

## We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents

WHAT MIGHT JUDITH BUTLER'S EARLY work on gender offer efforts to think through the contemporary proliferation of queer and trans identities—many of which gather under the new umbrella category of *non-binary*—in the Anglophone Global North? Despite Butler's own recent non-binary identification, the answer to this question is by no means straightforward.<sup>1</sup> After all, whereas Butler's early work is animated by the desire to empty out the fictive core of gender, revealing it to be a mere effect of the compulsory repetition of gender norms, contemporary queer and trans culture invests strongly in the notion of gender identity, seeking to solidify new genders far outside of the confines of any "heterosexual matrix."<sup>2</sup> The field of Trans Studies, moreover, has been durably oriented by Jay Prosser's foundational assertion that Butler's early work metaphorizes sex and is therefore unable to account for the transsexual desire to be differently embodied.<sup>3</sup> While such dissonances are significant and important, they do not necessarily mean that Butler's early work has nothing to say to gender today.

In this essay, I return to an early work of Butler's that was crucial to my own effort, in *Disturbing Attachments: Gender, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (2017), to define the type of scholarly idealization to which I find minoritarian fields, including Queer Studies, particularly prone. This passage, from Butler's "Afterword" to *Butch/Femme*, a 1998 volume edited by Sally Munt, reads as follows: "The regulatory operation of heterosexual norms *idealizes heterosexuality* through purifying those desires and practices of their instabilities, crossings, the incoherences of masculine and feminine and the anxieties through which the borders of those categories are lived."<sup>4</sup> While this passage ascribes the idealization of heterosexuality to the silent "regulatory operations" of dominant norms, Butler's broader analysis makes it clear that it is also lesbians themselves who, in their (understandable) effort to counter the claim that butch/femme is merely a poor copy of heterosexuality, end up shoring up heterosexuality's purity. That is to say

that, in their effort to defend butch/femme, lesbians ended up idealizing not only butch/femme but also heterosexuality itself; for, to avoid the charge of lesbian mimicry, *both categories* had to be defended as mutually unrelated, immune to any contaminating cross-identifications, fantasies, or desires.

In this essay, I return to Butler’s “Afterword” less for a workable theory of gender (in its linguistic idealism, Butler’s early work cannot offer this) than for a caution against any faith in the purity and distinctness of identity categories. This essay offers a polemical genealogy of the emergence of nonbinary identity, not as a progress narrative in which we move toward an enlightened recognition of the many types of human gender and sexual diversity, but rather as the outcome of a slow avalanche of historical accidents. I turn to Butler’s “Afterword” to consider the harms that the coinage and idealization of normative identities—from heterosexuality, to cisgender, to binary—has wrought on ordinary gender-variant people, particularly trans femmes, across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Along with *idealization*, I identify *divergence*, *binarism*, and *autology* as the four logics that have driven the historical production of new categories of gender and sexuality. I conclude with a proposal for how we might throw a wrench in this Western identity machine.

### The Divergence of Transgender from Gay

I begin by glossing a tale David Valentine has already told, that of the divergence of transgender from homosexuality in the US. I do so to underscore one engine of this entire history—the triumph of a “divergence” over a “convergence” model of gender-sexuality (a term I prefer to “gender and sexuality,” since the two are, in reality, indissociable).<sup>5</sup> The convergence model, which was dominant until roughly the 1990s, held that local forms of raced, classed, gender- and labor-differentiated homosexuality were, nevertheless, *all homosexual*. For instance, the widespread agreement, during the 1960s, that street queens (male-assigned people who dressed in drag full-time), drag queens, “hormone” queens (male-assigned people who took estrogen), effeminate gay men, and butch gay men were all homosexuals might retrospectively be understood as a convergence model, since a range of social types was understood to cohabit a social category together. Cohabitation, however, rarely makes for harmony. A number of scholars have demonstrated how this convergence model of homosexuality produced strife in managing the uneven social stigmas of the “covert” homosexuality of butch gay men, who were capable of functioning in the straight professional world, and the “overt” gender-variant homosexuality of drag

queens and street queens, who were forced to rely on gay and “street” economies.<sup>6</sup>

