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How *Cis* Went Mainstream: Critical Junctures and Costs

Perry Zurn

Abstract

Today, *cisgender* (or *cis* for short) typically refers to someone whose gender “aligns with” or “matches” their sex assigned at birth. In this essay, I track and analyze how that dominant sense of *cis* arose. I identify three primary forces that helped mainstream the term and its current definition: Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl*, Sam Killerman’s “Cisgender Privilege” checklist, and *South Park*’s “Cissy” episode. Analyzing these key moments, I argue that *cis* gets mainstreamed through its depoliticization and rarefaction. That is, it comes to modify a sense of self between the ears rather than serve as a militant term deployed in coalitional politics. I further argue that *cis* gets mainstreamed through a practice of citational injustice, according to which trans community conversations go largely unengaged and uncited. In closing, I argue that if we are to continue to use *cis* in trans, queer, feminist, and allied circles, it must be rerooted in the political history of trans community conversations and at the nexus of multiple co-constitutive assemblages of power-knowledge. *Cis* is best used as a term to diagnose a complex system of institutional legibility and legitimacy, not a private assessment of sex/gender.

Keywords: cisgender, cis, transgender, trans philosophy, citation ethics, citation injustice, genealogy

As it applies to gender, *cis* began as a subcultural word with stochastic reference. It appeared haphazardly in out of the way pockets of underground communities and was put to multiple, inconsistent uses. Archipelagic from the get-go, people played with it—and thought it playful. But that thought has turned serious and continental. *Cis* has become grounded, and ground into gender discourse like the definitive edge of a boot or a rebar. It now circulates ubiquitously in mainstream culture and means something solid. As in so many other cases, that history has been all but forgotten. Stories now get told starting with *cis* in its thing-status rather than as the primordial soup.

The term *cisgender* became canonized for the trans and nontrans communities in different ways and at different junctures. For trans folks, the term’s inclusion in a glossary at the beginning of Susan Stryker’s (2008) *Transgender History*

was a defining moment. “‘Cisgendered’ or ‘cissexual,’” Stryker (2008, 22) writes, “names the usually unstated assumption of nontransgender status contained in the words ‘man’ and ‘woman.’”¹ In the 2014 inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, which collects and defines key terms in the field, B Lee-Harrison Aultman’s “Cisgender” entry follows in Stryker’s footsteps. “Cisgender,” Aultman (2014) writes, is “a positive identification of a non-trans* identity” (62) and describes someone whose gender is “on the same side as their birth-assigned sex” (61).² A companion *TSQ* entry titled “Cisgenderism” diagnoses cis privilege in action: “the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community” (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63).³ Together, Stryker’s glossary entry and *TSQ*’s entries instantiate cis terminology as a central component of trans resistant knowledges.

For nontrans folks, the term’s adoption by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015 was a definitive moment of legitimation. Alongside *photobomb*, *retweet*, and *declutter*, *cisgender* (and its variants *cisgendered*, *cissexual*, and *cis*) took its place that year as a proper English word, the same year *they* was named “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society (2016). According to the *OED* (2015) entry, the term *cisgender* describes “a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth.” A year after the *OED*’s adoption, the term spun into the limelight when Jeffrey Tambor, in his second Emmy Award acceptance speech, described himself as cisgender. The lead actor in the television series *Transparent* said, “Please give transgender talent a chance. Give them auditions. Give them their story. Do that. And also, one more thing, I would not be unhappy were I the last cisgender male playing a female transgender on television. We have work to

¹ In the second edition of *Transgender History* (2017), Stryker repeats this sentiment (“It is meant to mark the typically unstated or assumed privilege of being nontransgender”), but then adds a paragraph addressing the term’s “conceptual contradictions and weaknesses” (13).

² In explaining the logic of the term, both Stryker and Aultman make an analogy to racial categorizations. Just as the term *white man* refuses to allow the normativity of whiteness to automatically define the category of man, so the term *cis man* refuses to allow the normativity of cisness to automatically define the category of man. Neither author gestures to a more intersectional or co-constitutive account of race and gender here. Nor do they remark upon the intertwining of cisheteropatriarchy with white supremacy—or ableism or endosexism for that matter—a point to which I will return later.

³ The authors suggest *cisgenderism* is an improvement on the more interpersonal and less structural term *transphobia*.

do” (Miller 2016). Certainly, Tambor’s acknowledgment is something, but it was far from everything. Tambor could have, for example, refused to play the character of a trans woman and insisted, publicly, that the role be given to a trans woman. Instead, he accepted the role, won an Emmy for it, and from that platform insisted trans people be given a chance to tell their own stories. Whatever evaluation one makes of Tambor’s strategy, his high-profile use of the term *cisgender* gave it significant standing and recognition in mainstream culture.⁴

Today, *cisgender* is everywhere. Primers on the term have recently appeared in numerous media outlets. After Twitter CEO Elon Musk (2023) banned the term as a slur from the platform, write-ups of the debacle appeared in major newspapers around the globe. In addition to taking up residence in prominent dictionaries and encyclopedias, explanatory entries have also appeared in cornerstones of LGBTQ scholarship, including *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (Aultman 2014), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies* (Goldberg and Beemyn 2021), *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (Naples et al. 2016), and *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective 2021). The term has also stretched across multiple continents, appearing perhaps most markedly in a 2022 high-profile abortion decision by the Supreme Court of India (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Radi 2015; Krémer 2021; Reeser 2013; Luvuno, Ncama, and Mchunu 2019; Yashee 2022). To all appearances, *cis* is here to stay.

For all of this—and any of this—to happen, several earlier events had to occur that both popularized the terminology and solidified its sense as referring to a gender identity that matches one’s sex assigned at birth. Key figures in these earlier moments, I will argue, were trans author and activist Julia Serano, nontrans artist and educator Sam Killerman, and the animated sitcom series *South Park*. In their deployment of the term *cisgender*, these three voices together gave it a level of public and conceptual accessibility that enabled it to function easily in mainstream contexts. Through them, moreover, *cisgender* also became oriented in a particular way. It became a largely neutral descriptor of self-identification whose sense depends on a typically Western sex/gender distinction. Importantly, in the hands of Serano, Killerman, and *South Park*, the term also traveled quite a distance from trans community theorizing, a fact that, while lending it more respectability, also weakened it. Together, these forces conspired to make the term increasingly flexible in quotidian contexts, but also less durable as a tool of political resistance and ideological critique.

