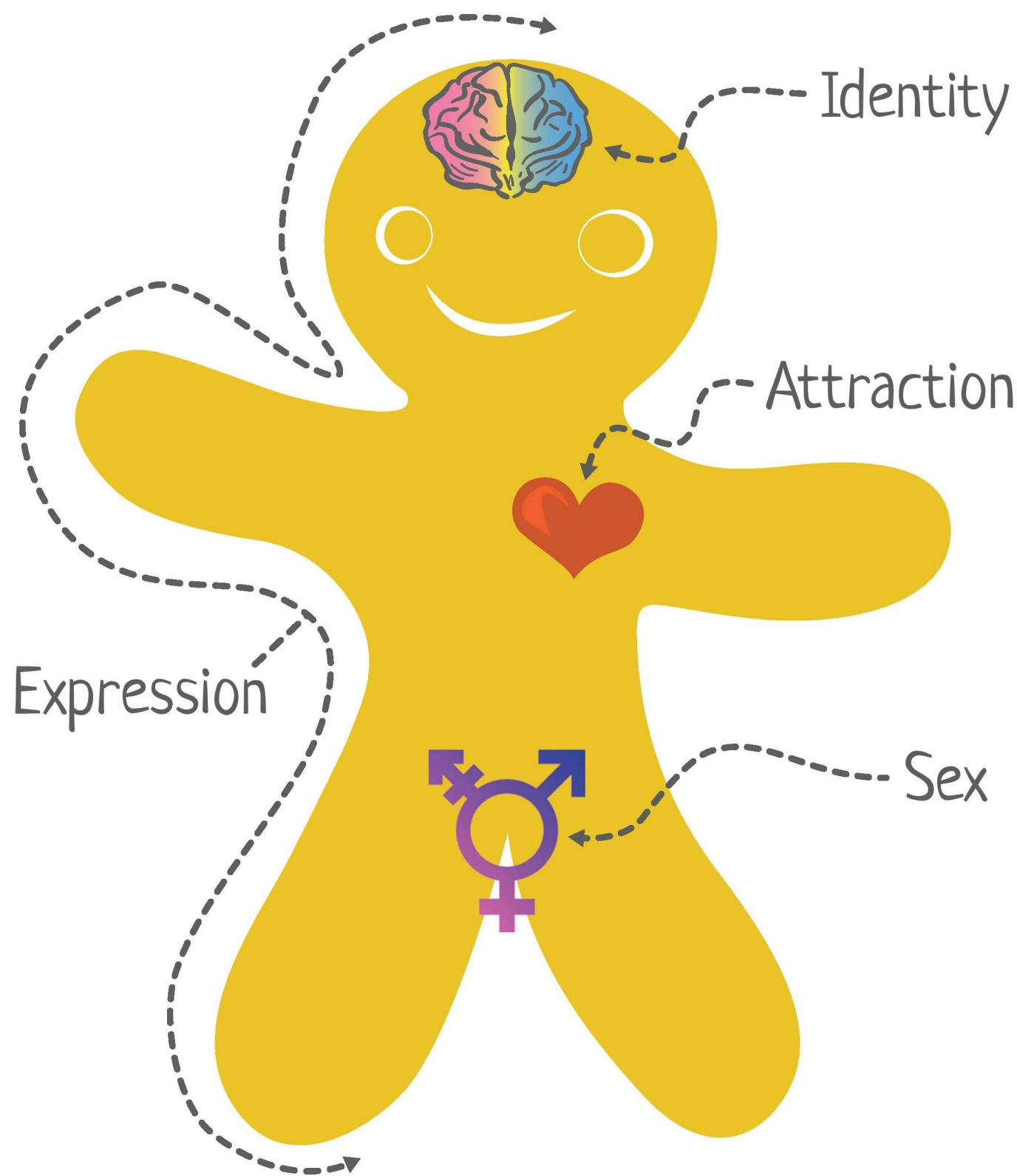


The Genderbread Person v4 by its pronounced METROsexual.com



⊘ means a lack of what's on the right side

Gender Identity

- ⊘ → Woman-ness
- ⊘ → Man-ness



Gender Expression

- ⊘ → Femininity
- ⊘ → Masculinity



Anatomical Sex

- ⊘ → Female-ness
- ⊘ → Male-ness

Identity ≠ Expression ≠ Sex
Gender ≠ Sexual Orientation

Sex Assigned At Birth
□ Female □ Intersex □ Male

Sexually Attracted to... and/or (a/o)

- ⊘ → Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- ⊘ → Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

Romantically Attracted to...

- ⊘ → Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- ⊘ → Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

LGBTQ is an acronym

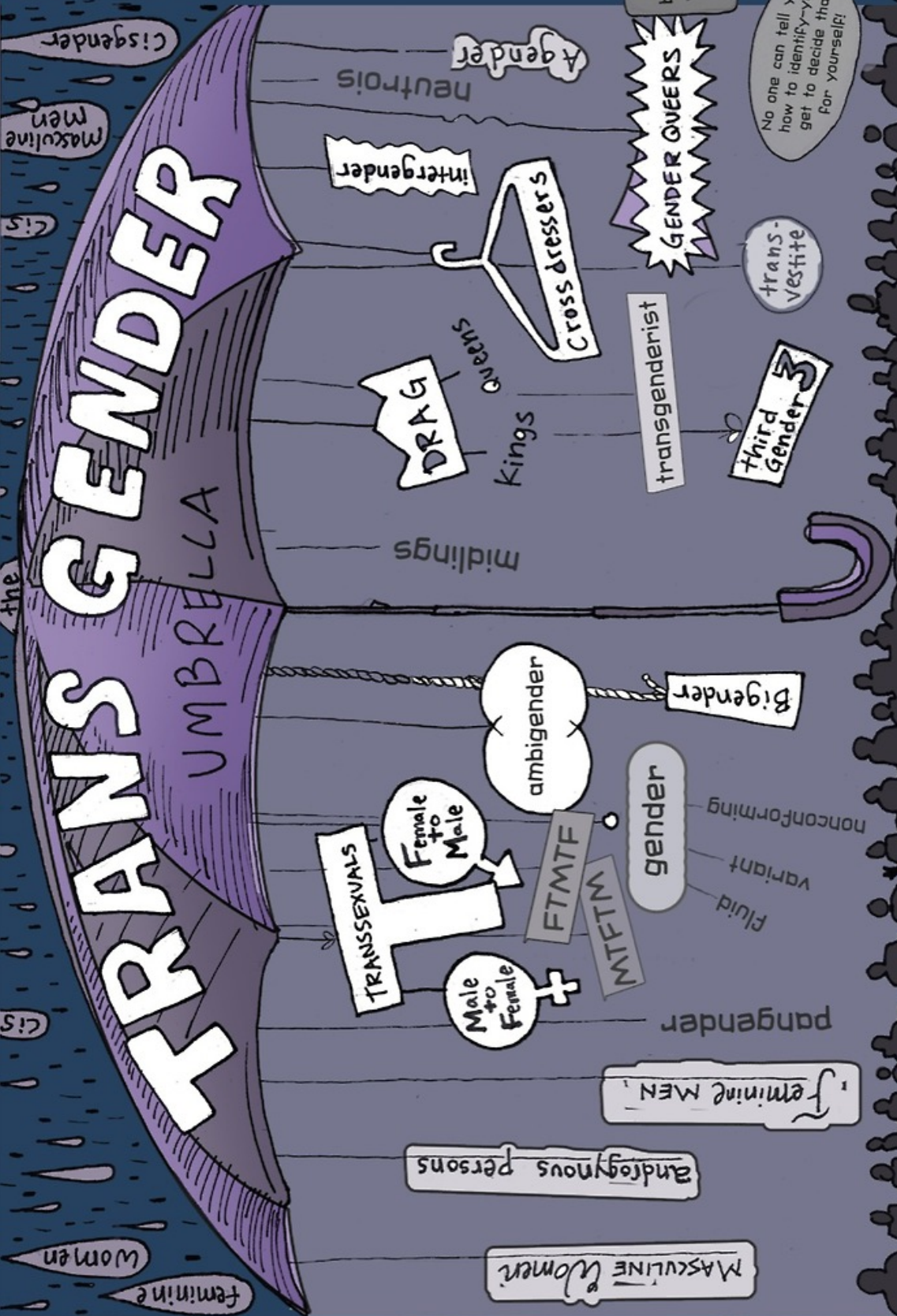
meant to encompass a whole bunch of diverse **sexualities** and **genders**. Folks often refer to the Q (standing for “queer”*) as an **umbrella term**, under which live a whole bunch of identities. This is helpful because **lesbian**, **gay**, and **bisexual** aren’t the only marginalized sexualities, and **transgender*** isn’t the only gender identity. In fact, there are many more of both!