From the vantage point of the 1960s, the gay liberation politics of “coming out of the closet” amounted to an injunction to the covert to become overt. Nobody could have predicted that, when they did so, it would be not as the “screaming queens” they were all assumed to harbor deep within, but as *men*. The open declaration of homosexuality by otherwise gender-typical men changed the face of homosexuality during the 1970s—not least for gay men themselves. Meanwhile, the shift from a semisecretive gay subculture to a publicly politicized gay movement brought the resentments and ambivalences that had long bubbled between different gay social types to an open boil. As Valentine has shown, gay politicization during the 1970s led to debates about which homosexuals would have to be left behind so that other, more palatable homosexuals could make a feasible plea for rights to the straight public. Unsurprisingly, gender-typical gay men positioned “screaming queens”—associated with sex work, public gender deviance, poverty, crime, and racialization—as a detriment to the gay movement. In her now famous “Y’all Better Quiet Down” speech at the 1973 Gay Pride rally, Puerto Rican street queen Sylvia Rivera angrily demanded inclusion in the gay movement based on the hardships she bore on behalf of gay liberation. No one argued that queens like Rivera were not gay, only that they were not gay in socially palatable (read white, middle-class) ways. These, in short, were battles fought out within the tensions of the convergence model.

For both gay/lesbian and trans people, the categorical divergence of transgender from homosexuality offered a number of benefits. After gay liberation, the growing visibility and numerical prominence of gender-typical lesbians and gays made it seem like common sense that butches and screaming queens were not the essence of all homosexuality, as had once been thought. In this changed context, embracing what had once been a merely medical distinction between gender and sexuality allowed trans people to explain—to a public that still saw them as a version of homosexual—why they resorted to “extreme” measures that gays and lesbians did not, such as cross-dressing, name and pronoun changes, and, at times, hormonal and/or surgical transition. In terms of political organizing, it had become apparent that the causes of gender deviants would always be a low priority within the gay and lesbian movement. Autonomous transgender organizing, with roots in groups like STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) as well as transvestite and transsexual mutual aid, seemed necessary. Finally, embracing the separation of gender and sexuality allowed trans people to openly explore an array of sexualities, not just the homosexuality (that is, the heterosexuality, once a change in gender categories is accounted for) long expected of them. Meanwhile, Valentine convincingly

argues that the category of transgender gave lesbians and gays what they had been seeking for decades—distance from the stigma of gender variance in its association with poverty, illegal sex work, street culture, and race. Divergence seemed like a win for everyone.

### The Cis/Trans Binary

Around 2008, the surprisingly rapid uptake of the term *cis* (short for *cisgender*) by educated young trans people and their allies reified the hitherto tacit binary between trans people and everyone else. As A. Finn Enke explains, *cisgender* was coined by biologist Dana Leland Defosse in 1994.<sup>7</sup> The scientific origin of the term accounts for the use of the little-known Latin prefix *cis-* for “that which remains in place.” Subsequently, small numbers of trans people took up the technical-sounding term, but nobody expected it to take off—until it did. Some early users of the term *cisgender*, such as Enke, understood it as an analytic of the unseen privilege and power of a set of common assumptions: that gender was visible and obvious, that sex was immutable, and that gender was a natural biological expression of sex. The version of *cisgender* that was popularized around 2008, however, was neither an analytic of privilege nor a term for regulatory technologies of gender and sex, but rather an identity category for all non-trans people. The use of *cis* as an identity was intended to mark the otherwise unmarked normalcy of those who did not desire transition. Its effect, however, was to ossify the opposition between trans people and the rest. Quickly, the *cis/trans* binary was reinterpreted as an ontological truth. Only a discrete category of people named transgender desired transition and exhibited gender variance—the rest, *cis* people, were perfectly comfortable in their sexed bodies and gendered social roles.

