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Playing dead: on part-time transvestism, digital semblance and drag feminism

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RESUMO: Este ensaio explora o potencial das tecnologias digitais em permitir que homens supostamente gays façam contato (sexual, fantasmático, amoroso) com homens ditos heterossexuais através do travestismo. Esse fenômeno expõe uma brecha na lógica heterossexual, na qual o objeto é revelado como um semblante, como dizia Lacan, não como uma materialidade finita e genitalizada. O ensaio desenvolve o conceito de "trans", então, não como uma categoria de identidade circunscrita na qual há um processo de transição com um destino final, mas como uma tecnologia de gozo pela qual pode-se transitar de uma posição a outra, sem compromissos ontológicos. "Trans" aparece aqui como uma prática, um sintoma e uma estratégia de sobrevivência que simultaneamente tira proveito da condição ilusória do objeto como coisa e o expõe como uma miragem. A ascensão e ubiquidade das plataformas digitais como veículo de expressão sexual e de gênero têm permitido com que o termo "trans" seja apropriado como uma ferramenta de tomada de prazer que contorna certos regulamentos sociais atrelados ao corpo carnal e a suposta estabilidade de gênero, sexualidade, práticas eróticas e os objetos prescritos às elas. No que homens presumivelmente homossexuais postam anúncios sexuais como travestis e se vestem como tais estritamente na esfera privada para fins sexuais, tecnologizando o homem heterossexual como uma espécie de aparelho autenticante, esses últimos se vêem eles sim, ou também, transitando além dos limites das identidades sexuais convencionais. Quais são as consequências dessas transições para a velha lógica da diferença sexual? O contato entre esse novo homem gay (não mais homem e não mais gay) com esse novo homem hetero (reduzido a uma effigie, ou vibrador, como diria Preciado) se dá dentro das brechas inerentes à identidade, ao gênero e ao objeto, revelando tais categorias como insuficientes e fictícias perante ao real do gozo. O ensaio entrelaça a teoria queer, a psicanálise e relatos autobiográficos/auto-etnografia para investigar essas porosidades, ou buracos, que o digital torna visível e disponível, estabelecendo o papel fundamental que uma teoria psicanalítica queer ocupa na compreensão das novas práticas sexuais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: transexualidade, crossdressing, barebacking, cruising, internet.

Abstract: This essay explores digital technology's enabling so-called "gay men" to make contact (sexual and otherwise) with heterosexually identified males through cross-dressing. This phenomenon, which the digital exacerbates, exposes a loophole in heterosexual logic, where the object is revealed to be a semblance, not a finite and neatly gendered materiality. The essay deploys "trans," then, not as a bounded identity category one might transition into like a final destination, but as a technology for pleasure to where one can transit back and forth through digital mediation. The rise and ubiquity of cruising digital platforms (*Craigslist's Casual Encounters*, *Plenty of Fish*, *Fetlife*, and *OkCupid*) has enabled "transgender" to be appropriated as a pleasure-making tool that circumvents social doxa regarding the supposed stability of gender, sexuality, sexual practices and the prescribed objects of desire associated with them. As presumably gay men increasingly dress up as women for sexual purposes, posting hook-up ads seeking straight men, and presumably heterosexual men catch themselves seduced by them, the limits of sexual identities and their related practices get tested, expanded, trespassed, and rendered porous. The essay weaves together queer theory, psychoanalysis, and autobiographical accounts/self-

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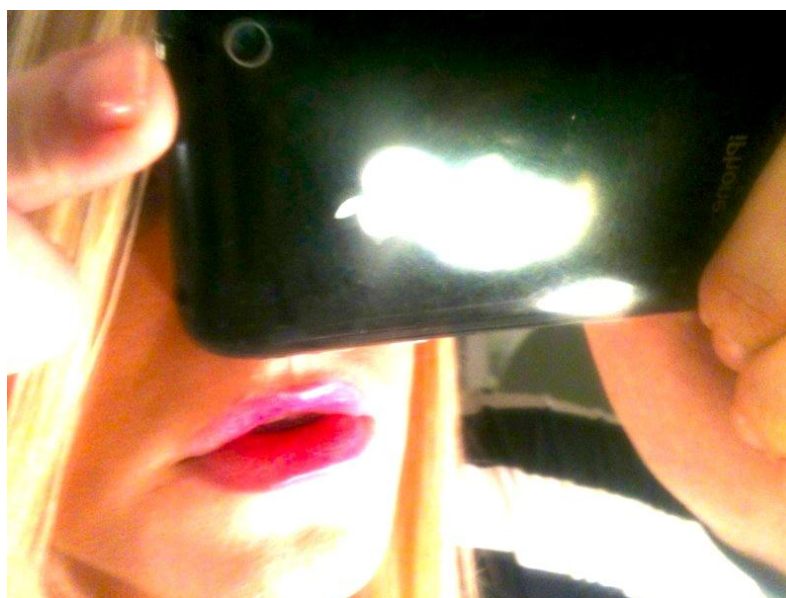
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ethnography, to investigate the very porosities between identity categories that the digital makes visible and available for play, and to experiment with the urgent role psychoanalysis may have to play in understanding new sexual/existential practices.

Keywords: transexuality, crossdressing, barebacking, cruising, internet.

