

Dresses and skirts are emblematic of a feminine style and also of women's subordination to men. But the fashion these days for what is erroneously called gender-neutral or unisex clothing is neither a sign of progress nor of victory of feminists against patriarchy. For while in protest of their physical and symbolic impositions women were abandoning feminine affect and apparel, without the political motive and under no pressure to do likewise, men enacted no equivalent abandonment of masculinity. With femininity subtracted out, the style men are habituated to wearing became gender neutral by default and nothing was or is sacrificed by men to achieve it. The process of becoming a man is an aversion therapy in anything held as feminine. This article centres on what I call a 'feminine praxis', a practice of thought and action with the aim of ending masculine domination. The idea, and what it entails, is unpacked through a range of theoretical sources and interventions germane to the topic, including Marxist, feminist, and queer theory.

Feminine Praxis

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Dresses and skirts are emblematic of a feminine style and also of women's subordination to men.¹ But the fashion these days for what is erroneously called gender-neutral or unisex clothing is neither a sign of progress nor of victory of feminists against patriarchy. For while in protest of their physical and symbolic impositions women were abandoning feminine affect and apparel, without the political motive and under no pressure to do likewise, men enacted no equivalent abandonment of masculinity. With femininity subtracted out, the style men are habituated to wearing became gender neutral by default, and nothing was or is sacrificed by men to achieve it. The process of becoming a man is an aversion therapy in anything held as feminine. Advancing on my first book under the name of Ciara, *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing*, this article centres on what I call a 'feminine praxis', a practice of thought and action with the aim of ending masculine domination.² The idea, and what it entails, is unpacked through a range of theoretical sources and interventions germane to the topic, including Marxist,

1 Thank you to the editors and reviewers of this piece for their comments and suggestions.

2 Ciara Cremin, *Man-Made Woman: The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theory.³

Traits associated with masculinity are inextricable to patriarchy and capitalism. Strength means domination; if not achieved through the dividends accruing to class and race, domination is secured through aggression. A stylisation as opposed to a state of being, forever compensating for feelings of inadequacy, masculinity is born of crisis but only named as such when the veneer of invulnerability is tarnished. A feminine woman, on the other hand, wears her vulnerability. Goddess, slut, scab to the sisterhood, and never queer enough, her femininity is synonymous with decadence, frivolity, weakness, and fragility. Her adornments, Freud thought, compensated for the absence of a penis, whereas for the self-righteous male who disdains femininity for its seeming excesses, betraying his misogyny in doing so, they are markers of an enslavement to, and complicity with, the nefarious practices of the beauty and fashion industries. What is recognised as characteristic of a gender, and opposed by those who reject crude and essentialist binaries, are not, however, so easy to liquidise, especially when the image of man is one we are so acquainted with and is so reassuring to us. Complicated by class, racial, and ethnic differences, doubtless there are as many masculinities as there are men. A barrier nonetheless exists in an overwhelming majority of men that prevents them from making even the slightest sartorial incursion onto women's turf. Gender fluidity stops with men. In view of the role assigned to women in the sphere of social reproduction, it is imperative to capital that it does.

Clothing is the most visible and easy to verify example of how closely the masculine gender is guarded. It is not, however, that men are never seen in women's clothes. On the contrary, they daily wear clothes such as shirts and pants, staples in a woman's wardrobe. Incorporating a multiplicity of styles, the clothes that women wear are, if anything, gender neutral. Consider the phrase, 'Brian is dressed as a woman'. The image likely formed in your mind is that of a male in a dress, heels, pantyhose, and makeup, items men do not wear. The image conjured by the phrase exposes the

3 This article is a primer for my forthcoming book with Bloomsbury in which, building on the article, there is a more detailed analysis of the issues it raises.

superficiality in the claim that gender expressions are indeed diverse, at least when it comes to men. Parallels could even be drawn to Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that the harder it is to discern differences between individuals the more that minimal differences are fetishised.⁴ Hence, we speak of gender in the plural.

The problem is this: spanning different subjective orientations, political affinities, sexualities, and so forth, the failure of a broad diversity of men to cross this trivial sartorial threshold issues from an unconscious dependency in both men and women on masculine domination. Men say to me: 'but I have no desire to wear women's clothes'. Women say to me: 'I'm not attracted to feminine men'. There is no reason to be suspicious of such claims; it either does it for you or not. But if there is nothing genetic about the disposition or otherwise towards feminine affect and apparel, it is evident that the patriarchal setup is remarkably efficient in socialising us into wanting the gender markers that sustain it. Whether male or female, one way or another, libido is wedded to the masculine. Originating in our socialisation, dysphoria is a generic condition; hence, a general dysphoria.

In the seemingly inexhaustible commentaries of left-leaning newspaper columnists, a 'toxic' masculinity is held responsible for many of society's ills. Thus, we might suppose, if men were of a more liberal disposition, patriarchy would be ended. Describing masculinity as toxic is like describing water as wet. Echoing, though also disavowing, Freud, Bourdieu described how men and women are libidinally and unconsciously oriented to masculine forms of domination which are habitually and unthinkingly reproduced in everyday interactions, comportments, gestures, tone of voice, and so forth.⁵ The androcentric unconscious is not, however, specifically male. In the home, workplace, and leisure time, in our words and everyday gestures, through space and time, such is the power of the patriarchal setup that it is impossible to register the multitude of ways that

4 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997).

