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Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

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# “Lesbian with the attributes of a man”: Is a trans history of male masochism possible?

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt at presenting a case for thinking about male masochism – from its conceptual inception in late 19th century sexology, to its contemporary framing as a sexual practice falling under the umbrella of BDSM – as having close historical connections with the history of transness, and trans femininity in particular. In order to do so, I provide an overview of the way that the idea of male masochism as femininely gendered has been variously posited, contested, and disavowed across 130 years of masochism’s discursive history. Finally, I argue for the necessity of histories of trans femininity to accept speculative approaches as a valid way of thinking about the possibilities of trans history, and ask what political ends have been served by the “cisisfication” of masochism and practices of sexual submissiveness, which is rendering them culturally legible as having nothing to do with their practitioners’ gender.

**Keywords:** BDSM; trans femininity; masochism; sex wars

“Many of my clients,” writes Jaxx Alutalica, a sex therapist specializing in working with trans and gender-nonconforming people, “find D/s [dominance and submission] dynamics affirming because of the ways in which D/s is often aligned with gendered behavior” (quoted in Fieldings, 2021, p. 184). In support of this statement, they cite a number of works from contemporary queer and trans studies that indicate how erotic practices bundled together under the umbrella term of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) can be means for embodying and living one’s trans gender (Bauer, 2014; Hale, 1997; Jacobs, 2020; Stryker, 2008).

Their argument, broadly speaking, is that BDSM, with its decentralization of genitally focused heterosexuality and an openness towards playful explorations of sexual and gendered alterity, can be more accommodating of trans bodies and subjectivities than cisheteronormative scripts that dominate in “vanilla” sex. However, aside from celebrating the diverse potential of kink<sup>1</sup> sex, Alutalica’s statement identifies another affinity between kink and transsexual practices. Namely, it points to the way that sexual dominance and submission – key elements of BDSM play (Weiss, 2011) – can be normatively gendered, being associated with cultural notions of, respectively, masculinity and femininity. This normativity, Alutalica explains, can be gender-affirming. What is trans-friendly about D/s isn’t just the way it makes it possible to break away from one’s assigned gender role, but also how it makes it possible to submit to and embody another through engaging in play that only dramatizes gendered power dynamics. In BDSM, by “either subscribing to these stereotypes or subverting them, participants engage with gender on a psychological level” (quoted in Fieldings, 2021, p. 184).

I am singling this idea out not because it is particularly novel. In fact, the core of it is as old as the first sexological attempts at theorizing sadism and masochism, dating all the way back to the late 19th century. Whether or not they were aware of this similarity (if not continuity), by making it present in their explanation, Alutalica hints at what I am going to suggest is a lacuna found within the histories of both transness, and of BDSM.

While there is a slowly growing body of work which investigates the intersection between BDSM practices, and lives of trans people, its focus tends to be limited to, at most, the past few decades. This is understandable insofar as both “transgender” and “BDSM”, the master terms of such research, are notoriously recent, having emerged around the same time in the late 1980s (Stryker, 2017; Stein, 2021). Of course,

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<sup>1</sup> Through the course of the article, I use terms “kink” and “BDSM” interchangeably, while remaining mindful that the former is generally a broader and less clearly defined catch-all term for a wide range of non-normative sexual activities.

what those terms denote has a far longer history, but with the exception of a rare few works (like Gayle Rubin’s writing on “butches, catamites, and kings” in the late 1970s and 1980s leather community in San Francisco) (Rubin, 2011), there has been little to no historical research on past convergences between the history of trans and sadomasochism.

At least not directly. This article arose as a series of notes and observations gathered during my own investigation into the history of BDSM (and to distinct, but frequently related concepts, like fetishism). Time after time, in the course of my work, I was struck by how apparently trans – in the broad meaning of this term as it refers not only to specific embodiments and identities, but also to the lived experiences and possibilities of gender transitivity in general (Snorton, 2017; Bey, 2018) – concepts showed up in these histories, without *trans* as an analytic lens being employed. While rectifying this is too big of a task for a single essay, it is my hope to present here some of the traces I have gathered for thinking about a trans history of BDSM, and ask what problems arise when we try to write it.

Specifically, I want to argue that trans femininity is a useful lens through which we may attempt to view the history of male masochism, which is one of the key categories for the emergence of BDSM as a cultural phenomenon. This particular focus is both due to the relative wealth of available research on this subject, compared to other related, potentially trans categories (like, for example, female sadism), and also because of an apparent affinity between certain contemporary theorisations of trans feminine sexual desire and historical attempts to frame male masochism as a kind of disorder of gender. At the same time, my goal is not to claim that some specific male masochists had a secret, suppressed, trans feminine identification. While I will, at times, suggest that we ought to view certain figures in the history of male masochism as potentially trans, the main thrust of my argument is that trans possibilities for scholarship exist across the history of male masochism, and that we should seriously consider the use of sexual masochism as a gendered style. This is similar to the point that Cameron Awkward-Rich

makes about the relationship between the categories of “trans” and “disability”, arguing not so much for their status as identity or their coterminousness, but rather for the ways that they have been “produced alongside one other (...) caught up in similarly confining double binds with respect to law, medicine, and entertainment”, while noting that “these constraints can and have been worked to create unexpected forms of freedom and authority” (Awkward-Rich, 2022, p. 57). Likewise, I am interested in the potential forms of trans feminine desire, identification, and embodiment that can be found in the double binds of sex and gender that characterize the history of masochism. While the trans feminine history of male masochism remains to be written, here I hope to at least render it as a possibility.

