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Bending the Binary

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Bending the Binary

Abstract

Friend: “Are you going to the Gender Bender Dance?”

Me: “I think so. I probably won’t dress up though; I figure I already bend gender enough every day.”

Friend: “What do you mean? Like you’re not feminine?”

Me: “Yeah!”

Friend: “No, Chelsea! Of course you are!”

Wait, what? I understand that this person meant no harm; if anything, my friend probably interpreted my remark as a self-deprecating comment uttered with the hopes that someone would reassure my femininity. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, gender

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

BENDING THE BINARY

May 5, 2014

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Wait, what? I understand that this person meant no harm; if anything, my friend probably interpreted my remark as a self-deprecating comment uttered with the hopes that someone would reassure my femininity. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Why did I say that I bend gender every day? Well, because I think it's true. My sex may be female, but I'm [agender](#), and I have no desire to present myself as something I'm not (that is, as a woman).

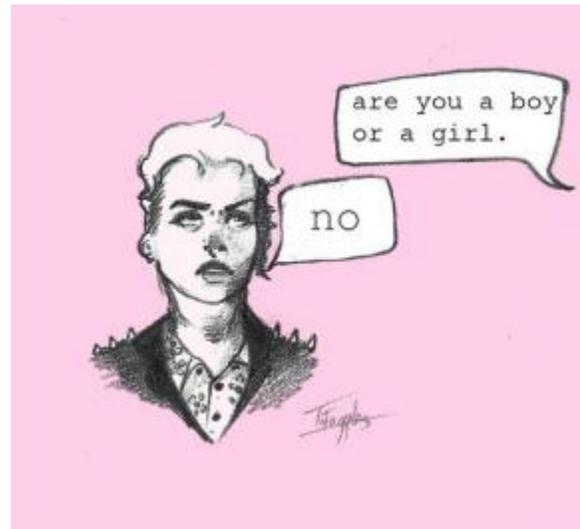
But encounters like this happen all of the time.

When I tell a co-worker not to greet me with, "Hey girl!" he laughs and dubiously asks if he should call me "boy" instead.

When a professor tries to make a point about of having students refer to their classmates by name and tells us "Don't say 'they.' You're only talking about one person. There is no 'they.'"

When I fill out a medical form and it asks if my [gender is male or female](#), or if my sex is man or woman.

When an audience member asks a student presenter if fashion can be a form of self-expression for gender-nonconforming people who have to dress according to gender norms, and the presenter laughs and says, "I guess a boy could wear a dress if he wanted to."



These encounters demonstrate a misunderstanding of gender. We have all been indoctrinated into the false perception that gender works on a binary. From before we are born, parents decorate us in pink or blue clothing depending on what genitalia the doctor told them we would have. It is reinforced every time we have to choose between boy toys and girl toys, the men's restroom and the women's restroom, the men's clothing section and the women's clothing section.

The belief in a gender binary is pervasive and continual, making it difficult for many to comprehend a gender other than man or woman. Until I came to understand my own identity outside of the gender binary, I believed in it, too. But now the binary feels like constant violence being done against my identity.

I don't want to be feminine. I don't want to be a woman. I don't want you to tell me that I can be a woman in spite of having short hair, baggy clothes, and abundant body hair. When I declare my lack of femininity, I don't want you to assume I'm putting myself down.

I have struggled immensely to accept a gender and gender expression that are constantly overlooked, questioned, and condemned by my community and society. I spent years contemplating whether or not I should cut my hair for fear of how people would perceive my gender. For six months after I stopped shaving my underarms, I was careful to always wear shirts with sleeves so that no one else would learn of my "dirty little secret." I knew that these things are deemed strange actions for females to take, so for a long time I was afraid to take them at all, and then continued to question them even after they were done.

So how do we proceed? How do individuals who identify outside of the gender binary gain recognition from a society that constantly overlooks us, delegitimizes us, and insists that we fit into the false dichotomy of the gender binary? How do we stop this violence?

I'd love to see a gender revolution, but I know this isn't exactly likely. For people who feel like they have no place in the world, small steps can make a big difference. When I studied abroad in Denmark, most public multi-person bathrooms were gender-neutral. *I don't have to choose between men's or women's? This is great!* Even smaller things, like asking people [what pronouns they use](#) and not assuming you know someone's gender based on their appearance, can mean a lot. There's a lot more that needs to be done beyond this.

Join me in making your wish list. In the comments, make concrete suggestions for ways we can bend the binary.

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Editor

<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/05/05/bending-the-binary/>