

## The Education of Little Cis

### *Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies*

I am trying to assess campus climates for the transgender community. . . . Issues of interest are transphobia, hostility, general knowledge and understanding, attitudes of the queer community and cisgendered people, etc.

—Dana Leland Defosse, 1994

I just kept running into the problem of what to call non-trans people in various discussions, and one day it just hit me: non-trans equals cis. Therefore, cisgendered.

—Carl Buijs, 1996

In other words, it's the opposite of transgender. . . . So why are y'all tripping, cisgender people? Cisgender isn't an insult.

—Monica Roberts, *TransGriot*, 2009

Things change when a neologism moves from a social movement context to a classroom context. On one hand, our ability to keep classrooms relevant depends on this movement, this perspectival and practical exchange between academic and activist worlds. And theorizations that take place in the classroom can provide sustaining energy to social concerns. On the other hand, meanings do change when words cross from one medium to another. Academic contexts—perhaps a bit slow on the uptake—can simplify, ossify, and discipline otherwise queer terminologies while authorizing, legitimating, and institutionalizing their use.

The neologism “cisgender” has long been associated with a kind of stasis, based on the Latin root “cis-,” which prefixes things that stay put or do not change property. Biologist Dana Leland Defosse is generally credited as the first to put the term “cisgender” into public circulation in 1994, using it in a Web-based call for research on campus climate and transgender subjectivities. At that time in Minneapolis, Defosse and I talked a lot about “trans-” as a prefix, and Defosse explained why cis- might serve as a linguistic complement to trans-. Within molecular biology, cis- is used as a prefix (as in cis-acting) to describe

something that acts from the same molecule (intramolecular) in contrast to trans-acting things that act from different molecules (intermolecular); in organic chemistry, cis- refers to substituents or groups that are oriented in the same direction, in contrast to trans-, wherein the substituents are oriented in opposing directions; also implied in cis- are things that do not change state as they contact certain media. Defosse—followed by others—saw the potential of cisgender to describe the condition of staying with birth-assigned sex, or congruence between birth-assigned sex and gender identity. Now, in common usage, cisgender implies staying *within* certain gender parameters (however they may be defined) rather than *crossing* (or trans-ing) those parameters.

But cisgender does not stay put. It is even now traversing contexts, and—like genders and many other substituents—it is changing in the crossing. Cisgender did not hit the ground running upon its introduction in 1994, and it is still only sparsely used in trans\* communities across the country.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the word is seeing new life on college campuses, particularly within student orgs and classrooms that critically interrogate the categories of gender. Cisgender's migrations can tell us a great deal about the power of language to transform gender politics and queer alliances in and out of the classroom, for better or worse. Specifically, the term appears to encourage investments in a gender stability that undermines feminist, trans\*, queer, and related movements.

Feminist, queer, and trans studies all pull hard on the seams of conventional sex/gender nomenclatures. Between the mid-1990s and around 2008, my undergraduate courses (at state universities in the United States) were frustrated by the problem that “women” and “men” acted as normativizing categories in contrast to “trans women” and “trans men”: Once we have “transgender,” the unmarked quality of “woman” and “man” reinforces the highly problematic conviction that most women and men (those whose female or male medico-judicial designation and social status have been consistent over a lifetime) are *naturally* women and men. I offered the terms cisgender and cissexual as conceptual tools, but these had too much of a subcultural “insider” feel to be democratically adopted in the classroom at that time.

I was surprised, then, around 2008, when an increasing number of queer-savvy students began to casually toss “cis” (as a noun or adjective as well as a prefix) into their classroom comments. They used such phrases as “she’s cis,” or, “the cis man in the film said . . .” or, “as a cis woman, I . . .” Required to explain for the benefit of the class, they typically defined “cis” along these lines: “Cis is short for cisgender, which is non-trans.” A more elaborate explanation often included, “You are cisgender if your gender identity matches your sex, the sex you were assigned at birth.”<sup>2</sup> Subsequent conversations occasionally problematized such definitions but rarely led to doubt about the *use* of the word. On the contrary, even critical conversations about cisgender had the effect of educating students who had not known the word in how to become disciplined users.

What role is cis playing here, and how can we understand its market value in this context? This deserves some explanation, not least because the term does

have its share of detractors. In 2009, *TransGriot* blogger Monica Roberts suggested that it is people who are not transgender who object to the word; in her analysis, “cisgender people” feel insulted by the word “cisgender” because transgender (i.e., stigmatized minority) people dare to name and to *other* them.<sup>3</sup> It is also clear that many people object to being interpellated as cis because cis is generally conflated with normativity, and they do not think of themselves that way. More recently, trans\* people have become the most vocal critics of cisgender.<sup>4</sup> It is all the more pressing, then, to analyze the campus and classroom context, because it reveals troubling contradictions behind the adoption of cis.

Although trans activism initiated discourses of cis, the word’s broader uptake may be an effect not of trans activism in itself but rather a particular expression of ally desire. In the classroom, people bring cisgender into being as a performative ally-identity, explicitly reserving the term “trans” for others. In its association with normativity, cis turns out also to be a racialized status. White students who identify themselves as trans *allies* (some of whom may also identify themselves as queer and/or gender-queer) are the most likely to refer to *themselves* with that term through such phrases as “as a cis woman I . . .” The use of cis in the classroom allows us to see these other aspects of its discursive power, including its paradoxical appeal.