Finally, I would like to offer a brief note on the term “masochism” as I use it throughout this article. As I will shortly demonstrate, masochism as a concept has a complicated history and has been through a number of changes in popular understanding since its introduction around 130 years ago. It can describe a pleasure from physical pain, a love for the physical sense of powerlessness and submission, or some mixture of both. However, as I have demonstrated in my ethnographic research on BDSM communities in contemporary Poland (Szpilka, 2022), the lines between these aspects of masochism are both blurry and often crossed. As such, I do not attempt to pin down a definition of masochism here, allowing it to stand for many errant forms of desire, even if they sometimes feel almost at odds with each other.

“Lesbian with the attributes of a man...”

It is no exaggeration to say that masochism enters the scene of late 19th century sexology as an explicitly trans gendered phenomenon. For Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the Austrian psychiatrist responsible for the first sexological description of masochism, it represented “a manifestation of psychical characteristics of the feminine type transcending into pathological condition” (Krafft-Ebing, 1912, p. 211). Ever a man of his

time, Krafft-Ebing accepted as a given that the sexuality of women is given towards passivity and receptive pleasures of submission. As such, masochism – "the association of passively endured cruelty and violence with lust (...) the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" where "the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused" (Krafft-Ebing, 1912, p. 131) – stood for him as a normal feature of women's sexuality which became clinically problematic by "transcending" into an excessive form. Crucially, however, this was a problem most notable not in women themselves, but rather in *men*.

While Krafft-Ebing did end up concluding that "cases of pathological increase of this instinct of subjection, in the sense of feminine masochism, are probably frequent enough", he also felt compelled to immediately add that "custom represses their manifestation" (Krafft-Ebing, 1912, pp. 196-197), and that:

It would probably be difficult for the physician to find cases of feminine masochism. Intrinsic and extraneous restraints – modesty and custom – naturally constitute in woman insurmountable obstacles to the expression of perverse sexual instinct. Thus it happens that, up to the present time, but two cases of masochism in women have been scientifically established.

(Krafft-Ebing 1912, p. 197)

The remaining dozens of case studies he cited were all of male masochists. Unlike their female counterparts, who represented at worst an excess of a natural tendency, masochistic men appeared to Krafft-Ebing and his contemporaries as evidence of the persistent threat of biological, social, and racial degeneration which threatened highly civilized societies (Noyes, 1997; Moore 2016). Since Krafft-Ebing's work was aimed at aiding the budding discipline of forensic psychiatry (Hauser, 1992), the tendency of female masochists to be indiscernible from "normal" women<sup>2</sup> was a further reason for him – and his profession at large – to not be particularly concerned with them.

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<sup>2</sup> One could even go as far as to suggest that the female masochist in Krafft-Ebing's work is a trans figure herself. She represents the double threat of both passing as a "normal" woman and eluding the

At the same time, the feminine remained highly present in Krafft-Ebing's case studies. The Austrian psychiatrist, deeply embedded within a degenerationist, congenital model of sexual perversion, literalized this by searching for – and identifying – evidence of en fleshed femininity among male masochists. In an often-cited example, his Caste 50 is described as having a “decidedly feminine” pelvis (Krafft-Ebing, 1912, p. 136). His suspicion, then, exceeded merely psychological speculation about the feminine tendency in masochist men, and reached towards the conclusion that they were *literally* part women in the flesh.

There is nothing surprising about the fact that Krafft-Ebing's theorizing saw perversion of sex and gender as one and the same; the analytic split of those categories would not come until well over half a century after his death. His idea of what male masochism was hewed closely to the notion of sexual inversion; the dominant perspective on homosexuality contemporary to him (Eribon, 2004; Kahan, 2019). Interestingly, however, while we recognize in sexual inversion an antecedent category for the emergence of transness as a concept, and see a clear shared historical root between male homosexuality and trans femininity (Sears, 2015; Stryker, 2017; Preciado, 2019), thus making inversion a part of the history of gender as well as of sexuality (if we are to maintain the rigorous form of this distinction), male masochism is mostly rendered solely as a question of sex.

