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To cite this article: Jay Szpilka (11 Sep 2025): What Puppygirls Know? The (in)Human Pedagogy of a Trans Feminine Style, Australian Feminist Studies, DOI: [10.1080/08164649.2025.2556256](https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2025.2556256)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2025.2556256>



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Published online: 11 Sep 2025.



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## What Puppygirls Know? The (in)Human Pedagogy of a Trans Feminine Style

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### ABSTRACT

'Puppygirls' is a name for a particular kinky trans feminine lesbian style, rooted in the long history of trans erotic productions, and currently thriving on social media platforms, such as Twitter (now X), Bluesky, or Discord. In this article, I provide an analysis of the style that is rooted in personal immersion in 'puppygirl culture'. Using several examples of puppygirl media productions, I argue for the possibility of reading the puppygirl style as a critical practice: one that hints at ways of being trans that do rely on the ciscentric understanding of 'the human' as their point of reference. In doing so, I show how puppygirl style resonates with theoretical interventions in the field of trans studies offered by scholars such as Susan Stryker and Talia Mae Bettcher.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 May 2025  
Accepted 29 August 2025

### KEYWORDS

Trans femininity; BDSM;  
puppygirls; puppy play;  
transgender; monstrosity

On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog. But, as the tumblr user boring kate says (Figure 1), 'some of you aren't keeping the secret very well. Everyone knows you're a good lil' pup. Everyone can tell. You're gonna look so good when leashed'.

Who are those 'some of you' that boringkate addresses (and, apparently) hopes to leash? Who is failing so adorably at disclosing their status as a 'good lil' pup'? The answer to this question is obvious, at least if you hang out in appropriate online spaces: these are puppygirls. Trans lesbians that are also dogs. Not literally, of course – but also not entirely figuratively.

Puppygirls are one of those phenomena which are both ever-present in the online media environment of many trans women, while also having almost no actual presence outside of them. That is hardly surprising: speaking of 'trans lesbians that are also dogs' in public feels ridiculous, let alone dangerous. After all, trans women are already commonly viewed as borderline (or outright) deranged. And yet, in our private internet spaces, a culture surrounding the concept of a 'puppygirl' is currently flourishing, feeding on the shadow history of trans sexuality as constitutive of transsexuality. And it has much to teach us about living a trans life.

I find it important to attempt to speak – and speak sympathetically – of puppygirls for two main reasons. Trans feminine sexual cultures and styles constitute some of the most maligned, and most ignored areas of the trans feminine experience, while also being

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**boringkate**

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Remember the old saying that "**On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog**"?

Well some of you aren't keeping it secret very well. Everyone knows you're a good lil pup. Everyone can tell. You're gonna look so cute when you're leashed.

**Figure 1.** An invitation to becoming a puppy by the tumblr user boringkate.

mostly overlooked by contemporary academic trans studies. To put it bluntly, one is unlikely to find out about puppygirls (or other similar phenomena, such as trans drone kink, Human Domestication Guide fiction, or the mechsplotation genre) within the echelons of the, admittedly still marginal, field of trans studies, even if one needs only to spend a few minutes in certain online trans spaces to come across them. On a personal level – as a trans woman who is immersed in both trans studies, as well as the online puppygirl culture – I find this neglect frustrating. However unintentionally, this disinterest with the odd and seemingly kooky (which is a by-word for queerness!) areas of trans feminine sexuality perpetuates politics of trans respectability responsible for the ongoing impossibilisation of figures such as that of the trans lesbian, or a kinky trans woman (Gill-Peterson 2022).

To speak of puppygirls – and perhaps to speak *as* a puppygirl – is therefore to look for the way that the abjected, perverted trans girl can speak of her desires without needing to frame them against the demands of trans respectability. It is to stake a claim that her way of being, however marked by association with sexual deviance, neurodivergence, and refusal of productivity, can nonetheless serve as a powerful rejoinder against those very trans-antagonistic forces that make us see such association as pathological. For that reason, it is not my intent to attempt an archeology of the puppygirl. While the work of historians of online trans cultures is vitally important (e.g. Dame-Griff 2023; Valens 2020), I want to focus not on what we can find out *about* puppygirls, but rather what they can teach us. It is my contention that puppygirls know something about being a trans girl that can be hard to articulate otherwise, and the cultural forms through which they are represented are potential vectors for a pedagogy of trans femininity no longer reliant on cis-centric notions of 'the human'. In this sense, my work is inspired by Kathleen Lubey's investigation into eighteenth century pornography as a critical genre (2022), and by Ana Valens insistence on the importance of online pornography for the development of trans feminine subjectivities (2020). To paraphrase the leading question of Lubey's work, I aim to consider what puppygirls know.

## The Puppy Style

To answer this question, however, we first need to establish what puppygirls *are*. The term 'puppygirl' can refer both to an individual ('she is such a puppy'), as well as to a broader

cultural phenomenon: a kinky erotic style, developed in online trans feminine spaces, in which a (presumed trans, presumed gay) woman (usually young and white) assumes a highly sexualised, submissive role of a ‘puppy’, and adorns herself with accessories which signify said role, such as dog collars, leashes, clip-on puppy ears, or stylised paw-like gloves. Crucially, the ‘puppy’ role is often depicted as both highly metaphorical and very literal at the same time. A puppygirl doesn’t need to engage in direct animal role-play (kinky ‘pet play’); instead, she can embody her role by showcasing ‘puppy-like’ characteristics, such as emotional dependence and vulnerability, general submissiveness, or low capacity for thought. Some of those characteristics are only loosely (if at all) associated with actual puppies and dogs – particularly when it comes to the strong presence of masochistic themes in puppygirl media. At the same time, puppygirl media constantly play with the idea that the perception of a puppygirl as a *human person* is mistaken, and that she should not be assumed to be one, no matter her ostensible appearance. In any case, a girl can either be intrinsically ‘puppy’, or can have this role (and its associated traits) imposed upon her through dominance/submission relationships – which are often framed as liberating one’s more authentic self from the abusive requirements of being human.

As this cursory overview of puppygirls shows, it is a phenomenon highly evocative of many elements of contemporary kink cultures, involving elements of such erotic practices as master/slave relationships, pet play, forced feminisation, bimbification, and humiliation/degradation play (Newmahr 2011; Saketopoulou 2023). The closest direct analogue to the puppygirl style can be found in the (predominantly cis gay male) figure of the pup, key to the puppy play subculture. However, while there is a clear relationship between puppygirls and puppy play, the differences between the two are important to note.

