



Not Woman Enough: A Trans Lesbian Epistemology

This essay explores the concepts of epistemic oppression and gender essentialism from a transfeminist, transfeminine, lesbian lens utilizing a mixed methods autoethnography which incorporates elements of discourse analysis and phenomenology. This topic is important because of the continued underrepresentation of trans, especially transfeminine, voices in the study of trans experiences. I hope that readers will examine their own relationship with gender essentialism.

Keywords: Epistemic Oppression, Gender Essentialism, Trans Studies, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Lesbianism

Come out of the closet or drink myself to death. These were the two options I permitted myself after admitting that I was transgender. I was afraid, confused, and desperately trying to go back into the closet. Coming out as transgender would disrupt my whole life and open me up to the possibility of being rejected for a core aspect of who I was. I tried desperately to integrate myself into manhood, because I saw my crisis as something fundamentally wrong with me. I went as far as trying to join the military, which I would later find is a common transfeminine experience. Pretending to be a man didn't work for me. I never identified with boyhood or manhood. They were compulsory social prescriptions, a set of rules and expectations rather than a description and affirmation of myself. Living as a man was suffocating me. I was imprisoned within the structure of maleness, and this imprisonment was enforced by society with actual or threatened

violence and ridicule. Growing up in male spaces, the worst things that you could be were queer or a girl. I would eventually realize that I was both, but before I could begin the process of truly exploring who I was, I needed to recognize what I was not. So, I said those five simple words, “I am not a man,” in fall 2015, in the college dorm I shared with five young men. It took me twenty-two years to say it, and it was the most pivotal statement of my life.

Saying that I am not a man was just the beginning of my journey, and I knew from the start that it would be a difficult one. I would face discrimination and rejection due to my identity. These negative experiences stem from one singular concept: essentialism. The belief that there is an innate nature to the self upholds and replicates discrimination in all its forms, not least of which are transphobia and transmisogyny. I reject essentialism. There is no essential self. The self is constructed and given meaning socially and performed for the self and others. The essentialized self is enforced socially, and transgressing it is rife with consequences and danger. The mere threat of repercussions leads us to police ourselves (Foucault, 1995). This concept of the self upholds and normalizes social inequality by controlling the way that we think.

Culturally hegemonic powers control knowledge production, defining both themselves and others, a process called epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014). The essentialized self is entirely socially constructed despite its insistence that it is natural, and society enforces it with threats of social consequences and physical violence. Essentialized gender is “a ritualized production ... reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production ...” (Butler, 2011, p. 60). Essentialism is reproduced and enforced not only by cisgender people, but also by transgender people. This essay will explore the epistemology of transfeminine lesbian identity as a challenge to the hegemonic gender system using my own experiences with existential crisis, essentialist thinking, social construction and compulsion.

Existence

I was raised as an atheist, albeit a Jewish one. I couldn’t believe that a benevolent God would allow its creations to suffer in the way that human beings do. We cannot blame God for our suffering, as the vast majority of human suffering is wrought by human hands. Transgender suffering is no different. In the absence

of God, I concluded that life had no inherent meaning. I did not choose to be born; I am simply along for the ride. Faced with a hollow existence or the promise of discrimination, I considered suicide. I looked death in the eye and decided that I could make life worth living by being myself. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1991) describes the existential crises I experienced using an analogy from Greek myth. Sisyphus cheated death and was sentenced to roll a boulder up a hill for all eternity. It is a meaningless, absurd punishment, but it is no more absurd and meaningless than any other possibility. Sisyphus could just have easily been sentenced to an eternity of modern commuting and office work. Our own lives are patently absurd when you consider the fact that they are lived under the constant threat of an apocalypse of our own making. Sisyphus, like any of us, has two options: suicide, or revolt against the absurdity of being. He can give up and let the boulder crush him or find a way to make it meaningful. Gender is my boulder, and I choose not to be crushed by the weight of it. We can simply choose what life means to us. Convincing others to accept that meaning is more difficult.

Transgender people live in a world that would frankly rather we not exist. This is because we represent a

fundamental, existential threat to gender inequality. Transgender people are a relatively small population challenging an enormous societal cornerstone; that there is something fundamentally different between men and women, male and female, and that those are the only two options. Gender is a social system, and, according to Butler (2006) “all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and . . . all margins are accordingly considered dangerous.” (p. 180)

Hatred and discrimination against transgender people are fundamentally a form of fear. The bigots fear the threat to the established social order, and there is no greater threat than that posed by transfemininity. Transfemininity is a diverse range of gender experiences with a slippery definition. For my purposes, transfemininity refers to people who are assigned male at birth (AMAB) who identify in some way with femininity, womanhood, or girlhood, who may or may not medically transition for any number of reasons, and whose social transition can take any number of forms. Transfemininity is not predicated on a feminine performance. Transfeminine people may be just as masculine or butch as cisgender women. What transfemininity is, however, is a direct

rejection of maleness, and society is determined to punish us for that.