My aim in tracing this specific moment in *cis*’s genealogy is fourfold. First, by tracking how *cis*’s present orientation solidified, I hammer home that the primary sense of *cis* that circulates today is a historical accident, not a historical necessity.

⁴ Tambor was later fired and *Transparent* was cancelled after allegations of his sexual misconduct surfaced—an ignominious end to the project.

Indeed, the notion that *cis* marks a simple alignment of assigned sex and gender identity, or of psyche and morphology, such that its orbit lies primarily in the personal experience of self—this, all of this, is contingent. Second, I show not only *that* but also *how* *cis* has become depoliticized as a category. In coming to refer primarily to an internal sense of self, *cis* has become actively divorced from critiques of *cis* norms, *cis*normativity, *cis* privilege, and the *cis* state as material-discursive institutions of legibility and legitimacy against which resistance is required. Third, I demonstrate that the personalized, depoliticized sense of *cis* is mainstreamed through an extended period of citational injustice by which prior (and ongoing) trans theorizations of *cis* go largely unmentioned, unengaged, and uncited. Fourth and finally, I track how the personalized, depoliticized sense of *cis*, divorced from trans community conversations, becomes a rarified category. While it is through ableism, endosexism, fatphobia, homophobia, racism, and sanism, not to mention transphobia, that *cis*normativity works, *cis* becomes washed of that work and silent in those conversations. It is on the basis of these four observations that I ultimately argue the contemporary sense of *cis* is ethically and epistemologically untenable.

In what follows, I first offer a brief history of *cis*, emphasizing the plurality, political sensibility, and trans-rootedness of these conversations. I then dedicate three sections to Serano's, Killerman's, and *South Park's* deployments of *cis*. Throughout, and especially in closing, I make the above demonstrations regarding the genealogy, depoliticization, citational injustice, and rarefaction through which *cis* gets mainstreamed. I then argue that if we are to continue to use *cis* in trans, queer, feminist, and allied circles, it must be rerooted in the political history of trans community conversations and at the nexus of multiple co-constitutive assemblages of power-knowledge.

A Brief History of *Cis*

Where did it all start? Originally a Latin preposition, *cis* refers to being “on this side” or the near side of something, rather than “on that side” or the far side.⁵ The term took deep root in English during the mid-1800s, when it was used in chemistry and geography to refer to the spatial arrangements of molecules and other matter. It was not until roughly one hundred and fifty years later, in the 1990s, that *cis* took up residence in its third major field: gender studies. There, it refers to one's gender being “on this side” of one's sex or “on this side” of sex/gender alignment. It gets explicitly used as the opposite of *trans*, which is taken to mean being on the far side of one's sex or on the other side of sex/gender alignment.

⁵ See, e.g., *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “*cis* (prefix),” accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cis>; and *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “*cis* (prefix),” accessed May 29, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/cis_prefix.

Variants of the term, as it applies to gender, percolated in twentieth-century German sexology. The first variant, *cisvestite*, is typically attributed to two German sexologists: Magnus Hirschfeld and his young collaborator Ernst Burchard. Both gay men, the two sought to provide medical, legal, and social support to intersex, homosexual, and transsexual people in Germany. For them, *cis* indicates a vested transgression or transition across divisions of age, race, class, and profession, while *trans* is reserved for vested transgressions or transitions across divisions of sex or gender (Hirschfeld 1914, 169–70; Burchard 1914, 32). Both fit in a larger, perhaps “infinite [*unendlich*]” category of sexual intermediaries and deviants (Hirschfeld 1910, 4). The variant *cissexual* appeared, in 1991, in the work of Volkmar Sigusch. Sigusch (1995, 828–29; 2013, 241–47) insists cissexualism is “a conundrum” (à la Jan Morris [1974]). In a remarkably prescient turn, he claims that both trans and cis involve “prostheticization” and “plasticity” (Sigusch 1995, 831). Both develop in dialogue with binary gender norms, and both sets of lives are, ultimately, irreducible to those norms, given the (again) “infinite [*unendlich*]” diversity of sexgenders, whether cis, trans, or otherwise (Sigusch 1991, 335).

In their present sense, the variants *cisgender* and *cis*, however, were first mobilized in online trans communities in the mid-1990s. Dana Defosse and Carl Buijs are typically credited with coining *cis* independently on the early internet forum Usenet, in 1994 and 1995, respectively.⁶ For them, as for the trans community members who further developed and theorized the terms, *cis* named the universal category (Defosse 1994, 2023; Buijs 1996). Trans people are as naturally occurring as cis people; we are categorical equals (Dame-Griff 2023). Canadian trans political activist and advocate Laura Blake then theorizes, as early as 1997, her signal concept “cisgender ideal.” The ideal, she argues, assumes people are cisgender by default; correlatively, those who are not cisgender are both unworthy of consideration and ought to do their best to appear cisgender (Blake 2001). What distinguishes the term’s appearance in those early conversations is the necessity of unseating the primacy of nontrans perspectives and lives—for the sake of making more and better room for trans perspectives and trans lives. There is a sociopolitical analysis at its heart. It was not until 1999, in an online gender glossary curated by Blake’s protégé Donna Lynn Matthews, that this largely political diagnosis undergirding the deployment of *cis* variants gets lost in favor of a more psychological description. Matthews (1999) defines *cisgender* as having “one’s identity and presentation *match* their physical morphology.”

In the early aughts, it remained paramount to recognize that *cis* did not—could not—simply refer to some natural match between personal psyche and

⁶ While Defosse’s original post from 1994 remains available, Buijs’ post from 1995 has not been located and was probably lost in the Usenet archiving process.

individual morphology, nor could it simply signal self-identity. Rather, *cisgender* referred at least to a system of power and social organization, replete with the disciplinary enforcements of cisness that now saturate all of our lives. It furthermore became clear that one could not talk about cisgender without talking about cis privilege, or the way the world is organized to support cisness and delegitimize transgender people (or even support trans embrace of cis normativity and delegitimize trans gender disruption). Spurred by Peggy McIntosh's (1989) essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," the early 2000s brought a rash of privilege checklists: for white privilege, male privilege, Christian privilege, heterosexual privilege, class privilege, able-bodied privilege, nonfat privilege, and even gamer privilege. It was here that the first cis or nontrans privilege checklist gained traction. Of the four major versions of the cis privilege checklist developed during this period, perhaps chief among them is Cedar's (2007) "Cisgender/Cissexual Privilege Checklist." Hers was the most comprehensive, most experiential, and most overtly political.

