

(Trans)Feminine History: A History of Feminine (De)Normalization

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Abstract

This essay focuses on fatness and trans femininity as lenses through which to detail and analyze particular histories of the politics of bodies and desirability. This work articulates the links between thinness and femininity within an Anglo-American system of desirability, predicated on a psychosocial formation of abjection. The essay articulates the relationship between cis-feminine and transfeminine aesthetics, particularly as this manifests in what can be termed as the “politics of passing.” Ballroom culture—particularly its New York City iteration—and its history become a case study granting a particular theoretical analysis of transfeminine aesthetics in history. This essay also asserts throughout that transfeminine aesthetics rely heavily on systems of desirability that inform the systems of gender normativity. Simultaneously, this research argues that transfeminine aesthetics are distinct from cisnormality, actively producing new forms of subversive gendering.

This essay focuses on fatness and trans femininity in order to detail and analyze the politics of bodies and desirability. This essay also seeks to articulate imaginative futures of fat and trans feminine embodiment as mediated through the Anglo-American industries and systems of fashion and beauty.

In this essay, which focuses on particular histories of trans femininity, there is a discourse analysis regarding (trans)femininity coupled with corroborative visual analyses of historical evidence. Firstly, this essay articulates the linkages between thinness and femininity within an Anglo-American system of desirability, predicated on a psychosocial formation of abjection. Then, to define, or at least contain for the purpose of this essay, the concept of femininity, there is an engagement with gender studies literature to articulate femininity and womanhood, along with their convergences and divergences. After establishing a sense of femininity upon which this essay grounds itself, the essay moves into articulating the relationship between cisfeminine and transfeminine aesthetics, particularly as this manifests in what can be termed as the “politics of passing,” a concept born from Black studies regarding the ability to “pass” (or be read) as a white person in common society but is used in gender studies to articulate the ability for a trans individual to “pass” as the performed gender category.

In analyzing the history of the politics of passing, Ballroom culture—particularly focused on its most notable iteration in New York City—becomes a case study which allows for a particular theoretical lens that is distinct from, yet in conversation with, canonical gender studies. Ballroom studies becomes a point of analysis which informs the different forms of trans femininity as posited by this essay. After understanding the “politics of passing,” the consequential divergence from this aesthetic-social system is the hyperfeminine trans aesthetic, an aesthetic defined by the exaggeration of traits commonly associated with or definitive of femininity. This aesthetic exists within the canon of genderfuckery, but, as this essay asserts, trans feminine aesthetics, like the hyperfeminine, even in genderfucking, rely heavily on systems of desirability that inform the systems of gender normativity. However, this essay also argues that transfeminine aesthetics are distinctly divergent from cisnormality. Simultaneously, this essay argues for the existence of a history of transfeminine aesthetics and that transfeminine aesthetics and their histories are distinctly divergent from cisfemininity.

Sabrina Strings in *Fearing the Black Body* presents a case for the subtitle of her book: the racial origins of fatphobia. This recognition of anti-Blackness as the crux of anti-fatness serves as a crucial starting point for contemplating how anti-Blackness functions as a crux for Western Euro-American systems of (un) desirability. Strings maps the development of the fetish for thinness on the “rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism.”¹ Her case begins with Albrecht Dürer in the 16th century and the mid-to-late fifteenth-century importation of enslaved Africans to northern and western Europe. Dürer belonged to a group of artists and thinkers impassioned by defining (however, in their pursuits, they saw this as a practice of comprehension of “nature” rather than definition) “the correct model of female beauty.”² In this pursuit, bodies became mathematicized and, in conjunction with the development of racial science, sciencified. Strings points to the Enlightenment as the genesis of anti-fatness-cum-anti-Blackness for its development of Science as a proper noun: a site of knowledge production predicated on producing regime, common sense, and truth, which nominalized and concretized racial science and race-making.³ Strings provides a history rooted in case studies for what can be connected with Julia Kristeva’s articulation of the “abject.”

¹ Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York University Press, 2019), 6.

² Strings, 39.

³ Strings, 42.

Abjection in contention with, not in opposition to, desire⁴ is foundational to the psychosocial imagination of (anti-)Blackness and all those deemed abjectionable—as born from the economic and political necessitation to render Blackness and the abject as repulsive and constructed by meaninglessness.⁵ Abjection is the affect which precedes disgust, refusal, rejection, and sickness. It is the grounds upon which the “I” is established by the self; it is the grounds upon which the “I” abjects itself. It is the lure into the void of Blackness “where meaning collapses.”⁶ Blackness, fatness, and transness, as case studies which are foundational to this essay’s thesis, are abject, are abjecting, are abjected, and are abjectionable. Using this placement of Black, fat, trans embodiment, to articulate a history of transfeminine aesthetics, a containment of transness and transfeminine aesthetics must take place.

C. Riley Snorton, a scholar of Black transgender and queer histories and identities, in the most precise language and with the most incisive analysis, provides containers for the concept of transness. Transness is ambiguous, as Snorton begins, and it is “more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival.” In taking this concept of transness and understanding its relationship with Blackness “in the midst of ongoing [B]lack and trans death” and along with the “rapid institutionalization of trans studies,”⁷ Snorton speaks to notable trans studies scholars, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, to call upon their reading of “trans” as a “concept that encompasses ‘categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts.’”⁸ What Snorton provides for this essay, particularly in relation to trans(feminine) aesthetics, is the assertion that sex and gender function as racial arrangements “wherein the fungibility of captive flesh [produces] a critical context for understanding sex and gender as mutable and subject to rearrangement in the arenas of medicine and law.”⁹ While Snorton focuses intently on medical, legal, and literary discourse to produce a history of transness as arranged by racial paradigms, this essay engages most notably and critically with aesthetic discourse born from cultural historical developments. Nonetheless, Snorton’s analysis provides excellent techniques and assertions that ground the analyses conducted in this essay, particularly that of the mutability of sex and gender and of the fungibility of “captive flesh”¹⁰ (a phrase reminiscent of

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1.

