

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Unspeakable Things

BITCH DOCTRINE

Essays for Dissenting Adults

LAURIE PENNY

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury USA
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2017
First U.S. edition 2017

© Laurie Penny, 2017

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders of material reproduced in this book, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers would be glad to hear from them. For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on pp. 369–70 constitute an extension of this copyright page.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

The text of this book has been excerpted and extended from articles and blogs written by the author for *New Statesman*, *Baffler*, *Buzzfeed*, *New York Times*, *Time Magazine* and *New Inquiry*

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-63286-753-7
EPUB: 978-1-63286-754-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by NewGen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in the U.S.A. by Berryville Graphics Inc., Berryville, Virginia

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

Bloomsbury books may be purchased for business or promotional use.
For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at specialmarkets@macmillan.com.

For my sisters, now and always

4

Gender

only through new words might new worlds be called
into order . . .

Saul Williams, *Said the Shotgun to the Head*

People have the right to call themselves whatever they
like. That doesn't bother me. It's other people doing
the calling that bothers me.

Octavia Butler

HOW TO BE A GENDERQUEER FEMINIST

I've never felt quite like a woman, but I've never
wanted to be a man, either. For as long as I can remem-
ber, I've wanted to be something in between. To quote
Ruby Rose: I called myself a girl, but only because my
options were limited. I always assumed that everyone
felt that way.

I discovered my mistake one day in junior school,
when a few of the girls in my class were chatting
about what boys they fancied. I wasn't often invited
to participate in these sorts of secret female chats.

Even back then, there was something odd about me, a strangeness that was partly about identity but also about the fact that I wore shapeless black smocks, rarely brushed my hair and tended to jump when anyone spoke to me. I couldn't think of anything to say that would be both interesting and true. So I mentioned that I often felt like I was a gay boy in a girl's body. Just like everyone else, right?

I could tell from their faces that this was not right. It was very, very wrong.

This was a time before Tumblr, when very few teenagers were talking about being genderqueer or transmasculine. The women I'd heard of who were allowed to dress and talk and behave like boys were all lesbians. I often wished I was a lesbian. But I almost always fancied boys, and if you fancied boys, you had to behave like a girl. And behaving like a girl was the one subject, apart from sports, that I always failed.

It was around this time that I first read second-wave feminist Germaine Greer. She seemed to explain fundamental truths that every other adult in my small universe of school, home and the library seemed equally anxious to ignore, and it helped that there were also dirty jokes. I clung to *The Female Eunuch* with the zeal of a convert and the obsession of a prepubescent nerd. I wrote Greer a letter with my very favourite pens and almost imploded with excitement when she wrote back, on a postcard that had koalas

on it. I resolved right then and there that one day I would be a feminist and a writer just like her.

According to Greer, liberation meant understanding that whatever you were in life, you were a woman first. Her writing helped me understand how society saw me – and every other female person I'd ever met. We were not human beings first: we were just girls. Looking back, though, that militant insistence on womanhood before everything is part of the reason it's taken me a decade to admit that, in addition to being a feminist, I'm genderqueer. That I'm here to fight for women's rights, that I play for the girls' team, but I have never felt like much of a woman at all.

I grew up on second-wave feminism, but that didn't stop me starving myself. I was anorexic for large parts of my childhood and for many complex, painful, altogether common reasons, of which gender dysphoria was just one. I felt trapped by the femaleness of my body, by my growing breasts and curves. Not eating made my periods stop. It made my breasts disappear. On the downside, it also turned me into a manic, suicidal mess, forced me to drop out of school and traumatised my entire family. At seventeen, I wound up in hospital, in an acute eating disorders ward, where I stayed for six months.

The window in my hospital room did not open more than a crack. Just wide enough to sniff a ration of fresh air before I got weighed in the morning. I

turned up with all my curves starved away, with my hair cropped close to the bones of my skull, androgynous as a skeleton, insisting that people call me not Laura, but Laurie – a boy's name in England. I was too unwell to be pleased that I finally looked as genderless as I felt.

At that point, I just wanted to die. Mostly of shame.

Long story short: I didn't die. I got better. But not before I let some well-meaning medical professionals bully me back on to the right side of the gender binary.

Psychiatric orthodoxy tends to lag behind social norms, and doctors are very busy people. So it's not their fault that, less than twenty years after homosexuality was removed from the official list of mental disorders, the doctors treating me took one look at my short hair and baggy clothes and feminist posters and decided that I was a repressed homosexual and coming out as gay would magically make me start eating again. Like I said, they were trying.

There was only one problem. I wasn't gay. I was sure about that. I was bisexual, and I was very much hoping that one day when I wasn't quite so weird and sad I'd be able to test the theory in practice. It took a long time to persuade the doctors of that. I can't remember how, and I'm not sure I want to. I think diagrams may have been involved. It was a very dark time. I was too unwell to enjoy looking as genderless as I felt.

Anyway. Eventually they gave up trying to make me come out and decided to make me go back in. If you weren't a lesbian, the route to good mental health was to 'accept your femininity'. You needed to grow your hair and wear dresses and stop being so angry all the time. You needed to accept the gender and sex you had been assigned, along with all the unspoken rules of behaviour involved. You needed to get a steady boyfriend and smile nicely and work hard. I repeat: these people didn't mean to do me or anyone else lasting psychological damage. Just like every other institution through the centuries that has tried to force queer and deviant people to be normal for their own good, they truly were trying to help.

For five years, I struggled to recover. I tried hard to be a good girl. I tried to stick to the dresses, the makeup, the not being quite so strange and cross and curious all the time. For five years, I shoved my queerness deep, deep down into a private, frightened place where it only emerged in exceptional circumstances, like a bottle of cheap vodka, or a showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or both. But being a good girl didn't work out very well, so I cut the difference, cut my hair short, and went back to being an angry feminist.

And feminism saved my life. I got better. I wrote, and I had adventures, and I returned to politics, and I made friends. I left the trauma of the hospital far

behind me and tried to cover up my past with skirts and makeup.

Today, I'm a feminist and a writer, but I no longer valorise Germaine Greer so blindly. For one thing, Greer is one of many feminists, some of them well respected, who believe transgender people are dangerous to their movement. Their argument is pretty simple. It boils down to the idea that trans people reinforce binary thinking about gender when they choose to join the other team instead of challenging what it means to be a man or a woman. Greer has called trans women a 'ghastly parody' of femaleness.

Greer's comments about trans women exemplify the generational strife between second-wave feminists who sought to expand the definition of 'woman' and the younger feminists who are looking for new gender categories altogether. This tension has been cruel to trans women, who have been cast as men trying to infiltrate women's spaces. But it's alienating to all corners of the LGBT community.

By the time I was well enough to consider swapping the skirts for cargo pants, changing my pronouns and the way I walked through the world, I'd become well known as, among other things, a feminist writer.

