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## Andrea Long Chu and the Trouble with Desire

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the writings by Andrea Long Chu focusing on her understanding of desire and its role in the formation of gender and in the process of gender transition. The essay also deals with her much-disputed understanding of the relation between desire and politics, taking into account the critique formulated by Amia Srinivasan. In conclusion the essay argues that Chu's writings, if taken with a dose of caution and supplemented with the theory of desire formulated by Jacques Lacan, can offer us insights about the importance of desire for understanding various phenomena of human experience, in which we otherwise maybe wouldn't look for it.

**Keywords:** Amia Srinivasan, Andrea Long Chu, desire, gender, gender transition, Jacques Lacan, politics

Writings by Andrea Long Chu have provoked a lot of controversies within contemporary feminist theory, especially in the U.S.A., not least because of her understanding of desire. In the course of this essay, I propose to analyze (but also criticize) Chu's understanding

of desire, as formulated in her book *Females: A Concern* and essays preceding its publication. The essay is divided into three parts; the first two parts discuss the role of desire in the formation of gender and in the process of gender transition, while the third part deals with the relation between desire and (feminist) politics.

### Desire and Gender

We will start by taking a look at Andrea Long Chu's equally praised and detested book *Females: A Concern* (2019).<sup>1</sup> The book is partly a memoir about her own transition and partly a theoretical discussion of *The SCUM Manifesto* and the play, *Up Your Ass*, by Valerie Solanas. The central thesis of the book concerns her conception of femaleness, which is for Chu, neither gender nor (biological) sex. It is, as she writes, "a universal existential condition"<sup>2</sup> which affects all human beings, and maybe not only human beings. As being and desiring seem to be inextricably connected for Chu, desire plays the central role in defining femaleness. Chu, therefore, writes that by female she means "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another. [...] To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense."<sup>3</sup> It is easy to notice that Chu's definition of femaleness resembles Lacan's formula of desire as the desire of the Other, insofar at least as we understand the other as the other person.<sup>4</sup> However, Lacan would never state that someone's desire results simply from the appropriation of the other's desire. It is rather that one recognizes the other's desire and tries to situate himself/herself in relation to the enigmatic object which the other lacks. Thus, Chu's concept of femaleness, it can be argued, presents the simplistic reading of Lacan's theory which reduces the dialectics of desire in favour of a sort of unilateral conception according to which one person always has to assume the role of "an incubator"<sup>5</sup> of the other's desire. Notwithstanding this important difference, a fundamental point which Chu's and Lacan's understanding of desire have in common is that our de-

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that all the citations taken from the book *Females* are paginated according to its digital (epub) edition.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Long Chu, *Females: A Concern* (New York: Verso, 2019), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Chu, *Females*, 15

<sup>4</sup> For Lacan's theory of desire we consulted Owen Hewitson's entry on [lacanonline.com](http://lacanonline.com). See Owen Hewitson, "What Does Lacan Say About... Desire?", [LacanOnline.com](http://lacanonline.com) (May 9, 2010). <https://www.lacanonline.com/2010/05/what-does-lacan-say-about-desire/>.

<sup>5</sup> Chu, *Females*, 15.

sires arise from our encounter with something outside of us, either with the symbolic order as the big Other or with the other people as its mediators.

Our desire is not something innate inside us. Indeed, for Lacan our desires are not even our own—we always have to desire in the second degree, finding a path to our own desire and our own recognition by asking the question of what the Other desires.<sup>6</sup>

The conception of femaleness as “a universal sex” leads Chu to the somewhat extravagant proclamation that “everyone is female and everyone hates it.”<sup>7</sup> The reason why everyone hates it is that it presupposes self-negation or sacrificing one’s self in order to make space for the desire of the Other. Chu goes on to define gender as the way “one *cope*s with being female” or, to put it more precisely, as “the specific defense mechanisms that one consciously or unconsciously develops as a reaction formation *against* one’s femaleness, within the terms of what is historically and socioculturally available—this is what we ordinarily call *gender*.”<sup>8</sup> By deploying such a definition of gender, Chu implicitly opposes the acclaimed performative theory of gender. In contrast to the followers of the theory established by Judith Butler, for whom there’s nothing beneath the social performativity of gender (gender as performative), Chu strives to give ontological ground or substance to gender. As she succinctly puts it: “the claim that gender is socially constructed has rung hollow for decades not because it isn’t true, but because it’s wildly incomplete.”<sup>9</sup> Chu will therefore argue that “what makes gender *gender*—the substance of gender, as it were—is the fact that it expresses, in every case, the desires of another.”<sup>10</sup> Far from being independent, gender has a complementary relation to sexuality. If sexual orientation can be understood as “the social expression of one’s own sexuality” (sexual desire), then gender can be understood as the “social expression of someone *else’s* sexuality,”<sup>11</sup> someone else’s desire. If we put this into Lacanian terms, we could say that

the social performativity of gender does not indeed express some inner gender identity stripped from all relationality but the way one situates oneself in relation to the enigmatic object of the Other’s desire. This is why Chu will write in her provocative manner that from the perspective of gender, “we are all dumb blondes”<sup>12</sup>, that is to say, objects of the Other’s desire.