As James Pickles describes it (partially quoting from previous research by Liam Wignall and M. McCormack):

Pups engage in their role-play by adopting the physical posture of a canine, such as panting, standing on all fours, sniffing, kneeling, crouching, as well as embodying the emotional and/or mental personifications of a young dog, such as obedience, loyalty, playfulness, curiosity, and unconditional love. Pup role play is symbolised through the ‘gear’ adopted by both handlers and pups. Pups often wear dog hoods, muzzles, collars, gloves and paw pads that restrict hand movement and resemble paws, and rubber toys that are anally inserted to resemble a tail. (Pickles 2024, 75)

Many features of the pup role are also present within the puppygirl style, as both foreground an attempt at embodying an ‘emotional and/or mental personification of a young dog’. Yet, the similarities can be highly misleading. Most importantly, puppy play is primarily associated with a subculture and practices of (presumed cis) gay men. This is in stark contrast to the trans femininity of the puppygirl style.<sup>1</sup> On a more practical level, the puppygirl style’s ‘puppy’ is far more likely to be exposed to dehumanisation and ‘hard’ sadism/masochism and dominance/submission dynamics. The differences can also be located when it comes to the specifics of the ‘material culture’ of kink. While puppygirl media are replete with images of collars and leashes, iconic puppy play ‘toys’ such as pup hoods or tail plugs (Wignall 2022) are comparatively rarer, and overall less important. Similarly, imitation of ‘dog-like’ behaviour through physical play (such as crawling on all fours) is comparatively rarer, though not absent, in puppygirl media, which instead prioritise a state of ‘puppiness’ emerging out of relationships of dominance and submission.

The issue of framing is likewise important. Puppy play has, thus far, been mostly investigated as a 'sexual subculture', a particular sub-community within the broader world of BDSM (Wignall 2017, 2022). This, in turn, influenced the research approach; scholars investigating puppy play have focused on self-identification as a 'pup' or a 'handler', and community structure enabling the puppy play subculture to flourish (such as pup pride groups at Pride marches). Puppygirls as a phenomenon, meanwhile, neither fit traditional definitions of a subculture, nor would it be correct to speak of there being a puppygirl community as such. For this reason, I define them as an erotic style: a shared, but constantly evolving set of aesthetics, narratives, and sexual scripts that can be further assumed, refused, tinkered with, or fundamentally reworked. There is no single 'canonical' way to depict or be a puppygirl, as the style has been produced, popularised and refined in decentralised, dispersed social networks, where it continues to circulate and mutate. It is possible, however, to speak of a 'puppygirl culture', in the broad sense of a shared repository of signifiers, and a common erotic language.

The internet being the home of the puppygirl culture is also reflected in my own personal experiences. I was first exposed to the idea of puppygirls through my participation in Discord (an instant messaging app) servers, where a high enough population of fellow trans women meant that posting of niche trans content did not register as unusual. There, a few years ago, I started noticing memes and erotic content (drawing and porn clips) being exchanged that hinted at the idea of puppygirls. Initially, those exchanges were mostly limited to dedicated 'nsfw' channels, where they coexisted with more traditional erotic content. However, as puppygirl content became increasingly legible and recognisable in the online English-language trans feminine culture, it also 'breached containment', and less obviously sexual memes began to also circulate in general-use channels, attracting both interest, as well as a degree of ridicule that tends to accompany styles perceived as overly popular fads.

In time, I became an active participant in the exchange of puppygirl content, reposting it and sharing it on other servers and with other friends. In many ways, the experience echoes a longer history of being trans on the internet. It resonates with Ana Valens' account of her own participation in niche, trans erotic spaces on sites like tumblr (2020), and their importance for the development of her own sense of gendered and sexual self.

For Valens, spaces like that mattered (and continue to matter), as they allowed for those those members of already marginalised social groups (such as trans women) who disidentify with dominant, assimilationist ideas of what 'proper' belonging in such groups should entail to be exposed to other, often erotically suffused ways of being. And while the world of tumblr porn feeds she describes is now gone, the experience of that milieu remains intimately familiar when it comes to my own participation in the puppygirl culture.

Rarest of all for its time, Tumblr's open embrace of queerness, gender, and sexuality fostered sexual communities that highly valued (and desired) its trans participants. One of my favorite users on Tumblr was a trans woman who ran a Tumblr blog that catered specifically to vore, macrophilia, and belly play content. Her posts would frequently feature her as a half-naked giantess, complete with her deliciously soft belly and bare breasts. Some of her photos would have her feminine penis in view, nonchalantly exposed against her thighs. It was beautiful, unquestionably les, and an incredibly rare opportunity for me (then pre-transition) to see

how hormone replacement therapy feminized trans women's bodies. Her content normalized not just the idea of trans women as sexually desirable, but also penises as – in and of themselves – vessels for trans sapphic desire. (Valens 2020, 78–79)

I am especially moved by Valens' stress on the importance of the 'unquestionably les' content in question. Trans lesbians – and trans lesbian desire – has been thoroughly invisibilised in both the historical record, as well as mainstream narratives of what lives are possible for those of us who transition towards womanhood (Gill-Peterson 2022). This invisibility is especially striking when it comes to trans feminine participation in kink, and kink-adjacent lesbian cultures. The fundamental analytic cleaving of sex from gender, and the need to combat the close association between transness and sexual perversion, have made the figure of a kinky trans lesbian borderline unintelligible – and the concept of *particularly* trans kinky lesbian styles impossible to articulate, despite their long history. The flowering of puppygirl style is direct evidence against the erasure of kinky trans lesbianism: an errant blooming of erotically suffused other ways of being trans, facilitated by grassroots internet communities and media.

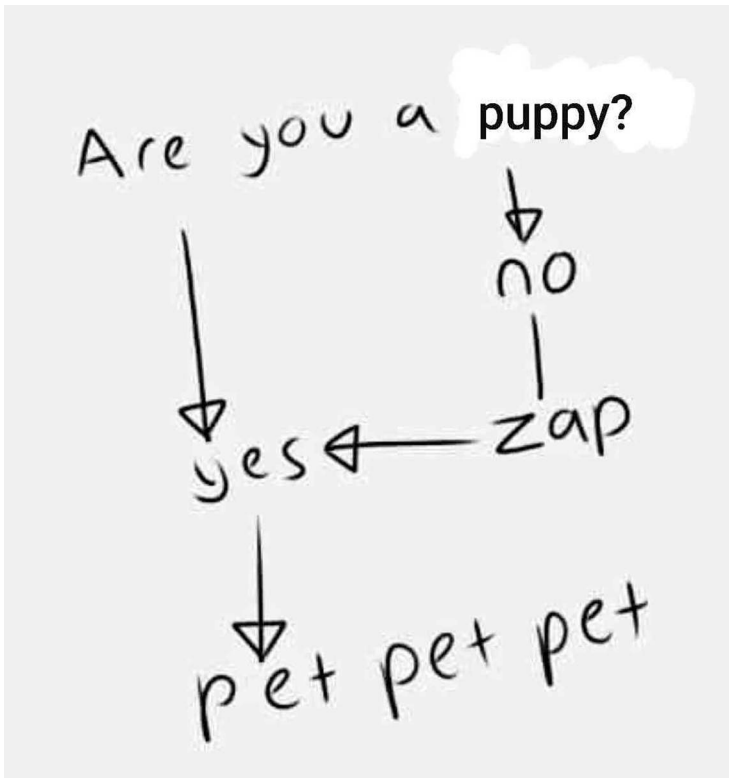
What are those ways, then? This returns us to the question of what puppygirls know, a question which I now move to answer by using select puppygirl content<sup>2</sup> to illustrate three key themes of what, however tentatively, may be called the puppygirl pedagogy: interpersonal affirmation, joyful dehumanisation, and refusal of respectability.

