

women to maintain a hyperfeminine appearance in order to gain access to the means of transitioning. In 1969, Money (and coauthors) discussed the results of tests they had administered to transsexuals to measure their feminine and masculine tendencies.<sup>47</sup> The authors praised trans men for giving answers that were “masculine,” but not any more “masculine” than those of the average cissexual man. At no time did the authors consider the possibility that the trans men’s unexaggerated masculine responses were made possible by the fact that most gatekeepers, being male themselves, understood that there was more than one way to be a man. In contrast, trans women were derided for having scores that were higher on the feminine range than that of the average woman. Yet trans women were required to act more feminine than the average woman in order to be taken seriously as transsexuals. Evidence to support the idea that trans women’s hyperfeminine test scores were merely an attempt to appease the traditionally sexist biases of the gatekeepers can be found in Anne Bolin’s 1988 work *In Search of Eve*. When Bolin—who is not a gatekeeper and whose interactions with trans women occurred entirely outside of a clinical setting—administered a similar test, she found that trans women’s scores were a lot more varied and closer to the norm of cissexual women. She commented, “The importance of fulfilling caretaker expectations . . . may be the single most important factor responsible for the prevalent medical-mental health conceptions of transsexualism.”<sup>48</sup>

This, of course, is the major problem with most medical, psychiatric, and sexological research into transgenderism. While generally presented under the guise of objective science, the body of research compiled by the gatekeepers has been so undermined by their own biases that their results are nothing more than a research

artifact. The gatekeepers consistently claimed that transsexuality was a “rare” phenomenon without acknowledging that they themselves played an active role in restricting the number of trans people who would be allowed to transition; they believed that crossdressing and transsexuality primarily “afflicted” those assigned a male sex at birth without realizing that their own effemimania rendered FTM spectrum individuals invisible. Indeed, the majority of research on transgenderism and transsexuality they produced clearly fit the criteria for “pathological science,” a term used to describe work that initially conforms to the scientific method, but then unconsciously veers from that method and begins a pathological process of wishful data interpretation.<sup>49</sup>

### Critiquing the Critics

Sexologists have greatly shaped the way the public at large views transsexuals (as well as the way many transsexuals come to view themselves), but they are not the only group to position themselves as “authorities” on transsexuality. Over the years, many academics in the social sciences and in gender studies have also written extensively on the subject. Unlike the gatekeepers, who have often expressed consternation and condemnation for those transsexuals who fail to live up to society’s traditional and oppositional sexist expectations regarding gender, many academics have had the reciprocal concern—namely, that transsexuals work too hard to achieve gender normalcy. This concern typically arises from the assumption (embraced by many in the humanities) that transsexuality is a modern construction, something that would not exist if it were not for medical technology, psychological pathology, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, and/or our culture’s rigid binary gender



norms. Because academics in the fields of sociology and gender studies have been disposed toward seeking out the societal causes of transsexuality, they have tended to overlook or dismiss the possibility that intrinsic inclinations (i.e., subconscious sex) drive people toward transitioning. Framing the issue this way has ensured that transsexuality can only be understood as a form of “false consciousness” and that transsexuals themselves can only be conceptualized in one of two ways: as “dupes” (who are misled into transitioning by gatekeepers) or as “fakes” (who are so distressed by their own exceptional gender expressions and/or sexual orientations that they are willing to go to the extreme lengths of surgically altering their bodies and unquestioningly embracing sexist ideals in order to fit into straight mainstream society).

While sociological models of transsexuality and transgenderism have not had as direct an impact on the lives of trans people as sexological models have, both models foster the false impression that cissexual “experts” (whether academic or clinical) are capable of understanding transsexuality better than transsexuals themselves—an idea that is as problematic as suggesting that male “experts” can understand womanhood better than women, or that heterosexual “experts” can understand homosexuality better than gays and lesbians. Further, while sociological and gender studies accounts of transsexuality have not garnered the public attention that their sexological counterparts have, they have profoundly shaped the manner in which trans people are discussed and considered in academia and in feminism. In this section, I will debunk many of the most common academic misconceptions regarding transsexuality. While some of the arguments I critique may seem unfamiliar, even esoteric, to readers outside the fields of sociology and gender

studies, it is vital to address these points here, as they are encountered repeatedly in queer and feminist politics.

One of the most prevalent academic misconceptions regarding transsexuality is that the gatekeepers actively promote the use of sex reassignment and prey on gender-variant people, enticing them with the promise of assimilating them into “normal” women and men. One of the more influential research articles espousing this view was written by sociologists Dwight B. Billings and Thomas Urban in 1982, in which they claimed that “transsexualism is a socially constructed reality which *only* exists in and through medical practice.” (Emphasis theirs.)<sup>50</sup> In Billings’s and Urban’s eyes, “transsexual therapy . . . pushes patients toward an alluring world of artificial vaginas and penises rather than toward self-understanding and sexual politics.”<sup>51</sup> Janice G. Raymond has a similar view. In her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire* (discussed previously in chapter 2), she described sex reassignment as a “male interventionist technology” in which “[t]ranssexuals surrender themselves to . . . therapists and technicians.”<sup>52</sup> She goes on to suggest that trans people would be better off if they were counseled using the same “consciousness-raising” methods that she experienced in the feminist movement.<sup>53</sup> So, in other words, both sets of authors believe that transsexuality would not exist if trans people simply became more educated and involved in feminism and sexual politics.

So how do Raymond, Billings, and Urban explain why trans people are so easily “duped” into transitioning when transsexuality itself is considered taboo by society at large? Their rationale is that transsexuality has become socially acceptable, a rather outrageous claim considering they were writing during the late 1970s and



early 1980s, respectively.<sup>54</sup> Of course, the idea that transsexuals are highly susceptible to suggestion and easily yield to medical authority would surely come as a surprise to many gatekeepers, who regularly complained about how transsexuals were “stubborn,” highly resistant to psychotherapy, and usually came to appointments having already made up their minds.<sup>55</sup>

Another major flaw with these theses is that they rest on the assumption that people identifying and living as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth was a novel phenomenon, one that did not exist prior to the invention of sex reassignment procedures. However, numerous historians and anthropologists have described the existence of trans people in other eras and cultures.<sup>56</sup> In fact, many of the original gatekeepers, including Harry Benjamin, only “discovered” the existence of transsexuality after trans people approached them about the possibilities of physically transitioning, and many of the earliest transsexuals, such as Christine Jorgensen (the first transsexual to gain mainstream attention) and “Agnes” (who is discussed in more detail in chapter 9), self-administered hormones prior to consulting with doctors about their desire to physically transition.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the gatekeepers didn’t “invent” sex reassignment, but were dragged into it kicking and screaming. And the fact that the gatekeepers almost universally favored strict restrictions that greatly reduced the number of people undergoing sex reassignment clearly indicates that they were, at best, reluctant advocates.

A similar attempt to remove transsexuals from any historical or cross-cultural context can be found in Bernice L. Hausman’s 1995 book *Changing Sex*. Despite the fact that Hausman is aware of people throughout history who have lived as members of the

other sex, or who do so today without using hormones or surgery, she nevertheless chooses to narrowly define transsexuality as the act of changing one’s sex via physically transitioning.<sup>58</sup> This allows her to put forward the thesis that “developments in medical technology and practice were central to the establishment of the necessary conditions for the emergence of the demand for sex change.”<sup>59</sup> The amateurish nature of this argument is astounding; it’s akin to discounting the existence of all nonmotorized vehicles (bicycles, sailboats, horse-drawn carriages, etc.) to make the claim that transportation is a modern construction dependent on the discovery of fossil fuel and combustion engines.

Of course, there is an obvious reason why Hausman chose to define transsexuality so narrowly: To do otherwise would subvert her entire thesis. After all, if she were to acknowledge that trans people have existed in varied cultures and throughout history, her readers might view transsexuality as part of a natural rather than culture-specific phenomenon and thus understand trans people’s desire to live in their identified sex as being primarily driven by their own intrinsic inclinations rather than by social forces. From such a perspective, one would be inclined to see sex reassignment as a modern option for trans people, similar to how recent advances in medicine now enable cissexual women and men to undergo similar procedures, such as hormone replacement therapy, breast or penis enhancement or reconstruction, and infertility treatments. Instead, by removing transsexuality from this trans-historical and cross-cultural context, Hausman misleads her readers into believing that trans people suddenly appeared out of nowhere, almost overnight—a fabrication that practically strong-arms her readership into seeing transsexuality as a culturally specific and socially derived phenomenon.



The intellectual inconsistencies in Hausman's thesis become even more blatant when she makes it clear that she accepts that same-sex desire has always existed (and therefore precedes social construction). This allows her to claim that transsexuality is not analogous to homosexuality because of its "special *conceptual* and *material* relation to medical discourse and practice." (Emphasis hers.)<sup>60</sup> This is a rather convenient argument for Hausman to make considering that she has already dismissed the existence of those transsexuals who do not physically transition. Indeed, Hausman seems oblivious to the fact that, were she able to wave away the existence of same-sex attraction throughout history (as she does with transsexuality), she could easily make the analogous claim that homosexuality is just as much a product of modern medicine as transsexuality. After all, both words, "homosexuality" and "transsexuality," were coined within the last 150 years, gained prominence as concepts with the rise of sexology in the twentieth century, and emerged as identities and political movements both because of and in response to their psychological pathologization. And if one were hell-bent on portraying homosexuality as entirely constructed, one could easily reach the same shortsighted conclusion that Hausman has reached. The argument would go: The rise in the number of people openly calling themselves homosexuals over the past half century is not due to political and cultural changes that have allowed them to finally "come out of the closet," but rather that the medical invention of homosexuality itself generated a "demand" for people to become homosexual.

Hausman's book demonstrates the misinformation academics can generate when they narrowly define transsexuality based on psychiatric or medical parameters, or attempt to isolate transsexuals

who do physically transition from the broader population of trans people who identify and live as members of the other sex without medical intervention. These very same mistakes are regularly made by anthropologists who focus on what are sometimes called "third," "multiple," or "alternate" genders—categories designed to describe people who are viewed by their cultures as being not quite male and not quite female. Because these groups appear to exist outside the gender binary, and blur distinctions between what Westerners would call transsexuality, homosexuality, and transgenderism, they are subjects of interest among academics who believe that gender is primarily socially constructed.

One such anthropologist is Serena Nanda, who has studied Indian hijras and authored several books, including *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*. This 2000 book is an overview of gender variation across the world, and highlights examples of social categories and gender roles that challenge our Western tendency to define gender exclusively based on one's physical sex. For the most part, Nanda remains respectful and refrains from placing value judgments on the cultures and gender-variant people she describes—that is, until she gets to the chapter titled "Transsexualism." Here, she seems to go into diatribe mode, describing transsexuals as a medical "invention" who are shaped by Western doctors' and psychologists' stereotyped view of gender.<sup>61</sup>

Nanda goes on to make the broader point that transsexuals, "far from being an example of gender diversity, both reflected and reinforced the dominant Euro-American sex/gender ideology in which one had to choose to be either a man or a (stereotypical) woman."<sup>62</sup> For Nanda to make this sort of blanket generalization when there are countless examples of transsexuals who were involved in the



early days of the gay rights and the lesbian-feminist movements, or who are at the forefront of today's transgender and genderqueer movements, suggests that either she is completely ignorant of the existence of any transsexuals who do not fit her stereotype, or she purposefully ignores or discounts them in order to create the false impression that all transsexuals are stamped from the same medical establishment cookie cutter.