At twenty-four, I wrote columns about abortion rights and sexual liberation, and books about how to live and love under capitalist patriarchy. In response,

young women wrote to me on a regular basis telling me that my work helped inspire them to live more freely in their femaleness. They admired me because I was a 'strong woman'. Would I be betraying those girls if I admitted that half the time, I didn't feel like a woman at all?

So I hoarded up my excuses for not coming out. I carefully described myself as 'a person with cis privilege' rather than 'a cis person' when the conversation came up. I decided that the daily emotional overheads of being a feminist writer on the Internet were enough for now.

And I waited.

Over the past few years, more and more of my friends and comrades have come out as trans. I've been privileged to be part of a strong and supportive queer community, and it has helped that a great many of my close friends are both trans and feminist. For them, there doesn't seem to be a problem with fighting for gender equality while fighting transphobia – which sometimes, sadly, means that they're also fighting feminists.

Many of the critiques of trans politics from feminists through the decades have been openly bigoted, the sort of self-justifying theories that let people feel okay about driving other, more vulnerable people out of their jobs, outing them to their families and welfare advisers, and putting them in danger.

Buried under the bullshit, though, are some reasonable critiques. One is that people who claim a trans identity are only doing so because gender roles are so restrictive and oppressive in the first place. Sadly, many trans people are forced to play into tired gender stereotypes in order to 'prove' their identity to everyone from strangers to medical gatekeepers – not long ago, one friend of mine was queried at a gender clinic because she showed up to her appointment in baggy jeans, which was evidence of her 'lack of commitment' to life as a woman. I repeat: even trousers are political.

I regret that there wasn't more language, dialogue and support for trans and genderqueer kids when I was a teenager and needed it most. I regret that by the time I had found that community and that language, I was too traumatised by hospital, by prejudice, and by the daily pressures of living and working in a frenzied, wearily misogynist media landscape to take advantage of the freedoms on offer. I regret the fear that kept me from coming out for so many years. Would I betray the girls who looked up to me if I admitted that I didn't feel like a woman at all?

When I say I regret those things, I mean that I try not to think about them too much, because the knowledge of how different things could have been if I'd known as a teenager that I wasn't alone, the thought of how else I might have lived and loved and dated if I'd had the words and the community I have now just a little

sooner, opens cold fingers of longing somewhere in my stomach and squeezes tight. But when they let go, I'm also glad.

The journey I took as I came to terms with my own identity – the journey that will continue as long as I live – all of that has led me to where I am now.

More than anything, I'm excited. I'm excited to see how life is going to be different for the queer, trans and even cis kids too, growing up in a world that has more language for gender variance. I'm excited to find out what sort of lives they will lead, from the gender-queer activists in the audience at my last reading to the barista with the orange mohawk who handed me the cup of tea I'm clutching for dear life as I write alone in this cafe, trying to believe that writing this piece is something other than gross self-indulgence.

The barista is wearing two name badges. One says their name; the other one says, in thick chalk capitals, *I am not a girl. My pronouns are They/Them.*

So here it is. I consider 'woman' to be a made-up category, an intangible, constantly changing idea with as many different definitions as there are cultures on Earth. You could say the same thing about 'justice' or 'money' or 'democracy' – these are made-up ideas, stories we tell ourselves about the shape of our lives, and yet they are ideas with enormous real-world consequences. Saying that gender is fluid doesn't mean that we have to ignore sexism. In fact, it's the opposite.

Of course gender norms play into the trans experience. How can they not? But being trans or genderqueer, even for cis-passing people like me, is not about playing into those norms. It's about throwing them out. Some 'radical' feminists argue that trans and genderqueer people actually shore up the gender binary by seeking to cross or straddle it rather than setting it on fire. To which I'd say: it is possible to jump over a burning binary. Just watch me.

Only when we recognise that 'manhood' and 'womanhood' are made-up categories, invented to control human beings and violently imposed, can we truly understand the nature of sexism, of misogyny, of the way we are all worked over by gender in the end.

Coming out is an individual journey, but it is a collective weapon. Questioning gender – whether that means straddling the gender binary, crossing it, or breaking down its assumptions wherever you happen to stand – is an essential part of the feminism that has sustained me through two decades of personal and political struggle. In the end, feminists and the LGBT community have this in common: we're all gender traitors. We have broken the rules of good behaviour assigned to us at birth, and we have all suffered for it.

But here's one big way I differ from a lot of my genderqueer friends: I still identify, politically, as a woman. My identity is more complex than simply female or male, but as long as women's reproductive

freedom is under assault, sex is also a political category, and politically, I'm still on the girls' team.

I don't think that everyone who was dumped into the 'female' category at birth has a duty to identify as a woman, politically or otherwise. Because identity policing, if you'll indulge me in a moment of high theoretical language, is fucked up and bullshit. This is just how it happens to work for me.

We're all gender traitors.

In a perfect world, perhaps I'd be telling a different story. I'm never going to be able to say for sure whether in that perfect world, that world without sexism and gender oppression, that world without violence or abuse, where kittens dance on rainbows and nobody has ever heard of Donald Trump, I would feel the need to call myself genderqueer. My hunch is that I would; and all I've got for you is that hunch, along with a stack of feminist theory books and a pretty nice collection of flat caps.

I am a woman, politically, because that's how people see me and that's how the state treats me. And sometimes I'm also a boy. Gender is something I perform, just like everyone else, when I put on my binder or paint my nails. When I walk down the street. When I talk to my boss. When I kiss my partner in their makeup and high heels.

I don't want to see a world without gender. I want to see a world where gender is not oppressive or

enforced, where there are as many ways to express and perform and relate to your own identity as there are people on Earth. I want a world where gender is not painful, but joyful.

But until then, we've got this one. And for as long as we all have to navigate a gender binary that's fundamentally broken and a sex class system that seeks to break us, I'm happy to be a gender traitor.

I'm a genderqueer woman, and a feminist. My preferred pronouns are 'she' or 'they'. I believe we're on our way to a better world. And you can call me Laurie.

UNNATURAL BEAUTY

Body image is big business. In 2013, the Brazilian modelling agency Star Models launched a graphic campaign with the intention of showing young women how horrific acute anorexia is. It shows models photoshopped to the proportions of fashion sketches – spindly legs, twig-like arms, wobbling lollipop heads.

Given the high-profile deaths of two South American models from anorexia – one of whom, Luisel Ramos, dropped dead of heart failure at a catwalk show – one might interpret this as a way for the agency to detoxify its brand while drumming up a little publicity. But that would be too cynical; the global fashion industry really cares about young women's health now. That's why model agencies were recently discovered recruiting outside Swedish eating disorder clinics.

Elsewhere, a new campaign video by Dove uses facial composite drawing to demonstrate how women underestimate their own looks. Dove is owned by Unilever, a multibillion-pound company that seems to have little problem using sexism and body fascism to advertise other products: it also manufactures Lynx, of the 'fire a bullet at a pretty girl to make her clothes fall off' campaign, the Slim-Fast fake-food range, and more than one brand of the bleach sold to women of colour to burn their skin 'whiter'.

