



This Is an Essay About Penises



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When I was a toddler I would push on the head of my penis until it disappeared inside itself. I would watch in fascination as it slowly unraveled into its usual form and again in fascination how easily I could make it disappear. I thought it looked like a rose blossoming and – more miraculously – unblossoming.

This is the kind of story I grasped onto and shared when I was first accepting my identity as a trans woman. It seemed to confirm that I was different and had always been different. I told myself this memory proved my transness and therefore proved my womanhood. Of course, I could just have easily been a curious little boy exploring his body.

Last week during [the Senate hearing on the Equality Act](#), Senator Kennedy began by saying that he believes gender dysphoria is real. He then directed a series of questions to the witness, renowned transphobe Abigail Shrier. “Would this bill require schools to open up a junior high school women’s locker room to a boy who identifies as a girl?” he asked. “Would this bill prohibit the boy with gender dysphoria from exposing his penis to the girls?”

If you’re a cis woman reading this in good faith, your response to these questions is likely disgust. You think of yourself as trans-inclusive; you have trans friends, you date trans people. Maybe you’re *my* friend, maybe you’re dating *me*. You recognize and protest against this obvious transphobia. But conflating genitalia and gender is not exclusive to the Senate – nor is it exclusive to intentional, obviously malicious transphobia. It’s ingrained in you. It’s ingrained in me. It’s why I felt like I needed proof of bottom dysphoria to be a woman. It’s why you carelessly say things that make the dysphoria I have so much worse.

I spent years not thinking about my penis – or, at least, thinking about it as little as possible. I did not share the dick obsessions of the other boys my age. I didn’t partake in the measuring contests or the group masturbation sessions or any of the other super gay things supposedly straight boys do with their hormones. When I did start masturbating, I always watched cis lesbian porn – or more esoteric penis-free content like the opening moments of *Barbarella*. I came directly into the toilet desperate to reduce the length of the experience – and the clean-up. My sex dreams never involved genitalia. One moment my body was pressed against another body and the next I was waking up covered in shame.

When I started having sex, my penis maintained this same level of importance. My first girlfriend and I mostly had what straight people call foreplay and I’d call one-sided lesbian sex. We’d make out and grind against each other and then I’d go down on her until she came. The end was mere obligation – I’d put my penis inside her to quickly release my desire while dissociating away from the moment itself.

The specifics changed slightly, but this is pretty much how I had sex until I came out. I wanted the intimacy and the release and to do a good job. But I didn’t care about my own pleasure beyond a drive to appear normal. I continued to masturbate directly into the toilet.

After I transitioned, my penis became the most important part of my body – at least, to other people. The disinterest I’d felt all my life disappeared with my self-ignorance. Suddenly, my detachment turned into active disdain. This increased dysphoria was made worse b

the watchful eyes and invasive questions of those around me. I wanted to shove my difference in people's faces with a punk defiance, but sometimes I just felt like hiding. I'd wear tight pants that showed off my bulge all the while oscillating between feeling rebellious and feeling insecure. In the four years I've lived openly as a trans woman I've struggled between proudly declaring myself a chick with a dick — even saying the phrase "chick with a dick" — and wanting to pivot my life choices so I could get rid of that identity as soon as possible. There is a difference between one's politics and one's feelings.

The fraught nature of my body increased once I was single. Dating as a trans woman in the lesbian community is challenging. But it would be more accurate to say that I have dated *adjacent* to the lesbian community. I don't date lesbians. Or, rather, they don't date me. I've had sex with one lesbian and our pants stayed on — if you call that sex. Of course, that doesn't mean cis lesbians aren't interested in me. But if cis men are likely to fuck a trans woman in secret, the cis lesbian counterpart is drawn out emotional affairs with no follow through. There's just... something... missing. Wonder what that could be.

This is not exclusive to cis lesbians. Plenty of other cis queer women and AFAB non-binary people are perplexed by my body. Some avoid me, others fetishize me. And while the obvious answer is to just date other trans women, there's no guarantee with those experiences either. The most fetishized I've ever felt was with another trans woman. We've all been raised with the same transphobia.