⁵ Kristeva, 2.

⁶ Kristeva, 2-3.

⁷ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, 7.

⁸ Snorton, 8.

⁹ Snorton, 12.

¹⁰ Snorton, 12.

Hortense Spillers, a Black American literary critic, and her distinction between “body” and “flesh,” whereby “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh.’”¹¹) To contain this concept of transfemininity, though, this essay must begin with an understanding of womanhood, a concept with which femininity and transfemininity must contend.

THE “NORMAL” WOMAN AND HER ABJECTIONS

Returning to Sabrina Strings and her engagement with the German painter, Albrecht Dürer, Dürer’s drawing of the “Normal Woman” (Figure 1) is a critical mapping of the concept of normalcy as manifest through Woman as a distinct gender category. Dürer, along with his peers of philosophers of ideal beauty, created models to define the standard of perfection, of what “normal” should ideally and materially be. Dürer created these iterations of normality; in his text, *Four Books on Human Proportion*, there are many sizes of women with the same proportions, as part of a canon which mapped a definable system of desirability onto the cultural psyche. As Strings explains, the Woman, the normativized construct of the Woman as produced by philosophers of gendered beautification, found beauty within the embodied self through these mathematicized mappings of proportionality upon the fleshed form.¹² Important to this explanation is the particular economic and political necessitation, as aforementioned, of Black abjection and denigration, which manifested in the rendering of Black women as the “social inferiors to white women.”¹³ If, to maintain and reify the social distinction of white women from Black women—as Womanhood suffers subjugation by Manhood—the Black woman must be the abject figure, then, as Kristeva figures, these lives are “not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion.”¹⁴ In this case, the Woman, the normal woman, is the object of gender, the ground upon which the Man, the normal man, constructs the self. Consequently, the abject of the object of gender, that jettisoned thing which must die and trigger repulsion and aversion in the object and its subject, the Black woman serves that purpose of creating the object as what the abject is not.

¹¹ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 67.

¹² Strings, 39.

¹³ Strings, 33.

¹⁴ Kristeva, 6.