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

we are all complicit in masculine domination. The parallels in Westernised societies to the Kabyle, a focus of an earlier study by Bourdieu, in which the labour of social reproduction is ostensibly the work of women and accords no symbolic value, are, by comparison, easy to identify, though still difficult to overcome. Although relative to women men are politically and economically the chief beneficiaries of patriarchy, in respect to the diminished capacities afforded for self-expression and the consequences for self-development, men are arguably more disadvantaged in their ego. It is a disadvantage that women frequently compensate for.

The need to compete for jobs and gain the upper hand requires a disposition that, while not organically male, has strong masculine connotations. Because of their socialisation, the male is better primed for competitive enterprise. However, women must also, by necessity, align their subjectivity to the imperatives of capital. But as with my apprenticeship in the art of becoming a woman, compelled along a different pathway, the sexed female is typically a late starter and thus, compared to men, her fledgling efforts to compete will likely seem awkward and unnatural. To the men in the position to validate them, an ambitious and successful woman is often about as welcome as a female football pundit. Women must in degrees ape the man. Men, on the other hand, must disassociate themselves from the image of women entirely.⁶ Being turned into a woman, wrote Bourdieu, is the worst kind of humiliation to be inflicted on a man. Or, as Stoller said, “The first order of business in being a man is, “don’t be a woman”.”⁷ The male fears ‘weakness, dependence, intimacy and closeness’, Segal writes.⁸ A man who openly displays such traits is never the rock in a woman’s life, nor does he represent the patriarchal authority that, in the eyes of others, can validate her as an object of desire.

6 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

7 Robert Stoller, *Presentations of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 183.

8 Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (Hampshire: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2007), 259.

Eros and femininity

The idea that there is a feminine essence is a male fantasy, argued Lacan. But for feminists such as Irigaray, the female body has the unique capacity for a multiplicity of heterogeneous pleasures. It is a capacity that, according to Mieli, males also possess but that a masculine ego represses.⁹ Taking his cue from Marcuse, femininity, in this register, equates with Eros, the creative life-force of a sensuous being. But whatever sensual pleasures are obtained through feminine attire, the clothes themselves do not magically liberate anything nor, in an unqualified way, affect a new sensibility. Had Marcuse wrote on male drag, a rebellious subject in Mieli's thinking, he would no doubt have regarded it as 'the ceremonial part of practical behaviourism . . . quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet'.¹⁰

Segal criticises Irigaray, and the strand of French feminism to which the latter is associated, for evoking a corporal idea of woman, as this idea reproduces the patriarchal myth that women are essentially nurturing, non-violent, and egalitarian. My point is not that these qualities are somehow there to be uncovered in men, nor that in covering himself up in items that strongly connote women that his psyche will magnetically attract these qualities, making him a better person. Anecdotally, many of the self-defining cross-dressing men who have gotten in touch with me serve in the US military and other highly masculinised professions; their masculine profession both masks and also, dangerously, traps a desire to take flight. Femininity is an escape valve for the cross-dresser who reserves his proclivity for the home, thereby protecting his masculinity at work. But it is also potentially an exit strategy, a more totalising and altogether radical alternative to masculinist forms of being and becoming, and the violence, whether self-inflicted or inflicted upon others, that is engendered through them. By incorporating the idea of woman in all situations, the masculine ego is no longer dependent on representing a man, and the pressure to

9 Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

10 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 2002), 16.

‘man up’ subsides. Moreover, in acquiring the aura of femininity that for a long time has mystified the female body—the ‘enigma of women’ trope—femininity becomes a free-floating signifier, neither male nor female. Though such moves are sometimes necessary when opposing forced dress codes, this cannot be achieved by women who refuse feminine adornment. As with unisex clothing, a masculine hegemony is not countered by such gestures; if anything, it is reinforced. It is the socially defined male who needs to step up and be a woman. For it is in this way that an answer to the ‘crisis’ of masculinity that men find themselves in can be found: stop being a man.

Masculine domination will not be ended under capitalism; only in a communist society will there be a chance of it withering away. We should not count on it. A prefigurative move is required. Pink shirt, red lipstick, and flowery dress. Feminine items and affects are the machinery of a praxis that manoeuvres up against this barrier and, testing for its weaknesses, explores ways to breach it. Both jarring and revelatory of an androcentric unconscious, a feminine praxis proposes a tactical reification and everyday embodiment by men of feminine signifiers. The substance of this move is determined by what is at stake—whether, for example, the effect is alienating to others and forces a subjective recalibration. A feminine praxis burns. It is a practice of thinking through the predicament we are all subject to, and for exploring the potentialities of affecting, through interventions, experiments and encounters in the world, a new kind of sensibility. This is not something for men to enact on behalf of women; rather, in view of the limitations of a masculinised ego, men must recognise that the dismantling of patriarchy is in their own self-interest. Theorised with the help of psychoanalysis, this brings us to the general dysphoria that afflicts all gendered subjects.

