

# GENDER HYSTERIA

Jennifer Agmon

In September 2017, Florida teacher Chloe Bressack was removed from their fifth grade class at Canopy Oaks Elementary after a letter they sent home had instilled fear in some parents. *Washington Post* writer Lori Rosza explains that Bressack's letter enthusiastically welcomed the students and included a short paragraph regarding titles and pronouns. Chloe Bressack uses the non-gendered honorific 'Mx.' and the pronouns 'they,' 'them,' and 'their.' Some parents appreciated the letter and respected the requests of Mx. Bressack, but others were appalled, believing this identification was unnatural and would only cause confusion among their impressionable young children (Rosza). Bressack recalls to *Washington Times* writer Tom Quimby that horrendous, demeaning messages from parents flowed into the school's main office saying that teachers' "gender, [their] existence, is inappropriate" (qtd. in Quimby). Former Arkansas governor and pastor Mike Huckabee, who now lives in Florida, commented that he would "yank [his] kid out of a classroom" that had a teacher who uses non-gendered pronouns. He would not let his child "be influenced by someone who is so devoid of common sense that they don't understand that there are men and women, boys and girls" (qtd. in Quimby).

Though the case of Mx. Bressack possesses a sense of modernity, as pronouns and transgender issues are commonplace in the news today, the controversy surrounding gender pronouns is not a recent phenomenon. Pronouns have been a topic of debate for decades, if not centuries, especially with regard to written language. In his 1989 *New York Times* article, "E Has a Modest Proposal on Ungendered Personal Pronouns," Victor J. Stone of the University of Illinois College of Law suggests creating a system of non-gendered pronouns to replace the universal male pronoun and the binary personal pronouns. His idea of using 'e' and 'e's' as gender-neutral pronouns allows authors to easily refer to people whose genders are unknown (Stone). Although numerous non-gendered pronouns have been proposed, most have failed to gain validity in the English language.

Jennifer Finney Boylan, a current writer for the *New York Times*, emphasizes in her 2018 article, “That’s What Ze Said,” that “the absence of a gender nonspecific singular pronoun in English really does present a problem.” Aside from addressing the concerns of writers and grammar aficionados who strive to write grammatically correct phrases that mention people of unspecified genders, a gender-neutral pronoun is also of immense importance in verbal communication and gender identity. Kelsey, an agender person who uses the pronouns ‘they,’ ‘them,’ and ‘their,’ tells *Washington Post* writer Monica Hesse, “I just want to be a person who is recognized as a person” (qtd. in Hesse). Transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, and agender people alike yearn for others to refer to them with the correct pronouns, whether or not they follow traditional notions of the gender binary.

The call for non-gendered language has precedence in the rise of the honorific Ms., which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to Miss, which emphasizes age, and Mrs., which emphasizes marital status. As communications professor Wendy Atkins-Sayre explains, Ms. was a “liberatory title,” shifting focus away from a woman’s marital status and promoting women’s equality (8). But despite such evidence of previous linguistic evolution, some continue to argue that language and the gender binary are fixed traditions that must remain forever unchanged. Linguistics and English professor Dennis Baron writes that “[g]etting English speakers to use a pronoun that doesn’t reflect a sex, or that inflects it beyond masculine and feminine, isn’t easy; [m]ore than 80 gender-neutral pronouns have been coined since 1850,” but their usage is often confronted with a strong resistance. Deviation from what is thought to be the conventional use of language and pronouns is frequently met with hostility, suggesting a rejection of all those who use non-gendered pronouns. Grant Strobl, a junior at the University of Michigan, is among several students who use prefixes to mock and protest the school’s policy of accepting all names and pronouns. Referring to the students who are respectful of the “absurdity” of his claimed title—“His Majesty”—Strobl comments that “it really does illustrate the ridiculousness of the policy in ignoring the English language” (qtd. in Bever). “His Majesty” considers policies that give students the right to be recog-

nized by any name or pronoun to be giving students an excessive freedom to change language.