Resumén: Este ensayo explora el potencial que las tecnologías digitales poseen para permitir que hombres supuestamente gays se relacionen (sexual, fantasmático, amoroso) con otros hombres dichos heterosexuales a través del travestismo. Este fenómeno expone una brecha en la lógica heterossexual, en la cual el objeto es revelado como una faz, según decía Lacan, no como una materialidad finita y genital. El ensayo desarrolla el concepto de “trans”, por lo tanto, no como una categoría de identidad circunscripta en la cual hay un proceso de transición con un destino final, pero como una tecnología de goce por la cual es posible transitar desde una posición a otra, sin compromisos ontológicos. “Trans” aparece aquí como una práctica, un síntoma y una estrategia de supervivencia que simultaneamente se aprovecha de la condición ilusoria del objeto como cosa y lo expone como un espejismo. La ascensión y ubicuidad de las plataformas digitales como vehículo de expresión sexual y de género están permitiendo con que el término “trans” sea apropiado como una herramienta de toma de placer que contorna ciertos reglamentos sociales atrelados al cuerpo carnal y a la supuesta estabilidad de género, sexualidad, prácticas eróticas y los objetos que se les prescriben. A ejemplo de hombres, presuntamente homosexuales, que postean anuncios sexuales como travestis y se visten como tales estrictamente en el ámbito privado con finalidades sexuales, tecnologizando al hombre heterossexual como una especie de aparato autenticante. Esos hombres heterossexuales se ven transitando más allá de los límites de las identidades sexuales convencionales. Cuales son las consecuencias de esas transiciones para la vieja lógica de la diferencia sexual? El contrato entre ese nuevo hombre gay (ya no más hombre y ya no más gay) con ese nuevo hombre hetero (reducido a una efigie o vibrador, como diría Preciado) se dá en el interior de las brechas inherentes a la identidad, al género y al objeto, revelando tales categorías como insuficientes y ficcionales perante al real poder del goce. El ensayo entrelaza la teoría queer, la psicanálisis y relatos autobiográficos/autoetnografía para investigar esas porosidades, o agujeros, que el digital pone en visibilidad, estableciendo el rol fundamental que una teoría psicoanalítica queer ocupa en la comprensión de las nuevas prácticas sexuales.

Palabras clave: transexualid, crossdressing, barebacking, cruising, internet.



« It begins quietly
 in certain female children :
 the fear of death, taking as its
 form
 dedication to hunger,
 because a woman's body
 is a grave ; it will accept
 anything. »

Louise Glück, *Dedication to Hunger*

“The writer is someone who plays with the body of the mother (...): to glorify it, embellish it, dismember it, wear it to the limit of what can be recognized as body.”

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

The non-duped cruise: digital transvestism as symbolic drag

I recently caught myself posting online ads in which I impersonate a husband looking for a “bull” to come over and play with my transsexual wife (performed by myself) while “I,” the husband, am gone. Not only that. The bull is to borrow my wife in front of a webcam so that “I” can watch the act of cuckoldry remotely and record it. Since the wife will probably ask for the bull to wear a condom, the fantasy goes, I ask him to try and discretely pull the condom off during sex, without her noticing it. It’s true, the bull originally responds to an ad that said nothing about the transsexual condition of the wife, but also doesn’t seem to mind when such detail is revealed, in the third or fourth email exchanged. The bull must be hailed away from his normative trajectory, it seems, so he can still be reeking of it when he comes over.

When he arrives, with the husband’s blessing and thorough directions, I am lying in bed as if trapped in this game between a man I know, and who only exists in my remote impersonation of him, and a man I don’t. I have spent 45 minutes becoming hairless, beating my face with half a bottle of NW20 MAC concealer, and I lie there, stupidly, like a little lamb, letting the men carry out their plan. I am feigning oblivion and absolute obedience to a pleasure that is outside of myself. I, the woman, desire nothing. I lend myself, my body, to the desire of the men, which they negotiated among themselves, in my absence. I am their currency, I am their buffer zone, I am their language.



If the bull asks to speak to the husband, he is not there. He is in San Diego, in Vegas, in London, in his graveyard shift. Isn't that the privilege of the phallus? You can summon it as much as you like, "it will always say nothing" (Lacan, *Book XVIII* 12). The sex thus unfolds as a kind of rape, authorized by an absence and carried out by a prosthetic proxy. I feign ignorance about the dynamics of the scene. I try to keep my head as down as possible, but it's hard not to look back and admire the scene as if from afar. With my head glued to the mattress, turned just so, I catch glimpses of ourselves in the mirror and the computer screen, the site and sight of the imaginary gaze of the missing husband.

The bull's ignorance of the fact that, in reality, the one being tricked is himself seems to hollow him out, enhancing his size, his weight, his force. By contrast, I become increasingly helpless and smaller. I need to give him an opportunity to seal the deal and take the condom off without my knowing it. Except that he is the one who doesn't know. Or does he...but still? At the moment he begins pulling off the condom I am moaning like a creature too pure to know how to contain herself in matters like this. When he sticks his penis back inside I turn around and ask where the condom is. I catch him red handed. But I'm not mad. I am sincerely wondering where the condom is. Because I am a stupid girl. We have to find the condom. This is where the fantasy ends: With the disappearance of the condom, for which no one is willing to take responsibility.