Influential Japanese American intersex, transfeminist, and disability activist and educator Emi Koyama (2002, 2013), who bookends the checklists moment with incisive blog posts elucidating *cis* and *cis privilege*, argues that we are never done assessing symptoms of cis privilege. Privilege systems themselves change. A continued vigilance is called for. On June 7, 2002, Koyama posted a message to the women's studies listserv (WMST-L), in which she recommended the use of *cissexual* and *cisgender* as a means to "de-centralize the dominant group, exposing it as merely one possible alternative rather than the 'norm' against which trans people are defined." More than a decade after her original endorsement, she posted a 2013 blog entry, "Cis Is Real—Even If It Is Carelessly Articulated." In it, she concludes, "A 'cis' person is not (necessarily) someone whose gender matches her or his assigned sex, or someone who does not suffer from 'Gender Dysphoria'; it should denote someone who does not suffer from (or [need not] manage possibility of suffering from) transphobia on a regular basis"—including some trans people. Like whiteness and able-bodiedness, she continues, *cis* is a socially constructed category of power and privilege. It is not, at bottom, some natural category of people whose sex/gender is properly aligned. It describes an ideological structure of value, replete with definitive material effects. More than mere analogies, moreover, these categories have to be understood and negotiated intersectionally.

For its first decade, then, *cisgender* (and *cis*) was developed and deployed to diagnosis a political landscape where nontrans voices, perspectives, and norms dominated the gender world and gender discourse. Throughout this process, trans people (including intersex, disabled, and of-color trans people) clearly cited one another and cross-pollinated cis theorizations with intersex, disability, and critical race theory. But that dominant sense and that practice was about to change. Against this

insistent political analysis and complex community conversation, a more simplistic psychological definition slowly surfaced, reducing *cis* to a sense of self between the ears rather than an inequitable structure of social organization. References to trans community conversations dropped out, as did efforts to grapple with multiple compounding projects of systematic oppression. It is to that story that I now turn.

Serano's Whipping Girl

In 2007, five years into her own transition, trans biologist-cum-activist Julia Serano published *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Of the terms she is best known for theorizing in this text, *transmisogyny* is one and *cissexism* is the other. Perhaps surprisingly, however, her chapter “Dismantling Cissexual Privilege” does not mention the trans community conversations, ongoing since 1994, around the terms *cis*, *cissexual*, *cisgender*, and *cis privilege*. While her book’s first chapter briefly footnotes Koyama’s 2002 blog post as Serano’s “inspiration” for using cis-related terms, the eponymous chapter cites no precedents for those terms or her theoretical analyses (Serano 2007, 364n3). The chapter itself asserts that trans folks “must begin” to develop their own language and concepts, and insists this work “should begin” with a critique of cis privilege, which she then goes on to offer (162). The implicit suggestion here is that Serano herself is spearheading that beginning. The suggestion is in fact so strong that many people reading *Whipping Girl* “assumed that I invented the [cis] terms,” Serano writes—an assumption she corrects several years later by blogging her four-line footnote to Koyama (Serano 2011). Nevertheless, Serano still wants distinct credit for her use of cis terminology. In her 2016 preface to the second edition of *Whipping Girl*, and in the context of stating she “coined” various terms throughout the book, Serano grants that, while she did not coin *cissexual* (here she moves her acknowledgment of Koyama up from footnote to text), “*Whipping Girl* is the first book to employ cis terminology on a consistent basis, and it is generally credited with popularizing this language” (Serano 2016b, xvii–xviii).

So what is Serano’s contribution to (the ongoing trans) discussion of cis and cis privilege? Throughout the book, she presents her contribution primarily as a series of (italicized) terms she understands herself to have freshly formulated, accompanied by explanations and examples thereof. First, Serano defines a “*cissexual*” person as someone who “ha[s] only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned” (2007, 12, 33, 174). A transsexual person, by contrast, is someone who experiences “dissonance,” “discomfort,” and even “dissociate[s]” between their subconscious and physical sexes (28, 181; see also 165). “*Cissexism*,” then, which for Serano typically marks a person rather than a social system, is “the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexuals” (12). In everyday life, she muses, people gender other people instinctively,

putting them into one of two boxes (men and women) that they already assume are cissexual in nature. This, she argues, is the “*gendering*” and “*cissexual assumption*” that undergird cissexual entitlement and cissexual privilege. “*Cissexual gender entitlement*” is the entitlement cissexual people feel to determine other people’s genders. And “*cissexual privilege*” is “the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders” (162). Serano’s explanations and examples, in each case, focus on the individual person and their interpersonal interactions. As such, Serano’s account of the cis position is more personal and interpersonal than it is political, institutional, structural, or systemic.

Serano’s emphasis on the (inter)personal in her elucidation of the categories of cis and cis privilege glints across the page. At every turn, she invites her readers to think about how cisness works in the realm of everyday life and communication. She opens by asking readers to observe how quickly they gender other people, even if they are “as queer as a three-dollar bill” (Serano 2007, 163), and how often that gendering reinscribes the presumption and privileges of cissexuality. She asks readers to reflect, further, on the role cissexual privilege plays both in moments when gender disruptive people are thrown out of bathrooms, but also when they pass in the bathroom of their own choosing. What sort of cissexual privilege, she asks, is being accorded her when a store clerk says, “How can I help you, ma’am?” (169)? What are the conditions that make that deference possible and, conversely, what are the conditions that shatter it? This widespread personal commitment to cisheteronormativity, she argues, informs the clinicians and academics who apply terms of their own choosing to trans people, instead of those that trans people offer; the television and movie producers who repeatedly depict trans as an affectation and imitation rather than an authentic gender expression; and the everyday people who, when a trans person comes out to them, congratulate that person, saying, “I never would have guessed!” (179). Serano then shares her own experience of coming out and seeing people get “this distinctive ‘look’ in their eyes” as they search for cues of a past “boy” self in her face, body, and voice (172). “The most radical thing that any of us can do,” she concludes in the final sentence of “Dismantling Cissexual Privilege,” “is to stop projecting our beliefs about gender onto other people’s behaviors and bodies” (193). Not organize, not revolt, not hack the system, but stop projecting.

