: (1) a set of interviews I conducted in 2004 with 13 FTMs and eight femmes living in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, or New York;<sup>2</sup> (2) four documentaries addressing FTM or genderqueer identities, spanning the years 1994 to 2005 (*Shinjuku Boys*; *Mind If I Call You Sir?*; *Boy I Am*; *The Aggressives*; – see filmography); (3) two websites in which participants discuss

trans/femme issues (*transsensualefemme.com* and *femme.com*<sup>3</sup>); and (4) FTM-related articles from two lesbian magazines (*On Our Backs* and *Curve*). All interview participants for this research have been given pseudonyms and each signed a consent form agreeing to the recording, transcription, and publication of their interviews. Comments taken from public websites are cited by website only and without names or other identifying information, whereas subjects in nationally distributed documentaries have been identified by the names they use in the films.

My analysis focuses on three forms of gender labor that femme partners do to co-produce trans masculinity: the labor of being ‘the girl’, the labor of forgetting, and the labor of alliance. These labors are in many ways particular to the temporal, regional, and subcultural context of trans/queer relationships in major cities of the USA in the mid-2000s, however, as I will illustrate, each also serves as an example of general mechanisms used to produce gender coherence for others.

### *The Labor of Being ‘The Girl’*

In FTM identity narratives, trans masculinity has frequently been described as the experience of not being, or not wanting to be, a girl. As has been explored in other research on FTMs (Devor, 1997; Dozier, 2005), ‘not wanting to be a girl’ speaks to an awareness, often beginning in childhood, of a gendered self and body that does not fit social, cultural, and familial expectations associated with girlhood: ‘I didn’t want to wear dresses’, ‘I always felt more like a boy’, ‘I hated my breasts’, and so on. Yet beyond not wanting to be *a* girl, many FTM (and butch) identity narratives also describe the experience of not wanting to be *the* girl in a particular relational context, often during sex. In Dozier’s (2005: 312) study, for example, ‘Dick’, a white FTM, explains why his transition led to a new sexual interest in men by stating, ‘what I figured out a lot later was that it wasn’t about not wanting to be with a guy; it was about not wanting to be the girl’.

Similarly, avoidance of being the girl – and reference to women who, in contrast, embrace being the girl – is a recurring theme in the 2004 documentary *Mind If I Call You Sir?: A Video Documentary on Latina Butches and Latino FTMs*. The film centers on butches and FTMs from the San Francisco area who are filmed discussing the contours of their masculinity while sitting around a table in an office-like setting. Scenes from this discussion are interspersed with more in-depth footage of individuals recounting stories of gender dysphoria, outsiderhood and/or transition, and, in one case, an interview with a femme who is filmed preparing food in a kitchen while speaking about her partner’s transition. During the discussion between butches and FTMs, Yosenio, a Latino FTM, tells the group that he is hesitant to ‘bottom’ to his sexual

partner because, as he states, ‘then I’ll be a girl’. Such narratives, which link ‘bottoming’ with femininity, define girlhood, in part, by a comfort with sexual submission and lack of sexual control. Other scenes from the film illustrate that being a/the girl refers to more than sexual receptivity or submission. In one scene, Diane, a Latina butch, describes her early awareness of her masculinity by telling the story of her difference from other Chicana political activists with whom she had worked. These women, Diane implies, were satisfied with their ancillary role in the Chicano movement:

In my soul, I knew I was different. I wasn’t like the rest of the Chicanas in the movement . . . I was more man. I wanted to hang out with the men. I wanted to talk politics with the men. I didn’t want to be in the kitchen. I didn’t want to be stuffing envelopes . . . So I was different.

Similarly, Yosenio, an FTM, explains his difference from women:

I was always taught, women are less than. You don’t want to be a woman . . . the poor lot in life of women. They struggle, and they struggle, and they struggle . . . And it’s like, I don’t want to be like that. But all the people that I gravitated to were women, all the people that I felt the closest to were women, and all the people that I always wanted to be around were women. And all the people who ultimately gave me the love to survive all the crap I went through as a child were women. And so it was a push me, pull you thing. I always want to be around you, but I don’t ever want to be like you.

