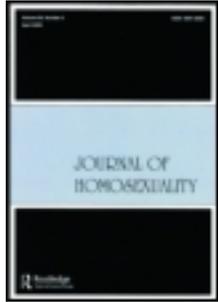


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# When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach About Sexual Orientation

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## Abstract

In this article, Bettcher argues that sexual attraction must be re-conceptualized in light of transgender experience. In particular, Bettcher defends the theory of “erotic structuralism,” which replaces an exclusively other-directed account of gendered attraction with one that includes a gendered eroticization of self as an essential component. This erotic experience of self is necessary for other-directed gendered desire, where the two are bound together and mutually informing. One consequence of the theory is that the controversial notion of “autogynephilia” is rejected. Another consequence is that the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation is softened.

*Keywords:* autogynephilia, Blanchard, gender identity, intimacy, selfhood, sexuality, sexual orientation, \*transgender, \*transsexual

## When Selves Have Sex:

What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach About Sexual Orientation

The standard way of viewing sexual attraction has been inadequate for capturing the experiences of trans people. To this end, I propose we rethink sexual attraction in light of those experiences. The result is “erotic structuralism”—a theory that concerns sexual attraction in general (not just trans-specific attractions). My goal is to do the ground-clearing work necessary to outline and provisionally defend it. My methodological approach is principally that of a philosopher; I use analysis and argumentation. However, my own experience as a transsexual woman is relevant to my theorization, as is the fact that my experience is shaped by the subcultures I inhabit (along with my friends, past lovers, chosen family, and life-partner).

Erotic structuralism maintains that the content of arousal is often complex and structured. It endorses two general ideas. The first idea (the complexity of sexual attraction) is that sexual attraction to a person possesses an internal, constitutive structure that includes the eroticized self as an element.<sup>1</sup> The second, closely related, idea (the interest/attraction distinction) is that erotic content is not exhausted by the “source of attraction” (the person to whom one is attracted). To be erotically interested in something (to be aroused by it) is not necessarily to be attracted to it.

The theory includes a specific “interactional account” according to which sexual attraction possesses a structure comprised of the eroticized other (“the source of attraction”), the eroticized self (“the locus of attraction”), and the erotic interactions between the two. Erotic experiences of self and of other are equally necessary, dynamically related, and mutually-informing where they

“mirror” each other through the mediating interaction. While there can be different types of eroticized interaction, sheer increase in intimacy is the constitutive mode of interaction defining this dynamic. And insofar as intimacy is fundamentally gendered, erotic experiences of self and other are likewise gendered.

Erotic structuralism has two important consequences. First, the controversial notion of “autogynephilia” is rejected. To briefly summarize, “autogynephilia” is one name, among others, for a particular phenomenon—namely, an erotic interest in oneself (or in the thought or image of oneself) “as a woman” (Serano 2010). We might call this “female embodiment eroticism.” The term “autogynephilia” literally means “love of oneself as a woman” and it suggests that sexual attraction wrongly loops back around and targets oneself (“as a woman”). The concept of autogynephilia plays a key role in Blanchard’s (1985) causal distinction between his two exclusive and exhaustive types of MTF transsexuality—androphilic and autogynephilic. As it is used in Blanchard’s theory (1992), it names a misdirected heterosexual orientation where “normal” heterosexual orientation and autogynephilia compete with each other.

According to erotic structuralism, defenders of the notion of autogynephilia err in assuming that sexual attraction is simple and in conflating erotic interest with sexual attraction. This leads them to identify the eroticized self with the source of attraction (and the effect of some imagined “target error”). In the interactive account of sexual attraction, by contrast, an eroticized self is a necessary component of attraction to another. Consequently, “attraction to oneself” is literally impossible and, therefore, so is autogynephilia. While there are indeed cases in which the

eroticized gendered self can appear in isolation from the other erotic content required for attraction, this phenomenon is better viewed as a non-pathological “erotic fragment.”<sup>2</sup>

The second consequence is that sexual orientation is re-understood to include a core erotic gendered self and, consequently, the traditional distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation is blurred. Since sexual attraction to a gendered other necessitates a gendered self, gynephilic and androphilic attractions each come in two varieties – andro-reflexive and gynec-reflexive. In other words, sexual orientation is not merely determined by stable gendered “object preference,” but also by stable “preference of gendered self.” Consequently, orientation and gender identity are more closely related than the orientation/gender identity distinction maintains.

In the first part of this article, I provide an argument in support of the interest/attraction distinction. The argument also suggests that, at least in some cases, sexual attraction possesses a complex structure. In the second part of the article, I defend the interactional account of attraction. This hypothesizes that, in all cases, attraction possesses a complex structure. I conclude by considering the two major theoretical consequences mentioned above.

