

Disorienting
a Category

Cisgender

Perry Zurn

**Cis-
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ASTERISK Gender, Trans-, and All That Comes After
*A series edited by Susan Stryker, Eliza Steinbock,
Jian Neo Chen, and Marquis Bey*

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cis- -gender

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I set out to write an article about cisness, and it fast became this octopus of a book. As such, there are many who accidentally became a part of this project, which always meant to be almost-already finished but stayed in flux until the very end (and perhaps does so still, despite the ruse of being typeset and defined by these page margins and book covers). This book is not perfectly aligned with a thesis; it does not have irreducible internal sense and self-consistency. And yet, I would not say that makes it any more a trans book than a cis book. Truthfully, it is a trans cis book: one that tells the story of cis in, through, and from the story of trans.

Here, then, I mean to thank the accidental participants of this project.

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Thanks to my trans-situated kin. And thanks to my cis-situated kin. To the ways in which we form bonds and resist gender norms together. To my trans-situated kin, a thanks for picking up the shattered pieces of gender and placing them in an evolving mosaic of your own. And for surviving the outcast status you negotiate as certainly as you do haphazardly. And to my cis-situated kin, a thanks for negotiating the pressures of gender norms so up close and for the beauty of the breaks you choose as much as of the other life force by which you transform those norms from within. We are at work, on all sides, for another world.

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Dis/Orienting

My ninety-five-year-old grandmother was the only girl around who knew how to whistle—and she was damn proud of it. At seven, she lost her father. At sixteen, she got pregnant. Forced into an abortion, she dropped out of high school traumatized. At eighteen, she entered an arranged marriage. She tells me the story of lying naked in feet of snow on her wedding night begging to die rather than live with this man. Sexual and physical abuse were par for the course in that marriage and the one after it. She is now twice divorced. Winter or summer, she typically wears a long cotton pajama T-shirt, white tennis shoes, oversized sunglasses, and a black trench coat (no pants, or underpants, just to clarify). Her breakfast of champions is a light Yuengling lager and spoonfuls of jelly from a jar, which she consumes quickly before scurrying off to run her Philly landscaping business of fifty years. On most days, she looks like a bum tramping around the richy-rich Main Line, telling everyone (employees and clients alike) what to do. Her quintessential grandmotherly activity was taking us on arduous hikes even before we were steady on our feet and handing out an endless supply of old, cracked jellybeans from her trench coat pocket.

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I remember reaching for them and having to brush off the leaf detritus and lint still stuck to them. She is “cisgender”—whatever that is.

I have often wondered what my grandmother thought of womanhood. She calls me every week or two to tell me the newest thing she’s learned from her magazine subscriptions—usually *National Geographic* or *Biblical Archaeology*. She is endlessly fascinated by nature and history. For her last birthday, she asked everyone to donate to save the pangolins. Before that, it was kangaroos and stories of mama kangaroos cleaning baby poop from their pouches with their tongues (the gross-out factor was important). Occasioned by one of these phone calls, I asked her, “Mommom, what would you say a woman is?” She thought for a moment and replied, “A woman is a person, created by God, who has unique attributes. We have very strong emotional abilities. And we have attitude. You can do almost anything in the world with the right attitude.” As she kept talking, it became clear to me that, for her, attitude is everything. On the one hand, when things get hard—very hard—you just have to push through it. And that takes attitude. On the other hand, when you need to make room for yourself, get something done, make a change, that takes attitude too. Attitude is a way to survive nonideal circumstances but also a way to insist on what you need and what you want. To be a woman, for her, is not simply to accept your lot in life or the gendered expectations you inherit. It is to scrappily negotiate them—with attitude.

Scrappy negotiation. Survival, but also refusal. Beer for breakfast, no pants, and crumbly-crackly jellybeans. Is this how cisgender womanhood works?

As typically defined, *cisgender* (or *cis* for short) refers to someone whose “gender identity” matches their “sex assigned at birth.” Sans the jargon, that means someone who doctors announced was a female (or a male) at birth, became a girl (or a boy) with little fuss, and is now quite contentedly a woman (or a man). The contentment and lack of fuss is critical here. Cis people, the stereotype goes, are fine with gender norms and expectations. They have no trouble fulfilling them, nor do they have any overarching critique of how gender functions in the world. Although it rarely gets put this baldly, the “cis” category assumes a sort of Stepford wives syndrome for everyone in it. A docility in being exactly what one was born to be. If you were born to be a girl, you become a girl, and you don’t think much of it. If you were born to be a boy, you become a boy, and, again, you don’t think much of it. How you dress, speak, eat, and sit “fits” with the general contours of people born with bodies like yours. Your gendered life does not buck the system, even if you find yourself bucking in other respects. Gender is simple to you, simple for you.

