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**“You don't always like your sisters,  
but you always love them”**

*– Trans feminine accounts of misogyny, sisterhood and  
difference in New York City*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines six trans feminine informants in New York City's experiences of oppression, trans-misogyny, femi-negativity, racism, and classism, as well as their experiences of community support, conflicts and resistance practices through the lens of the term sisterhood and the practice of sisterhooding. Focus has also been placed on the informant's views on allyship and coalition, and their relationship to other communities, such as the trans masculine community. The research has been conducted through in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with six trans feminine activists in New York City. The informant group was heterogenous in regards to age, race/ethnicity, as well as in regards to where in the city they resided and which parts of the movement they were engaged in. My findings follow Jenny Gunnarsson Payne's (2006) theory on sisterhood as an empty signifier, as my informants had different definition's of the term and concept of sisterhood, and while all of them expressed ambivalences towards the term and concept, they also all used the term to varying degrees. Several saw advantages in using the term to describe kinship and solidarity between trans feminine people. The participating informants in the study listed several different conflicts within trans feminine movements. Many of them were generally skeptical to conflicts, especially to those related to cattiness, competition, language and terminology – sentiment's which I agree with, albeit with the addition, which some of my informant's also stressed, that certain conflict's regarding differences in oppressions related to intersectional hierarchies, may be necessary. In the concluding chapter I argue for an understanding of trans-sisterhood based both on an understanding of similarities and difference's in *experience* and an understanding of *solidarity* that prioritizes the voices, perspectives and leadership of the most marginalized. My informant's described grave street harassment, employment discrimination and experiences of desexualization from gay/queer men and hypersexualization from so-called tranny chasers. Because of the lack of previous research on trans femininities from the perspective of an understanding of the specific oppressions of trans-misogyny and femi-negativity, this thesis has had a broad, rather than detailed, perspective and following in the foot steps of Julia Serano (2007) argues for an analysis on the position of trans women and other trans femininities beyond the gender neutral category of *transgender*. A majority of my informants sharp statements on the subordination of trans femininity to trans masculinity supports my argument for the need of more research in the field of trans femininity studies with perspectives from both transgender studies and critical femininity studies.

*Keywords:* Trans feminine, sisterhood, trans-sisterhood, femi-negativity, trans-misogyny, New York City, trans women, femininity, transgender, intersectionality

# *Table of contents*

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Aims of the study.....	2
1.3 Research questions .....	3
1.4 Positionings and personal reflections .....	4
<b>2. Prior research and theoretical beginnings</b> .....	6
2.1 Sandy Stone's Posttranssexual Manifesto and the birth of Transgender Studies .....	6
2.2 Critical femininity studies.....	7
2.3 Sissyphobia, femi-negativity and effemimania .....	8
2.4 Different trans communities in New York City.....	10
<b>3. Theory</b> .....	11
3.1 Trans-misogyny and the concepts of oppositional and traditional sexism.....	11
3.2 Passing-centrism.....	12
3.3 Critiques and usages of sisterhood .....	13
3.3.1 Second wave feminism and sisterhood .....	13
3.3.2 Difference, postcolonial and antiracist critiques of sisterhood .....	14
3.3.3 Trans-exclusionary sisterhood.....	15
3.3.4 Trans-sisterhood .....	17
3.3.5 Sisterhood as empty signifier .....	18
3.4 Intersectional trans politics.....	19
<b>4. Methodology</b> .....	21
4.1 Qualitative interviews .....	21
4.2 In depth and semi-structured interviews .....	22
4.3 Situated knowledge .....	23
4.4 Informants as knowledge producers and studying your own community.....	23
4.5 The informants .....	25
<b>5. Analysis</b> .....	27
5.1 Trans-misogyny and femi-negativity .....	27
5.1.1 Street harassment and “passing” .....	28
5.1.2 Education & Employment .....	32
5.1.3 The hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox .....	34
5.2 Sisterhood, sisterhooding and conflicts.....	37

5.2.1 Relationship to the term and concept of sisterhood .....	37
5.2.2 Sisterhooding practices.....	40
5.2.3 Cattiness, hierarchies and competition .....	43
5.2.4 The tranny debate .....	45
5.3 Intersectional coalitions and conflicts .....	47
5.3.1 Intersectional hierarchies and disparities within the group .....	47
5.3.2 Differences and similarities between trans brotherhood and trans sisterhood, trans masculinity and trans femininity .....	50
5.3.3 Allyship and relationship with other communities.....	53
<b>6. Concluding thoughts</b> .....	<b>56</b>
<b>7. Bibliography</b> .....	<b>63</b>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The title for this thesis “You don't always like your sisters, but you always love them”, was taken from a statement by my informant Polly, where she describes the necessity of support and a bond between marginalized groups like trans women. But what does this bond look like? And does it always exist? What are the impediments? My decision to write this thesis was rooted in my own longing to better understand these subjects, the different types of oppression that trans feminine people meet, and the practices of trans feminine activism in New York City, which has a history that has inspired many of my own political perspectives.

In 1969 The Stonewall Riots in New York City were led mainly by trans and other gender variant-feminine people, many of whom were working class and of color (Gossett 2013). This event is often viewed as the birth of modern LGBT-rights activism, but the ones who led The Stonewall Riots have often been placed at the back of the bus in the LGBT-rights discourse (Rivera in Gan 2013). In her play *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* the performance artist Penny Arcade relays a personal memory of the post-stonewall gay movement:

In 1974 (in New York) these gay men, they didn't like to dish, they didn't like to camp it up, they didn't like to dance, they hated art, they hated fashion, they hated fag hags, they hated women, they hated drag queens, they hated dykes, they hated effeminate men - all these guys wanted to do was go in the bushes and fuck, just like regular boys.<sup>1</sup>

I know from my own experiences that the shunning of gender variance, especially in it's feminine form, hardly stopped in the 1970's – it is still running rampant. Though shunned by the gay mainstream, the legacy of the activism of *the stonewall queens* continues, even if it is not widely known. I'm talking Sylvia Rivera, Miss Major, Marsha P. Johnson, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), Transy House, Ballroom Culture, and Trans, Gender Variant, Intersex (TGI) Justice Project. Some of these people and organizations are still active today, others have left a legacy that serves as an enormous inspiration for today's intersectional, radical trans activism, in not only New York City, but also many other places in the world.

New York City has a very specific history of intersectional trans feminine activism, perhaps this community could be called a sisterhood, perhaps it could be called something entirely different. I am longing to analyze, that is my role as a researcher, I am longing to learn, because researchers don't know everything, I am longing for conversations over tea that may have happened anyways, but been over sparkling wine or a joint had I not been uptight about my researcher role. Going into

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DT46oX2F5p4>

this study I don't have a clear hypothesis or investment. I know there is a lot of very interesting trans feminine activism going on in New York and I want to learn more about the links between different trans femininities and our activism. We are not the same, but we may share certain similarities and what does that mean? Personally I am empowered by using the term sister to speak with other femmes, it connects us to each other and offers a rhetorical affirmation of my fem(me)inine identity, but at the same time I am critical to the term, for fear of the illusion of complete unity and ignoring of difference, and I want to know more about how other trans feminine people feel about the term and the practice? I can say that I have often felt empowered by the presence of other trans femmes, but sometimes also judged, constrained and disempowered.

Can we still be sisters while admitting to our differences? My face lights up with the feeling of belonging when you call me your *sister*, but maybe that is just because I used to be someones brother and that name never fit and I reveled in the light when we were sisters and we played nature girls together, and the my little pony men were always stupider than the girls, and you dressed me up as a bride because you wanted to be the flower girl, but now you are the one who is married and never-ever-will-I-marry and I am not sure I would even ever be given the opportunity to, which I think may be an experience that several of my trans sisters share? This definition of sister differs entirely from the nuclear family definition of sister – or does it? What do you feel? And how does trans-misogyny and femi-negativity oppress us in different ways, as intersectional oppressions will also always make us differ from each other, but yet, perhaps we still meet at some of those intersections and what do we talk about there and what do we say to each other and how do we support each other, if it even is to each other we go for support, when we are on opposite ends of the street? Are we worried that being seen on the street together might make people think that we are “street walkers”, maybe that is exactly who we are, maybe we don't care if that's what people think we are cuz all us girls deserve respect. The questions are growing and that means that the introduction must end and the show, the struggle, the thesis must go on. I am longing to get to know more about different trans feminine positions and experiences as well as different models of trans feminine activism - the links, the differences, the conflicts, the coalitions, the collisions which may or may not be mutually exclusive concepts – and I hope you, my dear reader, feel the same longing to find out more about these subjects. But do not expect any definite answers.

## **1.2 Aims of the study**

Sisterhood is obviously not a feminine tradition. To build sisterhood, you need to get out of your kitchen, out of your family, out of your love story, you have to be allowed to get outdoors. That's why sisterhood is more a tradition for whores, alcoholics and outcasts. -  
Virginie Despentes in *Femmes of Power* (Dahl & Volcano 2008:170)

In this study I investigate sisterhood between trans femininities in New York City. From a broader perspective I would like to connect this topic to what Virginie Despentes describes in the aforementioned quote – sisterhood between others. In this case the specific others are trans feminine people who share a commonality in that their feminine positions are othered because of the crossing of gender borders. In order for a crossing to take place there must be some sort of border and this border, to speak with Julia Serano, can be called, *oppositional sexism* (Serano 2007:104-105). Femininity is not expected to arise in people who were assigned male at birth, at least not to a large extent.

The word sisterhood is often used within the contexts of nuclear families and second wave feminism, seldom the most welcoming spaces for trans femmes. At the same time I have heard the word *sister* used in many trans feminine contexts, especially in New York City, and I use the term myself. I wish to investigate what sisterhood and sisterhooding can mean to trans feminine people as well as what experiences they have around trans-misogyny, femi-negativity and intersectionality.

This study aims to be a part of two growing research fields – *transgender studies* and *critical femininity studies*. Both of these research fields are quite new within the academy so it comes to no surprise that there is extremely little research involving an intersection between both fields. I aim to fill in that knowledge gap ever so slightly and hope that these research fields will be built upon in the future. I certainly aim to build upon the knowledge gained in this thesis in coming research. We are/I am just getting started, and you *reader, my reader*, as one of my femme anti-heroines Violette Leduc would say, are just starting reading. So, let's not dwell on this section for too long, let's move forward.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The research questions for this thesis are as follows:

- *How do different trans feminine people in New York City relate to the term, concept and practice of sisterhood and sisterhooding?*
- *What sisterhooding practices exist between trans feminine people in New York City?*
- *What different experiences of trans-misogyny, femi-negativity, racism, and classism do trans feminine people in New York City have?*
- *Which conflicts exist within the trans feminine community and which coalitions and allied communities do many trans feminine people take part in?*

## 1.4 Positionings and personal reflections

I am taking a plane from Sweden, my place of residence, back to my country of origin, The United States, in order to do research with people who, like me, are in the trans feminine spectrum. But at the same time we are of course always different. And not one. I shall meet people who I would wish to meet anyways, and interview them about things that I would love to speak with them about anyways, and in the process of the interview on sisterhood we are sisterhooding together as our lips do not speak as one, but do speak together. In “Fictions of Feminist Ethnography” (1994) the feminist ethnographer Kamala Viswesvaran writes about decentering gender from the center of feminist theory (Viswesvaran 1994:113). In accordance to Viswesvaran's perspectives my analytical approach to my project is not that sisterhood is merely a matter of gender.

What do I mean by this? Well, first let me begin with the categories that may or may not be essential(ist) to talk about. I am white, with a lower middle class background. I am a Swedishamerican in my late 20's and a trans feminine person, to be more specific a trans feminine person who hasn't quite decided if she feels like a woman or neither male nor female. My study involves both sameness and difference – I as a trans feminine *person* interviewing other trans feminine *people*. The plural form *people* is key because we are more than one, and we do not speak with the same voice.

This is certainly about different forms of structural oppression, the people I will be interviewing will have different ages, class backgrounds, skin colors etc. But things do not stop or necessarily start there. As Leila Brännström wrote in an article in the feminist magazine *Bang*:

What I certainly know is that all our starting positions are different. That some people have starting positions that are more adapted to living than others, and that belonging to more advantaged citizenships, cultures, classes, genders, skin colors, sexualities, bodies and families says a lot, but never everything, about if a person can live a liveable life.<sup>2</sup> (Brännström 2014:54).

Yes, this is where my brain broadens and starts speaking of manners of the heart. Power dynamics are very real, but when we lock ourselves into neat little categories and believe that they are the things that say everything about me, you, and the world – are we really getting anywhere, or are we staying in the same positions? The understanding of plurality and intersectionality doesn't have to be equated with the impossibility of coalition, which is a way of working together through both our similarities and differences. The understanding of difference may be necessary to make a coalition strong. Related to this, Luce Irigaray states: “These streams don't flow into one, definitive

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2 My translation

sea, these rivers have no permanent banks; this body no fixed borders. This mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. For all this seems so strange for those who claim "solidity" as their foundation" (Irigaray 1980:76-77).

What exactly does she mean by that? I do not know, but I can say how these words make the I who is me *feel*. The people I will be interviewing are not objects of my knowledge but subjects of their own situated knowledge. Through listening I can attain more situated knowledge of my own as these voices speak to me in all their similarities and differences. I am not a blank slate, but my feelings are not only products of my social position related to hierarchies, but also a product of my values. And what are these values? I can list some of them: I side on the side of coalition, I side on the side of conflict, I side on the side of the most marginalized, I side on the side of complexity. These positions could be deemed mutually exclusive but in my mind they are not. In which way does a conflict render a coalition impossible? Well, perhaps if you are striving for 100 percent pure perfection, but I am not. This coalition is making me feel uncomfortable, this interview is making me feel uncomfortable – alright then, but let's try to revel in our discomfort and try to understand when discomfort can be the very thing that allows us to reach higher than ever before. I side with a struggle to reach higher than ever before. But I must be clear that it is the perspectives and voices of the most marginalized that must lead the way. Otherwise we risk creating a situation where some people are rising, while others continue to be treated terribly. Yes, what happens to a movement that stresses hate crime-legislations and giving more resources to the police, while not giving a shit about trans sex workers, who are harassed by the same police, who yes many a time have arrested you for whoring and then raped you in the car. Once again I must discuss how *values* and *social positions* are not always *the same*, just as *we* are not *one*, but plural, by definition and that doesn't mean we can not march hand in hand. One example: While conducting the research for this thesis I lived in an area in Brooklyn, Crown Heights, that is heavily policed. One block from where I lived there was a police station. On a *personal* level this police station may have been good for me, I am white and perceived as a member of the artist/cultural middle class, I am not working as a sex worker at the moment, and though I am trans feminine, I understand that the police, mostly, don't profile me as a criminal, but as somebody to protect. Does this mean I support the presence of that police station? No, I do not, because the large police presence effects the area as a whole in a negative way. It is probable that the urgency of my protests against the police presence would take a different form if I was always already criminalized by them. I do believe social positions and privileges exist and matter, but I do not believe that they render values like solidarity impossible.

## 2. Prior research and theoretical beginnings

After conducting an extensive search for academic research connected to the topics of my thesis it quickly became clear that very little research has been done on trans femininity from the lens of the specific oppression of trans-misogyny and femi-negativity. I have however found relevant research on trans women and other trans feminine people that has been conducted without explicitly bringing up this particular lens. Outside of the academic context Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl – A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and The Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), is an important work that theorizes about trans-misogyny and negative attitudes towards femininity. *Whipping Girl* will be referenced often in this thesis.

I have also found an array of different academic articles that partially connect to my research topics, for example prior research on trans in general, femininity in general, femininity in gay men, discrimination of drag queens, and femme in lesbian culture. I have chosen to include articles on feminine gay men and drag queens in my summarization of prior research, despite being well aware that they are not synonymous with trans femininities and that these groups are often problematically lumped together by society. I still find the research relevant to my thesis because there are connections and overlaps in the oppressions, seeing that both groups have the experience of being feminine and assigned male at birth, and both groups are targets of femi-negativity. Given the apparent lack of research on trans femininity it would not be wise to exclude this research especially since many of my informants have spoken of previously identifying as feminine gay men or drag queens.

### 2.1 Sandy Stone's Posttranssexual Manifesto and the birth of Transgender Studies

Sandy Stone's text "The Empire Strikes Back – A Posttranssexual Manifesto", originally published in 1991, is included in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006) where the editors Susan Stryker and Stephen Wittle introduced the text with the following: "Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual manifesto" has been described justly as the protean text from which contemporary transgender studies emerged," and furthermore "In the wake of Stone's article, a gradual but steady body of new academic and creative work by transgender people has gradually taken shape, which has enriched virtually every academic and artistic discipline with new critical perspectives on gender" (Stryker & Wittle 2006:221). Stone's article positions itself against the anti-transsexual book *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), written by the self-identified feminist Janice Raymond. Stone critiques the medicalized narrative of transsexualism where trans women are assumed to go from being unambiguous, but unhappy men, to unambiguous women, without a territory in between and with a

specific moment, sex reassignment surgery as the specific narrative moment when their sexual identification changes from male to female (Stone 2006:225). I draw inspiration from Stone's theory in this thesis which includes trans femininities of different bodies and identities, some may or may not be on hormones, some may or may not have had sex reassignment surgery, some may or may not identify as women. Stone continues:

As with “genetic” “women,” transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy “true” women. In this construction as well, the transsexuals have been resolutely complicit by failing to develop an effective counter discourse. (Stone 2006:230)

This pairs with one of the aims of this thesis, namely to have knowledge production within the field of transgender studies created by a trans feminine person based on interviews with other trans feminine people. Stone goes on to critique the view that “passing” is what constitutes success for transsexuals and states that passing means the denial of mixture (Stone 2006:231). She coins the term “posttranssexual”, and envisions a society where medical/psychological establishments do not serve as gate keepers for cultural norms or as authorities for what is deemed a culturally intelligible body (Stone 2006:232).

## **2.2 Critical femininity studies**

As I stated earlier I view this study as a contribution to both transgender studies and to critical femininity studies – two very new and burgeoning fields of research – with the hope of contributing to the formation of trans femininity studies as a research field of it's own.