The fashion, beauty and cosmetics industries have no interest in improving women's body image. Playing on women's insecurities to create a buzz and push products is an old trick but there's a cynical new trend in advertising that peddles distressing stereotypes with one hand and ways to combat that distress with the other. *We're not like all the rest*, it whispers. *We think you're pretty just as you are. Now buy our skin grease and smile*. The message, either way, is that before we can be happy, women have to feel 'beautiful', which preferably starts with being 'beautiful'.

Let's get one thing straight: women don't develop eating disorders, don't self-harm and have other issues with our body image because we're stupid. Beauty and body fascism aren't just in our heads – they affect our lives every day, whatever our age, whatever we look like, and not just when we happen to open a glossy magazine.

We love to talk, as a society, about beauty and body weight – indeed, many women writers are encouraged to talk about little else. What we seldom mention are the basic, punishing double standards of physical appearance that are used to keep women of all ages and backgrounds in our place. For a bloke, putting on a half-decent suit and shaving with a new razor is enough to count as 'making an effort'. For women, it's an expensive, time-consuming and painful rigmale of cutting, bleaching, dyeing, shaving, plucking,

starving, exercising and picking out clothes that send the right message without making you look like a shop-window dress-up dolly.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are severe mental illnesses but they exist at the extreme end of a scale of trauma in which millions of women and girls struggle for much of their lives. The fashion, diet and beauty industries exploit and exaggerate existing social prejudice, encouraging women to starve ourselves, to burn time and money and energy in a frantic, self-defeating struggle to resemble a stereotype of 'beauty' that is narrowing every year.

Studies have shown that, across the pay grades, women who weigh less are paid more for the same work and have a better chance of promotion than those who are heavier. In politics, in business and in the arts, accomplished and powerful men are free to get fat and sloppy, but women can expect to be judged for their looks if they dare to have a high-profile job: we're either too unattractive to be tolerated or too pretty to have anything worth saying. Beauty is about class, money, power and privilege – and it always has been. Women and girls are taught that being thin and pretty is the only sure way to get ahead in life, even though this is manifestly not the case.

Those few young women who have fought their way to public acclaim despite lacking the proportions of catwalk models are expected to account for themselves

in interviews, from the Oscar-winning singer Adele to the only-ever-so-slightly-plump Lena Dunham.

It's hard to feel all right about yourself in this sort of toxic beauty culture: as long as 'fat' is the worst thing you can possibly call a woman, any of us who dares to speak up or out about what is happening will be called fat, whether or not we are.

'Fat' is subjective and socially situated, and it's the slur most commonly directed at any girl or woman who asserts herself, whether physically or politically. Even the most stereotypically thin and beautiful woman will find herself dismissed as unattractive if what comes out of her mouth happens to threaten male privilege, which is why feminists of all stripes continue to be labelled 'fat and ugly'. This culture would still prefer women to take up as little space as possible.

Rather than fighting for every woman's right to feel beautiful, I would like to see the return of a kind of feminism that tells women and girls everywhere that maybe it's all right not to be pretty and perfectly well behaved. That maybe women who are plain, or large, or old, or differently abled, or who simply don't give a damn what they look like because they're too busy saving the world or rearranging their sock drawer, have as much right to take up space as anyone else.

I think if we want to take care of the next generation of girls we should reassure them that power, strength

and character are more important than beauty and always will be, and that even if they aren't thin and pretty, they are still worthy of respect. That feeling is the birthright of men everywhere. It's about time we claimed it for ourselves.

GIRL TROUBLE

Another week, another frenzy of concern-fapping over teenage girls. In late 2013, I was invited on to Channel 4 News to discuss a new report detailing how young people, much like not-young people, misunderstand consent and blame girls for rape. The presenter tried to orchestrate a fight between myself and the other guest, Labour MP Luciana Berger, because it's not TV feminism unless two women shout at each other.

As we approached the six-minute, time-for-some-last-words mark, the presenter Matt Frei was clearly floundering. It turns out that even respected broadcasters with years of experience have no idea how to handle the twisted narrative about girls and sex, and how adults feel about girls having sex, and what precisely it is about all of this that constitutes news. He turned to Berger and said (I quote): 'Miley Cyrus – should we just ignore her? Is she good or is she bad? What's your judgement on her?'

When the off-air lights blinked, I felt like I'd just gone through a Shakespearean shadow-play of the public conversation about young women right now, and it scared me. Berger and I had both come on to the programme to talk seriously about agency, about education and the importance of respecting young people, and instead we stumbled from slut-shaming to

pat ten-second pronouncements about sexual violence to manufactured controversy to worrying about the age of consent to deciding whether Miley Cyrus is empowered or exploited or both in the space of six minutes and twelve seconds exactly. Clearly, teenage girls aren't the only ones who are confused.

Teenage girls, however, don't get to put down their presenting notes on that painful, awkward confusion and switch to the next topic. They don't get to change the channel. Moral panic is the register in which young women are spoken to and about – always.

It should be no big shocker, then, that a report by the charity Girlguiding suggests that girls' self-esteem is not just low but also falling, year-on-year. As with any sociological study, the nature of the questions being asked – how much do girls care about makeup? How many wear nail polish, push-up bras, high heels? – reveals as much as the answers do, in this case about our priorities around girls and the women they're becoming. When we cannot help mustering our masturbatory outrage over whether or not young girls are wearing push-up bras – always with the padded bras – we should perhaps be less surprised to learn that '87 per cent of girls aged 11–21 think women are judged more on their appearance than on their ability'.

The tone of the reports on girls' lack of confidence, on the persistence of myths of ignorance about rape

and sexual violence, is as patronising as ever. The implication is that girls fret about their appearance, are confused about sex and consent, and worried about the future because they are variously frivolous or stupid.

They aren't. They know perfectly well what's going on, and why. It is not silly for girls to believe, for example, that society judges them on their appearance when it manifestly does and will continue to do so when they have become adult women unless we bring down patriarchy first.

The Girlguiding report finds that, as well as being miserable, self-hating and cynical about the prospect of equality, young women are terrifically ambitious. They work hard, and they want to do well in their careers. This is not a contradiction. Ambition is demanded of us because we know mediocrity is not an option. When society tells women that if we are just averagely good-looking, or averagely smart, or reasonably high-achieving, we will never be loved and safe, perfectionism is an adaptive strategy. We learn that if we want love and security, we have to be perfect, and if it doesn't work out, well, that means we just weren't good enough. And we know it probably won't work out well. Girls aren't fools. They know what is being done to them. They know what that means for their futures in terms of money and power.

