

WHIPPING GIRL

A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN ON SEXISM
AND THE SCAPEGOATING
OF FEMININITY

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Intrinsic Inclinations: Explaining Gender and Sexual Diversity

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, I stated that recognizing subconscious sex as separate from physical sex is crucial to furthering a better understanding of transsexuality and anti-trans discrimination. There is at least one other aspect of gender that we must come to terms with before we can discuss the entire spectrum of gender and sexual diversity: *gender expression*, which refers to whether our presentation, behaviors, interests, and/or affinities are considered feminine, masculine, or some combination thereof.¹

Gender expression is regularly confused with subconscious sex and/or sexual orientation. For example, people often assume that transsexuals transition not to align our physical and subconscious sexes, but because we want to express either femininity or masculinity. Similarly, it is common for some people to be mistaken for being lesbian or gay simply because they are somewhat masculine as women go or feminine as men go, respectively. Unlike our sexual orientation and subconscious sex, which are usually invisible to the rest of the world, other people can readily view our

gender expression, making it perhaps the most widely commented on, critiqued, and regulated aspect of gender.

Indeed, the fact that gender expression is so highly regulated in our society has led many to argue that femininity and masculinity are merely social constructs (i.e., they do not occur naturally, but rather are inventions or artifacts of human culture). According to this social constructionist model, boys are socialized to become masculine and girls feminine; we learn to produce these gender expressions via a combination of positive and negative reinforcement, and through imitation, practice, and performance. Social constructionists point to the fact that the words “femininity” and “masculinity” do not merely describe human behavior, but represent ideals that all people are encouraged to meet. To demonstrate this, they focus much of their attention on socially influenced manifestations of gender expression (often called *gender roles*), which include feminine and masculine differences in speech patterns and word choice, mannerisms, roles in relationships, styles of dress, aesthetic preferences, interests, occupations, and so on. Social constructionists also argue that the fact that these gender roles can vary over time, and from culture to culture, is indicative of their constructed nature.

On the other side of this debate are gender essentialists, who believe that those born male are simply preprogrammed to act masculine, and those born female are preprogrammed to act feminine. Evidence to support their case includes the predominance of femininity in women and masculinity in men, in our culture and other cultures; the fact that girls tend to behave in a girlish manner and boys in a boyish manner from a very early age; that even in prehistoric humans, women and men seemed to perform different sets of

tasks; and that species other than humans also show signs of gender dimorphic behavior. Among gender essentialists, it's generally assumed that genetic (and subsequent anatomical and hormonal) differences between females and males are the ultimate source for these behavioral differences. Despite their insistence, such direct links between specific genes and specific gendered behaviors in humans continue to remain elusive.

As someone who both is a geneticist and has experienced firsthand the very different ways in which women and men are treated and valued in our society, I believe that both social constructionists and gender essentialists are wrong (or at least they are both only partially right). The fatal flaw of the gender essentialist argument is the obvious fact that not all men are masculine and not all women are feminine. There are *exceptional* gender expressions: There are masculine women, feminine men, and people of both sexes who express combinations of femininity and masculinity. People who have exceptional gender expressions (like those with exceptional subconscious sexes and sexual orientations) exist in virtually all cultures and throughout history, which suggests that they represent a natural phenomenon. Gender essentialists often try to dismiss such exceptions as anomalies, the result of biological errors or developmental defects. However, exceptional gender expressions, subconscious sexes, and sexual orientations all occur at frequencies that are several orders of magnitude higher than one would expect if they represented genetic “mistakes.”² Further, the fact that we actively encourage boys to be masculine, and ostracize and ridicule them if they act feminine (and vice versa for girls), strongly suggests that were it not for socialization, there would be even more exceptional gender expression than there is now.

Unfortunately, a strict social constructionist model does not easily account for exceptional gender expression either. Many girls who are masculine and boys who are feminine show signs of such behavior at a very early age (often before such children have been fully socialized with regard to gender norms), and generally continue to express such behavior into adulthood (despite the extreme amount of societal pressure that we place on individuals to reproduce gender expression appropriate for their assigned sex). This strongly suggests that certain expressions of femininity and masculinity represent deep, subconscious inclinations in a manner similar to those of sexual orientation and subconscious sex. (I use the word “inclination” here as a catchall phrase to describe any persistent desire, affinity, or urge that predisposes us toward particular gender and sexual expressions and experiences.) While I believe that such inclinations are likely to be hardwired into our brains (as they exist on a subconscious level and often remain constant throughout our lives), I hesitate to define them as purely biological phenomena, as social factors clearly play a strong role in how each individual interprets these inclinations. In fact, in most cases it is impossible to distinguish our inclinations from our socialization, since they both typically point us in the same direction. Generally, we only ever notice our inclinations when they are exceptional—when they deviate from both biological and social norms.