In the article “Turning like a Femme: Figuring Critical Femininity Studies” (2012) Ulrika Dahl states a claim for the introduction of critical femininity studies as an important counterpart to critical masculinity studies, not because of the traditional gender equality-argument of “if we have one we must have the other”, but more because it is important to dissect questions such as what is the feminine figuration, what are the relationships between femininities and what queerness is their in femininities (Dahl 2012:58). Regarding radical feminist notions of femininity as defined by men's attraction (MacKinnon in Dahl 2012:59) or as being “obsessively involved in inconsequential details on a serious basis” (Brownmiller in Dahl 2012:61), Dahl calls for a (re)figuring of critical femininity studies that also tells a story of (queer) femininity beyond the simplified story of subordination, sexualization, objectification, and superficial narcissism (Dahl 2012:61). She also clarifies that critical femininity studies does not equate femininity with the category of (cis)woman, in doing so she cites the femininity embodied by “sissies”, which today is often addressed in the

terms of homophobia and not in the terms of femmebodiment (Dahl 2012:57), as well as Jack Halberstam's call for "masculinity studies without men" (Halberstam in Dahl 2012:62) and Julia Serano's contention that femininity is heterogenous and non-female specific (Serano in Dahl 2012:62) and wishes for a critical femininity studies that also goes beyond it's ties to femaleness and femmebodiment that goes beyond surface adornment (Dahl 2012:62). She states:

I wish for, extending the insights from feminist phenomenology and sexual difference theory we might stress feminine specificity and call the "emancipatory" qualities of gender neutrality into question, but without insisting on proper feminine objects or bodily processes as the foundations for our object(ion)s. (Dahl 2012:63)

The reason why my study is as situated in *critical femininity studies* as in *transgender studies* is because it deals with the specific position of trans femininity and deals with the relationship *between* femininities within this group. It is a partial and significant departure from the gender neutrality in the title Transgender Studies, because it insists on a difference in the feminine position from the masculine. Although trans categories are within the realms of *the feminine other* and *the masculine other*, the positions of *the feminine* and *the masculine* are as relevant as the positions of *the other*. More on this subject further forward in this thesis.

### **2.3 Sissyphobia, femi-negativity and effemimania**

The term *sissyphobia* was coined by Tim Bergling in his book *Sissyphobia – Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* (2001). Bergling investigates the discrimination against feminine gay men within the gay community through interviews. One informant states: "Straight men hate effeminate men because they betray the masculine facade and perhaps represent what straight men hate about women; gay men think straight people think we're all sissies, so being a swishy fag brings out that visceral dislike" (Bergling 2001:113). Bergling also conducted surveys and went through men-seeking-men contact ads in a number of newspapers around the country and found the following results: Masculine themed ads accounted for nearly 40 percent of the total, while feminine-themed ads, though present, barely registered at 1 or 2 percent (Bergling 2001:13). Through his research Bergling finds a correlation between misogyny and negativity towards effeminate men, especially among gay men who identify as "straight-acting" (Bergling 2001:60).

In the article "Negotiating Sissyphobia: A Critical/Interpretive Analysis of One "Femme" Gay Asian Body in the Heteronormative World" (2011), Shinsuke Eguchi, Assistant Professor at the University of New Mexico's Department of Communication & Journalism, further examines negative attitudes towards feminine gay men and how this intersects with race and the specific feminization of gay Asian men. Eguchi brings up how femininity within the gay community is

deemed unattractive and undesirable. Femininity and sissy-labels are placed on many gay Asian men, which plays a large role in the racial stigmatization of them (Eguchi 2011:38). Using auto-ethnographic observations he draws the analysis that:

Although sissyphobia is pervasive in this gendered society, this analysis has looked at the multiple realities of sissyphobia. There are some “straight-acting” gay men who show hatred toward “effeminate” gay men, simply because of internalizing sissyphobia and/or internalized homophobia. However, some of their sissyphobic communicative expressions may not correlate with what they may actually do behind the doors, according to my autoethnography. I equate this phenomenon to the situation that some gay and bisexual men in the closet deny their sexuality in public. Thus, considering the dialectic of public vs. private into account may be necessary in further understanding the communication processes of sissyphobia. (Eguchi 2011:52)

The interesting thing about this observation is that there may or may not be certain correlations between this phenomenon and the phenomenon of closeted straight men who desire trans women. Further connections to the topics in this thesis can be made in the article “The Association Between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs About Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity” (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, Sprecht 2014). The researchers discuss how drag is more accepted on stage than off stage, and how drag queens feel celebrated as entertainers, while being subjugated, segregated and alienated in the gay community at large (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, Sprecht 2014:557). Some drag queens reported difficulties in finding a romantic partner, because of connotations of them being promiscuous and overly feminine. These negative connotations seemed to stem from many gay men not being able to distinguish between a drag queen on stage and off stage (Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein 2007 in Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, Sprecht 2014:557). While a drag queens persona onstage seldom is synonymous with a trans feminine persons off stage, it is interesting for this thesis that negative connotations against drag queens, at least in some cases, have their base in seeing a drag queens stage persona as something that is done full time. Where does this leave trans feminine people and other people who present as feminine all day every day, one may ask?

In *Whipping Girl* (2007) Julia Serano uses two words to describe the types of oppression that assigned male at birth femininities risk meeting – *trans-misogyny* and *effemimania*. In the theory section of this thesis I will further expand on the subject of trans-misogyny which Serano writes about as something that specifically target trans femininities, in an intersection between misogyny and transphobia. Here I will instead focus on effemimania since it's closer to the subjects of sissyphobia and femi-negativity previously brought up in this section. Serano defines effemimania within the realms of traditional sexism:

Because femininity is seen as inferior to masculinity, any man who appears “effeminate”

or feminized in any way will drastically lose status and respect in our society, much more so than those women who appear masculine or butch. But it's not just that males who act feminine lose the advantages of male-privilege; rather, they come under far more public scrutiny and disdain. (Serano 2007:286)

As an example of this Serano brings up how growing up, boys must hide female or feminine gender inclinations, many MTF spectrum children channel these inclinations into very private and specific occasions while many FTM spectrum counterparts express their masculine interests and mannerisms in a more open way (Serano 2007:289).

## **2.4 Different trans communities in New York City**

A very important figure in post-Stonewall trans activism in New York City is Sylvia Rivera, who has both a street, Sylvia Rivera Way, and a large trans organization, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, in Manhattan named after her (Gan 2013:291). Her history tells something about the history of trans feminine activism in New York. In 1969 Sylvia Rivera was a part of a band of sex working street queens who were largely responsible for The Stonewall Riots. As she herself was quoted in Jessi Gan's article "Still at the back of the bus" in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (2013): "Routine was, 'Faggots over here, dykes over here and freaks over there', referring to my side of the community" (Rivera in Gan 2013:295). The Stonewall Inn had a largely white, normatively gendered clientele, and the people who started the riots, and fought the most fiercely, were mainly the street youth and gender variant people nearby, many of whom were working class and of color – tired of being constant targets of police harassment (Gan 2013:295). Post Stonewall, Rivera was active in the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) where she was often deemed a trouble maker and shunned either for her "passionate, fractured English" or for her "sashaying ways being offensive towards women". At the 1973 Pride Parade, Rivera and other gender variant feminine people were publicly denounced by Jean O'Leary of the GAA for "parodying" womanhood. Subsequently Rivera left the movement for 20 years (Gan 2013:296). An organization that Sylvia Rivera started with Marsha P. Johnson is still active to this day in New York City, namely *STAR* – Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries – which was founded to provide shelter and housing for gender variant youth on the streets. Jessi Gan describes *STAR* as an example of the self-organization of trans feminine working class people of color (Gan 2013:296-297). In the 1990's up until her death in 2002 Rivera resumed her activism, saying that she was sick of how trans people's political needs were sold down the river: "After all these years the trans community is still at the back of the bus". (Rivera in Gan 2013:298). As an example, Sylvia Rivera's activism is very relevant as a historical background to a thesis on trans feminine sisterhood

and intersectionality in New York City.

“Sex Workers, Fem Queens, and Cross-Dressers: Differential Marginalizations and HIV Vulnerabilities Among Three Ethnocultural Male-to-Female Transgender Communities in New York City” (Hwahng & Nuttbrock 2007) is another academic article on transgender communities in New York City. The article describes the differences between three MTF Transgender communities in New York City, the low-income African American/Black and Latina(o) House Ball community; middle-class White cross-dressers; and low-income and often undocumented immigrant Asian sex workers (Hwahng & Nuttborck 2007:36). Hwahng & Nuttborck find that the ethnocultural differences between these three communities are larger than the similarities regarding trans femininity (Hwahng & Nuttborck 2007:52). Many members of the house ball community were involved in survival sex work on the streets. Often the community members marginalization kept them from engaging in safer sex work practices, which meant that the risk for arrests, violence and HIV was high (Hwahng & Nuttborck 2007:44-48). While the community of Asian trans women also engaged in survival sex work it was often hotel- and apartment-based or done via solicitation online or in clubs. This type of sex work allowed for more negotiating of safe sex, screening of clients and staying off threats of violence and coerced drug use than street sex work. However since many of the Asian trans women were undocumented, one large problem was not having access to social or medical services (Hwahng & Nuttborck 2007:48-51). The community of white cross-dressers consisted mostly of people who were white and middle class and who had kept traditional masculine gender roles as husbands and fathers, while holding jobs as businessmen, real estate brokers, and other white-collar professions. Some of them had to find new jobs after coming out of the closet but could still find work within the legal economy in for example department stores and novelty shops. Sex work was not common and when it occurred it was usually more for exploratory and recreational reasons, than for survival reasons (Hwahng & Nuttborck 2007:51-52). The overlap between these three different trans feminine communities was just about non-existent, which is something I take with me in my study, while also being well aware that these three communities hardly are the only trans feminine communities in this five burrough large concrete jungle.

### **3. Theory**

#### **3.1 Trans-misogyny and the concepts of oppositional and traditional sexism**

Julia Serano defines the term *trans-misogyny*, in contrast to transphobia, as the following:

When a trans person is ridiculed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity(...) When the majority of jokes made at the expense of trans people center on “men wearing dresses” or “men who want to cut their penises cut off,” (...) When the majority of violence and sexual assaults directed at trans

people is directed at trans women (...) When it's okay for women to wear “men's” clothing but when men who wear “women's” clothing can be diagnosed with psychological disorder transvestic fetishism. (Serano 2007:14-15)

Trans-misogyny targets specifically trans women and other gender variant-femininities. In this thesis I will be using the concept of trans-misogyny as well as Serano's definition of *oppositional sexism* and *traditional sexism* to understand the trans feminine position(s). She defines oppositional sexism as the: “belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and nonoverlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires”. This punishes everyone who falls outside of gender or sexual norms (Serano 2007:13). The other category of sexism that Serano writes about is traditional sexism: “the belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity”. Using these forms of sexism as a theoretical base Serano theorizes around the specific form of oppression that trans femininities are subjected to. According to her, trans people on the Male to female (MTF)-spectrum are not only faced with ridicule because they transgress binary gender norms, but also because they embrace femaleness and femininity. Trans people on the Female to male (FTM)-spectrum however are discriminated against for breaking gender norms, but their expressions of maleness or masculinity are not targeted for ridicule in themselves (Serano 2007:14).

The definition of oppositional sexism and traditional sexism can lead to a greater understanding of the complexities of power dynamics related to sex/gender in a western context. It also greatly explains why there is a need for a specific field of studies on the border between critical femininity studies and transgender studies. While there is a risk that transgender studies focuses mainly on oppositional sexism, there is a risk that critical femininity studies focuses on traditional sexism – trans femininity studies works along the intersection of both forms of sexism.

### **3.2 Passing-centrism**

Sandy Stone and Julia Serano both critique societal focus on trans people passing as cis people. “Upon close examination, it becomes quite obvious that the concept of “passing” is steeped in cissexual privilege, as it's only ever applied to trans women”, states Serano in *Whipping Girl* (Serano 2007:176). She goes on to criticize how trans people often are judged based on their ability to pass, which is based on societies need to gender every person as either female or male. Passing as cissexual may in many instances bare with it privilege for trans people according to Serano, although it can also lead to accusations of “deception” or “infiltration”. She prefers the term *conditional cissexual privilege* to the term *passing privilege* (Serano 2007:176-180). Sandy Stone goes perhaps further:

Transsexuals who pass seem able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being “read”, relationships begin as lies – and passing, of course, is not an activity restricted to transsexuals. This is familiar to the person of color whose skin is light enough to pass as white, or to the closet gay or lesbian...or to anyone who has chosen invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance. (Stone 2006:232)

This stands in contrast to Julia Serano's assertion that: “the common use of the term “pass” in lesbian and gay communities (is) as a synonym for “hide” (i.e., a gay male who “passes” for straight is typically assumed to be hiding or playing down his queerness). This use of the word “pass” is completely different from its use in the transgender community, where it typically refers to whether one is appropriately gendered as the sex one identifies or presents oneself as” (Serano 2007:303).

In the analysis section I will be contrasting my informants statements on passing with Stone's and Serano's perspectives. Sandy Stone can be said to go further than Julia Serano and writes of reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body and cites Donna Haraway's “the promises of monsters”. She critiques the concept of passing in terms of the Derridean imperative “genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres” and remarks:

I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing, to be consciously “read”, to read oneself aloud – and by this troubling and productive reading to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written – in effect, then, to become a (look out – dare I say it again?) posttranssexual. (Stone 2006:232)

### **3.3 Critiques and usages of sisterhood**

#### **3.3.1 *Second wave feminism and sisterhood***

In 1984, *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, edited by Robin Morgan, was released. It is, according to me, an important document that charts different international struggles for women's liberation. It is also an important historical document that portrays the definition of sisterhood as universal, something that was common, but not all-encompassing<sup>3</sup>, within second wave feminism. Morgan writes the following:

The historical, cross-cultural opposition women express to war and our healthy skepticism of certain technological advances (by which most men seem overly impressed at first and disillusioned at last) are only two instances of shared attitudes among women which seem basic to a common world view. Nor is there anything mystical or biologically deterministic about this commonality. It is the result of a common condition which, despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female. (Morgan 1984:4)

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3 For more information around this discussion see: Hemmings, Clare (2005): “Telling Feminist Stories”, *Feminist Theory* vol. 6, n. 2, pp. 115-139

Morgan further stresses the similarities between women: “To fight back in solidarity, however as a real political force, requires that women transcend the patriarchal barriers of class and race, and furthermore transcend even the solutions the Big Brothers propose to problems they themselves created” (Morgan 1984:18). One may question if race and class barriers are patriarchal or products of other systems intersecting with patriarchy? At the same time I agree with Morgan when she problematizes the following: “”Women,” we are told, “really have nothing in common with one another, given class, race, caste, and comparable barriers.” (Morgan 1984:19). Of course, however, there is very much space in the rooms between “nothing” and “everything”. And the steps are taken a bit too far when she for example states: “Rape, after all, is an omnipresent terror to all women of any class, race, or caste. Battery is a nightmare of emotional and physical pain no matter who the victim. Labor and childbirth feel the same to any woman” (Morgan 1984:20). Perhaps we can not say that all women run as large a risk of being raped, which statistics stating that 68 percent of trans women in San Francisco have been raped (Clements, Marx, Guzman, Ikeda & Katz 1998), compared to 17,4 percent of heterosexual cis women and 46,1 percent of bisexual cis women in the U.S. (National Crime Victimization Survey 2008-2012) point towards. Perhaps all women can not or do not want to give birth to children. Perhaps some women have access to anesthetics and a clean safe hospital environment for childbirth, while others do not. All these differences are very relevant.

Second wave feminists who talk about universal sisterhood and shared common experiences get sharply critiqued nowadays. In many ways the critique is righteous, at the same time I simply can not paint a picture where they are all wrong. From my point of view it is important to address and recognize similarities as well as differences. It is when we go to extremes and try to create unified categories or go to the opposite extreme where we stress differences so much that there is little to no room for speaking about collectively shared experiences that our movements suffer.

### ***3.3.2 Difference, postcolonial and antiracist critiques of sisterhood***

In the essay “Sisterhood, Coalition, and the Politics of Experience” in *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global* and the concept of universal sisterhood:

It is difficult to imagine such a generalized identification predicated on the commonality of women's interests and goals across very real divisive class and ethnic lines – especially for example in the context of the mass proletarianization of Third World women by corporate capital based in the United States, Europe and Japan. (Mohanty 2003:116)

Without a critical gaze on the concept of sisterhood Mohanty states that it ends up being a

middle-class, psychologized notion that erases material power differences within and among groups of women (Mohanty 2003:116). She stresses the need for the politics of engagement rather than the politics of transcendence, as well as the need for localization and historicization of different experiences. (Mohanty 2003:122) Furthermore Mohanty states, in a quote that sums up much of my views on the politics of intersectionality and coalition: “Instead of privileging a certain limited version of identity politics, it is the current intersection of antiracist, anti-imperialist, and gay and lesbian struggles that we need to understand to map the ground for feminist political strategy and critical analysis”. (Mohanty 2003:120)

In the article “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women” (1986), bell hooks writes about the idea of universal sisterhood as created by bourgeois women's liberationists, under the pretense that sisters were to “unconditionally” love one another, avoid conflict, and minimize disagreement (hooks 1986:129). hooks critiques the erasure of difference in this version of sisterhood, but also points out that women do not need to eradicate difference or pretend to share all the same common oppressions in order to feel solidarity with one another (hooks 1986:138). Instead of throwing out the term and practice of sisterhood with the bath water she argues for the following:

In recent years Sisterhood as slogan, motto, rallying cry no longer evokes the spirit of unity. Some feminists now seem to feel that unity between women is impossible given our differences. Abandoning the idea of Sisterhood as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes feminist movement. Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle. (hooks 1986:127)

In my theorizing around the usage of trans-sisterhooding practices accompanied with an understanding of intersectional differences, hooks statement is very helpful, because she points towards the possibility of solidarity and doesn't define sisterhood as something that necessarily ignores difference.

