

Trans Femme Masculinity

By: *Auto Anon*

Who the fuck are trans women, and what the fuck do we want? Those two questions have come to increasingly define my own relationship to myself and my community—my trans community. The two obvious answers to this are: we are women who are trans, and what we want is to be left alone as women. Some of us medically transition, some of us don't. We are all women and we transitioned because that's what we are. Now, I am partial to this view, and I think within the community that's about as good an explanation and an answer as we can currently arrive at. But the problem comes when we leave it there for the outsiders. When we say we are women and transitioned because we were women, the white cis het dude or lass listening to our interview, reading our blog, or chatting over the watercooler does not get that it is in fact that simple. Instead, what they hear filtered through their own conception of gender. What they hear, is that we transitioned to be feminine. Worse, sometimes they hear that we transitioned because we *were* feminine. And, okay, there is something to that, we transitioned because we did not want to be, were not, men. But that's not the same.

Aided by the past two decades of 'supportive' queer (not made by, but made about) media, the self declared progressive, the liberally minded suburbanite, thinks they've a pretty damn good idea of just what trans women are about. They think this without having ever heard the term trans femme. Instead they picture Jules from Euphoria, Sophia Burset, Nia Nal, or Nomi Marks. In their defense, at least they've *mostly* learned to stop picturing Buffalo Bill. They probably still picture Caitlyn Jenner. Despite all this 'progress', or rather because of it, they've got a pretty good idea why *you* transitioned. You transitioned because deep down, in your heart of hearts, you're a girly girl. That stopped me for years.

The recent fashionability of transness (corresponding with the fashionability of drag queens) reinforces the idea that trans women are not only trans, they are extremely feminine, so much so that they must be trans. It is presumed that only the most feminine of *men* transition into women. That pre-transition we were all a bunch of lippy twinks who genderbent like it was nobody's business, and could do a better face than our mother by the 9th grade. Of course, the reality is often dramatically different. Most of us, I would hazard, weren't screaming queens. We were nerds. Nerd is what you get when you think you're a boy, don't want to be hyper masculine, and have that dysphoric shyness that accompanies so many of us. It's why trans girls still get together to code and game. It's why we host board game nights and DM D&D campaigns. We were mostly nerds.

I was a nerd. Well, I was a nerd a little more obsessed with fashionably punk attire and hair, and a deep seated interest in being a good and attractive lover. I'm not sure if I ever was either, but I tried. I hit the gym, a lot, and made a point of never orgasming before the girl in any porn I watched. Secretly, even to myself at first, what I did do while watching porn was mimic the girl's speed and rhythm. I told myself I was training myself to be more pleasurable, to last longer. Now, of course, I know what it was about. But the fact remains, I was a self conscious nerd, who did things like fashion, elaborate hairstyles, and fastidious gym routines in a misguided attempt to achieve an attractiveness in the eyes of my partners that I thought unattainable to anyone but women. Others had it worse, some of the hottest trans butches I know of once appeared to the world as massive hulks of testosterone proportions. Not all of that goes away; I mean, they're, I just said it, the hottest trans butches I know.

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In *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*, Torrey Peters describes the experience of throwing a football post-transition. She describes how “The girl down at the water’s edge throws the football in a beautiful spiral, so smooth and steady you could use it for a drill bit. I want to catch that football. I haven’t caught a football in three years. And normally, I’d be embarrassed—I’m self-conscious about the way displays of athleticism curl my body into the old shape: arms lank, shoulders loose, hips solid and straight; shrugging off the balancing-a-book-on-my-head pose that I’ve cast my body into. But today is Trans Beach Pride at Seattle’s Dyke-Ki-Ki Beach, so who cares? No one here is going to think I’m manly”. Peters’ work is beloved among trans readers, and you can see why. No made-for-cis-by-cis trans narrative is going to talk about that, about the skills we still have, the aspects that render even the most femme trans a little bit of a tomboy.