Nanda's motives for painting such a rigid and distorted picture of transsexuals becomes obvious in the following chapter, "Transgenderism." Despite the fact that virtually all organizations and communities that call themselves "transgender" generally include transsexuals, Nanda has somehow taken it upon herself to redefine "transgender" in opposition to "transsexual." She describes transgenderism as being based on the principle of androgyny, explaining that (unlike transsexuals) transgender people do not limit themselves to a single gender.<sup>63</sup> It seems rather obvious why she is so determined to deny the overlap between these two groups. A running theme throughout the book is that transgender people who are defined as being separate from female and male necessarily challenge our Western assumptions that the male/female binary gender system is "natural." Transsexuals complicate this issue by virtue of the fact that we are gender-variant yet typically identify within the binary. By dismissing us as a medical invention that "upholds the status quo of the binary sex/gender system," Nanda seems to be establishing a gender binary of her own, one in which "third gender," androgynous, and visibly queer people who blur distinctions between female and male are considered radical and natural, while those who identify as or appear to be clearly female or male are considered conservative and contrived.<sup>64</sup>

This radical/conservative gender binary is also forwarded by Will Roscoe, an anthropologist who has focused much of his research on reconstructing the lives of what he refers to as "berdaches" (a Western umbrella term for Native American gender-variant people) from the historical record. As a strict social constructionist, Roscoe refuses to believe that berdache status is merely "a compromise between nature and culture or a niche to accommodate 'natural' variation."<sup>65</sup> He also denounces the view held by many anthropologists that some berdaches "crossed" genders (from male to female or female to male) because they could then be "interpreted as upholding a heterosexist gender system."<sup>66</sup>

Because Roscoe is determined to demonstrate that Native American berdaches represent "third genders," he plays up the ways in which these groups showed signs of being separate from and/or a mix of female and male, while playing down evidence that some berdaches may have actually seen themselves as, or wanted to be, the other gender. While this is not difficult to do for certain berdaches (as these roles varied significantly between Native American nations), Roscoe sticks to his "third gender" hypothesis even when analyzing the historical record of the Mohave *alyha* (MTF spectrum) and *hwame* (FTM spectrum) berdaches (reviewed in his 1994 essay "How to Become a Berdache"). Despite the fact that the *alyha* "insisted on being referred to by female names and with female gender references," used "the Mohave word for clitoris to refer to their penises," received female facial tattoos, and took part in rituals where they simulated pregnancy, Roscoe still argues that they should be considered "third gender" because they were given a unique name (i.e., *alyha*) to distinguish them from other women.<sup>67</sup> Other evidence that Roscoe uses to undermine the



Mohave berdaches' self-identified gender is that they were not always fully accepted in that gender by other Mohaves: He references accounts of individual Mohaves commenting that alyha were less womanly than other women and cites rare occasions when some Mohaves used pronouns that referenced the berdaches' birth (rather than identified) sex.<sup>68</sup> Thus, to make his point that Mohave berdaches represent "third genders," Roscoe resorts to giving more credence to the judgments of non-gender-variant Mohave than to the way the alyha and hwame saw themselves. Perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise, as Roscoe himself purposely uses inappropriate pronouns and favors birth sex over identified sex when writing about berdaches.

The dichotomy that Nanda and Roscoe attempt to make between "third genders" and trans people who "cross" from one gender to the other seems rather dubious. After all, some people who are members of non-Western "third gender" traditions do identify fully as the other sex and/or choose to physically transition when given the opportunity.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, as a Western transsexual, I may identify squarely within the male/female gender binary if I want to, but once other people discover my transsexual status, they usually start slipping up on pronouns and referring to me as a MTF, boy-girl, s/he, she-he, or a she-male. In other words, people try to third-gender me. Both Roscoe and Nanda seem to have so much invested in promoting the theoretical significance of "third genders" that they're oblivious to the ways in which these categories—rather than shattering the gender binary—may actually contribute to its stabilization by marking and segregating those people who have exceptional gender inclinations from gender-normative women and men. If you want to convince me that a culture truly has multiple

genders that are dissociated from binary sex, show me one where male- and female-bodied people are both included in *every* gender category. So long as "third genders" are composed only of male-bodied people with feminine qualities and female-bodied people with masculine qualities, it is hard for me to see such designations as anything other than oppositional sexist attempts by society to marginalize gender-variant people.

Unfortunately, the mistaken notion that some genders are inherently more "radical" or "subversive" than others, which is seen throughout much of the anthropological literature on "third genders," has also flourished throughout the social sciences, in women's and gender studies departments, and the humanities in general. And in the social constructionists' radical/conservative gender binary, no group is more regularly discredited and maligned than transsexuals—we are often portrayed as gender sellouts, and our attempts to live as and/or physically transition to our identified sex are often misread as being driven not by our own intrinsic inclinations, but by a desire to "fit in" or assimilate into gender normalcy. Such misconceptions are evident in the following series of quotes:

*Transsexualism is a response to the rigid, socially prescribed gender dichotomy of heterosexual men and women.*

—Frank Lewins (1995)<sup>70</sup>

*The idea is that societal pressure . . . leads the transsexual to surmount the problem by changing the body to fit the norm of dichotomous gender.*

—David E. Grimm (1987)<sup>71</sup>



WHIPPING GIRL

*Transsexual patients have an excessively narrow image of what constitutes "sex-appropriate" behaviour. . . . Were the notions of masculinity and femininity less rigid, sex change operations should be unnecessary.*

—Margrit Eichler (1980)<sup>72</sup>

*Sex-change surgery is profoundly conservative in that it reinforces sharply contrasting gender roles by shaping individuals to fit them.*

—Germaine Greer (1999)<sup>73</sup>

*While transsexuals may be deviants in terms of cultural norms about how one arrives at being a man or a woman, they are, for the most part, highly conformist about what to do once you get there.*

—Judith Shapiro (1991)<sup>74</sup>

*Ironically, transsexuals wish to be women but end up approximating men's sexual conservatism . . . most can still be typified as the Uncle Toms of the sexual liberation movement, in sharp contrast with other sexual minorities.*

—Thomas Kando (1974)<sup>75</sup>

The implication that transsexuals transition in order to hide their exceptional gender expression and/or sexual orientation is only made possible by the social constructionist practice of dumbing down gender to exclude subconscious sex. This exclusion is notable, since virtually all transsexuals describe experiencing a

profound, inexplicable, intrinsic self-knowing regarding their own gender. Because such accounts of transsexual subconscious sex/gender identity are nearly ubiquitous, one can only conclude that either the above critics have made their conclusions without bothering to read or listen to what transsexuals have said about their own lives and experiences, or they have chosen to ignore or discount such accounts, presumably out of an unwillingness to consider the possibility that trans people have an understanding about gender that cissexual academics do not. Not only do these "transsexual-as-assimilationist" accusations blatantly dismiss transsexual perspectives, but they are also unabashedly cissexist in other ways. They erase the existence of the many transsexuals who are unrelenting feminists and queer activists, and hold those transsexuals who do identify as heterosexual feminine women and masculine men more accountable for gender-based oppression than the overwhelming majority of cissexual people who identify the same way.

Another dehumanizing tactic used by these academic critics is the assumption that they are capable of fully understanding and speaking authoritatively about transsexuality despite the fact that they are not transsexual themselves; in fact, rarely do they get to know any transsexuals personally. When Shapiro, Nanda, Grimm, and Eichler speak disparagingly about transsexuals, their arguments rely almost entirely on other people's research. Hausman boasts about attending one transgender conference, then liberally (and extensively) quotes from transsexual autobiographies without any consideration given to the role that non-trans book publishers and audiences play in deciding which transsexual stories get told and which do not.



Those sociologists who do base their critiques on interviews with transsexuals seem to have no qualms about drawing firm conclusions despite the many caveats inherent in their research: They generally rely on pathetically small sample sizes from the same geographic location, and their sample populations consist of trans people from similar (middle-class) economic dispositions who are all in the earliest stages of transition. This latter point is particularly salient, as the perspectives of transsexuals who are in the process of actively managing their physical transitions (and other people's reactions to those changes) tend to differ greatly from those who have already been living in their identified sex for a number of years. Further, many sociologists make the common mistake of deriving their sample population from patients at gender identity clinics (GICs). While such clinics may seem a boon for sociologists—as they provide a rare place where one can find a relatively large number of transsexuals—they are also likely to provide the most biased research population.<sup>76</sup> GICs are notorious for enforcing particularly strict oppositional and traditional sexist norms for their trans patients. Thus, research populations derived entirely from GICs have already been selected for those transsexuals who are most able or willing to conform to cissexual expectations regarding gender. Further, because GICs regularly carry out research on transsexuals, sociologists who conduct interviews in association with GICs are likely to be viewed by the transsexual as part of the gatekeeper establishment. As a result, the sociologists will likely receive pat and predictable answers to their interview questions.

Because transsexuals often have to submit themselves to the rigorous interrogation of gatekeepers, and constantly have to explain and justify their existence to a reluctant cissexual public, many

are weary and suspicious of any cissexual—whether gatekeeper or academic—who wishes to turn trans people into research subjects. This reluctance is evident in the vast difference between the conclusions of superficial sociological interviews and those where the interviewers worked to gain the transsexual's trust, such as in the work of Anne Bolin and Viviane K. Namaste.

Bolin's study is particularly telling because she starts out with a small and biased sample population similar to that which many sociologists rely on: The bulk of her data came from twelve members of the same transgender support group, all of whom were in the early stages of transitioning.<sup>77</sup> However, because she got to know these trans women over several years and eventually gained their trust, she got to see a very different perspective of the trans female experience: "Contrary to the stereotype of transsexuals as hyperfeminine, reveling in traditional notions of womanhood to a greater extent than genetic women, the transsexuals in this population were not admirers of stereotypical womanhood. They were keenly aware of the feminist movement, wanted careers as well as someone to share their lives with, and represented styles of dressing as diverse as the female population emulated."<sup>78</sup>

If more academics would actually get to know transsexuals as people (rather than as mere research subjects), they would find that the assumption that we transition in order to "fit in" to the gender binary has virtually no relevance in most transsexuals' lives. For many of us, the decision to transition comes after years of successfully "passing" as "normal" members of our assigned sex—for us, transitioning entails the complete antithesis of trying to fit in. Those of us who are attracted to members of our identified sex transition despite the fact that we will no longer be considered heterosexual.



The variation in our gender expression ensures that some of us will be considered somewhat masculine women or feminine men after our transitions. And all transsexuals run the risk of being unable to physically "pass" (in the short term or the long term) in our identified sex upon transitioning.

Perhaps the most condescending aspect of the "transsexual-as-assimilationist" argument is that it presumes that transsexuals are accepted by society more than cissexuals who are queer in other ways (i.e., because of their gender expression or sexual orientation). This is most certainly not the case.<sup>79</sup> As someone who has spent a chunk of her life as a relatively "out" male crossdresser, and later as an androgynous bigendered boy, I have found that people, on average, were extraordinarily more tolerant of—and comfortable with—my gender status back then than they are now when I tell them I'm a transsexual. And if you ask other transsexuals—even those who were out and proud queers prior to transition—why they didn't choose to transition earlier in their lives, most will tell you that they feared the social ramifications that come with transitioning: being disowned by family and community, losing a job, being considered undesirable in the eyes of others, having one's identified gender constantly questioned by others. Not only is sex reassignment just about the most stigmatized medical procedure that exists in our society, but transsexuals themselves are rarely accepted culturally and legally as legitimate men or women. It is safe to say that lesbians and gay men are far more accepted and respected by the straight mainstream than transsexuals are. Thus, the idea that a trans person would transition in order to "conform to heterosexual gender norms" is nothing more than an illogical and disrespectful farce.

