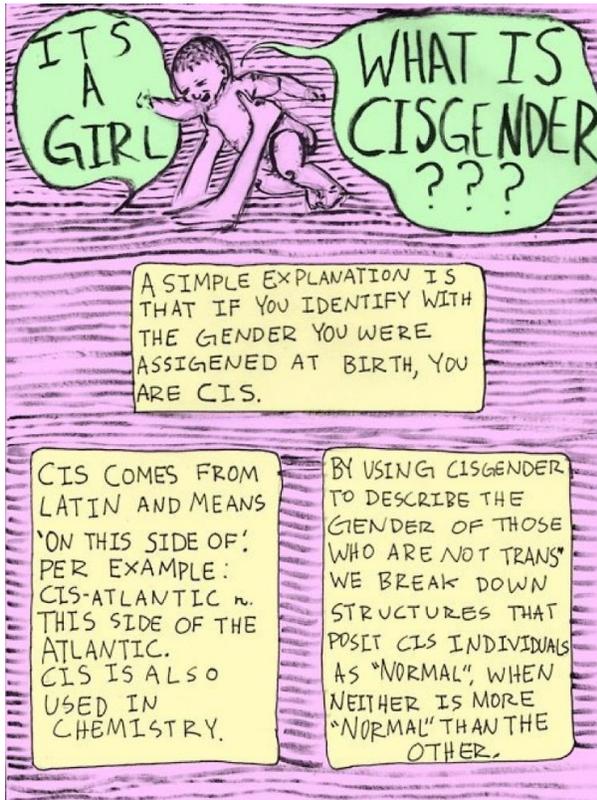


A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF “CISGENDER”

By Elizabeth Hungerford

Consistent with common usage of the term "cisgender," the graphic below explains that **"...if you identify with the gender you were assigned [sic] at birth, you are cis."**



Another Trans 101: Cisgender webpage describes cis this way: "For example, if a doctor said "it's a boy!" when you were born, and you identify as a man, then you could be described as cisgender."^[1] Likewise, girl-born people who identify as women are also considered cisgender. WBW are cis.

Framing gender as a medically determined *assignment* may seem like a good start to explaining gendered oppression because it purports to make a distinction between physical sex and gender. Feminism similarly understands masculinity and femininity (e.g., gender) as strictly enforced social constructs *neither of which* are the "normal" or *inevitable result* of one's reproductive sex organs. Feminism and trans theory agree that coercive gender *assignments* are a significant source of oppression.

On closer inspection of the concept of "cisgender," however, feminism and trans theory quickly diverge. Feminism does not believe that asking whether an individual *identifies with* the particular social characteristics and expectations assigned to them at birth is a politically useful way of analyzing or understanding gender. Eliminating gender *assignments*, by allowing individuals to *choose* one of two pre-existing gender molds, while continuing to celebrate the existence and naturalism of "gender" itself, is a not progressive social goal that will advance women's liberation. Feminism claims that gender is a much more complicated (and sinister) social phenomenon than this popular cis/trans binary has any hope of capturing.

First, "masculinity" and "femininity" are not monolithic, static concepts that are wholly embraced or wholly discarded. Socially assigned gender roles encompass entire lives' worth of behaviors and expectations, from cradle to grave. Most people's *identification with* their "gender" assignment is not a simple Y/N. One may be *aesthetically* gender conforming, but at the same time, *behaviorally* non-conforming. Or vice versa. Or some combination of both. Most of us are not walking, talking stereotypes. It is unusual for a person to both appear and behave in unmodified *identification with* their assigned gender at birth. For example, a female-born

person might wear pink dresses and lots of makeup, but behave in an assertive, detached, and highly intellectual manner. Or a female-born person might appear very androgynous, without any feminine adornment at all, but express herself gently, quietly, and with graceful concern for those around her. What about a female who is aggressive and competitive in her professional life, but submissive and emotional in her personal life? Who decides whether an individual is sufficiently *identified with* to be considered "cis"? Or sufficiently *non-identified with* to be "trans"? "Cis" and "trans" do not describe discrete social classes from which political analysis can be extrapolated.

Additionally, one's *identification with* their "gender" may change over time. Gender is not an immutable characteristic. While some people argue that "gender identity" is a deeply felt, unchanging personal quality,^[ii] the existence and prominence of late-transitioning^[iii] trans people drags this claim into very questionable territory. One may be gender conforming for many years, then slowly or suddenly reject the characteristics of their assigned gender. How an individual *identifies* in reference to their gender, whether it be masculinity or femininity, is not necessarily stable, *nor should it have to be*.