Although butches and FTMs are often theorized as stand-alone figures who are not reliant upon femmes (or the feminine other) for public recognition, such accounts construct trans and butch masculinity by citing the existence of a satisfied feminine other, or a female subject who may be queer, but is different from butches and FTMs in that she is happy to occupy the role of the girl. Diane describes her butch masculinity through an account of her disidentification not only with the costume of femininity, but with the women she presumes were happy in the kitchen, happy stuffing envelopes, happy being barred from political talk. Yosenio describes not only disidentification with femininity, but also with women’s ‘struggle’ and with being ‘less than’. He says, in a kind of address to the women who nurtured his own escape from girlhood: ‘I always want to be around you, but I don’t ever want to be like you’. In Diane and Yosenio’s narratives, butch and FTM subjectivities are not only those that reject feminine appearances or embodiment; they are also those that cannot tolerate sexism.

The film highlights the ways in which the coherence of butch and FTM identity narratives depends upon the existence of a feminine subject who experiences female embodiment, sexual submission, and sexism as more natural or trouble-free than the butch/trans subject. My interest here is



the way this reliance on the satisfied feminine other – whether as an abstraction (‘somewhere out there, other women like being girls’) or specified within a relationship (‘my girlfriend loves being a girl’) – has produced a demand for the labor of becoming this satisfied girl. Needless to say, many butches and FTMs do not have relationships with femmes (or feminine people, for that matter), however the figure of the girl nonetheless remains an important element of the narrative of trans and butch difference. In cases in which FTMs do have femme partners, the interviews I conducted suggest that the latter are often compelled to embody this girl subjectivity, or to work to enhance their own femininity and its apparent seamlessness in order to reinforce the masculinity of their partners. Keaton, a 32-year-old white FTM, told me:

[I think some transguys] want their girlfriend or their partner, if they’re dating a woman, to re-emphasize their masculinity. These two FTMs [I know] who are both dating women . . . apparently had both asked their girlfriends to grow their hair out long since their transitions . . . And [my girlfriend] has long hair, so they asked her if I did the same thing, and she’s like, ‘no, and if he did, I’d cut it all off’.

Jimmy, a 40-year-old Asian American FTM, told me about a conflict that he and his femme-identified partner had with one of their FTM friends. He said:

We had a friend who was . . . very warm and loving and wonderful in a lot of ways, but has this very clear sense of what he feels he needs to be as a man, as an FTM person, and has really imposed his sense of the world on us as a couple . . . And I think he saw my wife as, ‘OK, you’re the female, you need to be the one who’s doing clearly feminine tasks in support of your man’ . . . He really wanted to disregard her and put her in her place, and like snap at her or whatever, and disrespect her.

Femmes also told similar stories about being compelled to occupy the position of the girl so as to bolster trans masculinity. For example, Melinda, a 37-year-old white femme talked about her experience meeting transmen online (through dating websites). She said:

I heard from three transguys in a row who all made comments about liking my photographs, and specifically aspects of my appearance that were super feminine. And they all said ‘I want to learn more about you’ and followed up . . . with some variation of ‘tell me why trans-people do it for you’ and in one case ‘tell me why trans-people are better for you, hotter for you than anybody else on the planet’. That was a very explicit solicitation for my femininity to prop up their masculinity or validate it in some way, and it was really revolting and at that point I decided, ‘no trans-people, no trans-men’.

Similarly, another femme named Jennifer told me:

In my relationships with people who are trans-identified, there's been less room for the politics around *my* gender . . . They really wanted my identity to be femme, and they really wanted the person they were with to help bolster their own gender.

In femme–FTM relationships, being the girl produces scenes and intimate spaces in which FTMs become more clearly, or more easefully, the boy or the man. In the documentaries *Mind if I Call You Sir* and *Boy I Am*, femmes are shown engaged in very material forms of carework, such as binding their partners' chests and cooking in the kitchen. In *Shinjuku Boys* and *The Aggressives*, femmes are shown in constant pursuit of intimacy – calling, clinging, asking questions, hoping for more – while butches and FTMs appear to forge their most intimate or long-term relationships with one another. In other cases, femmes work to facilitate their partners' ability to experience a lost boyhood or male adolescence, often through a synthesis of sexual exploration and maternal nurturing. A femme writing on a website called [transensualfemme.com](http://transensualfemme.com) explains the femme/FTM 'dynamic' by invoking the image of an erotic mommy figure who gently guides a young boy through his first sexual experiences:

We are the pioneers. We are discovering what a femme trans-guy dynamic means. Thus far, for me it has mostly felt like a mothering role. In many ways, I'm acknowledging, encouraging, fulfilling and validating my partner's adolescent urges. I'm nurturing his maleness. I'm sexually initiating him, if you will.