We may generatively extend Butler’s questioning of the status of heterosexuality within lesbian theorization in 1998 to the role of *cisgender* today. “What is the background figure of heterosexuality at work here? When we refer to normative heterosexuality, do we know precisely what we mean?” Butler asks. They continue: “Have we begun to construct heterosexuality as a normative monolith in order to set into relief the variegations of non-heterosexual desire as the unambiguous and uncontaminated forces of sexual opposition?”<sup>8</sup> *What is the background figure of cisgender at work here? When we refer to normative cisgender, do we know precisely what we mean? Have we begun to construct cisgender as a normative monolith in order to set into relief the variegations of trans identity as the unambiguous and uncontaminated forces of gender opposition?* In short, are we idealizing *cisgender* as uncontaminated by any gender trouble whatsoever, just as we have idealized heterosexuality

as untainted by the slightest homosexual longing? If this is the case, then we might expect cisgender people to be far less straightforwardly cis than the cis/trans binary would lead us to expect. After all, Jane Ward's research has made it clear that homosexual sex between straight-identified people is ubiquitous rather than rare among white men and women in the United States today.<sup>9</sup> Might cisgender as a category be just as impure as heterosexuality? To ask this question is not necessarily to imply that *transgender* and *homosexual* are symmetrical terms. While some degree of homosexual desire is likely so ubiquitous as to be almost universal, I would argue that no more than a tiny sliver of non-trans-identified people harbor the secret desire to change their sex. This basic material asymmetry is distorted, however, by taxonomies and definitions that have been devised for *transgender*, based on the preexisting model of the homosexual/heterosexual divide. To tell the story of cisgender, then, we must back up and explain the historically contingent emergence of heterosexuality.

### Heterosexuality's Privileged Unreality

As Jonathan Ned Katz has shown us, heterosexuality emerged belatedly, as a normative ballast against homosexuality. Homosexuality, the abnormal type, was defined first by sexologists beginning in the late nineteenth century and psychiatrists in the twentieth century. If homosexuality came to describe a type of person defined by an abnormal and pathological same-sex desire, one of the many epistemological problems it introduced was that there *was no concept* for a healthy, normal desire for the opposite sex.<sup>10</sup> Heterosexuality was an afterthought to homosexuality, its belatedness a symptom of its purely ideological origins. As fictive as it is idealized, heterosexuality today names an exclusive, normal, and healthy sexual orientation to the opposite sex that hardly exists in practice. The first paradox of heterosexuality is that it defines as "healthy" and "normal" a form of sex and coupledness based on material power asymmetries between men and women and, therefore, on the basic psychosexual interplay of sadism/masochism, desire/disgust, and sex/rape analyzed by feminist scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon. To restore the contexts of patriarchy and sexism to heterosexuality is to reveal it to be a constitutively perverse form of sexual desire, "healthy" only by virtue of its statistical predominance and pervasive idealization. The second paradox of heterosexuality is that there are, I would wager, *no* heterosexuals who have neither experienced nor acted on same-sex erotic desire, even if only in the form of aggression or play. Heterosexuality as an exclusive sexual orientation is and has always been a myth, and much of the history of sexology could be renarrated as an

attempt to rationalize the fact that a great many apparently normal people had sex with someone of the same sex. Butler's insight is that queer thought inadvertently shores up the idealization of a pure and uninterrogated heterosexuality whenever it opposes queer/gay/lesbian to straight. Going further, we might argue that heterosexuality's privileged unreality is precisely what makes it possible for people to claim it despite and even in light of their own homosexual activity and desires. For claiming heterosexuality has always been, first and foremost, a means of aspiring to an idealized normalcy. As Jane Ward powerfully argues, heterosexuality is not a naturally existing sexual orientation but a "culture." Feeling comfortable and "at home" in straight culture is more powerfully predictive of heterosexual identification than is an exclusive desire for the "opposite" sex.

The prehistory of heterosexuality reveals why this is the case. Before heterosexuality, there were the normals, and there were the gender variants—fairies and queens, butches and "he-shes," hermaphrodites and sexual intermediaries. Properly manly men were *by definition* normal (at least when it came to gender-sexuality), even when they were having (manly, insertive) sex with fairies or queens.<sup>11</sup> (Women, who were imagined, in different contexts, to be asexual, polymorphously perverse, or exclusively responsive to the sexual advances of others, have always been more difficult to fit into models of sexual normalcy versus deviance or of sexuality as orientation.) No wonder, then, that many normals were and remain reluctant to recategorize themselves as deviant simply because of their (gender-appropriate) same-sex practices. If the homo/hetero binary can be said to have victims, however, these victims would be not the normals but rather trans women. If, before heterosexuality, any normal man might have desired a fairy without any diminishment (and even with a potential enhancement) of his manhood, now heterosexual men who are attracted to trans women may commit acts of extreme transmisogynist violence to protect their heterosexual masculine status. Extraordinary acts of transmisogynist violence may therefore be one consequence of the homo/hetero divide.

