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Becoming cisgender

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Abstract

The metaphysics of sex and gender is of significant philosophical, social, and cultural interest at present. Terms like *transgender* and *cisgender* have come into wider circulation in the fight for gender justice. While many are familiar with ‘transgender’, fewer know ‘cisgender’, the term that captures AFAB-women (assigned ‘female’ at birth-women) and AMAB-men. But ‘cisgender’ is controversial to some, which I find surprising. In this article, I reflect on my process of recognising my *self* as cisgender. During, I highlight the ethico-political consequences of refusing the onto-epistemic category ‘cisgender’. I shall argue that *uptake* of ‘cisgender’ and *apprenticeship* to trans texts uncovers how we maintain, and might purposefully disturb, queer/cis-hetero, man/woman/other hierarchies of social identity power. I argue this self-recognition is a crucial tool for challenging ‘cisgender commonsense’ and may be a means toward dislodging ciscentrism in my (western, Anglophone) milieu.

KEYWORDS

cisgender, transgender, feminism, oppression, equality, privilege

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is palpable hostility regarding the metaphysics of sex and gender in my social surrounds at present, such severe gender gatekeeping—usually centred on whether AMAB-women are, indeed, women—that I speak now with trepidation. I do not want to speak for, above, or over trans women (nor the trans community more broadly) — yet nor do I think it right for me, a cisgender woman

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and feminist philosopher, to stay silent as ‘gender critical’ arguments gain increasing traction and detrimentally impact the trans community (Pearce et al., 2020). So, what should a feminist cisgender woman do under such circumstances?

I admit, I have not given trans oppression the attention it deserves in my research — this, in spite of being a bisexual woman whose research focuses on (largely, cis) women's and sexual orientation-based oppression (e.g., Richardson-Self, 2015, 2019, 2021). *Why?* Cherrie Moraga (1983) asks:

Do we merely struggle with the ‘ism’ that is sitting on top of our own heads? The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression — will only insulate rather than radicalize us. (p. 29)

Perhaps I have been too busy struggling with my own ‘isms’. Or perhaps it has simply been my privilege to choose whether I engage in, or even *notice*, trans rights issues. But it is time to ‘move out’ — to explicitly *recognise* (*re-cognise*) myself as ‘cisgender’, to *become* cisgender.

Through this process, I continue to learn just how ignorant I am of this trans-hostile world — a consequence of my sedimented ‘cisgender commonsense’ worldview (Dembroff, 2020). To become lucid of this ignorance that is born of cisgender commonsense, I must actively give my attention to trans philosophers, other trans scholars, and trans activists, friends, students, family, who have testified to their experiences of what it is like to live-woman, live-man, or live-nonbinary in my social milieu, a milieu where biological essentialism reigns. In the current climate, I feel I must do more. I must listen, yet I must also say something. *But, what?* (We shall see.) *And, to whom?* (Other non-trans people.)

I think the most valuable contribution I can make to temper this climate of hostility as a cis woman academic is not to *defend* a certain metaphysics of sex-gender, though I do suppose one.¹ Rather, in this article I reflect on *becoming*, *being*, and, in turn, *recognising myself as cisgender*. I also demonstrate why such self-recognition matters. It matters because, if I and other cis people *apprentice ourselves* to trans knowledge, we might shake off some of that cisgender commonsense that reproduces our ciscentric society and learn to treat the trans community with the dignity they deserve.²

2 | THE SELF

I was raised on a diet of feminist materialism and, thus, how I see my *self*—my own being—is thoroughly embodied. Put differently, I understand my self, first and foremost, as fundamentally corporeal, of the flesh.³ What is more, I realise my self as a body with *particular* traits and capacities, such as female primary and secondary sex characteristics, white skin, pierced and tattooed flesh, particularly-oriented erotic drives, brown hair, blue eyes, thinness, flexibility, persistent pelvic pain, cognitive competence, poor coordination, and so forth.

There are two reasons I am highlighting this. First, the feminist materialist philosophy of the 1980s–90s that was my bread-and-butter scholarly diet insisted that *corporeal difference makes a difference* in what options are available to which subjects, in how one experiences their world and what they are capable of knowing about it, in the amount of autonomy one is able to exercise, in whether the normatively-prescribed types of action one undertakes are culturally valued or ignored, and in whether one is tacitly imagined (and thus, in fact, is expected) to be fit for tasks in the public sphere or private sphere, which all effect who a person can become. In short, feminist materialists argued—against an assumed backdrop of liberal egalitarianism that takes all subjects to be ‘equal

abstract Individuals' to whom a principle of non-discrimination would apply (Young, 1990)—that *we are not all the same*.