*Curve Magazine* has described [transensualfemme.com](http://transensualfemme.com) as a website for 'partners of people in transition – particularly femme-identified lesbians – [who] often get left in the dust when it comes to dealing with their own gender and sense of self' (Szymanski, February, 2003: 14). Yet most comments on [transensualfemme.com](http://transensualfemme.com) suggest that the site provides an online community designed precisely for femmes to trade information about caring for FTM partners sexually, physically, and emotionally, and to redefine themselves in relation to this work. Much akin to the 1970s spate of self-help books designed to teach straight women how to probe the male psyche – how to catch him, understand him, care for him, and keep him – femmes avoid being left in the dust by becoming the 'pioneers' of masculine territories.

Undoubtedly there are cases in which being the girl is a reflection of femmes' own sense of comfortable alignment with the conventions of femininity (with being in the kitchen, having long hair, and so on). Yet the foregoing narratives also indicate that being the girl is a form of intimate labor that is undertaken to produce the masculinity of the other and to keep the social, emotional, and erotic structure of femme/FTM relationships in tact. Femme labor not only involves embodying

feminine contrast (if I'm the girl, then you are the boy), but also discovering, acknowledging, encouraging, fulfilling, validating, nurturing and initiating masculine complexity. Like other forms of intimate and sexualized labor, femmes *give gender* to FTMs through efforts that augment masculine authenticity, offer moments of realness, and compensate for gendered shortcomings.

### *The Labor of Forgetting*

Several of the FTMs interviewed for this project explained that new sexual relationships with femmes go through a kind of testing phase in which FTMs assess whether or not they can trust their new partner to interact with them, and their bodies, as male. In some cases, this involves developing trust that the femme partner has forgotten, or does not see, signs of femaleness. Travis, a 27-year-old white FTM, described how he prefers women partners to relate to his childhood as a girl:

*Travis:* Most of the time, I think I want them to know, but not know. Like they know and they get it, but they don't talk about it. I'm allowed to talk about it, but it doesn't mean anything when I do talk about it. I know it's incredibly complicated and a lot to ask of a person. Like if I slip and say, 'when I was a little girl' you have to be able to hear that without even batting an eye, but understand what that means to me, and how that might get me to where I'm at now. Like I said, I know I'm asking a lot. I'm asking for the person I'm dating to be able to do a lot of work without me.

*Author:* Are you comfortable if the person you're dating wants to be in a partners' support group?

*Travis:* I feel like on one level she would need that, and I would want her to have that outlet. But like, I want her to know, but not know. So I don't know how I would deal with that if she wanted to go to SOFFA meetings [meetings for 'significant others, friends, family, and allies'] once a week. You know, I think that on that one day a week I would be freaked out all day. It would mean it was on her mind.

Like Travis, several participants explained that they are most comfortable in relationships with women who can demonstrate that they have forgotten their partners' past femaleness and are not preoccupied with being in a 'transgender relationship', even though their relationships require particular kinds of work and expectations related to trans identity. Some participants explained that they teach femme partners to learn a new trans vocabulary of the body, including ways of talking about sex, talking about the past, gender code-switching when FTMs are not out to family or co-workers, and a new gendered division of labor (such as asking femmes to always buy the tampons, place them in the bathroom, but never

speak about them). Forgetting, in this case, is not the opposite of having knowledge, but is a new kind of gendered knowing that includes a new vocabulary and a new set of gendered practices (Halberstam, 2006). These relations of forgetting and knowing are marked by many of the elements Zelizer (2007) attributes to intimate labor: trust, privacy, secret knowledge, and special access.

