

# The Gender Binary Is a Tool of White Supremacy

A brief history of gender expansiveness — and how colonialism slaughtered it

By Kravitz M.

The transgender community is in the public eye more than ever — and people are *not* pleased about it. From physical harassment to being refused medical care, transgender and nonbinary individuals often have a difficult time living as who they are. Many deny our identities altogether, claiming that they're an odd fad that shouldn't be acknowledged. Others claim they're unnatural as they go against the trusted — albeit rigid and fragile — gender binary.

Declaring that the only genders are female and male, both defined by physical characteristics, the binary sees any deviation from this system as artificial and freakish. This worldview allegedly justifies transphobia. Cisgender people treat this binary as if it were infallible. Enforcing it wherever possible, they code almost every part of their lives with gender, from the way they sit to how they express emotions.

While the past few decades have given people a bit of wiggle room within the confines of their gender, they're still confined. Why? If this binary is so instinctual, why are there people today who contradict it, or even actively fight against it?

In truth, it's not gender variation that's a recent invention, but the Western binary that abnormalizes it. While the term "transgender" wasn't popularized until the 60s and "genderqueer" not until the 90s, gender expressions outside of a rigid male/female dichotomy are as old as civilization. The reason it seems contemporary is due to its ferocious eradication from history and common knowledge. This suppression was carried out and perpetuated by none other than racism and antisemitism.

## Historical Gender Variance

As many more are aware of today, cultures worldwide have often recognized genders other than "male" and "female." India's [\*hijra\*](#), which has existed for millennia, has an essential place in Hinduism and a socio-cultural role as performers. Judaism recognizes no fewer than [six distinct sex<sup>1</sup> categories](#) in its classical texts and tradition. In Oaxaca, Mexico, the third gender [\*muxe\*](#) dates back to the pre-Columbian era. The South Sulawesi Bugis people recognize [five genders](#) which have been crucial to their society for at least 600 years.

Now, not all pre-colonial societies had such views on gender, and non-Western gender systems could be just as insulting as our binary. These cultural genders are not inherently “nonbinary,” either, since the systems that contained them do not operate on a binary whatsoever. I bring them up only to illustrate the historical existence of multi-gender systems.

The Dagaaba people in present-day Ghana didn't assign gender based on anatomy, but rather on a person's energy. Some other West African tribes [don't assign genders at all](#), or at least not until age five or after puberty. African scholar Malidoma Somé notes that “at least among the Dagara people, gender has very little to do with anatomy. It is purely energetic. In that context, one who is physically male can vibrate female energy, and vice versa. That is where the real gender is.”

Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women* (1997) illustrates how pre-colonial Yoruba society did not see gender as a determinant for what people could or couldn't do. Their categories were notably permeable; the terms “man” and “woman” were reasonably insignificant. Several pre-colonial societies also had a relatively fluid approach to relations between men and women. They weren't always opposites or sharply divided subjects, and [in some societies](#), women had many of the same rights and participation in society as men.

Even in Europe, French poet Kalonymus ben Kalonymus expressed a longing to have been born a woman in one of his [fourteenth-century works](#). Though it's impossible to be sure of the poem's sincerity or ben Kalonymus' identity, its content could be seen as gender dysphoria through a contemporary lens. Seventeenth-century Colonial Virginian servant [Thomas\(ine\) Hall](#)<sup>2</sup> and eighteenth-century [Jens Andersson](#) were arguably bigender, and the [Public Universal Friend](#) (1752–1819) explicitly identified as genderless.

European doctors and philosophers used to [only acknowledge one sex](#): male. “Females” were simply males with inverted penises. That began to change during the “long eighteenth century” (1688–1815) when Western society began shifting towards a two-sex system to generate additional chasms between men and women. Gender wasn't just a role but now a complete physical, anatomical, and physiological difference. With colonialism, European settlers proceeded to force their rigid views on gender upon the civilizations they invaded.

## Colonial Gender in Action

In “[The Coloniality of Gender](#),” philosopher Maria Lugones notes:

*It is important to consider the changes that colonization brought to understand the scope of the organization of sex and gender under colonialism and in Eurocentered global capitalism. If the latter did only recognize sexual dimorphism for white bourgeois males and females, it certainly does not follow that the sexual division is based on biology. The cosmetic and substantive corrections to biology make very clear that “gender” is antecedent to the “biological” traits and gives them meaning. The naturalizing of sexual differences is another product of the modern use of science that [Anibal] Quijano points out in the case of “race.” ...[S]exual dimorphism served and serves Eurocentered global capitalist domination/exploitation.*

In India, colonial officials judged the worth of hijras via British ideals of manhood despite hijras not being men. Seeing them disobey British masculinity, officials [attempted](#) to “correct” their behavior and banish them from the public eye. Colonial police forcefully cut off the long hair of hijras they encountered, stripped off any feminine attire then sold them “men’s” clothing. This bombardment wasn’t exclusive to hijras, either — anyone appearing to be a male cross-dresser was persecuted. In the British mind, the femininity of anyone believed to be men needed to be eradicated by any means possible.