### The Losses of Queer History

The emergence of *cisgender* follows a similar pattern to that of heterosexuality. *Transsexuality* was coined first during the 1950s as a medical diagnosis of the strange desire to change sex. *Transgender* followed, about forty years later, as an attempt to forge a politics and sense of community around the demedicalized desire to be differently gendered. Like *heterosexual*, *cisgender* emerged belatedly, its meaning settling from an analytic of cis normativity and privilege to the name assigned to a hypothesized normal

type—the opposite of transgender. The problem is that, in the meantime, the meaning of *transgender* had also shifted, from a politicized umbrella for all manner of gender-bending to the neutral descriptor of a misalignment between someone’s gender identity and their assigned gender. This newer definition of *transgender*, moreover, was actually a return to the midcentury sexological and psychiatric theories of gender that were the basis of intersex medical violence.<sup>12</sup> One consequence of this series of coinages and definitional shifts is that the cisgender/transgender binary has a gaping hole in its middle. If, in the past, gender variance—epitomized by the queen—was the definitional center of homosexuality, now, in a historically shocking reversal, homosexuality has become gender-typical by default. Transgender people (initially, anyone differently gendered and now, informally, only those who desire transition) have become the sole gender variants; everyone else is cisgender. So what has happened to all the gender variants who do not desire transition? Put differently, what are the contemporary fates of those who would have been fairies, queens, and butches in the past?

Butches, in fact, remain common, due both to the high value of masculinity in lesbian culture and to the overall ill fit between female-assigned people and the hegemonic history of sexuality. The real question, then, is what has happened to the fairies and queens? No doubt a great many would have either elected to transition or settled into a relatively stigma-free gender-typical homosexuality. Given the erotic and cultural value of masculinity among gay men, feminine gay men who do not desire transition have become something of a paradox. Stereotypically gay, yet rarely considered desirable within gay male culture (the slogan “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” epitomizes the “masc 4 masc” gay culture that is now hegemonic), feminine gay men have “become historical,” redolent of homosexualities of yore, yet deprived of even a single affirmative term to identify them, much less articulate a positive desire for them.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, not a single “tribe” on the gay sex app Grindr names feminine gay men or those who might desire them; “trans,” by contrast, is a named tribe. Feminine men have become erotic nonentities, desired, more often than not, *despite* rather than for their femininity. They are fallout of *both* the cis/trans and the homo/hetero binary: if, during the early twentieth century, any normal man might have desired them, now no heterosexual man is permitted to, and few gay men find themselves so moved.

### Enter Nonbinary

Such are the consequences of an ill-conceived taxonomy that sought to, counterfactually and in an affront to the entirety of queer history,

neatly sort people into cisgender versus transgender. That is, until just now. In keeping with the trend toward divergence as a strategy for managing taxonomical tensions, the cis/trans distinction has birthed a third term, *nonbinary*, which, unlike its seldom used predecessor, *genderqueer*, has caught on like wildfire in a few short years. Initially, *nonbinary*—an umbrella term for all those who identify as neither men nor women—offered a much-needed home to all those orphans at the fuzzy edges of the cis/trans binary. But increasingly, nonbinary identity is being claimed by people who look and behave in a manner indistinguishable from ordinary lesbians and gays, or even ordinary heterosexuals. While Miley Cyrus, Courtney Stodden, and Sam Smith have recently made headlines by coming out as nonbinary, this phenomenon is hardly confined to the rich and famous. A 2021 survey by the Trevor Project estimates that 26 percent of LGBTQ youth in the US ages 13–24 now identify as nonbinary—a proportion familiar to those who teach in the queer/trans classroom.<sup>14</sup> How did this come about? If, in the early 2000s, genderqueer was an almost unimaginable category understood to apply to almost no one, how has nonbinary become a ubiquitous category that could seemingly apply to almost anyone?