By this rubric, my grandmother is remarkably bad at being cisgender. Not only does she buck gender norms for breakfast (literally), but she also

understands a tough, rebellious attitude to be inherent to womanhood—not docility and certainly not bland acceptance. Or perhaps it is not my grandmother who is bad at being cis; perhaps “cis” is bad at being a category to begin with. I do not have to turn to an everyday cis person like my grandmother to start blurring the lines here. I can turn to another ancestor of mine—this time on the trans side.

Leslie Feinberg is remembered as a transgender warrior and revolutionary communist. Ze had a rap sheet of organizing credentials—for workers’ rights, women’s rights, against racism and war. The author of *Transgender Warriors* (1996) and *Trans Liberation* (1998), ze is credited with popularizing trans terminology. But I was unaware of all of that when I first met Feinberg in the pages of *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). Back in 2003, I was studying philosophy and theology in a conservative Christian college in the Midwest. I had never seen another person who looked like I felt until I saw hir staring back at me from the black-and-white page. I never knew the way I felt about women had a history. I never knew the way my bones sat in my body had a family. Feinberg stood so solidly—so gruffly and tenderly—in this space between man and woman. It would be another five years before I learned the word *trans* or heard of hir other books. For now, I simply lived in a nonspace with hir, so much less alone than before. Ze was the first butch to ever find me, and the first butch I ever lost. When I heard Feinberg had died, in 2014, of chronic illnesses, I was sucker punched. I had lived for a decade certain we would meet, but ze was gone before I thought to look. These days, Feinberg is a trans icon. Those days, ze was a fiercely uncategorizable thing, and I loved hir for it—the way only another uncategorizable thing can.

I still google Feinberg from time to time, because the loss of them won’t leave me alone. It was in one of those moments that—now understanding myself as a trans person, a trans activist, and a trans scholar—I stumbled upon a short pamphlet ze published entitled *Journal of a Transsexual* (1980). Feinberg offers a series of vignettes from hir own everyday life of living in the uneasy space between sexgender categories.¹ Ze describes street harassment, employment discrimination, restaurant insults, threats, bathroom policing, anti-cross-dressing laws, harassment from cops, running for hir life, and the many compromises of survival. In a brief preface, Feinberg writes, “I am a very masculine woman. Perhaps that is the easiest way to introduce myself. I lived convincingly as a man for four years on a sex-change program before leaving that program. I am a woman. I am the way I am. It is a fine way to be.”² When I first encountered these prefatory lines, I stopped in my tracks. Was Feinberg trans at this moment, then, as the pamphlet’s title, *Journal of a Transsexual*, seems to suggest?

Or was ze cis, as indicated by hir express embrace of the category “woman”? In this instance, what does it mean for Feinberg to reclaim “woman”—even, or perhaps especially, in a reclamation that necessarily *trans*-forms the category? And, perhaps most fundamentally, what do we make of the cis/trans binary’s inability to explain, let alone illuminate, this particular moment in what appears to be cis and trans (or neither cis nor trans) history?

I am not convinced the “cis” category, as commonly deployed today, holds up to the complexity of either so-called cis or trans life. “Cis” people like my grandmother unabashedly challenge certain norms about gender, while trans people like Feinberg hold on to the words *female*, *lesbian*, and *woman* until their dying day.³ And this is all well before the proliferation of nonbinary terminology, which allows people to live on the trans sides of cis and the cis sides of trans by turns. The more I try to palpate the borders of cisness, the more I find myself disoriented.

After struggling for years to settle the distinction, I decided to get serious. I wanted to figure out what the term *cis* really means and how to use it. I wanted to learn where it came from and what possibilities and limitations it therefore carried. In the simplest sense, I wanted to settle everything that unsettled me about *cis*. But the trouble with any word and any history is this: Nothing was ever settled to begin with. The more I dug into the cis story, the more disoriented I became. This book is the result of that journey.

History Sideways

Cisgender: Disorienting a Category intervenes at cisgender’s zenith to offer a story of how *cis* came to be and what it has come to mean. It does so in order to inform where cis can go from here. Critical history is illuminative in that way. I mean the kind of history that uncovers the messy spots, the spots where determinations got made when other determinations could have been. Histories that underscore the contingencies of it all—and, in fact, underscore the underground stories. If we are not looking for easy answers about the future of gender (and how we talk about it), then we cannot begin with too-easy narratives about its past. Philosophers Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche describe this turgid type of history as genealogy.⁴ Genealogies trace the ins and outs of where concepts have been, especially where those concepts have taken on material life in our everyday interactions and institutions.⁵ Genealogies say, “Look, here is how we have come to think and do things this way. And here are all the other ways we could have come to think and do things but didn’t.” Because that is what happens. History barrels into the present all bluster, buoyed by a toothpick structure.