Queer, trans, and feminist theory have not talked about cisgender, but they do provide ample basis for skepticism about its ontological nature. Riki Wilchins once wrote about trans, “Trans-identity is not a natural fact. Rather, it is the political category we are forced to occupy when we do certain things with our bodies.”<sup>5</sup> I am sure that the very same is true of the categories “woman” and “man,” although the manipulations required to produce them are naturalized and mystified. Without overlooking the vast social inequities meted out by transphobia, we do know from Simone de Beauvoir to Monique Wittig to Judith Butler to Riki Wilchins that “woman” and “man” are not natural, that they are coercive and compulsory, and that their power is built into institutions that structure what we do with our bodies, among other things. Cisgender must fall under similar theorization.

Just what kind of category is cisgender? What manipulations are required of the body and psyche of the so-called cisgender person? Exactly which signifiers of gender cannot be “crossed”—and exactly which borders between “male” and “female” cannot be “crossed over”—for one to perform cisgender? If cis is equated—and it usually is—with gender normativity, in what ways does its achievement depend on class status, ability, whiteness, and the maintenance of racist and nationalist hierarchies? Given the tendency of all things to change across time and place, can anyone be cis- anything? And, most pointedly, *what happens to trans and everything else* through the embrace of cis and the positing of cis and trans in binary relation to each other?

In this article, I first elucidate the discursive uptake of cis, emphasizing its use within social-movement contexts and the queer-studies classroom.<sup>6</sup> I offer a critique through the lens of trans, queer, disability, and feminist—what I call

transfeminist—theory and politics. The performative uptake of cis should invite questions about its cultural value not just to classrooms but to the multidiscipline of gender and women’s studies as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Cisgender may hold appeal for maintaining gender and women’s studies as an arena that produces and disciplines “women” and “men” as self-evident categories, contrary to gender and women’s studies’ more radical potentials. How troubling: Just when queer and trans theory remind us that gender and sex are made and have no *a priori* stability (“one is not born a woman”), cisgender arrives to affirm not only that it is possible for one to *stay* “a woman” but also that one *is* “born a woman” after all.

## The Genealogy of Cis

The history of cisgender begins with transgender activism. Transgender and transsexual activism has a long history in North America, but in the early 1990s, a transgender liberation movement by that name came into its own with a groundswell of concerted action that had momentum and staying power. At that time, “transgender” was most broadly conceived to encompass “the whole spectrum” of gender non-normative practices, communities, and identities.<sup>8</sup> The transgender liberation movement was to recognize and to address the connections among many different forms of gender-based oppressions and the economic, nationalist, and racist structures that buttress those oppressions; simultaneously, it would forge alliance among *all* the diverse gender-variant communities and identities that arise out of such oppressions.<sup>9</sup> Transgender signaled dissident politics and a positive embrace of new possibilities. As Currah, Green, and Stryker put it, transgender

was meant to convey the sense that one could live non-pathologically in a social gender not typically associated with one’s biological sex, as well as the sense that a single individual should be free to combine elements of different gender styles and presentations, or different sex/gender combinations. . . . [I]t represented a resistance to medicalization, to pathologization, and to the many mechanisms whereby the administrative state and its associated medico-juridical-psychiatric institutions sought to contain and delimit the socially disruptive potentials of sex/gender non-normativity.<sup>10</sup>

Transgender also emerged as a politicized identity category, as activists sought to collectively instantiate social viability for gender variant persons. Transgender furthermore described individuals by what they *do*, as in Susan Stryker’s articulation of transgender as “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”<sup>11</sup>

The term “cisgender” arose in the context of this groundswell, articulated most often by people who visibly crossed normative gender signifiers and/or



experienced significant cross-gender identification. This naming made visceral sense, as the world indeed seems divided between trans and non-trans epistemologies. Within trans activist circles, non-normative gender variability is normalized: The array of things we do with our bodies, pronouns, names, and histories is a necessary (in measures both joyful and coerced) aspect of being human in a gendered society. In the 1990s, collectively attempting to clear a wider path while faced with the inflexibilities of most social institutions confirmed that “the public” was (and still is) an explicitly and often violently trans-exclusive and disenfranchising space. People who reject medico-juridical determinations of sex at birth or who in any other way occupy a less legibly male or female sex/gender compartment can attempt to buy access to social arenas: We can supply specific narratives to garner specific diagnoses to attempt to win a legal status that will allow the most privileged among us access to sex-segregated spaces, jobs, housing, and health care.<sup>12</sup> We need the exact right combination of *visible* “difference,” *passability*, and *nonvisibility* (a combination assisted by whiteness, abledness, legal citizenship, employment, and noncriminal status) to hope to be granted authenticity, transparency, and belonging within a chosen gender.<sup>13</sup>

The distinction between living a life in congruence with static medico-juridical determinations of one’s sex/gender and living a life in defiance of that congruence is a highly consequential one, because our social institutions are structured to uphold and to privilege the former. It is hard to overstate how dramatically sex/gender congruence, legibility, and consistency within a binary gender system buy a privileged pass to social existence, particularly when accompanied by the appearance of normative race, class, ability, and nationality. The term “cisgender” was to name that privileged pass.