To quote the prophet Mitski: I don't want your pity. I've also had a lot of great experiences — relationships, flings, one-night stands — that have allowed me to uncover new parts of myself while connecting with others. I feel totally confident in my ability to find love and sex and chaos and anything else I seek. But this essay isn't about any of that. This essay is about penises.

The most frequent microaggressions I experience involve AFAB people talking about how they don't like dicks. Or how they don't like men and expressing that by referencing dicks. Or talking about how they *do* like dicks but immediately associating those dicks with cis men. Everyone may be obsessed with the genitalia of trans people, but AFAB queers are obsessed with the genitalia of cis men. I get it. It's easier to talk about "dicks" than it is to talk about patriarchy. It's easier to lament a body part than confront the trauma of compulsory heterosexuality or the trauma of sexual assault. It's easier to say you "miss dick" than to admit that as a bisexual person you are still drawn to cis men despite the harm other cis men have caused you. But as cathartic as it may be to blame penises for abuse and desire, these feelings are misguided. They allow cis men to evade responsibility for their actions, blaming innate biology for their harm. And they imply that trans women are not only men, but men to be feared.

You can learn people's pronouns and post things on Trans Visibility Day and tweet all about how Trans Women Are Women, but if you are still associating genitalia with gender then you have done a whole lot of surface work and changed none of your core beliefs. And so, when I hear these comments, it's unsurprising when you don't want to date me. And so, when I hear these comments, it concerns me when you do.

It's exhausting to spend so much time defending a part of my body I don't even want. People stifle their feelings for me because of my penis without realizing they might never even see it. The only dick I'm fucking you with is my strap-on. And if I do eventually trust you enough to let you interact with my penis it certainly won't be the same as whatever experiences you've had with cis men.

But this would never be my rebuttal, because my loyalties do not lie with some cis woman and my desire to get laid. I will always care more about trans women who will never have access to surgery. I will always care more about trans women who don't even want surgery. I will always care more about trans women who do want their dicks sucked. Because discomfort with one part of your body does not make you trans and does not make you a woman. The same way a cis man is still a man if he doesn't like getting head. The same way a cis woman's gender is not changed by wanting someone to deep throat her realistic strap-on. Trans and cis, our bodies vary, our relationships to our bodies vary. Sex is about discovering and connecting across those variations. Good sex anyway.

The fact is I don't think any of the discrimination and fetishization I experience is really about my penis. No body part is that powerful. My penis is simply a representation of my transness, of my difference. Some people feel it invalidates their queer identity. Other people feel it validates their queer identity too much. And most frequently it just makes people uncomfortable when attached to someone with such good tits because that goes against the cis white heteropatriarchal worldview that was forced upon us all.

I am tired of educating people on this history. I am tired of educating people on the most basic principles of biology. I am tired of first dates turning into gender studies classes. I am tired of not knowing why things didn't work out with someone and then finding evidence in their microaggressions months later. I am tired.

As the transphobia in media loses its subtlety and an unprecedented number of bills targeting trans people — especially trans youth — arise across the country, I feel more certain than ever that visibility and mere acceptance are not enough. The only way to fight transphobia in a way that's substantial, effective, and permanent, is for our culture to shift its very notion of gender. That is not going to start with transphobes. That's going to start with people who consider themselves trans-inclusive, but have so much internal work left to do. That's going to start with a queer woman who respects my pronouns, but is still uncomfortable at the thought of my penis.

I'm not asking for perfection. But I am asking for effort. Not for my sex life — I wouldn't date most of you anyway — but for my humanity, for the humanity of so many. Don't repeat platitudes. Really unlearn your binary connections between genitalia and gender. Really unlearn the associations you bring to bodies you've yet known. Really unlearn these things and start seeing trans people as individuals, as *people*. Unlearn these things because if you don't trans lives will continue to be debated in the Senate and I will not fuck you.

Those things are not of equal importance but I know at least some of you care about both.



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