# The Interest/Attraction Distinction and the Complexity of Attraction

## Preliminaries

Consider David, who has little gynephilic attraction. He can still have sex with a woman, Wendy, through the use of extensive internal fantasies about sexual interaction with some man (say, Fred). By “running a movie in his mind” he might be able to “get involved in” the sexual encounter. In such a case, David is fantasizing *about* Fred. Nonetheless, the actual act of sexual movement with Wendy may be sexually stimulating him physiologically. While both erotic fantasy and experience of physical stimulation have a phenomenology (by which I mean that both “*feel* like something” specific) the latter is not included in the erotic content. He is not excited *about* his genital activity *with Wendy*, nor is he excited *about* her. One way to put this is to say that he does not have an erotic interest in Wendy, while he does have an erotic interest in Fred. Fred, not Wendy, is part of the erotic content (i.e., the content of arousal).

While David is not sexually attracted to Wendy, he may be attracted to his ex-lover, Fred. One says that David has sexual desire *for* Fred or else that he has sexual attraction *to* him. I shall use these two expressions interchangeably. Strictly speaking, the term “desire” is broader than “attraction.” And it is also ambiguous. Does one desire sexual pleasure (and, ultimately, the achievement of orgasm), sexual activity, or the person one is with? I bypass these types of questions by focusing exclusively on attraction. To be clear, I am not interested in the mere

cognitive assessment that a person is attractive, but the actual experience of sexual attraction *to* a person. Being sexually attracted *to* somebody *feels like something*. And I assume that when somebody says she experiences sexual desire *for* somebody, she refers to the experience of sexual attraction *to* them.

A natural assumption is that sexual attraction *to* a person is nothing more than an erotic interest *in* them. This assumption commits to the “simplicity of attraction” in that the erotic content of attraction is taken to include *nothing but the source of attraction*. That is, the erotic content is not subject to a complex structure of elements. For example, suppose David sees Fred without his shirt and gets excited. In such a case, it appears that Fred, alone, belongs to the erotic content. David is attracted *to* him, in this view, just because he is aroused *by* him. Blanchard (1985) appears to accept this view; he speaks of the “male physique” as the “effective erotic stimulus” in “normal homosexual attraction” (249). Attraction *to* somebody, in this view, includes the other’s physique within the erotic content (and nothing else). The assumption is also implicit in the view that homosexual/heterosexual attractions can be fully captured by the replacement notions of gynephilic and androphilic attractions (e.g., Serano 2010). The underlying idea is that homo/hetero attractions are exhaustively characterized in terms of “gendered object preference.”

The belief in the simplicity of attraction yields the related view that there is no distinction between erotic interest and sexual attraction. If to be attracted *to* a person involves nothing more than that person being (the only or the main) part of the erotic content, then it would seem that *anything* that is an important part of the content is basically a source of attraction (since there is no basis for a distinction). The effect of the first assumption is, therefore, a collapse of erotic

content and source of attraction. By this I mean that to be aroused *by* something, in this view, is necessarily to be attracted *to* it; the experience of arousal *by* is in all cases *the same* as attraction *to*. This means that should anything other than the source of attraction occur prominently in the erotic content, it will seem to be non-normative. It will seem that one is attracted to the “wrong” thing. This is Blanchard’s (1992) view; he sees female embodiment eroticism as a kind of misdirected attraction. And once anything that occurs within the erotic content is viewed as an attraction, it is easy to see why one might see different attractions as competing with each other, as Blanchard (1992) does.

Erotic structuralism maintains, by contrast, that multiple objects of erotic interest are structured within a larger whole. This is obvious in the case of complex, narrative, sexual fantasies. It would be foolish to see each part of the fantasy as its own independent object of interest. But this is also fairly obvious in the case of sexual attraction. For while one can experience sexual attraction *to* somebody without having an explicit aim of doing something sexual *with* them, it is also the case that often one experiences doing something with the source of attraction as itself exciting. For example, one might find the prospect of being fellated by an - attractive man sexually exciting. In this case, one is not merely sexually aroused by the thought *of* the man himself, one is also excited by the thought of doing something *with* him. In this case, it seems fair to say the act (fellatio) is part of the erotic content insofar as the thought of receiving fellatio from him is sexually exciting. One has an erotic interest in being fellated, one has an interest in the man, and the two interests are structurally connected.