General dysphoria

Though sometimes in need of feminists to remind them, Marxists are better at discerning the institutional dimensions of patriarchy than they are the

unconscious ones. It was this failure to approach the problem of domination in unconscious desire that led Deleuze and Guattari to write *Anti-Oedipus*. There, they distinguish between the molar and molecular. It is easy, they say, to be anti-fascist on the outside, the molar level of representation—in other words, how you see yourself and want others to see you—without recognising the fascist within you which you yourself nourish and sustain, the molecular level of affects that can be sensed but not seen.¹¹ For example, due perhaps to unexamined feelings of inadequacy, a committed activist in a movement or party against capitalism, may, without being conscious of it, intimidate others, bully them, and be emotionally cold to those whose gender, sexuality, race, or class background differs from their own. Driving people away, the movement becomes increasingly uniform, masculinist in tone, and authoritarian in nature as only those in their image remain. This is the kind of scenario that Deleuze and Guattari warn against, and why, whether we are talking about a socialist party, a feminist group, or LGBTQ+ activists, it is not only the card-carrying fascist that poses a threat. Deleuze and Guattari alight on the problem that a subject born into the capitalist patriarchy develops an ego not only characterised by this arrangement but is also dependent on it for their sense of self. Desire is put to work and becomes active in the reproduction of what it is enslaved by. So the question, which is notoriously difficult to answer, is how to liberate the capacities that the ego represses? The problem is most evident in the way sexed males are socialised to be men: to repress their emotions, disguise their insecurities, and appear invulnerable to others. The ego plugs up capacities which, if liberated, would enrich us all. It is the same problem Marx centres on when describing how alienated labour deprives us of our species-specific (creative) capacities.

Due to the condition into which we are socialised, all of us are in degrees diminished in our capacities—hence, a general dysphoria. Neither knowing nor experiencing any other condition, it is impossible to grasp what it would mean, at both a subjective and interpersonal level, to have

11 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003).

been born into a more egalitarian and free society. It is the same with gender. What would those who are gendered to be masculine be capable of, and what would society be like, if instead they were gendered in feminine ways? In a society that forces us to compete aggression is a survival strategy, so negating the masculine must be a collective endeavour. We learn from the history of class struggles how to struggle better. We cannot await a world-shattering event before a phoenix purified of its bourgeois individualism rises out of the ashes. Consequently, a feminine praxis, if approached as a kind of therapy, must be both personal and collective. It must be something that is in the world—not simply on Freud’s proverbial couch—and at variance to the prevailing gender regime.

The absence of feminine adornment on the sexed male is illustrative of masculine domination and his ego investments in it. A feminine praxis is about removing an invisible barrier that exists in the psyches of men and women that prevents the sexed male from crossing over into the feminine. The path to liberation passes through the feminine. But what is understood as feminine, and what a feminine praxis entails, is culturally and subjectively contingent. If there is a universal dimension to such a praxis it lies in the aim to purge the soul of the masculine ego and make masculinity semiotically meaningless—the effect of which would extend far beyond language.

Connell describes masculinities as configurations of practices.¹² Masculinity is not a thing but an empty signifier, the meaning of which can be loosely derived from the values, behaviours, activities, and aesthetic choices associated with the word. There are masculinities in the plural because there are considerable variations between men. What she calls a hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the norm but rather an ideal-type that certain men, we might say ‘toxic’ men, identify with, aim to embody, and project onto others. Such men are status-oriented, entitled, emotionally closed, and hostile to those considered weaker, different, gay, or effeminate. It is not only women who are vulnerable. Boys and men who struggle to embody the ideal are pressured into acting like bullies too, as a means

12 Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, second edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 37.

of protection. Given that, for Gramsci, hegemony refers to an ideology operationalised through consensus, we can question the appropriateness of the term here. Nevertheless, if there is a hegemonic masculinity in play, ‘the best a man can get’, then it is the liberal variant: the man who appears at ease in himself and tolerant of other genders and sexualities—think Obama rather than Trump.

Like femininity, the meaning of masculinity is unstable and open to different interpretations, but not so unstable and open that the term is meaningless. If there is one characteristic that the different masculinities share in common it is the aforementioned aversion towards, or at the least disassociation from, what in our society is considered feminine. Many men do, of course, wear scarfs, carry their belongings in a ‘man bag’, or even wear makeup to hide blemishes, practices considered by some to be feminine. But there is a line, neither possible to define nor represent, the crossing of which is clocked. We possess a reptilian-like ability to recognise in a fraction of a second, without recourse to reflection, those who are labelled non-normative, genderqueer, and trans. This ability is all the more remarkable when considering how minor these differences are—say, for example, the characteristics differentiating a man bag from a handbag. Even if the only feminine item borne by the male is a handbag, it is nonetheless recognised and an explanation typically sought—‘that’s it, they’re holding it for their partner!’ Otherwise numb to the social environment through which we traverse, our senses are jolted to life when the sexed male dresses in feminine ways but not when the sexed female dresses in masculine ways. A binary notion of gender has colonised the unconscious. It leans, however, to the masculine in which the magnitude of libidinal expenditure is greatest, which makes the unconscious androcentric. It is a man-made invention that, as with all machines, have material consequences, and which, somehow, we need to jam.

Halberstam argues that if masculinity were the default gender category, more young girls would be ‘running around and playing sports . . . building

things . . . and so on'.¹³ Further, masculinity, she claims, is 'reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies'. But this misses the point. While incontestable that from a young age those sexed as female are steered away from these masculine activities, there is a greater taboo on male feminisation. There is no hegemonic femininity, as Connell rightly claims, because domination centres on the masculine, and while masculinities are delineated through the absence of feminine signifiers, there is no strict delineation in respect to women.

Those who are defined female but identify and present in masculine ways face enormous challenges, many of which are comparable to those of trans women—access to medical treatment, rejection by friends and family, employment opportunities, and so forth—but these are challenges I cannot directly speak to. What I can speak to is the effect of being socialised into manhood and how crippling it is for the ego. While cisgendered women are certainly capable of violence and can be as aggressive as any male, I struggle to think of examples of women who, independently of men, have massacred schoolchildren, churchgoers, civil servants, and social democrats. Such facts are not proof of a fundamental toxicity in males. Rather, it exemplifies the extent to which all possible means are mobilised to ensure that boys will, as they say, be boys. Trans men, female masculinities, and dykes have not typically undergone the same process of what hooks aptly describes as 'psychic self-mutilation', nor made to feel so entitled and, with violent consequences, vulnerable to humiliation.¹⁴ It is hard to imagine a trans man, or trans woman for that matter, going on a rampage. Or declaring, like Elliot Rodger, before killing six people and injuring 14 others: 'I'll take great pleasure in slaughtering all of you. You will finally see that I am, in truth, the superior one, the true alpha male'.¹⁵ Masculinisation from

13 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 269.