Further evidence that gender inclinations represent naturally occurring phenomena can be found in other species. If one looks across a wide spectrum of mammals and birds (whose gender and sexual expressions are presumably not shaped by social constructs to the extent that ours are), one generally finds certain behaviors and affinities that seem to predominate in one sex, but which also

occur at lower but substantial frequencies in the other sex as well.³ Thus, any model that attempts to explain human gender expression, sexual orientation, and subconscious sex must take into account the fact that both typical and exceptional forms of these inclinations occur naturally (i.e., without social influence) to varying degrees.

In order to reconcile this issue, I would like to put forward what I call an *intrinsic inclination* model to explain human gender and sexual variation. Here are the basic tenets of this model:

- 1 Subconscious sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation represent separate gender inclinations that are determined largely independently of one another. (This model does not preclude the possibility that these three inclinations may themselves be composed of multiple, separable inclinations, or that additional gender inclinations may exist as well.)
- 2 These gender inclinations are, to some extent, intrinsic to our persons, as they occur on a deep, subconscious level and generally remain intact despite social influences and conscious attempts by individuals to purge, repress, or ignore them.
- 3 Because no single genetic, anatomical, hormonal, environmental, or psychological factor has ever been found to directly cause any of these gender inclinations, we can assume that they are quantitative traits (i.e., multiple factors determine them through complex interactions). As a result, rather than producing discrete classes (such as feminine and masculine; attraction to women or men), each inclination shows a continuous range of possible outcomes.
- 4 Each of these inclinations roughly correlates with physical sex, resulting in a bimodal distribution pattern (i.e.,

two overlapping bell curves) similar to that seen for other gender differences, such as height.⁴ While it may be true that, on average, men are taller than women, such a statement becomes virtually meaningless when one examines individual people, as any given woman may be taller than any given man. Most people have heights that are relatively close to the average, but others fall in outlying areas of the range (for instance, some women are 6 feet 2 inches and some men are 5 feet 4 inches). Similarly, while women on average are more feminine than men, some women are more masculine than certain men, and some men more feminine than certain women.

Because these inclinations appear to have multiple inputs and show a continuous range of outcomes, it is incorrect to assume that those with exceptional sexual orientations, subconscious sexes, or gender expressions represent developmental, biological, or environmental “errors”; rather, they are naturally occurring examples of human variation.

Reconciling Intrinsic Inclinations with Social Constructs

The beauty of the intrinsic inclinations model is that it simultaneously explains why most people appear to have typical genders (e.g., most men come to identify as male, act masculine, and are attracted to women, and the inverse for women) and accounts for the vast diversity of gender and sexuality that exists in the world. It explains why gay men and lesbians may be butch or femme or androgynous; why masculine girls can grow up to be lesbians, trans men, or heterosexual women; and why trans women can be bisexual, straight, or lesbian.

In addition to the variation that exists within these three gender inclinations, there is additional diversity with regard to physical

sex itself. Physical sex can be further divided into multiple, separable characteristics: chromosomal sex (XX and XY), gonadal sex (ovaries and testes), genital sex (clitoris, vagina, and penis), hormonal sex (estrogens and androgens), and a host of secondary sex characteristics (such as breast growth in women, beard growth in men, etc.). While we like to think of females and males as constituting discrete, mutually exclusive classes, about two in one hundred people are born intersex.⁵