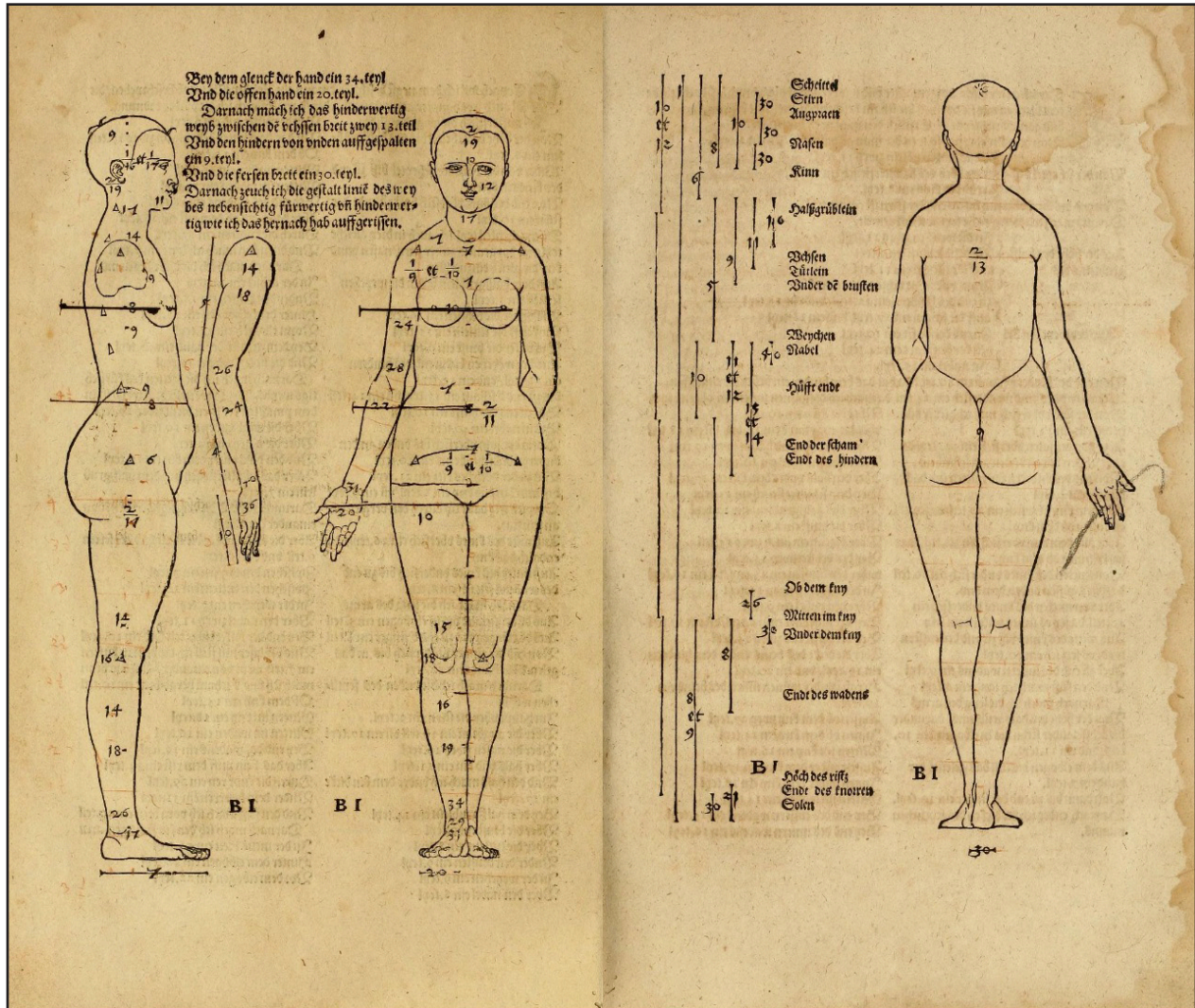


FIGURE 1 EXCERPT FROM *FOUR BOOKS ON HUMAN PROPORTION* (GERMANY: HIERONYMUS ANDREA FORMSCHNEIDER, 1528) BY ALBRECHT DÜRER. CONTRIBUTED BY GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART LIBRARY. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN (ARCHIVE.ORG).

All of this is brings transfemininity to the arena of contention with Womanhood and its primary component, Femininity. The Woman is the object, and the Black woman—a woman, as detailed by Strings’s text, who is constructed as the horrific disproportionate opposition to the thin, proportionate white woman—is the abject.¹⁵ Abjection serves as the categorical container which holds fatness-cum-Blackness, Black womanhood, and other abjected formations known to construct a sense of being. Embedded in this container is the transfemme: that embodied departure, with no origin point or destination, from the Woman and the Feminine ideal. This container of the word transfemme is perhaps too open to those not of transfeminine experience;

¹⁵ Strings, 52.

however, it operates, in this case, to recognize transfemme embodiment as being of a spectrum that transverses time, body, and space. Transfemme is a categorical container which alludes to an abject of the object of Woman, and transfemininity, like Femininity, is a component, an iteration, of its counterpart, the transfemme. Transfemininity is refuse (n.) and refused; it is Femininity's abjected tumour. To finish this arena of contention, Femininity and its abjects are socially reproduced through embodiments, particularly the distinct embodiments of the woman, the fat woman, the fat, Black woman, the fat, Black, trans woman.

How one becomes Woman and how one performs Femininity, the landmark words of Simone de Beauvoir, the French philosopher, ring with relevance: "One is not born a woman—one becomes one."¹⁶ As previously outlined, Kristeva provides the methods by which the woman subject becomes Woman—by performing, in a quotidian sense, a vehement disgust and aversion to the abject of the Woman. To become a Woman is one thing, but, as this essay focuses on transfemininity, the performance that produces Woman, the performance of Femininity, is crucial to this being of a Woman—or non-being of a non-Woman. Marianne Thesander writes in *The Feminine Ideal* that the beingness of Womanhood and the performance of Femininity are not particular birthrights.¹⁷ Therefore, women and performers of femininity must dutifully learn and produce this beingness and these performances in order to be legible as women, particularly in a cultural context which historically and contemporarily surveils the body and its iterations of objects and abjects.¹⁸ In this moment, Judith Butler rears her head with utmost relevance as her theory of gender performance and the assemblage of the self, of identity, as a repetitious performance of particular modalities of gender becomes relevant. Bluntly, she states: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."¹⁹ From this, it is conclusive that the Feminine, the Woman, is not existent (not to be confused with "real"), but it is a pervasive paradigm that is consistently reified and reproduced by its many iterations across a cultural body.²⁰

¹⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 273.

¹⁷ Marianne Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 8.

¹⁸ Barbara Vinken, "Transvesty—Travesty: Fashion and Gender," 39.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 33.

²⁰ Butler, 6.

THE POLITICS OF PASSING

Fast-forwarding into a history of transfemininity and its materialization through aesthetics, the concept of “passing” serves as a crucial starting point. Passing, a concept born from Black American history, initially spoke to the ability of a Black person to render themselves, or be rendered as, legible as a white person in quotidian social performance. In the case of transness, particularly in the formation of transsexuality and transvestism as formations of transgender, “passing” is the ability of a trans individual to perform a particular legibility as a cisgender individual—or more precisely, “passing as a nontranssexual.”²¹ Passing, as a performance, is, across the spectrum of transness, “craved and desired yet dreaded and unnerving.”²² For transfemmes, performing passability manifests in technical practices of feminization: wearing culturally feminine clothing; using feminine beautification products, like make-up; speaking in a higher register; altering body language to the diminutive—or perhaps the inaccessibly sexual; embodying heterosexual femininity; and, especially, having a culturally-defined, legible feminine-presenting physique. When considering the material experience of transness, particularly trans women and femmes, these criteria are like thorns and roses. They depend upon systems of desirability, predicated upon the perpetual reproduction of abject figures—notably abject Blackness, abject fatness, abject disability, abject sex and gender forms—which are dependent on and perpetuate systems and supremacies of white patriarchal classed gender. Put more plainly, these criteria require and reproduce the power of the Normal Man and its iterations that render particular embodiments safe, normal, and ordinary enough to evade incessant and pervasive bodies and modes of violence. However, doubly so, the roses of these criteria, and their ability to be reproduced upon the mutable flesh of the trans body, provide opportunities for trans women to embody these criteria towards survival, towards the mitigation of impositions of violence, towards the iterations of joy and euphoric affectivity.