### **3.3.3 *Trans-exclusionary sisterhood***

In 1979 Janice Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, a book which is often used as an example of trans exclusionary radical feminism. In the chapter “Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian Feminist” Raymond states the following:

While regarded by many as an obscure issue that effects a relatively minute proportion of the population, transsexualism poses very important feminist questions. Transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists show yet another face of patriarchy. As the male-to-constructed female transsexual exhibits the attempt to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women, the male-to-constructed female who claims to be a lesbian feminist attempts to possess women at a deeper level, this

time under the guise of challenging rather than conforming to the role and behaviour of stereotyped femininity. (Raymond 1979:99)

This is a prime example of the “damned if you, damned if you don't mentality”, according to Raymond some trans women are “too feminine” to be “real women”, while others are “not feminine enough” to be “real women” - neither are to be included in her feminist sisterhood. Raymond worries that trans women in lesbian feminist spaces might contain and control these spaces, further dividing women from each other and perhaps turning every lesbian-feminist space into a harem! (Raymond 1979:105). The thought that trans women might need feminism at least as much as cis women in order to survive oppression and discrimination apparently does not occur to Raymond.

While Raymond's gravely transphobic book does not deserve much space in this thesis, an issue that craves more serious attention is the repercussions of Raymond's, and other trans-exclusionary feminist's, texts, regarding how trans femininities are treated within feminism. Eli R. Green deals with these issues and the broader issue of trans inclusion in feminist spaces in the article “Debating Trans Inclusion in the Feminist Movement: A Trans-Positive Analysis” (2006). According to Green the theories presented in Raymond's book are still relevant to the trans inclusion debate of today (or at least at the time of his article's publishing in 2006):

Despite being published over twenty-five years ago, the book is still highly relevant to the current discussion of trans-inclusion. Many of the ideas forwarded by Raymond in 1979, such as what defines “woman,” the medicalization of gender and sex, the social and biological legitimacy of trans identities, the placement of biological influences in a social constructionist feminist movement, and the purpose and sanctity of feminist space, are still cornerstone questions of today's trans-inclusion debate.” (Green 2006:234)

Green points out that the debate of trans inclusion within feminism presents a challenge to traditional feminism regarding the decentralization of cis women as *the* oppressed gender and the recognition of gender variance as oppressed (Green 2006:242). Green points out that it is still important for feminism to fight against the oppression of women, but at the same time wishes for an acknowledgement of how cisgendered women are considered a social class with a legitimate right to exist, where as different gender variant people are more often called into question (Green 2006:243).

The discussion of trans inclusion has a tumultuous history within the feminist movement and feminist sisterhoods have far from always welcomed trans people, especially trans women and other trans feminine people. One may ask how this has effected the usage of the term sisterhood within the context of trans spaces? In the following section I will go through the very limited amount of

information I have found on the term and concept *trans-sisterhood*.

### 3.3.4 *Trans-sisterhood*

In order to find any kind of information on the usage of the term sisterhood within trans feminine spaces I was forced to look outside of academia, where I found a few internet articles and blog posts. The information presented earlier on trans exclusion from feminist sisterhoods is not enough to paint a historical picture of what reactions trans femininities may have to the term sisterhood. I must also attempt to take a closer look at how the terms sisterhood and sister have been used in specific trans feminine spaces. The terms may have a very different background, history and context than the more well researched second wave feminist sisterhood.

In the essay “Transvestites: Your Half Sisters And Half Brothers Of The Revolution” (1972) Sylvia Rivera uses the term *half sisters* to describe people on the trans feminine spectrum and *half brothers* to describe people on the trans masculine spectrum. She positions herself and her community both within and in opposition to the gay and homosexual community:

Transvestites are the most oppressed people in the homosexual community. My half sisters and brothers are being raped and murdered by pigs, straights, and even sometimes by other uptight homosexuals who consider us the scum of the gay community. They do this because they are not liberated (...) Transvestites are the most liberated homosexuals in the world. We have had the guts to stand up and fight on the front lines for many years before the gay movement was born. (...) By being liberated my half sisters and brothers and myself are able to educate the ignorant gays and straights that transvestism *is* a valid life style. Remember the Stonewall Riots? That first stone was cast by a transvestite half sister June 27, 1969 and the gay liberation movement was born. Remember that transvestites and gay street people are always on the front lines and are ready to lay their lives down for the movement. (Rivera 1972)

Today the terms sister and sisterhood are often used by trans women and other trans feminine people on the internet. In an interview with *Colorlines* on the #Girlslikeus, Janet Mock defines what sisterhood means to her in the following way:

For me, it's to bring the marginal center. I center my work around these women and I think the run-off water will then go to other sections of the community. Trans women of color are the most at risk, the most marginalized. I need to make sure that my work is speaking directly to them and to do that without shame or guilt. The next level of that is also building a network of sisterhood where we banish this idea that resources are scarce, that only one of us can be out in public on television or having a thriving career and life. No, all of us can have that. I think that by us connecting, we then share our resources with one another, share our platforms with one another and we uplift each other's names in the face of a world that tries to tell us that we should not even exist and then not even co-exist together.<sup>4</sup>

Janet Mock's statement can be described as a combining of the intersectional understandings

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4 [http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/02/janet\\_mock\\_redefining\\_realness.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/02/janet_mock_redefining_realness.html)

of sisterhood with a trans female-centric point of view. Elsewhere on the internet the term sisterhood is used by many trans people, some who speak of trans exclusion within feminist movements and strive for sisterhood that includes trans femininities, instead of *cisterhood*, which focuses on cis women<sup>5</sup>. Other's speak about both specific trans-sisterhood and solidarity between trans and cis sisters: "Building sisterhood and working partnerships in the cis and trans feminine ranks is a worthy and achievable goal. Let's get busy making it happen,"<sup>6</sup> states the blogger TransGriot, who also calls for *African-American Transsisterhood*, which she proposes can start in the following fashion: "Your job as part of the African American Transsisterhood Initiative will be to select five people you've wanted to get to know as friends, and for one year do exactly that. Where they live doesn't matter. They can live in your city or outside of it, but one member of your sisterhood circle must be younger than you, another must be older than you. You can even do more than five people if you wish."<sup>7</sup> At the 2013 Philadelphia Trans-Health Conference two panels on trans-sisterhood were held "Trans Woman to Trans Woman: Building Sisterhood Across Lines of Race, Class and Age"<sup>8</sup> and "Transwoman of Color: The Sisterhood"<sup>9</sup>. Quite obviously the term sisterhood is used in trans feminine communities, at least by some, hopefully this thesis can succeed in digging deeper into how sisterhood is practiced within trans feminine spaces.

### 3.3.5 *Sisterhood as empty signifier*

Sisterhood can have different meanings to different people, in different time periods and different contexts, but what exactly does it mean when the same term has many different meanings? One scholar who has researched this question, relating to the term sisterhood, is the ethnologist Jenny Gunnarsson Payne. In her PhD Thesis entitled *Systerskapets logiker: En etnologisk studie av feministiska fanzines (The Logics of Sisterhood: An Ethnological Study of Feminist Zines)* from 2006 on the Swedish feminist fanzine community between 1997 and 2003, Gunnarsson Payne describes the term and concept of sisterhood as an *empty signifier*. She follows in the footsteps of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who've earlier brought up the term empty signifier. They relay that we can not find the meaning of something in itself outside of it's discursive context, instead everything is what it means to us (Laclau and Mouffe in Gunnarsson Payne 2006:24) and Gunnarsson Payne defines empty signifiers in the following way:

Empty signifiers, like "democracy", "justice", "discipline", "solidarity" or "sisterhood" have no necessary connection to a specific content – therefore the denotation "empty".

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5 <http://iwriteaboutfeminism.tumblr.com/post/83463340461/feminism-is-about-sisterhood-not-cisterhood>

6 <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2014/08/still-thinking-about-sisterhood.html>

7 <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2009/12/african-american-transsisterhood.html>

8 <http://www.trans-health.org/content/trans-woman-trans-woman-building-sisterhood-across-lines-race-class-and-age>

9 <http://www.trans-health.org/content/transwoman-color-sisterhood>

However, the empty signifiers are not completely devoid of content. Their “emptiness” is instead comprised by their usage as a surface for inscriptions from a disparity of different demands that in and of themselves do not have anything in common. (Gunnarsson Payne 2006:113<sup>10</sup>)

While sisterhood may not be completely void of content, just as other empty signifiers like “justice”, “solidarity” and “democracy”, it has an elastic meaning. But if we look at for example a stretched out rubber band, it breaks and disappears when stretched out too far – the same may go for empty signifiers. Elasticity of certain unifying terms are helpful in the building of movements, but if stretched out too far the elastic term breaks and becomes devoid of meaning, instead of elastic in it's meaning.

According to Gunnarsson Payne the meaning of sisterhood is decided by the sisterhooding acts that build up a relationship of equivalence between different positions (Gunnarsson Payne 2006:155). In this thesis I use both the terms *sisterhood* and *sisterhooding*, the difference being that sisterhood describes a concept, often theoretical, where as sisterhooding describes an activity. These are not necessarily one and the same as ones feelings about a concept are not always equatable with what actually happens in interactions between people of the same, similar or different identities.

When theorizing about sisterhood I am thinking very much about the difference between similarities and sameness. We may be similar, and share commonalities, without being the same. Once again repeating the words of Luce Irigaray: “If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again...” (Irigaray 1980:69). We are not the same, we are different, but simultaneously share similarities - these are not each others anomalies. Gunnarsson Payne points out that the signifier of sisterhood is not completely empty – after all if it was completely empty there would not be a tension between different definitions (Gunnarsson Payne 2006:122). Gunnarsson Payne's theory around sisterhood as an empty signifier serves as a relevant starting point to analyze how different definitions of sisterhood, related to both experience and political goals, still can bare with them possibilities for coalition.

### **3.4 Intersectional trans politics**

In the book *Normal Life – Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and The Limits of Law* (2011) Dean Spade takes a close look at today's burgeoning trans movement, hoping that it will not follow in the foot steps of mainstream gay and lesbian organizations that prioritize the most privileged people within the group. He states: “Trans resistance is emerging in a context of neoliberal politics where the choice to struggle for nothing more than incorporation into the

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10 My translation, all translations to English from Gunnarsson Payne's PhD-thesis (2006) are my own.

neoliberal order is the most obvious option” (Spade 2011:40). At the same time he recognizes an emerging trans politics that critiques settler colonialism, racist, sexist, classist, ableist and xenophobic imprisonment as well as ever-growing wealth disparities (Spade 2011:41). It is within these theoretical perspectives and politics that I position myself in this thesis. It is about a politics of coalition – of not seeing the trans movement or the trans struggle as an isolated movement or struggle, but instead as part of a broad coalition to eradicate racist, economic, ableist, ageist and sex/gender based oppressions. This may of course be easier said than done, we can't just go around snapping our fingers and eradicating all forms of oppressions now can we? If we could my thesis would consist of one sentence “Eradicate all oppressions” and then I'd take my ruby red slippers and click them three times and my work would be done! No, but that won't work, and I have strayed from the academically correct format. But you enjoyed it, didn't you? Admit it!

There are certain strategies for intersectional trans activism that focus on the voices and perspectives of the most marginalized. In describing Morgan Bassichis', Alex Lee's and Dean Spade's article “Building and Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got”, in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, the anthologies editors, Susan Stryker och Aren Z. Azuira, write the following:

For them, a radical trans social justice movement needs to adopt different tactics, and address different goals. Critical trans resistance to unjust state power must tackle such problems as poverty, racism, and incarceration if it is to do more than consolidate the legitimate citizenship of the most privileged segments of the trans populations. (Stryker & Azuira 2013:653)

This issue is further addressed in the same anthology in the article “Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence: The Politics of Interlocking Oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance” by Sarah Lamble:

For example, when the bulk of an advocacy group's funds are used to lobby for hate crime legislation rather than to advocate for transgender prisoners, or for increased community policing rather than the decriminalization of sex work, or for corporate employee benefits rather than universal health care, it is often low-income people of color who lose. For this reason, activists have an obligation to continuously examine how their political strategies affect those who are most disenfranchised. If the most privileged within the community benefit at the expense of the most marginalized, such strategies are not worth pursuing. (Lamble 2013:40)

The critique is focused on organizations and movements that leave people in the trans community behind by prioritizing trans people with more privilege. When refusing to see interlocking oppressions it becomes impossible to do activist work that takes into account that many trans people face multiple forms of discrimination beyond just being trans (or in the context of trans feminine activism, beyond just being trans feminine). As Sarah Lamble writes on the murder against

three trans sex workers in Toronto in 1996: “Mirha-Soliel Ross and Viviane Namaste (2005) maintained that these deaths arose from anti-prostitute and class-based discrimination, an argument based on the fact that the perpetrator described street people and prostitutes as scum and demonstrated no clear evidence of transphobia” (Lamble 33:2013).

In the article “Whose Feminism is it anyways?” (2006), Emi Koyama brings up an example of when trans activism has not been intersectional. Koyama writes of a growing alliance between white middle class cis women and white middle class trans women regarding trans inclusion at The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival – an event whose policy of trans exclusion long has met much criticism from trans and queer feminists. Koyama brings up and cites trans activists who have proposed that post-op trans women be included at the festival:

We acknowledge that a post-op only/no-penis policy is not perfect,” admitted the writer of the statement. “This policy cannot address issues of race and class: specifically, the exclusion of women, especially women of color, who are not able to afford sex reassignment surgery.” “But it nonetheless is the best and fairest policy possible,” they argue, because it “balances inclusion of transsexual women with the legitimate concerns for the integrity of women's culture and safe women's space”. Their pretense of being concerned about racism and classism betrayed itself clearly when they used it as a preemptive shield against criticism's they knew they would encounter. (Koyama 2006:699)

This is a good example of when the most privileged people in a group are prioritized before the most marginalized, who in this case are left behind in order for the inclusion of trans women who wish to and can afford to have sex reassignment surgery, to be made possible. It also highlights how surgeries that make a trans woman more “passable” aren't affordable for everyone, which connects passing to economic privilege. I share Koyama's critique and will be writing my thesis through this lens.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Qualitative interviews**

My main research method in this thesis is qualitative in-depth interviews with trans feminine people in New York City. One of the reasons that I have chosen this method is because I want my thesis to be a product of meeting with people in life not just on paper. “Speak, nevertheless. Between us, “hardness” is not the rule. We know the contours of our bodies well enough to appreciate fluidity. Our density can do without the sharp edges of rigidity. We are not attracted to dead bodies” (Irigaray 1980:77).

While this may very well be motivation enough for me, I suppose it is not motivation enough for academic standards, so I will explain why my interviews are of a qualitative nature. The

aim of this study is not to answer the question of *if* there is a feeling of trans feminine-sisterhood with “yes” or “no” because 97 out of 123 respondents said so, but to delve deep into what it actually means. As John M. Johnson and Timothy Rowlands state in the chapter “The interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviewing” in *SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*: “Knowing whether an individual is “for” or “against” the death penalty tells us little about the complicated, multifaceted perspectives on and meanings of capital execution.” (Johnson & Rowlands 2012:102). A survey or formal interview may give interesting perspectives on trans feminine sisterhood and dominant discourses within the group, however these methods will not lead to the detailed and complex and complicated and perhaps sometimes contradictory qualitative interpersonal details that I can get through in-depth qualitative interviews. I believe it is of feminist importance to defend the relevance of qualitative knowledge, although I also do agree with Professor of Sociology Gayle Letherby that it is problematic to create a dichotomy where qualitative research is deemed as inherently feminine and quantitative research is deemed as inherently masculine (Letherby 2003:86). What I do believe to be masculine-centered is however a belief that what qualifies as proper science is logic, not emotions; statistics, not feelings; quantified data, not qualitative thoughts. And in this thesis, with its base in trans feminine studies, the method is as much a part of the project as the actual research. Let me tell you a bit more about what I mean by that.

## **4.2 In depth and semi-structured interviews**

The interviews were structured and conducted in a traditional qualitative manner with themes and topics (Letherby 2003:84). The format was not fully fixed nor was it completely loose, rather they had a semi-structured format, which I found appropriate in the sense that I was given a certain power to set the agenda for what was being discussed at the same time as both I and the informant were given certain freedoms to change that agenda and follow in the direction that the interview took us. In *Intervjumetodik* (2007), Annika Lantz writes about four different interview forms, which she names as: “the open”; “the targeted open”; “the semi-structured”; and “the structured”. They are divided according to different degrees of structure, determined by how much the researcher wants the interview to be dictated more by their previous knowledge of the subjects or by the informants knowledge of the subjects (Lantz 2007:35). I wanted to find a balance between these two “extremes” and have therefore chosen the semi-structured format. None of the interviews I conducted were comprised of identical questions but they always kept to the themes in my research questions. I interviewed the informants once each. The interviews were between 1.5 and 2.5 hours long and they were recorded and then transcribed in full in order to get the exact words

down as well as the nuances of tone, laughter etcetera.

### **4.3 Situated knowledge**

I know there is a lot that I don't know. I am not objective and I do not believe in the all seeing god-trick. My perspectives are partial, my knowledge situated, situated in my social position, experiences and my not unlimited realm of knowledge. My informants are also themselves bearers of situated knowledge: "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of "objective" knowledge (Haraway 95:2004).

Situated knowledge is not the same as total relativism. It's not saying one can't produce knowledge that holds any kind of relevance, rather I believe as Donna Haraway also says, that both relativism and totalization are "god-tricks" that promise vision from both everywhere and nowhere (Haraway 2004:89). The question is which claims can I make from my interviews with six trans informants in New York City? I can not say that my results portray the opinions of trans feminine people in New York City. What I can say is that through in depth interviews with six trans feminine activists in New York City, I can produce situated knowledge and analysis based on my own knowledges, perspectives and experiences and material together with the perspectives, knowledges and experiences of six different trans feminine activists who are of different ages, races/ethnicities, and class backgrounds, who occupy different spaces on the trans spectrum, who live in different parts of the city, whose activist bases are vast and different and whose activism is situated in three different burroughs. It is what it is, and it is neither nothing nor everything.

Reading Haraway one comes to the understanding that situated knowledges require engagement, and while there is not only one sole feminist (or trans feminist for that matter) standpoint there is the possibility for partial perspectives influenced by different subjects who when they have their perspectives joined together can reach a point of at least situated objectivity. Situated knowledge can be described as partial, local, and critically engaged perspectives (Haraway 1991:191).