For some FTMs, straight women and ‘high femmes’ play a central role in erasing femininity and offering masculine realness, primarily through their participation in heteronormative sex. Gaish, who is an Onnabe in the Japanese documentary about FTM and genderqueer escorts, *Shinjuku Boys* (1995), describes sex with women clients this way:

When it comes to doing it, it’s not because it’s fun . . . It’s probably nice for her, but for me, to be honest, I just get worn out. The first time I do it with a woman, it’s a mental thing. If this girl is letting me do this, then I’ve fooled her. That’s what I feel when I’m doing it. If she didn’t see me in that way, she wouldn’t do it. An ordinary girl. If she does it with me, and doesn’t think anything of it, then I know she’s thinking of me as the man and she’s the girl. In other words, she has accepted me as a man, and I feel relieved.

When it is believed that a given woman has no sexual desire for femininity, her sexuality becomes a valuable instrument for confirming that the FTM body is not a female body. Especially in the interaction between receptive femininity and stone masculinity, her sexual contribution is less about physical pleasure, and more about the affective pleasure of being seen as male.

The corollary of the labor of forgetting femaleness is the labor of establishing trust that femmes see, know, and understand trans masculinity and can deploy and communicate this understanding through particular sex acts. Countless sex columns in queer magazines and websites now instruct readers on how to have sex with the trans or genderqueer body (‘how to fuck a boi’, ‘how to suck cock’, ‘mommy/boy role-play’, and so on). These advice columns often stress the importance of relating to trans masculinity as authentic, as well as the importance of ensuring that one’s sex cannot be mistaken for lesbian feminist sex (circa 1970), which is typically represented as boring, unsexy, power-neutral, or passé. For example, the magazine *On Our Backs: The Best of Lesbian Sex* instructs readers about ‘how to suck cock’ by stating: ‘Get Real: treat the dildo like a real penis – focus on the things that feel good to bio men; stroke the vein along the bottom, tongue the slit, gently tickle the balls’ (Venning, 2002). Femmes can learn how to affirm the gender identity of FTM partners not simply by forgetting or de-emphasizing their partners’ past femaleness, but also by demonstrating knowledge of male physiology and desire. In some

cases, interview participants shared stories of successful male recognition, such as R.J., a 42-year-old African American FTM:

My girlfriend tells me, 'You're not a lesbian . . . When I talk to you there's no woman there . . . You're just male, you know. I don't relate to you like I've related to butch lesbians'. She says, 'I don't relate to you the same way. Nothing's the same'. So I feel very lucky in that sense.

Yet, in other cases, femmes described the trans/femme erotic script as a site of negotiation, confusion, and hard work, one that is subject to an unspoken and often changing set of rules, particularly with respect to sex. Bridgette, one 26-year-old white femme dating an FTM in Los Angeles told me:

The question of breasts and what I'm allowed to do to them has always felt very confusing to me . . . I can remember moments where every so often [one of my partners] would sort of be like, 'hey, I have boobs too' and I would be like 'oh, right, right, right' but I think there was this way that I had been given other messages . . .

My review of femme websites indicated that femmes are keenly aware that not seeing femaleness and understanding maleness are central aspects of their role in the trans/femme erotic script. Among the women who post on *transensualfemme.com* and *femme.com*, successful femininity is often linked to a seemingly effortless or natural ability to see only her partner's maleness. As one woman states on *femme.com*:

No one ever 'trained' me on how to understand their maleness. I just knew. I relate to my butch's female body as if it is male. In fact, thinking of or relating to a TG [transgender] butch as if he were female would be utterly confusing to me. I absolutely see TG butches as guys. It is difficult to express, yet it is extremely profound to me . . . very deep . . . deeper than words.

Many transensual femmes express their innate desire for trans masculinity in somewhat mystical terms that position this expression of desire outside of its social and political context. Such accounts obscure the ways in which trans-sensual femininity, like other forms of gender labor, is scripted, routinized and hierarchical (and learned through advice columns, SOFFA groups, and other authoritative sources); the more you can 'automatically' see maleness and forget femaleness, often the more desirable and valuable you are as a transensual femme.