It seems to me that the entire debate in academia over whether transsexuals are radical or conservative with regards to gender is founded on cissexual privilege. Because these scholars have not had to live with the reality of gender dissonance, they are afforded the luxury of intellectualizing away subconscious sex, thus allowing them to project their own interests or biases onto trans people. Not surprisingly, the researchers' academic backgrounds seem to be the primary determinant as to what explanations for transsexuality they will posit. Being that Harry Benjamin (who was trained as an endocrinologist) believed that transsexuality was caused by fetal hormone levels, and Richard Green, Robert Stoller, and John Money (all trained in psychology) looked to relationships with parents and/or events that occurred during one's formative years as its primary cause, it is not surprising that social scientists generally argue that transsexuality is the result of societal gender norms, lesbian and gay scholars claim it is the result of heterosexism, feminists blame it on patriarchy, and poststructuralists simply deconstruct it into nonexistence.

### Moving Beyond Cissexist Models of Transsexuality

The last fifty years of sexological and sociological discourses regarding transsexuality have been nothing more than a charade, where the opinions of those who have academic and clinical credentials always trump those of transsexuals themselves; where trans people are treated as nothing more than blank slates for cissexual gender researchers to inscribe their pet theories upon. And while researchers in the humanities often frame their work as being in opposition to that of the gatekeepers, it seems to me that the similarities between both groups far outweigh the differences. Both clinicians



and academics are obsessed with meticulously documenting and subcategorizing the transgender population; both display the effemimanic compulsion of focusing primarily on MTF spectrum trans people; and both view transsexuals as anomalies that require explanation and justification rather than viewing us as a part of human diversity that just simply exists.

The needs, desires, and perspectives of transsexuals have become lost in a shameful tug-of-war between those who wish to show that stereotypical gender differences arise naturally from biological predisposition and those who wish to demonstrate that those same gender differences are entirely socially constructed. As a transsexual, my lived experiences are at odds with both strict gender essentialist and social constructionist accounts of gender. And while the idea that gender is a combination of many things—some biological and others sociological—does not make for a catchy sound bite or a sexy “hook” for one’s book or thesis, it appears to me to be indisputable. And maybe once most sexologists and sociologists finally come to accept this fact, they will stop exploiting and dissecting the lives of transgender people and others who have exceptional gender inclinations and sex characteristics.

If there is anything to be learned from sexological and sociological accounts of transsexuality, it is that cissexism—i.e., the tendency to hold transsexual genders to a different standard than cissexual ones—runs rampant not only among the general public, but also throughout the medical and psychiatric establishments and in the ivory towers of academia. If sociologists truly wanted to better understand transsexuality, rather than focus exclusively on the behaviors and etiology of transsexuals, they would study the irrational animosity, fear, and disrespect that many cissexuals

express toward trans people (and others with exceptional gender and sexual traits). If sexologists were truly interested in transsexuals’ mental and physical well-being, they would not try to micro-manage our transitions, but rather focus their energies on correcting the huge disparity that exists between cissexual and transsexual access to gender-related healthcare. It is the gatekeepers’ failure to adequately advocate on behalf of their trans patients that has allowed U.S. insurance companies (which regularly cover cissexual hormone replacement therapy, genital and breast reconstruction, and procedures to enhance or enable cissexual fertility and sexuality) to get away with denying coverage for similar treatments for transsexuals. And the popular stereotype that transsexuals are “crazy”—that our identified genders are merely the product of overactive imaginations and are not to be taken seriously—is also the result of the same medically and psychiatrically sanctioned double standard: while cissexuals are free to choose from hundreds of different types of surgical body modifications without being pathologized or requiring anyone else’s permission, procedures required for transsexuals to lead full and healthy lives are singled out for gatekeeper approval and an accompanying diagnosis of gender identity disorder.

Despite the recent civil rights progress that has accompanied the rise of transgender activism in the 1990s, the gatekeeper model of transsexuality still dominates in the United States. While HBGDA has slightly liberalized its *Standards of Care* in recent years, it still requires transsexuals to gain psychiatric approval in order to gain access to hormones, obtain surgery, and change their legal sex. This system is inherently cissexist, as it requires trans people to accommodate and appease the gender presumptions of individual therapists (who potentially harbor traditional sexist, oppositional



sexist, and/or cissexist biases) in order to have our identified genders recognized. It's time we replace the existing gatekeeper model with one that's centered on the needs of trans people themselves. This begins with the public acknowledgment that all people have the right to self-identify (even if that identity falls outside of the male/female binary), and that one's self-identified gender is necessarily more legitimate than the one that is rather naively assigned to them by others. Further, the process of socially and legally changing one's sex should be entirely uncoupled from medicine and psychiatry: No specific medical procedure should be required for one to have one's identified sex recognized, nor should any medical or psychiatric professional have the authority to prevent someone from living in their identified sex. Those trans people who feel that they need to hormonally or physically transition in order to ease their gender dissonance should be allowed that option if they wish (in the same way that cissexuals ultimately choose for themselves whether or not to undergo hormone replacement therapy, genital or breast reconstruction, fertility and sexuality-related procedures, etc.).

The idea that trans people should decide for themselves whether or not to physically transition—what some have disdainfully referred to as “sex change on demand”—has been opposed by the gatekeeper establishment from the beginning. The most common argument is that the system as it stands acts as a safeguard to prevent people who are not transsexual (e.g., cissexuals who are merely embarrassed or confused about their atypical sexuality or who exhibit “delusional” or “antisocial” behavior) from undergoing potentially irreversible medical procedures.<sup>80</sup> Once again, such practices reveal the cissexist biases of the gatekeepers: Trans people are denied immediate treatment of their gender dissonance in order

to protect the well-being of a rather small minority of cissexuals. One can only imagine how furious and frustrated most cissexuals would feel if they had to undergo psychotherapy for three to six months (so that a psychiatrist could rule out the possibility that they were transsexual) before obtaining permission to undergo hormone replacement therapy or gender-related surgeries they required.

The gatekeepers' fear of “sex change on demand” rings particularly hollow in a world where most trans people cannot even afford to take the medically and psychiatrically sanctioned route to transition. Psychotherapy is prohibitively expensive for those who do not have adequate insurance; many trans people rely on underground markets and overseas pharmacies to obtain affordable hormones without a prescription. Many undergo sex reassignment surgeries in countries like Thailand, where it is much less expensive and where there are fewer restrictions than in the United States. Clearly, gatekeeper micromanagement of transitioning has only served to force a significant percentage of trans people (who either cannot afford to follow the HBGDA standards of care or fail to convince their therapists that they are “true” transsexuals) out of the system.

Those gatekeepers who believe that they alone should have the authority to determine who should and should not be allowed to transition ignore the obvious fact that gender dissonance has always been a “self-diagnosed” condition: There are no visible signs or tests for it; only the trans person can feel and describe it. Once we make the arduous decision to transition—letting go of other people's perceptions of us in favor of being true to ourselves—there is really nothing anyone can do to stop us. For these reasons, medical and mental health professionals should turn their attention away from regulating sex reassignment and toward facilitating the safe



access to the means of transitioning. Thankfully, some have already begun working toward this goal, designing programs that provide trans people with affordable access to information, hormones, and the appropriate medical tests to ensure a safe transition.<sup>81</sup> Others in the field of psychiatry have similarly advocated that mental health professionals move away from the gatekeeper model and toward one focused on helping the transsexual manage the emotional stress and obstacles they are faced with when transitioning.<sup>82</sup>

While all of these changes represent a promising start, true equality for transsexuals and transgender people will remain elusive as long as gender variance remains pathologized by the American Psychiatric Association, which publishes the *DSM*. Human beings show a large range of gender and sexual diversity, so there is no legitimate reason for any form of cross-gender behavior or identity to be categorized as a mental disorder.

That said, I also take issue with those who argue for completely demedicalizing transsexuality, or who advocate removing GID from the *DSM* without first ensuring that there are provisions in place to allow people who choose to transition affordable access to transsexual-related medical procedures. Some have suggested creating a medical diagnosis for transsexuality to replace the current psychiatric diagnosis of GID; this makes sense, being that most transsexuals feel that our problem lies not with our minds, but with our bodies.<sup>83</sup> Once these medical provisions are in place, the importance of psychiatrically depathologizing transgenderism cannot be underestimated. After all, it is the popular misconception that gender variance constitutes a mental illness—that transsexual and transgender people are the ones who have the problem—that enables cissexual and cisgender prejudice against us.

## 8

## Dismantling Cissexual Privilege

UNTIL NOW, DISCOURSES ON transsexuality have invariably relied on language and concepts invented by clinicians, researchers, and academics who have made transsexuals the objects of their inquiry. In such a framework, transsexual bodies, identities, perspectives, and experiences are continuously required to be explained and inevitably remain open to interpretation. Corresponding cissexual attributes are simply taken for granted—they are assumed to be “natural” and “normal” and therefore escape reciprocal critique. This places transsexuals at a constant disadvantage, since we have generally been forced to rely on limiting cissexual-centric terminology to make sense of our own lives.

In recent years, the rise of transgender activism has provided a new paradigm for understanding the experiences of the gender-variant population (of which transsexuals are a subset). According to this model, gender-variant people are oppressed by a system that forces everyone to identify and be easily recognizable as either a woman or a man. This perspective has led transgender activists to primarily focus their attention on opposing binary gender norms—



particularly those that place limitations on one's gender expression and appearance—and to celebrate and create cultural space for those who defy, transcend, or fail to identify within the male/female binary. While transgender activism has undoubtedly benefited the transsexual community in many ways, it has also made invisible many of our distinct issues and experiences. To a large extent, this is because transgender rhetoric favors the perspectives of those who identify outside the male/female binary (whereas most transsexuals typically identify within it) and those whose gender expression and appearance does not conform to the binary (whereas transsexuals typically cite the discrepancy between their subconscious sex and physical sex as the major obstacle in their lives).

While I believe that creating space for people who exist outside of the male/female binary remains a cause worth fighting for, those of us who are transsexual must begin to simultaneously develop our own language and concepts that accurately articulate our unique experiences and perspectives and to fill in the many gaps that exist in both gatekeeper and transgender activist language. I contend that this work should begin with a thorough critique of *cissexual privilege*—that is, the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders. Before describing how cissexual privilege is practiced and justified, we must address two underacknowledged yet crucial aspects of social gender that enable cissexual privilege to proliferate, yet remain invisible: *gendering* and *cissexual assumption*.

### Gendering

Most of us want to believe that the act of distinguishing between women and men is a passive task, that all people naturally fall

into one of two mutually exclusive categories—male and female—and that we observe these natural states in an unobtrusive, objective manner. However, this is not the case. Distinguishing between women and men is an active process, and we do it compulsively. If you have any doubt about this, simply observe how quickly you determine other people's genders: It happens instantaneously. Not only that, but we tend to make the call one way or another no matter how far away a person is or how little evidence we have to go by. While we may like to think of ourselves as being passive observers, in reality we are constantly and actively projecting our ideas and assumptions about maleness and femaleness onto every person we meet. And all of us do it, whether we are cissexual or transsexual, straight as an arrow, or as queer as a three-dollar bill.

I call this process of distinguishing between females and males *gendering*, to highlight the fact that we actively and compulsively assign genders to all people based on usually just a few visual and audio cues. Recognizing the ubiquitous nature of this phenomenon calls into question most definitions of "gender" itself. We can argue all we want about what defines a woman or a man—whether it's genes, chromosomes, brain structure, genitals, socialization, or the legal sex on a birth certificate or driver's license—but the truth is, these factors typically play no role whatsoever in how we gender people in everyday circumstances. Typically, we rely primarily on secondary sex characteristics (body shape and size, skin complexion, facial and body hair, voice, breasts, etc.), and to a lesser extent, gender expression and gender roles (the person's dress, mannerisms, etc.). I will refer to the gender we are assigned by other people as our *perceived sex* (or *perceived gender*).



