**Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?**
Andrea Long Chu

*So before I launch in in earnest, I just want to provide a little roadmap of what I'm going to say here. I have a little preamble, then an epigraph, then I'll go into the body of the paper.*

*So very briefly: In this paper, I'm going to be making an argument about transness (among other things), and to do that I'm going to be looking at a genre of internet pornography called sissy porn, sometimes also called forced feminization porn. And what I'm going to argue is that transness is essentially a kind of desire, or rather several different kinds, and that sissy porn basically stages the nonconsensuality of that desire, or one of those desires. And this work I'm sharing with you today is part of a larger project called* Bad Politics. *By bad politics, I mean what happens when subjects living under oppression just don't feel like resisting that oppression and do something else instead. I'm happy to talk more about that project in the Q&A.*

*OK, that being said. The title of this paper is "Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?" And I've got an epigraph: "Try arguing with an orgasm sometime." That's the feminist legal theorist Catherine MacKinnon, from her book* Only Words.

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The political lesson of pornography is this: We mostly just like what we like, whether we like it or not. This lesson might be hard to swallow. So might most porn. Few issues in the history of feminist movements in the United States have been more fraught than pornography. But the fabled acrimony of the sex wars can obscure just how much the warring factions had in common. As I've written elsewhere, feminists on *both* sides, having spent the Seventies fighting for the notion that sex was fair game for political critique, "were now faced with the prospect of putting their mouths where their money had been." In other words, everyone was pro-sex; the disagreement lay merely in what kind of sex to be pro. Amber Hollibaugh put it best at the legendary Barnard conference on sexuality: "Is there 'feminist' sex? Should there be?"

So if the sex wars derived their urgency from a certain precarious political optimism about sex that the opposing camps, for all their acrimony, *shared*, then I suspect that feminism's saturation by debates over pornography during the late seventies and early eighties is owed first to the fact that, in feminists' own personal experiences of viewing pornography, this optimism about sex washed like a wave against the indifferent levees of desire. Nothing sets you up for hypocrisy like porn. No one who encounters pornography, feminists included, escapes the gentle ravages of a probably ancient dialectic between the streets and the sheets. What I am suggesting, with very little proof, is that regardless of factional affiliation, most feminists in the sex wars liked porn, but none of them for political reasons.

If this is true, it is because to watch pornography is essentially to have the burden of desiring taken out of your hands, which are thereby freed up for other endeavors. Since at least the Eighties, pornography has enjoyed the presumption of a direct line to addiction. This presumption has only hardened into fact in the millennial age, where smartphones seem to have placed an infinitude of free, easily accessible pornographic materials in every imaginable category directly beneath the nation's vulnerable thumbs. This has left the social field well-lubricated for periodic moral panics about the sexual degeneracy presumed to prowl the public playgrounds of the digital. The decades-long cancer of go-go bars and porn theatres in New York City's Times Square may have finally been cut out by the family-friendly scalpel of the Walt Disney Company, but *Lion King*–themed erotic cartoons can now be accessed by any twelve-year-old in rural Utah with internet access and a clue.

These anxieties crystallize in the 2013 romantic comedy *Don Jon*, written and directed by onetime child actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who stars as Jon Martello, a latter-day Don Juan from a working-class Italian-American family in New Jersey. Jon's addiction to online pornography, which he prefers to sex with the girls he brings home, ultimately sabotages his budding relationship with a beautiful, high-maintenance woman named Barbara (Scarlett Johansson, obviously), who refuses to put out until Jon starts taking a night school class in order to escape his current employment in the service industry. Even after sleeping with Barbara, Jon finds himself slipping out of bed to power up his laptop. When she nearly catches him watching "porno," a

habit that disgusts her, Jon puffs out his chest and insists that only "fucking losers watch porn," not men like him who can have the real deal. "Baby, I *love* you," Jon whispers, as if delivering a line from the romance movies whose aesthetics of quotable heterosexuality Barbara has internalized.

What the scene suggests is that the popular fantasy of the perverted male loner glued to his computer in the dark, perhaps even when evoked by feminists, expresses not righteous disgust at patriarchal male sexuality, but rather genuine concern for masculinity in crisis. After all, Jon is right: Porn *is* for fucking losers. As Jon explains in voiceover, whereas the tiring mechanics of topping require him to "do all the work" in sex with women (he dubs missionary position "the worst position in all of fucking"), online pornography allows him to simply plug himself into a set of prefab object relations: "I don't gotta say anything, I don't gotta do anything, I just fucking *lose* myself." Unlike Jon's religious workout schedule or his carefully slicked-back hair, losing himself isn't about propping up a fantasy of male control; on the contrary, it's about finding temporary relief from the pressures of a heterosexuality already starting to crack under the weight of economic stuckness and unremitting gender performance reviews.