While those such as Huckabee and Strobl are firm in their opposition of non-gendered pronouns and the changing nature of language, others believe such changes can be tolerable if reformed in a controlled, systematic way. In response to the Boylan piece, New York politics and culture writer Jesse Larner agrees that English may be flexible and adaptable enough to include a single non-gendered pronoun, but strongly disagrees that individuals should be able to adopt any pronoun of their choosing. He asserts that allowing the use of unstandardized, self-proclaimed pronouns “is to invite chaos” and “normalizes something more dangerous: the deployment of extreme individualism in the service of political power over institutional and linguistic conventions” (Larner).

Despite Larner’s supposed acceptance of a gender-neutral pronoun, this emphasis on the problematic nature of “extreme individualism” overlooks the idea that pronouns and gender are typically bestowed upon people by parental figures before or immediately after their birth. Gender is often incorrectly dictated by the bows and dresses or caps and pants that parents dress their babies in before they even have an understanding of themselves. In her *Slate* article, “Are You a Boy or a Girl?” writer and mom Jessica Winter emphasizes that “gender-reveal parties” are the ultimate exemplification of implicit transphobia. Expecting parents go overboard with extravagant parties exploding with pink or blue decorations, an all-knowing cake or confetti gun that reveals the child’s gender (though it is really sex), and the exciting transfer of gender norms and a cisnormative mentality to their unborn fetuses.

The unnerving uncertainty about newborns’ personalities often leads parents to relieve their fears of the unknown by gender-policing their babies with stereotypically gendered toys and wardrobes. However, “gender isn’t really there for the grabbing” (Winter). It is understandable that parents want to control what little they can when expecting a newborn, but predetermining a child’s gender before they are able to speak can create tension between a child’s developing view of self and the ways in which others perceive them. These parties further the notion that boys and girls can easily be divided by color and

activity preference, and that gender is limited to male and female. This cisnormative tradition contributes to the erasure of those who identify outside of the gender binary and do not use gendered pronouns. When an older child or adult uses gender-neutral pronouns, they are not making up a creative way to display their individuality, as Jesse Lerner and Grant Strobl would suggest, but rather are reclaiming identities that have been forcibly suppressed by the gendered American society into which they were born.

Not only do gender-reveal parties reinforce gender expectations, but they also expose an insufficient understanding of the distinction between gender and sex. Professors Rose McDermott and Peter K. Hatemi assert in their paper, “Distinguishing Sex and Gender,” that sex and gender are not interchangeable terms and that there is a significant difference between “choice” and “natural disposition” (90). While sex is biological, gender is a socially-constructed categorization of people based on masculine and feminine traits, maintained through gender roles and norms. The distinction between sex and gender is noteworthy because “treating [them] as though they represent identical phenomena provides a limited understanding of the myriad ways in which any kind of identity informs behavior” (91). Neither sex nor gender is a choice, but gender expression—the outward depiction of an individual’s preferences and conception of self—is dependent upon choice.

When a person’s gender identity or gender expression is threatened by the speech of another, anti-discrimination laws may emerge to provide protections. The New York City Human Rights Law, or NYCHRL, requires that “employers and covered entities . . . use an individual’s preferred name, pronoun and title (e.g., Ms./Mrs.) regardless of the individual’s sex assigned at birth, anatomy, gender, medical history, appearance, or the sex indicated on the individual’s identification” (“Gender Identity”). Any figure of authority who dismisses and refuses to use a person’s correct pronouns is subject to a monetary fine equaling between \$125,000 and \$250,000 (“Gender Identity”). South Texas College of Law constitutional law professor Josh Blackman is unsure of the permissibility of these rules, as “there is a subtle but critical line between promoting tolerance and controlling thought.” While laws such as NYCHRL are in place to promote

tolerance and reduce discrimination, Blackman suggests that this law “[r]equir[es] people to voice beliefs that they do not hold, or even understand” and is a “flagrant and unacceptable violation of the freedom of speech.” Freedom of speech is a constitutional right that should be protected, but Blackman overlooks that the deliberate, malicious misgendering of people is not just an expression of beliefs; it is an extreme attack on their being. The scale of this critical line shows the severity of the problem—too many people are unwilling to acknowledge the validity of others’ identities. Using a person’s correct pronouns is a “matter of respect,” and the inability to adhere to this notion can severely hurt those whose pronouns are not being used (Boylan).