As the name of normative privilege, cisgender characterized the transphobic institutions and the everyday practices of a stunningly trans-ignorant and willfully normative public. Simultaneously, it purported to challenge the naturalization of “woman” and “man” by making visible their rootedness in the interested achievement of social hierarchies, thereby also exposing the non-natural privileges and exclusions gained by successfully performing them. The word “cisgender” spread as a strategy of social critique that resonated with feminism, critical race theory, whiteness studies, and dis/ability rights, among other arenas of radical politics. This theoretical and political intervention allowed cisgender to move outside as well as within trans communities. As Emi Koyama, an activist author who works for intersex, trans, disability, race, and class justice, put it in 2002:

I learned the words “cissexual,” “cissexist,” and “cisgender,” from trans activists who wanted to turn the table and define the words that describe non-transsexuals and non-transgenders rather than always being defined and described by them. By using the term “cissexual” and “cisgender,” they de-centralize the dominant group, exposing it as merely one pos-

sible alternative rather than the “norm” against which trans people are defined. I don’t expect the word to come into common usage anytime soon, but I felt it was an interesting concept—a feminist one, in fact—which is why I am using it.<sup>14</sup>

In 2002, Koyama did not expect the “common” adoption of cisgender “any time soon.” But by signing the statement, “In Cisterhood,” Koyama invited broader, allied use of the terms “cisgender” and “cissexual.”

Related to all the previous factors, cisgender additionally emerged as a critique of the way that queer and LGBT organizations often define “queer” and “LGBT” by dissident sexual desires and *not* also by gender variance. The pointed use of the acronym “LGB *not* T” critically makes explicit the actual exclusions of purportedly “LGBT” arenas: Although LG(B) and queer groups may fetishize gender fluidity and non-normativity while tokenizing transgender people, very few embrace trans politics as an integral and essential priority.<sup>15</sup> In this context, cisgender became a way of distinguishing queers who do not have trans histories, identities, and perspectives from trans people who do. Koyama thus joined a small but growing movement of people who would make cisgender a political act that could be spoken by queer sympathos of all kinds.

Cisgender (or cis) became a more common enculturated word and identity category, particularly among some activist communities that interface with academics.<sup>16</sup> Neoliberal rights discourses that feed on identity politics further promoted the sense that people are *either* transgender *or* cisgender; cisgender, that is, did not simply name privilege but could be used to describe individuals.

Widely accessible texts, such as Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), also helped authorize cis identifications. Foremost a treatise on transsexual politics and the misogyny that undergirds transphobia, *Whipping Girl* is the first book to elaborate cisgender and cissexual privilege. Serano defines cissexual as “people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their physical and subconscious sexes as being aligned”; cisgender more simply refers to “people who are not transgender.”<sup>17</sup> If not lost, the distinction Serano implicitly draws between cisgender and cissexual allows nuance: People can be cissexual but not necessarily cisgender. One could feel congruence with one’s assigned body sex and thus consider one’s self cissexual but not identify with the gender that is typically associated with that sex and thus not be cisgender. Reading between the lines, gender-queer and transgender people who do not strongly identify with either part of the gender binary (maleness *or* femaleness) might not experience transsex-ness or cisgender-ness, as *both* cisgender and transsexual suggest primary identification with one sex/gender in a binary system (male or female). In theory, this suggests variability within cis-ness, just as there is variation within trans-ness.<sup>18</sup>

Serano’s critique of cissexual privilege, much like critiques of race privilege, ableism, and heteronormativity, successfully brings attention to the ways that

people construct normative hierarchies through everyday behaviors. Her initial definition of cissexual privilege as “the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders” names one fundamental root of the transphobia that undergirds most social institutions. Cissexual privilege is instantiated in part through the activity of “reading” and assigning male or female sex/gender to others. All people make assumptions about other’s sex/gender, “whether we are cissexual or transsexual, straight as an arrow, or queer as a three-dollar bill.”<sup>19</sup> But one privilege of cissexuality is that it performs as the arbiter of real, true, or natural gender. Cissexuality by definition is rarely required to but can always legally and socially prove itself; as such, it serves to judge the realness or legitimacy of all people’s sex/gender. Cissexual privilege is authorized in part through connected practices: (a) assuming everyone is cissexual (erasure of trans existence), (b) demanding that trans men and women come out as trans rather than simply as men and women, and, simultaneously, (c) requiring that transsexual men and women “pass” or “be believable to others as” the sex/gender they “claim to be” to make their trans-sex more palatable to people who feel that birth-assigned sex/gender is the only legitimate (true) sex/gender.<sup>20</sup> Serano’s discussion effectively invites readers to see how the presumption that sex/gender is transparent naturalizes binary gender construction and pathologizes transgender existences; moreover, sexism and misogyny particularly pathologize all people on a feminine spectrum.

This is the kind of “eye-opening” that many students in a gender or sexuality course find satisfying: to see and to name systemic oppressions. In my experience, however, non-trans students assume the book is about someone else (transsexuals) who face an entirely foreign set of oppressions, and therefore it cannot also be about the very same sexism, misogyny, and binary gender system that they learn to analyze in Women’s Studies 101. Neither do readers tend to see themselves in the generalizations about how cissexuals think and feel. But some—in effort to *not be the kind of transphobic “cissexual people”* critiqued in the book—may take up the ally mantle and “own” their privilege as “cis” people.