Girls get it. An under-reported, crucial facet of the study is the extent and cynicism of girls' concerns about economic equality and unpaid work. A full 65 per cent of girls aged eleven to twenty-one are worried about the cost of childcare, and while 58 per cent say they 'would like to become a leader in their chosen profession', 46 per cent of them worry that having children will negatively affect their career.

Girls know perfectly well that structural sexism means they can't have everything they're being told they must have. They are striving to have it all every way, to have everything and be everything like good girls are supposed to, and it hasn't broken them yet, for good or ill. That is one reason young women still do so well in school and at college despite our good grades not translating to real-world success. It's one reason we're so good at getting those entry-level service jobs: we are not burdened by the excess of ego, the desire to be treated like a human being first, that prevents many young men from engaging proactively with an economy that just wants self-effacing drones trained to smile till it hurts.

The press just loves to act concerned about half-naked young ladies, preferably with illustrations to facilitate the concern. Somehow nothing changes. And maybe that's the point. Maybe part of the function of the constant stream of news about young girls hurting and hating themselves isn't to raise awareness.

Maybe part of it is designed to be reassuring. It must be comforting, if you're invested in the status quo, to hear that young women are punished and made miserable when they misbehave.

For all those knuckle-clutching articles about how girls everywhere are about to pirouette into twerking, puking, self-hating whorishness, we do not actually care about young women – not, that is, about female people who happen to be young. Instead, we care about Young Women (TM), fantasy Young Women as a semiotic skip for all our cultural anxieties. We value girls as commodities without paying them the respect that both their youth and their personhood deserve. Being fifteen is fucked up enough already without having the expectations, moral neuroses and guilty lusts of an entire culture projected on to this perfect empty shell you're somehow supposed to be. Hollow yourself out and starve yourself down until you can swallow the shame of the world.

And Miley Cyrus. Ah, Miley. The Zaphod Beeblebrox of 2013, distracting attention away from power with choreographed hammer-humping. The way Miley Cyrus has been allowed to dominate months of necessary discussion about young women and what they do, about sex and celebrity and the pounding synthetic intersection of the two which is pop music, is the ultimate example of our guilty, horny fascination with young girls' sexual self-exploitation. We

have discussed Miley Cyrus as a cipher for precarious womanhood everywhere to the extent that she has functionally become one. Miley is not the only very young woman doing bold, original or shocking things in public right now, but she's the one who gets to stand in for all girls everywhere.

Of course, young trans women and women of colour, however heroic, could never be Everygirl. That's why Rihanna only gets to be a 'bad influence' on girls, but Miley somehow *is* all girls. She is the way we want to imagine all girls – slender young white innocence forever being corrupted, allowing us to stroke out another horrified concernngasm.

In the real world, girls are not all the same. Attempting to make any one woman stand in for all women everywhere is demeaning to every woman anywhere. It tells us that we are all alike, that for all society's fascination with our feelings and fragility we are considered of a kind, replaceable. We're all the same, and we're all supposed to have the same problems. And that's the problem.

I've fought for years, since I was a messed-up schoolgirl myself, for a world in which women could be treated like human beings, and sometimes it seems like nothing's changed. It is as fucked-up and torturous to be a teenage girl now as it ever was, maybe more so. I am angry because in that time I have seen countless miserable, self-hating, brilliant girls become

miserable, self-hating, brilliant women who have somehow managed to survive and scrape through the shitty, sexist slimepile of rules and threats and contradictions to claw out a sense of self they could live with.

Well, most of them managed to survive. Not all of them. And not all of the ones who did grew up to thrive. I have seen such pain and wasted potential over these years that I could cry, and sometimes, when I'm tired, I do. The emotional violence this society does to teenage girls and young women makes us all suffer in the end.

So please, just stop it. Stop telling girls contradictory things. Stop telling them that they're worthless if they're not sexy, beautiful and willing and then shaming them into believing that if they were raped, it must have been their fault for dressing like sluts. Stop telling them they have to be high-achieving and independent and not rely on a man and then hating them for any freedom they manage to hold on to.

Stop teaching young women to hate themselves. Stop it. Because let me tell you something else about young women today. I'm going to say it slowly and clearly so it doesn't get forgotten quite so fast. Young women today are brilliant. They. Are. Brilliant.

If you are not stunned by how smart, how fearless, how fucking fantastic young women and girls are right now then maybe you've been watching too many twerking videos, or only paying attention to the news

coverage that reassures us that yes, young girls are miserable, as they deserve to be. But you'd have to be glued to *Bangerz* pretty consistently not to notice how bloody great this generation is.

Really, they're great. They know the challenges in front of them and they are determined to overcome them. They're as bright and ambitious as Millennials, except that they grew up with the Internet and they have no illusions that good behaviour will get them everywhere. I don't mean to essentialise; I've met some brutal, boring teenage girls in my time, too. But the cohort is shaping up to be just about as spectacular as it's going to have to be to fix the mess their parents made.

I believe that today's young women might yet grow up to save this vicious world. But if we abuse that promise, if we carry on hurting them and insulting them and treating them as trash symbols of our own shame, then maybe we don't deserve to be saved.

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

It's always the little things. In the midst of a welter of unutterably depressing news about welfare and political turmoil, the great controversy is, yet again, the stunning fact that women are human beings with bodies that grow hair, eat, sweat and shit.

First, a spectacularly misogynist and homophobic (and now withdrawn) advert from Veet, manufacturers of hair-removing goo, claimed that failing to remove your leg-hair with the help of Veet products will turn you into an actual bloke. Then there was the equally repugnant site set up to shame 'Women Eating on the Tube', featuring non-consensual pictures of women doing just that, because there's nothing worse a female person could possibly do than demonstrate in public that she has a body that gets hungry.

Now, in eight years of feminist blogging I have avoided weighing in on the body hair debate for two reasons, the first of which is political. I've always been faintly distrustful of the school of feminism that advocates a return to 'natural' womanhood as a political statement, because as far as I'm concerned, there's no such thing. There is something a tiny bit reactionary about the plea for nature as opposed to liberated modernity; it runs uncomfortably close to the rhetoric of those social conservatives who would prefer women to be 'natural' when it comes to being

submissive to a male provider and hogtied by their own reproductive capacities, but to continue the decidedly unnatural practices of bleaching, waxing and taking a bath more than once a year. The problem arises when any behaviour, however private and personal, is socially enforced. The problem arises when, according to the language of Veet, you have to go through the expensive and time-consuming rigmarole of shaving to prove that you are a proper, well-behaved woman and therefore worthy of the kisses of easily shocked men with boring haircuts. And the problem arises when this sort of pop controversy is used as a decoy, distracting us from structural arguments about class, power and privilege. Body hair, in particular, has become an obstructive stereotype when it comes to feminist history – sexist commenters speak of 'hairy-legged feminists' when what they really mean to say is that women who do not conform, women who refuse to perform the rituals of good feminine behaviour, are a deeply fearful prospect.