What I offer, in these pages, is a genealogy of the term *cisgender* from its inception to the present—a genealogy that, up to this point, has, at most, been accorded brief sections in random essays.⁶ In terms of a genealogy, this is orders of magnitude more thorough than anything offered before. Like most critical histories, the conceit of this book is that our pasts do not only explain where we have come from and shape where we are going; they also offer overlooked possibilities for who we are and might become. As, in part, a critical history, then, this book narrates key moments in the term's development from the 1990s to the present, but it also focuses on occluded conceptual and praxiological possibilities in that story. Some of those off-kilter possibilities are right at the surface, leaping off the page of history. Others I have looked for and leaned into in ways that may surprise the reader. I understand the chapters collectively to be sideways notes. They aim to record what happened but also to press at the seams of *cis*, to head it off in directions it has rarely, if ever, gone.

The book aims to set “this side” of things sideways, to render *cis* over and over again tilted and askew. At a juncture in which *cisness*—and critical discourses about it—have become more crystalline, I invite us to return to the muck and reimagine what *cis* could do. To make it, unmake it, and remake it in and for our present moment.

For me, *cis* is not a transhistorical gender formation; neither is *trans*. *Cis* is a concept. *Cis* is a word. And the story I want to tell tracks the idiosyncratic means by which that word-concept has come to assume transhistorical status, such that everyone from Nebuchadnezzar to Napoleon can be called “*cis*.” I am, of course, interested in how gender formations get normalized and restricted across history and in different geographical and geopolitical contexts. I am equally interested in how the most normalized and most restricted gender formations have gotten theorized and critiqued across those contexts. But that is not the *cis* story I have pursued. The *cis* story I have pursued is the story of a term and its associated and ever-narrowing meanings. I leave others to mark, as they have with *trans*, how these conversations are neither new nor eternal and to set about entrancing us with the details of that difference.⁷

As will become evident, the word *cis* did not merely appear on the scene fully formed, its sense already solidified and agreed upon by a representative gaggle of *trans* and *nontrans* people alike. *Cis* was generated in fits and starts primarily within *trans* communities. That matters. When we are talking about the word *cis*, we are talking about the linguistic generativity of *trans* people trying to make sense of the world. We are talking about subjugated knowledges.⁸ We are talking about concrete grappling with a WTF world.⁹ Moreover, perhaps one of the biggest surprises buried in the genealogy of *cis* is that the

lion's share of the people involved early on in developing the term *cis* as it applies to nontrans people were not simply trans people but trans disabled, trans crip, and transMad people.¹⁰ Disability is an essential part of the story. Doing a critical history, then, is not enough to do justice to the *cis* story. Other layers of historiographical comportment are required, layers that invite a transing and crippling of the otherwise increasingly well-disciplined concept of *cis*.

More than a critical history, I have written a trans history. Trans history involves, at the most basic level, telling the stories of trans people, especially where their traces have been all but lost, squandered, and erased by the powerful ideology we now call cisnormativity (and its predecessors). It can also involve, of course, reaching for gender-disruptive people across the ages, as it does in Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* and Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*.¹¹ Care, however, must be taken to narrate the continuity and difference that marks this network of related behaviors, affects, structures, and discourses and their non-linear changes across time.¹² But doing trans history also involves transing the process of history by telling a tale without letting the main players and main objects remain clearly distinguishable and separable from one another—including transness itself.¹³ It means telling a tale that disrupts binary distinctions of all sorts and maintains the ambiguity—even the “leakages”—between things.¹⁴ As such, trans history requires a trans epistemological praxis, where knowledge is generated in trans community and in a way that unsettles the solidity of knowledge objects and structures, trans or otherwise. I tell the story of *cis*—and emphasize the instabilities of *cis*—through the words, experiences, and lives of trans people.

I have written a trans history, moreover, with crip sensibilities. Crip sensibility listens for the stories of disabled and mad people, not only where those stories have been pushed aside by able-bodied people but perhaps especially where they have been buried under the presumption of able-bodiedness.¹⁵ Such a sensibility also involves crippling the process of storying itself, refusing sanist logics of normative temporal trajectories, spatial relations, and developmental scripts.¹⁶ It means not disentangling and further disciplining things with increasing precision but rather leaning into, as Eli Clare might put it, the messy stories, the awkward and ungovernable stories. As such, crip sensibility requires a cripistemological praxis where knowledge is rooted in disabled and mad people but also proceeds by inviting knowledge structures and objects to be and become dysfunctional and maladjusted.¹⁷ By pairing crip sensibility with trans history, my hope is not only to honor the trans crip theorists at the root of *cis* but also to refuse to offer trans as the undisturbed, stable anchor of this project. To keep it more honest.