14 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 58.

15 'Video manifesto reveals CA shooting spree was revenge for social rejection,' *Al Jazeera*, 24 May 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/5/24/ucsb-mass-shooting.html>

an early age is a social problem. Female masculinities are a problem for bigots and sociopaths whose sense of superiority can be traced to white-supremacist ideology.

In a study spanning colonial history, Bederman identifies the white supremacist core of American masculinity in the mythical hero Tarzan, ‘King of the Apes’:

Combining the ultimate in AngloSaxon manliness with the most primal masculinity, Tarzan is violent yet chivalrous; moral yet passionate. Above all, he has a superb body. If manhood is a historical process that constructs the male body as a metonym for power and identity, Tarzan’s cultural work was to proclaim that ‘the white man’s’ potential for power and mastery was as limitless as the masculine perfection of Tarzan’s body.¹⁶

A materialist approach explains the persistence of these gendered arrangements through the logic of capital, which colonisation and imperialism are fundamental components of. The position women typically take up in the sphere of social reproduction is also of fundamental importance to its circulation and expansion.¹⁷ This is not the focus here. With emphasis on the androcentric unconscious and libidinal investments in the reproduction of masculinity, psychoanalytic theory is essential in explaining the predicament, but is not so useful when it comes to finding a way out of it.

From Freud to Lacan

The basic premise of Freud is that human sexuality is undivided. We are inherently bisexual or, as he calls it, ‘polymorphously perverse’. To explain the preponderance of heterosexuality, Freud looked to the family. His theory of Oedipalisation explains how, with no natural inclination, gender

16 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 234.

17 Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (Brill: Leiden, 2013).

divisions emerge and the male assumes a dominant role.

In the classic Oedipal triangle, the mother is an object of desire that the child, born dependent, relies on for their sustenance. This is complicated by the entry onto this scene of the father—a literal individual or, typically in psychoanalysis, a signifier of power that functions as a moral authority with the capacity to punish—who is a more powerful rival for the mother’s attention. The boy’s sense of entitlement comes from recognising himself in his father’s image, a rival but also a role model, a masculine ideal to strive for and embody. By becoming like the father, the son appropriates his role and occupies the same privileged position within the patriarchy; he becomes an agent in adulthood of his own son’s Oedipalisation. In contrast, the mother, who occupies a subordinate position in the family, is ‘castrated’. She lacks power and authority. Thus, afraid that, if like her, he too would be castrated, the male distances himself from anything associated with women. Whether it is through anatomy or style that she recognises herself in the mother, the girl accepts her subordinate position in the patriarchy and looks for a father substitute to protect her and provide her with a substitute penis in the form of a baby. One does not have to accept the presuppositions of Freud to recognise that his theory helps explain the bifurcation of sex into two genders, the absence of feminine signifiers on males, and, without recourse to genetics, how these patterns are reproduced over time.

However, libido, in Freud’s theory, is seen to be biological in origin. It is a destructive force tamed through the Oedipal process, during which the subject internalises the rules governing society in the form of a social conscience or ‘superego’. Libido is both repressed and sublimated, channelled into socially useful activities. Our ‘passion’ for work is symptomatic of this. Lacan, on the other hand, claims that desire in the form of libido has a social origin. We desire because we lack and what we desire is what we imagine to be missing: signifiers or objects that if possessed would end insecurity and bring a sense of closure to our lives. It is the accolade on the CV that would clinch our promotion were we to possess it, the allusive sporting achievement that would confirm our greatness. Whatever it is, no object exists that, once possessed, would foreclose the need for something else.

We are never employable enough and we are never man enough. Whatever we signify as subjects, there is always something missing, what Lacan calls a leftover or remainder from signification. This is the *objet (petit) a*, the object that causes desire. The phallus, in Lacanian terms, is the symbolic object or prop that represents power and fulfilment for the subject but which, like the masculine ideal, is never fully embodied. This does not stop boys and men from imagining that they do embody the ideal.

Masculinity, as I said at the start, is born of crisis. It is born of crisis in this precise Lacanian sense of being unfulfilled and insecure, and also in its persistent need for validation from others—masculinity is thus always contingent. All the efforts expended to shore up masculine egos, and the fleeting moments of enjoyment these egos derive from achieving measures of ‘success’ in a capitalist society, are symptomatic of this crisis.

Signifiers are never equivalent to what is being signified by them, which is why, when discussing gender, caution is always required as to what precisely we mean. We tend to use the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ when referring to ‘biological’ sex. But even these terms are not self-explanatory. Aside from the fact that some people are ‘intersex’, ‘male’ and ‘female’ mean something only because we attribute meaning to them. When, for example, we ask if the newly born baby is a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’, we are not simply enquiring as to whether they have a penis or vagina. We are already anticipating the kind of person they will be, the clothes they will wear, the activities they will be encouraged or discouraged to partake in, and the roles they will eventually assume at home and in the workplace. ‘Sex’ does not in itself determine anything; the way we interpret sex does. There is no one-to-one or biunivocal relationship between ‘signifier’ (the image: a muscled torso) and ‘signified’ (the concept: masculinity) in Lacan’s theory. Thus, a ‘patriarchal’ authority is not necessarily male and, as a symbolic position, could equally be adopted by a female. Hooks notes, for example, that when the father is absent, mothers often overcompensate in the way they socialise boys, becoming more prescriptive and disciplinarian.¹⁸ This is why when a female becomes a leader we should not automatically assume

18 hooks, *The Will to Change*.

that she will be any less ruthless and self-serving than a male in the same role—the fact she has achieved such a position in the first place suggests that she might be.