### Interpersonal Affirmation: Becoming a Good dog!

Let us return briefly to the boringkate's post. Contained within it, aside from a clever play on an old internet adage, is one of the core concepts animating the puppygirl style: the insistence that the puppygirl is a *good girl*. Good dog. Good puppy.<sup>3</sup>

That insistence is external, and often cast in the patronising register of an address directed at, well, a pet: a being that does not necessarily understand itself well, or occupy the same position in the hierarchy of beings. In other words, one's status as a puppygirl within puppygirl media is not necessarily an expression of inner identity that needs to be revealed in the process of self-disclosure. Sexual self-knowledge, so key for the modern government of sexual identity is not required of a puppygirl, nor is she expected to participate in the confessional practices of self-avowal that undergird contemporary modes of sex and gender identity (Foucault 1978). In fact, as the following meme (Figure 2) demonstrates, a puppygirl may not even know she is a *puppy*, and needs to have this status imposed through loving, but forceful means.

Initially, the meme in which one's only choice is to either acknowledge herself as a puppy, or be made to acknowledge that through being 'zapped' (presumably, using a shock collar – an iconic piece of technology used for animal abuse, and less controversially, kink), can appear as a narrative of abuse, especially in its ostensible violation of consent. The puppygirl's no does *not mean* no: in fact, it has no meaning at all (as neither does her speech). However the meme, with its narrative, needs to be taken in the broader context of kinky edge play and consensual non-consent. It is important to remember that structures of affirmative consent, today commonly understood as the inviolable line separating 'good sex' from abuse, have originally arisen not to protect individuals, but rather institutions (Noyes 1997; Weinberg 2016), as they offer a clear and



**Figure 2.** An anonymous puppygirl meme.

unambiguous distinction between legal and illegal conduct. However, as scholars such as Katherine Angel (2021) and Avgi Saketopoulou (2023) have noted, sex (in both meanings of the word) is rarely a site of clarity, and is rife with ambiguity, particularly as it strays away from the sun-lit areas of cisness, heterosexuality, and normalcy. These are the shaded realms of puppygirlhood, whose desire does not align with the requirements of cis humanity. In other words, a puppygirl, in puppygirl media, is not represented as a subject of the orthodox understanding of affirmative consent. That, however, is not to say that she does not consent at all, even if there is no weight to her ‘no’.

Saketopoulou’s concept of ‘limit consent’ is illuminative for the dynamic at play. She writes that:

Affirmative consent emerges out of the tradition of reading the Hegelian dialectic as giving us an ethic of recognition, wherein wishes and boundaries are communicated and negotiated, recognizing each other’s needs so as to reach a synthetic conclusion (for example, what kind of sexual contact both are assenting to). But in this volume, I explore a different ethical terrain than the one we are accustomed to, which arises in the confrontation with the irreducible opacity in oneself and in the other. Where affirmative consent imagines a subject that can be fully transparent to herself, the kind of psychoanalysis you will find in this volume acknowledges that the self cannot be fully known, that we are always somewhat opaque to ourselves, and, therefore, that consent negotiations always involve more than we think we bargained for: they involve a confrontation with what is irreducibly alien to us about ourselves. (Saketopoulou 2023, 6–7)

The puppygirl's consent lies not in her disclosure of her desire for a 'puppy' status, and explicit agreement to participate in kinky play that this status facilitates. Instead, as Saketopoulou suggests, it should be located in her willingness to be exposed to that which is alien – animal, inhuman – to herself.

The puppygirl's transness adds another important wrinkle to the analysis. Erotic trans feminine cultures have a long history of engagement with fantasies of 'forced feminisation': of having one's status and position as a girl/woman/female (depending on the script involved) assumed not through a personal act of coming out, but by having it forced by an external actor (Chu 2019; Goldberg 2021). The key aspect of fantasies of 'forced feminisation' has always been that they offer a resolution to what Grace Lavery termed the 'romance of intractability' (2023): the cultural tendency to frame sexual and gender transitions as impossible, especially if they are desired. If one both wants to become a (trans) woman, and yet also cannot imagine a way that such becoming could be effected, the idea of having it externally enforced promises a way out of a seemingly impossible bind.

A puppygirl is a *good girl*. She does not necessarily have a say in whether she is good; in fact, the dominance/submission dynamic inherent in becoming a puppygirl strongly decentres her own subjective perception of herself. But this is not necessarily a bad thing: the reward for this loss of self-determination of her identity is the unconditional, effusive affirmation of her desire (Figure 3). Again, this needs to be taken in the context of the puppygirl's transness: most trans women know that their perception of themselves, that their own ideas of their *self*, are not always trustworthy. In a society built on foundational trans-antagonism (Stanley 2021), and suffused with narratives of trans femininity as inherently fraudulent (Bettcher 2025) and unloveable (Guadalupe-Diaz 2019) it simply *hard* for a trans woman to feel secure enough to be the source of her own affirmation. This is why external, community-based relationships are so vital for sustaining trans life. As Jules Gleeson notes, many of us receive our gendered, sexed sense of self not from personal identity work, but through participation in networks of mutual care, love, and affirmation with other trans people, who are far more likely to gift us with unconditional recognition than we are ourselves (Gleeson 2021). Puppygirls are an extreme case of just that.

Puppygirl media, intentionally or not, often call upon the trope of *dubious consent* (also known as *dubcon*): situations when one's desires and rational self may find each other at odds. While this is the trope of problematic ideas such 'her body says yes, even if her mind says no', it also the space of feminine guilty pleasures (Zibrak 2021), and of the enticing anxiety surrounding desires that we may fear as much as we want them, which, once again, is a deeply trans feeling (Lavery 2023). It is also important to remember that these are *media*, depictions of fantasies marked by a profound sense of longing. In this, their *dubcon* content serves not so much a representational function, but an investigative one: it asks about the more complicated aspects of trans feminine desire. An analogy can be drawn here with the role of *dubcon* as a way of 'thinking the unthinkable' in explicit fanfiction communities suggested by the fan studies scholar Milena Popova (2021). In both cases, what the medium (whether puppygirl memes or omegaverse fanfiction) provides is a mostly safe an anonymous space for expressing desires and anxieties that can be hard to both disclose and investigate otherwise – and as a result, lead to a more thoughtful

## GETTING PUPPY TALKED:



**Figure 3.** A representation of puppygirl praise by the artist [midnightsammy89](#).

and nuanced approach towards consent as a praxis of trust and care, not just a legalistic yes/no standard.