No Exit (Sartre, 1989) gives us an analogy that is useful in describing the nature of trans exclusion and oppression. The play centers around three dead souls who are trapped together in hell, which takes the form of a hotel room that they cannot leave. Rather than the tortures they were promised in life, they find that they are there to torture each other. That “hell is other people” (Sartre, 1989, p. 47). Our hotel room is Earth. It is, in fact, every human being’s hotel room. We are confined to this planet, or at least its close vicinity. But real experiences of oppression differ from *No Exit* (Sartre, 1989) in two major ways. Firstly, unlike the play in which each character is equally powerless, cisgender people do have power over transgender people. The suffering of transgender people is entirely because of the way cisgender society treats us. We are denied legitimacy, safety, and opportunity. Secondly, we do have a way out. We can die. And cisgender society encourages transgender people to take that option. Forty percent of transgender Americans have attempted suicide in their lifetime, nine times the rate of the general population (James et al., 2016). When your only way out of hell on Earth is

suicide, it doesn’t seem so absurd. Cisgender people aren’t trapped here with us, we are trapped here with them, and we are trapped because of essentialism. It is our meaningless, absurd punishment that we receive for merely existing, as it is our very existence that they hate. There is no inherent transness. There is no genetic marker or brain scan that can tell you a person is transgender, and if there were it would immediately be used for eugenics by the people who wish to eradicate us. If there were, it wouldn’t matter. What creates transness is simply our existence. Our “existence precedes [our] essence” (Sartre, 2007, p. 20).

Essence

I was rebuffed by my father the first time I wore one of my older sister’s skirts. I was young, preschool age, and had no concept of gender roles yet. He told me that boys don’t wear skirts, which I internalized. I would repress my feelings about gender for years. In my heart I found this new rule stupid and arbitrary, but I knew defying it would have repercussions. This was my first encounter with the collective self that society projected onto me. Rather than a completely internal process, the self is an ongoing collaborative process resulting from a complex interplay between

complementary individual and societal selves. It is malleable rather than static, and the development of identity necessarily requires the participation of people beyond the individual. Mead (1985) specifically separates identity into the “I” and “Me,” our individual and collective identities as subject and object, respectively, forming a feedback loop. Foucault (1978) describes identity as discursive. Rather than existing a priori, identity is created by the language that we use to describe action. Sex creates sexuality, and our gendered performances create gender. Trans womanhood embodies Simone de Beauvoir’s existential thesis, that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1989, p. 273).

Gender is a dramaturgical¹ construct in which all gendered behaviors are, consciously or not, a performance (Butler, 2006). For Butler (2006), gender is a combination of compulsory social construct and expression of the self. The social construct maintains a vested interest in reproducing itself and portraying itself as natural, whereas performative self-expression serves as liberatory. The self that we perform, however, changes based on the social situation in which we find ourselves. We

“travel” between “worlds;” pieces of society large or small in which we project a different social self (Lugones, 1987). These selves that we present are dualistic; ontologically multiplicitous, but existentially singular (Ortega, 2016). The concept of truly disparate internal and external selves is merely an obfuscation of the reality in which we find ourselves (Butler, 2006; Ortega). This obfuscation can serve useful political roles, but there is no special metaphysical aspect of the self. Our existence is tethered to the physical world, as are our experiences. These experiences of being in that world are diverse, but we still occupy the same physical plane of being, even if our life experiences are disparate. Transgender identity is created in the act of being. We move between situations where we go in and out of the closet with various people who may affirm or disparage us. Our performances cannot be taken piecemeal, they are always a part of the same existential self. We seldom present the same self to others in all situations, whether that be for reasons as disparate as safety or apathy. Being trans isn’t about an essence, it’s about affinity.