One precondition for the universalization of nonbinary identity is the trans idealization of cisgender. To paraphrase Butler yet again, *Have we begun to construct cisgender as a normative monolith in order to set into relief the variegations of trans and nonbinary identity as the unambiguous and uncontaminated forces of gender opposition?* The answer can only be a resounding *yes*. Keep in mind that cisgender is not and has never been a social identity. Like heterosexuality, cisgender is an opposite fabricated out of thin air. This is not to say that there are not people who are not transgender, in the sense of *people who do not desire transition*. Indeed, if that were the definition of *cisgender*, all would be well. However, that is only the opposite of the colloquial definition of *transgender*, not of the “official” definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *transgender* as designating “a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to that person’s sex at birth, or which does not otherwise conform to conventional notions of sex and gender.”<sup>15</sup> In a tidy and logical opposition, *cisgender* is defined as “designating a person whose sense of personal identity corresponds to the sex and gender assigned to him or her at birth (in contrast with transgender).”<sup>16</sup> Similar definitions proliferate on the internet and on social media, the major sites of sexual-gender identity formation for young people. Strikingly, *cisgender* (and “officially” *transgender*) is now defined as a matter of “personal identity” alone. But how is a gender-typical person to go about developing a relation to their gender identity? In a context in which most gender-typical people have never had to think about their gender identity, when they look within to find some felt relation to it, they may well draw



a blank. When they do find feelings about manhood and womanhood, these feelings are likely to be extremely ambivalent—how could they not be, since these terms are artifacts of patriarchal gender expectations and racialized civilization distinctions? While they may have heard trans people talk about gender dysphoria, they will search in vain for the feeling that indicates cisness. For there is none. The reason is that cisgender—the notion of an alignment so exact between one’s personal sense of identity and the gender role assigned to one that there is no rub, no ambivalence, and no sense of constraint—is and has always been a fantasy. *Nobody has ever felt that way.* We trans people invented the fantasy of cisgender as the opposite to the extreme gendered and sexed discomfort we have experienced. We are the ones responsible for the idealization of cisgender, and it falls partly to us to undo it.

As if cisgender were not bad enough, nonbinary discourse has just invented a new fictive opposite. Just as homosexuality birthed an idealized heterosexuality and transgender birthed an idealized cisgender, nonbinary has birthed an idealized binary identification as its (ironically, binary) opposite. If a nonbinary person identifies as neither man nor woman, a binary person not only *does* identify as a man or woman, but they (by connotation) do so in a “binary” way, that is, without *any* cross-gender feelings or identifications. The problem is that, thus understood, *no one is binary*, neither the “binary trans people” commonly opposed to nonbinary people, nor the “binary cis people,” who would never choose this term to describe themselves or their relationship to gender. Indeed, if nonbinary identity is catching on like wildfire, it is no coincidence that binary identity is not. Almost no one, trans or cis, identifies as binary or finds this term a useful descriptor for their experiential relation to gender. Binary, to an even greater extent than cisgender or heterosexual, is an idealized opposite, not a lived state of being.

Nonbinary discourse has also taken gender self-identification far further than trans people ever envisioned. If trans people used the discourse of self-identification to ensure that our choices to transition—medically or socially—were respected, nonbinary discourse has used it to eliminate the necessity of transition altogether. Contemporary nonbinary discourse holds firmly that nonbinary might “look” any number of ways and need not find external expression in choice of dress, hairstyle, pronouns, or any other social marker of gender.<sup>17</sup> This tenet likely emerged as a way to counter the reflexive binary gendering even of visibly gender-variant people, given the difficulty of appearing uncategorizable as either a man or as a woman to those accustomed to classifying everyone in this way. As a response, nonbinary discourse has doubled down on the notion of gender as an internal, psychic identification, adding the corollary that nonbinary identification is

“valid” regardless of outward expression. While many nonbinary people do seek to modify their appearance to counter binary gendered expectations, with the discourse of gender self-identification, more and more do not.