What you have before you, then, is a critical history. A true genealogy. But it is also a trans history with crip sensibilities. That makes it a sideways, side-winding genealogy. This book aims to tell the story—or, rather, many stories—that highlight how cis became possible and what possibilities its present solidification as a concept occludes. But the book also aims to move beyond history. To tell half stories, shattered stories, shifty and unsteady glimmers of stories that allow the crevices of cis—its buried worlds and upending appendages—to come to light. My goal is not—and has never been—to simply uncover the truth of cis (as if that were possible) but rather to come alongside it and attend closely enough to see when it goes sideways.

The Cis Story

In 2014, Renaissance scholar Paula Blank published a piece in *The Atlantic* entitled, “Will Cisgender Survive?”¹⁸ I think it is not too much to say that the term *cisgender* has not just survived—it is thriving. That same year, following on the heels of their May 2014 “Transgender Tipping Point” issue, *Time Magazine* published a piece explaining the word *cis*. According to the author Katy Steinmetz, *cis* refers, negatively, to people who are not transgender—which is to say, people who have not sought gender transition in hormonal, surgical, legal, or other social forms.¹⁹ As such, it applies, she writes, to “the vast majority of people,” which statistically encompasses “about 99% of the population.”²⁰ Today, more than a decade later, it is more common for the word *cis* to be characterized positively. Popular information sources as varied as Wikipedia, NPR, and WebMD all state that *cis* refers to people whose gender identity “aligns with,” “corresponds to,” or “matches” the sex they were assigned at birth.²¹ Thus, Jennifer Lopez is cis; Laverne Cox and Elliot Page are trans. At present, the term *cis* circulates promiscuously in informal conversations, policy documents, and key terminology sheets, across medical, business, and technology sectors, not to mention in mainstream news outlets, social media memes, and TikTok videos. The term has, in fact, been all but canonized as a central feature of trans inclusion and trans liberation work.

But 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.²² 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 150 years later, in the 1990s, that *cis* took up residence in its third major field: gender studies. There, it refers

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to one's gender being on this side of one's sex.²³ It is opposed to *trans*, which refers to having a gender on the far side of one's sex.

While variants of the term percolated in twentieth-century German sexuality, *cisgender* was coined and mobilized in online trans communities in the mid-1990s. Moving through activist and academic ranks, first by word of mouth and then across multiple social media platforms over the years (including Usenet, LiveJournal, Tumblr, blogs, Reddit, and Twitter/X), *cis* has become a mainstay of gender discourse. Impetus for the term was patently clear to everyone. Trans people were socially exiled and exoticized by turns. In medical contexts, we were aberrant and abnormal. Whole meetings of professional bodies occurred to discuss the intimate details of our flesh and psyches, often with none of us present. The power differential was excruciating. Natural, normal, biological men and women got to sit comfortably in their armchairs and assess our unnatural, abnormal, artificial genders. Something had to be done to equalize the playing field. Generating a name for nontrans people that assigned them to a discrete category (rather than allowed them to occupy an undefined universal position) was paramount. And *cis* did that. It named the universal and thereby insisted on the categorical equality of trans with its nontrans counterpart.

In this early milieu, two main senses of *cis* circulated alongside one another, diverging and converging by turns. I call them the psychological and the political definitions. According to the psychological definition, *cis* refers to people who experience their gender as aligned with or matching their sex. This is the definition that often gets deployed in today's Trans 101 materials. According to the political definition, *cis* refers to people whose understanding of their sexgender gets consistently legitimated by a society. This is the definition that often gets deployed in today's discussions of cis privilege and cisnormativity. Over time, it is the former definition that, especially since its popularization in Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl*, wins out. Crucially, however, and as I will show, while the psychological definition became mainstream in the United States, it was the political definition that rose to prominence among a certain sector of Argentinean and Brazilian theorists. There, within trans and *travesti* circles, cisnormativity was theorized as part of a colonial gender system roughly a decade before any such analysis seems to surface in the United States.²⁴