Some argue that respect can be difficult when a person does not conform to normative views of gender identity, because this lack of conformity can provoke feelings of discomfort, confusion, and disrespect (Hesse). Nancy Beckham, Kelsey’s mother, notes that “[w]hen people don’t know what gender you are, it’s confusing,” creating an unsustainable environment for communication (qtd. in Hesse). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud explains that we, as humans, do everything possible to separate ourselves from discomfort and discontent, as these feelings hinder our attainment of happiness (28-29). It is reasonable that people do not want to submit themselves to situations in which they are uncomfortable, but the constant desire to escape discomfort is also individualistic and egocentric. It wrongly suggests that a person’s own comfort is more important than respecting and understanding another person’s identity. Confusion is an inevitable occurrence in life, but we must also consider the transphobia, fear of difference, and intolerance which underlie the discomfort and resistance to gender-neutral pronouns.

*Time* magazine writer Katy Steinmetz notes that according to a survey conducted by GLAAD, an organization focused on LGBTQ+ acceptance, “20% of millennials say they are something other than strictly straight and cisgender.” Facebook has over “60 options for users’ gender,” and more options continue to be added (Steinmetz). These numbers call for the elimination of the gender binary, the recognition of all gender identities and pronouns, and the redefinition of gender.

Mx. Bressack left their school because some parents decided that adhering to a traditional honorific is more important than their child's education from a well-qualified teacher. There are evident double standards in schools that foster the marginalization of transgender and gender-nonconforming teachers, and these problems need eradication. An anonymous New York teacher, who is transgender, says that schools are receptive to the changing of names except when a teacher defies gender norms (Rozsa). No one questions teachers who "want to be called Mr., or Ms., or Mrs.," or change their names to match their spouse's, but when a teacher wants to be called Mx., a mass hysteria begins (qtd. in Rozsa). Parents should be able to make decisions about what their children are exposed to and what belief systems they internalize, but there is a difference between passing on a set of values and promoting the negation of another person's existence. Bressack was not teaching students about gender or telling them how to identify. They were simply asking students to refer to them with their correct name and pronouns.

Language is not a finite system, and it should not be given more power or respect than the very humans who give it meaning. Arguments against non-gendered pronouns and prefixes frequently cite the infeasibility of altering grammatical conventions, or the necessary preservation of language, but language has never been static. Language will continue to mirror the ideas and attitudes of the times, but people need to adapt simultaneously to foster this change. Too many people question the validity of others' gender identities, forcing young people such as Kelsey to ask to be seen as a person. Rather than rejecting another person's identity, it is essential that people consider the oppressive construction of gender in American culture, the importance of respect, and how detrimental it is to not have non-gendered pronouns.

---

#### WORKS CITED

- Atkins-Sayre, Wendy. "Naming Women: The Emergence of 'Ms.' as a Liberatory Title." *Women and Language*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2005, pp. 8-16, doi:10.13140/2.1.4767.2966.