They introduced the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871, aiming to eliminate the hijra. Concerned about the alleged moral threat these people caused by their existence, the CTA began revoking their civil rights and imprisoning them for dressing in a feminine manner or engaging in the performances crucial to the income and social role of hijras. The presence of hijras society became evidence, to the British, of India’s inherently debauched and morally corrupt nature. Within several decades through the brutal efforts of the CTA, hijras were systematically disenfranchised. Despite their attempts to petition the government for permission to express themselves, the government denied them, and Indian society began to see hijras as a threat to their community. Today, hijras typically live as outcasts and frequently endure severe discrimination.

In North America, white settlers viciously stifled Native American views surrounding gender and sexuality. Over a hundred tribes recognized more than two genders (an umbrella term coined in 1990 for these genders and sexual identities being “two-spirit”), some having as many as six. Colonizers found this [shocking and sinful](#) and [sought to exterminate](#) these alternative gender structures.

One way they did so was through violent cultural assimilation in [residential schools](#), where two-spirit students struggled significantly with their identity and mental health as officials forced them into European gender roles. They no longer had agency in their self-expression; they either assimilated or were killed (though many were killed regardless). Assimilation dissolved many formerly accepted Indigenous customs. It proved so effective that many Native Americans are not even aware of their previously broader gender systems today. Two-spirits in the 21st century may be met with rejection and outright hostility by their families and tribes.

Many cultural genders had significant spiritual and religious roles. The Indonesian *bissu* is rightfully revered as a ritual-leading priest, hijras can grant blessings to people during events like weddings or childbirth, and two-spirits typically hold a sacred, ceremonial function in their communities. Practitioners and leaders like these are naturally influential. They also go against the white Christianity that colonization rests its worldview on and justifies itself with. Colonizers figured that if they could eradicate the genders linked to these non-Christian religions, they could eliminate not only their power but the beliefs themselves.

As Melissa N. Stein discusses in [Measuring Manhood: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934](#) (2015), race became the purview of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American science. White people used their physical gender standards and proposed sex differences to “prove” their superiority to Africans via [scientific racism](#) of the mid-1800s. Many

know of the previous measurements of skulls for determining racial purity, but people also used similar evaluations to affirm their gender.

Numerous middle-class white women used phrenology — the assessment of bumps on the skull — to reassure themselves of their womanhood and distinguish themselves from other races and lower economic classes. “By promoting women’s health as good for ‘the race,’” Carla Bittel writes in [“Woman, Know Thyself,”](#) “phrenology encouraged good breeding and recommended that women select partners with heredity in mind.” Phrenologists in the United States argued that the procedure demonstrated that Europeans were morally and intellectually superior to other races.

The methods used to explain racial differences through biological means also depended on sexual characteristics.

*[This section contained more details on how European men and women positioned their own bodies as “pure” and viewed Africans as “hypersexual” and “animalistic.”]*

## Women and Race

Kyla Schuller’s [The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century](#) (2018) delves further into how sex difference as we understand it today is also a racial difference. The nineteenth-century saw white scientists declaring that only white people could achieve binary sex differentiation. By contrast, people of color allegedly hadn’t evolved enough to differentiate between “male” and “female.” Essentially, they were “unsexed,” and this inability to reach this full sexual dichotomy was yet another marker of racial inferiority.

Lugones elaborates on this separation from the categories “women” and “nonwhite,” stating:

*It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of “without gender,” sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity... Thus heterosexual rape of Indian women, African slave women, coexisted with concubinage, as well as with the imposition of the heterosexual understanding of gender relations among the colonized — when and as it suited Eurocentered, global capitalism, and heterosexual domination of white women. But it is clear from the work of Oyewumi and [Gunn] Allen that there was no extension of the status of white women to colonized women even when they were turned into similes of bourgeois white women. Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women. Though, the history presented by Oyewumi and Allen should make clear to white bourgeois women that their status is much inferior to that of Native American women and Yoruba women before colonization.*

Schuller sees this reality as the reason white women ritually vote for misogynistic white supremacist candidates. White supremacy is their selling point, surpassing their desire for female liberation. Considering that white women participated heavily in the slave market, making up about [40% of all slave owners](#) in the 1850s-60s, this isn't too shocking. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers's [They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South](#) (2019) reveals that "their very identities as white southern women are tied to the actual or the possible ownership of other people." They also [fully participated](#) in the KKK and lynching.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminist movements virtually only fought for *white* women — womanhood, in their eyes, was a white phenomenon. [Eugenic feminism](#), beginning in the late 1800s, might be the most blatant example of how white supremacy guided early feminist politics. Eugenic feminists wanted mainstream eugenics to meet their feminist views so they could work on breeding a superior race. Victoria Woodhull, a prominent American eugenic feminist, saw eugenics as more important than the right to vote.