And yet, this didn't have to be so. As many historians of sexuality point out, the late 19th and early 20th century was a period of great epistemological churn around the idea of sexuality, with many alternatives towards sexology and psychiatry being proposed, developed, and ultimately abandoned, but not without leaving a trace (Coviello, 2013; Kahan, 2019). Explicitly gendered visions of male masochism arose in this time, feeding on the theories of Krafft-Ebing and others, but moving them towards even more literal understandings of masochism as

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clinician's sight, while also bearing a dangerous excess of femininity. In this sense, she appears distinctly similar to other figures of late 19th century gender transitivity, such as the Black fugitive woman (Snorton 2017).

a form of trans femininity. Especially striking here is a comment by a French pseudo-scholar and pornographer, writing under the pseudonym of Jean de Villiot, who suggested that “the passive flagellant may possess a female brain in a male body, but this brain would be organized such that it resembles that of Sappho who (...) so liked her sisters. In other words, the masochist may be a lesbian with the attributes of a man” (quoted in Moore, 2009, p. 144). This statement goes a step beyond the models of sexual inversion, ascribing to male masochist not only a feminine subjectivity, but also a (trans) lesbian one.

One can speculate here if, as a pornographer, de Villiot was drawing from sources outside of the body of sexological works. The period’s erotic writing was no stranger to explicitly trans feminine fantasies, even if they are not identified as such. In her writing about the development of fetish fashion, and investigating the history of the corset, the fashion historian Valerie Steele remarked that:

in 1886, when A Lover of Stays wrote to the Family Doctor [an erotic British magazine] to describe how much he enjoyed wearing tight-laced corsets, Mary Brown responded: “I think ‘Lover of Stays’ must be a very effeminate man... that wishes he was a female.... [D]oubtless he would like to go about in a gown and petticoats and pass himself off for a woman”

(Steele, 1996, p. 72).

As Steele adds, such erotic fantasies were often framed as ones of forced feminisation, where a boy was made to wear corsets and pass as a girl by family members or schoolteachers. However, she does not see fit to view them as in any way trans in their attitude towards gender, instead falling onto the old transmisogynistic trope of transvestitism as a perverted appropriation of femininity. This, in itself, is typical; the crossover between trans femininity and male masochism is an area of especial cultural opprobrium that even academic works interested in the history of those phenomena sometimes struggle to escape (Fernbach, 2002). And yet, one can also read the very presence of such fantasies as pointing towards a trans feminine routing of the link between sexual submissiveness and a desire for feminine identification *among men* in Victorian Europe, one that had been in place even before masochism had



been codified as an issue of male femininity. From a more contemporary perspective, they are also strikingly similar to the modern narratives of forced feminisation fetishism, which is currently openly being discussed as a particularly trans feminine sexual style (Jacobs, 2020).

Forced feminisation as a practice within the realm of contemporary BDSM is an important point of reference here, not just because of the similarities outlined above, but also due to the way that the discussions surrounding it point towards a major challenge in representing the shared history of trans femininity and male masochism. Forced feminisation is, without a doubt, a trans style<sup>3</sup> – one need not look for further evidence of it than the ubiquity of forced feminisation scenes within contemporary trans feminine literature (Peters, 2021; Plett, 2018; Rumfitt 2021). At the same time, an aura of unease surrounds it, due to its seeming investment into sexist notions of feminisation as disempowerment, passivation, and its being generally rendered and understood as inferior – forced feminisation fetishism and humiliation play are rarely that far from each other. In a way, those anxieties precisely reflect the history I am trying to outline here, namely of the association between the masochist position, disempowerment, and femininity. Taken on face value, forced feminisation fetishism as a trans feminine practice comes dangerously close to supporting the old transmisogynist view of trans femininity as reinforcing sexist stereotypes.

What gets lost, however, when such a perspective is assumed, is the historicity of all the terms involved. “Femininity”, “sexuality”, “transness”, or “masochism” are not universal facets of human experience, but historically contingent categorisations – a point that feminist critique and queer theory have demonstrated in a wide variety of ways (LeFleur, 2019; Snorton, 2017; Heaney, 2018). Any sort of linkages that one presumes between them are therefore likewise historical but are not necessarily experienced as such. As such, those linkages, however problematic they

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<sup>3</sup> Though, obviously, not only, and perhaps not even primarily so. Forced feminisation as a practice is generally popular within BDSM communities I am familiar with (Szpilka, 2022), where it usually functions outside of any putative trans context. It should go without saying that one can enjoy (or criticise) forced feminisation play without being trans femme, or centering the discussion around transness.

may appear, often end up structuring individual understanding of gender, and serving as a resource for the making of such gender. After all, even if we do make our own gender, we do not do it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. Or, as Torrey Peters wrote about one of her trans feminine characters “[Reese] didn’t make the rules of womanhood; like any other girl, she had inherited them” (Peters, 2021, p. 61). No argument that I make should therefore be taken to mean or imply that submissiveness is inherently feminine, or that male submissives must be universally trans. The feminine is not essentially identical to the powerless, but it is commonly figured by or as powerless. Although the general feminist position would be to view this figuration as a pathologising imposition to be rejected, the performance of this powerlessness and submission can also present [itself as] a possibility for a trans identification and embodiment.