The uptake of cis among students in university contexts is also inspired by its use in community educational spaces such as Camp Trans, in part because such spaces confirm the word’s subcultural authenticity. Camp Trans is a week-long protest staged annually down the road from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF).<sup>21</sup> As a physical site comprising workshops, speeches, reports, performances, community-building activities, and direct actions, and as a generator of its own and related Web sites, blogs, and YouTube posts, its influence extends far beyond its temporal and geographic location.

Among the many productive outcomes of Camp Trans is that it began with insistence on self-identification, which was and is a fundamental tenet of trans activism; people’s gender identity must be respected, regardless of how they may appear.<sup>22</sup> Camp Trans also generated some of the earliest articulations of the classism and racism embedded in the use of surgical status as a criterion for

passable gender status. Emphasis on people’s surgical status has frequently accompanied considerations of exclusion/inclusion policies in “women-only” community spaces; as the most well-known women-only space, MWMF occasioned some of the first critiques of the relationship among racism, classism, and transphobic definitions of women.<sup>23</sup>

Over the last decade, the term “cis” has gained platform at Camp Trans. The use of cisgender in this context, acting as it does in binary opposition to trans\*, seems to cause an unfortunate amnesia of prior lessons about the relationship between binary gender and race and class hierarchies. The term “cis” has not generally been subject to race, ability, and class analysis; instead, its use reinforces gender as a self-evident, autonomous category.

As do many trans\* spaces, Camp Trans makes explicit its intended constituency. Before elaborating the “Inclusion” and “Exclusion” policies, the Camp Trans Web site offers a “note on wording”:

Used on this page, please consider “trans” to be the broadest possible usage of the word, commonly written as “trans\*” to include people who self-identify as trans, transgender, transsexual, transcending the gender binary, transvestite, and gender queer. . . . Similarly, as used here, “cis” is to be taken with the broadest possible definition, to include anyone not identifying under the umbrella usage of “trans.”<sup>24</sup>

The suggestive list following trans\* is meant to be elaborated into “the broadest possible” range of trans identities. Cis is identically broad, perhaps ironically, as seemingly none of the above.

The Inclusion/Exclusion policy disciplines by positing cis people as the sole agents of cisgender privilege. According to the Inclusion policy (“who is camp for?”), “Camp is secondarily a place where trans and genderqueer people are centralized. This does not mean that cis people are not allowed at Camp at all, but it does mean that Camp is not set up to play to the privilege cis people experience.”<sup>25</sup> The Exclusion policy (“who shouldn’t come to camp?”) states, “A cis person who wants to learn about trans and genderqueer people. A cis person who does not understand concepts of gender privilege and oppression. Please note that this applies to cis partners of trans people coming to Camp as well.”<sup>26</sup> These statements have been important to the preservation of Camp Trans as a space for trans organizing. Furthermore, such guidelines instruct insiders and outsiders in basic respect for Camp Trans as a trans-centric space that gains its vulnerable efficacy from its education and outreach mission, its proximity to MWMF, and its high profile to people seeking “real-life” queer classrooms.

Such statements contribute to the appeal of cis as an ally-identity in college classrooms: They offer a certain cultural capital to those who are close enough to trans contexts not only to imbibe vocabularies but also to be able and willing to address gender privilege and oppression outside trans-literate contexts. But



we must see that the compulsion to name cis (as that which is not trans) demonstrates that the difference between trans and non-trans mobilities is far more concrete than the rather elastic distance between male and female.

In an effort to restore nuance, Defosse generously reentered the fray in 2006: "As a biologist, I simply used the prefix cis as the complement to that of trans. In the simplest interpretation, cis means on the same side and trans means across. *Cis and trans are not just where something is, however; they extend to the realms of their respective effects.*"<sup>27</sup> Here, rather than being fixed in identities, cis and trans describe locations and effects. This is a critical point. Trans studies scholars have noted the extent to which trans invokes a person's (or body's) orientation in space and time.<sup>28</sup> Cis theoretically must also be *effected through* time and space, despite the presumption of stasis. Furthermore, cisgender's value from a social-movement perspective comes from the recognition and denaturalization of its powerful *effects*.

Notwithstanding claims that cis is simply "the opposite of transgender" in some neutral way, its effects are inextricably associated with transphobia. Monica Roberts's claim in *TransGriot* that calling people cisgender "is not an insult" thus rings rather untrue; it seems that the best cis can hope for is ally status. Cautionary reminders about the costs of identity politics have held little sway, as cis becomes a subject position in the performance of allyship. In the process, cis and trans both shrink, in exactly the way living things do when they desiccate and ossify.

### Enter the Unmarked Cis-Ally

From its social-movement origins, cisgender and simply cis wound their way into gender and women's studies hallways, where they found audiences eager to understand and to confess their places in a world of hierarchies, violences, and privileges. Here, further organizing comes in the concept of ally and the practice of allyship education that is increasingly popular on college campuses and elsewhere. Related to antiracist education, allyship education speaks to the desire of some members of "majority communities" (e.g., white, heterosexual) to solve rather than to participate in the oppression, stigmatization, and marginalization of "minority communities" (e.g., people of color, gays, lesbians). Inherent to the concept of allyship is acknowledgment of the relative privilege of being seen as part of majority communities and also of the relationship between that privilege and the perpetuation or redress of injustice. Ally is a paradoxical identity, however, claiming simultaneous proximity to and distance from those of whom one becomes an ally. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than when it resides in the embrace of trans ally.<sup>29</sup>