The second reason is a bit more personal. According to the accepted way this sort of article is supposed to go, now is when I'm supposed to tell you exactly what I do with my own body hair and why and how it's always been a problem.

Unfortunately, I am personally exempt from this particular dilemma by virtue of being a human axolotl

who doesn't grow much hair anywhere. I am literally unable to be the furry-legged, forest-crotched feminist hellwraith I often find myself accused of being. This makes shaving a largely academic issue, and puts me in precisely no position to judge any woman for her intimate topiary decisions, and I wish my friends would stop asking me to validate theirs. Seriously. Do what you want. I just want you to be happy.

As a teenager, though, I used to shave anyway – gamely saving up my pocket money for popular brand equipment I really had no use for – because I wanted to be part of that secret club of skin nicks and ritual complaints about razor burn. Did you shave, sugar or wax? Did you remove the hair up to the top of your shortest gym skirt, or all the way up, implying arcane and enviable sluttiness? I remember these conversations as among the few times I was permitted, as a nerdy, nervous, weird-looking kid, to chat to the cool girls. The pain, expense and wasted time of womanhood was something we were all supposed to share. Few of us had the language of feminism – this was before Tumblr, Twitter and Internet activism brought gender politics into every schoolgirl's back pocket. We complained about shaving and straightening and eyelash-curling because that sort of complaining was a safe, accepted way to express discomfort with the basic fact that, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.

Gender policing is all about the little things. It's the daily, intimate terrorism of beauty and dress and behaviour. In this as in so much else, feminists who are not transsexual can learn a great deal from trans writers and activists. I'm indebted to the work of Charlie Jane Anders and Julia Serano, both of whom talk about how femininity gets captured by capitalism, and how that homogenous, compulsory performance of femininity becomes a scapegoat for all society's bad feelings about women in general and trans women in particular. So it is not enough to feel that you are a woman – you have to prove it with a hundred daily conformities and capitulations. The reason the Veet advert is so hurtful, the reason the 'Women Eating on the Tube' site and its backlash went so viral, is that they both spell out gender policing at its simplest level: behave, be quiet and pretty and compliant, control your messy, hairy, hungry self, or you are not a woman at all.

None of which is to say that girliness can't be a good time. Dressing up, playing with makeup, fashion – all of that is a lot of fun right up until it becomes compulsory, until you have to do it to prove you're a real woman, a good employee, a person worthy of love and affection. The same goes for all of the bizarre rules that go along with being female in this society, the rules you have to engage with whether or not you choose to follow them: be pretty. Be nice. Be thin. Try

to look as young and fragile as possible. Be sexy, but not overtly sexual. Don't eat in public. Don't eat at all. Your body is all wrong: shave it down, starve it smaller, take up less space, be less physical, be less.

The little things turn out to be about the big things. They're about race, class and gender status. For trans women, or women of black, Middle Eastern or Mediterranean heritage, the question of body hair is extra fraught, because 'passing' as a woman these days turns out to mean looking as much like a nubile white cissexual supermodel as possible. Shaving or waxing is an ongoing expense, even if you do it yourself at home; getting hair removed professionally or lasered away permanently can run to thousands of dollars over a lifetime.

The same principle applies to eating on public transport: doing so is not considered 'classy'. 'Real ladies' conceal their bodily functions from the world as much as possible. 'Real ladies' are blank, smooth, pale slates, with nothing inside, no guts, no gore, no appetite, no personality.

Cultural disgust for the female body is deeply political. It is tied into reproductive and social control, which affects all female-identified people, whether or not we plan to have children or are biologically capable of pregnancy. Gender policing is about making sure that women don't get above ourselves, that we can be seen as less than human, with no real interiority, without

real bodies that eat and shit and hurt and die. If the female body remains a beautiful mystery, if it retains an ethereal, abstract quantity, you don't have to feel so bad when you do bad things to it.

How and where we choose to eat lunch. What we do with our hair in the morning and our pubes at night. Whether and when we wear makeup. Whether we wear jeans or a skirt. All of these things are intimate, everyday decisions that wouldn't matter if we didn't spend thousands of hours and a great deal of money fretting about them over the course of the short time we get to spend on this planet. We experience all of this on an intimate, everyday level, and it seems like it shouldn't matter, but it does. The little indignities, the little restrictions, they matter so much. And if we're smart and pay attention, they give us a language to talk about the big ones. The world in which we fritter away our energies worrying about body hair and eating on public transport is the same world in which the British government has just appointed a Minister for Women who is against both abortion rights and gay marriage. It is the same world in which people on welfare have just taken another hammering, being painted as scroungers even as the outgoing Minister for Women gets to keep almost £44,000 in wrongly claimed expenses. It is the same world in which women are indefinitely detained and then threatened with deportation for

being born queer in the wrong country and wanting to live and love in peace.

And the little capitulations wear us down. They soften us up for the big capitulations. Any good dictator knows that, which is why Kim Jong Un has just made it mandatory for every male student in North Korea to emulate his slightly odd haircut.

Ultimately, being a 'good woman' isn't just about shaving and whether you eat crisps on the bus. It's about how silent you're prepared to be in the face of social injustice.

WORD GAMES

Language matters. It defines the limits of our imagination. You don't have to be a gender theorist to understand that if we have only two ways of referring to human beings – 'he' or 'she' – we will grow up thinking of people as divisible into those two categories and nothing more. So it is significant that, in late August, OxfordDictionaries.com – an online resource created by the publishers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* – added an entry for the gender-neutral title 'Mx'.

This is how it's defined: 'a title used before a person's surname or full name by those who wish to avoid specifying their gender or by those who prefer not to identify themselves as male or female'. In 2015, the *OED* added to its lexicon the word 'cisgender', meaning 'not transsexual'. That matters, too, because without a word for it, you were either 'trans' or you were 'normal'.

Sweden has also recently added the gender-neutral pronoun '*hen*' to its dictionary. Pronouns such as 'xe' and 'they' (used to refer to a singular subject) are already in use in English as alternatives to 'he' and 'she'. Many conservatives and professional pedants are furious – it's fussy, it's far too politically correct and how are you supposed to pronounce 'Mx', anyway? So whose side should we be on?

By some accident of serendipity, the day I found out about all of this was also the day I met the feminist linguist Dale Spender. At seventy-one, when I met her, she was small and delicate and dangerous, like a cupcake full of razors. She was dressed from head to toe in purple: a lilac handbag, bright violet shoes, an elegant silk dress in swirls of fuchsia and lavender. The activist and author of *Man Made Language* could be the embodiment of Jenny Joseph's poem 'Warning' ('When I am an old woman I shall wear purple . . .') but Spender has worn the colour every day for decades, in honour of the suffragettes.

Swallowing my hero worship together with a luke-warm coffee backstage at a writer's festival, I asked Spender what she thought, as someone who has long pioneered the politics of women's language, about the recent push towards a more gender-neutral vocabulary.

