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A photograph of a person's back, showing a string of beads hanging down the spine. A pink rectangular stamp with the words "WHIPPING GIRL" in pink capital letters is overlaid on the lower back area. The person is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. The background is a solid light blue color.

**WHIPPING
GIRL**

**A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN ON SEXISM
AND THE SCAPEGOATING
OF FEMININITY**

Introduction

"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

—Audre Lorde

WHEN I FIRST TOLD people that I was working on a book based on my experiences and perspectives as a transsexual woman, many of them immediately assumed that I was writing an autobiography (rather than a political or historical account, a work of fiction, or a collection of personal essays). Perhaps they imagined that I would write one of those confessional tell-alls that non-trans people seem to constantly want to hear from transsexual women, one that begins with my insistence that I have always been a "woman trapped inside a man's body"; one that distorts my desire to be female into a quest for feminine pursuits; one that explains the ins and outs of sex reassignment surgery and hormones in gory detail; one that completely avoids discussions about what it is like to be treated as a woman and how that compares to how I was treated as a male; one that whitewashes away all of the prejudices I face for being transsexual; a book that ends not with me becoming an outspoken trans activist or feminist, but with the consummation of my womanhood in the form of my first sexual experience with a man. I am not surprised that many would assume that I was simply writing yet another variation of this archetype. Until very recently, this was the only sort of story that non-trans publishers and media producers would allow transsexual women to tell. And while I respect any trans woman who has been brave enough to share her story with the world, the media's narrow focus on the most palatable or sensationalistic transsexual storylines has resulted in making invisible the vast diversity of perspectives and experiences that exist among trans women. Further, this has dumbed down the intricate and difficult relationships many of us have with our own genders and physical bodies. It has also erased the difficulty we face in dealing with the gender stereotypes that other people project onto us because we are women and because we are transsexuals.

Other people who know me from my work as a transgender activist and trans-focused performance poet might have assumed that I was working on a "transgender revolution" book: one similar to those books by Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Riki Wilchins that influenced me so much when I was first coming out; one that challenges readers to look beyond the gender binary; one that encourages all transgender people (whether they are transsexuals, crossdressers, genderqueers, drag artists, etc.) to recognize that we are all in the same boat, all victims at the hands of the same rigid cultural gender norms. While I do believe that all transgender people have a stake in the same political fight against those who fear and dismiss gender diversity and difference in all of its wondrous forms, I do not believe that we are discriminated against in the same ways and for the exact same reasons. I have found that the ways people reacted to me back when I identified as a mostly closeted male crossdresser, or as a bigendered queer boy, were very different from one another and yet again different from the way people react to me now that I am an out transsexual woman. The focus on "transgender" as a one-size-fits-all category for those who "transgress binary gender norms" has inadvertently erased the struggles faced by those of us who lie at the intersection of multiple forms of gender-based prejudice. And while I agree with many of the points "shattering-the-gender-binary"-themed books regularly make, I have come to the realization that they only tell part of the story.

The idea that all anti-trans discrimination arises from the fact that, as transgender people, we "transgress binary gender norms" does not resonate completely with my personal experiences. As a somewhat eccentric kid, I was given plenty of leeway to opt out of boys' activities and to cultivate an androgynous appearance and persona. I was sometimes teased for being different, for being an atypical or unmasculine boy, but it was nothing compared to venom that was reserved for those boys who acted downright feminine. And now, as an out transsexual woman, I find that those who wish to ridicule or dismiss me do not simply take me to task for the fact that I fail to conform to gender norms—instead, more often than not, they mock my femininity. From the perspective of an occasional gender bender or someone on the female-to-male spectrum, it might seem like binary gender norms are at the core of all anti-trans discrimination. But most of the anti-trans sentiment that I have had to deal with as a transsexual woman is probably better described as misogyny.

The fact that transsexual women are often singled out to bear the brunt of our culture's fascination with and demonization of transgenderism is a subject that has been ripe for feminist critique for about half a century now. Unfortunately, many feminists have been extraordinarily apathetic or antagonistic to the experiences and perspectives of transsexual women. In fact, the few non-trans feminists who have written about us in the past have usually based their theses upon the assumption that we are really "men" (not women), and that our physical transitions to female and our expressions of femininity represent an appropriation of female culture, symbolism, and bodies. Besides being disrespectful of the fact that we identify, live, and are treated by the world as women, such flawed approaches have overlooked an important opportunity to examine far more relevant issues: the ways in which traditional sexism shapes popular assumptions about transsexual women and why so many people in our society feel threatened by the existence of "men who choose to become women."

The intent of this book is to debunk many of the myths and misconceptions that people have about transsexual women, as well as gender in general. By turning the tables on the rest of the world and examining why so many different facets of our society have set out to dehumanize trans women, I hope to show that we are ridiculed and dismissed not merely because we "transgress binary gender norms," as many transgender activists and gender theorists have proposed, but rather because we "choose" to be women rather than men. The fact that we identify and live as women, despite being born male and having inherited male privilege, challenges those in our society who wish to glorify maleness and masculinity, as well as those who frame the struggles faced by other women and queers solely in terms of male and heterosexual privilege.

Examining the society-wide disdain for trans women also brings to light an important yet often overlooked aspect of traditional sexism: that it targets people not only for their femaleness, but also for their expressions of femininity. Today, while it is generally considered to be offensive or prejudiced to openly discriminate against someone for being female, discriminating against someone's femininity is still considered fair game. The idea that masculinity is strong, tough, and natural while femininity is weak,

vulnerable, and artificial continues to proliferate even among people who believe that women and men are equals. And in a world where femininity is so regularly dismissed, perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than male and transgender expressions of femininity.

I have called this book *Whipping Girl* to highlight the ways in which people who are feminine, whether they be female, male, and/or transgender, are almost universally demeaned compared with their masculine counterparts. This scapegoating of those who express femininity can be seen not only in the male-centered mainstream, but in the queer community, where “effeminate” gay men have been accused of holding back the gay rights movement, and where femme dykes have been accused of being the Uncle Toms of the lesbian movement. Even many feminists buy into traditionally sexist notions about femininity—that it is artificial, contrived, and frivolous; that it is a ruse that only serves the purpose of attracting and appeasing the desires of men. What I hope to show in this book is that the real ruse being played is not by those of us who happen to be feminine, but rather by those who place inferior meanings onto femininity. The idea that femininity is subordinate to masculinity dismisses women as a whole and shapes virtually all popular myths and stereotypes about trans women.

In this book, I break with past attempts in feminism and queer theory to dismiss femininity by characterizing it as “artificial” or “performance.” Instead, I argue that certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological sex. For these reasons, I believe that it is negligent for feminists to focus only on those who are female-bodied, or for transgender activists to only talk about binary gender norms. No form of gender equity can ever truly be achieved until we first work to empower femininity itself.