Here the film's implicit political theory of pornography—call it antiporn postfeminism—both joins and splits with those of its forerunners in the sex wars. The film strongly concurs with Catharine MacKinnon's notorious position that pornography is fundamentally structured by the eroticization of dominance and submission, and furthermore that dominant and submissive sexual roles correspond, strictly and respectively, with male and female gender roles. But the film breaks with MacKinnonite orthodoxy by locating this power dynamic, not in the sex acted out between the powerful men and fawning women onscreen, but in the sex unfolding in real time between the pornographic image in its entirety and the viewer its flickering fantasies render powerless and obsessed. When Barbara discovers that his browser history is stuffed with porn sites, she will accuse Jon of having "more sex with that thing"—his screen—than with his own girlfriend. It's pornography, not "real pussy," that "does it" for Jon, pornography that's doing the doing, doing Jon's desiring on his behalf. Time-lapse shots of Jon barely moving from his computer for days at a time do not present a subject with the

dominion of a "grown man." No wonder Barbara breaks up with him: Under MacKinnon's structuralism, but equally in a twenty-first-century American culture generally hooked on heterosexuality's genre conventions, Jon is not just submissive, but also the woman.

The suggestion here is that the pornographic spectator is basically a bottom. Pornography blows a gaping hole in heterosexual masculinity that Jon will spend the rest of the film struggling to plug. To be sure, Jon, whose sexual floundering registers an experience of socioeconomic dispossession both illusory and genuine, has no shortage of compensatory fantasies of male empowerment. Porn just isn't one of them. Jon, I suspect like a great number of heterosexual men, watches porn not to have power but to give it up. (Luckily for Jon, the film holds out optimistically for mutuality's repair in the form of his emotionally fulfilling relationship with a wise older widow named Esther [Julianne Moore, obviously].) What I am proposing with this reading of *Don Jon*, a film with all the moral subtlety of an after-school special, is that the menace of pornography in the eyes of public figures, religious leaders, and even committed feminists in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century America lies, not in its virulently misogynistic "messages," but in its having raised the specter of emasculation. Put more tendentiously, pornography *feminizes*.

Now Jon would hardly be the first closeted trans woman whose gender dysphoria felt like porn addiction. Indeed, the internet is full of women like this, if you know where to look. The phenomenon is common enough, in fact, to have given rise to an entire subgenre of anxiety-fielding on the popular discussion website Reddit. In typical post from 2014, titled "Did sissy porn make me trans or was I trans all along?," one user writes: "About 3 years ago, I discovered sissy hypno videos [that's "hypno" like short for "hypnotism"], which in a nutshell are flashing subjective images telling you to wear panties, be girly, suck cock, and even take hormones. I became completely obsessed with these videos. Nothing got me off like these. It got to the point where I started wearing panties and imagining myself as a girl when I would masturbate." The poster is "95% sure" she is trans, but the sexual nature of her desires gives her pause. What if real trans women just aren't into this kind of thing? What if her therapist, like the one described by another

user, tells her that she has "a kink, not a gender identity crisis," since "real MTFs don't do that. Ever"?

Commenters, for their part, do their best to dispel posters' fears, many disclosing that they too were interested in sissy porn only to find that those fantasies attenuated or vanish in the course of gender transition. As one commenter puts it, "Once I started HRT [hormone replacement therapy], the sissy porn stopped immediately. Now I find myself baking bread instead." Another writes, "I haven't read your post yet but I'm gonna answer the title. Sissy porn makes you trans just like *Call of Duty* make you an elite soldier." Fair enough. Most commenters are simply applying a well-known transgender rule of thumb: If you're not sure if you're trans, you're definitely trans. This rule is a rope thrown over the city wall whose gates the mental health professions have kept on keeping ever since the first medical treatments for what the DSM-V calls *gender dysphoria* became possible. Effectively, this entails downplaying the significance of the posts' sexual elements. Most often, commenters don't deny that the poster may have a sexual fetish, but simply insist that "your porn use is a reflection of your transness rather than the cause of it." Here many follow (occasionally explicitly) the argument found in trans activist Julia Serano's popular 2007 book *Whipping Girl*: "When you isolate an impressionable transgender teen and bombard her with billboard ads baring bikini-clad women and boy's locker room trash talk about this girl's tits and that's girl's ass, then she will learn to turn her gender identity into a fetish." On this model (the "gender identity" model), desire becomes a kind of press release for identity: What you want tells you who you already are.