Passing, in all its complexities, holds many possibilities for trans women and femmes, and historically, as a political and economic endeavor, passing served to construct a particularly complex method of being—one that is rife with abjection and protection.

²¹ Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” 4.

²² Dean Moncel, “The Politics of Passing.”

Documented white American transgender history has an inception point, as detailed by Genny Beemyn in *Transgender History in the United States*: in the early seventeenth century, this history involved “a servant in the Virginia colony... who claimed to be both a man and a woman...Thomas/Thomasine Hall.”²³ Beemyn continues by detailing the general social confusion which orbited Thomas/ine, and the state response which was no less rife with confusion. As sanctioned by the state, Thomas/ine Hall was required to wear both a woman’s apron and men’s pants. This state-sanctioned reaction to Thomas/ine’s existence reveals how the state interacts with its abject figures—in this case, the trans figure. Recalling Kristeva, yet again, the visibilization of the abject figure results in dizziness, nausea, and repulsion of the subject’s body.²⁴ Visibilized by the political implantation of surveillance through social sartorial management, trans visibility in American history begins with the practice of policing, rather than a practice of policy-making. The nauseousness and dizziness manifest in the strange sartorial sanctions of androgynous fashioning, but, as Michel Foucault famously said, “visibility is a trap” and this visibilization of transness and its abject figuration of gender results in consequential, violent policing practice.^{25,26}

After years of the state dizzying itself attempting to apprehend and capture the trans figure in sartorial policies and policing, the state’s involvement became more pervasive and violent as the nineteenth century saw “the enactment of laws in many US cities...that made it a crime for a person to appear in public ‘in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.’” This quote from Beemyn continues in explaining how this new wave of policy-making “reflected the increasing visibility of crossdressers and the resulting efforts to contain them.”²⁷ In this compounding wave of anti-trans policymaking, the importance of passing as a quotidian performance grew to be paramount as a self-preserving response to state-sanctioned violence via the State’s weaponized, both materially and ideologically, policing force. The reproduction of the trans body—by a trans subject, or abject, through a political regime which required passing to ensure safety, and at times maintain life—became internalized to this historical trans embodiment. As such, the trans body became entrapped by the thorns of the rose bush—the politics of passing—and simultaneously comforted and affirmed by the silky petals of euphoric gender affirmation.

²³ Genny Beemyn, “Transgender History in the United States,” 1.

²⁴ Kristeva, 1.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” 200.

²⁶ Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, xv.

²⁷ Beemyn, 8.

PICTORIAL ARCHIVES AND VIOLENT METADATA

Breaking into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, trans identity and trans aesthetic formation began to be documented in ways which are now accessible to scholarly archives. James Gardiner, a social historian, collected hundreds of documents relating to the visual culture of transvestism and transsexuality in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. His documents serve as an excellent starting point for analyzing the early aesthetics of transfeminine-presenting individuals. Gardiner's collection of images, as documented in the Digital Transgender Archive, is entitled "James Gardiner's 20th Century Drag Postcards." The term "drag" functions as an interesting nexus point between transfemininity as an aesthetic and the embodiment of transness, whether through transsexualizing medical intervention or a psychic disposition with trans(gender) sensibility. "Drag" in this case maintains a temporal distance between the metadata and the depicted subject: transsexuality and transgender are not imposed upon the subject but transfemininity as an aesthetic performance is highlighted.²⁸ These postcards, as highlighting specifically transfemininity, are complicated in their relationship to the quotidian performance of transfemininity as a practical performance of passing because they highlight the specificity of transness and its divestment from normativized femininity—normativized through cisnormality. However, they do serve to articulate how trans aesthetics are simultaneously distinct and actively divesting from this sanctioned cisnormality *and* intentionally convergent with the system of desirability that conducts Femininity, as a proper noun, and as an aspirational performance, which invests in a particular anti-Black-cum-anti-fat aesthetic formation.

In "Francis Cowley Burnand, in drag, poses wearing a large pink dress with flowers in his hair" (Figure 2), a photograph from 1855, there is an individual dressed in a contemporarily fashionable and colorful dress. The caption on the verso refers to the individual depicted as "F.C. Burnand," and describes him as "wearing a large dress coloured with pink and has bright pink and green flowers in his hair and on the dress." The dress is contemporarily fashionable in its silhouette. The voluminous skirt is accentuated with layers of flouncing fabrics to create a near bell-shape that contrasts the drawn-in, cinched waist. Although in the image, the waist is obscured, it is inferable, from context present within and outside of the image, that the waist is cinched to the body or compressive of the body. Another feature that dates this piece is the silhouette of the sleeves which are large and akin to pagoda sleeves—the most fashionable sleeves of the

²⁸ In this case, it is transfemininity, but both historically and contemporarily, transmasculinity makes up a large part of cultural practice of drag.

mid-to-late nineteenth century.²⁹ The importance of the fashionability of this dress recalls the point of transfemininity as convergent with Femininity and its dually restrictive and expressive performative iterations. At the convergence of these two formations, transfemininity and Femininity—or cisfemininity—is the inextricability of the beautification and affirmation of trans/feminine practice *and* the anti-Black-cum-anti-fat imaginary and embodiment. Again, to return to Kristeva, the subject, even as it embodies something abjected, re/forms itself upon the grounds of that which is further abjected—abject to a higher degree.³⁰ Whiteness and thinness become the subject-making components which stave off the hauntings, the nauseating formations of abjection. This articulation of transfemininity, mapped onto a thin, white body, also functions to reveal the canon of trans(feminine) history, which is one that heralds and focuses on the thin, white embodiment of transness.



