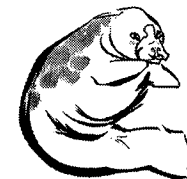


# DECOLONIZING TRANS/GENDER 101

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## Dedication

this is for my chum.  
ur a fucking unicorn.  
and i love you a lot, ok?

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation

The motivation for this book partially arises out of a request I received from a fellow Filipin@ who wanted to know if there were any good Trans 101s devoted to Indigenous and/or People of Colour's (IaoPoC) genders. I couldn't think of a single one off the top of my head. I ended up writing a fairly quick (relatively) blog post about it. And, for the most part, I was content to leave it at that.

Until I saw a recent publication, *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue* (2012) recently published by Columbia University Press and written by Nicholas M. Teich.

The book purports to be an accessible introduction to 'transgenderism' and the issues surrounding the identity. Except...

And this is where it gets especially problematic, one of the things it claims to do is touch upon the 'history' of transgender. Except, it is impossible to talk about the history of transgender with no explicit mention of colonialism or race.<sup>1</sup>

How can we talk about transgender without locating the identity in a larger global context? Or without mentioning the way that these guides, intended and whose purpose is explicitly to simplify complex issues, erase experiences of many people, while normalizing others?

Where is the transgender 101 for all the people who are erased, omitted, marginalized, left out, by guides like this? It is clear that there needs to be something more. Something for the rest of us. Something that allows us to have a conceptual space where we can articulate our experiences. And articulate them in ways that do not make us feel false or incorrect for all the ways we do not see ourselves reflected in the white normative trans/gender discourse.

1. Fe -- why does 'history of transgender' sound so odd to me? I know it's the use of the term, which, thinking of our convos and stuff I've seen from you, this isn't your wording but this Teich guy's. It feels like 'transgender' as strange entity, and not an adjective to describe the experience(s) of of actual people.

I, of course, have a personal and vested interest in something like this. And in the process of decolonization.

My very first blog post was about the colonial nature of white trans/gender discourse. It was at a time of personal awakening for me and a time when I was beginning to separate myself from all kinds of white rhetoric and discourse.

I ended up encountering, early on, this bit of history of the San Francisco Trans March

We are calling for this march to demonstrate that we are a significant and growing portion of the lgbtiq community; to increase our visibility and presence in the tgiqlb community and the overall community at large; to encourage more trans and gender-variant people to come out; to build connections among ftm, mtf, bayot, crossdressers, sadhin, hijra, transvestites, bantut, drag queens, drag kings, mahu, transsexuals, bakla, travesti, genderqueers, kathoey, two spirit, intersex and those with other labels for themselves and no labels for themselves...

2

It had never really occurred to me, until I saw this, that the trans community was under the impression that it was including people like me. Or that I was, as far as they were concerned, part of their community.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine my surprise (no really, try to imagine it). And it wasn't as if, up to this point, that I'd never encountered or spoken to white trans people before. I had. I had friends, dates, etc. in the community (since I was never really one to exist within the white normative/assimilationist part of the cis queer community).

Except... up to this point, I had been IDing largely as gay. And this remained true, even in my younger years when I had a very femme presentation (skirts, makeup, etc.). This situation was plausible because, in my community at least, this is what 'gay' meant.

2. San Francisco TransMarch. Accessed April 4, 2013. <http://www.transmarch.org/about>

3. Fe -- I wonder how many folks of color for whom the white discourse makes no sense experienced this? Since this is also apart of my narrative.

Of course, the Tagalog word for it is bakla (or sometimes is, at least). It was only after realizing that I'd never been gay, but rather bakla, that I saw the SF Trans March's pseudo inclusion of my identity under their umbrella. Their laundry list of Indigenous and/or people of colour (IaoPoC) genders as an attempt to appear inclusive.

(and i now know there is a certain amount of irony, at least, of including bakla in that list for an event like the Trans March)

Yet. This is exactly the problem:

What is behind the failure of the trans community to actually be relevant to someone like me? Someone they appear to think should be under their umbrella?<sup>4</sup>

And, of course, part of the problem is books like Teich's Transgender 101.