Living-woman is different from living-man. This is also because ours is a relational existence in a socio-historical hierarchical context. In other words, living-woman and living-man are different not (only) because of corporeal difference, but because of *situated corporeal experience*. Yet in this milieu of fraternal patriarchy, these two modes of living (and hence the needs of women) are often overlooked under the pretence that we are all *Individuals* (normatively indistinguishable singularities). Feminist materialism pulls back the wizard's curtain, showing that *this* shared situation is built from historically inflected social meanings, norms, and expectations attached to specific *aspects* of bodies, presumed capacities, and thus types of persons. Hence, we should devise *positive* recognitive relationships toward the differences among us (Gatens, 1996; Lorde, 2007). For sex-gender justice, it is necessary to abandon Individualism and recognise that human subjectivity is *at least* two (Irigaray, 1996), and indeed, many, many more (Lorde, 2007).

The second reason I divulge this information is to demonstrate, once again, that the frequently levelled charge of biological essentialism directed at feminist materialists overlooks the nuance of its ontology. I listed some of my corporeal traits above. All of them—and more—make me the specific self that I am, namely: *Louise*. But I do not have 'pure' or 'unmediated' knowledge of my body-self. That is to say, "my experience of my body, for me, is just as socially constructed as my experiences of the body of the other" (Gatens, 1996, p. 35). Explained by Kathleen Lennon and Rachel Alsop (2020):

We become sexed and raced by the ways in which our bodily features are taken by others, and then ourselves, to orientate us towards certain pathways, modes of inhabiting the world.... However, they are lived [i.e., *experienced*] as if they originated in bodily features themselves. (p. 172, emphasis added)

Each of us is born into and grows up in already existing societies with their own historical and futural trajectories, their own meanings or 'significances' attached to particular (bits of) bodies, all wrapped up together in sets of norms and narratives. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) explains, the body has an "organic openness to cultural completion" (p. xi). Indeed, "the human body is radically open to its surroundings and...its identity can never be viewed as a final or finished product...since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment" (Gatens, 1996, p. 110). One's identity may *feel* as though it is anchored across one's life, but *I am (you are) unfinished, I am (you are) always becoming*. Says Jack Halberstam (2018): "the experience and meaning of gendered embodiment and of sex and pleasure can change radically over time" (p. 17). The point is, simply: "this forming of ourselves is not done once but is a continuous process," a process that cannot extract itself from a contextual intersubjective world (Lennon & Alsop, 2020, p. 159). Throughout the course of our lives, as our bodies and environment change, so too are we *still* becoming who we are.

This alternative conception of subjectivity—of humans as organic, unfinished beings—has led to the proposal that the *self* is really just an *imaginary body*, or *body image* — for one's sense of self-in-the-world is a morphological-environmental *impression*, not brute reality (Grosz, 1989). Everyone develops their own morphological image, a schema that is particular to them. (I have *Louise's* schema.) It is a combination involving corporeal features, one's interrelationship with their specific environment and its inhabitants, and the salient social meanings circulating in that social context across time. Crucially, though, in spite of everyone's schematic uniqueness, bodies and environments (including the social meanings circulating in certain environments) contain similitudes that comprise certain groups that may become salient.

3 | BECOMING & SPECIFICITY

When we enter this world, we enter a functioning society. In my *becoming* over time, I have incorporated many identity-based social images into my imaginary body, into an impression of a fixed, genuine self (though *I* know I may have been, and could become, different). So, who—or what—is Louise? And which socially salient groupings have borne her? (Young, 1990). I am a girl/woman, assigned at birth, and this has always felt well-suited to me. I am bisexual, but I did not know (recognise) this aspect of my self until my early teens. In my early twenties, I came to know (recognise) that I am white; it took so long to see this because my milieu positions *whiteness* as the norm (Frye, 1983). And it is only in the last few years that I have known (recognised) I am cisgender.

Before I knew the term ‘cisgender’, I found myself unmarked: a *woman* in contrast to a *trans woman*. I accepted that trans women *are* women; I take feminist materialism only to hold that, because I am differently embodied to trans women, then their experiences of living-woman must be, at least in some ways, quite different to my own. Feminist materialism does not invalidate trans identity. Then I discovered ‘cisgender’. The term, combined with my feminist materialist commitments, *made new sense of my world and my self* to myself: epistemologically, ontologically, politically, and ethically.

But—as discussed above—there is simply no access to white skin, signs of arousal, of female primary and secondary sex characteristics, and even ‘femininity/masculinity’ as brute experience, and there never can be. These things—being a girl/woman, being bisexual, being white—were already imbued with shared social meanings before I entered this world, and as I have become *this* self through time, those meanings have constituted me.⁴ But my existence *preceded* the onto-epistemological concept ‘cisgender’, and I was ignorant of cisgender's birth, though it was precisely what I needed to communicate the view that being trans and being cis are simply *two different modes of living-woman* (or *living-man*). As is so aptly summarised in a Tweet by Emmy Zje, I can now recognise: “[The statement] ‘Trans women are women’ doesn't mean ‘trans women are cis women’, it means cis women aren't the only women” (2021). This is why ‘cisgender’ is important: “when used appropriately, [it] helps distinguish diverse sex/gender identities without reproducing unstated norms associated with cisness” (Aultman, 2014, p. 62). However, because of ‘cisgender’, I must also face my position within an oppressive structural dynamic over trans subjects.