FIGURE 2 “FRANCIS COWLEY BURNAND, IN DRAG, POSES WEARING A LARGE PINK DRESS WITH FLOWERS IN HIS HAIR,” CA. 1855. FROM THE JAMES GARDINER COLLECTION. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN (WELLCOMECOLLECTION.ORG).

As a response, the image of “Two [B]lack actors, one in drag, dance together on stage,” (Figure 3) from circa 1903 depicts two Black individuals frozen in a dance. The individual in front is dressed in a contemporarily fashionable silhouette. The tiered bottom of the dress and fanciful sleeves are reminiscent of the fashions of the time. This figure, as noted in the caption, is read as a “Black man in drag.” Compared to the depiction of Francis Cowley Burnand, who is named in full, this depicted Black individual is both unnamed and forcibly sexed by the provided metadata. In Snorton’s analysis of a similar image of the same two actors, Snorton explains that “the image purportedly portrays two male performers. However, to my eye, the sex/gender of both figures is uncertain.”³¹ This quote is important in

²⁹ Lydia Edwards, *How to Read a Dress: A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 20th Century*, 86.

³⁰ Kristeva, 3-4.

³¹ Snorton, 2.

setting up Snorton's later articulation of the mutability of flesh and the fungibility of transness,³² and in the case of this essay, it is important in setting up an articulation of abjection within gender. The relationship between the depicted individuals results in an undefinable and indefinite range of sex/gender/sexuality possibilities between and of the two, particularly because they conjure up the formation of abjection which was evaded by much of Gardiner's transgender archive. Similarly, the few images of non-thin, non-proportional bodies in the archive conjure the abject. It is apparent that this archive was and is meticulously evading and eradicating particular abjection formations from canonical transness and its iterations of femininity. While perhaps neither figure, whether the Black individual in drag or F.C. Burnand, desired to "pass" as a woman, the material relations between each figure and their depictions of transfemininity demonstrate the manifestations of transness as, aforementioned, simultaneously divergent and convergent with the complicatedly restrictive. The figures potentially read with a lens of abjecting ridicule—and affirmative—the depiction of each subject as either joyously and/or fashionably feminine—impositions of Femininity.



FIGURE 3 "TWO BLACK ACTORS, ONE IN DRAG, DANCE TOGETHER ON STAGE," CA. 1903. FROM THE JAMES GARDINER COLLECTION. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN (WELLCOMECOLLECTION.ORG).

³² Snorton, 6.

TRANSFEMININE PERFORMANCE IN SPACE, IN TIME: DRAG BALLS TO BALLROOM CULTURE

To continue along this complication of restrictiveness and affirmation of transfemininity, an important hallmark of Western Euro-American transfeminine culture is the pageant, or drag ball, and its subversive by-product: New York ballroom culture.

As articulated best in *Slumming Sexual and Racial Encounters and American Nightlife, 1885–1940* by Chad Heap, an American studies scholar, queer nightlife dedicated to Black and brown individuals existed in its own right, before giving rise to the Pansy Craze, and culminating into the modern formation of ballroom culture.³³ Drag balls date back to the 1920s, particularly located in Harlem, New York City. Balls and pageants tend to have little digital footprint, both historically and contemporarily, due to the illegalization of cross-dressing practices and the social denigration of transvestism. However, one of the most notorious photographs of a drag ball from the 1920s is at Webster Hall in Manhattan (Figure 4), demonstrating the liveliness and energetic nature of these balls at the time. The 1920s Harlem and Manhattan Black and brown queer nightlife, as represented in the Webster Hall image, functions as a predecessor to the modern construction of Ballroom culture, rather than that which followed the 1920s Black and brown queer nightlife craze: the “Pansy Craze.”

³³ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940*, 230.



FIGURE 4 “A COSTUME BALL IN THE GRAND BALLROOM OF WEBSTER HALL,” 1920S. FROM THE ALEXANDER ALLAND, SR., COLLECTION. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG).

The “Pansy Craze” was a concept constructed in and by 1920s and 30s contemporary journalism, and rather than some actual explosion of queer nightlife there was an explosion, in a sense, of the representation of queer nightlife. As explained in George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*,

in the Prohibition years of 1920–33, [balls] acquired unprecedented prominence throughout the city, taking a central place in its culture. As a “pansy craze” swept through New York, they became the subject of newspaper headlines, Broadway dramas, films, and novels. The drag balls they organized attracted thousands of spectators, and the nightclubs where they performed became the most popular in the city as visible gay life moved from the margins of the city ... into Times Square, the city’s most prestigious cultural center.³⁴

This shift created a social, and political, icon out of queerness and queer nightlife. Famous actresses and actors attended these balls and parties as it was an important constructive force in their social and cultural capital. Their presence also contributed to the tabloid presence, which led to the popularization of these clubs and this nightlife scene. However, as Heap also explains

³⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*, 301.

of this time period: it was the “white lesbians and pansies [that] replaced the bohemian artists, writers, and political radicals who had previously dominated the districts’ tearooms and cabarets.”³⁵ This intentional terming of the influx of “white” lesbians and pansies also leads into another quote from Heap about the exploding queer nightlife in that they, regardless of size, shared “a racial exclusivity in terms of audience.”³⁶ Therefore, this social and political icon that was “queer nightlife” in the 1920s and 1930s was intentionally and intensely racially exclusive, in alignment with the societal exclusion of Blackness from quotidian, particularly white, cultural life.