* The “Q” sometimes stands for “questioning” and “transgender” is often thought of as an umbrella term itself (sometimes abbreviated “trans”; or “trans*” in writing). Lots of asterisks, lots of exceptions, because hey – we’re talking about **lots** of different folks with different lived experiences to be inclusive of.

TRANS GENDER UMBRELLA

cisgender: individuals whose identity and expression usually match up with the sex assigned to them at birth.



Transgender the umbrella term, sometimes abbreviated as **trans*** describes what these varied identities have in common: some element of crossing over or challenging traditional gender roles, expressions, or expectations.

You might be intimidated by all these new words. I know I was. So...why all the labels? I think about that Mark Twain quote, you know, the one that says the difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between the lightning and a lightning bug. Fortunately, we don't have to memorize all these terms - there's no quiz! Just remember to approach each new person you meet with a respectful attitude and open heart.

ESSENTIALISM, IDENTITY LABELS, AND UMBRELLA TERMS

It is impossible to talk about sex, gender, and sexuality—or any human trait for that matter—without using specific words or labels to describe differences that exist between people. There are at least three different ways in which such words or labels can be used. The first way is to view such words in terms of essentialist categories. Essentialism is the belief that all members of a particular category must share some particular characteristic or set of characteristics in order to be considered a legitimate member of that group. People often resort to essentialist thinking when considering categories they consider to be “natural”—i.e., ones that arise on their own, independent of any social context or influence. People who view sex, gender, and sexuality as entirely “natural” traits will often try to categorize differences between people in essentialist ways. An example of essentialism is when people claim that all women have a womb, are chromosomally XX, and/or are naturally nurturing. Feminists (including myself) typically reject essentialism for reasons I discuss in Chapter 13, “Homogenizing Versus Holistic Views of Gender and Sexuality.” So when words like “woman” or “gay” or “transsexual” appear in this book, they are not meant to represent essentialist categories.

Another way to view such words is in terms of identity labels. For example, I identify as a woman, as transgender, as bisexual, and so forth. Identity labels are a highly personal way of conveying to others how we believe that we fit (or don’t fit) into the world. Because they are so personal, often people who share the same trait or behavior may differ with regards to what identity labels they use to describe themselves. So unlike me, other people who are female-bodied may not identify with the word “woman,” other trans people may not identify with the word “transgender,” and other people who are sexual with members of more than one sex/gender may prefer the word “pansexual” over “bisexual,” or they may choose not to label their sexuality at all. I am a big believer in the right of people to self-identify and to self-describe their own life experiences, and at no point in this book will I purposefully use a label to describe a specific person if I know that label runs contrary to how they self-identify.

It should be noted that people can use identity labels in either an essentialist or non-essentialist way. So, someone who believes that all women are chromosomally XX may identify as a woman on the basis that she shares that characteristic, and someone who believes that all transsexuals have a specific brain condition may identify as transsexual based on their belief that they have that supposed brain condition. In contrast, I call myself a woman and transsexual, not because I hold essentialist beliefs about those categories, but because I feel those words best describe some aspect of my person. Along similar lines, I also happen to identify as a musician (because I play musical instruments) and as a bird person (because I have parrots as animal companions, not because I identify as a bird!). I do not believe that there is some magical underlying quality that all musicians, or all bird people, or all women, or all transsexuals have in common. Rather, the only thing we have in common is that we loosely share some non-essentialist quality (e.g., we play musical instruments, we have birds as animal companions, we move through the world as women, we identify and live as members of the sex other than the one we were assigned at birth, respectively). In the course of this book, I will occasionally use words like “woman”, or “transsexual”, or “bisexual” as identity labels, particularly when I am referring to a specific person. But more often than not, I will be using these words in the third manner: as umbrella terms. So for example, throughout this book, I will

use the word “queer” as an umbrella term to describe people who (for one reason or another) are deemed by society to be “not-straight” because some aspect of their sex, gender, and/or sexuality falls outside of societal norms. I contend that one can use the word “queer” in this manner (i.e., as an umbrella term) while simultaneously recognizing that not all people who fall under the queer umbrella will necessarily identify with the term (i.e., they may not personally use “queer” as an identity label to describe themselves). Furthermore, one can use the word “queer” as an umbrella term without making any additional assumptions about individuals who fall under that umbrella. Indeed, I personally do not believe that any two given queer people necessarily have anything in common with one another other than the fact that they are both viewed by society to be “not-straight.”

One might ask: “If some people don’t identify with the term ‘queer,’ why not use a different word entirely?” Well, for one thing, there is about a twenty-year-long history of people using the word “queer” as an umbrella term in this way. And even if I were to invent a completely different word to describe this same group of people, there will always be some people who will choose not to identify with that term. Others might ask, “If people who fall under the queer umbrella are all different from one another, and many of them do not personally prefer the term ‘queer,’ then why bother lumping them all into the same category in the first place?” My answer to this is simple: I am not the one lumping us all into the same category! It is society at large that makes a distinction between people who are deemed to be “normal” with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality (i.e., straight) and those who are deemed “abnormal” (i.e., queer). More importantly, those who are deemed straight are generally viewed as more natural and legitimate than those who are deemed queer. This double standard constitutes a form of sexism, one that routinely marginalizes and injures those of us who are queer. If we were to stop using words such as “queer” (on the basis that not all people who fall under that umbrella identify with the term), it would do nothing to stop society at large from deeming us to be queer and treating us inferiorly as a result. Indeed, not having a word to describe people who are marginalized by this double standard makes it difficult, if not impossible, for sexual and gender minorities to organize and carry out activism to challenge this double standard.

This point gets to the heart of the identity-labels-versus-umbrella-terms distinction: We use identity labels to tell our stories, to describe our experiences, to let people know how we see ourselves and how we believe we fit into the world. This is an important, albeit primarily personal, matter. In contrast, umbrella terms are primarily used in order to form alliances between disparate people who share some obstacle or form of discrimination in common. By saying that we both fall under the same umbrella term, I am not claiming that you and I are “alike” in some way, but rather that we are treated in similar ways by society, and that it is in our mutual interest to work together to challenge the negative meanings and presumptions that other people project onto us.

Since this book is about challenging societal double standards and norms, I will primarily be using words like “queer” (and other terms described below) as umbrella terms rather than identity labels.

SEXISM AND FEMINISM

Throughout this book, I will be using the word sexism to describe double standards based upon a person's sex, gender, and/or sexuality. The most commonly discussed form of sexism is what I call traditional sexism, which is the assumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to, or less legitimate than, maleness and masculinity (i.e., what most people refer to as just plain "sexism"). This form of sexism primarily targets girls and women in our culture, although it also negatively impacts other people as well.¹ There are many other forms of sexism that exist, and which target specific sexual and gender minorities. People are probably most familiar with heterosexism—the assumption that same-sex attraction and relationships are less legitimate than their heterosexual counterparts. But there are many other forms of sexism out there, including monosexism/biphobia, cissexism/transphobia, and masculine-centrism/femmephobia, to name just a few. I will define less familiar forms of sexism when I first introduce them in the text, rather than overwhelming readers with a slew of definitions here. Note that labels describing sexism often take the form of an "ism" where the dominant majority is cited (e.g., heterosexism), or a "phobia" where the marginalized group is cited (e.g., homophobia). While some people use the "ism" and "phobia" variations differently, for simplicity's sake, I will use them interchangeably here.²

I will use the word feminism to describe various movements that work to challenge and eliminate sexism. There are many different strands of feminism, some of which are more narrowly focused on women's rights, issues, and liberation, while others are broader in scope and seek to challenge all forms of sexism. In other words, these latter strands of feminism are focused on challenging the marginalization of not only women, but of sexual and gender minorities (i.e., queer folks) as well. While I personally share this latter and broader perspective of feminism, I realize that not everyone does, so in the course of this book I will often refer to "feminism and queer activism" as though they are two different movements, even though they need not be. I will frequently refer to intersectionality, which is a concept that has come out of the work of feminists of color, and which examines how different forms of sexism, and other forms of marginalization (e.g., racism, classism, ableism, ageism, sizeism), can intersect with, and exacerbate, one another.³ Thus, feminists who are coming from an intersectional perspective (such as myself) believe that feminism should be concerned not only with all forms of sexism, but with all forms of marginalization as well.

SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

Throughout this book, I will be using the word gay to describe men who are exclusively attracted to other men, and the word lesbian to describe women who are exclusively attracted to other women. Over the last two decades, the word dyke has come into vogue as a word to describe women who partner with other women, albeit not necessarily exclusively.

On a few occasions, I will collectively refer to gay and lesbian people as being homosexual to distinguish them from people who are heterosexual (i.e., individuals who are exclusively attracted to members of the other sex or gender) or bisexual (i.e., individuals who experience attraction to members of more than one sex or gender). There is no hard and fast line one can draw to definitively separate heterosexuals from bisexuals from homosexuals. Many people are bisexual in experience (e.g., they have been sexual with members of more than one sex) but identify strictly as heterosexual or homosexual, perhaps because they view some of their sexual experiences as inauthentic or merely experiments. Some people, both

within and outside of the bisexual community, have issues with the word “bisexual,” and instead prefer alternative labels such as pansexual or polysexual (this debate is discussed in more depth in Chapter 9, “Bisexuality and Binaries Revisted”). In any case, I will stick with the word “bisexual” for the same reason why I will use the terms “lesbian” and “gay” over other potentially synonymous labels: because they are the most commonly used and accepted labels for such people at this time and place.

Within lesbian, gay, and bisexual circles, people often use the term butch to refer to masculine individuals, and the word femme to refer to feminine individuals, regardless of the person’s sex. Of course, in reality, gender expression is not a strictly dichotomous trait, and individuals may use variants such as androgynous, or soft butch, or stone butch, or high femme, or low femme, or (in my case) femme-tomboy, in order to communicate these differences. Many straight mainstream folks automatically assume that if a queer person is butch, then they must be attracted to femmes (and vice versa), but this is not necessarily the case. As a femme who prefers other femmes over butches, I can assure you that people are not necessarily attracted to their “opposites” in gender expression any more than they are necessarily attracted to the “opposite” sex.

There are at least two other sexual orientation categories: Asexual refers to people who do not experience sexual attraction toward other people, and questioning, which refers to people who are unsure of, or who are in the process of trying to figure out, their sexual orientation. (Note: This label is also sometimes used to describe people who are currently questioning some other aspect of their sex, gender, or sexuality.)

Outside of sexual orientation, there are other sexual practices or experiences that defy straight mainstream assumptions. One of these is polyamory, which refers to sexual relationships that are not monogamous. People unfamiliar with the term may mistakenly confuse it with polygamy, but the two terms are significantly different. Polygamy refers to relationships where a single man takes up more than one wife; such relationships are typically rooted in patriarchal ideas of men and women (e.g., that men are the head of the household, and that women are property and/or their primary duty is to bear their husbands’ children). In contrast, polyamory refers to people (of any sex or gender) who have sexual relationships with more than one person (of any sex or gender). Such relationships may take place within or outside of the context of marriage. Polyamory is also sometimes described as ethical non-monogamy in order to stress that such relationships are consensual—that is, all parties involved are aware that their partners also have other partners.

Another sexual practice that also falls outside of straight mainstream presumptions is BDSM, a complex acronym meant to include bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism. Those who practice BDSM sometimes describe themselves as “kinky” and refer to sexual practices that fall outside the realm of BDSM as “vanilla.” BDSM is also sometimes referred to as “role-play” or “power exchange” because the parties involved consensually take on roles where one party has power over another. Some people might mischaracterize BDSM as being equivalent to nonconsensual forms of abuse or rape, but this ignores the fact that BDSM practices are consensual—in fact, an often quoted tenet of BDSM relationships is that any act that occurs must be “safe, sane, and consensual.”

While both BDSM and polyamory certainly fall outside of what the straight mainstream considers “normal,” it is not generally accepted that people who engage in these sexual

practices fall under the umbrella term “queer.”⁴ However, these groups are clearly sexual minorities who are unfairly marginalized for their consensual behaviors by mainstream society, and as such, I will consider them here.

There are a number of different gender minorities. The term transgender is typically used as an umbrella term to describe all people who defy straight mainstream notions regarding gender. The transgender umbrella may include (but is not necessarily limited to) people who are transsexual, crossdressers, drag artists, androgynous, two-spirit, genderqueer, agender, feminine men and/or masculine women. People who are intersex—that is, who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the “standard” definitions for female or male—are sometimes included under the transgender umbrella as well (although some argue that intersex people differ with regards to their physical sex, not gender). As with all umbrella terms, many people who fall under the transgender umbrella do not identify with the term.⁵ Some people use trans* or gender variant as alternative umbrella terms to describe people on the transgender spectrum.

With regards to transgender trajectories, I will refer to people who were assigned a male sex at birth but who identify as female and/or are feminine in gender expression as being on the MTF (male-to-female) or trans female/feminine spectrum. And those assigned a female sex at birth but who identify as male and/or are masculine in gender expression will be described as being on the FTM (female-to-male) or trans male/masculine spectrum.⁶

Of the many transgender spectrum identities that exist, genderqueers and transsexuals are particularly common within contemporary queer communities, and as such, they are mentioned most frequently throughout this book. People who are genderqueer do not identify within the male/female binary, and instead may identify as being neither woman or man, or as a little bit of both, or as being gender-fluid (i.e., moving between different gendered states over the course of their lives). People who are transsexual identify and/or live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. A trans woman (such as myself) is someone who has socially (and sometimes physically) transitioned from male to female, and a trans man is someone who has similarly transitioned from female to male. While the medical establishment and the mainstream media typically define “transsexual” in terms of the medical procedures that an individual might undergo (for example, hormones and surgeries), many trans people find such definitions to be objectifying (as they place undue focus on body parts rather than the person as a whole) and classist (as not all trans people can afford to physically transition). For these reasons, trans activists favor definitions based on self-identity or lived experience—i.e., whether one identifies and/or lives as a woman or man. It should be noted that “transsexual” and “genderqueer” are not mutually exclusive identities.

It is difficult to discuss trans people without also having language to describe the majority of people who are not trans. For this purpose, trans activists often use the word cisgender as a synonym for non-transgender, and cissexual as a synonym for non-transsexual.⁷ In general, I tend to use the term cisgender when I am making a distinction between people on the transgender spectrum and those who are not, and I use the term cissexual if I am making a distinction between people who are transsexual and those who are not. And, in the same way that people often use “trans” as an abbreviation for transsexual and/or transgender, the term “cis” is routinely used as shorthand for cissexual and/or cisgender. Because I personally began

using cis terminology around 2006, some of the earlier essays collected for this book use the more clunky phrase “non-trans” instead of “cis.”

Finally, some people who pick up this book may be unfamiliar with and therefore curious (or perhaps even dubious) about transgender people. If you happen to fall into this camp, then I suggest that you check out my previous book, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, as I address most of the common questions, stereotypes, and assumptions about trans people there.⁸ While I will often talk about trans people, politics, and issues here, it is mostly to highlight specific instances of exclusion and/or to draw parallels between how different forms of sexism function.

Serano, Julia. *Excluded* (pp. 11-20). Basic Books. Kindle Edition.

Core Vocabulary and Other Definitions

A note about these definitions: We have done our best to represent the most popular uses of the terms listed; however there may be some variation in definitions depending on location. Please note that each person who uses any or all of these terms does so in a unique way (especially terms that are used in the context of an identity label). If you do not understand the context in which a person is using one of these terms, it is always appropriate to ask.

The categories of terms are:

- Sex assigned at birth
- Sexual and/or romantic orientation
- Gender expression
- Gender identity
- Discrimination/non-inclusive terms & other vocabulary
- Gender identity across culture and time

Sex Assigned at Birth

Sex: A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Because usually subdivided into ‘male’ and ‘female’, this category does not recognize the existence of intersex bodies.

AFAB/AMAB: assigned female/male at birth

CAFAB/CAMAB: Coercively Assigned Female At Birth/Coercively Assigned Male At Birth

Sex Identity: How a person identifies physically: female, male, in between, beyond, or neither.

Intersex: someone whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals differs from the two expected patterns of male or female. In addition to “intersex,” the DSD (“Differences of Sex Development”) is also used, often in the medical care of infants.

Sexual and/or Romantic Orientation

Sexual Orientation: the type of **sexual, romantic, emotional/spiritual attraction** one feels for others, often labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to (often mistakenly referred to as sexual preference).

Romantic Attraction: an affinity for someone that evokes the want to engage in relational intimate behavior (e.g., flirting, dating, marriage), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with **sexual attraction or emotional/spiritual attraction**.