'It's the same argument we had in the 1970s, when we started using "Ms",' Spender told me. The title 'Ms' was promoted by feminists and widely adopted as an alternative to 'Mrs' or 'Miss' – the idea being that there was more to a woman's life than her marital status. 'So many of us were getting divorced and leaving bad marriages and we didn't know how to refer to ourselves,' Spender said. 'I wasn't a "Miss" any more but I definitely wasn't a "Mrs". They said the same thing back then – that "Ms" was clumsy, that people didn't know how

to pronounce it. But how about "Mrs" or "Mr"? They're hardly obvious!'

Spender reminded me that the *Oxford English Dictionary* has always been run by men and that mainstream lexicography had a male bias; it wasn't until 1976 that 'lesbian' got an entry in what the feminist Mary Daly dubbed the 'dick-tionary'.

Spender is dismayed to see this kind of linguistic activism falling out of fashion – 'We used to spend days coming up with new words for concepts that needed to be talked about' – and she was delighted that Internet culture had brought it back with gusto.

'I love the word "mansplaining",' Spender said. 'It's perfect. You know instantly what it means. And "manspreading", "maninterrupting" – did you know that in mixed-gender conversations, most interruptions are by men?'

There is nothing new about activists working to move language forward to create cultural change but it is easy to underestimate the effects of that change over time. Listening to Spender talk about the importance of 'Ms' reminded me how radical a proposition it once was for women to claim their own names and titles after marriage. My mother retained what is still referred to as her 'maiden' surname, Penny, and always used 'Ms'. I remember asking as a child why she wasn't a 'Miss' or a 'Mrs' and being told that she didn't want the first thing people knew about her

to be whether or not she was married. That seemed fair enough. Why would a woman want to go around with a label on them that described who they belonged to – like a dog tag – when men didn't have to? That didn't seem fair. Also, Penny was a much nicer surname and I made a note to adopt it myself when I was older.

Now that I'm the age my mother was when she had me, I am beginning to understand what an impression that simple, powerful statement made. I always understood that Mum was her own person first and a wife second and that I could be, too. My relationships with men didn't have to be the core of my identity. The feminists of the 1970s and 1980s had to fight to make that possible but I grew up with that assumption, partly because of a simple act of linguistic activism.

Perhaps the generation being born today will grow up with different assumptions: not just that women should be equal to men but that gender might not be the most important part of your identity. That's an uncomfortable idea for a great many people, and that discomfort is at the heart of the predictable pedantry over 'Mx', 'xe' and 'they'.

We can only become what we can imagine and we can only imagine what we can articulate. That's why language matters to our lives; that's why little changes in grammar and vocabulary can affect the entire architecture of our political imagination.

Today, signing 'Mx' on an application form or an electricity bill is an act of linguistic rebellion but tomorrow it could be ordinary. And that is how you change the world.

TRANSPHOBIC THROWBACKS

In early 2013, columnist Julie Burchill used her platform in the *Observer* to launch what may be the most disgusting piece of hate-speech printed in a liberal newspaper in recent years. I'm not the only reader who was shocked to the core at her smug attack on transsexual women as 'screaming mimis in bad wigs', 'a bunch of dicks in chicks' clothing' and other playground insults too vile to repeat. Burchill claimed to be protecting a friend, which is a noble thing to do, but I suspect that the friend in question, the writer Suzanne Moore, who penned a far less vituperative article on the same subject, would rather she hadn't been associated with the popping of this particular pustule of prejudice.

Burchill's article is an embarrassment to the British press, an embarrassment to feminist writing and a shameful exploitation of a public platform to abuse a vulnerable minority. The *Observer* has now issued an apology, and rightly so, although I believe the decision to depublish the piece is not wrong so much as bizarre, since Google Cache never forgets.

It's even more dispiriting to see other mainstream media outlets, including the *Telegraph*, rally around Burchill's ignorant screed as a 'free speech' issue, as if the right to free speech and the right to publication in a major national newspaper were the same thing at all in the age of Tumblr.

But let us get back to the issues. I'm partly writing this piece out of selfishness. I want to make it clear to the readers around the world who were rightly disgusted by the *Observer* column that Burchill and Moore do not speak for all British feminists, and that not every British columnist is prepared to rally the waggons around bigotry. A young, powerful feminist movement with transsexual and queer people at the heart of the debate is gathering in strength in this country and across the world, and we know that gender essentialism and bigotry hurt all of us, cis and trans, men and women.

Transphobic men and women who promote prejudice in the name of feminism, including writers like Sheila Jeffreys, Germaine Greer, Julie Bindel and now Julie Burchill, are on the wrong side of history. For far too long, a small, vocal cadre of the women's movement has claimed that transsexuals, and in particular transsexual women, are not just irrelevant to feminism but actively damaging to the cause of women's liberation. Their arguments are illogical, divisive and hateful, and sometimes just plain bonkers. I've been to meetings where transphobic feminists have argued that if they don't keep a lookout, horrible sexist men will try to sneak into their meetings, marches and seminars in disguise in order to disrupt proceedings.

What precise form the disruption is supposed to take has not been explained, partly because it has never

happened, ever. If Jeremy Clarkson or Bill O'Reilly ever decide to try it, I can assure you that they will be spotted and stopped – but right now, the feminist movement needs no help from fictional men in petticoats to damage our hopes of winning the wider war on women's freedom. Far more insidious is the insistence by some feminists on mocking transsexual women and denying their existence.

The word that annoys these so-called feminists most is 'cis', or 'cissexual'. This is a term coined in recent years to refer to people who are not transsexual. The response is instant and vicious: 'we're not cissexual, we're normal – we don't want to be associated with you freaks!' Funnily enough, that's just the kind of pissing and whining that a lot of straight people came out with when the term 'heterosexual' first began to be used as an antonym of 'homosexual'. Don't call us 'heterosexuals', they said – we're normal, and you don't belong.

To learn that the world is not divided into 'normal' people and 'freaks' with you on the safe side is uncomfortable. To admit that gender identity, like sexual orientation, exists on a spectrum, and not as a binary, is to challenge every social stereotype about men and women and their roles in society.

Good. Those stereotypes need to be challenged. That's why the trans movement is so important for feminism today.

Thanks to a global surge in acceptance and discussion of a spectrum of gender identity, trans people are becoming more and more visible, more angry and more open about their experiences. The world is changing, and those of us fortunate enough to be born in a body that suits our felt gender identity are going to have to accept that being cissexual, just like being heterosexual, isn't 'normal', merely common.

Transphobic articles in high-profile publications are not harmless. They cause active, quantifiable damage. They justify the ongoing persecution of transsexual people by the medical and legal establishment; they destroy solidarity within political and social circles; they hurt people who are used to hearing such slurs shouted at them in the street, and do not need to hear them from so-called progressives. Worse, they make it seem to the average reader, who might be a friend or relative of a trans person, that the rights of transsexual people to be treated in a humane way are still a subject for reasonable debate.

