

SEX AND GENDER

The Performance of Transgender Inclusion

The pronoun go-round and the new gender binary

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The first time someone asked me my pronoun was about a decade ago at a meeting of directors of LGBTQ centers from colleges and universities in the Northeast. Sitting around a table for our first session, we were invited to share our names, pronouns, and the school we represented. I immediately felt my heart beat faster. The room was a mixture of people I had known for many years and others I was just meeting for the first time. As one of the few, potentially the only, visibly gender nonconforming people at the table, this question seemed aimed at me. The people I had known a long time came to attention when it was my turn. They wanted to know... well, what exactly was it that they wanted to know?

There are numerous things to be discovered by finding out someone's pronoun. At its most utilitarian, it is a literal question: tell me what pronoun to call you when I speak of you in the third person. Two intertwined forces inspire this question. Viewed pessimistically, the question seems to ask, how do I not offend you? Viewed optimistically, it asks instead, how do I refer to you respectfully? This question is deceptively simple, the possible answers vary ever so slightly — the difference between he and she is just one letter; they is simply "he" bracketed by "t" and "y." But great conclusions are drawn from the answer. It is less about she, he or they than it is about the significance of the answer: an ability to determine whether the speaker is transgender or cisgender.

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While the question was a narrow one about language, the answer had great implications. Was I trans? Given what I knew about transgender identity at the time and what I knew about myself, I did not identify as transgender. I was also very comfortable being referred to using the gendered pronoun she. I still am for two reasons: being referred to as such my whole life and a feeling that it has no bearing on my gender. My gender — a lifetime of non-conformity, masculinity, butchness, and transness — is neither validated nor undone by a one syllable word.

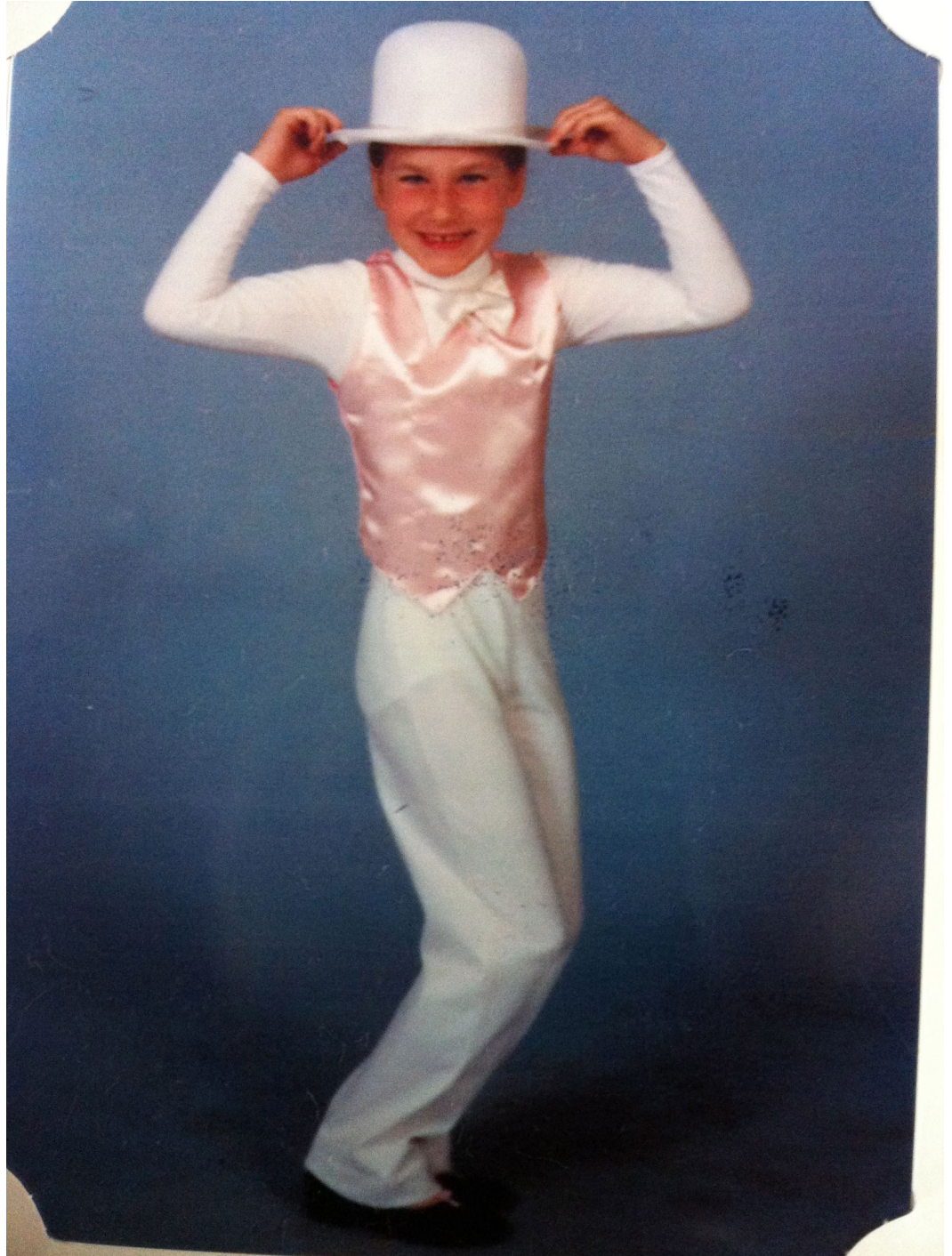
As a female-bodied masculine-presenting person, there was no good answer. Whatever I said would force me into a box — a new box. Though I successfully resisted the gender norms of family, church, and society for over 30 years, my chosen family — the LGBTQ community — was asking me to make an impossible decision. My pronoun was “she.” But saying it felt that I was consenting to a denial of my gender nonconformity and masculinity. My gender, something I then described as butch, was not legible as transgressive in this new gendered order. Saying “she” implied that I was cisgender and not trans, which I resented. Saying “she” implied that I was unaware, out of touch, or in denial of my gender. The exercise meant to create space and affirmation for transgender and gender-nonconforming people like me made me feel terrible and invisible.