So there is a vast amount of naturally occurring sexual and gender variation in the world. The question becomes: How do we make sense of it all? That’s where social constructs come in. While variation in our sex characteristics and gender inclinations may occur naturally, the way we interpret those traits, and the identities and meanings we associate with them, can vary significantly from culture to culture. In our society, what it means to be a woman or a man—the symbols, customs, expectations, restrictions, and privileges associated with those classes—are very different today than they were fifty years ago. This holds true for both typical and exceptional gender inclinations. For example, in this time and place I am able to identify as a woman, a dyke, a transsexual, and a transgender person—to me, each of these identities represents a slightly different (but somewhat overlapping) aspect of my gender and sexuality. However, had I been born a half century earlier—before most of these labels were commonly used or even existed—it would be impossible for me to identify the way that I do now. Perhaps my female subconscious sex would have led me to try “passing” and living as a woman, as trans people often did before medical means of transitioning became widely available. Or perhaps I would have taken part in the homosexual underground of the time, which was

an amalgamation of people who would probably be considered lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender today. Or maybe, unaware of the existence of any other gender-variant people, I might have remained closeted for lack of any obvious alternative.

Further, had I been born in some other country, I might have developed a very different transgender identity. Examples of MTF spectrum transgender people in other cultures include Indian hijras, Brazilian transvestis, Thai katoeys, and Native American “berdaches,” or “two-spirited people.”⁶ These transgender identities differ not only in name but in their customs, practices, and social roles. Part of the reason these groups differ relates to the fact that their cultures place more emphasis on certain gender inclinations over others. In some cultures, a person’s gender expression plays a larger role in determining gender than we experience in the United States. Other cultures seem to place more emphasis on whether the person in question engages in sexual relationships with women or men. In our culture, we divide people into two groups—females and males—almost exclusively based on their physical sex. Of course, many physical sex characteristics are not readily visible to us, so it is more correct to say that we tend to rely exclusively on genital sex when assigning a person’s sex at birth; with children, we rely on gender expression and roles; with adults, we rely primarily on secondary sex characteristics.

The fact that we perceive two major categories of gender enables us to view women and men as “opposites”—a premise that is founded on a series of egregiously incorrect assumptions. First, in order for the two sexes to be “opposites,” they must first be mutually exclusive. Therefore, on a societal level, we purposefully ignore the variation that exists in sex characteristics and create the illusion that

there is absolutely no overlap between the physical sexes. Second, we ignore the reality that intrinsic inclinations produce a continuous range of possibilities, and instead assume that each inclination produces only one of two possible outcomes, mirroring the two sexes. Thus, we assume that people can only be attracted to women or men (not both), they can only be feminine or masculine (not both), and they can only identify as female or male (not both). The third assumption we make is to presume that the typical inclination for each sex holds true for all people of that sex. Thus, all female-bodied people are assumed to be feminine, to be attracted to men, and to identify as female (and vice versa for male-bodied people).

The very idea that there are “opposite” sexes unnecessarily polarizes women and men; it isolates us from one another and exaggerates our differences. It provides the framework for us to project other “opposite” pairs onto female and male (and femininity and masculinity). Thus, we assume that men are aggressive and women are passive; men are tough and women are weak; men are practical and women are emotional; men are big and women are small; and so on. As a culture, we regularly buy into this way of thinking despite the fact that we all encounter countless exceptions that prove these assumptions incorrect: women who are aggressive, tough, practical, and/or big, and men who are passive, weak, emotional, and/or small. This idea of “opposites” creates expectations for femaleness/femininity and maleness/masculinity that all people are encouraged to meet, and simultaneously delegitimizes all behaviors that do not fit these ideals. For example, people regularly make comments about women who are aggressive, while male acts of aggression are rarely commented on (as aggression is built into our preconception of maleness and masculinity). Similarly, people

often make a big deal over men who cry in public, but not over women who do the same (as expressing emotion is built into our presumptions of femininity and femaleness). Sometimes these exceptional behaviors are further dismissed as illegitimate and unnatural through the use of gender-specific insults (e.g., an aggressive woman might be called a “bitch”; an emotional man might be called a “wimp” or a “sissy”).

Many opponents of this view of gender refer to it as the *binary gender system*, which implies that its problematic nature stems primarily from the fact that it consists of only two classes: male and female. Personally, I do not think that there is necessarily any harm in us recognizing that there are two major categories of sex, so long as we realize that these categories are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive, and that we remain respectful of the fact that many people have exceptional sex characteristics and gender inclinations. In fact, as a trans person, having spent most of my life battling gender dissonance, I don’t have the privilege that others have of being able to presume that the femaleness or maleness of my body or mind is entirely meaningless, superficial, or unimportant. I have found that my physical sex, and how it relates to my subconscious sex, is incommensurably important to me.

