

HOW CIS WOMEN OBJECTIFY TRANS WOMEN

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## **Abstract**

In our patriarchal society, the relationship between men and women can historically be recognized as the dominant and the submissive. In Simone de Beauvoir's terms, the relationship between men and women can be understood as the *Absolute* and the *Other*. Men have been respected and recognized in their role of the *Absolute*, their existence unquestioned and primarily served within society. Through the analysis of Martha Nussbaum's essay, "Objectification", I philosophize the "othering" of trans women, similarly to how the historical othering of cis women is written by Nussbaum and Beauvoir. I argue that cis women specifically objectify trans women through *denial of subjectivity*, that is, trans women are treated as something whose experiences and feelings need not be taken into account. Often, cis women deny trans women's identity and fail to recognize their transition. Although this denial of recognition comes from both men and cis women, I focus specifically on cis women because they experience, to a certain degree, the same objectification trans women face. The objectification cis and trans women both face from men may possibly be rooted in different factors, however due to the shared identity of presenting oneself as a woman in society, both groups are being othered by men.

## Introduction

Martha Nussbaum's defines objectification, in part, as "a way of speaking, thinking, and acting that the speaker finds morally or socially objectionable, usually, though, not always, in the sexual realm" (Nussbaum, 1995). In a society still rigidly constrained within a gender binary, Nussbaum articulates the way men "other" women. More specifically, men objectify women by *denying their subjectivity*. To deny one's subjectivity is to treat the person as something whose feelings and experiences need not be taken into account (Nussbaum, 1995). Denying others' experiences and freedoms can be seen in the silencing of someone's voice in terms of advocating for oneself, or the denying of one's own privilege and marginalization of others. A subject is a person society centers, whom society has accepted as the standard. Centering trans identities within society is not the main goal, but much rather an acceptance of multiple identities being simultaneously respected within our dominantly cis and heteronormative society. Nussbaum's definition of *objectification* can also be understood as treating a person as an object instead of a human being (Nussbaum, 1995).

Thinking about objectification, I argue that cis women, can play a role in the *denial the subjectivity* which can oppress trans women. Cis men<sup>1</sup> have always objectified cis women [and trans women as well], but many cis women, especially those in the radical feminist movement, have not yet realized that cis women can oppress trans women in similar ways. Besides sexualization, men have denied the existence of women by gaining control of their autonomy, silencing their voices, and degrading their being as a whole. The history of philosophical feminism has attested to this oppression in many ways. But philosophical feminism has not yet thoroughly addressed cis women's oppression of trans women. Cis women fail to accept trans

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<sup>1</sup> As a group and social force, not every single individual cis man.

women within the gender binary, and fail to recognize their existence. In our imperfect but growing society, trans women are ostracized to be the “other”. Even if inclusion is not the demand, there is a failure on our society as a whole to shift the dominant meanings of gender from transgender communities (Bettcher, 2013).

Julia Serano’s “*Whipping Girl*” (2006) is Serano’s memoir articulating her narrative as a trans individual experiencing multiple prejudices in her day-to-day life. *Whipping Girl* provided the language to the discriminatory actions experienced not only by Serano, but similarly by many trans women living as they are in a dominantly cis, heteronormative society. By reading Serano’s experiences, this was the beginning of my understanding on how cis women will objectify trans women as a means to further the feminist movement in benefit of cis women. To understand trans identities and gender fluidity as existing parts of the gender binary, is a recognition and mass validity of the existence of trans lives and trans experiences. For cis women to understand and push for multiple narratives in the ways one may “live as a woman”, is to grant trans women subjectivity within women as a group and social force.

## Simone de Beauvoir on Objectification

When Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949, Beauvoir gave a name to the unspoken relationship dynamic between men and women in the 20th century. As a feminist philosopher, Beauvoir named the phenomenon of ‘othering’ solely being experienced by women due to men’s dominance in society and the existence of the patriarchy. Within a group, one must assume the position of the *Absolute*, and if so, then sets up the position of the *Other* (Beauvoir, pp. 6). According to Beauvoir, “the category of *Other* is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in most primitive societies...” (Beauvoir, pp. 6). Due to the patriarchy, men are assumed to be the *Absolute*. Not only are men assumed to be the *Absolute*, but this role is accepted unconsciously by a majority of men as an unspoken rule of society. Regardless if a few men attempt to reject this role, there is already a collective assumption that men are the dominant species in society. With the existence of these roles in play, the dynamic of objectification is created. Between the *Absolute* and the *Other*, their relationship is doomed to their positionality in society. In reference to the positionality of women, Beauvoir notes “for man, she is a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an other through whom he seeks himself” (Beauvoir, pp. 67). In Beauvoir’s context, to be othered is to be belittled to something much smaller than a human being. Men being the *Absolute*, they are not viewed as “a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an other through whom he seeks himself.” Men have proven themselves of value, historically. Men have acted as the oppressors, not the oppressed. Men are assumed to be the “man of the house,” the championed breadwinner, and/or the authority. Mirroring opposite sides of the gender binary, the dynamic between men

and women is dependent on their own relationship with one another and how it is observed and encouraged.