The idea of a transgender (or specifically feminine) essence is not only

¹ That is, acted out like a play

inaccurate, but politically damaging. It is a form of self othering to insist that there is something fundamentally different with us at our core, rather than the difference being how we interact with the world. Even if there is something inherent to us that makes us more likely to experience the world as transgender people, we still wouldn't be transgender in a vacuum. We are different, but we can be just as different from each other as we are from cisgender people. An essentialist view of trans identity is as facile as it is dangerous. It simply leaves many of us behind. To essentialists (Blanchard, 1985; Daly, 1978; and Raymond, 1979, as examples), me and people like me will never be woman enough. To them, we are nothing more than men chemically and surgically altering our bodies to appropriate womanhood (Raymond), or sexual deviants aroused by the very thought of ourselves as women (Blanchard). We will never be recognized playing by the rules of our oppressors. We need to organize around something different, and that something should be the oppression that we share. We need to deconstruct the compulsory aspects of gender and sexuality for everyone to truly be free.

Compulsion

Gender is enforced and defined hegemonically. Gramsci (2012) defines the process of cultural hegemony as one in which a dominant class utilizes their privileged position to redefine society around them. Foucault (1995) defines panopticism as the process through which we police our own behaviors due to our fear of being punished by society. This fear of reprisal leads to us policing our own identities as well as those of others, whether we share affinity with them or not. In effect, gender is enforced through unequal expectations and recruits both individuals and society as its police. Essentialized gender is a social imposition. It is an open-air prison in which we are all confined. As prisoners, we are organized in a hierarchy that privileges some of us over others. We are each other's guards, but our own wardens.

People who are AMAB are expected to perform masculinity to certain standards. Connell (2005) defines the highest standard of masculinity as hegemonic masculinity. This variety of masculinity is the standard against which gender performances are judged. If you do not meet those standards, you are then considered to be less valuable as a human being. You're a fag, a sissy, a tranny, or whatever expedient insult serves to designate you as inferior and

deviant. C. J. Pascoe (2007) gives an account of the way teen boys enforce maleness. Fag is not a static identity, rather, fagness serves as “a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other” (Pascoe, p. 54). This discourse extends to transgender and gender-nonconforming people; we are recognized as doing maleness wrongly and are accordingly punished for it by ridicule, violent and/or sexual assault, or even murder. The fag discourse also influences men who are attracted to transfemininity and contributes to violence against transfeminine people. Men who are attracted to us view their attraction as a threat against their masculinity, and they react the only way that men are taught to: with violence. In this way, contrary to popular trans 101 level pedagogy, gender can never be completely decoupled from sexuality.

Sexuality is also compulsory and hegemonically so. But sexuality is not a monolith. Gender and sexuality are a part of the same feedback loop. I am transfeminine and a lesbian, and the experiences of that identity are unique. My transfemininity is viewed as less legitimate due to my sexuality; it has historically been predicated on our sexual availability to men. This is true of all women but is especially formalized with trans women. My lesbianism is

derided due to my transfemininity. In both cases, I am derided because of fundamental aspects of myself. I am asked how I am different from a gender nonconforming straight man. While most people who are AMAB are attracted to women, it is not a causative relationship. Who I love and who I am are not decided merely by the circumstances of my birth, but due to a complex of social experiences. My attraction to women was encouraged while I was living as a boy, and yet it always felt different. It felt wrong. I simply wasn't into women in the way that a straight man is. For the longest time, I didn't know that being a lesbian was an option.

Heterosexuality is the culturally hegemonic sexuality. Rich (1980) theorizes of heterosexuality as a compulsory force. It portrays itself as the normal, natural, and morally correct sexuality through a vast network of cultural forces. We are indoctrinated into heterosexuality from our childhood. Disney princesses and storybook romances not only privilege heterosexual couplings, but often portray a man as necessary to complete a woman's life. Heterosexuality is compelled, and the way that compulsory heterosexuality compounds is especially poignant to the women whose sexuality

does not include men: lesbians (Rich). Lesbian intimacy serves as a foil to the cultural force of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich). When the entire world defines itself contrary to you, the process of making an identity becomes even more difficult. The expectation of heterosexuality forms an unwritten social contract, one that is not only about sexuality, but also gender (Wittig, 1980). The compulsory natures of gender and sexuality are inextricably linked in this way. By rejecting the heterosexual contract, lesbians are simultaneously rejecting compulsory womanhood such that “lesbians are not women” (Wittig, p.110). Patriarchy defines society around masculinity such that it is viewed as the default or neutral state rather than an affirmative identity (de Beauvoir; Wittig; Woolf, 1977).

