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## Bad Language

### Gwendolyn Ann Smith on Terminology

by Gwendolyn Ann Smith, [The Bay Area Reporter](#)

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Gwendolyn Ann Smith

**D**a Vinci Code author Dan Brown has released his latest 'Oh my God there's a secret conspiracy and you can find the clues all over the place' book. In this one, *The Lost Symbol*, his Harvard expert of symbology takes on Masons, Washington, D.C., and presumably anything else that he can spin into a story.

What struck me and several other transgender identified people is the following paragraph from *The Lost Symbol*.

***Those who are transgender, myself included, are all too familiar with being labelled with identities we ourselves do not accept.***

**The act of tattooing one's skin was a transformative declaration of power, an announcement to the world: I am in control of my own flesh. The intoxicating feeling of control derived from physical transformation had addicted millions to flesh altering practices ... cosmetic surgery, body piercing, bodybuilding and steroids ... even bulimia and transgending.**

Transgending? I understand what he's trying to say here, but, really? In that short paragraph, Dan Brown has reduced the entire experience of being a transgender person to the level of steroid abuse, piercing and bulimia. I dare say that Brown's entire knowledge of being transgender stems from using the name 'Danielle Brown' on a book he co-wrote with his wife, and titled *187 Men To Avoid: A Guide for the Romantically Frustrated Women*.

Allow me to get a little lexical for a moment.

The word 'transgender' is believed to be initially coined by Virginia Prince as early as the 1950s, specifically to refer to someone who adopted the gender opposite the one he or she was assigned at birth, up to but not including undergoing genital reconstructive surgery.

Over the ensuing years, the term underwent a change, being used as an umbrella term to cover a wide variety of individuals: anyone who transgresses or transcends gender norms has been considered to be a part of such a group. In some recent years, the term has also started to be viewed as somewhat dated, with many adopting the term 'gender-queer'.

'Transgender' still does not appear in all dictionaries, and my spell checker will stumble over it as I proof this very article. Many use it as a noun, some as an adjective, and some as a verb, but Brown is the first to use it as he has.

This leads to a bigger debate, however. When you have a term like transgender, how do you describe those who are not transgender? Some, for example, feel that not having such a term is to doom transgender people to being somehow 'singled out' as something different: The very nature of not having a polar opposite term sets up those who are not transgender as being 'the standard'. There is logic in that, I suppose, though I don't think having the term 'right handed' has ever made a sinister southpaw feel any different. Nevertheless, a term has been invented to fill this gap: cisgender. 'Cis' is a Latin prefix referring to being 'on the same side', and comes to us from the vocabulary of chemistry. In this usage, it refers to gender identity and physical sex being 'in alignment' it is a sort of opposite for 'transgender'.

It initially came out of the Usenet before making it into texts in the middle part of this decade. Likewise, it has led to the birth of 'cissexual' as an opposing term to 'transsexual', and even 'cissexism' as a means of declaring the state of belief that transsexuals are inferior to 'cissexuals'.

Now here is where I become a stick in the mud. You see, while I do see the point of such terms, and can see the value in same, it also

seems that they're not so often used in the somewhat clinical way described above. Ironically, they end up being used as yet another tool to divide rather than simply classify.

I mentioned above about transgender being an umbrella term, and one that is often used somewhat broadly, One of its strengths is that it can include a wide variety of gender presentations, identities and expressions. You can presumably save yourself from having left out someone, unless they wish to be left out of said term.

But cisgender, used in the same way, shuts out our allies, our friends, our partners. Rather than levelling the field, it further sets transgender apart from the whole, and creates a dichotomy that honestly is not needed.

This is something that the transgender community, and frankly many other communities, does on a regular basis. At one time it was 'cross-dressers' versus 'transsexuals', then it was 'transsexuals' versus 'transgender'. There have been some who have adopted even more baroque terms such as 'women born transsexual' or 'Harry Benjamin Syndrome' to further distance ourselves from each other.

Another problem with 'cisgender', as pointed out by activist Helen Boyd, is that it is rarely used without a sneer. It is a term that tends to get used to point out that someone is transphobic or, at the least, clueless about things transgender. Perhaps like Dan Brown at the top of this article.

Yet by using it this way, and reinforcing its use as a snarky, snide term for those who don't 'get it', you make the term useless for neutral use. No one would want to be called 'cisgender' if it automatically implies a certain oafishness upon the person wearing the term.

Many years ago: I learned a proverb: It's not what you call me, it's what I answer to. Those who are transgender, myself included, are all too familiar with being labelled with identities we ourselves do not accept. Why should we, therefore, feel we can so easily label others?

## Gwendolyn Ann Smith

From Gwendolyn's website: Gwendolyn Ann Smith is a graphic designer, desktop publisher, web designer, writer, and transgender activist.

She writes transmissions for four major L.G.B.T. newspapers in the United States, *Baltimore Gay Life*, the *Bay Area Reporter*, *Between The Lines*, and the *Philadelphia Gay News*. Individual Transmission pieces are also often printed in *Express Gay News*, the *Houston Voice*, the *New York Blade*, the *Southern Voice*, and the *Washington Blade*. In addition to these, she has contributed to several other publications and online forums over the years. Her website contains a vast number of her writings that are of interest to transgender people and our allies.

Gwen has spoken publicly since High School, and has presented on transgender-related topics since 1994. She has spoken in a number of different clubs and forms.

Gwendolyn Ann Smith also founded the Transgender Day of Remembrance in 1998, a day which occurs annually on 20th November. It is a day to memorialize those who have been killed as a result of transphobia, or the hatred or fear of transgender and gender non-conforming people, and acts to bring attention to the continued violence endured by the transgender community. The Transgender Day of Remembrance was originally organised to memorialize the murder of Rita Hester in Allston, Massachusetts, however since its inception, it has slowly evolved from the web-based project started by Smith into an international day of action. In 2010, Transgender Day of Remembrance was observed in over 185 cities in more than twenty countries.



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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.