In this scene – of fantasy, of sex, of deception, and, now, of analysis, unauthorized violence is heterosexuality's most fundamental totem. Rape appears as a shortcut to heterosexual pleasure, to pleasure as heterosexual, or its fantasy. Rape is what provides the fantastic mimicry of a heterosexual scene of pleasure believability when the fictions of a settled biological difference (man and woman, penis and vagina) aren't offered up as givens or readymades. This is the logic of the unconscious, which slips out in moments such as a recent transphobic attack in São Paulo, Brazil, when three men tried to rape a very feminine-looking 19-year-old self-identified boy while shouting, "You want to be a woman? So you're going to get beat like a woman."ⁱ When the unconscious speaks, it is often quite violent. If we are willing to listen, we may actually get less wounded.

Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* gave me the clarity of this suspicion: to feel sufficiently placed in the position of woman – the woman of my Brazilian unconscious -- I would have to lie. I would have to lie in bed. I would have to lie about my intentions, I would have to lie about my wanting, I would have to lie about the extent of my wanting, and I would have to lie about my



knowing (too much). And as such, the sex scene would inevitably be staged as a rape because man would always end up taking more than I was willing to give, or that I was aware of giving.

In McEwan's novel, *man* (Edward) and *woman* (Florence) play out the script of their transactions in its absurdity and thoroughness. The edicts are clear and, despite bouts of unexplainable impulses toward ad-libbing, *man* and *woman* respect the boundaries of their matching slots. Romantic complementarity -- *obsession fusionnelle*, for Michel Onfray -- is a myth that heterosexuality depends on. McEwan unravels its gaucheness so coldly one would think this was an algorithmic process. The bodies engage in no fusion at all but in a one-way transaction, which, as Luce Irigaray and others have reminded us, will only see the exchange of one thing: *Woman*.

McEwan's *woman* dresses in a way that traps her and possesses thoughts that don't seem her own (McEwan 101). "They were piped down to her." She is always "automatically" certain of things, mostly that everything is her fault (McEwan 98). She learns her hetero-mathematics quite quickly: For every desire-of-the-self she effaces, she scores more points in the desire-of-the-other.

There is something of a botched Brazilian *antropofagia* here, eating the body away until there is nothing left, hoping (in)digestion brings something new. But nothing seems to move, so she persists.ⁱⁱ She devours herself into a receptacle. After such enduring disappearing act, so much pretense, such spectacular performing of the lack that befalls/becomes her, *woman* is empty so that she can be filled.

At the core of the *obsession fusionnelle* that tricks any of the parties involved into believing anything else is happening is irrevocability: It could not be any other way. *On Chesil Beach* reminded me that sex, that is, heterosexual sex, that is, heterosexual Brazilian sex, is always to be a sloppily disguised rape because from the phallus one is not to expect anything less. The penis, which is "the phallus as people imagine it," is itself like a stupid beast that "knows no limit, offering one of the rare 'experiences' of infinity" (Lacan, *Book XVIII* 100).ⁱⁱⁱ Freud, Luce Irigaray, Helene Deutsch and Marie Bonaparte all note that rape, "hopefully of the breeding kind," can work as the "model" for (hetero) sexual relations and as the epitome of "female" *jouissance*. It isn't without interest that central to the concept of *jouissance* is the idea of subjective division, "the paradoxical form of pleasure that may be found in suffering" (Irigaray 62, my translation): While something may feel pleasurable for one psychic agency it may cause pain for another. Curiously, Tim Dean describes the relationship between pleasure



and *jouissance* as a prophylactic one, in the sense that it forms a condom-like barrier keeping the subject from being overwhelmed (Dean 248).

In McEwan's context, *man* is to do all the work that will lead up to and produce intercourse. *Woman* is to surrender. In my condom-pulling fantasy of cuckoldry my agency is muddied by my feigned capitulation. I am playing both roles – I am playing all roles. Until the eleventh hour intervention, when I slip out of feminine paralysis and catch the bull, promptly berating him for articulating his own agency - or rather, the husband's, which is actually the execution of mine.

McEwan's intervention lies in the implosion of the carefully laid-out structures of heterosexuality, which my fantasy instrumentalizes. In the novel, right before letting *man* (and *woman*) carry out their fantasy of fusion, through the invasion of *woman's* body, the meticulously assembled composition collapses, Jenga-like. *Man*, having spent his life cooking up coherence of character and mimetic excellence, phallic emulation, engages in his own disappearing act through progressively thinner squirts of semen. "You can't even control your self," she says, outing him and the system that bred his likeness -- that bred him as (phallic) likeness. *Woman*, turning herself into a Medusa of sorts, witnesses, or (co-) produces his failure. It turns out he is as inapt at signing the heterosexual contract as he is at zipping down her dress.

The fantasy "could be sustained only if it was not discussed. They grew up inside it, inhabiting its absurdities because they were never defined" (McEwan 85). *Woman*, unlike *man*, was able to keep her end of the deal. *Man* made the horrific opening between reality and fantasy palpable.^{iv} She didn't mind so much touching it, "What she did not want, not just yet, was see it." Ironically, it is the apex of this archetypical priapism -- his incessant performing of his phallic drag -- that does him in. Like a part-time tranny who doesn't know when it is time to go home, betrayed by the beard that begins to grow through the, well, foundation (McEwan 125).