Perhaps the most difficult issue that I have had to contend with in writing this book is the varied backgrounds of the audiences I am hoping to reach. Some readers may be transsexual themselves, or may be very active in the transgender community, but may not be tuned in to the many discourses about gender and transsexuality that exist in academia, clinical settings, feminism, or queer politics. Others may take an interest in this book from a women’s, queer, or gender studies perspective, being familiar with what non-trans academics have had to say about trans people, but without ever having been exposed to a transsexual woman’s take on these many dialogues and debates. Still others may be completely new to the subject, having picked up the book because they want to learn more about transsexuality, how to be a trans ally, or because they have a particular interest in the subjects of femininity and/or sexism. For me, it has certainly been a challenge to write a substantial book about such complex topics that can simultaneously be easily understood and enjoyed by audiences who so greatly differ in their prior knowledge and their presumptions.

While I have written this book in “lay language” and with a general audience in mind, the use of transgender-specific or -related jargon is unavoidable. I have not only had to define a lot of preexisting terms for those who are new to this subject, but redefine or even create new terms to clear up confusion and to fill gaps left by the strange hodgepodge of clinical, academic, and activist language typically used to describe transgender people and experiences. While creating new terms can potentially be disconcerting to readers at first, I feel that it is necessary for addressing and challenging the many assumptions that are commonly made about gender and trans women.

“Trans Woman Manifesto,” which follows this introduction, is the piece I’ve chosen to set the stage for many of the ideas put forward in this book. It is followed by Part 1, *Trans/Gender Theory*, which focuses largely on depictions and representations of transsexuals in the media, medicine and psychiatry, social sciences, academic gender studies, and queer and feminist politics. Because transsexuals make up a relatively small percentage of the population and have little to no power or voice in these fields, non-transsexual depictions regularly stand in for or trump the perspectives and experiences of actual transsexuals. This is highly problematic, as many of these depictions are sensationalizing, sexualizing, and/or outright hostile. Other depictions are not intended to be blatantly demeaning, yet they still have a drastic negative impact on the lives of transsexuals because they frame transsexuality in terms of non-trans people’s assumptions and interests. This forces transsexuals to describe ourselves and our experiences in terms of non-trans terminology and values, which inevitably place us in a subordinate position (i.e., non-trans genders are seen as “normal,” “natural,” and “unquestionable,” whereas transsexual genders are presumed to be “abnormal,” “artificial,” and perpetually in question and open to interpretation). This also has the rather dubious consequence of positioning non-trans people who merely study transsexuality as “experts” who somehow understand transsexuals better than we understand ourselves. I spend a great deal of this section debunking non-trans representations of transsexuality because they effectively silence trans people’s political voices and prevent us from describing our lives the way we see and experience them.

Of course, it is impossible to discuss such issues without having to grapple with another gender binary of sorts—that between gender essentialists (who believe that women and men represent two mutually exclusive categories, each born with certain inherent, nonoverlapping traits) and social constructionists (who believe that gender differences are primarily or exclusively the result of socialization and binary gender norms). For this reason, I have included my own view of gender in this section, one that accommodates my experiences both as a trans person and as a practicing biologist; one that acknowledges that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors help to shape the way that we come to experience and understand our own genders.

Part 2, *Trans Women, Femininity, and Feminism*, brings together my experiences and observations—pre-, during, and post-transition—to discuss the many ways fear, suspicion, and dismissiveness toward femininity shape societal attitudes toward trans women and influence the way trans women often come to view ourselves. In the last two chapters of this section, I bring together several of the main themes in this book to suggest new directions for gender-based activism. In chapter 19, “Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism,” I make the case that feminist activism and theory would be best served by working to empower and embrace femininity, rather than eschewing or deriding it, as it often has in the past. Such an approach would allow feminism to both incorporate transgender perspectives and reach out to the countless feminine-identified women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past. And in chapter 20, “The Future of Queer/Trans Activism,” I show how certain taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions that are prevalent in contemporary queer and transgender theory and politics ensure that trans women’s perspectives and issues will continue to take a back seat to those of other queers and transgender people. I argue that, rather than focusing on “shattering the gender binary”—a strategy that invariably pits gender-conforming and non-gender-conforming people against one another—we work to challenge all forms of gender entitlement (i.e., when a person privileges their own perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of other people’s genders over the way those people understand themselves). After all, the one thing that all forms of sexism share—whether they target females, queers, transsexuals, or others—is that they all begin with placing assumptions and value judgments onto other people’s gendered bodies and behaviors.

Trans Woman Manifesto

THIS MANIFESTO CALLS FOR the end of the scapegoating, deriding, and dehumanizing of trans women everywhere. For the purposes of this manifesto, *trans woman* is defined as any person who was assigned a male sex at birth, but who identifies as and/or lives as a woman. No qualifications should be placed on the term “trans woman” based on a person’s ability to “pass” as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals—after all, it is downright sexist to reduce any woman (trans or otherwise) down to her mere body parts or to require her to live up to certain societally dictated ideals regarding appearance.

Perhaps no sexual minority is more maligned or misunderstood than trans women. As a group, we have been systematically pathologized by the medical and psychological establishment, sensationalized and ridiculed by the media, marginalized by mainstream lesbian and gay organizations, dismissed by certain segments of the feminist community, and, in too many instances, been made the victims of violence at the hands of men who feel that we somehow threaten their masculinity and heterosexuality. Rather than being given the opportunity to speak for ourselves on the very issues that affect our own lives, trans women are instead treated more like research subjects: Others place us under their microscopes, dissect our lives, and assign motivations and desires to us that validate their own theories and agendas regarding gender and sexuality.

Trans women are so ridiculed and despised because we are uniquely positioned at the intersection of multiple binary gender-based forms of prejudice: transphobia, cissexism, and misogyny.

Transphobia is an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms. In much the same way that homophobic people are often driven by their own repressed homosexual tendencies, transphobia is first and foremost an expression of one’s own insecurity about having to live up to cultural gender ideals. The fact that transphobia is so rampant in our society reflects the reality that we place an extraordinary amount of pressure on individuals to conform to all of the expectations, restrictions, assumptions, and privileges associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

While all transgender people experience transphobia, transsexuals additionally experience a related (albeit distinct) form of prejudice: *cissexism*, which is the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of *cissexuals* (i.e., people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned). The most common expression of cissexism occurs when people attempt to deny the transsexual the basic privileges that are associated with the trans person’s self-identified gender. Common examples include purposeful misuse of pronouns or insisting that the trans person use a different public restroom. The justification for this denial is generally founded on the assumption that the trans person’s gender is not authentic because it does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth. In making this assumption, cissexists attempt to create an artificial hierarchy. By insisting that the trans person’s gender is “fake,” they attempt to validate their own gender as “real” or “natural.” This sort of thinking is extraordinarily naive, as it denies a basic truth: We make assumptions every day about other people’s genders without ever seeing their birth certificates, their chromosomes, their genitals, their reproductive systems, their childhood socialization, or their legal sex. There is no such thing as a “real” gender—there is only the gender we experience ourselves as and the gender we perceive others to be.