Increasingly popular trans-ally trainings depart from antiracist and anti-oppression education in several respects.<sup>30</sup> As Vik DeMarco, Christoph Hansmann, and others have rightly observed, although white antiracist and anti-oppressive education emphasizes learning about and taking responsibility for

one's racism and racial privilege, trans-ally trainings tend to take the form of "Trans 101," in which participants learn (usually in the space of an hour or two) about the plight of the mysterious others we call transgendered and are virtually never asked to consider their own transphobia and passing privilege.<sup>31</sup> Defining, tokenizing, and fetishizing transgender individuals according to their greater oppression, such education suggests absolute and *discernable* difference between trans and "everyone else," the presumptive majority. Trans ally confirms not-trans identity by investing in a definition of trans as *someone else*, a more oppressed other. In just the way that "LGBT ally" effectively marks one as straight, "trans ally" is a discursive practice that resecures some portion of normativity.

With remarkable efficiency, the cisgender trans ally campaigns for the exceptional ontological stability of non-trans gender in several ways. It reinforces the assertion that we can accurately read and assign gender identity, not least by presuming that everyone is cis unless they come out as trans. Regardless of the gender identity of the observer, this has the paradoxical consequence of simultaneously invoking and erasing trans presence. For example, to signal alliance with trans people as well as to interrupt what is otherwise a routine lack of awareness of trans existence, we might completely replace "man" and "woman" with "cis-man" and "cis-woman." To wit, "the cis-man in the film said . . .," "as a cis-woman, this author thinks . . .," and so forth. This marks the speaker as trans-literate but removes trans presence and variable gender from view. The only way to restore this presence is for trans and gender queer people to come out as such, thereby reauthorizing the stability of cis.

The concept of cisgender *privilege* provides a necessary critique of structural hierarchies built around binary sex/gender, and it has the potential to intervene in the "Trans 101" model of allyship. However, such phrases as "as a gender-queer cis-woman I . . ." or "the cis-man in the film said . . ." don't so much acknowledge as reinforce this privilege by enacting a distinction between cis and trans. Such speech invokes trans by its absence; and this absence is predicated on a definition of trans as a rare but visible embodiment of "cross-sex" identification, or as the most institutionally recognized form of sex-crossing. When cis is taken up as an admission of privileged identity, it is cis-privilege itself that reifies trans as most oppressed—so oppressed, in fact, that it cannot speak out of character.

And finally, one of the most repercussive limitations of the discursive production of cisgender is the lack of attention to the *multiple* hierarchies on which cis status depends. Although trans studies increasingly acknowledge the extent to which sex/gender is constituted through class hierarchies, racializations, nationalisms, ableisms, and so forth,<sup>32</sup> cisgender has thus far remained impervious to theorizations of the multiple dimensions of dominance inherent to its privilege. Cisgender privileges are surely most commonly conferred and achieved when the appearance of normative race, class, and ability are also achieved, along with a host of other normative mobilities. Scholars have shown

that gender normativity is all but dependent on and reserved for whiteness, legal citizenship, and normative ability. David Valentine, Dean Spade, and others have also shown that the institutionalization of the term “transgender” inheres a history of race and class hierarchies and violences.<sup>33</sup> Cisgender then necessarily plays out as a normatively racialized ally status confirming its privilege through association with whiteness, legality, and ability. Can this be part of its appeal, even as people use the term in an attempt to critique systemic hierarchy?

The coincidence of trans erasure and cis’s enactment of whiteness is nowhere more apparent than in classroom discussions that might otherwise focus on racialization and ethnic or racial identities. I offer here an illustrative example, only one of many that students and faculty from several universities in the United States have shared with me as friends, colleagues in gender studies, or students seeking support.<sup>34</sup> A mid-level course on women and literature included a Crow narrative attesting to non-binary gender systems. In this context, the professor saw fit to talk about Native American “transvestites” and “trannies.” A trans-identified student in the class later initiated an e-mail exchange with the professor to express discomfort, to explain why those terms are considered stigmatizing, and to request that the professor use more respectful terms, such as “two spirit” (if appropriate) or, more generically, “trans person.” The professor responded appreciatively, apologized for the offense, admitted she had not thought about the implications of using words she had heard trans people use, and offered to bring it up in a subsequent class. The student then requested that the professor also actively teach about being respectful of sub-cultural or “reclaimed” terms, such as “tranny.” Displeased with the professor’s response, the student sent me the entire e-mail exchange with an explanatory note:

i also wrote a little bit about reclaimed words. i said that if she was using these words in front of a class of people who don't know much about gender studies (as she said), then they wouldn't know what were appropriate words to use for trans people, and that it wouldn't be ok for cis people to be using those words. she sent me a response email and seemed kind of mad at me because she thought i was saying that she was cis. she said she didn't identify as cis because it really upset her when she felt expected to wear really girly clothes. she kept reiterating how much of a trans ally she is.

In this exchange, the cultural complexity of gender in general, as well as the diverse gender ideologies within various indigenous nations, completely fell to the wayside.<sup>35</sup> In its place, cis took center stage and did so as an essential, transphobic, and racially unmarked subject. The student, feeling marginalized and exposed as the only person willing to speak as a trans person, could see no common ground in the professor’s own potentially complex history with gender and

with race. The professor, feeling wrongly associated with cis, objected to the assumption and asserted her trans ally intentions.