While the preceding is largely unsurprising, note that many of these activities involve various forms of sexual interaction *between* bodies. So, it seems to follow that one's own body is necessarily included in the erotic content. One is not merely attracted *to* him. One is excited *by* him as performing fellatio on *one's own* penis. How does one remove one's own penis from the fellatio? And how does one deny that one's own penis plays a *significant part* in the erotic content? <sup>3</sup> There is a natural response that makes it seem one's own penis should not be included. One is not *attracted to* one's own penis as one is *attracted to* the man fellating it. If that is correct, one might conclude that one's own penis cannot be part of the erotic content. The background assumption, of course, is that to be erotically interested *in* something is to be attracted *to* it. The argument below, however, shows that this assumption must be rejected.

### The Argument

Imagine a trans man, Sam, who is gynephilically oriented (with little androphilic attraction). Suppose he is having sex with a woman, Kim. He does not have a penis, but he does have a strap-on dildo. Suppose Kim is fellating the dildo and the dildo is eroticized by both participants as a flesh-and-blood penis. Sam fantasizes that his penis is being fellated (by Kim) and so does Kim herself. Now consider the following argument:

- (1) The fantasized penis is a significant part of Sam's erotic content.
- (2) Sam is not attracted to his fantasized penis.
- (3) Therefore, some significant erotic content is not reducible to "the source of attraction."

The argument is valid. If the premises are true, then it follows that there is an interest/attraction distinction. *Are they true?*

The sub-argument in favor of premise (1) is based on parity concerns. Reconsider David who, not attracted to women, fantasizes that he is with Fred when he is actually with Wendy. In this case, while he has feelings of stimulation from engaging in heterosexual intercourse, that activity, as such, is not eroticized. Rather, having sex with Fred is the content of his excitement. Were he with Fred, he would not be engaging in this fantasy; he would simply be excited by Fred (in the flesh). But this case is analogous to that of Sam. Sam fantasizes that he has a penis that is being fellated by Kim. While he has feelings of sexual stimulation from the base of the dildo pressing against him, the cause of the stimulation is not part of the fantasy. Rather, *the fellated penis* is part of the fantasy and it is a very important part. Were he to have a flesh-and-blood penis, he would not be engaging in this fantasy at all. That is, *the work of the sexual fantasy primarily concerns the fellated penis*. The fellated penis is primarily what the fantasy is *about*. It is, therefore, an important part of the erotic content. But why should the flesh-and-blood penis then occupy a *less* important role in the erotic content once the need for fantasy has been eliminated? One does not think the gender of the sexual partner becomes any less important to the erotic content in the first case. Why should the fellated penis become less important in the second?

Consider the second premise. The fantasized penis, while a primary part of the erotic content, is not a source of sexual attraction. The other possibility is that Sam is literally attracted to himself as possessing a penis. One could say his attraction is “autophallic” (Serano 2007). Instead

of being attracted to another person, he is attracted to himself (as a man). The problem with this suggestion is obvious, however. Sam *is* attracted to another person, namely Kim who is fellating the dildo and whom he fantasizes as fellating his penis. Nor does it make sense to say he is attracted to two people (Kim along with himself with a penis). First, it makes it seem he possesses both gynephilic and androphilic attractions. This distorts what seems to be a straightforward gynephilic attraction on his part. Second, and more important for my purposes, that his penis is part of the erotic content is obviously connected to his attraction to his partner. His sexual attraction *for* her, in this specific situation, has, as its eroticized aim, her fellating his penis. This is precisely what implicates his (fantasized) body in the erotic content. The view that he is merely attracted to two people—the woman and himself (as a man with a penis) distorts this evident structural connection that builds his fantasized penis into the complex of his aim-driven attraction *to his partner*.

So both premises are true. And by this argument, it follows that there is some important erotic content that is not identical to the *source* of attraction. Interest and attraction are distinct. Moreover, there is reason to accept that there are some cases in which attraction admits of a complex structure. In this case, Kim's attractiveness to Sam is temporarily mediated through the act of fellatio. He experiences her as attractive, in part, as one who is fellating him. Crucially, he likewise experiences *himself* erotically as one receiving the fellatio. His erotic experience of her is reflected in his erotic experience of self as his erotic experience of self is mirrored in his erotic experience of her.

This argument can be generalized by recognizing this example as merely one of various complex activities and fantasies in which some trans people engage in order to re-code their bodies to lessen body dysphoria, while allowing certain body parts to become part of a sexual encounter (Bettcher 2013, Hale 1997, Serano 2010). For example, if a trans woman (with a “penis”) is receiving oral sex, it is possible for her and her partner to erotically re-understand the activity as a form of cunnilingus rather than fellatio, perhaps by eroticizing a component of her genitals as a “clit.” Practices of this type involve two features. First, “re-coding” can involve the re-imagined body part being taken up into the erotic content. Second, that there is this erotic uptake does not undermine the capacity of the trans person to be sexually attracted *to* a partner. Indeed, the erotic uptake of the body part is structurally part of their sexual desire *for* the partner, where there is a specific eroticized activity. If one takes such common trans practices seriously, therefore, one must admit that erotic content is not exhausted by the *source* of attraction. Moreover, one must recognize that at least in some cases, sexual attraction admits of an interactive structure in which eroticized experience of self and other are mirrored through eroticized interactions.