However, to apply a trans lens to Beauvoir's research, I believe trans women experience *othering* from both men and cis women, specifically. Trans women experience *othering* from men in similar ways to cis women. Trans women experience sexualization, specifically fetishization in certain circumstances, and a means for men to seek oneself. Sexualization itself is not necessarily always rooted in degradation, although to reach a point where one is seen as an object or a mere tool, then the sexualization may have crossed a boundary protecting one from prejudices. However, the *othering* done by cis women, more specifically those whom are considered radical feminists, on to trans women is unique and dependent on the gender binary. My focus of *othering* by cis women is not due to sexualization, but rather the framing of trans women as a object diminished to only her body. In the case of men minimizing cis women to only their reproductive organs and sexed body, cis women are at fault for minimizing the trans women to her body and her history within the gender binary.

To be deemed as a *subject* within the eyes of society means to hold a consistent, dominant position. Subjectivity is the privilege to assert oneself as essential. Objectivity is to be considered inessential, as it is defined due to the existence of subjectivity. A common example of subjectivity and objectivity in play is the sexualization of women. The sexualization of women's bodies, to be reduced to a sexual partner or possibly a reproductive organ, this sexualization places a limitation on the perspective of women. Because of practices of objectification, women's lives, bodies, and thoughts are not deemed as valuable as men's. Beauvoir claims "*...women have thus never constituted a separate group that posited itself for itself before a male group. They have never had a direct or autonomous relationship with men.*" (Beauvoir, pp. 80).

While I do believe this was true at the time and still societally relevant, I also believe cis women and the radical feminist movement have *othered* trans women as if cis women have positioned themselves within subjectivity. Thus, through the othering of trans women, we deny their being as a whole. How did this othering occur?

## Nussbaum's Theory of Objectification

Martha Nussbaum expanded Beauvoir's feminist theory of *Objectification* into seven key features such as *instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity*; it is not necessary for all seven key features to be involved in the objectification of a human being, however at least one feature must be present (Nussbaum, pp. 258). Objectification is not simply treating something as an object. To experience objectification is for the objectifier, who may also be the *subject*, to treat the objectified as "something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account" (Nussbaum, pp. 257). To objectify someone, not necessarily in a sexualized fashion, is to make the person into an object and treat them as such, when they are not an object but a human being (Nussbaum, pp. 257). Objectification is understood to be a phenomenon of how we as human beings treat objects, and how sometimes we may treat human beings in a similar manner to how we treat objects (Nussbaum, pp. 257). Inanimate objects are usually regarded as tools of our purpose, and occasionally some tools are worth our respect due to their beauty, age, naturalness, or simply what the tool may provide for us. We may also treat these objects as lacking autonomy, as they are inanimate (Nussbaum, pp. 257). Nussbaum uses the example of a Monet painting to display how we may apply several of the seven features of objectification. I would assume a Monet painting, a respected name and associated with commonly known art styles, would be of considerable enjoyment and hold value to most human beings with basic art knowledge. Nussbaum considers the Monet painting to be objectified by humans due to the factors of *denial of autonomy, inertness, ownership, and denial of subjectivity* being imposed on the painting (Nussbaum, pp. 259). The Monet painting is objectified by these four key factors mentioned

above, and this tells us that other objects of different forms will experience different factors of the seven key features of objectification depending on the object's use and benefit to the one doing the objectifying (Nussbaum, pp. 259). Due to being objectified, Nussbaum believes that a loss of ownership is possibly linked to the lack of one's self-determination and autonomy as well (Nussbaum, pp. 260). Nussbaum uses the example of a Monet painting to show that non-human objects are easily objectified by humans, and there is no harm doing so. However, within a society, humans objectify each other and eventually, this objectification creates harm or societal rejection towards a group of people. Objectification, if occurring often enough, can desensitize one's feelings or care towards an object. An example would be the loss of *ownership* and *denial of one's autonomy* of most cis women concerning abortion laws in the United States; this is due to men's historical objectification of cis women.