4 | RECOGNISING MY SELF

I recognise myself as a woman, queer, white, and cis (among other things). But I want to reflect a little further here because my recognitive relationship to each of them is different; I have had experiences of social- and self-recognition, misrecognition and non-recognition, and what I shall call *privileged recognitive failure*. These have all shaped me in a contextually situated, meaningful way to produce the person that *I* am.

Let me start with my gender identity: I am a woman, I am feminine, and I am female. Not all women are feminine, nor female. But I am. I display my femininity through the clothes I wear, typically fit-and-flare dresses (my go-to outfit). While small-busted, I am proportionally curvaceous, and I dress to add to the hourglass aesthetic. I wear bold lipstick and large earrings. I'm not impartial to a high heel. I sway between short and long hair, but it's usually bob-length or longer. (Have you heard of the bisexual haircut? That's me.) Given the contours of the dominant sexual imaginary, my morphology and environmental priming conveys ‘woman’ to others based on cis-hetero-stereotypes, and that is what I am recognised as by others. My own self-image is *consistent* with the way others recognise

me. It may not be ideal that the people in my milieu *are* normatively primed to make these explicit assumptions, but in my case it is accurate and does me no harm.

The same is not so for my sexual orientation, which is often non-recognised, or else misrecognised. Paul Giladi (2017) explains:

In cases of misrecognition, the recognition order of a society acknowledges the subjectivity of a group or minority, but, incorrectly, does not afford that particular subjectivity the same level of respect and value as that of the majority. In cases of non-recognition, the recognition order of a society incorrectly fails to acknowledge the subjectivity of a group or minority, affording that group or minority no positive normative status at all. (p. 145)

My experience is that my queerness is often missed by others (even other queer people) which suggests my queerness cannot be morphologically read as easily as my gender identity can (even though ‘femme’ is a queer category). I suspect this is because I live in a (cis-) hetero-normative society. Thus, the fact that I am a feminine woman is all it takes for others *not* to recognise me — to assume I am heterosexual (*non-recognition*). It happens a lot. This is further complicated by the fact that I am bisexual and hence attracted to some men (even the cis-het ones). If people know my sexual orientation and I partner with someone, then there is where I encounter *misrecognition*: “Oh, so you’re with a man now? I guess you were just ‘trying it out’,” or, “Oh, you’re dating a woman? So, you’re really a lesbian after all”. This misrecognition and non-recognition fuel in me a felt compulsion to project my queerness into the world (via tattoos, nail-length, and hair-dye, mostly). It is my ongoing effort to be seen as I see myself. I also *voice* my queerness because it is not recognised (*read*) like my gender identity.

Being white, though, is quite different. Unlike my being a woman, which is confirmed through self- and other-recognition, and unlike my being queer, which is repudiated whenever I am mistaken for a (cis-)heterosexual woman, a kind of negation preceded my coming to recognise myself as white. As my milieu is post-colonial Australia, that is probably not too surprising. Whiteness was not *salient* in my context growing up — only Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) were noticed. As I grew up, I was becoming attuned to a social world seen through and built for white eyes (Frye, 1983); I was becoming epistemically and affectively insensitive to the different (often oppressive) experiences of BIPOC in my milieu (Medina, 2019). Recognising my whiteness meant *I had to learn* that “whiteness is a structuring and structured form of power that, through its operations, crystallizes inequality while enforcing its own invisibility” (Vidal-Ortiz, 2014, p. 264). That I (and other white people) could not see me *as white*, that I (we) saw/see ourselves simply as ‘people’ (Frye, 1983), well, I can only think to call this *privileged cognitive failure*.

Just as BIPOC in milieus like mine could recognise ‘whiteness’ from their position on the margins (and in spite of the ignorance of whites in the centre), so too have trans people recognised cis people from their position in margins. The term ‘cisgender’ emerged from trans activist discourse around the 1990s (Aultman, 2014; Bettcher, 2021; Serano, 2016); however, it was not added to the Oxford English Dictionary until 2015 and is still foreign to many outside the discipline of gender studies or our queer communities. This lack of awareness prompts articles aimed at the general public with titles such as: “Explainer: what does it mean to be ‘cisgender’?” (McIntyre, 2018). This is problematic because, like ‘whiteness’, ‘cisness’ is also an enduring, structuring, and structured form of power that, through its operations, crystallizes inequality while enforcing its own invisibility. As Iris Marion Young (1990) explains, this form of “cultural imperialism” is the very thing that *marks* those who are different *as Other* in the first place: difference “becomes reconstructed largely as deviance and inferiority. Since only the dominant group’s cultural expressions receive wide dissemination, their cultural

expressions become the *normal*, or the universal, *and thereby the unremarkable*” (p. 59, emphasis added). Just as my whiteness was unremarkable (and unmarked) *to me* for a long time, so too was my cisgenderness — I took it for granted, and this allowed me to be ignorant of it.