The domineering, patronising register of ‘puppy talk’ leaves just as little room for denial as the question of ‘are you a puppy’. A puppygirl does not speak back to being praised and affirmed. Her only possible response to being told she is an ‘adorable puppy’ or a ‘good girl’ is to bark enthusiastically, and get flustered. After all, dogs don’t talk. But this restriction should not be mistaken for a complete absence of agency. It can just as well represent a line of flight away from self-mastery as proof of one’s humanity (Singh 2018), echoing the old-standing theory of masochism as an ‘escape from the self’ (Baumeister 1988). Crucially, a trans escape from the self is also an escape from liberal ideas of ‘gender’ or ‘sexual’ identity, which predicate one’s status as a trans woman on an attainment of a stable sense of self. For those of us who find such stability impossible to achieve, or who refuse to locate our transness in the certainty of having been ‘born this way’ (Chu 2019) to flee – or be forcibly separated away – from the self need not register as a tragic loss. Even if – especially if – that self is also supposed to secure our status as a *valuable human being*.

### Joyful Dehumanisation: A Silly, Desperate pup

Puppygirl media vacillate between two main modes of address towards puppygirls. Yes, puppygirls are good girls and adorable puppies, but just as often, they are called stupid, desperate mutts (Figure 4). There needs not to be any contradiction between the two, and as Figure 4 aptly illustrates, the two registers are perfectly capable of not only coexisting, but also working towards the same ultimate goal. To be affirmed as a puppygirl is also to be denied the full measure of one's humanity.

Once again, the immediate associations this can summon are unpleasant – and so, as with so much of puppygirl culture, this requires explanation in order to avoid the surface level, pathologising readings. Obviously, there is a long history of kink cultures engaging in play centring around various forms of erotic humiliation and objectification. In fact, the loss of status inherent in becoming a 'pet' – the humiliation of being made to behave like a dog or some other animal – is one of the key elements of dominance/submission dynamics of pet play, including puppy play. Furthermore, in the context of addressing a 'pet', seemingly demeaning terms such as 'dumb' can often be also highly endearing, which is a cultural resonance that kinky pet play is highly attuned to. Puppygirl culture is no different in this regard; on a basic level, the humiliating register can also aid the work of affirmation: 'silly puppy' and 'dumb mutt' exist on the same spectrum of endearing, if patronising, modes of address that are foundational for the puppygirl style.

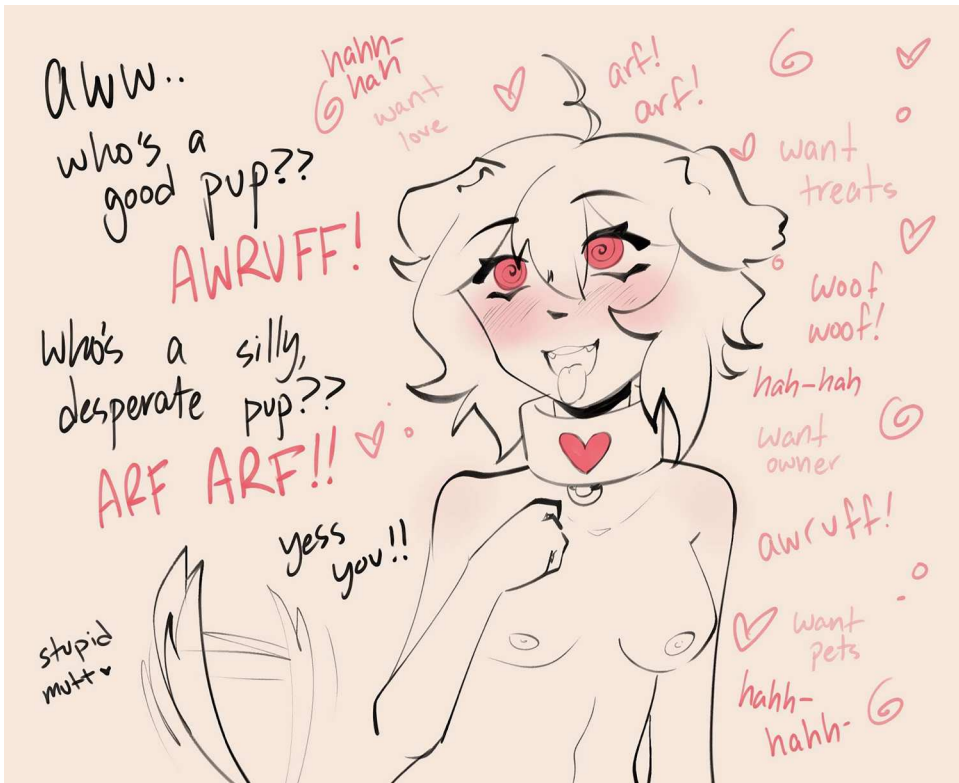


Figure 4. Further puppygirl praise by the artist rnsilver.

In this sense, the puppygirl's inability to respond through language (represented in [Figure 4](#) by the faded out text containing infantile phrases like 'want pets', and bolded out barking onomatopoeia) serves to enhance both the affirming, and humiliating fact of becoming puppy. There is an obvious dominance/submission dynamic being established through that – a puppygirl is defined by her low status, which is why she is usually a *girl*, and almost never a *woman* (though jokes abound about how 'puppygirls are everywhere, but what about dog women?'). As is common for such dynamics in kink, puppygirl's low status and stated incapacity to be anything more than a 'dumb mutt' is also a reason for why she needs to be taken care of (see [Figure 3](#): 'who wants treats for being a good girl'), further liberating the puppygirl not only from her self, but also from the sanist and ableist demands of productivity and self-maintenance expected of a 'productive member of a society'. If she is a pet, she is free from needing to achieve self-mastery. She can instead rely fully on others.

Importantly, the loss of status and dignity allows the puppygirl to become more expressive: to let her desires show in full, and be recognised for what they are ([Figure 5](#)). Once more, this has a strong precedent in erotic trans feminine cultural productions, which have long recognised, and engaged with the shame inherent in wanting to become feminine within a sexist, femmophobic culture (Kosse and Hall 2025). This is one of the reasons for the developments of erotic scripts such as sissy hypno (Chu 2019) that allow for the expression of both the trans feminine desire *and* the shame and humiliation of having such desires. Far detached from the dogmatic demands for trans pride, such scripts linger in the backwards feelings (Love 2007; Malatino 2022) of queerness and transness, and show how such feelings can become a source of pleasure and nourishment, however illicit.