Nussbaum argued *objectivity* as “a pejorative term, connoting a way of speaking, thinking, and acting that the speaker finds morally or socially objectionable, usually, through not always, in the sexual realm” (Nussbaum, pp. 249). Catherine Mackinnon also noted, “women's intimate experience of [sexual] objectification... is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender female” (Nussbaum, pp. 250). While writing on *Objectivity*, Nussbaum discovered seven key features that contribute to the treatment of women similar to objects. One of the seven key features is described as ‘*the denial of subjectivity*’ (1995), an aspect of mistreatments of women. Nussbaum defined *DOS* as “the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.” (Nussbaum, pp. 257). Nussbaum argues it is possible to experience *DOS* “without being treated as a mere tool, without being treated as fungible, [and] without being seen as fungible” (Nussbaum, pp. 257). A simple example of this would be the continued sexual objectification of women and the collective

refusal to correct that behavior, despite feminist thinkers and the feminist movement actively voicing the damage of this phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

As I have said, my biggest concern is the *denial of subjectivity* that trans women experience. It's possible to be treated as something whose experiences and feelings need not be taken into account without being treated as a mere tool, this is possible without being seen as violable, owned, or autonomous (Nussbaum, pp. 260). When trans women are denied subjectivity at the hands of cis women, cis women are not doing so to have ownership over trans lives. More so, the denial of trans women's subjectivity is to strictly define "woman" and reject multiple narratives of the female experience. According to Nussbaum, autonomy is the most demanding factor of objectivity, and is the only key factor which seems impossible to imagine imposed on an inanimate object (Nussbaum, pp. 260). There is an element of the "refusal of imagination" which impacts DOS. To deny one's subjectivity is the refusal to imagine the possibility that the objectified could supersede the key factors which objectify them in the first place (Nussbaum, pp. 260). To determine objectivity, the overall context of the relationship must first be understood. Due to one's intersectionality, the power dynamic in various relationships may fluctuate. Between cis and trans women, being cis is a privilege as it is the dominant and most accepted identity in our mainstream society. Cis women's positionality within society is respected and seen as more legitimate than trans women, and again, this is due to intersectionality in flux in our mainstream society. When cis women objectify trans women due to their gender identity or gender expression, cis women have become the subject, or Absolute,

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<sup>2</sup> Calogero, Rachel M. "Objects Don't Object: Evidence That Self-Objectification Disrupts Women's Social Activism." (*Psychological Science*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2013); Heflick, Nathan A., and Jamie L. Goldenberg. "Seeing Eye to Body: The Literal Objectification of Women." (*Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2014); Saguy, Tamar, et al. "Interacting Like a Body: Objectification Can Lead Women to Narrow Their Presence in Social Interactions." (*Psychological Science*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010)

in this specific relationship due to their positionality in society. From Kant, to objectify one through the means of instrumentalization, as to treat one as a means or tools for the satisfaction of desires, also is closely linked to denial of autonomy and denial of subjectivity. “One stops asking how the other person is thinking or feeling, bent on securing one’s own satisfaction” (Nussbaum, pp. 266).

When the feminist movement came to its second wave between the 60’s and 70’s, this collided with trans[sexual] rights also emerging as a new “mainstream” topic throughout the 1970’s (Schuller, pp. 187). “Rallying around the fantasy that sex discrimination is the main factor that shapes women’s lives and that women are united by this shared experience, *trans radical exclusionary feminists* [TERFs] conceived of a starkly binary universe in which men only oppress and women are only oppressed” (Schuller, pp. 188). Cis women can dismiss trans women’s existence by dismissing their intersectional oppression and agencies, that is, the depth of their experiences. There is a dismissal of trans women’s existence as a whole. According to Beauvoir, “it might turn out that to treat an adult as an end in himself, does entail recognition of subjectivity” (Beauvoir, pp. 261). It seems men have only been successful in their recognition of subjectivity, and all women are not afforded this privilege in any available way.

## Trans-Exclusion within Women

Within groups of women, trans women's subjectivity is often denied. The denial is especially dependent on the trans woman's axis of intersectionality. A trans woman may face prejudices due to her gender identity, but also may simultaneously face alternative prejudices such as race and/or whether or not she "passes" within a widely cis society. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) have excluded trans women from entering feminist and/or women-dominated spaces<sup>3</sup>. Through the exclusion of trans women from feminist spaces, TERFs have made it a statement that trans women are not welcome to identify themselves along with the dominant model of *the woman*. In this paper, I challenge the role of cis women in our patriarchal society. As there has been a violent history from TERFs towards trans women, I believe it is the role of the cis women to actively combat violence from other cis women towards trans women. The violence can come in the form of physical or emotional abuse, however cis women must also acknowledge this stems from the underlying patriarchal cissexism that contributes to transphobia.

Because of dominant patriarchy<sup>4</sup>, cis women have villainized and have *other-ed* trans women. During the 1970s, transgender rights was an emerging movement. Earlier in the 1900's, there were notable, nationwide breakthroughs in United States transgender history, such as Christene Jorgensen coming out as a trans woman in 1950, becoming a national sensation, and John Hopkins opening their first gender reassignment surgery clinic in 1966. However, white feminism plagued the feminist movement and created widespread lesbian separatism within trans

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<sup>3</sup> Czachor, Emily. "'Save 1 Trans, Kill 1 Terf' Graffiti Appears in Paris at International Women's Day Event."; Serano, Julia. "On Being Explicitly Named in a Violent 'Gender Critical' Manifesto." Medium, Medium, 8 Nov. 2021; Swimming World Editorial Staff. "University of Arizona Stars Write Letter to NCAA on Lia Thomas, Transgender Debate."