Nonetheless, the subject is thorny enough that it should not come as a surprise that hardly any scholarship takes up its thread. Even when Krafft-Ebing is read in search of histories of trans feminine embodiment, as by the trans studies scholar Emma Heany, they end up located in the more conventional area of transvestitism, and not masochism (Heaney, 2018). Again, this is hardly unexpected. Trans narratives emerge clearly from Krafft-Ebing’s case studies on transvestitism, in a way they cannot be drawn out of his examples of male masochism. In fact, masochists are more readily found disavowing their femininity rather than proclaiming it to the psychiatrist, declaring that there is “nothing feminine or effeminate about them” (Krafft-Ebing, 1912, p. 150). This kind of disavowal will return later in the history of BDSM.

The trans feminine presence within historical discussions of male masochism is spectral. It appears as a suggestion, an implication, a rejected interpretation, or a sexual fantasy. It’s hard to ground and express, even as it remains present. Few take it up literally, though it remains an open, if usually unacknowledged, trans possibility. Possibility, but not certainty – although conflation of femininity with

submissiveness and pathological masochism with masculinity, which ended up producing the ghostly trans feminine within male masochism reigned supreme in the late 19th century sexology, they would soon be subjected to a time of rigorous exorcising.

#### Cissification of masochism

Over the course of the 20th century, the trans gendered ideas about what makes a masochist became increasingly relegated to niche pornography and the kind of “common sense” of sex that is routinely disproven in expert discourse, and disavowed in politically-minded rhetoric. This was a side-effect of a number of broader processes through which the very understanding of what masochism is as a phenomenon and a category became split into two perspectives, only tangentially related.

In the first decades of the 20th century, and primarily through its uptake in psychoanalysis, masochism as a concept began to expand beyond the sphere of sexual perversion. Gradually, it grew into a popular and potent category for a general cultural critique, ranging in applicability from the arts and literature, through to mass psychology. As a side effect, particularities of masochism as a distinct set of erotic practices faded from attention; masochism came to mean a specific psychological disposition rather than any kind of a sex act (Moore, 2016). This process can be traced back to Krafft-Ebing’s reliance on literary narratives in addition to clinical case studies (Musser, 2008), which led him to view psychological attitudes towards the idea of submission as central to masochism. For Krafft-Ebing particular sexual practices remained closely related to those mental dispositions which he understood, again, as based in physiological degeneration (Musser, 2007; Noyes, 1997). However, his decision to frame masochism as being primarily about the life of the mind paved the way for Sigmund Freud, who not only championed the rejection of Krafft-Ebing’s degenerationist model, but also further deemphasised masochistic sexual practices in the discussion of masochistic psychical formations (Byrne, 2013; Silverman, 1992). Psychoanalysis also ended up

effecting a move away from the focus on male masochism's perversion of gender transgression, and towards increasing interest in female masochism viewed as a problem of gendered excess (Moore, 2009).

This approach to masochism ended up producing a truly staggering body of work, finding its way into too many fields to recount – but crucially, including feminism. However, one of its side effects was that while theories of masochism remained invested in the idea of a feminine submissive drive, the body of the male masochist, the original foundation upon which those theories of masochism had been built, became increasingly displaced from the popular imagination. Masochism emerged into the early – to mid-20th century as an abstract idea that was no longer moored to any particular kind of a body – but remained understood as an essentially feminine tendency. This made it a useful category for criticising the patriarchal oppression of women – but also meant that when a masochist body was being imagined, it tended to default to a female one. Masochism became cis, viewed as only ever capable of producing feminine submissives in cis bodies that passively yield themselves to actions of sadistic men.

Along the way, sex became split from gender. However problematic the simplistic separation of “cultural” gender from “biological” sex was (Gills-Peterson, 2018), its wide uptake across a variety of fields and disciplines rendered the 19th century sexological models even more obsolete (Germon, 2009). This split made it possible to present transsexuality as an issue wholly detached from its previous association with sexual deviation, but in return instituted a hard border between issues of sex and gender, which made it especially difficult to discuss trans sexualities in any other register than openly annihilatory portrayals of it within trans exclusive forms of feminism. As a result, any speculation on trans gendered aspects of male masochism became politically precarious, both without easy support in popular notions of what transness is (Gills-Peterson, 2018), but also seemingly dangerously close to condemnations of fetishism filling the pages of anti-trans feminist statements (MacKay, 2021).

While those processes were ongoing, the practices of sadism and masochism – or sadomasochism, or kink, or BDSM, as they came to be variously called – developed in their own way, generally with very little attention being paid to them by the scholars working on the abstract and literary concepts of sadism and masochism. As mentioned before, there is a general lack of scholarship devoted to the history of actual cultures of sadomasochistic practice, and the few works that attempt to describe it struggle to find sources for the period between the 1950s, and especially the 1970s, when more visible and political active SM cultures came into view (Bienvenu II, 1999; Stein, 2021).