This confluence of events has created a context rife for the production of more and more nonbinary people. For if, according to the law of opposites, one must either be nonbinary or binary, and, in an extension of the popular misreading of *Gender Trouble*, it is radical to be nonbinary and normative to be binary, then more and more people are choosing and will continue to choose nonbinary identity. This is particularly true since nonbinary identity costs very little. All that is required to be nonbinary is to identify as such, and nobody will be attacked, imprisoned, thrown out of their home, or discriminated against merely for identifying as nonbinary. One of the most popular current explanations of nonbinary identity is that it is not, in fact, an additional gender but rather a perspective or a belief—a choice to see gender as a spectrum or as limitless rather than as a binary.<sup>18</sup> Today, a list of people I have encountered who identify as nonbinary would include: a white female-assigned person who has studied Buddhism and decided that, ontologically, gender is not binary; a number of female-assigned feminists who experience discomfort with patriarchal expectations; a number of transitioned trans people who wish to be “out” as trans and avow that their life history has not been within a single gender; a number of brown people who wish to decolonize the “colonial gender binary”; a number of Black people for whom, due to a history of ungendering, blackness precludes cisgender status.<sup>19</sup> According to this logic, all “woke” people should be nonbinary; only the politically retrograde would subscribe to a binary gender identity, much less believe in binary gender at all.

None of these people’s beliefs or feelings about gender is uninteresting or wrong. What I question, contra current progressive gender discourse, is whether one’s politics, personal feelings, or beliefs about gender should be the basis of gender categorization at all. Like language, gender categories—including trans, cis, nonbinary, and binary—are social and interpersonal, not individual; this is what makes them meaningful in the first place. If they were not, trans and nonbinary people would not feel the need to announce our genders to the world any more than we feel the need to announce our favorite colors. What is socially relevant is *transition*—a shift in social gender categories, whatever they may be—not *identification*—a personal, felt, and thereby highly phantasmic and labile relation to these categories. *Identification is the psychic process that makes the interval between the individual and the social apparent; it is not the site of their suture.* Or, as Butler puts it, “identification is not identity,” a distinction that has been forgotten within nonbinary discourse.<sup>20</sup> While gender politics *are* socially relevant, it is only the neoliberal universalization of identity as the basis of all politics that has made it appear

necessary to announce one's gender politics as an identity—*nonbinary*—rather than simply enacting them. What is therefore necessary is to repair the historical wound opened by the cis/trans binary by creating one or more socially legible gender categories—based on presentation and behavior, not self-identification alone—for those who want to transition from men or women to *something else*, something with positive social content rather than something devoid of it, as nonbinary currently is.

### A Wrench in the Western Identity Machine

As my brief history of accidents has shown, we have not moved from a rigid and impoverished gender system to a flexible and nuanced one. To the contrary, the Western history of gender-sexuality has been one of the creation, through the method of divergence as a means of managing categorical instability, of increasingly idealized and uninhabitable normative categories, from heterosexual to cisgender to binary. It has been the history of the burial of gender deeper and deeper within the private recesses of the self, where it increasingly disavows any relation to the social. If Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* as a critique of the ascription of an interior core where there was nothing but compelled performances of social ideals of gender, in 2022 the fictive core of gender identity has taken on a life of its own. Gender identity is envisioned not as derivative of but as autonomous from the social, to the extent that it may entirely contradict one's actual gender performances (the popularization of femme AFAB [Assigned Female at Birth] nonbinary identity is one case in point). Today, "gender identity" references a core selfhood that requires no expression, no embodiment, and no commonality—in the case of some of the microidentities spreading on the internet—with genders as they are lived by others in the world. In this sense, contemporary gender identity is the apotheosis of the liberal Western fantasy of self-determining "autological" selfhood, a regulatory ideal that gains meaning only in opposition to the "genealogical" selfhood, overdetermined by social bonds, ascribed to racialized and indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup> Nonbinary identity is therefore not, as some nonbinary people would have it, a radical refusal of the colonial gender binary. For binary Western thinking has governed every step in the history of Western gender-sexual categories, generating an idealized opposite for each new category coined. The core binary that governs nonbinary thought, however, is less that between binary and nonbinary than that, foundational to Western thought, between the autological sovereign individual and the unchosen genealogical bonds of the social. It is therefore difficult to imagine an identity more provincially Western and less decolonial than contemporary nonbinary identity.