<sup>4</sup> A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby, 1990).

and lesbian communities. Due to Janice Raymond's transphobic dissertation, "*The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*," Raymond "lambasted sex transition as a pinnacle of male objectification and control over women" (Schuller, p. 196). In *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*, Kayla Schuller highlights that the anti-trans critical feminist framework that Raymond outlines in her thesis, depends on the premise that "sex oppression is the primary form of oppression" (Schuller, p. 198). It is a white feminist ideal that all women are oppressed primarily by sex oppression. Due to the existence of various intersectional identities, sex oppression is not considered a primary form of oppression by all. White women will never face the same oppression Black or Brown women will experience, and it goes the same for cis women never experiencing the same oppression trans women will always face. Our oppressions may overlap, and we may have similar oppressive forces they stem from, however, the context and the influences of the oppression will always have their own intersectional-based factor. It is important to note why Schuller includes transphobia stemming from a white feminist issue, as a common allegory repeated within white feminism is the "Black/women allegory".

*"We know what's at work when whites wear blackface; the same thing is at work when men wear drag."*  
(Schuller, pp. 187)

The quote above is the example Schuller provides as the "Black/women" allegory. Radical feminism survives by the ideology that being a woman is a very rigid, strictly binary, and universal experience from birth to death. The "Black/women" allegory popularized within radical feminism implies that experiencing discrimination based on race and discrimination based on gender have the same impact, when it is much more complex and dependent on individual intersectionality. Because "being a woman" is rigidly defined within radical feminism, cis women often separate themselves from trans women. This separatism is often rooted in the

objectification of the trans body and the denial of trans women's existing identities. An example of this would be the long-running MichFest (also known as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival), existing from 1976-2015. MichFest was a women's music festival held in Oceana County, Michigan, known for their "womyn-born-womyn" policy. Although "proof of gender" was not required upon entry, MichFest was a gathering of women who believed the existence of women is dependent on being born as a woman. In 1991, Nancy Jean Burkholder, a trans woman and attendee, was evicted from the premises of MichFest. A few festival attendees were suspicious of Burkholder's gender identity and reported her to festival authorities. Before eviction, Burkholder offered her drivers license and to undress, considering nudity was encouraged at the festival and simultaneously to prove her validity, but the security refused<sup>5</sup>. As a response, Camp Trans was established in 1994, and protested for the inclusion of trans women annually across the road from MichFest until 2011. In 2013, trans activist, Red Durkin, instead demanded for the boycott of the festival until trans women were included (McConnell, 2015). In 2014, the festival founder, Lisa Vogel, wrote: "We have said that this space, for this week, is intended to be for womyn who were born female, raised as girls, and who continue to identify as womyn...it is not a policy, or a ban on anyone...we do not and will not question anyone's gender." (McConnell, 2015). In an ethnophenomenological study conducted by Elizabeth A. McConnell, a team of four researchers immersed themselves in the culture of Michfest, by attending the festival in August 2013, and used participant observation to document experiences while participating in workshops, concerts, work shifts, and conversations (McConnell, 2015). Although most participants agreed that MichFest "may need to change its position as times

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<sup>5</sup> Michelle Tea. "A Week with the Believer: Transmissions from Camp Trans. (2003)." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 6 Mar. 2013, <https://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/transmissions-from-camp-trans-2003>.

change...and the festival needed to change to survive”, most participants also supported the organizers’ intentions to “maintain a womyn-born-womyn space” (McConnell, 2015). The “womyn-born-womyn” supporters believed that trans and cisgender women had different experiences, and shared concern that “if we can’t talk about pussies with three thousand women, where can we?” (McConnell, 2015). Another common belief shared by the participants were that including trans women would threaten the physical and emotional safety cis women experience at the festival” and connected with the fear of “overtly bio-markers of masculinity like penises and “male voices”.” (McConnell, 2015).

Applying objectivity with a trans lens, Stephen Whittle has noted that “transgender[ed] people have questioned the whole notion of objectivity—they do not try to claim it and instead have build upon the tradition the community has of autobiographical writing to give a voice to their self-acknowledged subjectivity” (Whittle, 199). This is because transgender folks have not been allowed either subjectivity or objectivity due to three major factors. Firstly, any discussion involving the transgender community and their personal interactions with gender has been coupled with medical discourse, which pushes for the viewpoint that trans people are only “self-interested and foolish” (Whittle, 199).