While often different in practice, cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia are all rooted in *oppositional sexism*, which is the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and nonoverlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires. Oppositional sexists attempt to punish or dismiss those of us who fall outside of gender or sexual norms because our existence threatens the idea that women and men are “opposite” sexes. This explains why bisexuals, lesbians, gays, transsexuals, and other transgender people—who may experience their genders and sexualities in very different ways—are so often confused or lumped into the same category (i.e., queer) by society at large. Our natural inclinations to be attracted to the same sex, to identify as the other sex, and/or to express ourselves in ways typically associated with the other sex blur the boundaries required to maintain the male-centered gender hierarchy that exists in our culture today.

In addition to the rigid, mutually exclusive gender categories established by oppositional sexism, the other requirement for maintaining a male-centered gender hierarchy is to enforce *traditional sexism*—the belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity. Traditional and oppositional sexism work hand in hand to ensure that those who are masculine have power over those who are feminine, and that only those born male will be seen as authentically masculine. For the purposes of this manifesto, the word *misogyny* will be used to describe this tendency to dismiss and deride femaleness and femininity.

Just as all transgender people experience transphobia and cissexism to differing extents (depending on how often, obvious, or out we are as transgender), we experience misogyny to differing extents too. This is most evident in the fact that, while there are many different types of transgender people, our society tends to single out trans women and others on the male-to-female (MTF) spectrum for attention and ridicule. This is not merely because we transgress binary gender norms per se, but because we, by necessity, embrace our own femaleness and femininity. Indeed, more often than not it is our expressions of femininity and our desire to be female that become sensationalized, sexualized, and trivialized by others. While trans people on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum face discrimination for breaking gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism), their expressions of maleness or masculinity themselves are not targeted for ridicule—to do so would require one to question masculinity itself.

When a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: *trans-misogyny*. When the majority of jokes made at the expense of trans people center on “men wearing dresses” or “men who want their penises cut off,” that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny. When the majority of violence and sexual assaults committed against trans people is directed at trans women, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.¹ When it’s okay for women to wear “men’s” clothing, but when men who wear “women’s” clothing can be diagnosed with the psychological disorder transvestic fetishism, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.² When women’s or lesbian organizations and events open their doors to trans men but not trans women, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.³

In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived threat than the existence of trans women, who despite being born male and inheriting male

privilege “choose” to be female instead. By embracing our own femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity. In order to lessen the threat we pose to the male-centered gender hierarchy, our culture (primarily via the media) uses every tactic in its arsenal of traditional sexism to dismiss us:

1. The media hyperfeminizes us by accompanying stories about trans women with pictures of us putting on makeup, dresses, and high-heeled shoes in an attempt to highlight the supposed “frivolous” nature of our femaleness, or by portraying trans women as having derogatory feminine-associated character traits such as being weak, confused, passive, or mousy.

2. The media hypersexualizes us by creating the impression that most trans women are sex workers or sexual deceivers, and by asserting that we transition for primarily sexual reasons (e.g., to prey on innocent straight men or to fulfill some kind of bizarre sex fantasy). Such depictions not only belittle trans women’s motives for transitioning, but implicitly suggest that women as a whole have no worth beyond their ability to be sexualized.

3. The media objectifies our bodies by sensationalizing sex reassignment surgery and openly discussing our “man-made vaginas” without any of the discretion that normally accompanies discussions about genitals. Further, those of us who have not had surgery are constantly being reduced to our body parts, whether by the creators of tranny porn who overemphasize and exaggerate our penises (thus distorting trans women into “she-males” and “chicks with dicks”) or by other people who have been so brainwashed by phallogentrism that they believe that the mere presence of a penis can trump the femaleness of our identities, our personalities, and the rest of our bodies.

Because anti-trans discrimination is steeped in traditional sexism, it is not simply enough for trans activists to challenge binary gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism)—we must also challenge the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity and that femaleness is inferior to maleness. In other words, by necessity, trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement.

Some might consider this contention controversial. Over the years, many self-described feminists have gone out of their way to dismiss trans people and in particular trans women, often resorting to many of the same tactics (hyperfeminization, hypersexualization, and objectification of our bodies) that the mainstream media regularly uses against us.⁴ These pseudofeminists proclaim, “Women can do anything men can,” then ridicule trans women for any perceived masculine tendency we may have. They argue that women should be strong and unafraid of speaking our minds, then tell trans women that we act like men when we voice our opinions. They claim that it is misogynistic when men create standards and expectations for women to meet, then they dismiss us for not meeting their standard of “woman.” These pseudofeminists consistently preach feminism with one hand while practicing traditional sexism with the other.

It is time for us to take back the word “feminism” from these pseudofeminists. After all, as a concept, feminism is much like the ideas of “democracy” or “Christianity.” Each has a major tenet at its core, yet there are a seemingly infinite number of ways in which those beliefs are practiced. And just as some forms of democracy and Christianity are corrupt and hypocritical while others are more just and righteous, we trans women must join allies of all genders and sexualities to forge a new type of feminism, one that understands that the only way for us to achieve true gender equity is to abolish both oppositional sexism and traditional sexism.

It is no longer enough for feminism to fight solely for the rights of those born female. That strategy has furthered the prospects of many women over the years, but now it bumps up against a glass ceiling that is partly of its own making. Though the movement worked hard to encourage women to enter previously male-dominated areas of life, many feminists have been ambivalent at best, and resistant at worst, to the idea of men expressing or exhibiting feminine traits and moving into certain traditionally female realms. And while we credit previous feminist movements for helping to create a society where most sensible people would agree with the statement “women and men are equals,” we lament the fact that we remain light-years away from being able to say that most people believe that femininity is masculinity’s equal.

Instead of attempting to empower those born female by encouraging them to move further away from femininity, we should instead learn to empower femininity itself. We must stop dismissing it as “artificial” or as a “performance,” and instead recognize that certain aspects of femininity (and masculinity as well) transcend both socialization and biological sex—otherwise there would not be feminine boy and masculine girl children. We must challenge all who assume that feminine vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For when we do open ourselves up, whether it be by honestly communicating our thoughts and feelings or expressing our emotions, it is a daring act, one that takes more courage and inner strength than the alpha male facade of silence and stoicism.

We must challenge all those who insist that women who act or dress in a feminine manner take on a submissive or passive posture. For many of us, dressing or acting feminine is something we do for ourselves, not for others. It is our way of reclaiming our own bodies and fearlessly expressing our own personalities and sexualities. It is not us who are guilty of trying to reduce our bodies to mere playthings, but rather those who foolishly assume that our feminine style is a signal that we sexually subjugate ourselves to men.

In a world where masculinity is assumed to represent strength and power, those who are butch and boyish are able to contemplate their identities within the relative safety of those connotations. In contrast, those of us who are feminine are forced to define ourselves on our own terms and develop our own sense of self-worth. It takes guts, determination, and fearlessness for those of us who are feminine to lift ourselves up out of the inferior meanings that are constantly being projected onto us. If you require any evidence that femininity can be more fierce and dangerous than masculinity, all you need to do is ask the average man to hold your handbag or a bouquet of flowers for a minute, and watch how far away he holds it from his body. Or tell him that you would like to put your lipstick on him and watch how fast he runs off in the other direction. In a world where masculinity is respected and femininity is regularly dismissed, it takes an enormous amount of strength and confidence for any person, whether female- or male-bodied, to embrace their feminine self.