In response to this racial exclusivity, Crystal Labeija, after she was snubbed of a pageant award, in which she lost to a white queen who she described as having “terrible” make-up compared to her, created her own pageant, one that was smaller, underground, and filled with people of color.³⁷ It became a model for places where Black and brown queer and trans people were able to feel and be beautiful and be in community within an urban world that demonized, violated, and harmed them at every turn. The Ballroom scene in NYC was a blueprint for Ballroom scenes across the United States (and now the world), and it is in these scenes, particularly the New York City scene, that the history of Black trans aesthetics finds its most influential epicenter and genesis.

Brandon Bailey in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps* conducts ethnographic research and tells the tale of the contemporary Chicago Ballroom scene, which is one of the most comparable ballroom scenes to NYC. Bailey explains the make-up of the community:

Black or Latino/a LGBT people who are in the Ballroom scene come from families, communities, and neighborhoods in which they have had to navigate the often difficult terrain of the streets, which means facing homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse ... the Ballroom scene becomes a necessary refuge and a space in which to share and acquire skills that help Black and Latino/a LGBT individuals survive the urban world.³⁸

Bailey explains that the Ballroom scene developed as a space that allows for “rehearsals and momentary acts of freedom within the liminal space and practice of the ball scene.”³⁹ In particular, the participants and viewers both participated in constructing a gender system within the scene that allowed for living beyond surviving.

³⁵ Heap, 231.

³⁶ Heap, 236.

³⁷ Frank Simon, *The Queen*, 1968.

³⁸ Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queen Up in Pumps*, 7.

³⁹ Bailey, 32.

The NYC Ballroom scene became a collection of microcosmic spaces in which Black and brown queer and trans individuals performed imaginative responses to the restrictive and binaristic gender system that surrounded them in their day-to-day life. These responses mapped onto the categories which made up the program of each ball. Some examples of these categories are: Femme Queen, Butch Queen, Butch Queen Up in Pumps/Drag Queen, Butches, Trade, and others. Within these categories, there are different walks, which is a specific performance that one does that aligns with the particular category that one is walking and is judged by a panel: Face, Body, Sex Siren, Vogue Performance, and others. As an example, Femme Queen Face is a performance in which a trans woman or femme—most often transsexual—accentuates their face and its “unlockability” —which is to be both wholly desirable and is fully Feminine. These performances and their judgments are, as Bailey explained, liminal spaces, removed from impositional and subjugating forms of violence. These spaces offer opportunities of gender mutability and affirmation to the highest degree. They also offer mentorship and intergenerational relationships that reproduce methods of self-preservation, communal preservation, kinship development, and archival production and remembrance. Using a concept most famously articulated through the writings of Silvia Federici, these spaces function as a transfeminist commons⁴⁰ for those that embody or map their selfhood onto the concept of transness and queerness.

The NYC Ballroom scene, even in its early days, was an incubator of harm and violence as well, though. This reproduction of violence is not the same as the imposition of violence that is forced upon and sanctioned by societal standards and political regimes. Instead, these reproductions of harm are similar to the violences that befall children, particularly children of abject formations, in order to train or prepare the child for the larger impositions of violence beyond the comforts of the “home” or “liminal” space. This violence manifests in the pedagogical techniques of Ballroom elders. At times, these techniques are wholesome and led by positive reinforcement, but other times, at times the most represented form in contemporary media, like *POSE*⁴¹ or *Paris is Burning*,⁴² elders engage in something along the lines of “tough love.” In this practice, elders may say *hurtful*—distinct from direct violence or harm—words that may be hurled at a young Black (trans)feminine-presenting individual; they read every inch, every centimeter of the transfemme flesh, in order to “prepare” for the “real world”—that world outside the liminal. This practice is also seen as an attempt to coach and correct performances of the intended gender-sexuality category in

⁴⁰ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Federici, *Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*.

⁴¹ Ryan Murphy, *POSE*, 2017.

⁴² Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, 1990.

order to align these performances with the institutional standards of Ballroom. They read and produce an analysis that reveals the abject figurations of the transfemme. As such, the transfemme borne through the Ballroom scene may hold a familial form of trauma that arises from these reproductions of violence. The cyclicity of these reproductions of violence results in generational traumas that manifest upon the fashions of the transfemme body—fashionable traumas which can simultaneously be the figurations of gender affirmation, like facial feminization, chondrolaryngoplasty, rhinoplasty, buttock enhancement, breast augmentation, etc.

The transfemme embodiment results in a particular state of being whereby an abjection of the Self results in the recognition that: as an iteration of abjection, one cannot and will not ever embody the Self that constructs the psyche of normativity. Instead, the transfemme realizes that all objects of the Self—the subject that the abject can never access or be—“are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being.”⁴³ Essentially, the abject figure of the Self—the transfemme abject of the Feminine Self—recognizes its own disposability and refusal from this construct of Self, of the normal. Therefore, as Kristeva progresses, the abject proceeds to “[disturb] identity, system and order... does not respect borders, positions, rules.”⁴⁴ Transfemme embodiment, as mapped through the Ballroom scene, then, divests from cisnormativity and Femininity as entirely aspirational. Passing, while still crucial and performed iteratively by trans folks, loses its ultimate, aspirational quality. Instead, transfemininity invests in its being that “is none other than abject.”⁴⁵ Instead, a new aesthetic formation, born out of Ballroom culture, embodied this investment in the *beingness* of abjection: the hyperfeminine aesthetic.

