

Not Your Mom's Trans 101

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There is a huge problem with the way that people are taught about gender in this society. Children are indoctrinated early to believe that there are two sexes, corresponding with two genders, which are both immutable and non-voluntary and completely beyond our control. This worldview is called the gender binary, and it has no room in it for us.

Trying to teach a new perspective to the victims of this extremely aggressive brainwashing can be daunting. In fact, the task can seem downright impossible. The temptation, therefore, is to “dumb things down” for the benefit of a cisgender audience. This situation has given rise to a set of oversimplifications collectively known as “Trans 101.” These rather absurd tropes, such as “blank trapped in a blank’s body” cause confusion among even well-meaning cis folks, feed internalized transphobia among us trans people, and provide endless straw-man fodder for transphobic ‘radical feminists,’ entitled cisgender academics, and other bigots.

Near the beginning of my transition, I myself taught “Trans 101” this way. Because I didn’t know any better. Because I had been taught to think of myself in terms of these same useless tropes, as an “FTM,” as a “female man,” as somebody who was “changing sexes.” Eventually, through a lot of intense discussions and a lot of tough love from people who were more knowledgeable, more radical, and more politically sophisticated than myself, I came to see things very differently.

I haven’t tried to teach Trans 101 since extracting my head from my rectum. But I think the time has come for me to tackle the problem of explaining and defining what it means to be transgender without resorting to cissexist language. It strikes me as I contemplate this task that Trans 101 is generally not only dumbed-down, but also declawed. There are truths that I must speak here that are incredibly threatening to a cissupremacist worldview, that attack its very foundations. But I for one am willing to do that. I am not here to make cis people comfortable or to reassure them that they are still the center of the gendered universe. In fact, I am totally fine with doing the opposite.

Without further ado, let’s begin.

Gender Assigned at Birth

Let’s start at the beginning. A baby is born. The doctor says “It’s a boy” or “It’s a girl” based on the appearance of the child’s genitals. If the genitalia cannot be easily categorized according to binary standards– that is, if the child is intersex– the doctor makes a decision. Surgery is then generally performed on the unconsenting infant to render its body more socially acceptable.

Whether the baby is intersex or not, the child is then raised as whatever arbitrary gender the doctor saw fit to assign.

“Cisgender” is the term for people who have no issue with the gender that they were assigned at birth. For whatever reason, they are able to live somewhat comfortably within the gender in which they have been cast. No one really knows why so many people are capable of fitting into such arbitrary categories.

Transgender people cannot accept our assigned genders. We know ourselves to be something different than what we were told to be. We do not see the random gender scripts we were given by society as relevant to us. We know that there is a different way, a way of autonomy, self-creation, and self-definition, and that this is the way we must follow, because we can never be happy with the parameters that have been mandated for our behavior and our bodies.

The Binary

All cis people and many trans people are binary-identified. Given the options of “man” or “woman,” we who are binary-identified are able to be comfortable with one, even if it is the opposite of what we were assigned. For example, I am a man who was assigned to live as a woman, therefore I am a trans man. My father is a man who was assigned to live as a man, therefore he is a cis man. Both of us are binary identified, both men, even though he is cis and I am trans.

It is a mystery why so many people are comfortable being categorized in just one of two ways. Just as nobody knows why there are so many cis people, nobody knows why there are so many binary identified folks.

But there are many trans people who are neither male nor female. They cannot be categorized as “either/or.” These people may use terms for themselves like genderqueer, androgynous, agender, or neutrois. They often use gender-neutral pronouns such as “ze/hir/hirs” or “they/them/their/theirs.” They can be both male and female, or none of the above, multi-gender, genderless, or something else completely.

In typical trans 101 discussions, right now I would probably be explaining to you that “gender is a spectrum” and drawing a cute little line graph labeled “m” at one end and “f” at the other. But this would be fallacious, as well as total bullshit. Gender is not a line, it is a huge three-dimensional space too big to be bounded by the concepts of “male” and “female.” Being trans is not always about falling “in between” binary genders, and as often as not, it’s about being something too expansive for those ideas to have meaning at all.

Self Identification

The language of self-identification is often used to describe trans people. “George identifies as a man.” “I respect Judy’s identification as a woman.” “Chris just told me that ze identifies as ‘genderqueer.’ Oh dear, that pronoun is going to take some getting used to.” An organization I know, in an effort to be trans friendly, as posted little signs on their bathroom doors, underneath the “MENS” and “WOMENS” signs that we know so well, saying “Self-identified men welcome” and “Self-identified women welcome” and “please be respectful of diversity.”

This co-opting of the language of self-identification is not only condescending, it completely missed the point.

Cis people seem to think that self-identification is only for trans folks. They don’t have to “identify” as men and women– they just *ARE!* Their gender isn’t “self-identified,” it’s “self-evident!”

What they fail to understand is that self identification is the *only* meaningful way to determine gender. Any other method is wholly dependent upon what that doctor said way back when we were still wrinkly, writhing, screaming newborn messes, completely unformed as individuals and without any identity at all to speak of, too bloody and scrunchy-faced to even be called cute. The fact is that cis people self-identify too– they just happen to agree with what the doctor said all those years ago. Anybody who answers the question of “are you a man?” or “are you a woman?” with “yes” has just self-identified.