The problem lays in all of these white attempts to explain, educate, and reduce the complexity of a complex subject for those who oppress us.

(I do understand the motivation, btw, I just don't buy into it. Because these attempts are usually predicated on the notion that it is necessary for us to be understood by our oppressors if we ever want them to stop. Except... what is actually necessary is that oppressors remove the hate from their hearts and see those they step on as human beings. Understanding isn't necessary.)

This reduction and simplification, ultimately ends up normalizing one way to conceptualize gender. One way for it to be articulated. One narrative. One story.<sup>5</sup>

It invokes the danger of the single story, as explained by Chimamanda Adichie in her July 2009 TED Talk<sup>6</sup>. And it is dangerous indeed, particularly, for IaoPoC people struggling with our gender.<sup>7</sup>

4. not always by name, but it is pretty clear that I'm often considered to be a member of a community that rarely, if ever, leaves actual space for either my body or my voice

5. Fe -- and of course that one way is the white way.

6. [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)

If you look at the recent report, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*<sup>8</sup>, it is apparent that IaoPoC trans or gender non-conforming people face levels of oppression that far exceeds that of white people. It is even more stark when you look at the list of trans deaths posted by the Trans Day of Remembrance every year and see that, by and large, most of the horrific transmisogynist violence is directed towards trans feminine IaoPoC.<sup>9</sup>

Books and blog posts, etc, like Teich's 'simplify' these struggles away. They create a mythical reality where all of our experiences are the same and equivalent. Even worse, they attempt to present them in a pretend method that is allegedly 'accessible.'

But they never ask the important question: to whom is this book supposed be accessible? Because, beyond the obvious answer that the guide or Trans 101s generally are intended for a cis audience, they should also be useful to people at the beginning of their journeys.

To all the people who type into Google "am i trans?" and hope to get some sort of answer to the this pressing and important question. Because this stuff is the foundations for communities. It defines the discourse and impacts not only the conceptual space available but also the allocation of very needed resources.<sup>10</sup>

7. nica -- this is, in some way, unrelated to this part of the text, but maybe mention in footnote that Adichie's work has also recently been critiqued for transmisogyny, citing essentialist biological notions of sex/gender-conflated

8. (#footnote-33-4 "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. 2011. [http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports\\_and\\_research/ntds](http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/ntds)"

9. Fe -- I swear I used these exact sources, and this exact connection in my senior capstone paper. now, seeing this I realize how much I was still trying to prove my humanity and that of everyone who was kind enough to allow me to share their experiences with my professors and the internal review board.

10. Fe -- I never searched 'am I trans.' I didn't think that term, even when identifying with another white term genderqueer, included me, It was so, medical. I ended up dropping the white term I was using because it was so "I'm rebelling against my parents' world."

b. -- omg. yes. i definitely, ought to have mentioned this too. i never googled this myself either. and this book really is for all of us who might have never (and maybe still haven't) thought about ourselves in those terms.

The community and available resources are critical for ensuring that more of us lead successful lives in ways healthy and happy. To allowing many of us to survive. And for us to go beyond survival.

To reach a place where we can be free. Of oppression, of violence, of racism, of cissexism, of transmisogyny, of transphobia, of colonialism.

Just.

Free.<sup>11</sup>

11. nica asked me to clarify what i mean by this. to a large extent that prior paragraph stating freedom from oppression... but not freedom from our identities about those integral parts of who we are and that shape our embodied experiences in the world. Like. I want a world free of transmisogyny but not of trans women of colour. i fervently do not believe that 'trans woman' depends on cis ppl (or transmisogyny or oppression) to be a coherent category of identity. in a world without transmisogyny, there will still be trans woc and cis woc. all that will change is that twoc die or be punished simply for existing. but we will still exist.