The pressing question now is how to characterize the difference between erotic content that is the *source* of attraction and erotic content that is *not*. Given that being an erotic interest is insufficient to count as being a “source of attraction,” what *makes* an erotic interest a source of attraction? According to erotic structuralism, an erotic interest is a “source of attraction” when it plays a certain structural role in “the complex of attraction.” In the following section, I specify the exact nature of this structure (individual activities such as fellatio cannot provide that structure since they are variable and even altogether eliminable *from* attraction).

I also address the following challenge: in cases of sexual attraction that do not have any explicit eroticized aim, it seems that sexual attraction *is* simple. Consider the case of a man looking at a naked woman. Suppose he experiences sexual attraction *to* her. In cases like this, it would appear that the self is not implicated in sexual attraction. The erotic content seems exhausted by the *source* of attraction (in this case, “the female physique” as Blanchard (1985) might term it). I show how the interactional account can explain such cases through analysis of physical intimacy. In particular, I show that even in cases that do not seem to implicate the self, the self is nonetheless involved.

## The Interactional Account of Sexual Attraction

### Overview

In outlining the interactional account, I assume that erotic content is highly variable. While there may be actual limits on what can be eroticized, this is not an assumption that can be made in a theoretical paper (any limits, I suppose, would most likely be failures of imagination on my part). Moreover, given this assumption and the view that sexuality is social in nature, informed by cultural “scripts” (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), it seems reasonable to assume that erotic content in a culture is significantly determined by the sociality of that culture. In other words, erotic content can vary cross-culturally. My goal in this section, then, is to understand sexual attraction as a culturally-specific, well-defined, and structured form of erotic content. And an erotic interest, in this view, is not a source of attraction *unless* it plays a specific role in this specific structure.

The basic idea runs as follows: “sexual attraction” suggests a spatial metaphor whereby two entities are drawn closer together through a kind of “magnetic” (sexual) force. In the interactional account, to be sexual attracted *to* a person is to be aroused *by* increasing physical intimacy between the other (the *source* of attraction) and the self (the *locus* of attraction). Intimacy is understood according to a spatial metaphor of closeness and distance (Bettcher 2012) and the increase in intimacy is understood as movement through interpersonal space whereby the locus and source are brought closer together (“intimization”<sup>4</sup>).

This view brings the representation of self into the light of day. In order to eroticize the intimization of self and other, the self *needs* to be included as an important component of the eroticism (since the self is one of the things being drawn together). Moreover, it provides a structural distinction between the eroticized experience of self and the attraction to an other. In this view, it is impossible to be attracted to oneself insofar as there is no interpersonal distance between oneself and oneself and, consequently, it makes no sense to speak of the eroticization of the intimization between oneself and oneself.<sup>5</sup> For the rest of the section, I elaborate this account in greater detail. First, I develop the idea of sexual attraction as the eroticization of intimization and show how this is relevant to gendered forms of attraction, Second, I show how a gendered experience of self is necessarily included in all forms of gendered attraction. Finally, I elaborate the idea of “mirroring” as central to the dynamics of gendered attraction.

### Interpersonal Spatiality and Gendered Attraction

Physical intimacy primarily involves *sensory access to bodies* (Bettcher 2012). It also implicates specific activities which require various types of sensory access to bodies as part of the activity’s

structure. For example, fellatio requires sensory access to a penis through the medium of a mouth and sensory access to a mouth through a penis. In this view, what is experienced as erotic is not merely a body but *sensory access to* that body. While sensory access is not an activity (although it can involve activities such as touching, undressing, and so forth), it involves both a subject and an object of sensory access.

Intimacy, however, does not merely involve increased sensory access. Rather, it requires *interpersonal boundaries* traversed in cases of mutuality and transgressed in cases of abuse (Bettcher 2012). Certain body parts are deemed “intimate” where exposure draws down moral concerns (as evidenced by Janet Jackson’s notorious “wardrobe malfunction”). Moreover, in order *to traverse* a boundary, a *movement* from one stage (of intimacy or non-intimacy) to another more intimate stage is necessary. Consequently, interpersonal boundaries are vaguely ordered sequentially so as to allow for socially-recognized degrees of closeness (Bettcher 2012). Different kinds of sensory access “occur earlier than others” (a woman’s breasts are touched before her genitals) as do sexual activities (kissing comes before heterosexual intercourse). Indeed nakedness, I have argued elsewhere, is a mode of self-presentation that is every bit as socially constituted as the clothed mode of self-presentation (Bettcher 2012). In particular, it is constituted through these interpersonal boundaries regulating visual access where the ordering of boundaries gives the body a moral structure.