But it is not enough for us to empower femaleness and femininity. We must also stop pretending that there are essential differences between women and men. This begins with the acknowledgment that there are exceptions to every gender rule and stereotype, and this simply stated fact disproves all gender theories that purport that female and male are mutually exclusive categories. We must move away from pretending that women and men are “opposite” sexes, because when we buy into that myth it establishes a dangerous precedent. For if men are big, then women must be small; and if men are strong then women must be weak. And if being butch is to make yourself rock-solid, then being femme becomes allowing yourself to be malleable; and if being a man means taking control of your own situation, then being a woman becomes living up to other people’s expectations. When we buy into the idea that female and male are “opposites,” it becomes impossible for us to empower women without either ridiculing men or pulling the rug out from under ourselves.

It is only when we move away from the idea that there are “opposite” sexes, and let go of the culturally derived values that are

assigned to expressions of femininity and masculinity, that we may finally approach gender equity. By challenging both oppositional and traditional sexism simultaneously, we can make the world safe for those of us who are queer, those of us who are feminine, and those of us who are female, thus empowering people of all sexualities and genders.

Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism

I REMEMBER BACK IN COLLEGE—when I was admittedly rather naive with regard to gender politics—someone asked a friend of mine whether she considered herself a feminist. I was surprised to hear her answer “No.” After all, she certainly seemed like a feminist to me. She was independent, intelligent, career-minded, pro-women’s reproductive rights. She regularly stood up for herself and was keenly aware of the disparity between how certain professors treated her and how they treated her male counterparts. When she was asked why she didn’t identify as a feminist, her reply was, “I like being a girl.” She went on to explain that she enjoyed, and even felt empowered by, being feminine. And in her experience, those who openly embraced the label “feminist” often displayed a condescending attitude toward her femininity.

Granted, this idea—that feminism and femininity are in opposition to one another—has often been fostered by those who wish to undermine feminism. For several decades now, feminism’s opponents have attempted to dissuade women from the movement by repeating two (seemingly contradictory) sound bites: that feminists are “man-haters” (read: “homosexual”) while simultaneously “wanting to be men” (read: “masculine”). While one cannot underestimate the negative effect that this antifeminist propaganda has had in turning feminine and heterosexual women away from feminism, we would be doing ourselves a great disservice if we didn’t also acknowledge the fact that many feminists themselves have forwarded the idea that femininity is artificial and incompatible with feminism.¹ This antifemininity tendency may represent the feminist movement’s single greatest tactical error. It’s high time we rectify this mistake by purposefully putting the feminine back into feminism.

Origins of Femininity

Before we can engage in an in-depth discussion about femininity, we must first accurately define the word. In its broadest sense, femininity refers to the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are typically associated with those who are female. Thus, the first thing we must acknowledge is that femininity is a collection of heterogeneous traits. This is an important point to make, as femininity is often assumed to be a monolithic entity—i.e., a “package deal” of gender expressions, traits, and qualities that are inevitably bundled together. The fact that individual feminine traits are separable is evident in the fact that some women are verbally effusive and emotive (qualities that are commonly considered feminine), but not particularly feminine in their manner of dress. Reciprocally, some women who dress very femininely are not very effusive or emotive. Still other women exhibit both or neither of these qualities. It must also be mentioned that these and other feminine traits are not unique to women, as individual men can (and often do) exhibit them.

The fact that feminine traits are not female-specific, and that they are separable from one another, is far too often brushed aside when people try to answer the question that unfortunately drives most discussions about femininity: namely, what produces feminine expressions in people? Those who wish to naturalize femininity will often describe feminine traits as though they were bundled in a single biological program that is initiated only in genetic females. Such claims gloss over the many people who have exceptional gender expressions (i.e., feminine traits in males and masculine traits in females) in order to fully subsume femininity within femaleness. On the other hand, those who wish to *artificialize* femininity often characterize it as though it were a unified social program designed to shape women’s personalities and sexualities via a combination of social norms, constructs, and conditioning. The assumption that femininity is one entity makes it easier for those who favor such social explanations to “prove” that femininity is artificial. After all, one needs only to make the case that certain specific aspects of femininity are clearly “man-made” and vary from culture to culture in order to extrapolate that *all* aspects of femininity are social in origin. Similarly, by showing that certain aspects of femininity are socially imposed on girls and women, one can claim that femininity *as a whole* is unnatural, or it would not have to be enforced at all. What should be clear by now is that the presumption that femininity is a singular program tends to foster an overly simplistic, all-or-none dichotomy between biological and social explanations for gender differences.

Once we let go of the concept of monolithic femininity—and with it, the either/or ideology that plagues nature-versus-nurture debates about gender—it becomes rather apparent that individual feminine traits arise from different combinations of biology and socialization. For instance, during my transition, when I first began to be perceived as female on a regular basis, I was surprised by how often male strangers told me to smile—“Cheer up, things can’t be all that bad,” they’d say. Needless to say, I found these remarks condescending, as nobody dared to tell me that I should smile for them back when I was perceived as male. However, despite my determination not to conform to the suggestions of patronizing strangers, I nevertheless found that, over time, I stopped hearing such comments. Obviously, something had changed. Maybe on an unconscious level, I learned to smile more without realizing it. Or maybe it had to do with another defense mechanism that I’ve learned since living as a woman: making eye contact with strangers less often than I did when I was male, which significantly reduced occurrences of strange men harassing me. These behaviors, which are often considered feminine because women primarily exhibit them, seem to originate as an unconscious response to negotiating one’s way through the world as a woman. In other words, they appear to be primarily or exclusively social in origin.

Other aspects of femininity that are clearly social in origin include what I call “feminine fashions”—i.e., qualities that have only recently become associated with, or symbolic of, femininity. For example, these days it’s common for people to view being thin as a feminine trait. While femininity and thinness have become almost synonymous in contemporary Western culture, women who were more full-figured were considered the feminine ideal in past eras. Similarly, today most of us grow up believing that pink is undoubtedly the most feminine of colors. In the early 1900s, however, it was more common for people to associate pink with boys and blue with girls.²

While some feminine traits are predominantly social in origin, others appear to be greatly influenced by biology. One feminine biological trait is being in tune with one’s emotions. Virtually all transsexuals transitioning in the MTF direction report an increased intensity in the way that they experience emotions once they begin taking estrogen; those in the FTM direction report the reverse effect upon taking testosterone. Thus, emotional intensity definitely has a biological basis, as it is greatly influenced by adult hormone levels.