The cis/trans binary does not, and cannot, account for the experiences of people with complicated, blended, or changing "gender identities;" nor does it address people with hostile relationships to gender in general. As a woman-born-woman who rejects femininity as females' destiny, I surely do not *identify with* my assigned gender in the way that "cis" describes. Indeed, no one holding radical feminist/anti-essentialist views about gender could be considered "cis" because, by definition of these views, we reject gender as a natural social category that every person *identifies with*. Feminists do not believe that everyone has a "gender identity," or that we all possess some kind of internal compass directing our *identification with* "gender."

Identifying with something is an internal, subjective experience. Self-assessments of gender do not equal self-awareness, nor do they provide insight as to how gendered oppression operates in the broader, external social sphere.

By using cisgender to describe the gender of those who are not trans we break down structures that posit cis individuals as "normal," when neither is more "normal" than the other.*

See graphic, above. The cis/trans* binary does not break down any structures of normalcy because it doesn't describe how such systems operate. It doesn't explain how a person will be treated by society or what kind(s) of power they hold relative to others. External observers cannot reliably determine whether someone considers herself "cis" or "trans;" they simply pass judgment by categorizing superficial *expressions* of masculinity or femininity as appropriate or inappropriate. In reality, *any person* who significantly defies the gender norms for their apparent sex will be subject to negative social treatment *because of* their non-compliance. This

will occur *regardless* of whether the individual applies the label “trans” to herself or not. Under nearly all circumstances, stealth trans* people will be treated by society *as if* they were cis; and gender non-conforming cis people who do not disclaim their reproductive sex—including butch lesbians and feminine males—will be treated by society *as if* they were “trans.*” Framing the politics of gender as a matter of *self*-perception rather than *social* perception evades the feminist political inquiry regarding why gender exists in the first place and how these gender dynamics operate, and have operated, for hundreds of years.

"IT'S A GIRL!" (see graphic above) *means something* in regard to that baby's life. Assuming she makes it to adulthood, that is. [\[iv\]](#)

For “It’s a girl!” to make sense, it must refer to a long string of gendered words that help the community understand what to expect out of babies called “girls.”

...

The single utterance, “It’s a girl!” does not a baby girl make. The drama of gender is a repeat performance—it must be reenacted continually to form a pattern. Butler writes, “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time.” 273 She explains, “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established...[\[v\]](#)

The *pattern of gender*, constituted through gender’s repeated performance on the stage of life, demonstrates that males and masculinity are institutionally dominant over females and femininity. Gender is not just a fun dress up game that individuals merely *identify with* in isolation from all contextual and historical meaning, but the most powerful tool of structural oppression ever created by humans.

Notwithstanding variations caused by intersecting factors such as economic class, national jurisdiction, and cultural differences; the collective female social location is consistently **less than similarly situated males** in terms of: (i) material resources received as an infant and child, (ii) respect, attention, and intellectual encouragement received as an infant and child, (iii) risk of being sexually exploited or victimized, (iv) role within the hetero family unit, (v) representation and power in government, (vi) access to education, jobs, and promotions in the workforce, (vii) property ownership and dominion over space. [\[vi\]](#)

Recognizing this, feminism understands gender as a powerful-- but not inevitable-- tool of organizing social relations and distributing power, including physical resources, between the sexes. The near-universal quality of life disparities enumerated above are created, enforced, and replicated through the enforcement of gendered *difference* and the *meanings* assigned to these *differences*. Being born with female appearing genitals and, as a *direct result*, being coercively assigned the feminine gender at birth, is clearly not a (cis) privilege, nor is it socially equivalent to males' masculine gender assignment. Female-bodied people and male-bodied people are *not* similarly situated persons in regard to gender based oppression. Gender is not simply a neutral binary. More importantly, it is a hierarchy.

Cis privilege does not exist, man-privilege does.

Feminine gender conformity ala "cis" does not protect women (trans or not) from gendered oppression. While a man's gender conformity with masculinity—both aesthetic and behavioral—will substantially insulate him from sex and gender motivated oppression and violence, a woman's appropriate conformity to stereotypical femininity does *not*. The 2011 SlutWalk campaign (hopefully) served as a grave reminder that victim-blaming, woman-blaming rhetoric is alive and well in mainstream social discourse. The perception that women "bring it on ourselves" or "ask for it" when we dress in certain, *undeniably feminine* ways is very wrong, but also very real. Some predators are even documented as specifically targeting conventionally "attractive" women.