5 | RECOGNITION & SOCIALITY

So, we have seen that the self is always becoming *socially*. This is not only true in the sense that all selves are, ultimately, social constructions. The self is social also in the sense that:

A self, to survive, requires recognition by another self or other selves. Without recognition from others we cannot recognize ourselves, or, in a more complex way, it is only in negotiation with others that our sense of self can emerge... [W]ithout such recognition... we are not able to find our feet in everyday practices of the varied communities in which we are placed. (Lennon & Alsop, 2020, pp. 159–160)

Patchen Markell (2006) further elaborates on what recognition entails, writing:

To be recognized means to be seen or regarded—whether directly or through the mediation of social and political institutions—under some practically significant description that makes a difference in the way the bearer is treated, perhaps even shaping the terms in which she understands herself, and which thereby helps to configure her powers and possibilities. (p. 450).

Much is written about the need to recognise the Other. But I think it problematic that, beyond the trans community, there is little personal recognition of cisgenderness and, by extension, the ciscentrality of this milieu. It is even more problematic when cis people *know* the onto-epistemological concept but refuse to recognise themselves as such. This is to refuse to own one's social identity power, one's privilege. If ‘cisgender’ is refused, this onto-epistemic concept built from the margins cannot do the essential work it was built to do: reshape our societies by asking us to remind ourselves that ‘cis’ is *one* (common, *not* normal) way of being a woman or a man — indeed, that there *is* more than one way of being a woman or a man.⁵

6 | MAKING ‘CIS’ EXPLICIT

Trans people have had to learn to navigate a world structured by cisgender commonsense whilst being constantly cognisant of the fact that *it is this very ‘sense’ which invalidates their being* (except in the most rigid, stereotypical forms). The world structured by cisgender commonsense generally notices ‘women’ and ‘trans women’, ‘men’ and ‘trans men’ (as I once did); sometimes it might give a nod to ‘nonbinary’. But from this cultural imperialism, trans consciousness produced ‘cisgender’ as a way to understand their relation to non-trans people and experiences of oppression.⁶ Nonetheless, cis people remain ignorant of this conceptual achievement. And there are different kinds of ignorance.

Ignorance is *passive* when its cause simply involves either the “absence of a true belief” and/or the “presence of a false belief” (Medina, 2016, p. 191). It is easily resolved by providing the right information or tools. However, sometimes people resist shifts to their received worldview in spite of

new conceptual advancements. Where these are genuine advancements, this is *active* ignorance which involves either of the conditions mentioned above, but also the exhibition of:

cognitive resistances (e.g. prejudices, conceptual lacunas, etc.); affective resistances (e.g. apathy, interest in not knowing – “the will not to believe”, etc.); bodily resistances (e.g. feeling anxious, agitated, red in the face, etc.); [and/or] defense mechanisms and strategies (deflecting challenges, shifting burden of proof, etc.). (Medina, 2016, p. 191)

When people are actively ignorant of ‘cisgender’ as an onto-epistemic resource (one with great potential for social justice), refusing to apply it to themselves where apt, constitutes *privileged cognitive failure*.

Explicitly adopting ‘cisgender’ as an epistemic resource and ‘cis’ as a prefix when talking about AMAB-men and AFAB-women seems to me indispensable for undermining a ciscentric society. As B. Aultman (2014) explains:

The terms *man* and *woman*, left unmarked, tend to normalize cisness—reinforcing the unstated ‘naturalness’ of being cisgender. Thus using the identifications of ‘cis man’ or ‘cis woman’, alongside the usage of ‘transman’ and ‘transwoman’, resists that norm reproduction and the marginalization of trans* people that such norms effect... Cisgender can be thought of as a positive identification of a non-trans* identity. (pp. 61–62)

The use of ‘cisgender’ destabilises ciscentrism by pulling it into the spotlight formerly shone only on ‘transgender’. When people refuse to use ‘cis’ they perpetuate an unjust environment for trans people. See how this played out in a recent experience of mine.