A major reason the act of gendering remains invisible to most people is that, in the vast majority of cases, our assessment of a person's gender tends to be in agreement with that person's gender identity and the gender assignments made by other people. (If the genders we assigned to individuals regularly differed from the assignments made by other people, the guesswork inherent in gendering would become far more obvious to us.) However, as a transsexual, I have been in numerous situations (particularly during my transition) where two or more people simultaneously came to different conclusions regarding my perceived gender—that is, one person assumed that I was female, while another assumed that I was male. Such instances demonstrate the speculative nature of gendering. I have also found that people's experiences and preconceptions around gender dramatically affect the way they gender other people. For example, back when I identified as a male crossdresser, I found that I could "pass" as a woman rather easily in suburban areas, but in cities (where people were presumably more aware of the existence of gender-variant people) I would often be "read" as a crossdressed male. Most cissexuals remain oblivious to the subjective nature of gendering, primarily because they themselves have not regularly had the experience of being *misgendered*—i.e., mistakenly assigned a gender that does not match one's identified gender. Unfortunately, this lack of experience usually leads cissexuals to mistakenly believe that the process of gendering is a matter of pure observation, rather than the act of speculation it is.

### Cissexual Assumption

The second process that enables cissexual privilege is *cissexual assumption*. This occurs when a cissexual makes the common, albeit

mistaken, assumption that the way they experience their physical and subconscious sexes (i.e., the fact that they do not feel uncomfortable with the sex they were born into, nor do they think of themselves as or wish they could become the other sex) applies to everyone else in the world. In other words, the cissexual indiscriminately projects their cissexuality onto all other people, thus transforming cissexuality into a human attribute that is taken for granted. There is an obvious analogy to heterosexual assumption here: Most cissexuals assume that everyone they meet is also cissexual, just as most heterosexuals assume that everyone they meet is also heterosexual (unless, of course, they are provided with evidence to the contrary).

While cissexual assumption remains invisible to most cissexuals, those of us who are transsexual are excruciatingly aware of it. Prior to our transitions, we find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we fully identify as members of our assigned sex, thus making it difficult for us to manage our gender difference and to be open about the way we see ourselves. And after our transitions, many of us find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we have always been members of our identified sex, thus making it impossible for us to be open about our trans status without constantly having to come out to others. Thus, while most cissexuals are unaware that cissexual assumption even exists, those of us who are transsexual recognize it as an active process that erases trans people and their experiences.

### Cissexual Gender Entitlement

For most cissexuals, the fact that they feel comfortable inhabiting their own physical sex, and that other people confirm this sense of



naturalness by appropriately gendering them, allows them to develop a sense of entitlement regarding their own gender: They feel entitled to call themselves a woman or a man. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, because many of these same cissexuals also assume that they are infallible in their ability to assign genders to other people, they can develop an overactive sense of *cissexual gender entitlement*. This goes beyond a sense of self-ownership regarding their own gender, and broaches territory in which they consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men. Once again, most cissexuals are unaware of their gender entitlement, because (1) the processes that enable it (i.e., gendering and cissexual assumption) are invisible to them, and (2) so long as they are cissexual and relatively gender-normative, they have likely not been inconvenienced by the gender entitlement of others. Because gender-entitled cissexuals assume that they have the ability and authority to accurately determine who is a woman and who is a man, they in effect grant a privilege—*cissexual privilege*—to those people whom they appropriately gender. To illustrate this point, imagine that I'm approached by someone who appears male to me (i.e., I gender them male). If they were to introduce themselves as "Mr. Jones," I would probably extend them *cissexual privilege*—that is, I would respect their male identity and extend to them all of the privileges associated with their identified sex. I might call them "sir," grant them permission into a male-only space, find it appropriate when they tell me they're married to a woman, etc. However, if I were gender-entitled, there might be some instances in which I'd refuse to extend them the privileges associated with their identified sex. For instance, if the person introduced themselves as "Ms. Jones," but I chose to view the gender

I'd initially perceived them as (i.e., male) to be more authentic or legitimate than their female identity, then I would be denying them *cissexual privilege*. Similarly, if I were to learn that "Mr. Jones" was transsexual and had been born female, and if that knowledge led me to re-gender him as female rather than male, I would again be denying him (in this case) *cissexual privilege*.

An excellent example of how gender entitlement produces *cissexual privilege*, and how that privilege can be used to undermine transsexual genders, can be found in the following Germaine Greer quote:

*No one ever asked women if they recognized sex-change males as belonging to their sex or considered whether being obliged to accept MTF transsexuals as women was at all damaging to their identity or self-esteem.<sup>1</sup>*

The immediate sense that one gets after reading this quote (besides nausea) is Greer's severe sense of gender entitlement. Despite the fact that she knows that transsexual women identify as female, Greer refers to us instead as "sex-change males," demonstrating that she feels entitled to gender us in whatever way she feels is appropriate. Similarly, because of her cissexual assumption (i.e., her belief that cissexuality is "natural" and goes without saying), she doesn't bother defining exactly what she means when she uses the word "women"; in her mind, it's a given that she is referring only to cissexual women. Greer grants these women *cissexual privilege* when she suggests that they (along with her) are equally entitled to be consulted about whether transsexual women should belong to their sex or not. It is particularly telling that Greer uses the word



“asked” in this context. After all, nobody in our society ever asks for permission to belong to one gender or another; rather, we just are who we are and other people make assumptions about our gender accordingly. Thus, when Greer uses the words “asked” and “obliged,” she is not talking about whether trans women should be allowed to be female, but whether or not our femaleness should be respected and legitimized to the same extent as cissexual women’s femaleness. By applying different standards of legitimacy to people’s identified and lived genders based on whether they are cissexual or transsexual, Greer is producing and exercising cissexual privilege.

### The Myth of Cissexual Birth Privilege

Since cissexuals are generally unaware that their gender entitlement arises from the acts of gendering and cissexual assumption, they often find themselves having to justify their belief that their gender is more legitimate or “real” than that of a transsexual. The most common myth used to justify this cissexual privilege is the idea that cissexuals inherit the right to call themselves female or male by virtue of being born into that particular sex. In other words, cissexuals view their gender entitlement as a birthright. This is often a deceitful act, as many (if not most) cissexuals in our society tend to look disparagingly upon societies and cultures that still rely on class or caste systems—where one’s occupation, social status, economic disposition, political power, etc., is predetermined based on an accident of birth. So while most Western cissexuals frown upon birth privilege as a means to determine these other forms of social class, they hypocritically embrace it when it comes to gender.

Once a cissexual assumes that their gender entitlement is a birth privilege, then it becomes easy for them to dismiss the legitimacy of

transsexuals’ identified and lived sex. After all, in their eyes, transsexuals are actively trying to claim for themselves a gender that they are not entitled to (having not been born into it). However, as a transsexual, I find several obvious flaws with this “birth privilege” argument. First of all, the sex we are assigned at birth plays almost no role whatsoever in day-to-day human interactions. None of us need to carry our birth certificate around with us to prove what sex we were born into. And since I have been living as a woman, I have never had a single person ask me whether I was born a girl. Indeed, cissexual assumption essentially renders my birth sex irrelevant, as others will automatically assume that I was born female (based solely on the fact that they have gendered me female).

Gender-entitled cissexuals may try to claim that I am actively setting out to “steal” cissexual privilege by transitioning to, and living as, female, but the truth is that I don’t have to. In fact, I have found that cissexuals dole out cissexual privilege to complete and total strangers rather indiscriminately. Every time I walk into a store and someone asks, “How can I help you, ma’am?” they are extending me cissexual privilege. Every time I walk into a women’s restroom and nobody flinches or questions my presence, they are extending me cissexual privilege. However, because I am a transsexual, the cissexual privilege that I experience is not equal to that of a cissexual because it can be brought into question at any time. It is perhaps best described as *conditional cissexual privilege*, because it can be taken away from me (and often is) as soon as I mention, or someone discovers, that I am transsexual.

Cissexuals may want to believe that their genders are more authentic than mine, but that belief is dishonest and ignorant. The truth is, cissexual women feel entitled to call themselves women



because (1) they identify that way, (2) they live their lives as women, and (3) other people relate to them as women. All of these markers apply to my transsexual womanhood. In the realm of social interactions, the only difference between my transsexual gender and their cissexual genders is that my femaleness is generally mischaracterized as second-rate, as illegitimate, as an imitation of theirs. And the major difference between my life history as a woman and theirs is that I have had to fight for my right to be recognized as female, while they have had the privilege of simply taking it for granted.

### Trans-Facsimilation and Ungendering

Because cissexuals have a vested interest in preserving their own sense of cissexual gender entitlement and privilege, they often engage in a constant and concerted effort to *artificialize* transsexual genders. A common strategy used to accomplish this goal is *trans-facsimilation*—viewing or portraying transsexual genders as facsimiles of cissexual genders. This strategy not only mischaracterizes transsexual genders as “fake,” but insinuates that cissexual genders are the primary, “real” version that the transsexual merely copies.

The tactic of trans-facsimilation is evident in the regularity with which cissexuals use words such as “emulate,” “imitate,” “mimic,” and “impersonate” when describing transsexual gender identities and expression. It can also be seen in the way cissexual media producers tend to depict real or fictional transsexual characters in the act of affecting or practicing gender roles associated with their identified sex. These depictions of transsexuality as mere affectation undermine the very real gender inclinations and experiences that lead transsexuals to live as members of their identified sex in the first place. Further, they ignore the ways in which all

people—whether transsexual or cissexual—observe and imitate others with regard to gender. For cissexuals, such imitation mostly occurs during childhood and adolescence, when they may emulate certain gendered behaviors exhibited by a parent or an older sibling of the same sex. For transsexuals, this process often occurs later in life, at the period just before or during one’s transition. In both cases, imitation is primarily a form of gender experimentation, with behaviors that the person feels comfortable with being retained over time, while those traits that feel awkward or incongruous with their sense of self eventually falling by the wayside. Once we recognize this, then it becomes apparent that trans-facsimilation is a blatant double standard that ensures that acts of cissexual gender imitation will typically be overlooked (thus naturalizing their genders), while acts of transsexual gender imitation will be overemphasized (thus artificializing our genders).

Another way in which transsexual genders are often dismissed as “fakes” is by applying different standards of gendering to transsexuals and cissexuals. This practice is well-illustrated by the following passage from Patrick Califia’s book *Sex Changes*:

*Recently, I had a very educational experience. I found out that one of my long-term women acquaintances is transgendered. . . . Given how much work I’ve done to educate myself about transsexuality, I didn’t think it would make that much of a difference. But I found myself looking at her in a whole different way. Suddenly her hands looked too big, there was something odd about her nose, and didn’t she have an Adam’s apple? Wasn’t her voice kind of deep for a woman? And wasn’t she awfully bossy, just like a man? And my God, she had a lot of hair on her forearm.*



Califa goes on to say that this incident made him aware of the double standard that exists in the way transsexuals are often viewed. For example, when we presume a person to be cissexual, we generally accept their overall perceived gender as natural and authentic, while disregarding any minor discrepancies in their gender appearance. However, upon discovering or suspecting that a person is transsexual, we often actively (and rather compulsively) search for evidence of their assigned sex in their personality, expressions, and physical bodies. I have experienced this firsthand during the countless occasions when I have come out to people as transsexual. Upon learning of my trans status, most people get this distinctive “look” in their eyes, as if they are suddenly seeing me differently—searching for clues of the boy that I used to be and projecting different meanings onto my body. I call this process *ungendering*, as it is an attempt to undo a trans person’s gender by privileging incongruities and discrepancies in their gendered appearance that would normally be overlooked or dismissed if they were presumed to be cissexual. The only purpose that ungendering serves is to privilege cissexual genders, while delegitimizing the genders of transsexuals and other gender-variant people.