As a result, attraction has a temporal aspect. What is arousing, in this view, is not merely sensory access to a body part, but to an *intimate* (private) body part that is part of a larger ordering of boundaries. Suppose Germaine is slowly undressing Sheena. Germaine’s sexual attraction to

Sheena takes the form of a continuous augmentation in arousal through a continuous increase in intimate visual access to Sheena. What is arousing is not merely seeing Sheena's breasts, for example, but the significance of that intimate access to private body within the larger context (actual or implied) of continuously-increasing sensory access. The *augmentation* of arousal (as the experience of "building" excitement) tracks the growing intimacy (in this case, the steadily increasing visual exposure of Sheena). And although Germaine need not explicitly desire to increase intimacy in some specific way with Sheena, her present arousal is characterized by "erotic anticipation." In seeing Sheena's breasts, part of the eroticism, for Germaine, is the potential that this is "leading somewhere." This is because visual access to breasts is *a stage* of intimacy that *can* lead to closer stages, so part of the erotic significance of this visual access *now* is precisely its implied potential for greater intimacy *later*. This account has notable consequences in terms of how gynephilic and androphilic attractions ought to be understood. Suppose Germaine has only gynephilic attractions. According to the account, this is a feature of *the way* she experiences attraction and not merely *what gender* she experiences as attractive. Sex-differentiated bodies have distinct "boundary structures" applied to them, constituting nakedness differentially (Bettcher 2012). In effect, there are two main types of nakedness—female and male.<sup>6</sup> One difference is that the former has a tiered structure whereas the latter does not (i.e., female chests have moral significance). Since to be attracted *to* somebody is to be aroused *by* the traversal of structured boundaries, different types of sexual attraction can be distinguished on the basis of *which* structures of nakedness are in the erotic content. Contrary to the view that Germaine is aroused by the "female physique," then, Germaine is aroused by the

female physique *as implicated and structured within a system of ordered boundaries governing sensory access to it.*

## **Erotic (Gendered) Experiences of Self**

While attraction eroticizes the closing distance between self and other, there are multiple ways in which this can happen. One way is for the source of attraction to move closer to the self. I call this “subject-centered-attraction.” This is what happens with Germaine’s attraction. It pulls Sheena “in closer” (as an object of sensory access). However, consider Sheena’s corresponding eroticism. She is also aroused by Germaine’s increasing sensory access to her. She feels excited by the prospect of being undressed and viewed by Germaine, etc. And the fact that Sheena is aroused by her own exposure to Germaine does not rule out her attraction *to Germaine*. In this case, Sheena has object-centered attraction to Germaine-as-sensory-subject. Her attraction moves her own self closer to the source of attraction. This means Sheena necessarily *has an eroticized self as part of her attraction to Germaine*. That is, Sheena’s own visually-accessed body is part of her erotic content (even though she is not attracted to her own body). Moreover, Sheena’s erotic self is given by the same boundary structure (to which Germaine is attracted). That is, a specific feature of her eroticization of the increasing transversal of boundaries between self and other is that her own boundaries be structured in a particular way, namely female. For example, her arousal at Germaine’s visually accessing her breasts requires precisely that her own body have a female boundary structure.

Not only is Sheena's eroticized self structured according to gendered boundaries, however, so is her "eroticized other" (Germaine). She is not merely excited by her own exposure to another, but by exposure to *a woman*. The reason for this is that boundaries are gender-sensitive (Bettcher 2012). How a boundary works depends upon the gender of the person traversing it (as well as the person who has the boundary). Consider sex-segregation (in restrooms, changing rooms, congregate housing, etc.). Same-sex intimacy is socially acceptable in such cases while hetero intimacy is not. The reason for this is complicated. But note that visual intimacy is controlled in two ways. It is controlled by the object through self-presentation (naked or clothed) and by the subject (looking or not). In sex-segregated contexts, the boundaries concern the latter (where overtly looking is considered a violation of privacy). The implicit rationale for prohibiting hetero intimacy in such contexts takes "looking" for granted and focuses on the self-presentation. In such cases, the boundaries operate asymmetrically (Bettcher 2012). A woman being in a state of undress with a man would constitute a privacy violation. A man being in a state of undress with a woman would constitute a decency offense (against the woman). In this case the sheer *threat* of looking is sufficient for the arrangement to be considered boundary violating (always against the woman), thereby justifying sex-segregation.