The first good looking girl I see tonight is going to die.

Edward Kemper, serial killer. [\[vii\]](#)

As long as stereotypical femininity remains the controlling standard of beauty for women, feminine-appearing women (trans or not) will be eye-catching targets for misogynistic violence *because of* their perceived "beauty." In other words, *because* they are feminine-conforming.

Further, socially defined feminine *behaviors* such as hospitality, care-taking, and a socially structured desire for male sexual attention contribute to women's vulnerability to exploitation. When a woman's social performance (trans or not) is consistent with feminine subordination to male authority, rapists and other abusers may target these women as easy victims on the assumption that they will be less likely to resist unwanted advances.

Rapists often select potential victims using gut feeling. Subtle attempts to invade our personal space and to force conversation with us are tests of our boundaries used by rapists to confirm their gut feeling. We send a strong message when we enforce our limits and preferences for

touching, revealing personal information and feelings, and having people in the space that surrounds us. [lviii](#)

Feminine socialization conditions women to be accommodating to others, listen politely and attentively, and express emotional concern for those who appear downtrodden. As a result, women still make up the majority of workers in underpaid “caring professions” such as social work, teaching, and nursing. This tendency towards altruism and giving of trust allow feminine-behaving people to be taken advantage of by those who recognize it as an opportunity to leverage their “feminine” generosity for personal gain.

As long as stereotypical femininity remains the controlling standard of appropriate behavior for women (trans or not), we will continue to struggle *not only* with setting boundaries against others’ predatory and/or exploitative intentions, but we are also doomed to walk uphill against the professional double standard recognized in the groundbreaking U.S. Supreme Court decision *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*:

An employer who objects to aggressiveness in women but whose positions require this trait places women in an intolerable and impermissible Catch-22: out of a job if they behave aggressively and out of a job if they do not. [lix](#)

The behavioral characteristics of femininity are economically and intellectually devalued as compared to the traits of masculinity. *Power is gendered*. As a result, males continue to control almost all of the world’s resources and power, including the positions of institutional authority required to direct social reform. Within this patriarchal context, women’s compliance with feminine behavioral norms simply does *not* result in social empowerment. It can’t. And it won’t. Because “gender” isn’t designed to work that way.

Eliminating sex-based gender *assignments*, while leaving hegemonic masculinity and femininity intact, isn’t going to rectify this imbalance. The cis/trans* binary is a gross oversimplification of the gendered dynamics that structure social relations in favor of male-born people. Gender is a socially constructed power hierarchy that must be destroyed, not reinterpreted as consensual, empowering, individualized “gender identities” that are magically divorced from all contextual and historical meaning. Such a framing invisibilizes female and feminine oppression by falsely situating men-born-men and women-born-women as gendered equals relative to trans-identified people. Though possibly unintentional, “cis” now functions as a significant barrier to feminism’s ability to articulate the oppression caused by the socially constructed gender *differentiation* that enables male/masculine supremacy. Cis is a politically useless concept because fails to illuminate the mechanics of gendered oppression. In fact, it has only served to make things more confusing.

I call for trans* theorists, activists, and supporters to stop promoting the cis/trans binary, and instead, to incorporate feminist objections regarding gender-as-hierarchy^[x] and the misplaced glorification of masculinity and femininity in the context of male supremacy into their explanations of "gender."

[i] <http://www.basicrights.org/uncategorized/trans-101-cisgender/>

[ii] Levi, Jennifer L., *The Interplay Between Disability and Sexuality: Clothes Don't Make the Man (or Woman), but Gender Identity Might*. [15 Colum. J. Gender & L. 90 \(2006\)](#).

[iii] <http://ensuringfairness.wordpress.com/statistics/>

[iv] Femicide is real. <http://www.webster.edu/~woolflm/femaleinfanticide.html>

[v] Clarke, Jessica A., *Adverse Possession of Identity: Radical Theory, Conventional Practice*. [Oregon Law Review, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2005](#).

[vi] Special thanks to Virginia Brown for articulating these disparities.

[vii] <http://www.examiner.com/true-crime-in-los-angeles/the-cold-blooded-killer-part-2-serial-killers>

[viii] <http://www.portlandonline.com/police/index.cfm?a=61860&c=35911>

[ix] *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* ([490 U.S. 228](#), 251).

[x] [Here is an example](#) of a trans woman listening, understanding, and incorporating feminist critique of gender into her work. It is possible. www.transadvocate.com/on-die-cis-scum.htm