### Moving Beyond “Bio Boys” and “Genetic Girls”

The first step we must take toward dismantling cissexual privilege is to purge those words and concepts from our vocabularies that foster the idea that cissexual genders are inherently more authentic than those of transsexuals. A good place to start is with the common tendency to refer to cissexuals as “genetic” or “biological” males and females. Despite its frequent occurrence, the use of the word “genetic” seems particularly strange to me, since we are

unable to readily see other people’s sex chromosomes. In fact, since so few people ever have their chromosomes examined, one could argue that the vast majority of people have a genetic sex that has yet to be determined. In the rare cases where people do have their chromosomes checked out (such as sex testing at the Olympics or in infertility clinics), a person’s genetic sex not matching their assigned sex occurs far more often than most people would ever fathom.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the word “biological” (and its abbreviation “bio”) is just as impractical as the word “genetic.” Whenever I hear someone refer to cissexuals as being “biological” women and men I usually interject that, despite the fact that I am a transsexual, I am not inorganic or nonbiological in any way. If I press people to further define what they mean by “biological,” they’ll often say that the word refers to people who have a fully functioning reproductive system for their sex. Well, if that’s the case, then what about people who are infertile or who have their reproductive organs removed as the result of some medical condition? Are those people not “biological” men and women? People often insist that “biological” refers to someone’s genitals, but I would ask them how many people’s genitals they have ever seen up close. Ten? Twenty? A hundred? And in the vast majority of instances where we meet somebody who is fully dressed (and therefore their genitals are hidden), how do we know whether to refer to them as “she” or “he”? The truth is, when we see other people and classify them as either female or male, the only biological cues we typically have to go on are secondary sex characteristics, which are themselves the products of sex hormones. That being the case, as someone who has had estrogen in her system for five years now, shouldn’t I be considered a “biological” woman?



When you break it down like this, it becomes obvious that the words "biological" and "genetic" are merely stand-ins for the word that people really want to use: "natural." Most cissexuals want to believe that their maleness or femaleness is "natural" in the same way that most heterosexuals want to believe that their sexual orientation is "natural." In fact, if you look at the entire spectrum of social and class issues, you will see a trend of people trying to "naturalize" their privileges in some way—whether it be wealthy people who try to justify the huge gap between rich and poor by appropriating Darwin's theory of natural selection, or white people who make claims that they are smarter or more successful than people of color because of their biology or their genes. When it comes to gender, "natural" is the ultimate trump card because it takes the relevant issues—privilege and prejudice—off the table and frames the very real and legitimate perspectives of sexual minorities as "unnatural" or "artificial," and therefore unworthy of any serious consideration.

This is why I prefer the term *cissexual*. It denotes the only relevant difference between that population and those of us who are transsexual: Cissexuals have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned.

### Third-Gendering and Third-Sexing

Cissexual people who are in the earliest stages of accepting transsexuality (and who have not fully come to terms with their cissexual privilege) will often come to see trans people as inhabiting our own unique gender category that is separate from "woman" and "man." I call this act *third-gendering* (or *third-sexing*). While some attempts at third-gendering trans people are clearly meant

to be derogatory or sensationalistic (such as "she-male" or "he-she"), other less offensive ones occur regularly in discussions about transsexuals (such as "s/he" or "MTF"). While "MTF" may be useful as an adjective, as it describes the direction of my transition, using it as a noun—i.e., literally referring to me as a "male-to-female"—completely negates the fact that I identify and live as a woman. Personally, I believe that popular use of "MTF" or "FTM" over "trans woman" or "trans man" (which are more respectful, easier to say, and less easily confused with one another) reflects either a conscious or unconscious desire on the part of many cissexuals to distinguish transsexual women and men from their cissexual counterparts.

When discussing the act of third-gendering, it is crucial to make a distinction between people who identify themselves as belonging to a third gender and those who actively third-gender other people. As with any gender identity, when people see themselves as belonging to a third gender, that is their way of making sense of themselves and their place in the world, and it should be respected. As someone who has identified as bigender and gender-queer in the past, I believe that it's important for us to recognize and respect other people's gender identities, whatever they are. But it's for this very same reason that I object to people who actively third-gender people against their will or without their consent. I believe that this propensity for third-gendering others is simply a by-product of the assumptive and nonconsensual process of gendering. In other words, we are so compelled to gender people as women and men that when we come across someone who is not easily categorized that way (usually because of exceptional gender inclinations), we tend to isolate and distinguish them from



the other two genders. There is a long history of the terms "third gender" and "third sex" being applied to homosexuals, intersex people, and transgender people by those who considered themselves to have "normal" genders. This strongly suggests that the tendency to third-gender people stems from both gender entitlement and oppositional sexism.

### Passing-Centrism

Another example where language presupposes that transsexual and cissexual genders are of inherently different worth is the use of the word "pass." While the word "pass" serves a purpose, in that it describes the very real privilege experienced by those transsexuals who receive conditional cissexual privilege when living as their identified sex, it is a highly problematic term in that it implies that the trans person is getting away with something. 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 people. For instance, if a store clerk were to say, "Thank you, sir," to a cissexual woman, nobody would say that she "passed" as a man or failed to "pass" as a woman; instead, we would say she is a woman and was *mistaken* for a man. Further, we never use the word "passing" to describe cissexual men who lift weights every day in order to achieve a more masculine appearance, or cissexual women who put on makeup, skirts, and heels to achieve a more feminine appearance. Yet, because I'm a transsexual woman, if I roll out of bed, throw on a T-shirt and jeans, and walk down the street and am generally recognized by others as female (despite my lack of concern for my appearance), I can still be dismissed as "passing" as a woman.

The crux of the problem is that the words "pass" and "passing" are active verbs. So when we say that a transsexual is "passing," it gives the false impression that they are the only active participant in this scenario (i.e., the transsexual is working hard to achieve a certain gendered appearance and everyone else is passively being duped or not duped by the transsexual's "performance"). However, I would argue that the reverse is true: The public is the primary active participant by virtue of their incessant need to gender every person they see as either female or male. The transsexual can react to this situation in one of two ways: They can either try to live up to public expectations about maleness and femaleness in an attempt to fit in and avoid stigmatization, or they can disregard public expectations and simply be themselves. However, if they choose the latter, the public will still judge them based on whether they appear female or male and, of course, others may still accuse them of "passing," even though they have not actively done anything. Thus, the active role played by those who compulsively distinguish between women and men (and who discriminate between transsexuals and cissexuals) is made invisible by the concept of "passing."

It should be mentioned that this view of "passing" is further supported by the use of the word with regards to other social class issues. For instance, a gay man can "pass" for straight, or a fair-skinned person of color can "pass" for white. Sometimes people work hard to "pass," and other times they don't try at all. Either way, the one thing that remains consistent is that the word "pass" is used to shift the blame away from the majority group's prejudice and toward the minority person's presumed motives and actions (which explains why people who "pass" are often accused of "deception" or "infiltration" if they are ever found out).



It has been my experience that most cissexuals are absolutely obsessed about whether transsexuals "pass" or not. From clinical and academic accounts to TV, movies, and magazine articles, cissexuals spend an exorbitant amount of energy indulging their fascination regarding what transsexuals "do"—the medical procedures, how we modify our behaviors, etc.—in order to "pass" as our identified sex. This *passing-centrism* allows cissexuals to ignore their own cissexual privilege, and also serves to privilege the transsexual's assigned sex over their identified and lived sex, thereby reinforcing the idea that transsexual genders are illegitimate.

Ironically, it has been common for cissexuals to claim that transsexuals are the ones obsessed with "passing." Such accusations dismiss the countless transsexuals who are not concerned with how they are perceived by others and also make invisible the fact that both parties have disparate vested interests when it comes to transsexual "passing." Specifically, while cissexuals have no legitimate reason to be concerned over whether any given transsexual "passes" (other than as a means to exercise cissexual privilege over them), transsexuals understand that being taken seriously in our identified sex has extraordinary ramifications on our quality of life. Living in this extraordinarily cissexist (and oppositionally sexist) world, transsexuals recognize cissexual privilege for what it is: a *privilege*. Being accepted as members of our identified sex makes it infinitely easier for us to gain employment and housing, to be taken seriously in our personal, social, and political endeavors, and to be able to walk down the street without being harassed or assaulted.

Cissexuals (not transsexuals) are the ones who create, foster, and enforce "passing" by their tendency to treat transsexuals in

dramatically different ways based solely on the superficial criteria of our appearance. If a transsexual does not "pass," cissexuals often use it as an excuse to deny that person the common decency of having their self-identified gender acknowledged or respected. Sometimes cissexuals even use these situations as if they were an invitation to openly humiliate or abuse transsexuals. And those of us who do "pass" are undoubtedly treated better by cissexuals, although not necessarily with respect. As a transsexual who "passes," I find it quite common for cissexuals, upon discovering my trans status, to praise me using the same condescending tone of voice that people use when praising gay people who don't "flaunt" their homosexuality (i.e., who act straight), or racial minorities who use "proper English" (i.e., who act white). In other words, these are backhanded compliments designed to reinforce cissexual superiority. The most common of these comments, "You look just like a real woman," would clearly be taken as an insult if it were said to a cissexual woman. Another common comment is, "I never would have guessed that you're a transsexual," which essentially praises me for looking *cissexual-like*, once again insinuating that cissexuals are inherently better than transsexuals.

Because the term "passing" creates a double standard between cissexual and transsexual genders and enables cissexual gender entitlement, we should instead adopt language that rightfully recognizes this phenomenon as a by-product of gendering and cissexual assumption. Therefore, I suggest using the term *misgendered* when a cissexual or transsexual person is assigned a gender that does not match the gender they consider themselves to be, and the term *appropriately gendered* when others assign them a gender that matches the way they self-identify. And, as mentioned



the term *conditional cissexual privilege* ought to be adopted to describe what has historically been referred to as “passing” privilege.

### Taking One's Gender for Granted

An additional problem with the word “pass” is that it is typically only used in reference to a transsexual's identified sex rather than their assigned sex. This gives the impression that transsexuals only begin managing other people's perceptions *after* we transition. Consider that people will talk about the fact that I now “pass” as a woman, but nobody ever asks about how difficult it must have been for me to “pass” as a man before. Personally, I found it infinitely more difficult and stressful to manage my perceived gender back when people presumed I was male than I do now as female. However, once we start thinking in terms of whether a transsexual is being misgendered or appropriately gendered in accordance with their understanding of themselves (as opposed to whether they are “passing” or not in the eyes of others), then we start to gain a more accurate and realistic appreciation for the transsexual experience. In fact, you could say that most transsexuals have the experience of being misgendered throughout their childhoods and sometimes well into their adulthoods. The extent to which this constant misgendering during our formative years shapes our relationship with gender (and our own self-perception) cannot be underestimated.

Having only ever had a trans experience, it took me a long time to realize how differently I experience and process gender compared to the way most cissexuals do. For example, a few months after I had begun living full-time as a woman, a male friend of mine asked me if I had ever accidentally gone into a men's restroom by

mistake. At first, the question struck me as bizarre. When I gave him a perplexed look, he tried to clarify himself. He said that he doesn't ever think about what restroom he is entering, never really notices the little “man” symbol on the door, but he always ends up in the right place anyway. So he was wondering whether I had accidentally gone into the men's room *by habit* since my transition. I laughed and told him that there had never been a single instance in my life when I had walked into a public restroom—women's or men's—by habit; my entire life I have been excruciatingly aware of any gendered space that I enter.