- Baron, Dennis. "Changing Gender in Language Isn't Easy." *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 2014, [www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/10/19/is-checking-the-sex-box-necessary/changing-gender-in-language-isnt-easy](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/10/19/is-checking-the-sex-box-necessary/changing-gender-in-language-isnt-easy).
- Bever, Lindsey. "Students Were Told to Select Gender Pronouns. One Chose 'His Majesty' to Protest 'Absurdity.'" *The Washington Post*, 7 Oct. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/10/07/a-university-told-students-to-select-their-gender-pronouns-one-chose-his-majesty/?utm\\_term=.f7211a0b660c](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/10/07/a-university-told-students-to-select-their-gender-pronouns-one-chose-his-majesty/?utm_term=.f7211a0b660c).
- Blackman, Josh. "The Government Can't Make You Use 'Zhir' or 'Ze' in Place of 'She' and 'He.'" *The Washington Post*, 16 Jun. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/06/16/the-government-cant-make-you-use-zhir-or-ze-in-place-of-she-and-he/?utm\\_term=.88da16563fe7](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/06/16/the-government-cant-make-you-use-zhir-or-ze-in-place-of-she-and-he/?utm_term=.88da16563fe7).
- Boylan, Jennifer Finney. "That's What Ze Said." *The New York Times*, 9 Jan. 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/opinion/ze-xem-gender-pronouns.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/opinion/ze-xem-gender-pronouns.html).
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2010.
- "Gender Identity/Gender Expression: Legal Enforcement Guidance." *NYC Human Rights*, 2018, [www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/law/legal-guidances-gender-identity-expression.page](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/law/legal-guidances-gender-identity-expression.page).
- Hatemi, Peter K., and Rose McDermott. "Distinguishing Sex and Gender." *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 44, no.1, 2011, pp. 89-92, doi: 10.1017/S1049096510001939.
- Hesse, Monica. "When No Gender Fits: A Quest to be Seen as Just a Person." *The Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/national/when-no-gender-fits-a-quest-to-be-seen-as-just-a-person/2014/09/20/1ab21e6e-2c7b-11e4-994d-202962a9150c\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d72782aaa496](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/when-no-gender-fits-a-quest-to-be-seen-as-just-a-person/2014/09/20/1ab21e6e-2c7b-11e4-994d-202962a9150c_story.html?utm_term=.d72782aaa496).
- Larner, Jesse. "A Non-Gendered Pronoun." *The New York Times*, 10 Jan. 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/opinion/non-gendered-pronoun.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/opinion/non-gendered-pronoun.html).
- Quimby, Tom. "Fifth-Grade Teacher Gets Schooled by Parents After Gender-Neutral Grammar Lessons." *The Washington*

- Times*, 28 Sept. 2017,  
[www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/sep/28/chloe-bressack-florida-teacher-gives-gender-neutra](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/sep/28/chloe-bressack-florida-teacher-gives-gender-neutra).
- Rozsa, Lori. "Transgender Teacher Removed From Classroom After Some Parents Object to Gender-Neutral Prefix 'Mx.'" *The Washington Post*, 29 Sept. 2017,  
[www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/29/transgender-teacher-removed-from-classroom-after-some-parents-object-to-calling-her-mx/?utm\\_term=.0d604803e345](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/29/transgender-teacher-removed-from-classroom-after-some-parents-object-to-calling-her-mx/?utm_term=.0d604803e345).
- Steinmetz, Katy. "Behind the TIME Cover Story: Beyond 'He' or 'She.'" *Time*, 16 Mar. 2017, [www.time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she](http://www.time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she).
- Stone, Victor J. "THE LAW: For the Record; E Has a Modest Proposal on Ungendered Personal Pronouns." *The New York Times*, 25 Aug. 1989, [www.nytimes.com/1989/08/25/us/1-the-law-for-the-record-e-has-a-modest-proposal-on-ungendered-personal-pronouns-326689.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/25/us/1-the-law-for-the-record-e-has-a-modest-proposal-on-ungendered-personal-pronouns-326689.html).
- Winter, Jessica. "Are You a Boy or a Girl?" *Slate*, 11 May 2016, [www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2016/05/gender\\_reveal\\_celebrations\\_for\\_babies\\_help\\_explain\\_transphobia.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2016/05/gender_reveal_celebrations_for_babies_help_explain_transphobia.html).