Sexual Attraction: affinity for someone that evokes the want to engage in physical intimate behavior (e.g., kissing, touching, intercourse), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with **romantic attraction or emotional/spiritual attraction**.

Aromantic: having a lack (or low level) of romantic attraction to others. Aromanticism exists on a spectrum from people who experience no romantic attraction or have any desire for romantic connection to those who experience low levels and only after significant amounts of time. Many of these different places on the spectrum have their own identity labels.

Asexual: having a lack of sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest or desire for sex or sexual partners.

Gray asexuality or gray-sexuality – spectrum between asexuality and sexuality. Individuals who identify with gray asexuality are referred to as being **gray-A, grace, or gray ace**, and make up what is referred to as the "**ace umbrella**". This spectrum includes terms such as **demisexual, semisexual, asexual-ish, and sexual-ish**.

Bicurious: A curiosity about having attraction to people of the same or another gender/sex (similar to questioning).

Bisexual: a person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to male/men and females/women. Other individuals may use this to indicate an attraction to individuals who identify outside of the gender binary as well and may use bisexual as a way to indicate an interest in more than one gender or sex (i.e. men and genderqueer people). This attraction does not have to be equally split or indicate a level of interest that is the same across the genders or sexes an individual may be attracted to.

Demisexual: an individual who does not experience sexual attraction unless they have formed a strong emotional connection with another individual, often within a romantic relationship.

Gay: (1) a term used to describe individuals who are primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex and/or gender. This term is more commonly used when referring to males/men-identified people who are attracted to males/men-identified people, but can be applied to females/women-identified people as well. (2) An umbrella term used to refer to the queer community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

Homosexual: a [medical] term used to describe a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex/gender. This term is considered stigmatizing due to its history as a category of mental illness, and is discouraged for common use (use gay or lesbian instead).

Lesbian: a term used to describe females/women-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other females/women-identified people.

Pansexual: a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions -OR- another term for people who experience sexual attraction to members of more than one gender or sex, often shortened to **pan**.

Polyamory: the practice or desire for intimate, consensual relationships with more than one partner. All partners are aware to of the relationships and consent openly to the relationships. Partners may or may not be in relationships with all persons involved.

Polysexual: is a sexual orientation related to bisexuality and pansexuality. While bisexuality is defined as being attracted to both men and women, and pansexuality is defined as being attracted to all genders (including non-binary ones), polysexuality is defined as being attracted to more than one gender and/or form of gender expression, but not all.

Questioning: an individual who is unsure about or exploring their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Same Gender Loving: A term sometimes used by members of the African-American / Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent. The term emerged in the early 1990's with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life. (Sometimes abbreviated as 'SGL'.)

Side A: Within the Christian community, Side A folks believe you can embrace same sex attraction and/or gay identity and believe that same sex sexual relationships can honor God, just as many other diverse sexualities can.

Side B: Within the Christian community, Side B folks believe you can embrace same sex attraction and/or gay identity but do not believe that same sex sexual relationships honor God. LGBTQ+ individuals who believe this either live a celibate life or have a heterosexual marriage (sometimes called a mixed orientation marriage). They also may have a committed same-sex relationship but not have sex.

Straight: a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to people who are not their same sex/gender. A more colloquial term for the word is **heterosexual**.

Gender Expression

Gender Expression/Presentation: the external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of on scales of masculinity and femininity.

Gender Cues: What human beings use to attempt to tell the gender/sex of another person. Examples include hairstyle, gait, vocal inflection, body shape, facial hair, etc. Cues vary by culture.

Androgyny/ous: A person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

Butch: A person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. 'Butch' is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but it can also be claimed as an affirmative identity label.

Stud: a term most commonly used to indicate a Black/African-American and/or Latina masculine lesbian/queer woman. Also known as 'butch' or 'aggressive'.

Femme: someone who identifies themselves as feminine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. Often used to refer to a feminine-presenting queer woman.

Passing: a term for trans people being accepted as, or able to "pass for," a member of their self-identified gender identity (regardless of sex assigned at birth) without being identified as trans.

Straight Passing: An LGB/queer individual who is believed to be or perceived as straight.

Gender Identity

Gender Identity: the internal perception of an individual's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don't align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, trans, and more.

Gender Binary: The idea that there are only two genders – male/female or man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or.

Agender/Neutrois/Gender Neutral: Person who feels that they are genderless or lacking gender.

Bigender: A person whose gender identity is a combination of two genders.

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity and sex assigned at birth align (e.g., man and assigned male at birth). The word cisgender can also be shortened to "cis." This term is preferred over "gender-normative" because it does not reinforce the existence of a 'normative' gender identity.

Genderfluid: a person whose gender identity varies over time and possibly in response to different circumstances. They may identify as male, female, neutrois or any other non-binary identity at different times.

Genderqueer: a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman; or as an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities (e.g., **agender, bigender, genderfluid, nonbinary**).

FTM/F2M: Abbreviation for female-to-male transgender person.

MTF/M2F: Abbreviation for male-to-female transgender person.

Pangender – A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender identities.

[Trans \(Links to an external site.\)](#)/Trans*/Transgender: (1) An umbrella term covering a range of identities that transgress socially defined gender norms. (2) A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex.

Transgender (Trans) Community – A loose category of people who transcend gender norms in a wide variety of ways.

Transsexual: A person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one to which they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals often wish to transform their bodies hormonally and surgically to match their inner sense of gender/sex. This term is somewhat outdated and controversial because it is considered by some to be less inclusive than the term “transgender.” However, some people in the community (e.g., older generations) prefer to be referred to as transsexual

Trans Man: Identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transgender people or transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as assigned female sex at birth.

Trans Woman: Identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transgender people to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as assigned male sex at birth

TPOC: trans person of color

Dead Name: name given at birth and is no longer used

Chosen Name: the name a trans* person chose for themselves

Gender dysphoria (formerly gender identity disorder): is defined as strong, persistent feelings of identification with a different gender and discomfort with one's own assigned sex that results in significant distress or impairment.

Transition(ing): this term is primarily used to refer to the process a trans* person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression. Some transgender individuals may choose to socially but not physically transition.

Binding: The process of flattening one's chest using a binder or other materials to have a more masculine or flat appearance. Binding can be dangerous to a person's health if improper materials are used, such as ace bandages or tape.

Packing: Wearing a phallic device on the groin and under clothing for any purposes including: (for someone without a biological penis) the validation or confirmation of one's masculine gender identity, seduction, and/or sexual readiness (for one who likes to penetrate another during sexual intercourse).

Passing: Describes a person's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as heterosexual.

Tucking: Tucking allows a visibly smooth crotch contour. In this practice, the testicles (if present) and penis are "tucked" between the legs. Tight fitting underwear, or a special undergarment known as a gaffe is then worn to maintain this alignment. In some cases, adhesive or even duct tape may be used.

Stealth: This term refers to when a person chooses not to be out in the public sphere about their gender history, either after transitioning or while successful passing. (Also referred to as 'going stealth' or 'living in stealth mode'.)

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT): (transgender or gender variant individuals) sex hormones and other hormonal medications are administered for the purpose of synchronizing their secondary sexual characteristics with their gender identity.

Gender Affirmation Surgery: the surgery some transgender individuals have to make their bodies and their gender identity match.

Bottom Surgery: Surgery on the genitals designed to create a body in harmony with a person's preferred gender identity.

Top Surgery: This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation.

Discrimination/Non-Inclusive Terms & Other Vocabulary

Invisible minority: a group whose minority status is not always immediately visible, such as individuals with disabilities and those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community

Discrimination: Prejudice + power. It occurs when members of a more powerful social group behave unjustly or cruelly to members of a less powerful social group. Discrimination can take many forms, including both individual acts of hatred or injustice and institutional denials of privileges normally accorded to other groups. Ongoing discrimination creates a climate of oppression for the affected group.

Prejudice: A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members.

Stereotype: A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. These are often negative, but can also be

complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact, however, simply because they involve broad generalizations that ignore individual realities.

Oppression: The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices

Institutional Oppression: Arrangements of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.

Internalized Oppression: The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group (e.g., internalized homonegativity).

Homophobia: The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuality or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes. It is this fear that enforces sexism as well as heterosexism.

Biphobia: The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexuals, which is often times related to the current binary standard. Biphobia can be seen within the LGBTQ+ community, as well as in general society.

Transphobia: The irrational fear of those who are gender variant and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity.

Transhate: The irrational hatred of those who are gender variant, usually expressed through violent and often deadly means.

Heteronormativity: The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality.