I would argue that the major problem with the binary gender system is not that it is binary (as most physical sex characteristics and gender inclinations appear to be bimodal in nature) but rather that it facilitates the naive and oppressive belief that women and men are “opposites.” Because the idea that women and men are “opposite” sexes automatically creates assumptions and stereotypes that are differently applied to each sex, I call this view of gender *oppositional sexism*.

Not only does oppositional sexism form the framework that fosters the entrenchment of *traditional sexism* (the idea that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity), it marginalizes those of us who have exceptional sexual and gender traits. It accomplishes this, in part, by invalidating our natural gender inclinations and sex characteristics: A gay man’s attraction to men is not seen to be as legitimate as that of a heterosexual woman; a trans man’s male identity is not seen to be as valid as that of a cissexual man; a male-bodied transgender person’s femininity is not seen to be as authentic as a cisgender woman’s; and intersex bodies are not considered to be as natural as non-intersex female and male bodies.

Oppositional sexism delegitimizes exceptional gender and sexual traits, and can also create hostility and fear toward those who display them. For example, the fact that I am a lesbian or a transsexual really shouldn’t have any bearing on anyone else’s gender or sexuality (after all, gender inclinations are not contagious). However, people who have not given any critical thought to their own sexual orientation, subconscious sex, and/or gender expression—and who therefore derive their own identities from oppositional assumptions about gender—may feel that their sexuality and gender are threatened by my existence. After all, if you believe that a woman is defined as someone who is not male, masculine, or attracted to women, and that a man is defined as someone who is not female, feminine, or attracted to men, then the fact that I have changed my sex, or that I’m a woman who is attracted to other women, will inevitably bring everyone else’s gender and sexuality into question. Because my lesbian and trans status appears to blur the very meaning of “woman,” other women might feel that

I somehow undermine their own sense of femaleness, while some men might fear that if they were to become attracted to me, it might undermine their own maleness. So in a sense, the notion of “opposite sexes” intertwines all of our genders and sexualities with one another.

This interconnectedness of genders helps explain why we are encouraged to modify our own behaviors to better fit gender norms, and why we go out of our way to encourage gender-appropriate (and to discourage gender-inappropriate) behaviors in others. The countless approving or disapproving comments that we make about other people’s gender presentations, identities, and behaviors create an atmosphere in which many people with exceptional gender and sexual traits feel that they have to remain closeted. It also causes people with typical gender inclinations and sex characteristics to become self-conscious and on guard, as their gender may be brought into question at any time. Thus, oppositional sexism exacerbates gender anxiety in all people, and is a major factor responsible for most of the prejudice and discrimination directed at sexual minorities.

Unfortunately, one of the most common ways people with exceptional gender and sexual traits try to counter such discrimination is by neutralizing the significance of their particular exceptional traits while simultaneously emphasizing the ways in which they otherwise uphold oppositional sexist ideals. For example, many people who are attracted to members of their own sex have tried to convince the predominantly straight mainstream public that “we’re just like you except for our sexual orientation.” This, of course, plays down the reality that many people who identify as bisexual, gay, or lesbian also have exceptional gender expressions,

sex characteristics, and/or subconscious sexes. At the same time, many people in the transgender community have tried to neutralize their exceptional gender traits by stressing their heterosexual identity: Some transsexuals insist that their goal is to become “normal” women or men (i.e., straight, with appropriate gender expression); and male crossdressers often emphasize the fact that they identify as men and are attracted to women (i.e., “normal” subconscious sex and sexual orientation).

The obvious problem with all of these approaches is that they marginalize those who have multiple exceptional gender and sexual traits. And their limited success is ultimately due to the fact that they attempt to cure the symptom (homophobia, transphobia, etc.) rather than the source of the problem (oppositional sexism). After all, the reason the mainstream public regularly confuses homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender people, and intersex people is that, in their eyes, we all represent the same thing. We are all often lumped together as “queer”—exceptions that challenge the mainstream oppositional assumptions about gender. Therefore, while it is important to educate people about the distinctions between different gender inclinations and sex characteristics, and the unique identities, issues, and challenges each minority group faces because of those specific differences, it is also important to stand together to challenge the myth that women and men are “opposites.”