Then again, turning people trans is *exactly what sissy porn says it does*. Sissy porn is a radical feminist's worst nightmare. The genre has circulated on the internet, and specifically the microblogging platform Tumblr, in the form of videos, still images, and animated GIFs since around 2013. The majority of these videos and images are cribbed from mainstream heterosexual porn (and/or shemale porn [*more on this in a minute*]). The women in these images (some cis, some trans) are then re-presented to spectators as formerly *male* subjects who have been feminized, or "sissified," through being forced to put on makeup, wear lingerie, and sexually submit themselves to "cock," usually (but not always) represented by "real men" to

whom sissies are expected to open their holes in worshipful surrender. Characteristically, sissy porn directly addresses its spectators in the second person: bossy captions explicitly inform spectators of their desires (usually some variation of "You want to suck cock" or "You love to be fucked in the ass") and instruct them to understand their addiction to the genre as constitutive of their own feminization. This means that sissy porn is porn *about* porn, a genre that takes the *formal* structure of all pornographic reception, which I've argued is basically feminizing, and promotes it, often spectacularly, to the level of explicit *content*. In this respect, sissy porn is more sex than text, less of an object and more of an event, the basic idea being that by *showing* sissies online, the genre is *creating* sissies in real life.

Leo Bersani once wrote, in the midst of the AIDS crisis of the Eighties, that public horror of the anal sex act betrayed a hateful envy of the "intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman." Sissy porn takes this literally. Getting fucked makes you a woman because fucked is what a woman is. Penetration confers femaleness. This distinguishes sissy porn's theory of anal sex from that of the gay male barebacking subculture Tim Dean describes in his book *Unlimited Intimacy*. There, writes Dean, "being sexually penetrated is a matter of 'taking it like a man,' enduring without complaint any discomfort or temporary loss of status, in order to prove one's masculinity." Even in barebacking, masculinity remains the ultimate condom. But sissies never use protection, latex or otherwise. While it borrows some of barebacking's terminology—notably the term *breeding*, which Dean glosses as "the deliberate abandonment of condoms as an attempt to conceive"—sissy porn depicts anal penetration as a full-scale assault on not just masculinity, but manhood as such.

Here we may find ourselves impaled on one of the bigger ironies of sissy subculture: Nothing makes you a girl like a big cock. A representative GIF features a trans woman on her side, taking it in the ass, her own penis (or "dicklet" or "sissy clitty") soft and limp. "There is no more man left inside of you," the caption reads, continuing, "Except that big hard cock that ruins your sissy hole." Another image, another caption: "Cock belongs in you. It makes you whole." That's *cock*, pure and simple, untarnished by the banality of an article. Sissy porn

often uses *cock* as an uncountable mass noun, like *water* or *sugar*, presumably because there is always more. In an excellent article on the oral sex series *Gag the Fag*, Damon Young writes that *cock* is the name, not of an organ given over to sensuous impulses, or even of a site of pleasure, but rather of a "formal principle of differentiation" that "organizes bodies in an erotic system, endowing anatomy with erotic significance." In other words, *cock* describes, personifies even, the abstract relation between the sexual positions of top and bottom—much as [*and as a good Christian girl I have to say this*] much as, in the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit is said, by among others Thomas Aquinas, to personify the loving relationship between the Father and the Son.

This therefore doesn't mean, at all, that sissy porn is at all interested the "real men" doing the fucking. Sissy porn's men are fragmented: a hand, an ass, a stray leg. One rarely sees their faces; one sometimes forgets they are even there. As Young puts it, "The top is there to fuck: he is a penis, not a face, and as such his face is removed from the scene." In sissy porn, tops are props. Their function is purely structural. Even the fleshly penis, for which a dildo may easily be substituted, is, in fact, just one of a series of accessories whose normative association with femininity sissy porn exploits to feminize viewers, including makeup, lingerie, breasts, high heels, the color pink, all of which may take turns "topping." To call these items *reverse fetishes*—that is, objects assuring castration, instead of warding against it—is to remember that fetishism was always, like all the best undergarments, reversible. Classical Freudian fetishism is a kind of witness protection program for the phallus. The little boy, traumatized by the discovery that his mother has no penis, and fearing lest the same fate befall his own, supposes instead that the penis has fled her body and is now living in a flyover state under an assumed name: Foot, perhaps, or Velvet, or Panties. In sissy porn, fetishism's structure remains identical but it flows, as it were, ass-backwards: The fetish object which once guaranteed the penis's safety now, for exactly the same reasons, guarantees its sure destruction. This applies, paradoxically, even to the case of cock itself: In sissy porn, the penis itself is a symbol of castration.