## 2.1 The word and its origins

The root of the word transgender comes from the Latin word trans, meaning 'across.' A transatlantic flight goes across the Atlantic Ocean; a transnational issue affects people all across the Country; and so on. Transgender literally means 'across gender.'<sup>1</sup>

Transgender is defined today as an umbrella term with many different identities existing under it. Some of these identities, such as gendervariant, genderqueer, and cross-dresser, are covered in chapter 8. We are going to put those aside for now. The type of transgenderism that we are most concerned with in the bulk of this book is transsexualism.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, because this is meant to be a 'simple' guide for those nice, well meaning cis people, this is all we get for what transgender means. And. Yeah. It is a very boring sort of definition that also doesn't do much for really understanding what it is supposed to mean. Not really.

He does do the kindness of giving some of the context in which 'transgender' becomes a coherent identity. Explaining things like the gender binary and such. Also giving the basic outlines of the supposed differences between sex, gender, gender expression, gender identity, etc etc.<sup>3</sup>

You can also see from the quoted paragraph that he is going to focus on transsexualism (glob, this fucking term hurts my brain) as a special kind of transgender sub-category of the people who identify as the opposite sex of what they were assigned at birth<sup>4</sup>. Now. Based

1. Page 2. Teich, Nicholas M. Transgender 101: a Simple Guide to a Complex Issue. Columbia University Press, 2012.

2. Page 2. Teich, Nicholas M. Transgender 101: a Simple Guide to a Complex Issue. Columbia University Press, 2012.

3. and, of course, he can't quite seem to pull it off without making some unnecessary reference to the Black american community on page 3

4. Teich 2012, 3

on the super confusing and conflating discussion that follows, it is unclear how we are supposed to understand transgender people who ID as the opposite gender (since, Teich explicitly notes that transsexuals do not need to have had any kind of surgery in order to be a transsexual, which is contra the what many people in the community think especially along the lines of the True Transsexuals).

But. Let us not pay attention to the man behind the curtain!

Instead, lets look at a short history of the word so that we can understand when it came about and why it was considered necessary:

In the early 1990s, 'transgender' was repurposed by a various groups of transsexuals in the US to basically include anyone whose gender expression was non-conforming with society's expectations. There were several reasons for this and one of them was because people with atypical gender identities do not always identify as transsexual....<sup>5</sup>

Between this post, and Part Two<sup>6</sup>, we can see that 'transgender' was a consciously and purposefully chosen term to be broadly inclusive of pretty much all the white genders and a variety of expressions out there. It was intended to serve a political utility for uniting a diverse group of people to fight with solidarity out of shared interests for the same sorts of social goods

(social goods like: anti-discrimination in housing, health care, employment, etc. or for having easier access to changing documented genders/sexes. or just the right not to be murdered in the streets. you know, high faluting stuff like that)

Put in another way: transgender was intended not to supplant something like transsexual but to compliment it. Except. As with Teich's explication, it becomes rather difficult to understand what

5. Denise Norris 2011a. <http://transgriot.blogspot.ca/2011/12/on-being-transgender.html>

6. Denise Norris 2011b. <http://transgriot.blogspot.ca/2011/12/on-being-transgender-part-ii.html>

the exact difference between transgender and transsexual is. (anyway, more of this discussion is continued in the next section).

Understanding the history and motivation for 'transgender' as political and social umbrella is key for understanding all the ways that it left people sitting out in the rain.

It is also important to understand that, in common usage today and for how most people interact with this term, not all variance in gender expression is actually included in 'transgender.' Like. Butch lesbians? Rarely group themselves in this category. Or how about femme gay men? Or crossdressers? Or drag queens/kings? Not so much.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps one of the biggest things needing to be decolonized about this explanation is the way that it overrides individual identification out of a need for a hegemonic identity for the 'common good'.<sup>89</sup>

(and, yeah, i realize that in decolonial terms, it is often considered white/western to emphasize the individual over the community. but i would answer this challenge with: no. I don't think that it is coherent to say that all IaoPoC people are to be understood as collectivistic in ways that replicate the situation we are currently discussing. Because the understanding, especially speaking as a Tagalog, that we are collectivistic in ways that leave little or no space for self expression is a racist and colonial notion of what it means to have a community centred on the community, rather than white individualism).<sup>10</sup>

7. Fe -- should there be a note here about how class and race affect what these identities mean? Like, for example, as you mentioned earlier, the word gay in some black and brown communities was an umbrella term (and where I am) that included many if not all of these, especially gay, dragqueen, crossdressers. Also these are sometimes used interchangeably or as additional adjectives to an identity? but wait, you probably address this later, and this is really still and investigation of how Teich is arguing.