In my experience as a trans activist, I have found that the biggest obstacle facing those who fall under the “queer” or “LGBTIQ” umbrella, with regards to coming together to challenge oppositional sexism, is primarily a conceptual one. Over the years, different queer subgroups have each developed their own theories and language to describe and communicate their particular struggles.

Many of these concepts, while effective in single-inclination activism, are counterproductive in the fight against oppositional sexism because they marginalize and make invisible the experiences of other queers.

For example, the gay rights movement has historically framed much of their activism around the premise that heterosexuals oppress homosexuals. This oversimplification creates the false impression that homosexual and heterosexual people are “opposites”—an idea that marginalizes bisexuals. Further, the terms most commonly used to describe the prejudice faced by lesbians and gay men—“homophobia” and “heterosexism”—mistakenly imply that queer people are primarily discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. This is a false assumption, as those in the lesbian and gay communities who arguably face the harshest discrimination from the straight world are those who also exhibit exceptional gender expression (i.e., outwardly feminine gay men and butch lesbian women). This privileging of sexual orientation over other gender inclinations has allowed some gay rights activists to exclude gender-variant people from their movement (under the premise that they are focused on sexual orientation, not gender identity or expression), while simultaneously claiming that the prejudice and violence faced by transgender people is the result of “homophobia.” This appropriation of gender-variant experiences and struggles by single-issue gay rights activists seems to serve the sole purpose of placing cisgendered gays and lesbians atop the queer pecking order. Any movement whose goal is to truly end prejudice against all queer people must begin by replacing gay-specific phrases (like “heterosexism”) with more inclusive ones (such as “oppositional sexism”) that are equally respectful of all exceptional gender and

sexual traits, and which acknowledge the fact that, in many cases, homophobia and transphobia are indistinguishable phenomena.

The transgender movement, which was primarily made up of those excluded by mainstream gay rights groups, has conceptual and linguistic problems of its own. The fact that at least two overlapping classes of people—those with exceptional gender expressions and those with exceptional subconscious sexes—have been subsumed by the category “transgender” has created a lot of unnecessary tension and confusion. The result is that at least two different (and largely incompatible) views of gender have gained hold in this community. The first one, which is forwarded by many transsexuals, can be summed up by the popular phrase “sex is in the body, and gender is in the mind.” While this saying is useful to convey why a transsexual might want to change their physical sex to match their identified sex, it oversimplifies the concept of gender. The fact that the word “gender” is shorthand for subconscious sex inadvertently privileges subconscious sex over gender expression. Further, it mistakenly implies that more socially influenced aspects of gender (such as gender identity and gender roles), as well as one’s ability or willingness to conform to oppositional sexist ideals, stem directly from one’s subconscious sex, which is most certainly not true. People who espouse this view often look down on those people who identify outside of the male/female binary, or who express combinations of masculinity and femininity, presuming that these groups do not represent “serious” or “true” transgender people.

A different view is held by those transgender people who insist that gender itself is entirely constructed. Many feel empowered by this idea because it frees their exceptional gender traits from

the social stigma inherent in oppositional sexism. But it also oversimplifies the concept of “gender” by dismissing the possibility that there are any intrinsic inclinations, such as subconscious sex and gender expression, that contribute to our gender identities and gender roles, respectively. This sort of thinking, when taken to the extreme, can privilege those people who are predisposed toward being bigendered and bisexual. In this scenario, someone who feels comfortable identifying outside the male/female gender binary, expressing combinations of both femininity and masculinity, and/or having sexual relations with both male- and female-bodied people, may falsely assume that their “bi” inclinations represent a natural state that is present in all other people. From this “bi-sexist” perspective, people who identify exclusively as either female or male, feminine or masculine, homosexual or heterosexual, are assumed to have developed such preferences as the result of being duped by binary gender norms and socialization. This view has also led to the creation of another oppositional binary of sorts, pitting those transgender people who identify outside the gender binary (and who are therefore presumed to challenge gender norms) against transsexuals (who are accused of supporting the gender status quo by transitioning to their identified sex). Such arguments—that bigendered and genderqueer people are more “radical” or “queer” than transsexuals—are highly reminiscent of similarly naive accusations made in the past by homosexuals who argued that they were more “radical” or “queer” than bisexuals. The creation of such radical/conservative gender binaries are both self-absorbed and anti-queer, as they dismiss the very real discrimination transsexuals and bisexuals face in favor of establishing pecking orders within the queer community.

