

Content Note: descriptions of gender dysphoria, historical medical malpractice

Girl's Night: The Upper Limit of Gender Euphoria

Being nonbinary is a lifelong search for gender euphoria among all the possibilities of presentation, language, and identity. I found my identity not by running away from dysphoria, but by running towards pleasure wherever I found it (regardless of whether the pleasure was marked with pink or blue). By refusing to choose between the joys of manhood and the joys of womanhood, I gained access to both; it feels like a waste not to fully explore the options this affords me. In light of this, I am always looking for new facets of gender I have not yet explored to see what pleasure I might find within them. Through the writing of past and present "gender hackers" (Preciado, 2013, p. 55), I discovered new places to look for euphoria and eagerly tried to put their theory into practice. Unfortunately, the theory did not survive the jump into my reality. The pleasure I was seeking failed to materialize; instead, my experimentation revealed a painful, ugly, inescapable truth. Seeking pleasure through gender exploration is possible in theory, but in practice, the structure of gender punishes deviance and incentivizes conformity because of its origins and continued use as a tool of biopower. Thus, the concept of gender destroys gender nonconforming people's ability to seek pleasure freely.

Gender as a construct is maintained by many components and structures, thus opening all of these structures to being repurposed for pleasure. The components of gender are wide-ranging and varied, as described by Paul B. Preciado in *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013). There are technologies of gender, which are the media images and real-world bodies that represent and thus reinforce the gender binary (de Lauretis, 1987, as cited in Preciado, 2013, p. 107). There are gender performances, which are the rules, norms, and actions associated with each gender, repeated to reinforce and reproduce the binary

(Butler, 1990, as cited in Preciado, 2013, p. 110). Finally, there is Preciado's exploration of biotechnology, where "corrective" surgeries are used to reinforce a sex and thus a gender binary that does not exist (Preciado, 2013, p. 119). All of these systems assemble the categories of "man" and "woman"; without them, the categories would cease to exist. Gender's constructedness implicitly opens it up to deconstruction; every tool required to maintain gender is a potential starting point through which gender can be dismantled. In addition, each tool of gender can be used in a myriad of ways beyond its current place in the machinery. Thus, we are inevitably heading towards a world where the machine of gender is broken down and used for parts, where technologies and tools of gender are freely used and discarded when they stop being enjoyable (Preciado, 2013, p. 125). This type of use was what I wanted to attempt. I am generally masculine-leaning and androgynous in my presentation, but I do not want to limit my expression because of in-group nonbinary norms (Cusack et al., 2020, p. 431). I have looked butch for my entire adult life, so I did not know what joys I could be missing out on on the other side of the spectrum. Thus, I decided to use the gendered technologies of femininity that I previously avoided. In pursuit of potential gender euphoria, I donned a pink dress, fake nails, a full face of makeup, and a wig and took my friends to a club for a "Girl's Night". Following Preciado's logic, I wanted to repurpose gender's tools and find my nonbinary pleasure in technologies created for womanhood. At first, I was almost giddy with the newness of it all. I liked the way my hand gestures looked with the fake nails. I took a million pictures of my makeup, enjoying the novelty of my unrecognizable face. Most of all, after 10 years of having a buzzcut, *I could not stop playing with my "hair"*. I truly wish this story stopped here, with straightforward pleasure and freedom. Unfortunately, my joy became complicated when it entered the world beyond my apartment.

Because I found my gender through the pursuit of pleasure, I failed to recognize the extent of the pain that gender exploration could cause. After spending most of my adolescence and entire adulthood as a gender deviant, I had no concept of how the world treated gender-conforming people. This experiment with feminine technologies showed me just how different my life had been. In my wig and my dress, I was let into the nightclub for \$10 less than usual. I easily became a part of the crowd, shoulder to shoulder with strangers. I went to the girl's bathroom and made fast friends with everyone who walked through the door, dancing with each other and giving compliments freely. In short, I had a standard club experience. This type of night may feel mundane to most, but I have never experienced this before. Normally, when I go to a club, I am never part of a crowd; people move away from me when I come near them. I am perpetually surrounded by a buffer of empty space as if the other people in the room are afraid that *whatever is wrong with me* is contagious. Normally, when I walk into a girl's washroom, the friend-making stops. Something about my presence turns the easy flow of compliments into tense silence, and the room is always louder behind me when I leave. These experiences follow me out of the club and into the rest of the world, inescapable. People glare openly wherever I go, regardless of whether I am wearing flashy clothes or a crewneck and sweatpants. No matter how many people are standing, I am always surrounded by empty seats on the bus. I am stared at so often that I have stopped noticing. Even in gay bars, spaces *designed* for deviants, I draw scowls and repel crowds. There is *nowhere* I can go to escape this. Before my experiment, I had no frame of reference for what was "normal". I know now that my life has been anything but. The pain of this knowledge flooded into me from all sides. It was the pain of realizing how much mistreatment I had endured without knowing any better. It was the pain of suddenly understanding how much easier life could be, and the grief of knowing that I would never