### *The Labor of Alliance*

One of the effects of the aforementioned labors is that they solidify a trans-gender/fixed-gender binary in which femmes are firmly located outside of a gender dysphoric experience, and often outside the realm of

the queer or transgressive. Femme activists in the USA, such as Amber Hollibaugh (1997), have asserted femme as a form of transgenderism that is marked by a constructed and ironic engagement with femininity, and femme scholars have suggested that femme subjectivity is defined by its own form of gender dysphoria and unintelligibility (Walker, 2001). However within trans subculture, femmes have been positioned in the outsider categories of ‘ally’ or ‘SOFFA’. In order to be understood as legitimate stakeholders in trans politics, some accounts suggest that femmes are compelled to participate as ‘gender supporters’, quietly celebrating female masculinity while remaining silent as femininity is de-queered or pathologized. A zine written by Rocko Bulldagger about misogyny in trans communities in New York discusses this dynamic:

When I first heard about *Venus Boys*, a documentary about drag kings and trannies, I was so excited to see some queerly gendered people on screen . . . When the movie got started . . . [we heard] so much contempt for femininity from the mouths of the very same people we consider our community . . . The final straw (for the girls I was with) was when one supposedly liberated genderqueer declared righteously that not everyone can be blonde haired and ditz. The laughter of this huge auditorium packed with queers, so delighted in their shared disdain for femininity, was just painful . . . It’s brave for femmes to persist in their support for butches and trannies who could comfortably sit down and name a thousand different genderqueer, masculine sub-identities but would experience serious discomfort at the thought of sitting down and having a long conversation about the meanings and complexities of femininity.

In emphasizing the work of alliance, my aim is to show the ways in which femmes labor at being gender supporters not only within intimate, sexual relations, but also within the more collective realm of FTM political and cultural public space. The laborious quality of alliance stems primarily from the silences and misrecognitions that femmes manage in order to help preserve the momentum of FTM exceptionalism. The femme-as-ally or SOFFA construction typically erases feminine forms of gender fluidity or dysphoria, an erasure that causes many femmes to assert and reassert their experiential alignment with trans narratives. For instance, Jennifer, a femme in Los Angeles who also identifies as a ‘tough broad’ told me that being an ally does not capture her own identification with the trans experience. She said:

When I was partnered with folks who were FTM identified, sometimes it was complicated for me to understand ‘ok, what is this ally thing?’ . . . Because [in the trans community,] I found for the first time a real comfort in my own queerness. I had similar feelings [as trans folks] about walking into dyke space and [being] both an insider and an outsider. I came into the trans community not as a partner to anybody, but as an individual. But it felt like I was being pigeon-holed as, ‘well, the only way a bio female can be in this community then is as

an ally or as a SOFFA'. But my only place wasn't as an ally, because the trans relationship to gender and sexuality and queerness was really familiar to me . . . Just because it's femininity and not masculinity, I [still] had similar things going on.

As Jennifer points out, feminine forms of gender trouble pose a challenge to the very construction of FTM community by drawing attention to the permeability of trans identification. Given the fixity of trans boundaries, femmes' efforts to locate themselves within trans politics frequently involves adopting, and adapting to, the ill-fitting role of gender supporter. Like other forms of affective labor, performing the role of SOFFA not only entails elements of scripted 'faking', it also requires suspending truer accounts of oneself in the service of the other.

Femmes who are critical of being assigned the position of gender supporter have drawn heavily upon feminist frameworks to intervene in the sexism they experience in their relationships with transmen or within trans political spaces. In contrast, many FTM discourses place the FTM subject outside or beyond feminist analysis, emphasizing instead the ways in which FTMs' refusals of femininity and/or the forces of sexism stem from a natural calling to masculine gender rebellion. The resultant polarization of feminist and trans frameworks has dissonant effects within femme/FTM relationships, particularly given the ways in which FTMs' disidentificatory narratives about female embodiment and objectification often ring true for femmes (and for women in general). Though it has become something of a taboo to draw comparisons between the gender dysphoric feelings of FTMs (i.e. I hated my female body and the sexism it elicited) and those of non-trans women (i.e. I hate my female body and the sexism it elicits), both femmes and FTMs reported in interviews that such comparisons nonetheless emerge, especially when two female-coded bodies share intimate sexual space. For instance, R.J., an African American FTM, explained:

[My girlfriend] says, 'You make [being female] sound so disgusting. I hope you don't think that of me'. And I was like, no . . . it's not that I think that about you. It's just that, you know, I love these things about you, but I don't want them on me. Like my chest, I call them cow sacks, you know. Something like that. I use those kind of really negative terms.