### **4.4 Informants as knowledge producers and studying your own community**

In this thesis I have chosen to study communities I myself have an investment in, both emotionally and politically. I am open about this and well aware that I am not objective. As Ulrika Dahl states in the article "Femme on Femme: Reflections on Collaborative Methods and

Queerfemme-inist Ethnography” (2011):

In this work I am often asked about how I can study something to which I also claim political and sexual belonging. These are questions that suggest underlying anxieties around the issue of objectivity. The subtext, it seems, is that despite decade-long epistemological discussions, there is still anxiety around the complex issue of ‘objectivity’. (Dahl 2011:2)

It is my own investments and longings as a trans feminine femme-inist that have led me here, but where exactly is here? New York City is the geographical space, but is it one or is it a multiplicity of spaces? The same goes for the trans feminine community. We must rather speak about different trans feminine communities. Am I member of these different communities? I guess the answer is yes and no, more or less so depending on which of the trans feminine communities we are talking about. I am personally and politically invested as an activist, researcher and artist who struggles with trans-misogyny and femi-negativity on a daily bases while also participating in a struggle against trans-misogyny and femi-negativity. Does this make me a better or worse researcher? Perhaps both, there are pros and cons with researching subjects one is invested in, one probably has certain knowledges that an “outsider” doesn't have, at the same time these certain knowledges may be taken for granted and an “outsider” may be better at not taking these knowledges for granted, therefore presenting them in a more understandable way for other “outsiders”. I am not a positivist and I agree fully with Ulrika Dahl when she writes the following about studying the femme-movement, a movement in which she is an active member:

The related and frequent question of whether my work can be seen as ‘scientific’ (rather than ‘ideological’ or ‘activist’) also suggests that the positivist roots of social science live on in the sense of privileging and encouraging analytic distance and that there is a continued split between theory and practice. Indeed, even within queer and feminist contexts, there seems to be a kind of hangover of objectivity hovering around knowledge production. (Dahl 2011:10)

Another hang over or hierarchy is the structured relationship between the researcher and the informant, where the researcher is supposed to be the big genius who pulls material from naive informants who stand for experience and nothing else. Certainly I as a researcher must analyze my material and not just passively relay what my informants have stated, however I view my informants as subjects of knowledge themselves. Most of them have as much, if not more experience of trans activism, than me, especially in the context of New York City and I view them as co-producers of knowledge. The interview is a collective process, where we share experiences and learn from each other knowledge banks, and this I consider to be both a theory-creating and (trans)sisterhooding practice in itself.

My informants and I are not one and the same, we may share a trans feminine identity and

certain experiences, but our differences regarding class, economic status, age, race, place of origin, ability, and even basic interpersonal differences are just as relevant. I am not completely studying “my own”, however I aim to be well aware of both our commonalities and our differences. My thoughts surrounding the issues in this section have made me a bit precocious about finding a balance between self-disclosure and sharing my own knowledge in order to make the interview situation more comfortable and interactive, and taking over the interview with my own opinions, as Charlotte Aull Davies discusses in *Reflexive Ethnography. A guide to Researching Selves and Others* (Aull Davies 1999:101-102). Sometimes I've shut up when it would have been good for the conversation for me to speak up, sometimes I've spoken up when it would have been better for me to shut up – I don't know if I've found a correct balance. I have shared my personal experiences and personal opinions on subjects with some informants during the course of the interview in order to create a better and more comfortable atmosphere for the interview, I have also withheld many of my experiences and opinions in order to create a better and more comfortable atmosphere for the interview. This process is largely intuitive, and it has probably not always been correct, but it most definitely hasn't always been wrong, either.

#### **4.5 The informants**

The material for this thesis is comprised of in depths interviews with six different trans feminine informants. In this section I will describe how I found my informants and why I chose the six informants that have partaken in this study. After having lived in New York City and partaken in different trans activist activities for three months I started contacting potential informants to ask if they would be interested in partaking in the study. My thoughts regarding which people I would interview for the study were as follows: I wanted to interview activists, people who, in different ways, were active in the struggle for trans liberation. Of course this means that the knowledge garnered in the interview does not necessarily represent “your average trans girl” (whoever she is?), instead it represents different trans activist realities (i.e. not *the* trans activist reality). The reason I chose to interview activists specifically is because I associate the term sisterhood to activism and activist practices. Although I realize that it isn't necessarily the only definition of the term, it is trans feminine activists associations and critiques of the term that I am interested in researching.

I found my informants through different activist networks, especially those who have an anti-racist and anti-capitalist agenda. They are all people I saw and met at different activities in different parts of the city – meetings, seminars, workshops, panels, parties, performances, rallies etc. It was very important to me that the activists I interviewed came from different activist realities and had different backgrounds and experiences regarding race/ethnicity, class, age etc. If we are

speaking statistically my informants live in and our active in three out of the five New York City burroughs – Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn. My informants all identified along the trans feminine spectrum. My criteria in defining trans femininity in this thesis was first and foremost self identification, however I have chosen to focus on Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB) trans feminine people. I am well aware that trans men can be feminine and define as trans feminine and that Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) genderqueer people can also be feminine, but that experience is still often times very different from the experience of AMAB-trans feminine people and this thesis has been narrowed down to focus on the experiences of AMAB-trans feminine people. Four of my six informants identify as trans women, while one identifies as transgender and feminine, and yet another as trans feminine-something. Three of my six informants were people of color. The age span was between 22 and 54, with two of my informants being in their 20's, one being in their 30's and three being in their late 40's/early 50's. Some of my informants are active in the downtown New York performance scene, others in trans and lgbtq-organizations and networks in different burroughs in the city and still others in the Bushwick queer art and nightlife scene – and some are partially active in all of these spaces. All of my informants have been anonymized, the reason for this being that I wanted them to feel as free as possible to say what they really believe without having to take into consideration that they would have their statements glued to their names later; and therefore perhaps refrain from saying things that could be perceived as controversial. The following is a short presentation of my informants with their anonymized names. I have not presented them in greater detail for the sake of their anonymity:

*Val* – Early 20's, white jewish middle class, has lived in New York City for five years. Originally from New Jersey. Lives in Brooklyn. She identifies as trans feminine-something.

*Grace* – A trans woman in her early 50's adopted from Korea who grew up in the midwest and moved to New York City in 1996. She lives in Queens.

*Luanne* – A black trans woman in her late 40's who has lived in New York City her whole life. She now resides in Brooklyn.

*Kurt Sarah* – Early 50's, born in Maryland and has lived in New York City since 1994. White, identifies as transgender and prefers the pronouns they/them or anything but he. Resides in Manhattan.

*Polly* – A white trans woman in her mid 20's with her background in the South. Has lived in New York City since 2012 and resides in Manhattan.

*Elena* – A black trans woman in her mid 30's from Kentucky, who lives in Brooklyn and has lived in New York City for one year.

## 5. Analysis

I have organized the analysis portion of this thesis through summarizing the full transcription of my informants statements in the interviews. I have then categorized the statements into three different primary themes, based on my research questions and the issues that my informants focused on in the interviews. The themes are as follows: 1. *Trans-misogyny and femi-negativity*. 2. *Sisterhood, sisterhooding and conflicts*. 3. *Intersectionality, hierarchies and coalitions*. These three themes are admittedly broad and within them I have identified different subthemes. I begin the analysis with the subject of trans-misogyny and femi-negativity largely because it is vital to the other themes addressed in this thesis to have an understanding of how trans-misogyny and femi-negativity effects trans feminine people in order to research and understand the sisterhooding practices, intersectional hierarchies, conflicts and coalitions that I bring up later in the analysis.

### 5.1 Trans-misogyny and femi-negativity

It's like ohh, so you want to be treated like a woman I'll show the ugliness of how it is to be a woman, that's my personal feeling as to why trans feminine people are so discriminated against and then the hypersexualization against transgender women, we get the hardest of the feminine spectrum, because it's like oh you wanna be a woman, well I'll show you how, all of the hyper patriarchy and anti-feminine actions are put on us and then we are fetishized at the same time, so it's like we're good for sexual rendezvous but people don't want to respect us in the daytime. - Elena

Elena paints a picture that is very much in line with Julia Serano's description of trans-misogyny in *Whipping Girl*, as not just a question of transphobia, but transphobia intersected with the societal degrading of both femininity and femaleness (Serano 2007:14-15). Trans femininity is not punished only for crossing gender borders, but also for being feminine and perhaps because of this intersection, like Elena states, is punished extra severely. Trans femininity is a femininity that is not deemed respectable. What Serano misses in much of *Whipping Girl*, but what many of my informants brought up in their interviews, is that the experience of trans-misogyny and the specific degrading of femininity, what I call femi-negativity, is affected by other forms of intersectional oppressions. When speaking about the specific forms of oppressions that trans feminine people face, my informants focused largely on street harassment, which for many also tied into a discussion on the concept of “passing”; education and employment; as well as fetishization and desexualization. The latter subject I call *the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox* – a term I believe to have coined in this thesis. But before going there I wish to cite the words of anti-racist trans activist warrior CeCe McDonald: “Freedom is about being able to move freely, while

liberation means being able to move freely without repercussions and oppression”.<sup>11</sup> This is strongly connected to my own experience and perspective around street harassment, it just so happens to me every day, I won't allow it to restrict my every movement, although sometimes, for safety reasons I will change directions or cross the street, and we are not liberated until the harassments are gone.

### **5.1.1 Street harassment and “passing”**

When asked to describe the forms of oppression they've met as trans feminine people, many of my informants bring up the issue of street harassment, both when they've been read as gender variant and when they've been read as cis women. Kurt Sarah even experienced both of these harassments while walking down one block:

I was walking down the street in San Francisco one day and I was wearing a skirt and you know combat boots and my hair was down and I was in my 20's and I looked good and felt good and I was walking down Market Street and some guy was like “FAGGOT”, called me a faggot, and then I turned the corner and some guy was like “Hey baby”, he wanted to get with me and I just ignored him and then I got called a fucking bitch

They also clarified that this was a minor incident and that they've also been physically attacked in the past. Kurt Sarah's quote offers a clear example of the intersection between homophobia, transphobia and misogyny that many trans feminine people meet on the street – where different forms of oppression effect them in various ways depending upon if they are read as feminine homosexual men, trans women or cis women.

One researcher who has written about gender based violence on the street is Viviane K. Namaste in the article “Genderbashing – Sexuality, Gender and the Regulation of Public Space” (2006). Namaste explains that instances of queer bashing often encompass the bashers marking of femininity on a body that they deem shouldn't be feminine (Namaste 2006:589). Once again we have the intersection between femininity and gender borders being crossed, here giving rise to a hatred that leads to bashings.

This crosses over to the discussion around passing that many informants touched on relating to street harassment. Trans-misogyny entails that while a trans woman who passes as a cis woman walking down the streets may not be subject to overt transphobia, however misogyny is still ever present, which my informants' statements on being harassed both when being read as trans and as cis women supports. But how can these harassments differ from each other? In New York today Polly says that she is mainly read as a cis woman and get's sexually harassed and objectified. A few

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11 Cece McDonald, Lecture at NYU, New York University, 2015-04-14

times when she had just started taking hormones she got condescending remarks and laughed at, but she clarifies that none of these harassments are anywhere near the violence she faced when being read as trans in Virginia, where she grew up – a difference that can be attributed both to the difference between New York City and Virginia and the difference between being read as trans feminine or as a cis woman. Grace states that she thinks she would get harassed more if she was further from passing and exemplifies by describing the experience of a trans woman she knows who got facial feminization surgery: “I have one friend who had that done, who had a very masculine face and she said that the amount of street harassment went down 80 percent overnight”. Many of my informants problematize passing, while also not neglecting that it can be important for safety reasons. In *Whipping Girl* Julia Serano speaks of passing in the transsexual context as the opposite of the term passing in gay and lesbian contexts. In gay and lesbian contexts the term denotes “hiding” and in the transsexual context the term denotes being correctly gendered (Serano 2007:303). While Serano certainly has a point and her words may ring true for many trans people, my informants comments around the concept of passing complicate the matter. Luanne reacts to the concept of passing with anger. For her passing means paying a bill and getting up for work, while passing for vanity is disgusting. She proclaims and embraces that while she is different, she is passing through. Polly, who feels that she usually passes, says that trans women like her need to acknowledge that passing privilege exists, which stands in contrast to Julia Serano's preference of the term *conditional cissexual privilege* to the term *passing privilege*. Serano sees the privilege as conditional since a trans woman who passes can have her trans history outed at anytime (Serano 2007:176-180). The question is if, even when being outed or open as trans, one is given certain privileges in society if one passes? If passing is deemed as the most important thing for a trans person to do, to speak with Sandy Stone (Stone 2006:231), perhaps trans people who pass are seen as successes while those who do not pass are seen as failures, and viewed as more uncomfortable for society to handle – and therefore we must talk of passing as a privilege beyond only the conditional. Polly is aware that passing is an important survival mechanism for many, in the same way that working for McDonalds is an important survival mechanism for many, but that doesn't mean one has to like it. Here we can see a difference between the pragmatic necessity of surviving on the streets and the political struggle of resisting binary understandings of gender.

Another issue where surviving and resistance may stand in contrast to each other can be found in different strategies of handling street harassment. While Kurt Sarah brings up several instances where they have talked back to harassers, Luanne is more careful. She stresses the importance of choosing ones poisons carefully and being well aware of ones surroundings since a sharp tongue in an unsafe situation can get you killed. Luanne wants to teach other trans women this

type of conduct, because according to her it can be life saving.

While bashing back can indeed be an act of bravery, what Luanne problematizes holds great importance. The calls for bashing back as the best response to street harassment that at times occur within contemporary radical queer activism can be viewed as an example of agency and resistance-politics gone bad, as it risks becoming a phenomenon where the resistance of the subject is prioritized before the safety of that subject, which can, as Luanne makes clear, at times have life threatening consequences for trans feminine people.

Both Val and Elena bring up passing as an issue of internal conflict within trans feminine spaces. Elena see's it as divide and conquer within the trans feminine group, and believes that passing should neither validate or invalidate a trans feminine person. She get's angry when she see's dating ads looking for "passable trans women", and doesn't think trans women should compete to live up to other people's standards of what it means to "pass" - something that ties into the argument I made problematizing passing being seen as constituting a trans person as a "success". Val see's a lot of shaming within trans feminine communities relating to passing. Personally she's not that interested in passing as a cis woman. While she acknowledges that visibility can be dangerous for trans women she also states that many people can't economically afford procedures that would make them more passable, and it shouldn't matter, it diverts focus from the problem of societal cissexism. Val's statements can be connected to how Sandy Stone makes a case for reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of refigured and reinscribed bodies therefore perhaps forgoing the goal to "pass" (Stone 2006:232). The question however that remains is if it is a problem that some trans feminine people wish to pass as cis women? And if so, for who is it a problem? From my point of view it is not the goal of passing for individual trans women that poses a problem for anybody, if that is her path to self-realization then she should be able to go for it. Rather it is when passing becomes obligatory or heightens ones status both within and outside of the trans feminine community that it becomes problematic.

Polly speaks of the difference between Virginia and New York City when it comes to street harassment. She says that in New York people have a "live and let live"-type of perspective, which makes their transphobia often less overt and aggressive. However, Polly asserts that if you talk to a lot of them they are still extremely transphobic, even if they leave you alone on the street. In Virginia the harassment was much more overt. She also explains that the experiences she has are that of a white woman, which doesn't represent the situation for trans women of color.

In an article in *The Advocate* Laverne Cox writes of her experiences of intersections of racism, femi-negativity and trans-misogyny on the streets of New York City:

A year before I started medical transition, I had been presenting in a very feminine

way 24-7 but hadn't yet changed my name or started hormones. I wasn't passing for female at all, but I also wasn't passing as the construct of black masculinity that the white supremacy has told us to be threatened by. That year I went to visit my brother in San Francisco, had an emotional breakdown and shaved my head. I was just exhausted — I think the stress of being harassed and threatened on a daily basis for years on the streets of New York City because of my gender nonconformity, and acting like it didn't bother me, had worn me down.

Cox continues to describe how presenting in masculine male drag made her go from being a target for harassment, to being viewed as a threat to public safety. One year later she started taking hormones and transitioning medically. Another very interesting perspective that she brings up is that many of the black men that harassed her for being gender variant and feminine often ignored white trans and gender nonconforming people in the same spaces. Cox' analysis of this is that it is an effect of internalized white supremacy, that makes black people police and monitor other black bodies<sup>12</sup>.

While passing may lead to a safer situation on the streets, factors such as race may be even more important, especially given that a vast majority of trans women who are murdered are trans women of color (Lamble 2013).

The question of passing is complex. All of my informants were skeptical to the concept of passing, some of them felt that they passed, some felt that they passed sometimes, and some felt they didn't pass. Many brought up passing as interesting mainly from the perspective of trans feminine peoples safety from violence on the streets. The trans feminine spectrum is broad and different positions within this spectrum lead to different forms of privileges and oppressions. Grace is a trans woman who has chosen to not take hormones, and feels that if her body was more masculine she would probably get harassed more. Laverne Cox brings up race as a large factor regarding harassment. Taking hormones may mean that a trans woman comes closer to passing, but does it lead to more privileges in comparison to trans women who do not take hormones? Perhaps the answer is in some ways yes and in some ways the very opposite, and comparing may not be as relevant as developing an understanding of the differences of the specific oppressions. Clear from my study is that trans feminine people, whether or not they take hormones or pass, get harassed on a regular basis on the streets in different ways whether or not they are perceived as trans or cis and that this has its roots in intersections of homophobia, transphobia, femi-negativity and misogyny as well as racism – the different categories to different extents for different people along the trans feminine spectrum.