After writing an article on the metaphysics of sex and gender using the terms ‘cisgender’ and ‘transgender’, one aimed at a general audience, I was stunned to learn that the publication had—without consultation—removed the word ‘cisgender’ from the piece. However, it did not remove ‘transgender’. My blood ran cold. I immediately emailed the editor asking for an explanation, and for the term ‘cisgender’ to be reinserted. I was met with the reply that the publication does not use ‘cisgender’ because some readers find it offensive. My response was that offence and harm are not the same thing, and that the absence of ‘cisgender’ in fact harms the trans community (per Aultman, above). These, I said, should outweigh the matter of offensiveness. I also said that I take myself to *be* a cisgender woman (my sex-gender), and surely this self-identification should be permitted in my own explanation of what sex and gender are. (After all, being able to self-describe as a ‘cisgender woman’ matters, because we, too, are subjects of oppression.)

They would not budge. They offered to rewrite some sentences so that the ‘woman/trans woman’ dichotomy did not appear, but the word ‘cisgender’ never came back. This was active ignorance. There was at least some cognitive resistance here insofar as they refused to consider the differing moral gravitas of harm versus offence. They engaged in defence mechanisms by pre-emptive censorship. There seemed to be some apathy on their part (an *affective* resistance); they were not moved by either of the arguments I presented to them though they were compelling. And while it is impossible for me to know whether the editors exhibited particular embodied resistances, they clearly anticipated them from their would-be-offended readers.

My experience of this exchange—where reason was met with a forceful imposition of ciscentrism—is part of the story of how I am becoming cisgender. This type of experience *harms the trans community, not me* — but it nonetheless maintains *my* hierarchical standing, and that’s the crucial point. This shows how necessary it is for cis people to (attempt to) overcome privileged recognitive failure (as

well as passive ignorance) *en masse*, and to challenge ciscentrism when it occurs — even when, as here, those challenges fail. Conceptually, political, and ethically, in my milieu, right now, we need ‘cisgender’. And we need both a cognitive *and affective* shift in how we understand our sex-gender categories. Both of these start with cis people recognising and reckoning with their own privilege which accounts for recognitive failure.

7 | OPPRESSION & PRIVILEGE

Young (1990) informs us that oppression is not (only) perpetuated by deliberately acting agents but is also structural. It:

refers to systematic constraints *on groups* that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant... Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules... In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in...the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41, my emphasis)

This means that a group may be oppressed without any specific agent, or even another group, acting as an *oppressor*. Yet while there may be no identifiable oppressing group, there are identifiable relations of power between groups. To recognise this dynamic—wherein some groups benefit in relation to the oppression of others—Young casts the beneficiary as *privileged*: “for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged in relation to that group” (p. 42).

The first thing to say is that if oppression and privilege are structures which can affect one's life independently of individual will, and if patterns of oppression and privilege are sedimented in one's society via unquestioned norms, habits, symbols, assumptions, and the collective consequences of following social ‘rules’, it is a *genuine* possibility that some well-meaning cisgender people do not recognise the ways in which they are privileged (passive ignorance) (Ivy & Sennet, 2017, p. 505). If there are no agent-to-agent interactions, it may well turn out to be the case that privilege of this kind is particularly hard to identify from the centre rather than the margins.

This is one of the ways cisgender people maintain an inability to recognise ciscentrism. In turn, it is hard to ‘check your privilege’. Amongst those who write about privilege, there is little said by persons who recognise themselves as belonging to some privileged group. So here I just want to reflect on two publications where privileged subjects *do* try to ‘check’ themselves: Peggy McIntosh's “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), and Steven Schacht's “Teaching about Being an Oppressor” (2001), regarding male privilege.

McIntosh's (1989) “Invisible Knapsack” is a well-known and oft-cited text. It contains observations that are not only resonant with Young's structural account of oppression but are also strikingly consistent with my parallel self-reckoning of cisgender privilege. McIntosh describes privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 10). She writes ‘meant’ because she thinks whites, like (cisgender) men, are carefully taught not to recognise their privileges. Rather, they come to “think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average,” and each learns “to see [one]self as an individual whose moral state depended on [their] individual moral will” (p. 10) — i.e., ‘I'm not a bad guy, my intentions were good, so don't blame me for trans/racial/gendered oppression!’ The main emphasis in McIntosh's

piece is how privilege is *recurrently invisible* to those who have it (including herself). She wants to make white privilege visible so that ‘obliviousness’ can no longer remain a moral defence to injustice. To achieve her end, she says, “I have begun in an un-tutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege” (p. 10). She then enumerates some 26 privileges that come to mind; some of them seem banal, but others are considerably serious. In closing, she concludes “the silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance” (p. 12).

