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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.

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.*[1]

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.[2]

Califia 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.[3]

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 genderqueer 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 previously, 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.

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 physicall transformations keeps transsexuals forever anchored in our assigned sex, thus turning 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 at-

tempt 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 replacing it with 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 consider the 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).[4]

In a world where people are viewed as being either female or male, and where all people are assumed to be cisgender and cissexual, those of us who are transgender 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.

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.