Growing up trans—having to manage both the psychological dissonance between my physical and subconscious sex as well as the constant barrage of being misgendered by others—was a harrowing experience and one that caused me to dissociate myself from my own body and emotions. And while physically transitioning and living in my identified sex has allowed me to finally overcome my gender dissonance, I still struggle with an intense hypersensitivity to gender (and more specifically to gendering). Having never had an opportunity to learn to experience my gender as being unquestionable or second-nature (as my friend had), I still sometimes feel an awkward jolt whenever people refer to me as “she” (even though that pronoun is preferable to me). When I look at photos or videos of myself, I still can't help but see the “boy” in my face or hear it in the sound of my voice, even though I haven't had anyone call me “sir” in over five years. I feel assaulted and get extraordinarily upset whenever I'm watching TV or a movie and I'm blindsided by a joke or ignorant comment that dismisses trans people's identified sex or refers to them in their assigned sex. And although I experience gender concordance these days, I still constantly dwell on gender



which, while helpful when writing a book on the subject, can often be unhealthy and exhausting.

My gender hypersensitivity reminds me of what a friend once told me about her relationship with money. She grew up in a family where money was scarce, and where fights regularly stemmed from the financial strain they were under. This irrevocably altered the way my friend relates to money. While most of us who have had a middle-class upbringing see money as simply a means to get the things that we want or need, for my friend it also carries an added emotional element. Even though she is now on more solid ground financially, she still feels undeserving when she receives money and guilty every time she spends it. It still preoccupies her and fills her with anxiety because she doesn't feel like she can ever take it for granted—she understands that it can be taken away from her at any time.

My friend's relationship with money reminds me of my own continuing insecurity regarding gender. Even though I have finally reached a point where I feel comfortable living in my own body, I often feel undeserving and guilty about it. And while everyone else around me seems to feel entitled to their gender to the point where they take it for granted, I always feel like mine can be taken away from me at any minute. And in a sense, it can (and often is) whenever somebody attempts to wield cissexual privilege over me.

### Distinguishing Between Transphobia and Cissexual Privilege

The fact that transsexuals have survived a childhood of constantly being misgendered creates major differences in the ways that we and other queers react to public expressions of gender anxiety. For example, a cissexual butch dyke friend of mine shared with

me an experience she had of being accused of being a "man" in a women's restroom (presumably because of her masculine style of dress and mannerisms). The woman who made the accusation confronted her in a gender-entitled way by saying, "You don't belong here." My friend, who was obviously disturbed by the incident, responded by pointing to her own breasts and saying, "I am a woman and I do belong here," which had the effect of making the accuser embarrassed and apologetic. While my friend does not identify as transgender, one could describe this incident as an example of transphobia (she was targeted because her appearance "transgressed" gender norms). And when the accuser apologized, she in effect (belatedly) extended cissexual privilege to my friend. That is to say, the accuser recognized my friend as a legitimate (albeit gender-non-conforming) woman and, as such, acknowledged my friend's right to share that women-only space with her.

I tell this story because it is so radically different from the way some of my trans women friends experience similar situations. When a transsexual woman is accused of being a "man" in the women's room, it's against a backdrop of the transsexual having been misgendered as male all of her life. Thus, rather than feeling like she has been unfairly targeted because her behaviors "transgress" gender norms (as many cissexual queers feel), she will instead feel targeted because of her transsexual status—in other words, she will assume that the accuser is exercising cissexual privilege over her. And the transsexual woman is often correct in assuming this. After all, the accuser became apologetic when my butch dyke friend told her, "I am a woman" (in other words, she was belatedly "read" as a cissexual woman), but when my trans women friends say "I am a woman," they are often still accused of being "men."



(in other words, they are “read” as transsexual women and thus denied cissexual privilege).

Recognizing the difference between transphobia (which targets those whose gender expression and appearance differ from the norm) and cissexual privilege (which targets those whose assigned and identified sexes differ) is important, especially when one tries to make sense of contemporary queer/trans politics. For example, some queer women’s events and establishments have policies that specifically exclude trans women from attending. Proponents of such policies often claim that they are not transphobic, because they do allow some transgender-identified people to attend (as long as they were “born female”). Thus, rather than calling trans-woman-exclusion policies “transphobic,” it is more accurate to say that they are cissexist, as they refuse to accept transsexual women’s female identities as being as legitimate as those of cissexual women. (Such policies may also be called *trans-misogynistic*, as they favor FTM spectrum trans people over MTF spectrum folks.) Furthermore, those “female-born” cissexuals (regardless of whether they are transgender-identified) who choose to attend such events can be said to be exercising their cissexual privilege (i.e., they are taking advantage of all of the privileges associated with their female birth sex). Indeed, it is disappointing that most cissexual transgender and queer folks—particularly those who hypocritically accuse transsexuals of trying to attain “passing privilege” by transitioning to our identified sex—have given little to no thought about the countless ways they frequently indulge in their own cissexual privilege.

Once we understand cissexual privilege, it becomes evident that many acts of discrimination that have previously been lumped under the term “transphobia” are probably better described in

terms of cissexism. Next, I will reconsider a number of such discriminatory acts, focusing on the ways that they are more specifically designed to undermine the legitimacy of trans people’s identified genders rather than targeting trans people for breaking oppositional gender norms.

### Trans-Exclusion

Trans-exclusion is perhaps the most straightforward act of prejudice against transsexuals. Simply stated, trans-exclusion occurs when cissexuals exclude transsexuals from any spaces, organizations, or events designated for the trans person’s identified gender. Trans-exclusion may also include other instances where the trans person’s identified gender is dismissed (for example, when someone insists on calling me a “man,” or purposely uses inappropriate pronouns when addressing me). Considering how big of a social faux pas it is in our culture to misgender someone, and how apologetic people generally become upon finding out that they have made that mistake, it is difficult to view trans-exclusion—i.e., the deliberate misgendering of transsexuals—as anything other than an arrogant attempt to belittle and humiliate trans people.

### Trans-Objectification

The objectification of transsexual bodies is very much intertwined with the cissexual obsession with “passing.” While our physical transitions typically occur over a period of a few years—a mere fraction of our lives—they almost completely dominate cissexual discourses regarding transsexuality. The reason for this is clear: Focusing almost exclusively on our physical transformations keeps transsexuals forever anchored in our assigned sex, thus forming



our identified sex into a goal that we are always approaching but never truly achieve. This not only undermines our very real experiences living as members of our identified sex post-transition, but purposely sidesteps the crucial issue of cissexual prejudice against transsexuals (akin to how some heterosexuals focus their interest on what gays, lesbians, and bisexuals do in the bedroom—i.e., how we have sex—in order to avoid contemplating whether their own behaviors and attitudes contribute to same-sex discrimination).

Another common form of *trans-objectification* occurs when cissexuals become hung up on, disturbed by, or obsessed over supposed discrepancies that exist between a transsexual's physical sex and identified gender. Most typically, such attention is focused on a trans person's genitals. Because objectification reduces the transsexual to the status of a "thing," it enables cissexuals to condemn, demonize, fetishize, ridicule, criticize, and exploit us without guilt or remorse.

### Trans-Mystification

Another strategy that goes hand in hand with passing-centrism and trans-objectification is *trans-mystification*: to allow oneself to become so caught up in the taboo nature of "sex changes" that one loses sight of the fact that transsexuality is very real, tangible, and often mundane for those of us who experience it firsthand. One can see trans-mystification readily in media depictions of transsexuals, where our assigned sex is often transformed into a hidden secret or plot twist and our lived sex is distorted into an elaborate illusion. In real life, when I tell people that I am a transsexual, it is common for them to dawdle over me, repeating how they can't believe that I used to be male, as if I had just impressed them with a magic trick.

The truth is, there is nothing fascinating about transsexuality. It is simply reality for many of us. I come out to people all the time and there is never any suspenseful music playing in the background when I do. And my femaleness is not some complex production that requires smoke and mirrors for me to pull off; believe it or not, I live my life by just being myself and doing what feels most comfortable to me. Trans-mystification is merely another attempt by cissexuals to play up the "artificiality" of transsexuality, thus creating the false impression that our assigned genders are "natural" and our identified and lived genders are not.

### Trans-Interrogation

Passing-centrism, trans-objectification, and trans-mystification delegitimize transsexual identities by focusing on the "how" of transsexuality; *trans-interrogation* focuses on the "why." Why do transsexuals exist? Why are we motivated to change our sex? Is it due to genetics? Hormones? Upbringing? Living in a plastic surgery-obsessed culture? Or maybe it's just a good old-fashioned mental disorder? Such questions represent the intellectualization of objectifying transsexuals. By reducing us to the status of objects of inquiry, cissexuals free themselves of the inconvenience of having to consider us living, breathing beings who cope not only with our own intrinsic inclinations, but with extrinsic cissexist and oppositionally sexist gender discrimination.

While I was working on chapter 7, "Pathological Science," immersing myself in sexological and sociological accounts that attempt to explain why transsexuals exist, it occurred to me that, rather than simply removing the gender identity disorder diagnosis from the *DSM*, we should perhaps consider



transsexual etiology disorder, to describe the unhealthy obsession many cissexuals have with explaining the origins of transsexuality. Unlike those cissexual researchers who find it fascinating and thought-provoking to ponder and pontificate on my existence, for me the question of why I am transsexual has always been a source of shame and self-loathing. From my preteen years through young adulthood, I was consumed with the question because, quite frankly, I didn't want to be transsexual. Like most people, I assumed that it was better to be cissexual. Eventually, I realized that dwelling on "why" was a pointless endeavor—the fact is that I am transsexual and I exist, and there is no legitimate reason why I should feel inferior to a cissexual because of that.

Once I accepted my own transsexuality, then it became obvious to me that the question "Why do transsexuals exist?" is not a matter of pure curiosity, but rather an act of nonacceptance, as it invariably occurs in the absence of asking the reciprocal question: "Why do cissexuals exist?" The unceasing search to uncover the cause of transsexuality is designed to keep transsexual gender identities in a perpetually questionable state, thereby ensuring that cissexual gender identities continue to be unquestionable.

### Trans-Erasure

The only thing more troubling than people who relentlessly wonder why transsexuals exist are people who arrogantly assume that they know the answer to that question. Unfortunately, rather than simply accepting transsexual accounts—which almost invariably describe some sort of intrinsic self-knowledge or subconscious sex—many cissexuals instead choose to project their own assumptions about gender onto us. Often, such attempts center on naive cissexual

notions about what a transsexual might socially gain from changing their lived sex: privilege, normalcy, sexual fulfillment, and so on. The idea that we transition first and foremost for ourselves, to be comfortable in our own bodies, is often never seriously considered. This is because transsexuals are generally viewed by cissexuals as nonentities: the processes of trans-objectification, trans-mystification, and trans-interrogation ensure that we are seen not as human beings, but as objects and as spectacles that exist for the benefit or amusement of others. The ease with which transsexual voices are dismissed or ignored by the public is due to the phenomenon of *trans-erasure*.

While all minority voices are silenced to varying extents—usually by being denied access to media and economic and political power—there are several aspects of trans-erasure that make it particularly extensive. First, as with all sexual minorities, oppositional sexism ensures that only a small percentage of trans people ever come out as transsexual. Second, those who come out often do so concurrently with their decision to physically transition, a process that has been historically regulated (and severely limited) by cissexual gatekeepers. Often, those who were granted permission to transition were selected based on the gatekeepers' assessment that they would be gender-normative in their identified sex and would remain silent about their trans status post-transition. This has helped ensure that most transsexuals effectively disappear within the cissexual population both pre- and post-transition.