That’s what I always wanted to be, a tomboy. I’m not non-binary. I’m a binary trans woman, but I always wanted to be a tomboy. As a child I would sit around watching Elly May Clampett, Marion Ravenwood, Ginger from Gilligan’s Island, and to a lesser extent Princess Leia and want to be them. I did not want to be them because the Disney Princesses seemed unattainable. Hell, I wanted to be Mulan too. I just knew what I was, a tomboy. I had no interest in high femininity. I wanted most of the same stuff boys wanted. I just wanted to do it as a girl. In her video “The West”, high femme trans gal Natalie Wynn says “Being trans is so weird. Like you have all these childhood memories that are just totally discordant with your adult gender identity” in reference to playing Age of Empires II while growing up. I still play Age of Empires Two (the rerelease of course), so I can’t say I agree with her, at least not totally, and that’s the problem. For a lot of us we never wanted to be high femme, most of us still don’t want it. Hell, many trans women aren’t even interested in passing. Instead, it is society that is interested in us passing.

Some of us tomboys trans gals femme up, I certainly did. But often it is not all the way, nor do we want it to be. Further, many of us are at least partly, if not mostly, motivated to do so to avoid being yelled at in bathrooms, and accosted on the street. Yet even in our own community there remains a pressure, not to throw that football, not to let our voice drop down in anger, not to admit we’ve got a whole shelf of military history books at home obtaining a new layer of dust.

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Ernest Hemingway was a trans woman. Or at least, if you want to get academic about it, there’s a damn high chance Ernest Hemingway had gender dysphoria. In “The False Macho” John Hemingway, Ernest’s grandson, writes of Ernest’s complex relationship with his trans daughter, Gloria. In the article John points to several short stories such as, “A Simple Inquiry,” “A Sea Change,” and “Big Two-Hearted River” as well as two of Ernest’s novels *Islands in the Stream* and *The Garden of Eden* to suggest a transgender Ernest Hemingway. John also retells the first time Ernest caught Gloria putting on women’s attire (please note John refers to Gloria as his father and uses he/him pronouns for her): “The first time that Ernest saw my father putting on a pair of nylons was in the Finca Vigía. Gregory was about twelve

years old and it was soon after he had won a national skeet shooting contest against adults in Havana. Ernest walked into his son's room, saw what he was doing, and walked out without saying anything. A few days later, when the two of them were alone by the swimming pool, Ernest said to my father, "Gigi, you and I come from a very strange tribe," and that was all. But it was more than enough for my father. He understood instantly that his father shared a secret with him and one that no one besides themselves would ever understand." Likewise, in her article "Hemingway, Literalism, and Transgender Reading" Valarie Rohy draws attention to Ernest's own attempts to feminize herself, such as taking on the name Katherin, imagining herself as a woman during intercourse, sex change fantasies, styling herself in a way she perceived as feminine, and an unrealized desire to pierce her ears.

So what do we do with this information? It's readily available with a simple google search, and yet on the increasingly long list of historical trans figures, most of whom are either less famous or more attentively trans than Hemingway, Hemingway never makes the list. Are we ashamed that someone so famously masculine, so boorishly drunk, such a womanizer, could have been a trans woman? We shouldn't be. With some notable exceptions, it's a largely undiscussed truth that the most cringe creating of chasers are our unrealized sisters. We see it in them, and no doubt is a small part of why we avoid them so insistently. And what of our non-passing trans sisters, the ones the worst of us used terms like 'brick' and 'mortar' to describe? These women that their fellow trans women shy away from, or rapidly denounce, just how much of that is internalized transphobia? More accurately, how much of that is the fear that we see ourselves, our masculinity, reflected in them?

Trans women are masculine. At least many of us are, and many of us enjoy that we are. Trans butches and futches unite. It's time for the trans femme community to accept that among us there are dommes, and D&D nerds. There are butches, and futches, and high femmes who can fix your motorcycle for you. We are not cis women, and cis women are not all femmes. We can must stop pretending either of those things are true. Don your leather, put your girlfriend's cock in a cage, and take a ride on your new yellow and black Kawasaki.