I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking “but what about bodies? What about genitals? What about chromosomes? What about hormones? What about SEX? Doesn’t that have any bearing on gender?”

Be patient, my darlings. I'll get to that in just a moment.

Bodies

Almost every Trans 101 will contain the truism "Sex is between your legs, gender is between your ears."

Gag.

Or they may say "Sex is physical, gender is socially constructed."

This simply isn't true.

Sex is no more an immutable binary than is gender. There are intersex people who are born with non-binary genitalia, as I have already mentioned. There are people with hormonal anomalies. In fact, hormone levels vary wildly within the categories of cis male and cis female. Chromosomes, too, vary. If you thought "XX" and "XY" were the only two possible combinations, you have some serious googling to do. In addition to variations like XXY, XXYY, or X, sometimes cis people find out that they are genetically the "opposite" of what they thought they were— that is, a 'typical' cis man can be XX, a 'normal' cis woman can be XY.

The fact is that the concept of binary sex is based on the fallacious idea that multiple sex characteristics are immutable and must always go together, when in fact many of them can be changed, many erased, and many appear independently in different combinations. "Female" in sex binary terms means having breasts, having a vagina, having a womb, not having a lot of body hair, having a high-pitched voice, having lots of estrogen, having a period, having XX chromosomes. "Male" means having a penis, not having breasts, producing sperm, having body hair, having a deep voice, having lots of testosterone, having XY chromosomes. Yet it is possible to isolate, alter, and remove many of these traits. Many of these traits do not always appear together, and before puberty and after menopause, many of them do not apply.

And what about women who get hysterectomies? Or who have had mastectomies for reasons related to breast cancer? Are they not women?

What about a soldier whose dick gets blown off by a mine? Is he not a man?

The fallacies of binding identity to bodies, which are fragile, changeable things, subject to injury, mutilation, maiming, decay and ultimate destruction, should by now be clear.

Sex is as much a social construct as gender, as much subject to self identification, and besides all that, quite easy to modify. Surgical and hormonal techniques are only becoming more sophisticated. If there ever was a need to consider biology destiny, that time is surely past.

The entire concept of "sex" is simply a way of attaching something social— gender— to bodies. This being the case, I believe the most sensible way to look at the question of sex now is this: a male body is a body belonging to a male— that is, someone who identifies as male. A female body is a body belonging to a female— that is, someone who identifies as female. Genderqueer bodies belong to folks who are genderqueer, androgynous bodies belong to androgynes, and so forth, and so on.

This is why I question the value of phrases like "man in a woman's body" or "male to female." Who is to say we ever *were* the "opposite sex?" Personally I will never again describe myself as "born female." I was born a trans *male* and my years of confusion were due to being forcefully and repeatedly told that I was something else. This body is not a woman's. It is *mine*. Neither am I trapped in it.

None of what I say here is to minimize the necessity of surgery. Many trans people do experience body dysphoria. Many of us do seek hormones, surgery, and other body modifications. But the point is that, while such modifications may be necessary for our peace of mind, they are not necessary to make us “real men” or “real women” or “real” whatever. We’re plenty real right now, thank you.

Oppression

This brings us, I think, the most important topic of all, and the topic which is most commonly left out of any Trans 101: transphobia and cissexism and how to avoid them.

“Cissexism” can be defined as the system of oppression which considers cis people superior to trans people. Cissexism is believing that it is “natural” to be cis, that being trans is aberrant. Cissexism is holding the genders of trans people to more intense scrutiny than the genders of cis people. Cissexism is defining beauty and attractiveness based on how cis people look. Cissexism is prioritizing cis people’s comfort over trans people’s ability to survive. Cissexism is believing that cis people have more right to have jobs, go to school, date and have sex, make decisions about their bodies, wear the clothes they want, or use public restrooms than trans people do.

Transphobia is irrational fear and hatred of trans people. Transphobia is *Silence Of The Lambs*. Transphobia is referring to transgender surgery as self-mutilation. Transphobia is believing that trans people habitually “trick” or “fool” others into having sex with us. Transphobia is believing that we are out to rob you of your hetero-or-homosexuality. Transphobia is trans people being stared at, insulted, harassed, attacked, beaten, raped, and murdered for simply existing.

If you want to be a good ally, you need to start taking cissexism and transphobia seriously right now. That means getting our goddamn pronouns right and not expecting a cookie for it. That means learning our names. That means not asking invasive questions or telling us how well we “pass.” (Passing generally means “looking cis.” Not all of us want to look like you, thank you very much.) That means deleting the words “tranny” and “shemale” from your vocabulary. That means understanding the immense privilege you have in your legally recognized, socially approved, medically assigned gender.

That means realizing that this is just the beginning, and that you have a lot to learn. That means realizing that it would be intrusive and importunate to ask the nearest trans person to explain it all to you, as if they didn’t have better things to do. That means hitting the internet and doing all that you can to educate yourself. And once you’ve done all that, maybe you can call yourself an ally, that is, if you’re still genuinely willing to join us in the hard work of making the world a less shitty place to be trans.

This will be a work in progress. I expect to receive a lot of commentary on this piece. I expect that it will be edited and possibly revised almost beyond recognition. I am OK with that. As always, there is more work to do. Trans 101 is a huge deal. Revising the way that it is discussed and taught is not a task for just one person. It’s something the entire community must take on.

This is only a first step. But I still hope we learned something today.

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