The origins of this practice are important and noteworthy. Misgendering transgender people through pronouns is widespread and mean. People do it all the time — intentionally and inadvertently. People who are friends, allies, queer, and strangers use these one-syllable words to bully, invalidate, and erase transgender people. Making a big deal about affirming what we used to call preferred names and pronouns was a basic staple of transgender organizing and consciousness raising. Responding to the demands of transgender students and under the leadership of longtime LGBTQ professionals, higher education led the way in instituting systems and policies to enable gender affirming naming and pronouns. The rhetorical exercise of having everyone declare their gender pronouns — not just trans people — was a valuable exercise in visibility and solidarity.

The practicality of the gesture of compulsory pronoun reporting has run its course. This practice does more harm than good, on several fronts. For so many young people who might be questioning or discovering their gender, it requires them to make a declaration, whether or not they are ready, or want to. For

people with clarity about their gender identities, certain situations may not feel comfortable or safe for any number of reasons. For transgender and gender nonconforming people like me who use pronouns that are consistent with our assigned sex, it serves to erase the significance of gender in our life, leading people to lump us into the “cisgender” pile. Some people are probably comfortable with this. I am not. When a young transgender student just out of high school called me cisgender, I was shocked. How could anyone — even just by looking at me — ever come to the conclusion that I was cisgender?

I have always been a gender warrior and a gender outlaw. The earliest evidence I have of this are a few pictures dating to when I was about five or six. Wearing a frilly white dress as a flower girl for my cousin’s wedding, I refused to smile for the camera. In all of the wedding pictures of me, I am making the worst face I possibly could to express my upset about the dress. Sometime that same year, I smiled a broad toothless smile while posing for a photo shoot for my dance recital. I joyfully showed off my matching satin vest and bow tie while clutching onto a top hat, knees slightly bent in comfortable white pants. I agreed to dance my part in the duet with my partner once I was allowed to be the boy.



Courtesy of Author

I now have a deeper understanding of the category of transgender and am happy to identify or be identified as such. As a social constructionist, I understand this development as a process shaped by external forces around me and not as an expression of some inner truth that has been until this moment suppressed. With the social, cultural, and political rise of a new gendered binary — that of transgender and cisgender — it is clear that I am transgender. Many aspects of the transgender community and identity are wonderfully affirming and

comfortable for me. I have found my place, even though the most common social ritual of transgender inclusion erases me. Most people overseeing such rituals are not trans themselves.