Man's problem is also temporal, as he arrives too soon, missing his cue. But it must have been her fault, as "[s]he should not have interfered, she should never have believed the manual" (McEwan 30). What really exposes *man* and *woman's* fusion as a dream masking their parallel existences is her proposal of living out another kind of (hetero-)sexuality, in which he would have sex with anybody but his own wife.



In my own cautiously coded fantasy this other kind of (hetero-)sexuality is found as attempt to mimic heterosexuality's classic model in all of its Brazilian radicalness: *A woman does not want, a woman surrenders*. The recent displaying of a “No means yes. Yes means anal” sign by an American fraternity condenses the structural pattern, the very slogan, of the Brazilian heterosexual logic of which I am an active product and which can cause uproar in the United States. The fact that “anal” is all I could ever offer places my transexualized body in a default position of “yes,” which I am to fight against if I am to mimic the supposed “No” position of sexual refusal of a “real (Brazilian) girl,” whom a “real man” would have to seduce, convince and dupe (or convince by duping) into granting him sexual access (Kingkade).

While the response to the cuckold ads is always large, one cannot say that all of the straight men follow through. Some engage with the fantasy but end up not showing up for its (re-)enactment. Yet this refusal to give form to the fantasy feels very different from the gay flake's inability to act it out, or his tendency to gain pleasure out of its infinite postponement – as we see played out in gay-centric cruising apps. The gay flake seems to foresee the dissatisfaction that the *passage a l'acte* will trigger - the gay object is incompatible with the gay subject, whose actual object of desire if a straight one he cannot have -- which makes him keep cruising to avoid the interruption that a physical meet would entail. In a contrary manner, the straight flake who recognizes T-girls as objects of desire seems to know he will like the object *too much*. Instead of dreading the frustration of an object who is sure be a letdown, he dreads the confirmation that the object's vicinity fulfills the function of the object qua object just the same, which may put him at odds with his own identificatory position.

Unless my spine snapped: a digitally mediated history of sex with strangers

What seems remarkable is to remember that just a few years before this fantasy of recorded cuckoldry and all-around dupery – in which man's stupidity lies in his belief that woman's stupidity has been confirmed—the mere touch of a male, any-male-whatsoever, was enough of a *sine qua non* to constitute pleasure. Transvestism had always felt like a shot-cut to a symbolic de-alienation that rendered me desirable and transitive: I had an object that felt like my own. But in the beginning, that is, once the dreams of womanhood of my first years of life had been properly shattered and replaced by a more realistic settling for gayness, even the touch of a



gay-identified male whose performed butchness was definitely not as seamless as that of some heterosexually-identified men, was enough to make me feel pleasantly feminized.

It's as though I myself had been "stupid" enough to see almost any male-ness, even in its most evident state of drag, as passable. If female attire provided me with an escape route to a kind of left-over heterosexual *jouissance*, the penis, any penis, could carry me to phallic territory. How had I, through my history of digitality and disease (its circumvention, its flirtation, its imminence), gone from stupidly believing the phallic drag of others to doubting it with so phobically to the point where the stupidity was put on them so that they could believe my own drag (of phallic absence)? How does such a simple demand in the coding of what shall count as pleasurable become an intricate set of equations with so many obstructions and strict rules, and various forms of calculated drag, through a digitally mediated history of sex with strangers? (Hefez).

This evolving fantasy follows a path that we can link to the psychoanalytic structure of perversion, which Lacan aligns with "desire per se," and which is a strategy of psychic survival that may come at the cost of the body. Whose body? Most importantly, the pervert excels "in exposing the fantasy of the other and the various social lies that such fantasy necessarily enforces." It is thus "a threat to the social bond." The pervert acts like a spoiled child. A child who doesn't want to be happy but "to discover a law, beyond the mask of the social order, that can bring solace to their torment," at all costs, and "[i]f he encounters no resistance, he will always push further" (Feher-Gurewich 191-192).

There was always resistance, not only from the symbolic but from the digital code itself, and increasingly so. In the mid-2000s, for instance, I could post ads on the *Casual Encounters* section of *Craigslist* as many times a day as desired. I would have to post and re-post repeatedly since other people had the power to block my ads, and didn't hesitate to do so. By 2014 *Craigslist* started using a ruthless automated blocking system, whose logic isn't clear besides its five-posts-per-day limit. The site often flags my ads automatically, presumably associating my IP address with spammers for having posted *too much*, or punishing me for my recidivism. The *two much* of *Craigslist's* code goes ironically against the *too much* of desire, which is what drives its in the first place. Its code punishes particularly feminine subjects who tend to preserve the dynamic of being-looked-at/for of heterosexist culture by posting ads and waiting for several men to reply and try to woo her instead of laboriously going through ads posted by men and responding to them individually.



