

Jane Ward

University of California, Riverside

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Femme Labor and the Production of Trans Masculinity

Within transgender activist discourse, the transgendered subject is often represented as a “gender outlaw” or “gender warrior” who creates a gendered selfhood in defiance and isolation. In contrast, this talk draws on documentaries, websites, and interviews focused on femme/FTM relationships to explore cases in which trans masculinity takes form in relation to an idealized femme subject for whom femininity is presumed to be natural, comfortable, and resolved. Yet “femme labor”—including the affective and embodied work femmes do to enhance the appearance of trouble-free femininity—hardly comes naturally. As with other forms of affective labor, the work of being “the girl” in the femme/FTM erotic script is becoming increasingly routinized—learned through advice columns, support groups, and other authoritative sources that teach femmes how to be supportive girlfriends and wives of FTMs.

This project builds upon West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” theory, which describes how gender differences take form through the “routine, methodical, and recurring” labors associated with femininity or masculinity—such as the conversational work of asking questions and appearing interested that is typically expected of, and done by, women. In emphasizing the interactional and performative quality of gender, the “doing gender” framework has been widely used to describe individual gender performances and their reception, or the labors that produce gendered selves, as opposed to the labors that produce gendered others. To fill in this gap, I draw on Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) theory of “emotional labor.” In her study of flight attendants and their job duties, Hochschild marks the previously unmarked emotional labor required of service workers—to make people feel validated, cared for, and superior to those who are serving them. Together, these frameworks point to the analytic usefulness of thinking about “gender labor,” which can be conceptualized as the routine emotional—but also social, cultural, and political—labor that people do to validate, reinforce, and celebrate the gender expressions of others.

Referring back to the case of trans/femme relationships, I end by arguing for the need to reconfigure “gender labor” as a more transparent and consensual form of queer work.