experience it again. Above all, it was the pain of a failed experiment in joy; in my attempt to play with gender and seek my own queer pleasure, I had stumbled into indescribable pain, and the contrast between expectation and result made the sting so much worse. The kindness I experienced in my long brown wig was the reward incentivizing gender conformity. The treatment I usually receive is the punishment for gender deviance. The message was clear: if I wanted the reward, I needed to conform. Otherwise, it was back to the suddenly silent bathrooms and my perpetual halo of empty seats on the bus. If I cannot seek pleasure in deviance without punishment and I cannot receive the rewards of conformity without doing something I find painful, I have no ability to seek pleasure through gender. Even when I attempt to play with conformity, the stark contrast between my normal life and the new treatment turns the pleasure sour; the joy of my makeup and my fake nails seeped out of me when I registered how much kinder the world had suddenly become. That night, in my wig and my dress, the tools of gender were not free to use as Preciado claimed. Putting them on only showed me how limited my capacity to seek pleasure through gender exploration really was. This policing is not a bug in the system of gender; it is the feature that the system was built for in the first place.

Gender's use and origins are inextricable from biopower and policing, making it impossible to seek pleasure and play with gender freely. Biopower is the power not to make *die*, as sovereign power can, but the power to "make *live*" (Foucault 2003, as cited in Harwood, 2008, p. 16). Gender is one arm of this system; the gender binary creates men and women, which creates heterosexuality, which creates heterosexual sex, which creates reproduction, which creates life (Repo, 2013, p. 231). Thus, reinforcing gender reinforces the continuation of life, making gender a key part of biopower. Biopower is not reinforced by a central authority; instead, it requires a whole system of biopedagogy to teach, reaffirm, and reproduce itself (Foucault,

1983, as cited in Harwood, 2008, p. 19). To maintain itself, gender must be reinforced in schools, hospitals, legislation, media, and everyday life. From the women's bathroom to the seats of the bus, gender is policed everywhere. The system requires an unfathomable amount of effort to maintain because *it is not natural*. Gender as a "psychological sex" distinct from sex was invented by Dr. John Money in the 1950s for the express purpose of forcing medical interventions on intersex infants to create gender conformity (Repo, 2013, p. 229). Money theorized that gender was not born, but was taught, and advocated this teaching needed to be aggressive (Repo, 2013, p. 229). Gender was built by the pedagogies that reinforced it even then, from the doctors performing the "corrective" surgeries to the parents of the intersex children who reinforced the divide in gender roles (Repo, 2013, p. 235). From the very beginning, gender was created to reinforce an artificial binary by force. Thus, it is no wonder that it is so difficult to explore the possibilities of gender without incurring the wrath of biopedagogy. Gender cannot tolerate deviance because the gender binary has to be reaffirmed by *everything*. Anyone who is publicly visible and deviant is a threat to the whole system. Because of this, nonbinary people are a massive target. Gender resists our deviance with medicalization, social ostracization, and outright violence. *This* is why I cannot play with gender freely to seek pleasure as a nonbinary person; my pleasure, my very *existence*, is a threat to biopower that must be "fixed" or simply eradicated. Gender's constructedness theoretically makes it a playground for gender deviants, but gender's purpose is and always has been to erase these deviants from existence.

Through theory, I discovered a world where gender could be taken apart and put back together in a new shape. I discovered gender's constructedness and dreamed about the joy I could invent with its repurposed tools. Then, through my experiences, I discovered how powerfully gender had constrained my capacity to find joy through gender experimentation.

Gender was created to reinforce itself by destroying deviants, and it continues to serve this purpose today; this is what made my pursuit of pleasure impossible. Put simply, I cannot live freely in a world structured by gender. Queer joy is incredibly, beautifully resilient, and I have no doubt that we will all continue to find our little corners of gender euphoria amongst the pain. With that being said, I am not content to live in corners forever. If I ever want to experience real, uncomplicated pleasure through gender exploration - not just pleasure *in spite of* the punishment - I cannot continue politely coexisting with a system designed to destroy me. We all deserve better. In the words of Marquis Bey, “[I am frustrated]...because of the stubbornness in not wishing to push, to take another step, to say it is not simply about making these orders a little easier on us but refusing the system tout court. I need us to go there.” (Bey, 2023, p. 314).

References

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