In the 2022 NCAA Women’s Division I Swimming and Diving Championships, Lia Thomas became the first transgender athlete to win a Division I national championship in any sport<sup>6</sup>. Although this is a victory for trans people competing in sports, there is continuous pushback from cis people themselves. The Women of Arizona Swimming & Diving (University of Arizona) penned an open letter which asks the NCAA Board of Governors, “Do we have a

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<sup>6</sup>Barnes, Katie. “Amid Protests, Penn Swimmer Lia Thomas Becomes First Known Transgender Athlete to Win Division I National Championship.” *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 17 Mar. 2022,

voice?” in response to Thomas’ victory at the Division I Championships. To diminish Thomas’ win, the University of Arizona’s Women’s Swimming team discredits Thomas’ hard-earned talent by pushing a focus on the possibilities of a “biological advantage”. Key phrases such as “natural born men”, “biologically male”, “physiological advantages”, and “testosterone” are brought up throughout the letter. The Texas Women’s Swimming and Diving Alumni from years 1990 & 1980 addressed a similar letter<sup>7</sup> to the NCAA athletic director and associate director. Their letter also focuses on key phrases such as “biological women/females”, “testosterone levels”, and “physiological differences”. In both letters, there is an attempt to separate the competing cis women from Lia Thomas. However, Lia Thomas is the first trans woman, but also the first trans person, to compete at the Division I Championships. What both of these letters have in common is an attempt to either recognize Lia Thomas’ identity or the scrutiny she is currently facing. The University of Arizona’s Women’s Swimming team pens, “a target was placed on the back of a trans athlete subjecting this person to devastating national outcry and humiliation” (The Women of Arizona Swimming & Diving, 2022). In the letter from UT Women’s Swimming team alumni, they have written “while we respect Lia Thomas’ right to express her true self, we feel it’s important to recognize the impact that her participation will have on fair competition opportunities for biological females” (Rieder, 2022). In the same letter, they sum up the debate as “the Lia Thomas issue” (Rieder, 2022). Instead of recognizing Thomas’ identity as a woman, the cis women speaking out against Thomas have created separatism between the other competitors and Thomas. In the defense of the cis women competing, the cis women writers are zoning in on Thomas’ biology, and unfairly doing so to

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<sup>7</sup>Rieder, David. “Texas Women's Alums Write Letter on Lia Thomas' Participation in NCAA Championships.” *Swimming World News*, 17 Mar. 2022,

only Thomas. In both letters, the writers discuss Lia Thomas' testosterone levels, which are specifically unknown and only speculated. Although Lia Thomas is the first trans person to successfully compete at the Division I level, she is not the first trans athlete to face scrutiny. Veronica Ivy, a trans athlete and cyclist, has also faced scrutiny due to her trans identity and championship wins in a field dominated by cis women. What both letters ignore is the NCAA rule that requires "trans women athletes to take testosterone suppression therapy for one full calendar year before competing" (NCAA, 2022). Lia Thomas has been taking testosterone suppression therapy for twice as long (CBSNEWS, 2022). Thomas has faced scrutiny from the public and competitors within her field. The University of Arizona Women's Swimming team describe this time as "hav[ing] reconnected with each other in sisterhood after many busy years living our lives beyond the water's edge" (The Women of Arizona Swimming & Diving, 2022). This "sisterhood" can be best described as a bonding of cis women through *cissexual gender entitlement*. Cis people develop a sense of entitlement regarding their gender due to others confirming this sense of "naturalness" (Serrano, pp. 163). Across the United States in 2022, the public debates whether Lia Thomas and other trans athletes should be allowed to compete in the gender category they rightfully identify as. As cis women speak out to "save women's sports", they simultaneously objectify trans women's bodies by scrutinizing "physiological differences" and denying trans women's subjectivity and control of a narrative through persistent outspokenness against "unfair competition."

Secondly, trans folks are overwhelmed with social and legal restrictions, which forces trans people to out themselves, and adds another layer of self-interest to gender thought created by trans people. Trans people may out themselves on a daily basis, through interactions that cis people do not think twice about. This can be as simple as presenting an outdated, or

pre-transition government identification. When trans people make the decision to medically transition, usually they will also change their name and gender marker on all forms of government identification. Updating your driver's license, birth certificate, social security, and/or passports can be a complicated and lengthy process, as well as expensive. During this process, trans people may face judgment or pushback which further delays the correction of their legal documents.

Thirdly, Whittle adds that Janice Raymond's thesis "The Transsexual Empire, the Making of the She-Male" discredited trans voices in academia and in the feminist movement as well (Whittle, 199). Raymond made three arguments for radical feminists to condemn trans women; firstly, the "medical rebirth" of a trans women through medical transition is a "process of mythic deception" as a male response to second wave feminism in America during the 1960s. (Whittle, pp. 196). Raymond believes that due to feminists fighting for their rights in 1960s, she is speculating the male response to be the invention of trans women, despite that trans women have historically been represented throughout the history of humanity<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, "transsexuals are one result of a "socio-political programme", controlled and implemented by the medico-legal hierarchies of, and on behalf of, a patriarchal hegemony which has used them." (Whittle, pp. 196). Raymond believes that trans women are cis men who "colonize" female culture, identification, and sexuality. Rather than understanding that trans women may be socializing themselves within the group they identify with to support transition, or rather so just "being themselves", Raymond pushes the belief that trans women are "stealing womanhood" from cis women. Thirdly, Raymond makes her most "damning statement": "all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact." (Whittle, pp. 196). Physical transition, which is a choice but also can be a necessity, is usually an incredibly tedious process.