After publishing *Whipping Girl*, Serano continued to think about cis-related terms. She wrote a substantive blog post in 2009 (Serano 2011) and two more in 2014 (Serano 2014a, 2014b), all three of which were then collected in her book *Outspoken* (Serano 2016a). These pieces further clarify the terms (and her use of them), as well as identify their limitations. In one, for example, Serano insists that cis is not an identity but a structural position, much like whiteness and able-bodiedness, which she herself does not “strongly *identify with*” but clearly occupies (2011; 2016a, 94). In

another, she explains the difficulties of pinning down cisgender privileges to only cisgender people. While she chooses not to tackle this “nebulous blob,” she does, in a footnote, “recommend” Cedar’s (2007) unapologetically political “Cis Privilege Checklist” (Serano 2014a; 2016a, 261, 326n9). In yet another, she warns against a too-easy bifurcation of cis and trans people that capitalizes on simply reversing the hierarchy and the discursive structures under which trans people have suffered. In contrast to such “reverse discourse,” she recommends “decentering the binary”—specifically the cis/trans binary (2014b; 2016a, 269). Cis/trans discourse should be used not to pit definable groups of people against one another but to elucidate the beliefs that produced double standards for them. It is a tool to unmask ideology, not further taxonomize, she insists.

Intriguingly, in one of her 2014 blog posts, Serano considers a “possible model” that “may (in some cases) provide a more effective framework than the cisgender/transgender dichotomy” (2014b; 2016a, 257). She prefaces this model by acknowledging that the word *cis* often “oversimplifies” gendered histories and that, more often than not, many people (including trans people) will experience some combination of cisgender privilege and a lack thereof (2014b; 2016a, 263). Given this complexity, Serano proposes *sometimes* using not the binary model of cis/trans but the tripartite model of gender conventional, gender unconventional, and gender transgressive. Gender conventional people “generally adhere to the accepted societal norms and expectations that are projected onto boys/men and girls/women in our culture” (2014b; 2016a, 265). They are generally viewed as “normal” and “legitimate.” Gender unconventional people “defy” some of those norms; they are generally viewed as “outliers” but not “threats” to the categories (2014b; 2016a, 265). Finally, gender transgressive people “defy” norms considered essential to gender categories and, as such, are viewed as “‘breaking’ the laws of gender” (2014b; 2016a, 266). Crucially, for Serano, the tripartite model can be used as a supplement to explain political structures of social legitimacy and illegitimacy, but it is the cis/trans model that, insofar as it explains the personal and interpersonal dynamics of how people feel and what they believe, offers a more widely effective foundation and “the most momentum” for the trans movement (2014b; 2016a, 268). And it is this (inter)personal sense of *cis* that Serano retains and that defines the word today.

Whipping Girl took the feminist scene by storm. Hailed by NPR as “a foundational text” for understanding trans politics (Friedman et al. 2016), the book was also named by readers of *Ms. Magazine* (2011) as one of the “100 Best Non-Fiction Books of All Time”). As such, it put trans theorizing, and especially the terms *cissexism* and *transmisogyny*, in front of a much wider swath of people than ever before. What circulated with that unprecedented circulation, however, was *cisgender* in a Serano-inflected form. A form of cisgender that frontloaded psychic experience and personal identity at the expense of political and institutional analysis. A form of

cisgender that paraded itself as a matter of fact—that is, what matches and what does not—rather than as a resistant trans intervention that speaks truth to power. A form of cisgender that can be adequately defined by a singular voice (i.e., Serano’s) rather than the longstanding (and continuing) community negotiation over the term. And a form of cisgender that is only ever analogous to whiteness and able-bodiedness rather than constituted with and through them. Here, at the very beginning of *cis* hitting the mainstream, it acquires a depoliticized, personal orientation, without citational accountability or multi-issue sensibility, and it is that orientation that garners traction.

Killerman’s Knapsack Takes Center Stage

A few years after Serano’s *Whipping Girl* was released, yet another cisgender privilege checklist surfaced, this time—and for the first time—written by a “cis” person. Sam Killerman is a social justice educator and multimedia artist. He understands himself to be a cis straight man with a mix of feminine and masculine gender expressions, which he stages in his “It’s Pronounced Metrosexual” comedy show. In a 2013 Ted Talk, he confessed to various “feminine” activities such as wearing tight salmon-colored pants, plucking his eyebrows, smelling like a flower after a shower, crying at the Lion King, and trying on multiple outfits each morning (Killerman 2013). He says he is regularly mistaken for gay. Killerman (2011a) originally composed and published a seventeen-item “List of Cisgender Privileges” in 2011. He later expanded that list to thirty-two items and reprinted it as the “Cisgender Privilege” checklist in his book *A Guide to Gender* (Killerman 2017, 41–44). Killerman’s list is now, by far, the most widely circulated, read, and used cis privilege checklist. While the vast majority of Killerman’s items have predecessors in prior checklists, he does not once cite the previous trans-authored versions. At best, and only on his website, he credits Bowling Green State University’s Safe Zone Program for “the beginnings of this list” (Killerman 2011a, 2020).⁷ Similarly, Killerman (2017, 41) defines *cisgender* as “having your sex assigned at birth correspond to your gender identity” but does not cite a single person, let alone a trans person, as a theoretical source for the term.