The exchange constituted “cis” and “trans ally” as mutually exclusive. This is not as paradoxical as it first sounds. Trans\* has historically played a “dissident” figure as part of an identity-politics strategy that pushes against normative policing systems and hierarchies. In opposition, “cis,” whether it is taken up as a self-referential identity *or* rejected as an interpellation of one’s self, can never do the same. But far more dangerously, cis and trans ally—like whiteness—are suddenly freed to function independently of ethnic literature, other cultural processes, and racializations. In turn, the trans ally can only be so as a normative, racially unmarked subject, covering the tracks of the racism and transphobia on which its own authority depends.

Identity politics thus authorized, how do we learn to recognize our own participation in transphobia, misogyny, and sexism no matter what sex/gender identities we may inhabit? And how do we challenge the structures that make identity politics seem attractive and even necessary for survival in a neoliberal and still transphobic world?<sup>36</sup>

### Will the Real Cis Please Stand Up?

How do we determine the distance between cis and trans, and at what point in time should this distance be measured? As someone who peed standing up as a child, who spent more than twenty years terrified that someone would discover that I was “really” male, and who passes almost consistently as a woman, I would hate to rely on the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* to answer that question. For most of my lifetime, the *DSM* has used “rejection of urination in a sitting position” or “desire to urinate from a standing position” as one criterion toward the diagnosis of Childhood Gender Identity Disorder, but only when it occurs in children with vulvas; neither the desire nor the behavior are diagnostic when they occur in children with penises, because such children presumably *naturally* urinate standing up.<sup>37</sup>

In the summer of 2010, out of curiosity, I let my light beard grow in, and I was not sorry to find that it has thinned over the years. Writing now, I pause, because I know that all parts of that statement can signify a lot of different things depending on one’s political persuasions, what one thinks of the relationship between beards and genders, and, more specifically, what is assumed about my body and my history. But as a historian, I want to say that history making is a highly suspect business. Particularly when it comes to identity confirmation, narratives do their work by selectively collapsing time and place into the present through the use of undisrupted signifiers.<sup>38</sup> What must stay the same and what must change to determine the distance between cis and trans? Or, is it not the fact of changing but rather the *method* by which one changes that distinguishes cis from trans?



As an adolescent, I secretly began to interfere with my body's endogenous hormonal balance to inhibit certain (gender-laden) body changes and to encourage others—and I did so at some cost to my health. After five years, others ferreted this out, and I submitted (under duress but not force) to medical authority's technique of using exogenous hormones to “restore” a more stereotypical sex/gender endogenous hormonal balance (this, too, at some cost to my health). In my late twenties, I dispensed with the conventional medical program. I became a lesbian, and, for the first time in my life, I lost most of the fear that someone would discover that I was “really” male and thereby forever deny me whatever moments of self-determination I had won. Alongside the joys of those liberations, I wince whenever I am called “ma'am” or “sir” (which is nearly constant, because in most places, gendering others is considered polite rather than violent).

Or perhaps the cis/trans distinction depends most on place and privilege.

During my grade school years in Michigan, I imagined myself becoming a monk to live and work in a monastery that I loved to visit. In addition to the sublime silence, I felt my gender “matched” that of the community, and it was one of few places I could imagine being a viable adult self. Forty years later in Wisconsin, I work as a tenured professor. Here, I wear a braid and men's clothes, and I pass as locally legible: The combination of locale, the deference accorded to my race and class status, my job security, and a workplace culture formed by a prior generation of feminists all contribute to the common interpretation of my appearance as a white, middle-class, lesbian-woman academic, which, after all, is a category of person that earlier won a place in this institution. Such interpretation projects onto me a history that erases uncertainty and secures my legitimacy as “woman” rather than as trans-woman, trans-man, cross-dressed trans-woman, or “unknown.” My birth certificate and passport match this interpretation; I pass security checks and cross borders—uneasily and often under scrutiny, but the law is on my side. Crossing the threshold to the women's room still gives me the willies; I don every item of privilege, entitlement, and history available to me every time I enter.

I offer these selective disclosures with skepticism, not about the veracity of the points but about the ends they might serve. I could be coming out as something or other. I could be asserting my right to belong in some space built around politicized identity categories. I could be anticipating interrogation—who am I, after all, to be writing on this topic? I do not seem to be claiming my own transparency (relying on the privileges available to me, I can afford to obscure signifiers), but might I want self-representation?<sup>39</sup> It would be easy to narrate a true history of gender consistency across my lifetime, and it would be equally easy to narrate a true history in which my expressed and/or perceived gender has changed dramatically across time and place. Critically, I could show how being read as male or female at various times and places was not about gender alone; in fact, it was at least as much my race and class privilege, my perceived age, and my perceived mobility and ability that have served as the

functional cues leading to people's interpretations of my sex/gender. What narrative signifiers are most important to maintaining a cis/trans distinction?

In the summer of 2010, my department of Gender and Women's Studies moved from one building where we had an almost wheelchair-accessible, single-occupancy restroom to a renovated building with wheelchair-accessible, multi-stalled restrooms that have mutually exclusive signs on the doors. I go there, braided and bearded, and am furious to discover the options. Workplace bathrooms acknowledge that workers are biological beings; the signs, on the other hand, suggest that some bodies—most pressingly in this moment, mine—somehow need not be biological. The signs provide social messages, too, telling other people that they should defend this territory that is clearly marked as *theirs*. But I also know that here, due to my relatively high status in the university's hierarchies, I can walk through *either* door, and I will not be physically or verbally assaulted. I enter the one that says “women” and, at a sink that is too high and set too far back to use from a wheelchair, I splash my face with cold water. I am not using a wheelchair. And I am white, and I am a professor, and, actually, no one is looking. I kick the door as hard as I can on my way out. Do I make the signs impossible, or do they make me impossible?