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<sup>8</sup> Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come.* , 1992. Print.

Trans people who choose to go forth with physical/medical transition must seek out multiple medical and psychological consultations, accompanied by thousands of dollars being spent. Raymond believes that gender transition is simply the “possession” of the opposite gender identity, and that cis men are simply molding themselves into their ideal image of a woman. Raymond uses a violent term such as “rape” to put across her ideology that trans women are simply cis men “colonizing” the female body. (Whittle, pp. 196) By the popularization of Raymond’s myths, cis women during the second-wave feminist movement in 1979 did not believe in and absolutely villainized trans women.

However, these difficulties are why I believe transgender folks do experience objectivity, and specifically trans women experience *DOS*, imposed by cis women . If objectivity is limited to gender, I believe intersectionality affects how objectivity is experienced. “It is not the other who, defining itself as the other, defines the one; the other is posited as other by the one positing itself as the one” (Beauvoir, 7).

## How do cis women objectify if they are othered too?

Intersectionality is the intersecting social categorization such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and/or disability and how one may experience disadvantage or discrimination in their own life (Crenshaw, 1989). Trans women experience their lives as being trans and living within the trans community, as well as experiencing life as women. The degrees of oppression dependent on these identities can also depend on how others perceive trans women. To understand how trans women experience objectification, Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* provides a first person account on how one experiences transphobia rooted in different forms of sexism. Often, TERFs will have a phallogentric<sup>9</sup> ideology against trans women, which reduces them to their sex organs. Again, stemming from Janice Raymond's thesis, the phallogentric ideology concerns the myth that "male energy" somehow is stored in the phallus. Feminism is rooted in the belief that women are worth much more than the bodies we are born into, and that our persons are able to transcend the gender socialization that we endure throughout childhood; thus, making it hypocritical for TERFs to push the "penis argument"<sup>10</sup> to trans women, as if they are not capable of transcending their own gender socialization, and are not actively already committed to doing so as a part of their transition process. Julia Serano, writer and gender theorist, critiques TERFs justification of discrimination, on the basis of "mannish looks or acts" (Serano, 2007, pp.236), because butch women<sup>11</sup> would be excluded (Serano, 2007, pp. 237). According to Serano, the TERF ideology focused on the "penis argument" has shifted away from a "gender essentialist"<sup>12</sup> theory and expanded towards social construction (Serano, 2007, pp. 237). The "penis argument", when

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<sup>9</sup> A focus of the phallus as a symbol of male dominance

<sup>10</sup> The "penis argument", used in Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* (2007), is used to describe the common myth that TERFs uphold that the phallus is associated with male domination and "male energy."

<sup>11</sup> This is not necessarily a literal belief that butch women are "mannish", more so Serano's ability to spin TERFs' beliefs into a viewpoint which may make more sense to themselves.

<sup>12</sup> Gender essentialism is the belief that gender identity is rigid and fixed.

rooted in gender essentialism, was the ideology that trans women with penises would never transcend how their sex organs define them within our cis, heteronormative society. Within a society with dominant social construction, regardless of a trans woman's sex organs, TERF ideology is still rooted in the belief that trans women cannot transcend their assigned sex at birth. The reasoning is often based on the belief that young male socialization is irreversible. TERFs also are known for their *womyn-born womyn* beliefs, attempting to justify that trans women will create an unsafe environment in spaces for women. TERFs reject the fact that trans women too experience physical violation and sexual assault by the hands of men, similar to cis women's experiences (Serano, 2007, pp. 241).

*"It infuriates me when cissexual women use male privilege as an excuse to dismiss [male to female] spectrum folks as it belies their reluctance to examine their own birth privilege, their socialization privilege, and cissexual privilege." (Serano, 2007, pp. 308)*

Trans women actually frequently experience stereotype threat<sup>13</sup> due to being trans, however they also experience a dual layer threat, as they are experiencing their lives through the oppression of being viewed and socialized as a woman, as well as being trans (Ivy, 2014, pp. 861). Due to living in a predominantly cis, heterosexist society, most sexual minorities experience greater stress (Arayasirikul & Wilson, 2019, pp. 1417). This is not to say that cis women are not oppressed just as much living in the same cis, heteronormative society; however it is to point out that trans women are not exempt from these conditions as well because of the TERF myth that the "childhood male socialization" or "male energy" somehow shields them from danger. According to the U.S. Transgender Survey (2015), 31 percent of trans women have experienced sexual assault, and 33 percent of trans women have been verbally harassed by strangers in public due to their gender identity.

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<sup>13</sup> "Stereotype threat generally occurs when an individual has heightened group awareness." An example being when a trans woman is aware she is the only trans person in a group. (Veronica Ivy, 2014, pp. 862).