The widespread adoption of *cis* as either a psychological or political diagnostic, however, has not been without backlash and pushback. Among nontrans and trans-allied circles alike, the term has come under fire. Some purportedly cis people simply do not "identify with" the term, despite users' insistence that the term is merely descriptive of a structural position and is not an identity

category. Others experience the term as derogatory, insulting, or even a formal slur. Within trans and trans-allied communities, people have leveled more germane critiques. Across Black, feminist, intersex, queer, and trans circles, people have long argued that the “cisgender” category seems to deny the way that racialization, intersex embodiment, queerness, and even womanhood already disrupt or trouble gender, regardless of one’s trans or nontrans status. There is also a nascent disability critique I identify and extend in the following pages. Across these critiques, it appears that, in attributing gender discontent only to trans people, *cisgender* misses the gender-resistance practices that arise from nontrans quarters and experiences. Nontrans people do in fact defy violently imposed gender norms in all sorts of ways. As media icon Jacob Tobia, in *Sissy*, puts it, “Perhaps the greatest oversight of the trans movement thus far is that it has positioned gender-based trauma as something only trans people experience.”²⁵ “Cis” people, too, trouble and are troubled by gender.

On May 25, 2024, *cisgender* turned thirty years old. The question, for me, is where will it go? Part of the impetus behind writing this book is to better inform the futures of *cisgender*: how the term gets used, by whom, what it means, where it resonates, and how we understand its limitations and possibilities. Scholar of religions Kim Haines-Eitzen once said she asks one crucial question of every project: “What are we simplifying in order to trouble something else?”²⁶ From its inception, cis has been the simple and simplified side of trans. And trans, conversely, has been the side of complexity. But what if there were gender trouble on both sides, so to speak, and smack in the middle? What if we turned both sides sideways—and built a bridge between them? Whatever *cisgender* is, it’s a wild category—a category of wildness. And in the rush to immobilize it (and have it stand in for immobility), we have lost our ability to appreciate and theorize the many ways in which movement, travel, and, yes, even transition fill its experiential contours. Sure, the qualities of cis movement are different from the qualities of trans movement, and the way those movements are disciplined can differ immensely. But the fact of their shared instability remains. And that—*that*—is disorienting.

Dis-Orienting Cis

People diss a lot in my neck of the woods. In trans and allied circles, “cis” people and cisness itself are often the object of disparagement and sometimes ridicule. Word on the street is that cis people are dupes of the patriarchy and the binary gender system it propagates. They live in an Orwellian gender world of normal men and women, and they have no problem continuing to drink

the Kool-Aid, poor suckers. Imbecilic sheep, they nevertheless hold a whole lot of power. One of my colleagues recently exclaimed, in exasperation, “I just can’t talk about gender with cis people around. They don’t get it.” Here my colleague made the not uncommon assumption that, while cis people have a gender, they do not “get” gender, insofar as they have (supposedly) never had to build their own gendered being in the world. They have simply accepted the gendered norms and expectations handed to them by society. As such, gender itself remains a black box. From here, we easily get “Cis people are stupid,” as one Reddit thread announces.²⁷ Or “Cis people suck,” as I have heard more times than I can count. “We are just better than them,” another colleague announced. This is the same strand of thinking that produces the derogatory use of *cissies* and the epithet (and now rampant Reddit/X/Tumblr hashtag) “Die cis scum.”

To be clear, my aim in this book is not to diss cis. I do not find such disparagements intellectually careful or experientially honest. I want to honor the term’s roots in creative trans resistance to oppressive norms, but I also want to dis- it. I want to disorient cis. To return us to its poetic substrate, to the clay still capable of taking new shape.

Like anything else, cis is oriented in a particular way, and we are oriented in a particular way to it. This is true not only of its original moment, in the 1990s, but also, and perhaps especially, now some thirty years later. Time settles things, squares off their corners, and shaves off the noise. In this book, I aim to disorient the term and disorient us. I do not mean simply to queer or to trans cis (or to show the ways it is already queered and transed), but to set cis veering.²⁸ Twisting it; making it strange. The goal of disorientation here is not to lose direction entirely but to shift direction, gain new possibilities for direction, get redirected and detoured. It is to let one prefix (*dis-*) work on another prefix (*cis-*).

In Latin, *dis-* means to pull apart, break asunder, cast away.²⁹ Its fundamental impetus is to destabilize. In disorienting the concept of cis and its contemporary moment, as much as its history and material complexity, I draw on a family of related *dis-* terms. I track the disidentifications that constitute cis, highlight the disknowledge that subtends it, and proliferate disepistemologies about it. I do this because I think that whatever category the term *cis* is trying to name is far more complex than it seems.