8. Fe -- The white good. I am going to end up saying white a million times.

9. b. -- ah, but i love be exact and precise and it matters a lot for this sort of thing to be super specific

10. Fe -- Stating that collectivism and individuality can exist within a single community is so, so very important, and I also feel addresses that either or colonialist thinking, when we are far more diverse and complicated than that. We can be both/and or something completely different and a lot of this is situational, adaptive, human? shutting up now.



## 3.1 The closet as myth

To a certain extent, this book is intended to be a general criticism of Teich's book. But there is no way to engage his section on 'coming out' without reifying the fiction of the closet as a universal 'trans' experience. Not only does he take it as some de facto thing that trans people necessarily do, but his handling of the topic is largely trite and uninteresting (barely touching on the differentials of privilege and danger inherent with entering the topography of the closet for IaoPoC).

Instead, I'm going to talk quickly about how the 'closet' is a social construction and what this construction is. And how it fits into the larger context of white hegemonic discourse.

The closet is a social construction relative to the white society that created it (largely white/anglo north americans). Being based not only in whiteness but in the 'developed' 'western' world as is the case, this means that as a construct it is neither universal nor separable from the historical context in which it was constructed.

Rather. We can see that the construction of the closet relies heavily on the public/private distinction so crucial to whiteness (and capitalism as it happens). There is a great deal of feminist criticism on the public/private dichotomy that I won't reference here because (obviously) too tainted with transmisogyny to be of much use. What is really important to know is how the public/private distinction is one of the many results of colonialism and the development of capitalism.

Why? Because a notion of 'private' is absolutely necessary for there to be private property. And land, property, is the foundation of settler colonialism and the economic systems it has built<sup>1</sup>. Before the things like the french revolution, the industrial revolution, before colonialism, 'private' property essentially did not exist in europe. in the age of absolute monarchs and feudalism, all land technically belonged to the monarch (with obvious variations depending on

1. the other foundation for colonialism and our current economy is anti-Blackness and slavery

region and people). the monarch was the entity who granted rights for certain people (nobility) to make profits and occupy the lands. the monarch could take away this land if they chose.

It isn't for nothing that at the beginning of the colonial age, the explorers claimed lands in the names of their monarchs. because at this time, claiming personal ownership over land wasn't really something people did unless they were royalty (this is why we have the Philippines a land claimed on behalf of king philip of spain). go forward a few hundred years as the notions of capital, ensuing revolutions, continued colonialism, and suddenly the notion of private property becomes a central thing to our current society.

for racial relations, this is clearly important for the ways that only white people were allowed to have 'private' lives. they were the only ones who could own land. and, even more starkly, people. Because it is also under this system that some people are 'public' and some are 'private'. And it is clear from the way that the Atlantic slave trade happened, that Black people were considered public. This clearly links ideas of agency to whether or not people can be construed as 'private.'

This is important because the topology of the closet rests on this foundation. What is 'in' the closet is private, personal and what is 'out' of the closet is public. The process of coming out, then is a process by which you render what is personal, public.<sup>2</sup>

And this is an interesting place for any IaoPoC person. Because we all know, growing up and around, that our 'closets' are much much smaller than any white person's (and it only shrinks with the more kinds of oppression you experience). Because being a non-white body in this world, is to immediately be rendered available for public consumption. where white people will feel comfortable discussing or commenting on your body. touching it (for a very notable example, see Black women and their hair). sexualising it. desexualizing it. or any other activity which clearly lets us know that we are not entitled to the same level of body integrity and 'privacy' that white people are.

2. Fe -- I don't think I have ever come across this stated in such a way. It kind of exploded that whole gay white boy claiming an inner Black woman, thing. It also makes me think of the unauthorized touching and questions I've seen witnessed regarding the genitalia of predominantly trans women, and most recently Black and brown trans women.