### Desire and Gender Transition

Now we’re going to turn to Chu’s essays in order to further analyze her understanding of desire, specifically its role in the process of gender transition. Before we continue, it may be useful to remind that Chu’s “theory” of gender transition is based primarily on her own personal experience.<sup>13</sup>

The way Chu describes the workings of desire in her essays might seem at first to be in conflict with the theory laid out in the book. Whereas in her book Chu highlights the interpersonal character of desire, i.e., how our desires always respond or, in her view, simply conform to the desires of the other people, in the essays she emphasizes the force of desire. However, this does not mean that in her essays Chu abandons her understanding of desire as an “external force.”<sup>14</sup> As she describes it poetically (and half-ironically) in the book, “wanting to be a woman was something that descended upon me, like a tongue of fire, or an infection—or a mental illness.”<sup>15</sup>

What is most likely the strongest account of the central role desire played in her own transition is given in two of her essays published before the book—“My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy” and “On Liking Women.” In the former short piece, Chu dives into one of the core problems regarding desire, which is that it doesn’t differentiate between good and bad; in other words, that desire by definition goes beyond the aforementioned opposition. We would add though, that this is not only a question of objects (good or bad objects) but also a question of effects. To put it in Deleuzian terms, the desiring process is always constituted on the plane of immanence where effects

<sup>6</sup> Owen Hewitson, “What does Lacan Say.”

<sup>7</sup> Chu, *Female*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>12</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>13</sup> However, there are other trans people who have come out with similar experiences. See for example Amanda Roman, “Gender Desire vs. Gender Identity,” *Medium* (September 11, 2019). <https://medium.com/@kemenatan/gender-desire-vs-gender-identity-a334cb4eeec5>.

<sup>14</sup> We might also call it “an alien force.” See Chu, *Females*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

that take place (actualize themselves) cannot yet be called either good or bad but only pleasurable or unpleasurable. So it is only in retrospect that we can say that our desiring turned out bad for us. The object of desire, on the other hand, as Chu seems to be perfectly aware, always remains unattainable to the point that we can say that there is no final (ultimate) object of desire; and objects which come to replace it, eventually disappoint us. Chu uses this structure of desire to describe people's relationship (attachment) to various things, including politics. Such is, for example, she claims, women's relationship to feminism today, whereby feminism functions as an object of desire, which constantly disappoints its adherents but without diminishing their desire.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in her essay, "On Liking Women," Chu characterizes being a woman as an object of desire which led her through the transition.

You attach yourself to this object, follow it around, carry it with you, watch it on TV. One day, you tell yourself, it will give you what you want. Then, one day, it doesn't. Now it dawns on you that your object will probably never give you what you want.<sup>17</sup>

To summarize, our three main theses regarding desire would be the following: a) the real object that could satisfy a desire is unattainable, b) the effects that the process of desiring might produce or lead to can be good or bad but appear as such to consciousness only afterwards, and c) the objects that come to substitute the non-existing ultimate object of desire might allure us for a while but eventually disappoint us.

It is not coincidental that Chu wrote her short piece anticipating the forthcoming operation (bottom surgery) by which she would get her vagina. This way she emphasized the relative autonomy of the desiring process in relation to the effects it might lead to. As she makes it clear, she figured out that this (operation with all of its outcomes) is what she wants and decided to do it although she knew that it might not make her happier: "This is what I want, but there is no guarantee it will make me happier. In fact, I don't expect it to. That

shouldn't disqualify me from getting it."<sup>18</sup> By stating that, Chu wants to affirm that "desire and happiness are independent agents"<sup>19</sup> or, as we would formulate it, that desire is immanent (or in immanence) while happiness is transcendent.<sup>20</sup> We could argue further that the attitude expressed by Chu exemplifies one of the ways that we can interpret what Lacan meant by saying that one should not give way on one's desire. As one anonymous blogger (presumably Levi Bryant) suggests, "the only way to escape the guilt that indicates the betrayal of our desire is to take responsibility for our desire, to avow our desire, to no longer put off our desire or to delay our desire, but to come to be the subject of our desire."<sup>21</sup> And isn't this exactly what Chu does when she decides to undergo the operation, because this is what she wants<sup>22</sup> and regardless of whether it will make her happier or not?