Some conservative feminists claim that arguing about trans issues is counter-productive to the wider struggle against austerity and sexual violence. They are right about that. Feminism is meant to be about defending women against violence, prejudice and structural, economic disadvantage – all women, not just the ones self-appointed spokespeople decide count, and at this time of crisis, we need to be standing

together to defend women who are poor, marginalised and live in fear of violence. We cannot do that if we exclude trans and queer women, who are more than usually vulnerable to gendered violence and discrimination. Entry to feminist spaces should not be conditional on having one's genitals checked over by Julie Burchill, Julie Bindel or their representatives.

It comes down to essentialism, and essentialism, as Suzanne Moore rightly pointed out in her *Guardian* column, is always conservative. Stubborn gender essentialism – the belief that your body and your hormones should define everything about your life – is what women have been fighting since the first suffragettes unrolled their green and purple sashes. For transphobic feminists, though, it all seems to boil down to an obsession with what precisely is inside a person's underpants, which is at best intellectually vapid and at worst rather creepy.

In fact, as Simone de Beauvoir once noted, nobody on Earth is born a woman. Julie Burchill was not born a woman, unless her mother is a hitherto unheralded miracle of medical science. Just over half of us grow up to become women, and the process is a muddle of blood and hormones and angst and pressure and pain and contradiction. Transsexual women know just as well, and sometimes better than cissexual women, what it is to be punished for your felt and lived gender, what it is to fear violence and rape, to be reduced to

your body, to be made to feel ashamed, to have to put up with prejudice and lazy stereotypes.

Personally, if I thought that my vagina, which I've had since I was born, was my most important feminist accessory, I would let it speak for itself. Unfortunately it hasn't read much feminist history, and neither, it seems, have transphobic bigots. If they had, they'd understand that taking a stand against violence and gender essentialism is what feminism is all about, and that's precisely why solidarity with trans people should be the radical heart of the modern women's movement.

A tipping point has been reached. All over the world, online and in local communities, transsexual men and women are finding their voices, and finding each other. Their struggle for acceptance in a society that still hates and fears those who are different, those who don't follow the rules of gender and sexuality, is vital to the modern feminist movement. Young activists understand that that's what feminism is all about, for all of us, men and women, cissexual, transsexual and genderqueer: the fight for equality and freedom of expression in a society that still believes that the arrangement of your genitals at birth should dictate the course of your life. It's time for cissexual feminists to put hate aside and stand with transsexual women in solidarity.

BEYOND BINARIES

When April Ashley, who in 1960 became one of the first Britons to have sex-reassignment surgery, was asked by reporters if she was born a man or a woman, her answer was always the same: 'I was born a baby.' For the full effect, imagine Ashley saying this with a little smile on her perfectly pencilled lips, dignified and demure in the face of the fusillade of stupid questions she has been fielding for more than fifty years. Sadly, Ashley's point – that not all babies fit into the pink or blue box they were assigned at birth – is taking a long time to sink in.

Now, Germany has announced legislation to allow parents not to record the gender of their newborn if, as is surprisingly often the case, doctors cannot instantly determine what biological sex the wriggling, squalling bundle of growth hormones is.

There are many conditions that can cause a person to be biologically intersex. Stories about the 'third gender', about gods and humans who weren't quite men or women, have been with us for millennia, but there has long been pressure on doctors and parents to 'fix' any baby who isn't obviously either a boy or a girl. This often entails intimate surgery that is performed when the child is too young to consent. Traumatic reports about the effect this sort of procedure can have on kids when they grow up appear

routinely in the tabloids – but the question of why, precisely, it is considered so urgent that every child be forced to behave like a 'normal' boy or girl is rarely discussed.

Germany's law, which came into force in late 2013, is just a small step in the long march to equal rights and recognition for intersex, transsexual and transgender people in Europe, a trudge that is beset by bigots on one side and bureaucrats on the other.

The main detractors of the German law oppose the move not on moral grounds but because of the paperwork involved – and look at me not resorting to any national stereotypes about managerial dourness to finish this sentence . . . but what if the paperwork is the problem? What if you're someone who is literally written out of every form and official document, every passport and bank account application, because society refuses to recognise there are more than two genders?

One in 2,000 babies, or 0.05 per cent of the world population, is estimated to be intersex. That's 3.5 million people across the globe. That, in case you were wondering, is ten times the population of Iceland. And those 3.5 million are just those who are visibly intersex at birth: some estimates suggest that the correct proportion of human beings whose bodies differ in some way from 'normal' male or female, either hormonally or genetically, could be as high as 1 per cent.

Some of those people prefer to identify simply as men or as women, but many do not.

The German law will give the right to 'leave the box blank' only to those born intersex – but gender identity is about more than biology. According to a 2012 Scottish trans mental health study, about a quarter of transsexual and transgender people do not identify as male or female, and prefer to present as nonbinary, gender-fluid or agendered.

So why aren't we talking about this more? Why isn't there a bigger public conversation about intersexuality and life outside the pink and blue binary? I don't mean drooling 'true stories' – I mean level-headed discussion that understands that intersex, transgender and androgynous people are 'normal' humans, too, who spend as much time stuck on trains or waiting for trashy crime shows to download as they do considering the contents of their underpants. Why are these matters so rarely taught in schools? Why do so many children – including intersex and transgender kids – grow up believing you have to be a girl or a boy and that there are no other options?

Unfortunately, I know the answer. We don't talk about it because questioning something as culturally fundamental as the gender binary is risky. It makes people confused and it makes them angry.

For some, the notion of large numbers of people not living as men or women doesn't morally compute,

objective fact and conservative morality never having been the most snugly of bedfellows. These are often the same people who can be found quoting dubious evolutionary 'studies' suggesting there are prehistoric reasons why 'some girls just like pink', possibly involving cavewomen and colourful fruit, even though the practice of dressing girls in pink is barely a century old.

The idea that there are only two possible genders and that those genders are rigid and fixed is an organising principle of life in most modern societies. It affects everything, from how we dress to whom we can marry and what work we get to do and whether or not we will be paid for that work. Discussion of conditions such as intersexuality threatens all that. It gives the lie to the gender binary, exposing it as not just flawed, but scientifically inaccurate. And so we carry on shoving intersex and transgender folk to one side and forcing everyone who isn't 'normal' to damn well act that way or face harassment, discrimination and violence, from the playground to the pulpit. Concerned parents of confused children are coerced into picking a sex and sticking to it – but is that for their own good, or for the good of a society wedded to a simple understanding of gender?

To anyone reading this who is intersex – and I know that there will be at least a few – I apologise for how basic this must sound. My sincere hope is that in ten years' time articles such as this one will look outdated

to the point of offence, rather like a column from the 1960s making the stunning observation that, gosh, some men fancy other men and might even like to marry them.

The journey from here to there will probably involve a lot of paperwork – but for millions of people across the world, it'll be worth it.