My own forays into manhood and boyhood certainly fit the conception of it being a null state, but masculinity is not the “problem” in this equation. It is the essentialized and hegemonic notions of gender, as there are forms of femininity that mirror hegemonic masculinity (Hamilton et al., 2019). Transfemininity is no different, though it is important to recognize that trans women are not privileged by their attraction to men, merely granted a modicum of legitimacy. Transfeminine people’s femininity is

judged like no others. Just like cisgender women, our value is judged by our attractiveness, body size and shape, skin color, and myriad other categories. Just like cisgender women, we judge ourselves and others, even going to the point of tearing each other down to build ourselves up. Our presentation is always under the microscope, and we are held up for the consumption of men. As someone who is both intensely masculine and feminine, I can’t seem to win. My androgyny delayed my transition, and I am still judged on it. I do not fit the cultural schema of a trans woman, and I don’t especially care to. My first exposure to transgender people was through disparagement and fetishization. Daytime talk shows and pornography. As objects for ridicule and the sexual pleasure of men. I didn’t know that I could be transgender without attraction to men. I didn’t know that, in its exclusion of men, lesbian womanhood is a very different creature than heterosexual womanhood. The reason I didn’t know is because of the suppression of stories like mine.

Epistemic oppression is “persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production” (Dotson, p. 115). Epistemic oppression is a specific form of epistemic power imbalance known as an epistemic

injustice (Fricker, 2007). Nowhere is the epistemic oppression of transfemininity more apparent than in the work of the men who “study” us. Transfeminine stories are rarely listened to, and when they are our testimony is often disregarded or misinterpreted. These “transsexual typologies” return to the fundamental patriarchal predication of women’s validity on their sexual availability to men, while simultaneously rejecting the existence of female sexuality (Benjamin, 1977; Blanchard). Blanchard is particularly heinous. His typology divides transfemininity into two archetypes; the “homosexual transsexual (HSTS)” and the “autogynephile (AGP)” (Blanchard). HSTS refers to solely heterosexual trans women who are misgendered by their characterization as hyper-feminine gay men who transition in order to sleep with heterosexual men. AGP, on the other hand, refers to homosexual, bisexual, and asexual transfeminine people. People who are a little more like me. We are characterized as fetishists whose sole reason to transition is that the thought of ourselves as women gets our rocks off. This is offensive, and quite frankly, fucking absurd. In a bad way. Blanchard’s research is filled with a myriad of methodological errors, which have biased his research from the very

beginning in a way that places the entire theory firmly into the realm of pseudoscience (Serano, 2020). No sexuality is completely uncoupled from gender, but there are so many easier ways to get your jollies than to expose yourself to the dangers of existing as a transfeminine person in a world that hates us.

Revolt

My gender identity is complex and expansive. I am transfeminine and nonbinary as well as a lesbian. The lines of gender and sexuality are blurred for me; my gender is inextricably wound up in a lesbian identity to the point that it is often expedient to describe my gender as simply lesbian. I knew I wasn’t a man but didn’t know I wanted to be a woman until I knew I was a lesbian. While trans woman is a correct descriptor for me, my womanhood is in the Wittigian sense (Wittig). It is not a sense of internal self, at least not wholly. My womanhood is as much about political affinity as it is identity, and that identity is not the same as straight, bisexual, or asexual women’s, including trans women. Patriarchy has an interest in defining gender through exclusion, and people like me are denied the recognition of womanhood, the privilege of manhood, and often the simple dignity of personhood. Simply

put, I'm not quite a woman in society's terms because I'm a dyke. I am fighting epistemic oppression by writing this essay, and I am fighting epistemic oppression by merely existing in opposition to the standards set for me by cisgender society. I am not a fetishist, but a complex human being exercising control of my fate. My story and the stories of people like me deserve to be told.

Existence is absurd, but that doesn't mean that it is meaningless. We construct our own meaning even as we are tormented by other human beings. Identity does not develop in a vacuum. It is a complex and dialectical process, informed by our interactions with others and by our internalization of wider

societal norms. Our identities are multiplicitous, even as our existences are unified. Gender is enforced through both public discourses and fear of punishment. Hegemons rewrite epistemology to position their own view (and dominance) as normal, natural, and morally correct. If the hegemon cements their power through epistemology, then it is necessary to develop alternative, contrary epistemologies to resist hegemony. We need to revolt. Don't let the boulder crush you. Keep living your life, for you are rewriting oppressive epistemology by simply being. Do your best to inject a little bit of trans joy into the world. Those who hate us want nothing more than to see us miserable, so trans love and joy are trans revolution.

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