Importantly, the gendered styles of expression present within those cultures (primarily gay leather, and early heterosexual SM political organisations) tended to shy away from the implications of effeminacy in male masochism. The reasons for it ranged from then gay leather's borderline femmophobic attitude to the assimilationist streak present within the first heterosexual SM organisations like *TES* or the *Janus Society* (Campbell, 2020, Stein, 2021). Presenting SM as a sexually perverse, but normatively gendered practice was a politically expedient move helping to avoid stigma. As such, even when male submissive desire was acknowledged, it was done so through stressing the fact that this desire is wholly separate from any kind of potential disturbance of gender identity or other kinds of effeminacy and that, their sexual preferences aside, they are *normal* people (Lindemann, 2012).

It was also between the 1950s and 1970s that practices of sadism and masochism were becoming more culturally present in the West *in general*, in no small part due to the growth of the sex industry and the weakening of obscenity laws (Bienvenu II, 1999; Nealon, 2001; Williams, 1989). The representations of it that became available and which circulated widely, however, were dominated by images of male domination and female submission, cisheteronormative expectations about gender roles and the bodies that carry them out. An early and famous example of this can be found in the bondage pinup photos of Betty Page produced by Irving Klaw, which found themselves at the heart

of obscenity trials in the 1950s, and which have become something of an archetype of mildly kinky mass-production erotica (Stein, 2021). It is important to note, though, that it was also a time when openly sadomasochistic pornography earned recognition also in the areas of high culture – and that the two SM novels that Susan Sontag cites as examples of great literary pornography, Pauline Reage’s *The Story of O* and Catherine Robbe-Grillet *The Image* both focused on images of female submission and male domination (Sontag, 1982).

The multi-pronged cissification of masochism ultimately resulted in the entrenchment in the western cultural imagery of the bound cis woman’s body as the metonymy of sadomasochism in general. Though the image of the dominatrix, descended from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Wanda, the male masochist himself faded from view, and there is no better proof of this than the fact that when, in the 1970s, debates on sadomasochism ignited within the women’s movement, the chief charge against those practices was that of gender normativity. At the same time, those conflicts were also a key moment of intersection between the histories of BDSM and of trans femininity.

In the footnotes of sex wars

Ongoing through the mid-1970s, and never really concluding, but mostly petering out by the start of the 1990s, feminist sex wars over sadomasochism were one of the first times since the early 20th century when kinky sexual practices were seriously discussed without the abstracting frameworks of psychoanalysis and philosophy. The history of those debates is well-documented (Chancer, 2000; Khan, 2014; Hart, 1998; Rubin, 2011; Warner, 2011), and I do not wish to reiterate it here. Instead, sticking to my overall method, I want to point to where, in the margins and footnotes of the sex wars, a trans feminine context may have lurked.

To think about the sex wars from the perspective of searching for trans feminine traces may seem counter-intuitive, considering how it was

issues of trans *masculinity* that were central to them (Hart, 1998; Rubin, 2011). Conflicts around lesbian SM featured prominently within the feminist sex wars. They were not isolated, but rather formed an important node in a wider network of conflicts and discussions, being particularly closely related to debates about the status of butch-femme relationships and their potential reproduction of heteropatriarchal norms within lesbian spaces. In fact, critiques of the practice of lesbian SM were almost always linked to the rejection of the butch as an anti-feminist figure (Jeffreys, 1993). If those conflicts have a trans face, it is one belonging to trans masculine tops, as embodied by Pat Califia, one of the central figures of the entire sex wars.

And yet, it is my contention that trans femininity haunted those debates, though seldom explicitly named. I want to point here to two interesting moments in the 1993 collection *Unleashing Feminism*, which was meant to be a follow-up volume to the 1982 collection *Against Sadomasochism*, whose publication was a milestone in the sex wars. The authors of the volume situate themselves explicitly against what they perceive to be a perversion of feminism under the mantle of “queer”, which is embodied by, as D. A. Clarke states:

[The] academics among us [who are] now proposing a “politics of deviance” which should embrace all queers, prostitutes, pornographers, pimps, fetishists, transsexuals, bestialists, sadists, masochists, and perhaps even paedophiles in one community of queerness, united in resistance to straight middle-class values

(Clarke, 1993, p. 110).

Clarke does not specify what this transsexuality is, and no explicit link is made between it and sadism or masochism, other than classifying it as belonging to the same category of threats as other sexual perversion. This is broadly in line with the condemnations of transness that fill the entire volume. In another of its essays, Kathy Miriam, having already presented her critique of lesbian sadomasochism, points towards some phenomena which she sees as related:

Hence the latest: transsexuals are back, in this round as “transgender,” and they even have their own transgender nation. This development was

foreseen in the discourse surrounding transsexuals and lesbian identity in the seventies, back in the time when lesbian-feminists were closer to winning the argument that no, doctors – and all the King’s horses and all the King’s men – could not turn men into women

(Miriam, 1993, p. 52).