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12 <http://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2013/07/15/black-gay-american-laverne-cox>

### 5.1.2 Education & Employment

There aren't organizations to get trans people jobs, there just aren't, why aren't there when that's the one thing that like every trans woman will list in terms of what trans women need, JOBS. - Polly

Three of my informants brought up employment and education as two of the most important issues in fighting discrimination against trans feminine people. Both Polly and Elena brought up situations where employers have thought they were talking to a cis woman and then experienced discrimination when the employers found out they were trans. In Elena's case the discrimination also had to do with her being black. Luanne and Polly bring up the nonprofit sector. Luanne critiques how trans women are boxed in and are only able to get jobs within the nonprofit sector<sup>13</sup>. Polly however brings up that trans women get discriminated against also in the nonprofit sector where they are viewed as the victims not the staff. Instead they: “want nice white trans guys with bow-ties to do the work.” In *Normal Life* Dean Spade writes about the nonprofitization of lesbian and gay activism: “As the leading lesbian and gay rights organizations emerged, they were (and remain) primarily funded and staffed by white gay people with professional degrees and/or wealth (Spade 2011:65).” The question is if this critique, at least partially, can be pointed towards many emerging trans rights nonprofits as Polly remarks on them often being staffed by trans masculine people and by people with class privilege and her critique extends even to more radical trans organizations such as Sylvia Rivera Law Project (founded by Dean Spade) and Audre Lorde Project who she says don't employ many trans women. Something which I will get back to later in the thesis, is the issue regarding if the nonprofit-system in and of itself, with it's employed staff, educated professionals, and funding need's, entails a certain amount of hierarchies, careerism, and elitism, and if this also seeps into the more radical nonprofits and if so what effects does this have on employment discrimination, sisterhood and our understanding of who is viewed as competent?

My informants qualitative reports on employment discrimination are supported by quantitative data in San Francisco from The Transgender Law Center's report *Good Jobs Now!* with 194 transgender respondents. Amongst the respondents only 31 percent reported working full- or part-time, 57 percent reported experiencing discrimination in employment and between 59-65 percent were living in poverty (TLC 2006:1-5).

Luanne speaks of her experiences with the education system and the need for school to be a

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<sup>13</sup> The nonprofit sector is used to describe the sector of organizations that function outside of government and profit interests – a third sector that exists both outside of the market and the state (Salamon & Anheier 1997:1). These organizations can work with a vast array of different issues. Many of the nonprofits referenced in this thesis work specifically with trans and/or queer-issues.

safer environment for trans girls so they are not forced to drop out like she was. She also speaks of a race and class divide, where more white middle class trans feminine students get support from their parents:

(Performing arts) was seen as a gay thing or cooking school which was thought to be a gay thing so yeah, classism and sexism. I think if I would have been going through this by caucasian parents it would have been much different. I think by saying I want to be a chef, immediately I would have been at culinary school, immediately I would have been at dance classes to develop these skills. So when it comes to classism this is something I see that everyone needs to do, when you see your child and how they are identifying or taking focus in any way that might be progressive regardless of gender, take it and run because that's developmental that's them conditioning themselves to wanna develop these skills to wanna go further and often in black culture if it doesn't fit the gender variant you can't even ask for these things you're a punk you're a sissy.

Luanne's statement illuminates the complexity of intersectional oppressions. While overarching power dynamics such as racism, sexism and classism most definitely were hindrances to her educational goals, she also speaks of strong norms of trans-misogyny *within* black culture as hindrances – something which Laverne Cox, as cited earlier, regards as internalized white supremacy resulting in a heightened need to police correct black masculinity. Even though trans-misogyny runs rampant just about everywhere in contemporary western society, we must analyze in which specific ways it operates in different contexts related to race, class, subcultural norms etc.

Luanne speaks about how many people nowadays tell their daughters that anything is possible, she wants the same to be true for trans girls. She says that community schools can be important, but need more structure, and she wants to get more of the youth into academics, which stands some what in contrast to Elena's views: “I think education needs to be addressed and I don't mean like ivory tower or like ivy league collegiate education, there needs to be community based education, I would like to see a trans summit or the transgender symposium where everybody can come and bring their true selves”. However, these two statements and these two education systems can complement each other rather than be brought up in contrast to each other.

When looking for informants I wasn't looking specifically for people with experiences of sex work, however half of my informants spoke openly about having done sex work, an experience that I share with them. There are probably not many other groups in society where you would come up with such a high proportion of sex workers/former sex workers when not actively looking for sex workers. This can be related to the discrimination both within the employment and educational system that I've brought up in this section, which may lead to few alternatives to sex work for many trans feminine people, as well as to the hypersexualization and fetishization brought up in the following section, which may create a high demand for trans feminine people in the sex industry. It

also matches previous research on trans feminine communities in New York City, for example Hwahng & Nuttbrock's article, referenced earlier in the thesis, where most of the trans feminine people in two of three trans feminine communities they studied worked as sex workers (Hwahng & Nuttbrock 2007). Elena touches on this subject and says that sex work is the only alternative for many trans women and that the worst thing according to society, besides being in prison, is being a trans woman that's a sex worker. She views sex work as honorable and vital for many trans women's survival. Issues that are very close to her heart in the trans struggle are supporting sex workers, making sex work legal and creating safer sex labour practices, as well as making sure the economy at large starts integrating trans women. Decriminalization of sex work is brought up by Sarah Lamble as a reform that leads to the prioritizing of low-income trans people of colors needs (Lamble 2013:40). However what is also interesting about Elena's statements is that they can be said to support a view of sex work for trans women as both a product of structural oppression and the closed job market described earlier in this section, as well as a possibility/strategy for economic independence, therefore occupying, like many things in our society of injustices, a space of both victimhood and agency.

### ***5.1.3 The hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox***

I have chosen the caption *The hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox* because many of my informants bring up the experience of being hypersexualized by certain men, often dubbed “tranny-chasers”, while simultaneously being desexualized by queer and gay men. For this reason I have coined the term *The hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox*. Grace states the following on the issue of hypersexualization:

I'm sure that you know, many of us trans women end up being objectified, fetishized and the whole tranny chaser-phenomenon. That's one of my biggest frustrations, cuz the thing is, many men are attracted to me, but most of them, if they know I'm transgendered will not, they're not out about their own interest, so they end up being, if you will, closeted tranny chasers for lack of a better term.

Grace continues to talk about how she and many of her trans feminine friends become pigeon-holed as a thing on the side, rather than a person to have a serious relationship with. Luanne speaks of trans women being seen by men as dirty dark secrets, as people who are outside of the outsiders. Elena describes it as a hypersexualization where trans women are fetishized and seen as good for sexual rendezvous, but not as people to respect in the daytime. My informants statements paint a picture of a clear positioning of trans femininity outside of the realms of *respectable femininity* – that is *the whore*, the kind you don't take home to momma.

Amongst men in the gay and queer community many of my informants speak about

experiences of desexualization. “It's the reverse end of the spectrum”, says Elena, who goes on to speak about how her queer ex-boyfriend was both comfortable and confused about having sex with her. She thinks we should be able to transcend that, but it seldom works and sometimes she feels like she should become a nun. At the same time she doesn't want to give up on her desires. Polly speaks of similar experiences of desexualization in the lesbian community in New York City. It's happened to her a number of times that lesbians have started flirting with her and then slowly backed away when they've understood that she's trans. Kurt Sarah talks about how they used to get pissed off because people, mainly queer men, would flirt with them and other queer/trans femme's as a fun game, without taking into account how they felt. Val sometimes “mascs up” in order to be more attractive for the gay male gaze: “My grindr picture is a photo of me with no make up on and some facial hair, and it was at a point when I really needed to tweeze my brows, so they looked fuller, so that's what you have to achieve, yeah I do it, it ultimately isn't worth it.” These experiences with gay/queer men are, unfortunately, hardly surprising. Femininity occupied an important space in the pre-stonewall gay community, but post-stonewall “clone culture”, which denotes a culture where gay men started looking like, and being attracted to, clones of each other, became dominant and femininity became marginalized (Bailey et al. 1997).

Both Elena and Kurt Sarah have been active within the radical faeries, and while both of them are clear about radical faerie-spaces being important to them as spaces where they can be their true selves, they also have experienced problems with desexualization and being made invisible in the highly sexualized male energy. In Elena's case the oppression has intersected with race and she has felt “mammified” as a desexualized, racialized, caregiver and nurturer. The term mammy has its historical roots in the US from the era of slavery as a description of an african american woman who served as a nurse and caretaker of white children (Wallace-Sanders in Weir 2010:115). In an analysis of the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox one must take racism into account because, although all trans feminine people may experience this paradox, racism effects in which ways and to which extent the paradox plays out.

My informants utilize very many different strategies in order to handle the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox. Luanne prefers to have long term relationships where she takes a while to sleep with a guy, so that she knows that it isn't just about physical attraction, but attraction of spirit, mind and body – something that she says trans feminine people usually don't get in society. Elena says that she almost exclusively dates queer men because she can't deal with people looking at her with sexual desire without seeing her as an individual with thoughts and feelings. During the interview we share our experiences and frustrations of mainly being sexualized by straight men and not queer men. Val speaks about it being important to her to be seen as a

complex person by the people she fucks, and feels that the people who have been most willing to sexualize her in a non-fetishized way are queer trans men. Kurt Sarah's approach to fetishization is slightly different:

I'm always like bring it on. I don't mind being sexually objectified, I wish it happened more, haha, I know that's not a lot of peoples experience but I really don't care cause I can handle it, like I'm not gonna be overwhelmed by someone objectifying me sexually I think that in my experience then the power is in my court, I have the power, you're at least being found to be attractive you know and I prefer that to you know, not.

The interesting thing about these strategies is that while they work as ways to navigate the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox, the people who are doing the hypersexualization are the “tranny chasers” and the people doing the desexualization are gay/queer cis men and lesbian cis women. For the paradox to actually change these groups are the ones who actually need to change their behavior. Another possible strategy would be for trans feminine people to desire each other, but Val says that in her experience this is extremely rare. However, Polly put forth that it is very common for drag queens to date other drag queens and bisexual/lesbian trans women to date other trans women, although she also stresses that this often is linked to these groups experiences of desexualization within the queer, gay and lesbian communities.

Polly speaks about her experiences in sex work where the men haven't necessarily had a “tranny fetish”, but other fetishes that they felt a sex worker who is a trans woman might be less judgmental of than a sex worker who is a cis woman. This sentiment is interesting, because it ties into the hypersexualization of trans femininities that several informants have mentioned – the cultural idea of trans women as more sexually available and dirty than cis women. When reading through my material on these subjects I connect so much to my own personal experiences and to prior research. My own frustration on the almost complete nonexistence of queer/gay boys ever flirting with me, while I have self-proclaimed straight boys writing facebook messages to me, catcalling me and following me on the streets just about every day. If we look at prior research, the desexualization of femininity within gay/queer male spaces, seems to be something that prevails for everyone from feminine men to MTF-transsexuals. In *Sissyphobia*, Tim Bergling presents research on gay dating ads that are overwhelmingly seeking masculinity (Bergling 2001:13) as well as gay male informants who say things like: “If you want to have a man, you should act like a man. If I wanted a pussy, I'd just ball a chick. I wouldn't even hang with a femme dude” (Bergling 2011:38). And in the article “The Association Between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs About Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity” (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, Sprecht 2014), drag queens report having trouble finding gay male partners, as well as sometimes hiding the fact that they are drag performers from their partners until the relationship get's serious. According to this

article the negative connotations seem to stem from gay men being unable or unwilling to distinguish between a drag queens onstage persona and who he is off stage (Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein in Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, Sprecht 2014:557). This could most definitely be seen as in connection to the findings of desexualization of trans femininities within gay male spaces which have come forth in my research. Furthermore I would like to ask the question if the same situation prevails for butch lesbians and trans men within queer lesbian spaces? Does an attitude of “we want real women and real women are feminine” dominate within these spaces? Perhaps this is different depending on which queer lesbian space you frequent, but my experience is that the contrary situation is often present and butch lesbians and trans men can be the most sought after, although at times this bares with it the problem of lesbians not recognizing trans men as men<sup>14</sup>. We should therefore ask ourselves if this particular form of desexualization stems from patriarchal femi-negativity? More research on this specific subject would be very interesting.

## **5.2 Sisterhood, sisterhooding and conflicts**

The starting point for my wanting to research *sisterhood* as a specific term, practice and concept rather than researching for example a less gendered term like *community* stems from my own relationship to the term. I often feel elated when someone calls me their *sister*, since the term is feminine/female coded, which brings happiness and a sense of belonging to a person like me who has struggled to be recognized as feminine. I also see sisterhood as complex, because of, amongst other things, intersecting relations of power that position us differently, and femmes not being believed to hold each others backs in the same way as bro's. I wanted to see if my informants shared my experiences. As I had expected, the answer to that question was both yes and no. In this segment I explore my informants experiences of and relationship to sisterhood, sisterhooding, and conflicts.

### **5.2.1 Relationship to the term and concept of sisterhood**

When asking my informants about their thoughts around sisterhood, I didn't directly connect to trans-sisterhood or to second wave feminism, instead I left the question quite open in order to see what my informants connected the term to and if the initial responses were positive or negative. Elena connected the term negatively to sororities and Val connected it negatively to the nuclear family. Polly related it to her biological sister who she has a good relationship with. Grace connected it both positively and negatively to feminism, while Kurt Sarah connected it positively to both close friendships and ad-hoc coalitions. The only informant who directly talked about trans

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14 <http://feministing.com/2012/06/28/enough-with-i-date-women-and-trans-men/>

feminine sisterhood was Luanne, who's relationship to the concept was both positive and negative. Two informants didn't speak about trans-sisterhood initially but later brought it up without my mentioning of it.

Grace and Polly both connect trans-sisterhood to solidarity, as well as an understanding of intersectionality. Polly sees trans-sisterhood as very important:

I love the idea of trans-sisterhood it's always been an important idea to me and I understand why not every one is down for that I think there's certainly a lot of things that upset me within the trans community as a whole, specifically white trans women, but you know even with that being said, just we go through the same sort of shit and I'm from a union family and solidarity is important and you know sisterhood is an affirmation of womanhood and as I said before, affirmation is so important when you are a trans woman and when you're sister's that means you're both women so you have a rhetorical affirmation.

Here Polly speaks of trans-sisterhood as a not uncomplicated concept and practice, for reasons of difference and dislike, but still as very important, for reasons of solidarity between people who share certain experiences of oppression. She also mentions the linguistic importance of a feminized word in the affirmation of trans female identity, something which may bear with it great importance in a society where trans women often have to fight for the right to be recognized as women, which is clear both in many trans women's struggles with being allowed entrance into women's bathrooms (Cavanagh 2010) and problems with being incarcerated into men's prisons<sup>15</sup>. Certainly Polly put words to my feeling of gender identity affirmation in being called a "sister".

None of my informants were completely positive to the concept of sisterhood, and expressed certain objections. Many spoke of problems with the word being thrown around and felt the need for a deeper kinship. Luanne sees trans-sisterhood as both everything and very dangerous. She has had experiences of deep trans-sisterhood, friendships that were like familial bonds, which she sees as important since many trans women are far away from their biological families. When she was younger however she was often taken advantage of or beaten up by other trans women for not fitting in. Elena says that she has some people who were a part of her life during her transition that she has fond memories of and still calls sisters, however she also feels that within many trans, ballroom or drag spaces the word sisterhood is thrown around superficially and used like in sororities. Like Luanne she connects the term to chosen family and familial connection and for that very reason it is important that it entails a real feeling of kinship. Polly points out that since there is a lot of suffering in trans women communities it is important that sisterhood is used in ways that are deep, strong and powerful, and not vapid. She states: "When you're from such a marginalized or oppressed or exploited community, you realize how important that sort of bond is, it's a bond for

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15 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/21/cece-mcdonald-prison\\_n\\_5366778.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/21/cece-mcdonald-prison_n_5366778.html)

better or for worse you know when they sink you're gonna sink with them, and you don't always like your sisters but you always love them.” This can be viewed as a comment on the political nature of sisterhood, as something that exceeds apolitical definitions of friendship. Perhaps Elena's ambivalent perspective on sisterhood is connected either to a lesser need for the collectivism of a sisterhood or to a linkage between superficiality and apoliticism. Clear is that all these informants wish for *sister* to mean something *deep* and not *vapid*, however exactly what deep and vapid respectively, meant to the different informants was not as clear in my material. Some seem to associate it more with political solidarity and others more to the depth of personal relationships – at the same time, where does the first one end and the second one begin? Several of my informants, for example Luanne, find great political importance in deep friendships with other trans feminine people.

Both Polly and Grace bring up feminist sisterhood. It is the first connection Grace has to the term sisterhood, which she hopes is powerful and she hopes she is a part of. She states that both the first and second waves of feminism excluded trans women and Janice Raymond had a big negative impact on her life. After reading Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* Grace asked herself questions like: “Am I an anti-feminist oppressor, a rapist who's appropriating femininity?” This held her up for a few years, before she thought it through more, read other authors and understood that Raymond was transphobic. Polly identifies strongly as a feminist and sees sisterhood as solidarity between women, however there are only a few women who aren't trans that she feels sisterhood with. Perhaps this hints at a possible gap between cis feminist and trans feminist movements in New York, that I personally deemed noticeable.

Kurt Sarah loves the word sisterhood and sees it as a spoken and often times unspoken kinship that is about having each other's backs. They feel this affinity not only with trans femininities, but also with many cis gender women and cis gender gay men. While they believe that trans-sisterhood exists they describe it as fractious, and feel that there is more focus on things that separate instead of things we have in common. Val is hesitant to the word sisterhood, and feels alienated by its connotations to nuclear family, at the same time she feels sisterhood with a lot of people and also connects the word, positively, to trans femmes taking care of each other.