At this point I should clarify what I mean by *bottoming*. By bottoming, I mean what happens when someone or something

else does your desiring for you. This is a model of bottoming somewhat different from the versions current in a mounting, largely queer-of-color archive on passivity, masochism, abjection, and bottoming. (Oh, off the top of my head: Darieck Scott, Jennifer Nash, Amber Jamilla Musser, Juana María Rodriguez, Ariane Cruz, Alexander Weheliye, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Jack Halberstam…). Representative here is Nguyen Tan Hoang's excellent study *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. On the one hand, Nguyen rightly avoids treating the bottom's feminizing surrender of a certain quantum of power as a problem to be politically overcome through the reassertion of masculinity. On the other hand, he accomplishes this only by critically valorizing bottoming as a site of "pleasure and agency" (the two are often synonymous, or at least, comorbid) which significantly less powerless than it first appeared. This attempt to braid Eve Sedgwick's paranoid and reparative reading styles allows Nguyen to have his cock and eat it too. True powerlessness, in other words, is never sincerely reckoned with.

I don't think it's too much to call this castration anxiety. Castration anxiety is easily mistaken for the fear that one will be castrated; in fact, it is the fear that one, being castrated, will like it. The threat, in other words, is not that you will lose power (this is basically inevitable, and not much worth worrying about), but that you won't actually *want* power, after all. Too often, we imagine powerlessness as the suppression of desire by some external force (maybe *someone else's* desire), and we forget that desire, in itself, is often, if not always, an experience of powerlessness. Most desire is nonconsensual; most desires aren't desired.

Sissy porn's sigil for the nonconsensuality of desire is its preferred image format. Writing in the Sixties on Victorian-era pornographic literature, the critic Steven Marcus once mused that the motion picture, with its capacity for non-verbal fantasy, was "what the genre was all along waiting for." He was wrong. It was the GIF. Indeed, the rise of the twenty-first-century pornographic GIF might confirm the instrinsic eroticism of the digital loop, much as the feature-length pornographic films of the 1970s tapped into what several film theorists have identified as the cinema's inherently pornographic ontology. Sitting cutely atop a twenty-first century that promises undreamt-of

technological innovation in the field of visual pleasure, the animated GIF nonetheless most distinctly recalls not only the earliest cinematic experiments with movement for movement's sake—what Tom Gunning has called the "cinema of attractions"—but also the moving image spectacles of the nineteenth century, from optical amusements like Edison's kinetoscope or the ever-popular flip book to Muybridge's famous motion studies. As Anna McCarthy argues, even non-pornographic GIFs are about the pleasure of a kind of machinic perfection, especially when the GIF is cut such that the final frame seems to lead directly into the initial frame, sealing the loop perfectly: fruit being sliced into a perfect cylinder, metal being bent into place. In GIF form, *everything* becomes fully automated. Every GIF is therefore, strictly speaking, perfect. It does exactly what it does. GIFs are autotelic; they complete themselves.

In this way, they are a lot like sex. "This impulse or compulsion to repeat, to repeat endlessly, is one of pornography's most striking qualities," wrote Steven Marcus in 1964. "The ideal pornographic novel would go on forever." The pornographic GIF does—if not empirically, then in the penetration of content by form: As Hampus Hagman argues, the GIF's function is not just to repeat a recorded event but also "to make the looping structure enter into the perception of the content." In GIF form, every sex act is clarified, like butter; the GIF is a kind of centrifuge for distilling desires into their essences. And unlike even the most durable adult performers, the GIF can suspend its own climax infinitely. This is pure, immanent desire, freed of any reliance on an object, propelled by nothing but the inertia of motion.

You can call this *jouissance* if you like, but the results here are different from what Bersani famously called "self-shattering." Sissyhood is not the obliteration of subjectivity, but its diminishment. Sissies have selves, in other words, but these selves are simplified, emptied, dumb. The technical term for this is *bimboification*. Numerous captions instruct spectators to submit themselves to hypnosis, brainwashing, brain-melting, and other techniques for scooping out intelligence. There is an economy of attention here: Get rid of your thoughts, make room for cock. "Slowly. In and out," reads one still image depicting a (probably cis) woman with wide eyes and a mouth full of cock.