*The transsexuals are back*, again infiltrating lesbian spaces. At a glance, this may appear as little more than just a rote example of all-too-familiar trans-exclusionary feminist tropes. Why, however, does it appear in a volume ostensibly specifically dedicated to combatting lesbian sadomasochism? In the introduction to her essay, Miriam positions sadomasochism as that which has “replaced woman loving as the most visible (public and publicized) emblem of lesbian identity” (Miriam, 1993, p. 8). It represents a part of a wider movement towards the erasure of the lesbian as a politically radical identity (which used to stand for the “rage of all women”). In fact, Miriam immediately clarifies that “lesbian sadomasochism is much more than what women do in bed, it is a widespread ideology concerning what lesbian identity means (or doesn’t mean)” (Miriam, 1993, p. 8). She finds no better manifestation of this ideology than in what she views as a gross perversion of the idea that any woman can be a lesbian. “Originally a threat to heterosexuality”, she writes “the idea has been reversed to signify its political/ethical opposite, namely, that any “woman,” whether bisexual, even heterosexual, and yes, even male (witness the advent of transgender nation!), can be a lesbian” (Miriam, 1993, p. 11). Trans femininity appears in Miriam’s text as a symptom of a malady that lesbian sadomasochism names.

It should be then of no surprise that while not all anti-SM feminists have claimed anti-trans positions, the majority of the most famous anti-trans feminists of the 1970s and 80s have, in fact, written extensively against sadomasochism. Again, the connection was rarely made explicit, though exceptions can be found, as in this piece of writing from Sheila Jeffreys:

I became aware of the links between sadomasochism and fascism in 1981 when I visited Amsterdam from my home in London to attend the women’s festival. An important, if not the main, theme of the festival was sadomasochism. Women at the Amsterdam festival demonstrated S/M



scenarios, e.g. a male-to-constructed female transsexual whipping a woman, both dressed in fetishistic 'feminine' clothing and black leather

(Jeffreys, 1993, p. 171).

For Jeffreys this is a launching point into an investigation of a putative connection between the practice of gay sadomasochism in the 1930s and the rise of fascism. The presence of a "male-to-constructed female transsexual" as a part of the inciting incident only helps her to cast the entire practice in especially damning light. Notably, Jeffreys also stresses that it was the trans woman who took on the dominant role in the described scene, which serves to further underline the supposed artificiality of her gender and sexuality.

Here, as elsewhere, anti-SM, trans-exclusionary feminism struggles with acknowledging any kind of a trans-feminine submissive position. This, too, is unsurprising. Much of the critique of masochistic practices by women in anti-SM feminist writing is premised on rejecting the myth of feminine submissiveness and contesting the reality of masculine domination. As I have already said, SM is presented as a force solidifying patriarchal gender relations, while masquerading as a subversion of them. This is why when Janice Raymonds spoke out against sadomasochism, she focused on the falsity of its promise of "transcending gender" (Raymond, 1989, p. 150). But to keep insisting that sadomasochism only ever produces feminine submissives and masculine dominants required constant rejection of the possibility of the male masochist, of the lesbian femme top, and of the trans feminine in general.

It is therefore with no small amount of irony that the porn studies pioneer Linda Williams, writing towards the end of the most intense period of the SM sex war, observed that:

Whereas popular perception sees sadomasochism as the perverse abuse by male sadists of female masochists, something closer to the reverse appears to be the case in actual practice: large numbers of male or female "bottoms" are in search of male or female "tops" to dominate them in their quests for sexual abandon

(Williams, 1989, p. 196).

Williams sourced this data from the first sociological studies of SM practice, which were starting to appear in the early 1980s (Simula, 2019). However, this dynamic continued to go unacknowledged in the condemnations of BDSM as written by trans-exclusionary feminists. As late as in 2021, Julie Bindel stated that “the majority of heterosexual men who practice BDSM take on the role of the sadist” (Bindel, 2021, p. 57).

Male masochism must be disavowed as a possibility in such theories for reasons which are eerily similar to the openly transphobic insistence that butches and trans men are victims of a false consciousness that recur in works of Jeffreys. Again, then, what it seems to imply is that there is a trans feminine possibility to male masochism which keeps on haunting anti-trans feminism, even as it continues to refuse to name it.

But it would be too simple to say that it was only the anti-SM and openly transphobic branch of feminism that had this problem with the trans-feminine in SM. Writing about the “dildo wars” (the controversy around the use of dildos by lesbians, a part of wider feminist sex wars), the lesbian feminist writer Lynda Hart notes that:

In the now defunct *Outrageous Women*, which was published during the 1980s and was one of the first lesbian s/m magazines, one finds many references to “lesbian dicks,” often without the qualifier. What is apparent is that s/m dykes have always considered their dildos to be the “real thing”

(Hart, 1998, p. 100).

Hart assumes, without even pausing to consider, that the “lesbian dicks” found in lesbian erotica, must always be dildos attached to bodies of cis lesbians. But what if they were not, and the bodies were trans? That 1980s lesbian sadomasochists could imagine trans women as a part of their community – and of their sex life – is evidenced by the presence of trans women characters in the collection of lesbian pornography *Macho Sluts* by the aforementioned Pat Califia, and also by the vitriolic rhetoric by anti-SM feminists warning the world that the *transsexuals are back*. Yet again, we run into a possible trans-feminine trace in the history of SM that goes, ultimately, unexplored and unremarked upon.