Of course, feminine traits that arise from our adult hormonal makeup are relatively easy to categorize as biological, as one can experience the corresponding changes firsthand via hormone therapy. In contrast, other feminine traits that have biological inputs—such as those that may be hardwired into our brains from birth—are more difficult to discern. Two possible examples of this include feminine aesthetic preferences and ways of expressing oneself. Evidence that these tendencies may be hardwired comes from the fact that they typically appear very early in childhood and often in contradiction to one’s socialization (both for children whose parents attempt to raise them in a unisex or gender-neutral fashion, and for boys whose families actively and aggressively steer them away from feminine expression). This indicates that some aspects of feminine verbal and aesthetic expression precede and/or supersede gender socialization. Further, the fact that some feminine male children will often continue to express these exceptional traits well into adulthood despite a lifetime of social conditioning to the contrary shows that these traits cannot be adequately explained by social mechanisms. While feminine verbal and aesthetic expression can surely be influenced or exaggerated by social forces, I would argue that these traits are also driven by intrinsic and deep-seated inclinations that are likely to be the result of biology.

Given the way that gender essentialists have distorted biology to justify sexist behaviors and norms, I can understand why some feminists would be hesitant to admit that biology has any role in producing or contributing to behavioral gender differences. However, the idea that gender differences arise solely from socialization and social norms is highly problematic, in that it assumes that our minds are blank slates with absolutely no intrinsic or instinctual gendered or sexual tendencies. This harkens back to views forwarded by extreme behaviorists like B. F. Skinner, who argued that human beings are merely products of their social conditioning. Such views have since been thoroughly refuted by other work in the fields of psychology and biology. Such behaviorist models are unable to explain how any gender system comes into being in the first place, and how (once it is established) anyone can come to transcend or challenge it. As with those models that assume that gender arises directly and expediently from sex

chromosomes or hormones, behaviorist models of gender fail to accurately account for the vast gender and sexual diversity in the world.

While I believe that certain aspects of femininity have biological inputs, it would be foolish for any person to presume that they can fully tease apart the social from the biological: to assume that they can know precisely what biological pathways lie at the root of feminine and masculine behaviors, or to claim to know why or how they evolved. Given the overwhelming number of social variables involved, any researcher who claims to approach human gender expression from a purely biological perspective practices speculation rather than science. Furthermore, I reject the sophomoric biological models of gender that are often proposed in pop psychology and pop science, which often naively portray genes, hormones, and neurons as though they were switches that are simply turned "on" in one gender and "off" in the other. In reality, these aspects of biology are complexly regulated and greatly influenced by an individual's unique genetic and environmental background. This is particularly true of the brain, where neural structure, connections, and activity are constantly being altered and modified in response to new experiences. Biology inevitably produces a broad spectrum of potential combinations of behavioral tendencies in people, making that spectrum compatible with the vast natural diversity we see in human gender expression.

Sexist Interpretations of Femininity

Throughout the rest of this chapter, when I refer to “femininity” or “feminine traits,” it should be understood that I’m talking about a heterogeneous, non-female-specific collection of traits that each have a unique biological and/or social origin. In fact, the only quality that all feminine traits share is that they all tend to be associated with women (albeit not exclusive to them). This point becomes highly relevant once we begin to consider how people interpret feminine traits. Indeed, the ongoing and hotly contested debates over whether femininity and masculinity are biological or social in origin have, in my view, served primarily as a distraction from a far more pertinent issue—namely, what meanings, symbolism, and connotations do we assign to different gender expressions? While I disagree with the notion that gender expression itself is entirely social in origin, I do believe that the way we perceive and assign values to feminine and masculine behaviors is primarily, if not exclusively, a social affair. In our male-centered culture, two forces most often shape our interpretations of femininity (as well as masculinity): oppositional and traditional sexism.

Oppositional sexism functions to legitimize feminine expressions in women and to delegitimize feminine expressions in men (and vice versa for masculinity). So while all people are capable of expressing feminine traits, oppositional sexism ensures that such expressions will appear natural when produced by women and unnatural when produced by men. In addition to creating the perception that female femininity is “real” and “right” while male femininity is “fake” and “wrong,” oppositional sexism may also influence the “doing” of gender expression. Exceptional gender expressions are regularly dismissed, even stigmatized, in our culture, which may lead some people to hide or curb their own gender-variant behavior, further exaggerating the assumed, apparent differences between the two sexes. In these ways, oppositional sexism creates the assumption that feminine traits—which occur in members of both sexes—are inexorably linked to female biology, and therefore, to one another.

Traditional sexism functions to make femaleness and femininity appear subordinate to maleness and masculinity. This is accomplished in a number of ways. For example, female and feminine attributes are regularly assigned negative connotations and meanings in our society. An example of this is the way that being in touch with and expressing one’s emotions is regularly derided in our society. While this trait has virtually nothing to do with one’s ability to reason or to think logically, in the public mind, being “emotional” has become synonymous with being “irrational.” Another example is that certain pursuits and interests that are considered feminine, such as gossiping or decorating, are often characterized as “frivolous,” while masculine preoccupations—even those that serve solely recreational functions, such as sports—generally escape such trivialization.

In addition to placing inferior meanings on feminine traits, traditional sexism also creates the impression that certain aspects of femininity exist for the pleasure or benefit of men. Take, for example, the concern for, or desire to help, others. While those who have this quality of empathy or altruism often express it toward all types of beings (i.e., children and adults, strangers and friends, animals and humans), it’s often recast in women as a maternal, “nurturing” quality that is meant to be directed primarily toward one’s family. Thus, this thoroughly human trait has been twisted into the expectation that it’s women’s “natural” duty to take care of their male partners and children, and to carry out the bulk of family and domestic chores.

Another example of this phenomenon is the way that feminine self-presentation is often framed as though it solely exists to entice or attract men. This assumption denies any possibility that those who are feminine might wish to adorn themselves for their own benefit or pleasure. After all, feminine self-presentation tends to highly correlate with a more general desire to surround oneself with beautiful or aesthetically pleasing objects and materials—whether in decorating one’s home or adorning one’s body. The idea that this trait exists primarily to pique men’s interest seems unlikely to me, as most straight men I know seem rather disinterested in the way their homes are decorated, and often are completely oblivious when their female partners don new outfits or hairstyles. It’s safe to say that most heterosexual men are far more interested in women’s physical bodies than they are in the clothing and accessories that cover them. The idea that feminine self-presentation exists primarily to attract heterosexual men is further undermined by the fact that femme dykes dress in a feminine manner despite their disinterest in attracting men. And some gay men also dress very femininely despite the fact that the gay male community has a history of idolizing and fetishizing hypermasculine images and bodies rather than feminine ones. As someone who’s not interested in attracting men, I often enjoy dressing femininely; I simply feel more alive and self-empowered when I do. Whenever people (male or otherwise) assume that women who dress in a feminine manner do so in order to elicit male attention, it always sounds like a slightly toned-down version of that arrogant claim that women who dress provocatively are somehow asking to be raped. Clearly, it’s the idea that feminine self-presentation exists for men’s benefit that is oppressive to women, not the acts of self-presentation themselves.