But perhaps nothing facilitates trans-erasure more than everyday gendering and cissexual assumption. When I come out to people, they often tell me that I am the first transsexual they have ever met. This suggests that most cissexuals never seriously considered



possibility that a certain percentage of the cissexual-appearing people they see every day might actually be transsexual. International statistics indicate that the percentage of “post-operative” transsexuals range from 1 to 3 percent of the population. While there are no rigorous statistics for the number of transsexuals in the U.S., estimates based on the number of sex reassignment surgeries performed suggest that at least one in five hundred people in this country are transsexual (and several times more than that are transgender).<sup>4</sup>

In a world where people are viewed as being either female or male, and where all people are assumed to be cisgendered and cissexual, those of us who are transgendered and transsexual are effectively erased from public awareness. This allows media producers to depict us however they want, for academics to posit whatever theories they wish about us, and for cissexual doctors, psychologists, and other self-appointed “experts” to speak as proxies on our behalf.

### Changing Gender Perception, Not Performance

A thorough understanding of gendering, gender entitlement, and cissexual privilege challenges both the mainstream assumption that cissexual genders are more “natural” and legitimate than transsexual genders, and the recent focus among gender theorists and activists on how all people “do” or “perform” their genders.<sup>5</sup> These performance-centric models of gender can vary quite a bit, but they generally stress the idea that each of us actively creates gender differences by “doing” or “performing” gender in particular ways. According to this view, femaleness is not a natural state, but one that we reproduce when we call ourselves women—when we act, dress, speak in what are considered feminine ways—and similarly

for maleness. Some of the more extreme variations of this theory leave little room for intrinsic gender inclinations, leaning toward the notion that our gender and sexual identities are merely unconscious repetitions of the socialization and gender norms that have been foisted upon us. Because many theorists and activists view gendered performance as the means by which gender privileges, expectations, and restrictions are propagated in our culture, they have argued that the most effective way to counteract oppositional and traditional sexism is to refuse all gender and sexual identities, or to subvert those categories by “doing” gender in nonconventional ways (e.g., drag, androgyny, and so on).

Many gender theorists and activists have embraced performance-centric models, praising these models’ potential to free us from oppositional gender norms and to challenge the idea that straight genders are more legitimate than queer ones. But I see several problems with such theories. For one thing, such models display several of the flaws that regularly plague gender theories, which I described in detail at the end of chapter 6, “Intrinsic Inclinations.” Further, I believe that the central tenet of performance-centric models of gender—that social gender arises and is propagated by the way individuals “do” or “perform” gender—is problematic. Many of us who have physically transitioned from one sex to the other understand that our perceived gender is typically not a product of our “performance” (i.e., gender expression/gender roles), but rather our physical appearance (in particular, our secondary sex characteristics). This makes sense if you think about it. After all, if you look like a supermodel, you can act as butch as you want to, but other people will inevitably gender you as female. And if you look like a linebacker, you can act as femme as you want, but



gender you as male. While the way we "do" gender may influence whether people perceive us as queer or straight, and may tip the scales for those whose appearance is somewhat gender-ambiguous to begin with, the vast majority of us are gendered primarily based on our physical bodies rather than our behaviors.

Personally, I used to have a performance-centric view of gender when I was living as a male, when I used to crossdress and "pass" as a woman in public. The amount of time and effort I had to put into altering my appearance and behaviors to accomplish that feat made it feel like a performance in many ways. But when I eventually did transition, I chose not to put on a performance—I simply acted, dressed, and spoke the way I always had, the way that felt most comfortable to me. After being on female hormones for a few months, I found that people began to consistently gender me as female despite the fact that I was "doing" my gender the same way I always had. What I found most striking was how other people interpreted my same actions and mannerisms differently based on whether they perceived me to be female or male. For example, when ordering drinks at bars, I found that if I looked around the room while waiting for my drink (as I always unconsciously had prior to transitioning), men started hitting on me because they assumed I was signaling my availability (when I was perceived as male, the same action was likely to be interpreted simply as me scoping out the room). And in supermarket checkout lines, when the child in the cart ahead of me started smiling and talking to me, I found that I could interact with them without their mother becoming suspicious or fearful (which is what often happened in similar situations when I was perceived as male).

During the first year of my transition, I experienced hundreds of little moments like that, where other people interpreted my words and actions differently based solely on the change in my perceived sex. And it was not merely my behaviors that were interpreted differently, it was my body as well: the way people approached me, spoke to me, the assumptions they made about me, the lack of deference and respect I often received, the way others often sexualized my body. All of these changes occurred without my having to say or do a thing.

I would argue that social gender is not produced and propagated because of the way we as individuals "perform" or "do" our genders; it lies in the perceptions and interpretations of others. I can modify my own gender all I want, but it won't change the fact that other people will continue to compulsively assign a gender to me and to view me through the distorted lenses of cissexual and heterosexual assumption.

While no gendered expression can subvert the gender system as we know it, we are nevertheless still capable of instituting change in that system. However, such change will not come by managing the way we "do" our own gender, but by dismantling our own gender entitlement. If we truly want to bring an end to all gender-based oppression, then we must begin by taking responsibility for our own perceptions and presumptions. The most radical thing that any of us can do is to stop projecting our beliefs about gender onto other people's behaviors and bodies.



## 9

### Ungendering in Art and Academia

*People use books on gender to invisibilize transsexuals.*

—Kate Bornstein<sup>1</sup>

*Sometimes I think they just don't want to hear the real stories. I get cynical and think, who wants the everyday details of someone's life when you can use people with intersex to fulfill erotic fantasies, narrative requirements, and research programs?*

—Thea Hillman<sup>2</sup>

IN PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, I discussed how most depictions of transsexuals are designed to reinforce the idea that female and male are distinct, mutually exclusive, "opposite" sexes. The same can also be said for depictions of other gender-variant people (i.e., those who deviate in some way from societal expectations of femaleness and maleness). In this chapter, I describe a more recent, reciprocal phenomenon—which I call *ungendering*—where gender-variant people are

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used as a device to bring conventional notions about maleness and femaleness into question. In theory, any person can be ungendered (simply by dwelling on the aspects of their gendered appearance, expressions, and identity that differ from the norm), but this practice seems to most often focus on transsexual and intersex people. While these two groups face very different social and medical issues because of their gender difference, they both tend to be targeted for ungendering because their physical bodies are in some way at odds with their identified and lived genders. Here, I discuss the practice of ungendering as it occurs in cissexual works of fiction (e.g., movies and novels) and in academia. In both cases, ungendering is an exploitive process, involving both the appropriation of gender-variant bodies and experiences while erasing intersex and transsexual voices and perspectives.

### Capitalizing on Transsexuality and Intersexuality

A classic example of ungendering can be found in the Emmy Award-nominated HBO movie *Normal*, which depicts a trans woman named Roy who comes out to her family as trans. The movie focuses on how Roy's revelation and her ensuing transition affects her relationship with her wife and children in their small midwestern town. In an interview about the film that appeared on *HBO.com*, writer and director Jane Anderson said that, despite the fact that the subject of transsexuality dominates much of the film, she did not envision *Normal* as a story chronicling the "adventures of a transgender person," but rather as a study of one married-couple's love for one another.<sup>3</sup>

So if the movie is not about transsexuality per se, then why did this non-trans filmmaker go to the trouble of including a

transsexual character? Anderson explained that she used transsexuality primarily as a device to challenge the couple's relationship. In fact, she draws a comparison between the way she employs transsexuality and the way other writers have used extra-marital affairs in the past. While Anderson seems to believe that stories that center on extra-marital affairs have become passé (both because the premise has been overused by writers and because many people continue to love the person who has cheated on them), she views transsexuality as "ultimate betrayal" that can occur within a marriage.<sup>4</sup>

So, in other words, one of the characters, Roy, is ungendered in order to throw a monkey wrench into the couple's marriage. And transsexuality is no longer a marginalized identity or a grueling issue that real human beings struggle with; it is merely a literary device—a "metaphor" for the "ultimate catastrophe" that can strike a relationship.

You would think that Anderson—as a woman and a lesbian—would be aware of the troubling way sexual minorities are portrayed (and their voices silenced) by the media, and that she would, at the very least, make a modest attempt to ensure that her character was respectful of the transsexual experience. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When the interviewer asked her if she drew on any sources when researching the movie, Anderson unabashedly answered that she relied solely on her "imagination," that she made it up all herself.<sup>5</sup>

Unencumbered by any need to have her character reflect reality, Anderson was free to turn Roy into a transsexual caricature. She explained in the interview that she purposely set out to make sure that the audience would not take Roy seriously as a woman.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is why Anderson makes no attempt to have any of the



other characters come to relate to Roy as female or use female pronouns when addressing her. Roy herself doesn't seem to protest this fact or assert her female identity at any point; in fact, she is inordinately meek and docile for someone who is in the process of coming out as transsexual. In a pre-movie interview, Tom Wilkinson, who played Roy in the made-for-cable movie, said, "I wanted to retain the kind of innocence about the whole thing that that *guy* had. He doesn't know quite what *he's* getting into." (Emphasis mine.) Thus, like his director, Wilkinson shows no respect for his transsexual character's gender identity. As a result, Roy comes off as excruciatingly mousy and confused, presumably because it never occurred to either Wilkinson or Anderson that a man who wanted to be female could be any other way.

For someone who claims to have little interest in making a film about the "adventures of a transgender person," Anderson sure does fancy her film up in all of the accoutrements of the transsexual transitioning process: The dialogue includes discussions about electrolysis, a play-by-play description of how a vagina is created during MTF sex reassignment surgery, and even talk about what breast size Roy can expect after she goes on hormones. At one point in the movie, close-ups of Roy's hormone prescriptions—Premarin and Spironolactone—precede an early morning family breakfast scene in which Roy, her wife, and her daughter (who has recently had her first period) all start arguing with each other in an apparent hormone-induced frenzy. (Upon watching that scene, I wasn't quite sure if I should be more offended as a woman or as a transsexual.)

In the end, the most damaging aspect of *Normal* is that it gives the impression of being a serious film about transsexuality without ever incorporating the perspectives of real-life transsexuals. There

are countless other movies that, on the surface, seem to be more demeaning or insulting toward transsexuals, but I find *Normal* to be more damaging than most. At least the *Ace Venturas* and *South Parks* of the world don't even bother to pretend that they know what they're talking about when they create transsexual characters. Anderson, on the other hand, did just enough homework about transsexuality to make her film dangerous. She poached and pilfered the transsexual experience without any sense of respect or responsibility for the very people she exploited in the process.

Another writer who knows just enough to be dangerous is Jeffrey Eugenides. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex* centers on an intersex person named Cal, who is raised female until he discovers his condition during puberty. The book follows Cal as he develops male physical attributes and eventually a male identity. So why did Eugenides set out to write a book about an intersex person? In an interview, he explained that he simply "used a hermaphrodite" (a word most intersex people find stigmatizing) as a metaphor for the confusing changes in identity and sexuality that all people face during adolescence.<sup>8</sup> So, this time, a main character is ungendered to make a larger point about puberty and metamorphosis.