Rituals of transgender inclusion have amplified binary thinking unwittingly by centering on pronouns. This has given rise to two related developments. First, an increase in the invocation of “they” as a pronoun, in some cases seemingly so as to avoid being designated as cisgender. If people find comfort, joy, and recognition for themselves by claiming “they,” that is awesome. We are winning the battle in making space for those of us who live beyond the gender binary. The second development is the use of the category cisgender to describe broad swaths of people without knowledge of their self-identification. Cisgender advances the notion that gender for everyone else is fixed, knowable, and normative. By using cisgender as a normative category, we deny the permeability, temporality, and messiness of gender for everyone. Asserting the idea that only trans people are on a gender journey and only trans people face gender struggles is the implication of the category cisgender. It divorces our gender struggle from those of other gendered beings. By doing so, we are losing the war against the gender binary.

When someone tells you what pronoun to use in reference to them, there is only one response: use it. It does not matter whether or not you understand their gender or approve of this request. I have made this point hundreds of times over the years, often trying to convince faculty members to make their classes welcoming environments for transgender students. I argue endless battles with well-educated people who think their own grammar school lessons from 40 or 50 years ago preclude them from referring to individual students as “they.” I will fight this battle over gendered language and pronouns every day of the week for any and every transgender person.

That said, it is time that rituals of transgender inclusion move away from pronouns. First, the pronoun “issue” is anxiety-provoking for many people, including some trans people as well as our best friends and allies. I have seen this repeatedly in higher education. Students embrace an expansive vocabulary for describing their sexual and gender identities that can be illegible even to LGBTQ faculty and staff of a different generation. LGBTQ students experience a certain

degree of acceptance, but many faculty and staff keep them at arm's length because they are afraid they will say something wrong. While faculty need to be more proactive in learning about LGBTQ communities and our language, our classrooms should not be defined by “gotcha” moments that leave no room for learning from our mistakes, together.

I cannot even count how many people have expressed anxiety over misgendering me. They feel bad. I feel worse. All of this hinges on the use of a pronoun. People who I think of as friends and colleagues, who I talk to every week or month then suddenly say “Oh, I’m sorry, did I use the wrong pronoun?” This gesture is well-intended. They do not want to offend me. But it is such a vacuous, disheartening experience for me every time. In that moment, whatever trust, friendship, or intimacy I felt is thrown into doubt. Why do they not know that I would correct them if they spoke of me inaccurately? Why did I assume they were comfortable with me and my gender when they obviously are not? In times like these, I miss the rituals of an earlier era when polite people — especially in the workplace — did not talk of such things.

But the real reason we need to rethink the place of pronouns in public life is even more significant: the advancement of transgender rights. What a distraction the pronoun go-round has become. I have sat through countless meetings in all kinds of spaces facilitated by well-intended people, often gay, sometimes straight, seldom trans, who righteously assert compulsory pronoun identification on everyone in the room and then never speak another word about transgender issues, rights, or people. It is as if this achievement — making space for pronouns — is the beginning and the end of the needs of transgender people. College students report doing this in meetings of all kinds and not really understanding why they do it. No one is doing anything to educate themselves or each other about the widespread discrimination and violence faced by transgender people, but by golly, every person will have a chance to state their pronoun! Now, if only people actually listened when said pronoun is declared — and remembered it — and used it every time in reference to that person. Then we would be getting somewhere, but that never happens. People cannot hear what you said or they forget it or mix it up with someone else’s anyway. What a thoroughly misguided good intention.

Trans people are used to advocating for ourselves in the face of great misunderstanding and hostility. Telling people our pronoun — when needed — is nothing compared to navigating educational, carceral, government and public spaces that enforce outdated gender binaries. We fight for access to healthcare — an industry long a source of violence — and try to make it work for us. Anti-transgender violence, especially against transgender women of color, persists at alarming rates. Transgender people experience high rates of suicide, homelessness, and unemployment. These issues of accessing the basic necessities for human survival are the important issues of transgender justice.

The next time you start a meeting and are tempted to go around the room asking everyone to report their pronoun, consider a better use of that time. Create an opportunity for people to say something substantive about their lives, including but not limited to gender. Provide some information that will actually advance the cause of transgender justice. Stop contributing to a performance of transgender inclusion that makes you feel good while doing little to actually advance the cause of transgender rights.

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