In *Mind If I Call You Sir*, Prado's comments about his breasts raise similar questions about the extent to which FTMs' experiences of femaleness differ from those of many women. Prado accounts for his decision to transition by explaining his rejection of the societal dictate that breasts are 'who he was':

My breasts were . . . like a constant presence that felt like all attention, all eyes, all focus, and everything about who I was, that's what it was about. And that

was always at the forefront of people's minds . . . it just became this psychological burden of womanhood that just wasn't true for me.

Referring back to the figure of the satisfied girl, such accounts gesture towards the female subject for whom the burden of womanhood must, at some level, be 'true'. In many cases, these origin stories ('I knew I was trans because the burden of womanhood wasn't true for me') produce conflict and alienation between FTMs and femme partners, especially when femmes foreground the ways in which they are implicated in FTM narratives (e.g., 'I hope you don't think that of me. . .').

As in most forms of service work, the story about the needs of the recipient also tells a story about the satisfied laborer. The laborer not only fulfills others' needs, but also arrives on the scene satisfied and ready to work, presumably without possessing similar needs of her own. As Hochschild explains (2003 [1983]), this is the justifying logic that naturalizes the 'second shift': women manage their own emotional needs throughout the course of a day's work, and arrive home from paid labor ready to provide intimate care for others. Similarly, the SOFFA construction implies a resolved and natural gender, one that arrives on the scene ready to nurture masculinity into being.

## Discussion

Focusing on gender labor draws attention to the collective work that produces and sustains gender. Though we already know that genders exist inside an interdependent gender system, little attention has been given to the laborious quality of reproducing other people's genders in daily life, and we remain without a clear mapping of the training, skills, duties, and specific efforts that various genders require. Here I have shown that in many cases, FTM identities remain reliant upon the labors of femininity that nurture and witness them, both within, and outside of, intimate sexual relations. It is not simply that femmes provide support to transmen (and butches); they also reproduce a trans/not-trans binary by training to be the girl in new and particular ways, many of which they are compelled to experience as easy and natural. In some cases, femmes learn to actively forget their partner's differently gendered past, to study up on male desire and male physiology, and to master a new set of sexual practices and erotic scripts. Trans-supportive and feminist-identified femmes also learn how to occupy the role of ally or SOFFA, often through silence regarding their own gender dysphoria. In sum, femme labor describes not only the emotional, physical, and sexual work of reproducing FTM subjectivity; it also refers to the work of adjusting one's own gendered self in relation to this process – such as the work of transitioning from femme to transsensual femme.



While this article has focused on the gender labors femmes do to produce trans masculinity, a similar article could have explored the opposite relationship, as femininity requires very particular labors of masculinity to sustain it. However, I have attempted to show the ways in which many elements of gender labor – offering sexual validation, co-constructing realness, forgetting other possibilities, maternal nurturing, keeping one's complex personhood to oneself – mirror the practices of intimate labor generally assigned to women. This confluence reveals the ways in which gender itself takes form through feminized acts of service done for others, often at the expense of the laborer's own recognition, dignity, or assistance with gendered shortcomings. To the extent that these labors are performed within intimate spheres and through gestures of bodily, emotional, and sexual care, they are embedded in the historical and political-economic structures of women's work. Women do a disproportionate amount of the commercial care and sex work in the USA, but they are also held responsible – sometimes through legal and other structural channels – for relationship-based forms of caring (Nakano Glenn, 2004) and relationship-based sex work (Cacchioni, 2007). Though I have not undertaken a comparative study that could demonstrate the ways in which gender labor weighs down most heavily on feminine subjects, I have attempted to underscore the ways in which all genders may be bound up in intimate dependencies and feminized relations of nurture, giving and collectivity.

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### **Notes**

1. Thank you to Raka Ray for offering this example, and citing the PBS documentary *Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill: Public Hearings, Private Pain* as one instance.
2. Interviews were typically two hours in length. Nine of the 13 FTM interview participants were white, two were African-American, one was Latino, and one was Asian American. They ranged in age from 25 to 42 years old. Five of the eight femme participants were white, two were Latina, and one was African American. They ranged in age from 23 to 40. I used a snowball sample to identify interview participants by starting with my own social networks as a queer femme who was, during the study, in a long-term relationship with an FTM.

3. Both these websites, transsensualefemme.com and femme.com, although available at the time of researching for this article in August 2004, have now transitioned to Facebook sites and now no longer exist.

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### Filmography

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- Shinjuku Boys* (1994) Directed by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams.

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