If gender is a linguistic signifier, does that mean I, as a trans woman, am not a ‘real’ woman? Irrespective of how you were sexed, that gender is a signifier means it is just as valid for a trans woman to declare themselves a woman as it is for a cisgendered woman to do so. Identity gives meaning to life. How we are gendered is often a matter of life and death, and whether you think the origin of gender is social or biological the consequences are the same.

When, in his theory of sexualisation, Lacan refers to masculine and feminine sexuality, he is not describing a relationship between genders.¹⁹ There is ‘no sexual relationship’ he provocatively declares, only a relationship to *objet (petit) a*—masculine and feminine sexuality being two ways, in other words, that desire relates to the leftover after signification. Masculine desire is oriented to *having* the phallus, a signifier that would bring closure to the lack, or the symbolic ‘castration’, at the core of being. What this phallic substitute represents to one subject may differ from that of another—career status for one person, a fast car for another. But whatever it means to us, the status of ownership is contingent on the recognition of others. It is therefore important to identify, examine, and understand why certain signifiers have more status in a particular symbolic order than others—this order being, for our purposes, capitalist patriarchy.

The masculine subject is unable to come to terms with their symbolic castration and thus, in a certain sense of the word, they are slaves to their desire to have the phallus, making them especially vulnerable to the judgement of others. With echoes of Freud, feminine desire differs, according to Lacan, in that in accepting their castration they are not wholly oriented to the phallus. As it is not object-oriented, feminine desire is more open and, we might say, gender diverse. But it is also, according to Lacan, partially oriented to *being* the phallus for the masculine subject. In

19 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1998).

other words, feminine desire is directed towards assuming the position of a symbolic prop that compensates for the masculine subject's castration or inadequacies—it aims to fill the lack in the masculine subject, to complete them, to be their other or missing 'half'. As with Freud, the description maps the relative positions that sexed males and females are socialised to adopt in patriarchal society. But are these theories relevant to all societies or only to patriarchal societies? Deleuze and Guattari do not dismiss the relevance of psychoanalytic theory as a mode of explanation, but they reject its fundamental premise and identify Oedipalisation as a peculiarly capitalistic and patriarchal assemblage.

Anti-Oedipus

If Lacan is indispensable in mapping the condition, Deleuze and Guattari are indispensable in proposing a way out of it. To do so, however, requires them, and perhaps Marxists in general, to formulate a conception of desire that differs from that of Freud and Lacan, as for the former it is inherently destructive, and for the latter it is born of lack. For Deleuze and Guattari, the unconscious is not, as Lacan says, structured like a language. It is a factory. Akin to the notion of drive as force, they hold that desire is productive and is neither in need of repression nor phallic substitutes. Accounting for the productive dimension of desire is important when conceptualising a feminine praxis. In what follows, I expand briefly on their use of gendered signifiers to describe the relation of desire to domination.

'Man', in Deleuze and Guattari's theory, represents the dominant or 'majoritarian' identity in patriarchal society.²⁰ If psychoanalysis explains this through the Oedipal complex or the lack in being, Deleuze and Guattari look for ways to overcome it. They criticise Freud for failing to see the revolutionary potential of desire, and for making psychoanalysis a tool for ensuring conformity in those who display characteristics that are not in

20 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003).

accord with the mores of the time. With Lacan we are stuck at the level of representation: his semiotic approach to desire places us in the deadlock of an endless signifying chain, wherein desire is perpetually in thrall to the phallus (signifier) that compensates for lack. The ego that Oedipalisation engenders represses the multiplicity of affects or creative capacities inherent to us all. Oedipalisation explains why desire wants domination. As with Lacan, notions such as man and woman do not refer to anything intrinsic, and so when Deleuze and Guattari use the term ‘becoming-woman’ they are not referring to men who dress as women but to an affective process of making the patriarchal ego supple to the point of its dissolution (becoming-imperceptible). As with Lacan, their use of gendered terminology reflects the relationship that exists between sexed males and females under patriarchy. For them, however, the masculine refers to domination and the feminine to liberation. Hence, because the task is the dissolution of the ego and thereby liberation from the effects of Oedipalisation, there is a becoming-woman but not a becoming-man, a micro-femininity but not a micro-masculinity. As it would intimate a process of becoming dominant, there cannot be a liberatory masculine praxis.