Heterosexism: Prejudice against individuals and groups who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Usually used to the advantage of the group in power. Any attitude, action, or practice – backed by institutional power – that subordinates people because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Privilege: Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual that are denied to non-heterosexual people.

Cisgender Privilege: Those benefits derived automatically by being cisgender that are denied to gender variant and transgender people.

More Terms

Ally: Someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexual and cisgender privilege and the challenges with intersecting identities may face in themselves and others. They have a concern for the well-being of the diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*,

queer and intersex populations, and a belief that sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues.

Trans Activism: The political and social movement to create equality for gender variant persons.

Closeted/In the Closet: an individual who is not open to themselves or others about their (queer) sexuality or gender identity. This may be by choice and/or for other reasons such as fear for one's safety, peer or family rejection or disapproval and/or loss of housing, job, etc. When someone chooses to break this silence they "come out" of the closet. (See coming out)

Coming Out: (1) process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's own sexuality or gender identity (to "come out" to oneself). (2) The process by which one shares one's sexuality or gender identity with others (to "come out" to friends, etc.).

Cross-Dresser: a person who enjoys wearing clothes and accessories typically worn by those of a different gender; cross-dressers may have any sexual orientation (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual); contrary to popular belief, the overwhelming majority of male cross-dressers identify as straight and often are married

Drag: The act of dressing in gendered clothing as part of a performance.

Drag Queens perform in highly feminine attire and **Drag Kings** perform in highly masculine attire. Drag may be performed as a political comment on gender, as parody, or simply as entertainment. Drag performance does not indicate sexual orientation or gender identity.

Gender Role: socially constructed behavioral expectations associated with being male or female (i.e. men should behave and interact one way, while women should behave and interact in another)

LGBTQ / GSRM / DSG: some of the initialisms used as shorthand or umbrella terms for all folks who have a non-normative (or queer) gender or sexual identities. **LGBTQ** is Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer and/or Questioning (sometimes people add a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive); **GSRM** is Gender, Sexual, and Romantic Minorities; **DSG** is Diverse Sexualities and Genders. Other options include the initialism GLBT or LGBT and the acronym QUILTBAG (Queer [or Questioning] Undecided Intersex Lesbian Trans Bisexual Asexual [or Ally] and Gay [or Genderqueer]). The use of "Ally" as the A is controversial; with some in the community accepting and others feeling like it does not belong.

Outing: Involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status, which could put the individual at risk

Queer – 1. An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people, intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and others who are nonconforming to the normative definitions of sexuality. **2.** This term is sometimes used as a

sexual orientation label instead of 'bisexual' as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to, or as a way of stating a non-heterosexual orientation without having to state who they are attracted to. **3.** A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur. For some people this is derogatory and for some it is not. Thus, it is typically best to use the terminology that the individual uses.

QPOC: queer person of color

Queer Platonic Partner (QPP): a term used to describe a platonic relationship that goes beyond friendship but does not necessarily include a sexual or romantic component. This term is also used to describe a family-like bond formed between two queer people.

Gender Identity Across Cultures and Time

(Not a comprehensive list!)

Two-Spirit (Native American): Native persons who have attributes of both genders, have distinct gender and social roles in their tribes, and are often involved with mystical rituals (shamans). Their dress is usually a mixture of male and female articles and they are seen as a separate or third gender. The term 'two-spirit' is specific to the Zuni tribe. Similar identity labels vary by tribe and include 'one-spirit' and 'wintke'.

Alyha and Hwame (Mohave Tribe, Native American): The creation myth of the Mohave tribe speaks to a time when humans were not sexually or gender-differentiated. They recognize four genders: men, women, hwame (male-identified females) and alyha (female-identified males).

Mahu (Hawaii): Native Hawaiian persons who are traditionally revered and respected as embodying both male and female spirits.

Guevedoche (Dominican Republic): In an exceptional case, genetics seems to have created a third sex in Dominican Republic. A heritable pseudo-hermaphroditic trait was discovered by ethnographers in the 1970s, who followed the children over generations. With undifferentiated genitalia, they generally were raised as girls, but began developing male traits at puberty. Instead of changing their gender identities to male, most chose to live as a third gender called guevedoche (roughly meaning "testicles at 12") or machi-embra (man-woman). The society has accommodated the guevedoche and constructed a third gender with distinct roles for them.

Quariwarmi (Peru): In pre-colonial Andean culture, the Incas worshipped the chuqui chinchay, a dual-gendered god. Third-gender ritual attendants or shamans performed sacred rituals to honor this god. The quariwarmi shamans wore androgynous clothing as "a visible sign of a third space that negotiated between the masculine and the feminine, the present and the past, the living and the dead."

Mashoga (Kenya, Tanzania): Mashoga is a Swahili term that connotes a range of identities on the gender continuum. While loosely used to indicate gay men, a large proportion of mashoga are biological men who adopt the female gender early in life. They characteristically wear both men and women's clothing, but in a manner distinct to mashoga alone. They often assume female gender roles and serve a crucial role in wedding ceremonies.

Metis (Nepal): The term meti is an indigenous term for a third gender in Nepal with a long and checkered history in the Himalayan region. They are born as males, but assume feminine dress and carriage. For the last 30 years, most Metis make their living as prostitutes. They do not consider themselves gay, but rather as a third gender that is interested in straight men. In recent years, they have been the targets of violence by Nepalese police and gangs calling themselves "Maoists."

Kathoey (Thailand): Very loosely translated as "ladyboys," Thailand's third gender kathoeyes are known as being born male but "having a female heart," according to a common Thai saying. They are often referred to as "sago," or a second type of woman. Thai tradition holds that true kathoeyes are neither male nor female but inhabit the space between genders.

Bakla (Philippines): Bakla is a Tagalog term that encompasses an array of sexual and gender identities, but especially indicated a male-born person who assumes the dress, mannerisms, and social roles of a woman. While bakla have existed as a recognized third gender for centuries, more conservative influences in recent decades has marginalized them.

Calabai, Calalai, and Bissu (Indonesia): The Bugi people of southern Sulawesi recognize three sexes (male, female, intersex) and five genders: men, women, calabai, calalai, and bissu. Calabai are biological males who embody a feminine gender identity. Calalai are biological females who embody a male gender identity. Bissu are considered a "transcendent gender," either encompassing all genders or none at all. The bissu (shown in first image above) serve ritual roles in Bugi culture and are sometimes equated with priests.

Sistergirls & Brotherboys (Aboriginal Australian): In Australia, indigenous transgender people are known as "sistergirls" and "brotherboys". As in some other native cultures, there is evidence that transgender and intersex people were much more accepted in their society before colonization. Now, there are more stigmas attached.

Whakawahine (Maori, New Zealand): In Maori culture, **wakawahine** are men who prefer the company of women and take up traditionally feminine occupations such as weaving. **Wakatane** denotes a biological female who pursues traditionally male roles, such as becoming a warrior or engaging in physical labor.

Fa'afafine (Samoa): are biological males who have a strong feminine gender orientation, which the Samoan parents recognize quite early in childhood, and then raise them as female children or rather third gender children. Fa'afafine traditionally assume roles of family care, although they are present in many spheres of Samoan society.

Fakaleiti (Tonga): Similar to the third gender traditions in Samoa and Hawaii, the Tongan fakaleiti are biologically male who adopt feminine dress, mannerisms, and social roles.

Chuckchi (Siberia): The Chuckchi (and neighboring indigenous peoples including the Koryak, and the Kamchadal) are a nomadic, shamanic people who embrace a third gender. Generally, shamans are biologically male with some adoption of female roles and appearance, who married men but also were not subject to the social limitations placed on women. Third gender Chuckchi could accompany men on the hunt, as well as take care of family.

Ninauposkitzipxpe (Northern Montana & Canada): The ninauposkitzipxpe were honored as a third gender in the North Peigan tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy in northern Montana and Southern Alberta, Canada. Roughly translated, it means "manly-hearted woman," and defined a biological female who did not necessarily dress in a masculine mode, but was unrestricted by the social constraints placed on other women in the Blackfoot society.

Sex: For such a small word, sex means a lot of different things. We use it as a description of a kind of person (as when we tick off a box on a bureaucratic form), for the act of participating in intercourse (“having sex”), as a synonym for our genitals (imagine the purple prose of a steamy novel that might say that “his sex went limp” or that “her sex burned with desire”) as well as to describe biological differences in reproductive capacity (having a body that produces either sperm or eggs).