Disorientation makes us lose our balance, lose touch with landmarks. Disorientation can occur passively when ordered arrangements fail. “Disorientation involves failed orientations,” feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes.³⁰ But it can also be an active project. Disorientation, she writes, entails “disturb[ing]

the order of things.”³¹ A queer disorientation of straightness, for example, makes things “slip,” “slide,” and “shift” that are otherwise expected to stay put and stay steady. It disturbs the logic of things by highlighting, again and again, “the proximity of what does not follow.”³² And it involves “the ‘becoming oblique’” of something.³³ As I take up the queer project of disorienting cis, I refuse the straight logics attributed to it. I press the cis/trans distinction until it slips, slides, and shifts. I disturb the category of “cisness” by repeatedly pointing out the proximity of what does not follow. And I set cisness on its side—the same cisness that means being on “this side” of normative gender. Set that side on its side.

In disorienting cis, I also point out the disidentifications that constitute it. According to common usage, *cis* refers to a simple gender identification with the sex one was assigned at birth. But such identifications are never simple. Cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz shows how queer and especially queer-of-color communities construct their sense of self through a process of disidentifying with the norms and expectations they inherit. While especially present in queer life, disidentification is not unique to it. “Majoritarian subjects,” too, he writes, “have . . . recourse to disidentification.”³⁴ In fact, even their processes of “identifying with” their majoritarian subject positions are “fraught.”³⁵ As such, they may have “the uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which [they] do and do not belong.”³⁶ For me, disorienting cis involves unearthing the moments in which the bedrock of cis identification cracks. It means finding where disidentification surfaces in the very processes through which “cis” subjects formulate their genders. In all too many ways, “cis” subjects find themselves standing uneasily under a sign to which they do and do not belong.

I also want to illuminate the disknowledge upon which cis rests. For literary theorist Katherine Eggert, *disknowledge* names “a mode of choosing not to know what one knows.”³⁷ Disknowledge is a certain refusal to know what one has already come to know. I hazard that the term *cis*, when it is used in an overly simplistic fashion, necessarily involves disknowledge. We know there are a vast number of competing ways of doing gender that so-called normal men and women regularly negotiate and, often enough, refuse or fail to inhabit. We know that variability does not comfortably boil down to two discrete gendered ways of being in the world—especially without rich remainders. But we insist, nevertheless, on using *cis* terminology in reductive ways and thereby overwrite what we experientially know about the world. For Eggert, one of the best antidotes for pro forma disknowledge is fictive disknowledge.³⁸ Fiction invites us to disknow this world and proliferate knowledge of other worlds. I, too, wish not only to name our refusal to see cis unraveling from the inside out, through

the gender variability and resistance of nontrans people, but also to invite us to proliferate disknowledge about cis, to proliferate new fictions and creations about what cis might mean and what cis might do.

Finally, in disorienting cis, I circulate disepistemologies around it. Disepistemology departs from traditional epistemology. It names a disorientation of traditional ways of locating, justifying, and valuing knowledge. Some knowledge must be lived, felt out gingerly and always provisionally. For social and disability theorist Liat Ben-Moshe, that gingerliness makes a world of difference. She defines *disepistemology* as a kind of not knowing and not knowing how. It resists definitive distinctions and decisions.³⁹ In place of certainty, expertise, and clairvoyance, disepistemology offers the process of the unfinished sketch.⁴⁰ As a term, *cis* has been constructed both through categories of distinction and as a category of distinction. Cisness includes only men and women and circumscribes only nontrans men and women. Furthermore, “cis” people supposedly live in a world where these distinctions cohesively hold. By contrast, I highlight what is not known about the “cisgender” category, as well as what “cis” people find themselves not knowing about their own and each other’s genders. I want to flush out the constitutive openness about what gender means that marks the process of even the most normatively gendered lives.

Disepistemology. Disknowledge. Disidentification. Disorientation. Big words for a big project. But driven, really, by something quite small: *dis-*. Not dat but dis. Let us return once more, and just for a moment, to the Latinate prefix *dis-*. It holds a world. *Dis-* can signal a full negation: taking us from one to none. Or it can signal a pulling apart into two. It can also signify the process of separating things out one by one—thread after thread. Or it can mean pulling something in different directions—perhaps innumerable ones. Finally, *dis-* can mark an unending undoing. None, one, two, multiple, many, innumerable, in perpetuity. *Cisgender: Disorienting a Category* invites readers to join this plurivocal project. To attune themselves to the steady tremors underfoot. To lean into the moments of dizziness—those that history offers, those that the author crafts, and those neither of us could have foreseen. And to take on, hereafter, the task of un/making cis.