Dressing as a woman is an imitation of an idea or identity, a molarity as opposed to an unrepresentable molecular affect. For this reason, the transvestite, according to MacCormack, is not an affective woman.²¹ Affects are engendered through surprising, chance encounters—situations in which proximity to others enables one to create affects and to be affected. But it is precisely by cutting a line, as it were, from the sanctuary of the home to the streets, going to work and having drinks at the pub afterwards—in other words, doing regular life—that the socially defined male with feminine adornment not only represents, in varying degrees, the feminine cliché but, through a multitude of surprising encounters, experiences femininity as one of affect. In other words, if feminine signifiers are incorporated by the sexed male into their appearance then people will behave differently towards

21 Patricia MacCormack, ‘Unnatural Alliances,’ in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Meri Storr (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2009), 139.

them. While you can theorise how people might react if you were to change your gender appearance, it is only in the doing that you affect others and others affect you. It is only in the doing of a feminine gender that the sexed male experiences something of what his masculine ego had deprived him of. This is, of course, contingent on the time and place in which it is done. Dressing as a woman on stage or at home is qualitatively different to doing so in isolation in the middle of town around strangers. If the thought of doing this is unthinkable to you, it is worth asking yourself why and whether what is at a stake is not so much your safety as your symbolic authority. We are afraid to let go of what binds us to a gendered order that privileges the masculine. On the streets, the sexed male with feminine adornment becomes a nomad whose appearance, at variance to the norm, ‘deterritorialises’ the sex–gender molar lineage that the cisgendered man and woman have spent their lives tracing since the onset of Oedipalisation. It is a mode of being and becoming that poses a threat to those, including some feminists, who hold to an imaginary and symbolic order in which a certain idea of man is symbolically reinforced and affectively reproduced.²²

The objects and ideas that shore up the ego and which we pursue may vary, but under capitalism particular ones are valorised. The investment of men in them constitutes a kind of libidinal enslavement. Ego validation becomes dependent on the capitalist. It is not only a job that is at stake but also the very idea of what it means to be a man. Under conditions as precarious as these, there is an ever-present risk of humiliation, a loss of face. Avenues of escape are closed. In the hope of saving face, often the only recourse is to double down by continuing in the pursuit of the valorised signifiers that lock the male into a downward spiral of growing frustration and resentment to others deemed an impediment to success. It recalls Adorno’s observation that the authoritarian leader is both the product and embodiment of a failed masculinity.²³ Trump is a well-worn example, a flawed individual, who openly and in ridiculous ways displays, even revels

22 I write about my own affective encounters in *Man-Made Woman*.

23 Theodor Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

in, his ignorance and misogyny. It is precisely because of these flaws that he makes a perfect screen onto which the typically white, narcissistic follower, who feels the largesse he is entitled to is denied or under threat from an external impediment—immigrants, women, black Americans—can project his libido. Gender is inherently precarious and mutable, Segal writes.²⁴ But it is the male in his phallic dependencies who is unable to come to terms with this and is the most susceptible to violence, aggression, fascistic ideologies, and extreme forms of misogyny—as seen with the self-defining and self-deprecating ‘beta males’ of 4chan who resent that women are bypassing them in favour of alpha males.²⁵ By mocking Trump, the liberal left are effectively calling his followers’ masculinity into question. The worst thing you can do to a man is humiliate him. Better to propose ways to overcome the ego.

Those who sympathise with trans people in their struggle to recover the gender authentic to their sense of self, and that society has robbed them of, would do better to recognise in their Oedipalisation the general dysphoria and the tragic consequences of it on their own lives. Those who sense this dysphoria may, as I have done, decide to present in the image of a feminine woman and come to identify themselves as women. Others will queer their gender, mix signifiers and move fluidly between one gender presentation and another. But what about those we call cis who have no desire to breach the norms that define their identity and are, in fact, at ease with the gender they were prescribed? Whether you identify as trans, queer, or cis, the general dysphoria that Oedipalisation realises is, as the term suggests, an affliction that the cis-gendered may only at best relate to in the abstract, but which there is nevertheless a common interest in overcoming. This interest needs politicising and must therefore ultimately include those identified as cis. For those who derive no satisfaction from dressing in feminine ways, a feminine praxis would be against the grain of what libidinally they desire but may well align to their political convictions or sense of the benefits to

24 Segal, *Slow Motion*.

25 See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Hants: Zero Books, 2017).

their personhood in doing so.

We need to discover ways to unplug desire from the destructive assemblages it fuels and plug it into a different kind of assemblage. This is what a feminine praxis invites, even if this means appropriating the very symbols that are stock-in-trade of the beauty and fashion industries, and which for many women are undoubtedly an imposition, burden, and denigration. However, as with consumerism more generally, and recalling Ernst Bloch, the appeal of things we associate with femininity is in part an index of an unconscious yearning for a sensuality freed from the drudgery of alienated labours and our libidinal enslavements in them. The beauty and fashion industry trade on Eros. They neither invented it nor entirely monopolise it.

The problem of femininity

If characteristics that are arbitrarily associated with the term femininity are germane to the kind of society that we want to live in as socialists, a feminine praxis is about acting as if that future is already realised. Trans women have no choice but to live against the grain of the norms by which they are judged and also discriminated. Gender is a curse. However, while the sexed female has to contend with the economic and political disadvantages of their feminisation, the problem is not with the feminised ego as such. Rather, it is with the masculinised ego against which the feminine is judged to be weak and dependent. As with current mobilisations to slow down, arrest, and perhaps even reverse the effects of climate change, a feminine praxis is future oriented. In other words, if an androcentric unconscious cannot altogether be exorcised from our psyches, the onus is on those who are living to ensure that the curse is not passed on to the next generation through a socialising process that psychoanalysis aptly describes, and which Deleuze and Guattari are apt to oppose.