THE HYPERFEMININE TRANSFEMININE AESTHETIC

The category is Femme Queen (a category for trans women to perform), Sex Siren (a category to show off sexuality, sexual energy, and how sexy one can be) at the 1999 NY Awards Ball and Sinia Ebony Azzedine Alaïa walks wearing an all pink outfit: hot pink mini-skirt, hot pink fur bolero jacket, and pointed, rose gold nipple pasties (Figure 5). A YouTube comment by Rachel Harris from 2016 reads: “Why didn’t she leave her breasts and face like this? She was perfect.” Another commenter, also in 2016, named Martez, responds: “[same thing] I always say over half of the girls always fuck up because they overdo it which makes them look fake instead of natural like an woman does but to each it’s own[.]” These comments speak to the repulsion produced by abjection which Kristeva outlines.

⁴³ Kristeva, 5.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, 4.

⁴⁵ Kristeva, 5.

Both commenters cling to cisnormativity *as* the paradigm for transfeminine aesthetics, but in the late twentieth century, transfeminine aesthetics, as aforementioned, intentionally divested from cisnormativity as a model. Instead, these aesthetics embedded themselves in a cultural revolt against the Feminine and the cultural discourse which constructed it as common sense or natural. Consequently, much of Femme Queen, and even Butch Queen Up in Pumps/Drag, performance embodied this hyperfeminine aesthetic that invested even further in abjection, but this aesthetic also further invested in normative systems of desirability.



FIGURE 5 "SINIA (EBONY) AZZEDINE ALAIA VS RAQUEL (MUGLER) BALENCIAGA," 1999. CREDIT: @SUGARCHAMPAGNE (YOUTUBE).

The hyperfeminine transfemme aesthetic takes aesthetics of transfemininity and Femininity and reproduces them in exaggerations predicated on the artifice.

This reproduction through the artifice realizes the absurdity of Nature, particularly the Natural Woman or Natural Femininity. From this realization of absurdity, the category of Woman and its performance of Femininity is, again, realized as an abject figuration of gender, one that deviates and opposes Man and Masculinity. Womanhood, in the paradigm gender binary, is the abject of Manhood; while in the paradigm of transfemininity against Femininity, it is the object of gender. In relation to Manhood, though, Woman is the ground upon which Man defines what he is not; Woman is that container into which Man tosses his abject loss, where Man places abjection in order to avoid and refuse. A consequence of binaristic formation is this result in which there exists hierarchization of the nodes of the binary where the object pours out its abject figurations into a categorical container that must be mapped onto disposable bodies. All of this is to *attempt to* reify and maintain the solidity of Manness, of Masculinity. Therefore, the abject (transfemininity) of the abject object (Femininity) results in an implosive reproduction of a violated form of gender in which the transfemme exists as some unnatural, artificial *being* – the hyperfeminine transfemme.

To understand hyperfemininity, the 1990s and early 2000s developed this aesthetic from the pages of high fashion magazines. Modeled after the supermodels which graced the pages, like Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Cindy Crawford, Kate Moss, and Tyra Banks, performers of categories of transfemininity, both inside and outside Ballroom, curated their imaginative spectacle performances based on these supermodels. These supermodels are all connected by one major trend: their notable thinness and svelte physiques. In the decade preceding the height of the predominant heroin chic aesthetic, thinness played a major role in defining femininity and womanliness, especially among trans women within the Ballroom scene. As noted by Bailey, he recalls a trans girl he knew named Brianna Cristal who explained that “[she] was always thin, so [she] always felt like a woman even when [she] was a boy.”⁴⁶ Similarly, a wildly popular icon—a term describing those who are revered and well-known in the Ballroom community for their talent in certain categories—found her peak in Ballroom in the 90s/00s: Dominique Jackson (Figure 6). She is well-known for her statuesque and modelesque physique and face. Known by the name Tyra (Mugler) Maison

⁴⁶ Bailey, 39.

Margiela, Jackson is a prime example of the standards of femininity that defined the Ballroom transfemme aesthetic of the 90s/00s. In this case, again, transfemininity simultaneously converges and diverges with the Feminine. Thinness became the ultimate crux of femininity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and as such the proper noun of Femininity is reiterated through transfeminine performance. As this reiteration is repetitiously performed, these performances are relegated to the subterranean walls of Ballroom, inaccessible to the omnipresent, impositional violence of surveilling proper society. This relegation becomes the materialization of the deepening of the transfemme's abject positionality (and Black and brown queer and trans embodiment's abject positionality). This deepening into the depths of abjection again recalls the distinctiveness of transfeminine performance as constructive a wholly different gender performance from the Feminine and its object of femininity. In short, the hyperfeminine transfemme performance is not just a different performance of femininity; it serves as a tool of gender-based distinction of the transfemme from the normative Feminine.



FIGURE 6 "TYRA (ALLURE) MAISON MARGIELA VS ALYSSA GARCON," 2009. CREDIT: @SUGARCHAMPAGNE (YOUTUBE).

This performance, though, as detailed earlier, became a spectacle, akin to that of fashion scholar Caroline Evans's definition of the "enchanted spectacle," which described the spectacular nature of fashion shows and their removedness from the quotidien.⁴⁷ These performances were imaginative and conducted in the "liminal" spaces of balls or clubs. In a quotidien sense, transfemininity tended to still affirm itself via the logics of passing because these were safeguards, for the abject embodiment, from the repulsion and violence of the 'normal' society. These logics of passing also served as more than protection; they were quotidien stylizations which produced sensations of affirmation and comfort within the fleshiness of being abject. The transfeminine aesthetic transformed with the advent of the Internet and the replication of transfeminist commons⁴⁸ beyond the "physical."