A puppygirl does not have a say in her status as a puppy – but once this status is asserted, she is not without a voice. What [Figure 5](#) shows is how in much of puppygirl media humiliating addresses such as 'miserable little mutt' are not imposed upon the puppygirl, but instead arise in response to her expression of her needs and desires. Here, desperation is a common theme – the puppygirl culture is shot through with a sense of intense longing, the idea that trans femininity is closely associated with alienation from intimacy and care. Yet, in sharp contrast to a lot of mainstream depictions of transness, which cast trans women as doomed to lives of solitude and unfulfilment, puppygirl media are rarely as pessimistic. The puppygirl's obvious desperation, however embarrassing, is acknowledged and cast as ultimately desirable. This is especially important when those needs are far from respectable, and skew closer to themes present in extreme pornography (Moorman 2017).

Puppygirl media often engage with themes of heavy dominance/submission and sadism/masochism. However, unlike many existing apologia for 'hard' BDSM, they rarely try to justify themselves by appealing to values such as consent, pleasure, or healing. As puppygirl media are primarily made and circulated internally, among trans women already engaged in their consumption, there is little need for explanation or justification. In this sense, they harken back to underground pornographic productions which shaped the anti-assimilationist desires within gay (Ruszczycy 2022) and lesbian (Bronstein 2014; Ziv 2015) kinky cultures. There is something liberating about the fact that the puppygirl's desire to debase herself for love, care, and recognition can be presented without the need to defend it as valid or permissible, just as



**Figure 5.** A popular, and impossible to source meme showing dehumanisation aspects of puppygirl media.

there is a perverse pleasure in allowing oneself to be 'weak and pathetic' without struggling to be anything more.

And after all, why should a puppygirl struggle to be more than just a 'dumb mutt'? Why should she gesture at being restored to a full measure of humanity and recognition? As scholars such as Susan Stryker (2024), Emma Heaney (2024), and C. Riley Snorton (2017) have long worked to demonstrate, the dominant modes of belonging to the category of the 'human' are rooted in cissexist, sanist and racist ideas of who gets to *count* as a human. In fact, trans people continue to be routinely denied access to humanity by various social movements that seek to define humanity in such a way as to explicitly make it cis-only. This is, in fact, the core of cisness as an ideology (Heaney 2025). Instead of trying to argue against this exclusion, the puppygirl culture gleefully engages it for pleasure. If the category of the 'human' was never home for kinky trans-bians, it asks, why not leave it altogether, and become a puppy? In this way, the play with dehumanisation present within puppygirl media can be read in two ways, which

do not necessarily contradict each other. On one hand, there is an obvious loss of status and position present in becoming puppy – a loss that mirrors the experience of many trans women who know that their transition risks downwards mobility in many social hierarchies. This loss is closely entwined with queer pleasures of shame and humiliation that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has famously described as ‘creative’ (Sedgwick 2003) – an assessment that holds undeniably true in the face of the blooming of the puppygirl culture and its media.

For all of its intoxicating, illicit pleasure of being discovered and shown as wanton, needy, and vulnerable, the puppygirl dehumanisation carries another promise. Learning how to become a good dog – or being trained by a loving, caring owner – is a byword for unlearning humanity, with all of its noxious baggage of compulsory cisness and sanism. However preoccupied puppygirl media are with the embarrassing erotic and affective needs of puppygirls, what is curiously absent from them are concerns with passing, acceptance, and social recognition at large. A puppygirl does not belong in the structures defined by those concerns, which is often rendered as a source of humour in puppygirl media, such as in this cartoon (Figure 6) of a puppygirl getting ready to steal ‘free dog treats’ from a convenience store jar. She *is* a dog, after all – more dog than human, because for some of us, the former is just far more appealing. No matter what others say.

### Refusal of Respectability: Barking and Ripping Things up and Just Freaking it

What does the girl in the kennel say? Well, that she is a quantitative analyst (Figure 7)! The contrast between a girl’s status as a puppygirl – with all the attendant infantilisation, submission, and dehumanisation – and her other achievements in ‘normal’ life is one of the more popular sources of humour within the puppygirl culture. The joke is obvious: that someone who so enthusiastically embraces her own apparent degradation can also be successful as a person. How could such a person want to become a dog?<sup>4</sup>

The rather vulgar piece of anonymous 4chan greentext (Figure 8) poses this question in a particularly dramatic, and explicit fashion: ‘how the fuck am I supposed to treat her like some brainless dog when she has a fucking masters degree?’. More than that: she is ‘literally the smartest person I know’, and yet insists on being called a ‘dumb little puppy’. Again, the source of the humour here is the seeming contradiction between the puppygirl’s desire to be demeaned and objectified, and her actual qualities as an (ostensibly) human *person*.

From a sanist perspective that sees professional success as evidence of *adjustment*, a state that is both to be desired, and celebrated, such a refusal of respectability is impossible to comprehend. ‘How am I supposed to treat her like some *brainless dog*?’ indeed. However, puppygirl style does not prioritise intelligibility in respect to the ‘human’ (i.e. cis, neurotypical, ablebodied) word. Instead, it revels in the opacity afforded by desires that at least *feel* unassimilable to normative socio-economic order (Cavar 2025).<sup>5</sup> The strangeness of those desires is what puppygirl media love to linger on. This is often done for humour, which nonetheless remains laden with a suggestion that there must be something more to the trans feminine puppygirl’s desire to deny her achievements, productivity, and public success and choose instead to embody a dumb mutt.

