

Gender: A Public Feeling?

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What is gender? According to assorted popular construals of gender, its truth lies in anatomy, social roles, hormones, chromosomes, "brain sex," or a feeling. Contested narratives of gender transition complicate these accounts even further: gender transition is understood as deception or truth, choice or necessity, change or revelation, journey or homecoming, reinforcing mind-body dualism or overcoming it, reifying gender stereotypes or breaking them down. I propose understanding gender as an affective assemblage, a material-discursive matrix of intra-actions with dispersed and multiple agencies. Drawing on Gayle Salamon's transgender phenomenology, Ann Cvetkovich's account of depression, and Karen Barad's agential realism, I attempt to sketch an analysis of gender that can be applied to a multiplicity of gendered experiences. I develop my account by studying the example of trans people who, for various reasons, are unable to transition, and who use the internet as an affective technology of the flesh. As Mayra Rivera observes in *Poetics of the Flesh*, "Flesh is an ambivalent term that names a rather slippery materiality" that is fluid, linguistically marked, and always becoming. Gender is incarnated through the ever repeating liturgy of performative acts identified by Judith Butler – acts undertaken by multiple actants in multiple realms, and acts that are always raced, classed, and dis/abled as well as gendered. By tracing the uses of social media technologies in the assemblage of gender, I show how edge cases of gender can reveal the

complexities of the gendered assemblage, the (sometimes fatal) flaws in most oversimplifications of gender, and the inadequacy of discourses of the “real” and “artificial.” In the Christian ecclesiological notion of the Church as the corporate body of Christ, I find a powerful theological resource for an understanding of gendered flesh as an affective assemblage that blurs boundaries, holds multiplicities in fruitful tension, and perhaps opens a space for bodily redemption.