That Killerman is “cis” and writing a cis privilege checklist is not itself a problem. In the 1980s, Peggy McIntosh was a white person writing a white privilege checklist. Unlike McIntosh’s calls for societal change, which always accompany her

⁷ An administrator of Bowling Green State University’s Safe Zone Training Program was willing to share their resources packet with me. In it, there is indeed a one-page, nine-item cisgender privilege list positioned, surprisingly, under a “Got Privilege?” sign (BGSU 2017, 18). Obviously, the goal of the checklist is not to enjoin readers to get more privilege, unlike the goal of the Got Milk campaign.

analyses of white privilege, however, Killerman (2020) merely expresses a hope that his cis privilege checklist will enhance cis people’s “understanding” and “cognizan[ce]” of their privileged positions. “The goal of creating these lists,” he writes, “is to make cognizant in [cis] minds the privileges with which they were born in hopes of increasing their ability to empathize with individuals who were not so fortunate” (2017, 40). Killerman’s appeal to empathy for the unfortunates is a far cry from McIntosh’s call to redesign whole social systems. Still more instructively, McIntosh’s entries begin with “I”; they are personal reflections on her own unearned privileges. The process of self-introspection is an essential component, for McIntosh, of privilege lists themselves and of the work of undoing they are meant to prompt. Killerman’s entries, by contrast, begin with “you.” The second person is, of course, more widely generalizable (something McIntosh warned against), but it also suggests Killerman may be reticent to work through his own privilege—in all its gnarly detail.

On his website, Killerman’s (2020) list is prefaced by the following sentences: “If you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth, here are a bunch of unearned benefits you get that many folks do not. Read them and consider them. It’s not about shame. It’s about understanding.” As an invitation to simply think about the benefits one enjoys, the list is highly personalized and depoliticized. Nevertheless, it clearly has roots in privilege checklists that preceded it. Some of Killerman’s items are derived (perhaps indirectly through early cis checklists) from Peggy McIntosh’s white privilege list, such as “You can easily find role models and mentors to emulate who share your identity” and “You can reasonably assume that your ability to acquire a job, rent an apartment, or secure a loan will not be denied on the basis of your gender identity/expression.” Other items are clearly indebted (whether directly or indirectly) to trans-generated cis privilege lists, such as “Your gender is an option on a form” and “You can use public restrooms without fear of verbal abuse, physical intimidation, or arrest.” One item appears to be Killerman’s own: “You can pretend that anatomy and gender are irrevocably entwined when having the ‘boy parts and girl parts’ talk with children, instead of having to explain the actual complexity of the issue.” The question, nevertheless, remains: How much transformation of structures of cis privilege does Killerman’s “Cisgender Privileges” list really prompt?

The same year that Killerman released his original cisgender privilege checklist, he also released his most popular infographic, “The Genderbread Person” (Killerman 2011b), which depicts overly simplistic distinctions between gender identity (residing in the brain), sexual orientation (residing in the heart), and sex (residing in the genital region). In 2013, Killerman was publicly accused of plagiarizing “The Genderbread Person” from the trans community, which had been iterating the idea for years (Cisnormativity 2013; Taranov2007 2011). There was an extended Twitter conversation and a lengthy Storify record providing evidential support for the accusation, almost all of which have since been, curiously, scrubbed from the web

(and the Wayback Machine). In response, many folks in the trans community recommend using “The Gender Unicorn” instead, a similar infographic curated by trans people, but one that reiterates the former’s oversimplified conceptualizations (Trans Student Educational Resources 2015). Killerman (2017, 66) responds to accusations of plagiarism in *A Guide to Gender*, cursorily acknowledging previous iterations but remarking folks writing to him “are unable” to identify the “absolute originator” of the infographic, assuming it is their responsibility. “The Genderbread Person,” he states, “existed long before the Internet, and is one of the best examples of creative commons learning that I have been a part of” (2017, 66–67). In this context, Killerman’s silence on previous cis privilege checklists by trans people appears to similarly aggrandize his own originality and obscure trans contributions to the conversation, an act of cis privilege if there ever was one.

Killerman is a digital-era sensation. Reportedly, his “Cisgender Privileges” list has been shared from his website at least five hundred thousand times and his “Genderbread Person” infographic has been downloaded almost 3 million times across more than one hundred countries and translated into more than a dozen languages (2011a, 2011b, 2020). His book *A Guide to Gender* was an Amazon bestseller and is in its second edition. His cocreated Safe Zone Project, in which his “Cisgender Privileges” list appears as a resource, is being used by tens of thousands of educators. Across all of these contexts, his circulation of the terms *cisgender* and *cis privilege*, much like Serano’s, promulgates a sense that is both personalized and depoliticized, weakening the challenge to social change they were developed to instigate. Furthermore, Killerman’s versions of cis and cis privilege, like Serano’s, are decontextualized from existing trans community conversations, erasing past versions and contributions, despite obvious reliance on them, whether direct or indirect. While this may be Killerman’s understanding of “creative commons,” it is quite different for trans people to default, within trans community settings, to the usability and shareability of each other’s work than for Killerman to use and share that work outside of trans community settings and without proper acknowledgment of his sources, even if those sources belong simply to the zeitgeist trans folks have created (Zurn 2023). Finally, Killerman’s emphasis on cis empathy in the absence of McIntosh’s critiques of racial capital and calls for systemic destruction of white privilege, let alone other structures of inequity, further whitens and rarifies cis as a category. It is this sense that now circulates in so many Trans 101 trainings.

South Park’s “Cissy”

In 2014, the critically acclaimed, animated sitcom *South Park* released an episode entitled “Cissy” (Parker 2014). The show and the term *cis* largely grew up together and lived parallel lives, with *cis* appearing in 1994, *South Park* debuting in 1997, and both running continuously since. In the episode, two stories are

interwoven. One is of Eric, a student in South Park’s elementary school, who, tired of facing perennially occupied toilets in the boys’ room at recess, decides to throw on a pink bow and use the girls’ restroom. When challenged, Eric/a asserts, “I’m transgender.” School administrators are stunned. They discuss Eric/a’s further insistence that they not be made to “go to the bathroom with cisgenders.” Mr. Garrison, an administrator, explains, “Cisgender. It’s a politically correct term for people who aren’t transgender. If you identify with the sex you were born with, you are cis.” Another responds, “But then cisgender is just normal.” Mr. Garrison replies, “Saying normal is extremely offensive to people who aren’t in that group.” Administrators decide to rehab a janitorial closet into a “transgender bathroom,” which they label “Other.” Eric/a is thrilled they get their own private bathroom, as are the girls whose bathroom Eric/a had most recently been using.