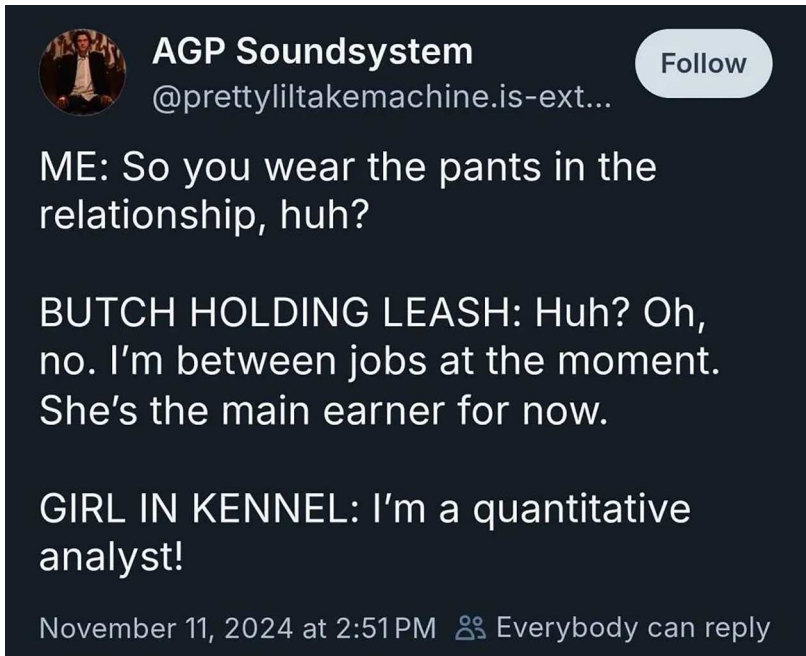
Rob Baumeister’s concept of the escape from the self provides a ready-made explanation, and one which aligns with the well-described phenomenon that many clients



**Figure 6.** A sneaky puppygirl's attempt at a treat jar, by the artist Hitsuji Goods.

of professional dominatrixes are actually highly successful businessmen and professionals, who seek erotic submission as a kind of release valve for the pressures of their professional lives (Lindemann 2012). However, to settle on this answer is to ignore the way that the puppygirl culture and media problematise more than just the dynamics of individual sexual lives and desires. Puppygirls are trans women: their relationship to their professional and public life is therefore defined by their transness, which then reflects in turn on their sexual desire.

Sketching out the public history of trans femininity across the long twentieth century, Jules Gill-Peterson observed that up until very recently, a decision to transition – especially publicly – towards womanhood meant, in practice, an embrace of a downwardly mobile social trajectory (Gill-Peterson 2023). Trans women not only were forced in worse paid, less respected feminine professions, mainly in the service industry (Heaney 2017), but were also often denied a possibility of legal work *at all*, moving them into further into criminalised, informal economies, such as sex work (Gabriel 2024).



**Figure 7.** A typical joke about puppygirl professional qualifications by the Bluesky user AGP Soundsystem.



**Figure 8.** An anonymous 4chan greentext engaging with themes of puppygirl professional achievement.

In other words (and with few exceptions) becoming a woman was disastrous for one's professional prospects – and one's capacity to remain a respectable member of the society. For that reason, many 1960s and 1970s organisations where middle class TV/TS (transvestite/transsexual) associated stressed keeping one's trans life as a purely private, domestic affair (Cousens 2023).

At the same time, as Gill-Peterson notes, there was an opposing movement, emerging from more mainstream types of early trans advocacy, which presented 'successful' transitions (ones resulting in the ability to pass as cis) as a way of saving 'street' trans women from a life of prostitution and exploitation. In this sense, carefully monitored and gatekept transition, happening in consultation with authorities, and containing features such as job training (into feminine professions such as typists) could be understood as a pathway towards, not away from, respectability (Gill-Peterson 2023). In this way, professional success was increasingly understood as a way for trans women to secure their class position, and (by extension) their social status as *proper* women. This association only became stronger as further job sectors opened up for trans women in the 1990s, in tech, education, and culture, helping to establish the idea of a white, economically and socially successful trans woman as the 'good counterpart' to the implicitly non-white, low-status transsexual sex worker.

The idea of transition as a facilitating a highly restricted mode of upwards mobility – as compatible with workplace success – is therefore inextricable from the assimilationist narratives of moving transness away from its historical associations with sexual perversion, sex work, sleaze, and, crucially, non-productivity. Within the liberal, progress narratives a trans person can become no different from a cis person *in the respect of professional achievement*: they can work their way up out of deviancy and solitude, and into normalcy and inclusion.

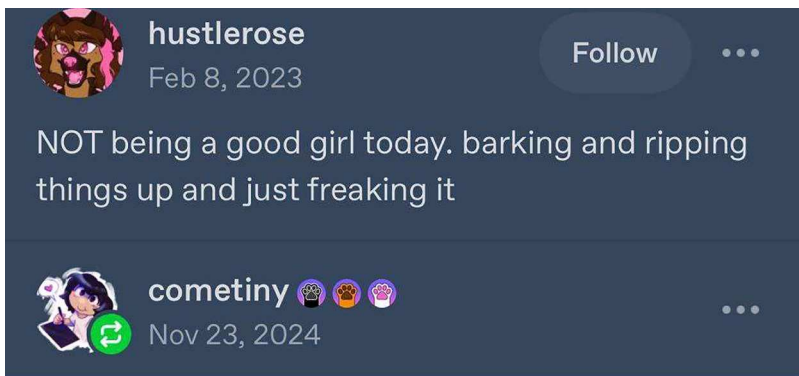
Puppygirl media refuse to celebrate such trajectories. Even if a puppygirl is a 'well-respected expert in her field', her desire is oriented away from the status and recognition that should be her due. Instead, she wants to be celebrated and loved for her wantonness, neediness, and dependency; for all those hyper-feminine, and highly pathologised qualities that are commonly seen as detrimental for one professional and public success (Lewis 2025). A puppygirl is resolutely *backwards*: her position is that of rejection of pride and respectability that ought to be celebrated as an achievement of mainstream LGBTQ+ advocacy. She is not out and proud to be trans and successful; she wants to live in a kennel and be told to bark by her girlfriend – even if she is eminently capable of being 'more'.

It should not be at all surprising, then, that the puppygirl culture is also rife with celebrations of neurodivergence and (at least declaratively) disability. In puppygirl media, puppygirls are often identified as belonging on the autism spectrum. Their puppy status affords them the ability to be openly neuro-queer; as dogs, they do not have to mask, that is attempt at passing themselves as neurotypical, which is yet another requirement for inclusion under the category of 'the human' (Chen 2023). Puppygirl's association of her transness with her autism also runs against the tendency to deny people on the spectrum the ability to self-determine their gender, and to speak of themselves from a position of self-knowledge (Yergeau 2017). Neither sexual, nor neurological 'normalcy' is a point of reference for a puppygirl's transness, nor does she have to be productive to matter. In fact, she can even be, like any other dog, quite bad: barking and ripping things up, and just freaking it (Figure 9).

For that reason, the flipside of the 'I am a quantitative analyst' joke is that in puppygirl media, puppygirls are just as often completely outside of formal economies, employment and education, as they are hyper-successful. One does not have to have status in order to

revel in the rejection of it. It is funny when a puppygirl has a masters degree, but it is by no means required of her; rather, it is the relationship of a profound disidentification from the requirements of trans respectability that defines her. The short comic by the indie artist Spicymancer (Figure 10) demonstrates this admirably.

