

Dear Choto Thamma¹,

It was so good to hear from you again. I am very glad that your back feels better after the successful surgery. I knew that you were nervous about it.

How is the weather in New York? I know Dadu² catches colds pretty easily, so I hope he is taking extra care of himself this winter.

Thamma, I understand that you are having a hard time grappling with the fact that Reshmi just came out as a trans woman. I know that you love her very much but cannot quite comprehend the legitimacy of her transness. I am very grateful that you wrote to me about this. Unlearning the binary notions of sex and gender, that we have grown up with can be very hard, and I appreciate that you want to do so for Reshmi. The readings from my feminist philosophy class have helped me better understand why the common notions of sex and gender as natural entities that exist only within the binary of male and female can be very problematic. It has also opened my eyes to why many of us grow up with this very false understanding.

Living in a radical city like New York, I know you must have often come across the idea that gender is socially constructed. But I think what many people have a harder time comprehending, myself included—but crucial to understand if we want to start unpacking our transphobia—is that even biological sex is socially constructed. You are probably scoffing at this letter right now but allow me to explain using one of my favorite readings this semester, Anne Fausto-Sterling's "Should There Be Only Two Sexes?" (2000).

¹ Choto Thamma is the Bengali phrase for grandmother which is often used to refer to elderly friends and relatives. Using an elderly individual's first name to address them, in Bengali culture, is considered disrespectful and therefore I will refrain from doing so here.

² Dadu means grandfather and used in the same context as Choto Thamma

Fausto-Sterling bases her argument on the natural existence of intersex bodies which often have reproductive systems and/or genitals that do not fit into our binary understanding of sex. Medical practitioners usually carry out infant genital surgeries to “correct” intersex individuals’ bodies when they are very young so that they conform to the common understanding of what a 'male' or 'female' body looks like (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 80). These surgeries are painful, invasive, scarring, and can have sustained physical and psychological impacts. Due to genital scarring, these surgeries also can affect an individual's sexual functions (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 85). Fausto-sterling also details the mental trauma, humiliation and pain caused by the procedure of “testing” genital function after the surgery (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 86). This often involves public masturbation with the help of the doctor, which I can only imagine to be horrific. Additionally, these surgeries are carried out without the consent of the individual, and, sometimes, against the knowledge or desire of the parents (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 92). There are no concrete medical reasons behind carrying out this surgery other than the intention of forcing these natural bodies into the sex binary. Intersex characteristics rarely pose life-threatening health risks to intersex individuals.

Therefore, Fausto-Sterling argues that the male and female sex categories do not accurately reflect natural reality, as they fail to account for these natural variations. In fact, the surgeries that force this binary onto natural intersex bodies reflect how sex categories are socially constructed to serve heteronormative and reproductive interests of the state (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 107). She also focuses on the gender identity of transgender individuals to project how, along with sex variations, there also exists variation in gender identity—which is often closely associated with the sex binary (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 101). Fausto-Sterling also mentions hijras in the reading (Fausto-

Sterling, 2000, 109). Thamma, as you are well aware, hijras are intersex and transgender women who were celebrated because of their close connection to god before the British colonisation of India. The British criminalised their existence because they wanted Indians to fulfil heterosexual reproductive functions, so they could have more human capital. This parallels Fausto-Sterling's argument about how gender and sex binaries are re-enforced and regulated by the state through legislation because it wants to protect heterosexual reproductive functions of family units. It is vital that we remember, while unpacking our own transphobia as cisgender Bengali women, that our culture once used to celebrate these natural variations in sex and gender.

Fausto-Sterling, in her previous work, had argued that to account for intersex individuals, we should have five sex categories instead of two. However, she rejects this claim in this reading, because she argues the focus needs to be shifted away from categorising genitalia, to thinking about why these categories exist in the first place, and what functions they serve in our society (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 110). By projecting how unstable the sex categories are because they are not completely based on biological truths, she further proves that these binary categories are socially constructed.

If you have been following my explanation up to this point, then I think you would probably understand why people claim the gender binary is also socially constructed. After all, our traditional understanding of gender is closely related to sex— which becomes the foundation of our transphobia. We have grown up, as cisgender people, thinking that our gender identity reveals biological truths about our sex and hormones. However, now that we have established that sex categories are socially constructed and many bodies and sex traits do not fall neatly into the binary of male and female, our understanding of the gender binary falters. But why do these binaries feel so natural?