Simultaneously, Randy, a forty-five-year-old fluvial geomorphologist and the father of another kid at the elementary school, is also frustrated by toilet use in men’s restrooms and decides to cross-dress in order to use the women’s. Something feels so right in the women’s restroom that Randy begins to sing there and develops an alternate persona: Lorde, a seventeen-year-old singer-songwriter from New Zealand. Lorde’s music rockets to the top 20. While her music is technically synthesized and virtually distributed, she does in one instance headline a neighborhood party for a kid with diabetes. Living two lives, however, is difficult for Randy. Eventually Lorde retires from the public eye entirely, reporting she is going through a tough time. Randy had fallen into severe depression. Shortly thereafter, Lorde releases a hit song about accepting and loving who you are. The song moves the whole school, students and administrators alike. They announce they are getting rid of the transgender bathroom. Instead, “Anyone who has a problem sharing a bathroom with people who might be transgender will have to use a special bathroom designed to keep them away from the normal people who don’t care.” They relabel the janitorial closet bathroom “Cissies.”

It is, of course, significant that *South Park* dedicated an episode to the word *cis* at all. It indicates and extends the social recognition (and debate) the term had already generated. A highly decorated television series, whose episodes are distributed around the globe, *South Park*’s reach is and has been phenomenal. In 2013, just one year before the “Cissy” episode, *South Park* had been named by *TV Guide* as the tenth greatest TV cartoon of all time (Sands 2013). In 2014 itself, exclusive streaming rights to *South Park* were acquired by Hulu for \$87 million (Goldberg 2021). That number jumped close to \$550 million when HBO acquired exclusive rights in 2019 (Goldberg 2021). The “Cissy” episode itself has been hailed as “turning the tables” on the treatment of transgender issues in popular media (Milloy 2014). Despite poking fun at trans people in a variety of ways—especially through the questionable “transition” story lines of both Eric/a and Randy—the episode’s overall

message is quite simple: Cis people, chill out about bathrooms! Let trans folk pee in peace.

The complex arguments that subtend this episode's overall message of trans inclusion, however, deserve to be spelled out clearly and evaluated carefully. First, the episode recasts "normal" people as people who are trans-accepting and renames non-normal people as people who are trans-exclusionary. This inversion is made materially evident in the conversion of the "Other" bathroom, reserved for "trans" students, into the "Cissies" bathroom, reserved for jumpy cis people: an outcast space in either case. In doing so, the episode continues to function within a normal/abnormal binary and, by pathologizing cis people in its work of depathologizing trans people, it practices a form of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. That is, it inverts the inherited hierarchy and simply turns the prior terms of engagement against the grain. What "Cissy" does not do is change the terrain of the debate, the terms of engagement, or the fact of hierarchical relations. It simply changes who gets to stand in for normal.

Second, the episode clearly capitalizes on the consonance of "cissies" with "sissies," and therefore on sexism and homophobia. Its message is simple: cis people should toughen up (man up) and accept trans people in bathrooms. Stop whimpering and being such a wimp about it all. At one point, Eric/a announces, "What we have a problem with is ciscenders who are intolerant. You know what we call them: cissies." Eric/a's friend responds, "Yeah! Stan's a big old fat cissy." Stan, who is the all-American counterpart to Eric/a's increasingly violent and erratic behavior on the show, does, in keeping with his character, end up using the "Cissies" bathroom at the end of the episode. Clearly the term *cissy* here does in fact function as an insult and a term of disparagement, rather than as a neutral descriptor or a political diagnosis. The episode therefore retools the rhetoric of shameful femininity and faggotry implicit in *sissy* to mobilize its critique of trans exclusionary cis people (i.e., cissies).

Third, the term *cissy*, as deployed in the episode, also capitalizes on ableism. When, at the turn of the twentieth century, the term *sissy* first began to be applied primarily not to sisters but to effeminate boys, those boys were by and large sickly. They were described as soft, weak, and unathletic, plagued by health problems and frequently ill. As such, they were not only pathologized for their effeminacy, but their effeminacy was taken to be a product of their pathologies (Grant 2004). To combat the plague of effeminate boys and weak men, as much as to recover and reinvent masculinity, then US president Theodore Roosevelt supported a regimen of professional athletics and outdoor sports, from which sissies—whether by reason of effeminacy or disability—were constitutively excluded (Bionaz 2005). *Sissy*, then, is a term historically used to police disabled bodyminds. It is still so today. In 2015, disability scholar and activist Morénike Giwa Onaiwu reported that her Black autistic son was taunted as a "sissy" for crying at the barbershop (Packham 2015). By

suggesting that cissies are sick, sickos, and poorly developed boys, in particular, the *South Park* episode recruits ableism to signal trans inclusion.

Fourth, the episode also trades in fatphobia to stage its call for trans inclusion. Of *South Park*'s four main characters (i.e., Stan, Kyle, Eric, and Kenny), Eric is the “fat” one. He is also the loudest and least couth of all the characters. He is consistently volatile and impressively egotistical. Something about his fatness stands in for all of this—or proves all of this. Fatness, after all, has a coterie of connotations in the West that suggest an inability to properly fit within (or fit themselves to, in becoming fit) a range of social norms regarding gender, race, class, ability, and productive citizenry. Insofar as fatness is associated with softness, moreover, and the weakness of soft bodies (against the presumed strength of taut bodies), fatphobia is also a force that underlies sexism (Manne 2024). Eric's fatness, in particular, is the theme of a *South Park* episode from season 1, where he tries to become a “beefcake” by compulsively drinking “Weight Gain 4000” (Parker and Stone 1997). He ends up a naked pile of rolling flesh on a nondescript surface. It matters, then, that Eric, as Eric/a in the “Cissy” episode, assumes the trans label immediately after being called a “fatass.” It matters, too, that Eric/a later supports the accusation that Stan is a “big old fat cissy.” Here, Eric/a endorses the lobbing at Stan (and thereby at cisflakes) the same stereotypes under which he has suffered: being fat, being soft, being a sissy, unable to man up about things one needs to man up for, like trans inclusion.