Schacht's (2001) essay is directly inspired by McIntosh and follows the same style. It enumerates 25 advantages held by Schacht just insofar as he is male rather than female. Again, they range from the benign to the serious, the most important of which is number 25 itself:

Should I choose *not* to partake in any of the above conditions [i.e., male privileges] ...I can still count on other men partaking in them, which ultimately still maintains my superior status in society. All that is expected of me is to remain silent, and I, too, will cash in on my patriarchal dividend. (p. 206)

Male privilege reigns so long as it goes unchallenged by other men. Like McIntosh, who is concerned with her own ignorance of her privilege, so too is Schacht. He writes: “we live in a society where ignorance truly is bliss, especially for those with unearned male privilege and status” (p. 207). The problem, for men, is that acknowledgement implies involvement; they not only have to “admit the unearned and unjust basis of their advantage, but perhaps even personally change and give up some of their privilege” (p. 207). Schacht does not try to absolve himself of the structural benefits he has—throwing off the advantages of salient group privilege cannot be done by a mere act of will anyway (Gatens, 2006)—but he takes up the tasks of challenging his own sense of superiority, and of making other men aware of the very same (structural) privileges he has come to recognise he holds.

But too often people become hostile when they are categorised as ‘privileged’, and they also do not appreciate being told they are ignorant. They may well exhibit *meta-ignorance* about their privilege, which “consists of indifference or lack of concern for our neglect and ignorance of the experiences, problems, and struggles of others” (Medina, 2013, p. 161). If some people see ‘cisgender’ as offensive, then at least some people are refusing self-recognition, and with it, refusing to own their social privilege. How to elicit the uptake of ‘cis’, then, *with* all the baggage (specifically, privileges) ‘cis’ carries? Veronica Ivy (writing as Rachel MacKinnon) and Adam Sennet make an important distinction between ‘overall privilege’ and ‘specific privilege’. Specific privileges are things like ‘flesh’ colour bandages being beige, and how men can be sexually active without the stigma of being a ‘slut’ (McIntosh, 1989; Schacht, 2001). But a specific white person who benefits from being white or being male (or both) is not, necessarily, privileged overall, or on the whole (Ivy & Sennet, 2017). In short, Ivy and Sennet think denying the status of ‘privileged’ occurs via a conflation of kinds. As they explain, “there's no contradiction between realizing that you are massively disadvantaged overall and that you still have certain unearned advantages (that is, privilege)” (p. 503).

There is another reason it is important to recognise structural versus overall privilege. While there are certainly some structural privileges shared by *both* cis men and women, the fact remains that cis women stand in a relation of oppression and privilege vis-à-vis cis men, which is to say that *cis women are oppressed because of their sex-gender configuration too*, whereas cis men are not. When it comes to social justice coalition building, it is imperative to see this (Serano, 2016, xxiv–xxv).

8 | APPRENTICESHIP

It is clear by now that I think people who are not trans should adopt the onto-epistemic concept ‘cisgender’ — that they should *recognise themselves* as cisgender. However, a worry emerges. What if ‘cisgender’ simply becomes the new terminology used to exclude trans folk? What if ‘cis’ becomes hierarchically positioned as both ideal *and* normal in contradistinction to ‘trans’? As Halberstam (2018) notes, “one must also become alert to the *multitude* of possible uses” of terms developed in the margins (p. 9). Uptake of ‘cisgender’ has liberatory potential: it may destigmatise transness and decentre cisgender commonsense. However, it may also end up a tool of exclusion. This must not occur if social justice is to be served. My suggestion to avoid this is that self-recognition be paired with apprenticeship to trans texts, precisely because *apprenticeship helps us to learn (become) what ‘cisgender’ is (and can be)*.

However, this will not be easy. On the difficulties in realising an intersectional feminism, Moraga (1983) writes:

Within the women’s movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? (p. 29)

With all the affective weight these questions carry, I call upon all cis people, and especially those who identify as feminists, to engage in the type of reflexion Moraga demonstrates here.

I am not necessarily asking for cis-het people to become *allies*, but to form solidarity through coalition — though, in truth, I had never questioned allyship itself until reading Ivy’s “Allies Behaving Badly” (2017). In it, she identifies the problem of so-called (or self-identified) allies gaslighting trans people with respect to their experiences of transantagonistic behaviour. In such situations, gaslighting occurs when “the listener of testimony raises doubts about the speaker’s reliability at perceiving events accurately” (p. 168). This is seriously detrimental to trans people because, given their corporeal social situatedness, they are “particularly *well* epistemically situated to perceive events properly,” whereas cis allies are not (pp. 169–170, original emphasis). Thus, Ivy concludes, rather than grandstanding about their woke attitudes via the category ‘ally’, “allies” ought to put their own perceptions largely aside and *trust* the testimony of the marginalized person. Trusting testimony means believing what’s said” (p. 171, emphasis added). Recognition of situated knowledges—opening up to those of Others—plus trust are what are fundamental here, and Ivy stresses that the onus is on the privileged to act in support of the marginalized when they become aware of oppressive behaviour (p. 172).

