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LIT 530: Gender and Text

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I am a woman who grew up at the beginning of the 21st century. I am a cisgender woman, biologically female or AFAB (assigned female at birth). Honestly, I believe that this does matter when talking about gender, sex and gender identity because the lived experience of a cisgender woman is very different than the lived experience of a person with any other gender identity. Each gender identity has with it a different lived experience than all others. However, this does not mean that other gender identities are invalid or one experience is necessarily more “real” than another. They are all real, but they are uniquely different. Those differences should be respected and understood.

Culture also deeply affects how someone is socialized in their gender. When and where someone grows up matters in how they will learn to perceive themselves. The construct of gender is presented to children early. Most small children know whether they are a girl or a boy and will be able to identify themselves as such from a young age. They will also be able to identify their classmates and peers as being either girls or boys. Most cultures assume there is a gender binary, meaning that people are either male or female. This assumption pairs a person to their biological sex and assumes that all women are female and all men are male. In most cases, people tend to identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

However, some people do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth nor their biological sex. Some people are transgender (Female to Male or Male to Female), non-binary, or agender (identify with no gender at all). I did student activism with the LGBT community as an undergraduate, since I was a bisexual in the early to mid 2010s. Really only over the last ten years has the transgender community gotten any real media visibility. Unfortunately, many times when they get attention from the media, it’s often for negative reasons and often does not help them. Like with the LGB community, religious groups seem to find reasons to be outraged at the very idea of transgender and gender nonconforming people. An overall lack of understanding and sympathy for the complicated process of transitioning in a heavily gendered society does not help either.

While seeing what my trans friends struggled with, I did question my own gender identity briefly. I was never super feminine like the women that were often portrayed in the media on TV, in magazines, online. When I was younger, I made the mistake of comparing myself to these full grown women who fulfilled the near impossible beauty standards of our culture. Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* changed my mind and intrigued me when I read her book as a college sophomore. I didn't need to display a particular type of femininity in order to be considered a woman. There are as many types of women as there are women in the world. The definition of what makes a woman is not limited to how well she conforms to gender stereotypes. I never really wore heels or much make-up; I preferred boots, but I still wear dresses or skirts sometimes. It was fine for me to express my gender in a little more of a gender neutral way rather than having to be an ultra-feminine ideal woman that the media wanted me to be.

Despite being considered post-women's liberation, the 90's and 2000's were still an incredibly gendered time period in American history. Though it was acceptable for a girl to like some "boy" activities, it was still expected that she'd eventually grow out of them and pick up more womanly activities later; abandoning her favorite childhood cartoons and video games, in favor for shopping and make-up as she grew up. As a teen, I really looked up to musicians who were popular at the time. Avril Lavigne's dual style as a tomboy and a punk princess appealed to me. I also liked Katy Perry as a more playfully colorful, feminine icon. But there was a question of whether I wanted to be like them or be with someone like them. They helped me realize that I had the potential to be attracted to other women.

Sexuality and gender identity have been historically linked. That's part of the reason that the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities have a long history relating to and have overlapping struggles with the trans and gender nonconforming communities. Sexuality is another important construct in one's identity. My experiences as a bisexual cisgender woman separate me from straight cisgender women, though I can still understand much of their struggles since I am also a cisgender woman. The ideas of intersectional feminists like bell hooks who talked about how her race, class, and sexuality affected her identity as a woman and a feminist have also influenced many of my personal beliefs as a feminist. She also believed that feminism would benefit men as well as women and I agree with her. Historically, men have also suffered from restrictive gender roles like women have. Feminism can help free everyone from restrictive gender roles.