Trans inclusion, then, throughout *South Park*'s “Cissy” episode, is calculated and calibrated not only within the context of a chalk-white show but also through the episode's disparagement of femininity, effeminacy, faggotry, fatness, and disability. Viewers have come to expect *South Park* to trade in offensive stereotypes; it is par for the course. At least one reviewer, however, argues its treatment of transness, by way of trans inclusion, has some value (Milloy 2014). But does it? The depathologization of transness, in the “Cissy” episode, is couched in a show context where Stan, the stand-in for cis sensibilities, will always come out as more reasonable than Eric, whose transness is, from beginning to end, a sham, whatever point this particular episode is making. In fact, neither Randy nor Eric are trans characters going forward. Thus, even the episode's *ressentiment* is inauthentic; its transvaluation of values is a smoke screen and the dustup is followed by a return to “normal” gender roles thereafter. But it is this episode that put *cis* and *cisgender* on the map for the many people who would never encounter Serano's books or Killerman's educational materials. And it is this episode that further entrenched a personalized, depoliticized account of *cis*, not only divorced from the trans community conversations before and since, but also mobilized through a naturalization of whiteness and a denigration of femininity, faggotry, fatness, and disability.

Counting Losses

At this juncture, it is worth taking stock of the historical trajectory of cis terminology—beginning with the fact that there is a genealogy at all. People who insist that cis *is* this or that have forgotten (or dis-known [Eggert 2015]) something they know all too well: no word “is” anything at all. Words are signs with histories of changing usage across time and place. We cannot hide behind any given definition of *cis* today as if it might settle our theoretical debates or political conundrums. Instead, it is the task of critical politics to continuously revisit the words we use for our projects and the meanings we lend to them, not only through our discourse but also through our embodied lives. The primary sense or senses of *cis* might have been different and might, thereby, have equipped us not only to think different (gendered) thoughts but achieve different (gendered) ends.

It might seem at first that this is just an old, old story. In the beginning, there was a mess of senses of *cis*. From the Latin prefix and German sexologists to Usenet regulars, bloggers, and privilege listers, a smorgasbord of definitions of *cisgender* and delineations of cis privilege, cis normativity, and cis ideology had been put on the table and made available for exploration. Instead of continuing to pursue that plethora of possibilities, however, discourse took a turn toward a more constrained and conscripted sense of *cis*. The richness of the term was slowly whittled down, and the excess chiseled away. Something more tractable and (apolitically) reliable was settled upon. *Cis* became a match between psyche and morphology, something upon which constituents as diametrically opposed as Serano and *South Park* could agree. It might seem to be simply the natural development of words to settle into less mobile, more brittle formations. But that whittling is not all that happened, nor all that can be seen in what happened.

More than simply a numerical reduction in the senses of *cis*, we also witness here a turn toward depoliticization. In its first decade, *cisgender* developed as a term of political struggle and increasingly became understood to name an ideology and concomitant sociopolitical structure that treats so-called cis people as legitimately gendered people. Defosse, Buijs, Blake, and Koyama set the stage for the quickly proliferating cis privilege checklists that washed through the aughts. Cedar (2007), author of perhaps the best known trans-generated cis privilege checklist at the time, defined *cis* as “someone whose determination of her sex[/gender] is consistently validated and reinforced by institutions of power, particularly medical, legal, religious, and scientific.” She published her checklist—with that definition—in February 2007, just months before Serano’s *Whipping Girl* came out. Across this conversation, trans people engaged with and cited one another in a collective praxis of theorizing the term and its implications. They understood *cis* to be part and parcel of trans resistance and creativity, a political critique and a call to action. And over and over again they interwove theorizations of gender, race, intersex, and disabled experience.

But *cis* did not stay there. Starting in 2007, the formulations of cisness and cis privilege offered by Serano, Killerman, and *South Park* together make the term's solidification in *Transgender History*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, the *OED*, and Tambor's acceptance speech possible. In this process of mainstreaming, there is a general trajectory toward an individual psychological definition of *cisgender* and recommendations for neoliberal inclusion rather than the radical reassessment of gender as a whole that marked the term's early roots. There is also an ever-increasing distance from the trans communities that generated the term. It bears repeating that none of these popularizers cite previous trans theorizations, with the exception of Serano's buried footnote to Koyama. *Cisgender* came into its own, then, but at the cost of reducing a radical term to a neutral descriptor that obscures the trans community's collective negotiation of the term; that bears little tractable commitment to resisting or changing cisheteronormativity; and that, by turn, gets divorced from the discussion of—but also, simultaneously, crafted through the enforcement of—sexism, homophobia, ableism, racism, and fatphobia in order to enact trans inclusion. The mainstreaming of *cis* occurred through a history of depoliticization, rarefaction, and citational injustice, then, that increasingly abstracts it from the coalitional consciousness within which it had begun. And that—all of that—matters.

This slice of genealogy gives us a vantage point from which to evaluate current scholarship on *cis*, as well as to assess our own use of the term itself. In 2024, *Feminism against Cisness* hit the shelves with a gauntlet of a title. With contributions primarily by trans theorists and dedicated to theorizing transfeminist politics, history, and theory, the collection imagines feminism from a fresh vantage point. In her introduction, editor Emma Heaney argues, against the mainstream definition, that cisness is not merely the fact of experiencing one's gender as aligned with one's sex. Rather, cisness is an ideology with devastating material consequences.

Cisness is the biologizing ideology that these social roles of sexual difference adhere to assigned sex based on the appearance of genitals at or (via prenatal imaging technology) before birth. . . . Cisness is the idea that those identified as girls at birth are naturally inducted into the social expectation that sexual difference sets for the feminine and likewise for boys with the masculine. (Heaney 2024, 10)

Against the widespread personalization of cisness as a felt sense between the ears, Heaney insists it is an ideological construct and a political ploy. It enforces an idea rather than reflects facts.

In her pointed pushback against the many abstractions of cisness, Heaney argues that its founding distinction is ultimately not between men and women at all but between preservable, penetrating, masculinized bodies, on the one hand, and

disposable, penetrable, feminized bodies, on the other. These distinctions are inextricable from multiple systems of oppression, as well as histories of reproductive labor, racial capital, and eugenics. “Cisness,” Heaney (2024, 2) writes, “is the ableist apprehension of bodies into good and bad, the colonial destruction of kinship structures, the white supremacist obliteration of personhood in the service of capital extraction, and a component of bourgeois antipathy for the poor, working, and racialized people of the world.” In repoliticizing cisness, then, Heaney poses cisness as perhaps the single most fundamental organizing system.⁸ Cisness is not a category of self-identification. It is an iceberg of patriarchal, white supremacist, ableist, colonial, and capitalist projects—against which feminism must stand if it is to stand against anything.