Taking a metaphor literally

The possibility that a lesbian dick may just be a lesbian dick after all – that we can read a metaphor literally and arrive at a useful result<sup>4</sup> – suggests that perhaps similar readings are possible of other texts, existing outside of considerations of feminism. To bring up an easy example, what happens if we read Leo Bersani’s landmark essay *Is the Rectum a Grave* in search of trans femininity?

The very real potential for subversive confusion in the joining of female sexuality (I’ll return to this in a moment) and the signifiers of machismo is dissipated once the heterosexual recognizes in the gay-macho style a yearning toward machismo, a yearning that, very conveniently for the heterosexual, makes of the leather queen’s forbidding armor and warlike manners a perversion rather than a subversion of real maleness

(Bersani, 2010, p. 13).

I am taking this passage purposefully out of context, which is to say I am opting not to reference any of Bersani’s points about the self-shattering sexual desire, instead pointing out how easily – and without much need for a justification – he links the gay leather style with female sexuality. When, a few pages later, he returns to this concept, he concludes it with a flourish of the “intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (Bersani, 2010, p. 18).

How literally should we take this statement? How close does it come to stating, between the lines, that sometimes the grown man with his legs up in the air, and lost in the suicidal, masochistic ecstasy of being a woman is, in fact, a woman?

It’s a problem taken up by MacKenzie Wark’s autofictional memoir *Reverse Cowgirl*, where she relates her taking of the passive, masochistic, and ultimately *feminine* position within gay sex as an entry-point into her trans-femininity. She writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the lesbian dildo may also be a literal lesbian dick, for example when viewed from the trans-masculine perspective, and especially if we follow Paul B. Preciado’s intuition that the dildo precedes the phallus. There is no contradiction between claiming that both a trans-woman’s bio-penis and a trans-man’s strap-on are both “the real thing” (Preciado 2018).

He wanted me to want to be fucked. He wanted to penetrate both flesh and being. He wanted me to ache with need for him to inject himself under the skin. He could not recognize himself in me as a mere thing that he fucked. I had to be another being, but one that wanted to give itself to him. So I changed myself. I changed myself in the mirror of his inclination. I was not just a thing he could have. I became another. One that dwelled within the aura of another's desire to poke their dick into it and come and cum inside. He probably didn't know how that would work out. (...) I felt that as the one who is fucked, the small one, that I must be a girl

(Wark, 2020, p. 50-51).

Here, Wark plays with the script of forced feminisation. Her femininity is at the same time an external imposition – she is fucked and objectified into it – and a self-actualizing realization she revels in. There is no contradiction, and the pleasure she experiences is thoroughly feminine in part because it is masochistic. Similar kinds of ideas recur throughout other pieces of contemporary trans-feminine autotheory and fiction, with the common thread being the feminizing pleasure of becoming an object of sexual desire (Chu, 2019; Baer, 2020) – which ends up recalling Krafft-Ebing's characterisation of the masochistic pleasure as the feminine “association of passively endured cruelty and violence with lust”.

In a predictable twist, those texts too can get pretty haunted by the shared history of anti-trans and anti-SM feminism. To bring up an example, Andrea Long Chu's influential essay *On Liking Women* contains a passage where she addresses her submission to ideals of feminine beauty, a submission she contrasts with a more “genuinely feminist” position, such that of Ti-Grace Atkinson:

Someone like Ti-Grace Atkinson, a self-described radical feminist committed to the revolutionary dismantling of gender as a system of oppression, is not the dinosaur; I, who get my eyebrows threaded every two weeks, am

(Chu, 2018).

Chu invokes Atkinson on account of her anti-trans statements; however Atkinson was also one of the first American feminists to speak openly against sadomasochism, all the way back in the 1970s – rejecting the same kind of a feminine masochism that Chu embraces (Warner, 2011).

But how can all of this be linked back to the history of BDSM as more than just an abstracted investigation into the psychic operations of

masochism? Again, this is not a question of equivalence, of trying to point at such statements or imagery and say “this is trans feminine BDSM”, but rather one of sketching out affinities, parallels, and potential intersections. Alatulica’s statement I opened this article with is a broad one; games of D/s do not have to be called such to be evoked in erotic performances of gendered behaviour.

Let’s return here briefly to practices of forced feminisation, and the pre-Krafft-Ebing letter to the *Family Doctor*, and compare it with the way Laura Jacobs writes about the explicitly kinky practice of forced feminisation today:

A fantasy for many trans women prior to coming out, forced feminization is the role-play of a dominant woman “coercing” an individual still living as male through a social and medical transition to female. To someone who has internalized the shame and discrimination often assigned to trans women, the thought of ceding authority to make transition happen (even if only within such role-plays) allows them to feel less stigma and to mitigate the fear and guilt of making the socially transgressive decision to change genders. (...) Depictions are easily found on the internet of men remade through manipulation, cruelty, or devotion into compliant fetish Hormones and Handcuffs 101 objects adorned in stockings and stilettos, with disproportionately large breasts, corseted waists, elegant hair, and sexually suggestive mannerisms all tailored to emphasize extreme feminine norms with return to life as male forever impossible. Emasculation is often incorporated

(Jacobs, 2020, pp. 100-101).