These examples demonstrate how gender theories designed to free certain people from gender-related stigma or oppression can often inadvertently marginalize other sexual minorities, or even worse, create new gender hierarchies that are just as oppressive as the initial system. There are several telltale signs of flawed gender theories. First, we should beware of any gender theory that makes the assumption that there is any one “right” or “natural” way to be gendered or to be sexual. Such theories are typically narcissistic in nature, as they merely reveal their designers’ desire to cast themselves on top of the gender hierarchy. Further, if one presumes there is only one “right” or “natural” way to be gendered, then the only way to explain why some people display typical gender and sexual traits while others display exceptional ones is by surmising that one of those two groups is being intentionally led astray somehow. Indeed, this is exactly what the religious right argues when they invent stories about homosexuals who actively recruit young children via the “gay agenda.” Those who claim that we are all born with bisexual, androgynous, or gender-neutral tendencies (only to be molded into heterosexual, masculine men and feminine women via socialization and gender norms) use a similar strategy.

I take issue with any theory that suggests that people are so easily duped into leading such contrived sexual and gendered lives, as my own exceptional gender inclinations have been too strong and persistent to be ignored or reshaped by society. And while oppositional sexism certainly leads many people to closet their gender inclinations, I find it difficult to believe that the vast majority of people are hiding their true genders and sexualities or have resigned themselves to accepting wholly artificial ones. I would argue that our culture’s oppositional gender system can only be held so firmly

in place because it resonates with the majority's gender inclinations (that most—but not all—men gravitate toward masculinity and women to femininity).

Second, we should beware of any theory that attempts to oversimplify gender. It is common for articles or books about gender to begin by defining gender in an exclusive way, such as whether a person is feminine or masculine (i.e., gender expression/gender roles), whether they identify as female or male (i.e., subconscious sex/gender identity), or whether they behave according to the social norms associated with each sex. These assumptions severely limit the terms of the debate. The truth is that any dialogue about gender must begin with the acknowledgment that the word “gender” has scores of meanings, and all of them must be seriously considered if we hope to have an honest and fruitful discussion on the subject. Thus, theories that rely on either strictly gender essentialist or social constructionist definitions of gender, or that privilege certain gender inclinations over others, are destined to be inadequate in explaining the vast diversity of gender and sexual traits that exist in the world, and will inevitably make invisible certain sexual minorities.

Finally, we should question any view of gender founded on gender entitlement. When we project our own gender-based assumptions and opinions onto other people's behaviors and bodies, we necessarily erase the distinctness of their individual genders and sexualities. Each of us has a unique experience with gender, one that is influenced by a host of extrinsic factors, such as culture, religion, race, economic class, upbringing, and ability, as well as intrinsic factors including our anatomy, genetic and hormonal makeup, subconscious sex, sexual orientation, and gender expression. Together, these factors help determine the gendered

experiences we are exposed to, as well as the ways we process and make sense of them. For this reason, no person is capable of fully understanding our own gendered perspectives and experiences, nor are we able to presume the gendered histories, desires, motives, and perceptions of others.

As a transsexual, I have been fortunate enough to have had the rather rare (and surreal) experience of being perceived by others as both a woman and a man, as homosexual and heterosexual, as feminine, masculine, and gender-ambiguous at different points in my life. People treated me in vastly different ways in each case, and the assumptions they made about my gender and sexuality often had little to do with my own identity and life history. As a gender activist, I believe that it's crucial for us to finally recognize this massive difference that exists between perception and personal experience. While I do not believe that there is an impenetrable wall that separates women from men, or queers from straights, I do believe that one exists between our own *experiential gender*, which we live, feel, and experience firsthand, and the genders of others, which we merely perceive or make presumptions about but can never truly know in a tangible way. It is time for discourses in gender and sexuality to acknowledge this great divide, to move beyond the insolent rhetoric of gender entitlement and one-size-fits-all gender theories. We must stop projecting what we wish were true about gender and sexuality onto other people, and instead learn to yield to their unique individual identities, experiences, and perspectives.