The Latin root of sex, *sexus*, means “a division.” Some species reproduce asexually, meaning that each individual organism has all it needs to make another new organism just like it, and some species reproduce sexually, meaning that not all of the genetic information needed to make a whole new organism is contained within the body of any one organism of that species: in such cases, reproductive capacity is divided, or sexed, between different individual bodies. A few sexed species have more than two divisions, but most, like us, have only two. That much about sex is pretty straightforward, though in practice even this biological understanding of sex can get pretty complicated.

The messiness of sex has to do with our cultural beliefs about what those biological differences of reproductive capacity mean. It’s a cultural belief, not a biological fact, that having a certain kind of reproductive capacity necessarily determines what the rest of your body is like or what kind of person you are, or that some of these biological differences can’t change over time, or that biological differences should be used as a principle for sorting people into social categories, or that these categories should be ordered in a hierarchical way.

This set of cultural beliefs and practices about what biological sex means can be called “gender.” It can feel confusing at first to try to think analytically about the difference between sex and gender, and the relationship between them, because one of our strongest unexamined cultural beliefs is that gender and sex are the same thing, which is why most people tend to use sex and gender interchangeably in everyday speech. A good rule of thumb to keep in mind is that sex is generally considered biological, and gender is generally considered cultural, and that you should use the words male and female (rather than man and woman) to refer to sex.

Secondary sex characteristics: Certain physical traits tend to be associated with genetic sex or reproductive potential such as skin texture, body fat distribution, patterns of hair growth, or relative overall body size. Secondary sex characteristics constitute perhaps the most socially significant part of morphology—taken together, they are the bodily “signs” that others read to guess at our sex, attribute gender to us, and assign us to the social category they understand to be most appropriate for us. Many of these physical traits are the effects of varying levels of hormones, the “chemical messengers” such as estrogen and testosterone that are produced by endocrine glands, at different moments in the body’s physical development. Adjusting one’s hormone levels can change some (but not all) secondary sex-linked traits. Hormonal treatments to alter secondary sex characteristics have a greater capacity to effect a wider range of change the earlier in life they are undertaken. Testosterone can give a beard to an adult person who had never been able to grow one before, but it will never make that person’s hips narrower, just as estrogen can promote breast development on the body of an adult who’s never had breasts before but will never make that person shorter. But taken in adolescence, while the body is still maturing, hormones allow trans people’s bodies to develop many of the same

secondary sex characteristics they would have had had their bodies been of another biological sex.

Gender: Gender is not the same as sex, though the two terms are often used interchangeably, even in technical or scholarly literature, which can lead to a great deal of confusion when you are trying to be analytically precise. Generally speaking, gender is considered to be cultural, and sex, biological. It's usually a safe bet to use the words man and woman to refer to gender just as male and female are used to refer to sex. Though we are all born with a certain kind of body that the dominant culture calls our "sex," no one is born as a boy or girl, a woman or a man; rather, we are all assigned to a gender and come to identify (or not) with that gender through a complex process of socialization.

Gender is derived from the Latin word *genus*, meaning "kind" or "type." Gender is the social organization of bodies into different categories of people. In the contemporary United States, this sorting into categories is based on sex, but historically and cross-culturally there have been many different social systems of organizing people into genders. Some cultures, including many Native American cultures, have had three or more social genders. Some attribute social gender to the work people do rather than to the bodies that do that work. In some cultures, people can change their social gender based on dreams or visions. In some they change it with a scalpel or a syringe. The important things to bear in mind are that gender is historical (it changes over time), that it varies from place to place and culture to culture, and that it is contingent—that is, it depends on many different and seemingly unrelated things coming together in a unique and particular way.

One complication in drawing a hard and fast distinction between sex and gender, however analytically and conceptually different these terms are, has to do with our cultural beliefs. Although it's true that sex typically is used to determine gender categorization, it's also true that what counts as sex is a cultural belief. We believe that sex is chromosomal or genetic, that it's related to being able to produce sperm or eggs, that it refers to genital shape and function, that it involves secondary characteristics like beards and breasts. But as described below, chromosomes, reproductive capacity, genital type, body shape, and secondary sex characteristics don't always go together in a biologically predetermined pattern. Some of these characteristics are unchangeable, whereas some are transformable. This leaves us with the collective social task of deciding which aspects of physical embodiment count the most for determining social gender categorization. The criteria used to make that decision are as historical, cultural, and contingent as they are biological—after all, nobody talked about using "chromosomal sex" to determine social gender before the development of genetics, or using birth certificates as proof of identity before issuing birth certificates became commonplace in the early twentieth century. Moreover, the perceived need to make a decision about someone's sex and to determine their gender is based as much on aesthetics as on biology; no one would question the sex of an elite woman athlete like the South African runner Caster Semenya if she looked stereotypically feminine.

It's therefore possible to understand sex being just as much of a social construct as gender. What this boils down to is saying that we believe sex is a stable basis for determining a fixed social gender, but the reality of the situation is that physical bodies are complex and often nonbinary, and social categories, which are themselves highly changeable, can't be

unproblematically grounded in the flesh. It's another way of saying that trying to relate sex to gender in some deterministic way always fails at some level and that any correlation we do establish has a cultural, historical, and political dimension that must be established, asserted, and reasserted over and over again for it to remain "true."

This takes us into one of the central issues of transgender social movements—the assertion that the sex of the body (however we understand body and sex) does not bear any necessary or predetermined relationship to the social category in which that body lives or to the identity and subjective sense of self of the person who lives in the world through that body. This assertion, drawn from the observation of human social, psychological, and biological variability, is political precisely because it contradicts the common belief that whether a person is a man or a woman in the social sense is fundamentally determined by bodily sex, which is self-apparent and can be clearly and unambiguously perceived. It's political in the additional sense that how a society organizes its members into categories based on their unchosen physical differences has never been a politically neutral act.

One of the main points of feminism is that societies tend to be organized in ways that are more exploitative of women's bodies than of men's bodies. Without disagreeing with that basic premise, a transgender perspective would also be sensitive to an additional dimension of gender oppression: that our culture today tries to reduce the wide range of livable body types to two and only two genders, one of which is subject to greater social control than the other, with both genders being based on our beliefs about the meaning of biological sex. Lives that do not conform to this dominant pattern are generally treated as lives that are not worth living and that have little or no value. Breaking apart the forced unity of sex and gender, while increasing the scope of livable lives, needs to be a central goal of feminism and other forms of social justice activism. This is important for everybody, especially, but not exclusively, for trans people.

Gender identity: Each person has a subjective sense of fit (or lack of fit) with a particular gender category; this is one's gender identity. For most people, there is a sense of congruence between the category one has been assigned to at birth and socialized into and what one considers oneself to be. Transgender people demonstrate that this is not always the case, that it is possible to form a sense of oneself as not like other members of the gender one has been assigned to at birth or to feel oneself to properly belong to another gender category or to resist categorization at all. Many people who have never felt a sense of gender incongruence themselves can't really understand what it feels like for others, and they may even doubt that transgender people actually experience this or that it can be persistent and intractable and emotionally painful, whereas transgender people who do experience this incongruence often have a hard time explaining to others what this feels like or why it's so important to address. How gender identity develops in the first place and how gender identities can be so diverse are hotly debated topics that go straight into the controversies about nature versus nurture and biological determinism versus social construction. Some people think that gender identity and transgender feelings are caused by inborn physical characteristics; others think that they are caused by how children are raised or by the emotional dynamics in their families; still others consider identity, and the desire to express it differently, to be rooted in spiritual beliefs, aesthetic preferences, or erotic desires. As noted above, it's more important to acknowledge

that some people experience gender differently from how most do than to say why some people experience gender differently from how most do.

A BIOLOGICAL BASIS?

Many people believe that gender identity—the subjective sense of being a man or a woman or both or neither—is rooted in biology, although what the biological “cause” of gender identity might be has never been proven (in spite of numerous conflicting assertions to the contrary). Many other people understand gender to be more like language than like biology; that is, although they understand us humans to have a biological capacity to use language, they point out we are not born with a hard-wired language “preinstalled” in our brains. Likewise, whereas we have a biological capacity to identify with and to learn to “speak” from a particular position in a cultural gender system, we don’t come into the world with a predetermined gender identity.

Evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden suggests a way to blend learned versus innate models of gender identity development. In *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*, she writes: When does gender identity form during development? Gender identity, like other aspects of temperament, presumably awaits the third trimester, when the brain as a whole is growing.... The time around birth may be when the brain’s gender identity is being organized.... I envision gender identity as a cognitive lens. When a baby opens his or her eyes after birth and looks around, whom will the baby emulate and whom will he or she merely notice? Perhaps a male baby will emulate his father or other men, perhaps not, and a female baby her mother or other women, perhaps not. I imagine that a lens in the brain controls who to focus on as a “tutor.” Transgender identity is then the acceptance of a tutor from the opposite sex. Degrees of transgender identity, and of gender variance generally, reflect different degrees of single-mindedness in the selection of the tutor’s gender. The development of gender identity thus depends on both brain state and early postnatal experience, because brain state indicates what the lens is, and environmental experience supplies the image to be photographed through that lens and ultimately developed immutably into brain circuitry. Once gender identity is set, like other basic aspects of temperament, life proceeds from there.

While researching her book *The Riddle of Gender: Science, Activism, and Transgender Rights*, science writer Deborah Rudacille became convinced that environmental factors helped explain the seeming increase in the prevalence of reported transgender phenomena. Rudacille draws on the 2001 paper “Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals and Transsexualism,” in which author Christine Johnson posits a causal link between the “reproductive, behavioral, and anatomical effects” of exposure to chemicals commonly found in pesticides and food additives and “the expression of gender identity and other disorders such as reproductive failure.” Rudacille links transgenderism to falling sperm counts among human males; to rising numbers of alligators with micropenises and hermaphroditic birds, fish, and amphibians; and to other anomalies purportedly associated with endocrine-disrupting chemicals in the environment.

Gender expression: We all perform our sense of self through how we comport our bodies to express our gender. In recent years, as transgender issues have become the subject of more

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and more legal attention and bureaucratic regulation, gender expression is often listed as a protected status along with gender identity. The intention here is to protect people who express their gender in nonbinary or nonconformist ways, such as a tech-industry woman who doesn't wear makeup and who feels more comfortable in a T-shirt than a strapless floor-length gown, or a young man at art school who has a fondness for glitter nail polish. The idea is that such expressions of self should not be illegal, stigmatized, discriminated against or result in harm to the persons who express themselves in those ways. Gender expression is also a useful term in situations where some members of the public, or some business owners, might not accept or recognize transgender people as actually belonging to the gender they identify with and persist in thinking of a trans woman as a "man in a dress" or a trans man as a woman with facial hair. It doesn't matter as much what somebody else thinks you are if you can express yourself without fear in whatever manner feels right to you. Some trans people, particularly those who feel that their transness has a biological basis and requires medical treatment, draw a distinction between gender expression and gender identity to argue that gender identity is more serious, less chosen, and in greater need of protection than gender expression, which is considered more voluntary and less important.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*, second edition (Seal Studies). Basic Books. Kindle Edition.

Words Don't Kill People, People Kill Words . . .

I wrote most of this essay in 2013 (all of it except for the previous “2014” section and this revamped “conclusion”). I didn’t post it back then because frankly I was worried about misinterpretation and blowback. I worried that people who abhor the word “tranny” would disparage me for not taking a hardline stance against the word and/or for giving “potential ammunition” to the other side of the debate. And I worried that people who like to carelessly drop the word without regard for how others feel about it would either cite this essay in order to bolster their claims, or else accuse me of kowtowing too much to those who wish to “censor language.” I suppose this all may still occur: A negative drawback of holding complicated or ambivalent views on a contentious matter is that one runs the risk of being misunderstood and denounced by people on all sides of the debate.

I started writing this essay simply because I thought that it would be interesting to chronicle how dramatically community reactions toward this word have shifted over the last decade. As the title suggests, I initially viewed this piece as a personal historical project. And I decided to shelve a previously completed version of this piece last summer, again, because I feared that it would be misinterpreted and misunderstood. But a couple of months ago, I found myself wanting to revisit this piece. As I did, it became increasingly clear to me that I was not really writing about the word “tranny” per se. After all, I do not have a personal stake in the word, so if it dies a slow death, I won’t personally mind. And even if I did harbor strong opinions about the word, I highly doubt that anything I could say would really make much of a difference: There is so much critical mass against the word within trans communities these days that I have a hard time imagining it ever making a comeback.

So why did I bother spending countless hours over the course of a year to write a eight-thousand-ish word essay about a term that I have no personal investment in? Well, because I realized over time that what this essay is really about is language. And more specifically, about how we, as trans activists, constantly and continually attempt to transform any and all language that relates to us.

As activists, we often stress how crucial words and language are. You don’t need to convince me of this—I literally (pun intended!) named myself after a character in a George Orwell book.[26] The problem that we often make, however, is that we mistakenly assume that words have fixed meanings: that they are inherently good or bad, righteous or oppressive, revolutionary or conservative. The truth is that the meanings that we assign to words (or presume they have) are often extraordinarily arbitrary. One subpopulation of trans folks will celebrate a particular word as a self-empowering label, while another will claim that the same combination of letters and syllables is problematic for some reason, or does the community more harm than good. We denounce people for their attempts to reclaim words that we detest despite the fact that we ourselves routinely use reclaimed words (e.g., gay, queer, dyke) that others detested and protested in the past. And we complain about how neologisms look “too foreign” or are “too confusing” despite the fact that many words we regularly use nowadays started out as neologisms. In some cases, we point to a word’s troubled history to make the case that we should completely do away with it (e.g., when people who dislike the word “transsexual” point to its origins as a pathologizing term), and in other cases, we completely ignore any positive history a word may have had (e.g., how people who dislike the word

“tranny” ignore its origins as a community-created, non-pathologizing identity label, or how it was used in a positive way by activists in the ’90s and early ’00s). Frankly, there is no rhyme or reason to any of this.

Once again, this goes well beyond consternations regarding the word “tranny.” I can’t tell you how many conversations I have participated in over the past two decades about trans terminology. Should we refer to our community as transgender, gender variant, gender non-conforming, trans, trans*, or other?[27] Are we MTFs, transwomen, trans women, women of transsexual experience, girls like us, survivors of Harry Benjamin Syndrome, or other?[28] Should we call it a “sex change,” sex reassignment surgery, gender reassignment surgery, gender confirmation surgery, bottom surgery, or other? Is it transsexuality or transsexualism?[29] Should we spell “transsexual” with one or two S’s?[30] Are we “transgendered” or “transgender”?[31] Can transgender and transsexual be used as nouns and/or as plural words?[32]

It used to be okay to refer to someone as a “transvestite” (still is in the U.K., from what I gather), but then the preferred term in the U.S. became “crossdresser.” However, some activists pointed out that “crossdresser” and “crossdressing” make too many assumptions about a person’s life history and current gender identity. So to avoid such assumptions, many of us began simply describing people as “presenting as female (or male),” but some have objected to that on the grounds that such phrasing is pathologizing (with analogies being made to patients “presenting” symptoms of an illness), even though this phrasing had activist (rather than medical/psychiatric) origins.

I have informally started referring to this phenomenon as the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round, as these continual shifts in terminology never seem to end. In some cases, a particular word replacement may seem to be a vast improvement over the previous term (I don’t hear too many people lamenting the loss of “sex change,” for instance). But most of these word swaps seem to be fairly arbitrary and/or provide incremental (if any) improvement over previously existing terms. A few terms blatantly espouse a particular ideology (e.g., the usage of “Harry Benjamin Syndrome” implies a belief that transsexuality is an intersex condition), but most seem to be more about aesthetics (e.g., in many of the terminology debates I have alluded to above, there are linguistic precedents to support both sides of the argument).[33]

It is true that words and language are important. This importance stems not from the actual words themselves, but rather the meanings that we attach to them and ways in which we use them. Case in point: The words “gay” and “lesbian” are generally considered to be inoffensive, and even respectable, words to use to refer to people of those particular sexual orientations these days. And yet, those labels have very different histories. The word “gay” has a long (as in several-hundred-year-long) history as a pejorative lay people used to refer to people who were considered to be promiscuous, prostitutes, and/or sexually deviant, before it became an in-community term for gay men.[34] As the straight majority learned of this latter usage, they began using it in a derogatory fashion toward gay men, as well as other people and things they did not like. “Lesbian” is a historical reference to the Greek Island of Lesbos, which was home the poet Sappho (circa sixth century B.C.). The term was used by sexologists for years before it was reclaimed by lesbian activists.[35] As the straight majority learned of this usage, they began using it in a derogatory fashion toward lesbians, any woman who is not

conventionally feminine, and/or primarily associating it with a particular genre of pornography that had virtually nothing to do with actual lesbians.