Interestingly my informants expressed a range of perspectives on and definitions of sisterhood. None of them are completely positive to the term and concept, and none of them are completely negative. Perhaps this is not surprising and I see connections between their statements and bell hooks perspective that the critique of sisterhood should not lead to abandoning the term and concept as one of political solidarity (hooks 1986:127), as well as to Jenny Gunnarsson Payne's perspective on sisterhood as an empty signifier. It is interesting that two seemingly very different

context's - the feminist zine-scene in Umeå in northern Sweden in the 1990's and trans feminine communities in New York City in 2015 bare a similarity in their usage of the term sisterhood. My findings support Gunnarsson Payne's argument that sisterhood is an empty signifier and while the contexts that Gunnarsson Payne and I have researched are different in relation to not only time and place, but also to the backgrounds of the participants in the movements, still we have the term sisterhood and still we have different people connecting the term to different things. Gunnarsson Payne states the following: "Feminism, like any other political movement, needs to be organized around empty signifiers in order to construct a 'united front' against an oppressive regime – even when there is no full consensus within the movement about the exact definition of either the movement itself or its political targets." (Gunnarsson Payne 2012:198). The interesting thing is that she doesn't limit her analysis to feminism, and, speaking with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, broadens it to include all political movements. I am in agreement with them, and when it comes to trans feminine movement(s) in New York City a term like sister and sisterhood connects people who face similar oppressions to one another – politically and emotionally. And with a term that *connects* comes greater possibilities for creating a broad movement, although terms in themselves will not make or break a movement, they can provide one element of affinity. Gunnarsson Payne writes: "Sisterhood as collective identification and ideal is not itself an element of any one logic." (Gunnarsson Payne 2012:198) This has shown through also in my research, where sisterhood means many different things to different people, while at the same time, many of my informants have brought up, that it is important that *sister* and *sisterhood* aren't used as vapid or meaningless. It creates a form of connection between us despite the fact that we also are different, which is always useful when trying to create political change.

### **5.2.2 Sisterhooding practices**

While the previous section focused on my informants relationship to the term and concept of sisterhood, this section focuses more on what concrete sisterhooding practices take place in New York City, as well as what practices my informants wish to see more of. That is: What constitutes or should constitute sisterhooding? I will begin by listing some concrete activities that my informants brought up and partake in.

Luanne spoke about a yearly fundraising event at the make up store Sephora as well as an all trans women theatre production that was conducted by a sex workers rights organization. Many of the trans women in the latter project Luanne says had earlier attacked, hurt and made fun of other sisters. In the theater project there was no tolerance for meanness and cattiness, instead Luanne tried to get past the negativity in personal relationships to form a stronger community where the

participants in the theatre project could embrace their sisters, no matter where they were at and without regard to physical beauty. She saw one person in the group who had a big drug problem, stop using drugs during the period of the project, and others in the group have become trans rights advocates. Also the event at Sephora helps build family and sisterhood, because it combines a fun and popular activity with fundraising and advocacy.

Many informants bring up having fun together in different ways as a trans-sisterhooding activity. Polly feels that these types of activities are important and often forgotten by “serious” trans activists. Val states:

The most important trans feminine, trans women spaces, have been when I've been with other trans femmes and we've either been doing our nails, or doing our make up, doing femmy things, and that is just the most beautiful thing in the world to me, it's like spiritual in a way that is hard for me to even go into.

On the contrary Elena thinks that make up tips are superficial and wishes for more spaces where trans professionals speak about how to be professional and succeed in the work place. My question is if these two things need to be pit against each other? Often times both social bonding and what is deemed more serious activism and advocacy go hand in hand when it comes to the building of bonds and community.

Many of my informants speak of friendship as an important part of sisterhooding. Kurt Sarah says that while they have fun with other people as well, they generally have more fun with trans feminine people. When it comes to sisterhooding as an activity of support they state similarly that though they seek support from various different people, however thus far never the police, they generally go to other femmes, regardless of gender. Grace speaks of going shopping with other trans femmes as fun, but what is more important to her is sharing stories and supporting each other. She connects sisterhooding to being each other's girlfriends but in a more meaningful way. And Luanne states: “You know a true sister when she arrives at your house every time some shit is going down”. These three informants statements support the notion of sisterhooding, as being, amongst other things, a kinship, deep friendship and source of mutual support based on similar experiences. This definition can be seen as similar to radical feminist sociologist Carin Holmberg's description of sisterhood as a type of *political friendship* between women who know each other, share the same world view and build resistance strategies together through these political friendships (Holmberg 1995:26). There are however also differences, besides the obvious difference that my informants focus on trans feminine sisterhood, as I've stated earlier, my informants also do not necessarily share the same world view, the same resistance strategies or the same definition of sisterhood. The lack of sameness should however not be equated with lack of similarities, and the differences do not

necessarily render the term meaningless. The empty signifier is not completely empty (Gunnarsson Payne 2006:122).

Polly brings up a number of different activities that she likes to participate in such as readings and panels with trans women. She works with correspondences with trans women in prison, both personally and through organizations, as well with issues for trans women sex workers. One specific activity she is fond of is the trans lady picnics that happen once a month in New York City, although she see's some problems with them, for example regarding lack of racial diversity, she's positive to the space being less fat phobic and having less of a divide between “cool” and “uncool” trans women compared to many other spaces. She states that the coolness-divide is most prominent in spaces where there are also people who aren't trans women, which she see's as an effect of internalized oppression, and not wanting to be associated with trans women who are perceived to fulfill stereotypes. This statement points to one important reason why sisterhood and trans women/trans feminine only spaces may at times be important.

Luanne and Elena brought up activities that they'd like to see of more in the future. Luanne speaks very much about different forms of familial bonds. She says: “I have a couple of sets of gay parents, best to be raised by the community than not at all”, and also speaks about drag mothers and sisters. She wants more trans women to get involved in foster care, since many trans, gay and lesbian children can't count on their parents, and group homes are not designed to protect LGBTQ-children. According to her we fall short on taking care of our own and this is an important form of sisterhood. I also connect this to an important difference between traditional second wave feminist sisterhood and trans-sisterhood, where second wave feminist sisterhood wasn't necessarily dealing with being cast out by ones biological family and forming new chosen familial bonds to take the place of the biological family. Perhaps these relationship models are most common amongst communities consisting of predominantly queer people of color with working class backgrounds, as in for example ballroom culture (Arnold & Bailey 2009). More extensive research would have to be done on the details of different trans communities in order to make more definite conclusions.

Elena voiced frustrations regarding the lack of activities for trans feminine people like her, who don't feel the need for support groups. I don't read her critique as a criticism of support groups per say, instead I see it as a voicing of the need for activities for trans people who are in different stages of their lives as trans. Grace speaks of sisterhood as being comprised of everything from helpful hints on tucking, to dealing with harassment on the street and from police, especially for trans feminine people who are sex workers or perceived to be sex workers. One young african american women who went to a meeting in the support group Grace runs, expressed delight in that it was different than other transgender support groups she'd partaken in because there was no

bitchiness, cattiness or comparisons of clothing. In this section I have mainly focused on presenting the different forms of sisterhood that exist in New York, although I have touched briefly on certain conflicts as well. The incident that Grace cites leads us directly into the following sections that deal more specifically with strains and conflicts that exist within trans feminine movements.

### **5.2.3 Cattiness, hierarchies and competition**

Several of my informants expressed concerns about cattiness, hierarchies, and competition within trans feminine communities. In general my informants were skeptical to most conflicts that take place within the trans community, speaking of them as often, but not always, petty. When it comes to cattiness and competition all of the informants who brought it up were very annoyed at it. This can be seen as similar to discussions within many second wave feminist spaces on the importance of women sticking together and not competing against each other. “The time for individual skirmishes has passed. This time we are going all the way”, states *The Redstockings Manifesto* (1970:536), which also brings up the importance of unity between women in sticking up against the oppressive male class (1970:533-535). Luanne states the following about the aftermath of her close friend's death: “I watched my so-called sisters tear her name apart and her memory and some girls didn't want to participate cause Tamaya either looked at your man, these are all petty issues, does not make you a sister.” Once again we notice the discussion on competition, here focused on criticizing competing for male attention, which can be connected to traditional second wave feminist discussions on sisterhood. In the anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) Connie Brown and Jane Seitz for example write: “Our pleasure and our womanhood are still defined by what men want from us” (Brown & Seitz 1970:28) - as long as this is the case, sisterhood, whether trans or cis or both, is of course going to be very fraught, because instead of turning to our sisters we are turning to men. Another issue that has been up for discussion within the feminist movement is sex work, and Polly speaks about this as also being something that can create conflicts amongst trans women. She tells me about a time when she was at a bar and another trans woman saw a stripper and said she couldn't believe how terrible it must be to make a living letting men touch you. Since Polly used to do sex work, she was extra disappointed by this statement.

The discussion surrounding sex work is an old one within feminism. In the article “Decriminalization of sex work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research”, Jacqueline Comte writes of three main feminist stances regarding sex work: *Abolitionism*, *sex positive feminism* and *decriminalization*, with abolitionism stressing victimization of female sex workers and sex positive feminism often stressing sex workers agency, while the decriminalization stream more stresses sex workers labour rights (Comte 2014:197). My analysis of the situation Polly describes is that the

statements made by the trans woman about the stripper perpetuated stigmatization of sex workers as well as invalidated the strippers agency, which is problematic from both the sex positive feminist and the decriminalization perspective.

While there may be similarities between discussions of feminist sisterhood and trans-sisterhood, the contexts are also different. Elena brings up how a lot of trans female spaces are dominated by comparisons around who passes the best. Because of the comparisons and cattiness involved in many trans feminine spaces, she doesn't hang out with other trans women very often. Polly says she notices a lot of fat phobia and "stupid shady bullshit" in many trans feminine spaces, along with hierarchies where some trans women are deemed "cool" and others "not cool". She despises these categorizations and often gets lumped into the "cool trans woman" category because she's had multiple boyfriends and many visible trans activist moments.

While "passing" hardly is an issue that is brought up within cisgender feminist sisterhood (cisterhood), the connection between having multiple boyfriends and being lumped into the category "cool" shows once again possible links between strains within trans-sisterhood and strains in traditional cisgender feminist sisterhood about competing with each other for men. Elena see's an unspoken hierarchy within trans female spaces where the trans women who are given the most space are either semi-passable white trans women with a lot of privilege or very outspoken trans women of color who are "eloquently speaking". Elena feels frustrated that people listen more to her than to other african american trans women who are not as "well spoken". This hierarchy can be attributed to an intersection of racism and classism.

According to my informants, cattiness and competition are hindrances to sisterhood. What's worse is that they are hindrances that don't have any base in countering hierarchies and power dynamics, quite the contrary they are maintaining structural oppressions. As referenced earlier in this thesis Emi Koyama makes clear that not all trans women can afford medical procedures that make them "more passable" (Koyama 2006). Both Grace and Luanne speak of active resistance to catty culture, Grace makes sure there is no catty behavior in the support group she runs and Luanne talks about going in between fights between trans women and questioning why they are being catty and mean to each other. She also brings up a specific instant that I found very powerful connected to sisterhood, about another trans woman who had convinced her to leave a destructive relationship with a man, only to later find out that this trans woman had been having an affair with him all along. Later, when this woman was dying, due to drugs and the destructiveness of being with this man, Luanne stepped in and offered support, both before and after her death, with the funeral arrangements and with bringing her loved ones together. For me this is a fantastic example of what Polly states: "You don't always like your sisters but you always love them and there's some trans

women I fucking despise but for the most part almost all trans women with some notable exceptions I would you know wholeheartedly stick up for them”. Polly's and Luanne's statements show possible ways forward from an environment of competition and cattiness. I find it important to point out, that one vital difference between political friendships and friendships with more of a mere personal nature, is, in the vein of what Polly states, that our political friendships with our *trans-sisters*, don't necessarily entail that we like them or hang out with them in our spare time, but that we stick up for them and each other when the wind of trans-misogyny threatens to knock us down.

#### **5.2.4 The tranny debate**

One particularly infected conflict within the trans movement in the U.S. was the tranny-debate of 2014. The debate was sparked because of the use of the terms tranny and shemale on Ru Paul's Drag Race, but came to focus on if the word tranny should be used at all. Some parties within the trans community wanted the word abolished, while others wrote about the word tranny as a term of endearment. The tranny debate took place largely on social media and all of my informants spoke of social media as both positive for the trans movement, because it helps trans people find community, and negative, because it often makes conflicts quickly escalate and become infected. My informants were not unanimous in their opinions on the tranny debate or the term. Elena says that where she's coming from tranny is a term of endearment. She identifies as a tranny, or a tranny faggot, but says that it is provocative and it is something she only does in safe spaces. Both Kurt Sarah and Grace, who also sometimes identify with the word tranny, speak about the usage of the word for themselves as being something that is controversial. Luanne and Polly felt negatively about the word tranny. Polly said that the word had been used against her in hurtful ways, but at the same time she has trouble with the language focus within the trans movement. Luanne thinks the word tranny is disgusting and she wants other trans people to stop using it, just as she wants other black people to stop using the n-word. Both Grace and Elena also brought up the n-word related to the word tranny. Elena has gotten angry when white drag queens have called her the n-word, but feels that tranny does not have the same charge or history. Grace compares the two words and says that, just as many african americans use the n-word to describe themselves, many trans people use tranny to describe themselves.

I would say that I am in partial disagreement with Luanne and Grace and more in agreement with Elena. The n-word and the word tranny are not one and the same, they are different words with different histories. It is very important to note, as Kate Bornstein writes<sup>16</sup>, that the word tranny

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16 [http://katebornstein.typepad.com/kate\\_bornsteins\\_blog/2009/07/who-you-calling-a-tranny.html](http://katebornstein.typepad.com/kate_bornsteins_blog/2009/07/who-you-calling-a-tranny.html)

mainly has its background within the trans community. At the same time its usage has changed over the years. As Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, words are given meaning through their usage (Wittgenstein 1953:§77) and we can not consider the meaning of words independently from their context (Wittgenstein in Kanterian 2007:§38). The meaning of the word tranny is filtered through history and context and not all trans people share the same history or context, because of age difference or because they've been in different trans spaces. Perhaps the word tranny is similar to the empty signifier of the term sisterhood, given its varying definitions, with the difference being that the word tranny at the moment is dividing the trans movement. The question is, why? If, as Kate Bornstein writes, the history of the word tranny is as a unifying umbrella term for trans femininities, what is it that has made this change?

Something that many of my informants brought up was the importance of not focusing on words, but the intentions behind the words. Elena, Grace and Kurt Sarah do not believe in attacking the word tranny in itself but instead attacking transphobic attitudes, that somebody who uses the word tranny may or may not have. I still remember the time when a teenager on the streets yelled at me: "You fucking trans person". Was it better or worse because he used the "correct" terminology? Grace points out that her experience is that in the event of hate crimes against trans feminine people the words "faggot" and "drag queen" are used more often than the word "tranny".

At the same time it is important to respect that many trans feminine people find the word tranny offensive and it is of course very disrespectful to call someone a "tranny" who doesn't define as a tranny. Kurt Sarah speaks about learning a lot through the tranny debate. Although they still reserve the right to use the word sometimes, they understood that many trans people, especially trans women of color (though Kurt Sarah also says that many trans women of color identify with the word), had heard the word used in an abusive way, and because of that they are more careful about how and in which situations they use the word. Grace doesn't use the word in her public speaking. Val is fond of reclaiming the term faggot, and speaks about perhaps re-reclaiming the word tranny, since it came from the trans community and then started being used hatefully.

Both Val and Polly bring up the tranny-debate as partially a conflict between generations, where more older trans women identify with the term, while more young trans women have a problem with the term. Val is conflicted about the debate and wants to side on the side of sensitivity and perhaps stop using the word, at the same time she says that she kind of likes the word. Polly's feelings on the tranny-debate are also complex. She dislikes the word herself, but also has problems with the way people who are very adamantly against the word conduct the debate:

It moves us from a movement of trying to assert and preserve and liberate our humanity to one that tries to define our humanity which I don't think is always a bad thing, I think it's

fine to say the word tranny is hurtful, but when that's the paramount focus and you are going to angrily shut someone down simply for using that word, when you're going to say that certain things are the right language and other things the wrong language, you're not gonna explain to people and just say don't say tranny, umm, that's very disconcerting to me.

According to me Polly's words are vital. What does it mean if we create a movement where we shut people down because they use certain terms and call them transphobic, even if their intentions were good? Can we even build a movement and create coalitions that way or will the movement become more and more narrow. I am worried that we often get caught up in our own language games. Do we risk excluding many people who come from different language contexts where other terms are used then in the english language context? We must ask ourselves who we exclude and why, when we focus on language and terminology. I'm inclined to believe that a great focus on language leads to exclusion of people based on class and level of education. While the upper middle class may often have the greatest knowledge of the correct terminology, it is hardly the group that has the greatest experiential knowledge of oppression.

### **5.3 Intersectional coalitions and conflicts**

This section deals with difference. Firstly with intersectional differences between trans feminine people and secondly with differences in the positions and actions of trans masculine people and trans feminine people. Last but not least I bring up the relationship between trans feminine communities and other communities and movements, as well as the experiences of and possibilities for coalitions.

#### ***5.3.1 Intersectional hierarchies and disparities within the group***

Nearly all of my informants bring up the need for intersectionality within the trans feminine struggle. They mainly bring up disparities related to race, but also class and age. Several of my informants speak of the intersection between class and race, which is something I would like to see more of in an analysis of oppression and power dynamics. What may the following statement from Beyoncé say about her experiences of oppression: “I grew up in a very nice house in Houston, went to private school all my life and I’ve never even been to the ’hood,”<sup>17</sup>, and how do they differ from the experiences of a black, brown or for that matter a white person who grew up in “the hood”, and why is it mainly people of color who live in “the hood”? All of this ties in with the intersections between race and class, and statements by for example Elena on how she gets comments like “you

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17 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/why-beyonc-shouldnt-inspire-feminists-despite-her-vm-as-performance-9689938.html>

“speak so eloquently” and therefore gets listened to more than many other black trans women as well as Luanne’s statements on how racism and classism often effects which people can access education.

Polly speaks about intersections of privilege between whiteness and being from a city like New York:

At first (when I arrived in New York City) I was like kind of really disappointed, all the trans women that I was meeting for the most part were women who had lived in New York City or places like it all their lives. They were mostly white and I just didn't feel any connection to them you know I would like tell them about the type of stuff that I went through in the south and they'd be like ohh, that's so terrible, I'm so sorry. But that was like not really what I was looking for you know I was looking for someone who was like yeah I've been there, that really sucks.