The issue of feminine self-presentation also brings up another way in which feminine traits are undermined: They are often cast as being dependent on masculinity and maleness. This sentiment seems to be projected onto virtually all aspects of femaleness and femininity. It can be seen in the way men are often cast as the “protectors” of women, either because they are typically physically stronger or because women are seen as being “emotionally frail.” The stereotypic and mythic image of the damsel in distress who requires a masculine man to save her seems to impart an air of helplessness, fragility, and passivity onto virtually all aspects of femininity and female sexuality. Such connotations seem to heavily inform both the materiality and symbolism of certain feminine fashions. They also help foster a predator/prey mentality regarding sexuality, where femininity becomes conflated with being sexually receptive and passive, while masculinity is synonymous with penetration and sexual aggressiveness. This, of course, denies the reality that women are often sexual initiators and that both parties are invariably active during the act of sex.

Indeed, the fact that helplessness, fragility, and passivity are merely meanings projected onto female bodies and feminine expressions (rather than qualities that are “built into” femaleness and femininity) becomes obvious when we imagine what would happen if, instead of centering our beliefs about heterosexual sex around the idea that the man “penetrates” the woman, we were to say that the woman’s vagina “consumes” the man’s penis. This would create a very different set of connotations, as the woman would become the active initiator and the man would be the passive and receptive party. One can easily see how this could lead to men and masculinity being seen as dependent on, and existing for the benefit of, femaleness and femininity. Similarly, if we thought about the feminine traits of being verbally effusive and emotive not as signs of insecurity or dependence, but as bold acts of self-expression, then the masculine ideal of the “strong and silent type” might suddenly seem timid and insecure by comparison.

The mistaken belief that femininity is inherently helpless, fragile, dependent, irrational, frivolous, and so on, gives rise to the commonplace assumption that those who express femininity are not to be taken seriously and cannot be seen as legitimate authority figures. While such assumptions regularly undermine feminine people of both sexes, they often have a greater net effect on

women, because traditional sexism targets female bodies as well as feminine expression, and because traditional and oppositional sexism act together to put women in a double bind: If a woman acts feminine, she will be delegitimized by traditional sexism, and if she acts masculine, she will be delegitimized by oppositional sexism.

Feminist Interpretations of Femininity

Now, I will address different ways in which contemporary feminists have reacted to the sexist devaluing of femininity in society. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on two broad trends in feminism, which I call *unilateral feminism* and *deconstructive feminism*. By focusing on only these two general trends, it is not my intention to erase the significant differences that distinguished the individual branches of feminism that together gave rise to these trends, nor is it to ignore other branches of feminism that fall outside of these trends. Rather, my main purpose for this categorization scheme is to illustrate two major tendencies in feminist perspectives on femininity.

Several of the most influential branches of feminism that arose during the 1960s and 1970s may be described as falling under the umbrella of *unilateral feminism*, in that they viewed sexism as a straightforward matter of women being oppressed at the hands of men. One of the canonical writings of unilateral feminism is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which focuses on the malaise that affected many middle-class women during the 1950s and 1960s as they gave up careers to become housewives and to raise families.³ Friedan co-opts Sigmund Freud's phrase "feminine mystique" to describe the popular belief at the time that women could only be happy if they fully immersed themselves in femininity. Friedan discusses femininity in relation to what she calls the "housewife trap"—the expectation that middle-class women should become full-time homemakers, a role she believed stifled women's emotional and intellectual growth. To make her case that femininity is a trap (rather than something many women naturally gravitate toward), Friedan spends much of the book discussing the ways in which companies, advertisers, the media, psychiatry, and others actively manipulate women into buying into feminine trappings. *The Feminine Mystique* was a rather narrowly focused book, in that it only dealt with issues that affected middle-class American women, and with those aspects of femininity that are associated with the "housewife trap." But it helped reinforce a notion that would appear repeatedly throughout unilateral feminism—that femininity (or at least certain aspects of it) is an artificial, man-made ploy designed to hold women back from reaching their full potential.

Looking back at unilateral feminist writings, one finds that sexism is often described as arising from a patriarchal system that kept women oppressed via two interrelated tactics: (1) placing belittling meanings and assumptions onto women's bodies, and (2) coercing women into femininity, a program that was seen as inherently stifling and which fostered (or was the product of) women's subservience and subjugation to men. Thus, unilateral feminists viewed the oppositional sexism faced by women as part of traditional sexism. Because masculinity was viewed primarily as a position of privilege, oppositional sexism against male-bodied people remained obscured. Indeed, the very idea that a man might find masculine expectations restrictive seemed as nonsensical to many unilateral feminists as a rich person complaining about being oppressed by their own wealth.

The unilateral feminist notion that women were coerced into femininity was further facilitated by the growing use of the sex/gender distinction, which differentiated between one's sex (which arose from biology) and gender (which arose from one's environment, socialization, and psychology).⁴ This gave unilateral feminists the theoretical means to challenge the traditionally sexist messages projected onto women's biology and bodies while ignoring or disavowing the negative messages associated with femininity. In fact, it's clear that many influential unilateral feminists believed that qualities such as helplessness, deference, and passivity were essentially "built into" feminine expressions and practices.⁵ In other words, these feminists not only failed to challenge sexist interpretations of femininity, but often accepted those interpretations at face value.

While unilateral feminists almost universally agreed that some or all aspects of femininity enabled sexism, they differed in the proposed solutions for countering it. For example, liberal feminists (such as Friedan) worked within the existing system to try to gain equal access to previously male-dominated areas (particularly professional and leadership positions), often promoting a "women can do anything men can do" philosophy. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that certain masculine-associated qualities and interests were natural and desirable for women to strive for, whereas the reciprocal feminine qualities were not. Radical feminists argued that women's oppression would only end by entirely rejecting both masculine and feminine gender roles—which were seen as being inexorably tied to men's "oppressor" and women's "oppressed" statuses—and instead adopting a more "natural" androgynous disposition. Cultural feminists took a more essentialist position, arguing that men and women were inherently different, and had distinctive innate traits; for example, men were inherently destructive and oppressive, while women were creative and nurturing. While cultural feminists certainly embraced some feminine traits—even characterizing them as superior to their masculine counterparts' traits—they were careful to portray such traits as arising from a woman's "natural" womanliness rather than from "artificial, man-made femininity."⁶

The notion that sexism can only be overcome if women work to become more masculine, more androgynous, or more "naturally womanly" all artificialize femininity by assuming that one's gender expression is easily malleable, and can be reshaped according to one's politics. Such one-size-fits-all approaches falsely presume that femininity is monolithic, ignoring how significant differences in class, culture, and biological predisposition give rise to a vast diversity of feminine expressions and perspectives.⁷ Because many unilateral feminists refused to accept this diversity in female gender expression, they often developed rather belittling views of women who were unabashedly feminine, characterizing them as having their minds colonized, being "ego repressed," and not being a "whole person."⁸ Some unilateral feminists called femininity a "slave status," equating it with masochism, comparing it with Stockholm syndrome, and believing that it existed only to "communicate a woman's acceptance of her subordinate status."⁹ Women who engaged in feminine beauty practices were perhaps the biggest target of such criticism, as they were accused of donning "symbols of oppression," being manipulated by "thought control," alienating themselves from their own bodies, and taking part in "self-imposed passivity."¹⁰