The digital was there from the beginning as that which made possible for the first any- whatever-male, André, to touch me in a way that washed me with the impression of being a desired object -- an object *tout court*, in 1997. How has the digital interface gone from pragmatic facilitator to a necessary witness 17 years later? How has the digital shifted from a step to be overcome to a crucial partnership, whether as the ghost-like attendance of a husband who doesn't exist but in fantasy or as an instrumental presence in bed, a tool in my very hands mid-act, to line up the next stranger to come over and save me from the disappointing performance of the one who is about to leave?^v

A Brazilian chat room called *Gays e Afins* ("Gays and The Like") produced the first male who touched me in a way that placed me in my position of desired/desirable object. The experience of being on *Gays e Afins*, whose very name seemed to promise a latitude and acknowledge a non-meticulous likeness to desire (there was a non-defined constellation surrounding *Gays*), was so filled with anxiety -- someone could interrupt me, that is, *catch* me from behind at any moment, that the time spent online was always too short. The rush that it brought forth (up to 25 males in the same chat room) was troubled by the threat of maternal invasion. Even if such invasion were physically avoided, if I took too long on the family computer, whose screen faced the home office door -- perfectly placed so whoever entered the room would see what you were seeing before you could see that they were seeing you see the image, my mother would ground me. The grounding meant the literal detachment of the keyboard from the computer, which she would yank from my hands, and lodge inside a pile of her folded clothes inside her closet, which she would then lock and walk around the house with its key dangling around her waist, as if to boast the punishment.

The desktop would sit on the office desk dismembered like a limp bomb, or a an octopus with amputated tentacles. The maimed machine would expose my punishment for the members of the family when they passed the office door, which no one ever dared closing: A flashing eyesore, a red set of freshly beat young boy buttocks on display as a reminder that in that house privacy, which meant the opportunity of pleasure for pleasure's sake, would not be tolerated.

The anxiety over the prowling mother who may surprise the scene of intimacy between her child and a other, bringing it to a halt, mirrors, of course, the primal scene, when it is the child herself who catches the parents' intimacy, even if only in the child's fantasy.^{vi} The mother of my childhood is the foreclosure of abandonment, a lurking threat that can catch me red-



handed. As she hovers over the scene, it is impossible to know if/when she will emerge, whilst the father never turns up as a surprise.

In a way, the father is always there because he never is. His physical appearance can be counted on, whether because business hours are over or because certain childish acts will certainly provoke his aggressive interference. He will not show up unannounced, like the mother. The stoking of the father('s active presence) usually takes place through the stoking of his wrath, as in the child did something wrong, the child must be beaten, the child's buttocks must turn red, the child must scream in horror.

Perhaps my most reoccurring memory of paternal presence is precisely that: The father is irate. The father must beat the child who did something excessive. The child was up too late, the child watched too much television, the child was on the phone for too long, the child was too disrespectful, the child didn't stop. The dynamic of paternal interaction in my household, before the advent of personal computers, was a dynamic of violent intervention. When his presence was triggered, my father would run after me through the house, I would make it to my bedroom before he did, and I would shut the door as fast as I could, but there was no key. Unable to lock the door, I would sit on the floor with my back touching the door and extend my legs until my feet touched the wooden credenza. My body would thus function as a blocking bar wedged between the opening door and the static piece of furniture. The purpose of my little body was to render it motionless, creating an impasse. The price of this impasse was paid with hard labor: The child had to withstand the pain (playing blocking mechanism) in order to avoid another pain (spanking). If the father really wanted to come in, he would have to clench his fists and beat the door to shreds, if not the child.

Unless my spine snapped, the door shouldn't open, my body shouldn't move, the furniture shouldn't budge, the father should remain outside. If the spine never quite snapped, it always inevitably bent enough for my makeshift blocking mechanism to break and give way for the father's invasion of the unlockable room. He would knock on the door with the fury of a deranged animal. Yelling and screams would be heard from my mother and sister off in the distance, none of which aimed at stopping the father from performing his duty, but to egg him on so that the child would learn to "parar de ser criança," or "to stop being childish." While the father's fists were pounding the door, my back glued to it, feeling each pounding reverberate on my head, I stared at the window in front of me and thought: Shall I throw myself out of it and declare game over or shall I stay here and feel the force of his fists almost touch me until one of us surrenders?



The anxiety of the imminent cock-blocking of maternal materialization or of paternal invasion (of the bedroom, if not the child) through the failure of the child's body to act like a (cock-)blocking mechanism itself, can also amount to a courted haunting. If the haunting is called upon, the fear produced by the ghost is undone, in the fantasy. There is actually no contradiction in a child who wants to avoid being beaten and finds herself creating the very conditions that will result in her beating. Just as there is no contradiction in a queer theorist dreaming of rape and laboriously authoring its fantasmatic performance ad nauseam. In fact, this presumed dissonance, which could be deduced at first glance, only makes evident "the irreducible character of fantasy" and the fundamental position the unconscious occupies in relation to all subjective phenomena. We can be a "perfectly authentic feminist and then, on the couch, confess that we take pleasure in thinking of being beaten and raped. (...) These are two levels of being," is how Jacques-Alain Miller puts it. (Miller, my translation).

The child summons a particularly phallic deference, in order for him *not* to be surprised by his/its presence. This structure illustrates Leo Bersani's argument on the Oedipal triangle being a "misnomer," for its dynamic involves a much larger multiplicity of figures orgiastically imbricated in the child's "shifting sexual dispositions." Bersani offers "the desired father and the law-giving father," "the desired mother and the threatening mother" as examples. We can extend this *mise-en-abyme* economy of ghostly multiples to the sexual scene itself, including its pre-production, as seen in the autobiographical anecdote of the grounding mother threatening to take the computer apart and render the son digitally castrated, as does Bersani when he cites Freud's remarks that "(...) I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act as an event between four individuals" (Bersani 9-10).