My brief history has also shown, however, that any problems with non-binary identity and discourse are not the fault of nonbinary people alone. In keeping with the lessons of Foucauldian genealogy, they are the consequence of a slow avalanche of historical accidents. In sum, they are the fruit of 1) a turn to divergence as a means of managing the imperfection of identity categories; 2) the use of binary thinking to fabricate fictive opposites (heterosexual, cisgender, binary) whose uninhabitability then spawns further divergent identities, which then spawn new fictive opposites, and so on; 3) the idealization of these identities; and 4) the popularization of the (Western, Cartesian, sexological) thesis that gender is psychic rather than social.

I propose that we throw a wrench in this identity machine. It may be necessary to generate new identities, given that nonbinary is not a true social category but rather a vast umbrella with no positive social content. However, we can abandon Western binary and taxonomic thinking by refusing to create a fictive opposite for each new term. We can drop the notion that gender is purely psychic and work instead toward creating a livable, valued, and legible social category for feminine male-assigned people (given the high cultural and erotic value of masculinity, a space for masculine female-assigned people will likely always exist). Most importantly, we can stop idealizing (and attempting to name) some version of normal gender, and we can refuse to use the misleading terms *binary* and *cisgender* altogether. For just as there has never been a heterosexuality without homosexual desire, there has never been a cis- or binary gender free from cross-identification or gender atypicality. As Butler writes,

The line is supposed to differentiate straight from lesbian, but the line is contaminated by precisely that which it seeks to ward off: it bounds identity through the very same gesture by which it differentiates itself; the gesture by which it differentiates itself becomes the border through which contamination travels, undermining differentiation itself.<sup>22</sup>

Contamination is the companion of categorization. It is all but impossible to feel entirely unambivalent about, entirely described by, a social identity category; this was never the goal of transgender or transsexual politics in the first place. The question, then, is whether we can develop a tolerance for contamination and for the inevitable misfit of identity categories, rather than continually kicking the bucket further down the road, generating ever more terms in pursuit of an impossible dream—that of social categories capable of matching the uniqueness of individual psyches. To accomplish all of this, we must, first and foremost, relinquish the fantasy that gender is a means of self-knowledge, self-expression, and authenticity

rather than a shared, and therefore imperfect, social schema. This means developing a robust trans politics and discourse *without* gender identity.

## Notes

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1. Jules Gleeson, "Judith Butler: 'We Need to Rethink the Category of Woman,'" *Guardian*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender>.
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).
3. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, 1998), 21–60.
4. Judith Butler, "Afterword," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London, 1998), 227, my emphasis.
5. I appropriate the terminology of divergence/convergence from Janet Halley to refer to two opposed strategies for negotiating the variety, fluidity, and differential social stigmas of gender-sexualities. See Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, 2008).
6. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago, 1979); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC, 2007). The terminology of "overt" versus "covert" is Newton's.
7. A. Finn Enke, "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Aren Aizura and Susan Stryker (New York, 2013), 234–47.
8. Butler, "Afterword," 226.
9. Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men* (New York, 2015).
10. See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York, 1995).
11. George Chauncey, for instance, demonstrates that this was the case among working-class men in New York City from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994).
12. On medical violence against intersex people, see Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (Lincoln, 2019).
13. Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC, 2017), 127.
14. "National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021," <https://www.TheTrevorProject.org/survey-2021/>.
15. *OED Online*, s.v. "transgender, adj."
16. *OED Online*, s.v. "cisgender, adj."
17. See, for instance, Meredith Talusan, "This Is What Gender-Nonbinary People Look Like," *them*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.them.us/story/this-is-what-gender-nonbinary-people-look-like>.
18. Jennalynn Fung, "What It Means to Be Non-Binary," *Teen Vogue*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-it-means-to-be-non-binary>.
19. The relation of Black people to nonbinary identity is undoubtedly the most interesting and warrants further study. At times, Black nonbinary people break

with the autological bent of nonbinary discourse to assert nonbinary identity as the result of antiblack racialization.

20. Butler, "Afterword," 227.
21. Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC, 2006); Aniruddha Dutta, "Allegories of Gender: Transgender Autology versus Transracialism," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender Culture & Social Justice* 39, no. 2 (2018): 86–98.
22. Butler, "Afterword," 228.