

Social Justice: LGBT+

Breaking down the Acronym: T

This month, we will be talking about the fourth letter in the LGBT+ acronym: “T” for transgender.

A transgender person is someone whose psychological gender does not correspond with their birth sex. This means that a trans man is a man who was assigned female at birth (afab) while a trans woman is a woman who was assigned male at birth (amab). “Transgender” is sometimes used as an umbrella term for all gender nonconforming (gnc) people, or anyone who doesn’t fit into the gender binary; this includes typical trans people as well as people who are non-binary (aka people who don’t identify as either male or female), genderfluid (people whose gender identity is not fixed, who may feel more male some days and more female other days), and agender (people who are genderless).

The term “Transgender” was only coined in the mid-20th century, but this doesn’t mean trans people didn’t exist before 1970. Human civilizations from across the world have a long history of gender nonconformity; what makes this history uniquely different from LGB history is that many societies actually had traditional or spiritual roles within their power structures specifically made for gender nonconforming individuals. From the people of the Balkans who swore off sex to become socially recognized as men, to the pre-colonial African tribes (like the Igbo and the Nuba) with important religious roles for people seeking to switch sexes, all the way to the genderless priests of ancient Mesopotamian cultures, the traditional third and fourth genders still acknowledged across all of Polynesia, the hijras in India and the two-spirit Native Americans (both of which are socially recognized third genders that still exist to this day within those societies), there is no shortage of people throughout history who do not conform to the modern idea that there are only two genders/sexes. That said, terms like “transgender” and “non-binary” are specifically catered to the modern gender binary, and therefore should not be used to label historical people from societies where gender was not considered a binary matter.

As with most other LGBT+ issues, transgender activism really started at the turn of the 20th century. Several isolated cases of transgenderism and gender nonconformity cropped up across the world from the Medieval period to the modern era, but by the 1890s, enough people were writing about it for scientists to take note of the phenomenon. Thus came the Institute of Sex Research, founded in Berlin immediately after WWI: a scientific and medical research facility that advocated for LGBT+ rights and performed several gender reassignment surgeries for transgender people across Europe. It was disbanded in 1933 by the Nazi party; all of their groundbreaking research was burned, and the members, scientists, and patients were tracked down and sent to concentration camps. This forced transgender activism into obscurity. But come the 1960s, trans activism re-emerged into the public eye alongside other LGBT+ activists. And like all of the social movements championing civil rights from that era, the issues regarding trans rights are still being fought for to this day.

Some notable transgender people in history include radiology pioneer Alan L Hart, gospel singer Wilmer Broadnax, actress Laverne Cox, directors of “the Matrix” the Wachowski sisters, decorated Union soldier Albert Cashier, and author and activist Janet Mock. There are many more gender nonconforming individuals throughout history who are theorized to have been transgender, non-binary, or a third gender—like Joan of Arc (who swore she would never dress in women’s clothes unless God told her to) or the Pharaoh Hatshepsut (who was depicted as fully male in several pieces of artwork despite being

born a woman)—but because these people died long before the modern terminology regarding trans people came into use, it is impossible to say whether or not they would have considered *themselves* transgender.

Finally, when interacting with or talking about transgender people, it is of utmost importance to use the name and pronouns they ask you to use. Respecting a trans person's pronouns is the first and *most important step* to show your trans friends, trans family members, and the trans community that you care about them. Being mindful of our trans brothers, sisters, and siblings is one of the most important things that we, as a reconciling church, can do to help make our community a safer place for trans people to exist.

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