The fear of maternal invasion inevitably drove my digital interactions, but André and I still managed to exchange phone numbers and arranged to meet at a movie theatre before being interrupted. It was 1997, so no images were exchanged but based on our physical descriptions and zip codes, enough was inferred. At the theatre, we set in the back and on the floor, with our backs positioned against the carpeted wall so that no one outside our field of vision could catch us in such close proximity. There was literally no space for the mother. Were she to somehow storm in the room to catch us, we would see her first, as soon as she blocked the film image.

Despite the disarming of the mother, we stared at the screen, buffered by the carpeted concrete supporting our spines, on high alert. That anxiety felt like a privilege. And nothing short of surreal. The idea that something sufficiently male could want me, that something sufficiently



male could be stupid enough to want me, that something was sufficiently stupid to be male and still want me struck me as a stupidity to take advantage of before it disappeared.

I wouldn't come to the realization until several years later, in analysis, that growing up under the fantasmatic logic that "Father does not love me = man does not love me = I cannot be loved by man" has been one of the most fundamental pillars propping up my psychic (k)nots. Yet if father/man doesn't love me, father/man's presence is made itself known through violence, which appears as a second-best replacement for love, or, at least, a guarantor for touch, as in the scene of paternal invasion of the child's bedroom. It is also noteworthy that I came of age under the notion, and retained it until just a few years before that night of anxiously ensconced pleasure at the movies with André, that any sexual contact between two males-whatsoever, whether they were both HIV negative or one of them was positive, would inevitably produce AIDS in both, or at least in me. I grew up, then, telling myself I would only give in to temptation, escape maternal supervision (or give in to it) and have sex with a man twice, once to see what it was like, and the second time to actually enjoy it as I bid it farewell. Vladimir Marinov recognizes a relationship between a child's anxiety over being "treated like a piece of shit or like a corpse" and his anxiety over *becoming* his object of desire if he gets too close to it (Marinov 88, my translation).^{vii}

Stupidity, it seems, made male contact possible, but also became a currency that was progressively more complicated to find, in me and in others. The closer I got to these manly-enough males the less sufficiently manly they became. I caught them in their non-sufficiency (their "lack") as I probed for the smallest proof of femininity in their body, their taste, their speech, the way their head set on their neck in their photographs. Femininity was everywhere.

The more I cruised, the more I brushed against objects that resembled me too much to pass for the otherness that my fantasies required, to produce some kind of irrevocable difference. When I spotted their queerness their bodies melded with mine and I wanted to scream in horror. I wanted distance, I wanted contrast, I wanted what they, too, wanted: To get fucked. This was our only coincidence. We had bought the ruse of homosexual sameness – the sameness that stunts the queerness of (homo-)sexuality into place--when, in fact, we wanted a difference we could see, and smell, and fantasize about, but had no access to. We wanted the comforting familiarity of the phallus, which heterosexual men emulated so well, without traces of a process. It became clear that gay men do not desire gay men, but are forced to settle for them. Gay men want straight men, or something that straight men have, something that straight men resemble, not something that resembles straight men. My cross-dressing move, then, functioned as a slipping



into heterosexual territory, or at the very least, into its *shade* – the neighboring zone that preserved so much of its meanings. Dressing like a woman, or rather, like a girl, I am not sure I *became* a woman, but I became desirable – *remotely* desirable.

In referring to this feminine position that I usurp for myself, I will refuse to delineate distinctions in the terms t-girls, trans-, transsexual, cross-dresser, tranny, transvestite, and others. These will indiscriminately evoke a femaleness that isn't taken for its naturalized biological literalness but the multiple variations, virtualizations and materializations rendered performable, representable, imaginable and consumable through digital platforms. This refusal to settle for one term or to articulate the nuance amongst them reflects the fact that while we know that our bodies change, transform and are perceived “with incredible fantasy and creativity (...), no linguistic form could ever map out these modifications and fluctuations in an exhaustive fashion.”^{viii} It also echoes the way this ad hoc category is claimed and tossed, in my own t-girlhood, owned and let go. While “the referent is never the right one, and this is what makes a language (...),” as Lacan says (Lacan, *Book XX* 60), a referent must be chosen, if anything, for the sake of analysis. Impermanent referents that we can use, “as stupid as anything, but really use them, work them to the bone” (Lacan, *Book XVIII* 61). That is, work the referent to the point of rawness.^{ix}

T-girlhood was precarious and confined to the limits of my bedroom, a bedroom whose invasions would be pragmatically yearned, and whose violence would be rehearsed in advance. The guests would be invited, they wouldn't have to storm in. In fact, I would often leave my door unlocked, not because I was denied a key, but because I wanted to wait in bed and watch their entrance into the bedroom. I wanted to probe their entirety as though I were at once in and outside of the frame.