Eugenides says he was initially inspired to write *Middlesex* after reading *Herculine Barbin*, a real-life account of an intersex person who lived during the nineteenth century, published by French philosopher Michel Foucault in 1978. Eugenides was fascinated by the book, but he found that, "as an expression of what it is like to be a hermaphrodite, from the inside, Herculine Barbin's memoir is quite disappointing. She just tends to go into this moaning, talking about how misfortunate she is and . . . it's sad."<sup>9</sup> Rather than be inconvenienced by the overwhelming depression and



that often typifies the lives of gender-variant people, Eugenides set out to invent his own new-and-improved intersex story: "I wanted to write about a real person with a real condition. I did a lot of research on the details, but in terms of figuring out what hermaphrodites psychologically went through, I did that from my imagination. That's how I work, I try to identify my narrator and my characters as much as I can instead of going out, observing other intersex people and focus[ing] on the details. Hopefully I make the right assumptions and choices about all these characters, so that someone [who] is interested in intersex reads the book."<sup>10</sup>

*Middlesex* is chock-full of descriptions of atypical chromosome combinations, genital configurations, and other highly detailed medical references to intersex conditions, yet it remains remarkably untainted by actual intersex perspectives or voices.<sup>11</sup> The book reads like an intersex adventure story, with colorful scenes of Cal's visit with an eccentric, John Money-esque doctor who wishes to perform nonconsensual genital surgery on him, or his befriending other intersex people (as well as transsexuals) when he fulfills the standard gender-variant-person cliché of working as a performer at a sex club. For a character who is supposedly fourteen years old at the time of these events, Cal's narration remains remarkably light, humorous, and generally above the fray at all times, as though it had been whitewashed of all of the shame, self-loathing, and self-consciousness that plagues gender-variant adolescents as their bodies, identities, and behaviors are placed under society's microscope. The way that Eugenides dwells in all of the physical aspects of intersexuality while playing down the emotional trauma and stigma that generally accompanies it gives the book an extraordinarily objectifying and voyeuristic feel to someone who is actually familiar with the subject.

Eugenides and Anderson both claim to use intersexuality and transsexuality merely as metaphors, but this is clearly disingenuous. While *Middlesex* may be an epic novel that follows a Greek American family through several generations, what consistently grabbed people's attention in book reviews and interviews was its intersex protagonist. And while *Normal* may be a film about marriage, it was clearly marketed as a film about transsexuality. The success of *Middlesex* and *Normal* was clearly due in large part to the fact that they offered mainstream audiences a glimpse into what are largely considered the mysterious and exotic lives of gender-variant people. Eugenides and Anderson capitalized on the taboo nature of intersexuality and transsexuality without acknowledging the fact that the stigma associated with these conditions forces real people to the margins of society. These writers took two of the most maligned and misunderstood sexual minorities in existence, hollowed them out, and poured in their own non-intersex, cissexual biases, inclinations, and impressions. In a world where transsexual and intersex works of art never get the chance to be seen on HBO, or are not considered mainstream enough to be nominated for Emmys and Pulitzers, the facade presented in *Normal* and *Middlesex* profoundly shapes and solidifies a naive audience's opinions about transsexuals and intersex people. By replacing gender-variant voices with their own, both Eugenides and Anderson ensure that real transsexual or intersex voices are not heard.

### Toying with Gender-Ambiguous Characters

Another form of ungendering in media involves sexually amorphous characters. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Julia Sweeney's character "Pat," who gained popularity on the TV show



*Saturday Night Live*. Skits involving Pat essentially consisted of one recurring gag: Other characters, disturbed by Pat's indeterminate gender, would ask her/him questions designed to reveal whether he/she was a woman or a man. Pat always replied in a gender-ambiguous fashion that thwarted their efforts. While most of the jokes were made at the expense of the other characters, who expressed ridiculous amounts of concern and frustration over their inability to gauge Pat's sex, the mainstream appeal of the skits was most likely due to the fact that the drooling, whiny, creepy Pat was pretty much a joke him/herself.

Another similar use of an ungendered character can be found in Diane DiMassa's comic strip *Hothead Paisan*, *Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*. With its dyke protagonist who confronts expressions of sexism and homophobia with a lethal combination of violence and humor, *Hothead* became a popular vehicle in the '90s for expressing the frustration and anger many queer women felt. At one point in the series, Hothead meets her eventual love interest, Daphne. When they are first dating, Daphne mentions, "I'm just low on friends! Mine took off 'cause they couldn't handle it." After Hothead asks why, Daphne explains, "I'm in the middle of a large-scale transition. Look at me. . . . Do you see?"<sup>12</sup> The fact that this "large-scale transition" is a physical one, and that Daphne follows with, "I'm telling you now so you can do what you gotta do. If you're gonna fly away I'd rather just get it over with," DiMassa is clearly leading the audience to believe that Daphne is transsexual. This is further evident in a later episode when Hothead imagines asking, "So Daphne, what's the story? You gotta dick or pussy or what?"<sup>13</sup> While the fact that Daphne has a feminine name, longish hair, breasts, and identifies as a dyke suggests that she is a trans woman,

DiMassa never clearly spells it out, opting instead to tease the audience by relegating Daphne to a permanently ungendered state.

In 2004, Daphne's ungendered status slammed up against the political reality of actual trans people when a musical based on *Hothead Paisan* was to be performed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Because many people were led to believe that Daphne was transgender—and more specifically, a trans woman—DiMassa received pressure to denounce the festival's trans-woman-exclusion policy. In response, DiMassa published an open letter on her website in July 2004 stating that she supported the trans-woman-exclusion policy. In an interview with *Bitch* magazine around the same time, she said, "Daphne has become sort of a transgender hero character. But I never used that word. I never said which way she was going. I never said if she was MTF or FTM."<sup>14</sup>

It seems that DiMassa wants to have it both ways here. She wants to toy with the idea of transsexuality without taking responsibility for the fact that real trans people have identities that are regularly dismissed by other people. DiMassa feels entitled to use her gender-variant characters as mere plot devices to provoke other characters and audiences in much the same way that heterosexual TV sitcom writers create walk-on lesbian characters who exist only to challenge the male protagonist's masculinity. Perhaps the most surreal part of the entire incident was DiMassa's defensive reaction to the anger of the trans female community, at one point quipping, "It's just fucking typical that a man-born woman can't get the concept of not being allowed somewhere."<sup>15</sup> Apparently, DiMassa believes that the anger lesbian women feel about being marginalized by the straight, male-dominated mainstream is legitimate, but that the similar anger trans women feel about being



dismissed, stereotyped, and exploited by the lesbian community merely represents selfishness on our parts.

I am sure that writers like DiMassa, Eugenides, and Anderson would defend their works by claiming they have artistic license to create characters and stories as they please. To be honest, I would have no problem if their stories contained characters that magically transitioned from one sex to the other. But instead, they chose to base their gender transformations in reality—a reality where transsexual and intersex people are marginalized, where our voices are seldom heard. It is as if these writers feel some kind of sense of ownership about experiences that intersex and transsexual folks—and they alone—struggle with. Transitioning from one sex to another is not simply an interesting anecdote; it is a grueling, tumultuous experience that turns a person's life upside down, that often causes people to lose their family, friends, and jobs. And the discovery that a family member is intersex is not simply some clever plot twist. It is most often a traumatic situation, resulting in the person being endlessly poked and prodded by doctors, an experience that shrouds individuals and their families in shame and secrecy. For writers who have never had to deal with being transsexual or intersex to lay claim to those experiences, to use them for their own purposes, and to profit from them, is nothing short of exploitation.

### Fables of the Deconstruction

Arguably, nowhere have people felt more entitled to possess and exploit intersex and transsexual experiences and identities than in academia. The ungendering of gender-variant people has been an ongoing practice among sociologists, poststructuralist theorists, and feminists who wish to demonstrate that our notions of

gender are socially constructed. One of the earliest examples of this approach is sociologist Harold Garfinkel's 1967 book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, which attempted to elucidate how members of society "produce stable, accountable practical activities, i.e., social structures of everyday activities."<sup>16</sup> While Garfinkel could have examined how the average person makes sense of their own gendered experiences, he instead focused on someone who didn't have the privilege of taking their own gender for granted. That person was Agnes, a trans woman who (unbeknownst to Garfinkel) had taken female hormones for a number of years and posed as intersex in the hope of obtaining sex reassignment surgery (during the 1950s in the U.S., such surgeries were regularly carried out on intersex individuals, but not transsexuals).<sup>17</sup> Garfinkel devoted seventy pages to describing Agnes's attempts to reconcile her female identity and feminine behavior with the fact that she had male genitals. The account is extraordinarily objectifying, and not only with regard to Garfinkel's descriptions of Agnes's body (such as, "Her measurements were 38-25-38" and "she was dressed in a tight sweater which marked off her thin shoulders, ample breasts, and narrow waist").<sup>18</sup> He spends page after page relishing the details of how she managed to "pass" as a woman, highlighting her anxiety around the discrepancy between her anatomy and gender identity, and pointing out what he believed were inconsistencies in her personal history and her claims that she always felt like a girl. The entitled way he picks apart Agnes's life, graphically chronicling her fears, secrets, embarrassments, and insecurities, shows no regard for her as a person or for the immense difficulty she must have faced in simply trying to survive and make sense of her life as a gender-variant person living in the 1950s.



Another early example of ungendering can be found in the previously mentioned *Herculine Barbin*. Foucault makes it clear in his introduction to the book that his interest in publishing this nineteenth-century account of an intersex person stemmed solely from the fact that it challenges the modern Western notion that all people have a "true sex." (At one point, he even boasts that "the narrative baffles every possible attempt to make an identification."<sup>19</sup>) It is clear that Foucault had little interest in the desperation and disorientation Herculine felt as she/he grappled with the masculine changes in her/his body and sexuality, as well as other people's reactions to those changes (which apparently led to Herculine's suicide). In reference to Herculine's personal tragedy, Foucault states that he "would be tempted to call the story banal" if it were not for the fact that it provided an example of how society actively imposes a "true sex" onto people.<sup>20</sup> Foucault further dehumanizes Herculine by publishing her/his memoir alongside a dossier that includes medical and legal records, including graphic details of Herculine's body and intersex condition, as well as a sensationalistic fictional account from that time period based on Herculine's story.<sup>21</sup> The needless inclusion of this extra material only adds to the reader's sense that Herculine is nothing more than a specimen for us to freely examine.

The fact that both Foucault and Garfinkel claimed to be making larger points about gender and society (Foucault: that society imposes a "true sex" on *all* of its members; Garfinkel: that we *all* actively manage and produce our gendered sense of self) makes their subject choice seem rather dubious. Wouldn't their cases have been stronger if they'd focused instead on subjects who were not gender-variant—who were not such obvious exceptions to the rule? I would argue that Herculine and Agnes were chosen as subjects not

because their conditions offered any unique insight into social gender, but because their gender-variant status facilitated their depiction as specimens. After all, one only has to look at how apologetic people become when they accidentally misgender another person, or how insulting it is generally considered to be to suggest that someone's femaleness or maleness is suspect in any way, to understand that ungendering is an inherently demeaning process. If Foucault and Garfinkel had instead chosen to pick apart the gender identities of young people who were not gender-variant, the process of ungendering would have undoubtedly (and appropriately) seemed intrusive and disrespectful. But because society typically views transsexual and intersex people as illegitimate and unnatural—even inhuman—Agnes and Herculine could be depicted as mere objects of inquiry without any chance of the audience identifying with them or sympathizing with them.

While Foucault and Garfinkel may have seen their subjects as nothing more than interesting case studies, I found both of these writers' accounts—specifically, the way these gender-variant young people were dehumanized and used as pawns to forward academic theories of gender—to be horribly exploitive. Having experienced firsthand what it's like to feel a disconnect between my own physical sex and gender identity, having deeply internalized the shame that's associated with having a body that defies public expectations of what is natural and normal, and having experienced the profound sense of isolation that comes with being a young gender-variant person, I found the lengthy, graphic depictions that Foucault and Garfinkel provide shamelessly voyeuristic. These accounts are akin to offering an explicit play-by-play description of a rape scene for the sole purpose of making some rather generic point about human sexuality.