Can we create coalitions of solidarity which lead to active bystander behaviour? To quote Moraga (1983) once more:

I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress, is when they’ve come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally. (p. 32, original emphasis)

In other words, if we have the courage to reflexively investigate *how we are oppressed* and *who we oppress*, then there lies the possibility of coalition across difference. I agree with her. For example, seeing how misogyny and queerphobia *link up* has helped me come to know the meaning of my own oppression as a bisexual cisgender woman (see Richardson-Self, 2019, in particular). And I agree with

Julia Serano (2016) when she points out that “it is vital that we try to understand and work together with one another rather than view ourselves as opposing factions, or as existing at different hierarchical positions” (p. xxiv).

But this is not easy. Again, with great honesty, Moraga (1983) also confesses: “I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite ‘caught up’ with my ‘woman-identified’ politics” (p. 32). I can certainly relate. I have failed to live up to my intersectional commitments on more than one occasion. This is an inevitability of being privileged and having social power, but it is not an excuse — that does not mean one should be spared moral reproach (Calhoun, 2016). We have to hold ourselves accountable, especially to our own standards. The *challenge*—that I pose to myself and other cis people—is the *ongoing reflexion* of how I (you), a cis person, oppress the trans community given my (your) own ignorance of my (your) various cisgender privileges, and *then* to also hold oneself accountable. I (we) must commit to owning my (our) acts that have not caught up with my (our) social justice politics, while still maintaining the aim to eliminate society's ciscentrism.

Cis women, further, must not only *acknowledge*, but also to *understand* in a nuanced, deep way that trans oppression hurts us all collectively as women (Richardson-Self, 2019; Serano, 2016). I believe *apprenticeship* can lead to substantive, rich understanding amongst us. Crucially, it involves the cultivation of skills and virtues, of learning how to listen and to adequately comprehend claims of structural injustice. It also requires us to ongoingly survey our prejudicial habits, that ‘commonsense’ which can always affect our judgement. We know that cis women will never completely experience what it is like to live-woman as trans women do (and vice versa), but we can, and indeed, should, “place more epistemic weight, credibility, and trust in the first person reports of marginalized situated knowers” when it comes to testifying to experiences of ciscentric oppression (Ivy, 2017, p. 171). We do not have to—and *should not*—learn about our privilege ‘in an un-tutored way’ per McIntosh's method. There are trans-developed scholarly (and other) resources ready to hand (for example: Dembroff (2020); Halberstam (2018); Serano (2016); Stryker (2017)). What we can do instead is *make an active effort* to learn from trans scholars, activists, social workers, community leaders, and so forth.⁷

To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that it is the trans community's duty or responsibility to teach ignorant cis folk what it is like to live trans womanhood, trans manhood, non-binary life, or any other means of living.⁸ I am saying we should actively turn our attention to the abundance of resources the trans community have already developed through and from their situated experiences. Put bluntly, the aim of apprenticeship is to show epistemic humility to, and perhaps even suspend cisgender common-sense for, “voices and sentiments [we] might fail to recognize as authoritative and might otherwise dismiss” (Churcher, 2019, p. 148). Questions may be asked, and answers will be found, if not in the materials already existing, then in new ones. Thinking *apprenticeship* broadly, the imperative for cis people would be to *seek out trans ‘texts’*, be they written, videoed, orated, and from diverse scholarly, mediated, and biographical fields. (A conversation between trans and cis persons could even count as a ‘text’, assuming it is undertaken in good faith and with the willingness of all parties to recognise that the cis conversant is not an expert.) Like Jean Harvey (2010), I recognise that “if a privileged, non-oppressed person's thinking is developed without interaction of the right kind with the victims, the dangers of misperception, oversights, and the imposition of false descriptions on the relevant phenomena are all too familiar” (p. 21). But, again, trans people are not obliged to educate us. *We are obliged to learn from them.* (And as a cis woman philosopher, I think the obvious imperative *for me* is to prioritize engagement with trans philosophers' scholarship.)

The importance of good faith cannot be understated, for apprenticeship—if undertaken—is likely to generate feelings of frustration, impatience, and irritation from being compelled to work within a ‘foreign’ framework (Churcher, 2019, p. 148). Importantly, apprenticeship does not require dogmatic subscription to any topic, including the metaphysics of sex-gender, simply because a trans person has

proposed it. For one thing, trans scholars disagree on this matter anyway (e.g., compare Bettcher (2014, 2021) with Nicholas (2021) or Latham (2019)). There is no 'one' trans perspective. The apprentice's role is to learn, but it is not to learn by rote. So, cis people will still need to exercise critical thinking, but they will also need to be open to taking up new narratives. The skill, then, would be developing a *nuanced* understanding of different trans' takes on specific matters, and not dismissing them when they tug at affects I (you) don't like to feel, which attach to beliefs I (you) take to be immutable truths. Part of what it is to learn and to understand is to be open to changing one's mind and thus open to changes in bodies of knowledge *and* the embodied self. We (I) need to exercise epistemic humility, which allows us to leave behind passive ignorance, but we (I) also need to reflexively confront our (my) affective resistances to trans narratives — our (my) active ignorance: Why has *this* statement made me feel *that* affect? Are there logical or epistemological fallacies here, or do the implications of this argument threaten my deep affective sense of who I am and what the world is like?