Chu draws further theoretical implications from her own experience of gender transition in her by now famous essay "On Liking Women" where, in contrast to the usual narrative, she insists that she didn't transition because of the inner feeling of already being a woman but because of her desire to become a woman.<sup>23</sup> And she makes it clear that by this she doesn't mean being a woman in "some abstract, academic way"<sup>24</sup> but goes on to list all those stereotypical behaviours (performative acts) and objects associated with female gender (femininity) that she transitioned for: gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, crying at the movies, the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

By stating this, Chu rejects the theory according to which people transition because of the inner feeling of belonging to a gender different from the one into which they were raised and claims, on the

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Long Chu, "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy," *The New York Times* (November 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Chu, "My New Vagina."

<sup>20</sup> Happiness is, in our opinion, always attached from the outside (as a signifier) to the certain psychic/bodily state.

<sup>21</sup> Levi Bryant, "Lacanian Ethics and the Superego," *LARVAL SUBJECTS* (June 6, 2006). <http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com/2006/06/lacanian-ethics-and-superego.html>.

<sup>22</sup> We could note that Chu doesn't make a distinction between wanting and desiring, so we decided to follow her and simply equate the two.

<sup>23</sup> One should note that Chu avoids using the verb becoming in the context of transition, even as she insists on the central role of desire in the transition.

<sup>24</sup> Chu, "On Liking Women."

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See Andrea Long Chu, "The Impossibility of Feminism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 30.1 (2019).

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1 30* (2018), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/>.

contrary, that “transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire.”<sup>26</sup> For Chu, transness is “a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*.”<sup>27</sup> Gender identity, on the other hand, she thinks, is becoming more and more of an empty concept whose primary function is “to bracket, if not to totally deny, the role of desire in the thing we call gender.”<sup>28</sup> Again, it is only by acknowledging the role of desire in the formation of gender, that gender becomes a meaningful (substantive) concept.

This all leads us to the fundamental question about the relation between desire and identification. At the beginning of her essay, Chu offers us a striking confession: “The truth is, I have never been able to differentiate liking women from wanting to be like them.” It is easy to notice that this sentence operates with a distinction between desire (liking someone, taking someone as an object) and identification (to be like someone, regarding someone as ego-ideal). But what makes this proclamation startling and potentially theoretically significant is that it designates desire as a force behind identification. So could there be a type of desire, different from but not necessarily opposed to the sexual desire, which runs behind the process of gender identification? We could call it identificatory desire.<sup>29</sup> It would be this same desire that drives (guides) the process of gender transition, as Chu and some others have testified in their writings.

### Desire and (Feminist) Politics

In the last section of this essay, we will turn to the question of the relation between desire and (feminist) politics. Chu elaborates her view on the topic mostly in the previously discussed essay “On Liking Women” and the academic article “The Impossibility of Feminism”<sup>30</sup> in both of which she discusses lesbian separatism as a failed political project. Chu claims that the radical feminists of the seventies, who demanded the withdrawal of women from men, not just in

the sphere of the economy, but on the level of relationality as such,<sup>31</sup> encountered a problem of “desire’s ungovernability.”<sup>32</sup> What this indicates for Chu, is, again, the relative autonomy of desire, which in this case means that one cannot simply curb his/her desire in order for it to fit one’s political program. Drawing from this historical outcome of seventies’ feminism, Chu concludes that “nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle.”<sup>33</sup> She elaborates her analysis of seventies feminism in the U.S.A. in more detail in the aforementioned academic article but the general conclusion remains the same and, in a somewhat extended version, sounds like this:

There is no political program, I submit, capable of efficaciously restructuring people’s attachment to things that are bad for them [...] You simply cannot tell people how to feel, at least with the result that they start feeling the way you want them to.<sup>34</sup>

Chu’s implicit conviction that there is nothing we can do about our desires, except to submit to them/follow them has expectably provoked reactions. Amia Srinivasan, in her essay “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?”, notices the dangers of Chu’s position and warns that it leads toward the total rejection of the political critique of desire, which she finds unacceptable for any feminism that wants to discuss the injustices of exclusion and misrecognition suffered by women but also by other oppressed groups.<sup>35</sup> Most importantly, Srinivasan doesn’t agree with Chu that any political critique of desire necessarily leads to moralism. What feminism, but also other forms of theory, can and ought to do is to “interrogate the grounds of desire.”<sup>36</sup> Although she doesn’t explain what she means by it, we can suppose that it primarily means addressing the formation of desire inside a broader political and economic system. It would therefore aim at the critical analysis of the semiotic infrastructure through which desire traverses, gaining its shape. In other words, although

<sup>26</sup> Idem.

<sup>27</sup> Idem.

<sup>28</sup> Idem.