The movement declined by the 1940s when it became harder to gather support and combine feminism with eugenics. In terms of fighting for women of color, however, the white suffrage movement wasn't at all an improvement. Many [white suffragettes](#) — and white women in general — played a [crucial role](#) in [maintaining](#) white supremacy and crafting white supremacist politics. They were "segregation's constant gardeners."

## Transmisogyny's Racist and Antisemitic Legacy

The Nazi era is yet another example of gender's white supremacy. Out of a desire to "purify" German literature in the 1930s, books opposing Nazi ideology were burned, including those proposing broader views on gender and sexuality. The most significant of these documents were produced by sexologist [Magnus Hirschfeld](#), who coined the word "transvestite" and founded the Institute of Sexual Research in Berlin. His clinic was the first to administer gender reaffirming surgeries to transgender people regularly — and the earliest target of the book burnings. Nazis destroyed over 20,000 books housed in the building, which they then took over for their personal use. Hitler deemed Hirschfeld "[the most dangerous Jew in Germany](#)" due to his work.

Joni Alizah Cohen [notes](#) that "Eugenic sexology understood homosexuality essentially through the lens of gender, specifically as the corruption of the male body and psyche by femininity." Richard Krafft-Ebing's [Psychopathia Sexualis](#) (1886) described [sexual inversion](#) as happening in four increasingly degenerative states, the gravest of which being feeling like the "opposite" gender: "With reference to the sexual feeling and instinct of these urnings [homosexuals], so thoroughly permeated in all their mental being, the men, without exception, feel themselves to be females; the women feel themselves to be males." The former experience, while now crudely worded, is arguably adjacent to what people would now call transgender womanhood.

Arguably, homophobia during the Nazi era was [largely due](#) to contempt for the gender deviance associated with gayness rather than sexual orientation alone. We can see this with [Ernst Röhm](#), the Nazi militia's gay co-founder and Hitler's close friend. He and other gay members of the army did not consider themselves gay because they [viewed gayness as effeminacy](#), not only

same-gender attraction. To them, their attraction to men was manly and thus acceptable. On November 13, 1933, the Hamburg City Administration [requested](#) the Head of Police to “pay special attention to transvestites and to deliver them to the concentration camps if necessary.”

Today’s transgender, nonwhite, and Jewish communities bear the brunt of all this destruction as we try to restore our humanity. This has proven to be an uphill battle at best. Many far-right conspiracy theories point to Judaism as the source of transness, and Transgender Woman-Exclusive Radical Feminists (TWERFs) notoriously use white supremacy to “determine” womanhood. TWERFs are curiously indiscriminate in their discrimination. They often harass not only transgender women, but *any* woman outside the Eurocentric boundaries of femininity.

The body of Caster Semenya, a South African Olympic runner, has been under fire since she was eighteen. The International Association of Athletics Federations questioned her testosterone levels and made her “prove” she was a woman through sex verification. When the association verified she was female, they then insisted she take medication to [lower her testosterone levels](#) or risk disqualification from running events. They argued her natural body put other runners at a disadvantage.

Despite them coercing her into altering her body to keep her athletic career, TWERFs [saw this as a victory](#). They asserted that Semenya was a man due to her hormones, despite her genitalia. (Ironically, TWERFs also refuse to see transitioning transgender men as men due to their genitalia, despite their hormones.) On the other hand, when people discovered Michael Phelps to have half the lactic acid of his competitors, his gender wasn’t questioned at all. The public [celebrated](#) his genetic upper hand.

Images of four female runners from the 2019 Chinese National Athletics Championship were spread widely on Twitter, [many TWERFs declaring](#) that as many as three of them were men. Yet despite their short hair and “unconventional” physiques, all the runners were cisgender women. The Chinese Athletics Association explicitly confirmed that none of the runners under attack are transgender, but TWERFs refused to believe them. Some went so far as to claim the government was gaslighting the public. Members of the Iranian women’s football team went under [similar allegations](#) in September 2019 due to their “masculine” appearances.