Judith Butler provides an interesting argument for this in another reading that I was assigned for this class called “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” (2011). Butler argues that gender and sex binaries are unnatural because gender is an identity that is produced by the constant repetition of a specific set of actions (2011, 185). In other words, gender is performative. Since we are constantly repeating these actions, gender feels natural (Butler, 2011, 186). If we divert from this performativity and engage in something that is considered taboo, we face criticism from society. This is why we start regulating and policing ourselves and others (Butler, 2011, 185). These social prohibitions contribute to the false understanding that gender identity is stable. We also actively respond to and participate in gender and sex cues, which further project this as a natural stable category. For example, when someone says, “hello, miss,” or “hey, girl”, I immediately turn back and respond. At that moment, I am actively participating in my own gendering.

Butler also echoes Fausto-Sterling’s argument that gender and sex are both state-regulated and geared towards heteronormativity, which helps propel reproductive interests (Butler, 2011, 185). Our gender identity and expression need to serve the purposes of the state and society. She begins her argument by focusing on how we tend to see nature and culture in binaries (Butler, 2011, 176). As I mentioned, even if most people think gender is culturally constructed, they think that the *body* that gender is laid upon is natural—and therefore our sex is natural, too. This again contributes to transphobic understandings of body and gender. Butler argues that we need to change this thought, because the moment our body is exposed in the society through birth, it is immediately framed by a cultural understanding of binary sex and gender categories. I would further

argue that, even when our body has not fully developed in our mother's womb, social expectations of gender and sex are placed upon us.

She also explains how gender is only projected at the surface level of the body and does not reveal essential truths about who we are as human beings (Butler, 2011, 185). This is crucial to understand because, after all, gender is a set of acts that we have to constantly perform in a society that polices our behaviour in doing so (Butler, 2011, 190). Therefore, even though gender is performative, it is important to remember we cannot *choose* the set of acts we want to perform.

Thamma, I would highly encourage you to go to a drag show in New York. I think you would be able to understand Butler's complex argument better if you were to do so. As Butler mentions in her work, when people do drag, they reveal the performative nature of gender (Butler, 2011, 187). I remember watching my first drag show and thinking that if I did not know that the performer was a drag queen, I would have mistaken him for a cisgender woman who wears "too much" makeup.

My assumption of the drag queen performer's gender if he was in the drag get-up also reveals the problematic nature of how we, as cisgender women, actively gender people on a day-to-day basis. This assumption would have purely been based on the secondary sexual characteristics and outer appearance. In "Dismantling Cissexual Privilege" (2007), Julia Serano explains this further.

She says that, though there are heated debates about which biological characteristic is used to determine gender, on a more daily basis, our assumption is based on what we can see physically present (Serano, 2007, 163). We centre what we perceive an individual's gender is. This can be extremely harmful for transgender folks, who are often forced into the gender binary based on cissexual assumptions.

Serano also explains how cissexual people often reinforce this binary of gender expression by putting cisgender and transgender people under different levels of scrutiny (Serano, 2007, 172). If we assume that a person is cisgender, then we are not quick to look for flaws in how they express their gender identity. However, this is not the same when we believe or find out that a person is trans. We immediately start looking for “mistakes” in their gender expression, whether intentionally or subconsciously. By doing so, we reproduce the gender binary and our stereotypical assumptions.

Problematic terms such as “biologically male” or “female” reinforce both gender and sex binaries, as they assume the binary of gender is based on biological truths (Serano, 2007, 173). But, as we have seen, this is not the case at all. Serano also explains how, if reproductive capacity is tied to this idea, it can be harmful not only for transgender people but also infertile cisgender people (Serano, 2007, 173). Our obsession with gender reassignment surgery also helps in distancing and mystifying the reality of transgender experience (Serano, 2007, 187). This contributes to the delegitimization of trans individuals’ lived gender identity. Serano explains the prevalence of this in media and how narratives of deception and shock are created around transgender characters (Serano, 2007, 187).

Serano might not point out problems with the binary of sex and gender itself but she points to the role of cissexual privilege and assumptions in reinforcing biologically-centered understandings of sex and gender binaries.

Thamma, I understand if this is a lot to take in all at once. The process of unlearning is slow and takes a lot of time and effort. But it is absolutely crucial, especially if we want to support Reshmi. She must be navigating a very difficult time right now and

it's important that, as cisgender people, we do the work of unpacking our own transphobia and create a safe space for her.

I can't wait to talk to you more about this when I call you next weekend.

Please take care of yourself.

With love,

Atmaza

If you want to take a closer look at the readings that I have referenced in this letter, here is the list:

Butler, Judith. (2011). Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions. *Gender Trouble: Feminism And the Subversion of Identity* (pp.175-193). Taylor and Francis

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9780203824979>

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). Should There Be Only Two Sexes. *Sexing The Body: Gender Politics and The Construction of Sexuality* (pp. 78-114). ProQuest Ebook Central

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Serano, Julia. (2007). Dismantling Cissexual Privilege. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (pp.161-193). Seal Press.