According to Serano, there is an enforced ignorance to the very real discrimination and abuse trans women face in their day to day lives; to dehumanize trans women is to then enable the sexual harassment, abuse, and objectification that they face without understanding or remorse (Serano, pp. 306). Cis women objectify trans women by the popularized radical feminist myth, “the penis argument”. To firmly reinstate throughout the decades, since the popularized Janice Raymond dissertation in 1979, that trans women are not valid for their own socialization of womanhood, in addition to living and experiencing their lives as women, thus objectifying trans women due to their sex organs. There is a denial of subjectivity, as trans women’s real life accounts of similar abuse faced by men are not taken into account when cis women claim trans women are not the “true definition” of a woman. Trans facimilation is the viewing (or portrayal) of transgender folks as facsimiles of cisgender folks (Serano, pp. 171). This belief suggests that cisgender folks are the “default” and “primary”, especially when cisgender folks use language such as “emulate”, “impersonate”, and “mimic” when referring to trans identities and expressions (Serano, 2007, pp. 173). According to Serano, the objectification of trans bodies is intertwined with the cisgender obsession with “passing” and focusing exclusively on trans people’s physical transformation. This focus will keep trans people anchored to their assigned sex in society (Serano, pp. 175). “Passing” is referred to as the practice of embodying the gender one identifies as, and it is specifically only used in context to refer to trans folks. In trans sub-cultures, the conversation of “passing” is often used to express whether one would be seen as “cis”, also usually used in the context of navigating safety in the mainstream, cis heterosexist society. However, in the cis, heterosexist dominant society, “passing” is understood more so as an “expectation” for trans people to *mirror* cis folks. “*Passing is conditioned by trans-misogyny through surveillance and measurement, and continually defining what and who is passable and how to pass.*” (Arayasirikul & Wilson, pp. 1425). To determine whether a trans woman “passes” is a

complex social interaction, holding members of society and trans individuals through the lens of trans-misogyny (Arayasirikul & Wilson, pp. 1425). *“Cissexuals are the ones who create, foster, and enforce “passing” by their tendency to treat trans people in dramatically different ways based solely on the superficial criteria of our appearance”* (Serano, pp. 179). From a cis woman’s perspective, if she were to determine whether or not a trans woman is passing, would be a use of conditional cissexual privilege<sup>14</sup> and a participation of ungendering<sup>15</sup>. In the context of trans women, they were most likely socialized throughout childhood with specific masculine gender roles and consistently reinforced these roles due to interactions with cisgender folks in their lives. During transition, as well as consciously in their day to day lives, trans women are rejecting the male cisgender binary through a process of being aware of masculinity, patriarchy, and misogyny, their distance from it and the negativity they associate with it (Arayasirikul & Wilson, 2019, pp. 1431). There is a flux in passing, as determined by the types of spaces trans women encounter, especially gendered spaces, thus also victimizing trans women to trans-facsimilation. According to Serano, trans-facsimilation is a blatant double standard that ensures that acts of cissexual gender intimidation will typically be overlooked, while acts of “trans imitation” will be over emphasized (Serano, 2007, pp. 173). In Serano’s essay *“On The Outside Looking In”*, Serano detailed her experiences at an event where other women, presumably queer but mostly cis, were in attendance:

*“I would sometimes come across certain women who would act dismissive towards me, who seemed bothered with me being there, who acted as if they were granting me a special favor by “tolerating” my presence, who would make off-hand comments about my trans status as if to remind me that I was not a “real” woman like they were.”* (Serano, *“On The Outside Looking In, 2016”*).

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<sup>14</sup> “The temporary cissexual privilege that is granted to a trans person but can be taken away any time if their identity is known” (Serano, 2007, pp. 172).

<sup>15</sup> “An attempt to undo a trans person’s gender by privileging incongruities and discrepancies in their gendered appearance that would normally be overlooked if cis....The only purpose this serves is to privilege cisgender while delegitimizing trans and gender variant people” (Serano, 2007, pp. 177).

Serano is not the only trans women to be dismissed by cis women, as if cis women are given the ability to critique and validate trans women and their bodies. By critiquing trans women and their bodies, there is a sense of ownership over the “female body” and through this, there is a denial of trans women’s existence because cis women cannot accept that the “female body” can exist in more than one form.