Whether or not your gender identity is consistent to the one you are given at birth, it is easy to understand why, from the perspective of a cis-gendered woman (a socially defined female who in Deleuzian terms traces

a molar line by representing the idea of woman consistent with established norms), femininity would be considered an aesthetic of powerlessness. The clothing is impractical, makeup expensive, and putting it on a routine craft. In voice, as in comportment, sentiment, and sensibility, to be feminine, Brownmiller writes, is to display weakness and fragility.²⁶ According to Young, the feminised woman experiences her body as a restrictive object.²⁷ In their ‘often, enthusiastic’ participation ‘in cultural practices that objectify and sexualise’ them, the female who feminises her body, Bordo claims, must bear some responsibility for their subordination.²⁸ Nevertheless, men and women, she says, are both implicated by conditions they have no authority to determine, but through ‘external regulation, subjection, transformation’, and ‘improvement’, it is the female body that is ‘docile’. Comparing my elaborate and time-consuming morning routine of applying makeup, and all the vexing questions about which outfit to wear and what shoes and jewellery to match it with, to that of the man who was out of bed and out the door in 10 minutes, I would surely agree. But such views must be tempered according to the greater extent to which men police their own boundaries and the lengths they go to in disassociating their bodies from femininity. While women are also obviously subject to gendered forms of disciplining, they differ in the key respect that while a man must disassociate himself from the image of woman, a woman must, if she is to compete, partly incorporate masculine traits. In view of the material circumstance and symbolic ordering of gender, a rejection by women of femininity would appear salutary to a feminist praxis. Plugged into the capitalist machine, the masculine nonetheless becomes, or rather remains, the default; such a praxis does nothing to end or, arguably, even lessen patriarchal domination.

Bartky’s description of a stereotypical femininity underscores the

26 Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

27 Iris Marion Young, ‘Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,’ *Human Studies* 3, no. 2 (1980): 137–156.

28 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (California: University of California Press, 1995).

problem with such critiques, at least insofar that, contextually, she regards the following traits to be negative.²⁹ The feminine woman, she says, is ‘warm, nurturant, expressive, unaggressive, gentle and genteel’, and, if not for her occasional lapses of vulgarity, likely mistaken for upper class. A feminine woman defines herself in contrast to the image of a stereotypical masculinity and thus, lacking ambition for herself, is ambitious for her husband and children. Acknowledging that there have been changes in the workplace, Bartky claims that a feminine woman still tends to disassociate from activities and professions in which the masculine male predominates. Sometimes the feminine woman is courageous, Bartky writes; unlike men, however, she is not ashamed of appearing cowardly or fey.

Bartky describes the skill of feminine women in dealing with complex human emotions as ‘peculiar’. We might add that this ability makes the feminine woman an excellent candidate for a job in the caring professions. After all, in a labour market frequently described as ‘feminised’, femininity is not without exchange value and males who, short of representing, affect femininity are in some respects at an advantage. However, unlike ‘masculine’ forms of labour that are physical, ‘skilled’, and practical, and which involve the creation of tangible things, ‘feminine’ labour is affective and intangible. Like the work that women are tasked to do in the home, feminine waged labour is invisible. It literally cannot be counted.

Perhaps it is because I was socialised to compete for Daddy’s crown, and therefore have not had to contend with the material limitations of such a disposition, that the qualities Bartky speaks of strike me as positive ones that a good parent would want to encourage in their children. After all, who does not want their children to be expressive, ‘nurturant’, and caring? Are feminine women lacking in confidence, as Bartky claims? Or, as Schweickart suggests, is a woman who defers to others simply being respectful and demonstrating a capacity to listen?³⁰ Is the lack of shame

29 Sandra Lee Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 15.

30 Patrocínio Schweickart, ‘In Defence of Femininity: Commentary on Sandra Bartky’s “Femininity and Domination,”’ *Hypatia* 8, no. 1 (1993): 178–191.

in displaying cowardliness really such a bad thing? Whether at the pub, school, or on the battlefield, imagine the conflicts that surely could have been avoided if men felt no compulsion to man up and show courage. When femininity is equated with being girly, individualistic, and possessive, and this attitude to life equated with feminism—a neoliberal variant to be sure—then Bartky makes a salient point: that to be feminist one has to overcome femininity. But just as it is wrong to conflate feminism with liberalism, so too to conflate femininity with patriarchal submission. To do so lends weight to the old Freudian view that women are indeed weak, and men strong. What Lacan’s description of masculine desire suggests, on the other hand, is that because of his need for a symbolic crutch, it is the male who is weak. Whether femininity is a commodity that post-feminism embraces, or a set of signifying practices that second-wave feminism refuses, the capitalist is untroubled.

Resignifying femininity

If, semiotically, femininity cannot exist without masculinity, according to some it can nonetheless be resignified as an expression of strength and even incorporated as a mode of resistance. As Barton writes in respect to a queer femininity, ‘to be “femme” is to forge a self-made femininity that subverts the gender binary and heteropatriarchy by refusing to be defined in opposition to manhood and masculinity’.³¹ But within the queer hegemony, feminine styles and expressions are considered passive and to therefore reinforce gender norms.³² Thus, in the LGBTQ+ pecking order, trans men become the privileged subjects entitled to wear the badge. ‘Androgynous’ styles fair no better. Defined by the ‘absence of gender markers’, it is the

31 RM Barton, ‘On Femininity and Being a Fierce, Autonomous, Radical, Queer Femme,’ *Wussy*, 19 February 2018, <https://www.wusymag.com/all/2018/2/17/on-femininity-and-being-a-fierce-autonomous-radical-queer-femme>

32 Laura Brightwell, ‘The Exclusionary Effects of Queer Anti-Normativity on Feminine-Identified Queers,’ *Feral Feminisms: An Open Access Feminist Online Journal* no. 7 (Spring, 2018): 15–24.

feminine gender that is marked as other. If a feminine woman cannot be queer, what we are left with is a queer femininity appropriated, caricatured, and monopolised by homonormative men (men who are gay, typically white, affluent, and liberal in their values, the kind likely to campaign on gay marriage and defend the right of police officers to attend gay pride parades dressed in uniform).³³ Butler is, of course, a widely acknowledged, though much criticised, proponent of the idea that by revealing gender to be iterative—a habit as opposed to an essence—the drag artist causes gender trouble. Her original qualification, under-theorised elsewhere in her theory of performativity, is worth repeating:

On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality; the disquieting effect of the act is that there are no conventions that facilitate making this separation.³⁴

Ridiculed, ‘sensationalised, sexualised and trivialised’, and accused of reinforcing the gender binary, trans women, Serano suggests, are victims not only of transphobia but also transmisogyny.³⁵ Given how few males do adopt overtly feminine styles and how significant the social and psychological obstacles to doing so are, if anyone can claim to be queering gender norms it is trans women as broadly defined.