Despite the fact that the majority of transsexuals will have no transition-related surgeries in their lifetimes (due to lack of access or desire), medico-juridical transition continues to be a defining feature in the constitution of trans as a category, and never more so than when trans is elicited by cis. By announcing its own sex/gender consistency, cis makes the *across* (n.) that trans *crosses over* refer to the “line” between “male” and “female,” as though we agree upon what and where that line may be as well as on what constitutes male and female.<sup>40</sup> Doing so effectively asserts the naturalness of medico-juridical determinations of and control over trans existence.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, cis further distances from trans by establishing its own relative normativity.

As trans-studies scholars emphasize, trans theoretically inheres movement and change, or space and time. But when we posit cis in binary opposition to trans, cis and trans *both* must erase their temporality and location. At precisely what point in time do trans-ness and cis-ness depart from each other? I think a lot about Dr. Marci Bowers, a surgeon and gynecologist who offers sex reassignment surgery (SRS—also known as gender confirmation surgery) and one of the more famous women with a transsexual history. Practicing in Trinidad, Colorado, she is willing to use her status to create publicized platforms for education around transgender issues. Dr. Bowers seems to enjoy her notoriety as SRS's “transsexual rockstar.”<sup>42</sup> But she tells me to “get the *nomenclature* right”: She does not think of herself as a transsexual or a transsexual woman; “that's all in the past; I am a woman.”<sup>43</sup> While not rejecting transsexuality, Bowers marshals several entitlements to successfully reject the *abjection* that neoliberal discourses of oppression cast upon transsexuals. This strategy is available to few people, and it may leave most others (poor and unemployed people, people for whom surgeries are not available, people of color, and so forth) disenfranchised.<sup>44</sup> But

if we take Bowers at her word—and I think we must—her perspective suggests that at an *earlier* time, perhaps but not necessarily including when she was living as a boy and later as a man, Bowers was a transsexual woman. Then—also “in the past”—she transitioned: She became a woman and *now* is a woman. One might say she is a cisgender, cissexual woman. This suggestion flies in the face of most assumptions that attend the cis/trans binary, not least of which is that a transsexual history makes one forever trans and precludes cissexuality at *all* points in time.<sup>45</sup> Cis’s peculiar ontology erases location and effects through time and space: To preserve the stasis of cis as non-trans, trans must never have been or become cis but instead be consistently trans across all time and in all spaces.

### Bumping into Walls

Trans studies and disability studies together provide compelling insight about movement and change. Movement is integral to trans studies, but disability studies may do a better job of recognizing that bodies, abilities, and core identities change. For example, disability studies will not reify ability as a static *condition*: cis-abled?! Impossible. Although people with disabilities constitute 20 percent of the population, only 15 percent of people with disabilities (roughly 3 percent of the whole population) were born with disabilities; the other 97 percent of the population is likely to enter the status of disabled at various times and places even though they may presently feel securely abled. Moreover, built environments reflect social normativities and biases, and thus, by design, they also constitute dis/ability. Moving from one context to another, an individual may be abled then disabled then abled again. Disability and ability, along with identity and subjectivity, are situational, temporal, spatial, and culturally constructed; barriers are in the same measure social, physical, and psychological—which is to say, always political.<sup>46</sup> Bringing transgender studies and disability studies together, we can see that physical movement and habits elicit ableist judgments and social gendering simultaneously.<sup>47</sup>

Trans, queer, and disability movements suggest that we should not assume anything about a person’s gender identity, sex, desires, abilities, personal history, or future. Trans-ness, for example, more often than not is nonvisible to outside observers regardless of how queer-savvy those observers may be. But positing the existence of the cis-normative subject seems to encourage the assumption that the people around us—our peers, coworkers, and students as well as “the man in the film”—are cis unless they provide visible and narrative proof of trans-ness.<sup>48</sup> Alternatively, knowing that trans-ness is among us regardless of whether it shows itself as such makes it impossible to assume that anyone here is non-trans.

Social spaces that depend on identity categories—as most do—are constituted through the constant surveillance and policing of those within. The presence of “difference” from the operative identity category is simultaneously

invoked and erased: Social spaces suggest that all people within them *pass* as *really being* members of the social category that the space thereby helps produce.<sup>49</sup> Thus, normative social spaces are structured around the presumed absence of disabled, queer, trans, and other marginalized subjects, which is to say that such spaces inscribe exclusion.<sup>50</sup> Disability and trans theories insist that we challenge this cultural logic, a logic that believes that “the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility.”<sup>51</sup> How can we interrupt the erasures enacted by normativity? The strategy of identity politics believes that if we first *get in* (accept the pass granted by the presumed absence of queer, trans, and/or disabled subjects), we can then perform or make visible our own non-normativity by *coming out* as disabled, and/or queer, and/or trans. However, such solutions underwrite visibility politics and attendant discriminatory practices as well as hierarchies between those who can pass and those who never will.<sup>52</sup>