This quote portrays differences in the experiences of being trans in New York City versus a rural area in the South. In the earlier section on sisterhood, many informants described sisterhood as an experience of kinship between people with similar experiences, but what happens when the experiences are very different? When one trans feminine persons experiences is not met with: “Yes, I know what that's like”, by another trans feminine person, but with sympathy in the form of: “Oh, that sounds so horrible”. Elena says that she has met some white trans women who have never been around people of color in their lives. She describes the trans community as a broad community that comes from every other community in society and that actually is several different trans communities with different social norms. This description matches the one given by Sel Julian Hwahng and Larry Nuttbrock in the article “Sex Workers, Fem Queens, and Cross-Dressers: Differential Marginalizations and HIV Vulnerabilities Among Three Ethnocultural Male-to-Female Transgender Communities in New York City” (2014) which researches the low-income African American/Black and Latina(o) House Ball community; the low-income, often undocumented immigrant Asian sex workers community; and the community of middle-class White cross-dressers – and finds these three communities to be very separate from each other and more connected to different ethnocultural contexts than to a shared trans-identity (Hwahng & Nuttbrock 2014:36). However, one question that is not largely addressed in that article is the difference between being a cross dresser and being trans feminine full time. Perhaps the differences between these two categories play as large a role as the ethnocultural differences between the communities? Elena doesn't like cross dressers and drag queens being placed in the trans category, because she thinks it's picking and choosing and see's a difference between presenting as trans feminine full time and being someone who puts on a blazer and suit, accesses male privilege and has a job making a lot of money. She places it in sharp contrast to many trans women of color who do sex work because they

can't find any other work.

While I'm not interested in getting into the issue of whether or not drag queens or cross dressers should be included in the trans umbrella, I stress that it is a very different experience to only present as trans feminine in certain, often safe, environments and to present as trans feminine 100 percent of the time and therefore also in environments of risk, such as on the streets and in job interviews. When Hwahng & Nuttbrock wrote of differences between the three different trans communities they studied, the fact that many of their cross dressing informants lived as heterosexual men outside of certain cross dressing contexts may have been just as relevant to their complete separation from the other two trans communities as the ethnocultural differences. Would the results have been the same if they had studied a group of white middle class trans women instead of white middle class cross dressers? Probably not, but, there would most likely have been overlaps, which is supported by what Polly said about her experiences with white trans women from New York City as well as by Val's criticism of party spaces where most of the trans femmes are white. She believes these "femme party girls" take up too much space and wishes for a movement that prioritizes those who are in the most vulnerable positions, trans women of color, trans women who don't pass and especially trans women of color who don't pass. This can be connected to Bassichis, Lee & Spade's perspective on the importance of prioritizing transformative approaches that make sure that the most marginalized queer and trans people aren't placed at the back of the bumper, to paraphrase Sylvia Rivera, instead of the more "official" solutions that are reformist and work mostly for the most privileged queer and trans people (Bassichis, Lee & Spade:652-654). Also in relation to intersectionality, Elena wishes to talk more about how we can help poor trans youth transition in healthy ways and have community and economic liability. Polly see's a segregation of the trans movement with one assimilationist side dominated by older white trans people and one progressive side that generally has the right values and priorities, but seldom has a program and instead works with bandaied solutions. She wishes to talk more about alternatives to incarceration in response to violence against trans women, but feels that it is important that she as a white woman doesn't lead this movement. Although she supports Dean Spade's politics she thinks we need more people like Cece McDonald to lead. Also in the progressive trans movement she see's a class divide and many trans masculine people in positions of leadership, as well as a lot of people trying to make a career out of the issues. This takes us back to a former statement Polly made on progressive trans and queer nonprofits not hiring many trans women. Perhaps the nonprofit sectors large expansion within the realms of radical trans politics in New York has a problematic effect on intersectional sisterhooding? I will investigate this question further in my concluding chapter.

While my informants spoke of intersectional hierarchies and differences, many also stressed

the need for some form of unity and coalition. Grace stressed that she's used to being the only one of something in a room, the only trans person or the only asian pacific islander person of color etc., but this doesn't deter her from trying to use the activist situation creatively and productively. I see this as an awareness of difference, but also an openness towards coalition. In general Grace doesn't like internal conflicts within the trans movement. She says it's often the oppression olympics and wants there to be conversations about difference without comparison of different groups. My question as a researcher is how can we discuss and clarify hierarchies without playing the game of the oppression olympics? How is it possible to contain conflicts, learn through conflicts, and let conflicts and differences not hinder collective struggle and coalitions? How can we create a solidarity that is aware of disparities and hierarchies? Throughout my interview with Luanne she spoke very much about hierarchies within the trans movement, but also stressed that her view of an activist was that there should be no difference between a black advocate and a white advocate because an activist must be an advocate for all. She wasn't necessarily against conflicts, but skeptical, and believed that trans feminine activist culture should be a culture of: "Pick me up, I'll pick you up, I believe we should piggy back on each other and learn to rise, not step on each other to get on the next step, cuz then we go nowhere." These words sound like the essence of sisterhood, community and resistance to masculinist capitalist behavior of "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" and "elbow your way up to the top". How we can create this kind of unified resistance and still be aware of difference and hierarchies and make sure that those in the forefront of our sisterhooding activities are mainly those in the most vulnerable positions are the necessities that can enable unity and coalition.

### ***5.3.2 Differences and similarities between trans brotherhood and trans sisterhood, trans masculinity and trans femininity***

That pattern of acceptance is basically there from the point you identified as male, you were kind of not as ostracized as becoming a trans (woman). It's no comparison and we're kind of led to believe by the trans men, oh yeah, let's just, NO, NO, it's nowhere close to our fight, NO WHERE close, we don't have that umbrella that y'all are walking under.

This was stated by Luanne after a passionate recollection of being in the audience at a trans conference that was dominated by trans men. She speaks especially of one panel where her friend, an activist for 40 years, was the only trans woman on a panel dominated by trans men with PhD's. Listening to my informants statements on trans femininity and trans masculinity, it became very clear to me that the relationship between the two groups in New York City is fraught. All of my informants expressed trouble with oppressive/sexist masculinity amongst at least some trans guys,

and a majority of my informants expressed major problems. Val exclaims that trans masculine movements are the mortal enemies of trans feminine movements, before quickly thinking it through and saying that around half of the trans men that she knows are great and very involved in trans feminist activism. Other trans masculine people she knows try to usurp the limelight, for example in the aftermath of Leelah Allcorn's suicide she saw many trans men in her facebook feed post articles on suicide among trans men, stating that it was important to not just talk about trans women. Val believes that trans feminine people deserve more space in the trans movement than trans masculine people because statistically speaking they are in positions of higher vulnerability.

Several of my informants spoke of differences in how trans masculine people and trans feminine people are treated. Polly says that white trans guys quickly become the king bee's of the queer scene, something which can be connected to the following critique by Julia Serano of subversivism within queer activism:

Despite the fact that the mainstream public tends to be more concerned and disturbed by MTF spectrum trans people than their FTM spectrum counterparts, subversivism creates the impression that trans masculinities are inherently “subversive” and “transgressive”, while their trans feminine counterparts are “lame” and “conservative” in comparison (Serano 2007:348).

This mirrors traditional views of masculinity as active and femininity as passive, which is perhaps the reason why it is the masculine crossing of gender borders that is deemed subversive.

Polly describes trans masculinity as “the appealing kind of trans” and “the liberal wet dream” and points to a list of different areas where trans men are privileged: Nonprofits, who often hire white trans guys while trans women are seen as the victims; academia, where trans men are part of the queer theory paradigm and often the academics while trans women are the objects of study; and advertisement campaigns, which usually feature white trans men and mostly only feature trans women if they are celebrities – a statement which connects us right back to the Serano citation in the previous paragraph about the mainstream public being more concerned and disturbed by MTF spectrum trans people than their FTM spectrum counterparts.

When it comes to the relationship between trans masculinities and trans femininities several of my informants bring up problems. Elena has seen a lot of trans masculine patriarchy. In her experience, many trans men especially white trans men are passable and take on patriarchy. She is critical to divisiveness and has some great trans male friends, but at the same time feels it's important to talk about sexism amongst many trans men, some of which blame it on taking testosterone which Elena does not buy. Polly speaks about many trans masculine people treating trans women badly and she knows of very few trans male organizations that haven't had instances where they've been mean spirited toward trans women.

Perhaps one reason for the disparities between trans femininities and trans masculinities is trans-misogyny, which is unique to the trans feminine experience. While trans men/trans masculinities and trans women/trans femininities share the experience of transphobia, only the second group gets targeted by misogyny. To attack the “maleness” or “masculinity” of trans masculine people would require a critique of maleness and masculinity in itself. Critiquing the femininity of trans feminine people, however is a direct result of femi-negativity.

Notions of femininity and masculinity can also feed into the different ways that trans feminine sisterhoods and trans masculine brotherhoods operate. Are the problems with cattiness, that I've brought up earlier in the thesis, predominant within trans masculine spaces? Probably not, although I'd have to conduct interviews with trans masculine people to be able to say for sure. Polly's statements support my hypothesis. She sees trans male communities, especially communities for trans men of color, as far from as divided as trans feminine communities. Although she's heard of some policing of masculinity within trans masculine spaces like “don't do this bro, that's not very macho”, it's still often in the spirit of lifting each other up while she says that trans women love to tear each other down, something that can be linked to the previous section on cattiness and competition, and shows the necessity of stressing more sisterhooding solidarity.

At the same time several of my informants point out that the disparities between trans masculinities and trans femininities are not always black and white. Both Elena and Luanne are critical to divisiveness while at the same time speaking of their view of the differences of experiences between trans men and trans women. Luanne points out that she's met many great trans men, mostly outside of New York, and says that it should be the same fight for equality. Kurt Sarah speaks of very mixed experiences with trans masculine people and doesn't want to generalize, however she doesn't like people who present as masculine in a stereotypical, oppressive male way, whether the person is trans masculine or just masculine. Polly stresses the need for an intersectional analysis and says that for example feminine trans guys get hassled more than masculine trans guys, because people in general usually don't even know that the masculine trans guys are trans. In Virginia where she grew up, feminine trans guys would get a lot of shit, although not as much as trans women, and she also points out that trans masculine non-binary people of color (not trans men of color) are murdered at a higher rate in the US than white trans women.

It is, as always, important to make clear that trans feminine people and trans masculine people are not universal, uniform, homogenous categories, and besides the issue of intersectionality, we must remind ourselves that not all trans men are masculine and not all trans women are feminine and this can effect our experiences in various different ways. Grace says that she feels as much community with trans men as with trans women, has met both trans men and trans women with

sexist/macho tendencies and wishes to see more focus on similarities between trans masculine and trans feminine people. One commonality she discusses is the questions of disclosure of genitalia when you are dating someone new. However I wonder if the experiences, beyond the issue of physicality, surrounding this question really are that similar? For example: How many gay men or straight women would beat up or murder a trans man if they found out he was not a cis man – something that is often a risk for trans women dating straight men.

As I've made clear earlier, I find coalition important, but not at the cost of ignoring difference and hierarchies. My informants comments show many disparities between trans femininities and trans masculinities and differences in experiences and positions between the two groups. This points towards the need for a specific field of study that researches (intersectional) trans femininity and the specific forms of oppression that are trans-misogyny and femi-negativity.

### ***5.3.3 Allyship and relationship with other communities***

Throughout the thesis I have written about the need for coalition and a point of inquiry to my informants regarded their view on allyship and their relationship to other communities. Many of my informants have experiences from various different communities and activist groups. Polly says she often gets misidentified as a client of the services of organizations that aren't specifically about trans feminine activism. Because she is white, assertive and has many references however she get's treated better than many other trans women in these spaces. More than once she's been identified as another trans women's, usually a trans women of color's, lawyer. Elena often feels like a token in non-trans feminine centered activist spaces, like she's *the* trans woman, and she has actively tried to bring other trans women to forefront positions in these spaces, something that is most definitely an example of trans-sisterhooding.

While going through my informants thoughts on allyship it was not possible to point to one certain group as “a good ally to trans feminine people”. Elena found allyship with many cis women, cis gay men and trans men. Kurt Sarah pointed out “other femmes” as good allies, while Polly had problems with the femme-movement in New York City, which she felt was overwhelmingly white, heteronormative or homonormative, skinny and with bad class politics. We discussed our differences in experiences with the femme-movement, who I've often seen as important allies, and came to the mutual understanding that New York, in contrast to for example Berlin, is not a city where feminine presentations are scarce within the queer scene, not even in the gay male scene. While Polly understands that in Berlin femme's might be happy just to find other femme's, she feels that it isn't as simple in New York, which she see's as a city where feminine *attributes* are more celebrated than actual feminine *people*.

The broader LGBT-rights movement was also a point of contention with Elena and Val being sharply critical of HRC (Human Rights Campaign) and Val calling the gay male movements behavior towards trans feminine people “abhorrent”, something that is hardly surprising given the amount of research that points toward femi-negativity in the gay male community (Bergling 2001, Eguchi 2011, Bailey et al. 1997). Five informants bring up drag queens and the relationship can be described as fraught, with both affinities and frustrations. Two informants have a problem with Ru Pauls Drag Race being seen as a representative for the LGBTQ- or trans-movement and yet another informant see's a problem with drag queens being seen as representatives for trans women. Four informants started out as drag performers and one was called a drag performer by the media even though they identified as trans. However they did not have a problem with that because they don't think it's negative to be a drag queen. Polly see's a commonality between many drag queens and trans female lesbians/bisexuals in that most drag queens that she knows date other drag queens just as many trans female lesbians/bisexuals date other trans women, which she connects to trans-misogyny and femi-negativity within the gay male and lesbian community respectively. The statement also matches the findings in “The Association Between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs About Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity” (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe & Sprecht 2014) on the problems drag queens have navigating gay male spaces mentioned earlier in the thesis. Other movements that were brought up were the sex workers rights movement, which several informants felt support from, the radical faeries, which Kurt Sarah and Elena, both felt was in many ways a place of safety and self-realization but also a place of desexualization related to race and trans femininity, and the #blacklivesmatter-campaign. Elena feels like the campaign is not for her because it is too one-sided and Val says that #blacklivesmatter and many other big anti-racist movements are often heteronormative and ignore black trans women and the intersections of race and transness. She points out that many trans femme's she knows are passionately active in the blacklivesmatter-campaign, without getting all that much back in return. This points to a larger question that I would like to bring up, namely, are certain movements expected to be more intersectional than others? White middle class heterocis feminism is widely criticized for not being intersectional, and rightfully so, but is the critique as broad against anti-racist movements that centralize heterosexual cis men of color, who may or may not be middle class, or trans female movements that centralize white middle class trans women? And if not: What does the origins of intersectionality as largely an internal critique of white middle class feminism play in this?

Before moving on from the analysis portion I want to point to some possible ways forward. Elena see's a big difference between activist practices in New York City and the city in Kentucky where she is from: “It's like if we were having a rally in Kentucky, like we had a rally in front of the

statewide capitol(...) we had people there from labour, from racial justice, and LGBT-civil rights groups there and it's like everyone was there and we would like always show up for everyone else's things as well, and it's like we realized that that's how you make an impact". In New York she seldom see's these types of reciprocal alliances, and wishes to see more of them. I wonder if the possible lack of broad coalitions in New York City has something to do with a tendency in large cities to break into smaller more detailed groups and fractions, something which at times can be positive, but at a larger scale, also negative. It would be very interesting to research and compare the workings of activist movements in large cities versus smaller cities to see if this is a general pattern. While it is often possible in larger cities to break into more detailed fractions, because the communities are often larger, the question is how it effects the possibility to create change? Perhaps we must ask ourselves at which point politics based on identity become a hindrance for our goals, while simultaneously asking ourselves what our goals are, and at which points solidarity and identity politics can and must meet?

When Elena describes the coalitions she saw in Kentucky, she is not necessarily talking about an erasure of understanding of difference and hierarchies, but of the possibility of solidarity. Also Polly yearns for this and see's a broadening of sisterhood as important. She likes Socialist Alternative, because they are a political group with a program, and she wants more trans women to get involved with them and other broader political movements, because with more trans women in Socialist Alternative they would start talking about trans women of color being murdered and have the capital and power to do concrete things about it. At the same time it may not be so simple, since other informants speak of trans women's involvement in #blacklivesmatter as something that did not result in black trans women's experiences being prioritized. Both Polly and Grace are critical of the depoliticization of many nonprofits. Polly doesn't think we need more nonprofits and see's it as a sad state of affairs that much of the trans organizing in New York is through service provider organizations who have rallies when a trans woman of color is murdered and then meetings where they hand out free metro cards and slices of pizza. The role of the nonprofit sector is criticized by Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee and Dean Spade who write about the US governments active strategies to undermine radical grass roots organizations and the professionalization of social movements through nonprofits that focus on social services, chasing funding, and legal reform instead of radical projects aimed at underlying causes of poverty and injustice (Bassichis, Lee & Spade 2013:658-659). Activism through nonprofits is something I see as much more dominant in New York than in other trans contexts I've been in, like Berlin, Stockholm, Istanbul, and Malmö. It would be interesting to conduct more detailed research regarding what it means and how trans-sisterhood is affected when trans activism is professionalized and several trans organizations have

clear distinctions between *service providers* and *clients*.

## 6. Concluding thoughts

This thesis has focused on different trans feminine people in New York's experiences of oppression, sisterhood, and conflicts. Given the lack of research in the field I chose to write a thesis that presents topics very broadly, as a starting point, for further more detailed research. The majority of my informants' statements on power dynamics and hierarchies, such as trans-misogyny and femi-negativity, privileging trans masculinity over trans femininity in New York City shows a need for research within the field of transgender studies that doesn't come from the perspective of transgender as a gender neutral category. This chapter is a look forward through certain questions and understandings and it can only offer some preliminary answers and suggestions. Academic research on trans femininities built on an understanding of the specific oppression of trans-misogyny and femi-negativity remains scarce and this is a contribution. A key finding of the research process is that there needs to be *more* research conducted within these areas.

While all my informants had very clear experiences of trans-misogyny and femi-negativity, some also experienced oppression related to other intersectional power dynamics, such as race and class-oppressions, and differences between coming from rural areas and coming from a city like New York. The understanding of sisterhood that I am putting forth in this conclusion includes these differences and prioritizes the perspectives of those whose differences lead to structural marginalization. Polly and Grace state that sisterhood is about solidarity, and if as Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2006) argues, both sisterhood and solidarity are empty signifiers, I want to fill sisterhood with coalition, and solidarity with empathy and seeing "who is in the most need of support", and giving it, so we can rise together.