The point is that the gender of the subject is relevant in cases in which one has an object-centered attraction. Even a straight man who is aroused by having his penis touched by woman, will rarely experience a similar arousal by having his penis touched by a man. A *man* touching his penis is not part of that erotic content, a *woman* touching it is. An important feature of this is that the erotic object and the erotic subject *are components on one and the same intimization track*. It is

not merely that Sheena erotizes a female other and a female self, for example, but, rather, *she specifically eroticizes female-female intimacy.*

In light of this, Germaine's subject-centered attraction to Sheena can be shown to contain an erotic gendered experience of self as well. While the erotic experience of self is somewhat obscured in this case, since her eroticized self is not in "intimate motion," it is nonetheless required as the fixed point towards which Sheena moves. This point is required *in order for the intimate movement of Sheena to be erotized* over time. She is the viewer to whom Sheena is increasingly exposed. Germaine, therefore, has an erotic experience of herself *as the sensory subject toward which Sheena moves through interpersonal space.* And insofar as Germaine eroticizes female-female intimacy specifically, this point of reference is necessarily gendered. For in eroticizing her increasing visual access to Sheena as an increase in female-female intimacy, she necessarily has an erotic experience of herself as a *female subject.*

Beyond this, however, note that a person typically possesses *both* object and subject-centered attractions at once. In such cases, a person's attraction pulls both self and other together. Rather than the other moving towards the self or the self moving towards the other, the two move towards each other. Such cases bring out the relevance of the erotic self in a way that does not sharply distinguish subject and object. Consider David. The view that he is merely attracted to the male physique truncates a more complex homoeroticism of male-male intimacy. What he finds arousing is not just seeing a man's naked body, but *being two naked men together*, sexually experiencing each other's bodies (both seeing and being seen). This suggests that cases (like Germaine and Sheena) involving a *strict asymmetry* in intimate access also include this

asymmetry itself as part of the erotic content. There is a differential distribution of vulnerability/invulnerability that provides *even more content* to Germaine's eroticized experience of self (namely an eroticized contrast of Sheena as vulnerable and herself as not) <sup>7</sup>.

#### Gendered Mirroring and the Attraction Dynamic

In light of the preceding, it is clear that a reductive focus on erotic interest in gendered physique is a restricted conception of a more complex attraction dynamic. This dynamic can be conceptualized in terms of "mirroring." In erotically experiencing Sheena, Germaine erotically experiences herself. And in erotically experiencing herself, Germaine erotically experiences Sheena. The dialectic is gendered insofar as the eroticized intimacy boundaries are gendered. Sheena's body is subject to gendered boundaries (her nakedness has a female moral structure) and Germaine traverses those gendered boundaries in a gendered way. In this case, the mirroring is "direct" (reflected through the lens of sameness). However, their dialectic also concerns differential distribution of subject and object positions. In erotically experiencing Sheena as vulnerable object, Germaine erotically experiences herself as a non-vulnerable subject and in erotically experiencing herself as a non-vulnerable subject, she experiences Sheena as a vulnerable object. In this case, the mirroring is also "indirect" (reflected through the lens of difference).

Gender is the prime modality by which self and other are mirrored (either directly or indirectly) since sexual attraction eroticizes intimation and intimacy is essentially gender differentiated. However, there is room for considerable complexity. First, gender is not monolithic; so sometimes different aspects can come apart. In butch/femme lesbian attractions, for example,

both direct and indirect gender mirroring may occur (where sexed-bodies are similar, but gender presentations are differential). Second, it may not always be that gender is the basis for mirroring (as seen above with vulnerability). In SM attractions, for example, the basis for mirroring may concern pain and/or power distribution. Third, different kinds of gender mirroring may, themselves, be eroticized. For example, some people might find only direct gendered mirroring erotic, while others might find only indirect mirroring erotic. This could offer one explanation why some trans people retain same-sex attractions through their transitions (moving from lesbian relations, for example, to gay male relations). Finally, the various structural components (self, other, modality and type of mirroring, etc.) may be more or less gender specific within a given person's sexuality. Obviously, a full discussion of such complexity is best left for another article. My aim in considering it now is only to hint at the potential explanatory power of the account.

This sketch, however, is enough for my current purposes. I have outlined the structure of sexual attraction and shown that even in cases in which attraction might seem simple, it is subject to a complex structure that includes the eroticized self. While I have not defended the interactional account of attraction in great detail, I have defended my views about intimacy and the social construction of nakedness elsewhere (Bettcher 2012). And in light of them, it is difficult to believe that excitement at seeing a woman's breasts, for example, is not significantly shaped by their socially-constituted "privatization," making it at least plausible to believe that sexual attraction is the eroticization of gendered "intimization" between self and other. Most importantly, however, the account provides an explanation of *why* some erotic content is "the source of attraction" and some is not. The interest/attraction distinction and the complexity of sexual attraction, recall, are significant features of trans "re-coding" practices. For this reason,

simpler conceptions of attraction cannot accommodate them and are therefore inadequate. The interactional account, by contrast, provides a viable alternative that elucidates these features and therefore successfully accommodates these practices. This is a powerful argument in its favor.