While the nameless protagonist of the comic is successfully tricked into service work (with the implication being that she's been unemployed thus far), her reactions to employment do not hint at an easily upwards trajectory towards becoming more human, and less dog. She has to regularly shower – but that is not a sign of personal growth, but rather a downside of her new position, just as the fact that as an *employee* (not a human!) she is not allowed to peruse the dog treat jar. If her work has any upsides, they are to be found in realms of interpersonal connection (nice coworkers) and indulgence (free pastries at the end of the day). She still wears her dog collar, and although as a 'working dog' she should not be pet during her shift, she expresses a hope that maybe, after hours ...



**Figure 9.** A tumblr joke about being a 'bad' puppygirl by the user hustlerose, illustrated by the user cometiny.

### Service Dog



Figure 10. A comic about a puppygirl's work situation by the online artist Spicymancer.

Spicymancer's comic shows how puppygirl media can critically engage with the pillars of normalcy and respectability that constrain trans life. While the comic's protagonist is capable of fully escaping the necessities of work – and of humanity – she nonetheless does not identify with them, and instead finds ways to remain a puppy even when on the clock, even when forced to play at a role and a position so far apart from the thrust of her desire. Just as the quantitative analyst choosing a kennel, she finds a way to live against trans respectability in the cracks of everyday survival.

### In Praise of Dumb Mutts

Reflecting back on her field-defining early work, Susan Stryker says the following of her positions at that time:

At the time, my goal was to find some way to make the subaltern speak. [...] The only option other than reactively saying “no we’re not” to every negative assertion about us was to change the conversation, to inaugurate a new language game. My strategy for attempting that was to align my speaking position with everything by which “they” abjected us. It was to forgo the human, a set of criteria by which I could only fail as an embodied subject. (Stryker 2024, 154)

Puppygirl culture, as I have tried to demonstrate, represents a similar attempt. Although it emerges not out of critical dialogue within the critical in/humanities, but rather from the thick soup of internet erotica, memes, and fragments of varied kink cultures, what it offers is, in the end, not that different: it is a way for the subaltern to speak. Just as Stryker suggests, puppygirls forgo humanity, and present within the puppygirl culture is strong suspicion of the overt valorisation of this category in general. Even without the sophisticated theoretical background of high theory, puppygirls know that as long as being human remains bound up in cisness, capitalist productivity, and sanist neuronormativity, they can only fail at it. So they choose not to try.

At the same time, puppygirl also know that ‘becoming puppy’ is both a liveable position, and one that can never be fully realised. There is no way to fully step out of the world of being human, as long as one is required to be one for survival and basic recognition. For all the jokes about it, there is no mythical dog pound on the other side of normativity, where all puppygirls can live in joyous (in)human<sup>6</sup> harmony. This is what all the jokes about dumb mutts with master degrees suggest: many of us have to play at humanity, even as that humanity neither suits us, nor nourishes us. In this sense, puppygirl culture does not really promise a revolutionary solution to the challenges of trans life. It does not propose a way out of our present binds, though it does possibly make them more liveable in the present.

After all, the promise of boringkate’s post, with which I have opened this article, is that there is a possibility of trans feminine recognition outside of the ambit of the human; that there are spaces online (and not just online) where one’s (in)human position can be asserted, enforced, and celebrated. This is the fleeting utopia of being told that you will look so very nice when leashed, of being told to bark instead of speaking, and of having all the concerns of being a fully-fledged person zapped from one’s head.

The last needs not to be such a scary prospect. What is striking about the pedagogy of puppygirls is how close it lies to the challenge issued by the trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher, who in her recent work *Beyond Personhood* suggested that concepts such as ‘self’ are so closely and noxiously associated with the coloniality of the Enlightenment human as to require abandoning for trans people (Bettcher 2025). Instead, Bettcher suggests the need to move *beyond personhood*, beyond the self, and into a recognition of the worlding work of ‘interpersonal spatiality’. While Bettcher’s subtle philosophy cannot be adequately explained in a short paragraph, what is striking to me here is that the puppygirl insistence on interpersonal affirmation, and her devaluation of humanity, personhood, and respectability all align closely with Bettcher’s project. This in turn both strengthens Bettcher’s own claim to working in the area of ‘grounded philosophy’, one emerging from personal, embodied experience of being trans in the world, and shows how even seemingly irrelevant, niche trans cultures can unostentatiously sustain new ways of being, thinking, and desiring transness.

Here, my analysis of puppygirl culture both aligns itself, and departs from the work being done on *tranimalities*. This field thinks trans through the lens of animal studies and the broader affinity between transness and animality (Chen 2012; Colebrook 2015; Hayward 2008; Hird 2008; Seymour 2015). The hierarchised human-animal dichotomy is a key theme in puppygirl culture, and the way through which the pleasures and desires of (in)humanity become accessible. Similarly to tranimal perspectives, puppygirl media both engage with, and refuse to honour a hierarchical worldview in which being human is seen as both intrinsically superior and desirable compared to being animal, while also blurring the putatively fundamental distinction between humanity and animality (Lemke 2021). However, while puppygirl media share *tranimalities*' interest in the live-able possibilities afforded by trans (in)humanities, the 'puppy' of puppygirl remains a 'girl', preferably in a relationship to a more conventionally 'human' owner, and thus does not necessarily desire a wholesale abandonment of the human/animal distinction. After all, her desire is to be located *against* the human, but not *without* a human.<sup>7</sup>

This puppygirl investment in a dichotomy that it is also seeking to trouble is also indicative of the deeper limitations of puppygirl media. For all of their celebration of trans (in)humanity, they remain limited in the same way that so much of online trans culture is. Puppygirls are, almost without exception, white, young, and conventionally attractive. Despite textual refusal of the scriptures of passing, most puppygirl media represent trans women who would have little problem with 'going stealth' if they only removed their floppy ears. This is not only representative of the broader lack of diversity in many online trans spaces (Dame-Griff 2023) but also painfully harkens back to the association of whiteness and youth with plasticity (Gill-Peterson 2018; Schuller 2017). It is not clear from engaging with puppygirl media if they leave any room for being trans otherwise – for the joyous trans (in)humanity – to those whose bodies and minds are not understood as capable of easy change and adjustment. Even becoming puppy, then, happens under the long shadow of seeing young, conventionally attractive white people as capable of infinite transformation and self-fashioning, and rendering age, non-whiteness, and fat to the realm of static flesh (Gill-Peterson 2018).