Of course, one of the biggest caveats in the unilateral feminist argument that femininity is artificial and only exists to oppress women is the fact that some people who are assigned and socialized male also express femininity. Perhaps sensing that feminine gay men and MTF spectrum trans people brought unilateral feminists' antifemininity theses into question, many unilateral feminists developed vehemently disdainful attitudes toward these groups. Interestingly (and not coincidentally), the unilateral feminists who have been most outspoken in deriding feminine gay men and trans women also tend to have the most openly hostile attitudes toward femininity in general. For example, Mary Daly, who referred to feminine women as "painted birds" and portrayed feminist women such as herself as being "attacked by the mutants of her own kind, the man-made women," was similarly resentful of

transsexual women (whom she called “Frankenstein’s Monsters”) and drag queens (whom she compared to whites playing “blackface”).¹¹ Germaine Greer, who has referred to conventionally feminine women as “feminine parasites,” has written multiple trans-misogynistic screeds, one of which assails trans woman Jan Morris for her “obsession with femininity.”¹² And Sheila Jeffreys, who believes that femininity “is the behavior required of the subordinate class of women in order to show their deference to the ruling class of men,” has argued that MTF transsexuality and gay male femininity arise exclusively from sexual masochism.¹³ Thus, the anti-gay-male, anti-trans-woman sentiment that persists today among many unilateral feminists has its roots in their traditionally sexist views of femininity.

Many of the unilateral feminist positions that I’ve discussed so far have been challenged with the rise of *deconstructive feminism* in the 1980s and 1990s. Deconstructive feminists, while varied in their backgrounds and approaches, share the belief that the category “woman” is socially constructed and therefore doesn’t exist independent of the societal norms and discourses that bring it into being. Therefore, instead of working to end sexism by highlighting the ways that women are “oppressed” by men (as unilateral feminists had), deconstructive feminists set out to deconstruct our very notions of “woman” and “man,” exposing the assumptions and expectations that enable sexism. They describe “man” and “woman” as being situated within a binary gender system that permeates every nook and cranny of our society, infusing itself into our language, traditions, behaviors, and the very way we think about ourselves and others. This binary gender system assumes that men are masculine and aggressive and attracted to women, who are feminine and passive. If one fails to adhere to these assumptions in any way—for instance, if you are an aggressive woman or a feminine man—then you automatically become unintelligible within this system and are therefore marginalized.

Deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in a number of important ways. First, unlike unilateral feminism, which focuses almost exclusively on traditional sexism, deconstructive feminism focuses primarily on oppositional sexism. In a sense, deconstructive feminism subsumes traditional sexism into oppositional sexism, as it typically depicts the “othering” of “woman” as an inevitable by-product of that identity being binary-paired to “man.” Because this relationship privileges oppositional sexism over traditional sexism, deconstructive feminists have been influential in both feminist and queer theory. Deconstructive feminists also differ from unilateral feminists in that they do not subscribe to the sex/gender distinction, but instead argue that our notions about “sex” are just as socially constructed as our notions of “gender.”

While deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in many ways, it shares its predecessor’s tendency to artificialize gender expression. This is often accomplished via *gender performativity*, a concept developed by Judith Butler to describe the way in which built-in expectations about maleness and femaleness, straightness and queerness, are constantly imposed on all of us. Butler uses the term “performativity” to highlight how feminine and masculine norms must constantly be cited. She uses the example of the child who becomes “girded” by others at birth: She is given a female name, referred to with female pronouns, given girl toys, and will, throughout her life, have her “girlness” cited by others in society.¹⁴ Butler argues that this sort of reiteration “produces” gender, making it appear “natural.” However, many other deconstructive feminists have interpreted Butler’s writings to mean that one’s gender is merely a “performance.” According to this latter view, if gender itself is merely a “performance,” then one can challenge sexism by simply “performing” one’s gender in ways that call the binary gender system into question; the most often cited example of this is a drag queen whose “performance” supposedly reveals the way in which femaleness and femininity are merely a “performance.”¹⁵

While unilateral feminists typically view femininity in exclusively negative terms, deconstructive feminists believe that femininity is context-dependent: It can be “good” (when it is used to subvert the binary gender system) or “bad” (when used to naturalize that system).¹⁶ In other words, deconstructive feminism only empowers and embraces queer expressions of femininity, while straight expressions of femininity are typically portrayed as reinforcing a sexist binary gender system. Thus, both deconstructive and unilateral feminism share the belief that (1) femininity is not a natural form of expression, but rather one that is socially imposed; (2) most women are “duped” into believing that their femininity arises intrinsically rather than due to extrinsic forces such as socialization or social constructs; (3) people who are “in the know” recognize that gender expression is artificial and easily malleable, and thus they can purposefully adopt a more radical, antisexist gender expression (e.g., androgyny, drag, etc.); and (4) because feminine women choose not to adopt these supposedly radical, antisexist gender expressions, they may be seen as enabling sexism and thus collaborating in their own oppression.

The Ramifications of Artificializing Femininity

So why has the artificializing of femininity become a preoccupation for many feminists over the last several decades? I believe that it has to do with the fact that many of the women who have most strongly gravitated toward feminism are those who have found traditional feminine gender roles constraining or unnatural. In many cases, this is due to their own inclinations toward exceptional forms of gender expression. Because their personal experiences with femininity felt uncomfortable and contrived in comparison with their experiences with androgyny, masculinity, or other gender expressions (which they found more liberating and empowering), they mistakenly projected their own experience and perspective onto all other women. While not necessarily done maliciously, this extrapolation was nevertheless an act of gender entitlement, one that denied that any diversity in gender expression might exist among women arising out of their very different class, cultural, or biological backgrounds and predispositions. By arrogantly assuming that no woman could be legitimately drawn toward feminine expression, these feminists permanently relegated femininity to the status of “false consciousness.”

The feminist assumption that “femininity is artificial” is narcissistic, as it invariably casts nonfeminine women as having “superior knowledge” while dismissing feminine women as either “dupes” (who are too ignorant to recognize they have been conned) or “fakes” (who purposely engage in “unnatural” behaviors in order to uphold sexist societal norms). This tendency to dismiss feminine women is eerily similar to the behavior of some lesbian-feminists in the 1970s who arrogantly claimed that they were more righteous feminists than heterosexual women because the latter group was “fucking with the oppressor.”¹⁷ It is an extraordinarily convenient tactic to artificialize, and even demean, an inclination (such as femininity or heterosexuality) when you personally are not inclined toward it. Indeed, this is exactly what straight bigots do when they dismiss queer forms of gender and sexual expression as “unnatural.” When we feminists stoop to the level of policing gender and start inventing etiologies to explain why some women adopt “unnatural” feminine forms of expression, there’s little to distinguish us from the sexist forces we claim to be fighting against in the first place.

While femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped, and enforced by society, to say that it is entirely “artificial” or merely a “performance” is patronizing toward those for whom femininity simply *feels right*. Indeed, one would have to have a rather grim view of the female population to believe that a majority of us could so easily be “brainwashed” or “coerced” into enthusiastically adopting an entirely contrived or wholly artificial set of gender expressions. In fact, it seems incomprehensible that so many women could so actively gravitate toward femininity unless there was something about it that resonated with them on a profound level. This becomes even more obvious when considering feminine folks who exhibit no desire whatsoever to fit into straight society, such as femme dykes (who proudly express their femininity despite being historically marginalized within the lesbian movement because of it) and “nelly queens” (who remain fiercely feminine despite the gay male obsession with praising butchness and deriding “effeminacy”).¹⁸

The idea that “femininity is artificial” is also blatantly misogynistic. While a handful of theorists in the field of gender studies have more recently begun to focus on how masculinity is constructed, the lion’s share of feminist attention, deconstruction, and denigration has been directed squarely at femininity. There is an obvious reason for this. Just as woman is man’s “other,” so too is femininity masculinity’s “other.” Under such circumstances, negative connotations like “artificial,” “contrived,” and “frivolous” become built into our understanding of femininity—indeed, this is precisely what allows masculinity to always come off as “natural,” “practical,” and “uncomplicated.” Those feminists who single out women’s dress shoes, clothing, and hairstyles to artificialize necessarily leave unchallenged the notion that their masculine counterparts are “natural” and “practical.” This is the same male-centered approach that allows the appearances and behaviors of men who wish to charm or impress others to seem “authentic” while the reciprocal traits expressed by women are dismissed as “feminine wiles.” Femininity is portrayed as a trick or ruse so that masculinity invariably seems sincere by comparison. For this reason, there are few intellectual tasks easier than artificializing feminine gender expression, because male-centrism purposefully sets up femininity as masculinity’s “straw man” or its scapegoat.

As feminists, it’s time for us to acknowledge that this scapegoating of femininity has become the Achilles’ heel of the feminist movement. While past feminists have gone to great lengths to empower femaleness and to tear away all of the negative connotations that have plagued women’s bodies and biology, they have allowed the negative connotations associated with femininity to persist relatively unabated. Nothing illustrates this better than the fact that, while most reasonable people see women and men as equals, few (if any) dare to claim that femininity is masculinity’s equal. Indeed, much of what has historically been called misogyny—a hatred of women—has clearly gone underground, disguising itself as the less reprehensible derision of femininity. This new version of misogyny, which focuses more on maligning femininity than femaleness, can be found everywhere. It can be seen in our political discourse, where advocates for the environment, gun control, and welfare are undermined via “guilt by association” with feminine imagery as seen in phrases such as “tree huggers,” “soft on crime,” and pro-“dependency”—where male politicians who exhibit anything other than a two-dimensional facade of hypermasculinity are invariably dismissed by political cartoonists who depict them donning dresses.¹⁹

This new misogyny still very much undermines women, and it accomplishes this in several ways. First, the majority of feminine people are women, so by default they make up the largest class of those who are targeted by antifeminine sentiment. Second, our concept of femininity doesn’t merely affect how we “do” our own gender expression—it is also an expectation or assumption that we project onto other people’s bodies and behaviors. Therefore, while an individual woman may purposefully eschew femininity in her appearance and actions, she cannot escape the fact that other people will project feminine assumptions and expectations upon her simply because they associate femininity with femaleness. In her book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, Virginia Valian makes a strong case that what has come to be known as the “glass ceiling”—the fact that women, regardless of their skills and merits, tend not to advance as far in their careers as similarly qualified men—is best explained by the fact that all people project feminine assumptions and expectations onto women and masculine ones onto men.²⁰ This, of course, favors men, since masculinity is by default seen as “strong,” “natural,” and “aggressive” while femininity is seen as “weak,” “contrived,” and “passive.” Therefore, until feminists work to empower femininity and pry it away from the insipid, inferior meanings that plague it—weakness, helplessness, fragility, passivity, frivolity, and artificiality—those meanings will continue to haunt every person who is female and/or feminine.

Feminists’ past privileging of femaleness over femininity has also enabled misogynistic acts that target men who have feminine

traits to remain unnoticed and unarticulated. For example, when a gay man ridicules another gay man for being too “flamboyant” or “effeminate,” he may be accused of harboring “internalized homophobia”—a nonsensical turn of phrase to describe someone who is openly gay and has no problems with masculine gay men. Isn’t this form of antifeminine discrimination better described as misogyny? Similarly, straight women who regularly pair up with macho guys who treat them poorly, yet won’t consider dating a “nice guy,” might be described as harboring “internalized misogyny.” Again, isn’t this better described as a form of externalized misogyny directed at men who display qualities that are considered feminine?

Some feminists (particularly unilateral feminists) will no doubt have a negative knee-jerk reaction to my suggestion that we extend our understanding of misogyny to encompass effemimania—our societal obsession with critiquing and belittling feminine traits in males. However, as I have argued in past chapters, effemimania affects everybody, including women. Effemimania encourages those who are socialized male to mystify femininity and to dehumanize those who are considered feminine, and thus forms the foundation of virtually all male expressions of misogyny. Effemimania also ensures that any male’s manhood or masculinity can be brought into question at any moment for even the slightest perceived expression of, or association with, femininity. I would argue that today, the biggest bottleneck in the movement toward gender equity is not so much women’s lack of access to what has been traditionally considered the “masculine realm,” but rather men’s insistence on defining themselves in opposition to women (i.e., their unwillingness to venture into the “feminine realm”).

Until now, the typical feminist response to men who fear being associated with the “feminine realm” can be paraphrased as “*Get over it!*” Such an attitude is ignorant, as it fails to take into account the fact that male femininity is perceived very differently from female femininity. If femininity in women is already seen as “artificial” and “contrived,” then oppositional sexism ensures that femininity in men appears exponentially “artificial” and “contrived.” While a handful of feminists have recognized this fact—that male feminine expression tends to evoke levels of contempt and disgust that far exceed that which is normally reserved for female masculinity or femininity—most have unfortunately chosen to ignore or dismiss misogyny when it targets those who are male-bodied.²¹ By doing so, these feminists have become enablers for one of the most prevalent and malignant forms of traditional sexism.

The greatest barrier preventing us from fully challenging sexism is the pervasive antifeminine sentiment that runs wild in both the straight and queer communities, targeting people of all genders and sexualities. The only realistic way to address this issue is to work toward empowering femininity itself. We must rightly recognize that feminine expression is strong, daring, and brave—that it is powerful—and not in an enchanting, enticing, or supernatural sort of way, but in a tangible, practical way that facilitates openness, creativity, and honest expression. We must move beyond seeing femininity as helpless and dependent, or merely as masculinity’s sidekick, and instead acknowledge that feminine expression exists of its own accord and brings its own rewards to those who naturally gravitate toward it. By embracing femininity, feminism will finally be able to reach out to the vast majority of feminine women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past. The movement would also be able to reach those who are not female (whether male and/or transgender) who regularly face effemimania or trans-misogyny, but who have not been able to seek refuge or have a voice in the feminist movements of the past. Indeed, a feminist movement that encompasses both those who are female and those who are feminine has the potential to become a majority, one with the strength in numbers to finally challenge and overturn both traditional and oppositional sexism.