Practices and fantasies which she outlines as trans *and* BDSM are different from the forms of feminisation that Wark, Chu, or Baer describe not in essence, but rather in intensity. Forced feminisation exists on a continuum with more quotidian forms of (trans)feminine masochism, not always synonymous but rarely unrelated. And yet, so often, the particular strands bound in trans feminine BDSM are taken apart, and analysed in complete separation, in a hope to distil away sex from gender, femininity from masochism, and sexual fantasy from an embodied practice.

The residue of this distillation process is to be found in the kinds of surprise, overlap and wilful misreading that I have attempted to sketch out in this article. If a trans history of male masochism – and a BDSM history of trans femininity – is to be found anywhere, it is in those lapses, gaps, and lacunae. It is the yet-unwritten history that brings together

sexological speculation, pornographic fantasizing, and embodied, lived experienced of erotic practice to work it together into another possible history for our present, trans moment.

But is such history possible? The evidence I have brought forward is, at best, circumstantial. Much of it is downright speculative, pointing towards absences as indicative of lost presence, and reading between the lines for what I assume remains unintelligible in various visions of sadomasochism and transness. It would not be hard, then, to accuse the attempt of braiding those elements into interpretative overreach. To this, I would like to propose two counter arguments.

Firstly, while the evidence is circumstantial, and possibly not sufficient to issue a judgement on its own, it is still a reason enough to start an investigation. Due to lack of institutional access and global pandemic conditions affecting the writing of this article, it is not research I could have conducted. However, even my preliminary survey managed to identify several potential areas of interest. My intuition is that the trans feminine trace in the history of male masochism could be most easily picked up in archives of pornography, particularly the specialist, fetishistic publications which have started to enter the European (and later American) market starting in the late 19th century. Furthermore, a huge body of quasi-academic sexological texts and pamphlets exist, often dealing with “prurient” matters – such as transvestitism, transsexualism, or sadomasochism (Jagose, 2013)<sup>5</sup>. Finally, the history of the lesbian sex wars can be also re-read in search of references to trans femininity in the context of lesbian sadomasochism. While there is significant interest in early forms of feminist transphobia, the conflicts around sadomasochism are rarely queried, and treated more as an irrelevant curiosity, rather than an integral part of the thinking of figures such as Raymonds, Jeffreys, or

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<sup>5</sup>It is also interesting to note that some of the key early figures in the development of trans medicine in the United States maintained interest in sadomasochism. Robert Stoller in particular made S/M the main object of his focus later into his life.

Bindel. Those are just a few potential starting points for an in-depth investigation, but they are hardly unpromising ones.

More importantly, however, the idea that to reach for a trans history of male masochism is to extend too far into the realm of speculation is based on the presumption of cisness that still structures much of our thinking about the past (Bychowski, 2021). It is treating historical phenomena, events, and people as presumably cis until solid and unambiguous evidence can be presented to “prove” that they should be, instead, viewed as trans. For a trans historian, this approach can easily become self-defeating; cisnormativity primes historiography to reproduce itself. Cisness in history is taken as self-evident, whilst transness is draped in ambiguity and doubt as to whether it has even existed in the first place.

This problem becomes especially pronounced in the case of trans femininity, which shares the tendency of the feminine in general to fade out of the heteropatriarchal records of history. As such, reading the past for the trans feminine often requires a speculative approach, asking after the possibilities left in sources’ lacunae (Betancourt, 2021).

The question then should not be whether a trans history of male masochism is possible, but rather: what grounds do we have to assume it’s not there? This is not a claim that all male masochists, past and present, should be treated as latent trans women, but an expression of hope that thinking from the perspective of trans femininity and its discontents can open up a new perspective on what constitutes the history of BDSM, and that, conversely, that the history of sadomasochism can become a new resource available to those of us interested in trying to write a history of transness. My argument, ultimately, is for potential. The history I have attempted to outline exists at the margins of our contemporary understanding of both what transness and BDSM are and should be. In fact, there may even be something out of time about its reliance on outdated and thoroughly problematic models of feminine desire. And yet, those models continue to haunt our contemporary understanding of what living a gendered life means – and continue to

provide it with unlikely resources for living it better. We should not – and for that matter cannot – wish that the trans feminine submissive streak will go away, fading into more immediately palatable forms of trans sexuality. Instead, we should acknowledge its potential, which is the potential of transness as a category in general, to – as Marquis Bey (2018, p. 167) put it – "exceed [its] housedness", whether in theory, history, or, especially, in the common sexual sense on which we continue to rely.



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