<sup>29</sup> We’re borrowing this concept from the text by Jordy Rosenberg. See Jordy Rosenberg, “The Daddy Dialectic,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (March 2018), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-daddy-dialectic/>.

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, we weren’t able to obtain the access to the article again. That is why the information about the exact page location of certain paraphrases and citations are missing.

<sup>31</sup> See Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism.”

<sup>32</sup> Chu, “On Liking Women.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism”, ?.

<sup>35</sup> See Amia Srinivasan, “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?”, *London Review of Books* (March 2018), 40.6, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n06/amia-srinivasan/does-anyone-have-the-right-to-sex>.

<sup>36</sup> Srinivasan, “Does Anyone.”

it does not make much sense to criticize desire as such (this way moralism lies),<sup>37</sup> we can and should ask ourselves about the semiotic infrastructure, together with its material (economic) ground, in which our desires are embedded. To put it simply, there's no better way of changing desires (allowing them to reshape themselves) than by changing the infrastructure in which and through which they take shape, although this is easier said than done. The remaining question is still "what do we get by such (critical) consciousness and would it mean anything for our actions?" This question is tightly connected with the importance, especially highlighted by Lacanian psychoanalysis, of differentiating between "true" desire (the desire that is central for defining who one is and what one does) and so-called false or defensive desires which tend to obstruct the process of desiring and direct subject toward more easily accessible satisfaction.<sup>38</sup> It follows that Lacan's expression not to give way on one's desire pertains only to the former.

In her essay, Srinivasan points at a few other important things. One of them is that our desires (she writes about sexual preferences) can and do alter over the course of time and "sometimes under the operation of our own wills." So, whereas Chu emphasizes the stubbornness of desire (its tendency to remain fixed on certain objects), its "childlike" character, Srinivasan rather points toward its flexibility (plasticity). Both theorists are right because desire is neither completely flexible nor fixed, and it is definitely not given. Secondly, as Srinivasan beautifully notices, our desires can surprise us, "leading us somewhere we hadn't imagined we would ever go, or towards someone we never thought we would lust after, or love."<sup>39</sup> This is because our desires originate in the unconscious where their deepest roots reside and as such, they are initially unknown to us, which is to say that they have to be discovered and turned conscious, to the extent that it is possible, through an often difficult and long process. In other words, no one is born a subject of his/her desire and it is in that process of becoming a subject of one's desire that Lacan thought the ethics of psychoanalysis lie.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Chu, "On Liking Women."

<sup>38</sup> Never was this probably more important than today when our survival as a species and the future of life on this planet depend largely on our ability to recognize how our present desires open or close space for certain futures. For this line of thinking, see for example Mareile Pfannebecker, "Fully Automated Luxury Veganism: Desire in a Post-Labour World," *Arc Digital* (June, 2020), <https://arcdigital.media/fully-automated-luxury-veganism-ce149507f845>.

<sup>39</sup> Srinivasan, "Does Anyone."

<sup>40</sup> See: Bryant, "Lacanian Ethics and the Superego."

## Conclusion

With her daring and provocative style of writing, Andrea Long Chu has helped to bring desire once again into the focus of feminism, gender and trans studies. In her book *Females: A Concern*, as well as in her essays Chu elucidates the role played by desire not only in the process of gender transition but also in the formation of gender as such. Her writings on the relation between desire and politics, grounded in her helpless and fatalistic stance toward desire, have shown themselves to be especially controversial, and for a reason. Although it seems fair to say that Chu is right when she warns that desire does not conform to political principles and cannot be changed proceeding from the political demand, this, however, does not leave theory helpless and critique useless.

We can agree, with Elena Comay del Junco, that Chu would have use of adopting a dialectical (or bilateral) approach sometimes.<sup>41</sup> Instead of just speaking from the perspective of our desires, we should also, as subjects of our desires, take a critical stance toward representations of their objects. Maybe even more importantly, what Chu completely ignores is the creative aspect of desire, which is why the desiring process cannot be reduced to the demand (either internal or external) "submit, or else."<sup>42</sup> In the case of trans people, this means that experiencing being a man or being a woman as an object of (identificatory) desire, does not have to suppose conforming to the existing norms and stereotypical representations of what it means to be a man or a woman.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, we have tried to show that Chu's writings, if taken with a dose of caution and supplemented with the theory of desire formulated by Jacques Lacan, can offer us insights about the importance of desire for understanding different phenomena of human experience.

<sup>41</sup> See Elena Comay del Junco, "Killing the Joke: On Andrea Long Chu's *Females*," *The Point* (February 2020), <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/killing-the-joke-andrea-long-chu-females/>.

<sup>42</sup> See Comay del Junco, "Killing the Joke?."