9 | THE ONTO-EPISTEMIC VALUE OF 'CISGENDER'

Trans imaginings pose substantial challenges to the central meanings of a cis-hetero-patriarchal sexual imaginary which is struggling to keep its stranglehold on current dominant sex-gender meanings (Richardson-Self, 2021). If it succeeds in shifting those imaginings to the margins—which may be helped along by the explicit use of 'cisgender'—then we may find that “the problem is not the rigidity of the [sex-gender] binary categories but rather the starting assumption that there is only one interpretation in the first place (the dominant one)” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 390). It is not that we *must* eliminate or move beyond the identities 'man' and 'woman', but rather that we evolve (in our language as much as our acts and self-understandings) to create new meanings: the uptake of 'cis' to explicitly contrast 'trans', prefixed to 'man' and 'woman', in the same field as 'non-binary', challenges the dominant social imaginary of my milieu and opens up alternate paths of *becoming* otherwise foreclosed. As Serano (2016) notes, “identity labels are always evolving” (p. xix), and I find Mari Matsuda's (et al., 1993) words to be quite resonant in this respect: “We have learned that even as we understand and name the world we see, it changes and must be understood and named again” (p. 11). 'Cis' is just this. Through 'cis' I can make sense of *my* world consistently with my commitment to the logic of materialist feminism without denying the legitimacy of trans people's gender identities, both those who fall within or are resistant to the binary classification.

Adopting an *active* recognition of one's own cisgender identity will not magically fix the problem of ciscentrism and trans oppression. But recognising ourselves as cis may at least contribute—perhaps even substantially—to this process, and taking an active apprenticeship (which itself is a part of our of becoming) to the texts of trans folk should be considered obligatory. What I want for cis people, myself included, is to undertake a “reflective and creative apprenticeship to difference” (Churcher, 2019, p. 89), where the aim is not only to learn about difference, *but to come to develop a different affective relation to difference itself* — recognitive and respectful, rather than hostile and aversive (Lorde, 2007). Becoming cisgender has helped me do this.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The onto-epistemological model that underscores my reflections here is a feminist-materialist one. This does not posit a firm sex/gender distinction, but rather acknowledges an inextricable interconnectedness of both 'sex' and 'gender' whilst simultaneously refusing the premise that 'sex' is a 'natural biological category'. Thus, I use J. R. Latham's (2019) term 'sex-gender' to signify this interconnection that is not an essentialism.
- ² A ciscentric society is one which takes cisgender commonsense as the universal worldview, with an underbelly of (lessening) transphobia and (constant) cissexism, even by those who self-describe as 'allies' (Serano, 2016, p. xxi).
- ³ See, e.g., Gatens (1996), Grosz (1989, 1994), Irigaray (1996), Young (1990).
- ⁴ This does not mean that I passively accept social stereotypes. As a feminist, I have long been concerned with the constraints social images, norms, and narratives put on (queer) women. I aim to challenge harmful social imaginaries.
- ⁵ The reasons why people refuse to take up 'cisgender' may be multiple and should be treated with a thorough discussion elsewhere. For example, Halberstam warns that "having a name for oneself can be as dangerous as lacking one" (2018, p. 4). How so? Nonetheless, here I maintain an aspiration of making people re-cognisant of *difference as such*. Recognition of specificity (e.g., being cis) is what leads to social justice if feminist-materialism is correct (Young, 1990).
- ⁶ If one is operating outside the frame of feminist materialism (or thinks I have misinterpreted it) they may think there are other issues with the concept 'cisgender'. My position is that 'cisgender' *positively* names non-trans people who exist in relation to—and with social power over—trans people in my milieu. There is no other content attached to the concept. For example, cisgender women are not *necessarily* feminine, and vice versa for cis men — a mistake that might be easily assumed. Femininity and masculinity are designations of social styles, behaviours, and comportment. They are fluid, and most everyone displays aspects of both to greater and lesser degrees — and this is true *across* cis, trans, and non-binary status.
- ⁷ On 'apprenticeship', see: Churcher (2019), Harvey (2010), and Spelman (1988).
- ⁸ To do so would constitute 'civilized oppression' (Harvey, 2010; see also; Lorde, 2007).

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