Modern transphobic (particularly transmisogynistic) rhetoric continues to be notoriously antisemitic. Mary Daly calls transgender women the “final solution” of women in her book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), where she warns that they desire an “inability to distinguish the female Self and her process from the male-made masquerade.” The “final solution” phrasing alludes to the extermination Jewish people in Europe. Kevin MacDonald, who the Anti-Defamation League names “Neo Nazi’s favorite academic,” [declares](#) that it’s the Jewish goal to destabilize societal norms like the Western gender binary.

His online magazine, *The Occidental Observer*, features many articles written by his followers who blame Jewish people for the spread of “transgender ideology.” One published by Andrew Joyce [claims](#) that Jewish sexologists leaning towards fluid, “Talmudic interpretations” of gender, are denying “biological reality.” Another by Brent Sanderson [asserts](#) that “the focus of the [Jewish] ‘identity politics’ agenda has now shifted to deconstructing traditional Western views about what it means to be a man or a woman.” Far-right rhetoric remains immensely concerned over the preservation of supposed “biological” divisions, as they are the foundation and justification for their ethnonationalism.

Politically active TWERFs like Cathy Brennan and organizations such as the Women’s Liberation Front routinely work alongside [misogynistic conservatives](#) and white supremacists to bar transgender rights. Brennan has [collaborated](#) with the Pacific Justice Institute — which has [compared same-sex marriage to the Holocaust](#) — to [fabricate stories](#) of transgender women assaulting young girls in public restrooms. Jennifer Bilek [wrote an article](#) arguing that transgender “ideology” is the work of wealthy “elites,” particularly Jewish people. Mentioned for funding the “transgender agenda” are George Soros — who Nazis frequently point to as proof of Jewish people controlling the world — and Jewish transgender activists Martine Rothblatt and Jennifer Pritzker.

It’s unsurprising that gender essentialism is [a primary doctrine](#) in “gender critical” radical feminist thought, even though gender essentialism arguably [works against](#) gender equality and [several scientists question its alleged accuracy](#). TWERFs routinely cling to the notion of the “biological woman” to keep transgender women out of women’s spaces and frequently examine women’s physiques to “determine” if they’re transgender or not (by the way, Non-classical Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia — NCCAH — is [particularly common](#) in cisgender Ashkenazi Jewish women, occasionally accused to be male due to this condition).

Speaking of which, Donald Trump recently [proposed](#) a rule which would allow homeless shelters to force transgender women to go to men’s shelters. A memo from his administration explains how to “spot” them: “factors such as height, the presence (but not the absence) of facial hair, the presence of an Adam’s apple, and other physical characteristics which, when considered together, are indicative of a person’s biological sex.” If the rule passes, shelters would be allowed to request proof of “biological sex” from homeless women assumed to be transgender. Interestingly, though, even the rule [admits](#) that there is little available “data suggesting that transgender individuals pose an inherent risk” to cisgender women.

It’s most often nonwhite and Jewish women — transgender or not — who will face the brunt of this physical scrutiny. This doesn’t seem coincidental in the slightest, especially not when dominant society’s ideals of femininity depend on whiteness. Claiming the size and proportion of body parts can accurately distinguish between genders reflects grimly on scientific racism, eugenics movements, and [Nazi-made literature](#) describing how to spot a Jewish person. Demanding perfect obedience in rigid expectations for the body excludes many cisgender women from what TWERFs consider “natural” womanhood.

## Conclusion

The Western gender binary soaks in blood. Sculpted by a shifting European society in the nineteenth century, it restricted the liberty of its people and swiftly oppressed the lives of those who contradicted it. Regardless of society teaching its new mold to itself, civilizations that communicated their identities differently now lead “unnatural” and “deviant” lives. They went against a strict model they hadn’t even known beforehand. People repressed thousands of years of history to justify these newly introduced rules of gender, and everyone feels the aftermath. These rules explicitly favor the white body at the expense of everyone else.

Gender variation is not unusual or historically unknown in the slightest, and implying otherwise contributes to the violence that forced these notions on so many people. Any system trying to sort people into clear cut groups will have its fair share of outliers. The outliers aren’t subhuman. Much like evolution occurs on a gradual scale with no clear distinction as to where one species ends and the next one begins, humanity cannot be sharply defined, and punishing ambiguity will not eradicate it.

Our current political climate sees fascism on the rise and transgender bodies ceaselessly up to debate. One cannot be a genuine ally to nonwhite or Jewish people while disparaging the transgender community. Likewise, it’s unfeasible to discuss transgender history or issues without bringing up colonialism and race. To be transphobic — to discredit the millennia of gender variance in different cultures, to insist that one’s body defines their mind, to cast transgender people as degenerate — is to be racist and antisemitic as well.