While there was no guarantee that all heterosexual men online were going to read me as girl-enough, there was no question that lots of them did, and they would bring with them, to this symbolic vicinity where I could bask some of the heterosexual's laurels, the same symbolic code(s of conduct) they would have abided by were they in heterosexual territory proper. T-girlhood granted me access to a pleasure, and to the relishing in the shadow cast by the heterosexual symbolic that had reserved me no slots, which had been, until then, ontologically foreign and unfathomable. This pass, and passing, made evident Lacan's famous maxims of the inexistence of the sexual act and of love being the demand for that which the other cannot give. For Lacan, copulation is a kind of assisted masturbation. One's being in the sex scene has to do



with one's own psychic necessities in a way that reduces the other(s) in that scene to supporting help. By the time the sex scene takes place there is only one person actually there, or for whom the scene is dedicated, apart from the various fantasmatic addressees and figures that may hover over the scene (Braunstein 107).

Beatriz Preciado illustrates this when she describes having sex with her lover, V.D., noting that, "I know that at the moment I undress myself, she won't see anything but one out of these two bodies. This reduction to one fixed image frightens me" (Preciado 83, my translation).^x The increasing omnipresence of smart phones as an active presence in the sex scene literalizes the role of the other as masturbatory aid. The presence of the recording device confirms the excessive role of the sex partner, whose own subjectivity or presence as anything other than a technology is, in many ways, *too much* – a nuisance for the subject.

In using *Plenty of Fish* (*pof.com*) as a cruising platform, I am forced to post my photos as a girl and only reveal my transvestite condition in private messages (*Plenty of fish* offers no transgender option, and announcing my trans-ness on my profile has gotten me immediately blocked). When I ask male users, who contact me to say I am so sexy, or that they'd like to "know" me, if they like t-girls, a common answer is something along the lines of "If they give good head." Here the reduction of the sex partner to a masturbatory device, and a limb (mouth, ass, hole), becomes clear. In the sex scene the subjects are always incompatible as subjects, but often speak to each other as technologies of masturbation. A t-girlhood that makes usage of digital tools of cruising for *becoming desirable object*, while escaping its destiny as a category in the socius, takes the sex partner's technological status for what it is: The other in the sex scene is a device, not a partner.

As a (gay) man I was never there in the sexual act. And serving as screen for the other (gay man) to project his fantasies of masculinity always felt like a cringe-inducing botched trick. The other too, after a brief moment of novelty (*something male touches me*), never quite *took on* the images I'd set out to project. Taking on the place and the look of woman, and thus inheriting a long history of well-established rules and assumptions felt like slipping into desire knowing that while I may not be sexually satiated, I would come out of the sexual scene having been wanted – infected by man's wanting. Here, too, there was no sexual relationship and the demand was out of synchrony with what the other could give, but we recognized each other. The ruse was so hysterically evident (my wig was cheap, my five o'clock shadow never completely



concealed), but our positions incredibly clear. Nothing had to be invented so nothing could go wrong. It felt like slipping into a slot, or a comfy pod, without effort, pain, or negotiation.

The anxiety of knowing too much, knowing masculinity (the other's and mine) to be a sham, gave way to a soothing feeling of mere repetition through digitally assisted t-girlhood. Instead of playing a hot-potato game in which my feminine position was never conceded, and if it ever were, it was never safe, it was as if the (T-girl) sexual relation had become the performing of a choreography we knew by heart. By usurping this feminine position and pledging allegiance to the heterosexual symbolic, the punch was a guarantee, and the organisation of its staging a given. No, the sexual relation didn't exist here either, as we were both masturbating to the invention of the other closed off in our own pods, but now, having borrowed woman's likeness, as a girl, *becoming object* was a predictable, effortless and welcome enterprise bound to last from beginning to end.

The scene of gay sex was a scene of war that both parties waged against the sameness of the other. Sometimes this presumed lack of difference would be successfully administered when I could hold on to another kind of difference that felt, in a Brazilian context, just as etched in stone as genital difference: Black men, poor men, married men, men without identity papers, tall men, toothless men, hairy men, men who weren't vain, men who took public transportation, men who didn't know who their father was, men who didn't dance, men with bad teeth, men for whom maternal love hadn't been excessive, or even proven – all of these men gave me enough material to see a difference.

The scene of cross-dressing digital sex, by comparison, was, for all intents and purposes, a heterosexual sex scene. Difference was metastasized into its fabric. A war had already been waged and I had lost before arrival. All I had to do was revel in the post-mortem stillness of its *après coup*. I could actually believe the wanting in the man's eyes. There was a very focused aggression and a completely unambiguous impulse to dupe me into surrendering to a pleasure he was sure to benefit him more than myself. This scene was coded in such precise terms, all I needed to do was show up and lay there, like a doll or a baby, and moan as if I were only partially enjoying it.

Drag feminism: the (non-)political ramifications of becoming desirable object



Thierry Schaffauser describes the move to experience the sex scene from gayness to t-girlhood as an act of “drag feminism,” which may not shun the violence of hetero-masculinity, but exposes the laborious artifice required for such sex scene to hold itself up at all. The t-girl sex scene, for Schaffauser, makes evident the aesthetic labor of womanhood (“leg waxing is hell”) whilst producing a distinctively queer pleasure, much queerer than gay sex, which “is quite basic: we suck and fuck each other in the ass”, for it not only troubles the category but is inaugurated by the very unstable-ness that is always inherent to it. In this set up, the gay man-cum-t-girl is finally able to access the most fundamental of privileges, that is, pleasure (Schaffauser 90, my translation).