The words “gay” and “lesbian” have been used as both slurs and as self-empowering identities at different times by different people. One is used primarily as an adjective, while the other can be used as an adjective or a noun. Nobody takes these words literally (e.g., assuming that all gay men are happy, or that all lesbians are of Greek descent), nor does the historical usage of these terms take precedence over their contemporary usage (e.g., nobody assumes that “gay” implies promiscuity or prostitution, or that “lesbian” implies pathology or geographic origin). Their prominence today is not due to the fact these were the magical “perfect words” that allowed these groups to finally challenge the oppression they face and garner mainstream acceptance. Rather, these words are merely accidents of history—one can rather easily imagine that, under slightly different circumstances, other neologisms or reclaimed terminologies (e.g., homosexual, homophile, sapphist, queer, dyke, fairy, woman-identified woman, to name but a few possibilities) could have become the accepted terms for these populations.

In other words, the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round does not stop when the marginalized group finally finds “all the perfect words” to convey their identity and circumstances. It stops when people (or at least, a big chunk of society) cease projecting stigmatizing meanings, assumptions, and stereotypes onto those identities and circumstances. And for trans people, this obviously has not happened yet.

Stigma is the engine that keeps the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round in perpetual motion. We grow up in a culture where everything related to being trans is deemed illegitimate, suspect, fake, immoral, ridiculous, gross, etc. These meanings seep into the words that people use to describe our bodies and lives, our identities and partners, the things that we do, and virtually anything associated with us. These negative meanings and the systemic social structures that propagate them run deep and remain largely out of our reach. One of the few areas in our lives in which we can exert a modicum of control is through language: the words that we personally choose to embrace (or discard), and the words that we will tolerate (or not tolerate) from the mouths of others.

There is an understandable tendency for us to be suspicious toward (and perhaps even despise) trans-related language that was popularized before our time, as such words may seem to symbolize or embody the very stereotypes and negative meanings that we are trying to disentangle and dissociate ourselves from. This desire to destroy previously existing terminologies, and to replace them with novel alternatives, or freshly minted reclaimed words, seems to occur in every activist movement to some degree.

Historically, this process has been fairly slow moving—a gradual evolution in word usage over time. But in the Internet age, an idea or argument regarding language can catch on like wildfire (as I discuss in Notes 24 and 31 for this chapter). This is perhaps even more true with regards to trans communities, where the people who tend to be most active on Internet community forums and social media are younger trans folks, those who are in the process of coming out or transitioning, and/or who are not too far removed from those life events. Furthermore, many trans people ultimately become far less active in, or completely dissociate themselves from, the community after a few years of vigorous involvement (I am admittedly an anomaly in this regard). Together, these trends can create a wave-like phenomenon: Newly

engaged activists are constantly forwarding their own word preferences designed to replace the previously existing terminology (which they find problematic for understandable reasons), just as the activists who initially championed that previous terminology (and who also did so for understandable reasons) are pulling back and thus remain largely unavailable to defend that language or explain why those language preferences resonated with them in the first place. Hence, the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round keeps on spinning.

At this juncture, a few points need to be made before people start hating on me. First, I am not in anyway implying that newer activists are “naive” whereas their predecessors “have historical perspective.” I believe that ahistoricity runs rampant among all generations, and especially within LGBTQIA+ circles, where (with a few exceptions) we suddenly “come out” into communities that we were neither raised nor socialized into, and for which we have little previous historical knowledge about (unless we go out of our way to purposefully seek it out). Second, while the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round often results in a mere “re-branding” of previously existing identities, objects, expressions, and ideas, it is also true that each new wave of trans activists contributes new and important concepts that further our understanding of trans people and our experiences. And many of these concepts will be responses to present circumstances that could not have been envisioned by activists of the previous wave. So while some shifts in language may be somewhat arbitrary, others may be vitally important.

Some people may assume that my discussion here is self-serving: “Well, now that Julia has written her books and articles forwarding the language that she wants, she is trying to prevent future generations from replacing her preferred trans-related words with their own.” Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, I do not have the power to stop any one person, let alone an entire trans community, from forwarding or protesting whatever language they wish. The phenomenon that I am describing here is bigger than any of us.

Furthermore, I have accepted the fact that the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round will not stop until trans identities, expressions, bodies, etc., are viewed as legitimate in our culture. When that time comes, trans-related words and labels will no longer be saturated with stigma, and only then will trans folks not feel compelled to eradicate such language or replace every term with novel (or reclaimed) alternatives.

Returning to the initial topic of this essay: The word “tranny” is, on one level, merely an ensemble of letters and syllables. But on another level—one in which many of us viscerally experience—the word is often (albeit not always) used to unleash an onslaught of negative sentiments. My fear is that we, as trans activists, are focusing all of our ire and wrath on the word itself, while not challenging the negative sentiments it seems to embody (and which are our true foe). And I am worried that the message that we are inadvertently conveying to the cis majority is “don’t ever use the T-word,” rather than encouraging them to interrogate and challenge the numerous negative meanings, assumptions, and stereotypes that people sometimes try to convey via that word.

In this essay, both directly and indirectly (via articles I’ve described or referenced) I have discussed a plethora of different meanings that different people have associated with the word “tranny” over time:

—“Our first own language word for ourselves that has no medical-legacy” and which was coined in order to unite drag queens and transsexual women in Sydney during the ’60s and ’70s (as pointed out by Kate Bornstein).

—A word co-opted by pornographers and the sex industry in order to market trans women and others on the trans female/feminine spectrum as sexual objects.

—A word that people who are attracted to trans people have subsequently adopted to describe their attractions to us (e.g., “tranny chaser,” “tranny fetish”), and which some trans people also use to dismiss those very people (e.g., “He’s just a fucking tranny chaser”).

—A word that the mainstream public employs to ridicule trans women, and sometimes cis women, for “doing womanhood/femininity badly” (as discussed by Hazel/Cedar Troost).

—A word that trans people reclaimed during the ’90s and early ’00s in order to challenge trans invisibility and cis assumption (as I discussed earlier).

—A word that some transgender-spectrum people use in a subversivist manner in order to imply that their gender identities, expressions, or politics are more radical and subversive than other people’s (as discussed by Hazel/Cedar Troost).

—A word that cisgender hipsters bandy about in order to give the impression that they are politically progressive or cutting edge because they supposedly have some familiarity (usually a highly superficial familiarity) with trans communities and culture (e.g., Christian Siriano and his slogan “hot tranny mess”).

—A word that trans-unaware cisgender people use, not as a slur, but rather because they have heard other trans people (e.g., Julia Serano, circa 2001–2005) use the term self-referentially, and thus presumed that it was a neutral term that transgender-spectrum people use to describe themselves.

My purpose in listing these various meanings is not to imply that “tranny” is a special magical fairy-dust word that can mean anything to any person, and therefore all people are entitled to freely use it however they wish. The word does have a history as a slur (albeit only over the last few decades), and some trans people have experienced the word in association with sexual harassment and/or transphobic violence. People should be aware of this history, and if they choose to use the word, they should be responsible for their decision to do so. At the same time, we should all be cognizant of the complex history of the word, and (I would argue) we should judge people primarily according to their intent and the context in which they use it.

Earlier in this essay, I cited “queer,” “gay,” and “dyke” as examples of words that have been positively reclaimed. Despite being successfully reclaimed, these words are still sometimes (by certain people, in certain contexts) used as slurs. Most of us can rather easily distinguish between positive or neutral uses of these words—e.g., “Zachary Quinto came out as

gay a few years ago” or “The Dyke March is this Saturday”—and negative ones—e.g., “That show is so gay, I can’t believe you like it” or “Fucking dykes!” (as angrily shouted from a passing car at me and my girlfriend).

I would love to see conversations about the word “tranny” reach this level of nuance. Rather than calling out the mere utterance of “tranny,” let’s call out instances in which the word is used to exploit, erase, or denigrate trans people. And rather than simply calling out the fact that someone has used the word, let’s call out the negative meanings behind the usage (e.g., “When you called her a ‘tranny’ just then, you were trying to sexualize/objectify her,” or “. . . you were implying that she’s not a ‘real’ woman”).

I would argue that it’s the negative meanings behind word “tranny” that invalidate us, not the word itself. If we only strive to eradicate words (whether it be “tranny” or others), those negative meanings will continue to persist, and they will inevitably latch themselves onto other words. And it is only when we have convinced much of the cis majority to abandon those negative meanings that the Activist Language Merry-Go-Round will finally stop spinning.

I, for one, am looking forward to a time when trans activism and trans-related language is not so dizzying all the time.

Serano, Julia. *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism and Trans Feminism* (pp. 244-251). Switch Hitter Press. Kindle Edition.