Paths and Seasons

This book tells the story of *cis* coming of age. That genealogy is essentially disorienting insofar as it displaces the overbearing, ahistorical sense of *cis* in the present and opens up all kinds of possibilities for its meaning and use—some of which have been actualized in the past and some passed over. But that

genealogy is disorienting on a secondary register as well. As I write the story of *cis*, I look to unsteady the referent along the way, as a trans history with crip sensibilities demands. I look for incommensurabilities and invitations. I look for the slips and the leaks. I look for the ungovernable and the maladjusted. I have not tried to write a merely factual account of what happened (although there are facts here). I have not tried to lock in a proper meaning. While I have offered conceptual clarifications along the way, I have also tried to break the concept open—to force us to reimagine and to think again.

Based on that genealogy, I make several demonstrations, some of which I have already gestured at but I want to offer, here, in an organized fashion. First, I show that the term *cisgender* was a trans innovation and intervention. It is not just a neutral term that describes a naturally occurring kind. The term itself developed as a militant act to denaturalize nontrans status. As such, I argue, an appropriate citational politics is in order, one that acknowledges the trans people who built the term rather than participates in a cisnormative erasure of their contributions to knowledge. Second, I show that there are two competing senses of *cis* all along the way: the psychological account (*cis* is a sense of one's gender matching one's sex assigned at birth) and the political account (*cis* is a gender position that is sanctified by the state and other material institutions). While the psychological account won out and is now mainstream, it is the political account, I argue, that still harbors future life. Third, I show that the mainstream psychological sense of *cis* as referring to a gender matching one's sex has ignored the especially Black, crip, Global South, intersex, and queer contributions to and critiques of the term. If trans and nontrans people are to use the term to diagnose and resist epistemic and material inequalities, we need to be equally attentive to the ways our uptake of the term reinscribes epistemic and material inequalities. It is for this reason that I emphasize Global South contributions to thinking *cis* in chapter 6, intersex and Black critiques of the term in chapter 7, crip critique in chapter 8, and queer critiques in chapter 10.

Across this history, *cis* gets repeatedly deployed to refer, on the one hand, to a social norm and state project and, on the other hand, to a category of people and an experience of gender. After evaluating the case for each, perhaps the most fundamental argument I make throughout the book is this: Cisness is a normative project but not a discrete gender category or gender phenomenology. Cisgender norms cultivate gender performances that are largely celebrated or brooked by institutions of power, especially legal, medical, religious, and scientific. Importantly, however, those gender performances can be quite variable and change. People in a cis relationship to gender norms have a wild plethora of gender expressions and gender resistances. Given this, the sign of

cisnormativity's power is not the narrowness of its gender expectations but the panoply of deviations it sustains before activating its eliminative or carceral logics. If *cis* means a gender matching an assigned sex, then I argue there is no such thing as cis because there is no such gender. If, however, *cis* refers to a suite of genders that are allowed to pass as instantiating a norm well enough to be continually disciplined into shape, then I argue there is indeed such a thing as cis but that it is a category of essentially flexible and impermanent gender referents.

Cisgender: Disorienting a Category, however, is not just a history, nor is it simply a book of demonstrations and arguments. It is an experiment in thinking a term that has otherwise stopped thought in its tracks, slapping a quick label on an ill-defined subject. As a tiny three-letter word, *cis* still has a journey of its own to take. Buried in this history are a range of possibilities for rethinking the term not only to elucidate the stakes of cis versus trans life, as currently defined, but also to branch beyond them. More can be dreamt of, here, and more resources set reeling.

Consider Black feminist warrior poet Audre Lorde, for a moment. She is cis, right? If one spends any time at all with her work, it is impossible not to know that, “born female,” she is a woman who loves women, especially a Black woman who loves Black women. That cord tying her to womanhood, however, is not mass manufactured. It is singular and complicated. And it begins before she does. Reminiscing in *Zami*, her biomythography, she speaks of her mother as being neither a woman nor a man but requiring a “third designation.”⁴¹ She offers a name for this thirdness: “Black dyke.”⁴² But this thirdness also resists naming. “Most often,” Lorde writes, “her difference was like the season or a cold day or a steamy night in June. It just *was*, with no explanation or evocation necessary.”⁴³ What is a gender difference made of steam or of seasons? A gender difference like a sudden June?

Lorde comes into being through her mother's thirdness and remains tethered to it. She, too, is a Black dyke. But she, too, escapes explanation. The opening sentences of *Zami* read:

I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks. I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. . . . I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable. . . . Woman forever.⁴⁴

As a woman, Lorde nevertheless inhabited “gender differently in different contexts.”⁴⁵ But what does Lorde’s womanhood mean if it coincides with a desire to be both man and woman? Where does her womanhood come from if its erotic source point is androgyny? What is her womanhood made of if it functions through both phallo- and gynocentric fantasies? These are the kinds of complex questions that surfaced in the 1980s before the handy cis/trans distinction buried them.