In many ways, *Feminism against Cisness* serves as a corrective to the personalized, depoliticized, rarified sense of *cis* so widespread today. As a corrective to that history, however, the book itself proceeds without history. No reference is made either to what came before that mainstreaming or to the resistant underflows that flourished during and since. In her introduction, Heaney does not cite a single trans theorist of *cis*, past or present. In fact, only two essays in the collection cite prior theorists of *cis*: those theorists being Finn Enke (2012) and Marquis Bey (2022). For a text dedicated to theorizing feminism against cisness, it is a signal (although unfortunately unsurprising) choice to undertake such theorizing without reference to the long history of trans theorizations of the term. There is a loss in the citational injustice, here, one difficult to fathom. Such an oversight highlights the seductive siren song of self-origination—of not having a beginning, of not having been made or made possible—a song upon which cisness itself is surely built. But it also signals the elite forces that conspire to make Enke and Bey, as (especially North American) scholars, available for citation, while leaving the vast comments, blogs, zines, pamphlets, and other nonacademic work invisible, without the blazing insignia of the university. Such forces continue to favor a small coterie of trans and nonbinary voices over the many that speak. For all that the book does, then, it does not reverse the longstanding citational erasure that has marked the mainstream discourse of *cis*.

In the essay “(Foot)notes on Cisnormativity and Feminism,” Argentine trans philosopher Blas Radi (2020) argues that *cis* terms and the theory of cisnormativity exist, much as intersex and trans people do, on the margins of feminist theory. *Cis* terms and theory are rarely adopted in said literature, and, where they are, they typically occupy the footnotes, literally and figuratively. They are rarely developed,

⁸ From my perspective, the impetus to identify the single most fundamental inequity through which all others can (or must) be understood refuses the complexity of our histories (and our presents), as well as the limitations of each vantage point of analysis. That said, for me, cisness is certainly one important vector.

rarely given references, and rarely impact the main text. Writers treat the term *cis* as if it “emerged spontaneously from common sense” or were merely “the fruit of the writer’s introspective reflection,” not the product of extended trans community theorizing (Radi 2020, 25). This fundamental erasure of a history of thought is in keeping with colonial knowledge structures. The margin, however, to which *cis* and cis theory are consigned, is not “a white, virgin, empty margin,” he argues, citing Franco-Maghrebian theorist Jacques Derrida (1982, xxiii), but rather another text and another land that any decolonial project must take seriously (Radi 2020, 23).

Radi’s own essay is a series of twenty-one theses proffered as footnotes to map—and to cite—the rich landscape of trans and intersex theorizations of *cis*. He includes the voices of Koyama (2002), Cedar (2007), Serano (2007), Enke (2012), and Aultman (2014), but also Mauro Cabral (2009), Viviane Vergueiro Simakawa (2015), Alexandre Baril (2019), and Peter Cava (2016). In fact, Radi is so committed to conveying the richness of the margins—and resisting their marginalization—that he makes the pointed choice of inserting, as his penultimate thesis/footnote, his own bibliography. As a thesis all their own, then, his references become part of the main text (which is itself a series of footnotes) rather than coming after. This is not a move to “include” what has been excluded or to let the margins trickle in. Rather, it is a move to rupture the exclusion/inclusion structure itself. The margins have moved in, producing a shift (and rift) not only in the material geopolitics of citation but also in the essay genre itself (Pérez 2017). The whole structure of writing is perturbed here. Rather than merely citing something outside the text, Radi’s references form a presence that changes (both afterward and in advance) the very nature of the text itself, bedeviling cisnormative distinctions between text and reference, words and white space, authorial voice and scholarly apparatus, continent and archipelago, forethought and afterthought.

One of the reasons *cis* can continue to function in its mainstream sense (i.e., modifying a gender that matches an assigned sex) is a widespread refusal to acknowledge and learn from trans community theorizations of *cis* over the last thirty years. Any contemporary attempt to reframe cisness as a political ideology, materialist practice, or racial project, moreover, should be wary of replicating that same citational and epistemic injustice. In either case, such injustices foreclose accountability to trans histories, but they also permit the colonial mirage (and self-satisfaction) of being first on the ground.

The contemporary sense of *cis* is ethically, as much as epistemologically, untenable. Epistemologically, *cis* as felt sense disavows the ideological construct of matching gender identity and sexed morphology that subtends it. Ethically, *cis* as felt sense denies accountability to early trans theory and politics, as well as cuts off coalitional analyses of co-constitutive hierarchies. As we look toward a future of feminist, queer, and trans work that deploys—and hopefully also theorizes—*cis* and

its sibling terms, it is my hope that *cis* be rerooted in trans community conversations, in gender creative and disruptive political militancy, and thereby also in a continually expanding nexus of co-implicated issues and systems of oppression.⁹ What follows from there, however, might surprise us. Genealogies are useful for many things, chief among them being this: they pose the question of how we should then live. Having spent a significant amount of time with *cis*'s history, it is my conviction that *cis* needs to shift. That shift should involve a recovery of our pasts, as I have emphasized here, but it may also involve still undetermined turns. As we take up that task, I hope we honor where we have been and the complexity of where we are but also deeply reimagine where we are going.¹⁰

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⁹ For perhaps the first full-length critical disability engagement with *cis* as a term and a framework, for example, see my article "Crippling Cis: Rethinking Cisgender within a Disability Critique" (Zurn 2024).

¹⁰ For a full genealogy of *cis*, one that addresses, in particular, analysis of the term stemming from Black studies, disability and mad studies, Indigenous studies and literatures, intersex studies, Latinx studies, queer studies, South American trans and travesti theory and communities (especially in Argentina and Brazil), and trans studies and activism, among other work, see my book *Cisgender: Disorienting a Category* (Zurn, forthcoming).

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