Puppygirl media play with an experience of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) underpinning trans women's relationship to their humanity – a status that they can never fully attain without giving up on transness itself. However, this relationship, where *trans* becomes the crux of one's (in)humanity is not necessarily as readily available (or relatable) to those whose non-white flesh has historically been framed as *intrinsically* animal (Goldberg 2021). It is not impossible to imagine forms of the puppygirl aesthetic that could be more accommodating outside of the ambit of whiteness – after all, kink cultures have a long history of providing a space for painful, but productive engagement with race and racial relations (Cruz 2016; Musser 2014; Saketopoulou 2023). Yet, that would require the puppygirl culture to be able to account for its own constitutive whiteness, in ways more productive than simply demanding more diversity in puppygirl representation.<sup>8</sup> That this feels unlikely is particularly painful in the context of puppygirl's gainful engagement with questions of disability and neurodiversity, which nonetheless remain badly constricted by the culture's whiteness and ageism.<sup>9</sup>

The puppygirl culture's unthinking celebration of youthfulness, and its implicit whiteness is almost certainly the result of puppygirl media being primarily circulated among the trans women who make up today's trans feminine internet. This is a community of

primarily white, downwardly mobile or precariously employed (often in spite of their high education) women of the millennial and zoomer generations (Valens 2020). In this way, it is reflective of both that community's desires, as well as its persistent blind spots. It is not accidental, I think, that the 'stock' puppygirl representation present in media analysed for this article reflects an idealised, 'girly' embodiment that many of us find simultaneously highly desirable and unattainable. There is an unmistakable element of yearning in puppygirl culture, an aching need for a body and a life stripped of all the complications of being trans in the world.

Puppygirl media are capable of both engaging this desire critically, while also affirming the same normative, respectable forms of trans embodiment that they otherwise strive to deny. Those tendencies do not cancel each other out, but rather run in parallel. They are in a contradiction that has to remain unresolved, if only because it is not inherent to puppygirl culture by itself, but rather representative of a larger tension present within our often contradictory desires for social legibility. Puppygirl culture, on its own, is incapable of escaping the conditions of its emergence, no more than any other product of trans cultures developing within the historical context of dominance and exclusion that inheres in the very idea of a 'trans person', who needs to be recognisable *as a person* to count as a trans one. That does not mean, however, that it is incapable of engaging with *itself* critically – in fact, I hope this article to be an example of just that – or of being critically *engaged with*.

That is the spirit of the joke drawing hidden within Figure 8: the reminder that 'you are going to grow up eventually', which means ceasing to be a puppygirl, and instead becoming a *dog woman*. The drawing illustrates this transition by showing a passage from youthful partying to adult office work – but one within which the trans woman in question is *still* a dog. The potentially queerphobic mandate of leaving the childhood follies of erotic extravagance for the sake of gainful employment is thus juxtaposed with the affirmation of a possibility to remain a *dog woman* even as one ages out of puppygirlhood.

This contradiction shows fractures within the puppygirl style, but fractures are nonetheless openings, hinting at possibilities of charting out our own, disidentificatory ways of living a trans life in a world that remains profoundly marked by the refusal of trans desires. The puppygirl culture is not a ready-made utopia. It is too limited and contradictory for that. Through those limitations and contradictions, however, it offers a limited and contradictory (and thus lived) way of speaking our desires: a map, however spotty and imperfect, towards a trans feminine life that does not take the cisness of humanity as its main point of reference. Ultimately, this is what puppygirls know: that you don't have to fit in within the narrow constraints of the human to be loved, desired, and cared for; that you need not to be valued for your capacity to engage with fundamentally trans-antagonistic structures of daily survival; that transness can be more than just an exercise in mimicking modes of living that were never meant for us.

## Notes

1. This distinction, of course, needs not to be taken as categorical. There are cis lesbian histories of puppy play: Martha Alexander's (1982) short story 'Passion Play' from the landmark lesbian S/M collection *Coming to Power* provides a great example of a form of puppy play between cis lesbians which touches on a number of themes (such as forced feminisation) that are important to the contemporary puppygirl aesthetic. On the flipside, elements of the puppygirl

aesthetic have been taken up and remixed by trans masculine people, such as in the case of the porn performer Cam Damage. However, it is likewise important to not generalize too much away from the trans feminine specificity at the heart of the puppygirl style, as is far too often done when trans feminine cultures are generalized into a more generic allegory of gendered and/or sexual diversity (Heaney 2017).

2. While I have attempted to attribute the works referenced in this article to individual artists and creators, puppygirl content is often difficult to trace back to a source. Images are circulated and reposted server to server without attribution, while the increasing fragmentation of social networks coupled with link rot means that the 'original' source of the work may simply be no longer available. Furthermore, some of those works (such as Figure 2) are further reworked by individual users reposting them, making authorship borderline impossible to establish.
3. It is important to note that the 'puppy' or 'dog' qualities of a puppygirl need not to be necessarily understood as referring to *actual* puppy- or dog- like qualities (and so to a specific animal positionality or identifications), but rather to a set of highly stylized, eroticized forms of expression with an antagonistic relationship to the foundational cisness of the post-Enlightenment Western human subject (Heaney 2024; Snaza 2024), and only nominal affinity with actual animal behaviour (which is also sometimes discussed within puppygirl media). While – as this article shows – disidentification from (cis) humanity is a key part of puppygirl culture, this does not necessarily lead to xenogender or furry (Cavar 2025) identification with animality.
4. There is an obvious resonance here with the old-standing question present both within certain feminist, as well as transmisogynist (and sometimes feminist transmisogynist) discourses: 'how could a man want to become a woman'?
5. One, of course, needs to be extremely careful with any kind of argument that assigns worth to trans practices and styles depending on how radical and/or subversive they present themselves. The puppygirl desire is not meaningful because it is a path away from the ravages of capitalism. It is meaningful because it is lived as a way of *surviving* within them.
6. I use the parenthetical here following Stryker's description: '(In)human thus cuts both ways, toward remaking what human has meant and might yet come to be, as well as toward what should be turned away from, abandoned in the name of a better ethics' (Stryker 2024, 155).
7. It is also important to note that tranimalities belong to a family of theories with a noted tendency to elide the particularities of lived trans experiences and desires (Chu and Harsin 2019). In writing about puppygirls, I am invested in highlighting the trans feminine particularity of this style, which may unfortunately be lost if we follow, for example, Claire Colebrook's call for 'forms of sexuality that do not allow themselves to be recognized as ultimately human just like us but instead refuse the drama of an individuation that has tiresomely relied on gender and sexual distinction' (Colebrook 2015, 241).
8. A significant challenge here is that the puppygirl 'owner', usually implied, but not represented in puppygirl media, occupied an unmarked body – and so a body easily presumed white. This in turn means that any depiction of non-white race in puppygirl media needs to account for the racial hierarchies it may inadvertently call upon.
9. Yet, an interesting approach to an explicitly Black and kinky human/animal hybridity is suggested in Lilian Wolf's study of the work of the artist Juliana Huxtable (Wolf 2023). While Wolf does not engage with puppygirls explicitly, her reading of race and kinky pleasures of undoing one's humanity through animal identification hint at what a more nuanced engagement with race within puppygirl culture could look like.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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