If we look at those who are most at risk, those who continue to get murdered (Lamble 2013), we see that we can't build a coalition solely on fighting transphobia. We look at the list of the murdered and find that most are trans women, so our response should be actively femme-inist. We see that most lack basic economic security, so our response should tackle economic injustice and discrimination within education and employment. We see that most are trans women of color, so our response should be anti-racist. We see that many are sex workers, so our response should both work for securing sex workers rights and opening up employment and education for trans feminine people and low income-people, so that all trans femininities can have many different employment and educational alternatives and opportunities.

My informants have both brought up ambivalences and delights towards the term sisterhood

as well as both practices of sisterhooding and conflicts. The picture painted is complex and the conflicts – several. Several of my informants strived for unity. However, although this goal is important, it is my opinion that some conflicts are in fact necessary. When it comes to hierarchies related to intersectional power dynamics it may for example be important for conflicts to arise and be aired out in the open in order for us to reach a broader understanding of what an *intersectional sisterhood* that includes *difference* needs to prioritize and address. At the same time, other conflicts seem mainly to hurt us. For example cattiness, an attitude that may or may not have it's place as a chargon in certain personal friendships, but that is hurtful and counterproductive when brought into political friendships in political movements striving for political change. Competition for men and status hierarchies regarding who passes the best leads to a deepening of power dynamics rather than a questioning of them. Several of my informants are worried that the trans movement is focusing too much on conflicts regarding language, and I agree with that perspective. It is worrying that our wordings can be such cause for divide, when as Kurt Sarah exclaims: “If a word is filled with hate it's because a person is saying it with hate and making a word disappear doesn't make the hate disappear”. Personally, even if I only define as a tranny (and relate very much to Elena's identification as a *tranny faggot*) in a few specific situations, I'd much rather spend time with a person who treats me as a complete human being and calls me a tranny, than with someone who doesn't, yet calls me trans feminine, and we must not forget that a focus on terminology can reproduce class and educational privilege.

In order for sisterhood to be a possibility we must, to speak with Chandra Mohanty, rise beyond a definition that entails a psychologized idea of sameness and instead entails an understanding of both differences and commonalities. After all, while sisterhood in it's nuclear family form may stress *similarities* in our roots, it is certainly not limited to *identical* twins.

Another issue that may effect the trans-sisterhooding practices in New York City is the nonprofit sector, which according to my research seems to have a larger role in the progressive trans movement in New York than in other cities I've been in. Polly extends her critique of nonprofits to partially include radical organizations like Sylvia Rivera Law Project and Audre Lorde Project and also says that many nonprofits have radical politics at their base, but still work mostly with bandaid solutions. My question is what do radical nonprofits do to radical organizing and to the prospect of sisterhood? Dean Spade's critique of the nonprofit industrial complex is important, but perhaps paradoxically, Spade himself founded a nonprofit organization (Sylvia Rivera Law Project). While radical nonprofits like Sylvia Rivera Law Project may function in certain different ways than most organizations in the nonprofit industrial complex, the question is: Can they be completely outside of a nonprofit system they indeed are a part of?

Here is where this issue ties into this thesis' theme around trans feminine sisterhood. In a follow up conversation, Val states that while she respects much of Sylvia Rivera Law Projects and Audre Lorde Projects work, the meetings are conducted in a way that makes her feel like a child. The Indian author Arundhati Roy states: "The NGO:ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, nine-to-five job" (Roy 2004:315), and also critiques NGO:s for blunting the edges of political resistance, turning people into dependent victims, interfering with self-reliant movements, being too focused on getting funding, turning confrontation into negotiation and altering the public psyche (Roy 2004:310-315). The question that must be asked, and I certainly do not have the answer, is: Are also the more radical nonprofits complicit in what Dean Spade calls the nonprofit industrial complex and what Arundhati Roy calls the NGO:ization of politics? Do they reproduce relations of power that take on parent-child dynamics, or turn people into dependent victims? Perhaps the answer is both yes and no, and there needs to be more research conducted on radical trans/queer nonprofits resistance strategies related to these issues. What worries me however is that through the hierarchies with employees and service providers within nonprofits, an atmosphere of fathers/mothers and children is created instead of an atmosphere of sisters side-by-side in the struggle.

At the same time perhaps we sometimes also need parents, not just siblings, but the question is who these parents are and why they are given their roles? Is it because they studied at university and therefore landed a full time job at a nonprofit? We must then ask ourselves, *who* becomes the parents and *who* becomes the children, and does this reproduce classist hierarchies? We must also ask ourselves how funding effect's ones radicalism. It worried me that The Sylvia Rivera Law Project Attorney Awards labeled sponsor's who donated 5,000 dollars as *champions*, 2,500 dollars as *leaders*, and than down to 250 dollars as *allies*<sup>18</sup>. I understand that nonprofits need funding, but here we can see a compromising of anti-capitalist ideological principles in the process. The activism of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson through STAR was hardly professionalized or funded with employees, and was certainly organized differently. Was STAR:s work more important than Sylvia Rivera Law Project's? Perhaps they both fill important functions, but for that very reason, maybe it is a problem if radical nonprofits are dominating radical activism.

Hierarchies where some more experienced activists take on a role as teachers are not always negative. As I already stated in my presentation of my informants, many of my informants perspectives on sisterhooding come through the lens of being activists, several of which are very experienced activists, who more have the perspective of helping trans feminine people in more

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18 <http://srlp.org/srlp/?page=CiviCRM&q=civicrm/contribute/transact&reset=1&id=18>

marginalized positions and phases in life. I chose these informants actively because in this thesis I wanted to interview people with very broad activist networks and knowledge bases. In future, more extensive, research however it would be interesting to dig deeper into the experiences of many other trans feminine people, who perhaps are not engaged in activism and/or do not see themselves as particularly political. The perspectives would be different and it would make for a broader understanding of what community and sisterhood means to a vast array of different trans feminine people.

As I've mentioned earlier there is a great lack of research on the oppression that different trans femininities meet conducted from the bases of an understanding of intersectionality, trans-misogyny, and femi-negativity. What became clear is that all my informants have grave experiences of street harassment and most also speak of problems with employment discrimination as well as *the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox*. Many of my informants problematized the concept of "passing", but a subject that wasn't brought up much in the interviews relating to passing was the issue of gender dysphoria<sup>19</sup>, which for some trans women may be the most important reason for wanting to be perceived as a cis woman. It would be interesting to research the connection between dysphoria and passing in greater depth. At the same time, the fact that some of us wish to use hormones, remove our facial and body hair and have surgeries in order to look more like the way we always appeared in our mind, shouldn't stop us from critiquing passing as the necessary ticket for acceptance for all trans people on a societal level. Some aren't interested in passing and others aren't able to pass even if they want to. Or as Grace states it:

I think what we have to do is instead of focusing on ourselves and what we perceive to be our imperfections in relation to non-transgendered women or men we need to focus on changing society so that no one who is perceived to be gender different is harassed or assaulted or attacked. That's what I think is important and I think we have to stop constantly comparing ourselves to the cis-whatever women or men around us because we are not them, we are not better or worse.

Some of my informants described passing as a cis woman as something that can lead to a safer situation for trans femininities on the streets, but they also clarified that it does not lead to safety as demonstrated by their experiences of misogyny and sexual harassment while passing. When speaking of passing some of my informants brought it up as an important strategy for survival in the here and now, but all of them criticized passing as a prerequisite for acceptance/status, whether on the streets or inside trans communities.

My informants accounts also reveal a clear connection between the hypersexualization of

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19 Gender dysphoria is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender" (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). Here I use the term specifically related to bodily incongruences.

trans femininity and sexual harassment on the streets – trans femininities are often punished and placed in the category of the bad girl, the whore, the type of femininity that resides outside of respectability. The desexualizing flip side of these hierarchal politics of desirability can be found on the gay dating site Grindr where profile's often state “No fats, femmes or Asians”<sup>20</sup>. A question for further studies on the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox: How does race and body type effect and increase hypersexualization and/or desexualization?

I wonder also what possibilities there are for resisting the hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox? In her speech “The beauty in us” from the trans march in San Francisco 2009 Julia Serano argues for the purging of the terms “tranny chaser” and “tranny fetish” from our vocabularies<sup>21</sup>. And while I wish we could purge these concepts from our society, they still exist and perhaps therefore the word should still exist, in order to name a certain phenomenon and purging a word will not purge the concept. The problem that arises however is, when it is *assumed* that a person who is attracted to a trans person is a tranny chaser with a tranny fetish, what space does that leave us to realize our sexual and romantic desires? With no alternative terms we risk reproducing and cementing the structural oppression that we experience. In an article on Salon.com the cisgender straight male Thomas Matt writes about his attraction to trans women – how it should not be viewed as shameful and how men's fetishization oppresses trans women. He uses the term trans-attracted or trans-oriented rather than tranny chaser/tranny fetish<sup>22</sup>. As in many other places in this thesis I must relay that there is very little academic research specifically conducted on the objectification and sexualization of trans femininities. When searching for articles on the subject the most relevant finding was an article that deals with the term tranny chaser connected to cis women who are attracted to trans men. I don't believe the tranny chaser-phenomenon effects trans masculine people to nearly the same extent as it effects trans feminine people. It seems to me to be very uncommon that cis women write trans men they don't know on facebook with lewd sexual suggestions, or catcall and stalk them on the streets. Once again, this shows the problematics of “gender neutrality” when it comes to trans issues and the need for studies specifically about trans women and trans femininities. Still, I find that article's sentiments around the need for cis people to take part in discussions around trans sexualities and fetishization (Tompkins 2014:775), important. After all, it is cis people, mainly cis men, who are doing the fetishizing and cis gay men and lesbians who are doing the desexualizing. While it is important that we can have trans-only sisterhooding discussions on our strategies for handling the

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20 <http://www.gay.net/hot-topics/2011/11/09/no-fats-femmes-or-ugly-side-online-dating>

21 <http://www.juliaserano.com/TSetiology.html#TransMarch09>

22 [http://www.salon.com/2013/10/22/im\\_attracted\\_to\\_trans\\_women/](http://www.salon.com/2013/10/22/im_attracted_to_trans_women/)

hypersexualization/desexualization-paradox, we also need broad, difficult and complex discussions amongst cis men who are attracted to trans femininities. And in gay male culture, discussions about femme-phobia and hierarchies of attraction, as well as similar discussions within lesbian culture. Perhaps then we can begin to take steps towards trans femininities being broadly viewed as people who can be attractive in a sex positive-manner, and therefore allowed space to be full human beings, instead of being viewed through the confusing and often traumatizing lens of either hypersexualized fetishes or desexualized erasure.

In this broad thesis I was not able to dive into details, but there is so much interesting detailed research that could be conducted in this field: For example what ideas of trans femininity and what sexual practices do “tranny chasers” fetishize? What plays into gay men's desexualization of femininity? In which ways do the politics and hierarchies of desirability effect trans masculinities and trans femininities differently within queer spaces? And what could Polly's statement on the prominence of vapid celebrations of feminine attributes in New York, rather than celebrations of actual feminine people, mean? Does femi-negativity extend beyond attributes to a devaluing of femm-bodied emotionality, intensity, vulnerability?

The amount of trans-sisterhooding activities in New York City that my informants describe, coupled with their at times ambiguous outlook on the concept of sisterhood, is very promising. It showcases the possibility for both an understanding of difference and for coalition. While my informants have different understandings of trans-sisterhood and have different critiques of the trans feminine movement, it hasn't stopped them from being involved in trans activism or using the word sister to describe other trans femmes, although they at times are hesitant. In my opinion this is healthy. Sisterhood is complex. All trans feminine people do not share the same interests. For example: In the process of gentrification some middle class artistic trans feminine people can be seen as the poster children for the first wave of gentrification, whereas other trans feminine people, namely poor trans sex workers of color, are often those that investors and corporations looking to gentrify a neighborhood, wish to get rid of. In these instances we must ask ourselves how we can find coalitions despite the fact that our interests, on paper, are contrary. Once again I must stress the importance of a definition of sisterhood that is not limited only to the idea of shared experiences, but also includes difference and solidarity geared towards the most marginalized experiences in order for a coalition that counters oppression to be possible.

There are so many answers yet to be uncovered like how do we as a community define resistance, can we imagine self-care, protecting oneself and surviving on the streets as much of an act of resistance as bashing back or actively deviating from the norms? Several of my informants seem to say yes, and I am thinking especially about Val's stressing of the importance of self-care,

and Luanne's problematization of the notion that the most subversive thing we can do when harassed is to bash back. We must make space for many different trans feminine narratives, neither shame for “passing” or “not passing”, understand that these are not dichotomies, and, to speak with Sandy Stone, find, crave and demand recognition for the power and beauty in the various spaces in between that many of us trans femininities inhabit.

Perhaps it would be interesting to research and compare the different positions of trans femininities and the different strategies of trans-sisterhooding in different places in the world? Comparing differences in particular contexts might bring forth more clarity in imagining what trans-sisterhood can look like. My own experience is that the trans feminine contexts that I've been a part of in Stockholm, Delhi, Berlin (Europe's extremely masculine dominated “queer capital”), and Istanbul have been quite distinct from each other.

We are heading towards the end of this thesis and I must choose my words very carefully. When Jenny Gunnarsson Payne lays forward sisterhood as something that can symbolize both unity and difference (Gunnarsson Payne 2006:116), I cry out, YES! This is it's very strength! Within it's elasticity it can unify, but that doesn't for a second mean we can stop thinking, join hands and declare sameness. No, we have both similarities and differences and therefore sisterhood must also both be about shared experiences as well as solidarity. In this thesis I have often referenced Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl*, while also critiquing her lack of intersectional analysis. Are Sylvia Rivera and Julia Serano one? Am I and Julia Serano one? Am I and Sylvia Rivera one? No, no, no, but also somewhat yes, yes, yes. Not the same but that doesn't mean we don't share any commonalities or similarities in our experiences. And these commonalities are one base for a trans-sisterhood in my definition, but the other base, which is just as important, is the base of solidarity with the most marginalized voices in the community. Prioritizing their experiences and encouraging their leadership. Perhaps it is also upon these principles that we can build broader coalitions that exceed trans-sisterhood and work to counter capitalism, racism and gender based oppression.

Why do some of us feel the need for trans-sisters? Perhaps it is as simple as the fact that we face so much trans-misogyny, femi-negativity and other forms of oppression. It is only May, and already 10 trans feminine people, mainly latina and black trans women, have been murdered in the United States alone. When a large portion of our surroundings hate us maybe we need each other despite (neoliberal and pseudofeminist?) cries of independence as radical and dependence as conservative. To speak with Sara Ahmed perhaps we need a lifeline to get out of an impossible world, and perhaps when we follow certain lines (and converge in certain packs) we are able to understand better who we are (Ahmed 2006:17-20). I don't know for sure. As I've said earlier this thesis is broad, since I found that there is so much in this area that hasn't been studied. I feel as if

I've merely opened doors, providing more questions than answers, for there has not been a sufficient amount of time to thoroughly explore the interior of the rooms. This is what I and we must do in future research. However, before I set out to do that in both my personal and professional life I must tell you this: Through the process of this thesis I have come a few steps closer to understanding myself and a few steps closer to understanding my sisters, who, yes, I do consider to be my sisters.

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## **“You don't always like your sisters, but you always love them”**

### **Trans feminine accounts of misogyny, sisterhood and difference in New York City**

#### Populärvetenskaplig Sammanfattning

Genom djupintervjuer undersöker uppsatsen sex olika transfeminina informanter i New Yorks erfarenheter av förtryck, trans-misogyni, femi-negativitet, rasism och klassism, såväl som deras erfarenheter av stöd, konflikter och motståndspraktiker, vilket sker genom ett undersökande av deras inställning till termen systerskap och den systerskapande praktiken. Fokus har också legat på informanternas syn på allierade, koalitioner och deras relation till andra grupper, som till exempel transmaskulina personer. För att fånga in en intersektionell bredd av erfarenheter var informantgruppen heterogen i förhållande till ålder, “ras”/etnicitet, samt i förhållande till var de bodde i staden och vilka delar av rörelsen de var engagerade i. Informanterna beskrev grova erfarenheter av trakasserier på gatorna och diskriminering på arbetsmarknaden, samt erfarenheter av hypersexualisering från så kallade tranny chaser's och avsexualisering från homosexuella och queera män. I linje med Jenny Gunnarsson Payne's (2006) teori om systerskap som tom signifikant, hade mina informanter många olika definitioner av begreppet systerskap, och medan många av dem uttryckte ambivalenser i förhållande till termen, använde sig alla av begreppet i varierande grad. Flera av dem såg stora fördelar i att använda termen för att beskriva samhörighet och solidaritet mellan transfeminina. Mina informanter listade flera olika konflikter inom de transfeminina rörelsen och var allmänt skeptiska till konflikter, framförallt till de som handlade om elaka attityder, tävlande, språk och terminologi – vilket jag håller med dem om, med tillägget, som en del informanter också tydliggjorde, att visa konflikter gällande intersektionella hierarkier kan vara nödvändiga. Jag argumenterar för en förståelse av trans-systerskap som baseras både i en förståelse av likheter och skillnader i erfarenheter sam i en förståelse av solidaritet som prioriterar perspektiven och ledarskapet av de mest marginaliserade rösterna. Uppsatsen har ett brett perspektiv eftersom det tidigare gjorts väldigt lite forskning om transfemininitet utifrån den specifika förståelsen av trans-misogyni och femi-negativitet. I likhet med Julia Serano (2007) argumenterar jag för ett analyserande av transkvinnors och andra transfemininas situation bortanför trans som könsneutral kategori och får stöd i majoriteten av mina informanters skarpa uttalanden

om den hierarkiska underordningen av transfemininitet gentemot transmaskulinitet. Slutligen menar jag att det behövs mer forskning inom fältet transfemininitetsstudier med perspektiv både från kritiska femininitetsstudier och transstudier.