## Consequences

### Against Autogynephilia

There are two important consequences of adopting the logics of erotic structuralism. First, “autogynephilia” must be rejected. In saying this, I do not mean to critique the hypothesis that “autogynephilia” is causally responsible for MTF transsexuality or that it can be used to categorize MTFs into different “types.” These claims have already been convincingly critiqued by Moser (2010) and Serano (2010). Instead, I question the very framing of “female embodiment eroticism” in terms of “autogynephilia.” That is, rather than critiquing Blanchard’s theory of autogynephilia, I critique the very notion of female embodiment eroticism *as* autogynephilic in nature. There are two false assumptions involved. First, it is falsely assumed that attraction is simple (i.e., to be a source of attraction is merely to be a part of the erotic content). Second, interest and attraction are conflated. Once these assumptions have been rejected in favor of erotic structuralism, there is no longer any reason to construe female embodiment eroticism as a kind of “misdirected” attraction. Instead, an erotic interest in oneself as a gendered being can be recognized as a legitimate (indeed, necessary) part of all normally-directed sexual attraction to others. Indeed, the alleged misdirected attraction is actually impossible, according to erotic structuralism, insofar as a decrease in interpersonal distance between one and oneself is

unintelligible (and therefore cannot be eroticized). “Autogynephilia” is, therefore, a seriously misleading term insofar it explicitly characterizes the nature of the phenomenon in a distorted way.

To be sure, there can be cases of arousal when this eroticized self appears by itself (without an “other”), particularly in solitary fantasy. And this is the phenomenon to which “autogynephilia” typically refers. But the question is whether this phenomenon is to be framed as “attraction to oneself as a woman.” According to erotic structuralism, it *cannot*. There is, however, an alternative view. In fantasy, one can produce scenarios that, while arousing, do not constitute (or even replicate) attraction *per se*. In order for an erotic interest to be implicated in attraction, recall, it must be subject to the appropriate structure. Such interests, may, however, be replications of *parts* of the larger structure (from whence they derive their erotic power). For example, a woman may be erotically interested in a sexual scenario that does not include her own involvement as part of it. While the scenario may be arousing, this will not be a case of attraction since crucial elements of interpersonal interaction (the self, intimate access) have been omitted. Instead, it can be characterized as an “erotic fragment.” Similarly, a woman might have erotic narratives about herself as a gendered being that do not include a well-defined “other” to whom she is attracted. In such cases, female embodiment eroticism is, rather than a misdirected attraction, an erotic fragment that abstracts (and yet gets its erotic force from) the interactional structure of attraction. This account predicts that “other-exclusive” fantasies will shade into ones with a more explicitly eroticized self (or at least implicit identifications) and that “self-exclusive” fantasies will shade into ones that involve (or imply) an other.

Of course, one might argue that “self-exclusive” female embodiment fantasies are still pathological since they involve a truncated eroticism that replicates only a fragment of sexual attraction to another. I do not see the value of such assessments, however. They are too detached from the health and happiness of the individual. And I suspect a host of different types of erotic fragments can be found in the fantasy lives of “normal” people. The important question is what role solitary fantasy plays in the overall well-being of the individual. And in light of the intersubjective “re-coding” practices discussed earlier, it seems appropriate to regard such self-exclusive female-embodiment fragments occurring among trans women as likewise productively allowing them to “recode” their bodies (Serano 2007, 2010). That view accords well with the transient nature of such fantasies, unlike Blanchard’s (1992) theory in which they somehow constitute a permanent orientation (Moser 2009, Serano 2010).

Moreover, it is worth noting that if “self-exclusive” fantasies are viewed as pathological (on the grounds that they are erotic fragments), it follows that “other-exclusive” fantasies should be viewed as pathological as well. Yet such a result is surely implausible. And, indeed, in heterosexuality there tends to be a mutual emphasis on the objectification of the woman, suggesting that it is not unlikely the fantasies of heterosexual men will tend towards those that shade into “other-exclusive” ones (and that it is not unlikely the fantasies of heterosexual women will tend towards those that shade into self-exclusive ones).<sup>8</sup> One ironic result of the view that “self-exclusive” fantasies are pathological, therefore, is that much non-transgender, heterosexual male fantasies are similarly pathological. It is preferable, I think, to avoid this route of pathologization altogether.