With the Westernised idea of gender ingrained into everyone brought up in a Westernised culture, it is difficult, impossible even, to visualise what no gender, or having no gender markers, looks like. There is no image, in

33 Yael Mishali, ‘Feminine Trouble: The Removal of Femininity from Feminist, Lesbian, Queer Aesthetics, Imagery and Conceptualization,’ *Women’s Studies International Forum* no. 44 (2014): 55–68.

34 Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,’ *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 527.

35 Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013), 66.

other words, that we can turn to and embody that is not in some fashion gendered and which others, unnaturally adept at ‘recognising’ gender markers in a fraction of a second, will not seemingly automatically register. Progressively minded individuals have stopped me in the street and said: ‘I love it!’ What they love is that I represent a contradiction of masculine physique, a trace of one at least, and feminine dress (my presentation is unambiguously and altogether feminine). If not, there would be no reason either to stop or congratulate me. Those that identify as non-binary, and who present in so-called androgynous styles, either eschew feminine signifiers altogether or, like the iconic Prince and Bowie, represent a mixture of masculine and feminine signifiers, but not a compound or synthesis of signifiers that represent a third gender. The difference between molar representation and molecular affects that are not represented is worth recalling. If gender is fluid and the variations inexhaustible, it is not at the level of representation. A concept of gender in which the variations are as plentiful as the human personality is, after all, conceptually, politically, and analytically meaningless. It would make more sense to qualify the idea through Deleuze and Guattari, not as representation but as multiplicities—egos to the nth degree—that cannot be bracketed off from one another as identities, however many we claim there are.

In conceptualising a binary notion of gender as the problem to deconstruct and overcome, theory and practice binds to a red herring. However egregious the idea in practice, the ‘binary’ as such is not the issue, at least not one for which a solution can be found in its refusal. Gender theory frequently reminds us of Lacquer’s observation that in certain cultures there is no sex distinction. Accordingly, the one-sex model proves that the two-sex model that Westernised societies are predicated on is culturally specific. The two-sex model nevertheless has a one-gender problem. The solution to the former lies in the answer to the latter. Immanent to the situation, material, symbolic, identitarian, and affective, it is masculinity that wants queering, masculinity trouble that wants causing, and masculinity that wants fucking.

Conclusion

A unified idea of femininity is refracted through the prism of a dominant class of men that remains largely uncontested. A feminine praxis opposes the monoglossia of this singular accent and proposes that the idea of femininity is multiplied through the heteroglossia of competing accents or voices. Though they are never entirely dead, Voloshinov spoke of how signs lose force when no longer part of a social struggle. ‘Feminist’, a label that the former Conservative prime minister of the UK, Teresa May, once brandished on her t-shirt, could be considered one such example. For femininity to enter the arena ‘for the clash of live social accents’, the negative supposition of this monoglossia, which is essentially a patriarchal one, must be rejected.³⁶ In doing this, the sign of femininity enters the social struggle and becomes an ideological force with which to contest masculine domination. Thus, we might say that the proper place of femininity is not at the Dior counter, in the women’s section of H & M, at the care home, or on RuPaul’s latest show. The proper place of femininity is in the class struggle.

A tactical reification of femininity, signifying practices in the feminine register, must first and foremost be taken up, without irony or ‘just for fun’, by those who are sexed as male, irrespective of whether or not they desire to wear feminine things or consider themselves gay, which has nothing much to do with femininity anyhow. It is an experiment in which, like all experiments, the outcome cannot be determined in advance. But for some, even a minor deviation from a masculine norm would be catastrophic, their circumstances prohibiting such a move. For whoever takes this path there are always risks, many that are not so trivial. But people, strong people, brave people, are already blazing the trail, and they are doing so in increasing numbers. Proud and assertive, in their visibility trans women announce themselves to the world and in doing so, whether intended or not, contribute to changing it—to forcing, in a Lacanian sense, a different

36 Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 23.

symbolic order. Not just on TV or at gay pride parades, but in your midst. The germ of a communistic future is socially embodied—idealised—in your trans ‘daddy’, your teacher, your co-worker, your union rep; a gift to the unborn through the various ways they articulate and embody a feminine praxis.

In a master/slave dialectic, the masculine master requires the feminine slave to recognise and thereby confirm him as master. In other words, it is the slave that makes the master, not the other way around. From this Hegelian angle, there would seem to be a point in refusing the feminine aesthetic. But whatever the merits of dialectical thinking, it is a fairly crude tool for discerning differences in magnitude—unrepresentable molecular affects—through which at particular thresholds changes occur that produce the sorts of rupture that dialectically minded theorists like to wax on. Changes that are affective, indiscernible, and productive prefigure the more dramatic and discernible breaks in the symbolic order, the major negation that retroactively confirms the political salience of the minor one.