This level of publicness comes with a great deal of problems. particularly for dark skinned Black people and/or Latin@s (these sorts of things definitely exist on a sliding scale of dark/light skin, where the darker you are the more public your body).<sup>3</sup>

And it is in this context that all trans IaoPoC are given the expectation that we be 'out'.<sup>4</sup>

to a certain extent, we can see the problems with this construction, since it really comes down to an expectation that we render our bodies even more available to the 'public' for consumption<sup>5</sup>.

And we are expected to do this despite the mounds of evidence that doing so will only increase the chances for Black and/or Latin@ trans feminine people of experiencing violent oppression. The same is true to a lesser extent for other IaoPoC trans people.

so. part of the message for this section is:

It is never wrong to prioritize your safety

one interesting consequence of the invocation of the private/public dichotomy in closet discourse is the ways that it ends up glorifying white individualism (or exceptionalism) over and above any other concerns.

3. nica -- to consider: i recently saw a conversation on my dash, strugglingtobeheard reblogged it, summarizing that a South Asian, specifically Indian person, with darker skin mentioned that there is a difference between 'Indian dark' and 'African' dark -- positioning the latter as worse than the first- so not only is darkness that thing by which a person is rendered public- but specifically Blackness, in congruence w the logics of chattel slavery, is of course the category from which one should distance themselves. this doesn't contradict what you have written- but comments on what Lewis Gordon, has said, I think something like "above all, don't be black"

4. and, of course, i'm not even touching upon the incoherence of what the fuck it even means to be 'out' as a gender. a trans woman is a woman at all stages of her life -- unless she states otherwise

5. and, as should be clear right now, the 'public' is white people, esp. cis whites but also white trans ppl because they also participate in the consumption of public iaopoc bodies -- almost recursively seen in the necessity of this book, since if white trans ppl weren't actively perpetuating a hegemonic gender discourse and actively colonizing the bodies/narratives/culture of iaopoc, this book wouldn't be necessary

we see movie after movie after book after narrative about trans (and/or queer) coming out stories. and in all these narratives coming out is framed as this individual action that occurs in opposition. In opposition to (most often) family, to religion, to social communities, schools, etc. Etc.<sup>6</sup>

it assumes as very white notion of valuing the individual's needs above that of their communities. which, on its own, is fine. but the problem comes in when people are shamed for choosing to subsume their needs to that of their community's. Things like this come out with 'national coming out day'. or with the urging of famous (rich white) celebrities telling everyone that they owe it to the trans/queer communities to be 'out'.<sup>7</sup>

and that implicit responsibility is interesting looking at it from a transpinay point of view:

because my experiences in either the trans community or queer community have made it very clear that the 'community' is hostile to my existence.

and so the request to sacrifice my current communities, the communities to which i properly belong, just to fulfill some (imaginary) obligation to a community that regularly lets me know how much i don't belong, seems ludicrous. but it is not just that: it creates a situation whereby not only is the white trans/gender narrative normalized but your value/goodness as a human being becomes dependent for how well you are able to locate yourself within that narrative.

and, of course, all of this ends up being 'be out' for the good of the public. but who is this public? it is the rare person who actually bothers to mention how being 'out' for iaopoc actually benefits our communities. like, don't even get me started on how many times i've seen one iaopoc group or another mention that all this gender/sexuality/identity stuff is white stuff.

6. Fe -- I hope you go on to address this linear path connected to coming out, and the kind of stagnation of ones identity, because I have yet to actually meet someone Indigenous and/or of Color whose experience actually went a to b to c.

7. Fe -- It also assumes that the individual's needs and their identities can be above or beyond, or disconnected from the community.

which means that if we reify the closet just to come out we are, in part, validating this criticism (since we accept a white framing for our genders and histories) but also being — on a very deep level — disavowed by our communities, since this is something white ppl do and if you aren't white and doing it, you've been around too many white people and no one should have anything to do with your self-colonizing ass.

of course, we know well that there are a wide variety of iaopoc cultures that have more genders and different gender systems than white ppl. and this includes 'newer' cultures that make space for gender variance without explicitly marking it. or that many communities embody colonial imposed binary genders in very different ways than white people. all of which happens in a space beyond coherence for white discourse.