

## **Trans femininity and sadomasochism/BDSM. Affinities and tensions in the field of the production of gender**

A key transformation in the 20th century humanities was the analytic separation of sexuality and gender research. This had immense influence over the development of feminist critique, cultural studies, anthropology, as well as more specialist disciplines like queer and trans studies. It allowed us to look at sexuality as not necessarily determined by gender, and at gender as a set of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simple mechanisms of drive and desire.

For all the usefulness of this separation, however, contemporary humanities increasingly chafes at its limits: with all the areas of culture and experience in which the sexual and the gendered flows into each other in ways that make a clean distinction impossible. One of such areas is the object of study in the “Trans femininity and sadomasochism/BDSM. Affinities and tensions in the field of the production of gender” project.

Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada*, a text widely seen as a breakthrough for contemporary trans feminine literature, opens up with a scene of a failed, sadomasochistic encounter between the main character and her girlfriend. In other words, the pioneering contemporary trans feminine novel starts with sadomasochism. Why? Is it a coincidence?

Just as with the cleaving of sexuality and gender research in the humanities, contemporary trans studies tend to neglect the sexual dimension of trans people’s lives. The lack of scholarly attention does not imply, however, that this dimension is not there. On the contrary: even a cursory survey of trans cultural productions shows its importance. *Nevada* is but one example.

A reverse of this problem can be found in contemporary research into sadomasochism/BDSM. Here too those practices are primarily understood as not directly associated with experiences of gender, and gendered expression and identity of BDSM practitioners. And yet, this fails to exorcise the specter of the “gendered visions of perversion”, to use Allison Moore’s phrase. For all the transformations in theory, non-normative sexual practices remain marked by the sign of gender.

“Trans femininity and sadomasochism/BDSM. Affinities and tensions in the field of the production of gender” is therefore a project aimed at plugging intellectual gaps. Starting from the lack of research into trans sexualities within trans studies, and with the lack of attention to gendered aspects of sexuality in BDSM studies, it sets out to use trans feminine sadomasochism/BDSM as an opening for a broader analysis of the unresolvable entanglement of sexuality and gender. Using archival material, like sexological writings or historical pornography, and relating them to contemporary trans feminine cultural productions, the project seeks to build a new theory of the relationship between what is sexual, and what is gendered. The goal is not to return to naive identity between those two fields, but to create a language that will allow us to better describe how sexual desire is usually marked by its situatedness within the field of gender.

Aside from developing theory, this project will also help trans studies. It will provide a pioneering framework for analyzing the peripheries of trans feminine sexuality. In the age when public discourses on trans sexualities are increasingly defined by a phobic backlash, this project hopes to offer an alternative where trans feminine engagement in minoritarian sexual practices needs not to be seen as evidence of personal perversity, but rather conscious use of available gendered resources present within the sexual to better embody one’s desired gender.

To sum up, this project is an attempt at breaking through a theoretical impasse on the intersection between gender and sexuality research. At the same time, it is not simply dry academic theorizing, but a hope for a new and more inclusive language which will teach us to better speak of what is difficult in the sexual desire for gender. In the time of trans feminine visibility, this is nothing short of necessary.