The phrase is repeated over and over, until the bottom of the image, which reads, "Until he breaks your tiny brain." In this fashion, sissy porn recalls what Gayle Rubin, in "Thinking Sex," pejoratively called the "brainwash theory" of sex. Some sex acts, or so the theory goes, "are so disgusting that no one would willingly perform them. Therefore, . . . anyone who does so must have been forced or fooled." Sissy porn not only buys into this theory, it expands it: No one in their right mind would want to be a woman.

This kind of intelligence play (a phrase I hadn't heard until literally a week ago) makes it exceedingly difficult to attribute to sissy porn the kind of critical knowingness scholars of pornography are accustomed to wielding as a stamp of political agency. Take, for instance, Mireille Miller-Young's reading of the early stag film *KKK Night Riders*, which depicts a Klansman who breaks into the cabin of a black woman to rape her, or Jennifer Nash's analysis of a scene from the Golden Age film *Sexworld*, in which Jill, a black woman, seduces Roger, a white male bigot, by explicitly playing with racial stereotypes. In both cases, pleasure can be retrieved by the scholar precisely insofar as knowingness can be discerned. Both critics locate this knowingness in gesture: Miller-Young, in a swaying of the hips; Nash, in a cocked eyebrow.

But in sissy porn, eyebrows are pretty much the only things that don't get cocked. Sissy porn, too, has a gestural vocabulary, but one that registers the evacuation of will: wilting faces, trembling legs, eyes rolled back into heads. Here, pleasure fills the gap knowledge leaves behind. If this nonknowledge is a form of passivity, then it lacks the political tenor of the radical passivity explored by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Writing about Yoko Ono's performance "Cut Piece," Halberstam asks, "Can we think about this refusal of self as an antiliberal act, a revolutionary statement of pure opposition that does not rely upon the liberal gesture of defiance but accesses another lexicon of power and speaks another language of refusal?" Sissy porn answers, Nope. A post by the user cleavagepool entitled "On being made dumb" explains: "My brain is always full. I'm always worrying if Master truly loves me. Am I enough? Am I making good choices? Do people actually like me? How can I live in a country like this with this current political climate?" How, indeed? With knowledge comes

the unwanted burden of agency; with agency, the desperation of its inevitable squandering. Knowing sucks. But sucking rules. Becoming a bimbo is your ticket out of ethics, an escape hatch in the hull of a political ship that was probably sinking anyway.

What this means is that sissy porn is not queer. Like porn, this bears repeating. Sissy porn is not queer, at least if by *queer* one intends, minimally, oppositionality vis-à-vis the sexual norm. It is easy to forget: Most nonnormativity isn't antinormativity, just as most literature isn't nineteenth-century British novels. (And in reference to our title today, "Queer Disruptions"—two terms which are often taken as if locked in copulative embrace, the one always already inside the other—let me just say: Most disruptions do not have the patina of the political. Most disruptions are not radical, or revolutionary, or insurgent, or fugitive, or "productive," which is what we in the academy call things when we're pretty sure they matter but we're not really sure how.) So sissy porn's reliance on the normative conventions of heterosexuality is, I'd suggest, sincere, naïve even, and certainly not "critical," which is the high compliment we pay to an object so heavily burnished by the rag of theory that we begin to recognize in it what we imagine to be our own political consciousness, reflected back at us. But this doesn't mean that the people watching are all straight. (Indeed, purely anecdotal evidence—by which, I mean, like, a conversation I had with someone one time—suggests that of the trans female slice of sissy porn's audience, a majority is occupied by trans lesbians.) What it means, rather, is that in sissy porn, heterosexuality, especially in its coercive forms, is not a sexual orientation so much as an aesthetic form calibrated to reflect the basic heteronomy of desire—that is, the fact of desire's originating outside of the subject. From this perspective —desire's perspective—everyone's a bottom, and not the politically reparable kind.

The political lesson of sissy porn is this: Being trans can feel like getting fucked. There are, I like to say, at least two kinds of trans people: people who are trans because they want to be trans, and people who are trans because they *don't* want to be trans. Sometimes these are the same people. But it's this second mode of desire—where transness is, paradoxically, often tragically, constituted by a desire not to be trans, or by (we could say) a desire's desire not to exist—to which sissy porn is

designed to appeal. Hence the voice in which the sissy caption speak: anonymous, all-caps, and thick with authority. Desire is talking. It says to bend over.

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