It is too easy to say Lorde is cis. It is also too easy to say Lorde is not cis by virtue of her blackness, her queerness, her disability and disease, or some other such abstract concept rooted in a large social group that deviates from a white, cishet, able-bodied Christian norm. No. There is something specific—and specifically disorienting—about what Lorde is saying here. Something a poet—and poetics as a method—can put into words, at least for a moment. There is a smallness to this difference—her difference—that deserves attention. In the pages that follow, I aim not only to critically track the rise of this monolith we now call *cis* but also to court the shock-cold and steamy June gender differences that hide beneath its hum.

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Notes

DIS/ORIENTING

1. I use the term *sexgender*, instead of *sex* and *gender*, to resist the common notions that sex is biological and gender is social and that body and mind can be meaningfully separated.
2. Feinberg, *Journal of a Transsexual*, 2.
3. Because I am ultimately suspicious of the applicability of *cis* to people and genders, I will often use quotation marks to insert dis-ease in such framings.
4. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*; Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."
5. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*.
6. For example, Enke, "Education of Little Cis"; Cava, "Cisgender and Cissexual"; Bey, *Cistem Failure*, 28–29.
7. DeVun, *Shape of Sex*; LaFleur et al., *Trans Historical*.
8. Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges."
9. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?"
10. For more on these terms, see Cavar, "Toward transMad Epistemologies"; Cavar and Baril, "Disability."
11. Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*; Stryker, *Transgender History*, 1st ed.
12. DeVun and Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History"; LaFleur, "Sex and 'Unsex.'"
13. See also Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Manion, *Female Husbands*.
14. Stryker et al., "Introduction."
15. Rembis et al., introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*.
16. Mills and Sanchez, *Crip Authorship*.
17. McRuer and Johnson, "Proliferating Cripistemologies"; Johnson and McRuer, "Cripistemologies."
18. Blank, "Will Cisgender Survive?"
19. Steinmetz, "This Is What 'Cisgender' Means."
20. Steinmetz, "This Is What 'Cisgender' Means."
21. Wikipedia, "Cisgender," accessed July 25, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cisgender>; Wamsley, "Guide to Gender Identity Terms"; Watson, "Cisgender."
22. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1968), under "cis-."

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23. Aultman, “Cisgender.”
24. *Travesti* is a term of self-identification developed among racialized gender-nonconforming people, especially sex work communities, in South America. See DiPietro, *Sideways Selves*.
25. Tobia, *Sissy*, 8.
26. Kim Haines-Eitzen, personal correspondence, October 21, 2023. Kadji Amin asks something similar of cisgender in “We Are All Nonbinary,” 109, 113.
27. [Deleted user], “Cis people are stupid.”
28. Cohen and Duckert, *Veer Ecology*.
29. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1968), under “dis-.”
30. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 160.
31. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 161.
32. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 168.
33. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 162.
34. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.
35. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8 (citing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick).
36. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12 (citing Judith Butler).
37. Eggert, *Disknowledge*, 6.
38. Eggert, *Disknowledge*, 13.
39. Ben-Moshe, “Dis-Orientation, Dis-Epistemology and Abolition.”
40. Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability*.
41. Lorde, *Zami*, 15.
42. Lorde, *Zami*, 15.
43. Lorde, *Zami*, 16.
44. Lorde, *Zami*, 7.
45. Gumbs, *Survival Is a Promise*, v.

I. “CIS ISN’T A SLUR. IT’S LATIN!”

1. See, for example, Leahy et al., “Clinically Isolated Syndromes.”
2. Musk, “Repeated, targeted harassment.”
3. Biscuit, “Do Not Call Me Cisgender.” See discussion of this post in Shotwell and Sangrey, “Resisting Definition.”
4. Roberts, “Cisgender Isn’t An Insult.” See also user Mykell’s comment (1:53 p.m.) in response.
5. Aravosis, “Dan Savage Glitter-Bombed Again.” See commentary by Jones, “Cisgender Is Not a Slur.”
6. Williams, “Are Misogynist, Homophobe, and TERF Slurs?” See also Williams, “TERFS.” Of course, these arguments are also structurally related to the claim that “white is a slur.” See Ahmed, “Gender Critical=Gender Conservative.”
7. Defosse quoted in Boboltz, “Researcher Who Coined ‘Cisgender.’”
8. Rowling, “‘Cis’ is ideological language.”
9. Musk, “Exactly.”
10. See Esther Krakue stating, “The word *cis* or *cisgender* signifies ideological capture,” in *Piers Morgan Uncensored*, “Ideological”; With Woman, “Ideological Capture at the Heart of the NHS.”