In this past year, BCC published an online article which villinized trans women to the public, a largely cis heteronormative society. On October 26th, 2021, BBC posted an article titled “*We’re being pressured into sex by trans women*” written by Caroline Lowbridge. The article demonizes trans women by entertaining one of Janice Raymond’s myths, which generalizes trans women to be rapists. The article also discusses complaints from lesbians on “being pressured to accept the idea that a penis can be a female sex organ.” Within this article pertained data from a survey run by Angela C. Wild, co-founder of *Get The L Out*. Eighty lesbian women were surveyed, by social media, and she reported that 56% of the surveyed presented “being pressured or coerced to accept a trans woman as a sexual partner.” Wild also admitted in the article that “the sample may not be representative of the wider lesbian community, she believes it was important to capture their “points of view and stories.” In the BBC article, Lily Cade, self-proclaimed as “*Porn Valley’s Gold Star Lesbian*”, was one of the lesbians profiled, and has been removed from the article since November 4th 2021. Cade, a cis woman, has had multiple sexual assault allegations<sup>16</sup> and had even admitted so in a blog post, writing “If a rapist is someone who is accused in public of sexual misconduct, then I am a rapist.” BBC claims the article was “carefully considered before publication and went through an internal editorial process<sup>17</sup>”. However, somehow during the “internal editorial process”, it was never discovered

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<sup>16</sup> Nolan, Emma. “BBC Removes Lily Cade Contribution after Transphobic Remarks Spark Outrage.” (Newsweek, Newsweek, 4 Nov. 2021)

<sup>17</sup> Shaun. “BBC Transphobia Part 2.” (YouTube, 3 Dec. 2021)

that Lily Cade had a past of serial sexual assaults, and was therefore published in an article claiming that trans women are actually the ones pressuring cis women into sexual intercourse. This article assumes a much bigger issue, as sexual assault cases perpetrated by trans women would only be considered isolated cases, which anyone could expect from any minority group<sup>18</sup>. However, according to the 2015 US Transgender Report<sup>19</sup> (USTR), 47% of trans people interviewed reported experiencing sexual assault at least once in their lifetime. One out of every ten trans people reported having been sexually assaulted during the 2015 survey year. These reports I have provided are not meant to diminish the sexual assault many cis women experience yearly, however it is provided to dismiss the dangerous myth that trans women are viewed as sexual assault perpetrators. It is much more likely for a trans woman to experience sexual assault, rather than commit the act themselves. However, Lily Cade was not removed from the BBC article because of her multiple sexual assault allegations. Due to the backlash that the BBC article received<sup>20</sup>, they replied directly to those who left complaints via email to address the concerns. BBC does not acknowledge Lily Cade's predatory past directly, however they did comment "we [also] acknowledged that an admission of inappropriate behavior by the [same] contributor should have been included in the original article." The actual reason why Lily Cade was removed from the BBC article was due to the discovery of multiple violently transphobic posts created on her blog, one of her manifestos directly threatening trans educator and writer, Julia Serrano. These blog posts advocated for violence to be committed against trans women, and even called for them to be "lynched." This is only one result of objectification. By the publication of this article, BBC supported the objectification of trans women. Within the scope

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<sup>18</sup> Shaun. "Response to BBC Transphobia." (YouTube, 12 Nov. 2021)

<sup>19</sup> The USTR is the largest running survey in the United States which surveys elements which make up trans people's quality of life. The 2015 USTR is the most recent report, however they are currently surveying for 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Lowbridge, Caroline. "'We're Being Pressured into Sex by Some Trans Women.'" (BBC News, BBC, 26 Oct. 2021)

of the article, cis women reduced trans women to their sex organs. In *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serrano points out that feminism is “based on the conviction that women are far more than the sex of the bodies we are born into, and our identities and abilities are capable of transcending the restrictive nature of the gender socialization we endure during childhood” (Serrano, 2007). Cis men are viewed as the *Absolute* because there is no necessity to transcend their gender socialization. Cis women and trans women are simultaneously transcending their gender socialization, however they are both condemned by very different groups due to their own intersectional identities. In this context, trans women are hypocritically being ostracized by cis women for their transcendence. In addition, Serrano points out in *Whipping Girl* that “sexualization is an attempt to dehumanize and disempower women” and in conjunction to “sexualization that occurs in both media imagery and public harassment reinforces a power dynamic between the sexes which men are invariably viewed as predators and women as prey” (Serrano, 2007). In the BBC article, cis women are framing trans women to be aggressors through objectification. By belittling trans women to their sex organs, objectification has started to take affect, and the objectification of trans women can pose as a dangerous threat because it will likely lead to the sexual predator talking point.

## **Conclusion**

Experiencing oppression through objectification is shared between both cis and trans women. However, trans women experience a unique objectification at the hands of cis women, and this objectification is rooted in the refusal to accept trans women's gender identity. Although not all cis women hold this belief, as a group protected by cis privilege, the prejudiced and discriminatory myths invented by Janice Raymond and used against trans women have been spread far too long. The objectification of trans women based on physiology and society's strictly binary definition of womanhood has created enough harm, and it is the responsibility of cis women to shift the narrative. It is the responsibility of cis women to erase Janice Raymond's narratives of trans women from future generations, and it is the responsibility of cis women to break free the definition of 'woman'. To objectify a trans woman is to frame trans women as an object diminished to only her body. Again, cis women are at fault for minimizing the trans women to her body and her history within the gender binary.

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