ON THE 'TRANS TIPPING POINT'

I have a colouring book in front of me. It's called *Finding Gender*, and it was sent to me by an activist who knows how much I love social justice and felt-tip pens. In the book, a small child and a robot go on marvellous adventures, and children and nostalgic adults get to scribble on their clothes and costumes, their hair and toys. It's an ordinary colouring book in every respect, apart from the fact that the child isn't identifiably male or female. Neither is the robot. The person with the crayons gets to decide what they're wearing, whether they're boys or girls, or both or neither.

This is how it happens. From dinner-table conversations to children's books, the lines of gender are being redrawn. Suddenly, transsexual and transgender people – those who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth – are everywhere in popular culture. Suddenly, people who are transitioning from male to female, or from female to male, or who choose to live outside the gender binary entirely, are no longer universally portrayed as freaks to be gawped at or figures of fun, but as exactly what they have been throughout human history – real, flesh-and-breath people with feelings and dreams that matter.

In 2014, *Time* magazine published a cover story titled 'The Transgender Tipping Point'. The

trend-hungry American press is toppling over with spurious tipping points, but this one is real, and it's important. Centuries of marginalisation mean that the statistics are still shaky, but it is estimated that between 0.1 and 5 per cent of the population of Earth is trans, genderqueer or intersex. Whichever way you slice it, that's millions of human beings. As a species, we have come up with space travel, antibiotics, and search engines so it seems rather archaic that so much of our culture, from money and fashion, love and family is still ordered around the idea that people come in two kinds based roughly on what's in their knickers.

Something enormous is happening in our culture. In the past three years, and especially in the past twelve months, a great many transsexual celebrities, actors and activists have exploded into the public sphere. Some have taken the brave step of disclosing their trans status after they were already household names, like American presenter Janet Mock, rock star Laura Jane Grace, athlete Fallon Fox, Oscar-winning director Lana Wachowski or activist and former soldier Chelsea Manning. Others have simply become successful without hiding or apologising for their trans status, like sassy British columnist Paris Lees, or actress Laverne Cox, star of *Orange Is the New Black*, who graced the *Time* cover as one of a new generation of breakout trans stars.

At the same time, the Internet is making it easier for members of a previously isolated section of the population to find and support one another. Until recently, the threat of violence, coupled with the relatively small visible number of trans people, meant that coming out was a fraught, complicated process. It often meant moving away from your hometown, finding a community in a city, changing your job, your school. Transgender people in isolated or rural areas found it very difficult to make connections with others who might be able to understand their situation and offer advice. A great many trans people waited decades before deciding to transition in public – and some attempted to keep that part of their lives secret for ever, at great personal cost.

The Internet changed all that. Partly because of the Internet, and partly because of a new wave of transgender role models, more and more people are coming out as trans, and they are doing so younger, and their friends and families now have the language to understand what that means. As celebrated trans author Julia Serano told me, 'The truth is that trans people exist and our lives are fairly mundane. In the US, the number of transsexuals is roughly equivalent to the number of Certified Public Accountants. Nobody views accountants as exotic or scandalous!'

If gender identity is no longer a fixed commodity, that affects everybody. Not just those who are

transsexual, their friends, families and colleagues, but everybody else, too. If gender identity is fluid – if anyone can change their gender identity, decide to live as a man, a woman, or something else entirely, as it suits them – then we have to question every assumption about gender and sex roles we've had drummed into us since the moment the doctors handed us to our panting mothers and declared us a boy or a girl. That's an enormous prospect to consider, and some people find it scary.

Changing words changes the world. The word 'cis' is both necessary and challenging, because previously, people who weren't transsexual were used to thinking of themselves simply as 'normal'. If being cis, in Dorothy Parker's terminology, isn't normal but merely common, that changes everyone's understanding of how gender shapes our lives, individually and collectively.

Of course, 'cis' covers a lot of bases. A great many cis people experience gender dysphoria to some degree, and a great many women, in particular, experience the socially imposed category of 'womanhood' as oppressive. I'm one of them, and that's why I believe trans rights are so important to feminism – and why it's so dispiriting that some feminists have been actively fighting against the inclusion of trans people in anti-patriarchal and LGBT politics. The notion that biology is not destiny has always been at the heart of

radical feminism. Trans activists and feminists should be natural allies.

It is increasingly clear that gender is not a binary. Unfortunately, we're living in society which has organised itself for centuries on the principle that it is, and that everyone who disagrees should be shouted down, beaten up or locked away.

For centuries, it was standard practice to compel anyone who didn't conform to the rigid roles set out for their sex – from gay and transgender people to women who were too promiscuous, angry or 'mannish' – to do so by force and medical intervention. Generations of activism have fought this type of gender policing, but for the transgender and transsexual community, that sort of bullying is still an everyday reality. Trans people are more likely to be victims of murder and assault than any other minority group – recent studies suggest that 25 per cent of trans people have been physically attacked because of their gender status, and hundreds of trans people are murdered every year. Up to 50 per cent of transgender teenagers attempt suicide. That, of course, is what violence and prejudice are designed to do. They're designed to make people hate and hurt themselves, to frighten them out of being different, to bully and brutalise any perceived threat to the social order out of existence.

Explaining why this is so significant is hard for me, because I'm about as close as you can get to the

trans rights movement without being trans yourself. I've been associated with trans activism for years, and while I don't know what it's like to be harassed, threatened or abandoned for being transsexual, most of my close friends do. Right now, I'm watching the rest of the world begin to understand the community that has become my home, and it is incredibly exciting – but it's frightening, too, because the backlash is on.

Even as reports come in that the Southern Baptist Convention, an influential American religious lobby, has made it official policy to oppose trans rights, even as the anti-trans opinion pieces mount up, I'm watching my trans friends and colleagues attacked and harassed online, made to fear for their jobs and their safety. With greater visibility, the stakes are even higher – and sadly, some sections of the left, including feminists like Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond, have allied with social conservatives to attack trans people as deranged.

Time magazine is correct to call this the 'new civil rights frontier'. The cultural Right has largely lost the argument on homosexuality. Those who argue against gay marriage and gay adoption are increasingly at odds with social norms, and the type of popular pseudo-religious homophobia that was common in the days of Section 28 sounds more and more frothingly bigoted. But gender and sexuality still need to be policed – and if you can no longer call gay people

sinful and expect to be taken seriously, someone else has to be the scapegoat, the 'other' against which 'normality' is defined.

The time is coming when everyone who believes in equality and social justice must decide where they stand on the issue of trans rights – whether that be the right to equal opportunities at work, or simply the right to walk down the street dressed in a way that makes you comfortable. Those are rights that the feminist and gay liberation movements have fought for for generations, and those who have made gains have a responsibility to stand up for those who have yet to be accepted. If we believe in social justice, we must support the trans community as it makes its way proudly into the mainstream.