Critiquing visibility politics, disability and queer studies scholar Ellen Samuels has argued that dominant social institutions *and* resistant social movements require “difference” to be made visible, and most especially visible *on the body*. This “focus on specularly and visible difference” fuels a culture of surveillance and policing. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon, in which “the Panopticon’s power is to ‘induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power,’” Samuels explains that dominant cultural institutions render nonvisibility—what some call “passing”—tantamount to fraud. However, institutions also reify a narrow or stereotypical range of recognition: Disability, for example, may be legible to outsiders only if performed with a wheelchair or by bumping into walls. Samuels states, “Thus many nonvisibly disabled people may feel that our choice is between passing and performing the dominant culture’s stereotypes of disability.”<sup>53</sup> Marginalized communities, too, often render nonvisibility as normativity, reifying the demand to perform one’s marginalized status and legitimating one’s belonging in the marginalized community through scripted disclosures.

For trans\* subjects, trans visibility and the achievement of gender legibility are vexed, because they invoke the exact nexus of power among medical, legal, and other social institutions that confirm or deny people’s right to occupy virtually every kind of space and cross virtually every kind of metaphoric or geopolitical border. Moreover, as trans scholars and activists have noted, normativity maintains itself in part by ensuring that only people who do *not* trans (v.) some boundary of sex/gender can be the experts on the trans subject’s sex/gender.<sup>54</sup> Within this hierarchy, the role of the trans subject is to display stereotypical physical markers for scrutiny, to supply a scripted narrative of transsexuality or transgenering, and to submit to the most intrusive questions about our bodies and what we have done or want to do with them. All this further reinforces the outside observer’s sole power to assess the trans subject’s true sex/gender and confirms the belief that cissexuality and transsexuality are readable and readably distinct.



These dynamics have clear Foucauldian implications. As Serano points out, *everyone* participates in conferring and benefiting from cissexual privilege by sharing in the assumption that we can accurately assign “sir” and “ma’am” to those around us. But any benefits come at the price of further submission to the hierarchies of normativity even as we rail against them. We do not win the right to authorize our own existence by coming out as trans while managing to *be read as* our chosen genders; doing so does not interrupt the assumption of cissexual universality but instead authorizes its hegemony.<sup>55</sup>

Despite their binary opposition, cis and trans are not functionally equivalent or parallel figures. The presumption of cis as non-trans will continually effect the marginalization of trans existence, requiring trans to appear through an ever narrower set of signifiers. Cis, meanwhile, never needs to prove itself. To draw on Evelyann Hammonds’s metaphor of black (w)holes, we can only know the existence of cis by the effect that it has on bodies around it.<sup>56</sup> It might be tempting, then, to attempt to disrupt the normativity of cis, to dis-cover the cis subject, to define its borders and limits, to authorize its distinctive narratives and its distinctive specularly, and to force it to prove itself. But to do so is to invest in all the policing functions and powers of the Panopticon. Surely we can find better friends than that.

The effects of cis make clear that we cannot simply add trans to the list of “differences” covered in our classrooms without launching a simultaneous critique of the impulse to name cis as trans’s absence. Wittingly or not, gender and women’s studies derive disciplining security from the embrace of cis: This occurs in the presumption that “women” is not “trans” and in the presumption that “trans” is limited to a relatively small fraction of human existence that does not intersect with habituated definitions of “gender” in the title “Gender and Women’s Studies.”<sup>57</sup> As cis circulates, it renders “woman” and “man” more stable, normative, and ubiquitous than they ever were. In the very same gesture, the cis ally reduces “trans” to the most oppressed and institutionally defined object fighting for recognition within a framework of identity politics and additive “rights.” Whatever else it may accomplish, cisgender forces transgender to “come out” over and over through an ever-narrower set of narrative and visual signifiers. This erases gender variance and diversity among everyone while dangerously extending the practical reach and power of normativity. That is to say, little cis and its step-cister ally can only rediscipline gender.

As so much feminist, queer, and trans theory has suggested, the compulsion to identify and even to posit a cis/trans binary in which people are either cis or trans is an effect of neoliberal politics in which identity categories are crafted to maximize a share of normative privilege. Feminist and queer theory and gender and women’s studies as a whole have therefore been challenged to develop perspectives on lives, power, and oppression that do not require speaking as or speaking for the next identity category to be “included.” This challenge has helped produce our best resources. Recalling Sandy Stone’s charge

that “passing means the denial of mixture,” we might take greater pause at the constrictions wrought by cis.<sup>58</sup>

As a teacher and activist, I am humbled by the extent to which we exceed the English language. Words fail utterly, as do all conventions of naming the variety of ways we live with gender. In one sense, this underscores how powerfully most communication reinscribes binary gender. We make up pronouns and prefixes—languages change, after all—and then we wrestle with how to use them, because they do not escape systemic gender policing. We inevitably cloak ourselves in paper suits of biocertification, all the while tearing at the seams.<sup>59</sup> But perhaps it is in this very wrestling that we can find hope and be changed. Otherwise, to paraphrase Ryka Aoki, our classrooms may only encourage us to make our mistakes more eloquently.<sup>60</sup> As a transfeminist teacher and activist, I have a vested interest in keeping the categories woman, man, and trans\* wide open, their flexible morphologies blending into one another and becoming accessible in more ways than we can even imagine.