**Blurring the Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation Distinction**

A second consequence of erotic structuralism is the rejection of a central assumption in transgender politics, namely that gender identity is entirely distinct from sexual orientation (e.g., Serano 2010). For sexual orientation must be re-conceptualized to include a core gender-inflected erotic self in addition to a persistent attraction to a type of gendered persons. Insofar as one can speak of gynephilic and androphilic attractions, one can also speak of andro-reflexive and gyne-reflexive attractions. That is, in addition to distinguishing attractions on the basis of gendered “object choice,” one can distinguish them on the basis of gendered erotic self as well. This means that hetero/homo attractions cannot be adequately captured by the replacement terms, “androphilic” and “gynephilic” attractions, since the latter include only gendered object preference.

Insofar as one speaks of a *stable* gynephilic/androphilic attraction, one ought to speak of a *stable* gendered erotic self. David, who only has androphilic attraction, can be said to possess a stable orientation towards men. And it follows, by parity, that Sam, who has only andro-reflexive attractions, likewise possesses a stable erotic male self.<sup>9</sup> Both exemplify two important parts of orientation. David is likewise andro-reflexive while Sam is, unlike David, gynephilic. And while David eroticizes male-male intimacy, Sam eroticizes male-female intimacy. So while it is true that gendered self-identity and orientation are somewhat distinct, it is also true that orientation has an erotic gendered sense of self as a component. To be clear, this theory does not reduce transsexual motivation to transition to a sexualized one. Such a view is implausible for many reasons, not least of which is the complete erasure of trans people’s own self-reports about their

experiences and motivations. However, it *is* plausible to believe that gendered self-identity and erotic gendered self tend to correspond to each other. Given that a trans woman has the self-identity of a woman, it is little surprise she also has a core erotic self that is female. The consequence is that gender identity and sexual attraction are far more relevant to each other than one might have supposed, and in ways that are ultimately congenial to transgender politics.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel (1979) provides a classic account in which he claims that “self-perception” is involved in sexual desire. This is largely because he takes *ideal* desire to include desiring that “one’s partner be aroused by the recognition of one’s desire that he or she be aroused.” I do not have the space to contrast my account with his. Suffice it to say that his account does not actually

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concern an eroticized *gendered* sense of self. Moreover, my account concerns “first-order” arousal, rather than the iterative stages of arousal that are necessary in Nagel’s idealized account

<sup>2</sup> This concept comes from Nagel (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Serano (2007) makes a related point (pp. 268-9). One worry is the putative contrast between one’s body merely being important to the overall success of a fantasy and one’s body actually being a significant source of arousal (Moser 2009). If the former is the case, then one’s body is not really part of the erotic content. If the latter is the case, however, it might seem the body is best viewed as the source of attraction. The argument I provide is designed to address this worry.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Susan Forrest for this neologism.

<sup>5</sup> This does not rule out thinking oneself to be attractive. But that is different from literally experiencing attraction to oneself.

<sup>6</sup> This is far more complex in non-mainstream (non-dominant) contexts.

<sup>7</sup> While I do not have the space to contrast my account with Gayle Salamon’s illuminating reading of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “sexual schema” in detail, let me note that in Salamon’s view, the experience of self is not included *within* the content of sexual desire. It is simply the embodied experience of *desire itself*. This is because Salamon is principally concerned with the experience of sexual desire as “located” within the body (in a specific body part or spread throughout). In Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “sexual transposition” sexual desire replaces and effectively becomes the body itself. In this way, awareness of self is a kind of

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virtual proprioceptive awareness of body *qua* desiring subject. By contrast, my account concerns the experience of the body as a subject *or object* of intimate sensory access *within the field of attraction*—where attraction is understood as complex, structured erotic content. Rather than experiencing herself as the *desiring subject*, Germaine primarily experiences herself as *sensory subject*. And rather than experiencing herself as the *desiring subject*, Sheena primarily experiences herself as the *sensory object*. What is at stake is not the location of desire itself within a body, but the *content* of desire – namely, intimate contact between self and other (as normatively bounded sensory access). In my view, therefore, the body is not primarily implicated *qua* desiring subject, but as that which is normatively bounded with respect to sensory access. Such boundaries are a *precondition* of sexual desire and hence prior to it.

<sup>8</sup> Moser (2009) finds female embodiment eroticism among non-trans women, undermining Blanchard’s view that this is an MTF-specific phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> There are interesting complexities raised by bisexuality. For example, just as a person may possess both gynephilic and androphilic attractions, it seems possible that a person may possess both andro-reflexive and gyne-reflexive attractions. I have not explored this issue here.