THE "HYPERFEMME"

The hyperfeminine transfeminine aesthetic, which I will refer to as the "hyperfemme aesthetic," is a continuation of this embrace of the abnormality of being and performing that unnatural hyperfemininity which was used to describe Sinia Ebony Azzedine Alaïa. Stephanie Rotz, a journalist, writes about a concept termed, "glitter femininity," which is a form of femininity that "[confronts] 'natural' as a construct, exposing gender's reliance on cultural dress and conditioning."⁴⁹ Rotz provides a straightforward, contemporary articulation of Butler's theory of performativity⁵⁰ through the contemporary implementation of the artifice in the construction of aesthetic embodiments as most intensely replicated through the digital. Rotz explains that glitter femininity uses "shimmer ... stickers ... plastic, fake fur, and satin" to implode the idea of a natural femininity.⁵¹

One of the most notable examples of this aesthetic development is the work of Amanda Lepore (Figure 7). Both her face and body are distinctly, artificially sculpted in the image of that which is determined Feminine: plump lips, cinched waist, hourglass figure, diminutive stature, blonde hair, and large breasts. Coupled with this deep investment in Femininity is the investment in transfeminine aesthetics: visual erasure of bulge, breast augmentation, and buttock enhancement. From this, she invested in a particular sheen of artifice that undermined the subject-making potential of her Feminine investment with large, bright red

⁴⁷ Evans, "The Enchanted Spectacle."

⁴⁸ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 71. Federici defines the commons as "the material foundation upon which peasant solidarity and sociality could thrive," and in the case of a feminist commons, they become a site of "subsistence, autonomy, and sociality," for women. A transfeminist commons, then, becomes an iteration of the feminist commons that seeks to materially support via communality the life, autonomy, and communal affirmation of transfemmes and those of marginalized genders.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Rotz, "Glitter Theory."

⁵⁰ Butler, 33.

⁵¹ Rotz, "Glitter Theory."



FIGURE 7 AMANDA LEPORE, 2019. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN (ARCHIVE.ORG).

lips, platinum blonde hair, and breasts and buttocks larger than the size of the waist. Her body became a hyperbole of abjection and of Femininity to produce an alternative formation of gender that is wholly distinct, yet not removed, from the system of desirability and normality upon which gender is founded. In this, there is a return to the embodiment of transfemininity and its manifestations as simultaneously divergent and convergent with the restrictive and affirmative impositions of Femininity. As Amanda Lepore receives critical acclaim, inside and outside of the club and Ballroom scene, for the spectacle of her physique and aesthetic, Sinia Ebony Azzedine Alaïa receives little acclaim outside of the Ballroom scene. Even further, within the scene, there exists few Femme Queen performers who are non-thin; therefore, the abject figure, manifest as the fat transfemme figure, becomes an abstraction to which the cultural institution of Ballroom remains generally averse.

“Glitter femininity” and its performances add to the canonical realization of the absurdity of gender. While it misses the materiality of gender as a real and influential category that is not easily collapsible by individuated response or minority iterations of subversion, “glitter femininity” assists in giving language to the potentiality of gender to unearth, to create, and to serve its subjects. While repressive and violent, gender also provides both the psychic and communal space for affirmation and subversion. Jack Halberstam introduces the book *The Undercommons* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey with this crucial line that explains what subversive transfemininity, glitter femininity, and genderfuckery⁵² set out to do through the container of gender: it is “mostly about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness.”⁵³

⁵² June Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” 113.

⁵³ Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 5.

TRANSFEMININE PERFORMANCE AS ANTI-COLONIAL PRAXIS

As projects of decolonizing the institution, decolonizing gender, decolonizing the world crop up, *The Undercommons* and much work that performs in the vein of *The Undercommons*—“fugitive planning and [B]lack study” —becomes incongruent with the canonical logics of decoloniality, as entrapped by the institution itself. Therefore, I posit that transfemininity, the transfemme, and the hyperfemme perform an anti-colonial embodiment of the “undercommons”: one that is constructive and actionable, rather than solely whittling away at the colonial entity. As further practiced through the essay “Don’t Exist” by Eva Hayward, this theoretical investment into the abjection of a particular figuration of existence, whether fatness, Blackness, or transness, asserts a politic of “trans negativity” which seeks to “turn against liberal (white) transgender projects about visibility, accessibility, and progressivism, to expose how these political logics are predicated on racialized humanism.”⁵⁴ Although this text is an abrasive confrontation with trans beingness, what this quote particularly provides is an articulation of the impetus of anti-coloniality, which is to “turn against.” Beginning from the abject position and constructing a logic that is not invested in the system and its tactics of whittling away via progressivism, trans negativity provides the language to realize how transfeminine embodiment, as previously articulated, serves to imagine new worlds, through and beyond gender. As *The Undercommons* goes on to state: there is no answer or period at the end of this sentence. Instead, all that can occur is practices of imagination and articulations of theories and their metatheories, so that we may understand our “brokenness” and the World which breaks, and through transfemininity and its depths of abjection, new possibilities of embodiment can arise to provide affirmation and communal recognition for the transfemme.

⁵⁴ Eva S. Hayward, “Don’t Exist,” 193.

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