Maud-Yeuse Thomas differentiates this kind of t-girl (*travesti*) from the drag queen by claiming the unsettling political importance of the latter and the self-serving privateness of the first. For Thomas, the t-girl avoids the danger of public visibility (she seeks to benefit herself) while the drag queen embraces it (she is interested in the public good), as if there were something shamefully less noble about producing pleasure privately, at last. This differentiation also presumes, naively, that the subject could ever be engaged in a selfless political project at all that didn't also aim at a less evident pleasure that is also private, perhaps even more so – that there isn't something surreptitiously self-serving about literal activism (Thomas 84).

The sartorial pleasures to be had in dressing up as a girl, which used to be so vital in my childhood, feel very small compared to the anxieties that the sex scene qua sex scene begets. While, as a child, the texture, the smell, the look of the fabric and the colors seemed like a self-sufficient cathexis (they were addressed to a foreclosed – man – other destined to remain a other-in-fantasy), now they served the very pragmatic function of making this other real. There is, then, no *time* for the enjoyment of the accouterments themselves (no time for myself), which are trumped by the multiple materializations of the other to whom they are addressed. It is curious that it takes very little aesthetic effort for me to gain feminine-enough status, as it becomes obvious that what man is after isn't beauty per se, but someone willing to accept the blame of lack, to wear the sign of *there where there is nothing*, to disappear into a function, to notarize man's fictions of immunity.

As a t-girl, I am able to find an object that renders me desirable, that desires back, as I escapes the impermeable doom of the category for I occupy it only while pleasure lasts. Bio-women don't have that luxury. The question that many lovers ask me, if I *will go all the way*, presumes t-girlhood to be a stop in a linear process to gain biological status, or proof. But my t-



girlhood is not about becoming so passable as to become a woman in the socius, it is about appropriating the category of the socius not as a life sentence, but as a sex toy. This t-girl will not be operated on. Instead, she herself operates “a radical rupture on the environmental doxa” for private pleasures with political ramifications (Aubry 68). If I hadn’t been a child coerced into accepting gayness as my category, I would probably have gravitated toward *being* a girl – in the socius. That child is dead, but her desire remains – it can be st(r)oked by a T-girlhood who doesn’t commit to a sexual and social, private and public metastasis.

The idea that this sort of gay man, the kind whose t-girlhood is stunted by the demand for gayness, occupies a privileged position in a patriarchal system for the simple fact that he is taken for male is countered by the alienating experience of, precisely, being taken for male but taking oneself for something else – something without an object that can properly work for him as a pleasure-granting device. We could say that the gay man who becomes a t-girl for sex purposes after having already had to mourn his original girlhood (as a child) reduces the violence of hetero-masculinity to a masturbatory aid while gaining exemption from its less welcome violence once the scene is over. Schaffauser argues that even such non-welcome violence terrorizes the t-girl/gay man once the sex scene is over, and before it could ever be propped up. The lived experience of such a man, forced into a relationship of sameness in which the actual object of desire -- straight man -- is barred, is an apprenticeship of heterosexual domination rather than a wallowing in social privilege. The symbolic alienation that it stages is so terrorizing it can be said that the privilege of such man is in a constant and perverse pawned state: He has it in theory, but it is always on the horizon.

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ⁱ According to the victim, Gabe Kowalczyk, he wanted to scream, but his body "was so hurt all I could do was whimper." Ana Ribeiro, "Você Quer Ser Mulher? Então Vai Apanhar Como Mulher", *Dizem Agressores a Gabe*, *Igay*, September 25, 2014. <http://igay.ig.com.br/2014-09-25/voce-quer-ser-mulher-entao-vai-apanhar-como-mulher-dizem-agressores-a-gabe.html> My translation.

ⁱⁱ Subordination, for Judith Butler, is the raw material for a self that persists: "To desire the conditions of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself." Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am extrapolating Avital Ronell's claims on stupidity, or "the sureness on which blissful stupidity is based." Ronell, "The Question of Stupidity: Why We Remain in the Provinces," p. 43.

^{iv} "The matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature, a mountain, a headland." McEwan, p. 170.

^v If the digital has worked as an enabling tool for a certain queerness to be stoked and executed it increasingly depended on other apparatuses of luxury, as an increasingly complex network of fantasies could only be carried out with a lot of leisure time and the privacy conceded by living alone in a big American city. The American F-1 graduate student visa to make such a life possible is, of course, also a luxury – one granted by intellectual knowledge, its institutional recognition and/or fantasy of it.



^{vi} “[P]rivacy research in both online and offline environments has shown that just the perception, let alone the reality, of being watched results in feelings of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.” Kate Murphy, “We Want Privacy, but Can’t Stop Sharing,” *The New York Times*, Sunday Review, October 4, 2014, p. 4.

^{vii} Marinov utilizes the life and work of Constantin Brancusi to trace this parallel. My translation.

^{viii} Luca Greco in Jérémy Patinier, “La Face Cachée du Genre,” *Miroir/Miroirs* 2, Issue 1, 2014. My translation.

^{ix} Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated and annotated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 60. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVIII*, p. 61.

^x Preciado uses the term “*masturbatory cooperation.*” p. 255 (in italics in the original). My translation.

